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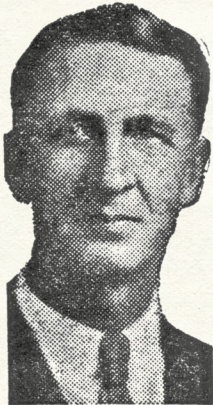
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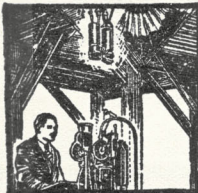
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The Golden Cipher.....T. T. Flynn 46
As Jerry Prince—Prince of Thieves—sets out to retrieve a brace of diamond-eyed death messengers from hell's own hock-shop.

2 SMASHING MASTER MURDER NOVELETTES 2

Cardigan—that big dick from Cosmos—is

Too Hot to Handle.....Frederick Nebel 10
Even with asbestos gloves, when a mug like MacQueene accuses him of picking a dead man's pockets.

Sign the register for a room at

Murder Inn.....Preston Grady 108
And check in with Detective McGovern as he cracks down on a death set-up deluxe.

4 THRILLING DETECTIVE SHORT STORIES 4

Roll

Dice and No Dice.....R. D. Torrey 32
With Johnny Carr for \$1,750 in table stakes—then raise the ante with a murder side-bet.

Follow a blind-alley clue to where

The Corpse In 518.....D. E. Winstead 78
Lies stiff in its pool of crimson, mute challenge to turn a cold lead into the hot tip that'll corner the kill artist.

Do a danger

Fade-Out—A Cass Blue Story.....John Lawrence 91
Up a seven-year murder trail, to those twin terror houses where the Dale girl waited under the shadow of doom.

Smash the

Scandal Racket.....Dwight V. Babcock 127
That meant murder for two with a string of priceless pearls the blood stake.

Here are some

Gun Angles.....Editor 139
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Cover—"He Had a Sickle in His Hand".....John Howitt
From "Fade-Out."

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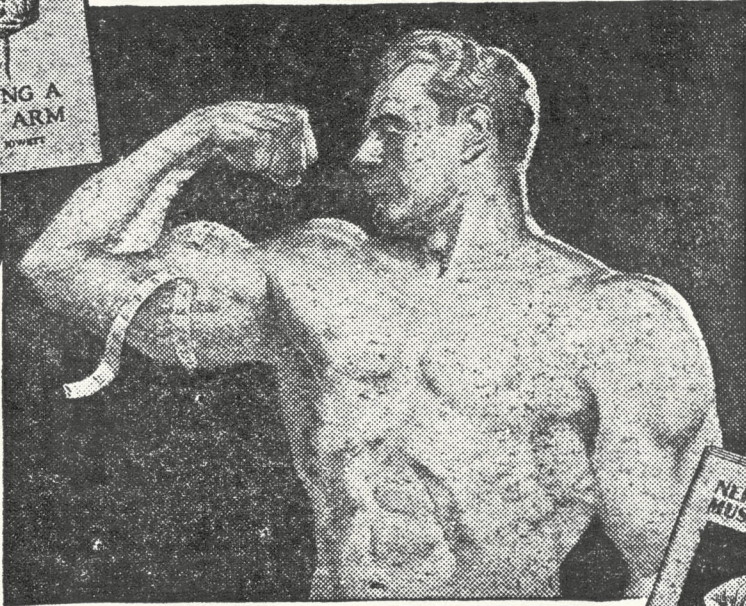


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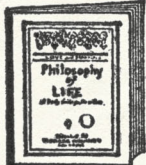
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TOO HOT TO HANDLE

A Cardigan Story
by Frederick Nebel

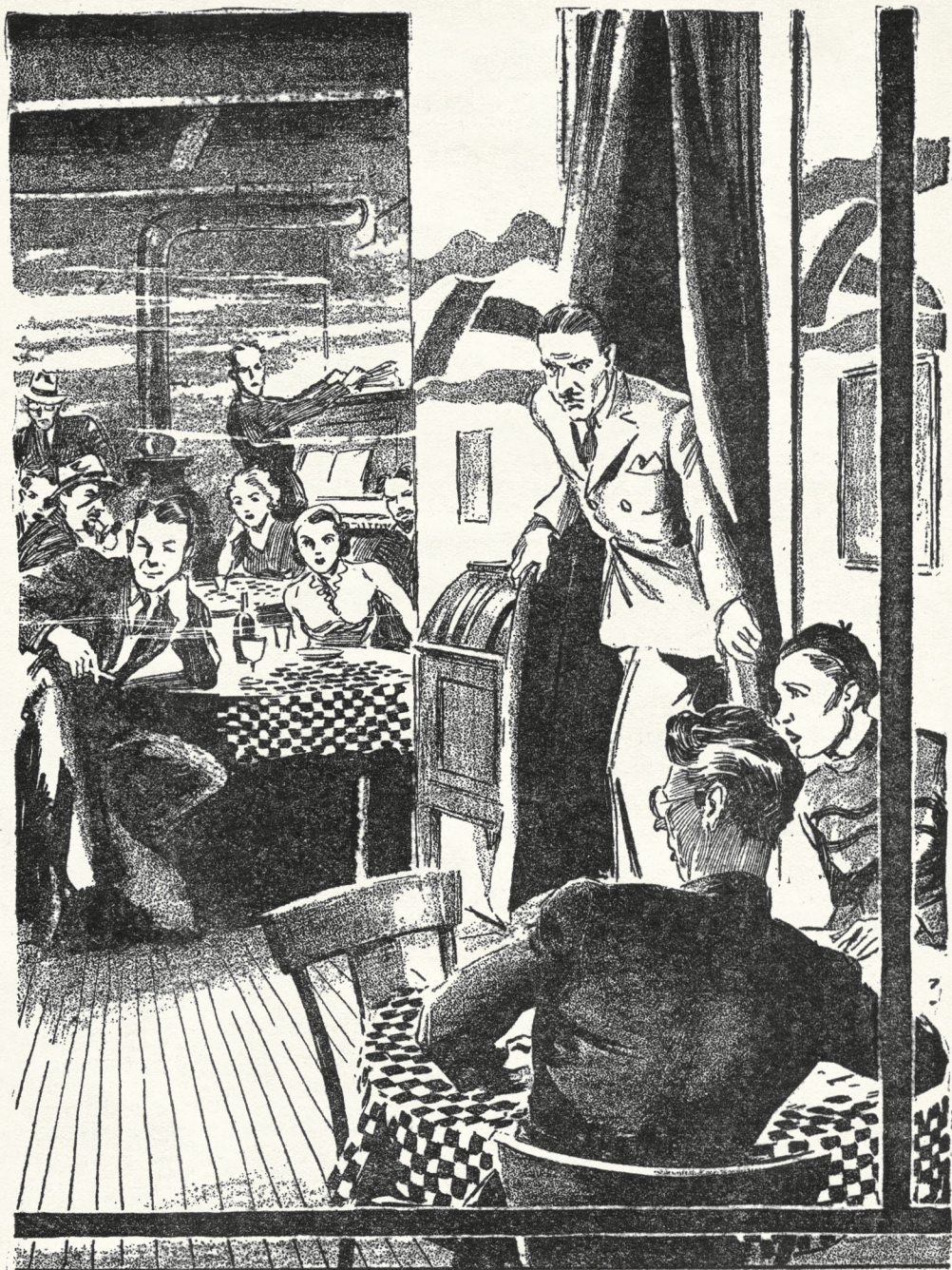
Author of "Not So Tough," etc.

That big dick from Cosmos had taken plenty of knocks in the course of his career, but for MacQueene to accuse him of rolling a lush was a little more than Cardigan could stomach. He'd kept cool till then but at that crack he became too hot to handle. Even with asbestos gloves—which MacQueene didn't think worth putting on.

CHAPTER ONE

The Man With the Missing Hand

IT WAS one A. M. in the Dynamite Bar. The blue-checked cloths of the small square tables had plenty of elbows on them still, and the lad with the broken nose was ripping the ivories in



Cardigan banged a bottle off MacQueen's head.

his own version of *Rhapsody in Blue*. The Dynamite Bar was in a cellar in a house off Pacific Street and among its patrons were disillusioned poets, bloated plutocrats and a sprinkling of chaps who couldn't be placed at all. It was noisy, smoky. Its stone walls were painted a dull

red and in one corner there was a pot-bellied stove. There was a legend connected with the place: you might get plastered there, but if you got too plastered somebody would always take you home.

Cardigan came down the winding stone staircase at a few minutes past one, his

big, distorted shadow moving along the wall beside him. His cheeks were reddened by the cold out-of-doors and as he made his way among the tables toward the bar he unbuttoned his shaggy ulster, pushed back his battered fedora.

Miles O'Mara was leaning on the bar. He was a thin, hawk-nosed man, nattily dressed, with tight red hair and a small sliver of a red mustache.

Cardigan said: "What's it, Miles, a gag?"

"Have a drink," O'Mara said, and motioned to the barman.

The barman said: "What 'll it be, Mr. Cardigan?"

"Rye and seltzer on the side." Cardigan turned, looked the place over. "Nice crowd, Miles. Where'd you get the piano player?"

"He came with the piano."

Cardigan chuckled, leaned his elbows on the bar. "I was just turning in. What's the gag?"

"It's no gag, Jack." They drank and O'Mara nodded toward a curtained doorway. "He's in the next room. I think the guy's got a complex, but if he has—what the hell. He's afraid to go home in the dark. I offered to send Jackie home with him, but he gave me a knowing leer and said, 'Oh, no you don't, mister. I want a detective—a guard or something.' Then he asked me for a phone book and he looked in the classified ads and found your agency. He told me to call the number. I kept calling you 'Mr. Cardigan' on the phone because I didn't want him to think I knew you personally."

Cardigan said: "Maybe he's screwy."

"No, he's just tight. He came in here about an hour ago and Max here"—he nodded to the barman—"said he asked for four Scotches. Max thought he was with a gang at some table, so he poured out four Scotches. Well, the guy just stands here and downs 'em—one, two,

three, four. Then he has another. Of course he was tight when he hit here. Then his knees began to give away and I took him in the back room. Then he began wanting somebody to take him home."

Cardigan groaned. "My God, Miles, and you get me down here on a job like this!"

O'Mara spread his palms. "What could I do? I offered to send Jackie home with him. But no. The guy's got an idea I'm a smoothie. I told you on the phone—"

"I know, I know. I thought it was a gag." He scowled, annoyed and irritated, then growled: "O. K. Where is he?"

O'Mara took him into the rear room.

THE man was lounging on the small of his back on a green settee, his legs out straight and far apart. He wore evening clothes and a black overcoat. He looked to be about fifty, tall, thin, bony, with grayish hair. His right hand was in his overcoat pocket, his left lay on the settee. Though he was drunk, very drunk, his eyes were sharp, searching.

Cardigan said: "I'm Cardigan from the Cosmos Agency."

"Let me see your identification."

Cardigan showed him.

"O. K.," the man said. "You know you can't trust people these days." He shot a quick look at O'Mara, drew liquor-parched lips across large teeth in a weird smile. "No one can fool me," he added, stirring, starting to get up. He managed to get to his feet and leaned against the wall, keeping his right hand in his overcoat pocket, buttoning his coat with his left. He suddenly staggered and Cardigan caught him, steadied him.

"Thanks," the man said gravely. "My name is Lincoln Trent. Let us go." He paused, however, to bend a blue stare on O'Mara. "No, sir," he said, "I'm not easily fooled."

O'Mara leered. "O. K., Mr. Trent. Drop in again some time."

Cardigan had hold of Trent's arm. Cardigan was angry and disgusted, and he said suddenly: "This'll cost you twenty-five bucks, Mr. Trent."

"Pay you now," Trent nodded, drawing a small sheaf of bills from his left trousers pocket. He held the sheaf in the palm of his left hand, deftly separated the bills with the fingers of his left hand. "A twenty and a five."

Cardigan took them. He was frowning and he said: "You might give me an idea what you're scared of."

Trent chuckled dryly. "Fellows like . . ." He nodded toward O'Mara, chuckled again.

O'Mara drew a thin smile across his lips. "I can take it, Mr. Trent."

"Come on," Cardigan muttered.

He had a time getting Trent out of the Dynamite Bar, getting him up the narrow winding staircase. The man was shaky on his pins, and though he did not fumble his words when he spoke, still it was obvious that he was very drunk. So drunk, in fact, that he had illusions of people following him. There was a cab outside and Cardigan helped him into it, followed and asked him his address and then gave the address to the driver. As the cab drove off, Trent twisted around, stared suspiciously through the rear window.

"You can never tell," he mused aloud. "No, you can never tell." He reached up and pulled down the roller shade. "Imagine that bird wanting to send me home with one of his pals! Thought he could fool me! Ha-ha!"

The streets were empty. It was a cold, clear night, with a million stars, no moon. The sound of the tires was brisk and dry and the various sounds of the city, coming from near and afar, had a sharp bell-like clarity.

Cardigan let the man ramble on, nod-

ding, humoring him. Likely he was a decent enough guy in everyday life. You might find him next day behind some executive desk, running a prosperous business. At length Cardigan smiled to himself, shrugged. The agency game was a crazy one anyhow. You ran into all kinds of things. Suddenly he wasn't angry any longer.

The address was in Polk Street.

Cardigan said to the driver: "Hang around. I'll be right down."

HE piloted the unsteady Mr. Trent into the small, neat foyer of a small apartment house. There was no elevator. "What floor?" he asked.

"Third."

Cardigan kept a firm grip on the man's arm and they mounted slowly to the third-floor landing.

"This one," Trent said, falling against the door on the right and fumbling in his left overcoat pocket. He gave that up and searched in trousers pocket, his vest.

"Try this one," Cardigan said, and thrust his hand into the man's right overcoat pocket, where his bare fingers touched a gloved hand, then a key. He withdrew the key, unlocked the door and opened it and steered Trent in. He found the light switch.

"Much obliged," said Trent.

The living room was small but neat and comfortable, and there was a door open to a bedroom beyond. Trent wiped a hand across his eyes, staggered. Cardigan caught hold of him. The man was becoming a dead weight and Cardigan stood holding him for a moment, thinking he would brace up again. But Trent didn't and Cardigan lugged him into the bedroom, turned on the light there and placed him on the bed.

"I'll be all right," Trent said.

"It was probably something you didn't

eat," Cardigan grinned. "Come on, I'll get your overcoat off."

It was then that he noticed that Trent's right hand was useless.

"Lost it in the war," Trent said, chuckling. "Always wear a glove. Just the overcoat . . . and my collar. That's enough. And leave the lights on. I always sleep with a light on. You can never tell."

Cardigan thought, "Shell-shock."

He laid Trent's overcoat across a chair, picked up some address cards that had fallen from one of the pockets and placed them on the bureau. Then he went into the bathroom, drew a glass of water and placed it on the bed-table.

"You may want that," he said, "when the liquor begins to bite in."

"You're a white chap, Mr. Cardigan."

Cardigan grinned, pivoted and left the bedroom. He put the key on the inside of the door. About a foot above the ordinary lock was a massive brass snap lock whose keyhole did not penetrate to the outside of the door. The man certainly had an obsession, Cardigan reflected. This lock, when snapped shut, could not be opened from the outside. He shrugged, released the catch, stepped into the corridor and closed the door. He heard the lock snap and then he tried the door. It was locked.

The cab was waiting in the street below. Cardigan put his foot on the running board, struck a match and lit a cigarette. He looked up at the wide array of stars.

"Great night," he said.

The driver was shivering at the wheel. "You can have it," he complained. "I give it to you, mister. Take it away."

CHAPTER TWO

McQueene

CARDIGAN got up at nine next morning, showered hot, then cold, and collected his clothing from various parts of the room. His apartment was on the

second floor of a California Street bay-windowed house. When he left, the sun was bright but without warmth and a harsh wind clubbed him, made his hat-brim drum. He took a trolley downtown and ate breakfast in a Powell Street counter-lunch: a pint of tomato juice, steak, fried potatoes, five pieces of toast and three cups of coffee. He read the morning paper meanwhile, scanned the Caliente entries and made a phone call to place a bet on one of the nags.

When he swung long-legged into his Market Street office, at nine forty-five, Patricia Seaward, the good-looking end of the agency, was cracking the typewriter keys. She said sweetly, but too sweetly: "Good morning, Mr. Cosmos Agency."

He threw his hat at her and it disarranged her haircomb. She threw the hat in the waste paper basket, sighed: "If I come in at a minute past nine, I get bawled—"

"Your lips are pretty, honey, but button them. I was out on a case last night. Picked up twenty-five bucks for taking a drunk home."

"Do you mean you paid someone twenty-five to take you home?"

He held his head between his hands, groaned and went on into the inner office. He was sitting at his desk, a minute later, when Pat came to the connecting doorway to say: "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. Sergeant McGovern called up about ten minutes ago."

"Too bad you didn't forget. What did he want?"

"Oh, he said never mind—he'd call again."

The sound of the outer door opening made Pat turn her head. She smiled brightly. "Oh, good morning, Mr. Hunerkopf!"

"Good morning, Miss Seaward," Detective August Hunerkopf said, lifting his hat straight off his head as he came across

the outer office. "I just thought I'd kind of drop in and pass the time of day and see if Mr. Card—Oh, there you are, Mr. Cardigan."

Cardigan said in a loud, good-natured voice: "Hello, Augie. You wouldn't be here on business, would you?"

A pained look crept across Hunerkopf's broad face. "Mac wants to see you," he admitted grudgingly.

"What about?"

"About a guy that died account of his head was busted in."

Pat glanced at Cardigan. He gave her a quick look, then said to Hunerkopf: "What guy?"

"Name of Trent—"

Cardigan stood up, strode across the office, took his overcoat from a three-pronged costumer and shoved into it. "Come on," he said to Hunerkopf.

Pat looked bewildered. "But, chief—"

"It's all right, Pats," Cardigan said. "The guy I was telling you about I took home last night."

"That's what Miles O'Mara said," Hunerkopf nodded.

"Said what?"

"You took Trent home."

On the way out Cardigan bent to pick his hat from the wastepaper basket. Hunerkopf was waiting at the doorway. Cardigan joined him and they walked down the corridor toward the stairway, Cardigan way ahead and Hunerkopf thumping his broad heels behind. There was a battered police flivver parked at the curb downstairs.

"Is this the one without the brakes?" Cardigan asked.

"Well, it used to but we got brakes now. We still haven't got no lights though. Brakes but no lights. Mac and I was arguing about whether it's better to have lights or brakes. What we do now, being we have the brakes, we don't take the car out after dark."

"It doesn't make a hell of a lot of sense, Augie, but get in and drive anyhow. What did Miles O'Mara say?"

They drove off and Hunerkopf said: "Oh, just that you took Trent home account of Trent asked you to."

"How did Miles get into it?"

"We found one o' them throw-away matchboxes that it had on it O'Mara's Dynamite Club. Miles is a nice fellow. He says he eats three oranges every morning."

THEY reached the Polk Street address; found an ambulance there, a couple of autos, a crowd of curious, milling people, and a squad of uniformed cops. Cardigan got out before Hunerkopf had quite stopped the car. The big Cosmos up shouldered his way through the crowd, reached the entrance to the foyer and was blocked by a rookie.

"McGovern sent for me," Cardigan said.

"Yeah?" the cop challenged. "I was told to let nobuddy—"

"But me, officer. I'm Cardigan."

"Well, whyncha say so!"

Cardigan climbed to the third-floor landing, where another uniformed cop was standing doing tricks with a nightstick. The door to Trent's apartment stood partly open and it had been shattered partially by an ax. When Cardigan entered the living room, his hat crushed beneath his arm, his hands lounging in his overcoat pockets, McGovern barked from the bedroom doorway: "There you are, Cardigan!"

"In the flesh, Mac. Augie dropped around to pass the time of day. Hello, Miles."

"Hi, kid," O'Mara said. "I hope you don't think I ratted on you, Jack."

Cardigan chuckled with rough good humor. "Ratted how?"

McGovern chopped in with his fog-horn voice: "Miles says—"

"I know what Miles said, Mac. Miles said I toted Trent home last night and Miles told you the truth. The guy was screwy or drunk or both with a touch of the D. T.'s thrown in. He had an idea someone or something was following him. He never slept with the lights off."

McGovern's dark eyes were hard, beady, and his snowplow jaw was set. He snapped: "It's damned funny that I can't run onto a case lately around here without you cropping up on it like a stinkweed."

Cardigan was paying no attention to him. "Where's the body?" he asked.

It was in the bedroom, lying on the floor near the foot of the bed. One temple was bashed. The man from the coroner's office was standing in the bathroom doorway drying his hands, his sleeves rolled up over fat white arms.

"Hello, Doc," Cardigan said.

"Hello, Mr. Cardigan."

"How long's he been dead?"

"I figure he died between one and two this morning."

McGovern put in: "Miles says you took him out of the Dynamite at a little past one."

"Yeah," said Cardigan. "Exactly ten past one."

"What'd you do then?"

"Took him home—here—in a cab. Lugged him up the stairs, laid him on the bed, took off his overcoat and his collar and tie, put a glass of water alongside his bed and left."

"What else did you do?"

Cardigan pivoted slowly, knotting his shaggy brows together. "Maybe that's your idea of a joke."

"It's my idea of a police question."

"O. K. What else did I do? I took the same cab to my place, got out, went up to my rooms, undressed, brushed my teeth, put on a pair of blue pajamas and

went to bed. Then I had a dream. I dreamt that a guy named McGovern was a great detective, but it was only a dream, Mac, it was only a dream."

"We'll skip that," McGovern growled; and still fixing Cardigan with his hard, blunt eyes, he said: "See that door we had to cave in? Go over and take a look at. O. K., don't. But there's a lock on there that locks only from the inside. You can't open it from the outside. We know because we had to break the door in. What I want to know, Cardigan, is if you accidentally bopped this guy. Maybe he got troublesome, the way drunks will, and you had to bop him. Maybe you didn't think you hit him as hard as you did. Maybe you—"

"The guy," said Cardigan with vast patience, "was very nice. All your guesses are cockeyed, Mac. All he wanted was to be taken home. I took him home. When I left, I noticed the lock you're yapping about and I slipped the catch and heard it snap shut when I closed the door from the outside."

McGovern had not removed his hard stare from Cardigan; and now he said: "Didn't Trent pull a gun on you?"

"Pull a gun on me!"

McGOVERN hauled a long-barreled .38 revolver from his overcoat pocket. "This was in his hand when we found him. No shots fired. He was slammed on the head before he could fire it. The bed-table drawer is open, so we figure he yanked it out of there."

"Not at me," Cardigan said. He turned away from McGovern, his eyes keening and snapping around the floor. "Was this the position the body was found in?"

"He was laying face down," McGovern said. "About a foot nearer the bed."

"Got a flashlight?"

One of the cops had one. Cardigan took

it and sprayed its beam on the dead man's face, then on a nearby chair, then along the bed and down the foot of the bed. He knelt, fastening the beam on the near post at the foot of the bed, running the beam down to the heavy, clawlike base. Then he stood up, reversed the flashlight and extended it toward the man from the coroner's office.

He said: "Take a look at that down there. Does it look like blood to you?"

The man took the flashlight, knelt. Then he drew a small magnifying glass from his vest pocket and bent way over. "It does," he said. "Yes, it does."

Cardigan said: "It looks to me as if Trent took a header and smacked his noggin on the bottom of that bedpost. The man could hardly stand up when I brought him in. I had to practically carry him to bed. I'd almost swear that if he tried to get out of bed and stand he would have taken a header sure as hell. And that's what he did."

"You forget the gun," McGovern cut in. "The gun was in his hand."

Cardigan said: "I told you, Mac, the guy was screwy about people following him. He might have got a brainstorm, grabbed the gun out of the drawer, tried to stand up and then—" he jerked his index finger downward—"taken a belly-whopper."

"That," said the man from the medical office, rising, "sounds about as logical as anything I've heard yet."

McGovern said: "This potato could make anything sound logical."

"What did you find on him?" Cardigan asked.

"In his pants, thirty-two bucks and a few cents. In his wallet some cards of his, some other business cards, a lodge card, a letter from his sister in New York—stuff like that. Damn it, Cardigan, nobody got in this apartment after you left. They couldn't have got in through that

lock and there's no other door and they couldn't have got in by the windows."

"Of course not," Cardigan nodded. "People die accidentally once in a while, Mac. They die in bathtubs and slip and fall out of windows— Of course nobody got in here. I'm willing to swear that Trent wouldn't have been able to get to the door to let them in. His legs gave out on him. I had to lug him to bed. Who found him?"

"A guy works with him at the tourist agency where he worked. Trent ran the agency and this guy was supposed to stop by for him with a car this morning at eight thirty. Well, he did—name of Sylvester—and knocked and rang the bell. No answer, so he thought Trent'd left, but when he got to the office, no Trent. So he phoned the apartment. No Trent either. So he came back and knocked some more and then called a cop."

"Did Sylvester say anything about Trent's brainstorms?"

McGovern scowled. "Well, he said Trent'd been shell-shocked but it came back at him only now and then."

"It sure came back at him last night."

Hunerkopf was holding open his report book, pencil poised. He said: "Excuse me, Mac, was the guy's first name Lincoln?"

"Yeah. Lincoln Trent."

Hunerkopf wrote it down. "I once knew a guy that was named Lincoln and asked him if his folks named him after President Lincoln and he said no, they didn't. He said they named him Lincoln account of he was born in an automobile."

McGovern said peevishly: "It's just too bad you weren't born in a covered wagon and never uncovered!"

Hunerkopf was writing in his book—*Death from accidental causes.*

Miles O'Mara was regarding Cardigan covertly.

THE evening newspapers didn't give the case an awful lot of space. It got a stick on page three. It was relatively unimportant, and it had been discovered that Trent had had occasional fainting spells before. Blood was found on the bedpost where it was supposed he had struck his temple in falling. An acquaintance had come forth to say that on one occasion, about two years ago, Trent had sat up all night with a gun leveled at his door, certain that someone was going to attempt to kidnap him.

Cardigan was in his office at about six-thirty, finishing up for the day, when the outer office door opened and a man looked in.

"Yeah?" called Cardigan.

"Oh, glad you're in," the man said and entered, closing the corridor door and making his way into the inner office. He was short, heavy, with fat arms, rubbery lips and brown jowls. His eyelids were thick, puffy, seeming to crowd his eyes almost shut. He smiled and held out a thick, broad hand, stump-fingered. "My name's McQueene, Mr. Cardigan. I don't doubt you've heard of me."

"Sorry," Cardigan said, not looking sorry, "I haven't." He made an uninterested pass at the man's hand, then picked up some strips he had clipped from the various evening papers and shoved them into a filing case.

McQueene smiled at his fingernails. "Of course, I'm not as well known as you are. Besides, I'm a one-man agency."

"Oh, McQueene, yeah. I've heard of you. I'd forgotten."

"I see you're interested in the Trent death." McQueene, smiling with his rubbery lips, thumbed in the direction of the newspapers.

"We always clip out references to cases we stumble into. What can I do for you, Mr. McQueene?"

"Oh, I don't know. I just thought I'd

stop by, sit down here, and we'd talk the case over, thresh it out, come to an understanding on just what did happen. I know I'm not in a class with you as private detective. I'm just—"

"Skip the self-panning, Mr. McQueene," Cardigan frowned. "The fact is that you think you're pretty good. Now isn't that the fact?"

McQueene looked absently at the palms of his hands. "It's a queer business you and I are in, Mr. Cardigan. As a matter of fact, I'm here to lay a proposition before you. We can sit down here and talk it over like two sensible men and I say we ought to be able to reach some sort of agreement."

"About what?"

"About the Trent death," McQueene said.

"The police reached a pretty good agreement on that," Cardigan said bluntly, his eyes darkening and searching McQueene's face.

McQueene chuckled in a preoccupied manner, his eyes fixed on the surface of the desk. "What I like particularly about it," he said, "was the fact that it was you who finally convinced the cops that it was a case of accidental death."

One of Cardigan's eyes narrowed down wickedly. "Brother," he said, "has it occurred to you that you might be talking out of step?"

McQueene looked up with his half-hidden eyes. "I've got both feet on the ground," he said, his big lips barely moving. "We ought to talk business, not nonsense. I don't like to get tough and I know you don't, either."

"Who said I don't?" Cardigan growled.

"I know, I know; I've heard you're pretty hot to handle, but—"

"Make it business, Mr. McQueene," Cardigan interrupted.

"Sure, I intend to. Let's forget all about the police hand-out in connection

with Trent's death and get down to cases. You know there's been no motive established why Trent should have been brained and that alone makes your theory of his accidental death hold the water it does. Now suppose it came to light that there was a motive for Trent's having been knocked over? What would you say to that?"

CARDIGAN sat down on the edge of the desk. "You're getting interesting. McQueene. Don't let me down."

"That's why I came here."

"Why?"

"To not let you down." McQueene leered slowly, lights dancing in the fleshy folds of his eyelids. "You convinced the cops that Trent fell while under the influence of liquor and killed himself. You pooh-poohed the idea that someone might have come in the apartment after you left. The only thing that holds your reconstruction of how he died so well is the fact that there's been no motive aired. The airing of a motive, Cardigan, might do more than make your face red, don't you think?"

"You're doing an awful lot of talking, McQueene, but still it makes no sense."

"Don't be an Airedale, Cardigan. Trent had something like twenty-two thousand bucks on him when you took him home. I didn't hear the cops say they'd found it."

Cardigan said very slowly: "They didn't."

McQueene leered. "Of course they didn't. Come, come. I'll even grant you that Trent fell down the way the papers said he did and conked out. But you know yourself that nobody could have got through that door to lift his roll."

"You ought to smile when you say that, McQueene."

"I am smiling."

"Not according to my dictionary."

"You wouldn't try to get too hot to handle, would you?"

"Even asbestos gloves wouldn't help you mister."

McQueene's face got dull, saturnine, but his voice was still patient. "Trent, I tell you, was packing around twenty-two grand when you took him home. Are you going to be fool enough to stand there with your bare face and think that the cops will laugh it off if they find that out?"

Cardigan's voice was low, taut. "You said you had a proposition."

McQueene's face relaxed and his shrubby lips unwound in a jovial leer. "Sure, nobody wants to run to the cops, Cardigan. The case is death by accident with them. Sure, sure. I knew you'd see the light. The proposition's a white one, Cardigan. Fifty-fifty."

"Eleven grand to you and eleven for for me, huh?"

"That's right. That's a clean break, isn't it?"

"That's pretty clean, McQueene."

McQueene stuck his stumpy thumbs into his lower vest pockets, grinned broadly, jovially, showing two buck teeth, slightly yellow. "I knew you'd come around to sensible talk, Cardigan. We're both in a tough game, underpaid, and when a little cash is found laying around loose, why—" He shrugged, spread his palms.

"Sure," nodded Cardigan.

"Absolutely," nodded McQueene. "I often thought that you and me, with an agency of our own—"

"Could clean up."

"Positively!" agreed McQueene. "Why, Cardigan, this town is wide open for a man of enterprise—two men of enterprise—"

Cardigan opened his desk drawer and withdrew a box, flipped it open. "Have a cigar, McQueene."

"Why, thanks. I don't mind if I do."

McQueene stuck the cigar in his mouth and Cardigan struck a match and held it up. McQueene leaned forward, touching one end of the cigar to the flame, sucking on the other. Cardigan used his free hand to reach in beneath McQueene's left arm and snap his gun from its shoulder holster. The gun he pressed against the man's soft big belly. The cigar fell from McQueene's mouth.

Cardigan said: "I always wondered, McQueene, just why you were a tenth-rate dick. I know now." He backed up McQueene, side-stepped to the window, closed it. Then he crossed to a steel cupboard, opened it and took out a towel. He wrapped the towel around the gun and the hand that held the gun. He said: "This makes a pretty good silencer, McQueene."

McQUEENE'S lips flapped like loose rubber, his pulpy lids crushed upward, revealing wet wide eyes, stark with a growing horror. His jowls jounced. "My God, Cardigan!" he croaked.

"Another reason why you're a tenth-rate dick: you can't take it. Well, maybe you can talk. How did you find out Trent had twenty-two grand on him?"

"Honest, Cardigan," the fat lips blubbed, "it was a chance I took. Just a long chance."

"Don't try talking yourself up. You never took a long chance in your life. Yes, you did—one. But it was a mistake. You over-reached yourself. You thought you could carioca in here and chisel your way into a small estate of eleven grand. Even thinking of that long chance, McQueene, ought to give you heart failure. And by the way, how is your heart?"

McQueene held his arms out before him, fat palms toward Cardigan, fat lips joggling. "S-so help me, Cardigan—"

"Douse it. What I want to know is,

where'd you find out Trent was packing twenty-two grand when I took him home; and if you don't tell me I'm going puncture that spare tire around your belly and I hope to hell you don't bleed all over my carpet."

Sweat had sprung out on McQueene's forehead. "Don't! Put that gun down, Cardigan! I made a mistake! I'll admit it—"

"You talk too much. You heard what I asked you."

McQueene pawed at his throat. "I—I was hired, Cardigan. Honest to cripes, I was hired! It's no doing of my own. I was hired to—"

"Who hired you?"

"Listen, Cardigan, you know yourself a private detective is like a lawyer—he shouldn't reveal his client's identity—"

Cardigan snarled: "You fat-head! Do you think I give a damn about a lot of noise like that! You walked into something here, McQueene, and so help me you're going to spill over or I'll open you wide!"

McQueene staggered backward, his upper lip fluttering and revealing his two buck teeth. "Beckels—Beckels!" he gagged.

"That's not enough. Who's Beckels?"

"He—he runs a place up the street from the Dynamite Bar."

"What kind of a place?"

"You—you know—cards—roulette—chuck-a-luck."

"And Beckels sent you after me?"

"Look, Cardigan. Look now! Trent hit there early last night and took the roulette wheel for a ride. He damn near broke the bank. He ran five hundred bucks up to twenty-two grand! When Beckels read the papers this afternoon—read how you convinced the cops Trent's death was an accident—"

"He hired you to proposition me."

"Yeah—yes!"

"You sure he didn't want the whole twenty-two grand back?"

McQueene's eyes rolled.

Cardigan snapped: "Of course he did! And he offered you a commission of—say—a thousand bucks. And you thought you'd be wise. You thought you'd get eleven grand out of me easier than twenty-two—and then skip with the eleven grand."

McQueene was pressing his back against the wall, guilt written starkly all over his flabby face. He gibbered: "D-don't tell Beckels! For God's sake, don't t-tell Beckels!"

"Get out," Cardigan muttered.

"Listen—please—d-don't tell—"

"Out, McQueene!"

McQueene stumbled ingloriously into the outer office, turned around, croaking: "Promise me you won't t-tell Beck—"

"I'll promise you a kick in the teeth if you don't get out!"

McQueene rushed out blindly, choking, spitting.

CHAPTER THREE

Cardigan Burns a Butt

THE lad with the broken nose was dribbling his fingers up and down the ivories in a dusky, lazy song about a man who done a gal wrong. It was a slow hour—ten—in the Dynamite Bar, and only a few of the blue-checkered tablecloths were occupied by elbows. In a corner a fat girl with bangs was taking the delta song to heart and sniffing into a rye highball while her escort, a flat-headed tall man, was patting her hand. There was a lazy, sleepy atmosphere about the place, and Miles O'Mara was absent-mindedly rolling dice all by himself at the bar, while the barman looked on dully.

Cardigan came down the winding stairway with his big feet making a lot of

noise. The buttons of his overcoat were in the wrong buttonholes, the crown of his old hat looked like a relief map of a mountain range. He came up to the bar as Miles O'Mara rolled out a natural.

"Nice night out, eh, Jack?"

"I wouldn't know, Miles; I'm a stranger in town. Come in the back room a minute." Cardigan did not wait but swung away from the bar, ducked his big head as he went into the rear room. He swiveled, crackled a match to life on a thumb-nail and was puffing the end of a cigarette red when O'Mara came in.

O'Mara said: "You act like a guy with things on his mind," and sat down on the settee, shooting his legs out and crossing them at the ankles.

"Plenty, kid," Cardigan nodded, bending a keen glance on him and keeping it there. "What would you say if I said Trent was floating around town last night with twenty-odd grand in his pockets?"

O'Mara looked up at him, said nothing for a minute, then said: "Am I supposed to bite hard or just nibble?"

"Take a good hard bite."

"O. K. What's it to me?"

Cardigan took a couple of slow, ruminative puffs, his hard stare still fixed speculatively on O'Mara. He said at length: "Trent spent some time in this back room, Miles."

O'Mara stood up, stretched. "So I rolled a lush, huh?" His smile was thin, crooked.

Cardigan said: "You know, Miles, there was something damned screwy about the whole thing. Are you sure you weren't the one put the idea about a guard into Trent's head so that I would be the fall-guy?"

O'Mara reflected aloud: "You were, so far as anyone knows, the last to see him alive, weren't you? What do the cops say to the new angle?"

"The cops don't know about the new

angle. I thought maybe you knew about it all along."

O'Mara crossed the room and looked at himself in a mirror. "I don't look a hell of a lot like a rat. Maybe I am one, though." He turned, his smile lopsided. "I don't know whether to bust out laughing or cave in your kisser."

"Cave in whose kisser?" Cardigan mocked him, then chuckled, said: "You'd have to whittle me way down first, Miles."

O'Mara took three steps and one swing and the swing stopped against Cardigan's jaw and Cardigan sat down on the settee. He blinked, shook his head, rubbed his jaw; for an instant there was a glassy look in his eyes, but then it faded.

O'Mara was grimacing, biting his lip. He ripped out: "You big sap, why'd you egg me on? Are you all right? Did I hurt you? You want a drink?" He swept a bottle from the table, poured a stiff jigger. "Here, Jack."

Cardigan downed it, smacked his lips. "O. K., Miles. I asked for it, didn't I? I always thought you were a right guy, Miles, and I guess you are. But somebody got that twenty-odd grand."

O'Mara's fists curled up again.

"Uh-uh," Cardigan said, shaking his head. "Ten to one you didn't get it. What do you know about Beckels' place up the street?"

"I've won a couple of bucks there, lost a couple, now and then." He squinted. "Why?"

"It's a spot I never heard of, and I never heard of Beckels."

O'Mara said: "I think he comes from Reno. They say his games are on the level. I don't know much about him. I've had a couple of drinks with him over the bar."

"How does he stand in with the cops?"

"He doesn't."

Cardigan said: "Trent took his roulette wheel for a long ride last night and—"

"Stop!" O'Mara cut in, his eyes widening, his index finger pressing against Cardigan's chest. "Let me think. Now let me think. It comes to me now. About ten minutes after Trent came in here last night a guy came in and took one of the tables over the other side of the bar. Just after you left with Trent, this guy went in the phone booth alongside the bar. He was in there, well, I don't know how long—just long enough to make a call. Then he came out and had a drink at the bar, taking his time. I didn't think anything of it at the time, and maybe there's nothing to it now. But I remember I'd never seen the guy before. He was a little fellow, well dressed, with a blond mustache. Wait a second. I'll call Angelo."

HE summoned one of the waiters, a hunchbacked Italian with a bald head and a big nose. He said: "D'you remember the little guy with the blond mustache at that table behind the post last night, about the time the funny drunk was in here?"

"Sure."

"Was he ever in here before?"

"I never seen him."

"Did he ask you any questions?"

"Nope."

"Nothing, huh?"

"Nope. Only when Mr. Cardigan came in, the fella kind of grinned and said, 'That guy smells like a copper. Is this a raid?' So I said, 'No. That's just Mr. Cardigan, the private detective. He's taking the stewed gentleman home.' That's all. The guy just laughed and bought another drink and asked for some nickels."

O'Mara said, "O. K., Angelo," and the waiter returned to the bar. O'Mara dropped his voice. "Think there's a tie-up?"

"Like this maybe. Trent was tailed

here by two guys. One parked himself in a store across the street near a telephone. The other came in here, to keep his eye on the prize. When the prize left, the one in here phoned his pal in the store across the street, or down the street, or maybe around the corner. The pal took up the trail."

"Except this: how could anybody've got in through that big lock?"

"No one could've, Miles—but if I stop to worry my nut off over that I'll get muscle-bound. The way it stands now, the only guy who could have rolled Trent in his apartment was me. And I didn't. They're the words and I've got to write music to them." He strode to the door, paused to pivot and say: "Is there any gag about getting in Beckels' place?"

"Hell, man. I imagine Beckels'd welcome you with open arms!"

Cardigan chuckled roughly, swung aside the curtain and passed through the doorway. McQueene turned sidewise away from the bar and blocked him. McQueene's rubbery lower lip hung loosely; his face looked sweaty and greasy and there was about him the hot stench of too much whisky. Whisky made his voice husky when he croaked: "Where you going, Cardigan?"

"Hello, McQueene," Cardigan said, his eyes dropping to the bulge in McQueene's overcoat pocket. McQueene's hand was in that pocket but his hand alone did not make the bulge. Cardigan leaned sidewise against the bar. "Have a drink, McQueen."

The big lips hung motionless but McQueene was saying, "Where you going?" in a dull, sunken voice.

"I suppose you've been tailing me all evening, huh?"

"Where you going, Cardigan?"

"You're plastered, McQueene. Use your head."

McQueene murmured: "You're going

to Beckels." His lips shook and there was a dull, sodden look in his pinched eyes. Cardigan could see the bulge moving. He knew what the dull look meant. It was far more deadly than if McQueene's eyes had blazed. The barman was down at the other end of the bar, paying no attention. O'Mara was still in the back room. The people at the tables were absorbed with their own interests. The broken-nosed piano player was hunting through his sheet music.

McQueene shook his head. A slow, crazy leer drew his lips apart, revealing his two buck teeth. "No you're not going to Beckels," he said thickly.

Cardigan said gravely: "I'm sorry for you, McQueene. You're not doing this because you've got guts. You're yellow. I'm sorry as hell for you. When you come after me again, sweetheart, come stark sober."

He swung upward with his left, crashed it into McQueene's mouth. McQueene staggered backward, dragging out his gun. Cardigan's right hand swept a bottle off the bar. He chopped with it. It slammed against McQueene's head. People jumped up, knocking over tables. McQueene flopped around on his feet like a piece of jelly, the gun dangling in his hand, his eyes rolling. Cardigan hit him in the mouth and McQueene went down, lay motionless on the floor.

O'Mara came out of the back room like a shot, stopped short.

"Nothing, nothing," said Cardigan, jerking a thumb toward McQueene. "I think he thought I was somebody else. Nice guy, but impulsive. Be seeing you, Miles."

He went out.

THE woman who let Cardigan in the house up the street looked to be about thirty. She had black hair, cut short, smooth as a boy's, and her ears were bare.

The entrance hall was quiet, deserted. At the left was a wide, open doorway leading into a large, comfortable living room, and this was empty but for a young man in a tuxedo who sat facing the doorway, turning the pages of a magazine. The whole thing looked innocent enough. It looked like a comfortable home, quiet, well ordered.

"Nice, nice," Cardigan said to the woman. "Tell Beckels I want to see him?"

"Beckels?" She looked curiously at him.

"My name is Cardigan," he said.

Her eyes steadied, her lips tightened.

He smiled. "Don't let the name get you down."

It seemed she did not know what to do. Her eyes fluttered for an instant, her breast rose, fell.

The man in the other room got up, tossed the magazine onto a table and came out into the entrance hall lighting a cigarette. He was young, lean. He said indolently: "What do you want to see Beckels for?"

"I'll tell that to Beckels."

The young man looked at him steadily with dry, expressionless eyes, then said: "Come on up. Leave your things."

Cardigan gave his hat and overcoat to the woman and followed the young man up the stairs. In the upper hall were several wall lights, one of which was out. The young man screwed the bulb until it was lighted; then he unscrewed it again. Down the hall, a door opened and a small, dark-faced man looked out.

"O. K., Sam," Cardigan's companion said, and they passed into a small room furnished with two high-backed chairs. There was a door beyond, which Cardigan's companion opened, stepped aside to let him pass.

Cardigan stepped into a room where half a dozen people were standing around

a crap table. At the other side of the room was a chuck-a-luck layout being patronized by two women and a man. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling. Beyond, there was an open doorway; beyond the doorway a larger room, a large group of men and women hemming in a roulette table.

"Nice, nice," smiled Cardigan.

His companion did not smile. The man seemed to have no lips at all. He paused, looked around, went over to speak with a man who stood against the wall. Then he came back, motioned Cardigan to follow him and so led the way through another room where five men in evening clothes were playing stud poker. He knocked on a door. The door was opened and the man gestured Cardigan in.

The room was a sitting room, small but luxuriously furnished. Inside, Cardigan stopped, measured a tall, barrel-chested man who stood holding a drink in his hand. The man wore evening clothes. He had a round, solid, heavy jaw, rusty hair, a narrow bony forehead and big-knuckled rusty hands. He chuckled. "Cardigan, eh?"

Cardigan said: "What was the idea of sending around a guy with a lot of ham in him to try to scare me?"

Beckles took a drink. "Where is McQueene, by the way?"

"I gave him a bottle and rocked him to sleep. He gets underfoot a lot, like an old rug. What gave you the notion that a tenth-rate wind-broken dick like McQueene could get to first base with me?"

Beckles was unperturbed in a heavy manner. "McQueene's been working nights for me here since I opened the spot. I pay him fifteen bucks a night for keeping out mugs that oughtn't to come in. I'm practically a stranger here. He's been in the detective business a long time and knows the hot numbers by heart."

"Why did you send him after me?"

"Why go over all that, Cardigan? Trent hit the bank for twenty-two grand and a few hundred last night and you took him home and he was found conked this morning and there wasn't anything said about the dough being on him. I called McQueene in today and we talked it over. I sent him after you. I figured you'd rolled the guy and since the money was loose I wanted to get back what I'd lost. What's wrong about that? I offered McQueene ten per cent of the take—a couple of grand. What did you expect me to do, run to the cops, get myself in a jam for running a blind spot and at the same time get kicked around headquarters on a charge of having connived to roll the lush of what he'd won off me?"

"I might have done that myself," Cardigan said, "if I'd been in your shoes—but I wouldn't have sent McQueene. The thing is, Trent's dead. I convinced the cops that it was an accident. The fact that Trent had hit the bank here for a lot of dough can't remain a secret forever. Somebody'll spill it. Likely McQueene, because he's slamming around town tight as a tick now and the guy's mouth is loose. And if the cops find Trent did have so much dough, there's your motive—and the case of death by accident that I built up'll backfire on me. Somebody's going to pay through the schnozzle for this and I'm damned if it'll be me."

BECKLES said: "Trent left here with the dough. He walked a block or so and went in the Dynamite and because he had so much dough on him he got panicky, so he phoned for a private cop to take him home." Beckels finished his drink, shook his head. "Boy, you're going to have something to talk yourself out of—if the cops find there's a motive. You absolutely convinced them that no one

could have got in that apartment after you left and that Trent would have been too drunk to reach the door to let anybody in. As the saying goes, you've made your bed."

Cardigan's face got dull red. "Who's to prove that Trent actually had the dough on him when he left here?"

"If I have to come out in the open," Beckels said, "I can get six prominent citizens summoned. Ordinarily they wouldn't want it known that they were playing in a gambling casino. But if I have to come out in the open, I can prove that he left here packing the dough. And do you think he would have left the Dynamite without making sure, as he left, that the dough was in his pockets?"

Cardigan's lips tightened, curled. "So I'm holding the bag."

"You're holding the bag, Cardigan," Beckels said, "and the bag contains twenty-two thousand and three hundred berries. *Take him, Dave!*"

The man with the lipless mouth was already on the draw when Cardigan kicked him in the stomach. The man looked very ill, his mouth twisting open, his knees breaking. Cardigan had his own gun out, a wicked, malevolent smile on his face.

"Be nice, Beckels," he said.

The man with the lipless mouth said, "*Ugh*," and fell on his face, writhing, groaning. Beckels' face looked very white against the rusty color of his hair, but his eyes were steely.

Cardigan said: "I'm going out, Beckels. You've got a lot of swells out in your rooms and I'd advise you and the punk to stay in here for five minutes, until I get out."

"Five minutes," said Beckels, nodding.

Cardigan put his gun into his pocket, opened the door and left the room. He did not hurry. He strolled through the rooms, was let out into the corridor and

went down the staircase to the entrance hall. The woman was not there. He went to the rear of the hall, saw a door at the left, a small room beyond in which a lot of coats were hanging. At the rear of the room the woman was leaning out of a small window, cigarette smoke blowing around her head.

"My hat and coat," Cardigan growled.

She spun about, startled. "Oh," she said. "Oh, you—you frightened me!"

"Tough."

She closed the window hurriedly.

Cardigan put on his overcoat, slapped on his hat. He looked puzzled about something for a minute, but then shrugged and swung his legs up the corridor. The woman unlatched the front door.

"Got a butt?" he asked.

She seemed eager to please. She took a small green lacquered case from the pocket of the black silk jacket she wore. He looked down at a row of oval-shaped cigarettes, took one, lit up and said, "Thanks."

He drifted up the street, leaned against a pole, struck a match and looked at the cigarette he was smoking. Then he leaned against the pole for a few seconds, his brows wrinkled, the smoke curling from his lips. Suddenly he strode across the street, went down the opposite sidewalk and ducked into the alley alongside Beckels' house. He found the window in which the woman had been leaning. It was closed now—a foot above his head. He bent down, sniffing. Then he picked up a cigarette on which a few strands of tobacco still glowed. He pinched them out and returned to the street, walked a block and stopped to strike another match and looked at the butt which he had picked up. He slipped it into his pocket, retraced his steps and stood at the entrance of an alley obliquely across the way from Beckels' house.

CHAPTER FOUR

Too Hot to Handle

IT was a long wait, and from time to time Cardigan shifted restlessly, resisting an impulse to drum his cold feet on the pavement. At intervals he saw people come out of Beckels', singly or in pairs or groups. Midnight crawled past. A thin haze crept up the street and in a little while became a milky fog. At two o'clock lights went out here and there in Beckels' place. At two fifteen the door opened and the woman came briskly down the steps, alone, and walked away down the street, her high heels clicking sharply on the pavement.

Cardigan followed, though he did not cross the street. He saw the woman only as a shadow now in the fog, but he could follow the sound her heels made. Then the sound stopped. Cardigan stopped also, puzzled, but in a moment he was sure he saw the woman standing near a street light on the next corner, just the blur her form made in the dimly lighted fog. Five minutes later he heard a slight laugh, saw another shape join her; saw both shapes move dimly away, close together, with only the sound of the woman's heels distinct.

He followed the pair for a matter of four or five blocks, noticed a change of pace, then a change of sound. The heels were now striking on wood. He saw a lighted doorway and caught a glimpse of the two figures blurred vaguely against it. A frame house, a frame porch. He saw the door open, caught sight of a third blur, and then heard the door close, sending a small bang out into the drenched darkness. Two drawn window shades became illumined from behind.

He went around to the back of the house, but found the basement windows protected by vertical iron bars. Up a flight

of six wooden steps was the back door, and he found this locked. He entered the side alley again. It was very narrow. He looked up and saw a curtain blowing out of a second-story window of the house which the woman and her escort had entered. The house next door was of brick. Reaching the front, he peered at a sign nailed to the porch of the brick house—*For Sale or Rent*.

He went around to the back of this house and tried to force a basement window, but did not succeed. Looking up, he thought he saw a hole in a windowpane on the first floor. In the yard he found an old galvanized tin garbage bucket. He placed this on the ground below the window, climbed up and found that there was a hole in the windowpane. He shoved up his coat sleeve, reached in and unlatched the window, raised it and climbed in. Using matches—he had no flashlight—he made his way to the second floor, found a window almost opposite the one in which the curtain was blowing. The intervening distance was about six feet.

He returned to the basement again, hunted around until he came to a boarded coal bin. The planks that enclosed it he judged to be about six or seven feet in length. He used a long poker to pry off the top plank and carried the plank up to the second floor. Opening the window carefully, he shoved the plank out, rested it on the opposite windowsill. He had several inches to spare.

Crossing on the plank on hands and knees, he pushed the blowing curtain aside and entered a darkened room. He lit a match, saw that he was in a bedroom. There was a door beyond, closed. He listened at it, then opened it and stepped out. Here a small light burned against the wall. There was a bathroom across the way, another room on the right. On the left was the head of a staircase. He sniffed at the tang of fresh coffee being

made. They were having a late snack.

His feet were big but he could make them fall lightly when he had a mind to. The padded runner on the steps helped. He made little sound on the way down to the lower hall. Voices were somewhere in other regions of the house. The woman's—a brief, amused laugh—then a man's low chuckle. The smell of bacon. Bacon and eggs, he supposed.

THERE was a living room, small, sparsely furnished but pretty comfortable. Beyond it a dining room, darkened; but beyond the dining room a swing-door with a small glass panel at the top and light beyond the panel. The kitchen.

Cardigan crossed the dining room, paused before the swing-door, peered through the small glass panel. His brows came together. A puzzled expression took possession of his face. He remained standing there for a long minute, chewing on his lip, wrinkling the flesh on his forehead. And then the wrinkles vanished, the puzzled expression faded. His eyes steadied, his face looked very brown and heavy and almost sinister.

He put his right hand into his overcoat pocket, placed his left against the door and pushed it inward until his left arm was out straight. "Hello, Miles," he said.

The woman started and her elbow knocked a glass of beer off the table. The glass shattered on the floor. Beside her sat a man with a rocky jaw, high cheekbones and a bald bony head. His sleeves were rolled up and his lank forearms were dark with hair. Miles O'Mara had stopped chewing on a piece of bread; it bulged his left cheek. He looked very immaculate. The woman's teeth were chattering.

O'Mara asked conversationally: "How'd you get in?"

"I rang the doorbell. No answer. The door was open and I walked in."

O'Mara leaned back, chewed, swallowed. "Any reason?"

"Sure. I was walking along in the dark feeling very hungry. I smelled the smell of bacon and eggs and coffee and I couldn't resist it. It's a complex I have. Whenever I smell bacon and eggs and coffee, I go all weak all over. I think I inherited it from my father."

The bald-headed man looked around the table resentfully and said in a hoarse, angry voice: "I locked that door! Don't I know when I lock a door?"

Miles O'Mara looked thoughtfully at him. The woman's teeth had stopped chattering and now she sat with her hands clenched in her lap, her face dead white but for a splotch of high red color on either cheekbone. Her back was arched inward, her breath drawn in and her lips peculiarly hueless.

Miles O'Mara smiled dryly, started to get up.

"Uh-uh," said Cardigan, shaking his head, motioning O'Mara to remain seated.

"What's the matter?" O'Mara asked, still smiling, but remaining seated.

"Plenty," Cardigan said slowly, dully, threateningly. He withdrew his gun from his overcoat pocket and held it in his big hand with a deceptive negligence—the way a man who is used to a gun holds one. "I came especially for the bacon, Miles. You can keep the eggs and the coffee. I'll take the bacon. Twenty-two thousand dollars' worth of bacon."

Miles O'Mara drew a crooked, amused smile across his lips. "Will you take it with you or should I wrap it up and send it around?"

"We'll skip the comedy, Miles. I may be a thick Mick but every now and then I even surprise myself by the bright ideas I get. I got a bright idea tonight. I figured the whole thing out. I figured there would have had to be three people to play the game that rolled Trent for his dough.

It doesn't figure any other way. I've eliminated McQueene, the cheap dick I put to sleep in your spot tonight. I've eliminated Beckels and that guy of his with the forgotten lips. I'd eliminated you until I saw you here. The only one I was sure of when I came here was the woman—"

THE woman's lips tightened down and there was a quer shimmer in her eyes. The bald-headed man's jaw was thrust forward and his face looked like wet cement. His shoes scraped on the floor.

"You be nice, funny face," Cardigan told him. "The cops'll probably want you especially." He said to the woman: "When I left Beckels' place tonight—when I went to get my coat—you were leaning in that little window on the alley and I saw smoke around your head. When you turned away from the window you weren't smoking a cigarette. I asked you for a butt when I left, because I thought when I startled you at the window yours might have fallen out of your mouth. But it didn't. You weren't smoking. You were talking with somebody in the alley. I went around in the alley a minute or so later and found a dropped butt still burning. It was not the kind you gave me. It was a self-rolled cigarette. I see," he said to the bald-headed man, nodding to a packet of cigarette papers and a sack of tobacco, "that you roll your own."

The man snarled hoarsely: "Suppose I did—I do?"

Cardigan paid no attention to him. He spoke to O'Mara. "The woman really pulled the boner. For one thing, she was the only person who looked at all scared when I went to Beckels' place. Now let's take Trent. Trent had only one hand—his left. His right was false and he wore a glove on it. When I took him home, he fished around in his left-side pockets for his doorway. He was quite drunk, so

I reached in his right overcoat pocket and found it. I only began to remember this when I saw the woman leaning out of that little window in the cloakroom. Trent would never have carried his key in his right overcoat pocket because he would have had to be a contortionist to get to it. Maybe a right vest pocket—but not an overcoat pocket.

“The thing figures out like a blueprint. No one followed Trent home. No one could have got through that lock, which I snapped as I left. I’ll swear to that. And I’ll swear to it that Trent was too shaky on his legs to ever have got to the door to let anyone in. There’s only one answer. Someone was hiding in the apartment when we arrived. In a closet, say. Someone who knew Trent would have a lot of dough on him. I left. The guy came out of the closet, got his hands on the dough. But Trent struggled, got the bed-table drawer open and got his gun out. The guy pulled his own gun and smacked Trent and Trent fell off the bed. Then the guy, seeing Trent was dead, rubbed some of Trent’s blood on the foot of the bedpost, to make it look like an accident, and placed Trent’s body so his head would be near that post. The woman wasn’t in the room. No—and you weren’t, Miles—not then. The woman was on her job at Beckels’ and you were at the Dynamite. But I’ll bet you funny face here can’t produce an alibi as to where he was, say, at half past one and maybe a couple of hours straight before that. Why? Because he was waiting in Trent’s apartment for Trent to come home.”

The bald-headed man’s shoes scraped on the floor. The woman’s face was dead white.

O’Mara said quietly: “How’d he get in the apartment when you yourself say it was locked when you got there?”

Cardigan grinned without humor. “The

woman knew Trent was taking the roulette wheel for a killing. This think wasn’t planned on the instant. You’d laid the plans and were just waiting for the right guy with enough dough won to make it worth while. Trent was the guy. There were cards of his in his overcoat pocket. His key was there too. She took the key and passed it out to funny face, through the alley window, after phoning you or him. She gave him the address. She must have known he lived alone. You joined funny face and both of you went to Trent’s apartment. In a car you can make it in ten minutes from Beckels’. You unlocked the apartment and funny face went in and stayed there. You locked the door, Miles, from the outside and brought the key back to the alley window and the woman put it back in Trent’s overcoat pocket—but in the wrong pocket. Funny face rolled Trent and killed him!”

Cardigan felt something hard jammed against the small of his back. “That’s just what I was waiting to hear,” croaked McQueene. “Put ’em up, Cardigan.”

CARDIGAN’S eyes slid to the sides of his sockets and he raised his hands. McQueene took his gun away, kicked him to one side so that Cardigan stumbled, stopped against O’Mara, who was still seated. He made, ironically enough, a perfect shield for O’Mara. The eyes of the bald-headed man almost popped from his head. The woman looked terrified.

A gun in each hand, McQueene looked gross, deadly, his eyes crowded down to two dangerous glints between his pulpy lids, and fastened on the bald-headed man.

“So you didn’t get the dough,” he snarled slowly. “You told me you didn’t get the dough. You told me you were hiding in the closet and when you finally looked out Trent was on the floor, dead, and there was no dough. So that’s the

way it was, huh? You said that Cardigan must have got the dough. You just up and double-crossed old McQueene, huh? And I followed Cardigan tonight, thinking he still had it, and where do I follow him to? Here! And I damn near broke my neck coming across that plank! Kabe," he ground out desperately, his lips wet, "I want that dough. Not a split. The whole dough! Get it! I'm drunk and I don't give a damn who I knock off! Get it!" he screamed. "Tell your sister to get it and if she ain't back here with it in two minutes I'll blow your block off!"

The woman stood up, shaking, terrified. "I—I'll get it," she breathed out.

She left the room and the bald-headed man waited, his eyes bulging, fixed on the two black muzzles. In a couple of minutes the woman came back with a large brown envelope. McQueene put his own gun in his pocket, took the envelope from her, glanced at its contents.

He said: "Now go around back of your brother, Belle, and take his gun out of his hip pocket. Put it on the table. I'll not trust a shot in the back."

She did this, placing a .38 automatic on the table. McQueene stepped over, picked it up, stepped back as far as the doorway, his face contorted in a mad, crazy grin.

"So you double-crossed me, eh? You double-crossed the guy who thought up the plan, who went with you, Kabe, to Trent's place and brought the key back. Well, I've got Cardigan's gun now and I've got yours. I'm going to knock off Cardigan with your gun and I'm going to knock off the rest of you with Cardigan's gun. And I'm not smart, huh? The cops'll think Cardigan came here on a tail and you all shot it out."

The woman cried out and clapped her hands to her cheeks. McQueene laughed, shook his head. "Cardigan first, sister,"

he said. "The guy that thinks I'm all ham and a yard wide."

Cardigan was beginning to perspire. He looked at the woman, at the bald-headed man. O'Mara had been idly tapping with a pencil on the white tablecloth. Now Cardigan felt his leg being nudged. He looked down his nose. O'Mara had written on the tablecloth—*Left gun not loaded.*

And McQueene was snarling: "Well, Cardigan can you take it?"

CARDIGAN had about ten feet to cover in order to reach McQueene. He looked at McQueene and said, "Maybe," and strolled closer, the gun pointing at a spot high on his chest. He reached out his hand. "Give it to me, McQueene." McQueene pulled the trigger of the left-hand gun as Cardigan made a stab at the right. McQueene's mouth flew open. Cardigan whipped McQueene's right hand down, then way up. McQueene jammed the gun in his left hand against Cardigan's ribs and pulled twice more, but there were only hammer clicks. Cardigan came up with a short vicious blow to McQueene's chin. The one good gun, held high, went off and drilled a hole in the ceiling. McQueene went flabby against the wall and Cardigan ripped both guns from McQueene's hands, tossed the empty one aside, reached into McQueene's pocket and got McQueene's own gun as the fat man slid down the wall to the floor.

"Duck, Cardigan!" O'Mara yelled.

Cardigan did not look around. He ducked—instant reflex to the warning. An iron skillet dug into the wall in front of him, fell, gonged against McQueene's head. Cardigan jumped far to the right before he swiveled; swiveling, he saw an iron pot leaving the bald-headed man's hand. The pot hit the wall spewing scalding water.

The woman put her hands over her eyes.

The bald-headed man looked at Cardigan and backed up, his jaw loose, his breath gagging him, his eyes bulging.

Cardigan said with a shrug: "Don't look so scared, funny face. What a mug I'd be to shoot the guy that killed Trent. Miles, how's to grab a phone and call the cops?"

O'Mara was mopping his face. He went toward the swing-door saying in a jittery voice, but with a smile: "If you hear a knocking sound, don't worry; it's my knees."

He went into the living room and Cardigan heard him telephoning headquarters. When he returned, Cardigan said: "I had you all fitted into this puzzle, Miles. But McQueene took your place. What's the answer?"

"I got Belle her job at Beckels' because I thought she was going straight. As a matter of fact, I vouched for her. I used to know her mother and the old lady when she died asked me to keep an eye on Belle once in a while. But I guess both the girl and her brother had a bum streak. I called her up this afternoon and said I'd like to drop around for a late snack after hours. I'd hoped there wasn't a tie-up with the Trent job, but I meant to find out. I met her at a street corner after I closed shop."

"How'd you know the gun McQueene took from her brother wasn't loaded?"

"It was on the mantel piece in the living room when I came in. Kabe didn't look pleased at sight of me and he and the girl went in the back—in here—for a minute. I unloaded the gun—just in case. When Kabe came back he picked up the gun and put it in his pocket."

"How about that phone call that mysterious guy made from your phone booth?"

"No connection at all, Jack. He was around again tonight and I got talking to him. On a bender. His mother-in-law came to visit him and his wife and he keeps floating around and calling up to see if his mother-in-law's left yet."

A siren screamed through the dark outside. The bald-headed man sucked in his breath, clutched at his chest. The woman began crying.

O'Mara went over and put an arm around her. "It's tough, Belle, but you ratted on me," he said.

Cardigan said in a low, dropped voice: "If you want, Miles, let her scam out of this—the back way."

"There's no use," O'Mara said. "D'you suppose McQueene would keep his mouth shut?" He laughed. "Not if I know McQueene."

There was hammering on the front door. The bald-headed man groaned, clutched at his throat.

Cardigan jerked his chin. "The cops, Miles. Let 'em in."

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

CARROLL JOHN DALY brings CLAY HOLT

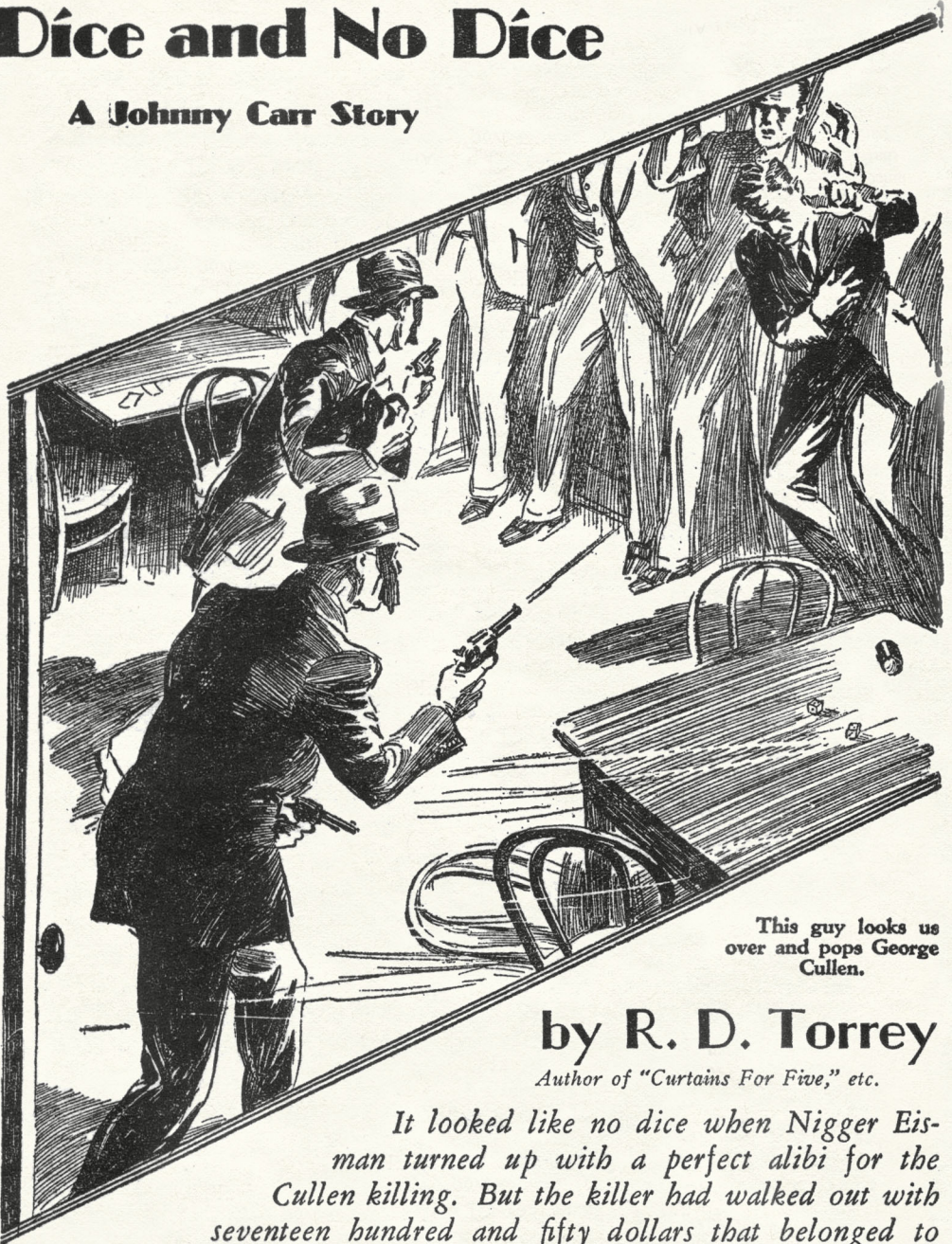
back again and presents that hard-boiled investigator and "sucker for women" with a yacht-club dance invitation that turns into a

TICKET TO MURDER

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE for October 1st Out September 15th

Dice and No Dice

A Johnny Carr Story



This guy looks us over and pops George Cullen.

by R. D. Torrey

Author of "Curtains For Five," etc.

It looked like no dice when Nigger Eisman turned up with a perfect alibi for the Cullen killing. But the killer had walked out with seventeen hundred and fifty dollars that belonged to Detective Johnny Carr, and when Eisman turned up with a couple of snake-eyes Johnny figured it was time to pick up the ivories and roll again.

IT'S a honey of a crap game . . . for Farmer Sheats that's running it. I drop a hundred and twenty but I ain't crying about it because if I'd got over

I'd have got a cut of between five and six grand as near as I can count. There's about that much in it. I've just lost the dice and the hundred and twenty and am

standing right back of George Cullen that's got the dice now, and Nigger Eisman is right next to George waiting for 'em. George is rattling the dice in his hand and has got five twenties laying in front of him that's taken, but he's holding tight so's to give the side-bettors a chance to get their dough on the line.

Half of these are calling for how much they think he'll make his point, which happens to be eight, and the other half of 'em are saying for how much he'll seven and it's the usual madhouse that a big crap game always is.

MICKEY CATARINA'S taking the cut for the house and the game's big enough so Farmer's watching him which isn't usual. Mickey reaches out and takes a fin for the house and says: "Hit the board, George!"

George nods and says: "Eight just once, dice!" and draws his arm back to bounce 'em against the back of the table.

Just then Nigger grabs his arm and says: "No dice!"

He holds George's hand and says to Mickey: "These are bum dice. He *can't* seven with 'em."

Mickey says, "Gimme!" and holds out his hand for the dice. George gives 'em to him and says, "Look good, Mickey!" and turns and takes Nigger right in the puss.

He's all braced and set and he times it perfect. Nigger can't fall backard because there's too many people behind him and they keep him from going that way, but he bounces on them and then just sort of slips to the floor and lands on his back. George takes a step ahead and holds his foot about a foot above Nigger's face and then stamps down with it—but Nigger don't know it.

I grab George before he works on him any more, not because I give a damn about Nigger but because I don't want George going up on a murder rap.

Farmer's seen the whole thing. He goes over to Mickey and looks the dice over and tosses them on the board. They show seven which proves Nigger was wrong about them being crooked dice. He says to Mickey: "How much did Nigger drop?"

And when Mickey says, "Not over fifty bucks!" he says, "Pick him up."

There's a guy waiting to go on shift in Mickey's place that I don't know and he and some guy that Nigger fell against pick him up, and they and Farmer go into the washroom and I go along with 'em for two reasons: I want to hear Farmer tell Nigger what the score is because I don't like him five cents' worth; and I'm now out of money and figure I'll get a hundred off Farmer and get back in the game. I figure a hundred more won't hurt me too much and there's percentage in that big a game if you can ever get over.

They throw water in his face and Farmer and I stand there waiting for him to come to. He's got on a new suit that's a light flashy gray, and when George stepped on his face it busted his nose and he's bled all over the front of it. He's a mess.

He comes around finally and looks up at us groggy as hell, and Farmer says: "Here's the lousy fifty you lost and if you ever come in my place again I'll not only throw you out but I'll see you'll get a floater out of town from then on. Get that, Nigger?"

Farmer's got enough drag to do just that little thing and Nigger knows it. He gets up shaky as hell and takes the money and then says, "All right, Farmer!" and wobbles through the door. Farmer says to the house man: "See that he gets as far as the steps, Sam, and—" He winks and Sam, who's a big husky bird, winks back and they go out.

Farmer don't even ask me what I want;

which proves how smart he is but just says: "How much, Johnny?"

I say: "A hundred'll do. I can't be sick always."

He gives me the hundred and I go back and get in the game.

AN hour later I'm well again. I've run the hundred up to about seventeen-fifty and I've got the dice and have just made my point and am going to try for a seven when somebody says: "Heist 'em, boys."

I look up, see two masked guys, one standing right by the door where he's got the room under control, the other by the side. The first guy's got two guns and the second, one. The door's about thirty feet from me and I think fast.

I've got two-fifty on the table and the rest of it, fifteen hundred, in my left hand, and I figure I can toss this under the table as I raise my hands and as soon as the heist guys are gone I can find it.

I do this.

There's a little guy wedged in next to me that's been rattling about ten dollars in silver in his hand and betting dollars against points. He sees me toss my fifteen hundred under the table and I'm damned if he don't throw his ten in silver after it! When the silver hits the floor it sounds as loud as an automobile smash-up.

Nobody could miss it and the guy at the door don't. He says: "Line up against the wall and face it!" and waves his guns and we do just what we're told. Then he says to his partner: "Shake 'em down, keed! The cash drawer is on the far side and there's money under the table."

Keed goes through the crowd and cleans us right down to and including carfare, and takes the money out of the house drawer and dives under the table, and I can hear him grunt when he finds my roll. He even gets the guy's silver that he was so proud of.

Then the guy by the door says to us: "Turn around."

We do. I'm so mad I can hardly see, not so much at the heist guys as at the little dope that pitched the chicken-feed, but what happens next scares the mad out of me. We're all lined up against the wall, maybe twenty, maybe twenty-five of us, and this guy looks us over and comes up with his right-hand gun and pops George Cullen, who's standing right by me. When he does I see the gray coat he's wearing and it's the same one Nigger had on. There's blood down the front of it just the same way and it's cut the same and made out of the same flashy cloth.

I get all this in the second it takes George to fall forward on his face.

The guy waves his guns and says, "Don't hurry!" to us and to his partner, "Le's go, keed!" Keed goes out the door and the trigger man follows him out backward and we just stand there and watch 'em go. The game's really a hustler's game and all these boys know enough not to run after a guy with a gun. They figure all they lost is money and I figure the same way right along with 'em. We couldn't stop the guys and all we'd do is take chances on being laid on a slab alongside of Cullen.

I know he's dead but I squat by him and see I'm right. Farmer goes over and locks the door and calls out: "As soon as the law comes you boys can go but I don't want any questions about what's happened. There'll be no beef. Get the time straight and remember what's happened as plain as you can because you're going to be witnesses in a murder trial."

He comes over to me and squats down alongside and says: "Dead?"

"Plenty," I say.

He says, "You know who don't you?" and I say: "Nigger Eisman. I'll call Mac-Andrews at the station if you want, Farmer. He'll give you as much of a

break as any of 'em and maybe more."

"Go ahead," he says.

We got to call the law because the room's so soundproof nobody could have heard the shot unless they was right against the door. I go over to the phone then and call the station and get homicide and ask for MacAndrews, and he's in which is a break. I tell him it's me—Johnny Carr—and where I am and what's happened and for him to come down, and then I say: "It'll save time if you put out a pick-up on Nigger Eisman. He's the guy that done it."

He says: "It's easy done if I want to but why should I?"

I say: "He's the one that done it, I tell you. There's at least twenty witnesses to it."

"How long ago did this happen?" he says.

I LOOK at my watch and see it's 11:26 and I know this happened at 11:23 because I looked at the time then in case of any question.

"Three minutes ago," I say.

He says: "Eisman's been here for at least twenty minutes talking to Tony and me. He's damn near drove us nuts trying to get us to put in a good word for him with Farmer so Farmer won't put the bee on him in all the rest of the joints."

"What kind of a coat's he got on?" I say.

I hear MacAndrews talk to somebody else in the homicide room and then he says: "He's got on a gray coat. He's got a smashed schnozzle and it's bled all over the front of it."

I say: "Well, come on down!" and hang up the phone and tell Farmer what he said.

Farmer's place is on Spring and not over eight blocks from the station. It takes Mac about five minutes to make it and he knocks on the door and Farmer

lets him and Tony Corte, his partner in, and they've brought Eisman with 'em.

This Eisman is only called Nigger because he's got thick fat lips and is dark. And he's just one of those dirty stinking kind of two-bit hustlers that hang around the real ones. He comes in, feeling plenty snotty, and looks at me and Farmer and says: "Trying to hang this on me, hunh. It's no dice because I was at the station when it happened and I can't be framed."

He's just as smart about it as he can well be. Farmer looks at me and shakes his head so I don't say anything. By the time Mac and Tony take everybody's names and where they live there's a photographer there and about twenty other cops, some in uniform and some not, and an assistant district attorney and the place is jammed.

Farmer's got this D. A. over to one side and is talking to beat hell and then Mac calls out: "You can all go home but don't leave town without coming up to the station and telling me. You're material witnesses and I don't want to have to go after you." He knows he's safe in letting 'em go like that because they're mostly birds that live without working and can't afford to jam with the law over anything like being witnesses.

I start to go with 'em but Farmer sings out, "Wait, Johnny!" so I do. He gets through with the D. A. and gets his hat and I say goodnight to Mac and Tony and we start to go. I say, "Where?" and he says: "Le's go to Herbert's and talk it over."

So we get a hack in front and go there and sit at a table and order and then Farmer says: "And what d'ya think of it?"

I've done plenty of thinking. Whoever done it got away with seventeen hundred and fifty dollars of my money and this hurts. I don't like to have George Cullen

killed right alongside of me but after all he's no particular friend of mine and this don't bother me as much as losing the dough does.

"Why in hell should Nigger start the beef with George?" I say. "That was a phony. He'd lost fifty slugs but what of that. That wouldn't start him out unless he was higher than a kite and he didn't act like it."

Farmer asks: "Does he use the weed?" and I say: "Sure! But he didn't act like he was high tonight."

"You want to work on it for me, Johnny?" Farmer says.

I say: "Yes you bet. I'm going to do seventeen hundred and fifty dollars' worth of work on it for my own side."

He says: "The D. A.'s going to act as if it was a row in a private club so I won't get jammed for running a spot, but I had between four and five grand in that drawer. If I hadn't got a break I'd have had to pay out every one of the customers on a frequenting-a-gambling-house rap. I'm out and injured."

"You ain't got any cherry," I say. "I'll scout around and see what I can see."

He thinks about this for a while and says: "Cullen was in this, it's a gut. If Eisman's row with him was to make it look good for the shooting later on, which I think and you think, he must be. How's that for an angle?"

I tell him that it's maybe O. K. and we go. He's got to cash a check to pay our ticket. He's cleaned out as pretty as I am.

I FIGURE Farmer's got a good idea about Cullen but that I've got a better one. MacAndrews and Corte think we was seeing things when we saw Nigger Eisman but I know better. If Nigger had an alibi, and he's got a cast-iron one, somebody else didn't know he was going to have and was going to use him for the goat—whoever did the job. That's first-

grade stuff. Also they wouldn't know he had blood all over the front of his coat unless they had seen him in the hour between the time of the beef with Cullen and the time of the heist. That's second-grade. Also Eisman wouldn't have picked a beef with Cullen unless he was in the dope some way. That's third-grade only it'd be eighth- if I could figure why he'd spot himself as a killer, and then back out on it.

The fourth-grade is a lot harder. I scout around a little that night and don't do any good and it's around three the next afternoon before I find out where Eisman lives . . . the Continental Hotel on South Main.

I beat it right down there and Eisman ain't in when I get there but comes in while I'm asking the clerk what room he's got. He sees me and starts to back out but he ain't got a chance because I see him at the same time he sees me. I grab him and say: "Le's go in your room and talk," and he stalls a little but we go back.

Just as soon as we get inside I shut the door and tell him to sit down and then I see he's higher'n a kite. He's got that *dopey, screwy* expression that shows it all over his face . . . a kind of silly grin that tells the score right down to runs, hits and errors.

"High, hunh!" I say; and he looks at me and grins and says: "Uh-huh."

I tell him that he's behind the eight ball and he tells me I'm crazy. Then he starts to tell me why I am. He's just so damn high he's got to brag to somebody and I'm there.

"You know Felix Ullman's place?" he says.

I do and I say so. Felix runs a cigar stand and is fronting for some bird that's making book in the back room of the spot. He goes on with: "Well, I was there yesterday about noon putting five on Jackie

Horner's nose in the fourth at Caliente." He swears some here at somebody that touted Jackie Horner to him. "The dog thought he was the little lamb and the rest of the field was Mary. He'd have come in tenth except there was only nine horses running."

He's so dinged up that I figure it's better to let him go and not try to hurry him. I lost five myself on Jackie Horner to place and I know how he feels when it comes right down to it. He says: "While I was in there some guy comes over to me and says do I want to make fifty smackers. I say yes and he takes me over to one side and says it's mine if I pick a beef with George Cullen and let him take me." He kind of puffs up on this and explains that that's the only reason he lets George take him. In the shape he's in he even believes it.

"Who was this guy?" I say; and he says: "I don't know him but I've seen him in there once or twice before. He comes in there always with some other guy and this other guy calls him Oley."

I ask him what he looks like and he says: "He's about as tall as I am but he's got a big belly. He's bald as an egg on top of his head and just got a fringe around the edges and is light-complected." He goes on then with: "I tell him I'll do it and he says he'll pay me when I do. I back up on it then and he gives me twenty of it then and is going to give me the rest later."

"You think you'll get it?" I say.

"I know I will!" he says, and takes out a sweetheart of a stop watch that's worth half a grand of anybody's money. He shows it to me and explains: "He give this to me to hold and is going to meet me here with the other thirty at five today to get it out of soak." He nods his head at me as if that should show me what a smart dope he is.

I look at my watch and see it's ten to

four. I say: "Where did you see him after you left the joint?" and he says: "In the cafeteria up the street from there. He and his friend were there waiting for me to see whether I did it or not. As soon as I talk to them I figure it's maybe a phony so I go up to the station and make myself an out. I guess I'm half smart."

I don't know whether he'll remember what he's told me when the marijuana wears off but I hope he does. I figure to ask him then how smart he is. He hasn't got any phone in his room and I figure that maybe the guy that did the job *will* take a chance and come in and pay off because they won't know I know anything about the set-up, and may figure that it's safer to pay Eisman so he'll keep his mouth shut. It'd be a sucker stunt but the whole thing's so screwy I figure it's a good bet.

"I'm going out," I say to Eisman. "Be right back."

He goggles at me and pulls out another reefer and grins at me and says: "I'll be right here when you get back."

He is. . . .

I'VE gone to the lobby and telephoned. I get Mac and tell him to come on down if he wants to make the pinch and he says he will and I go back to the room. I knock on the door and Nigger don't say anything and I try the knob and it's locked. I pound some more thinking he's passed out. He was so damn high I don't think he can walk out and he didn't act like he wanted to take a powder on me.

About then my foot slips in something on the floor. I look down and see a dark spot that gets bigger while I look at it and right then I get the smell of fresh blood. There's no mistake if you ever smell it once. I get back against the wall across the hall and slam into the door with my shoulder, and this breaks the lock and I fall over Eisman.

He's laying on his back about a foot from the door when it's open, and somebody has fixed him up good. Really first-class. There's a spot on his temple that means he got clouted there and then somebody's taken a knife and just ripped his neck open. This has cut the big artery and he's bled to death while he was knocked cold and this means plenty of blood.

For a minute it gets me. The phone booth's at the side of the lobby and all the time I telephoned Mac I kept watch, and I know nobody either went back or come out through the hall. I know it can't be suicide because marijuana smokers don't do the dutch hardly ever for one thing, and he wasn't even feeling low for another, and what makes it murder for sure is that there's no knife. I look.

I sit down on the bed and try and figure it out, and here's a closet with the door standing open and that tells the story. Whoever did the killing was in the room when Nigger and I come down the hall, and he heard us and hid there and heard Nigger tell the story of his life to me and figured that with Nigger dead things'd shape up better, and come out and smacked him when I left and made sure he was dead by cutting his throat. This makes it look like the bird that Nigger alibied for must be it, and it makes any chance of me tagging him at Ullman's no dice, because he's heard Nigger tell me about him hanging around there and'll give the place a miss from now on. The whole thing don't look so good.

I sit there and watch these puffy lips of Eisman's change color and think this all out before Mac comes. He sneaks down the hall and knocks real quiet and I whisper just loud enough so's he can hear it: "Come in!" He does, very quiet, looking at me instead of at his feet— and falls over the body and goes on his face.

Then he gets up and I say: "Meet the

boy friend!" and I wave at Nigger.

He looks at him and says: "Did you have to—" then sees how his neck is chopped up and changes it to: "Who done it?"

I tell him that I don't know and this makes him sore and he says: "You was here, wasn't you?"

Mac's like that, flies off the handle easy. He says: "What was the idea in getting me in here and making me fall over it?" He waves at the body.

I say: "It was your own feet you fell over." It burns him up but he lets it slide. I tell him how it happened and that the guy locked the door after himself and must have gone out the back way and about what Nigger told me about this Oley, whoever he is.

"Ullman might know," Mac says then.

I say: "He *might!*" and Mac says: "He better."

He calls the morgue wagon and the print man and all the rest of the staff at the station and I beat it. I know Ullman and I don't think Ullman's going to know a thing that he'll talk about. Mac could take some guy that didn't know the score too well down to the station and make him think up stories if he didn't know any, but this Ullman'll know what Mac can and can't do. He's got plenty of protection on his joint or he wouldn't be running the way he is, and a guy like that's got too many connections to get rough with just on a guess. As soon as Mac gets down to earth he'll figure the same way and I know it so I can't see any sense in wasting time sticking along with him.

I START right then on Farmer Sheats' hunch because it's all I got left, and make the rounds of the joints trying to find somebody that knows something about Cullen. The catch on this is everybody knew him and don't know anything about him. He was one of these birds that

don't get up until the joints open and stays until they close and that don't seem to have any home. It takes me three days before I get a lead, but when I do I find out he's married and has got a kid and lives out in the Wilshire district which is a damn nice neighborhood.

I go out there and find his apartment and knock on the door and a little short dark woman comes to the door and I say: "Mrs. Cullen?"

She says she is and looks scared to death. I say: "I want to talk to you," and she says: "Won't you come in?"

I do. They got a pip of an apartment, the kind that rents for at least a hundred and fifty, and this is important money for a hustler to be paying for rent. She waves me to a chair and says in this scared way: "George isn't home, officer. I don't know where he is."

She's got me picked as a copper which is all right with me for a while. If I figure I can get more out of her by telling her I run a private agency there's always time. I never think about her maybe not knowing what the score is and say: "Why, didn't you know George was dead?"

"It's a hell of a thing to do but I don't think. She looks at me like she don't understand and says: "What did you say?" and then sees by my face that she's heard right. She looks at me for a minute and then says, "Oley!" as if to herself and starts to cry.

I let her go for a minute and think what a heel I am to tell her like that and she says, still crying: "George knew it. He knew it was going to happen."

I say: "He had a hunch?" and she says: "He told me we were going to move away from here because he was afraid of Oley."

I say: "Oley who?" and she says: "Oley Chrisman." She's really going to town with her crying and it's like talking to somebody who's answering questions

they don't know is being asked 'em. Like somebody talking in their sleep. I say: "What made him think that?" and she says: "He and George quarreled something terrible the last time he was here. Oley's brother was quarreling with George too."

I say: "What about?"

She keeps on crying and mumbles: "I don't know!" and I say: "George is dead, Mrs. Cullen. Anything you tell me may help me find the man that killed him." She cries harder than ever and says: "It was my fault. The whole thing was my fault. If I only hadn't asked George to quit."

"Quit what?" I say.

She looks up at me and says: "Kidnaping!"

I stare at her and she says: "George and Oley and his brother and a woman Oley said was his wife, only I don't think she was, were kidnaping people. I made George tell them he was going to stop it."

I've changed my mind about it being such a raw stunt telling her about her old man. If she had a chance to think it over she wouldn't be talking like this. She's lived with a hustler and if she wasn't about half nuts she'd clam up like one. I got her at just the right time.

"Did you ever hear any names?" I say.

She says: "I heard the name McClure once. And Sullivan. I heard that too. That was when they were all arguing, the night before George went away." She puts her head down on her hands and really goes to town again with her crying on this and I let her go because I got to have a minute to think.

For the last six months there's been talk around the joints about some snatch gang that works the big hotels for married men that want to party a bit. They let him meet some gal and seem to get over with her pretty well and when she

takes him to her apartment they bust in and take him. The gal's supposed to be a respectable married woman just out for no good and the guy can't squawk on her account as well as his own. He'd have to admit being where he shouldn't. There's never been a beef come out yet because this bunch is smart enough to put the slug on easy—maybe five, never over ten grand—and give the sap plenty of time to raise it. A guy won't cry on a touch like that where he would if it was lots of money. I don't remember either the name McClure or Sullivan but I think of another way to check on it.

"How long have you lived here, Mrs. Cullen?" I say.

"About six months," she says. "We came from Kansas City. George got in some trouble there and..."

This fits fine. I can't see why George and his friends have a beef about him quitting though, so I say: "Why did you want him to stop?"

"This woman that was supposed to be Oley's wife," she says, "was always making eyes at George!" She breaks down here and starts in to cry good again and sobs out: "He got killed just because I was jealous of him."

I SMOOTH her down a little and wonder a guy that was as smart as this George Cullen must have been should have married a half-wit of a woman. He might have quit the other boys because she wanted him to but they didn't knock him off on account of that. I think of another way to check this kidnap yarn and ask her where the phone is and she points it out to me. I call the station and get Mac.

"Mac," I say, "did you ever hear of anyone named McClure and Sullivan?"

He speaks back real quick. He says: "McClure was picked up in a ditch last week but wasn't identified till this morning. Why?"

"I just wondered," I say. "What about Sullivan?"

He says: "Never heard the name. What about McClure? Why did you ask?"

I say: "Never mind. I'll tell you when I see you," and hang up the phone and go back to the woman. I ask her if she has any idea where this Oley Chrisman hangs out and she says she don't and then I figure I'll check on Nigger's description and I say: "He's blond, ain't he?"

"Why no," she says. "He's dark and he's got curly black hair parted in the middle. He's heavy." I ask her how tall and she shows me about five feet and a half high in the air.

I got another hunch now so I say: "You better get in touch with the law, Mrs. Cullen. I'm only a private detective!" And I get out while she stares at me.

I get down to the front of the apartment house and just as I step out on the street I hear a siren howl and along comes Mac and Tony Corte in a fast wagon. Mac sees me and climbs out and says: "What's this about McClure?"

His face is red and I can see he's so damn mad he can't hardly talk. It burns him up to think I'm holding out on anything he should have found out by himself. It takes me about ten minutes to tell him what the gal told me and then he says: "And you don't know where this Chrisman is?" and looks at me like he don't believe it.

I say: "I don't. There's *two* Oley Chrismans. One blond and bald-headed and the other dark and with black curly hair. As soon as I find more of them I'm going to put 'em with the Smiths in the phone book."

He says: "And you don't know where to find 'em, hunh?"

I say: "No. Believe it or not."

"For two cents," he says, "I'd stick

around with you for a while." I give him a nickel and tell him that he owes me three cents and he says: "You mick! You hold out on me and you'll wish you hadn't."

I say: "Come along then."

He stares at me as mean as he can and says: "I know you're holding out on me. That's why I traced the telephone call."

"So what?" I say.

He says to Corte: "Come on, Tony. Let's go up and see what this woman's got to say."

They go into the apartment house and I head for a phone booth.

I start calling up hotels and make it on the fifth one. The Belvedere. A nice place. I say: "Have you had a Mr. Sullivan registered at your hotel in the last week or two that went away without his luggage?" I know that if anybody does a stunt like that it makes talk among the help.

The girl says: "Wait a minute!" and I wait and by and by she says: "Hello. Who is this speaking?"

"Missing Persons," I say, which is taking an awful chance if the hotel has reported it to Missing Persons. But in a minute a man says: "This is Mr. Fields, the manager. You were asking about Mr. Arthur Sullivan?" I say: "Yes."

I hear him talk to somebody else and then he says: "Can you come down here? It's very important."

I've started something I don't know what to do with. Then I think that even if worse comes to worse and there's trouble I can always say they misunderstood on the Missing Persons gag and that I can't be stuck for impersonating an officer on that kind of proof so I start. There's something doing and I want to know what.

I GO into the lobby and ask for this Mr. Fields and he's left word for me

because a bell-boy takes me to his office plenty quick. This Fields is a thin, worried-looking bird and he doesn't look too happy when he says: "You're from Missing Persons?"

"I'm John Carr!" I say, and let him take the Missing Persons thing for granted.

"This is Mr. Zeil," he says, and waves at a little dark Jewish-looking guy and I shake hands with him not knowing what it's all about. This Zeil says: "Mr. Fields and I had just decided to call you."

I sit down and say nothing and Fields says: "We didn't know what to do. We were just talking when your call came in."

I let Zeil tell the story and it's just what I thought it is. He and Sullivan run a real-estate office and a hotel in Santa Barbara and have quite a bit of property. Zeil gets a letter from Sullivan that tells him to dig up ten thousand in cash and to give this to a man that'll give him another letter from him. The pay-off is here at the Belvedere but Zeil gets thinking about it and don't believe the letter where it says it's for a business deal.

He explains: "We got spread out before the slump and are land poor. Sully'd know that I'd have a hard time to get the money and that we can't afford to go in to anything else."

He and Sullivan and this Fields have been friends for years and so he asks him about it and they just about decided it was a phony when I call. The baggage being left in the room is the tip-off to them, though they are sure that Sullivan wrote the letter.

I say: "Does it say when the man'll call for the money with the letter?"

Zeil gives me the letter and I see that he's supposed to wait at the hotel from Wednesday on and it's Friday now. I ask him about this and he says he's been waiting but the more he thought it over

the more he thought he ought to do something. Then I tell them that I heard of a man named McClure who's just been found dead and Sullivan mentioned in the same way and ask 'em if they'll let me go on it my way, and we talk it over and finally decide what to do and how to do it, and Fields calls in the house dick and tells him he's to do what I tell him. Fields don't want any fuss in the hotel but I tell him that whether there is or not depends on how the play comes up and he has to stand for this.

The play comes up that same night and there's no fuss.

I'm in Fields' office and I hear the buzzer on his desk tick three times which means that somebody asks the clerk for Zeil and I drift out easy into the lobby.

There's a short, runty-looking bird standing by the desk. By and by Zeil comes downstairs and he and this guy talk a minute and then the guy gives Zeil a letter. Zeil reads it and goes over to the clerk and asks for the envelope he's checked in the hotel safe, and the clerk gives it to him and he gives it to the guy and then I step in.

I don't make a move before because the guy has to get the money before the case is air-tight. I tip the wink to the house dick and step alongside this bird and say: "Easy, guy. It's a pinch."

Cullen has been shot and Nigger Eisman has been stabbed and this McClure has been killed some way I don't know about and I ain't taking any chances. I got a gun in my coat pocket and I got about three inches of the end of it into this guy's ribs when I speak.

He turns and looks at me and says, "What for?" just as easy as hell and I say: "It's only kidnaping now. It'll be murder on top of it by and by."

He says nothing to this but shoves his shoulders up like it's no never minds to him, and the house man and I take him

out the back way so's not to tip anybody off that might be waiting for him. The whole thing goes so smooth that nobody even guesses there's been a pinch made and there's at least fifty people milling around the lobby. As soon as we get him out of sight we shake him down and don't even find a gun. He's got this envelope that Zeil gave him though, and he's got a letter addressed to Victor Chrisman and this is a break.

I load him into a cab and take him to the station and into the homicide room and say to Mac: "Here's one of the guys!"

Mac don't waste any time in getting into action. I don't even have time to tell him I know the answer to what he wants to know. He comes right over to the runt and says: "Where d'ya live?"

The guy gives him a snotty look and says, "You guess!" and Mac smacks him across the puss and the guy hits the floor so hard he bounces. He's out cold.

"He lives on Redondo," I say. "I just brought him up to park him and see if you want to make this pinch with me." I show Mac the letter, which is a bill from a radio company, and Mac says to another copper that's there, "When he comes to, put him away!" and to Corte, "Come on, Tony!" and we go.

THIS house on Redondo is in the third block up from where the street-car line ends on Washington. It's a nice neighborhood, all little houses but modern and most of 'em built this Spanish style. Mac coasts the police car into the curb a half block down from the house and I say to him: "This is going to be tough."

He grunts and gets out and says, "Why?" and I say: "Because this guy is plenty tough and there's this poor devil of a Sullivan in there with him. We got to call our shots."

He grunts again and pays no attention and says to Corte: "You take the back, Tony. Carr and I'll go in the front way." He's sore as hell because he thinks I'm trying to tell him what to do and just starts out with his head down and never a thought in it, and I got to tag along or lose my place.

He gives Corte barely enough time to get to the back and pulls up on the front porch and pushes the doorbell. There's nothing happens for a minute, but from where I'm standing back of him I think I see a shade on one of the front windows flicker. There's no light showing any place in the house and Mac keeps his finger on the bell and half turns to me and says: "I guess we're too—"

He gets that far and the front door opens and somebody reaches out and clouts him on the side of the head. Mac don't even see what hits him. There's a street light on the corner but the porch is so dark I just get the flash of the gun the guy uses to clout with as it comes down and I'm looking right at it.

Mac goes down like it was an ax he was hit with instead of a gun and I go through the door in a dive at about where the guy's knees should be, figuring that if he's going to shoot I can maybe upset him before he does.

He don't shoot but hits down at me as I come in. He misses my head and just hits me on the back and this don't bother me none. What does bother me is that I miss his knees and sprawl out there on the floor and can't see or hear a thing. I'm afraid to move. The door is either on a spring or he gave it a pull as he dodges back because it's closed now.

I lay there on my belly and listen and all of a sudden I hear a grunt and he smacks down with the gun again, but it lands on my shoulder instead of my head which is a break again.

It's the last one I get. This bird acts

like he can see in the dark. I'm stretched out there and I got a gun in my right hand and all of a sudden he piles on top of me and gets my right wrist in two hands and puts on a wristlock that's a honey. I got to drop the gun to break it and I do this, and he changes it into a hammerlock but don't get a chance to put on any pressure because I get my head down and roll ahead. We're all tangled up with him still holding my wrist with both his hands and I shout, "Corte!" just as loud as I can, and smack whoever's got me with my left—but I can't get any weight behind it because he's holding me off balance.

This is the first he knows there's anybody in the play but Mac and me. He puts a twist on my wrist and puts me down to my knees and then he must remember that I've dropped the gun I had, because he lifts me up and changes his hold into a whip wristlock and pitches me over against the wall. I land sitting down.

This is a mistake but I can see how he makes it. He's got his gun and thinks I ain't. I've lost one but I got another one and I yank it out. I got to hold it in my left hand because my right's still numb, but at that I figure it's even.

I hear Tony Corte pounding away at the back door and have got time to try and figure what in hell's holding him back before this bird makes a move. When he does I *know* he can see in the dark. I'm just sitting there, afraid to move because he could hear me, and he shoots and I hear the slug chunk into the wall right by my head.

The flash of the gun is heading right at me and it about half blinds me, but I shoot right at it once and then once to each side and about a foot away from it. While I shoot I get up to my knees and the minute I'm done I throw myself as far to the side as I can, hoping he won't

be able to hear it above the bang of the gun. But I get another bad break.

I land into a chair and the damn thing skids across the floor generating plenty of noise, and he turns loose again. I feel a kind of jar in my left shoulder and high up but it don't seem to hurt at the time. I shoot twice back and move about five feet to one side and this time I manage not to run into anything.

I hear a kind of thud and then a little scramble, but I'm afraid to try for it. I only got one shell left in my gun and I can't waste it. I can hear Corte pounding away on the back door and it sounds like he's got something to pound with finally.

I hear a kind of groan and then I think I hear something move on the floor. Just then Corte smashes through the back door and comes in through the kitchen and the damn fool's got a flashlight in his hand, and as he comes into the front room he turns it full on me!

I DUCK and the guy on the floor shoots but Corte has kept on swinging his light and just as the guy shoots the light hits him. He's on his knees and right in front of a door. Corte and I shoot at the same time and he goes backwards through the door. Corte starts after him and I say: "Hold it. Turn on the light first."

He uses the flash some more and finds the light switch by the front door and turns it on. Just then Mac starts to pound on the outside and he lets him in. We all three look, and see a pair of feet sticking out this other door. I pick up my gun that's still got shells in it and then we move sideways until we can see what belongs to the feet, and here's the guy laying on his back and all shot to hell. He's deader than last Christmas's goose.

We hear another noise in the room beyond and ease in there, and here's a guy

on the bed with tape across his pan and both his hands and his feet tied with more of it. We cut him loose and pull the tape from his puss taking a bunch of whiskers along with it, and he looks at us and sees he's on the right side once again and passes out. Corte goes in the bathroom and gets some water and throws it on him, and we find a bottle of bum rye in the kitchen and give him a slug of that. He comes out of it far enough to even watch us shake the stiff down.

We figure right away the blond bald head and the black curly hair angle. He's in his curly hair make-up when we come in and when he fell his toupee fell off and shows his egg head. He's a little short guy but built as solid as a Shetland pony, and I'll be damned if I see how I made out with him as good as I did. If I hadn't been scared to death it'd just been too bad.

He's got one hole in his head and along the edge of the blood the dark stain he's put on his face has run. That makes the dark complexion the woman said he had. He's got another hole right center on his wishbone and there's two more besides this in him, one low and to the right in his side and another just ticking his left arm. I figure that Corte and I made the two center shots when the light was on him and the other two was what I was doing in the dark.

We look at my own shoulder and the slug's made a little groove about half an inch deep right on top. It don't hurt any until I look at it and then it hurts like hell because I think about it. It's bleeding some and there's some cotton in the bathroom and we put some of this on it and tape it there. Then Corte goes out front to where all the neighborhood is flocked in the street and borrows a phone and calls the morgue wagon.

We load Sullivan in the car when the morgue wagon and medical examiner get

there, and take him back to the station and sit him down in the homicide room. He tells us that the reason George Cullen falls out with his Swede pals was because after this guy McClure paid off they killed him and Cullen wouldn't go for that. This makes more sense than his wife's yarn about quitting because of her being jealous of him, though he probably told her that to keep peace in the family. McClure was still there the first day Sullivan was brought in and he knows McClure paid off and hears Chrisman and his brother tell Cullen they were afraid McClure would squawk.

We get a description of the woman, Chrisman's wife, from Sullivan and Mac puts out a pick-up for her, though it probably won't ever do any good. Then we go to Chrisman's cell and tell him we got Brother put away on ice and that all he's got to do is sign the complaint; and I'll be damned if he don't look stubborn and say: "I'd really rather not."

We tell him we know what the score is and can prove it's a blackmail proposition along with the snatch and all that, but he says that he could never make his wife see that and so he'd rather not.

Mac's just about ready to blow his cork on that, because he ain't got any proof on the McClure killing without it, and the kidnap rap won't stick either unless Sullivan beefs, but I get an idea. I go back to Sullivan.

I say: "Did you have a stop watch?"

We've searched the stiff but he didn't have any watch on him.

This Sullivan says: "Why no, but McClure did. I saw it and heard Chrisman and his brother talking about it. The brother you got in jail got it."

I say: "If we find that watch and ask you to testify to this will you do it? The gal angle won't come into it if you're only a witness like that."

He thinks a minute and says he will if we'll keep him in the clear and then he says: "But what's the watch got to do with it?"

Even Mac don't get it and I've told him where I saw the watch. So I explain: "If it can be proved that the brother we got in jail had it instead of the brother we killed, I say, "This brother can be stuck for the Nigger Eisman killing. It don't make any difference who he's charged with killing as long as it sticks. He can only hang once."

Mac says: "We never took time to look but they'd shake him down before they'd put him away. It'll be on his property slip if he's got it. It'll be his neck if he has."

He rings a buzzer and when the clerk comes in he says: "Get me this fella Chrisman's property slip."

The clerk goes out and Mac says to me: "If he's only got it!" and then the clerk comes back with the slip.

We look and he has. Also he's got seventeen hundred and fifty that I get, which makes the difference between dice and no dice to me. Where Chrisman goes he ain't got no use for money.

In DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE for OCTOBER 1st

PALOOKA DEATH-PAWN

by

OSCAR SCHISGALL

THRILLS! MYSTERY! SMASHING ACTION!—WHEN AN EX-COP TURNS EX-PUG THEN BACK TO COP AGAIN IN A HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPIONSHIP BOUT WITH MURDER

It will be out SEPTEMBER 15th

The Golden Cipher



A Jerry Prince Story

by T. T. Flynn

Author of "Murder in the Mud," etc.

In the pawnshop of Leo Bakos, Jerry Prince—Prince of Thieves—had seen the first of those gleaming golden circlets, fashioned in the form of a serpent, with diamond eyes. When he bought it he never guessed two more would turn up—each one a metal murder messenger more deadly than leaden bullets.

CHAPTER ONE

The Man From the Pawnshop

JERRY PRINCE said gently: "If that small emerald bracelet of Miss Jeanne Cameron's is not in my hands by eight o'clock this evening, someone in this room is going to have nightmares for

The helpless figure
hurtled into space.



a long time, Leo. And it won't be me," Jerry finished cheerfully. "I sleep like a top and never dream. Think it over, Leo."

They were alone in the room.

Across the black, flat-topped desk Leo Bakos rested his stocky weight on his elbows and looked past the big oily cigar which was clenched between his teeth. His eyes were half shut. They seemed to drowse behind the blue smoke which spiraled lazily up from the motionless tip of the cigar.

With thick fingers Leo Bakos slowly removed the cigar and spoke. "If anybody heard you say that, they'd think I was a fence, Jerry."

"Hear me—in here?" said Jerry Prince with lifted eyebrows. "You're not afraid of that, are you, Leo?"

The drowsing eyes of Leo Bakos went around the room. Not large, but distinctly unusual, that room. In fact the entire pawnshop of Leo Bakos was unusual. The three gold balls over the front door were always bright with fresh gilt. The front window held a luster which matched the gleaming display behind the iron bars which backed the glass. And the shop inside was immaculate, the stock dusted and clean. Leo Bakos' place always appeared prosperous, brisk and busy.

LEO BAKOS himself came to work every morning in a five-thousand-dollar car driven by a uniformed chauffeur whose hard, set face was always blank, whose eyes saw nothing, whose ears heard nothing, whose mouth spoke nothing that Leo Bakos did not wish.

Two clerks and a bookkeeper handled the routine work. But if a customer asked for Leo Bakos his wish was granted instantly.

Sometimes the customer was taken back into the private office where Jerry Prince now sat. About him the walls were pan-

eled in dark wood to the height of a tall man's head. The rug was solid, thick, black, silent to all steps. Sound seemed to vanish when the door was closed and one took the single chair beside the ebony desk where Leo Bakos puffed the fat, dark cigars which he imported for his own use.

Nothing hung on the walls. No other furniture was in the room. And it was seldom that more than one person at a time sat in there and talked to Leo Bakos in an undertone. The quiet seemed to breed undertone confidences. It was an axiom that anything said in there never got beyond the walls. Leo Bakos never talked. The walls were soundproof, without windows. The door was a double door, and the inner one was sheet steel.

It was rumored that Leo Bakos' five-thousand-dollar car and chauffeur were not supported by the profits of the shop, successful as it was. But the rumors evidently were unfounded, for no detective—and many had tried—had ever been able to find anything outside the law.

In the robbery detail at headquarters choleric detectives had sworn they would pin something on Leo Bakos, if only for his nerve in rolling luxuriously through the streets behind a uniformed chauffeur who had been pardoned from a life sentence on evidence that Leo Bakos had dug up and presented to the governor.

But nothing had ever come of such threats. No man had ever been able to prove that Leo Bakos fractured in any way the rigid letter of the law.

Something of that was in his heavy, solid face now as he pulled deep on the cigar, rolled it between his lips and slowly blew a large smoke ring.

"Me, I'm not afraid of anything," he said in the thick, slurring speech he had never taken the trouble to correct. "Shout it in here and down at headquarters, Jerry. It makes no never mind. But why

you should crack I got this Cameron necklace don't make sense. You understand?"

Jerry Prince watched the smoke ring expand and float toward the ceiling. He was a tall, sinewy young man, carefully dressed. He had an air. It was easy to believe that he belonged to the best clubs, that he was worth knowing. Features finely molded from temple to jaw, mouth wide and good-natured, he had the finely drawn look of perfect condition and steel nerves.

And yet, looking a bit closer, one never failed to sense an aloof, poised air, like that in the solitary vigil of a waiting hawk, set to swoop, strike, kill. Jerry Prince was fit—and solitary. His smile at Leo Bakos was without humor and without threat.

"Leo," he said, "I've known you a long time. Are you sitting there thinking I've come in here to bluff you?"

The pawnbroker studied him again. The quiet in that rich, ascetic room became thick and heavy. And under the quiet a certain tension lay tauntly. The breath Leo Bakos exhaled was almost a soft sigh.

"No," he admitted. "I've never seen you bluff, Jerry. But listen, you can't—"

Jerry Prince leaned forward. He was still smiling. "Have you heard," he interrupted, "that Skimpy Halls was killed last night?"

Leo Bakos sat bolt upright, cigar forgotten, eyes wide. "Who killed him?" he asked. "You?"

"No!" Jerry Prince relaxed against the back of his chair, a certain sardonic humor in his smile.

Leo Bakos spoke almost feverishly. "Who killed Skimpy?" Why are you telling me? I ain't interested in that little prowler. I hardly know him. What's he got to do with what we're talking about?"

"He made a statement before he died, Leo."

LEO BAKOS put the fat cigar on the brass ash tray at the edge of the desk blotter. His hand was trembling slightly. "What kind of a statement did he make, Jerry? Who killed him? The cops? Let's have it. What'd he say?"

Jerry chuckled. "Got you worried, eh, Leo? Take it easy. Skimpy wasn't shot by the police. He was struck by an automobile when he tried to dodge across the street and get away from me. I went to the hospital as a bystander. Skimpy talked to me there."

Jerry Prince's glance narrowed.

"Skimpy knew he was dying, Leo. He didn't have anything more to lose. That's why I'm asking you for the emerald bracelet that belongs to Miss Cameron. I told her I'd get it for her. It belonged to her mother. The butler was killed the night it was stolen, you remember. Skimpy was a little nervous that night. His trigger finger slipped. He confessed to that job, by the way. The confession was turned over to the police by the hospital authorities—if you're interested."

A white silk handkerchief took little beads of perspiration from Leo Bakos' forehead. His hand was still unsteady. "Nothing Skimpy Hall could say would prove I had an emerald bracelet," he said thickly. He spoke louder than necessary, as if reassuring himself as he said it.

Jerry Prince smiled again, sardonically. "Who said anything about proof? I merely asked you for the bracelet—and told you what would happen if I didn't get it. The law hasn't got anything to do with this. It's between you—and me, Leo."

Leo Bakos passed the handkerchief over his forehead twice more, reached for the cigar, left it alone, and visibly went through mental turmoil. "Suppose I had bought it?" he suggested finally. "You ask me to hand over two or three thousand dollars because you promised a girl

something? Am I crazy? Do I look like a charity?"

"If you gave Skimpy five hundred for it, you sweated blood, Leo. I'll give you five hundred and we'll be friends. Done?"

Leo Bakos' lips framed an explosive "No"; but something he saw in the lean smiling face stopped it. His hands went up in a gesture of surrender. He had the grace to smile sheepishly.

"Now I think of it maybe I can get that bracelet, Jerry. I'll join you out in the shop in a few minutes."

Jerry Prince got up at once. "I knew you could—if you thought real hard, Leo. Here's five hundred."

Closing the billfold from which he had slipped five crisp hundred-dollar bills, Jerry Prince opened the steel inner door, the finely grained wooden door, and passed into the spic-and-span bustle of Leo Bakos' pawnshop.

Both the clerks were busy with customers and several people were waiting with packages in their hands. A young man standing near the back dropped something on the glass case.

"How much for this?" Jerry heard him ask the clerk in a nervous voice. "It's solid gold."

Jerry had already noted that. The object had struck the glass with the dull sound of heavy metal, had twisted sinuously for a moment, and now lay there half coiled in a delicate, mobile, viciousness that was startling.

Gleaming with a dull, yellow sheen it lay there, a small golden serpent, each scale clear and distinct, with a tiny wedge-shaped head in which glittering diamond eyes stared coldly.

Jerry Prince stopped, stood idly watching while the clerk picked up the golden serpent and inspected it. And the thin, sinuous, lifelike body coiled around his fingers with startling reality.

Admiringly, the clerk said: "It seems to be gold all right."

The young man was leaning tensely on the edge of the counter. He said: "Sure it's gold. How much?"

The clerk temporized: "If you don't redeem it, a thing like this is pretty hard to sell."

"You buy old gold, don't you?"

And the clerk made no attempt to hide the amazement in his voice. "You're not going to sell this for old gold?" he asked. "It's a work of art. Chinese, I'd say."

"I need the money," said the young man.

He was thin, stooped; his old gray suit was shabby and the brim of his weathered old hat lopped down all the way round with a discouraged air. His profile to Jerry Prince was gaunt, hollow, from hunger or fever.

"We'll have to test it for fineness," the clerk said.

"Go ahead."

LEO BAKOS emerged from his private office with a small package in his hands and came toward Jerry. The clerk held up the small golden serpent. It seemed more viciously beautiful and alive than ever as it dangled and coiled from his fingers.

"Mr. Bakos," said the clerk, "this gentleman wishes to sell this for old gold. I've just told him we'll have to have it graded for fineness."

Leo Bakos looked startled. He took the serpent in his hand and scrutinized it closely.

"One hundred eighty dollars," he said without hesitation. He looked more closely at the customer. "Where did you get this?" he asked suspiciously.

"I didn't steal it," said the young man quickly. "Call the police if you think that. I can prove it's mine. And maybe

if you weigh it and test it you'll know better what's it worth."

"I don't need to," Leo Bakos said promptly. "I got one like it in my safe. One hundred eighty dollars the other one came to, so this is the same. They were both made by the same man if I know my gold work. The gold ain't so fine."

"All right, I'll take it."

Leo Bakos nodded to the clerk to finish the transaction and walked to the front of the store with Jerry Prince. He handed Jerry the small package as they went. "Get it out of the store quick," he begged. "I ain't so anxious anyone should find you here with it."

Jerry slipped it in his pocket and thought that Leo Bakos looked, at that moment, a little more like the furtive crook he was than he ever had before.

"Who sold that other snake?" Jerry asked.

Bakos shrugged. "I'd have to look it up. Come to think of it, another young fellow about like him brought it in. He looked hungry too. But he thought more of his snake. He pawned it. I gave him fifty."

"Always the big-hearted business man," Jerry said admiringly. "Fifty dollars on a hundred and eighty dollars' worth of good gold. And I'll bet you squealed at it, Leo. Don't sell either of those snakes. I've taken a fancy to them. I'll see you later about them."

"Sure. Any time. Only the price ain't what I paid, and the other one ain't out of pawn for a long time. Goodby—and I hope I don't see you again, *goniff*."

Jerry Prince walked across the street and waited in a convenient doorway.

He was still there when the young man emerged from the pawnshop, cast a quick look about and walked hurriedly north. Jerry followed on the other side of the street.

His man walked fast at the corner,

crossed the street there, passed in front of Jerry without looking toward him, and continued on down the side street. He walked with a curious shamble that covered ground at an amazing speed. It was, Jerry thought, much like the gait of a man used to long treks afoot, subordinating all extra motion to efficiency in walking. The gait seemed tireless. A mile fell behind. Not once did the other look back. He headed into a shabby neighborhood filled with old houses, some brick, some frame with the paint long since weathered away. All sat close to the sidewalk. Every other house had rooms to let.

A QUEER neighborhood to give up such an exquisite work of art as the golden serpent, Jerry Prince thought as he trailed half a block behind. More than that, he was a queer young man to be selling such a thing, with no thought of redeeming it and no haggling over the price. He must have needed the money badly, or else he had a reason for getting rid of it. And the reason was not the one that had made another young man pawn his golden serpent so cheaply, evidently expecting to get it back some day. That little mystery was what had made Jerry follow.

He was still half a block behind when his quarry entered a three-story frame house whose sagging front porch ended at the sidewalk line. The gaunt young man went in without looking back.

Jerry slackened his pace to a slow stroll as he came up to the house. On one of the square porch pillars which supported a second-story porch over the lower one, a peeling sign said cryptically—*Rooms*.

But Jerry got that with half an eye. His attention was on a large, shining limousine which stood at the curb in front of the house. Such a car in this neighborhood was an incongruity. It did not

belong. It stood out against the sordidness, the grime and the wretchedness with a sleek, polished aloofness. And the uniformed chauffeur who sat stiffly behind the wheel added to the impression.

Subconsciously Jerry noted the license number before turning his head to the fat slattern who was sweeping the lower porch and talking in a loud shrill voice to a woman on the next porch.

"I says to him," she shrilled, "you can't talk to me this way! I'm a lady, I am! Better bums than you have tried to beat their rent! I'll show you—" She broke off as a hoarse, unintelligible shout sounded in the house, upstairs. It was drowned by two loud shots, upstairs also.

The two women stopped where they stood, frozen, mute. The fat one lifted her broom wordlessly, but, as the voice cried out in the house again, she began to scream shrilly: "Police! Police! Help! Murder!"

The chauffeur of the limousine started his motor as she screamed. Jerry glimpsed the man's face, middle aged, thin, pallid with fear as terror-filled eyes rolled wildly at the house. He clung to the steering wheel as if it held safety of some kind for him. Perhaps safety in flight, Jerry thought fleetingly.

The fat woman continued to scream.

Overhead a door slammed loudly. Feet stamped on the second-story porch; stumbling feet which crossed the porch with a rush.

Three louder shots, crashing against the open air overhead, drowned out the fat woman's screams.

It was all happening while a man could draw half a dozen quick breaths. Looking up, Jerry saw a reeling figure come heavily against the wooden porch railing overhead. The rotten wood at one end gave way. The rail sagged out. The helpless figure hurtled out into space, arms flopping limply.

The man did not struggle as he fell. Jerry had the instant conviction that he was dead as he went out into the air. He looked away as the body struck the sidewalk.

The fat woman saw it with bulging eyes. Her screams choked in her throat. Gagging, she dropped in a faint, the broom handle clattering to the porch beside her.

When Jerry looked at the sidewalk again, the shabby figure he had followed from the pawnshop lay sprawled and inert on the hard cement.

CHAPTER TWO

Hit-and-Run

QUIET had dropped over the street with all the smothering effect of a shroud. Stunned quiet, which one knew would erupt explosive excitement in a few moments.

The chauffeur in the big car was still clinging to the steering wheel. The motor was racing wildly. Jerry shot a wary look to see if a gun was being drawn there, and when he saw no sign of it he dashed across the porch, kicked open the front door, lunged inside—and came heavily against someone who was trying to get out.

The shock was severe. The other staggered back, crying a low exclamation. It was a woman. Jerry's arms went around her; with an effort he saved them both from going to the floor.

The front hall smelled of cabbage. Against that the soft scent of expensive perfume came to Jerry's nostrils as they stopped against the bottom stair post. He still held her close.

Small hands beat at him in fear. Against the front of his coat a stifled voice said fiercely: "Let me go! Let me out of here!"

Jerry dropped his arms, stepped back and caught her by an elbow, swinging her around so the light from the door was in her face. And sheer surprise made him whistle sharply.

If the sleek limousine were out of place at the curb, this girl was far more out of place in the dim, smelly hall. She was like an orchid on a trash heap. A small orchid, slender, graceful, dainty. But not so dainty either as she struck Jerry's hand away and tried to get past him. She was quick, strong.

He caught her again. "Did you have anything to do with it?" he snapped.

"I?" Her scorn would have withered another man. She forgot to be frightened any more. On her toes, and still falling well short of Jerry's shoulder, she looked up at him from indignant blue eyes, bright with excitement.

"I was in the other room, waiting!" she burst out. "I thought it was an accident at first. I don't know anything about it! Let me out of here!"

And when Jerry still blocked her way, she flared: "Who are you? How dare you d-do this to me?"

Her voice faltered at the last and Jerry saw that she was young, not more than eighteen, and very bewildered and frightened about it all.

He smiled at her and stepped back. There were men who would not have believed that Jerry Prince's smile could be warm, flashing, comforting as it was now. "I'm sorry," he said. "Of course you had nothing to do with it. Run along."

She was gone in a breath of frightened flight, leaving the door open behind her. The fat woman on the front porch was still quiet and the upper part of the house tense and waiting as Jerry took the steps two at a time.

The upper hall was dim, forbidding, covered with ancient, worn linoleum. It smelled of powder smoke as Jerry came

into it, panting. Not more than a minute had elapsed since those last shots, yet the hall was empty now.

A door at Jerry's left opened cautiously. A face peered at him for a second. The door slammed again, but not before he caught a glimpse of a woman's frightened face.

"Who did it?" Jerry called through the door.

Her reply was near hysteria. "Get the police! They killed him! Oh, my God, they killed him! I saw him bleeding! Get the police! The back stairs. I heard them run that way."

A REVOLVER lay on the floor where someone had discarded it. The bright nickel finish was splotted with the dull crimson of fresh blood. And plainly visible on the grimy linoleum were other splottes of blood leading out to the upper porch where death had finally caught up with the gaunt young man.

Beyond the gun an open door gave into a small bedroom, shabby as the rest of the house. Dim, too, for the curtains were pulled down. But there was enough light to show bureau drawers pulled out, clothing and papers scattered over the floor, and two suitcases slit open at the top with a sharp knife.

It was, of course, the room of the dead man. Unobserved, Jerry stepped quickly inside. He was interested in the papers scattered on the floor, mostly letters. A few seconds was enough to gather most of them up and get back in the hall again. It was still deserted. Jerry went to the back, found there a narrow boxed-in stairs that took him down to a small rear porch.

Behind the house was an untidy yard, barren of grass, enclosed by a high plank fence. Jerry ran out in the yard. A woman leaned from the second-story window of the adjoining house and, pointing,

cried: "They ran down the alley an' drove away in an auto!"

"D'you know who it was?" Jerry called to her.

"Two men!" she cried excitedly. "All I seen was their backs, mister! But I knew they fired them shots for I seen one of them with a revolver in his hand! They ran to the alley an' drove away like mad!"

Jerry went back to the alley. It was deserted. The men who had fled had dropped nothing. He hesitated a moment and then turned back into the yard to a narrow cement walk at the side of the house.

He wondered as he went about the girl in the front hall and what had brought her into this neighborhood. The big limousine was not a rented car. Therefore it must be her own.

She, somehow, fitted with a limousine. Her clothes, her manner had that elusive stamp of genuine quality. The fat slattern on the front porch had known she was inside of course, and yet had seemed to take it as a matter of course. It was all very puzzling.

The street reminded Jerry of an erupting beehive. People—men, women, children—were running from everywhere, gathering on the sidewalk around the still sprawled form that was not pleasant to look at. Exclamations, loud talk, questions, answers made a bedlam. And the big limousine, the chauffeur and the girl were gone.

The fat woman was just stirring on the porch. No one had gone to her yet. Jerry pushed up the steps, helping her to her feet. Her eyes were rolling as she gathered breath for loud outcry.

Shaking her roughly, Jerry snapped: "Shut up! I want some sensible talk from you! Who was that young woman who came in the car? What did she want?"

Her eyes rolled at him. Her pent up emotion burst forth in a gurgling whimper. "What are you, a cop?" she gasped.

"Never mind about that. What about her?"

"I don't know. I never saw her before, mister. She came here to see Mr. Upton. That's all I know. I told her he had gone out for a little while but he was coming back. She said she'd wait, so I let her in the front parlor."

Her eyes rolled to the crowd on the sidewalk below them.

"An' now he's dead!" she bleated. "Oh my Gawd, I shoul'da knowed better'n to let her in like that. These high-fallutin' floosies are as bad as the other kind when they get stirred up. She shot him. You seen him fall. You know I didn't have nothin' to do with it, mister! I'm a re-spec—"

She was babbling when Jerry shook her again and stopped it. "Answer my questions!" he said savagely. "How did you know this Upton was coming back?"

She swiped at her eyes with the back of a big red arm. "I'd give him notice about his room," she snuffled. "Him and a coupla others that was behind in their rent. I'm a poor woman, I am, an' I can't afford to take chances with strangers. I said I'd have to have the money by noon, an' he said he'd get back in less than an hour with it. So I told her to wait in there for him. I tried to talk to her too, but she was snooty an' toney. So I left her in there an' come out to sweep the porch, an' when Upton come back he handed me a twenty-dollar bill an' I told him she was in there."

Jerry said coldly: "That girl wasn't upstairs. When I went in the front door she was coming from the other side of the lower hall."

"I dunno about that. Upton said he'd talk to her private, an' slammed the door when he went in, so I didn't pay no more

attention to him. I could see he was all right. He had a roll of bills when he paid me."

"Not a bit of doubt that he was all right then," Jerry said dryly. "And that's all you know? She ever been here before?"

"So help me, mister, I never seen her before. An' I never had anything like this happen in my place before. It'll give me a black eye. Every hussy on the street'll be telling around how I'm running a joint here. An' I got the cleanest, most respectable rooming house in this end of town. I can prove it."

"Were any strangers in the house?"

"I didn't see none. If they got in, they come in the back."

"How long has Upton been here?" Jerry pressed while he had her talking.

"About two months," she gulped.

"What did he do?"

"Nothin' I could see, mister. He didn't have company. He spent most of his time in his room. He looked sick to me. Some nights he was out late, but it wasn't none of my business."

A POLICE siren wailed around the corner and a patrol car raced up to the front of the house. Its wheels had hardly stopped rolling when a second siren came around the other corner; one of the bigger squad cars from headquarters Jerry saw as he went down the steps and mingled with the growing crowd.

To leave now would invite notice. Jerry waited in the crowd while the police took charge. He was thinking of the girl when a hand fell on his arm from behind. In his ear a genial voice said: "As I live and breath—Jerry Prince. Fancy finding you around a murder like this. Let's get out of this crowd, Jerry."

Jerry felt the back of his neck crawl as he turned slowly. That bland voice was the last thing he wanted to hear at

this time. He would have left quickly had he known this was going to happen. In his pockets were the package he had gotten from Leo Bakos and the letters he had scooped off the floor of the dead man's room. Either would make trouble if found on him.

Jerry Prince's face was debonair, cheerful, however, as he went with the speaker. "I was wondering if they'd send you out to take charge," he said. "And how is my old friend, Sergeant Pincus Smith today?"

Jerry's hand was engulfed in a huge paw which looked fat and had an iron grip. The great, bland, pinkish face of Sergeant Pincus Smith broadened in a modest grin. "I'm not in charge, Jerry. Just came along to see what all the fuss was about. Unusual neighborhood to find you in, Jerry. Business around here, I suppose?"

"I was walking," Jerry said easily. "Walking for my health, Sergeant. A little exercise might help your own waistline."

"There goes my vanity again," Sergeant Smith said mournfully, as they stopped in the street. "Didn't I see you leaving the house as we drove around the corner, Jerry?"

Sergeant Pincus Smith was a large man, in height and breadth. His middle bulged far out. His huge pinkish face was innocent as he laid the trap and waited.

Jerry silently damned Pincus Smith. Behind that big, bland countenance was the keenest brain in the department.

"You did," Jerry admitted. "I was passing and heard shots inside. Then a man fell off the porch up there. I ran in to see what I could do. The landlady there on the porch will verify it."

Sergeant Smith looked slightly disappointed. "What luck did you have inside, Jerry?" he asked.

"None. A woman upstairs said two men had done the shooting. They ran out the back way and left in a car which was waiting in the alley. A woman next door saw them leave. One carried a gun in his hand. And there's a revolver on the upper hall floor."

"Hmmm," said Sergeant Smith thoughtfully. "You aren't carrying a gun by any chance, Jerry?"

Jerry managed to look shocked. "Of course not, Sergeant. Why should I be carrying a gun?"

"Search me," Sergeant Smith sighed. "Why doesn't a snake have rabbit ears? Sure you ain't kidding me, Jerry? Mind if I have a look?"

Sergeant Smith made a quick movement with his hands. He was half through a frisk before Jerry managed to step back.

"Am I under arrest?" Jerry demanded.

Sergeant Smith's big bland face was aggrieved. "Of course not, Jerry. Just a little friendly curiosity, you might say. What's that lump in your left coat pocket?"

"That," said Jerry, "is a package I'm taking home." He displayed the small package which held the emerald bracelet, and put it back in the pocket. "If I'm not under arrest," Jerry said severely, "don't be so curious. If I am under arrest, take me along and do it legally—and give me a chance to start some fireworks under you, Sergeant. I've always wanted to see you squirm. Just out of friendly curiosity, of course."

Sergeant Smith was wounded and showed it. "If I thought you meant that, Jerry," he sighed, "I think I'd take you in just to see what would happen. Smooth your back fur down. If you don't know anything about this, you don't. Mind coming along in the house with me?"

"No," said Jerry. "But I've some business to do. Plenty of people around here

can tell you as much as I can. You're not going to be nasty, are you, Sergeant?"

"Good lands no, Jerry," Sergeant Smith assured him hastily. "Run along."

THE sergeant waved a big hand cheerfully and turned away with the flat-footed lumbering movement of a man whose feet had been punished by years of walking a beat. He headed into the house. Jerry walked easily to the corner, turned right and left the excitement behind.

But in less than half a mile Jerry became aware that an automobile was trailing him. He smiled thinly to himself. He had expected it. Sergeant Smith was never so dangerous as when he cheerfully dismissed a matter.

Jerry walked with long strides to the edge of the business district, hailed the first empty taxi he saw and had the driver take him into the thick of the mid-town traffic.

Following Jerry's directions the taxicab zigzagged here and there through the crowded streets; and just as it turned one corner Jerry thrust a bill into the driver's hand and said sharply: "Keep going."

He left the cab while it was still in motion, slipped across the sidewalk, entered the first doorway and watched.

The police patrol car turned the corner a moment later and kept on after the taxi. Beside the driver Sergeant Smith bulked with his eyes glued on the traffic ahead.

Smiling to himself, Jerry waited until they were past and then walked the opposite way. Shortly thereafter he entered a cigar store and, from the telephone booth, called Leo Bakos.

"Leo," Jerry said, "look on your record and get me the name and address of that first chap who pawned his gold snake with you."

Leo Bakos snorted. "A smart busi-

ness man, huh? You want to buy his ticket in cheap?"

"I won't try to buy his ticket," Jerry promised. "My word's good for that, I guess."

"Uh-huh," Leo Bakos grudgingly admitted. "Wait a minute." And presently he said: "The name is Harry Duval. He gave his address as the Windsor Hotel. But you can't tell about them names and addresses they give. Half the time they ain't right."

"This chap probably told the truth," Jerry said. "He evidently intended to get it back. The Windsor isn't a half bad place either. I know it. Quiet and respectable. Thanks, Leo."

THE Windsor Hotel was located in a side street where the business district merged into a section occupied by residences and apartment houses. Five stories of gray limestone, it's small lobby was cool, quiet and heavy with an air of sedate respectability. Not at all the place, one would say, for a young man to be staying, unless he also was ultra-respectable and quiet.

The clerk at the small desk in one corner of the lobby was elderly, fussy in little movements. He wore an alpaca coat and rimless glasses, over which he peered with a startled look when Jerry said: "Do you have a Mr. Duval staying with you?"

The elderly clerk asked a queer question, almost eagerly. "Are you a friend of Mr. Duval?"

The clerk's manner was not unfriendly. Jerry smiled. "I could be a closer friend," he said. "Does it matter?"

"Very much so," said the clerk, bobbing his head with such vigor that the glasses slipped on his nose and he had to replace them. "Will you talk to Mr. Haworth, our manager, sir? I'll get him down here at once."

Jerry's smile grew a trifle forced. "I'll talk to him if it will make you feel any better," he agreed. "But I can't see that my interest in Mr. Duval calls for a consultation with the manager. Just ring Mr. Duval's room."

"That is impossible, sir."

"I see. He's left, eh?"

"Not exactly," said the clerk, lowering his voice and straightening the pen by the register pad with a nervous gesture. "Mr. Duval is dead. He was—er—buried by the city because we could find no trace of his home or people. We are holding a piece of luggage filled with his things. Mr. Haworth would like very much to speak to you, I'm sure."

"I'll see him," Jerry agreed.

The clerk ushered him into a little cubby hole office behind the desk. The manager hurried in a few minutes later. Elderly too, he was short and plump and round. His face was bright with good nature and lack of worldliness. His story was brief, after introductions.

"Mr. Duval was with us a matter of three months, I should say, Mr. Prince. We hardly knew he was around. Just the kind of a young man in which we delight, for our guests are older and quick to complain if they are disturbed. I noticed at the last that Mr. Duval seemed rather worried and nervous. He dropped behind in his account with us. But," said the manager earnestly, "we did not press him unduly. Frankly, I liked what I saw of him. It was a great shock when he was killed."

Jerry's face showed none of the emotion he experienced. "Who killed him?" he asked calmly.

The manager lifted a quick, protesting hand.

"It was an accident. A hit-and-run driver, the police decided. Mr. Duval's body was found about three miles from the city limits, just off the North Shore

Boulevard. It was—uh—badly bruised about the face and had been lying in some bushes below the edge of the road several days. Identification was made by one of our statements which was in the coat pocket.”

“What proof did the police have that it was a hit-and-run driver?” Jerry asked. “What was—er—Harry doing out there? The street cars don’t run beyond the city limits. Rather a queer place for him to be, I’d say.”

“Now that you speak of it, I’m inclined to agree with you,” the manager admitted. “But Mr. Duval’s watch and billfold were not taken. The bruises about his face and body were those that would have been inflicted if he had been struck violently by a speeding car and hurled down the rocky bank at that point. It is possible he rode to the end of the car line and walked into the country for a bit of fresh air. He registered from New York. I believe the police got in touch with New York, but were unable to obtain any information about him.”

Jerry made his decision on the spur of the moment. “You’re holding his luggage against the bill?” he said.

“One piece,” the manager admitted. “Mr. Duval had two bags when he arrived. But we found only one in his room, and very few other effects.”

“I’ll pay the bill and you can give me his bag,” Jerry suggested. “You’ll find no relatives.”

The manager looked doubtful, but the thought of the unpaid bill evidently forced his nod of agreement. The bill came to thirty-eight dollars. Duval’s bag, a worn leather kit bag of good quality, had seen much service. Foreign steamship and hotel labels had been scraped off, so that it was impossible to tell in what parts of the world the bag had been.

“One thing more,” said Jerry as he

prepared to leave. “What papers were found on him?”

“Our statement only, as far as I know,” the manager replied. “The police have the billfold. It only contained three dollars, poor fellow. You can question them.”

Jerry smiled, said nothing and left.

CHAPTER THREE

Stick-Up

A SHORT time later a taxicab let Jerry out before a high, smart apartment house. An elevator whisked him to the fifteenth floor. He let himself into one of the apartments, locked the door and emptied the kit bag in the middle of the living-room floor.

It contained only old clothes. Two pairs of khaki shorts were all that he showed interest in. They were stained, worn, had not been washed since the last wearing. They were the type of clothing a white man would wear in the back country of the tropics.

Thoughtfully Jerry repacked the clothes in the bag and took out the letters from Upton’s room. He was not surprised to find them addressed to another name—John Lambert. And they had all been sent to foreign addresses, ranging from Peiping, China, to Singapore. They were dated over a space of eight months and written by a woman who signed herself Jane.

Mailed in America, at several different points over the eight months, they bore no return address. Jerry skimmed through them with a growing sense of guilt. Jane, whoever she was, loved the man whose name was John Lambert. She worried in those letters about fever, danger and trouble he might encounter. She wrote without enthusiasm of trips here and there, light social affairs, mentioned

people by their first names and spoke often of her father who was evidently with John Lambert part of the time, begging Lambert not to quarrel with him. Bad blood evidently existed between Lambert and her father, but the cause was not mentioned.

In no letter did she give a definite clue as to who her father was, who John Lambert was, what he or her father were doing in China. The last letter was dated several months before.

The remaining item was a small, strong manila envelope which contained a woman's white linen handkerchief with a J worked in one corner. The envelope was crinkled, soiled, as if it had been carried a long time. The handkerchief itself showed signs of much handling. A faint scent clung to it. Jerry put the handkerchief to his nose.

And his mind returned to that dim, smelly rooming-house hall. For a moment there, as he had held the girl in his arms, the same scent had been in his nostrils. She must be the Jane of the letters.

Jerry looked at his wrist watch. It was after four thirty. He telephoned the Motor Identification Bureau, gave a certain name; and a moment later said: "This is Jerry Prince, Bill. I know you're closed there but will you look up a number for me? . . . Thanks. Here it is. . . ."

The search took some time, but Jerry waited by the telephone patiently, his brows creased in thought.

"Michael Madison," he repeated as the name was finally given him. "Sixty-seven Forty-three Laguna Road, Huntley Park. Thanks, Bill. I'll do the same for you some day."

Jerry went down to the street, stepped in a taxi, and within two blocks was able to assure himself that he was being trailed again. Sergeant Smith was evidently devoting the afternoon to an idea.

It took Jerry fifteen minutes, afoot, in the home-bound rush of the shopping district, to assure himself that he had lost this latest follower; and shortly thereafter he walked into the pawnshop of Leo Bakos.

Leo Bakos himself was behind one of the cases. "I've come to have a look at those gold serpents," Jerry said to him.

"Too late," Bakos grunted. "I only got one left." He seemed in an ill humor.

Jerry smiled noncommittally. "That's strange, Leo, after I asked you to hold them for me. I suppose one of them crawled out of your safe and wriggled away?"

"For such a wise crack I ain't even got a laugh," Leo Bakos said peevishly. "I know you'd figure I was running a hot one on you. The fellow who pawned his came in a little while ago, put down the cash an' his ticket an' got his property. He was out the door before I heard about it. I gave the clerk hell."

Jerry put his palms on the edge of the counter, leaned toward Bakos. His smile had an edge, his voice even more of a one. "Do you mean to tell me," Jerry said, "that the man who pawned that serpent with you, the Harry Duval who lived at the Windsor Hotel, came here and got it?"

"That's right."

"You're lying," Jerry said softly. "Duval is dead, buried, gone, forgotten. You'll need a better story, Leo, or, so help me, I'll make you sweat tears for double-crossing me."

LEO BAKOS put his hands on the counter edge too. He appeared to need the support. His eyes were not drowsy now. Horrified was nearer the word.

"You're kidding me, Jerry!" he said.

"Am I?"

Bakos fished one of the fat, oily cigars

from his coat pocket, and then forgot to light it. "Sure you're kidding me," he repeated as if trying to convince himself. "It was the same guy who pawned it. The clerk said so himself. He had the ticket an' knew what he wanted."

"Duval is dead, Leo."

"Maybe some other guy pawned it an' used Duval's name," Bakos suggested eagerly. "You know me, Jerry. I wouldn't lie to you. Hell, ain't we done business too often? Would I cross you on a lousy little deal?"

"You'd cross your mother on a five-cent piece," Jerry said calmly.

Leo Bakos' broad face turned red. But despite his anger he kept his voice low, leaning over the counter to keep his words between them. "You can't talk to me like that, Jerry. I got your number, but it ain't aces with me when you go too far. You may be the slickest crook in the country—an' I got an idea you are from the funny stuff I've handled for you—but I ain't takin' too much from you."

Jerry Prince's face went hard. His voice did not change. "Leo," he said, "you're a rat. I was wondering when you'd get such ideas in your head. Any transactions I've had with you can be reported to the police at any time. I never trusted you. But business is business. When I make a deal with you, I expect it to be carried out. What happened to that other gold snake?" And don't alibi."

Leo Bakos himself didn't know why he cringed. He always had done it when Jerry Prince looked at him in that way. He had heard things about this lone young man which were not conducive to easy sleep. Jerry Prince—Prince of Thieves—if rumor had it right, made no idle threats.

"Jerry," said Leo Bakos, "it ain't an alibi. So help me, the same guy that pawned that snake came in and got it. I

don't want no trouble with you. I'm doing the best I can."

Jerry looked at him closely, nodded slowly. "I believe you are telling the truth," Jerry said. "Let's see the other one."

Leo Bakos went back to the safe, returned and put the golden serpent on the case.

It was more life-like than ever. The tiny scales, the graceful sinuousness of the body and the perfection of the head with its cold diamond eyes carried the very essence of life. Evil life. It was uncanny. The master goldsmith who had made the serpent had with his art injected into the hard cold gold a lurking evil, a threatening viciousness that was startling to see.

"Does this mean anything to you?" Jerry said.

Leo Bakos shook his head. "Two hundred dollars' worth of gold it means to me. And another hundred for the work that's in it. And the trouble you make over it with me."

"Three hundred you want for it, eh?" Jerry asked briskly.

Leo Bakos hesitated, nodded slowly. "That's right."

Jerry dropped the golden serpent in his coat pocket. "Sold," he said. "I'll send you a check for it, Leo. If you see or hear anything about the other one, or the chap who redeemed it, let me know at once."

Down the street Jerry stopped in an optical shop and purchased a small but powerful magnifying glass. He walked four blocks to a garage, drove away from there in a modest blue sedan, which might have belonged to any man on the street.

Beyond the business district he parked at the curb and, unobserved, took the snake, turned it over and inspected its belly through the magnifying glass.

In the pawnshop he had caught a

glimpse of what he now saw more clearly. The tiny belly scales bore an inscription, etched faintly, barely discernible. Each scale held a Chinese character. They ran from throat to tail, done as carefully as the rest of the gold work. Their faintness was clearly to escape attention. Only a student of Chinese could decipher them.

JERRY drove on out north to Huntley Park. It had been an exclusive suburb before the city reached out around it. It still was. Laguna Road was on the outskirts. With no trouble Jerry found the address he had gotten from the motor bureau.

He was not surprised at the size of the grounds or the big house back among the shrubbery; or the high iron fence that surrounded it. But the locked gate, the man patrolling inside with a gun at his waist did surprise him.

When the blue sedan stopped before the gate the guard made no move to unlock the chain which secured it.

Jerry got out and spoke through the bars. "Is this where Michael Madison lives?"

"Yeah." The answer was surly and a scowl went with it.

"Is Miss Jane Madison at home?"

"Maybe."

"I'm asking a civil question. Is she home?"

The guard topped six feet. He was powerful, rough-looking, able to give a good account of himself in trouble. His reply was a grunt. "She's home," he said. "What about it?"

"I'd like to see her."

"You can't."

Jerry spoke calmly. When anger rose in him he always grew calm; it was a lesson he had learned at some cost long ago.

"Why," Jerry asked, "can't I see her?"

What have you to do with it? Is this an institution?"

"It's private property," the guard told him. "Private—get me? No strangers wanted in here."

"How do you know I'm a stranger?" Jerry asked.

As he spoke, he was looking past the guard into the grounds, mapping them in his mind. The high iron fence seemed to enclose six or seven acres. Trees, shrubs, bushes, cut off most of the view of the house. Off to the right he glimpsed a second guard; armed also, walking watchfully; and at the man's side, a big police dog.

The man inside the gate spat, answered promptly. "It doesn't matter who you are. No one gets in here. We've got orders."

"Who has orders?" said Jerry.

"The guards. Day and night."

"Why," Jerry begged, "do they need so many guards? What's wrong?"

"Beat it!" said the guard coldly.

Jerry made one last effort, looking at a small brick gatekeeper's lodge inside the gate.

"Call the house and tell Miss Madison that I'd like to talk to her about an important matter connected with Mr. Upton. She'll understand. Tell her I'm the man she spoke to before she left the house."

The guard said curtly: "We got orders not to call the house about anybody. That's flat, see? No one gets in. Now scram."

Returning to his car, Jerry drove off. He should have been annoyed but he was not. Rather he was cheerful. The curiosity which had led him to follow a single thread of mystery was being rewarded as it led into an ever widening web, grimmer and more ominous with each new discovery.

He had not been able to put out of his

mind the look in Jane Madison's eyes, or the helpless terror on the face of her chauffeur. She walked with fear, that slender girl with her big car, her fine clothes and the guards about her house.

And the one man who could perhaps have helped her, the man to whom, across the world, she had written her love for long months, was dead, shot down, murdered in cold blood.

Gruesome too was the death of Harry Duval and the reappearance of the man who had pawned the other golden serpent under Duval's name. It was impossible to doubt that the manager of the Windsor Hotel had told anything but the truth. What, then, was the answer to everything; where the connection, Jerry asked himself.

The street lights were on when he parked the blue sedan in front of his apartment house. He opened the door, started to get out—and found himself looking into the barrel of an automatic pistol.

"Back in and drive on," a gruff voice ordered.

The man must have come from one of the parked automobiles. A soft hat was pulled low over his face. The automatic was held in against the front of his body, invisible to anyone who glanced casually at the spot.

He was a stranger, medium-built, well dressed; and there was no doubt that he meant what he said.

Jerry slipped back behind the wheel.

A second man got in the seat from the other side at the same time. From the corner of his eye Jerry saw a second drawn gun. He had little time to think. The first man jumped in the back and slammed the door. The man beside Jerry snapped: "Let's go! Straight down the street!"

JERRY drove off, trying to place the one beside him. The thin, sallow face was vaguely familiar. He had covered several blocks before he got it. His companion had been a body-guard for one of the notorious liquor racketeers several years before. The racketeer was dead, his gang broken up, scattered in the swift changes that had come over the underworld. But this man had been a killer then; he was undoubtedly so now. He'd probably kill quicker now. Money was no longer easy for his kind to get.

Neither of the men had said anything more. Jerry was still driving straight ahead. He spoke first. "What," he said, "is the idea? If you two want my bill-fold, take it and get out. You don't need to go to all this trouble to get it. I'm in a hurry."

"Lay off the wisecracking, smart guy!" the man in the back seat said in Jerry's ear. "We'll get your dough when we feel like it. Don't drive so fast. You might draw a speed cop—and then it'd be too bad for you."

Against Jerry's neck the cold end of a gun muzzle pressed warningly.

And the man said: "You'd better frisk him, Jack. He's supposed to be hot stuff. I'll keep the rod on him."

The frisk was quick, thorough. Sergeant Pincus Smith couldn't have done better.

"He ain't heeled," said Jack.

From Jerry's pocket he drew the golden serpent, held it to the faint radiance of the dashlight, whistled loudly.

"Geeze—lookit this!" he exclaimed. "If it ain't all gold I'm a liar! Feel it. I thought it was a real snake at first. I can't stand snakes."

The man in the back seat did not bother to look. At least the pressure of the gun did not alter on Jerry's neck. "Yeah, it's gold all right," he said, as if already aware

of the fact. "Never mind that. He got anything else on him?"

"I'll see. Where's your billfold, guy?"

And the man in the back seat swore impatiently.

"Get that later too! See if he's got a bracelet on him."

Jerry had all he needed to know by now. He said slowly: "So Leo Bakos is behind this?"

And his companion said: "Who? That fence who runs a hock shop?"

"Cut out that talk," said the man in the back seat. "Frisk him good, Jack."

"Hell, I am! He ain't got no bracelet on him!"

"All right. We'll find out what he did with it."

"I'll save you the trouble," Jerry said calmly. "It's in the left hand dash compartment. I haven't time to argue with you two. Take what you want and get out."

The small package was retrieved from the dash compartment, opened by the man in the back and examined. "It's a honey!" he said with satisfaction. "Worth five grand if it's worth a dime. Gimme that snake too. Get his billfold."

That done, neither man made a move to get out. Jerry was still driving north. The boulevard they were on was a through street running into a state highway at the edge of town.

Jerry said shortly: "If you two want a joyride, take the wheel and let me out. I told you I was in a hurry."

"Now ain't that too bad," the man behind him said sarcastically.

For the first time since the sudden surprise of a gun in his face Jerry's nerves went tight. This was no common stick-up. These two were leisurely, as if robbery was only a part of the job.

And, suddenly, Jerry knew what the rest of it was.

Leo Bakos was behind it, of course,

since only he knew that Jerry had the valuable bracelet. Bakos had evidently decided to take no chances on reprisals. A gunman, down on his luck, needing money, would not ask much for a killing these days.

Jerry silently swore at himself for not wearing a gun after he began to get an inkling that murder was connected with the mystery into which he had been penetrating.

Silently he drove straight ahead as he had been ordered. The street was well lighted. Cars were constantly passing, people were on the sidewalks and front porches. And, instead of being a comfort, the life all about was a mockery.

Silently they passed the edge of the city and rolled out into the country, where there was no lights, fewer cars.

Jerry's nerves grew tighter each moment as he wondered just when the end was coming. Either of them might slug or shoot at any second. It was almost a relief when the man in back, who seemed to be giving orders, said: "Turn off at the next road. An' take it easy on the turn, fellow!"

The next turn was a dirt side road. In a few minutes they were far from the world, between fields and patches of woodland and an occasional farmhouse well back from the road.

No better place for murder could be found around the state. Jerry recalled that the victims of various gang killings had been found down this road.

A small white concrete bridge showed up in the headlights. Jerry took a chance. Quick thinking and disregard for the consequences had worked before.

The sedan leaped forward as his foot pressed hard on the accelerator. A wrench on the wheel at the last instant—and Jerry braced himself hard.

Crash—

CHAPTER FOUR

Sergeant Smith Draws a Blank

THE front of the car struck the thick concrete end of the bridge. Glass cracked. Jerry heard the man behind him yell as he catapulted over the back seat.

The car slued around, rolled down the embankment, grinding and crashing, and came to rest on its wheels again.

Bruised, battered, the breath knocked out of him, Jerry let go of the steering wheel. The other two were crowded in the seat beside him. One was sitting up, groaning, swearing. The dashlight was still on. Jerry glimpsed a hand coming up with an automatic. He grabbed for the gun, got it, wrenched it free as a shot shattered the stillness which had fallen about them.

The shot went through the front of his coat, just missing his chest. The next moment Jerry struck hard with the gun palmed; struck hard to the head which dodged too late. One blow was enough.

The man he had hit was the one who had been sitting in the back. The other had been knocked out against the shatter-proof windshield, which was a mass of cracks.

Jerry shut off the ignition, recovered the unwrapped bracelet, the golden serpent and his billfold from the man's coat pocket and got out. He ached in half a dozen spots, was dizzy from the shock, but otherwise he seemed all right.

The front of his car was a wreck. It would have to be towed back to town. Gun in hand, Jerry started to climb the weed-grown bank to the road.

Panting, he reached the top—and stopped short as a blinding spotlight played over him.

From behind the light a voice called: "Put 'em up! You're covered!"

Another car must have been following

them to be sure that nothing went wrong. Jerry dove out of the light, down the bank, dodging as he went. He couldn't risk luck a second time. Better chance fighting it out now than cold-blooded murder with a gun against his back.

He escaped the spotlight for a moment, but it swerved down the bank and picked him up at the bottom. Instead of a burst of gunfire, a voice called:

"Jerry Prince! You're under arrest!"

And at the sound of that voice Jerry stopped, turned, and climbed back up the bank into the bright light. He was smiling wryly now. "Fancy meeting you out here, Sergeant," he called. "I didn't interrupt a necking party, did I? Why didn't you say who you were? I might have taken a shot at you."

Sergeant Pincus Smith lumbered out into the light, cradling a sawed-off shotgun in his arm. "If I live to be eighty, I'll remember it, Jerry," the sergeant said. "You went down that bank like a kangaroo. What are you doing out here with a gun in your hand? Give it to me."

"A slight accident," Jerry replied as he surrendered the gun.

Sergeant Smith looked down at the wrecked car and shook his head wonderingly. "Slight?" he said. "I'd hate to see what you'd turn out if you tried real hard, Jerry. Ain't there someone in that car of yours?"

"Two old style gunmen," Jerry said. "They brought me out here to look at the stars. We—er—got so interested that I ran into the bridge."

The sergeant tilted his head to the sky. Clouds hid all the stars. "And I'll bet you ran up the bank with that gun to shoot a star," the sergeant said admiringly. "Come on, Jerry, what's it all about?"

"I wish I knew," Jerry admitted. "I was getting out at my apartment when they materialized out of the air, forced me back in the car and made me drive

out here. Things began to look a little serious so I ran into the bridge for a change."

They were climbing down the bank to the wreck as they talked, two plainclothesmen with drawn revolvers following. The two men were still unconscious in the front seat.

ONE of the plainclothesmen directed a flashlight in on them. Sergeant Smith looked, said: "Jack Hall. There's a 'want' out on him. Either of you know who the other one is?"

They didn't answer.

"Must be a visitor," Sergeant Smith decided. "Bring them up to the car. We'll give you the keys to the city when they come to. Your story checks, Jerry. We happened to be passing and saw them walk to your car."

"You were probably parked across the street looking for me," Jerry corrected amiably. "But let it pass, Sergeant. You will waste your time. Here—what are you doing?"

"Frisking you legally," Sergeant Smith sighed. "You're under temporary arrest now you know. Great snakes—what's this?"

Sergeant Smith held up the gold serpent; and in the light of the electric torch it writhed and wriggled in his fingers realistically.

"Exquisite, isn't it, Sergeant?" Jerry asked.

"Funny thing for you to be carrying around in your pocket, Jerry."

"There's no accounting for tastes," said Jerry. "Suppose you stop going through my pockets. I've no other gun."

Sergeant Smith's hands were already probing. A moment later it came out with the emerald and diamond bracelet.

"All kinds of tastes, haven't you, Jerry?" Sergeant Smith said with a mildness that did not hide an exultant satis-

faction. "And I guess this is where you finally put your foot in it. Take a look at this bracelet, boys. If this isn't part of that Cameron jewel robbery, I'll eat my hat. Here, let me look at the list."

Sergeant Smith took a folded paper from a small notebook, held it in the torchlight, scanned it, and studied the bracelet again, counting the emeralds and diamonds.

"It is!" he said. "By the Lord Harry, I've got you this time, Jerry! It's been a long time, but I knew you'd slip finally. I—I can't understand your killing the butler though. I never thought you were a cheap gun." And there was honest regret in the sergeant's voice.

Jerry warned calmly: "You're on the wrong track, Sergeant. I don't know what you're talking about. I was going to return that bracelet to Miss Cameron."

"Sure you were," Sergeant Smith said. "We'll return it to her right away. Did you get the snake in the same place?"

"Look at your lists," Jerry advised. "Was there any such article stolen and reported?"

"Not that I know of," the sergeant admitted. "But we'll probably get a report on it. Come along, Jerry. And no tricks. I don't want to have to put the cuffs on you."

Jerry said nothing as he stood on the road with the sergeant and watched the two detectives bring the limp forms from the wreck to the patrol car.

"You pulled a slick trick on me today," Sergeant Smith said suddenly. "Why didn't you tell me everything about that murder, Jerry? If I'd known you were covering up, I'd have taken you in."

"Covering up, Sergeant? You're wrong, aren't you? How could I be when I was just passing?"

"You didn't say you went in the house and met a girl in there who probably shot that fellow."

"I didn't meet a girl who did that," Jerry said calmly. "She didn't have anything to do with it."

"Why didn't you tell me about the girl, Jerry? And why did she run away if she was innocent?"

"Can't tell you why she did anything. I never saw her before. If she didn't want to stay, it was her own business. Don't know that I blame her with the place sounding like a battle field and a corpse on the sidewalk in front. For all she knew, she might have been the next one."

Sergeant Smith pushed his old slouch hat on the back of his head and turned abruptly.

"You knew her, didn't you, Jerry? You had an idea what was going to happen—and that was why you were there at the house when it did!"

Jerry laughed. "Try again," he invited.

"Mighty funny you took the trouble to run through the house, Jerry."

"It looked like a man was needed in there. As a public-spirited citizen I did what I could until the police got around. I was hoping you'd praise me for that," Jerry said wistfully.

SERGEANT SMITH passed a hand over his big bland face. What thoughts were running behind it no man could say. The sergeant himself grew thoughtful and let the subject drop.

A few minutes later they started off. The patrol car was heavily loaded.

"We'll drop them at Emergency Hospital," Sergeant Smith decided. "And then go to the Cameron's and get the bracelet identified."

Jerry said nothing. On the way to the hospital Sergeant Smith tried to draw him out about the Cameron jewel robbery.

"I don't know anything about it," Jerry said goodnaturefully. "You're making a terrible mistake, Sergeant."

"You made a terrible one when you shot their butler," Sergeant Smith retorted. "I'm sorry, Jerry. It looks bad for you."

"Doesn't it?" Jerry agreed.

He let the matter stand while they dropped the two prisoners at the hospital and then drove to the dignified town mansion of Augustus Cameron, a leading banker. As they got out of the car Jerry brushed as much of the debris from his suit as he could with his hands.

Sergeant Smith took him by an elbow. "Your looks don't matter now, Jerry."

"They always matter," Jerry corrected as he went to the front door with the sergeant. A butler admitted them after hearing their errand, left them in a drawing room, saying: "I will inform Mr. Cameron, sir."

Sergeant Smith planted his feet stolidly on the thick rug and looked around. "Pretty swell," he commented under his breath. "I'd like to live here. I guess it looks familiar, huh?"

"Nice," Jerry agreed. "I've always enjoyed coming here."

The sergeant wagged his head. "You will joke about it. How did you get in the night you knocked the house off?"

"I wasn't here that night," Jerry said. And he turned as a clear voice behind him said with amusement: "What are you doing here, Jerry? Heavens, your suit looks as if you've been rolling on the ground. Stevens said it was about my bracelet."

Jeanne Cameron was twenty-two, pretty, blond, frank and friendly as Jerry said: "Sergeant Pincus Smith, of headquarters—Miss Cameron. We brought your bracelet back, Jeanne. The sergeant has it. We wanted to be sure it was yours. *Ummm*—Sergeant, the bracelet."

Sergeant Smith looked slightly dazed as his eyes went from Jerry to Jeanne.

Cameron. "I didn't know you knew Jerry, Miss," he mumbled.

Jeanne Cameron laughed. "Everyone knows Jerry. We've been friends for years. Ohhh! That is my bracelet! Jerry you're a duck. I didn't believe you when you said you'd get it back for me. How in the world did you do it?"

"Yes," Sergeant Smith prompted quickly. "How, Jerry?"

And Jerry's smile at them both was quizzical. "That," he said, 'is one of the advantages of knowing people. I couldn't get everything that was stolen, Jeanne. Our efficient police will have to do that."

Jeanne Cameron's smile at Sergeant Smith was dazzling. "I'm sure they will," she said. "This was the most important piece. Here's daddy."

Augustus Cameron looked more like a polo player than a banker. He had been a polo player of note some years before. He seemed almost too young, too vigorous, too cordial to be a banker as he shook hands with Jerry and Sergeant Smith.

"Good work, Jerry," he said, looking at the bracelet. "I suppose there's no use asking how you got it? Some of your queer friends, I suppose?"

"Something like that," Jerry smiled.

And his smile grew broader as Cameron smiled at Sergeant Smith and said: "Mr. Prince is rather an unusual young man. He's told us some tall stories of his queer friends. I've often wondered if half of them were really true."

Sergeant Smith's eyes were slightly glassy. He rallied with an effort, an edged meaning in his voice. "I'll bet Jerry hasn't told you the half of it. He—uh—interests me too. Some day I hope he'll tell me a lot of things. Uh—nice he was able to get your necklace back. We'll do the best we can on the other things, I guess we'd better get along now, Jerry."

Jerry said easily: "Run on, Sergeant. Nothing more you can do for me this

evening. Thanks for coming. I'll stay on here a few minutes and see you in the morning."

"Uh—well—all right," Sergeant Smith agreed meekly.

He lumbered out, hat in hand, still glassy-eyed and rather dazed. The sergeant looked somewhat like a small boy whose firecracker had exploded in his hand.

JERRY was smiling as he remained with the Camerons; although he knew that Sergeant Smith would not soon forget the chagrin he had just undergone.

"Do either of you know a Michael Madison who lives in Huntley Park?" he asked the Camerons. "There's a daughter named Jane I believe."

"Two daughters," Jeanne Cameron corrected. "Jane and Caroline. I've heard friends speak of them. The father inherited his money and that place out at Huntley Park from the Philadelphia branch of the family. He's an explorer or something of the sort. Always away in queer parts of the world. Do you know anything about them, daddy?"

"Can't say that I do, except that Madison's credit is very good," Cameron replied. "I'll have to get back to my study, Jerry. Glad you stopped in. Do it again."

When he was gone Jerry turned to the daughter. "I was hoping you knew Jane Madison well enough to get her on the telephone," he said. "I tried to get in touch with her this afternoon and couldn't. The place was guarded and the man at the gate refused to tell her I was there."

"A romance," Jeanne guessed.

"Nothing like it, child. I want to see her on business. If I can get her ear for a moment I'm sure she'll see me."

"You've made me curious," Jeanne Cameron confessed. "I'll telephone her and ask for Betty Thornton's address. Betty's in Europe and they're friends. I

never heard of a person being guarded so well that a man wouldn't be announced to them."

But Jeanne Cameron's intentions helped little. No one answered the call she made. "I don't understand it, Jerry," Jeanne said, puckering her brows. "Can I do anything more?"

"Thanks, no." Jerry said lightly. "I was merely curious, too. I'll run along now."

CHAPTER FIVE

Prince of Thieves

THE police car was not in sight when Jerry came out on the street. He walked some distance, making certain that he was not being followed. Sergeant Smith had evidently given up for the evening in disgust. Jerry finally hailed a taxi, rode a mile across town, paid it off, walked some more to be certain no one had followed him, and ended at a garage.

The attendant recognized him on sight, and brought out a powerful, speedy black coupé. The motor purred almost inaudibly as Jerry drove it away. He turned a dial and a short-wave radio began to pick up police calls. With one hand he opened a compartment in the top of the seat and took from it a small automatic, a pair of light suede gloves and a ring of keys which he slipped into a pocket tailored inside his coat.

Driving leisurely he skirted the business district through the quieter streets. The evening was still young. Late diners were little more than away from their tables.

Leo Bakos lived in a sedate brownstone house within walking distance of his store. One of the oldest parts of town, the neighborhood was still occupied by many well-to-do people who did not wish to live further out. Bakos lived alone with the ex-convict who drove his big car, the only person he fully trusted.

And tonight, as Jerry drove slowly past the house, he saw Leo Bako's limousine parked at the curb. The window shades were pulled down but the lights were on behind them. Parking near the corner, Jerry walked back to the house and went on the porch noiselessly.

For a moment he listened at the front door. No sounds were audible inside. Ignoring the bell button at the right of the door, Jerry pulled on the suede gloves and turned the knob carefully. The door was locked.

He took out the keys and began to try them. Half a dozen slipped in and out of the lock without a sound that could have been heard more than a foot inside the door.

The lock clicked gently. Jerry eased the door open, stepped inside and closed the door in a breath. He wrinkled his nose at the stale odor of incense which filled the overfurnished hall. It had offended him before.

In one corner a tall clock ticked loudly against the silence. To the left a living room was empty. Leo Bakos must be upstairs in his study, where so often at night he had received visitors in whom the police would have been interested. Jerry had one foot on the stairs when a muffled groan from the back of the house held him there.

The groan was not repeated.

Jerry hesitated, drew the small automatic and went back in the house on his toes. The rear hall was not lighted. He had been in before and knew his way roughly.

A small cross hall cut across the back of it. In there he tripped on a body and almost fell. As he groped for matches Jerry heard hoarse breathing at his feet, but no movement.

The match flared in the blackness.

Jerry said, "Damn!" very softly.

The ex-convict chauffeur was lying on

the runner of rose-colored carpet, face down, hands outstretched with the nails digging into the pile of the carpet, as if seeking to pull himself forward.

Beside him in the corner a small telephone stand was overturned. The telephone lay on the floor just beyond his hands. He had been trying to pull himself to it when he collapsed. By his neck the rug was damp with blood.

All that Jerry got in a glance. As the match burned down he looked for a light switch, found it, clicked it on.

The chauffeur was near coma, breathing heavily. On the rug behind him bloodstains were still damp. Turning him over, Jerry found slits in the front of the gray uniform where a knife had stabbed again and again.

"Poor devil," Jerry said gently.

The overturned telephone and the man's position told their own story. Wounded badly, dying, almost helpless, he had tried to get help.

Leaving him, Jerry searched quickly, watchfully. Leo Bakos was not in the back of the house. He went up the stairs at a run; and got no further than the top. There in the upper hall, wearing slippers and smoking jacket, Leo Bakos lay on his back, dead, with a useless gun in his hand. His throat had been slit.

A GAINST the stale incense Jerry smelled the faint odor of powder smoke. He brought Bakos' gun up with his gloved hand. The thick fingers of the pawnbroker clung to the weapon even in death. The gun had been fired at least once.

Before Jerry could look further the scrape of a step sent him melting back in the hall. The front door opened as he went. And Jerry's nerves crawled for the second time that evening as he heard the voice of Sergeant Pincus Smith say: "Doesn't seem to be anyone in here."

JERRY PRINCE didn't have to reason it out. Sergeant Smith had all he needed for a case. Breaking, entering, murder, robbery—it might have been made to order for the sergeant. And the way out front was blocked. Jerry kept on to the back of the house, where Leo Bakos' big den was located.

It was a huge room, that den, extending clear across the back of the house. In it were books, chairs, couches, liquor, everything to make one comfortable, welcome, unwary. The business from which Leo Bakos had derived most of his profit was conducted by word-of-mouth negotiations. Hospitality helped.

One thing only was different about the room. It had no windows and only two doors. Jerry knew about the other one.

The study was lighted, quiet, peaceful. One of Bakos' fat, black cigars was still burning on an ash tray. From the length of the ash Jerry judged it had been lying there for ten or fifteen minutes. That short a time had elapsed since death had visited the house.

One look was all that Jerry cast about as he closed the hall door softly and turned to the left corner of the room. He was partway across the floor when an object caught his eye. He turned back and picked up a woman's small glove, dropped evidently after Bakos went out of the room to his death. Bakos would have picked it up himself if it had been there before. His neatness was known to everyone acquainted with him.

A woman, here, again. Jerry brought the glove to his nostrils automatically as he continued on across the floor. And, somehow, as he had expected, this glove had been worn by the same girl; by the Jane Madison who kept herself barred, locked and guarded on her father's estate; that slender, graceful, dainty girl whose expensive perfume seemed to be at every point Jerry turned. It was on the glove.

Three long steps took Jerry to the end of the room. A rug lay awry on the polished floor where it had been pulled aside. Faintly discernible in the floor, now that the rug was off, was the outline of a small trap door.

Bending, Jerry pressed a plug in the floor beside it. A hidden spring raised the door up an inch or so at one end. Jerry lifted it the rest of the way. Narrow dark steps went steeply down. Carefully he descended, closing the door overhead, leading himself in pitch darkness.

He knew where he was going. There was no great secret about the trap door or steps. Set in the floor that way it was merely one of Leo Bakos' precautions against surprise, and a way for surreptitious visitors to leave without discovery when someone was at the front of the house whom they did not wish to see.

The steps went down in a little square shaft and as he felt his way Jerry heard voices through the thin wall which separated him from the lower floor. Sergeant Smith and the men with him had discovered the body of the chauffeur in the back hall.

Sergeant Smith was speaking loudly. "It's going to be murder all right. This fellow can't live long. And I'll bet there's more of it around the house. Look the place over as quick as you can, boys. Bakos never got very far from this man of his. He must be the one who made the funny noises over the telephone. Guess he was passing out when he did it. Brown, call an ambulance."

And the steps went on down past the first floor to the level of the cellar. At the bottom Jerry felt with his hands, turned a knob and a close-fitting door swung noiselessly out. He stepped through, held the door a moment while he listened and then closed it carefully. It had no knob on the outside. Once closed no man could get in to those steps. The whole arrange-

ment was an exit only. Anyone who entered the upper part of the house did so by the front stairs—after passing inspection by Leo Bakos or the man who had guarded him.

ORIENTING himself in the darkness, Jerry felt a way to the back of the cellar, finally being forced to strike one match which he extinguished almost instantly. The light however had shown him the door he wanted.

It was not latched. Someone had come out this way in a hurry. The cool freshness of the night was against his face as he stepped out. He ducked his head, went up steps to the back yard, kept on toward the alley at the rear of the property.

The back door of the house opened suddenly, letting out a shaft of light. Jerry heard footsteps, then the voice of Sergeant Smith saying loudly: "I'll have a look around the outside."

It was too late to get back to the cellar. The yard had no place to hide. Jerry ran for the back gate as Sergeant Smith lumbered down the steps.

The sergeant heard him, sensed him or started his search at that moment. The bright beam of an electric torch swept over the back yard, passed Jerry, came back to him.

"Stop!" Sergeant Smith yelled.

Jerry kept on. Nothing else for it now.

Sergeant Smith shouted again—and then the loud report of his revolver smashed the quiet of the neighborhood. Jerry heard the bullet *plunk* into the wooden planks of the fence ahead of him.

He did not fire back. Perhaps he would have done it with another man; but not Sergeant Smith. They had, in a way, been left-handed friends for a long time. The sergeant, suspecting him of various nefarious things, had worked assiduously to prove them.

With satisfaction the sergeant would go

into court with proof and send Jerry Prince to prison for a long term of years. But somehow Jerry could not shoot at the big lumbering detective with his bland and innocent face. He would, he knew, regret it ever afterward, if his bullet went home.

Sergeant Smith had no such scruples however. His service revolver crashed twice more on the night as he ran across the back yard in pursuit, keeping the dancing beam of his flash on Jerry as much as possible.

Both bullets came closer. The neighborhood was being aroused, the other detectives called out of the house. Jerry swore as he sprinted for the gate. He made it, kicked the gate open and ducked out into the alley as a fourth bullet drove splinters from the wood at his shoulder.

To make matters worse as he went out he heard the sergeant yelling: "Jerry Prince! Stop or I'll kill you!"

Jerry gave vent to an oath as he sprinted along the alley. He was in for it now. Without additional proof no power on earth would convince Sergeant Smith that Jerry Prince had not invaded the house of Leo Bakos and committed murder.

The sergeant would work until he had proved the case around that; and the facts which he would quickly turn up would only bear him out. The evidence of the clerks in the pawnshop would help mightily. They would tell about Jerry's visit there, about his getting the golden serpent—which the sergeant had found on Jerry.

Circumstantial evidence, of course—but many a man had gone to the chair on evidence no more conclusive.

Before the sergeant reached the alley Jerry came abreast of a lower fence on his left. He vaulted over into the back yard of the third house down, raced toward the street and his car. For a few moments all the attention of the sergeant and his men would be concentrated in the alley.

And it was.

Jerry ran past the side of a dark and quiet house and at the front, paused, breathing heavily, while he looked up and down the street.

Down the street to the left the police car stood before Leo Bakos' house. At the right, near the corner, Jerrys' own powerful coupe stood waiting.

DOORS were opening along the street as people looked for the source of the excitement. At the moment they could do no harm. Jerry ran for his car, jumped in, started the motor and, in second gear, raced around the corner and sped out of the neighborhood.

He drove fast, turning a corner now and then, and finally slowed somewhat and turned on the radio. His heart was still pounding. It had been a close shave. And—the whole thing was just beginning. The manhunt would be on in a few minutes.

It meant flight—and continuing flight, with a murder charge ever dogging him; disgrace and probably prison and the chair at the end. Years of that—or quick discovery of the murderer to satisfy the law.

A decision had to be made in brief minutes. Flight meant the need of money, certain things to be taken and destroyed in the apartment, quick exit from the city.

From under the dash the announcer's voice at headquarters droned impersonally.

"Calling all cars Calling all cars Pick up on sight black coupe driven by one Jerry Prince Wanted for murder This man is probably armed and will resist arrest He has just driven out of the fourth district, heading east when last seen Calling all cars calling all cars"

Jerry turned the next corner, worked through the dark streets toward the west. The man hunt was on. He was little better

than a fly slipping through the ever tightening strands of the police web. If they snared him, guns would probably blaze without warning. Mentally he chalked up that little score against Sergeant Smith, being forced at the same time to admit that the sergeant was only doing his duty as he saw it.

Jerry made up his mind. In escape he would find no escape. Always the thing would dog him. He headed out toward Huntley Park. There, guarded and inaccessible, was the only person who could give evidence that would help him. Jerry's face set in hard grim lines as he drove.

She would be accessible tonight.

CHAPTER SIX

The Golden Cipher

HUNTLEY Park was a dark tree-filled section of the city. The estate of Michael Madison was even more isolated. Jerry parked the coupe in a dark lane half a block from the north side of the estate. Here he had noted the trees and shrubs were thicker, and garage and out-buildings lay between the fence and the house.

From the hidden compartment in the top of the seat Jerry took a small flashlight, an extra clip of cartridges for the automatic inside his coat, a light and powerful steel jimmy that folded for easy carrying, a pair of wirecutters and another ring of keys.

They did not bulk greatly in his pockets as he walked out of the lane, crossed a dark cinder road and came to the high iron fence around the estate.

The one thing that would have made access to the grounds dangerous, lights spaced inside the fence, had not been installed. Jerry smiled slightly, grateful to whomever had overlooked that, and walk-

ed up to the fence without hesitation.

A heavier, clumsier man, one in less perfect physical condition, could not have done what Jerry did then. He had the build of an athlete, steel muscles, wiriness. By sheer strength of arms and wrists he drew himself up the fence bars, caught the top, levered his weight gingerly over the sharp iron spikes and vaulted into space.

He landed lightly, staggered a few steps and came upright, listening.

A breeze rustled the leaves of nearby trees; an automobile horn blew in the distance. Those were the only sounds. He judged that his entrance had made no alarm. Walking carefully he set off toward the house.

He had seen one dog that afternoon. There must be others. They were his chief concern. Once they scented him they would arouse everyone on the property in a few minutes. And, if trained well enough, they might easily be dangerous. They would have to be risked however.

Quiet lurked about the two story garage to which Jerry came. Past it he could see several lighted windows in the house, but the garage itself was dark.

He went on—and not fifty feet in front of the garage stumbled over a soft and yielding body on the ground.

No cat could have recovered balance and crouched for trouble quicker than Jerry did then.

The form did not stir. He moved to it, put down a hand, felt the short hairs of a dog's coat. The dog was dead.

The quiet had subtly changed. The peace was gone, driven away by the discovery of that dead dog. Almost as warm as in life, it had been dead only a short time.

Wrapping a handkerchief around the end of his flashlight, Jerry held the light low and winked it once. The faint glow

showed blood on the gravel of the driveway—and a pair of boots a few feet away. A man lay there.

Jerry was at his side a moment later, using the light again. It was one of the guards, still wearing a gun belt around his waist. But the gun was gone, and the side of his head was covered with blood. He had been felled by a terrible blow.

In the wrist a faint pulse beat steadily. Jerry left him there, got off the gravel and skirted the side of the house on grass damp with dew.

The trees and shrubs that had promised to be a help to him were abruptly menacing. They hid now the thing which had struck down the guard and dog.

The house was brick, two stories with wings, with the driveway sweeping before a big front porch. At the steps stood the black limousine which Jerry had seen that afternoon before the rooming house.

The parking lights were on, heading the other way. In the radius of their rays two traveling bags were sitting on the gravel in front of the machine. A quick departure was evidently to be made. But no one at the moment seemed to be around the machine. Jerry went to it on the balls of his feet, looked in, made certain it was empty.

And as he did so a shot sounded in the depths of the house and a woman screamed.

SKIRTING the front of the machine Jerry ran to the front porch—and dodged the moment he stepped on it. A dark figure had lunged out at him from the left.

The blow would have crushed the side of his head. It missed, due to his quickness, and glanced off his shoulder, numbing the shoulder; and as Jerry dodged again, swinging around, a gun roared close to his side.

He saw the flash from the muzzle, felt

the hot blast drive through the fabric of his coat, and breath for an instant was driven from his chest as the bullet struck a rib with a sledgehammer blow.

Jerry shot as he staggered back, twice, as fast as his finger could pull the automatic trigger. And then stood on wide-spread feet, gasping, as his attacker pitched down to the porch floor, stirred there a moment and lay still.

Abandoning caution, Jerry used the flashlight.

The man had been shot through the middle. A revolver and leather-covered blackjack had dropped from his hands. He lay on his back, clenched fists pressing in against his middle. About thirty, well dressed, stocky, his features were stamped clearly with the mark of the underworld. Jerry had never seen him before but he knew the type. A killer, ruthless, desperate. He'd kill even now if he was able. His eyes opened, closed; he continued to breath harshly and hold his middle. He was almost unconscious.

Jerry's breath was back again. Strength too. The hemorrhage of blood inside did not come, but he could feel blood trickling down his side. When he moved pain stabbed through his chest. He judged correctly that a rib had been cracked or fractured and the bullet had been deflected from the chest cavity. He could still move normally; and he did, swinging to the front door, throwing it open, stepping inside in time to face a man plunging down wide curving stairs with a gun in his hand.

The man opened fire on sight and tried to stop. His first shot splintered the door glass behind Jerry. His second clipped Jerry's coat sleeve. Close shooting for a moving man. Jerry fired once, carefully; and hit his target as he intended. The man fell forward, tumbling and rolling to the bottom of the steps.

Jerry was past him before he was quite

at the bottom, running up the steps. The trouble was upstairs, the girl must be up there; to hesitate now might double odds which Jerry had no way of counting. One thing only he was certain of. He could not go back. The girl, and only the girl, could help him; and she herself needed help now.

In the hall above an excited voice called: "Joe, what's the matter down there?"

The speaker ran toward the head of the stairs.

They met at the top, almost colliding. The other was the most surprised. His jaw dropped. Fear ran over his face. He dropped instinctively the golden serpent which dangled from his left hand and raised the automatic in his right.

And Jerry clubbed hard with the gun he carried, smashing true to the back of the other's hand. He saw as the automatic dropped and the fellow cried out in pain the little golden serpent writhe for a moment on the floor and then lie still.

The man was young, in his late twenties, thin-faced, gaunt, sallow, as if his frame had been racked by fever and privation. His face could have been frank, open, likable, but at the moment it was dark with fear, hate, apprehension as he backed off holding his injured hand.

"Hold it," said Jerry. He kicked the automatic behind him and stood watchfully, listening.

Down the hall behind a closed door a woman was sobbing loudly. At the foot of the stairs the man stirred, groaned. The rest of the house was quiet.

"Who else is up here?" Jerry asked the man before him.

And the fellow shrugged. His eyes, deep-set, dark, shifty, Jerry saw, darted here and there as if seeking escape. His fear made him more desperate. He did not answer.

"Who else?" Jerry rapped at him. "And

don't try the jump you're figuring on. I'll drop you at the first move."

The other looked at the gun, at Jerry's face. The watchfulness drained out of his own face. His shoulders drooped a little and he shrugged.

"No one," he muttered.

"Just the three of you come here?"

"You've—got the others?"

"What does it look like?"

The young man considered him for a moment, and shrugged again. "I guess you have," he admitted. "That's all there was. The three of us."

JERRY stirred the little golden serpent with his foot. His mind was working fast. Sergeant Smith had taken the serpent Jerry had gotten from Leo Bakos. And the second one had been taken out of pawn by the man who had pledged it, by the man who called himself Harry Duval—who had been found dead beside the North Shore highway.

"Where did you get this snake?" Jerry asked.

He got no reply to that question. Stooping, with his eyes on the other, Jerry picked up the snake, dropped it in his pocket and said curtly: "Back down the hall. We'll have a look."

Jerry stopped him at the door where the woman was sobbing. It was unlocked. Gun against the other's side, Jerry threw the door open and looked in the room. A pretty girl in a maid's apron and cap was lying on the bed. She started up fearfully, peering from swollen eyes. She was alone in the room.

"Where is Miss Madison?" Jerry asked her.

She wailed: "I think they killed her! I d-don't know. Who are you?" Jerry smiled at her. "I dropped in to call on Miss Madison," he said. "And I was forced to join the party. What were they after?"

"I d-don't know!" she sniffed. "We

were packing to leave when they burst into the house with guns in their hands and held all up. The s-servants are locked downstairs in the pantry. They threatened to k-kill us if we made any noise."

"And so you cried as loud as you could," Jerry said.

"I c-couldn't help it, sir."

From the hall behind Jerry a voice he remembered well said: "Are you looking for me?"

Jerry made the mistake of turning his head. His prisoner was on him instantly, grabbing the automatic and trying to wrench it away. The maid screamed. And Jerry fought for the gun and, he realized his life.

Natural strength or the frenzy of fear made the other almost a superman. Using both hands he twisted the automatic from Jerry's fingers. And as it went out of his grasp Jerry struck with his other fist, crossing hard to the jaw with all his weight behind it.

His man staggered across the hall, struck the wall and weaved there in a daze, trying to bring the gun up. Jerry was on him a moment later, tearing the weapon away, jerking the fellow around by the coat collar and running him along the hall with the gun against the back.

The girl who had spoken was standing there to meet them. She wore a traveling suit now, but she was as slender, as graceful and as dainty as ever. Pale, nervous, she seemed to be forcing herself to stand and face them.

And her look at Jerry was a mixture of astonishment, fear and relief. "Where did you come from?" she asked.

"Outside," Jerry said, shaking his prisoner by the collar. "Sorry I had to let this fellow break out that way again. He seems to be dangerous."

She said: "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I dropped in to talk to you," Jerry

said, smiling slightly. "You made a bit of trouble when you left so quickly this afternoon. And the guards at the gate didn't seem to want to admit me when I called shortly after."

"Why did you call? What business was it of yours? How did you find me?"

She put the questions with forced calmness, and back of that her hands were tightly clenched at her sides and there was enough light in the hall to show the quick pulse throbbing at the side of her throat.

"My name is Jerry Prince, Miss Madison. I'm a friend of Jeanne Cameron, who knows Betty Thornton, who knows you."

"I don't know Betty Thorton."

"I understand she was a friend of Jane Madison."

"I am Jane's sister," she said. "Jane is in Europe, ill. And I still don't see why you came here."

RELASING his prisoner's coat collar, but keeping the gun against his back, Jerry took the little golden serpent from his pocket.

"I came here about this," he said.

"It's mine. He took it away from me by threatening me with a gun. Give it to me."

She reached for it and Jerry let her have it. "How could he take it away from you when he's had it?" he asked

"He hasn't had it."

"He pawned it, and then redeemed it this afternoon," Jerry said.

"Not this one," she said. "He had another one. That must have been the one he pawned."

And, weakly, Jerry demanded: "How many of those gold serpents are loose around town?"

"Three," she said. "I had one, he had one and—and—"

"And the man who was killed this afternoon had the other one?" Jerry finished for her. "He sold his outright—and was

killed as soon as he got back to the house. Why was he murdered, Miss Madison? You know."

"No!" she denied.

"I'm afraid you do. Would I be close to the truth when I said you went to the pawnbroker's house tonight to buy the serpent from him?"

She swallowed. "What do you know about that?"

"Bakos was murdered while you were there," Jerry told her bluntly. "That makes the score two for you today."

He felt the prisoner stir uneasily against the gun muzzle, and gave no indication he noticed it.

"Killed?" she whispered. "While I was there? No!" And her face was white now and her denial wrenched out with fright. "He wasn't dead when I left," she said. "I did go to see him. John told me he had just sold the serpent at that pawnshop. He had no money. He had to live, and he wouldn't let me give him money. He ran upstairs to get something and—and he was killed up there. When I got to the pawnshop it was closed, so I went to see the owner this evening and buy it back from him. While I was talking to him someone called downstairs. Bakos raised up a door in the floor and told me to get out. I—I think he expected trouble and didn't want me there. Just as I started down I heard a shot—and—and I got out of the house as quickly as I could."

"And left your glove there, Jerry said.

Startled, she said uncertainly: "Did I?"

"You did," said Jerry. "Who is this man?"

"His name is Harry Duval."

"That right?" Jerry asked his prisoner.

The man kept a sullen silence.

She said: "Why shouldn't he be? I know him. He was with my father's party in the Orient. I've seen him in pictures of the party my father sent back. John Lambert told me over the telephone some time

ago that he had seen Duval on the street, and Duval saw him and hurried away. John was afraid there would be trouble. He warned me to be careful."

"Why careful?"

Duval burst out abruptly: "The police aren't looking for me. If they mistook someone for me, it isn't my fault."

"They'll have something to say about your billfold and hotel bill in the pocket of that dead man," Jerry remarked dryly.

"They were stolen."

"Of course. And you didn't report it—and the man was careful enough to keep the hotel bill. They believe fairy tales at headquarters—sometimes," Jerry said. "But not as raw as that one, I'm afraid. Miss Madison, you're holding out. Where is your father? What about these three snakes that seem of such interest to ever one?"

SLOWLY she said: "I guess you might as well know. Father is dead. He was killed in the hills of Annam, in the country behind French-Indo China. Stabbed. They were hunting for the ruins of a lost city supposed to be hidden back there in the jungle like Ankor-Wat was for centuries. They found it, and in one of the temples they unearthed those gold serpents. They were so striking that my father, John Lambert and Duval each took one. Father sent his back to me by the first post, without saying anything about it to the others. Two nights later he caught Duval ransacking his tent. Duval stabbed him and fled from the camp with a rifle and his own gold serpent.

"John Lambert came back to the coast at once. On the way he heard a rumor that Duval had been killed by a tiger but could not verify it. He cabled me, wound up the expedition and sailed for home with what little money he had left.

"On the way he managed to decipher characters on the belly of his snake and

realized that they were part of directions for reaching the buried temple treasure. Each snake apparently had part of the directions engraved on it, and all three of the snakes had to be deciphered to get the full directions. Duval must have stumbled on the truth and, thinking father probably knew it too, killed him to get him out of the way and get his snake and the directions it held. John Lambert would probably have been next. John came back here. told me the story, got the directions off the snake father had sent me, and found that he still had to have the one Duval had carried away.

"And the next day," she said soberly, "John saw Duval on the street and realized that Duval must have come here to get father's serpent and the one John had. John warned me. I had the place guarded. John wouldn't stay here. He began to search the city for Duval. I didn't know his money was so low until I went there today and he told me he had sold the serpent for the gold in it. And then—he was killed."

She hesitated, and then said: "That pawnbroker—Bakos, seemed to know more than he should. He asked me what I would pay for both snakes, and when I said any reasonable price, he laughed and said they would come pretty high as he knew a thing or two about their value now."

"Ummm, so Leo said that?" Jerry commented softly. "That means he talked with this man then. He didn't know a thing about them this afternoon. But shortly after that he sent men to hold me up and kill me. It makes sense now. Leo made a deal with our friend here."

And abruptly Duval broke out with thick rage: "That swine! He had me followed from his store and forced himself on me. He said he was the only person who could get the other snake back. He promised to have it this evening. I thought he knew more than he did."

"And so," said Jerry, "when you went to get the snake, you removed Bakos, and then came to finish up with Miss Madison."

"I didn't say that, damn you!"

"You did," said Jerry, "only you didn't mean to. There's such a thing as circumstantial evidence." Jerry drew a soft breath and smiled past his prisoner's shoulder at Miss Madison. "I should know," Jerry said to her. "I've become an expert on circumstantial evidence this evening. Suppose we get to a telephone? I know just the man who will know what to do with it, and with our slippery, greedy friend here. He'll be chagrined, but he'll be honest about it. I think your troubles are over, Miss Madison."

She smiled doubtfully at him. "I hope," she said, "you are telling the truth. You—you seem so honest."

Jerry chuckled as she went along the hall by his side, with Duval walking dejectedly in front of the muzzle of Jerry's gun.

"When my friend gets here," Jerry said to her, "I want you tell him just that. How honest you are sure I am."

"Of course," she promised. "But—but I don't see why."

Jerry chuckled again at the vision the idea brought up. "I merely want to be there watching his face when you do," he said.

COMPLETE in DIME DETECTIVE for OCTOBER 1st
A GREAT NOVEL-LENGTH MASTER MYSTERY

THE FLAMING SHADOW

by

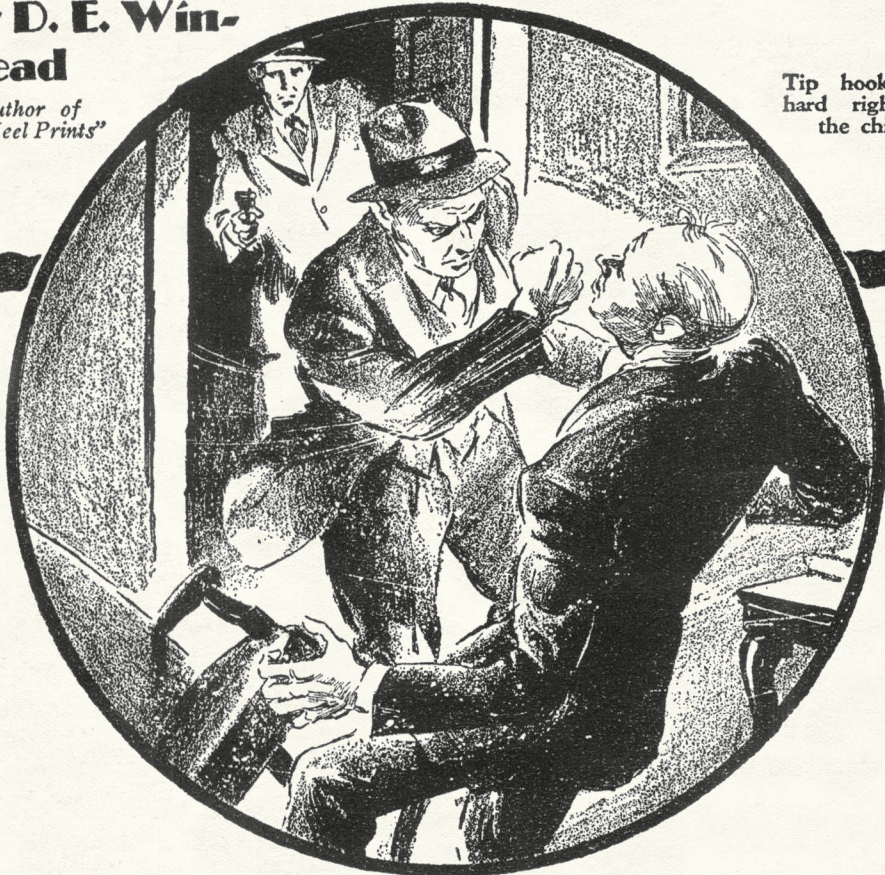
GEORGE HARMON COXE

Out on SEPTEMBER 1st

The Corpse in 518

by D. E. Win-
stead

Author of
"Heel Prints"



Tip hooked a
hard right to
the chin.

The girl in 518 lay dead in a pool of fresh blood and every clue seemed to head up a blind alley. But just a little difference in temperature was all that Tip Gregory needed to change a cold lead into a hot tip.

TIP GREGORY frowned as he reread the note.
Midnight—Grace Summer's

There was no signature, yet there could be little doubt that it had been written by his prospective client. But why had she left before his arrival? If surprised in the room by those she feared, how had she managed to leave a note?

The woman's voice had sounded as though she were highly excited when she called Tip. "Come to Seven-o-seven, Hobart Hotel!" she'd said. "Don't worry about your fee. I'm solvent. I am—"

And then there had come a startled "Oh!" The click of a pronged receiver ended the conversation.

The room was obviously unoccupied. An ancient and tottery birds-eye-maple dresser was bare except for a soiled scarf. There was a bed to match, and in one corner a small gas heating stove. This, with a porcelain lavatory in the opposite corner, and one straight chair to which Tip would not have dared entrust his two hundred pounds, comprised the room's furnishings.

Cursing himself half aloud for having

answered such a call, Tip stiffened suddenly at a slight sound from the doorway.

Schooled by experience against betraying surprise, Tip did not whirl at the sound. Instead he slipped the open note into his shirt pocket underneath his vest, and with the same motion clutched the butt of the Colt .45 in his shoulder holster.

"Take your hand off that rod! Heist 'em!" This was a hoarse whisper punctuated by the jab of a hard object against Tip's spine.

Tip slipped his right hand from under his coat and raised both above his head.

"That's better." The pressure was removed from his back. "Now you can turn round."

Tip turned to face a stocky, rat-faced man who stood with an automatic leveled at his waistline. The man's grin showed his yellowed teeth, and his hair was a close-cropped mop. "Frisk him, Knob."

A SMALLER man, who had stood behind the other, completely hidden by him, stepped forward and removed Tip's gun from its holster. He had a flattened nose and a very bald head. His small eyes and a stereotyped sneer were his only other distinctive features.

"All right," said the larger of the two threateningly. "We're ready for you to start talkin'!"

Tip eyed them coolly. "About what?" he asked.

The larger man sneered and his eyes narrowed with menace. He motioned his companion to get behind Tip. "The girl. What did she tell you and where'd she go?"

Tip sighed with relief. At least it seemed that his client, whoever she might be, had not fallen into the hands of these hoodlums. Perhaps she had seen them lurking near and evaded them.

"I haven't seen her. She phoned me to

meet her here, but something must have happened."

The man in front stepped forward quickly, jabbing the gun muzzle against Tip's abdomen, at the same time slapping him upon the lips with the back of his open hand. It was a hard blow, and unexpected. Tip restrained with difficulty the impulse to fight back.

"Get smart! Stop stallin'!"

"I told you the truth. I didn't get to see her. She didn't show up. I don't even know her name. I've no idea what it's all about."

An angry snarl from behind and the bald-headed Knob struck Tip on the back of the head with the heel of his hand. Tip staggered forward and the man in front struck him with a short hard jab to the mouth. Tip's knees sagged. He slid to the floor.

He wasn't out, but he felt helpless and smothered with wrath. He closed his eyes, feigning unconsciousness. A sharp kick in the side brought a groan from him. He lay gasping. Then he felt cold water being dashed into his face. He got to his knees, strangling.

The larger of the two hoodlums reached down then, grasped his coat collar and jerked him to his feet. Tip stood unsteadily.

"Some day I'll take you apart for this!" The blood in Tip's mouth made his words thick.

"We'll take you apart now and save you the trouble!" snarled his assailant. "Damn you—where's the frail?"

"Do you think I'd be hanging around here after I'd seen her? You've got a hell of a lot of sense!"

The answer was another back-hand blow across the mouth. Tip's head went far back, but he came erect, muscles tense and shaking. Another blow closed his right eye. With his left he saw the larger hoodlum's face, red and contorted with fury, the thick lips drawn against stained, un-

even teeth. The pistol flashed upward and down. Tip seemed to hear the ringing of a million bells. Lightning flashed before his eyes, went out.

WHEN Tip regained consciousness he found his hands fastened with his own handcuffs, one on either side of the lavatory drain. There was a nauseating pain in his body. He closed his eyes and stifled a groan. Dulled words beat against his ears. He opened his eyes again.

The room was a wreck. The dresser drawers sat on the floor, the bed had been stripped, and the spread, mattress, and sheet lay on the floor in disorder.

"But she didn't tell him her name over the phone," he heard the man, Knob, saying. "Sounded like she heard somebody comin' and hung up. Or maybe I moved or made enough noise that she got wise that I'd tapped Bradley's phone. Looks like he was tellin' us right."

"Hell! This guy Gregory ain't no fool. He's slick. This note don't mean a thing. It's a plant. He knew we'd find it."

Tip's heart sank. They had found the note, and now they knew as much as he did. Perhaps more.

"It's been more'n an hour since you heard her call him. She's already met him and gone while you was foolin' round wastin' time. He was waitin' here to get a line. The boss is goin' to be plenty peeved about this."

Knob scowled. "How could I help it not bein' able to find you?" He nodded toward Tip. "What about him?"

"We'll have to let him have it. He knows too much."

"But not with a rod. Too much noise. Look, I'll turn on the gas." Knob stooped and turned the gas cock of the stove. Then as both started for the door, he looked at Tip who lay still, with closed

eyes. "Meetcha in hell!" he chuckled as he slammed the door.

Tip at once awoke to activity. He wrenched at the drain pipe with desperation. It held. He grabbed it with his hand and strove to work it to and fro. No use.

Already he could smell the odor of escaping gas. He stamped his feet against the floor, desperately hoping to attract the attention of someone below. He stopped, listening, trying to plan some logical means of escape.

The telephone, a desk model, sat upon a small square shelf about four feet from the floor, and just beyond the reach of his outstretched foot. He tried kicking for it, missed by inches.

The smell of gas was more oppressive now. Tip's eyes and nostrils burned, and his ears roared. He kicked again for the telephone. Missed. He lay still then, gasping.

Tip snapped his head upright from where it had slumped. He must retain his wits. Must not give way to despair. The odor of gas was no longer discernible, but the knowledge of its presence seemed to choke him.

In desperation Tip hooked the handcuffs in the curve of the drainpipe, scrambled to his feet, with hips high and kicked both feet with all his strength in a last desperate try for the telephone.

There came a sudden wrench that seemed almost to tear his body in twain. Steel bit into his wrists, and his chest crashed hard to the floor, knocking the breath from him.

As Tip gasped, his eyes burning and his head roaring, he craned his neck and saw that the telephone lay on the floor, the receiver off the hook. He yelled hoarsely, hoping the hotel clerk might hear him.

It worked. After what seemed ages he heard footsteps in the hall. The door

opened and a bell-boy peered in with widened eyes.

"Quick!" yelled Tip. "Turn off the gas!"

The bell-boy complied. In moments, then, Tip was free.

Out in the fresher air of the hotel corridor he felt much better. He looked at his watch. It was 7:00 P. M.

While the hotel doctor closed the wound on his cheek and applied iced gauze to his eye and lips, Tip questioned the clerk.

"I was called to that room," he explained. "Found it deserted. Two hoodlums stepped in behind me and beat me up. I don't know the name of the party who called me. It was a woman. I overheard the two men who attacked me say they had tapped Bradley's telephone. Do you have anyone named Bradley?"

"Sure. Dotson Bradley and his daughter live in the apartment on the eighth floor. Maybe it was Miss Lorine Bradley who called you."

"So. Who is this Bradley?"

"He's a theatrical man. He just came in. Shall I call him?"

Tip considered for a moment. He had no idea why Lorine Bradley, if indeed it were she, had called. Knew nothing of what sort of danger might be threatening, nor whether she would care to take her father into her confidence. He'd try to see her before taking anything for granted.

"No," he said. "It might not be Miss Bradley at all. Let's not disturb her father until we're sure that it wouldn't be merely causing him unnecessary worry. Just forget this incident. I'm by no means proud of it, and besides, if you keep all this dark it will give me a better chance to learn what it's all about."

AT TEN minutes past midnight Tip Gregory began to grow impatient. He had made every possible effort to con-

tact Lorine Bradley and warn her, if she proved to be his elusive client, that her note had fallen into the hands of her enemies. But he could not locate her. There had been nothing else for him to do but go to Grace Sumner's night club and wait.

And for half an hour he had waited, his mind a prey to doubt and the fear that the two who had attacked him might have found her after leaving him handcuffed to the drainpipe.

Tip had finished his food, and a drink stood untouched at his elbow. From the camouflage of a newspaper he studied the crowd, his eyes frowning, thoughtful. But if anyone beside the waiter had so much as noticed his presence he wasn't aware of it. He saw no sign of his two assailants of a few hours ago.

There was one other singleton at a table not far from his own. Its occupant was a stout middle-aged man with bushy red hair and a close-cropped gray mustache. His frequent furtive glances toward the foyer betrayed the fact that he, too, awaited someone.

Just at that moment the stranger caught Tip's eye. He arose at once and walked over to the detective's table.

"You're Tip Gregory?" he asked.

Tip nodded. "Have a seat." He was annoyed, on guard.

The man sat down. "My name is Dotson Bradley. I heard of the attack that was made upon you at the Hobart. I understand that you suspect it was my daughter who called you?"

So the hotel clerk had talked after all. Tip had expected as much. "I haven't any good reason to believe that," he said. "What do you think?"

"I'm terribly afraid it was she," Bradley answered promptly. "I surprised her talking over the telephone a short time before your—ah—accident, and she quickly hung up when she saw me. I thought nothing of it at the time, but

since hearing what happened to you I've suspected that she was in trouble and didn't want me to be worried."

"Have you any idea what sort of trouble?"

"Yes." Bradley leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Three years ago she very foolishly became engaged to a man who has since acquired quite an unsavory reputation. That engagement has been broken off for nearly three years. But a short time ago my daughter fell heir to quite a sum of money. In the meanwhile this same man had become one of my backers in my new musical comedy, *Meetcha In Hell*. When he learned of her inheritance he tried to force a renewal of the engagement by threatening me with ruin. It didn't work. He withdrew his support and left me on the rocks. He has since made numerous threats."

Tip's eyes widened. "And who is this man?"

"Remember, I have no proof that it was he who sent the men that attacked you. But I do suspect him. Have you heard of Fred Webber?"

"Check!" said Tip with a start. "Webber's a lame-duck politician who's been about two jumps ahead of the police for the past year. How did you happen to come here tonight?"

For answer Bradley handed the detective a blank piece of note-paper. Tip scrutinized it minutely. There was no writing on it, but it carried the imprint of a penciled note which had evidently been scrawled on the page above it. It read—

Midnight—Grace Sumner's.

TIP frowned. "That note seems to have got around. I tried to get in touch with Miss Bradley to learn if it was she that called me, and if so to warn her that her note had been found by the two who beat me up. I couldn't find her. Where is she?"

"That's just it! I'm afraid they've found her! She has disappeared. I came over here to explain the situation to you and ask you to help me find her."

"If you suspect that she's been kidnapped why haven't you notified the police? Or have you?"

"No. I don't want any publicity just now, when I'm trying to get backing for *Meetcha In Hell*. Too, it might prove to be a false suspicion. I suggest that we go or send someone to Webber's place immediately."

"Perhaps you're right," Tip said. He scrawled a message on the piece of note-paper Bradley had given him. "Go to a phone booth and call this number. Deliver the message written here. That'll take care of Webber for the time being. I'll wait here a bit longer in the hope that Miss Bradley will meet me. If we haven't located her in a couple of hours we must notify the police."

As Bradley left his table Tip picked up the glass at his side, frowned into it, sipped its contents. The orchestra struck up a new song hit.

Suddenly, then, a tall girl with blond curls and too much make-up stepped out in front of the orchestra pit, throwing kisses to the crowd.

Tip's brow wrinkled in surprise. He'd been here often. This girl wasn't Loretta, the regular performer.

She sang the chorus. When the orchestra repeated the chorus she started. Her voice wasn't so hot, Tip thought, but her dancing was superb. She was very pretty, too, with large eyes and a good smile. She wore a pink dancing frock, and a bandeau clamped upon her head was set on either side with a cluster of sapphires. Her limbs were slender and shapely, and her movements graceful.

As she danced nearer, flitting in and out amongst the tables, the detective noted with surprise that her eyes were brown. He stared with renewed interest. Those

blond curls, then, might be false

Still dancing, she glided swiftly toward Tip's table, and when within a step of it she stopped and spun upon a toe as though propelled by some magic force. Tip watched her expectantly.

As the spin ended the dancer seemed momentarily to lose her balance. She clutched quickly at the edge of Tip's table, steadied herself before he could move to assist her, and as quickly picked up the rhythm of the dance again. Then it was that he noted a tiny L-shaped scar under her right eye.

As the number ended Tip joined in the applause, then sipped again at his drink as he reached nonchalantly to the spot where the girl's fingers had clutched the under surface of his table. There he found a small envelope stuck fast with some sort of gum. He removed it, and as he drained the glass he tucked it slyly into his trousers pocket.

Since the girl had used such precautionary means to approach him, there must be some reason for caution. This demanded equal caution upon his part. He paid his check and walked unhurriedly to a row of telephone booths which lined the foyer. He stepped into one of these and closed the door behind him. Then he took the envelope from his pocket and broke the seal.

There was a small piece of note-paper pinned to a five-hundred-dollar bill. Tip unfolded the paper and read.

Room 518 Bushmann Hotel at 2:30. Important. Confide in no one.

Lorine Bradley

There could be no further doubt now as to his client's identity, for the writing was the same as that on the previous note, though written less hurriedly. Tip tore the note into fine bits and put the bill caressingly into his wallet.

When he came into the foyer again

Dotson Bradley was nowhere in sight. He stepped warily into the street, after looking in all directions along the street intersection. Tip had no intention of again falling into the hands of his two assailants of yesterday. He crossed the street and entered an all-night movie theater. He spent the next hour and a half nodding through a dull show.

Why, Tip wondered, had such precaution been necessary? Why had Lorine Bradley not entered and walked directly to his table? Or why hadn't she called for him at the desk? Why hadn't she asked him to meet her immediately, instead of at two thirty? Was the dancing girl Lorine Bradley, or an emissary? Was Lorine Bradley's life in imminent danger that he must be approached with such caution?

AT EXACTLY 2:31, Tip knocked at the door of 518 at the Bushmann. There was no answer. Hell! This sort of thing was getting under his skin! He knocked again, insistently.

Abruptly, then, the door swung open. Tip gasped in surprise. A man of about twenty-five stood just inside the threshold, his eyes wide and staring, his face pale as a sheet, and his white lips drawn tight against his chattering teeth. He was breathing in short, halting sobs. As his left hand trembled upon the doorknob the right hung at his side, and a small automatic pistol dangled from his fingers.

Tip peered into the room, bounded past the standing youth, stepped inside. On the floor, her head partly under a small writing desk, lay a young woman. She lay on her left side with her back toward the door. Tip knelt upon the floor to look at her face.

She was a brunette. Large brown eyes wide and staring, her black hair combed straight. Tip put a finger under her chin and turned her face upward. There was a small round hole in her left temple. He

leaned forward then with quickened interest. There was a tiny L-shaped scar under the right eye. This was the midnight dancer in street clothes, and with her make-up removed!

A pool of blood darkened the floor about the girl's head. It was bright red and unclotted.

Tip got to his feet and looked again at the other man in the room. He still stood near the doorway, staring vacantly into space. He hadn't spoken a word. He looked crazy.

"Put your gun on the bed," Tip commanded.

The man looked at the gun in his hand then as though he were seeing it for the first time. "It isn't mine!" he croaked in a strained, high-pitched voice. "She—she's been murdered!" He tossed the gun on the bed and covered his eyes with his hands.

There was a telephone in the room. Tip called police headquarters. He got Captain Rex McGruder of the homicide squad, on the wire and reported the murder. He also called the hotel clerk.

Then he turned back to the man who had held the gun. "If that isn't your gun what were you doing with it?" he asked him. As he spoke he had taken a small vial from a case in his pocket. The vial was labeled, *Salt Solution*. Now, with a piece of paper, he carefully scooped up some of the still unclotted blood from the floor and poured it into the vial.

The white-faced man watched him unseeingly. "It was on the floor," he answered dully. "I came in and found her—found her like that. I picked up the gun after I'd called her name over and over and she didn't answer me. Then you knocked."

"Why did you kill her?"

The man whirled. "I?" His eyes flashed wilder than before. "I kill her? But I didn't! I didn't! We—we were

to be married as soon as I could get my divorce. Now—oh my God!"

"Who is she?"

The young man took his face out of his hands and looked quickly at Tip. "Why, don't you know? She is Lorine Bradley. Aren't you Tip Gregory? She called me during my rehearsal and told me she was going to have Tip Gregory meet us here. It was a dress rehearsal and I couldn't leave until two. She said to come at two thirty."

"Yes, I was to meet her here, but I've never seen her. Do you know why she wanted me here?"

"No. She wouldn't tell me over the phone."

"Who are you?"

"Grantland Hill. I'm an actor. I have a small part in Shanley's Revue. My God. Who could have done this, Mr. Gregory?"

"What do you think? Any rivals?"

"None that I know of. And you needn't ask about my former wife. She's four thousand miles from here. And she isn't interested in my affairs anyhow."

Tip heard footsteps and turned to greet McGruder, fat, red-faced and frowning. He was accompanied by Dr. Lukeson, the police physician, also a fingerprint man.

After the exchange of greetings Tip said: "The murdered girl is Lorine Bradley, daughter of Dotson Bradley, the theatrical producer. I was to meet her here at two thirty. When I came in I found her like this. This fellow," indicating Hill, "let me in. He had an automatic in his right hand at the time. There it is on the bed."

McGruder grunted. He rubbed his nose, looking from Tip to Grantland Hill. "O. K., Gregory. What did she want with you at two thirty in the morning?"

"I've no idea. I didn't get a chance to talk with her."

"Huh!" said McGruder, fixing small

eyes on Grantland Hill. "It don't matter. This is open and shut."

THERE was a light behind the closed door of Grace Sumner's private office. Tip knocked.

"Who's there?" came a hoarse feminine voice.

"Tip Gregory. Open up. There's been a murder."

The door opened. A woman in her late thirties stood inside. "What's that? A murder in my place?"

Grace Sumner had once been beautiful. She was still beautiful for that matter, but too many cocktails, too much loss of sleep had left tell-tale lines on her face, and she was beginning to grow stout.

"No. Not here. At the Bushmann Hotel."

She stepped aside with widening eyes. As Tip entered he was surprised to see Dotson Bradley sitting in the extra chair beside Grace Sumner's desk.

"But I don't see how a murder at the Bushmann could possibly concern me." Grace Sumner showed her annoyance. "Who was murdered?"

The young lady who substituted for Loretta here at midnight. She was"—Tip looked helplessly at Dotson Bradley—"was Mr. Bradley's daughter. I'm sorry . . ."

Bradley leaped from his chair. "What's this? Lorine murdered? "When—what?"

"I've just come from the hotel and I got there before the blood was clotted. Grantland Hill was in the room with a gun in his hand when I went in. He claims he had just entered and found her."

"Good God!" Bradley burst out. "It doesn't seem possible! I can't believe that lad capable of such a thing! And yet if it was as you say she couldn't have been dead but a few moments. Who else could it have been? My God! Lorine!

I'm going to the Bushmann at once."

He went out, pale and obviously trembling. When he was gone Tip turned to Grace Sumner. "I'd like to talk with the conductor of your orchestra."

Grace Sumner pushed a buzzer on her desk.

"This is horrible!" she said. "Mr. Bradley and I were just talking about her. He came in about an hour ago, and he was worried then. Lorine had disappeared from her home. He was afraid she'd been kidnaped."

A waiter came from the dining room, where now there were no more than a scant half dozen patrons.

"Find Nick Walton and send him here," she ordered. Then she turned again to Tip. "But it couldn't have been Lorine who danced at midnight. She is a brunette."

"She wore a blond wig," Tip explained. "Did you know there'd be a substitution?"

"No. Of course, I noticed that there had been a substitution, but she did her dance well and I didn't make any inquiry. I took it for granted that the regular performer was ill. Nick Walton, the orchestra conductor, handles all that—"

A small dark man, with his black hair roached back, appeared in the doorway. He wore a smile that looked built-in, perpetual.

"Mr. Gregory, this is Nick Walton," Grace Sumner said. "Nick, the girl who did the song and dance for you shortly after midnight has been murdered in a room at the Bushmann."

The smile disappeared from Walton's face. "Murdered? Lorine Bradley murdered? Good God!"

"Why'd she dance?" Tip asked.

Nick Walton seemed genuinely shocked. "Why, she came to me about eleven-thirty and offered a hundred dollars if I'd let her do Loretta's number. I knew she could do it. I taught her music and dancing. So I put her on."

"Did she explain why she wanted to do the number?"

"No. I asked her, but she refused to tell me. She seemed excited and nervous. I told her she'd be recognized in spite of her wig unless she used a lot of make-up. She looked scared then, and asked me to make her up so that no one would know her. That's why we were late with the dance. And she's been murdered!"

IT was 10:00 A. M. when Tip reached his office. Barbara Taylor, his secretary, whose hobby was filing newspaper clippings, greeted him with an exclamation.

"Good heavens! Pipe the shiner! How come?"

Tip didn't bother to answer. He looked at the litter of cut newspapers upon her desk and filing cabinet. "Anything about the Bradley case?"

"Plenty." Barbara Taylor opened her filing cabinet and scanned a card index. She reached in a compartment, took out a handful of clippings, and began sorting them out.

"If looks mean anything," she said, "you were up all night, and I judge you knew something of the recent developments before these slips I've just filed were published. Or at any rate, that you've already read the morning papers, so I'll spare you that."

"Thanks, Horoscope. I want something about Bradley and his daughter; their associates, and what they've been doing the past several years."

"Here you are," she announced with a flourish. "Dotson Bradley used to be a big-time producer. He lost a half million in the crash of 'Twenty-nine. Has put on several musical comedies since that time, but nothing big. Just now he's trying to stage a comeback with another musical comedy entitled *Meetcha In Hell*.

He's having a hard time with the financial end.

"Here's an item, but I suppose it isn't important. It says Dotson was given a blood transfusion after being injured in an automobile accident. That was two years ago. And here's an item from yesterday afternoon's scandal column. It says: 'What theatrical producer with a musical comedy well-nigh on the rocks is beginning to get *that way* about a certain night-club proprietress? Will she finance his stranded production if and when? It's a safe bet the cast hopes so.'

"There's not much about the murdered girl except society items. Her picture, any number of parties—not the wild kind. The only thing of importance that I have is that she fell heir to fifty grand two weeks ago from a maternal grandmother. It seems that Bradley was poison to this old lady and she fixed it so he couldn't touch a cent.

"Is this boring you? Maybe you'd rather—"

"Read on, Horoscope. Got a file on Fred Webber?"

"I have if he's ever been in the papers."

"Look him up. He's been there."

Barbara bent over a drawer of her filing cabinet again. "Yes. Fred Webber was alderman from the tenth ward in Nineteen Twenty-five. He was arrested on a liquor violation charge in Nineteen Thirty. Was cleared. One of his men, Knob Purcelli, was tried for murder in Nineteen Thirty-one. He beat the rap. He has been accused—

"Wait, Horoscope! What was this man's name?"

"Knob Purcelli."

"Check! Bye, Horoscope. I got work to do."

But as Tip hurried for the door he met McGruder coming in. He stifled an oath and turned back. They went into Tip's private office.

McGruder wasted no time. "Say, Gregory," he growled at once, "you ran out on me last night before I noticed you'd gone. I've been thinkin' . . . Sounds screwy, your goin' up there at two thirty in the mornin' to interview a client you'd never seen. What's the low-down?"

"I told you the straight dope, McGruder. I never got a chance to talk with Miss Bradley. I don't know why she wanted to see me. To protect her from whoever murdered her, I suppose."

McGruder rubbed his nose. "You wouldn't try to kid me, would you, Gregory? Oh, I've got the murderer, all right. But I'm lookin' for a motive. If you know anything, Gregory, you ought to spill it. You can't gain anything by holding out on me. The thing's already in the bag."

"I'll keep my eyes open, McGruder. If I learn anything I'll give you a ring."

"Hell! Is that any way to treat a pal? Why're all private dicks like that?"

"Honest, McGruder, I don't know what Hill's motive was. What do you think?"

McGruder looked at Tip for a long moment with narrowed eyes. "Lovers' quarrel, I suppose. She was throwin' him over. He wanted her and her fifty grand. She was afraid of him and wanted you to be there when she gave him the gate, maybe. He came earlier than she expected and let her have it."

"Sounds reasonable. Find anything on the gun?"

"Sure. Hill's prints. The gun belonged to the girl. Her prints weren't on it though. Death occurred at about two thirty. Blood wasn't clotted when we got there."

"That certainly makes it look as if you've got an open-and-shut case."

McGruder scowled, rose to go. "Sure," he said. "But I still think you're holdin' out on me, Gregory. Though maybe I'm wrong . . ."

FRED WEBBER'S place was a two-story brownstone set far back from the street. Rumor had it that the estate was mortgaged to the gills.

Tip parked in front and sought the operative sent there by Bradley's call at midnight. He found him in a cheap restaurant up the block a ways.

"Find out anything, Charley?" Tip asked him.

"I've seen Webber and a big mug come and go a coupla times. The guy you had call me told me to watch out for a girl. I haven't seen any girl."

"O. K., Charley. Go get yourself some sleep."

Tip walked up the broad walk and rang the doorbell. After a pause a bald head appeared at the door.

"Mr. Webber's out. He—" The man recognized Tip and his eyes went wide. He stepped back, trying to close the door. Tip stuck his foot across the threshold.

"Not so fast, louse!" Tip flung the door open and entered with his gun against the man's belly. He prodded his way well into the living room and stopped. The man in front of him was Knob Purcelli, the smaller of his two assailants of the day before.

"I promised you I'd take you apart. I've come to keep that promise." Tip patted the man's pockets. He was unarmed. "Where's the rat that beat me up?"

"Go to hell!" Purcelli snarled.

Tip slipped his gun back in its holster. "Get your mits up!" He jabbed Purcelli with his left.

Purcelli staggered backward, then came in swinging. Tip straightened him with a left, hooked a hard right to the chin, and Purcelli wilted. He crumpled to the floor and lay still.

Tip heard a step behind him and whirled, trying to bring his gun into action. But he had started for it too late. Fred Webber stood facing him as he

turned and he had an automatic aimed at the detective's heart. Tip let the gun slide back into its holster.

"I'm disappointed in you, Gregory," Webber smiled. "I've heard you were clever."

Webber was tall and slender. He was fair and blue-eyed and his lip twitched occasionally with a nervous smirk. Through the open door Tip saw the larger of his two Hobart assailants alight from a car which had coasted silently under the porte cochère.

Webber stepped up and removed Tip's gun from the holster. "So you traced my boys? You shouldn't have done that, Gregory."

"How's your alibi on the Bradley kill, Webber? McGruder'll be wanting to know."

"Unfortunately, I don't have one. That's just the trouble. I was seen by half a dozen persons as I passed through the Bushmann lobby this morning at two thirty. I can account for myself until two twenty, but there's ten minutes that rise up to embarrass me. .

"It won't matter though. You're the only person who'll think of connecting me with that kill. I won't need an alibi now." Webber replaced his gun in its holster.

"Don't be a fool, Webber. McGruder'll learn you were one of Bradley's backers, and he'll learn that you made threats. Bradley hasn't forgotten how you threw him down. He'll delight in telling McGruder about it, just as he told me. Bradley knows you tried to snatch the girl. He knows you beat me up."

The man whom Tip had seen through the open door came in now, and stood regarding Tip with a sardonic grin on his face. Knob had gotten up. After a trip to the bathroom to wash blood from his face, he too, came and stood facing Tip.

"I didn't do that kill and I don't intend to take the rap," said Webber sullenly. "I don't know how many witnesses I'll

have to get rid of, but anyhow, your the first."

"Do you have your sodium citrate ready, Webber? Better be sure about that before you bump me off."

Webber's brow wrinkled. "I'm no good at riddles."

"Maybe not." Tip smiled mirthlessly. "Maybe you don't know what I meant by that crack, and maybe you're stalling. Anyway, you taught me a good lesson yesterday. That was to never get caught again with only one gun on me."

Tip's hand had been groping in his coat-sleeve pocket as he talked, and now it flashed out and up. He was facing the astonished men with a leveled automatic.

"Now the first of you to make a false move," he snapped, "can claim the honor of dying with his boots on. I almost hope you'll try it! Line up and face toward the door!"

None of the three had their guns out; they could do nothing but sullenly comply.

Tip disarmed Webber first. When he approached the larger man that one hunched his shoulders and whirled. But a sound rap over the head with the muzzle of Webber's gun discouraged his resistance. Tip herded the three into the bathroom, locked the door on the outside, and walked nonchalantly to his car.

AFTER a trip to the mortuary where Lorine Bradley's body had been prepared for burial, and an hour's work in his laboratory, Tip Gregory walked into McGruder's office.

McGruder looked up with a scowl from a littered desk. "What's on your mind, Gregory?" he demanded.

"I told you I'd cut you in if I got a lead. Maybe I've got one."

"What is it?"

"There are a few loose ends that need to be cleared up. I won't commit myself

just yet. Come with me and we'll interview Dotson Bradley."

"Hell! I interviewed him last night. Give that man a break. Let's don't make it any harder for him than we have to!"

"See this shiner?" Tip pointed to his right eye.

"Yes. I've been wonderin' about that."

"Fred Webber sent out his two hoodlums to kidnap Lorine Bradley yesterday afternoon. They found me where they thought they'd find her. I had another turn with Webber this morning. He tried to put me on the spot. Admitted he left the Bushmann at two thirty this morning."

"What's that? Then let's get Webber!"

"He'll keep. We've got to interview Bradley first."

McGruder leaped up from the desk and grabbed his hat. "Come on then, and get started! I'm achin' for a crack at Webber!"

Dotson Bradley was at rehearsal at Bremer Hall Auditorium. His look of annoyance was not to be misunderstood when he was summoned to the office.

"I wonder," he said, "if this business might not be postponed until we've finished the first rehearsal?"

"I'm afraid we'll have to insist upon talking with you for a few minutes," Tip answered, and motioned him into a chair beside a large flat-top. Tip sat in the swivel chair in front of the desk. McGruder remained standing near the entrance.

"Mr. Bradley," began Tip, "isn't it a fact that you were given a blood transfusion about two years ago?"

Tip heard McGruder's grunted surprise. Bradley's frown of annoyance deepened.

"Yes."

"And at that time you learned, no doubt, that the blood given you was let from the donor into a weak solution of

sodium citrate to prevent its clotting? You learned that citrated blood will not clot.

"Normally, blood will clot in three minutes after being let. Yet the blood supposed to have been from your daughter's wound wasn't clotted when the police physician arrived. I had been there some ten minutes, and Grantland Hill was there before me."

"What the hell are you driving at?" asked Bradley. His eyes were very bright, his face had gone pale.

"I collected a specimen of that blood last night, and later got another specimen of your daughter's blood from the undertaker. Not only did I find that the cells do not match, but the specimen I took from the murder room had been citrated.

"Furthermore, when I touched the face of the corpse it didn't have the feel of having died so recently. It wasn't cold, but it wasn't warm. The police physician was completely misled by the citrated blood. He had lost sleep, he didn't make as careful an examination as he'd otherwise have done. Lorine Bradley was killed nearer to one thirty than two thirty."

BRADLEY shifted in the chair. "And how does that help?" His lips were trembling, his hands moved nervously.

"You were on the rocks with your musical comedy. You probably tried to induce your daughter to finance your show. But that would have taken most all her inheritance. She refused. You probably made threats. At any rate she became alarmed and called me. You overheard that call and interrupted before she told me her name.

"I don't know how she got the note down to Seven-o-seven. Maybe she'd already planted it there, just in case. But after you intercepted that phone call you locked her in her room, probably tied her

up. I imagine you intended to take her for a ride as soon as a good chance offered.

She probably had a key and managed to get loose. Meanwhile you'd gone out to eat a belated dinner, I suppose. That's a good guess because you didn't eat when you came to Grace Sumner's at midnight.

"You were desperate when you learned she'd escaped you. Especially when you found the imprint of her note to me. So you came on in a desperate attempt to prevent her seeing me. But you over-acted. You weren't at all like a distraught father who was afraid his daughter had been kidnaped. And you had no good excuse for not going to the police.

"Your daughter knew you were sweet on Grace Sumner. She knew of but one of Grace's employees whom she could trust for sure. So she went to Nick Walton and managed to approach me in masquerade. But you recognized her.

Tip leaned forward, eyes boring into the silent Bradley's.

"You had already citrated a quantity of your own blood," he said, "just in case the chance presented itself to carry out a scheme which you'd been brewing for a long time. So you followed her to the Bushmann, forced her to tell you when she expected me—and then murdered her.

"You cleaned up the blood, dashed some of your own citrated blood over the wound and upon the floor to make the wound appear recent when discovered, then went at once to Grace Sumner's to establish your alibi."

Bradley sneered. But his face was deadly white, his lips thin.

"Nice pipe dream! How are you going to prove it?"

"That shouldn't be difficult," Tip said confidently. "You already had a goat, so you didn't want to ball McGruder up by telling of your suspicions of Webber as you told me. But better than this, will be a blood test. We'll see if your blood matches the blood I took from the murder room."

"I'll be damned if you do!" Bradley screamed. He came up out of his chair with a lurch, jerking an automatic from his pocket.

Tip hurtled forward out of the swivel chair, ducking low. He grabbed Bradley's knees just as the gun roared above his head. He snapped Bradley's feet from under him and they sprawled on the floor. Tip reached desperately for Bradley's gun hand, while McGruder flung himself atop of both.

Tip reached the struggling man's wrists, and at the same moment McGruder caught the gun and twisted it from Bradley's grasp. Bradley got up, wild-eyed. Tip pinioned his wrists and McGruder snapped the handcuffs on them.

"That act was a confession of guilt!" snapped McGruder.

"Hell yes! I killed her!" Bradley snarled. "But she isn't my own daughter. I adopted her when I married her mother."

"But Fred Webber," said McGruder dazedly. "What about him?"

Tip smiled ruefully. "Sorry, McGruder. There's nothing about Webber. He can account for himself until two twenty A. M. Lorine Bradley was dead before that time. Some other time, McGruder."

McGruder rubbed his nose disappointedly. "Hell! Let's shake on that, Gregory!"

IN THE NEXT ISSUE MAX BRAND

Introduces to DIME DETECTIVE readers a *Brand-new* trio of mystery-fiction characters, **DAVE CLOVELLY—AL CHAMPION—and JAY SHANEY** in

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DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE for OCTOBER 1st will be out on SEPTEMBER 15th

Fade-Out

A Cass Blue Story

by

John Lawrence

Author of "Guilty Party," etc.

It was a crazy, sordid mess into which Cass Blue's caller dragged him, and a twisting trail to follow. But the chase led in Nate Chapman's direction . . . and that was where Blue had been heading for seven long years . . .

ANYBODY would have gotten me to take any case that involved Nate Chapman, for any price they wanted to pay. There was a time, just after he'd kidnaped—and murdered—the Ross girl, when I walked the streets with a gun in my pocket, and a red haze in my head, stalking him. If I'd found him, I'd have dropped him in his tracks. I didn't. He ran squealing to the cops and they put him in the can. When the tongue that worked for him got through performing, they had to turn him loose. I was just a year off the cops then, not much more than a hot-headed kid, and my father's friends at headquarters didn't want to see me in a jam. They fixed it that I was being questioned in the D. A.'s office when Chapman hit the street, and he had a chance to jump town. He vanished. Ten days later Ben Ross walked into the lawyer's office and blew the top of the shyster's head off, so they had to put Ben away. It was a maddening, rotten mess. As I say, that was seven years back.

Seven years trying to get a living out of my agency had knocked most of the volcanics out of me, but not all. I still had something in the region of my stom-



The gun roared and my fist smashed into Chapman's mouth.

ach that started to pulse queerly when my office girl laid the card on my desk and said: "A little fat guy. Claims he met you at a smoker once. Something about Nate Chapman."

His card read, *Morris Urnst*. A shaft of sun just caught the top of his sweating bald head, glistened purple, as he sat tense on the chair by my desk. His face was drawn, lined, and the blood-shot eyes he turned on me were desperate. "I—I hoped you'd—remember me. I—" His voice was hoarse, jerky. "It—it makes it harder—harder to— Now I don't know what—what to say—how to beg you—I've got to beg you—no matter what—to keep—what I say confidential, Mr. Blue." He swallowed, blurted suddenly: "I—I've spent the last two weeks—in fear of my life, Mr. Blue. I crossed the continent expecting a bullet to rip me open any minute. I thought of the police—the agencies out there—bodyguards. I didn't dare go near them. I didn't dare because I didn't know anywhere that there wouldn't be risk of the truth leaking out. And if it gets out—as God is my judge—we're through—absolutely finished. I—I remembered you—and for another reason too. You—I can count on you—not to break my confidence. That's what I told myself."

I nodded. "And Chapman?"

His voice was almost a croak. "He's the one that's going to murder us."

I blinked. "Us?"

"Both of us, now." His lips were like paper. "Not that I had anything to do with it. He was one of *her* prizes." He jerked at the card, and his voice started rising. "You know what I mean—if you read the papers. They're true, Blue—every word and ten times more. She's man-crazy—male-crazy. She's got the discrimination of an alley-cat. She's had me in agony—damned agony—for four years—getting her out of one mess after another. I might have known—it'd end in something like

this—but God's my witness—not at a time like this. Blue—listen—we're desperate—we're sitting on the ragged edge of being thrown out of the picture business—I'm nearly crazy trying to grab our last hope in that direction—and doesn't she have to spring the news that she's been playing around Nate Chapman—and got tangled in one of his terrible 'jobs'. I won't mince words. She was with him in a Hollywood dive, when he killed a man. You understand? She was the only witness. She stood there and watched Chapman shoot the poor devil down in cold blood! My God, do you understand?"

"All but who?" I said. "You haven't said who you're talking ab—"

HE jammed hands to temples. "Who? A drunken tourist! What does that matter? She can hang him! If he hadn't been drunk she never would have got home that night. She realized what she'd done—what was liable to happen. She refused to see him—or even talk to him on the phone. I had to front for her—hide her—and stall him off."

"I didn't mean—"

"He came to the house next day. I had to face him. He looked me in the eye and told me he wanted to see her, and I swear my blood went ice-cold. He didn't threaten—he didn't have to—just told me to have her there next day. The next day we were in San Francisco.

"We stayed there two weeks—as long as I could. I had to get here. She—you know—or maybe you don't—they say she's through—that she's blacklisted all over the country because of the scandal she's plastered herself with—that her drawing power's gone. Her contract runs out nine days from now. They're not going to renew, unless—well, I've got one chance. Zachary, of the Metropolitan houses—I've got him almost talked into a series of personal appearances—in the three Eastern cities. Mongrel that she is,

you can take my word for it she'll pack them in. Her draw's as good as ever—better. If we put it over—jam her popularity down their throats—they'll have to take us back. Then we can tell them about this. They have ways to handle Chapman. They'll put their publicity staff on to wipe out this other scandal. I don't have to tell *you* how many times it's been done. But we can't hide out any longer. It's our finish if we fluff this engagement. And it's our finish if Chapman gets to us in the next nine days. He probably knows that—he knows Hollywood. I say she realizes what she's done. She doesn't really. I don't want her to. I'm trying to keep her steady. I—"

"Yeah, but who?" I almost had to yell to stop the torrent. "What girl are you talking about?"

"Who? Her!" he raved—and suddenly choked, his jabbing finger stopping in mid-gesture toward the now-face-up card on my desk. His face twitched, and he groaned: "Oh, my God!" He jumped up and jerked out a card case, tossed a larger card down on my desk, sat down again, blurted: "I'll be in the asylum before this is over."

This card said, *Carma Dale. Morris Urnst, Agent and Personal Representative.*

I got a thrill. "And Chapman plans to kill *her!*"

He nodded tensely. "Both of us."

"Where's the advantage in doing *you* up?"

"No—no advantage, but he told—"

"Forget it. Killing you would blow the whole thing into the open. She might be through in pictures, but she'd be ripe to go to the cops. He'll get her first, if I've got the picture straight. Where is he now? And where is she?"

"I'm hoping and praying he's still on the Coast. They had him in jail—overnight—a week ago. I don't think—"

"Hell, do the cops know he did it?"

"I—I guess so."

"How do you know they don't know about her?"

After an uncomfortable second he said: "There's no possible way they could know unless he told them."

I turned hot eyes on him. "Listen—if you're holding out any other little items like that—pop off with them. Has anybody been following you—or like that? Anything else—"

"Fol—no, no. My God, no."

"Just exactly what do you want me to do?"

SOMETHING came into his eyes that wasn't there before. It looked like fear of me. He kneaded the handle of his brief-case. "Mr. Blue—I'm willing to pay—pay well. I want you to—to take responsibility for Miss Dale—to guard her every second—for the next nine days. You don't need to worry—you'll see Chapman. He'll come for her. Nothing in this world is surer—he'll come for her. After nine days—you can do what you please. But I want—I'm going to beg you to give me your word that—that you'll look after her—first—her interests—and you know what they are. After all—as well as pay—I'm giving you a chance to find Chapman. Am I asking too much to do—" Every word was getting tougher for him.

"Listen," I said. "What *is* this? If I take the job of guarding Miss Dale, I'll guard her. What are you afraid of? That I'll desert her? Listen, Mr. Urnst—with a chance to get a crack at Nate Chapman—"

"I know! I know!" he cried desperately. "That's just it! He told—I heard—about you and the road-house owner—wanting to kill him—over a deal. If you leave her—go after him, now—he'll have men to—to—"

"You must be crazy!" I snapped. "Ben Ross was the 'road-house owner' you're

talking about. The deal was that Chapman kidnaped his twelve-year old daughter. I was supposed to make contact and pay the ransom. Three hours after Ross asked me to handle it, they found the kid with her throat cut. Something went wrong with the contact arrangements and that stinking rat killed her. I went off my head, I'll admit—I would have killed him. But then isn't now. I hate the devil's guts. I'll do almost anything to nail him for something—and I'll work him over when I do. But I won't murder him, Mr. Urnst, now. If he's after your girl—I'll stick to her like glue. I'm not a hysterical kid any longer. You can wipe that out of your mind—once and for all. Now—where is Miss Dale?"

"You—you give me your word—you'll look after her first—"

"I give you my word."

HE LICKED his lips. "She's on the Sunset Flyer. Nobody knows it—I don't think. If you'd meet her—rush her up to my brother's in Mill Falls, Connecticut—there's a train leaves just a few minutes after the Flyer arrives. I—I've got an appointment with Zachary this afternoon. I'm scared to break it—the way things are. And she simply can't be left alone. She's like a child, Mr. Blue—God knows what she's liable to get into. I've been worried sick even this last day and a half when—"

"When would these personal appearances start—if they did?"

"Any minute Zachary says. It could be tomorrow—it's got to be practically right away, if we're going to—going—" He gulped.

I looked at my desk clock. "It's three thirty-five now. I meet her on the Sunset at four twenty-five, and take the first train to Connecticut, and . . .?"

"My brother'll be at the station. He looks like me—you can't miss him."

I let a whole minute go by in silence.

Then I said, "All right. When will I see you?"

"I—I'll phone the minute I leave Zachary." He fumbled out a checkbook. "I—I—"

"Fix that up with Miss Cottar," I said.

He got up, looked anxiously into my eyes. "She—she's—if you talk about this to her—make out it's nothing, will you, Blue? The kid's had an awful scare. She's liable to go to pieces if—I've kind of laughed it off. You can help her—she's heard of you—thinks you're hot stuff, and—"

"I'll watch it."

He went out.

I sat tight-lipped, staring at nothing, finally switched to the phone. I had a queer feeling—as though the whole thing were misty, unreal. Unreal! There was nothing unreal about the cold sliminess of Nate Chapman—or the way I felt about him.

I wrinkled my forehead. Why *did* I see red when I thought of him? Ben Ross? The little girl? Horrible, rotten business, but five years on the force and eight on my own should have built up some sort of a shell around my feelings. The feeling was like—I groped for it—like the one I have for wasps. Blind, unreasoning fury—or was it blind? I conjured up a picture of myself vs. wasps—and it dawned on me that there was fear mixed with the fury.

Of what? I've watched a man shoot me, without flinching—yet I flinched from a wasp—or was it, rather, from all wasps? From some unconscious fear of their getting the upper hand—of more and more wasps—a world swarming with them. And the frantic, furious slashing, cutting them down—blind reaction—an attempt to keep the numbers down? I thought of a world full of Nate Chapmans, of vicious, thieving, cowardly parasites, and I got the same feeling—the

one of wanting to slash, to beat him down, stamp him out.

Foolish? Maybe—but it pointed me. I pulled the phone over, called a friend at headquarters. They'd heard nothing on Chapman later than the one-night detention on a murder charge in Hollywood.

Miss Cottar came in, wide-eyed, waving a check dry as I hung up.

"Five hundred! He made it out to you. You'll have to endorse it."

As I did, she asked: "What goes on?"

"A little bodyguarding," I said grimly. "Maybe a crack at Nate Chapman. *He* thinks so."

"Who is he?"

"A movie guy. His set-up sounds like a movie. I wish to God I had something to get my teeth into . . ."

I got it.

In the corridor a man screamed, hoarsely, frantically. "*Blue! Blue!*" My stomach went cold. A gun blast thundered, and glass somewhere crashed.

I WAS up, around the desk, a gun in my hand, running for the door when the second shot boomed. I slammed through, dived for the catch on the wooden railing gate. The echoes walloped for the third time. I vaulted the gate—and the corridor door burst open, spilling Morris Urnst in, showering blood, one hand clutching his throat, the other on the torn handle of his brief-case. He banged squarely into me, spun off, banged into the railing and crashed down, blood spurting from his open mouth down over his hand in a cascade, making horrible his effort to cry out.

One look and I jumped for the door, yelled over my shoulder, "Get Travers—fast!"

Dead silence held the hall. Powder stank. Feet were racing down the stairs at the rear of the hall. I flung myself in pursuit—and my foot came down on an irregular-shaped chunk of metal, sent

me slamming on my face, sliding, my gun clattering across the tiled floor to the stairhead—and off into space.

In the four seconds it took me to scramble up, race to the stairhead, find my gun halfway down and stoop down to scoop it up, the footsteps had ceased. I crouched there on the landing and listened. I cursed through my teeth, ran down to the floor below me, as noise started in the hall above. I ran for the door marked, *V*. Travers, *M. D.*, and the door opened in my face to let out the little mild-faced doc, his two horns of gray hair adding the perpetual question mark to his expression.

"I'm coming. What—"

"Man shot."

We ran up together, as a gong started banging in the basement.

Tam Cottar was standing white-faced over Urnst, her slender hands out from her sides. There was blood on them. Urnst was gurgling horribly. There was a towel around his throat, but his hand still clung to the wound. The doc whistled, circled swiftly, dropped to his side. He jerked away Urnst's towel, opened his coat, vest, to expose a crimson patch above his belt-buckle, almost meeting the one from above.

In that minute the prone man suddenly arched his back, gagged desperately—and went lax, head, elbows, feet and back flopping. Travers hand froze over him—then dropped away. He met my eye, got to his feet and shrugged.

"He died right then."

I was absolutely disorganized. I didn't know what to do. A stream of facts flashed in my brain. Chapman. The girl the little manager had tried to protect. My promise—the cops—publicity the poor little devil had fought to avoid—the girl's trouble if it all came out. . . .

My jaw snapped tight. My eyes darted from the dead man to the brief-case, its broken handle mute evidence of a strug-

gle. Then I saw something else. There was a strap circling his chest and, under his left armpit, an empty shoulder holster.

I went into swift action. I snapped at Miss Cottar: "In the hall—his gun—I stepped on it. Get it—fast!" I grabbed for the pen-knife on her desk. Her heels rattled as I jumped around the dead man, bent over and hacked the leather strap through. I tugged the harness loose, flung it across the railing. The brief-case came away from his limp hand easily, and I tried the catch. It was open. I propped it open on the ground, free of the blood, and squatted grimly.

He didn't have much in his pockets. I didn't look to see what it was—simply jammed everything into the brief-case. I looked at his clothing labels. I got a break—they were ready-made. I went through him swiftly, ruthlessly, completely. He hadn't so much as a match on him when I was through.

Travers blurted hesitantly: "Look here—"

"Put it on your bill!" I threw at him, and got up snapping the brief-case closed—just as Tam Cottar ran back with the gun. She went white when she saw my hands. I snapped at her: "Put the gun—and that harness—in the safe. I'm going to try and keep them from identifying this guy. Remember—he was just coming in. We'd never seen him. Get my hat and coat." I jumped for the washstand.

She was back again with them as I dried my hands. "Where—where are you going?"

"Out of here before the cops get organized. Paragon, I guess—Van Ness." I gave the doctor a straight look. "Don't forget what I said about the bill, Doc. Anything you're worried about—stick it in. Miss Cottar will tell you what to say to the I took after the murderer."

I ran out, the brief-case under my arm, cops." To her I said: "If they ask—

no more than three minutes after I'd led the doctor in.

I walked down the four flights, taking the service stairs for the last one, emerged through swinging doors into the lobby—eased through, rather. Uniforms were piling into the elevator. One copper stood in the hall. I leaned against the wall, lit a cigarette, smoked till he wandered near. Then I threw it down and stepped on it, ask him: "What was the row?"

"Don't know yet."

I looked at my wrist watch, muttered something about time, and walked by him. He followed me dully with his eyes but made no effort to stop me.

The Paragon Hotel was three blocks north, just off Broadway. It was a chill autumn day, the sky overcast. I hurried through the crowds mechanically, my brain racing.

THE desk clerk was Billy Farraday. He looked through his horn-rimmed glasses and his chubby face started to grin as I came up. I clipped, "Van Ness is the name. I'm in a hurry," and scribbled it on the register. He was well-trained. His face straightened and he banged his bell.

I tipped the bell-boy in the elevator, relieved him of the key, and got off at Eight alone. My room was facing the elevators. I gave the lock a good examination before I went in.

Two minutes later, in my shirt-sleeves, I sat on the edge of a chair, pulling at a cigarette, looking down at two piles of papers on the carpet—one from Urnst's clothes, the other from the brief-case. I didn't expect anything from them. I was still trying to get myself organized—figure what to do. I tried a dozen lines—and they all came back to the same place—I had a moral responsibility to do the best I could for the girl. Besides, if there were any more money coming on this job, it would come from her. I looked

at my watch, cursed—then I felt better as I grasped at what Urnst had said—Chapman would come for the girl. My teeth clamped. If he did. . . .

I went through the stuff at my feet quickly. Urnst's clothes had held two handkerchiefs, a leather card-case with the two types of cards, a check-book with cryptic entries, a watch and chain of white gold with his name engraved on the watch case, three cigars, a handful of change and a hundred and eighty-two dollars in bills.

The brief-case contained papers of value—to Urnst. When I got through them, I made a vague guess that he had cleaned out a safe-deposit vault, with some idea of replacing them in a similar spot in New York. There was an old passport. A substantial life insurance policy with a sister, Penelope Urnst, as beneficiary. A couple of small savings account books. The deed to some Florida property and a few gold-mine stock certificates.

Then, in the side pocket, the only thing of interest in the group—a flat leather case containing a lemon-squeezer revolver, carefully wrapped in cotton wool. I didn't notice the white smudges on the handle, till a beam of light caught them. Then I got them to the window—and whistled. They were fingerprints, carefully brought up with white powder, and some sort of fixative shellac sprayed over them.

And under the cotton wool—I blinked—a marriage certificate, and a yellowed photograph of a frightened-looking young man with ears like handlebars, holding a fluffy-haired girl on his arm. Apart from seeming extremely young, I made nothing of that. I assumed that the marriage certificate was theirs.

It wasn't. When I spread it open I discovered that Carma Dale had been married, five years before, to Morris Urnst, in Mill Falls, Connecticut.

I STARED. After five minutes, I wasn't anywhere. I caught sight of my watch. Four o'clock—and I had to meet a train in twenty-five minutes. I clamped my lips, went over and yanked the newspapers from the drawers of the bureau, went to work to make two bundles—one the things from the brief-case—the other those from Urnst's pocket. I could just get the stuff from the brief-case in the side pocket of my coat. I'd keep that with me.

I washed my hands, came out and picked up the phone—and another harassing thought struck me. I set it down, paced the room with compressed lips, finally went back to it, sat on the bed. I jerked the phone book out, looked up the number of Harry Fry, a theatrical agent I knew. I gave the number to the operator, and said: "Give me Billy while you're getting it."

When the desk clerk answered, I said: "I'm going out right away. I want to leave a bundle and brief-case in your safe, Billy. Send a boy up—and if I'm gone when he gets here, it'll be on my table."

I held the hook down till the bell tinkled, got Fry on the other end and told him: "Don't ask questions. I'm elected godfather to Carma Dale. Her manager had an appointment with a bird named Zachary of the Metropolitan Theaters, sometime this afternoon. He's—ducked out on her—through, washed up. It's a proposition about making personal appearances. Something like this: the studio she works for thinks she's slipped, and making a series of personal appearances is supposed to prove her draw and like that. If you want to keep that appointment and land the engagement for her in Zachary's shows, I'll almost guarantee to swing her permanently to your agency. Now—that's every blessed thing I know. You'll have to pick it up from there if you want it. I'm in a rush, Harry. I'll

call you later. Do you want to take a shot at it?"

He said he would, and tried to get in some questions, but I hung up, grabbed my coat—and the phone tinkled again.

I cursed, grabbed it up. Billy's guarded voice said anxiously: "Hey, two plain-clothesmen just eased into the lobby. Are you—"

My eyes thinned. "Thanks, Billy," I said. "I'll go out the basement way. Don't let them see that brief-case."

I made speed getting into my coat and hat. I was beginning to feel badgered, feverish. Arguing with muttonhead cops at this point was out of the question. I felt a sudden stab of worry. If they'd happen to cover the alley entrance. . . .

I swung a hasty look around the room as I buttoned up, plowed for the door. I jerked it open—and stared into the black muzzle on an automatic pistol.

Behind the pistol, Nate Chapman's sleek, fat figure stood tense, his long-lashed, brown eyes strained on me. He wore a black fedora and a black overcoat, and there was someone behind him. He chopped out huskily at me. "Don't move, Blue! I'll kill you sure as hell!"

I DIDN'T move. I couldn't move, for the first split second. I stood there, one hand on the door edge, my left foot stopped dead in the middle of a step. There was a riot inside me. I was hot—then cold—then hot. Then I jerked myself together. My teeth clamped, and the pulse on my forehead started to swell.

He licked his lips, and there was something queer in his expression I didn't fathom—and then I did. Fear. It was in his quick breathing, his stiff lips, his eyes. The rat had never gotten over being afraid of me—was still jittery at the sight of me even after seven years.

"Get back in the room." It was almost a husk. There was a queer tremble in it.

Then, with a shock, I got it. He was going to kill me. Call it part of his fear—self-preservation—call it anything. I read it in his starched face—I wasn't to leave the room alive.

I drawled: "It's a lousy room, Nate—I don't like it."

Over his shoulder, a face popped into view—a face flanked by handlebar ears. Shifty black eyes covered the room inside, blazed suddenly. "Look—there it is, Nate!" A slim-hipped, white-faced youth squeezed excitedly round Chapman, brushed by me and ran in. I tensed.

I was on the balls of my feet when Chapman's eyes shifted—for the fraction of a second.

It was a madman's chance, but I had to take it. My left hand flashed down for the gun; I flung to the right. The gun roared and fire raked my hip—then my right fist smashed into Chapman's mouth. Teeth crumbled. He cried out as his head snapped back.

I flung my weight and both hands on the gun, twisted. I jerked it free, slashed out and cracked his forehead with it as I flung round to face the youth in the room. I took one glance at him backing white-faced, into a corner, evidently unarmed. I whirled back on Chapman.

He was spread-eagled against the elevator door, and there was the fear of God in his eyes. As I swung he dived wildly toward the red light of a fire door a few paces away. I half lit on his back, jerked him back, sent him spinning into the wall.

He gasped, "Wait—wait, Blue—!" wildly, tried to duck out again. I caught him by the collar and spun him round again. His back was to the elevator. He put up his hands wildly, closed his eyes. I cocked my right, dropped the gun and put everything I had into one smash at his jaw.

He went sailing, half turning, across the hall, crashed into the elevator.

But he didn't. Some crazy trick of fate had brought the elevator to the floor. Its door was just opening, as I bent to scoop the gun up again—and Chapman's body jammed into the opening door. Before the boy could check it, he had fallen inside on his back. The boy got one look at the gun in my hand, and slammed the door in my face!

I banged against it. I roared, hammered with my gun, pounded the iron gate—and my wrist watch got jammed under my eyes. That look at the time sobered me like a douche of cold water.

I jumped away from the elevator. Its mechanism was whirring madly. I blurted one curse, turned and ran for my room. The youth had come to the door. He scurried back to the corner like a frightened rat. I dived for the phone, yanked off the receiver, and roared at the operator: "Tell the cops in the lobby to grab the guy just went down in the elevator. The one that fell—"

She cried excitedly: "They just went up in another elevator!" My heart went down in my boots. I threw the receiver at the hook, roared at the white-faced youth: "Come on—run!"

He stared at my gun with the gaze of an idiot. He yammered: "No—I won't. I haven't done—"

And there was nothing I could do. I damned him, flung the gun in his face, turned and ran. . . .

And in the split second before I reached the hall, my brain flashed. I didn't think what I was doing—that I was putting a girl's life in maybe useless danger. I didn't think of any of the things I should. All I thought of was that Chapman was slipping me—had slipped me, just when I had my hands on him once and for all, and maybe I'd lost him for good. I was half crazy with disappointment, and it must have flashed on me that here was a sure way of connecting with Chapman again.

So I stopped at the door and flung savagely at the shrinking youth: "God help you if you follow me to Mill Falls!"

I KNEW what I'd done, the second it was out. As I shot across the hall for the fire door, there was something cold in the pit of my stomach. I jerked up my watch as I raced down the fire stairs. I didn't stop to ask myself if I regretted it. What was the use? It was too late now. Everything was resolved into one grim necessity—getting to the girl's side and staying there, till. . . .

At the fourth floor I ran back into the hall. I jabbed at the elevator bell, kept my hand in my pocket, on my gun, till I scrutinized the passengers. I went down to the basement. The boy knew me. I trotted down the cement corridor to the delivery entrance, up steps and out into an alley. I stopped for a second, but no one was in sight.

I caught a cab at the alley's mouth, was driven to the nearest elevated station, rode to One Hundred Twenty-fifth. I ran in to the station, just two minutes before the Sunset pulled in.

My badge, and a hastily concocted dramatic story, got me aboard and got me the conductor's awed assistance. I told him I was looking for Dolores De Voe and gave him as close a description of Carma Dale as I could remember. The red hair did it. He gave me a drawing-room number.

I found her room a minute before the train pulled into Grand Central. I gave my name to her breathless, frightened, "Who is it?" when I knocked, and she said faintly, "Come in."

She was pressed into a corner—the farthest spot in the room from the door. I met wild, wide violet eyes. She had one white hand on the porter's bell, the other on her breasts. She looked like a lovely, starry-eyed child, even her red hair and green dress and hat failing to get sophis-

tication across. I took my hat off, produced my folder of credentials, bobbed. "Mr. Urnst sent me to meet you."

She didn't say anything or move. I felt like a fool, poking my papers at her. The dazed expression didn't leave her eyes as she looked down finally, up again. Her voice was husky with fright. "Where—where is Morrie?"

"He had an appointment with a Mr. Zachary." Then I added, "He said for you not to worry if he didn't come out tonight. He might have to—uh—be with Mr. Zachary tonight." I fingered my collar. "You—uh—Mr. Urnst thought you'd recognize me."

"Yes—yes, I do." She sat down silently, unexpectedly, her tiny feet still close together, and clasped her hands in her lap.

"This is what I thought," I said rapidly. "When we get in, I'll catch a red cap that knows where the Mill Falls train is and maybe we can walk right over to it—inside the enclosure, I mean. Not go into the main waiting room at all."

A stab of fear darkened her eyes. "Is—is Nate—"

"Mr. Urnst said he was still in California," I reassured her. "I just like to play it safe with my clients."

Some of the tenseness went out of her body.

More of it was gone when we made the change into the Connecticut train successfully and settled ourselves in a drawing-room while the train was still otherwise empty.

I won't go into the trip. I was nervous as a cat. I spent some of the time in the drawing room, some of it outside the door. I ached to search the train, but—apart from leaving the girl alone for the time—if I did find my man, I could do nothing—and it might be a tip-off to him. True enough, I had gone a long way to get him coming to me—but I didn't want it to happen in a train.

I found out why the girl had so many

people on the make for her. There was nothing else to do with her. She had absolutely no information on any subject. I tried to tell her stories, and that bored her. She didn't seem interested in anything. More from force of habit than anything else, she gave me a few openings, but I couldn't play up. My mind was on something else.

When we finally rolled into the station, I was about as glad to see it as I'd ever been to see anything.

Ben Urnst was waiting for us. He was a slightly larger edition of his brother, and he had his hair. He looked me over sourly, said he was pleased to meet me and looked dull-eyed at the girl. "Hello, Sadie." To me he said: "Her name's Sadie."

He led the way to an ancient sedan. I was raking the platform, and the gun in my pocket was sweating my hand, but nothing happened.

NOTHING happened on the way out. Mill Falls was two blocks of red brick stores. We followed a winding road out of it. Presently the road ran into woods—and kept in woods. I didn't like that much. I leaned over and shouted in the round-faced Ben's ear: "Is the place in this forest?"

"Yeah," he bawled back. "Right in the middle."

We came to a spiked iron gate, set between two cement pillars—and I got some comfort out of seeing that a twelve-foot barbed-wire fence stretched away in both directions from the pillars. We rattled on—and then the woods dropped away and we were in a clearing.

It was a queer-looking place. There were two small houses, square, like barracks, with a swimming pool between them, at the top of the clearing. The rest of the open space was lawn. The houses were of red brick, three stories high, with red brick chimneys letting out smoke.

They were identical. One huge black walnut tree stood exactly halfway between them, at the top of the center of the swimming pool, and as we circled the lawn I saw a Negro man and a Negro woman standing by its trunk, looking at us.

And as we bent back to come up in front of the left-hand house, the door opened and an old woman in a wheel-chair rolled herself out onto the porch to greet us.

We got out, and the Negro man came running around the outside of the house to take the girl's bags. I met Penelope Urnst, the woman in the wheel chair—a razor-faced, henna-haired old witch with a twisted jaw and her spine curved like a bow. She was, they told me, paralyzed from the waist down—the result of an accident when she, along with Morris and Ben, was performing in carnivals. She bore a faint family resemblance to her brothers.

EVERYBODY took my presence quietly, like they'd expected it. We went into the house and the old woman's cracked voice said that dinner would be ready in half an hour. Then she wheeled herself out to the kitchen.

They'd given us rooms adjoining—the girl and myself—on the second floor. That floor had three bedrooms and a bathroom. Our rooms looked out over the swimming pool. I opened my window and looked down. There was just a foot between the edge of the pool and the house. The enormous walnut tree's branches waved at a higher level than the roofs of the houses, but they were so high and sufficiently distant that a man—even if he could scale the long stretch of perfectly bare trunk—could hardly leap down on either house with more than a ten percent chance of hitting what he aimed at.

I found the stairs to the third floor,

went up and took a look at it—one huge empty room, really an attic. I fastened all the windows and, finding a key in the door at the foot of the stairs, quietly locked that. And while the girl was powdering her nose in the bathroom, I locked all the windows on the second floor.

I went down before her, found Ben Urnst alone in the roomy living room that was a full half of the ground floor. He eyed me dully, expectantly.

"You know what I'm here for?" I said.

He nodded. "I got a letter from Morris yesterday. Some gambler after Sadie. You're guarding her. That's all I know."

"Was there any hard feeling around locally for Morris? I mean anybody who might help an enemy of his?"

His dull brown eyes started. "Morris? My God, no—he had no enemies."

"You mean the girl did?"

He clamped his lips, thumbed his chest. "Me. I hate the little devil! Listen, Blue—after the accident that put Morrie and Penelope out of the carnival game, Morrie had ten thousand insurance. She did too." He jerked his head toward the kitchen. "Morrie took his dough, pulled Sadie out of a cooch tent at the carnival and kept her for a year on that dough. He worked his head off to get her a break. He's worked his head off ever since to make her something. He made her a big star. And what does she do? She treats him like a rat. She even tries to clip him on his percentage of her salary. By God! she's the dumbest cluck that ever lived on everything but that! She squeezes every nickel until—"

"Are the Negroes the only servants you've got?"

"Yeah. You ain't thinkin' they—"

"No. No. Listen—that barbed-wire fence—how far does it run?"

"Right around the property. Further-

more, I can send a charge through it, if you want me to."

"We'll see about it later," I said hastily, as the girl came downstairs.

IT WAS dusk as we ate dinner, dark by the time we were through. It was a silent meal. I had little stomach for it.

After dinner we sat around in the living room and talked. At nine o'clock, Penelope Urnst announced that she was going to bed. The Negro trundled her out, and her chair crunched away across the path to the other house.

I said to the girl: "Why don't you go to bed, too? You must be tired."

She looked at her watch. "Isn't Morrie coming?"

"I guess not," I said. "I told you—"

"I know," she said wearily. "You'd think he'd phone, though. Are you—"

"I'll be around, in case you want me," I said. "Just call."

She went wearily upstairs.

Ben's heavy stare followed her sourly up. I asked him: "Have you got a gun?"

He almost jumped out of the chair. "A—a gun? You—you think there's really—he's really—he might—" His fleshy face went pale, and he swallowed. "I—I thought—"

"There's a damned good chance that Chapman'll be here tonight," I told him. "Where do you sleep?"

"We—we all been sleepin' in the other house. This is Morrie's, y'understand. If you want though, I'll—"

"I don't want you to do anything out of the ordinary. I don't want the girl to get the idea there's any danger. Have you got a gun?"

"No—yes, I've got a shotgun. I'll get it."

"Don't get it. Let me get this straight. This house is your brother's?"

He hesitated. "He give them to me, legally, but—well, hell. He wrote and asked me if we'd mind movin' into this

one, but we ain't had a chance yet. He likes my room in the other house. Why?"

"Nothing," I said. "I was just thinking what a funny thing it'd be, if Chapman picked the wrong—hell, it doesn't matter."

His mouth hung open. "My God—you mean he might come in our—" He swallowed again. "I—I'll sit up—listen—I'll throw the electric current through that fe—"

"What use is that?" I said. "A man could stand on top of an automobile and jump over the gate. And I don't think there's much chance of his getting into your house. But keep the gun handy, just in case."

He was sweating like a pig when he left me. I went up, gave all the windows a second look. When I came to the girl's door, there was a chill breeze coming under the crack. I scowled. I went into my room, looked hesitantly out. I didn't want to alarm her by telling her to close her window, and—hell, there wasn't much chance of anybody being able to get up that wall, anyway.

I prowled. I locked all the windows on the ground floor. I sealed the house up as tight as a drum. Then I sat on the stairs, in full view of her door—and waited.

TEN o'clock came—and went. I heard sounds of the girl stirring about in her room.

She opened her door, and I was on my feet like a flash, my gun half out. She widened her eyes in surprise. "I—I didn't know you were here. Do you know anything about annuities?"

"No. Why don't you wait till morning and—"

"Oh, I have to. What could I do at this time of night? You see all the money I've saved is going into an annuity the first of the month. I was just wondering how much—"

"Lady," I said grimly, "please go to

bed. I don't know anything about annuities."

I sucked cigarettes. Somewhere I could hear a clock ticking. Thoughts went through my head in kaleidoscope. For the first time, it became clear how Chapman had found me in the hotel. The brief-case! Then—he must have followed Morris Urnst to my office, been waiting outside and tried to hold him up. The little manager had—it dropped into line now—pulled his gun and put up a fight. The would-be robber had shot him, tried to tear the case from his hand, but even shot to pieces, Urnst had still held on—dived into my office. And the killer, waiting somewhere outside, had seen me come out with the brief-case, followed me. . . .

I suddenly focused on the fact that there must be something damned important in the brief-case. Or at least Chapman thought there was. The gun? I hadn't thought about the gun enough, I suddenly realized. There could be only one grim conclusion. That gun was evidence—evidence of murder. What murder? The one Chapman had pulled with the girl as witness?

I couldn't make that jell. If Urnst held the murder gun with Chapman's prints on it, all he had to do was mail it anonymously to the D. A. and if Chapman mentioned the girl, deny she had ever been at the scene. That would have put Chapman out of the way. The lad with the tubular ears? My eyes were suddenly alive. And the picture—of him and the girl. I conjured the picture back in my mind, tried to set it off against Carma Dale's features. I thought there was similarity. Anyhow, the white-faced youth somehow fitted. Why had he not been armed when he was with Chapman?

I could think of only one reason for that. He was a stir-bird—an ex-con, who couldn't afford to be found with a gun on him. That he had been yellow without

one, didn't bar him as a killer with one—most of them are.

How did he fit with Chapman? I suddenly felt my pocket for the bundle—and my heart missed a beat as I failed to find it. Then I cursed myself. I had left it in my topcoat when they hung it in the closet. I stood up, swearing at myself feverishly. I had a sudden queer sensation—as though something were hammering at my head, trying desperately to get in. I started quickly down the stairs toward the clothes-closet.

And out of nothing the whole sordid deadly business exploded in my face.

I HAD one foot on the middle step when the girl screamed in the room above. A man shouted hoarsely—and there was the thunder of a high-calibered gun! I was absolutely flabbergasted. I gasped, flung myself back up. A gun—a man! It was impossible. Nobody—no living soul—had gone into that room.

A man screamed, as I threw myself at the doorknob, jerked it. He screamed again. I felt as though I were going batty. I twisted wildly at the doorknob. But the door was locked!

I roared, "Open up—open up!" but I knew it was foolish even as I said it. I leaped back, put my shoulder down and flung myself at the door. I heard thuds, threshing bodies—and then a terrible whimpering. I jerked my gun up. I put four crashing shots through the lock of the door, literally blew it away—and plunged in.

If I thought I was batty before, I knew it now. I snapped on the lights. A man lay feebly twitching, groaning by the window in a pool of blood. His face and throat were slashed to ribbons. A crimson grass sickle lay on the floor beside him, and a still smoking revolver. And the girl—she was half under the bed, her eyes closed, her face the color of death.

Red was in my brain as I dived down

beside her, grabbed up her wrist. But her heart was beating strongly. I pulled her out hastily, looked desperately for marks on her. She was unharmed. Her hand was clutched on her gold locket on the chain around her neck. She had simply fainted.

I jumped to the slashed man. The sound he was making was reminiscent of that the murdered Urnst made in my office. His face was blood covered, and a crimson froth bubbled on his lips. And then suddenly I saw his ears.

He was the tubular-eared youth that had been with Chapman!

I was mentally paralyzed. The girl—she'd killed him. . . .

And then I got my sanity back. I blurted suddenly, "My God!" and shot to the window, looked out, down. I could see the light from the living room downstairs reflected on the water. It was calm unruffled. Lights were going on in the other house and I heard the old crone's voice shrilling, "Irving—Irving—go over there—hurry!" and the Negro's miserable, "I'se goin', Miss Pen."

I swung back, lifted the girl over my shoulder, pounded down the stairs. That bedroom was no place for her to wake up in. I laid her on the couch in the living room, ran to the door and roared, "Irving—come here or—" And he popped into the light, gasping.

"Look after Miss Dale—she's fainted!" I flung at him, and dashed out. At the same moment, Ben Urnst dived from his front door stuffing a night-shirt into his pants. He was yelling: "Blue—Blue—the roof! He's on the roof! I saw him against the sky!" And I roared back: "Put the current through that fence—fast! He could get in without touching it, but by God, he'll have a time getting out!"

There was agony in my head at my own absolute insanity in not searching the roof. The precious pair must have arrived before we did—driven out—hid

themselves on the roof while Ben was at the station. . . .

Yet—I couldn't restrain it—the leaping, fierce hope that this was the pay-off—that Chapman was my meat at last. If he were on the roof—I had him. I ran hastily around it, my blood pounding. I could see no way—if he had been there three minutes before—that he could have gotten down.

Ben Urnst came running back out. "I—I switched it on."

"Have you got a torch—a searchlight?" I roared.

"The car—the car."

"Get them on."

He raced for the parked car, switched on the lights. I thundered: "Turn toward the house—back down that slope a little!" And the car pounded.

The full glare of the lights slapped the roof. There was no one on that side. I sprinted for the other, my gun ready—and there I stood frozen, groaning. There was absolutely nobody on the roof.

I heard the girl's startled scream in the house, as she came to. I roared at Urnst: "He's gone—he's got away. We'll never find the rat in these damned woods!" I ran back and toward the front door.

"He can't get through the fence!" Urnst roared back. "We'll get him!"

I ran into the living room. The girl was struggling up, her eyes terrified. I tossed at her: "What happened—tell it as quickly as you can, Miss Dale!"

"I—I don't know! I don't know. *It was Morrie!*"

"What?" I almost choked.

SHE rose up on one hand, her other clenched around her locket, fairly shrieked, "The porter on the train today—he gave me a note—from Frank. He said he had to see me—tonight—that you wouldn't let him in—that he'd hide on

the roof and slip in. He came in, and—and—told me Morrie was dead! Murdered! He wanted me to get something you had! And just then—Morrie was in the room! He had a black mask on but I recognized him. He was after this. . . .” She shook the locket. “I know he was. He had a sickle in his hand—he was going to kill me. Frank tried to shoot him—but he started slashing at Frank and I—I fainted. . . .”

My head was swimming. I cried hoarsely: “Miss Dale—it couldn’t have been Morris. He’s dead. We think it was Nate Chapman. He had a mask on—how do you know—”

She suddenly cried: “Yes—yes—it was Nate Chapman. I—”

“Did he try to grab your locket?”

“No. No. Frank shot him before he could.”

“What’s in the locket?”

She hesitated, looked around the room. Both the Negroes had run in while I was talking. And the crunch of the old lady’s wheel-chair was coming up the walk. Irving ran, brought her in. Ben’s sweat-soaked face was at my shoulder.

“There’s nothing in my locket that anybody wants but Morrie,” she said. “It’s the agreement we had when we were married that it was just for business—that he wasn’t entitled to any of my money.”

I felt like somebody had pulled a chair from under me as I sat down. For a moment I’d forgotten I was dealing with a moron.

Yet—Chapman was still in the grounds. He had to be.

I swung on Ben Urnst, and rapped through my teeth, “Listen—you’ll have to lie. All of you—you’ll all have to lie. Chapman killed Morris this afternoon. There’s no evidence of it—but by God we can make evidence here that he killed the lad upstairs!” Then as they started. “There’s a lad upstairs. Frank, I gather

he’s Miss Dale’s brother. Do any of you know anything about him?”

“I do,” Ben roared. “He’s a criminal—a damned criminal. I can tell—now that he’s dead. He went to prison for picking pockets at the carnival. He would have wrecked her career—and Morrie’s. He tried to blackmail them, but Morrie got something on him through a private detective and he’s been afraid ever since. Damn him! I’m glad he’s dead. I wish—”

The old crone cried out shrilly: “What do you mean we have to lie? I won’t lie for nobody!”

“I want you all to say that we saw Chapman on the roof—after we turned the spotlight on! That way—even if he does get away—we can get a murder warrant out for him, and send him where he belongs—to the chair. You want to see him get away with your brother’s murder?”

Ben burst out: “Pen—for God’s sakes—you’ve got to do as he says! You’ve got—”

Glass crashed behind me. I swung round. A furious voice burned out: “Get your hands up—all of you!”

Framed in the broken window, Nate Chapman’s face, purple with fury, stared over a gun at the center of my stomach! “Frame me, would you, you damned dick—”

I SAW his finger whiten—and I knew I wasn’t going to miss this bullet. I jerked up my own gun, fired—a split second after he did. I felt his slug rip through my shoulder, and the force of it sent me slamming back against the wall.

I gritted my teeth against the pain. I catapulted back from the wall—and he had disappeared. I flung for the door. The girl was screaming—the old woman was screaming—“You hit him! You hit him!”

I dived out the front door, swung round. I heard bushes crackling, and as I flashed

through a bar of light from the living room orange flamed at me.

If he hit me I didn't know it. My gun banged twice at the flash. I heard a sharp gasp. I fired again. Something suddenly rose from the shadow of a tree, went weaving away. I fired again. There was a choking grunt as he went down—and then five stammering, racking reports as he jammed his trigger home and let the automatic roar empty.

I heard the shots rattle against the brick of the house. He wasn't even facing me. I planted two more where I thought he was—and the sound they made wasn't the sound lead makes on ground.

Then there was blank silence. I heard him cough once—and my gun came up. Then the rattle in his throat, and a long sigh.

I yelled at them inside: "It's all over. I got him." I felt shaky all over.

Ben came out, fearfully. I gestured at where Chapman lay, turned to go back—and my ankle collapsed under me. I hit the ground and sent fire through my shoulder. I grunted at Ben: "Get Irving and give me a hand in. I got a slug in the foot."

They carried me in. As they put me down in an easy chair, Ben burst out: "We won't get you into trouble, Mr. Blue—we'll back you up—we'll swear we saw him before he jumped down from the roof! Pen—you won't get Mr. Blue into trouble—after he's—"

"That's decent of you," I said, "but I've got another scheme now. Are you afraid to touch him?" I asked Ben.

He swallowed. "No—no—"

I leaned to one side. "There's a pair of handcuffs in my hip pocket," I said. "Get them out."

His jaw sagging, he got them out. I took them from his hands—and before he could move, snapped one of them on his wrist—the other on mine. "That's how they work," I said.

With a quick jerk I sent the key spinning into the old lady's lap. "Just hold onto that—till the cops come," I told her.

Ben started a sickly grin, choked. "You—what—this is a ghastly joke—" he stammered.

"You horse's neck," I told him. "You can take your own rap now. I was willing to let you out of it for the sake of getting that rat outside, but—I've got him now—in self-defense."

The old lady snapped: "You mean—mean Ben killed—"

"Both your brother Morris and the lad upstairs. The lad upstairs was an accident. He meant to kill Miss Dale."

"God Almighty!" Ben raved hoarsely. "Why would I want to kill her? She's our meal ticket—all of us—"

"Was," I corrected him. "She's all washed up now—according to Morris. He claimed she had one chance. I don't believe even that now. You wanted to kill her—for the same reason Morris did. In fact, you stole Morris' thunder. You both wanted the money she's saved up. Morris—as her husband—would get it if she died—unless her brother was still living.

"I figure it something like this: Morris saw that she was slipping—that his racket was over. I don't know whether or not he started in with her being in love with her, or working for her best interests or what. Maybe he did. The way she behaved was enough to turn anybody against her. Anyway, Morris went to Chapman and hired him to murder Frank Dale—or Frank whatever his name is—Miss Dale's brother. Chapman must have gone on the job drunk and killed the wrong man. Morris got scared—and beat it out of town.

"Then he saw how he could make it work for him. He'd heard Chapman say I was out to get him, so he came to me. You understand—he planned to kill the girl from the start. He must have ar-

ranged his little trapeze, or whatever it is—upstairs here—long, long ago.”

The old lady gasped: “Trapeze?”

“Well, you folks are carnival performers. You probably know the technical terms better than I do. But if I wanted a cast-iron alibi for murdering somebody in that house over there, I’d sling a rope or something over the limbs of the black walnut tree outside and simply swing myself across. When I was through, I’d swing back again. Oh, I’m guessing, I’ll admit. If my leg wasn’t game, I’d go look it up. But I think it’ll hang together. It’s got to hang together. I have a hunch, as I say, that Morris fixed all that up—a long time ago—intending to bring her here for the pay-off.

“He figured that Chapman would be after him—and as the girl evidently saw the murder committed, Chapman would be after her too. He came to me, gave me a story, and got me hot about Chapman.

“However, when Chapman found Urnst had run out on him, he hunted up the guy Morris had hired him to kill—Frank—the lad upstairs. Frank bargained to guide him to Morris and the girl, in return for Chapman guaranteeing to retrieve certain evidence that Morris had over Frank’s head. They came to New York together.

“If this sounds kind of involved, don’t worry. I’m trying to get it clear in all your minds, so you can tell the cops when they come. I don’t think I’ll last.

“Ben here, either through Morris tell-

ing him or stumbling onto it, got wise. He figured that if Morris could kill off all the heirs to that money—I’ve got a hunch the lady had saved plenty of pennies—why couldn’t he add one more to the list and since he was Morrie’s heir—collect it all. He did just that. I imagine Morris kept him in pretty close touch with things. He knew the minute to strike—and he did—today—right outside my office.

“He was a little previous. When Morris married Miss Dale, she was suspicious enough to make him sign away any rights to her property—which would include her estate. Evidently she didn’t trust her manager any too much because she kept the paper in that locket round her neck—and I imagine she was hard to handle when he tried to get it back from her. But since Morris planned to murder her anyhow, he figured to get it then. And so, in due course, did Ben here.

“Chapman’s arrival here tonight complicated things for you folks. It didn’t for me. He’s the guy I came here to get. Miss Dale, you better get on the phone and call Harry Fry, the theatrical agent. I’ve put him in temporary charge of your affairs. I don’t know where you go from here, but Harry can tell you.

“And call the cops. If you want to tell the whole business to Harry—maybe he can tell you what to tell the cops to avoid this boiling mess getting into the papers. Maybe not. I really don’t care a damn. Miss Penelope—you seem to be the only decent one in this bunch. Do your duty.”

I went to sleep.

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MURDER INN

by
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When Baldy McGovern started to work on the Baker snatch he didn't expect a death set-up with his own name on the murder package as soon as he stepped off the train. Without taking all the

Now take another," Baldy said.

other angles into consideration, that alone was enough to make him start out shooting—make him leave the question-and-answer stuff till the very last gasp.

CHAPTER ONE

Murder Gone Astray

LUCIUS J. BAKER smiled patronizingly and pushed the box toward his guest. "Have a cigar," he said.

The guest took one, sniffed it pleas-

urably, bit off a sizable chunk of the end and spat the chunk on the expensive rug. He scraped a match on the sole of a brogan and lit up.

"Now, to get down to business," Baker said. "We can be of mutual profit to each other, you know." He smiled again and gestured broadly with a manicured

hand. "The industrial boss and the political boss."

Puffing on the cigar, his guest said nothing.

"You understand there is certain legislation pending in the state assembly that would do me great harm," Baker went on. "You can stop it for me. I know of no one else who can. You control ninety percent of the votes in this part of the state. Everyone knows John Maxwell, the common man's friend."

Smiling at the compliment, his guest began: "Maybe we should—"

He broke off as the door to the living room whipped open and a maid fairly ran toward them, her face working spasmodically.

"Mr. Baker!" she got out after some difficulty. "Your son! Somebody—" She choked over her words, looked terror-stricken, swallowed hard.

"Well, what is it?" Baker snapped.

"Somebody got him!" she said breathlessly. "A man in a car. I was walking with Bobby outside the gates, and a man drove up in a car, took the boy away from me, and drove off with him!"

Color drained slowly from the manufacturer's cheeks. Unsteadily he got to his feet. "What is this?" he demanded. "Some joke?"

"No, sir," the maid replied, and her expression was answer enough.

"Who was this man?" John Maxwell asked, the cigar bobbing between his lips.

Baker shot him a glance, nodded, and looked back questioningly to the maid.

"I never saw him before," she said.

"You mean to stand there and tell me my son was kidnaped before your very eyes?" the manufacturer husked, his own eyes bulging.

"I don't know, sir. I mean, yes, sir. Somebody got him and took him off in a car."

Baker strode to a telephone on a table,

lifted the instrument from its cradle with trembling fingers, and said: "Get me the sheriff." He looked around at Maxwell, his lips bloodless, his face drawn into a tense mask of anxiety. "Hello! This the sheriff? . . . Yes. Lucius J. Baker. My son has been kidnaped. . . . Eh? . . . Yes, I said kidnaped. Get out here as quick as you can!"

He dropped the telephone back into its place and turned round to the maid again. "Were you alone with Bobby when this thing happened?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who else knows about it?"

"No one, sir. I came straight to you. I—" She wrung her hands, unable to go on.

Maxwell got up slowly, pursed his lips, peered at Baker from under shaggy brows and walked to the phone. He asked for long distance, gave his name and the telephone number. "Get me the governor, and I'll hold the line."

Watching, Baker nodded eagerly.

Presently the political boss said into the phone: "Governor? Maxwell talkin'. . . . Yeah. . . . Lucius Baker's son has been kidnaped. I'm at his place now. We were havin' a little talk, see? And the maid rushes in and tells us. . . . I reckon so. You'd better send up one of your special constables. . . . All right. G'by."

THE Baker estate was six miles from the resort town which was the county seat. Sheriff Clark, with two deputies, made the trip in a little more than fifteen minutes.

Sandy-haired, thick and hard, he came into the living room of the Baker mansion followed by the deputies. He took in the room with his little bloodshot eyes and glanced from Maxwell to Baker. The manufacturer quickly explained all that the maid had told him of the kidnaping.

"What about this maid?" was the first thing the sheriff wanted to know. "How long has she been with you?"

Baker frowned and extended a hand, palm up. "Several years. She's thoroughly reliable." Little globules of moisture stood out on his forehead.

"Then it looks like a plain case of having to pay big ransom," said Sheriff Clark, and looked appealingly to Maxwell. "Of course we'll do everything we can, but—" He raised his eyebrows, put his hands in his pockets. "I don't imagine you'll want to stand for much interference if it endangers your son, huh, Mr. Baker?"

"No," said Baker. "Of course not."

Maxwell was glaring at the sheriff. "This is a pretty way to start, Clark. I thought I was gettin' a good law enforcer when I had you elected."

CLARK gulped looked uncertainly at the political boss. He was plainly embarrassed because the remark had been made in the presence of Baker and the two deputies.

Running fingers nervously over his thin hair, Baker said: "My boy must be safely returned. I'll pay any price. Money is no consideration. And frankly, Sheriff, your office is not capable of handling this situation. I'm going to hire the best detective I can find."

The sheriff paled but said nothing.

"Who're you figurin' on, Mr. Baker?" Maxwell asked, taking the cigar from his beefy lips.

"I thought of a fellow named McGovern who once did some work for me," Baker said. "Lately I think he's been doing undercover work for the police of various cities."

"Baldy McGovern, the one that's supposed to be a sort of gang buster?" asked Sheriff Clark.

"Yes," Baker confirmed.

"That guy'll mess up everything," the sheriff declared. "Everywhere he goes there's always some kind of violence and killing. Let me handle this, Mr. Baker. Give me a day or two, anyhow."

Baker, tense as a tightly coiled spring, was walking toward the telephone. Sheriff Clark followed him, caught him by the arm very firmly. Maxwell looked on without speaking.

Jerkily Baker reached for the phone with his free hand. The sheriff, red little eyes narrowing into sinister slits, swung him around.

"You may be the richest man in the state, Baker, but by God I'm still sheriff of this county and I won't have any private dick messing things up! You're not going to call him!"

Trying to shake off the sheriff's grip, Baker leaned aside and twisted. Clark held on. Baker was not an imposing man, physically, but he was desperate. He stared at Maxwell, partly in appeal and partly in warning.

The political boss glowered. He had a big nose and a markedly undershot jaw. He approached slowly, ponderously, and said to Clark: "Let go of him!"

Clark hung on to Baker's wrist.

Without further ado, Maxwell tightened his hamlike fist and drove it to the point of the sheriff's jaw. Clark released his hold on Baker's wrist and staggered backward, heels digging into the thick rug. His knees buckled; he sagged suddenly and sat on the floor. Under different circumstances, his pose might have been funny.

Baker was saying into the phone: "I want a man named Baldy McGovern, a private detective. I don't know where he is, but it's highly important that I get him as quickly as possible. The police in the big cities should know. Call the police in New York, Chicago, San Francisco—everywhere, until you find him.

... The rules do not permit what? ... To hell with the rules. Get Baldy McGovern!"

HIS FULL name was Archibald Algernon McGovern, but not many people knew it. He never used the full name except when absolutely necessary, and seldom even the initials. Baldy McGovern was the name he scrawled on hotel registers.

He dropped his cigarette on the floor and ground it out with one foot, absent-mindedly. The smoking compartment of the day coach was hot, uncomfortable. He lifted his forearm from the sooty window sill and straightened his panama.

"This'll be that millionaires' resort town," said the traveling salesman on the opposite seat as the train slowed.

"Uh-huh," Baldy agreed disinterestedly.

He peered out and saw, beyond three rows of tracks, the rising slope of a mountain spotted by rustic inns. He shrugged, turned, got up and stepped into the narrow corridor.

His wide shoulders almost filled the passageway; his long thin legs carried the rest of him like stilts. The train, he saw, was coming to a stop before a squat brick depot. Couplings slam-banged in the vestibule behind him.

As he emerged into the coach proper he stopped suddenly. His body remained loose-jointed, his long arms limp, but his eyes became hard and cold.

A small, pasty-faced man occupied the seat under which he had left his handbag. The little man was leaning over, fumbling with something on the floor—something Baldy could not see from where he stood, but which might have been the big detective's handbag.

Baldy strode forward, looked down at the man, and the hardness went out of his blue eyes as quickly as it had appeared.

There was another handbag on the floor, and the little man was securing a strap around it. He picked it up, gazed blankly a moment at the detective, then brushed past and moved down the aisle to the end of the car where passengers were being discharged.

Shrugging his left shoulder slightly to ease the gun holster under his coat, Baldy got his own bag and followed.

Outside, under the depot shed, he dodged a line of taxi drivers and three hotel porters whose special busses were parked at the curb.

He went into the hot, stuffy waiting room. Unimportant-looking people sat dejectedly on the hard wooden benches. He found a checkroom, disposed of his bag and went out again.

Facing away from the depot, he saw that the street which crossed the railroad tracks to the right became merely a high-way bordered by nothing except a few filling stations and booths which offered apple cider for sale.

Back up to the left, boarding houses cluttered the street on each side as it ascended a hill. He turned that way, walking half a block before he stepped out of sight behind a corner of a building, in an alley.

Leaning against the wall, he waited three minutes, watching both back of him and across the street. No one who passed so much as glanced in his direction. He grinned because it began to look as if he hadn't been tailed from the station.

EMERGING onto the sidewalk, Baldy headed up the hill. A block and a half farther on he came upon the main street of the town. It was wide, with a double parking lane in the center. People lounged on the benches along the sidewalks. His eyes, shrewd and cold, shifted in every direction.

Presently he headed back toward the depot.

He heard the noise before he reached it. Voices clamored; automobile horns set up a shrill chorus.

As he crossed to the train shed, elbowing his way through the quickly gathering crowd, an ambulance, its siren going, whined to a stop before the waiting-room door. Two attendants got out of it, went to the back, drew out a stretcher and carried the stretcher inside.

Baldy asked a man in overalls: "What happened?"

"Some kind of explosion," the man said. "Somebody got kilt."

Two minutes later the ambulance crew came out carrying something on a stretcher. It was covered by a sheet. It did not have the shape of a human body.

Baldy found a bench under the shed and sat down and lit a cigarette. He smoked and watched. The crowd began to disperse. When things had quieted down somewhat he got up and went into the waiting room. It was disordered. There had been an explosion at the checkroom counter.

Three men who wore badges on their coats were firing questions at the checkroom clerk. The clerk—harassed, spouting answers excitedly, looking from one officer to another—spotted Baldy as the big detective approached.

"That's the man!" the clerk yelled, and pointed.

The officers turned and stared at Baldy. One of them said: "What's your name?"

"Who wants to know?" Baldy countered.

"I'll have you understand I'm sheriff of this county!" Clark raged.

"What am I supposed to do—give three cheers?"

The sheriff clenched his fists and quivered all over. "A man has been killed here—his head and his arms and his should-

ers blown off of him. Answer my questions or I'll lock you up!"

Baldy smiled bleakly. "Sure."

"Did you check a handbag here a few minutes ago?"

"Yeah. Does that make me a murderer?"

"You're damned right it does."

"How come?"

"I'll tell you, McGovern—"

Baldy stopped him. "Wait a minute. You asked me my name like you didn't know it, and then you come callin' me by it."

The sheriff looked nonplussed. He bit his lower lip. "That's beside the point," he went on quickly. "One of my best deputies was killed, blown to pieces!"

"And where do I come in?"

"He was opening your handbag when it happened."

BALDY took off his hat and pawed the hairless top of his head thoughtfully. His mind flashed back to the little pasty-faced man on the train.

After a moment he said: "You mean—something in the handbag exploded?"

Sheriff Clark bobbed his head up and down quickly and gestured toward the checkroom. It was a shambles. The counter was splintered at one place; several pieces of luggage that had been there lay in ragged sections on the floor, blood-spattered. It was not very nice to look at.

"When my deputy tried to open your handbag," said the sheriff, "my deputy got it." He extended his arms dramatically like a mammy singer and threw them up in front of him. "Bloooey!"

"*Tsk, tsk,*" Baldy commented.

"If the clerk here"—Clark jerked a thumb—"hadn't been standing off to one side he would have got killed too. See?"

Baldy looked sharply at the clerk and saw a spot of blood on his shirt. The man was trembling, biting his fingernails

nervously, apparently without knowing what he was doing.

"I don't know anything about this," the big detective said. "I got off that train a few minutes ago and checked my bag. So far as I know it had nothin' in it but some clothes. I walked up the street for somethin' and when I came back all this had happened."

The sheriff gritted his teeth. "I'm charging you with murder, McGovern!" He tapped a forefinger emphatically on Baldy's chest.

"Like hell you are!" Baldy challenged. "You know me and you know what I am. Somebody is after me. There are a lot of people that would like to see me dead. You know that. Good God! If your man hadn't butted in, you'd have found me blown up in my hotel room."

"Maybe," Clark conceded.

With a show of indignation, Baldy continued: "I've got enough to worry about without goin' around plantin' infernal machines for some dumb deputy to get caught on. What was he doin' goin' into my bag in the first place.

"He, er—I'm charging you with murder, McGovern!"

"Nerts! A couple of nerts! You can ride some of these folks around here because they don't know any better." Baldy scowled, bent his brows in a savage frown, put his leathery, lined face close over the sheriff's. "But when you start on me, big boy, that's a chemise of another color. Your deputy had no business goin' into my bag. And if you want to get nasty and press a charge, go ahead and press. Uncle will do the same."

He pivoted and started toward the door.

"Hold on there!" the sheriff barked.

Baldy shot back over his shoulder: "When you want to talk to me you can get me at the Terrace, mug. So long."

CHAPTER TWO

Tip-Off

IN A TAXI, he was taken up the hill street and onto the main thoroughfare. he signaled for the driver to stop in front of a department store, got out, paid the driver and went inside.

He bought another handbag, with toilet articles, shirts, underwear, socks and pajamas, put the stuff in it and carried it out. The street was filled with people in vacation attire. He stood in front of the store watching them a minute or so and suddenly thought that it was well past two o'clock and he had had no lunch.

Carrying the bag, he went into a restaurant. He ate a steak with potatoes and drank three glasses of beer. After that he felt better.

Outside again, he hailed another taxi and went to the Terrace Hotel. When the bell-hop showed him to his room he said: "Never mind the windows and the bathroom. What kind of liquor have you got?"

The state was one of those amazing commonwealths which is still dry; national repeal hadn't altered the merchandising of whisky by bootleggers; and Baldy had neglected to bring his own. The porter looked interested.

"Scotch and corn."

"How much?"

"The corn is a dollar a pint and the Scotch is four dollars a quart."

Baldy took off his hat and decided that the Scotch probably wasn't Scotch at all—just a good grade of bootleg corn doctored with flavoring, but even so better than what was sold for plain corn. So he said, "Scotch," and tossed the bell-hop a quarter. The bell-hop went out.

He shoved up a window, took off his coat, holster and gun, vest and shirt and went into the bathroom and washed his

face and hands, splashing water noisily. Using a towel, he went back to the bedroom and sat down before the telephone.

Lucius J. Baker recognized his voice. "Yes, hello, McGovern. It's you, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"I meant to send someone to the train for you but forgot about it in all the excitement."

"That's all right. Somebody else fixed up a swell reception for me."

"Who?" Baker's voice was thin, worried.

Baldy told him about the explosion.

"I can't understand that," the manufacturer said. "No one has been told about you. No one was supposed to know you were coming except a political friend of mine, John Maxwell, and the sheriff and two deputies. And I cautioned them to say nothing of it."

"Have you got a ransom note yet?"

"Yes. It's for a hundred thousand."

"Any instructions?"

"No, the note said the instructions would come later."

"O. K. I'm goin' to piddle around a little. May be out to see you later."

He hung up, left the towel on the table beside the phone and got a clean shirt out of his handbag.

BY THE time he was dressed there was a knock on the door. He admitted the bell-hop, gave him four dollars and the bell-hop left. Pouring a glass a third full of liquor, he went to the bathroom, put some water in it and drank it through a wry face. It felt good after it was down. He wiggled his shoulders appreciatively, got a cigarette out of a crumpled package, lit it and left the room.

The elevator operator grinned at him as the car started.

"I said down," Baldy protested.

Still grinning, but without much mirth,

the operator said, "*Anh-hanh*," and kept the car going up until it got between floors. Then he stopped it.

"What's the big idea?" Baldy wanted to know.

"There's three gunmen parked outside the hotel waiting for you," said the operator.

Baldy thought it over, eyes slitted behind smoke that curled up from his cigarette. He threw the cigarette down and stepped on it. "So what?"

"You better not go down."

"No?"

"No. After a while when the maids get through cleaning up you can walk up to the top floor and turn to the right. I'll have it fixed so the service elevator'll be ready for you."

"Maybe I'm screwy," Baldy said. His cold blue eyes kept on the elevator man's hands. "Is this Christmas? You don't look like Santa Claus."

"No, I ain't Santa Claus," the man admitted. His gaze was unwavering, impersonal. "But I used to have a good job with the county. At the court house. A good job. I got kicked out."

He stopped and looked as if he were sorry he had made the statement.

Baldy advised. "Maybe you're the one that's screwy. What's the connection?"

"A taxi driver told me about your getting the sheriff's goat at the station. That makes you solid with me. The sheriff was the one who kicked me out. . . . You're working on the Baker case, ain't you?"

"It looks like you know the answers anyhow. Yeah, I'm workin' on the Baker case."

"Well, while you're messing around, you might spend a little time on a politician named John Maxwell." He started the car down.

"I've heard of him," Baldy said.

The car stopped at the floor at which

Baldy got on. "How do you ease out of this?" the big detective asked.

"S'pose you sock me in the eye. Make it look better. I won't kick to the management."

Baldy wrinkled his forehead.

"Sure," said the man. "Go ahead."

Baldy grinned and socked him.

The man's head snapped back, thumped against the elevator wall. He shook his head, said "Zowie!" and slid back the door.

Before he got out, Baldy pressed something into the man's hand.

"Gosh, thanks! That'll buy a big beef-steak for the shiner, won't it?" said the operator, and gazed down fondly at a fifty-dollar bill.

RETURNING to his room, Baldy made a telephone call to the federal bureau of investigation in Washington and got the director of the bureau. He told who and where he was.

"Have you sent anybody here on this Baker snatch case?"

"No," said the official. "We were advised by the local authorities to stay out of it."

"So you did?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I thought maybe you might've sent somebody on the Q. T. anyhow."

The official drawled: "Well—"

"It'd be a good idea. I speak for Baker. If you haven't sent 'em, send 'em on the next plane." He pronged the receiver without waiting for a reply.

The bottle of booze caught his eye and he took another drink. It made him sleepy. He reflected that he hadn't had more than four hours sleep in the last forty-eight. Off one case right onto another. Yawning, he took off his clothes, went into the bathroom and showered hot and cold.

Then he put on pajamas, fell across the

bed and stared at the ceiling. His eyes grew softer. Outside it was beginning to rain. The sound of it was vaguely comforting. The bed was deliciously restful. He turned over and went to sleep.

When he awoke it was ten o'clock. The room was dark. He switched on the light. Dressing, he drank a glass of water from the iced-water faucet. After consulting the telephone directory for an address he left the room.

On the top floor he found the service elevator as he had been told he would. He went down in it and emerged from the hotel onto a side street. The rain had stopped. The air was cool, clean, invigorating.

From above came the pulsing strains of a dance orchestra. A throaty feminine voice was singing the classic of jazz, the *St. Louis Blues*. Farther up the street, toward the front of the hotel, he could see cars disgorging men and women in evening dress.

He followed the side street to an avenue which ran parallel to the main thoroughfare, walked a block on the avenue, and turned back to the busy section. The streets were not plainly marked. He found a cop and asked to be directed to the address he had gotten from the telephone book.

It was an office building not two blocks distant. As he approached it, Baldy noted with satisfaction that the entrance was on the side, beyond a sharply lighted zone around a drug store.

He strode down the cross street half a block on the sidewalk opposite the building, returned in the shadows, glanced into the entryway.

An oldish watchman sat behind a counter under a cone of light, reading. Baldy pursed his lips thoughtfully, went to the gutter and picked up a pebble.

Standing in the shadows, he threw the pebble in an arc over the watchman's

head so that it landed on the floor a good fifteen feet behind the old man, in the darkness. It hit with a sharp crack and rolled noisily.

The watchman looked up, startled.

He put down the magazine he had been reading. Baldy was afraid he might switch on more lights, but he didn't. He got up and walked back into the shadows.

Baldy slipped quickly, silently, inside and dodged up a stairway beside the elevators.

The office he wanted to investigate was on the fourth floor. It was dark. He got out a key ring, tried several keys, and on the fifth try the lock gave. He donned thin gloves and opened the door.

WHEN his eyes had become accustomed to the dark, he crossed the room and lowered the window shades. Then he turned on the light.

His wrist watch indicated ten thirty. He went to work on the files. There were several drawers taken up almost entirely with political correspondence. These he skimmed over.

Another drawer contained letters pertaining to John Maxwell's personal financial affairs. These he studied intently. None of them contained anything of a direct damaging nature, but by careful deduction Baldy was able to learn much of the politician's business.

Maxwell, it appeared, dealt extensively in real estate. He owned many residences and small hotels about the town. At one time, after the collapse of the original Florida boom, when the high-powered land developers had moved into this section and succeeded in putting over a small imitation of the Florida bubble, he had been worth around ten million dollars.

Baldy puckered his lips in a soundless whistle as the details of one deal—Maxwell's biggest—unfolded before him. It had been a project, inspired by specula-

tive realtors, for a four million dollar hotel to be built on the top of a mountain.

He searched diligently for more data on this but was unable to find anything definite.

Looking up from the files, his eyes alighted on a phone. It would be a direct outside line, he guessed.

He called Baker.

"Where have you been?" the manufacturer demanded.

"Never mind," said Baldy. "I want some information about a deal by John Maxwell. And keep it under your hat."

"A deal?"

"Yeah. I hear that Maxwell was mixed up in financin' a four-million dollar hotel to be built on the top of a mountain near here."

"That was eight years ago," Baker said.

"A good part of the work was actually done. Nearly two million dollars was spent in construction. The hotel was nearly completed—all the framework and everything else, up to the top floor."

"Go on," Baldy told him.

"Well, that's when the boom ended. The bottom fell out of everything around here. The company that was financing the hotel collapsed. Maxwell was unable to raise enough cash to save the company. The hotel was never finished."

"Is it in an isolated spot?"

"Very. On the top of a mountain about ten miles from town. . . . What do you want to know that for?"

"Never mind," Baldy said. "Tell me more."

"They call it Maxwell's Folly," the manufacturer went on. "It's really a gigantic structure, visible from many points on account of its elevation. Tourists sometimes go up there to see it. There's a caretaker, but no one is allowed to enter. The building is unsafe."

There was a note of excitement in Baldy's voice as he said: "All right. Hold

everything. I'm getting somewhere on this case."

"You mean there's some connection between all this and the kidnaping of my son?"

"Maybe. Any more information about the kidnapers?"

"No."

"Good enough. Sit tight. I may have news for you before mornin'."

He slammed down the receiver, rubbed a brown hand across the back of his neck, and went to work on the files again.

By the time he was through with them it was midnight. He made no effort to conceal the fact that the files had been disturbed.

READY to leave the room, he went suddenly rigid as he heard leather heels clicking in the hall outside. He glanced quickly about. A flat desk was on a direct line between the hall door and a window. On the desk was a wide, thin ledger.

Baldy crossed to the desk as he heard the clicking footsteps come closer. He grabbed up the ledger, opened it, and balanced it precariously on the desk, one side of it facing the hall door and the other side the window.

He heard keys jangle in the hall and he slipped swiftly to the window, opened it.

Crossing the room again, he barely had time to crouch near the door hinges before it swung inward. He purposely let the door whack against his hard body. The man coming in wheeled and jammed a gun at him.

"Get 'em up, fella! High!"

The big detective raised his arms and hoped for a breeze—any kind of a breeze, just so there was a draft between the doorway and the window. It came.

The carefully balanced ledger on the desk toppled, smacked down flatly.

"Got you!" Baldy snapped, and the

man with the gun jumped back and whirled in the direction of the noise.

Baldy drove a tightly clenched left fist into the man's frightened face and sliced his right hand onto the biceps of the arm that held the gun. The biceps blow momentarily paralyzed the arm, and Baldy wrenched the gun out of his hand.

He kicked the door shut behind him. "Now you get 'em up!"

The man was young, short, chunky. He reached upward, stared incredulously.

Baldy glared at him. "Well?"

"What do you want?" the chunky man said none too steadily. His nose twitched. "A robber? There's no money in this office."

"No?"

"There isn't anything worth stealing. What do you want? My cash?"

"Yeah," said Baldy. "Let's see your wallet."

The chunky man let one hand down carefully, glanced around as if hoping for help to materialize out of the walls, then got a wallet out of his inner coat pocket, extended it.

Baldy grabbed it and let it fall open in his hand. He read the name on the card under the isinglass. Jerking his chin up, he handed the wallet back.

"You don't want any money?" the man asked.

"No," Baldy replied. "Face this way," and he moved toward the desk and picked up a carbon copy of a letter Maxwell had sent to someone. The initials in the lower left corner were those of the name in the wallet. "So you're John Maxwell's secretary, huh?"

"Yes," the chunky man admitted. "Who are you?"

"What were you comin' up here for?"

"Really, now—"

Baldy raked the gun barrel across his face, jabbed his nose fiercely with the

muzzle. "What were you comin' up here for?"

The secretary said: "A drink." He sulked, his lower lip protruding. "I ran out of liquor and happened to remember that there's a quart in the desk. Saw the light and thought you were a robber—"

"Which drawer?"

"That one," the secretary said, using his eyes. "The bottom one."

Baldy took three steps, leaned over and opened it. There was a quart bottle without a label, full of liquor. He lifted it, set it on the table. "All right. Take one."

"What?"

"Take one. Out of the bottle."

The chunky man, a puzzled frown on his face, uncorked the bottle, picked it up and drank. He choked slightly, started to set the bottle back on the desk.

"Take another one," Baldy directed.

The secretary's frown deepened. He took another one.

"Take another one."

"Really, now—"

Baldy smacked him across the face with the gun again.

He hastily tilted the bottle and drank. This time he coughed, retched slightly.

"If you let any of it go I'll fix your face so your own mother wouldn't recognize you," Baldy warned. "Take another one."

Fifteen minutes later the secretary was groggy, rocking on heels and toes.

"Stand still and take another one," Baldy kept on mercilessly.

Five minutes more and the secretary showed the whites of his eyes and fell like a length of chain. The bottle bounced out of his hands as it hit the floor and rolled. There was not enough liquor left in it to run out of the mouth.

Baldy chuckled, threw the gun on the floor, switched off the light, raised the shades and left the room.

On the second floor he turned toward the rear of the building. The window at the end of the hall overlooked a dark alley. He raised it and leaned out. The ground was fifteen feet below.

He went through the window, lowered his long body, dangling outside with his hands on the sill and dropped catlike to earth. In the dark alley, he removed his gloves, pocketed them.

CHAPTER THREE

Maxwell's Folly

GOING out onto the side street, Baldy walked boldly past the building entrance and out on the brilliantly lighted main avenue. A few tourists in summer clothes still occupied the benches. Traffic was still fairly heavy—merrymakers returning from dances. Some of the vacationists looked as if they wanted more hi-de-ho and didn't know how to get it.

Baldy hailed a cruising taxi and it braked and slip up to the curb; its wheels shot a geyser of slush from the gutter onto Baldy's pants and the driver said cheerfully: "Taxi, sir?"

Looking at his pants, Baldy scowled. He stepped onto the running board and leaned inside, close to the driver.

"I want to see Maxwell's Folly," he said. "Can you take me there?"

The driver scrutinized him. "At this time of night?"

Baldy nodded and repeated: "Can you take me?"

"You look sober enough, boss," the driver told him, "if that would make any difference, which it wouldn't, and I'd take you, only there's a private road up to the place. It's about two miles from the public road. It ain't open at night."

"That's O. K. by me," Baldy said. "You take me to the gate and forget you ever had the fare. There'll be twenty

smackers in it for you. How about it?"

The driver grinned. "Get in, boss."

Baldy got in. He sat silent as the cab threaded its way out of town and onto a broad highway. They followed this about five miles and turned off on a less-traveled road.

For nearly two miles they encountered no traffic. Once they passed a parked car as a couple was getting out of it; the couple ran toward the cover of bushes, giggling guiltily.

The road led always upward, a tortuous course along a mountainside. A few farm houses, little more than shacks, were gloomy, dark splotches in the moonlight.

The taxi stopped before a gate swung between two concrete pillars. There was no fence—only the gate barring vehicles.

"Here you are, boss," the driver called back.

Baldy climbed out, produced a twenty-dollar bill and handed it to the driver. "How far did you say it was to Maxwell's Folly?"

"Two miles."

The big detective winced. "O. K. Part of that twenty is for forgettin' the fare, see?"

"Gotcha, boss."

The driver turned the taxi around, rolled off and disappeared on the road back to town.

Baldy went around one of the pillars. The private road was unpaved, rutty. Trees, tall and shadowy, bordered it. Sighing resignedly, he began the walk.

A GOOD while later, coming around a turn in the road, he caught a glimpse of his objective high above him. It was a gaunt, square structure, seemingly a complete building except the top story. Of the top story there was nothing but steel framework.

He plodded on. It was tough walking, up all the way.

Suddenly, as the road made another turn, Baldy almost walked into a low fence. He saw the unfinished hotel not more than three hundred yards ahead of him.

It seemed very high now that he was nearer. Constructed on a small plateau, the very summit of the mountain, it loomed dark and foreboding. Sweating, he reflected that it was certainly a monument to folly.

There was another gate in the low fence here, and a booth which bore a sign—*Admittance Ten Cents*.

Vaulting lightly over the gate, Baldy made his way cautiously toward the ghostly structure. He left the path and went through low bushes.

A light, the first he had seen since he had dismissed the taxi, came into view. He halted, every muscle tense. The light, he saw after a moment, was not in the big building but in a small house which nestled at its base.

The front of the house appeared to be a store for the sale of curios and drinks, the rear of it living quarters for a watchman. The light came from a window in the rear.

Baldy emerged from the bushes onto an area strewn with plumbing pipes and rusty bathtubs which evidently had been meant for the hotel but which had never been installed. There were at least a hundred tubs, now worthless from exposure to the weather, enamel peeling.

Crouching, he made his way among them toward the watchman's house.

The place was silent as a tomb.

He came up under the lighted window and peered in. A man sat at a table playing solitaire by the unsteady light from a kerosene lamp. He was the little pasty-faced man of the train.

Baldy watched for several minutes. Apparently the man was alone. The gut-

tering light showed, incongruously, a telephone on the wall.

He retreated from the window and began a circle of the hotel. Stepping over all kinds of building materials, he stared up at every nook and cranny of the rotting structure.

Some of the windows were boarded over; others were gaping holes of blackness. He made his way past piles of girders, reinforcement rods, bricks, hardened sacks of cement. At the corner he came upon two enormous boilers. Everything was rusty, neglected, decaying.

Hardly fifty yards away on three sides of the building, the table-top of the mountain ended upon steep inclines. Thousands of feet below, in the valley, the surface of a lake shimmered in rays of moonlight.

He reached the opposite side before he found what he was looking for. Even then he found it only after patiently staring upward for several minutes. A barely perceptible ray of light came from a crack in one of the boarded windows.

The window was on the ninth floor. Fixing its location in his mind, Baldy quickly and stealthily walked around to the front of the building.

Throwing his head back again, he read a sign high over the entrance. The lettering announced—*Dangerous! Do Not Enter.*

An almost audible chuckle escaped the big detective. He entered and found himself in pitch darkness.

FIVE minutes passed before his eyes were able to make out the dim shape of a stairway ahead. On careful feet, he padded to it and began the ascent. He kept close to the wall, both because there was less likelihood of a betraying squeak and because the stairway really appeared unsafe.

It was of concrete, but there were big

cracks in it. There was no railing. It doubled back and forth beside an empty elevator shaft. In some places water had ripped through from above, hastening decay.

He heard voices when he came out on the ninth floor. They were from a room three doors from the head of the stairs. He crept forward. The door there was closed. He flattened himself against the wall, close to the door jamb, and listened.

A voice came through. It was whining, complaining. "I still think you oughta stayed down at the highway gate a while. Somebody might be onto us."

"Whatsa use?" retorted another voice. "It's pretty close to daybreak. The highway gate is closed. An' George is keepin' an eye peeled at the little gate where the suckers pay their dimes."

Baldy frowned. He hadn't encountered anyone at the little gate. Somebody wasn't on the job.

The second voice went on: "Cain't no automobiles come through, and if they could, we'd hear 'em before they got up here."

"Maybe so, but—"

"Geeze, we gotta get some sleep, ain't we? This may go on fer weeks."

"All right. All right." The tone was peevish.

The second one added: "I reckon nobody'd walk two miles up a mountain just outa curiosity."

Listening intently, Baldy got his gun out. He tried the knob with his left hand, pressing gently inward to minimize noise. The door gave.

The first voice was saying: "Blow out the lamp an' go to sleep."

Baldy whipped the door open and stood, feet planted wide, on the threshold. His eyes slitted; his jaw went out. He jerked the gun up and rasped: "Suppose we leave the light on a while." His voice was like a meat saw cutting bone.

The two men gaped.

They were lying on cots at each side of the room. Between them was a table bearing the lamp. Beyond the table, Baldy saw another cot on which was the bound figure of a child, apparently asleep.

"Wh-wh-wh—" stuttered one of the men, and his Adam's apple rose and fell. He had been getting up from his cot. The other, partly beneath a blanket, resting on his elbows was transfixed, his jaw sagging.

Baldy waved his gun at the man on the right. "Get up, punk," he ordered. "I've got a little job for you to do."

The man threw back the blanket and got on his feet.

"Come here," said Baldy.

The man came. Baldy frisked him, found a revolver and pocketed it. "O. K. Stand back there." The man retreated, stood beside the table. Baldy looked at the other one. "Now you, handsome."

Holding his hands carefully in sight, the other one, who had a crooked nose, rose and came forward. He also yielded a gun.

"Get back on your cot," Baldy ordered, and the man complied.

Baldy frowned at the first one. "I said I had a job for you, punk. This is it: get over there and tear up that blanket and tie your little playmate down with it. And it better be a good job."

The first kidnaper said: "An' who's gonna make me? Go to hell!"

BALDY stepped forward and used his bony left hand slapped him across the mouth—hard. The man raised fingers to his lips and looked curiously at the blood on them.

Their eyes locked for a moment. The man saw uncompromising purpose, a warning of sudden death that lurked in Baldy's ice-blue orbs.

He turned and busily began to com-

ply. He used a pocket knife to slit the blanket into strips and tied his comrade to the cot frame. Baldy cracked out terse orders superintended the tightening of knots, also the affixing of a gag.

When the operation was completed, Baldy barked viciously, half to himself: "You had it comin' mug," and smashed the barrel of his gun down in a savage, well-judged blow on the top of the first man's head. The kidnaper collapsed like an empty sack.

Baldy holstered his gun, picked the man up by the neck of his coat, glanced at the child on the bed, and hauled the unconscious figure to the empty cot.

The child, who had been sleeping the sleep of exhaustion, now began to stir and rub his eyes with his one free hand.

When the big detective had finished gagging and tying his man to the cot, he walked over to the child, knelt and said: "Hullo, kid."

"The boy blinked. "Who're you?"

"I'm from your papa."

The boy's lips trembled and broke into a smile. "Gee, mister I'm glad. Will you take me home?"

"Sure. After a while. But I'm goin' to leave you here for a little while until I can get your dad, see?"

Nodding eagerly, the boy said: "Please hurry."

"Are these the men who took you away from home?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you seen anybody else but them?"

"No, sir."

Baldy got up and started toward the door. He said over his shoulder, "See you in a little while," and went out, closing the door behind him.

He headed for the stairs. He had to grope because the darkness was emphasized after the lighted room. It was like a thick blanket around him. Just as he

reached the stairway, he felt something hard and familiarly round jabbed against the small of his back. "Well, well, well!" he commented cheerfully. "So here's George! Hi, George!"

The man behind him snarled. "The great McGovern! The big guy from the big towns! I've heard of you, too. But you're just a skunk to me." He spat.

Baldy was smiling tightly. "If that's the case, bozo, you ought to've smelled me, even if you didn't see me when I came by the little gate. But maybe you can't smell when you're asleep.

The gun jabbed harder. "No cracks, buddy! Turn around slow, easy like. That's right. Now, see that room over there? The one where the doorway ain't got no door in it? Yeah. Go slow, that way. That's where I'm gonna let you have it!"

Baldy walked slowly, stiffly, toward the open doorway. Through it he could see nothing but blackness. As he walked, he sidled slightly toward the wall, so that he reached the doorway at a right angle. The man behind him suspected nothing.

When Baldy's shoulder was even with the edge of the doorway, he jerked his body, lunging inward, and felt hot lead sear his side as George fired.

Echoes banged violently against the rotting walls. Baldy in one continuous motion, weaved back of the wall inside the room while his right hand flashed beneath his coat and came out with his revolver.

His weapon exploded, streaked orange flame. The bullet blasted against George's gun, which was being pushed frantically around the door frame.

George howled with the shock of it. His hand was numb and he was unable to pull the trigger.

Baldy grabbed the gun out of his hand, tossed it through an open window. He stepped from behind the wall and his left

fist crashed to the point of George's jaw. George reeled out.

SWEARING, not at his adversary, but because he had been forced to shoot and probably had aroused the man in the house below, Baldy holstered his gun and pursued swiftly.

His right fist lashed out this time. It smashed with a crunching impact onto George's mouth. George staggered, shook from head to foot uncontrollably. He took several steps backward, very awkwardly, and tried to stop himself, without success.

He almost balanced himself, put a foot behind him once more—and stepped into space. The foot went down over the edge of the empty elevator shaft. His body described an arc as it fell into the shadowy hole. One heel dragged futilely on the edge of the floor, and he plunged downward, head first.

He shrieked once, briefly.

Baldy didn't make a sound. He heard the body hit bottom with a sickening thud. Then there was silence. Rubbing the knuckles of his right hand into the palm of his left, he shrugged and started warily down the stairs.

The darkness did not seem so complete now. He descended as silently as possible, keeping a sharp watch for the little pasty-faced man or anyone else who might be lurking about the premises.

When he reached the ground floor he stood for a moment listening. There was no sound. He went to the elevator shaft and peered down. It was too dark. He risked a match, holding it below the level of the floor.

What was left of George took up a lot of space, and it wasn't pretty. Baldy looked at it a moment and wished he had a drink. Either a drink or time enough to go ahead and be sick.

He straightened, shivering involuntarily.

ily, and pushed toward the hotel entrance.

Coming out into the moonlight again, he made his way back to the window of the watchman's house. The man inside was still playing solitaire.

Perplexed, Baldy went to the rear of the house and tried a door. It was not locked. Scowling, he crept in, gun ready, and just behind the pasty-faced watchman. It was very quiet in the room. He could hear a clock somewhere ticking. He moved by inches until he was standing over the man, raised the revolver, cracked it down on his head.

The watchman slumped over the table.

His brows bunching, his lips in a thin line, Baldy went to the telephone and called Baker's home. Someone who did not identify himself answered; there was a delay of several minutes.

Finally the manufacturer's voice said: "Baker speaking."

"This is McGovern. I've got your kid."

"You've got—" Baker broke off and cleared his throat, tried to get the tremor out of his voice. "You mean—Bobby's safe?"

"Well, kinda, for the time bein', anyhow." And Baldy explained the details. He added: "The question is now, do you want me to drop everything else and bring the boy in, or do you want me to get the men who are back of this?"

Baker pondered a moment. "Will it mean any danger for Bobby?"

"Not necessarily," Baldy said. "I can leave him up there in the room with those two punks. They're tied down good enough, all right. And the kid is too."

"Who are the men you want to get?"

"I'm not sure," said Baldy. "Not sure enough to tell you, anyhow. . . . Have there been any federal dicks around your place?"

"Yes, two arrived half an hour ago. And there's a special state constable from the governor's office. I don't know

whether they're still here, but I can find them."

"Good enough. In an hour—no sooner and no later—I want those men to start from your place and come up here. You can come too if you want to. Get me?"

"Of course, but why—"

"I think," Baldy cut in, "I'll have the man or men who engineered this snatch by the time they get here," and he hung up.

The little watchman was still unconscious.

Baldy went over him and found a gun. That made three extra ones to be carried. Baldy was getting heavy with them. He found a chair and placed it on the opposite side of the table. He sat down on it, settled himself to wait.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death Hotel

NEARLY half an hour passed before the man showed any sign of returning consciousness. He groaned feebly and raised his head. His eyelids fluttered and he found himself staring into the ugly muzzle of Baldy's revolver.

"Hoist 'em!" the detective clipped.

The man got his hands up, stared unbelievably.

"I want you to call Maxwell about me," Baldy said softly, and waited a moment as his prisoner's eyes went wider. "Do you know my name?"

The man shook his head.

"O. K. I came in here sneakin' around and you batted me over the dome with a chair, see? I'm ga-ga, stretched out on the floor. You're panicky, and thought you'd better call him. Get it?"

The man shook his head again.

"Move!" said Baldy, and jerked his head toward the phone. "Get goin'!"

Expressively, the little watchman used his index fingers on each side of his head and pointed to his ears. He tapped the lobes, shook his head again.

"Talk loud," he said in a squeaky voice.

Baldy laughed outright. He kept on laughing until tears came into his eyes. He saw why the little man had not been disturbed by the pistol shots in the rotting hotel. The little man hadn't even heard them.

Now the watchman was pointing down with his fingers to a pencil and a pad of paper on the table.

Still grinning, Baldy nodded vigorously.

The little man lowered his arms, pushed the pencil and pad toward him. Baldy switched the gun to his left hand, leaned over and wrote hurriedly, keeping the watchman in his scope of vision. He finished with a flourish and pushed the pad forward.

When he had read it, the little man said in the indistinct, subdued voice of the partially deaf: "Yes, I can say things to people over the telephone, but I can't hear what other people say to me." He hesitated a moment, added somewhat reluctantly: "Unless they know who I am and know how to talk loud."

Baldy thought a moment and then yelled at the top of his voice: "Can you hear me now?"

"Yes."

Straining, shouting every word, Baldy repeated his orders.

The watchman started to get up, changed his mind and sat down.

All the humor went out of Baldy's face. His upper lip quivered, curled like a wolf's. He waved the gun and shouted: "Move!"

The watchman moved. He got up and went to the phone. He was hunched over, his head low. He looked around. "I said I don't know who you are. I don't, except that you're the fellow I

planted a bomb on, in your suitcase. On the train."

"Yeah," yelled Baldy. "You can tell him that if you want to. The main point is, you knocked me out, here on the floor. Call him!"

WHEN the watchman had Maxwell on the line, Baldy stood over the phone, his hand ready to be clapped down over the mouthpiece. His eyes were cold and expressionless, like glass eyes.

His orders were carried out. The watchman described him as the big fellow on the train—the man in whose handbag he had been ordered to place a bomb.

Baldy clapped a hand over the mouthpiece. "Does Maxwell say anything about comin' up here?" he roared.

"Yes, he says to tie you up and hold you. He's coming up."

"O. K. Tell him good-bye."

After a moment or so during which he said only "Yes" and "No," the watchman placed the receiver back on the hook. "What now?"

"Park your body over there and keep your mitts in sight."

With one hand, Baldy fished out a cigarette and lit it. He puffed speculatively, eyed the lamp shade, reached over to it and adjusted it so that part of the room was in deep shadow.

He retired to the shadow, in a corner.

After a seemingly interminable wait there came the sound of a car ascending the mountain road. The car paused briefly at the second gate and came up to the house and stopped.

The back door opened. John Maxwell, his beefy face worried, came into the room followed by Sheriff Clark. In the shadows, Baldy smiled grimly.

"Where's McGovern?" Maxwell demanded in a loud tone, stepping forward next to the pasty-faced watchman, in the light.

M-McGovern?" the watchman stammered.

"Damn you, don't you know his name?" Maxwell roared. "The big fellow we showed you on the train. The one you said you had up here."

"I—he—er—" the little man gulped.

"You can look at the answer as well as hear it," said Baldy, moving out of the shadow and hefting his gun. "Up, bozos!"

Three pairs of hands were raised. Baldy swept them with his cold blue eyes. His mouth was turned down at the corners, his big fist tight on the revolver. Faintly, he could hear a second automobile coming up the mountain.

"A trap," he informed them, scowling, "in case you can't recognize one when you get caught in it."

The politician, standing with his left side to Baldy, had been easing his right hand down surreptitiously. Suddenly the hand dived to his hip, came out with a blunt-nosed automatic.

Baldy's revolver spewed flame. The bullet slashed through Maxwell's wrist and the gun hung for a moment from useless fingers, then dropped to the floor with a thud. The politician slowly raised his right arm and looked down at the wrist, his eyes humid. Bloom pumped out.

"If anybody else wants a sample," Baldy said, "go ahead. Only it'll be a bigger sample next time."

He walked over, gestured for Maxwell to move back, scooped up the automatic and started to put it in a pocket. His pockets were already full. He tossed the automatic on the table.

THE sheriff glared at Maxwell, threw out his arms like a mammy singer. "It's no use, John. This is the end. I told you over and over it would come to something like this."

Maxwell said, still looking down at his wrist: "Shut up, you fool!" He got out a handkerchief and made a crude bandage, stanching the flow of blood.

"No," wagged Clark. "I won't. It's no use trying to bluff. McGovern has a way of getting onto things." He turned to Baldy, who stood loose-jointed, his hat pushed back from his tawny brown forehead. "How do you figure this, McGovern?"

Baldy started to answer, checked himself. They could hear an automobile coming up the mountain.

"Wait until they get here," he said.

In a few minutes they heard the car come up beside the house and stop. Baldy kept the three men in the room in the sweep of his gaze.

The back door opened.

Three men came in followed by Baker. They took in the situation at a glance, produced guns.

"These," Baldy said, "are the guys behind the kidnapin' of your son, Mr. Baker."

The manufacturer stared incredulously at Maxwell, at the sheriff. He expostulated: "Impossible. You don't know them. This one"—he jerked his head toward Maxwell—"is a friend of mine, a man of integrity and standing. And the other is the sheriff of this county."

Baldy said wearily: "I know." He repeated: "These are the buys behind the kidnapin' of your son, Mr. Baker."

"I don't believe it," the manufacturer declared. "Where's Bobby?"

"In a room on the ninth floor of that skeleton hotel. Two of you fellows go get him." He nodded to the state constable and one of the federal officers.

The two men started out.

"Wait a minute!" Baker called. "I'll go with you."

"No," Baldy clipped. His tone bore a crisp whip of finality. "Stay here. I've

got to convince you I'm right if I'm going to get the right kind of a fee out of this." He grinned.

The two men left.

"Stop me if I'm wrong," Baldy told the sheriff. "You're fed up with this business and ready to take your medicine. Is that right?"

"Yes," Clark said.

"You were forced into this snatch job by Maxwell. You didn't want to do it in the first place. But you had to do it to cover up the shortage in your office. It was the only way. You weren't responsible for the shortage. Maxwell was. He got you elected. And then when he went busted—got head over heels in debt—he got desperate."

"Yes, yes," the sheriff said.

"Maxwell had to have money. A lot of it. He was in debt so deep that if he didn't get out, he'd lose all his say-so in politics. So he made you a party to this kidnapin', which he figured was safe because he was a friend of Baker's."

BAKER—wild, stunned belief creeping into his expression—turned and glared at the politician a moment, then looked back to Baldy.

The big detective grimaced. "So when Baxwell heard Baker call me in on the case, he figured a bright way to get rid of me would be to plant a bomb in my handbag. He didn't tell the sheriff about it and that's where he went wrong."

Clark, clenching and unclenching his sweaty hands, put in: "It was murder, I tell you! It was murder!"

Maxwell didn't say anything. He just stood there.

Swiftly Baldy went on: "Maxwell didn't figure anybody but me would be likely to open my handbag. But the sheriff was panicky too. He tried to do a

little investigatin'. He sent one of his deputies down to the station to check up on me when I hit town. The deputy thought maybe he'd find somethin' in my handbag, used his badge to get into it at the checkroom, and got blown to hell."

He stopped, looking from the three prisoners to Baker.

The federal agent said nothing; he merely listened, his gun out.

Sweat glistened on Baldy's brow. "I got a hot tip right after I hit town. It put me onto Maxwell. I went and fanned his office. Learned a lot about him. And learned about this place. It sounded like a swell hideout. So I came up here and found the boy."

His expressionless eyes were on Maxwell now. His voice quickened, hardened.

"So I got this little hard-of-hearin' rat I found here to call Maxwell and tell him I been knocked out up here. Maxwell goes up in the air, which was what I thought he would do, gets the sheriff and comes up fast. O. K., sheriff?"

Some of the fire had gone out of Clark's face. He appeared finished, beaten. He said: "That's right. I'm fed up, with the whole rotten machine. I'd rather go on the witness stand and tell it all than to listen to Maxwell any more."

Baker wheeled on the politician. "You—"

Maxwell suddenly lunged to the table and grabbed up his automatic with his good left hand. Baldy, watching closely, could have shot him before he got his hand on it, but Baldy held his fire. He didn't like to shoot a man to death until the instant it became necessary.

He had an idea Maxwell was trying to shoot the sheriff. But Maxwell didn't shoot the sheriff.

Maxwell shot himself.





Kirk put the paper in front of him, held out the pen.

When Marcia Winters smuggled in that string of pearls she knew she ran a good chance of getting her fingers burned. What she never guessed was that her crime would start a murder ball rolling—make her easy pickings for the—

SCANDAL RACKET

by Dwight V. Babcock

Author of "Pearls Without Publicity," etc.

NORA SULLIVAN came through the connecting door into Kirk Daniels' private sanctum. Blue eyes serious, she crossed the carpet and leaned a comely hip against his desk. "Someone left the door unlocked and a skunk got in," she said quietly.

Daniels lowered his newspaper, let his feet slide from the desk-top to floor.

"After having your cat around all day yesterday, I should easy be able to stand a skunk."

She wrinkled her nose at him, dropped a small tan business card on the blotter. "This skunk walks on two feet."

He let his eyes rest for a moment on the card. Printed in brown, modernistic type across its center was—*BOULE-*

VARD GOSSIP. And in the lower left-hand corner—*August Zidell, Advertising Manager.*

"Skunk is flattery. Tell it I'm out."

She pushed glossy black hair back from one side of her high forehead. "Suppose you read what's on the other side first."

Daniels flipped the card over, read in a whisper: "About a certain screen star's pearls." A frown gathered on his forehead.

"Well?" Nora Sullivan's eyes were twinkling, a smile tugging at her lips.

He looked up. "You seem to be getting an awful kick out of something. Show Mr. Skunk in."

SHE went out briskly to admit, in a moment, a wiry young-looking man, too well dressed. He wore a crooked, thin-lipped smile and his face was pale, unlined. Beneath a long aquiline nose was a black hair-line mustache. His eyes wandered leisurely about the office while he said: "You're doing pretty well by yourself, Daniels."

"I'm getting by." Daniels' gray eyes were half closed, his face expressionless. "Let's have the sales talk. But whatever you're selling, I don't think I want any."

Zidell dusted the seat of a chair with a silk handkerchief, sat down near one corner of the desk, crossed his legs. "You've heard of our little publication, *Boulevard Gossip*, of course."

"I've heard of your lousy blackmail sheet," Daniels said evenly. "And I've heard of Julian Gilbert, your boss. And I've also heard of Gilbert's shake-down man, Augie Zidell."

Zidell beamed. "Fine—fine! You understand, then, what an ad in an exclusive magazine such as *Boulevard Gossip* would mean to you."

"I know it wouldn't mean a damn thing.

Since when did you start shaking down private dicks?"

"I wouldn't call it that. All we're asking is for you to contract for a small advertising campaign that will undoubtedly pay for itself many times over in new clients."

"Horseradish! No one buys that dirty rag of yours except the ones you've got something on." Daniels tossed a thumb toward the door. "Breeze! This is my busy day. You picked the wrong guy to put the squeeze to."

Zidell took a paper from his inside coat pocket, unfolded it and laid it on the desk in front of Daniels. "In that case, we shall be forced to publish this statement." He settled back, lit a cigarette, inhaled with apparent relish.

Daniels knifed him with a quick, searching scrutiny and bent over the paper.

I, Mary Hoyt, former personal maid to Marcia Winters, do solemnly swear and affirm that the following statement is true.

On the evening of July 1st, 1934, Marcia Winters was robbed of a string of pearls. Her chauffeur, Gene Clark, was black-jacked and killed by the thief. Before notifying the police, Miss Winters called in Kirk Daniels, a private detective.

I overheard the conversation which took place between Marcia Winters and Daniels at that time and from it learned that the rope of pearls that had been stolen from her had been bought in England for \$30,000 and smuggled into this country by Miss Winters.

Because the pearls had been smuggled and Miss Winters was liable to a fine double their value, Daniels advised Miss Winters not to mention the pearls to the police—to tell them that nothing was taken in the attempted robbery in which the chauffeur met his death. She followed his advice.

Later, Daniels recovered the pearls and returned them to Miss Winters. A police detective, Lieutenant O'Neal, was seriously wounded and two men, supposedly the thieves, were killed in accomplishing this. Daniels told the police that the men that were killed were the ones that had tried

to hold up Miss Winters and had killed the chauffeur. He concealed the existence of the pearls.

(Signed) Mary Hoyt.

When Daniels looked up, his mouth was tight, his smoky eyes glittered.

Zidell gushed smoke through his nostrils, said: "Don't bother to tear it up. That's only a copy."

"Nice!" Daniels grated. "Very nice! But you have no proof—only her word."

"That's good enough. Publicity of any kind about those pearls would cause an investigation that would embarrass Marcia Winters in more ways than one, and get your license revoked for fooling with smuggled jewels and suppressing evidence."

Daniels' face was pale and hard. He spoke slowly, barely moving his lips. "Does Marcia Winters know about this?"

"Certainly. I saw her yesterday. She agreed to take half a page, every month, at our regular display rates."

"And what does half a page cost, at your regular display rates?"

"Five hundred dollars. She's drawing down plenty and can afford it, but of course, we don't expect any such ad from you. Say now, ten column inches would make a nice set-up."

"Yeah. Almost any way you look at it, it makes a nice set-up."

"Well." Zidell turned on his crooked, thin-lipped smile. "What do you say, Daniels?"

Daniels got slowly to his feet, his face twisted in a spasm of fury. "Get the hell out of here, you dirty little rat, before I splatter you all over the wall. Go back to that heel, Gilbert, and tell him if he prints that statement, I'll be over to see him personally. Understand?"

Zidell's eyes opened wide. He stood up and backed against the chair. Daniels, his fists knotted, started around the desk and Zidell back-pedaled to the door. He

paused for a moment with one hand on the knob and carefully flicked cigarette ashes on the carpet. His teeth flashed briefly. "Think it over, hot-shot. I'd hate to read in the newspapers about you getting hurt." He turned and slipped through the door, closing it quietly behind him.

DANIELS stood for a moment glaring at the door. At length he shook his head, went back and dropped into the swivel chair. He got a small leather-backed notebook from a drawer, thumbed through it, found Marcia Winters' private phone number.

When he got her on the phone he said: "I hear you're going in pretty heavily for advertising in Hollywood's leading blackmail rag."

"What else could I do, Kirk?"

"You could have let me know. Zidell was in just a minute ago trying to put the squeeze on me, too. I kicked him out."

"Oh, Kirk, you can't! You said yourself that if it got out about the pearls being smuggled, the government could take them and fine me sixty thousand dollars, too. And, believe it or not, I'm still broke."

"So I guess you'll learn not to buck Uncle Sammy again. But don't worry. They won't publish that statement as long as you're shaking down to the tune of five hundred a month. What got into this maid of yours? Going to Julian Gilbert and giving that affidavit."

"She was sore, I guess. When I moved out of that big barn in Beverly into an apartment, I let her and the gardener go—just kept my housekeeper. Mary—she was a quarter-breed Indian I'd picked up in New Mexico—didn't like being let out. She got sassy and said I'd be sorry. I didn't know she knew about the pearls, so I laughed it off."

"Where can I get in touch with her?"

"I don't know, Kirk. I phoned her yesterday at the number she left with me, but the person that answered said she had moved and hadn't left any address."

Daniels scowled, rubbed the corner of one eye with a little finger. "I guess it's too late for her to do us any good, anyway. See you around, Ag."

"Damn it! How many times do I have to tell you to quit calling me Ag?"

He chuckled and replaced the phone in its cradle. He had known Marcia Winters, America's latest screen heart-throb, when she was just another extra—and her name was Agnes.

DANIELS got back from a late lunch at three o'clock the next afternoon. He settled himself at his desk, began to sort through his mail. The phone jangled. He swooped it up, barked: "Hello."

"Is Mr. Daniels there?"

"This is Daniels."

"I'm Mary Hoyt. I used to work for Miss Winters. I've got to see you right away. It's important." The voice was vibrant with panic.

He said: "I'd like to see you, too. Come on up. I'll wait till you get here."

"No—no, I can't. They're watching me. You come to Seven Ten East Thirty-third. Just off San Pedro. Hurry!"

Clicking noise in the receiver checked the reply Daniels had started. He sat still for a minute gazing into space while a frown creased his forehead. Then he replaced the phone in its cradle, stood up and, leaving his mail unread, strode through the outer office past Nora at her desk, out and down to his car.

Thirty-third, near San Pedro, was a neighborhood of decrepit, gone-to-seed bungalows. Number 710 was the third house from the corner, a dingy gray duplicate of its immediate neighbors. He passed up a walk bordered by a sun-browned, Bermuda-grass lawn, climbed

four steps and thumbed the bell button.

The bell's clangor echoed loudly through the house, but no one came to the door. Daniels glanced warily about him. Two dirty children were passing the front of the house carrying a bottle of milk and a loaf of bread. Otherwise, the street was deserted.

He tightened his jaw, jabbed the bell again, keeping his thumb on it for several seconds. Still no results. His right hand slipped beneath his coat to settle on the butt of his automatic and with his left he tried the door. It was unlocked. He inched it open, sent a backward glance out into the empty street, slid through and to one side. Then he closed the door silently.

He was in a small living room, haphazardly furnished with a horsehair sofa, two rickety chairs, a stained and dusty upright piano, a table. He could see through the dining room into the kitchen. Heavy quiet filled the place.

Moving silently through dining room, kitchen, to the back door, he looked out upon a junk-strewn back yard bounded by a high wooden fence. Returning to the dining room, he took his automatic from its shoulder holster, thumbed down the safety catch. He opened a door on his left and found himself in a gloomy hall facing another closed door.

This opened at his touch to disclose a bedroom, empty save for its furniture. He passed down the hall, glanced into a bathroom and brought up before the last door in the house. It, too, was closed. He turned the knob and pushed it inward. With one foot across the threshold, he froze, stood rooted to the spot, jaw slack, eyes widening as a cold chill drove down his spine.

A slim, olive-skinned woman in a white dress was lying diagonally across the bed, face upward—inert and lifeless. Her head was half turned toward him,

revealing staring eyes that were filled with a wild terror. It was Marcia Winters' former maid and she lay in a pool of blood. Her throat had been slit.

Daniels gulped down a wave of nausea and forced himself to cross to the bed. He felt a limp wrist that had not yet started to stiffen. The fist was clenched tightly. He pried open the fingers and found a Yale key from which hung a short length of white-gold watch chain that had evidently broken at a weak link when the woman had snatched at it as she struggled with her killer.

DANIELS dropped the key in a pocket and behind him someone sneezed! He spun about. A huge, hulking figure—obviously a mixed-blood of some sort—stood in the doorway. There was something apish in the slope of his big shoulders, the hang of his long arms. He blew his nose into a soiled handkerchief, stared stupidly at Daniels. "What you doin' here, mister?"

The first thought that whipped through Daniels' head was to get out of here and get out fast. A sweet spot to be found in! He motioned with his gun. "Outside, you!" he bit out.

The other for the first time caught sight of the horror on the bed. His blood-shot eyes saucered and instead of moving backward he took an uncertain step into the room. Daniels caught a whiff of alcohol-laden breath. His mouth worked vainly for a few seconds, one huge finger pointing at Daniels. Then he clamped his jaw, whipped one hand around to the back of his neck and started to shuffle forward. His hand came down with a huge clasp-knife which flicked open in a continuation of the same motion.

Daniels backed away, gritted: "I'd hate to drill you, iella. Get outside!" But he realized that he could not reason with this alcohol-soaked brain.

The man kept shuffling toward Daniels, slowly swishing the knife back and forth in front of him. Daniels grimaced and backed away around the bed. He didn't want to fire his gun as the report would draw people to the house and he would be in a position which he could not possibly explain. Then his back hit the wall and he was in a corner! The giant breed still advanced on him, was now but a few feet away.

"Another step and I'll let you have it," Daniels grimly promised.

"You killed Mary, mister. Now I'm goin' to kill you." Insane determination shone in those bleary eyes.

Daniels aimed the automatic at the giant's leg, gritted his teeth, started to squeeze the trigger. Then he noticed the other's mouth open wide, upper lip twitching, head drawn back. He relaxed the trigger and there came a violent, tearing sneeze—and another. At the apex of the second sneeze, the barrel of Daniels' automatic descended swift as a striking adder, caught the giant between the eyes. He went straight over backward like a felled tree, out cold.

Daniels allowed himself a whistle of ardent relief, stepped gingerly over the body and left the room. Using a handkerchief to wipe the doorknob, he closed the door softly behind him. He went directly to the front window, peered out. No one was about. He took one last look around to make sure he had left no evidence of his presence and, again using the handkerchief, he opened the door, started to slip out.

A black sedan careened around the corner, slued up to the curb in front of the house. At first sight, Daniels recognized it—a police car—and moved back from the door. He shot through to the back porch, went down steps, across the junk-filled back yard, through a gate and into an alley. Here he slowed to a walk,

made his way cautiously toward San Pedro Street.

Pedestrians were plentiful on San Pedro. He stepped boldly out of the alley's mouth, crossed the street to where he'd parked his roadster. Searching for his car keys, his fingers brought out the key he had found in the murdered woman's hand.

He stared at it a moment. Then he dropped it into a pocket, started the car, slowly pulled away from the curb. He did not relish the thought of running away and leaving the giant breed to face a murder charge. He would be found drunk with a knife gripped in one hand and in the same room with a woman whose throat was cut. He would be held and his story that another was the killer would not be believed.

But it had been he or Daniels. And free and unhampered, Daniels might be able to find the real killer. For he did not doubt that the breed—whatever his connection with Mary Hoyt had been—was innocent. Someone had forced Mary Hoyt to phone Daniels' office or that someone had phoned himself and imitated her voice. And that someone had used a knife on Mary Hoyt's throat. And then had phoned the cops after he had seen Daniels enter the house. A sweet frame! But the giant breed had stumbled into the middle of things and had been the proverbial sand in the gear-box.

THE big neon-tube clock on the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Vine said a quarter to five when Daniels garaged his car and went up to his office. When he opened the door, Nora Sullivan took her face out of a book long enough to say: "Hi, boss."

He went on through, paused in the connecting doorway. "You might as well go on home." He closed the door, went to his desk, got out a fifth of his favor-

ite brandy, tilted the bottle and took a long pull. He lit a cigarette, began to smoke moodily. Crossing to the window, he looked down on the homeward-bound traffic tangle, and troubled shadows moved far back in his half-closed eyes.

Minutes later the sound of the door opening and closing made him turn. Nora was coming toward him. "I thought you'd gone," he said.

"Business before pleasure. There's a hotcha blonde outside that simply must see you."

"I always did have a weakness for blondes." He got behind his desk, sat down. "What's our prospective client's name?"

"Parker—Ruth Parker. And she's a honey!"

"Well, shoo her in."

Nora hadn't lied. The girl that came through the door a moment later was just that. She was nearly as tall as Daniels. But her height gave her no appearance of awkwardness and she had curves in the right places. Her blond beauty was set off by a neat navy-blue suit.

Daniels, on his feet, indicated a chair, said: "Please sit down, Miss Parker."

She darted a quick nervous glance around the room, showed pearl-like teeth in an uneasy smile, dropped into the chair that stood before the desk. "I—" She stood again, leaned earnestly toward him. "We've got to get out of here right away. The police are coming here after you!"

"What?" Daniels' brows drew down skeptically. "How do you—"

"There's no time to explain, but I'm Julian Gilbert's secretary, if that means anything to you. You know—*Boulevard Gossip*."

Daniels said, "I know," and his eyes held sudden suspicion.

"Come on." She turned toward the door. "There must be some place where we can go and talk that will be safe."

"Well, now—wait a minute." He sat down, leaned back. "What makes you think the police are after me? Why would they want me?"

She shook a small black handbag in exasperation. "Oh, well—" She shrugged her shoulders, sat on the edge of the chair. "It's your funeral. I'm only trying to help you."

"I'll take a chance on sticking around until I hear the whole story. Spill it."

"Well—" She looked down at the bag in her hands. "This morning a woman—she looked like she might be part Indian—came into the office and demanded to see Mr. Gilbert. I think she'd been drinking. At least, she talked very loud and most of what she said didn't make sense to me. It was something about a statement concerning Marcia Winters' pearls that she wanted back from Gilbert. Mr. Gilbert was in the back office and heard her. He came out and took her into his office and got her quieted down. She stayed about ten minutes and when she came out she seemed satisfied. I—I think he paid her some money."

Daniels rubbed one side of his face and watched her, slit-eyed. She sucked in breath and went on.

"This afternoon she phoned in. All the calls go through me in the outer office except those that come in on Gilbert's private phone. She seemed very drunk and after switching her to Gilbert, I listened in. I was curious."

SHE looked up, her cheeks coloring a little and then her eyes moved away from his. "He called her Miss Hoyt. She was quite violent, demanded more money—a thousand dollars—or she was going to the police and spill everything. She said she would tell them that he was blackmailing Marcia Winters. Mr. Gilbert tried to reason with her, then agreed to send a thousand dollars right down to

her. Mr. Zidell was in the office with him and a few minutes later he went out."

Daniels was leaning forward now and an inner excitement had sent a glow into his gray eyes. "I get it!" he said softly. "But Augie didn't go there to pay her money. Go on—finish."

"That was about two thirty. I'm through for the day at four thirty. I left then and when I got down to the street, I found I'd forgotten a book I was reading, so I went back after it. The door to the inner office was open a little and I could hear Mr. Gilbert talking on the phone. He didn't hear me come in. He was saying, 'It was a great idea and it's tough he slipped out of it.' Then he said, 'But wait a minute! It's not too late. You phone a tip to the cops that Daniels was seen coming out the back way. Maybe that breed you saw go in after he got there will identify him as the killer. Anyway, the cops will pick him up and he'll be in plenty hot water. We'll show that cheap gumshoe it pays to advertise.'"

She smiled briefly, spread her hands a little. "So I knew he was talking about you and I was sure he was talking to Zidell and that they were trying to frame you."

Daniels nodded his head while faint little lines appeared and disappeared at the corners of his eyes. "I owe you plenty for warning me. Did Gilbert find out you were in the outer office listening?"

"Well, he came out and saw me by my desk getting the book out of a drawer. He looked at me queerly and asked me how long I'd been there. I said I'd just come in. I left then and he didn't stop me, but I don't think he believed me. I came right here."

Daniels jerked to his feet, got his hat from the costumer. "You may not realize it, Miss Parker, but you're in a

pretty bad spot. Mary Holt was murdered this afternoon and if Gilbert begins to think you might have overheard anything—”

She shivered, went suddenly white about the lips. “I know. I’m afraid.”

Daniels gazed down at his hat. “The thing for me to do is to take you to the police and let you tell this same story. It would clear me and the breed the cops found with Hoyt’s body and it would point to Augie Zidell as the killer. Only Gilbert’s still got Mary Hoyt’s statement and if the authorities get hold of it, it’s going to be pretty tough on Marcia Winters and I’ll probably lose my license.”

“I’ll do whatever you say.”

“Thanks.” He grinned. “I hope you won’t regret it. We’ll get out of here the back way and I’ll take you to a place where you’ll be safe.”

“What are you going to do then?”

His jaw was firm, his mouth tight, eyes grim. “I’m going after that paper and any other like it I can get my hands on. Then maybe we’ll go to the cops. But I can’t get it through my head why a square-shooter like you would be working for a snake like Julian Gilbert.”

She smiled crookedly, walked with him to the door. “The same old story. Broke—hungry—and it was the only job I could land. I didn’t know what I was getting into when I took it.”

THEY passed into the outer office. Nora Sullivan had gone. They were halfway across the room when the hall door opened and a heavy-set man came in. A taller man, chewing on a thin black stogie, was directly behind him. Daniels recognized the first one as Lieutenant Flynn of central homicide.

Daniels stopped short, his teeth clicking together. The tall detective leaned against the door while Flynn came on into the room, saying gruffly: “I’m sor-

ry, Daniels, but I’ve got to take you in.”

“Yes?”

Flynn removed a battered fedora. “Yes.” He coughed. “I don’t think I’ve met the young lady.”

Daniels’ face was wooden. “Miss Parker, may I present Lieutenant Flynn?”

She forced a smile. “How do you do, Lieutenant.”

The thin man by the door said: “Let’s get goin’, Leo.”

“What is this?” Daniels said.

Flynn lifted a finger, made a sandpaper noise on his blue-black chin. “It won’t take long, Daniels. The captain just wants to ask you some questions.”

“That’s why he sent two of you, I suppose. Tell the captain I’ll drop by tomorrow. Miss Parker and I have a dinner date.”

Flynn suddenly stepped forward and his hand darted, snake-like, under the lapel of Daniels’ coat, came out with a flat .38 automatic. Daniels stood still, his arms hanging loosely at his sides, his jaw hardening. Flynn put the gun in his own coat pocket. “You can keep that date afterwards. Maybe Miss Parker had better come along, too.”

The thoughts that moved through Daniels’ brain were bitter. Taken in alone, he might wriggle out of a murder charge, but with the girl along her testimony would certainly clear him—but also it would eventually cause Marcia Winters plenty of trouble. Good old Ag—he couldn’t let her down. And he was thinking of himself, too—what the loss of his license would mean. . . .

He said: “You wouldn’t by any chance be trying to kid us? Why should Miss Parker come?” His mouth dipped at the corners and he took a step toward the bulky detective. The blond girl cut in front of him, said quickly: “It’s all right.

Daniels scowled at her, but she only
I’ll go.”

smiled. They all went out and down the hall, the girl and the tall detective in the lead, Daniels and Flynn following them. Daniels plodded in silence, his eyes on the floor, his mouth set in a harsh line, hands thrust deep in jacket pockets.

It was getting dark outside, but street lamps and lighted store fronts made a twilight of the dusk. The tall detective with Ruth Parker paused at the first corner, pointed with his stogie into the side street. "This way. The car's down here."

"I know it," Flynn said. He had an arm hooked through one of Daniels'.

THEY walked a quarter of a block from the lighted boulevard, stepped down off the curb and had started diagonally across the street when a pair of fat headlights came out of the boulevard, shot white beams into the side street. The car, a low streamlined sedan, gathered speed, came hurtling toward them. A premonition clutched at Daniels. He jerked loose from Flynn, grabbed the girl and dragged her backward.

Flynn and the other detective jumped toward the gutter as Daniels hollered, "Look out!" and maneuvered himself between the girl and the onrushing car, crouched, forcing her down. Then a gun exploded, seven times in rapid succession, from a curtained window of the sedan as it rushed by, barely missing Flynn and the tall detective.

Glass in the windows of parked cars behind Daniels and Ruth Parker shattered and fell with a harsh jangling sound. The sedan roared on down the street. The tall detective, his stogie still clamped between his teeth, was sitting on the pavement. Blood streamed from one shoulder, but he was conscious. Flynn was emptying his gun at the disappearing car. Daniels, by some miracle, had not been touched. He turned on the girl.

"You O. K.?"

She tried to smile, but her lips wouldn't behave and she pressed them together, nodded her head jerkily. He found one of her hands, squeezed it. "Atta girl. They were after you. But stick with Flynn and you'll be all right. And don't mention Marcia Winters or pearls to him. See you later."

He turned and slipped into the gathering crowd, worked his way through, back to the boulevard and slung his legs eastward for three blocks. Then he rounded another corner, passed two unlighted shop windows. The corner street lamp made it possible to read the gold-leaf lettering on the third set of windows. The sign said—*Boulevard Gossip*.

Daniels stepped into the dark doorway, groped in a pocket and found the key he had taken from Mary Hoyt's lifeless hand. The key slid easily into the lock. He turned it, pushed open the door and slipped inside.

By the light from the street lamp he could make out a counter running the width of the room. Behind it was a desk on which were a phone and typewriter. Files stood in one corner. A wall-board partition cut off further view. He passed through an opening in the counter, located the door in the partition and went on through, closing the door. He got out a pocket flash, fanned the beam about.

It was a small, tastefully furnished office. The flash picked out a draped opening opposite him. He crossed a deep-piled carpet, pushed aside the drapes. There was a washroom and, to one side, a back entrance. He swung back to the office, switched on a small modernistic lamp that stood on the mahogany flat-top desk, tried the drawers. They were locked.

A key made rasping noise in the lock! It was at the back door. He clicked off the light; his fingers closed around a

heavy glass paper weight, and he cat-footed over to one side of the draperies.

The door opened and closed. Daniels felt the drapes move and he made out a tall figure that stepped through. He brought the paper weight down easily on the man's head. The figure went to its knees, groaned. Daniels stepped to the desk and switched on the lamp again.

THE man on the floor squinted, blinked. One lean hand massaged his head. His skin was a sickly yellow color, deeply lined about the mouth and eyes, and the eyes were pale blue, watery. Daniels got a fistful of coat collar and yanked him into a chair. He passed his hands quickly over the dazed man's body. He was unarmed.

"So you're Gilbert, you lousy heel!"

Gilbert groaned. "My head!" His voice was a deep whine.

Daniels ripped off the man's tie and belt and with the addition of his own belt he bound him securely to the chair and proceeded to make a methodical search of his pockets. He found keys and one of them fit the desk. He ransacked drawers but came upon no papers of any importance. He did find a small, hammerless .25 automatic which he pocketed. There was no safe or file of any kind visible in the room.

The dazed man had regained his faculties and was eyeing Daniels. "What do you want?"

Daniels leaned against the desk, smiled tightly. "Well now, sweetheart, what do *you* think?"

Gilbert blinked his watery blue eyes. "I have no idea. I don't even know who you are."

"I'm one baby you couldn't blackmail. The name's Daniels and I hate your guts."

Gilbert's pale eyes flickered; his adam's apple jerked convulsively and a shiny film of moisture grew on his yellow forehead.

"Where," Daniels said slowly, "is Mary Hoyt's statement?"

"It's not here. You don't think I'd keep it here!"

A muscle jerked in Daniels' cheek. He reached out and slapped Gilbert's face. The impact made his fingers sting and turned the other's cheek from a saffron hue to a bright red. "That's just a sample, Gilbert. I don't fool around with blackmailers and murderers. Where is it?"

The pain had brought tears to Gilbert's eyes. One spilled out and ran down the side of his long nose. His mouth worked. "Damn you! You'll pay for that!"

Daniels cracked him again, harder. His gray eyes were smoky. "I can play this game longer than you can and the longer we play, the rougher it's going to get."

Gilbert's thin chin slumped down on his chest. His deep voice was choked. "In the corner, under the rug." He indicated which corner with a bob of his head.

Daniels went to the corner and swept back the rug, disclosing a steel trap set in the cement floor. He opened this and revealed the door of a small safe imbedded in concrete. "What's the combination?"

The man in the chair did not answer. His jaw was clamped and he was staring away from Daniels. Daniels returned and stood over him. "If you think I mind beating hell out of you, you're squirrely. I get a big kick out of it."

He grabbed a handful of Gilbert's long hair, jerked his head up, shoved a big freckled fist against his nose. Gilbert closed his eyes, gave the combination quickly.

Daniels made a gag out of his handkerchief and tie and secured it in Gilbert's mouth. He got the safe open the first try. It was absolutely bare save for five well filled manila envelopes. He stuffed these in pockets without looking at them,

confident that he had all of the *Boulevard Gossip* blackmail material.

CROSSING to the desk, he found a sheet of paper and a pen. Gilbert's eyes watched him questioningly as he wrote. The pen made scratching sound for a minute. Then he untied the other's hands, dipped the pen in ink, put the paper in front of Gilbert, held out the pen to him.

"This is a statement of your part in the killing of Mary Hoyt. It says that Augie Zidell killed her and that you and he tried to frame the murder on me. You're going to sign it and I don't mean maybe. Incidentally, I found Zidell's key to this joint in Hoyt's hand. Augie was pretty careless."

Gilbert's face had gradually turned from yellow to a sickly white. He made queer little noises in his throat, trying to talk through the gag. He did not take the pen.

Daniels waited a moment, then gritted his teeth and let go with one fist. It caught Gilbert on the nose. The impact made a peculiar crunching sound and a squirming crimson snake crawled down over Gilbert's mouth, dripped on his coat. Tears began to flow again. He shook his head, tossed blood from his nose and chin.

"Damn you, look out for my suit!" Daniels rasped. "I ought to bust you again for that." He raised his fist threateningly.

Gilbert clutched the pen, scratched his name on the paper as a voice from the door snapped: "All right, Daniels. Get 'em up!"

The voice was behind him, but Daniels recognized it as that of Zidell. He was facing Gilbert with his back to the desk. He took a chance, dropped prone to the floor. A gun boomed, reverberated in the room.

The small automatic he had taken from

the drawer jumped into Daniels' hand. He fired around the corner of the desk. An answering shot roared, lead thudded into some part of the desk.

Shouts, followed by scattered gunfire, sounded outside. He heard the front door slam and risked a quick glance over the desk-top. No one was there. He got to his feet, heard a gun bark outside somewhere, followed by another shot. He turned his attention to Gilbert. There was a small bluish hole in his throat. As Daniels watched, it turned red, commenced to bleed.

Daniels shook him, cursed softly when he found that he was dead, then smiled thinly. He quickly unbound him, pocketed belts and ties, folded the statement Gilbert had signed and added that to the mess already in his pockets. He heard the front door open, turned to see Flynn and a uniformed cop troop in, guns thrust before them.

Daniels said: "Did you get him?"

Flynn put away his gun, let his calm, unperturbed gaze survey the room. "You mean the mug that busted out of here a minute ago? Yeah, sure, I got him. We chased him, got him cornered and he tried to plug me, so I let him have it."

DANIELS leaned against the desk and his mind welcomed the realization that now no one else knew about Marcia Winters' pearls save Ruth Parker and the little she knew he was sure she would keep to herself. "Those other shots," he said. "Before Zidell came out. What were they for?"

"The car was sitting out in front and the driver tried to make a break for it. He'll probably live. Just some cheap two-bit punk of a kid."

"I suppose you know now—" Daniels lifted an eyebrow at the detective, squinted his eye—"that it was Augie Zidell

that killed that Hoyt woman this afternoon. Or do you? It was he—and I think Gilbert was with him and they separated afterwards—that tried to get Ruth Parker a while ago to keep her from talking to the police. And he just now killed his boss here, Gilbert.”

Flynn stood before the body in the chair, looked it up and down. “Just one less heel in this town. And that Zidell baby— Today must have been his birthday or something.”

Daniels said: “I guess he didn’t mean to blast Gilbert. He was shooting at me but I ducked.”

“A good idea.” Flynn scratched the stubble on his chin, eyed Daniels quiz-zically. “Miss Parker kind of went to bat for you. She gave us the idea of dropping around here when she said that car that almost ran us down looked like her boss’s. She told us about overhearing the phone conversation between Gilbert and Zidell and the rest of it. Only she didn’t seem to know why they wanted to frame you.”

“They tried to shake me down for some advertising in their dirty sheet. I kicked Zidell out of my office and he got a little bit mad.”

“Sure.” Flynn nodded his head, smiled wisely. “But why was Mary Hoyt put on ice? She used to be Marcia Winters’ maid. I’ve got a hunch this hooks up with that last mess you were mixed in. It’s damn funny. First Winters’ chauffeur gets slugged out and now her former maid has her throat carved.”

Daniels shrugged, said nothing. Then he fished in a pocket, got out the statement Gilbert had signed, passed it to the detective. “Here. If it means anything. How’s your pal? Hurt bad?”

“Just nicked.” Flynn’s eyes were on the sheet of paper. “This can’t do any harm. How’s it to drop into H. Q. tomorrow with the answers to a lot of questions? You can drift out of here now if you want.”

“Sure.” Daniels, acutely conscious of the contents of his pockets, heaved a soft sigh of relief. “Where’s Miss Parker?”

“We dropped her off at Sardi’s on the way over.”

Daniels’ face relaxed in a grin as he moved toward the door. “Right now I could eat a horse and chase the rider. I guess I’ll just keep that dinner date.”

In the next issue—the first puzzle in a new series

Cross Roads of Crime

by

Richard Hoadley Tingley

which is going to appear regularly in DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE. Each puzzle will picture some individual whose career is—or has been—bound up in some close way with the world of crime, either on the side of the law or against it. Famous outlaws as well as famous detectives and police figures will be pictured and in each case the name of the person under consideration will appear within the puzzle. The correct solution together with a brief summary of the figure’s career will be found in the issue following the one in which he—or she—has been pictured, together with some interesting facts about his career.

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE for October 1st—Out September 15th

GUN ANGLES

IT SO happens that in the last few weeks we have been swamped with queries from various of you DIME DETECTIVE readers concerning different controversial points regarding guns, and the way they are used—or abused—in detective fiction. We've put a couple of these facers up to authors who ought to know the what's-what-and-why about such weapons and here are quotations from a few letters which should clear up one of the angles which seems to have been a bit cloudy up to now.

Mr. George W. Martin of New York takes T. T. Flynn to task on what he considers a bad technical error. Here's the way he jumped on us—

Gentlemen:

Your Dime Detectives are fine, so long as they make sense. However, it quite spoils a good story when the author is guilty of gross carelessness, or if he is unfamiliar with firearms. Such is the case in "Murder in the Mud" in your June first issue. The person who writes under the name of T. T. Flynn should take a course in firearms.

I refer to the fact that in the story he has a man shot with a small automatic pistol which later turns out to have contained blanks. Now, I have never heard of blanks being made for an automatic handgun. If so, I should like to be informed where I could get some for my own use.

Will you kindly pass this on to the above mentioned author. I like his stories, but he should study up on guns.

• Very truly yours,

As Mr. Flynn was somewhere between New Orleans and New Mexico and not available to take the witness stand in his own behalf, we called on Leslie White, our gun expert, lately associated with the Los Angeles D. A.'s office, to testify. Here's what he said—

—it's a very delicate point and can't be answered didactically one way or the other. One authority states that no automatic pistol will shoot blanks unless specially prepared with what is known as a "neck down" muzzle. I contend, however, that a single shot could be fired all right, but the recoil would not be sufficient to either eject the shell from the blank or to set the firing pin for another or second shot. •

That seemed to vindicate both Mr. Flynn and our genial critic to a certain extent, and we were just about to go to press without going into the matter further when the author of the story in question got caught up by his mail and crashed through with the following.

I'm afraid this chap has spotted an error. As I recall the story in question, the character was really murdered when first written in; and revision made it a fake, with blanks fired, and I didn't notice they were from an automatic.

Offhand, as far as I know, only one blank can be fired at a time from an automatic. The blank does not give recoil enough to reload, and blanks in the clip would flip up and jam, due to the lack of lead in the nose to make them fit the clip.

However, this reader's major kick seems to be that blank shells for an automatic handgun can not be purchased. How in heck does he suppose automatics are fired point blank (no pun meant there) in the movies, and a thousand and one places where automatics have fired blanks.

Blank cartridges for standard calibre chambers and breeches are made and sold, I'm sure. One could be slipped into the breech. I'm not situated, on the road as I have been for months, to make experiments. I have only a shotgun and rifle along. I'm not a gun expert or even an enthusiast, so this is all offhand comment; but I think if Leslie White replies he'll say that blanks can be purchased which will make a nice bang in an automatic. But only one at a time, without stopping to reload by hand. Blanks can also be made. Plenty of gun

enthusiasts load their own shells and fix powder loads to suit themselves. The story didn't say they were purchased; merely used, and shot, presupposing the thing was carefully planned, and blanks would have been on hand for the job. However, that's quibbling about it. I think he's wrong about not being able to get blanks that would fire in an automatic handgun—and indirectly right in the point he uncovered, and evidently did not notice, that only one blank can be fired, and not two, as the story stated.

All of which just goes to prove that there is much to be said on both sides—of almost all questions. Come again, however, with your problems and we'll do the best we can to solve them. Of course, the question of where to purchase said blanks still remains unanswered. How about trying one of the theatrical supply houses, Mr. Martin? As Mr. Flynn says, blanks are constantly being shot from automatics on the stage and in movies. Some such place of business might very well fill your needs.

AND here's just room to introduce an author you haven't met yet, but whose stories you've been enjoying for several issues. We give you—R. (oger) D. Torrey. He says the following is frankly deleted for the sake of the public.

Three years of high school. Canadian army at sixteen. A year in a bank. Then working in a sawmill, then keeping time and books in a logging camp. Then playing piano in a theatre. Graduated, or maybe it was going the other way, into a the-

tre organist and worked at this until talking pictures killed this business. This took me up and down the West Coast and as far east as Tulsa, Oklahoma, though most of the time was spent in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Ran a show on the Klamath Indian Reservation until 1930. Then many things . . . starving and pick and shovel and driving a truck among them. Writing since the middle of 1932.



R. D. Torrey

Writing crime fiction came natural. When the music business was good, every musician got around to a lot of places and met a lot of the (lower?) element, and I used to be insane about gambling, which same habit took me to even other places that serve as a base for local color. Also have chummed around with several policemen, which has helped this slant.

The hobbies are fly fishing and pistol shooting . . . the aversions are fishing with heavy tackle and the kind of yarns in which the hero does impossible things with a gun.

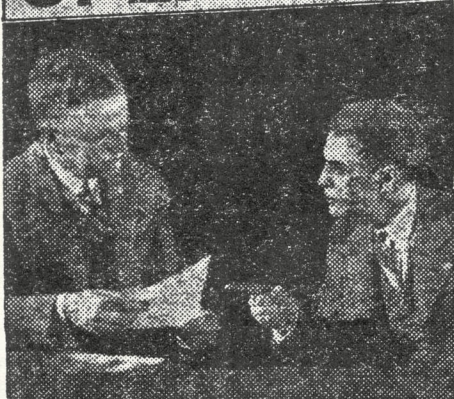
Am Irish by descent . . . have just turned 33 . . . have been married and divorced . . . have a weakness for blondes which I fight against, knowing I can't win . . . another for gambling, which I've

whipped. I'm too smart to even play penny ante now, though it's taken ten years to get that way.

If that's deleted, we'd like to have the spaces filled in some time and see what kind of a guy this Torrey man really is. And from the way he handled the house-game atmosphere in the opening of *Dice and No Dice* we'd like to bet it's not so damn long since he dropped some dough "inside the line." How about it?

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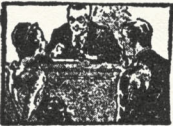
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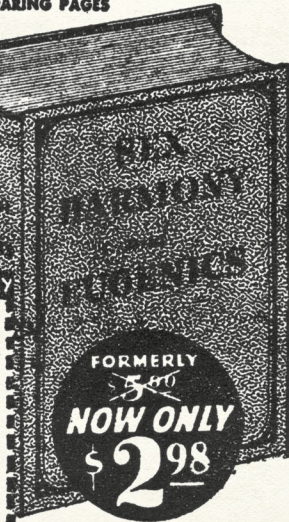
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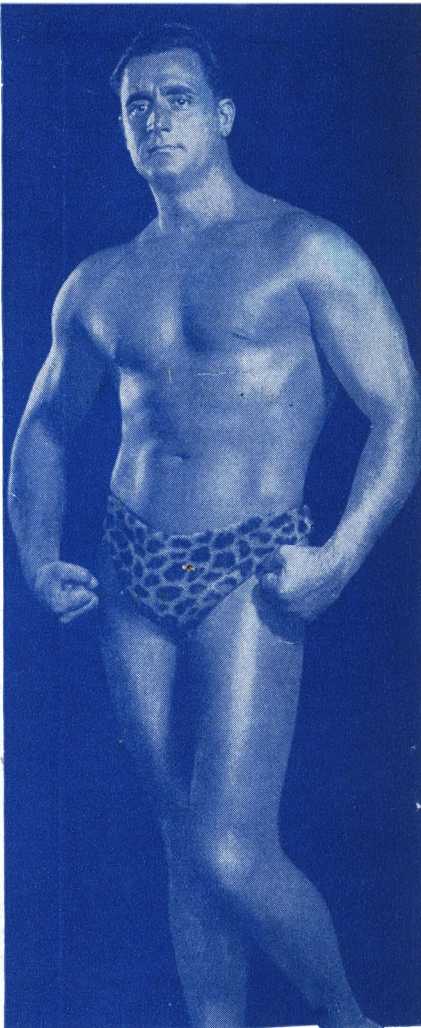
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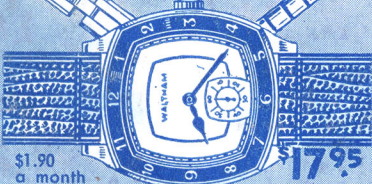
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