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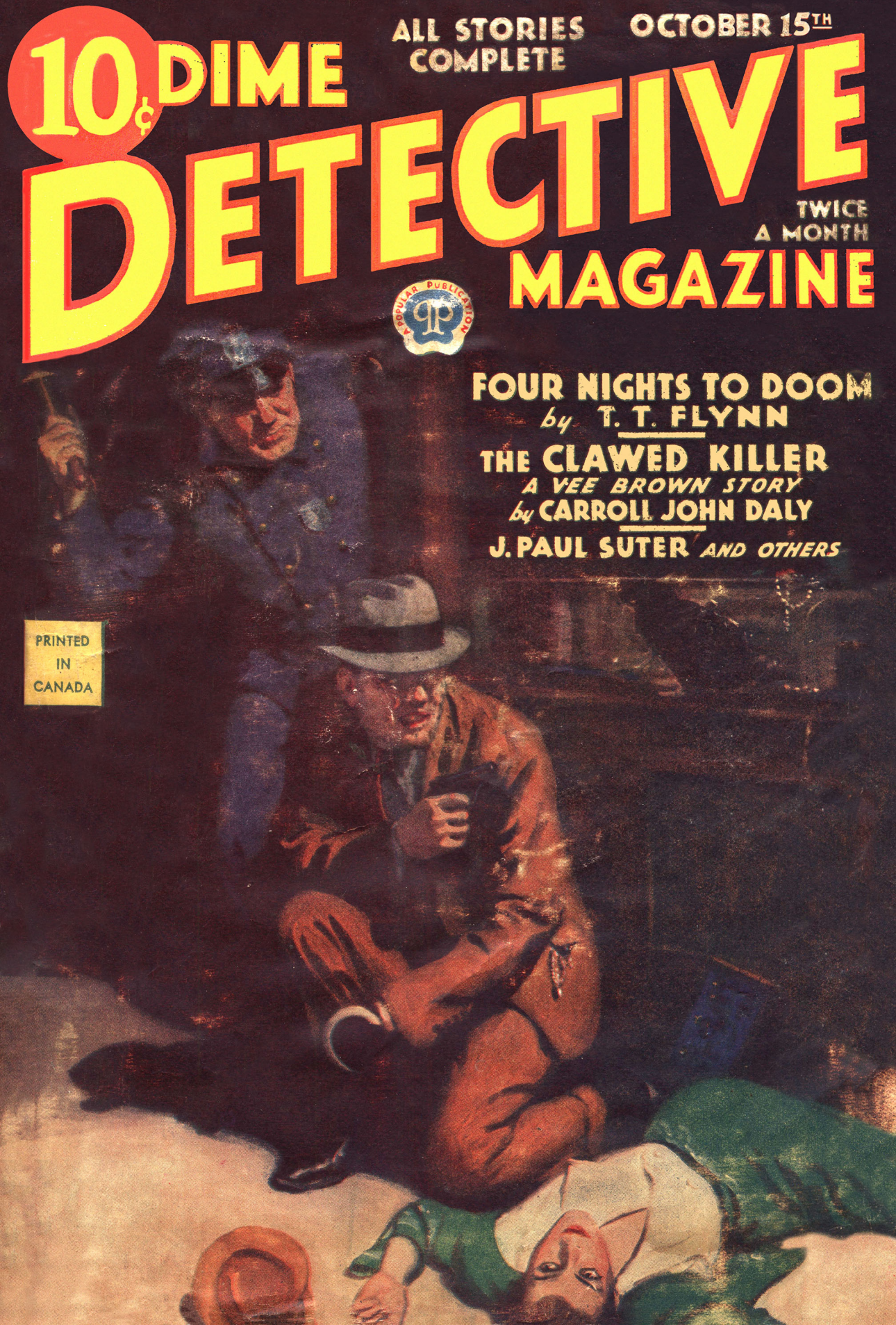

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by CARROLL JOHN DALY

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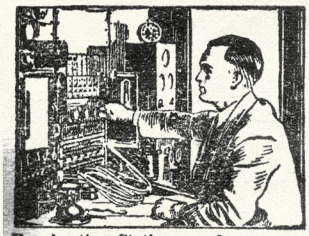

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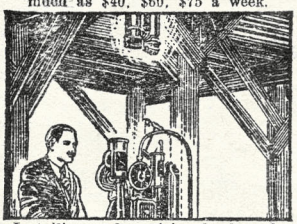

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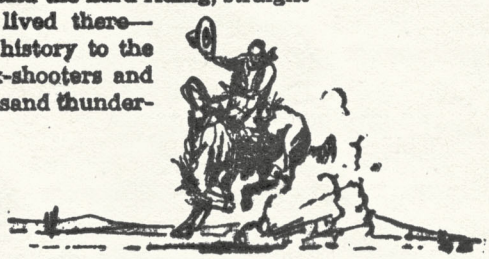

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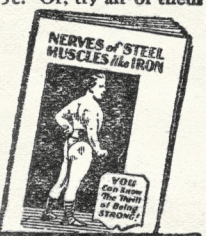

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THE CLAWED KILLER

A Vee Brown Novel

by Carroll John Daly

Author of "Ticket To Murder," etc.

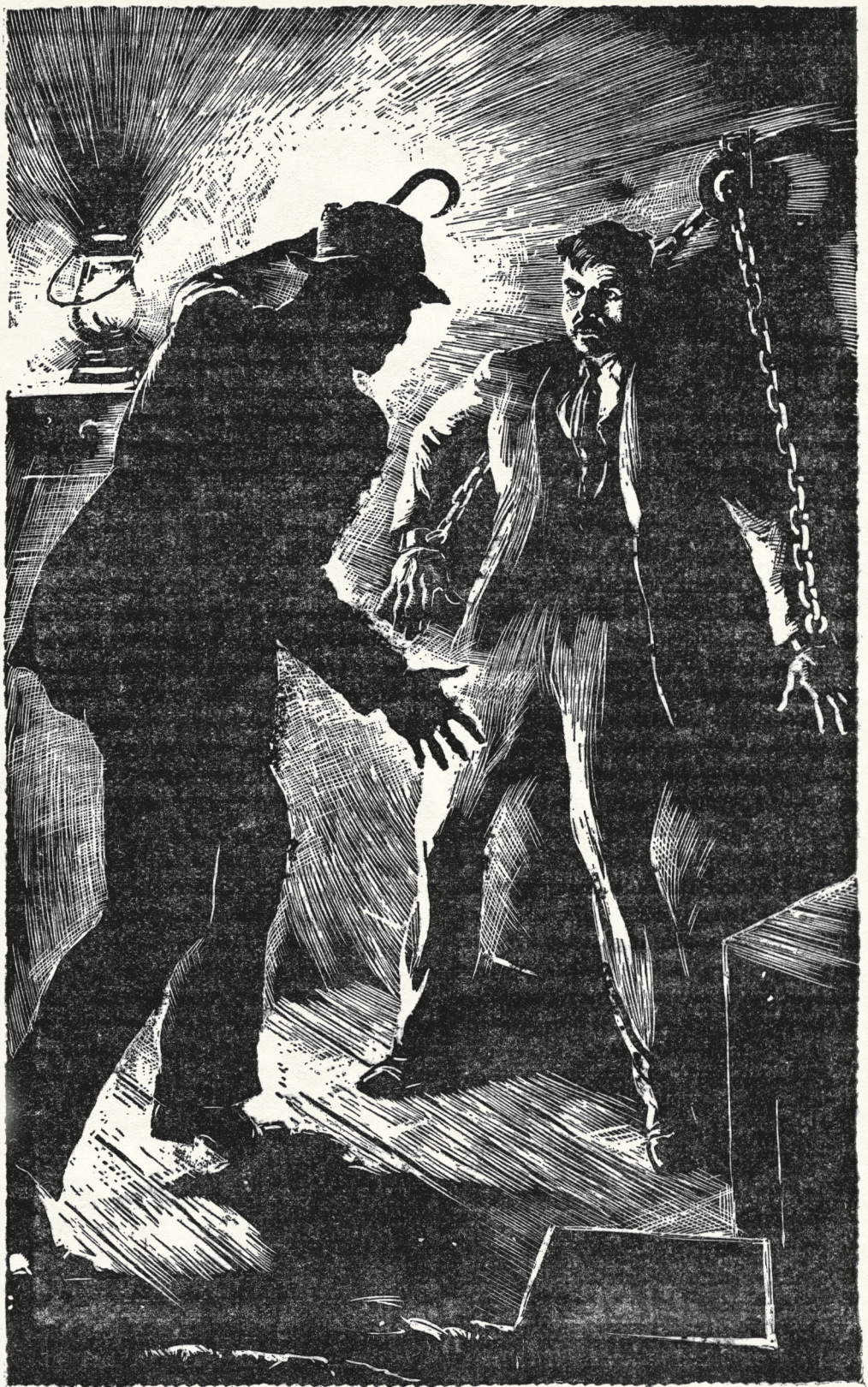
"This is a case in which the crimes have been committed before the motive," Brown announced, as he peered at the body of the fourth victim. But the D. A. and Inspector Ramsey only smiled sceptically. How could they guess that this was indeed a homicide set-up with reverse English—that the motive wouldn't appear till later—only to be killed in turn?

CHAPTER ONE

One-Armed Murder

FOR a good five minutes Vee Brown looked down at the body. Then he turned and walked through the doorway where I stood. "It's not a pleasant sight, Dean," he said slowly. "Just like the others. Her throat clawed open, her body horribly mutilated." He took my arm, dragged me into another room. "Shooting such killers to death is, after all, not such an unpleasant job."

When I shook my head in disapproval of his last words Brown grinned up at me, his black eyes tightly knitted. Yes,



He lunged forward. The great hook almost touched my throat.

it was easy to believe that this slim little man was Vivian, writer of so many sentimental song hits.

But it was hard to believe that he was also Detective Vee Brown, assigned to the district attorney's office and known to the underworld as Killer of Men.

"The same thing again." Brown pulled at the corners of his mouth with forefinger and thumb. "Four dead so far, and no one to profit by any of the deaths. No, not even by the death of the rather pompous banker. Dean, I'm interested in this case. Inspector Ramsey has been working on it. Mortimer Doran, the district attorney, has not appealed to me—and yet I've followed these murders since the very first, had private detectives looking up the heirs, friends, business associates, and even possible enemies of each victim.

"The Clawed Killer, as the papers so pleasantly call him! Yes, I am interested. Mortimer Doran has just returned from his vacation. The papers have been riding him a bit and I don't imagine he will be in the best of humor, and I think he will come to me. Inspector Ramsey! Well, he is faced with that terrible nightmare of every manhunter—no apparent motive for these crimes."

"No motive at all!" I suggested.

VEE corrected me with emphasis. "No apparent motive. There is a vast difference between the two."

"But Vee, these crimes are committed by a maniac! Each person killed the same way. That terrible steel hook suddenly caught in the victim's throat. No chance to cry out. The killer creeps up from behind a stretch of that arm, a sudden jerk, and the jugular vein is—" I shuddered slightly. "It's terrible—horrible. Then to mutilate the body afterwards! A creature not fit to live. A one-armed fiend, whose false, wooden arm is equipped with that terrible instrument of death. There is no motive in madness. There can be no motive without reason, and—"

"How do you know this one-armed man with the steel claw is committing all these murders?"

"Why, because he's been seen in the vicinity of each dead victim. Not just once, but every time. Seen by someone before the body of his latest outrage has been discovered."

"And that is the real coincidence. If he were seen once, or even twice perhaps, it would be all right. But every time and before the body is discovered! This killer is able to sneak up on his victim, kill him before he can cry out, and yet he is unable to get away without being seen. Now—is he unable to get away without being seen, or simply unwilling to get away without being seen?"

"Why, what do you mean?"

"I mean simply—does he wish to be seen, wish to be identified with the crime?"

"But why?"

"This girl makes the fourth victim. Four absolutely unrelated lives clawed to death in the same manner." He held up his left hand and ran them off on his fingers. "The first, a derelict in a deserted section of a city park; the second, a laborer on the docks who strayed away from his fellow workers; the third, our banker, hardy enough or foolish enough to continue his game of golf on a deserted course in a violent rain storm. Quite a jump—that, if you're at all inclined to be class conscious. Now our killer steps back into the middle class, for the dead girl had a very fine position as private secretary to the head of a large shoe factory."

"Yes," I said. "And each time the killer was seen. Seen by people who say they would recognize him again."

"Quite so." Brown nodded. "And it is just that which stirs my imagination and makes me wish to be officially on the case. The men on the dock saw him; after killing the man in the park he was seen close to the entrance of that very park; on the golf links, he drove away in a car after being seen by the agent at the railroad station. Now— Well, we'll see later if—But let us slip out, Dean. Here comes the redoubtable Inspector Ramsey himself, in person." And after a second's hesitation, "No. We'll wait. There's Mortimer Doran with him. The fireworks are about to begin."

BROWN was right. The fireworks did begin. Inspector Ramsey did not like Vee Brown and was not a man to hide his dislikes.

Mortimer Doran said, after a quick grasp of Brown's hand and a nod to me: "Glad you're here, Vee. What made you come now, and why not on the job sooner —a murder or two back, before the killing of that banker brought so much public notice—and condemnation?"

Brown jerked his head at Ramsey. "I called him," he said to Doran, and the giant of an inspector reddened. "I think Ramsey said something about my wanting to horn in on the simple chasing of a crazy, one-armed man; that he'd pick him up any moment. Let me see. That was—how many days ago, Dean?"

Ramsey raged in. "Well, here's your chance now. There's the dead girl in the next room and a half dozen people who saw the killer. Yes, saw him before her mother started looking for the girl. Some even thought they recognized him from former newspaper descriptions. But they were too scared, or—well, one did tell Grogan, the flat-foot down the block. It was Grogan who found the body."

"Where?" said Vee.

"Alley behind the house. Her mother wasn't well and she got up and went out for aspirin. The killer was waiting at the end of the alley, a little cut to the left as you go to Hanover Street. He just reached out and—" Ramsey made a gesture toward his throat, which needed no vocal explanation. "You'll see the body, Mr. Doran? The commissioner thought I should notify you even though you were just back home."

"I shortened my vacation because of—of this." Doran's big, good-natured face was very serious. "The commissioner knew that. So our clawed killer waited in the alley for the girl!"

"No," said Ramsey, "he couldn't have been expecting her. She never used that alley before. There's an all-night drug store on the corner of the block behind. It was her first trip."

"You mean he just happened to be in the alley, and the girl came and was killed."

"That's just what I mean. That's what makes setting a trap for this killer so difficult. He just jumps from place to place. Kills only when opportunity presents itself, without reason and without motive."

"Come, come!" said Brown, just as he had said to me before. "You mean—without apparent motive, my dear Inspector."

Ramsey said, with feeling: "I mean exactly what I said. No motive of any kind! I've traced down every death. Besides—even though these murders are undoubtedly committed by the same person, in the same way, they are entirely unrelated. Impossible to anticipate the next victim."

"Of course, of course!" Mortimer Doran was impatient. "But we have definite information about the killer. He is small and stocky, has one arm missing. The left one is a false arm with a hook on the end of it, with which he kills his

victims. It should not be hard, Ramsey, to locate a one-armed murderer. There can't be so many."

"No, they're not, and they're all accounted for." He straightened slightly. "I don't mind telling you, Mr. Doran, that I've identified the man. You see, it took time, for this criminal didn't have his arm removed in any of the city hospitals. Yes, I got the hospital records. It was a devil of a job." And with a glance at Brown, "I got a picture of our man, too."

"Good work!" Mortimer Doran beamed. "Identified, and all that?"

"Identified, yes." Ramsey's head jerked down on his chest. "As for 'all that,' well—I haven't located him, if that's what you mean. But he's been missing from his home for seven weeks."

"Seven weeks!" I gasped. "That's about when the first murder was committed."

"That," said Ramsey, "is exactly when the first murder was committed. Exactly, to the day!"

"Peculiar!" Brown cocked his head and studied Ramsey's look of triumph. "It's not like you, Inspector, to—well, be so generous with your information to me."

Ramsey stared at Brown, said: "I'm a cop. I work for the good of the people. And the good of the people demands that this information be made public." He paused, and the real explanation of why he gave Vee the information popped out. "Tomorrow the front pages of every paper will carry his picture. We know the man; we know where he lived. He has only one arm. That deformity should betray him quickly. I expect to break this case before tomorrow night."

"You've done good work, Ramsey." Mortimer Doran's words alone were praise, his voice carried disappointment. He looked half reproachfully at Brown. "Bring him in, Ramsey—dead or alive."

"Dead!" Ramsey nodded. "Every cop has orders to shoot to kill."

"This man you suspect! Has he ever been in an institution; has he a criminal record; was he known in his neighborhood as vicious; and did he, before his disappearance, wear a hook on the end of his arm?" Brown shot out.

"Of course he didn't go around sporting a hook," Ramsey sneered. "And he was peculiar. No criminal record. A little odd, perhaps—even weak-minded—but quite—" Ramsey hesitated, and then, "He's certainly turned vicious enough now."

"Quite harmless you were going to say." Brown looked over his shoulder, and I knew he was thinking of the dead girl in the other room. "And you are right, Ramsey. He's anything but harmless now—this killer."

"He'll be harmless soon enough." Ramsey jerked at his belt, puffed up slightly. "Read your papers tomorrow, Brown. There'll be things to interest you."

"So"— Mortimer Doran turned to Brown when the huge Ramsey had gone —"the police have been doing things while our office slept. I know, I know! You only take cases that interest you or on special orders from me. But when that banker was clawed to death, and I was on my vacation—it made copy for some of the sheets. I'm an active district attorney, not just the indoor variety who gets his convictions after the criminal is brought in. My office gets out and does things. Now—Ramsey."

VEE cut in in his low annoying drawl. "The one-armed man's name is Richard S. Swartz. The 'S' stands for Stephen. He is thirty-four years old, lost his arm in an auto accident in Newark. Came to New York when his girl broke the engagement, has been silent and

morose; shy and very conscious of his deformity. A little odd, of course, and certainly pronounced harmless by his neighbors; at least, until they discovered the police interest in him and the suspicion that he is the famous—or infamous clawed killer. I have known about him for well over two weeks."

Mortimer Doran's big tanned face cracked with a smile. "You—you have found him, his connection with these murdered people?"

Brown shook his head. "I haven't found him, but I have discovered that he has no connection with these murdered people. None of the victim's relatives, friends or even associates know of a one-armed man."

"But he must have had a reason for killing these people."

Brown's shoulders shrugged. "That seems impossible."

"Then he is simply mad."

"Mad enough to show himself after each killing but shrewd enough not to show himself after the body has been discovered. Insane enough to claw people to death and hack their bodies, yet sane enough to seek a hiding place until another victim dies." Brown shook his head. "Queer, very queer, Mr. Doran."

"At last, then, you have murder without a motive—if madness itself isn't motive enough."

"Maybe," Vee told him. "But insanity reasons. A mad reason, perhaps, that you and I could not understand. Yet, a reason."

"Ramsey's right." Mortimer Doran nodded. "Not that you're not worth a dozen Ramseys in hunting the criminal! But now we're not interested in theories, motives or reasons. The murderer has been seen, finally identified. We are interested only in bringing him in to justice and preventing other murders of the same kind."

"Let us hope," said Vee, "we can bring him to justice."

"'Let us hope," said Mortimer Doran, "that we can find this Richard Swartz."

Brown was very serious when he spoke. "I don't think there will be much difficulty in finding Swartz once the newspapers publish his picture, his description. I am sorry it came out so soon."

Mortimer Doran clamped a hand down on a narrow shoulder. "'Nonsense, Vee!" he said goodnaturedly. "I know how you feel. Personal credit, credit to our office and all that. But once the picture is out we'll have a million eyes watching. A man with his left arm gone won't be able to avoid arrest much longer." And slightly the politician, "Our one and only interest is to protect the people—the people we serve."

"That's right," said Brown. "We must protect the people." He walked toward the door very thoughtfully and then turning, "You won't need to worry much longer about the people, Mr. Doran."

"You think he'll be picked up, that his killings are over!"

"I think he will be picked up, and that there will be one more killing."

"Look here!" Doran followed Brown to the door. "It's no time for playing the story-book detective. The boys from the papers will be pushing me pretty hard. If you know anything that Ramsey doesn't—"

BROWN'S thin eyebrows went up. "Really, Mr. Doran, can anyone know anything that Ramsey doesn't?" And when the district attorney didn't smile in return, "You know, of course, that this clawed killer whom people have described is without a left arm."

"Yes, yes." Mortimer Doran nodded. "That's the description witnesses have given, and—and—my God, Brown! This man of Ramsey's—this man of yours—

this Richard Swartz! It's his left arm that's missing, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes," said Vee. "It's his left arm that's gone all right. There's no doubt about that, all who knew him are agreed on that. Even the records at the Newark hospital verify that."

"Then—you don't think we'll find this man?"

"Oh! I'm quite sure we will."

"And that will end the case?" Mortimer Doran watched Brown, his sharp eyes snapping bright.

"Or just begin it," Brown said as he passed through the door. And then, to me, "I want another look at that girl's throat and a word with the medical examiner before they take the body away."

CHAPTER TWO

Murder Before Motive

THE picture of Richard S. Swartz appeared in all the papers the following day. Vee Brown looked at the likeness in each paper, held them beneath the light.

"A rather fine face," he said slowly. "Sad, almost gentle. I've looked forward to meeting this murderer and—" He came to his feet and stood looking down at the tabloid on top of the bunch of papers. "No. It's hard to picture myself shooting the owner of that face to death."

He turned almost in the middle of a word and walked straight into the music room. For a time I heard his feet beating back and forth, then the strumming on the piano and finally the pounding feet again. And I knew. The Clawed Killer was bothering him. His music was not going so well.

Twice the phone rang. It was with some misgivings that I told Mortimer Doran that Vee was out working on the case. The second call was from the detective agency Vee had hired. There was little to report about the girl who was murdered. But I took careful notes.

It was close to dinner time when Brown came from the music room. He went straight to the table and read the report.

"Well," he said, and rather irritably, I thought, "you did right in not disturbing me. I would have grouched all afternoon that you'd thrown me off my latest song. But you wouldn't have, Dean. I did nothing, absolutely nothing. Not a note." He grinned. "I need a stimulant. A good murder to stir my sentimental side."

"Aren't these murders good enough?"

"Not yet. Not yet!" He nodded emphatically. "But I think they are going to be. There is little of official glory or personal satisfaction in hunting a maniac."

"That's it, Vee!" I told him. "You have too much imagination. Generally you put on your harness, tuck a gun under each arm and go gunning for your man. Now, you sit back and wait for something to happen. The man's mad, of course. You'd see it yourself if it wasn't that Ramsey had the same idea, first."

"First?" he sputtered. "Why, I had the same idea before the first body was cold. Now—"

"Now," I said, "Ramsey has the same idea, so you change yours."

VEE laughed. "That's not true, Dean, but if it were, it would be reason enough. God knows Ramsey's been wrong enough times." And suddenly with vehemence, "And he's wrong this time. But his mistake is in publishing that picture. Yet, his very stupidity will put the criminal off guard and cause him to betray himself."

He looked at me a long moment. "I'm waiting, Dean," he said slowly and very seriously, "for another murder. Our last murder—or murders."

"You expect more than one murder, then."

"Yes, I do. If my imagination, as you call it, is correct—then we'll have two more murders, murders that mean something." He threw up his hands. "Over six million people in the city, and it may be any one of them. The police can do nothing, I can do nothing. We must wait until another dies, until another is clawed to death. Then we'll really begin to hunt for the murderer."

"And there's no may to prevent—"

"None whatever." And suddenly, when I looked at him doubtfully, "How can I prevent it? With the millions in the city, how guess at the next victim, how stop his death without that knowledge?"

"By capturing the murderer before he can commit his crime."

"Bravo, Dean!" He looked at me. "But how capture the criminal when you have not the slightest idea who that criminal is?"

"But you do know." I pointed down at the pile of papers. "Richard S. Swartz. The 'S' for Stephen." I gave him some of his own sarcasm. "You said yourself you knew who the murderer was."

He tossed back his head and laughed. "No, Dean, I never said that. I said I knew who the one-armed man was whom so many witnesses saw and later recognized from photographs after the crimes were committed. I didn't say he was the murderer." And when I would have cut in, "But no matter!" And as he put on his hat and coat, "I'll go out now and play the detective you'd like me to be. False whiskers, a wig, and a hoarse whisper to everyone in the subway. Have you seen Swartz? And—A name for a song there. *Have You Seen Swartz?*" And the smile going, "To find Swartz now might prevent a murder—at least, for the present. But it also might prevent us from bringing a criminal to justice for the murders that have already been committed. You see, Dean, we wouldn't have the motive."

"Motive. Motive! What difference would that make? If you found this Swartz, then you'd soon find the motive."

"No, Dean, you wouldn't. For, you see, the motive has not yet been committed." With those cryptic words he went out whistling.

I DIDN'T see him again until almost eleven that night. Then he came in, tossed his hat to our only servant, Wong, and threw himself into a big chair. This time I waited for him to talk, and he did.

"I was foolish enough to visit Mortimer Doran. Things are stirring in the city tonight. Every cop on duty, all leaves off, parks, docks, alleys—everything but golf courses being watched. Ramsey and the commissioner and even Doran expect the murderer to strike again tonight. They think that his picture in the paper will goad him on, bring him from his hiding place to satisfy his lust for blood. They believe that his vanity will be tickled and that he'll go madly chuckling through the night."

"Well," I said, "I agree with them. It's just how a madman would act. Don't look at me like that, Vee. It's anything but funny. And certainly, no sane man would so treat dead bodies. The police are right. Four murders! The murderer's picture glaring out at him from every paper! Why not a fifth tonight?"

"Certainly. Why not a fifth tonight? I expect it, really expected it earlier. But not in a park, along the water front, out on the golf links, or in an alley. Before, our murderer simply went to deserted or dark, out-of-the-way spots and waited for opportunity. Man, woman, rich or poor—it did not matter so long as it was human prey. Tonight he must bring his own opportunity with him, kill his man, plant the evidence that will free him from all suspicion and hope that the news-

papers and the police will write 'finis' to the case."

"Just what do you mean—his own opportunity, his own evidence?"

"I mean," said Vee, "in this case the murders were committed first and the motive committed afterwards."

I looked at him. "I don't believe you know what you mean."

Black eyes stayed on me, narrow eyes, thin slits of ebony. At length he spoke. "You're right, Dean, dead right. I don't know what I mean. For a moment I have it, an illusive something. But it won't jibe. No, we must just wait, wait until another dies, and then start from scratch. Start as if it were the first murder; a murder, alone and unrelated to all other murders."

He lifted the ringing phone and a couple of minutes later, "I'll be right down." He jarred the phone back in its cradle.

"Better come along, Dean. Arthur Myer, investment broker and collector of rare jewelry has just been clawed to death and they've trapped the murderer."

"The one-armed man? The murder you expected?" I gasped.

"The one-armed man and a murder, whether the one I expected or not. I hope to God they have sense enough to take him alive."

"This from you! And after all the murderers you've killed!"

"But," he said, with that twisted grimace, "I've never killed a motive, and I wouldn't like to see one shot to death tonight."

CHAPTER THREE

The Killer Strikes Again

ARTHUR MYER'S place of business proved to be more a residence than an office. It was a brown-stone-front about midtown. The block was filling with curious people. Police crowded the doorway and reporters and cameramen were already fighting to gain an entrance. Brown used me as a sort of battering ram, crowded his slim body behind me, as we fought our way up those old stone steps, through the large outer vestibule and finally into the hallway itself.

Men were grouped before a curtained door to the left of the hall.

Vee Brown stepped in front of me and walked straight to those curtains. For a moment he paused, rocking on his heels. Then I followed him into that room.

Mortimer Doran turned, faced us, came over to Brown, opened his mouth to talk, then simply pointed down at the foot of the counter that ran the width of the room. My eyes traveled along the counter to the string of pearls upon it, the brilliantly lit glass display case, and so down the counter to the two bodies on the floor. The woman was lying on her back, her throat and chest exposed; clear white, with no mark upon them. Nothing to show that it was the work of the clawed killer. Nothing but the body of a man, that lay beside her. And that dead body told the whole story.

A short stocky man was stretched full length upon the floor. The medical examiner was still kneeling beside him. Ramsey, with his hands clasped before him, stood looking down at the dead man and the dead woman, face impassive.

Mortimer Doran explained. "Ramsey shot him to death. Killed him just as Reardon—I think his name is—clubbed him from behind." Doran jerked his head toward a huge uniformed policeman. "It's the Clawed Killer all right. The show is over. Same man as the pictures, too. See that left arm, the hook for a hand, and—"

"Just what happened?" Brown cut in. "How did Ramsey know he was here, and how did the kill take place?"

"The woman!" Mortimer Doran nodded. "Secretary and, in a way—though

Arthur Myer lived alone—housekeeper. Anyway, she stopped back here tonight. We're not sure why or how. But she gave us the first news. A frantic call came to headquarters, and a woman who was almost hysterical screeched that Myer had been murdered and his body hacked by the Clawed Killer. The man who took the call said that she was nearly incoherent and then, in the middle of her words—just like that—she screamed. It was a piercing, terrible shriek, that nearly lifted the headset from the man's ears. She said, 'He's here now, and—and—God! It's—' That's as far as she got. But he distinctly heard the two shots, maybe three. We'll see what Doc Fitzgerald has to say. But the man guessed, and we guessed, she was going to finish, 'It's the Clawed Killer.' Anyway, she's dead, and there's the phone still hanging over the counter, where she dropped it when she was shot."

"And Arthur Myer! He's dead?"

MORTIMER DORAN'S laugh was not pleasant. "He's dead, all right. The same as the others. The woman must have looked over the counter and seen him. Our guess is that the killer came here, got Myer out of bed—or even had an appointment with him—and let him have it. You see, he must have kept his false arm with the hook well hidden. We think, and Doc Fitzgerald agrees, that Myer turned his back. The killer leaned over the counter and hooked him just like he hooked the others. The jugular vein! The old man must have died at once. Then the killer climbed the counter and hacked at—" Mortimer Doran stopped. "Have a look for yourself."

Brown gave a long steady look over that counter. Then he went around behind it and I saw the flash in his hand. As for me, I was satisfied; or at least, felt I had done my duty with that one quick look. Arthur Myer was dead, and his body was a fearful sight.

It was a good five minutes before Brown came from behind the counter. He nodded at the medical examiner, ducked his head at Ramsey. Then he looked at the dead Clawed Killer, lifted the stiff left arm carefully, examined the hook on the end of it, looked at the soles of the dead man's shoes, then down at his own feet.

"There's blood on his feet," he said to the doctor.

"There's blood all over him." Doctor Fitzgerald nodded.

Brown knelt and looked at the dead man's eyes, pushed back the lids, then rolled up the coat sleeve of that good right arm and looked carefully at the little puncture upon the arm.

"That's right," said Doc Fitzgerald. "He was loaded with dope."

"How long was he using it? I mean—years, months, or just lately?" Vee asked.

The doctor's shoulders moved. "Your guess is as good as mine for the present."

"Queer place. In the arm, like that." Brown stood up, held out that right hand, tried bending the fingers back. "Below the elbow too. Rather strange!"

"Oh, it wasn't self-administered, if that's what you mean." The medical examiner was putting things back in his bag, rolling down his sleeves.

"Then someone else gave him the shots." Vee pulled at his chin. "A mighty good friend, since Richard Swartz' picture was in all the papers. A man mighty close to him, or—"

"Or—" the doctor said encouragingly.

"Or it might have been forcibly administered."

"What the hell's all this, Brown?" Ramsey's voice seemed strangely loud, out of place in that room. "There's no doubt about the murderer. A dozen witnesses have seen the man at different times, recognized his picture. There he

is! Richard Stephen Swartz, wanted for several murders."

"That's right." Vee's voice was very low. "I'm sorry you killed him, Ramsey —very sorry indeed."

"Of course you are. But then, I don't have your imagination. Your book-learning either." And with a smile and somewhat mimicking Brown, and certainly quoting his words from former occasions, "It saves the state a heavy bill for electricity, and the executioner's fee."

"He might have talked," Brown said. And suddenly, looking at the open curtains, hearing the loud voices of newspapermen, "Will you give me a few minutes, Ramsey?"

Ramsey said: "Post mortems are for the doctors, Brown. Why not read about it in the papers. You see, occasionally the police department does good work and quick work."

"Yes, Ramsey, you did quick work."

"And good work!" Ramsey snapped. "The case is finished."

"Is it? Well, maybe. But I'd like to hear just how you killed him."

BROWN did hear, but that was a few hours later in Mortimer Doran's home. "I'll tell you." Ramsey addressed himself to all three of us, but his eyes brightened, fairly snapped as they kept almost steadily on Brown. "I'm not strong for just shooting lads to death, but this man had committed four previous murders and had two people dead there in the house when we reached it. A couple of radio cars had gotten there ahead of me, had found the bodies and were searching the house when I popped in. Reardon drove me up. Just the dead girl before the counter and the dead collector, Myer, behind it. No sign of the killer."

"Myer was a wealthy man, wasn't he?" Brown cut in suddenly.

"Never mind that," Mortimer Doran said. "You want to hear how he died."

"Oh, Myer was wealthy enough," said Ramsey, "and a little slippery too, I think. I won't say he was a fence, because that wasn't true. But he wasn't above slipping in rare jewels or even a work of art if it put money in his pocket and took it out of the government's. But he's dead now, and we'll have his record quick enough, just to clear up odds and ends."

"About Swartz' death?" Brown said.

"About his death!" Ramsey's thick lips parted. It wasn't often that he smiled. "Well, we had finished searching the house and were back in the death room. Reardon was well across the room when the killer suddenly appeared. We heard him stumble, cry out as if in terror from some place behind that counter. The little gate—the swing one almost in the center of the counter, dashed open and there he was. Those eyes, under his slouch hat, shifting like a trapped animal's.

"He was kneeling, crouched almost over the dead body of the girl. His hooked left arm was across his chest, a gun in his right hand. Reardon jumped forward, his night stick raised, but I don't think he'd have been in time." Ramsey's shoulders shrugged. "There was our murderer. Dead or alive—and preferably dead, in place of me. You're not the only man who can shoot straight, Brown. I let him have it. One in the chest, one straight between the eyes. And—well, he died."

Brown said: "And how did you account for his being there, after searching the place?"

"Hell! We found that out all right. A small closet behind the counter. A sort of trick door you wouldn't notice at first. None of this 'hidden door' you read about, if that's what you're thinking. Just a door that we'd've found later, of course."

"And his reason for staying there like that?"

"Madmen don't reason." Ramsey grinned. "And madmen don't have motives. I guess a psycho-artist, or some such kind of a bird can explain that to you. But there he knelt, with the hooked arm. A plain-thinking cop, like me, would say he came back or stayed hidden there to mutilate the girl's body just as he did the others."

"He didn't fire at you?"

"No, he didn't get a chance." Ramsey nodded. "He seemed sort of surprised to see us." Ramsey finished his drink, stood up. "It's over. The press will give the public what it wants, and we'll rest easy again for a while."

"There isn't a whole lot of honor in shooting a madman who didn't get a chance to fire," Vee said.

"No." Ramsey nodded, grinned. "There isn't much honor. But there is a deal of protection for people—certain people, Vee Brown who don't understand your desire for personal glory. Queer people who have peculiar ideas about getting their throats clawed open and their dead bodies cut up fancy-like."

Brown too was on his feet. "I suppose, Ramsey, you did your duty as you saw it."

Ramsey moved toward the door. "The case is over anyway."

"There are the punctures in his arm," Brown said, as if he might have agreed with Ramsey but didn't want to. "They'll have to be explained."

Ramsey smiled. "He might learn to do it himself with his teeth or somehow. These hop-heads are clever."

"Or someone injected the dose for him."

"Sure. Sure!" Ramsey agreed good-humoredly. "There's odds and ends to clear up, just routine work. We wanted Swartz and we got Swartz. You think up the questions, Brown, and I'll get some rooky down at headquarters to give you the answers. Night!"

Mortimer Doran looked at Vee, said: "The case is closed, Vee. Closed anyway until we have something more to go on than such theories." And with a smile, "Or anti-Ramsey propaganda. He's got to beat you occasionally, you know."

"It's damned hard not to." A stretch, a yawn, a grin at Brown—and Ramsey was gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Why A Gun?

THAT night before we retired, I said, "Vee why are you so sure that there is more to this than the simple killing, the lust for blood?"

"This last murder," he said, "you've got to admit, was different from the others. For the first time we found a shooting, and for the first time we found a planned murder. For I can't believe that our murderer entered that house simply by accident. No. I think he carefully picked his man this once."

"Even so. Arthur Myer was probably known to keep valuable gems in his house. Maybe our Clawed Killer decided to profit by his crimes."

"Mix business with pleasure, eh? Perhaps you're right. But he should have thought of it before. Besides, what made him hide in the closet and come out when the police were there? He must have had plenty of time to escape after killing the girl as she telephoned, and he must have heard her telephoning. For the first time he killed with a gun. Why a gun, when his hooked death was handier?"

"He killed her because she recognized him, was about to divulge his identity to the police as the Clawed Killer. And he only had time to shoot before she could talk."

Brown laughed. "Divulge his identity! Why, in every other death he had taken pains to make that identity known. And now, with his picture on all the front pages of the daily papers, he had nothing to hide."

"Then why do you think he shot, if not to silence her."

"But he did shoot to silence her, he did shoot to conceal his identity. Why? Simply because the man who killed the girl was not Richard Swartz, was not the man whose picture is known to millions tonight. And the girl recognized him, recognized the real killer."

"Oh, come, Vee! You are determined to explode Ramsey's facts with your theories. Besides, before tonight you were convinced that there was a motive back of the whole business. So, what took place at that house really followed your theory, not preceded it."

"Quite correct." He nodded. "You see, I have felt certain that this Richard Swartz whom so many witnesses recognized after each murder could not be the real killer. Why? Because, as I have harped on several times, Richard Swartz had lost his left arm. Every witness noticed that, even saw the hooked left arm. Do you understand? Do you see now why I examined so carefully the gash in each dead throat? It was always made from behind, Dean, and always over the victim's right shoulder. There! Stand so, and I'll show you."

FIRST, he took the position of the victim and made me lift my right hand over his right shoulder to show me how easy it was done. Then he made me do the same thing with my left arm.

"Possible, of course." He nodded. "But you see the peculiar curve it would be necessary for the murderer to make, using a false left arm, to cause the hook on the end to enter the jugular vein in the way that it did. It would be very awkward, very unsatisfactory, and almost impossible to get the force behind the pull that could be obtained with the right arm. No. I had thoughts before. Tonight my thoughts have proved correct. The hook on the end of Richard Swartz' false arm was curved inward, and the clean sudden stab in each victim's neck was made with a straight backward jerk. Our murderer, then, had the hook on the end of his right arm in place of his right hand. Not on the end of his left arm."

"Won't the medical examiner see that?"

"He'll see how the blow was struck, recognize how the hook was pulled into the throat and no doubt attach little importance to the position of the murderer when he made the kill. At least, not now, he won't. Richard Swartz was the wanted murderer. Richard Swartz was recognized by many witnesses as the Clawed Killer. Richard Swartz' picture has appeared in every paper as the Clawed Killer, and Richard Swartz has been shot to death by the law. Could a case be more complete to the satisfaction of the public and, Dean, to the satisfaction of the man who planned these four diabolical, unrelated murders for the single purpose of committing the fifth without attracting too much official attention to it?"

"Good God!" I cut in. "You don't think he hired Richard Swartz to help commit these murders, then planned his death at the end."

Brown's shoulders shrugged. "No, I don't think he hired him to help commit these murders. But I do think he planned his death at the end. Undoubtedly Richard Swartz, alive, could talk and would talk."

"Why didn't he talk before? Why leave himself open to be blamed for these murders?"

"I can only guess, of course. But my

guess is—that Richard Swartz knew nothing of these murders, was kept in ignorance of them. How, I don't know. But the thing was well planned, fiendishly planned, and would be finally written off the books as the work of a drug-crazed madman."

"But there was too much luck attached to it," I objected. "How could this killer be sure that Richard Swartz would be shot by the police? That was simply luck."

"Maybe it was." Vee's eyes half closed. "And maybe, again, the killer was sure that he would die. My guess is, Dean, that Richard Swartz, crazed and only half conscious with dope, was hurled from that closet into the very arms of the police. The dead bodies on the floor, the hook upon his arm, the wildness in his eyes as he saw the blood—felt it, perhaps —all had its effect on him and its effect on Ramsey. Maybe I would have shot him myself."

"But he might not have been killed, and then—why, all these murders would have been useless."

"I don't know how it would have worked out if Ramsey had not shot him. But you can be sure, Dean—after going so far and planning so well, Swartz was doomed to die at the end. There is no use in guessing how."

"Yet you may be entirely wrong, and Swartz is the murderer after all. That's so, isn't it, Vee?"

His head nodded. "Yes, that is so. I'll admit that my ideas are far more fiendish than those of a simple mad killer."

"They are!" I told him, and meant it. "It is unbelievable that a man who wants to kill one man goes deliberately out and slaughters four—five, counting the woman secretary. Five innocent people to gain his end!"

"That is true," Vee agreed. "Yet our criminal records show hundreds of unbelievably brutal murders, each year. You must remember, Dean, that the same punishment is meted out to the man who kills five times as to the man who kills but once. Unfortunately, murderers — like national heroes—have but one life to give for their country. But, enough! The morning will show who profits by this crime and if my theories are correct we will have our motive, and perhaps the name and address of our criminal."

THE next day we did have our motive —that is, the names of those who profitted by the crime. Vee Brown went over the will with Arthur Myer's lawyer. He was not overpleased with the way things had broken.

He told me: "It's as complicated as if this were simply the first murder, rather than the last of a long line of them. Damn it, Dean, this murderer is a shrewd man!"

"You have a motive then, a suspect?"

"I have four suspects, and perhaps more. Listen to this!" He ran off names on his fingers. "The girl who was found dead at the house is mentioned in the will for one hundred thousand dollars. The clerk who took care of things for Arthur Myer, for another hundred thousand. There are even various gifts to hospitals, and one to a church he was never inside of in his life. Myer proved much more charitable in death than he did in life. It would seem that he thought of going to heaven on a pass. But the bulk of his estate goes to a nephew in Maryland. The lawyer was not sure of the amount; indeed, had no idea of it. But he does know that it is far in excess of a million dollars and could very easily be ten million dollars. They'll be opening his different safety-deposit boxes in no time now.

"So we have the nephew, Gordon Fuller, in a little town in Maryland, who profits considerably. We have Andrew

Shaffer, the clerk and assistant who would find one hundred thousand dollars an undreamed of sum; and the dead girl, who was quite evidently more than a secretary and housekeeper."

"But the girl is dead. That helps, Vee."

He shook his head. "It rather complicates things, at least, for the moment. You see, now, the money will go to her estate. It is my belief that the girl came there and was killed by accident, but it is quite possible that someone, a beneficiary under the girl's will, might have planned to kill both of them. Far-fetched, of course. But then, the whole thing is rather far-fetched and brings only a laugh from Ramsey and a pat on the back and soft, kindly words from Mortimer Doran. I tell you, Dean, I'm getting no cooperation now that a motive is established beyond a doubt."

I said: "It may be just luck, Vee, that motives weren't discovered in previous killings, and that Ramsey is right."

"And that Richard Swartz simply wandered into that house! No. Someone must have brought Swartz there after the death of Myer, to be the victim of police stupidity and to be taken, of course, for the actual murderer. Don't you see that Myer must have been killed by someone he recognized, someone he would receive at a late hour, turn his back on and so get the—" He smiled rather grimly. "Well, get the hook. And don't you see that a one-armed man, that left arm being off to the elbow, would hardly be able to jab a needle in his other arm, let alone practice—yes, practice for a long time—to turn his arm and make a back-handed death swipe with it. It's full of too many coincidences, too many things that won't fit together."

"Maybe you're right." But I didn't believe that he was and expected him to be let down. "Ramsey can't be wrong all the time, and you can't be always right. There's just one thing, Vee. One thing that you didn't overlook, but didn't give enough attention to. The murderer had no way of being certain that Richard Swartz would be shot to death by the police. In fact, the odds were all against it."

Brown's mouth opened but closed without a word coming out. Then he swung and entered the music room. But no notes came from his piano, no soft humming. Just the pacing of his feet—back and forth, back and forth. I shook my head. Ramsey had his goat. There was no mistake about that. After all, his theories were—well, simply theories. There was nothing really tangible; nothing you could actually grasp, behind them. Anyway that's how I looked at them; as did Ramsey, and Doran too.

VEE was rather busy that afternoon. He came home and threw himself into a chair. "Brains. Brains!" He pounded at his head. "How much easier it is to know that a killer is lurking in a place, and all you have to do is to go in and gun him out. That dead girl made no will—at least, as far as I can find—and her money will go to two brothers and two sisters. I visited all of them, and—well, two of them have alibis and two haven't. But they don't look the part. Shocked with grief and, though they don't admit it, I believe they at least suspected that their sister's association with Arthur Myer was more than simply business."

"At his age!" I said. "He must have been over sixty."

"Greed and lust know no age." Brown nodded. "Then there's Myer's clerk and assistant, Andrew Shaffer. He's quite excited about the money and frankly pleased that the old skin-flint is dead. That is, he was pleased until I began to question him as to his whereabouts last night. And, damn it, Dean, his alibi is not good. Far from good. He spent his time wandering

about Central Park. Now—it was rather a cheerless night, misty, if not actually rainy. He might have killed Myer, of course. But he looks too old, too bewildered, but mostly too pleased about the murder. Oh, he isn't pleased now! Not when he learned I wasn't satisfied with the Clawed Killer. But the point is—that he felt at first that he had nothing to worry about."

"Vee," I said, "you're not actually questioning these people in connection with the murder. Not officially, after the morning papers say the case is closed, and Mortimer Doran doesn't want to—"

"Officially or unofficially, I'm questioning them—yes. I am paid to see that justice is done. I don't believe that it has been done. I—Ah, That telegram is for me?" This last as he saw the thick envelope on the table, that I had forgotten to give him.

He read the telegram, tossed it over to me and cursed softly. I read it too. It was from the chief of police of Riverhead, Maryland, and concerned the nephew, Gordon Fuller.

> GORDON FULLER LIVING HERE THREE YEARS STOP HAS TWO GOOD ARMS STOP DYING INCURABLE DISEASE STOP IN BED MOSTLY FOR LAST TWO MONTHS STOP WIFE WITH HIM DAY AND NIGHT STOP NO WITNESSES BUT WIFE AND DOCTORS ASSURANCE THAT HE COULD NOT HAVE MADE THE TRIP NORTH STOP UNFRIENDLY WITH UNCLE ARTHUR MYER STOP CALL ON ME WITHOUT HESITATION FURTHER INFORMATION.
>
> MATHEW DILLON
> CHIEF POLICE

"Well," I said, "that lets him out."

Brown shook his head. "Many murders have been committed by people who have made the supreme effort, left a sick bed and returned unnoticed. Of course his wife would have to be in with him."

"But," I objected, "if your theory about the other murders is correct, he would have had to leave his bed for seven weeks, or those times in between. Then the effort of the thing. It's impossible."

"Nothing is impossible in crime. I'll admit it looks bad, and I certainly favored him for the murders—at least, the final one. He had the most to gain—millions. And he knew about the money. Arthur Myer's lawyer told me that Myer often spoke of changing his will but never got around to it. The Fullers were very poor and could starve to death for all Myer cared. But he never did change that will. This lawyer thought he was afraid to change it. It seemed, Myer practically robbed his own sister—legally, of course—and each time he went to change that will his nerve—not his conscience, for he didn't have any—failed him. You can see that when he came to die he was afraid. His will showed it. Hospitals, churches, institutions. Oh, he threatened to write a new will often enough and I believe the young woman who was killed was egging him on. The Fullers were—" He stopped suddenly. "Hell, Dean, we'll fly down and have a talk with the Fullers!"

"Can't you get enough information over the phone and—"

"No. Reporters have been nosing around. They spotted me. Maybe I talked a bit too much. It's a fault of many of us. But Ramsey has been shooting his mouth off about my views and started things that way. No. Mortimer Doran is getting hot under the collar, has been looking for me—I think, to put on the dampers. We'll skip out on him, and besides, I want to see Fuller's doctor and look his wife straight in the eyes."

"But how could she—"

"How—how—how! What difference does it make? She'll be worth millions now, if her husband dies."

JUST before we left for Riverhead, Maryland, Mortimer Doran telephoned. I looked at Vee, saw his head shake, and lied.

The district attorney was a bit hot. "Well—you find him," he said. "You tell him to lay off this Arthur Myer killing. The police are satisfied, I'm satisfied, and the public's satisfied. This dislike of Ramsey is almost a fetish with Brown. Get hold of him and tell him I want to see him at once. And he's to drop everything."

"But I don't know where he is and—"

"Hell! Find him. He's officially off this case. Understand! Officially off it. Things are buzzing already. A couple of reporters have— But tell him—just tell him."

The phone banged up.

"Vee," I started, "it's Doran, and—"

"I work for Mortimer Doran," Brown cut in quickly, "and a good detective obeys orders from his superior. That is, if he receives those orders. But a good friend can have a bad memory. You might very easily forget to tell me anything I don't wish to hear. At least, until I return from Maryland. So—we'll get going."

I just looked at him. He was like a child sometimes, so serious about such nonsense. He knew without my telling him, yet such subterfuge satisfied his sense of right. I didn't like it but I let it go at that. And we did fly to Maryland.

CHAPTER FIVE

Slow Death in the South

MRS. FULLER was young, beautiful, in a worn, tired way. She met us at the door of their small cottage on the outskirts of the town, uncertain but not timid or afraid.

She said: "You're lawyers from New York, aren't you? The chief of police has been here. Is there anything wrong about the estate? We're not cruel or heartless, but money means so much to us now. Gordon had such a fine position before the discovery that his stomach trouble was not simply indigestion, or even ulcers." She didn't exactly cry but she wiped at her eyes. "I wished Arthur Myer a horrible death but I didn't mean it, of course. I won't say I'm sorry he's dead. I—I just hope the money has come in time to help Gordon. We—he will get it quickly won't he?"

"I'm not familiar with the procedure," Brown told her. "But the will has to be probated. That takes time, but things may be arranged if someone doesn't contest it."

"Contest it!" She looked surprised. "But who will question the will? Why?"

"It's Mr. Myer's death," Vee told her. "You see, there's some doubt, some things to be cleared up."

"But it was that maniac, the Clawed Killer. We had read about him. You're—you're lawyers?"

"Not exactly. Just investigators. We want to ask you a few questions, Mrs. Fuller."

"Detectives?" There was just the question in her voice, no fear or alarm.

Then she talked, willingly enough, lowering her voice as she looked at the closed door there at the end of the room.

She had been to see Arthur Myer more than once. Pleaded with him for aid—an operation, even medical attention for his nephew. Accused him of robbing her husband's dead mother. He had changed his will then, made it read that his nephew would inherit only if he lived longer than Myer himself.

"I'll always remember Arthur Myer as he was then." She stood stiff and straight when she said that. " 'Go back to Gordon,' he told me. 'Go back and nurse him, and if you can keep him alive longer than I

can live—why, you'll be a rich widow some day.' Then he stood up and paced the room and told me he hadn't had a sick day in his life and asked me how Gordon was. I said things, of course, many things I shouldn't have said. But I don't know that I am sorry for it, even though he's dead."

THEN we saw Gordon Fuller. He was slightly flushed, feverish. The eyes that snapped at us were bright, gleaming. He called irritably to the woman when she opened the door.

"Damn it to hell! Ann, what's the matter with you? I want nurses, a good doctor—not that old crab, Robinson. We're rich now. Hell! The old miser is dead. Don't tell me! We can borrow plenty." He saw us and stopped. Then, "Lawyers, eh? Shysters. Well, I'll pay an even ten percent for spot cash. Come on! Get your pound of flesh."

The man was neither a pleasant personality nor a pleasant sight. The terrible disease had wasted away his body. Suffering, perhaps, had dragged at his nerves. Like the clerk, he was frankly glad that Arthur Myer was dead. He laughed only once, and that was when Brown admitted that the police were not altogether satisfied that a maniac had killed his uncle.

"Well, what does it matter?" he said. "The point is—that the old thief and miser is dead. What do I care who killed him? I didn't, if that's what you came down to find out. I can't even get out of bed to see him safely buried. What has it got to do with me? Where the hell is Perry? All I want is the money." And suddenly jerking up in bed with an effort, "By God, they're not going to tie things up! They can't! They can't, I tell you. There's a chance for me yet—a chance, with money." And to his wife, "Damn it! Ann, bring me a blanket, close that window. By God! You've kept me alive in hope. Now you want to freeze me to death."

The woman got the blanket, put it around his shoulders, looked at the open window, said: "Doctor Robinson said to give you plenty of air. It's really very warm here."

"To hell with Robinson. I'll have no hick quack from now on, only the best. I suppose he'll be sending in a bill now, waiting for something like this."

"Gordon"—the young wife leaned forward and placed fingers against his lips— "Doctor Robinson has been so kind. He never expected, never even hoped to be paid. You shouldn't talk—"

Her head jarred back as the sick man's hand shot out and knuckles slapped against her mouth. I stepped forward.

"Please!" She took my arm. "He doesn't mean it; it's the pain. He—"

"Don't mean it!" The man on the bed dropped back on the pillows. "I mean it, now. Robinson will get his money. And you, my girl, well—you won't just sit around waiting for me to die. If there's money, you'll jump to earn it. I want the finest surgeons, the best doctors. Where the hell is Perry? By God! I— I—"

After that a fit of coughing, and Brown and I left the room. But we could still hear him complaining and mumbling as she brought him something to drink.

WE drove back to town and saw Doctor Robinson. One of the few remaining old-time, family doctors. He listened to Brown patiently and answered him very seriously.

"He might have left his bed, of course, and he might have gone to New York. I wouldn't say no to it, for there are too many things bordering on the miraculous inside that wonderful machine God has given us. He's been up and down for the past year and a half—longer down than up each time. I'm not a surgeon, and

it's possible the biggest man in New York might save him, if only for a few years. But even he couldn't tell until he found out just what was inside of him. It's a hundred to one he'd die on the table."

"I wonder," said Brown, "how his wife stands him."

"He's a sick man, but the pain isn't that bad—not as bad as he treats her. I don't like to talk about him, but he's not a man you'd admire. I know how he feels about me, hates what he calls my charity. Hates it and fears he'll lose it! I've heard him abusing that little woman and damning me up and down that I treat him free for the experiments I practice on him." He shook his head. "As if I didn't see too much—far too much of that dread disease and know the little I can do. Just relieve the pain! But he whines and is ingratiating to me. At least, he was until he got word of his uncle's death and the telegrams from the lawyers Now he's talking of my 'damn bill' and of big expensive city doctors. No, I don't know how his wife stands it either." And after a pause, "But I know why."

"Money, eh?" Brown nodded. "The hope of money."

"No. She took me aside after his first bad attack. He was talking about his wealthy relative—for my benefit, I guess. And she told me there wouldn't be any money; that some day, after he—this Gordon—was gone, she'd work to pay me. You're a stranger and it would be hard for you to understand. It's not money."

"What then?" Brown watched him.

"She loves him." The old doctor nodded. "Yes, she loves him."

"She told you that?" Brown pulled at his chin.

"She didn't need to tell me that. After thirty-eight years, I know those things. They aren't strange to me any more. There's far too many of them. Women who just stick to their men."

"He has some money though, Doctor. They live, you know."

"Yes. She does manage to get money for medicine, soups, foods for him. But it's little enough. An aunt of hers, I believe."

"I see," said Brown. "And a man called Perry, Doctor. Do you know him? Lawyer—or just what?"

"Perry—Perry. Yes, yes!" The doctor seemed to think. "Crawford—Perry Crawford! About the last of Gordon Fuller's friends. Best man at his wedding, I believe. Comes from up north—New York. Ain't well-to-do, though."

WE had lunch at the town's single hotel after we left the doctor.

"We don't seem to get far," Vee told me. "And we've got to get far fast, or Doran will drag me off the case. It's—well, insubordination, I suppose. Still, Doran can't afford to lose me and he hasn't directly drawn me from the case. Despite the careful, even 'miraculous' caution of the good Doctor Robinson, Gordon Fuller couldn't have gone to New York and hacked up all those men. But there's his wife. Oh, don't shake your head! In the long run, if she plays her cards well, she profits most by Arthur Myer's death. That would be only one motive, the desire to be a wealthy young widow; the other, her love for her husband."

"But she couldn't have left town, Vee. The chief of police says that. She's been seen almost every day, and—"

"Hell, man!" he snapped. "I'm not suggesting that she did the job personally. Hired someone!"

"But why go to all that trouble—the four or five other deaths? If her uncle was killed and she had her alibi, wasn't that enough?"

"No, it wasn't. She didn't want suspicion to center on her. Look at the months, even years she had to brood over and hate Arthur Myer. We don't know her past life, past associates. She might be in a position to hire the right person —or persons."

"But suspicion did center on her. At least, you're down here."

"Yes. But she couldn't suspect that I'd notice the angle of the claw in each throat and not swallow the madman killer."

"But her face. Her whole attitude."

Vee shook his head. "We must close our eyes to faces and attitudes and see only death and motives for death. I— But we'll visit the Fullers again."

And this time we met Perry Crawford. We knew he was there the moment we entered the house. Gordon Fuller was talking in a loud voice.

"I tell you I want money. I want it now. I thought you would bring it with you! Damn it I'm through with charity."

"I'm sorry, Gordon—damned sorry— but there's too many things in the way. I managed to raise a thousand dollars. You know I haven't got—"

"A thousand dollars!" the sick man stormed. "Why, I'm a rich man. Worth millions."

"I know, I know! People will find it out soon enough and you'll get plenty of offers. I came down at once. Your uncle's lawyers are good, a big firm, and will—" He swung and faced us.

My first impression was the contrast between the two men. The dying one on the bed; the living, beside him. Perry Crawford was bursting with health, ruddy, strong. Mrs. Fuller introduced him.

IT was almost an hour before we went. Perry Crawford left with us. "He's like a child," the big giant told us. "God! It snaps at your heart to see him. He was as big and as strong as I, very much in love. I remember when he left on his honeymoon. Now— It cuts at a man, I tell you. Money! Little good it will do him. Yet, I daresay his credit is good to any amount right at this moment."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," Brown said easily. And when Perry Crawford looked suddenly at him. "You see, I'm down here looking for the murderer of Arthur Myer."

"Why—you're joking! Surely— The papers—everyone says—why, the killer was shot to death by the police."

"Everyone but me!" Brown told him. "And I freely admit that my ideas are not taken seriously by my associates, including Dean here." And suddenly, "How long and how well have you known Mrs. Fuller?"

"Well—" Perry Crawford seemed to think. "I guess I met her first through Gordon. We went to college together, you know. Buddies for years."

"And her people?"

"Her people? Her parents are dead, I believe."

"But she has some relatives—an aunt."

"Yes. A Miss Duane."

"Who sends her money?"

"Really, I don't know about that."

After a while Vee said as we went up the main street: "We're going to the flying field. And you, Mr. Crawford?"

"I am going to call up Arthur Myer's lawyers. I'm going to arrange to get money for Gordon, and for a plane to fly him up to New York where Doctor Adolph Hurst can operate on him at once."

"You think you can do that, eh?"

Perry Crawford moved big shoulders. "It's business," he said. "These lawyers should wish to keep such a valuable client. He's got a good chance to live."

Vee nodded. "Doctor Robinson said it

is a hundred to one he'd die on the operating table."

Perry Crawford shook his head as he climbed from the car. "Arthur Myer's lawyers don't know that, and besides, there is always the estate."

"Yes," said Brown. "Who would inherit?"

Crawford looked at him in surprise.

"Why—his wife, of course. At least, I should think so."

"She should. She's suffered enough."

"In a way, yes. She's a fine woman. But then, when she married him Gordon had great promise." And with a frown, "I hope your investigation and suspicions won't hamper things for him."

"Not if you work fast." Brown nodded. And Crawford was gone and we were driving out toward the little airport where our chartered plane was waiting.

"Vee," I said, "why tell Gordon Fuller, his wife, the doctor, even Perry Crawford your suspicions? What is the point?"

"I don't know. I don't know." He held his head in both hands while I drove the hired car. "I've told everyone in the slightest way connected with Arthur Myer my suspicions. I told the same thing to Andrew Shaffer, the clerk; and several of the dead girl's relatives. I'm trying to stir up action, some sort of action. You see, if we actually knew the name of this murderer we'd have hard work getting a conviction. The Clawed Killer captured the imagination of the people, would satisfy any jury. Motive or no motive, we'd be laughed out of court."

"Vee, you don't know it wasn't the Clawed Killer. Everything points to him."

"I know that. Why keep reminding me that I—I—Hello!" He looked searchingly after a car that sped by us toward Riverhead. "Detective Young and Sergeant Leary were in that car. Ramsey's pet workers! Could Mortimer Doran have sent them down to call me off the case? Ramsey could easily suspect where I went and as easily verify that suspicion."

ON THE way back in the plane Vee was grimly silent. Yet, I should not have had any sympathy for him. Certainly he had dug up all these motives, odd suspicions, with the single purpose of confounding Ramsey.

There was word for Vee when we reached our apartment. It was from Mortimer Doran, and strictly business. Word that could not be ignored.

> Do nothing. Say nothing. See or talk to no one until you have spoken with me. Come at once to my house.

Brown looked at the message a long time, then swung on me. "Maybe you think I can't take it," he said suddenly. "Maybe it's best this way. I'll have a good excuse for quitting. Doran will see to that."

And in the taxi as we sped straight to Mortimer Doran's, "I was so sure, Dean, so positive, that there was a real motive behind that series of crimes. Now—"

"You're sure there isn't." I thought that I picked up his unfinished words. "You just tell Doran, Vee, that you wanted to be absolutely certain, and perhaps made a little too much ballyhoo in the way you went about it."

"Since when did you have to tell me what—" He started to flare up, then stopped. "Good old Dean, you stuck right to me, knowing the truth. I'm simply a gunman, a man that hunts down his prey and shoots him to death. No. If I tell Mortimer Doran anything at all I'll tell him I'm a fool. Imagine it, though. Ramsey being right, actually beating me to the kill. And the look in his eyes, Dean. Oh, I won't admit I was wrong! Just that a criminal popped up who's too clever. Why—if I found the man, who would believe me? The police simply wanted a victim.

They found one that fitted in Richard Swartz."

"Oh, come, Vee! Go all the way with it now. A man who can admit he's wrong is— But here's Doran's now."

"I'd much rather be a man who can prove he's right," Brown whispered.

CHAPTER SIX

The Third Bullet

I MUST admit that I sucked in a sudden breath when I entered the district attorney's library. The gathering was impressive. Mortimer Doran behind the flat desk; the commissioner of police himself sitting stiff and straight on the edge of a chair; Ramsey leaning against the mantel chewing on the end of a match. Yes, it looked more like a court martial than a simple rebuke and a warning.

Mortimer Doran was not in the habit of jumping on one of his own staff in the presence of the police commissioner. Now the thing must be serious. Brown must have trod on toes that supported a valuable, important and influential body. But, who? Gordon Fuller? Maybe. It would not be hard to believe that, if his lawyers had objected to Brown's activities, Gordon Fuller was about to receive a vast sum of money. Money not only talks, but very often—too often, for the good of the common citizens—screams its indignation.

Vee Brown straightened his slim body, stuck up his chin, grinned somewhat like a child caught in the jam jar, and said: "Well—come on! Let me have it—all of it."

Mortimer Doran was on his feet, around the desk. In bewildered uncertainty I saw his arm circle Vee's shoulders, turn him toward the commissioner. He said: "Detective Vee Brown, Commissioner. There'll be something done now."

"Yes, yes. I hope so." The commissioner looked at Ramsey, took Brown's hand, shook it vigorously. "I know Vee Brown, of course. Everybody does." The political smile spread slowly over that expansive face, a smile that was generally reserved for the great and the mighty. "We in our department and you in yours are like two units of a great army, fighting separately, in good natured rivalry, but for a common cause. Always willing, ready, anxious even, to share our knowledge with each other." And suddenly, the politics disappearing and his face changing as if you had rubbed the smile off with a cloth, "You know who killed this Arthur Myer and the others, Mr. Brown." That last, half a question and half a statement of a fact. I can't explain it, but there was something in his voice of both.

Brown licked at his lips, studied those faces before he spoke—especially the sour unfriendly look on Ramsey's face. Then, just as I—not fully understanding the situation, he said: "Why, I thought that Inspector Ramsey had that all figured out."

"Come, come, now, Brown!" The commissioner's laugh was loud but slightly cracked. "We mustn't mind Ramsey's overeagerness to clean up a rather dirty mess. Let us have the facts."

"Just what has happened?" said Brown, that shrewd mind of his working now that he appeared suddenly to be on top and Ramsey underneath.

Mortimer Doran explained the situation. "You see, Vee"—that huge paw patted Brown's shoulder—"Ramsey fired two shots—two shots into the Clawed Killer. But he didn't kill him."

"No?" Brown's eyes widened, as did mine. "He's— Why, he was dead enough."

"Yes, he was quite dead," Mortimer Doran agreed. "But Doctor Fitzgerald found three bullets in the man, all the

same caliber, all police regulation. The boys down at the ballistics bureau got on the job, and that third bullet that entered the side of Richard Swartz' head was not fired from Inspector Ramsey's gun."

"Ah!" Brown's lips smacked, he turned to me. His black eyes widened; his words were eager, boyish. "You see, Dean. You see, now, that it wasn't luck that Ramsey shot Richard Swartz to death. Someone else, the real murderer—the real Clawed Killer—was there in that room too. It was he who thrust the drug-crazed man into that room. It was he who fired when Ramsey fired. It was he who made certain of the man's death—who had to make certain of that death—whose shrewd plans did not permit of any luck. By God! That bothered me, bothered me a lot."

"But there was no way to tell there was another shot. And where did it come from?" Ramsey choked out the words as Brown looked at him.

MORTIMER DORAN looked at Ramsey. "Oh! Come, come. We know that now." And turning to Brown, "Arthur Myer had a house next door. He bought it under his secretary's name, the dead girl. *H-m!*" he smiled. "The papers, I suppose, would call it a love nest. But the point is—there was a concealed door in the back of the closet; a door to the other house."

"Just as I thought. Just as I told you, Dean." Brown's head bobbed up and down. "The murderer used that after he made his kill. He waited there with the one-armed Richard Swartz, and when the police were there—hurled him out into the room. He shot, of course, as Ramsey shot. Shot because"—Vee grinned—"he was hardly certain of Ramsey's marksmanship."

"But," I objected, "he'd know that the police would discover the bullet and—"

"And only complicate things, if it actually was discovered."

"Doctor Fitzgerald would have found it, as he did find it," the commissioner horned in.

"Would he? And if he did, would there be any significance attached to it? I'm not criticising, Commissioner. But you know and I know that people who have apparently been shot to death actually died in some other way, and the method of death was only discovered through accident. Yes, I can quote cases. There was the Bromberg suicide, put down as a gun shot, and only through the merest chance found to be suicide by poison."

"But my dear Brown"— the commissioner puffed a bit—"we knew that was suicide. There was really no use to—"

"There was no use to be so careful in this case either, from the murderer's point of view. Remember—Ramsey shot the man apparently to death. Three bullets or two bullets—what difference would it make? You had the killer, were certain of Richard Swartz. No, I spoke to Doctor Fitzgerald, cautioned him to examine that body carefully—for anything. And even though we knew the man was killed by Ramsey, to put the boys from the ballistics bureau to work."

"So you did. So he said." The commissioner still kept his good humor. "Now the important point, Brown. The murderer! You see, we thought the case was over."

"I'm afraid," said Brown, "it's just beginning. I hope what you have discovered is not public."

"Do you think we're fools?" The commissioner bristled slightly for the first time. "Ramsey has an idea."

"Really?" Brown's eyebrows went up, his lips twisted humorously. Ramsey's look could have killed on the spot.

"Yes"—Ramsey had hard work getting the words out—"I've been covering every

angle since this unforeseen development broke." He emphasized 'unforeseen' while Vee's grin broadened. "Take Andrew Shaffer, the clerk. He's been stealing small articles of jewelry from Arthur Myer. There's no doubt about it. I beat the—" He hesitated, and then, "Well, I got it out of him."

"I see," said Vee, "and you arrested him. Did you find out where he was last night?"

"He's scared and went wild on his story." Ramsey nodded. "Some mysterious telephone call brought him into the park. He said it was from the fence who bought the stuff, and the fence denied it. Then he shut up and hollered for a lawyer. But listen to this! That girl went to Myer's house to go over some accounts last night."

"So that's what they call it now." Brown was having his innings with Ramsey, and Ramsey didn't like it.

"That's what it was, and that's what would have betrayed Shaffer. That's why he came back and killed the girl. She would have discovered him too."

"And that," said Vee, "is why he killed the four or five others."

"Hell!" said Ramsey, "I don't take much stock in the two things being so closely mixed up together. I think Shaffer just got a break on the Clawed Killer being around, found him or knew him, or—"

"Or it was his long-lost son." Brown rode Ramsey good.

"Well"—Ramsey was fairly boiling over—"what do we care, if we get the murderer? I've gotten word from Maryland. Young and Leary called on long distance. Nothing doing there. A lad called Crawford is getting a big three-motored plane ready to fly Gordon Fuller to the city for an operation."

So Gordon Fuller raised the money. Myer's lawyers?"

"I don't know about the money. But I know Fuller couldn't have committed the murder and I know Shaffer's the man. Guilt is written all over him."

"You think he's the Clawed Killer, eh?"

"I'm not interested in the Clawed Killer now—he's dead. I'm looking for the murderer of Arthur Myer and the murdered Clawed Killer."

"The Clawed Killer and the murderer of Arthur Myer are one and the same person." Brown was emphatic now, and what was more he had the attention of Mortimer Doran—serious attention. "You'll find the Clawed Killer is still alive and will be the one to profit by the death of Arthur Myer."

"But," said the commissioner of police, "there is no one connected in the smallest degree with Arthur Myer who has but one arm."

"I am not looking for a one-armed man now."

The commissioner smiled sort of indulgently. Ramsey caught that smile and took on a different attitude—more assured.

"The Clawed Killer was recognized by a dozen people right after the murders. Anyone could have made the same mistake I made, under the circumstances—if it was entirely a mistake. But I correct my mistakes. I'm willing to admit that I'm not always right."

Brown smiled goodnaturedly and got in his final crack. "I'm willing to admit that you're not always wrong."

BROWN was humming softly when we left Doran's. "It's the little things that change life. I went to Doran's in disgrace, as I thought. Then a tiny bit of lead in a dead man lifted me from the depths to the heights. People like a winner, Dean. And they like him to be a winner all the time. Shaffer, no less."

"Listen, Vee! Don't you drop the

Shaffer angle too quickly. He not only profits through the will, but he hides his dishonest acts. As for the one-armed killer! Well—I think you're going to find plenty of coincidences in that."

"Perhaps. Perhaps!" Vee was in one of his best moods. "But we have a one-armed man, moody, morose, discontented and harmless. Suddenly he breaks out as a killer. Possible, that. Just a mad killer! But he also twists that arm into a most unnatural position to make each kill, jabs himself in the good arm with a needle, though he had no method of doing it. Then sits around almost publicly after each crime; each crime that he has committed so stealthily, so quietly and so surely."

"But to bring him into this—this killing with a purpose behind it—only confuses matters," I said. "I think the Clawed Killer is dead."

"And I think he is alive. Oh! I admit that it is confusing to everyone but the Clawed Killer himself. To him it is crystal clear."

"We must look, then, for another one-armed man, or a one-armed woman?" I was a bit sarcastic myself. "This aunt of Mrs. Fuller might be the one."

"She might." Brown nodded. "I'll certainly see this aunt."

VEE Brown spent the better part of the next day at the Tombs Prison, the New York Hospital, and other places of which he didn't tell me. But that afternoon he was full of talk, yet not answering the questions I put to him.

"The breaks are with us," he said. "The newspapers have not the slightest idea of the three bullets as yet. The gods have been kind, and those closest to the events have moved to New York. They operate on Gordon Fuller tonight. Mrs. Fuller is there in the hospital praying for the success of that operation, though I can't see why. I saw Fuller for a few minutes, and while he's considerably better in health, his temper has not improved. Yes, the trip in the plane did him good. The doctors were surprised at his vitality. They wanted to hold him for observation several days, but he's raised such hell, is in such a mood that they're going through with it at once. It was simply a question of telling him the truth. And they did, Dean. Some of these big men are brutally frank. But he took it without batting an eye. Doctor Robinson was against the operation at this time, but surgeons must live, you know."

"So Doctor Robinson came up too."

"Yes, he did—and paid his own way. Fuller's gratitude was in the form of a rather substantial check, and much abuse. And the final dismissal—that he was through with small-town quacks, and other such little pleasantries. But Robinson can take it. Maybe it was Mrs. Fuller, maybe it was just Robinson himself. But he paid his own way on the train and gave the big boys the benefit of his years on the case. Oh, they high-hatted him, raised their eyebrows in a bored manner. But they listened to every word he had to say. They didn't ignore him until after they had pumped him dry."

"He's the kind of a man who would return the check, tear it up."

"He's a bigger man even than that." Vee nodded. "That would only satisfy his personal pride and show in a rather spectacular manner his contempt of Fuller and his money. No. I was curious and got it out of him. He explained it simply enough. He said, 'Mr. Brown, years ago I would have torn it up, perhaps even have flung it in his face. It's a large check, ten times more than I would have charged him. I turned it over to our new hospital.' "

"About the aunt?" I asked. "You saw her?"

"I did. I did! A dear simple soul who is torn between the horror of the murder and the vengeance visited upon the wicked."

"Have you learned anything?"

"I learn something every day."

"Have you built up any case?"

"Ah!" Vee rubbed his hands. "I've built up several cases. The wife, of course, is the logical one if you take it simply as a mathematical problem and work from the death of Arthur Myer back to the motive that instigated that final murder."

"And Shaffer! Don't let Ramsey throw you, Vee, he may be right."

"Yes, of course. But Shaffer's story is so wild. A mysterious telephone call. His wandering in Central Park to meet an unknown man who would show him a way to make a great many—not a few, but a great many—honest dollars! And his emphasis was so strongly on the honest that I haven't the slightest doubt that it was dishonest dollars."

"You believe that story? Why, it's preposterous."

"Preposterous—improbable, even. But such an extraordinary and unbelievable alibi—especially by a suspected man shrewd enough to plan such a fiendish list of murders for the final purpose of killing one man, that I'm inclined to believe it—yes, swallow it, hook, line and—Central Park."

"But the wife! You think she loves her husband enough to—to cause so many deaths for one chance in a hundred of saving him?"

"We have only her sticking to him, standing his abuse for so many years, which we interpret as love. It might be simply greed, Dean. And one can take abuse, suffer poverty, when one looks ahead and plans for the future."

"She'd make a charming widow, and a rich one." I half thought aloud.

"So you thought of that too. Greed and love! A peculiar combination." He began to hum softly.

I knew then. I knew that if there was anything I was going to get out of him I'd have to get it quickly.

"This aunt! What of her?" I crashed in right in the middle of a note.

Black eyes narrowed, thin lips straightened, he looked at me sharply. "Damn it, Dean, I had the swing of it then! It—But the aunt! Our fine, virtuous Mrs. Fuller lied to us. Her aunt says she has never sent her a nickel. Indeed, it's quite the other way. Mrs. Fuller has been sending the aunt small sums from time to time, to keep her out of the poorhouse."

"No!" I sat up straight. "She didn't lie to us, Vee. We got that from Doctor Robinson."

Brown pulled at his chin. "Perhaps she didn't lie to us directly, but she did to me indirectly. Oh, I didn't put it to her as a question. I simply said to her at the hospital, 'It will be nice to have money and be able to return some of the kindness, the financial kindness, of your aunt.' She looked straight at me, Dean. Never even batted an eye. Then she said, 'Yes, that will be nice.' Laugh that one off!" He turned, and before I could get in another word passed into the music room.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Death Gun

THOUGHTS? Of course I had thoughts. But I couldn't get them to come together and form any sort of a mental picture. That is, any but a jumbled picture. Certainly I was inclined to agree with Ramsey. Shaffer had the motive; both his own protection and his own profit. Also, being the confidential assistant or clerk of Arthur Myer he had the opportunity. The Clawed Killer! Well,

I couldn't exactly fit that in. Somewhere Shaffer must have met the killer and—or— And that's where things blew up.

As for the wife! Ann Fuller lying about the money! That seemed easy enough to explain. No doubt she had a little income; had a dying husband and a helpless aunt on her hands and lied to the doctor to keep what little there was. One couldn't exactly blame her for that.

The music stopped and Vee came into the living room.

"How did it go, Vee?" I asked.

"Grand. Just grand. Music and crime; melody and murder. I think I know who murdered Arthur Myer. I can't be sure why. And I think I know who killed the other four."

"Who, Vee? Who?"

He threw back his head, spread his slender legs apart and stood flat-footed; looking at— well, at nothing, I guess.

"It's too weird; too fantastic, and counts on a love; a woman's love and devotion for a man that would be far greater than any devotion even Doctor Robinson has seen in his thirty-eight years of studying people."

"So it was the wife then, after all."

"After all—what?" Vee could be annoying when he was in such a humor. "But there! Dean, You mustn't ask me yet. I've got considerable work to do. And if I told you what is on my mind—why, you'd laugh me out of my own belief. It's too fantastic." He paused. "But it's the fantastic murderers that get away with it. Imagine killing four; even five perfectly innocent human beings just to get at one man!"

"I don't believe it and I can't imagine it," I told him bluntly.

"Consider it this way then," Vee mused. "You wouldn't be surprised at any one of those four being horribly killed; even the body being mutilated for a— well, say— a million dollars."

"No, of course not. Many horrible murders have been committed for far less; with axes, hammers, even by burning people to death. But just one murder."

"Good!" Vee's head bobbed up and down. "I've seen the lawyers again, and now they're convinced that Arthur Myer left at least five millions. So we have a simple mathematical problem. Five lives at a million dollars a life! Not a bad price. Not a bad price even if you consider the woman a part of the murder plan, though I look at Myer's secretary as merely an accident."

"But if Shaffer did it, she—"

And I got no further. Vee was gone. Just a jerk of his hat from the costumer in the hall and the slam of the door.

MORTIMER DORAN called twice on the phone, but his words were soft and his message to Vee anything but snapped orders. I remember smiling when I put the phone down the second time. Mortimer Doran had said—

"Have Vee give me a ring if he gets back. I'll be glad to know how he's coming along." Then his laugh; high, slightly relieved. Vee was in the running again. Everybody likes a winner. A winner! I wondered.

Vee called once from the hospital. He didn't know when he'd be back. He was just a bit jumpy.

"The damned doctors won't let me talk alone with Gordon Fuller. Mrs. Fuller guards him like an only child." And when I told him of Doran's call and asked him what he knew, he ran right on. "Oh! I've laid out a line, Dean. They're operating on Gordon Fuller tonight. But you know that. No—no more. You'll see me when I get there." And the phone crashed down in its cradle.

And that was that. I read the papers,

smoked, and was trying to figure things out when the phone rang again.

It was not a familiar voice, nor yet exactly a strange one. Vaguely, I felt I had heard it before. It was a man, and the request was for Vee Brown.

"He's not here. Can I take the message?"

There was a long moment of hesitation, then the voice again.

"This is Mr. Condon, isn't it? Of course; you were at Riverhead with Mr. Brown, and you're the man who wrote up so many of his cases for the *Globe.*"

"That's right," I said. "And your name?"

"Perry Crawford. I've got to get hold of Mr. Brown at once."

"I'm afraid," I said, "that's impossible."

"Then Inspector Ramsey. The thing's important. I had a talk with Gordon Fuller. God! He's my best friend. I'm in a hole. I had better call Ramsey."

"No, no. Don't do that." I fairly flung the words over the wire. And then feeling that my sudden vehemence demanded some explanation. "It's really Vee Brown's case." I tried to make my laugh light. "Sort of friendly rivalry between the two men. You understand!"

"I'm afraid I don't." There was a new stiffness in Crawford's voice. "This is murder, Mr. Condon, and I'm hardly interested in petty rivalries. I want someone in whom I may have implicit confidence and who will not jump at things too quickly."

"That's Brown." I was disturbed now. I had handled the thing badly; I did my best to correct the mistake. Damn Vee's boy-like habit of making mysterious even his whereabouts. "The police, of course, are responsible to their superiors and can not guarantee you any—well—well—" I stumbled for the word.

"Any assurance of even temporary silence. That's it?" And when I hastened to say that was it, "You see, I have important information. I would like to feel that I had confided it to someone in authority. Perhaps you could advise me."

"Well—I'll do my best to locate Brown."

"That won't do." A long moment of silence. "Look here, Mr. Condon, I'm at the New York Hospital. You come and see me at once. I'll wait just ten minutes for you to get here." And when I was about to say I'd do better in spending the time locating Vee, "Ten minutes! Then I'll take it to Inspector Ramsey."

"Take what?"

"The gun that killed Richard Swartz, the Clawed Killer."

That was that. I was on my feet before the phone clicked over the wire; had my hat and was out the door racing toward the automatic elevators. I was excited too. Things had broken. Vee's triumph over Ramsey was in my hands. By God! I'd get that gun from Perry Crawford if I had to stage a fight right in the reception room of the New York Hospital.

BUT I never reached the inside of the hospital. Perry Crawford met me before I entered the building, big, gloomy and deserted of visitors. He caught me on the steps, before I reached the front door.

"You're hardly a detective, Mr. Condon." His smile seemed rather sad. "I wouldn't have the gun with me, of course; in fact, I haven't got it at all. But I have been told where it is, and I have been told a rather horrible story." He seemed to shudder as he led me down the steps and out onto the street. "Time is imperative. The operation will be performed in just about an hour; we must make our discovery within that time. And

then you must accept the responsibility of postponing that operation."

"You— My God! Gordon Fuller didn't tell you where the gun is! He didn't—he couldn't have committed those murders!"

Soft blue eyes looked at me. A mouth opened to speak, closed, then opened again. I thought that he spoke different words than he had first intended to speak.

"I will break no confidence. I will tell you nothing. The thing is a nightmare to me. Perhaps— I hope we will find nothing there."

"Where?" I asked.

Again he looked at me, shook his head; said simply: "The subway will be shorter, I think."

We walked across town, took a Bronx express, left it well uptown. There was an all-night drug store on the corner. Perry Crawford hesitated, stopped, then turned me toward the drug store.

"We haven't a great deal of time. There is a servant at your—at Brown's apartment?"

"Yes. Wong," I told him. "Why?"

"Call him. Leave a message for Mr. Brown that he is to meet us in a half hour at the Hotel Botsford. That's nearest to the New York Hospital. We'll have to work fast." He pushed me toward the telephone booth, stood by the booth next to it. "I'll call the hospital and leave the same message for him there. Certainly he should show up at one of the places. It's very late."

"O. K.!" I went into the booth and called Wong. There had been no word from Vee. I left my message.

Then we walked down one block, up three, took a long block to the left through a vacant lot and by a deserted warehouse. From time to time Perry Crawford consulted a little memorandum book.

"I'm not familiar with this part of the city. I copied things down."

"What Gordon Fuller told you?"

He smiled at me, shook his head.

"You're quite a detective too, Mr. Condon. In your articles you are overmodest. But I'm not talking yet. It is possible I've brought you on a wild chase. If so, it is best that I have not taken up Mr. Brown's valuable time. He has taken me into his confidence. He tells me that tomorrow he will have solved the murder."

"Then he suspects who the murderer is?"

Again the shaking head.

"You are closest to him and would know better than I."

"But I don't know a thing."

"Perhaps he has confided in Ramsey, or the district attorney."

It was my turn to smile.

"You don't know Vee Brown. He confides in no one until things are ready to break; least of all, Ramsey." And then a bit proudly, "Sometimes he confides in me if there's danger of things going wrong."

"Indeed you're very fortunate, Mr. Condon. But this looks like the place. You wouldn't think one could be so isolated right in our great city."

AND it was isolated. A factory looked down upon a two-story frame house. A factory that had long since been abandoned overshadowed the house just as dilapidated and just as deserted.

"This is the place?" I asked. "You expect to find the gun here!"

"I was told it is here. I was given the minutest details."

We swung around to the side of the small house. Not a sound. Far distant a single street light gleamed dully; once the faint sound of a distant auto horn. Except for the factory's two smoke stacks

towering above us we might have been far off in the woods. Great weeds had grown up; thick bush, yet ten minutes before we had stepped from the subway.

Perry Crawford seemed uncertain. At length he located a door, pushed at it, held it a moment, turned to me.

"You have a gun?" he asked suddenly.

"Why— well, not with me." Maybe I stammered. "You didn't tell me there might be danger and I thought to meet you at the New York Hospital, not come to a place like—"

"No matter," he cut in. "It's just the weirdness of the place. No one could be here now." He shook his head, stepped back, motioned to me. "After all, Mr. Condon, I am not connected with the law." He ran a hand over his forehead. "I'm not afraid, but the thing nauseates me; grips me deep down in the stomach. After all, he was my friend; my best friend. But only a human whose body is racked with pain could conceive of such a plan."

"He did it then, and—it wasn't Mrs. Fuller."

"No." He motioned me forward. "That is why we must act quickly. It is a hundred to one that Gordon Fuller will die. His wife must not be in any way implicated in this."

"So it was Fuller." I jerked back my shoulders, stepped forward and entered that dark dreary building. Nothing but blackness! I had not even brought a flashlight. But Perry Crawford had, and its thin pencil of light played about the room. I saw a lantern, moved toward it; a box of matches already in my hand.

"I wouldn't do that," Crawford cautioned. "We don't want to attract attention; at least, yet. And light might show. That room there, with the boxes before it. I was told to go in there."

And in we went, moving the boxes, swinging open the heavy door. It swung closed with a dull thud, opened slightly, stayed so. It was a large room; evidently a store room in its day, and it still stored things. Huge boxes, heavy barrels, hundreds—perhaps thousands of old bags and sacks tossed promiscuously about. And the smells were still stored there too. Damp foul air; stiffling, hot, though the night was fairly cool; almost cold for that time of the year.

There was a chest of drawers against one wall. The light shone on the flat surface above those drawers. No dust there either, as if a cloth had been carefully wiped across it. On top of that chest of drawers a lantern stood.

"This," said Perry Crawford, "is the room all right. The words, then, were not the ravings of a man, but—" He struck a match, lit the lantern. It flickered, flashed, blazed up, smoked for a moment, and as he adjusted the wick I jerked back, then bent forward. Subconsciously I must have known the truth before I mentally adjusted each object that caused that single thought.

An old mattress, a heap of sacking, a heavy chain held in the wall by a huge rusty staple.

"Good God!" I put my thoughts into words. "A man has been held prisoner here, chained to that wall."

I CAME erect and looked about the room as if I expected someone to leap from behind those boxes, from back of those barrels, or even jump from the heap of musty sacks. And there was no wild imagination about such a thought. Certainly one would have little difficulty in hiding there.

"I can't do it; can't do it." Perry Crawford's voice held awe, as if he feared what he might find. "Beneath the mattress! Look for the gun!"

I bent down, lifted up a corner of the mattress. A black object, I thought, but

the light from the lantern was suddenly obscured by a shadow. Perry Crawford was bending over my shoulder hiding the light.

"Wait!"

I swung my head and looked straight into the eyes of Perry Crawford. Crawford? Well—yes, I thought it was Crawford. Those blue eyes flashed a vivid, sudden sort of green, as if another light came from back behind them, mingling with the blue and giving it a queer color. But I don't think it was that which made me cry out. It was the points of fire; steel-like sharpness that had taken place of the softness. Oh, the whole face, that had been so round, so soft, even jolly, was now— A cruel satisfaction was there! I felt that those eyes were simply lenses of powerful binoculars and for the moment I looked through them; far back inside the man, into his soul and found it rotten, creeping with—with—

Vee tells me it was after the blow was struck that I thought I saw those things, but I'll always believe that I saw them before the heavy bit of metal struck me. Yes, something did strike me. Just my single cry; the single flash of truth that I was facing a murderer, and blackness. Heavy, overpowering, clinging blackness.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hundred-to-One Shot

I DIDN'T come to slowly. I didn't have to figure out where I was or what had happened. It was just the opposite of everything I had read, everything I had ever experienced. I jarred fully conscious, with the full realization of just what had happened.

That heavy chain held both my wrists in steel bracelets, and that chain was fastened to the heavy rusty staple that was driven far into thick wood. Yes, I knew that before I opened my eyes. And I knew that when I opened my eyes I would face the murderer of Arthur Myer; the murderer who had struck me down—Perry Crawford.

And I did face the murderer, and I did slink back against the wooden wall just as another poor creature must have slunk there before me.

Blue eyes didn't glare now. No rottenness showed far back behind those eyes; no soul of evil was revealed to me. I simply faced a calm blue-eyed man, who smiled pleasantly at me. Perry Crawford spoke.

"Peculiar, isn't it, Condon? Murder is a fascinating thing. I wish that I could safely write a book about it. Do you know, I was struck with horror when I first saw the blood. Let me see, now. The first was the bum on the park bench. I came behind him. He made a funny gurgling noise in his throat before he died. But the hardest part was mutilating the body. Quite necessary though, to give the appearance of madness. The second! Well—I drove myself to it. After that—Do you know, Condon; it will be hard, very hard not to bring the Clawed Killer to life again. Your throat interests me. I never saw a man die who expected death; felt it coming."

"You—you killed them, like that! But you have two arms."

He laughed, and it was a pleasant friendly sort of laugh.

"Yes, I have two arms." He stood before me, his hands clasped behind his back; at least I could not see his hands. "Shall I entertain you with the way it worked out? How the idea was born; the pleasurable thrill as the third man gurgled and died? Shall I"—he leaned forward—"make your blood flow cold? You're afraid, Condon. There's fear in your face. Shall I tell you while we wait for Brown to come?"

"Vee Brown coming here?" I gulped the words. If cold—moist cold, wet cold is fear, then I was afraid.

"Certainly. You telephoned your home to have him meet you at the Botsford Hotel. I sent a message to the Botsford that he was to come here. Things are nicely arranged."

I would have cut in but he brought his right hand from behind his back, and my words turned into a low cry. Perry Crawford held a short thick cane. On the end of it was a hook; a curved, steel hook—about; no, exactly the same size and shape as the one on the arm of the dead Richard Swartz.

"Pretty little instrument." He nodded. "The temptation to use it now is very strong indeed." He stretched it toward me, laughed again as I pressed my body tightly against the wall. "Just a sudden twist and a sharp jerk of the wrist. The idea was born suddenly. You see, business has not been any better for me than it has for others. I had a possible chance to sell a factory; an abandoned factory like this, to a client. But I didn't go further into the matter. To keep the price down I slipped out alone to look at this place, and I found Richard Swartz living here. I give you my word I felt sorry for him; his story interested me. He was in love, lost his arm, and the girl turned him down. He was broke and out of work. He hid away here just as if he were out in the north woods. And the idea struck me. He had fashioned a sort of makeshift arm with a steel hook he found here, used it to move heavy boxes; a place to hide if anyone came. But he never used that hiding place; never needed it, for no one came. So the idea was born. Just a flash; something I had read once. A one-armed murderer with a hook for a hand! Do I interest you?" He half waved that clawed cane at me.

I OPENED my mouth; my tongue moistened dry lips, but no words came. Finally I simply nodded. He went on.

"I too loved a girl. Ann Fuller—her name is now. Yes, my best friend took my woman. I didn't like it. I loved her, and—" His lips set a bit tighter. "She stuck to him, even when she knew he was doomed to die. God, how she loved him. She took money from me; money to buy him medicine; money to keep him in comfort, or to give him as much relief as certain drugs and medicine could give.

"She lied to me too; lied as she made her promise. Her promise that anything his uncle left would be mine some day. For she had visited his uncle and knew he would never leave her a cent. And—and—well, perhaps I made it a point. She promised to marry me when Gordon was dead. She loved him madly; crazily, for he was no good, well or sick. Yes, she loved him enough to promise to marry me.

"It was after that I found out the truth. That Arthur Myer had arranged that the money should never reach her if Gordon died first; and so—never reach me. I went to see him; visited him many times, always with the plea that I came from his nephew who was badly in need of aid."

"And Gordon! What did he say to this?"

"To seeing his uncle? He asked me to go enough. But he knew nothing about the money I gave his wife; he would never have permitted that. He thought that it came from her aunt. We never discussed his wife, but he knew that I loved her. He met her through me. I hated him from the day he married her, and I think he hated her. There was another girl; one of wealth. I'll always believe that Gordon married Ann simply because I— that he knew I wanted her. He beat me at everything. Now." And

I saw him look at that sharp stick again, and I saw him look at my throat.

"Then what? What did you do; how did you do it?" I almost fired the words at him. Hope—time—to live a little longer!

"Love and hate are very close. I don't know now if I love her or hate her. However, she would keep her word; she would marry me; live with me and long for the dead. So it was I first thought of killing Arthur Myer; killing him before Gordon died; killing him and marrying the widow and getting the money. Money. Money! I had money once; a lot of money. Did you ever plan to kill a man?" And not waiting for my answer, "I planned it over and over; visited Myer more than once with a gun in my pocket and murder in my heart. He was always glad to see me. Somehow, he took pleasure in hearing how his nephew suffered; how his wife did without things; how their medical attention was free. He was not fit to live."

There was a pause then, and he went on rapidly.

"But all crimes have motives, and in this case the police would look for it. I had the girl's promise that she would never divulge to a soul our 'understanding.' But even then she might suspect me, and certainly the police would if we married. No. The crime must be committed and the criminal caught and the case closed. I was on the verge of giving things up; keeping the little money I was sending her when I met Richard Swartz. There is little to that. I—I have used drugs; as medicine only," he ran in hurriedly, but there was a sharp eager look in his eyes. "Swartz was weak. I drugged him, doped him, drove him to places at night, killed only when it was safe to kill, then arranged that Swartz should be seen—hooked arm and all. Oh, I take no pride in that. He was half an imbecile to begin with. Before his time came to die; when I shoved him out into that room to be shot to death, he was a madman."

"And you killed all these men just for the chance of money?"

"Money, yes. The plan was clever. I killed and created in the minds of the public, the press and the police, a monster—the Clawed Killer, so that he would be accepted as the mad murderer when the time came for Arthur Myer to die."

I HARDLY breathed the words. "And the girl, Ann Fuller—Gordon's wife! She didn't suspect you?"

"Of course not. I was her friend; I was the man who stood outside the church and wished her happiness and told her to call on me at any time if she needed a friend. No, the agreement of our marriage—not if, but when he died came from her. Oh, I engineered it, but she thought and still thinks it came from her. Now we'll see, when he dies. For there was just that gamble in it; the gamble I arranged with his lawyers. A hundred to one, and millions for the winner. Fair enough!"

"But the woman, Ann Fuller!"

"She might be bearable, with the millions. And if not, there are distant countries, accidents. There is the chance that, in grieving for her lost husband, she might leap from a mountain. I will see. I will see."

"And the girl; Arthur Myer's secretary!"

"Her death was an accident. She came suddenly, recognized me, and I shot her to death. It was after that I hurled the drug-crazed Swartz into the room." He shook his head. "My only mistake was when I shot him, but without Brown's suspicions that would not have mattered. At least, Brown told me so.

"Yet, I had good luck. Andrew Shaf-

fer robbing the old miser! That was a break. If the Clawed Killer will not cover it, Shaffer will. I made the telephone call that sent Andrew Shaffer to the park that night, just in case anything went wrong. I will be safe if Brown—and you, his confidant, are dead."

"Brown knows about you, then?"

"No. But he suspects Gordon Fuller; even his wife." He shook his head. "I must not let suspicion rest on her. You see, Brown visited the aunt who was supposed to have sent the money to Mrs. Fuller. He confided in me that the aunt never sent any money, and said that when he found out where the money came from he would know the murderer. So, feeling sure that you would become his confidant before morning I decided to strike at both of you tonight. He told me too that he was sure Swartz was only a—a 'front' he called it, for the real murderer, and that tomorrow he would know where Swartz was hidden while the police scoured the city for him. And he said that tomorrow he would go into Ann Fuller's past life and see who else might profit by a rich widow. Those words doomed him. He's a clever man, Condon. He discovered that the aunt did not send Mrs. Fuller the money. I erred there. For when I first sent money to Ann Fuller I had no view of the future and sent it by check. If he checks up on all his suspects and eliminates them, it is possible that he may go into my life; my past friendship with the girl; even before Gordon met her. He might even visit my bank." He smiled. "But all that will take time."

"And how do you expect to trap Brown here?"

"Much as I trapped you. But I do not expect him to be quite so gullible. I may wait for him outside the door, and as he enters strike him down as I struck you down; only, he will not have a moment to suspect things. You see, he'll think he came to meet you. Or—you see that large box there with the hole in it." He jerked his thumb at a large packing case and I saw a hole about as big as a fist in the side of it. "I may be waiting there with a gun."

"But—if he's away all night!"

"I plan well," Crawford said. "Brown told me he would be at his apartment at twelve o'clock. I hinted that I might have something of interest to tell him. If he calls there first, he'll get your message, go to the hotel and receive the other message with directions how to come here." He consulted his watch. "But he can't come yet. I of course arranged the time the message at the Hotel Botsford would be delivered to him. Oh, we have plenty of time. He will come and the light will be in the room. He will be rather stunned at what he sees here, giving me plenty of time to shoot."

"Stunned! Why?"

THE man paused, licked his lips, held out both his hands now but did not look at the gun in the left one—and neither did I. We both looked at the thing in his right hand; the short thick stick; the great sharp glistening hook on the end of it.

"Because," he repeated very slowly, "the Clawed Killer will have returned to confound the police. Because you will be chained to that wall dead; dead with your throat torn open and your body clawed." His laugh was a little shriller this time, and certainly with no softness and no pleasing note to it. "None of the others saw me. Arthur Myer turned his back, leaned over the counter. This will be what the criminals call 'a natural.' Hundreds, perhaps more, would have a motive for killing Brown, if motives are looked for; enough thugs, thieves, murderers and racketeers hate and fear him. The papers will be full of the Clawed Killer's return;

Brown will be dead. Confusion, fear and horror will grip the city. By tomorrow I will have won my gamble with millions, if Gordon Fuller is dead."

He stretched out the stick, the hook was close. I shrunk back. Then his hand dropped, he looked toward that chest of drawers, opened one. I saw him lay the gun down, lift something out. Then the hooked cane went down; he started to roll up his sleeve. So it was dope then! Maybe I had seen the two points in his eyes; the sharp steel, but— He suddenly turned, lifted the hooked stick, said: "No, no. Afterwards!"

Death—sudden, horrible and sure! I saw it in his eyes then.

I cried out the question; screamed it.

"Then what you told me; that Gordon Fuller told you to come here, was not true?"

Silly! Stupid! Sure it was. But I didn't know what I was saying; didn't care. I wanted to save time; live a little longer. Why? There is no reason. We all want to live. Even as my eyes popped and great beads of cold sweat poured down my forehead I wanted to live. A minute; a second longer.

His laugh was high and shrill, like a woman's. Like the scream of a bird; like the cry of a gull.

"That's right. Fuller knows nothing. And you—"

He lunged forward, the great hook almost touched my throat. And I knew. Out and back! Out and—

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Cure for Murder

MY eyes closed. A roar! A sudden deafening roar that shook the room. The roar of a gun. Had he shot me then? But there was no pain. No gun! His gun was on the dresser, or—

My eyes opened. The big body of Perry Crawford was swinging around. He was lurching toward that chest of drawers, blood streaming from his neck; his throat, as from the throat of those who— And he had the gun; it was in his hand. I saw the flame, the smoke; heard the roar. And I saw the little figure in the now wide-open doorway.

Feet spread apart, lips tight, black eyes alive—there stood Vee Brown. Nothing boyish or delicate about him then. Nothing of the musician; nothing of those sentimental songs that made the name Vivian so well known. Nothing but— Just the Crime Machine. His lips parted, knuckles showed white in the dullness; and Perry Crawford, the city's cruelest and most heartless murderer, dropped the hand that held the gun to his side, tore once at his chest, and crashed straight out on his back.

Vee walked easily and quickly into that room, looked down once at the gasping killer, and without even breaking his stride kicked the gun from those helpless fingers just before he reached me.

"The key!" I said. "It must be in his pocket. How did you get here?"

"I've been following him ever since he left the hospital and came here with you, Dean. I followed him a bit before, too. Of course you never suspected, and he couldn't very well look back and make you suspicious. It was quite easy. Yes, I suspected him. Damn it! I was sure of him after I got the information from the bank that he had been sending checks to Mrs. Fuller. But I suspected her too. I fed him a line, Dean, that I thought might make him act tonight. I told him I was sure to know tomorrow where Swartz had been hidden. If Crawford was guilty; then, like all murderers, he'd get to worrying about what he had left behind. And he had left plenty here." He pointed to the gun and the hooked cane. "But I never thought he'd go after me so stupid-

ly. Yes I stood in the doorway and heard every word of his confession."

"You stood there and let me— Why—why—" I stopped.

"Nonsense! I wanted him to finish all he had to say. It was very interesting; exonerates the woman to us. But, by God, with her promise to marry him, it will look bad for her with a jury. There, there! Don't sulk, Dean. You did a good job and sweated off at least five pounds; five pounds you could easily afford to lose." He was looking on the dresser. "Hello! The dope jabber, and—yes, the key to your handcuffs."

He was unlocking the cuffs when Perry Crawford groaned, leaned on his elbow, tried to sit up, begged, pleaded for just one shot of dope.

"Give it to him. God, give it to him!" I pleaded too. Murderer, fiendishly brutal killer though he was; he was suffering horribly, terribly. It was in his face, his eyes, his agonized voice. Even the thick tongue that tried to moisten his lips.

"Why—sure." Vee lifted the little syringe. "But, first—pencil and paper." He whisked both from his pocket. "We must have a written confession."

"Yes, yes." The man cried out in agony; agony and sudden hate. "She was in it. Gordon will be dead; I will be dead, and, by God, if I make a statement, she'll burn! She was going to take the money and marry me; she knew I was going to kill Myer. I hate her. I hate her! I hate her!"

"Upon my word!" Vee Brown turned easily and looked indifferently down at the writhing body, the hypodermic syringe held in his hand. "He's making quite a squawk for such a clever, brave man; a man that sneaks up behind innocent victims and tears their throats wide open."

"God! Oh, God!" Perry Crawford stretched up a feeble hand, tried to clutch at Vee's arm; the hand that held the needle. "Please! Please!"

VEE said very slowly: "And he calls upon his God." He knelt now by the man, knocked the clutching, grasping fingers roughly aside. "You want a shot, Crawford? Well—your confession first. No lies! Just as you told it to Dean here. The truth—the whole truth. Here!"

A pen, a little memorandum book. They were shoved into the horribly wounded man's hand.

"Quick. Write!" Vee supported the man; and when Perry Crawford shook his head, Vee said, "I know. I know you are not able to write all of it. Just the beginning, as I dictate it. I'll write the rest of it myself. Then the jab in the arm; the jab that will deaden the pain —the terrible pain. Come. Write!"

And Crawford did write. Guided by Vee he got down the simple words.

> I killed Arthur Myer. I killed him and those five others. I was the Clawed Killer. I—

The pen fell from the dying man's fingers. Vee deftly caught it, tried to force it between his fingers again; took it himself. I could see his fingers flying over the paper as he repeated aloud almost word for word the confession; or then, just the statement Perry Crawford had made. The promise of marriage; everything. Yes, Vee's hand moved with great speed; greater speed than I thought a human could write.

"Now—" Vee pushed the pen at the man again, "that's the truth, isn't it? Sign here."

"No, no. She planned it; she—I say she planned it. I hate her. She's got to die. That's the truth, but I won't—won't —won't—"

Vee held the needle close; close to one bare arm as he pushed back the sleeve.

"No pain," he said softly. "An ease

and comfort that you don't deserve. God knows Ann Fuller will be brought into it anyway. She'll be tried probably. No one will believe she didn't know, even with this statement of yours. They'll think you lied to help her. Here. My word! The jab. No pain. No—"

The man gripped at the pen, tried to push up his eyelids to see as he wrote. But I think he signed it blindly. And Vee turned to me; held out the pen.

"Sign as witness, Dean." And to Perry Crawford, "This, as I have written it here, is the truth? You swear it?"

"Yes, yes!" the man gasped as I hurriedly signed the paper. I wasn't sure then, for I was watching; trying to guide my own shaking hand, but the statement seemed very short; very— And Vee put his name to it.

"That's that!" Vee waved the paper in the air, to dry. "An ante-mortem statement, to which the court attaches a great deal of importance; though why, I don't know."

Perry Crawford was screaming now, tearing at his throat. The agony must have been terrible. Words gurgled deep down in his chest; a hand groped blindly, madly for the little syringe. He was pleading; begging incoherently.

"Vee! Give it to him. It's terrible, horrible. How can you—"

"How can I?" He swung on me. "How can I watch him suffer, eh? Well—I could pull up a chair and sit down and enjoy every single moment of his agony. Don't you think I felt it when those others died? Oh, not Arthur Myer, but the innocent victims. The dead girl who supported her mother! You think you understand me, Dean, because I laugh and joke and ignore the seriousness, the awfulness of death—and such a death. But I felt it then; I've felt it since. The sudden stab across the throat; the shoot of warm blood! Now—now! Yes, I could tear at his body as he tore at the bodies of others. Look—look! He knows how it feels. Realizes—"

"Vee!" I grabbed his arm. "I can't stand it. Give him the drug he craves. Give him—"

"If you can't stand it—get out!" he said to me savagely as he shook off my arm.

"Your word! You promised him. Your word!"

Vee looked at me a long moment as the dying man's screams grew louder, shriller, terrible even to hear. Then he dropped to one knee, jabbed the needle into Crawford's arm.

"You're right, Dean," he told me. "I was a fool to give my word."

PERRY CRAWFORD screeched just once more; his whole body seemed to leave the floor, then flop grotesquely back again with a single thud. He didn't move again. He would never move again. He was dead.

"Well"— Vee was wiping; yes, wiping the red from his hands on a bit of old sacking—"it doesn't matter. He would have died anyway, and I kept my word. Thanks for reminding me! Come, come! Snap out of it, Dean. His punishment, in this world at least, was far too easy."

There were many details. The coming of Ramsey and the rest of the outfit, that to me always seemed to drop down like vultures on the scene of a murder. The medical examiner, the detectives from the ballistics bureau, the cameramen and the fingerprint experts. I said to Vee, as we waited for them—

"It looks bad for the girl; for Ann Fuller. That statement! It might be better if we had no statement at all."

Vee shrugged his shoulders.

"A good detective always gets an ante mortem statement when he can. A good detective serves, not a single person but the whole city. A good detective writes

word for word the statement as it is given to him. A good detective kills his man and saves the price of—"

"What does all this mean?" I cut in, as Mortimer Doran burst into the shack.

"It means—that I'm not entirely a good detective."

Vee didn't ride Ramsey this time. He just pointed down at the body and said: "There's your murderer, and he's a mess." And to Doran, "There's your confession."

Doran looked at the paper, grunted.

"Humph! Rather vague. But enough; yes, quite enough. Too bad you didn't get details and—"

"After he was quite dead he couldn't talk. I'll make out a full report tonight. I've got to see how a bet comes out. A hundred-to-one shot."

We were at the hospital a half hour later. Ann Fuller met us; her eyes were red. She didn't have to tell us, but she did. "He's dead," she said simply. "Gordon is dead. Now—now I have to—"

Brown's hand was over her mouth as he led her to a far corner of the room. Five minutes later he held her unconscious body in his arms. Doctor Robinson said:

"A terrible shock to her." He shook his head. "But I—I think it's best for her that he's dead."

Vee nodded.

And then finally, when Robinson whispered to him, "Yes. It's quite true about Perry Crawford."

It was back in the taxi that I spoke about Ann Fuller. Did he think they'd prosecute her? Would they arrest her? And even if they didn't, wouldn't the scandal; the suspicion follow her all her life?

"I told her to say nothing," said Vee. "And they'll ask her very little. Her agreement with Perry Crawford will never become public."

"The papers won't get it, and the police will keep it quiet?" I was surprised.

"The papers won't get it, and the police will keep it quiet. Because, Dean—they don't know anything about it."

"But the statement; the confession."

"Perry Crawford," Brown said in mock seriousness, "talked too fast for me to follow. I didn't get it all down. I just wrote, after his single line, another sentence. It was—'Arthur Myer ruined me; I hated him and I planned his death.' But you read it, Dean. Surely you wouldn't sign anything you hadn't read!"

"And that means?" I gasped.

"Oh!" Vee yawned, "that means that I'm not a good detective." And with animation, "But he died hard."

"It was terrible, horrible." I agreed. "There ought to be some way to stop such crimes. Maybe he wasn't mad, but he certainly wasn't normal. There must be some solution to the problem. Medical science should—"

"Should stay out of it," Vee snapped. "And there is a solution; a simple one."

"And that solution?"

"Why—you saw it tonight, Dean. You've got to admit one murderer is cured—completely cured."

It had taken Henry Hammer years to work up nerve enough to pull his one crooked deal. And when he did pull it he pulled Pete Bowden right along with him, leaving only one out—a measly

Rabbit Alibi

by Oscar Schisgall

Author of "Palooka Death Pawn," etc.

It was just three-thirty by the clock when the safe cracked open.

THAT afternoon—about five months after they'd let me out of Sing Sing on parole—I was playing two-handed pinochle with Sid Winton in the back room of Hogarth's place; and I give you my word I had no more intention of blasting a safe than of committing suicide. In fact, I had sworn not to be smart with the law again till my year of parole was ended. So I was enjoying a peaceful, honest time when big Hogarth himself entered, bent over my shoulder, and whispered to me.

"Pete, there's a little runt out front begging to see you. How about it?"

I put down the cards quickly and stared around at Hogarth's round red face. "Look like a cop?" I asked.

"Nope. Like a rabbit."

"Huh?"

"You know"— Hogarth's tremendous face creased in a grin—"small and mild

and timid, like something the kids play with. He stammered when he asked for you."

I got up frowning to take a suspicious peep through the door, which was open a couple of inches. Ordinarily I don't trust strangers who seem too mild and meek. But the man I saw waiting near the bar gave me a regular jolt. I gaped. And then I couldn't help laughing. For it was Henry Hammer! Good old Henry Hammer, who'd been a friend of my dad's ever since I could remember! I hadn't set eyes on him since my father's funeral, four years ago. It certainly surprised me plenty to see him here, in Hogarth's joint.

Standing out there in a wrinkled brown suit, he looked as meek as ever—a small figure, narrow-shouldered, apologetic in the very way he stood. His head was a little balder than it had been, and his nose a little sharper. But the eyes behind his spectacles were as mild as ever, and the way he twisted his hat in his hands made you realize he felt he was an intruder wherever he went. Somehow, in the very first instant, I recalled what my father used to growl at him: "Henry, you're all right, but you've got less nerve than any man I ever met. You'll never amount to anything. Too timid! No backbone!"

Anyhow, I went out with a grin and an extended hand, and pretty soon Henry Hammer was pumping my arm as if I were his own brother. In that high-pitched, choppy voice of his—it hadn't changed a bit in four years—he declared: "I'm certainly ha-happy to see you again, Peter! You—you look fine. Splendid! Like a—like a football player!"

I said: "Matter of fact, I played fullback on the Sing Sing team. We beat most visitors, too. Read about it?"

Henry Hammer gulped, forced a smile. You could see that the very mention of Sing Sing rattled him. He glanced around nervously; and after we'd talked of this and that a few minutes, he caught my arm and began to speak earnestly.

"Peter, can—can I speak to you in private somewhere? It's about—something very important."

I peered down at him, surprised by the sudden change in his eyes. They were shining. Almost feverish. His fingers had tightened on my arm like claws.

"What's the excitement?" I asked.

"I—I can't explain here! If we could be alone somewhere—if you'll come with me—"

I DIDN'T go with him. Instead I led him into Hogarth's back room, asked Sid Winton to leave us alone—with a wink—and locked the door after Winton had shuffled out to the bar. Henry Hammer and I sat down at the card table. He was fidgety and pale, and his tongue darted out again and again to slide over his lips. His very nervousness began to get under my skin. So finally, just to ease him a bit, I inquired: "How did you locate me, Henry?"

"Just by accident—sheerest accident," he confessed. "I ran into that lawyer of yours a few weeks ago. He—he told me you were out on parole. Told me I'd probably find you here, among your friends, if I was interested in seeing to it that you —ah—continued to—"

"Go straight?" I suggested with a smile.

"Er—yes!"

"And is that why you came today?"

Henry Hammer hesitated. Then his manner changed. He swallowed hard, glanced around the room. Apparently reassured by our privacy, he leaned far across the table, grabbed my wrist again, and whispered tensely.

"No, Peter! I—I came here principally

to—to offer you a chance to make some real money. Big money!"

After that I peered at him and slowly said, "Oh, yes?" Men who can show you how to make big money generally have to be watched pretty carefully; I never trusted them.

But Henry Hammer, unaware of my aloofness, plunged right on with increasing tension.

"Peter, maybe you'll think I'm crazy!" he exclaimed. The pressure of his fingers seemed to beg me to believe he was quite sane. "I—I came to you because I remembered what those detectives said at your trial a few days ago. They—"

"Were you in court?" I demanded, astonished.

"Of course! After all, you were the son of—of my best friend. I had to be on hand in case there was any—well, any help I could offer. Unfortunately there wasn't. But I remembered how those detectives had sworn you were one of the cleverest safe-crackers in New York!"

I said heavily, still frowning: "So what, Henry?"

He paused again, looking down in bewilderment at his knees. You could see he wasn't accustomed to this kind of planning. In truth, it took me more than fifteen minutes to bring him around to talking brass tacks; minutes during which he slipped off on all sorts of tangents. But at last I had him headed right again. He put a question to me timidly.

"You—you know the business I'm in, Peter?"

"Last time I saw you," I answered, "you were working for some diamond merchant."

"Yes. Well, I'm still in the diamond line," he whispered. "Only, for the past two years I've been in it for myself. I have an office of my own."

"Keep talking," I said, lighting a cigarette. "I'm listening to every word."

"Peter—" He faltered, held his breath, and suddenly blurted out: "I want you to rob my safe!"

He might as well have poked a gun at me. Through the cigar smoke I gaped at him. "You wha-at?"

"I—I want you to break into my office and blast the safe, Peter! I want you to do it this week! And I—I'll promise you ten thousand dollars for the job! One thousand in cash the night you do it, and nine thousand within a couple of months afterwards! That—that's my proposition."

WELL, for a while I just sat there, blinking. I couldn't believe what I'd heard. I'd have been just as stunned if I'd heard a minister yell a string of cuss words out of a pulpit. Henry Hammer simply didn't look like a criminal. And his whole past was against the notion that he could conspire in crime. He was too timid, too inherently honest and meek. He didn't have the nerve, I'd have sworn, to venture anything crooked. And yet—

There he sat, staring across the table at me with wildly excited, brilliant eyes. They actually flashed behind the glasses. An unnatural flush had crept into his thin cheeks, and his bald head was moist with perspiration. And I saw he was trembling, too.

"Wh-what do you say, Peter?" he whispered huskily. "How about it?"

I drew a deep breath, regarded the ash of my cigar, then spoke in the grave voice of a judge.

"Let me get this straight. You want me to break into your office and blow up your safe. Unless I'm dizzy, that safe is supposed to contain diamonds."

"Right!" tensely.

"Your diamonds?"

"My own, yes! All my own!"

"Insured?"

"Of course!"

"As I see it, then, this business of your

hiring me to rob your safe begins to smell like an attempt to defraud some insurance company of—"

Before I could finish, Henry Hammer sprang to his feet and started walking back and forth, quickly, across the little back room. He forgot his hat on the table. He snatched a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped it over his bald, wet head, around the inside of his wilting collar. It wasn't a hot day; yet he perspired as if the thermometer were hovering in the nineties. And while he paced the room, without glancing at me, he kept talking in that choppy, breathless way.

"Peter, I know you must be surprised! But it doesn't matter. Nothing matters. I've lived my life wrong, and I know it! I'm forty-eight years old, Peter—forty-eight!—and I've been working hard ever since I was sixteen. What have I got to show for it? Eh? What? I'm being frank with you, Peter! Just about two thousand dollars saved in the bank and about twenty-five thousand in diamonds. That's all! Twenty-seven thousand dollars—and not a diamond buyer in sight anywhere! These days nobody is investing in stones. I've had those gems in my place over a year."

He paused, jabbed a hard look at me through his glasses. Then he plunged on.

"Peter, before I die I want to be rich! I'm going to be rich! But I know damn well that I can't do it just by plugging along the way I have been. I'll never get anywhere that way! No. It takes nerve to get on in this world. Courage! A man's got to take a wild chance now and then. As for myself, I've never had enough gumption to risk anything. Oh, I know it! Even your father used to tell me that years ago. I was timid, scared of risks. But—but that's changed, Peter! It's all changed now! I've thought it over for months, and from now on I'm going to have nerve!"

There wasn't any sense in my trying to prompt him. He was sailing along beautifully without any help. So I just sat still, smoking in astonishment, and watching him.

"If I had nerve—if I'd had nerve years ago—I'd be wealthy today! But I'm not complaining. Things will change. I—I've taken on new life, Peter! And this little job you and I are going to do will start me! My diamonds—" He leaned over the table now, and as his voice sank to a husky, agitated whisper, his eyes blazed down into mine with a kind of greed. "My diamonds are insured for twenty thousand dollars! I've already got them hidden where nobody will ever find them! The morning after you crack my safe, I'll report they've been stolen! Eventually I'll get twenty thousand dollars in cash from the insurance company. I'm willing to split that with you, Peter, on a fifty-fifty basis, because I'll still be in possession of the diamonds! The money will be clear profit. It's up to you now. What do you say?"

DELIBERATELY I took the cigar from my mouth. I asked with a touch of irony: "Do you think, Henry, that the scheme is so blamed original?"

"Of course it isn't!" he snapped. "But that doesn't mean it won't work!"

I looked at the cigar, thoughtfully. Finally I asked: "Why do you need me in on this?"

"Because you—you can jimmy my office door professionally, like a real burglar! You can blast the safe so that the police will know it was the work of a real thief! I'd do the whole thing in a messy, amateurish way which would rouse suspicion at the very outset!"

"Still," I argued, "do you realize I'm out on parole? If I were caught, it would mean years and years of prison for me. God knows what a judge would give me now! The limit, I'll bet."

"But you won't be caught!"

"Where's the guarantee?" I demanded sarcastically.

"I am!" Henry Hammer sat down again, stiffly. He stared intently across the table into my eyes.

"Listen, Peter," he said swiftly. "The night you break into my office, I'll be with you! I'll be with you every second! If you're caught, we'll both pretend to be drunk, and I'll swear I brought you in myself. I'll swear I urged you to break my safe because I had to get something in a hurry and its lock had gone wrong. They can't arrest you or me if we're engaged in opening my own safe, with my sanction!"

I squinted at him hard. Frankly, I forgot the cigar. "Got it all figured out, haven't you, Henry?"

"Yes!"

"Been planning it long?"

"Months and months! All I needed was somebody who knew how to blow that safe! Then I thought of you."

"But," I said slowly, "this sort of thing is out of your line, Henry. How did you ever come to—"

"Peter," he interrupted harshly, "it's as I told you! If I had nerve, I'd be a really rich man today, because I've always had plenty of ideas! Well, from now on, I'll have nerve!"

IF YOU were to ask me why I finally allowed myself to be talked into agreeing to the harebrained scheme, I wouldn't be able to answer. All I know is: two hours after Henry found me at Hogarth's we called for drinks, shook hands across the table, and became partners.

We planned the job for Friday night.

In the intervening four days nothing much happened—except that Hogarth was killed. He was peppered with machine-gun bullets on Thursday night when he walked out of his door. Who did it, I don't know. Neither do the police, yet. His death didn't mean much to me, save that I had to find a new place to hang out during my idle moments. I drifted here and there and at last settled on Tim Lanneran's café, over on Eighth Avenue.

That, however, is neither here nor there. The important thing is—at three A. M. Saturday I knelt in front of Henry Hammer's safe, in his office, and drilled a hole under the dial.

Henry stood behind me, intently watching. I could actually hear his teeth chattering.

"Listen," I whispered impatiently over my shoulder, "if you're going to rattle your bones behind me, beat it! You're making me nervous! Go look out of the window!"

"Wh-what for?" he stammered.

"Keep watch. Let me know if somebody passes in the street. I'm not going to blow nitro while somebody's within hearing distance!"

Henry gulped, nodded jerkily, and pattered away to the side of the window.

I'd plugged rags around the doors to muffle sounds. I'd put plenty of them around the windows, too. The old safe wouldn't need much of a charge. According to Henry, there'd be nobody in the building to hear the explosion. It was a small place, four floors in height, and the superintendant went home every night at eight. So we seemed to be alone and safe enough.

Personally, I'd have been enjoying the thrill of the affair if it hadn't been for Henry's nervousness. He became so fidgety that he gave me the jitters, too. Time after time he trotted to my shoulder, watched me a while, and hurried back to the window. He was breathing irregularly. Once, when he gave me a tool, I could feel that his hand was soaked with perspiration.

But I granted him very little attention

after I got busy. With a flashlight to help, I got the hole drilled by about three twenty. And ten minutes later—

I whispered: "Everything all right down there?"

He swung around from the window with a gasped, "Eh?"

"See anybody in the street?"

"N-not a soul!"

"Sure? Look again!"

He turned. The glow of some distant lamp post struck his thin face, glinted on his spectacles. I could see, even in darkness, that he was yellow of complexion and probably sick with a kind of terror. That made me snarl in contempt.

"Listen, Henry, if you're losing your nerve, say so! I don't have to blow this can! It's empty anyhow! We can call the whole deal off right now!"

He looked at me wildly.

"Oh, no!" he panted. "No! We—we're going through with it, Peter!"

"You're scared yellow."

"I—I'll be all right! It's just that I'm not used to this sort of—of business! But my nerve's holding out fine. Go ahead if you're ready! The street's empty."

Well, it was just three thirty A. M. by the office clock when the dull detonation cracked open the front of Henry Hammer's safe. Then, as I straightened, Henry shoved something into my hand with fingers that quivered.

I glanced down; flashed my light on the thing. It was a roll of bills.

"The—the thousand I promised you tonight!" he whispered shakily. "You'll get nine thousand more, P-Peter, as soon as I collect from the insurance company!"

"All right," I snapped, and shoved the money deep into my pocket. I turned to the door. "Let's get the devil out of here while the getting is good!"

The little bald man stuttered: "You—you don't think there's any danger now, do you, Peter?"

"Not unless they get on to your brilliant scheme," I said gruffly. "Then maybe both of us will take a nice long rest behind bars—for criminal conspiracy against the insurance company!"

Henry yanked open the door for me. He spun around and glared. "They won't get us!" he grated hoarsely. "Never! I've planned this thing, and I'm going to see it through! You just watch, Peter—you just watch!"

SATURDAY morning I naturally slept late. I hadn't got to bed until six. It was almost noon when I finally drifted toward Tim Lanneran's café for breakfast. On the way I bought a late morning edition to see what, if anything, the newspapers contained about the big diamond "robbery" at Henry Hammer's office.

After I'd given my order at Lanneran's, I sat back in my corner and began hunting through the sheet.

The front page showed nothing, of course. Neither did the second or third. But when I found the half column on the top of Page Five—well, I don't mind telling you I sat up with a jerk. I gaped, held my breath, and something like ice-water trickled down my back. And then I gasped—

"For God's sake!"

Why? Because this is what the headlines reported—

DIAMOND MERCHANT HELPS
BLOW UP OWN SAFE

"Nothing Missing," Laughs Henry Hammer
"Only A Lark," Says He

Well, I sat there like a piece of wood and blinked my way through the whole unbelievable story. The waiter put eggs and coffee in front of me, but I didn't even see the food. I kept on reading, while my whole chest went into an enraged riot, and my head hammered like the inside of

a thunderstorm. All I could see just then was, I'd been cheated of nine grand.

Absolutely cheated, yes, sir! For according to the paper Henry Hammer had explained—

> "I was out last night with a friend who claimed he understood the niceties of safe-blowing. We had both drunk a little too much, and he insisted he could show me exactly how crooks would treat my safe. I was curious to know. The safe was old, anyhow, and empty; whereas I was full and dizzy. So we laughed over the business. He got the materials necessary and staged his demonstration. His name doesn't matter to anybody—I'm not making any complaint, am I?"

The rest of the account isn't important. I was too infuriated to read it carefully, anyhow. All I know is that two minutes later I stood sweating in Lanneran's telephone booth and talking madly to Henry Hammer. I pounded the instrument with one gestulating hand while I berated him.

"You fool, what the devil got into you, anyway? What's the idea? Why did you spoil the whole set-up?"

I could hear him suck in a quivering breath. And then his high-pitched, feeble voice came to me shakily, on a kind of apologetic wail.

"Peter, I—I lost my nerve!"

"You what?"

"It—it happened this morning, when I reached the office. The superintendent had found the d-door open and the safe broken. He—he'd called the police, and they were already there—"

"And you lost your guts?" I almost shouted.

"Y-yes, Peter!" miserably. "I did. I—I guess I am yellow. Your father was right. No nerve. No b-backbone. I just couldn't go through with it—"

"But why not?" I groaned. "Do you realize the stage was set perfectly? Do you realize you actually threw away twenty thousand dollars? Do you?"

"Y-yes, Peter, I do!"

"So?"

He moaned: "I'm sorry, Peter. I couldn't help it. Something in me collapsed just as I opened my mouth to cry the diamonds were gone. I—I couldn't go through with it. I guess I'm just not—not built for this kind of job. So I invented that story you saw in the papers. They've got nothing on you, have they? I tried to fix it, Peter, so they wouldn't have—"

I rasped: "Of course they haven't But good heavens, man, I was counting on nine thousand dollars more for last night's piece of work!"

"I'm sorry, Peter—" on a gulp. "Still, your time wasn't entirely wasted. You've got one thousand—half of all the cash I've got in the world—"

"Oh, hell!" I cried in fury. "I should have known better than to go into partnership with a—a rabbit! I'm sick and disgusted and through with you, Henry. You haven't got half as much nerve as a kitten! Good-by!"

I SLAMMED up the receiver and strode out to my cold breakfast. By that time I was sweating freely and feeling wild. I didn't even notice that the food was cold; just jammed it down with a kind of vicious rage.

And I was still eating when a tall man suddenly stopped in front of my table.

I looked up—and instantly grew rigid. The man was smiling in a thin, cold way. I knew him pretty well, too well; Detective Sergeant Lester Brainey. And he knew me, too—considering the fact that he'd been watching me ever since I'd been let out of Sing Sing on parole.

"Hello, Pete," he said quietly. "Go right on eating, you lucky dog."

"Lucky?" I snarled. "Why?"

"Because I haven't got anything on you this morning. Your friend Hammer fixed you up with a nice alibi."

Slowly, then, I put down my fork and gaped. A little chill of warning trickled through me, and maybe I became slightly pale.

"Wh-what are you talking about, Sergeant?"

He chuckled. He picked up my knife and began to drum the table with it, absently.

"Pete," he said softly, after a time, "I don't mind telling you we knew you were going to blow the Hammer safe. We knew the whole crazy scheme. In fact, eight of my boys were parked around Hammer's office last night. They saw you go in and saw you come out. They heard the bang of the explosion, too. But they had orders to let you beat it. See? They were just posted there as witnesses. We wanted Henry Hammer to make his report of stolen diamonds; wanted him to try and soak the insurance company first. Then we would have nabbed you both for criminal conspiracy. Only—well, Henry lost his nerve and twisted things in a neat, safe way, didn't he?"

Sergeant Brainey stood quietly laughing, quietly drumming with my knife. I stared up at him, and I felt as cold as a corpse—then suddenly as hot as somebody with fever.

A little hoarsely I whispered: "Wh-where did you get a story like that, Sergeant?"

He chuckled. "A little pigeon told me."

"Eh?"

"He's dead now," slowly. "So I can tell you his name. It was Hogarth. He used to tell us lots of things he overheard in that back room of his—just as he overheard Hammer the other day."

"So that," I gasped, "is why he was shot to the devil! So that's it!"

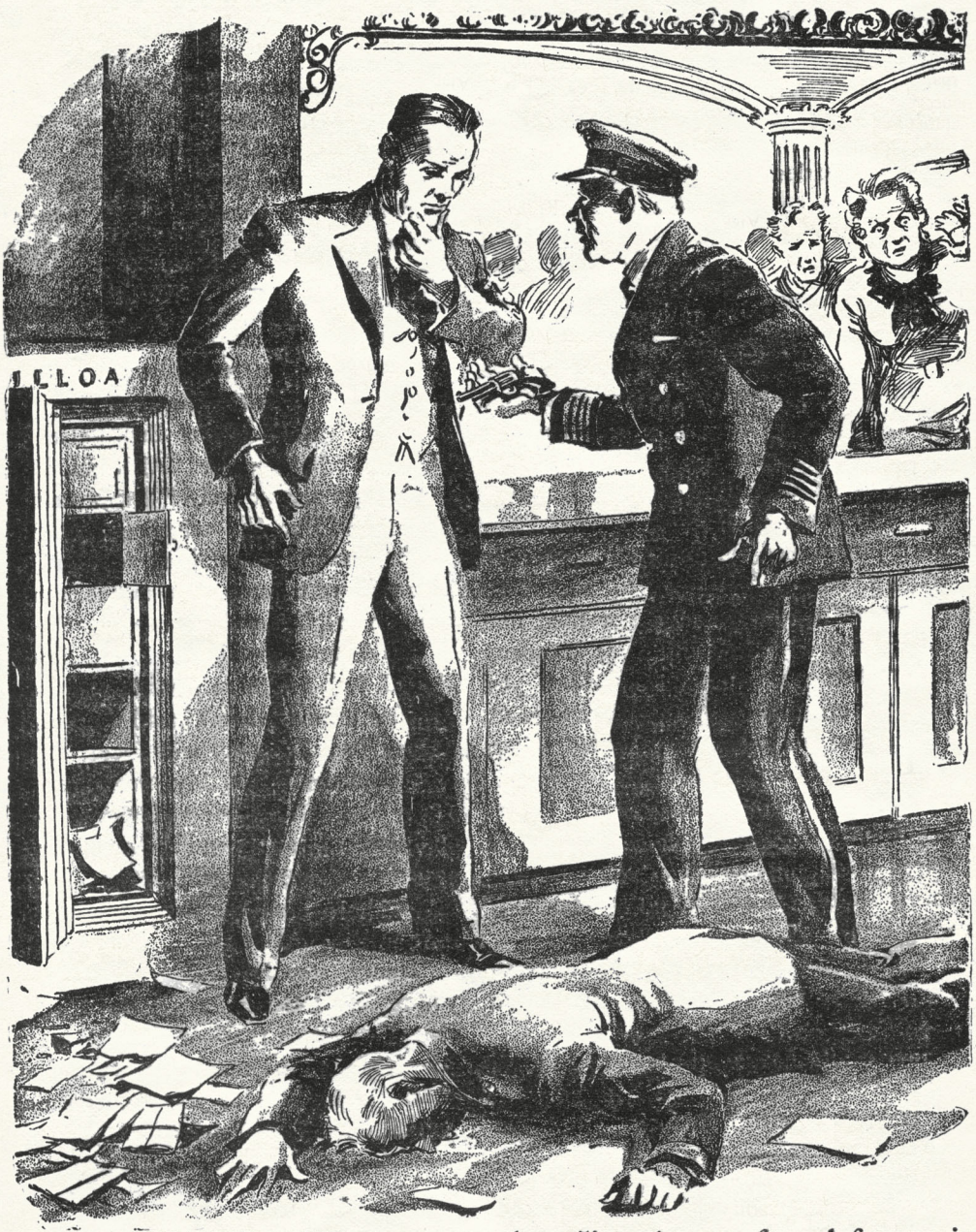
"Yep," agreed Brainey, nodding, "that's probably why somebody shot him—for something he'd told. Anyhow, he's gone now. Like so many stoolies. And you're still on the outside of prison walls because this fool Hammer lost his nerve and cooked up some stupid story about his bringing in a friend on a drunk." The sergeant tossed down the knife and waved his hand at me. "All right, Pete," he finished almost sadly. "You were lucky this time. But I'm advising you to be mighty careful. Next time you may pick a partner with nerve—and that'll probably land you right back in Sing Sing!"

The sergeant nodded and walked away. And I just sat there a while, paralyzed.

After a time, when I could trust myself on my feet, I got up and staggered into the telephone booth. My own voice was shaky as I called Henry Hammer. When he answered and recognized my voice, he began to apologize again. He even began to wail about his being yellow and without backbone. But I cut in.

"Henry, stop it! I—I appreciate what you've done! Believe me, I do! I appreciate it so much that—well, to show you how I feel, I'm mailing that thousand dollars right back to you this morning! You've earned it! Good-by."

Four Nights to Doom



CHAPTER ONE

First Warning

IT had seemed like a good idea at the time the telegram was sent. "When the old man gets this in the morning," said Sam Hastings gleefully, "he'll hit the ceiling, throw a fit and fire me in the middle of my vacation."

"And what'll you do for a job when you get back?" Porter, of the *Express*, had sense enough to ask.

"That," said Sam Hastings, reprovingly, "is where the joke comes in. I won' go back."

by T. T. Flynn

Author of "The Golden Cipher," etc.

"Ever see this before?" the captain growled.

When Sam Hastings took passage on the S. S. Illoa from New Orleans that morning he thought he was starting on the rest cure he'd been needing for more than a year. It wasn't until the second murder, when he lost his own identity and became suspected of committing half the crimes in the calendar, that he was willing to admit he might have been wrong. Began to realize that his short vacation was turning into a horror holiday.

Thereupon with the help of five willing sinners Sam Hastings wrote and sent the following telegram—

WILLIAM T ZOOKS
MANAGING EDITOR
SAN FRANCISCO TRIBUNE
AM JUST LEAVING FOR SOUTH AMERICA ON EXTENDED TOUR STOP HAIL AND FAREWELL THOU MASTER OF SLAVES STOP SIC SEMPER TYRANNIS
SAM HASTINGS

It was a large evening. A very large evening. It took the five of them to get

Sam Hastings up to his room at the Montcalm on Royal Street. In the excitement no one thought to leave a call at the desk.

It was almost noon when Sam Hastings awoke. His head was splitting, his mouth tasted like something you read about and then try to forget. Sam groaned, rolled over, glimpsed his wrist watch still on his wrist. On sudden thought he sat up groggily and looked at it. The figures danced, steadied.

"Holy smoke!" Sam said loudly.

He hurled the covers back, leaped from the bed, staggered toward the shower. Ensued frenzied minutes of dressing and packing. It was eleven minutes to twelve when a porter took Sam's two heavy bags and followed Sam's dash to the elevator.

He dropped change in his pocket without counting it and ran for the taxi which the porter was holding at the curb.

"New York boat at the Damaine Street wharf!" Sam yelled at the taxi driver. "It leaves at twelve! Got eight minutes to make it! Dollar tip if you do!"

A traffic jam in narrow Royal Street held them there at the curb for two precious minutes. Then they crawled toward Canal Street, losing more time. Canal Street itself seemed to be carrying more traffic than usual. The driver did the best he could, weaving in and out with the horn sounding constantly. Sam sat tensely on the back seat saying things to himself about addle-pated asses who tried to take a town apart the night before a sailing.

The events of the previous evening were more or less hazy, consisting of vague recollections of many night clubs, various young women of more or less charm and vivacity, and much hilarity.

In that kaleidoscopic picture there was no recollection of the telegram dispatched just after midnight.

THEY finally swung into St. Peters Street, paralleling the docks. Three minutes remained. The deep warning bellow of the steamer's whistle drifted over the dock sheds.

"Step on it!" Sam pleaded, leaning forward.

The driver swung the taxi around a slow oil truck and did things to the speed law which would have curdled the disposition of a traffic cop. They reached Jackson Square, swung to the right, bumped over railroad tracks and jolted to a stop on the cobblestones beside the long, low dock shed.

Another taxi just ahead of them pulled out as Sam paid his driver, adding the dollar tip, seized his bags and ran.

Through the open dock shed the high black steamer side was visible. A man was standing at the bow lines to cast off.

The whistle blew again as Sam gave up his bags to a Negro and ran for the gangplank, which was on the point of being drawn in. Just ahead of him, Sam glimpsed two men and a girl following porters loaded with bags.

The usual sailing day scene was being enacted. Overhead the ship's rail was lined with passengers. A crowd milled about on the wharf below. Last minute messages and farewells were being called back and forth. A holiday spirit permeated the air.

All that meant nothing to Sam Hastings. His head still ached. He more or less had the feeling that he had just been jerked out of a laundry mangle. He made a vow, as he went over the gangway, that hereafter for a long, long time, sobriety and decorum were to be the lot of Sam Hastings.

His cabin was on B deck, port side. No steward was in sight at the moment. Taking his bags, Sam entered a corridor, passed to the port side, walked to the right looking for his number. He did not see

one of the men look behind at him; stop, wait.

Sam almost bumped into him. "Sorry," he murmured as he tried to pass.

It took him a second or so to get what was happening as an accusing voice addressed him. "So you succeeded in following us here?"

Sam stopped and looked at the man closely for the first time.

"Talking to me?" he asked mechanically.

The man standing stiffly erect in the middle of the corridor had a dry, academic look, as if he might be a teacher of some kind. But he was not meek. His eyes were blazing through rimless glasses perched on a large, beaklike nose. His thin mouth was tight, determined. A panama hat, perched precisely on his graying hair, carried an air of stiff formality.

By that hat Sam recognized him. Not one man in a hundred wore headgear so stiffly, so precisely. This hat had been passing over the gangway as Sam ran to it. This man had led the trio who had been hurrying aboard at the last minute.

The answer Sam got was cold, angry. "Yes, I was talking to you, sir! I remarked that you had succeeded in following us."

Sam snorted.

"Followed you? Why should I follow you?"

"I thought," said the other, "that you would deny it. Your intelligence would work that way. I saw your taxicab trailing us along St. Peters Street. I suspected then it was you."

"Nuts!" Sam Hastings said inelegantly. "I wouldn't follow you up an alley. You must be coming out of a pipe dream."

His denial was ignored.

Sternly the stranger said: "I watched you jump out of your taxi and follow us aboard."

Sam Hastings was usually a polite young man. You couldn't be a star reporter without making large use of tact and politeness, no matter what the movies and fiction stories made of the average reporter. But now Sam could think of only one answer which fitted the occasion.

"Nuts!" Sam said again. "Let me past."

A bony finger waved under his nose.

"I warn you!" the stranger said in a voice which quivered with indignation. "I warn you! I know you are aboard. I'll be watching you. The first time you trouble us I will go to the captain. I may take this to him as it is."

"About one more crack out of you, and I'll go to the captain myself!" Sam snapped. "I thought this was a passenger boat, not a floating asylum. One side! I'm not going to stand here arguing with you!"

Sam shouldered past with his bags. The academic looking stranger followed, muttering angrily to himself. The rest of his party had gone on and were not now visible.

SAM found his cabin, entered, slammed the door. The trip, he thought, was starting on a par with the hangover with which he had awakened. About the only other thing needed for perfection was a bout of sea-sickness. He should have taken a train to New York, Sam told himself savagely; he should have flown. If there was no other way to get there he should have walked, rather than find himself couped up for days with the erratic aberrations of a lunatic looking for trouble.

The footsteps of the stranger paused before the door, as if the other were inspecting it and noting the number; then they went on, sounding firm, determined, uncompromising.

Sam was in a double cabin and, at the

moment, alone. He busied himself with unpacking. While doing that the engine began to throb. Through the porthole he caught glimpses of the ship swinging away from the wharf, turning in the river, picking up speed with the current for the hundred-mile run down river to the Gulf of Mexico.

The stranger stuck in Sam's mind. Who was the fellow, he wondered. What was on his mind anyway? What was he suspicious of? A habitual nose for news reasserted itself. Sam began to speculate on the possibilities of a story.

He perked up a bit as he began to sense a corking little mystery. It couldn't get away at sea either.

HE went to dinner with that idea in mind. The dining room was crowded. A soft hum of conversation and music from a five-piece orchestra filled the big room. There was much turning of heads and furtive inspection as these people, who were thrown together for the first time, looked one another over.

Eight people were at Sam's table. The two women at the end looked like school teachers; prim, precise, sober and virtuous.

The young couple across the table who couldn't keep their eyes off each other were probably a bride and groom. If they weren't they should be, and if they were, they'd probably get over it, Sam thought cynically.

The well fed, prosperous-looking gentleman was probably a business man. His wife, very much the dowager, looked as if she spent most of her time prying into and settling the affairs of her fellow mortals.

The one man at the table, who stood out from the rest, sat next to Sam. In a face almost as dark as old saddle leather, blue eyes were bright and interested. Strong hands, work-roughened, handled the silverware nervously. The man sat stiffly in his chair and didn't appear entirely at ease. Yet, casting furtive glances around, as if perhaps this was the first time he had ever seen such an assembled company, he managed to radiate a definitely friendly air.

Sam spoke to him. "It looks as if we'll have a smooth passage through the Gulf."

He got a warm, quick smile.

"I hope so," the other said. "I've heard plenty about sea sickness an' I don't want none of it."

Sam kept him talking, throwing in a word now and then to keep the conversation moving. Holbrook was the other's name. He was from Texas.

"My first trip on a boat," Holbrook confided. "Pretty nice, if I do say so. Beats train travel. Me for a boat after this when I'm not in too much of a hurry."

"I don't blame you," Sam agreed.

His eyes, wandering around the big salon, came back again and again to the adjoining table. There sat the three people who had crossed over the gangway just ahead of him. The academic-appearing man with the glasses perched on his big beak of a nose sat to the left of the girl and the young man with whom he had come aboard.

The young man wore rimless nose glasses also. Dressed in a dark blue conservative suit, he had the same severe, precise look on his pale face. He ate gravely, sparingly.

But it was the girl who really held Sam's attention. She was as different from the other two as night from day, as spring from autumn, as a saucy, sweet-pea blossom from a staid, dignified coxscomb. Nothing scholarly about her, nor conservative nor queer.

Her face was a small oval, a bit irregular here and there, but saucy, warm, changing and alive. She smiled readily.

Sam caught himself watching for her smile. It had the effect of sunlight in a shadowy nook. For, despite her good looks, her faultless clothes, her saucy features, there was about her a background of strain and worry. The smiles which crossed her face did not entirely hide it.

The man from Texas noticed his glance. "Nice-looking girl. Know her?" he asked.

"No."

"Hope I get a chance to," his companion said cheerfully.

The older man beside her had noticed their glances. He frowned, said something to his two companions.

The younger man adjusted his glasses and stared. The girl looked with quick interest, then dropped her eyes as Sam did not look away. From the manner of their conversation Sam gathered they were talking about him.

Noting their places at the table, he hunted up the dining steward after the meal and asked who they were.

The steward's list gave the older man as Professor Junius B. Young. The girl was Miss Dorothy Young. The young man was a Mr. Martin Seldon.

The names told Sam nothing. He thanked the steward and walked on, filing their names in his mind.

A FEW minutes later he met Holbrook in the smoking room. The Texan buttonholed him and suggested a friendly poker game with two other men with whom he had become acquainted.

Holbrook introduced them—a Mr. Smith, plump, easy-going, affable; and a man named Brinker, who had the virile grace of a football player. Brinker seemed about thirty-four. His glance was direct, his handshake hearty, his manner brimming with casual shipboard friendliness.

"I'm not much of a poker player," Brinker said, smiling. "Penny-ante will do for me if no one has any objections."

Penny-ante it was.

Sam reserved judgment as long as the stakes stayed that low. But from the moment he saw Brinker riffle the cards Sam watched him and the affable Mr. Smith. Strangers they might be to each other, but they handled cards like experts. Holbrook played poker in the best traditions of his state—casually, grimly.

Not one of the three had ever met before by their own statements; yet Sam Hastings became aware of a faint, increasing belief that there was a bond between them. He played watchfully, trying to puzzle it out.

If they had lied about not knowing one another previously, they had inveigled him into the game for a reason. He was not a man to appeal to traveling card experts. Such men were interested only in money.

The stakes remained low. Sam won a dollar or two. It was very puzzling. Then, gradually, he began to realize they were pumping him with aimless questions, drawing him out as to who he was. In a spirit of perversity, Sam gave them misinformation as fast as they applied for it.

An hour passed. Sam tired of it, turned in his chips and departed. No one made a serious attempt to keep him in the game. It was as if they had found out all they hoped to and were equally glad to see the game end.

Sam went to his cabin wondering who had been put with him. So far he had failed to see his cabin mate. Unlocking the door, Sam stepped in to find the lights burning and a towering figure standing there opening a package of cigarettes.

The man said, "Good evening," and stared with a curious, unblinking gaze.

Sam said, "Good evening," looked at his bags.

He had caught, as he opened the door, the barest glimpse of the other man turning away from the bags. One of the straps of the gladstone was out of the buckle. It had been fastened securely when Sam last saw it. He remembered fastening it.

Sam's eyes narrowed as he closed the door.

"What were you doing in my bags?" he asked slowly.

"What is that?"

"What do you mean by opening my luggage?"

It was not a nice situation. You hated to accuse a man of being a thief. But Sam was certain his unexpected entrance had caught the man closing the bag. He had to look up to meet the frown his question evoked.

The man was a good ten years older, as strange and unusual a personality as Sam had ever laid eyes on. He towered in the small cabin, powerful in chest and shoulders. But his face made him. Impassive, it had been hewed out on a grand and reckless scale. Chin, mouth, big nose, ears —even the heavy blond brows over beetling eye ridges. And from those dominating eye ridges the forehead swept up to a high smooth dome that was completely bare of hair.

Strange, startling at first sight, that smooth skull did not lose its effect as you looked at it. It gave wisdom and a faint sinister cast to the big craggy face below it.

But the voice was strangely even, smooth and free from emotion despite the frown which bent the craggy blond eyebrows.

"A nice start for a voyage—no?" said the other calmly. "Why should I be looking in your bags, young man?" He lighted a cigarette with a sweeping flick of a lighter and drew deep and long, filling his big lungs.

"I'd like to know," Sam answered curtly.

"A mistake you have made, young man. Shall we settle it now? In your bags I am not interested." He twisted the sentences around as if used to expressing himself in another tongue.

You couldn't make much headway against an attitude like this. But you might wait and keep your eyes open. Sam smiled.

"Perhaps I was mistaken," he admitted. "Sorry. Suppose we forget it? No use spoiling a pleasant voyage with misunderstanding."

The heavy blond brows smoothed out. The other smiled too, held out a massive, powerful hand.

"So! It is good to hear this. I am Otto Kunz."

"Hastings is the name," said Sam as his hand was engulfed and crushed by a hearty handshake.

"Perhaps," said Kunz, beaming, "you will do me the favor of having a bottle of beer in the bar?"

"Glad to," Sam agreed.

THE beer was good. Kunz was cordial, talkative. He seemed to be trying to erase any lingering suspicion. He volunteered that he was a chemist for a big eastern chemical firm. He was taking the boat to New York as the most pleasant way of passing several days of spare time.

"And you, Mr, Hastings?" Kunz beamed, turning the cool glass slowly in his big fingers. "In what business are you? I have been puzzling to myself. A little habit of mine, wondering what my neighbors do in life."

Sam repeated the story he had told about himself at the poker game. Too much interest was being shown in his background. What he haid was not true, but he was unabashed about it, espe-

cially in the light of Professor Junius Young's startling accusations.

"I'm from the Coast," he said. "California. I'm in the chicken and egg business. Run a big poultry ranch."

"Ah—chickens—eggs. *Hmmmm.* An interesting occupation. It should be possible by the right feeding of chemicals to double the food value of an egg."

"Doubtless," Sam agreed hastily.

He was wondering if there wasn't the slightest bit of mockery behind Kunz's broad smile, as if the man had his own opinion about that poultry ranch in California. But, if Kunz had, he said nothing about it. When the glasses were emptied, he crushed Sam's hand again and departed with the light shining from his big dome-like head.

Sam went out on deck.

On the boat deck couples were in the shadows talking in low tones. It was peaceful, quiet, serene there. Sam should have felt the same, but he didn't. For some reason he was nervous, restless. A strange feeling of mystery was closing about him. Forces beyond his control and his knowledge were working. In some way he had been caught in a strange current of events. He wanted the answer. Yet, growing in him was a conviction that the answer would not be pleasant for Sam Hastings.

Professor Junius Young had acted like a man verging on desperation.

Holbrook and his two casual acquaintances, Smith and Brinker, were an enigma. Their interest in a total stranger was inexplicable.

Otto Kunz could not be dismissed lightly. Despite his beaming smile and handshake, and his attempt to be cordial, Sam was convinced the man had opened that gladstone bag. Kunz was not a common thief.

Staring over the rail, Sam found himself wondering whether chance or design had given him Kunz as a cabin mate. A judicious use of money might have made it possible at the last minute. A further use of money might uncover that fact if it had happened. Sam decided to look into that angle.

A couple strolled past. Without turning his head, Sam noted them both staring at him. One was the pale, studious Martin Seldon. The other was Dorothy Young. They were walking arm in arm. They passed on and did not look back.

Sam lighted a fresh cigarette. He was staring down at the phosphorescent water sliding endlessly past the ship's side when a voice spoke at his elbow. A woman's voice.

"I must see you privately for a few moments, Mr. Hastings."

CHAPTER TWO

Introduction to Murder

IN the semi-darkness of the boat deck he saw that she was almost as tall as he was. Her voice was tense but crisp. With an effortless, unhurried swing she walked beside him to the dark shadows at one end of a life-raft near the stack. Sam knew he had never seen her before.

He asked calmly: "How did you know my name?"

"I looked it up on the passenger list."

"Why?"

"Because I wondered what name you were using."

She said it in a way that suggested he was not using his right name.

"Cigarette?"

"No thank you," she refused.

Sam lighted one, holding the match so he got a good look at her face. She was not pretty; neither was she bad-looking. Her features had strength, force, symmetry, and still were plain. Her small hat had no particular style. Her suit was

just another suit. But. speaking, she was a woman of individuality. She had something which made her stand out. Being a mere man, Sam accepted it; did not try to analyze it.

"You don't think Hastings is my right name?" he challenged.

"I'm sure it is not," she replied calmly.

"But it is."

"Have it your own way," she said impatiently. It was plain she still did not think so.

"Let's have it. What do you want to see me about?" Sam said.

And her reply was startling—stunning—the last thing he would have looked for. She said: "You're to be killed before this trip is over!"

"Killed?"

"Yes. Murdered." She spoke with calm certainty.

Sam laughed softly. It was the only thing he could think to do. "I doubt it," he said. "Why should anyone murder me? I haven't any enemies."

"You don't need to fence," she replied with a touch of annoyance. "I have risked my own safety to warn you."

She so obviously believed it, Sam stopped smiling. "Who are you?" he questioned.

"It doesn't matter, does it? Call me Miss Fairchild. And I suggest you forget me as soon as I leave you. It will be the kindest thing you can do."

"Why," said Sam, "are you warning me?"

Her impatience flashed at him. "Because I think you're a fool," she said. "You're either blind—or reckless and more of a fool than ever. Good night."

She turned away. He caught her arm.

"Just a minute. Why am I a fool? Who's going to kill me?"

"I don't know," she answered calmly. "It doesn't really matter, does it?"

"I suppose not," Sam admitted with a chuckle. "Except that it's always convenient to know who's going to kill you."

She said stiffly: "There are men and women aboard who may do it. I've done all I can for you. Good night."

This time Sam let her go. His mind was a welter of conflicting emotions. He stood there in the shadows for long minutes, smoking, trying to make some sense out of what he had just heard.

She had taken it for granted that Hastings was not his right name. She was certain he was someone else, someone important enough to be killed. The chill Sam Hastings felt was not from the wind. He suddenly believed her. He felt on the defensive—defenseless.

And he remembered that he had forgotten to ask her the most important thing—whom he was supposed to be.

A quick search of the boat deck failed to discover her. Sam decided to locate her cabin and ask her. He was standing at the moment almost exactly where they had been talking. The breeze was cool on his face. Out of a nearby ventilator drifted the throbbing hum of the engine room. In the dining salon the orchestra was playing; they were dancing down there. Peaceful sounds, and without warning they were blotted out by the vicious zip of some object past his ear. It smacked the smoke stack smartly.

Sam ducked involuntarily, swearing aloud. He had heard no other sound but that deadly *burr*. It had come from behind, from among the nest of boats and rafts aft of the stack.

He looked that way—and something struck him a terrible blow on the side of the head. He dropped to the deck, rolled on his side and lay motionless.

SAM first became aware of the pain in his head. He groaned, decided again on sobriety for a long time. Then the lift and fall of the deck, the vibrations of

the engine, his cramped position on the hard deck brought him back to reality with a rush. He struggled to a sitting position, blinking at the stars, the towering shaft of the smoke stacks, the life raft in front of him.

He remembered then and felt his head. Through the hair just above his left ear something had plowed a raw, angry furrow.

The ship's bell struck six times—eleven o'clock. The last Sam remembered was a little after nine o'clock. He had been unconscious almost two hours.

By a fraction he had missed death. The Fairchild girl had been right—tragically right. She'd have to tell more now. Still a bit wobbly, Sam went below to study the passenger list.

No Fairchild was on it.

"What cabin does Miss Fairchild have?" Sam asked at the purser's office.

"We have no one on board by that name," the young man told him promptly.

"There must be a mistake in your list."

"I'm afraid not. If you can describe the lady, perhaps I can place her. Is she alone or with someone?"

"I can't tell you," Sam had to admit.

"What does she look like?"

"An inch or so shorter than I am," Sam described vaguely. "Her hair is—er—darned if I know. She's not so pretty, but her voice is rather unusual."

The assistant purser smiled slightly.

"Afraid I can't give you much on that description, sir. At breakfast you'll probably see her if she's aboard."

Sam studied the passenger list again. A dozen unmarried women were listed. She might even be down under a married name. He noticed the assistant purser glancing at him curiously through the window. His actions were doubtless peculiar. Sam decided to go to bed.

Otto Kunz was asleep, face to the wall, breathing heavily. Sam opened the gladstone for the small revolver he carried.

It was gone.

NOT much use wondering who'd taken the weapon. But why? Had Kunz tried to murder him up there on the boat deck? Sam started to wake the man up, then decided against it. He wanted to see the Fairchild girl again.

He washed the blood out of his hair and applied antiseptic from a small first-aid kit he carried. By rights the ship's doctor should have done it; but that would involve explanation. He was not ready for that yet. Not until he talked with her.

Sam went to sleep without fear. If Kunz meant to kill him, it wouldn't be here in the cabin.

It seemed he had only been asleep a few minutes when a loud knocking on the door awoke him. Kunz was already up, grumbling. The big man snapped on the light, stood there hurriedly girdling a dressing gown around his big frame.

"Such a business!" Kunz growled as he unlocked the door and opened it, snapping: "What is?"

The assistant purser stood in the corridor with a seaman. He apologized to Kunz. "The captain wants to see Mr. Hastings," he said.

"The captain?"

"Yes."

Kunz turned. "You hear that?" he said.

Sam was already up, reaching for his trousers.

"What does the captain want with me?" he queried.

The purser stared at him without answering, walked in past Kunz without apology and looked about the stateroom. The wash basin caught his eye. He lifted the blood-smeared towel which Sam had used on his head.

"What made this?" he questioned curtly.

"What the devil's the matter with you?" Sam countered irritably. "This is a queer time for questions?" Looking at his watch, Sam snorted: "Two thirty! A damn queer time!"

"Quite," the young man agreed without emotion. "Please get your clothes on and come with me." It was an order, not a request.

"And if I don't?" said Sam.

"I think you'd better."

Face flushing with anger, Sam dressed hurriedly.

OTTO KUNZ had kept silent while they talked. Now the big man pointed a finger at the towel and grunted, "That was clean when I went to bed. Did you have an accident?"

Sam replied shortly: "You might call it that."

"I do not understand?"

"Who's asking you to?" Jerking a knot tight in his shoe lace, Sam stood up. "Let's go," he said.

The assistant purser walked in front. The seaman brought up the rear. He was a big fellow who lumbered along watchfully. He looked as if he might be able to cope with almost any kind of trouble.

Sam snorted: "You two are acting as if I were a prisoner. What is this, anyway?"

The answer was as noncommittal as ever.

"The captain will tell you, Mr. Hastings."

"Damn the captain!" Sam felt that way.

They crossed over to the other side of the ship, went down to C Deck, aft along the starboard corridor. Near the back half a dozen people were standing in front of a door talking in low undertones. Tension, excitement gripped them all. They stared, opened a way; and the assistant purser knocked on the door.

It opened slightly, then a bit wider. To Sam he said: "Come in."

Sam recognized the captain at once. His name was Fogg. Captain Fogg. He was the stocky, taciturn skipper of fiction. He was grim now.

The second man in the cabin was the ship's surgeon—a bluff, jolly-looking man when Sam had seen him last, with a round red nose and little red veins in his cheeks. He was grave now.

The third man was the chief officer, tall and spare, gravely courteous in his brief appearances among the passengers. Now he was graver than ever.

The assistant purser, together with Sam and the three others, almost filled the small cabin when the door was closed. Sam saw only the three at first; their faces, their manner as they looked at him. And then, past them, he saw the lower berth.

Sam Hastings said: *"Good God!"*

It was a stricken exclamation, thunderstruck, a bit sick and full of horror. The last thing he had expected to see lay there on the bunk—very limp—very still. A young woman. Her face was waxen against the pillow. The knife which had killed her was still there in her chest. Blood had trickled down her side, staining the white bed-spread red, very red.

CHAPTER THREE

The Searchlight Goes Out

SHE was dead. That much could be seen instantly. Death—in violence—sudden and final. She must have struggled a little for her hands were clenched and the left shoulder strap of her blue silk pajamas was torn. But only a little. Death had come quickly.

No one spoke.

"Who did that?" Sam asked, looking about at the other four who crowded in the little cabin with him.

He sensed their suspicion before anyone spoke. Captain Fogg's grim reply furnished an answer.

"We're trying to find out," Captain Fogg said. "Your name is Hastings?"

"It is."

"You know this young woman?" The captain indicated the berth with a muscular hand.

"I can't say that I do. Matter of fact I've never laid eyes on her before."

"Her name on the passenger list is Miss Nita Calhoun."

"Why tell me?" Sam said coolly.

Captain Fogg said brusquely: "In her bag we found a Washington, D. C. department-store bill addressed to Miss Nadine Fairchild. Mr. Dyer, the assistant purser, tells me that you were trying very hard to get information about Miss Fairchild late yesterday evening. You were certain she was aboard. Your actions, he has given me to understand, were most unusual. I'll want quite a bit of explanation from you, since you now deny knowing her."

Fairchild! Sam cast a startled look at the berth. He felt his face getting red. Fairchild—the girl who had warned him up there on the boat deck. But—but—

"This isn't she!" Sam said aloud before he thought.

Captain Fogg's grim face sharpened.

"Isn't who?" he demanded.

"Why—er—Miss Fairchild."

"I thought you said you didn't know this young woman?"

"I don't. That's why I know it isn't Miss Fairchild," Sam explained, and cursed himself for saying anything at all.

"I suppose," Captain Fogg said with gruff sarcasm, "there's no connection between this young woman and the envelope addressed to Miss Fairchild?"

"How do I know? Don't ask me. I met a Miss Fairchild up on the boat deck this evening," Sam explained. "At least she told me her name was Fairchild. I wanted to see her again, and quite naturally looked on the passenger list to find her cabin. When I didn't see her name there, I asked for her. If there's anything queer about that, you'll have to point it out. This young woman is not the one I talked to."

The first officer said: "Was that the first time you'd ever seen her?"

"It was."

"And you mean to say she gave you, a stranger, what was apparently her right name, when she's evidently sailing under another name?"

"I told you what happened."

"What time were you talking to this woman who called herself Fairchild?"

"A little after nine."

"Dyer says you were asking about her a few minutes after eleven. Where were you until then?"

"Up on the boat deck."

The mate smiled sourly.

"I don't think so," he said. "I was walking about that deck for a full three-quarters of an hour before and after ten. You weren't there then. I'll take my oath on it."

DYER cleared his throat after a moment. "I found a damp towel stained with blood in his cabin, Captain. The man in there with him says it was not there earlier in the evening when he went to sleep. Mr. Hastings used it and got the blood on it sometime late tonight."

Captain Fogg said. "*Hrrrmmph*—fresh blood on a towel! I suppose you have an explanation for that, Mr. Hastings?"

"You suppose right, Captain. It came from this wound in my head. I washed it out and put antiseptic on it before I turned in."

All three of them looked at his head. The surgeon exclaimed: "This is a nasty

place. It should have been dressed. Why didn't you come to me? How did you get it?"

"I didn't come to you," said Sam, "because it was late and it seemed all right until morning. I got it up on the boat deck. Someone shot at me. I lay there unconscious until a few minutes before eleven. I was in the shadows near the stack where a man would have to stumble over me to see me."

"Mr. Kirk, were there any reports of a shot this evening?" the captain demanded.

"No, sir."

"I didn't hear any either," Sam admitted. "But I heard a bullet pass my ear and hit behind me. The second one creased my head. Almost killed me. I've been thinking about it. One of these new air pistols seems to be the answer. They don't make any noise—and yet they're accurate and capable of killing a man. There's a chance, if you have the place searched now, that you'll find the first bullet where it fell after hitting the smokestack."

"Mr. Kirk, have one of your men take a flashlight and search the deck around the base of the stack," the captain ordered.

And as the mate stepped out, Captain Fogg said brusquely: "Why didn't you make a report about this at once, if it happened?"

Sam sighed.

"Because I wanted to see this Miss Fairchild before I did. The one I was talking to, I mean. She had just warned me that an attempt would be made to kill me," Sam explained rather desperately.

The more he talked the worse it sounded; and he had to admit that this last sounded pretty wild. Captain Fogg evidently thought so.

"If you'd never seen this young woman before, by what stretch of the imagination can you claim she warned you that someone would try to kill you? Have you an enemy aboard?"

"I can't think who; but I seem to have."

"You didn't know her, yet she knows you and knew enough about your business to warn you, as you claim. And yet she gave you the name of Fairchild."

"Right."

The captain snorted. Even the surgeon smiled a bit skeptically.

The assistant purser returned with the damp, blood-stained towel. Finger smears were plainly visible on it, as if bloody hands had been hurriedly wiped clean.

"If I'd had blood on my hands from that knife," Sam said emphatically, "And if I'd wiped them clean on that towel, I'd have had sense enough to pitch the towel over the rail. You don't think, if there was murder on my conscience, I'd go to sleep with incriminating evidence around, do you? I'd be a damn fool."

"I don't think, Mr. Hastings. I'm going by the evidence," the captain said shortly. "Your story is fantastic. It would be laughed out of any court. Who are you, anyway? Why are you making this trip? Do you know anyone else aboard?"

"No one. I'm making the trip because it seemed like a good idea. Hastings is my right name. I'm a member of the staff of the *San Francisco Tribune.* You can check on that. I write a daily column called the *Searchlight.*"

"Mr. Dyer, get a radiogram off to the *San Francisco Tribune* and check those statements," the captain ordered. "The reply should be here the first thing in the morning."

The captain looked at the berth again.

"Did you ever see this dagger before?" he asked.

SAM had been looking at the knife as he was cross-examined. The handle was long, slender, slightly curved, appar-

ently of old ivory. The blade was invisible; but judging by the handle it was long, thin and sharp.

"I've never seen it before," he said.

He didn't know whether he was believed or not. It didn't matter much. Nothing else was believed.

"Who found her?" he asked. "Or is it a secret?"

Captain Fogg frowned. He seemed to consider the remark out of place.

"She was discovered by the young woman who has this cabin with her," he said. "A Miss Chase. She stayed up late. When she came in she found this girl dead. It was a bad shock. The nurse is taking care of her now."

"Were they traveling together?" Sam asked.

The captain shrugged his lack of knowledge.

The lanky first officer opened the door and stepped in. He was rolling something between the fingers of his right hand.

"I went up on the boat deck myself," he said to the captain. "This was lying about a yard away from the base of the stack."

He held it out in the palm of his hand, a small piece of lead, flattened and smashed by a hard impact. But enough shape remained to indicate that it had been a little leaden air-pistol pellet. Sam had seen them before.

"I found the spot on the stack where it hit too," the mate continued. "About the height of a man's head it was. And on the deck, about where this man claims he was lying unconscious, there were several blood smears. Looks like he was telling the truth about that."

"Forty truths about that wouldn't make the rest of his story sound reasonable," the captain said testily. "Damn the whole business anyway! I'm a ship's captain, not a detective. If there was any chance of the company allowing it, I'd put back and turn the whole matter over to the police. But I've got to go on to New York; and I'll be expected to turn up there with some facts to act on. If this man is guilty of murder, I want to know it. He might kill someone else. There'll be enough hell raised about this, without risking further trouble among the passengers. Everyone aboard will have the facts before breakfast is over. They'll have to be assured we're doing everything we can, and that everyone else aboard is safe."

"And so you try to pin this on me," Sam said coldly. He thrust his chin out. "I'll do a little talking now. Watch your step, Captain, if you don't want a suit for damages."

"You may go now," the captain growled at Sam.

Sam was still angry as he shouldered through the little group before the door and walked back to his stateroom. The light was off. Kunz was sound asleep again, snoring gently.

Fifteen minutes later Sam was asleep too. In the morning they'd know who he was. He'd be cleared on a lot of things—and there would be four days left to dig to the bottom of this mystery. And to find, Sam resolved before he went to sleep, the girl who had called herself Miss Fairchild. He had liked her. She had done her best for him—a stranger. And yet she had helped to ensnare him in a mystery which grew more involved by the minute.

KUNZ had already left the cabin when Sam awoke in the morning. But then, Sam thought a trifle sourly as he waited in line for his bath, Kunz hadn't been tangled up in a murder mystery the night before. He had probably slept with a clear conscience—in spite of the fact that he had evidently stolen Sam's revolver.

Before Sam went in to breakfast he was aware of the tension which had fallen

over the ship. The passengers were talking about the death, speculating, casting furtive glances at one another. You saw it, you sensed it—suspicion covertly spreading over the decks and through the corridors.

Death had stolen aboard and stalked among them. Violence had laid a grisly hand on the peace of the voyage. Murder had been done. A beautiful woman had died to the brutal bite of cold steel. Even now the murderer was moving among them; undetected and unsuspected.

Breakfast, for those who were at the table when Sam ate, was not marked by any great heartiness of appetite. The killing seemed to be the general topic of conversation, so quickly had the news flashed from person to person.

"Pretty bad last night, wasn't it?" Holbrook said to Sam.

And the dowager-like woman across the table overheard the remark, shuddered visibly and spoke with heated frankness.

"A perfectly ghastly occurrence, if you ask me! I've already asked the captain to put back to New Orleans and let me go ashore! He refuses. And yet he is forced to admit he doesn't know who killed that young woman! He's taking us on, helpless, with the murderer among us! It might be any one of us!"

Holbrook laughed in his easy way and looked around the table.

"It might be any of us at that," he remarked.

The dowager-like lady—whose brassy stare and belligerent manner were beginning to get on Sam's nerves—sniffed.

"I understand a man was questioned about it last night. One of the stewardesses was telling me."

Sam wasn't sure whether her eyes went to him or not. He didn't much care at the moment as he looked over to the next table. Professor Junius Young was not in his seat. His daughter was pale, visibly shaken, without much appetite.

Her companion, the staid young Selton, did not bother to turn his glance away when Sam looked at him. The look on Selton's face struck Sam Hastings with something akin to a shock. The man's thin-lipped, tight mouth had on it for an instant a slight, sneering, knowing smile.

"Now what the devil's on his mind?" Sam asked himself with a surge of anger for which he could not entirely account. The anger did not abate a moment later when he turned his head quickly and surprised a thoughtful stare from Holbrook.

The Texan had seen Selton's look—and seemed to have something on his mind also.

So far this morning Sam had seen nothing of the girl who had called herself Miss Fairchild. But she was aboard. She couldn't stay hidden the whole trip. He'd find her, of course.

Meanwhile the Miss Chase who had discovered the body might be able to tell him something. He went below to her cabin. The door was locked. No one answered his knock.

A white-clad stewardess came along the passage as he knocked a second time. She eyed him with more than ordinary attention.

"I'm looking for Miss Chase," Sam said to her. "Can you tell me where she is?"

The stewardess nodded. "Miss Chase has been assigned to another cabin, sir. C Ten, on the other side of the ship. I believe she is in there now. Her breakfast was sent in to her a little while ago."

Sam thanked her, went to the new cabin. A woman's voice said: "Come in."

Sam opened the door and stepped in.

The next moment he started to back out as a cry of fright greeted him.

"It's all right!" Sam said hastily. "I only wanted to ask you a few questions."

She had started up from the pillow on which she had been reclining. The back of her hand was across her mouth now; her eyes were wide with fright as she stared at him.

"It's all right," Sam said again, giving her his most reassuring smile.

Her hand slowly came down from her mouth. She gathered a frilly negligée together across her bare breast.

"What do you want?" she questioned uncertainly. "I thought you were the stewardess. Who—who are you?"

"My name," said Sam, "is Hastings. I'm one of the passengers. I wanted to ask you a few questions about the girl who occupied the other cabin with you."

"Oh—I don't want to talk to you! I haven't anything to say! Go away!"

"Please," Sam urged. "It's very important to me."

"I haven't anything to say!" she repeated with a rising note of protest and hysteria in her voice. "They've asked me so many questions now I don't know what I'm saying! I've had about all I can stand! Go away or I'll ring and have them make you!"

SHE had flung her feet over the edge of the berth. She was a blonde, all white and pink. Pretty too. But darkish circles lay under her long-lashed eyes. She looked tired and wan, as if she hadn't slept much. At the moment she seemed near the breaking point.

Sam delayed leaving. He spoke as persuasively as possible.

"I dislike this, Miss Chase. I'll go in a second, if you won't help me. But how would you like to be accused of murder and have the one person who might possibly help you refuse to do so?"

That caught her interest.

"Who—who is accused of murder?" she asked, calming down a little.

"I may be. They are suggesting that I might have committed the crime last night. I was asking for a Miss Fairchild earlier in the evening, and because they found a letter in her bag addressed to a Miss Fairchild, they've made it pretty bad for me."

She said: "I see. They asked me about that letter too. What is it you want with me?"

"I'd like to know anything you can tell me about her."

"Nothing, I never saw her before we were assigned to the same cabin. She told me her name was Miss Calhoun. We only spoke a few words together."

"Did you see her talking with anyone else?"

"No." Her long-lashed eyes were gravely direct and sincere as she added: "I'm afraid I can tell you nothing at all. The captain has asked me that and a lot more. I simply don't know a thing. It's—it's horrible. My whole trip is spoiled. I only want to forget about it."

And Sam decided she must be telling the truth.

"Thank you," he said. "I'm sorry to have troubled you. I think perhaps it's helped me some just to make sure you know nothing."

She knit the thin line of her eyebrows.

"I don't understand," she said uncertainly.

"Perhaps I don't either," Sam smiled; and he left her on that, stepping out into the passageway.

For an instant Sam halted, his hand on the door knob. He had almost walked into Otto Kunz. The big fellow was startled, thrown off guard for a moment; then Kunz's big, craggy face broke into a smile.

"Ah—fine morning, no?" he said, and walked on down the passage, his bald head hidden by a checkered cloth cap which looked curiously small and incongruous atop his huge figure.

Sam Hastings walked the other way thoughtfully. Kunz, he was ready to swear, had been on the point of stopping at that door himself. Kunz was interested in Miss Chase.

Sam hastily revised his opinion of her. If there was anything between her and Kunz, she must know more than she had admitted; and suddenly Sam began to wonder if Kunz might not know something about the murder.

The young assistant purser hailed him on B Deck a minute later.

"I say, I've been looking all over for you."

"I haven't been looking for you."

Unruffled, the young man said: "The captain wants you."

"What, again?"

"Reply to that radiogram last night, I think. He's on the bridge."

"I've been wondering when it'd get here," Sam said, relieved. "I guess this ends the nonsense."

The assistant purser smiled crookedly at him, walked with him up to the sacrosanct bridge. Captain Fogg was standing stiffly in the port wing—in the full majesty of uniform and cap. He turned, frowning as the two came up to him.

"That will do, Dyer," he dismissed the assistant purser; and when the young man departed the captain drew a radiogram from his coat pocket.

"What have you to say to this, Mr. Hastings?" he demanded shortly.

The captain's manner was anything but reassuring. Sam read the typed message.

J. T. FOGG MASTER
SS ILLOA AT SEA
SAM HASTINGS NOT ON PAYROLL OF SAN FRANCISCO TRIBUNE STOP HAVE AUTHENTIC INFORMATION FROM HASTINGS HIMSELF THAT HE IS EN ROUTE SOUTH AMERICA.
SIGNED W. T. ZOOKS
MANAGING EDITOR TRIBUNE

CHAPTER FOUR

Blood on the Envelope

SAM HASTINGS felt a sudden sinking in the pit of his stomach, and bewilderment and indignation.

"South America!" he choked. "He's crazy! How could I be on my way to South America when I'm here? I never sent them any information that I was going to South America. I—"

Sam stopped there. Back in his subconscious mind, memory stirred. That little night club in the French Quarter took shape again. He recalled the glee with which a telegram had been drafted to Zooks.

He remembered with another sickening feeling what that telegram had said.

Zooks had received it. Zooks had promptly fired him. Zooks now was ready to swear Sam Hastings was headed for South America.

"It's all a mistake, Captain. I can explain this."

Sam was aware he was speaking feverishly. He felt that way.

"You'd better," the captain assured him coldly.

"You see, I am Hastings."

"You said that last night."

"I wired them from New Orleans that I was going to South America. That's why this radiogram says so. I wasn't supposed to go, you see. Zooks evidently fired me when he heard it."

"Of course," Captain Fogg assented curtly.

It was plain he didn't believe a word of it.

"Damn it, man! I'm telling you the truth!" Sam exploded. "Send him another radiogram! I'll pay for it! Tell him I insist I'm aboard this boat. Tell him I'm gathering material for the column. Tell him I left my flatbottomed briar pipe in

the right-hand top drawer of my desk; and my black tobacco pouch and a new typewriter ribbon are in the same drawer. If that won't identify me, nothing will!"

Captain Fogg lost some of his hostility.

"It should," he admitted. "I'll wire that and request an answer. I'm as anxious to get this point settled as you are Mr.—er—Hastings. Meanwhile"—Sam wondered if he really heard grim sarcasm there—"you can't get off the ship. Make yourself comfortable."

"I will," Sam said coolly. "And while you're turning up information, I'd like to report the theft of a revolver from one of my bags sometime yesterday."

"A revolver?" Captain Fogg snorted.

"A revolver, Captain. A Smith and Wesson, thirty-two calibre. I can identify it with my initials, SH, scratched on the frame in front of the cylinder."

"*Hummmmph!* Why did you bring a revolver aboard, Mr. Hastings?"

"I usually carry one. It was in my luggage. You couldn't expect me to leave it ashore when there was no good reason for doing so."

The captain waved that argument aside impatiently.

"Do you suspect anyone, Mr. Hastings?"

"If I was suspecting anyone, I'd name Kunz, the other chap in my cabin."

"Want to make a charge against him?"

"No. That's up to you."

"Why this man?"

"Forget it," Sam said wearily. "But just remember I've reported it."

THE *S S Illoa* plowed through the smiling Gulf all that day, white paint shining, brasswork gleaming. It seemed the height of absurdity that fear could raise its head in that huge bulk. Yet fear was there.

Sam Hastings became increasingly aware of it as he searched diligently that morning and afternoon for Miss Fairchild. She was aboard he knew, yet he found no trace of her. That little mystery in itself began to be knotty, and doubly so late in the afternoon when he entered his stateroom.

Kunz—stretched full length on his berth—reading, looked up.

"I put on your pillow an envelope which was slipped under the door," Kunz said, gesturing lazily with a big arm.

The envelope, ship's stationery, bore Sam's name in neat firm strokes. It was unsealed. The single sheet of paper inside held a brief message—

Keep your eyes open. They're watching you. Miss F.

The envelope had not been sealed at all. Sam wondered why. She should have thought of that. He wondered too if Kunz had read it.

Considering the revolver, it was a safe bet that he had. Sam pocketed the warning, shrugged.

"Strange things happen aboard ships."

"Strange," Kunz agreed, still with that slight smile. He reminded Sam of a big lazy cat taking its ease. A cat whose claws were momentarily sheathed, whose purr was contented—and yet no less dangerous because of it.

It was a maddening, helpless feeling. Cooped up on the ship, there was no chance of escaping it. Four days or more lay ahead. Four days of danger. Four nights which might bring death, as the preceding night had almost done.

Sam paced the deck and thought it over. On one hand he was being suspected of murder—on the other he was being threatened with it. For his own welfare there was only one answer—break the mystery, break it quickly, completely.

It was in the hour after the receipt of that note that Sam Hastings shed his identity as a newspaper man and turned detective.

His first move took him to the captain's quarters. Captain Fogg did not invite him in. Sam stepped in anyway, smiling. The prospect of action made him feel better.

"Hear from that second radiogram?" he asked the captain.

"Not yet. Very queer." The captain made it sound almost like an accusation.

"I can't leave the ship," Sam reminded him cheerfully. "Did you find out who Miss Chase stayed up so late with last night?"

"I did, but it's not public information, Mr. Hastings."

"I'm under suspicion, Captain. I'll have to clear myself, it seems. I want to know."

"Hmmmph!" Captain Fogg grunted, then, grumpily: "If it'll do you any good, she spent the evening with a Mr. Smith. He verifies it. Anything wrong with that?"

Sam smiled blandly.

"I've met Smith. Nice chap. Thank you."

He left with another bit of information to puzzle out. Smith was that plump, easy going, affable man who, with Brinker and Holbrook, had tried to pump him at the card game the evening before. Queer that Smith, like Kunz, should know Miss Chase.

Sam was a trifle cynical about Miss Chase by now. That was how he happened to be abroad on the boat deck after midnight—watching Miss Chase and Martin Seldon. It had been a shock to see them dancing together earlier in the evening. Sam hadn't suspected they knew each other.

Now, after midnight, the two were sitting in deck chairs on the dark boat deck talking in low tones.

Casually, silently, he moved to the other side of the deck and tiptoed up amidships, back of them.

PRACTICALLY all the passengers had retired. Only an occasional seaman made the rounds of the decks. The masthead lights overhead brushed little lazy arcs against the stars.

Sam hadn't forgotten Miss Fairchild's warning. It was his extra vigilance which discovered, as he paused in the shadows, the darker blur of a figure coming furtively after him.

Sam took a quick step over behind a lifeboat and waited.

His pulses were moving faster. He had no weapon. He was sure that he was being followed. The footsteps came so softly he didn't hear them. The dark figure slipped around the bow of the lifeboat—followed the course he had taken.

Sam snapped an arm around its neck, jerked it back off balance, snapped in its ear: "Keep quiet, damn you!"

A startled gasp—a hand caught his arm—and Sam went limp. It was a woman!

She did not scream when he released her neck. But her hand made a quick move to the pocket of the dark coat she was wearing.

Sam reached it first, found a gun, took it. She wrenched away. He caught her arm.

All that in silence.

"Let me go!" she said in a low, furious voice—not the voice of Miss Fairchild. "I'll scream for help!"

"Try it," said Sam under his breath, "and I'll strangle you! Come down on the next deck and let's see what you look like."

She went mutely, seemingly as anxious to keep quiet as he was. When they entered the dim pool of light at the bottom of the companionway stairs, Sam was the one who stared, dumbfounded, into the oval, saucy face of Dorothy Young. She was not smiling now.

"I might have known it was you!" she

burst out indignantly. "I—I think I'll report you to the captain! You're a newspaper man, aren't you?"

Before Sam could answer, a piercing scream rang out from the little lounge where the purser's office was located. Sam was running along the deck toward the entrance when, still screaming, a woman burst out on deck ahead of him, stumbling into the rail.

Sam recognized her before he reached her— the dowager who sat across table from him.

"Stop that yelling!" Sam said gruffly, catching her arm. "What's the matter!"

Her sagging face working, she screamed at him: "He's dead! I saw him! Oh, my God, it was horrible! And then he rushed out at me!"

"Dead? Rushed out at you? Who did that?"

"Oh—oh—oh—oh—"

At Sam's elbow, Miss Young said briskly: "I'll take care of her. Go and see what happened."

The small lounge was dimly lighted and practically deserted. No light was burning behind the big, glossed windows of the purser's office; but when Sam looked through the nearest window the reflected light from the lounge showed the silver painted door of the purser's safe standing wide. A small heap of papers and articles lay on the floor in front of it.

And on the floor near them the young assistant purser lay on his back with his face contorted and his swollen tongue was thrust stiffly out of his mouth.

One look was enough. The assistant purser was dead.

Beyond the windows the door into the office was half open. Sam entered—and almost fell as he stumbled over a second body on the floor. A groan issued from it.

Looking down Sam saw that it was the night watchman who made regular rounds through this part of the ship. The side of his face was bloody. He had been knocked unconscious by a heavy blow on the head. A revolver lay on the floor beside him.

Sam left it there as running steps drew him back to the door.

A seaman had burst into the lounge. Close behind him came a white-coated steward, then a stewardess.

"Get the captain!" Sam snapped at the seaman. "There's been a murder and robbery here!"

"He's comin'!" the seaman panted. "I hammered on his door an' on the mate's. We heard the scream up on the bridge!"

Then people streamed into the lounge, half-clad passengers mostly; startled—fearful—curious. Foremost among them were Miss Chase and Martin Seldon.

Seldon looked at Sam who was standing in the doorway of the office. "What happened?" Seldon demanded.

"Safe robbed."

Seldon had already looked in the office and guessed it. He was strangely agitated.

"Robbed—I wonder what they got? Who did it? Isn't that a body in there on the floor?"

"Assistant purser," Sam told him. "He's dead. I don't know what they got. I don't know who did it. One of the woman passengers discovered it. She did the screaming."

MISS YOUNG entered from the deck with the woman she had been quieting. The biggish woman, freed from fear by the presence of so many people, spoke with shrill excitement.

"When I looked through the window and saw him there on the floor, I had to scream! Something made me! I just couldn't help it!"

Captain Fogg came in hurriedly, buttoning up the front of his coat. He cast one quick look around and made for the

office doorway where Sam was still standing.

"What happened here?" he snapped.

Sam stepped back in the office, motioned the captain in. Switching on a light overhead, Captain Fogg looked around, began to swear salty oaths under his breath.

"It looks to me," Sam guessed, "as if he was forced to open the safe—and then killed so he couldn't identify whoever made him do it."

The captain snarled something under his breath.

"Ever see this before?" he growled, thrusting out the revolver he had picked off the floor.

It had a few strands of hair and some dried blood on the side of the barrel.

"It's mine," Sam said. He wondered if his voice sounded as hollow as he felt. He added: "The one that was stolen. You remember?"

"Yes—you were careful to report it."

Whatever the captain meant by that was lost as the tall, spare chief officer entered, blinking sleepy eyes. But he was alert in a moment however; and when the captain barked: "Get the purser and the doctor!" he went smartly about it.

The doorway was full of passengers; some were edging in the office. The captain waved them out, slammed the door, ignored their faces at the windows.

"You seem to have been one of the first here," he said to Sam; and if the others missed the implication in his voice, Sam didn't.

"Not quite," Sam denied. "I was out on deck with Miss Young when a woman —Mrs. Keenan, I think her name is—looked through one of the windows, saw the body on the floor, screamed and ran out on deck. I heard her—and when I got here found things as you see them."

The door opened. Martin Seldon looked in.

"Will you find out what was taken from the safe, Captain?" he begged earnestly.

"The purser's coming. Did you have something in it?"

"Professor Young had a large sealed manila envelope. Very valuable. I don't see it there on the floor. If it's gone—" Seldon shrugged, turned away without finishing.

The bluff ship's doctor pushed in with an emergency bag. One look, and he said gravely: "Mr. Dyer is dead, Captain." A hasty examination of the other man and he straightened. "May be a concussion. I can't tell for certain here. Send two men for the stretcher and they can bring him along to the hospital."

The purser entered, nervously.

"Dyer was working late," he reported. "He shouldn't have had the safe open. There are the sheets on the desk on which he was working. They don't belong in the safe. And only a gun would have made Dyer open the safe for anyone, I'm sure."

"Check the safe and see if you can discover what was taken," the captain directed. "Look particularly for a manila envelope belonging to Professor Young."

Two seamen came in with a stretcher, loaded the unconscious watchman on it under the doctor's directions and departed. The doctor spent a moment more examining Dyer's body.

"Been dead less than an hour," he decided.

The captain stepped into the doorway and spoke to the now crowded lounge. "Did any of you see the assistant purser around midnight or after?" he asked them.

SEVERAL had seen Dyer a little after eleven. Thereafter most of the passengers had begun to retire. Those who had passed through the lounge later had paid no attention to the office.

One or two thought they had seen the

light burning behind the office windows just before midnight.

Holbrook, the Texan, was talking to Dorothy Young a few feet away. A smile touched Holbrook's tanned face.

"Sure is a Jonah ship, ain't she?" he remarked to Sam. "This young lady was just telling me she was with you when this was discovered."

"Yes," Sam said.

They were near enough to hear Martin Seldon speak to the captain. "Have you checked that manila envelope yet?"

The purser's reply was audible too. "It doesn't seem to be here."

Seldon turned away from the door, biting his lower lip, plainly perturbed.

Sam looked at Dorothy Young from the corner of his eye. The envelope belonged to her father. She must know what Seldon was talking about; yet she showed none of the agitation that Seldon did. Rather she was thoughtful.

And Holbrook's tanned face, off guard for the moment also, was thoughtful too.

In the office the captain was grumbling, growling, issuing orders. But the crest of the excitement was over. Some of the passengers were already moving toward their cabins. Seldon and Miss Chase had left.

Dorothy Young moved toward the deck. Sam followed her; and the door closed behind them on buzzing excitement, new fear, apprehension. She did not openly resent his presence.

"This should make a good story for you," she remarked as they walked slowly forward.

"Perhaps. I'm not after a good story right now. What was in that envelope?"

She did not deny knowledge of it. Coolly she said: "You should know."

"I?"

"You."

"Now we're at it again," Sam sighed. "Why must you make me out a liar every time I open my mouth?"

And she was so free from agitation that she could smile a little at that; the quick warm smile which brought light to her face and made a different person out of her.

"Because," she said calmly, "you seem to be a liar every time you open your mouth. I'm afraid you'll be wasting your time asking me any more questions. Good night. I'm going to bed." She left him there and went toward her cabin without looking back.

Sam lingered at the rail and finished his cigarette; and on sudden impulse started to his cabin. The man who had taken his revolver had murdered Dyer. A surprise visit to Kunz might reveal something.

But Sam was surprised before he got to his cabin. As he started to turn into the port passageway, he caught a glimpse of Martin Seldon stepping out of the cabin.

Sam quickly drew back out of sight. When he looked again, Seldon was not in sight, evidently having crossed over to the starboard side.

And when Sam entered his cabin, which Seldon had left but a few minutes before, the light was out and Kunz was sound asleep. At least the big man lay with his face to the wall snoring gently.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Mysterious Miss Fairchild

BY MORNING Key West lay behind and the ship was making her northing up the Florida coast. No stop was made at Miami to obtain the help of the law, as Sam had rather expected. Captain Fogg was evidently grimly determined to make straight for New York with his tragedy and trouble. Perhaps the captain knew that if he touched shore a goodly number of his passengers would try to

leave the ship, the guilty person or persons among them.

Certainly the tension, as the story reached those who had slept through the trouble the night before, was rising to the breaking point. Fear had really descended over the ship by now; as those aboard accepted the fact that death was not done with them, and there was nothing they could do to get away from it. No prison ever held inmates more firmly than did the steel hull of the *Illoa*. A prison would have been kinder. Death, at least, was barred from the cells.

Something of that was in Captain Fogg's weathered taciturn face when he summoned Sam Hastings to the captain's quarters in midmorning. He came to the point before Sam Hastings had seated himself.

"What do you mean by trying to hoodwink me with your fancy stories, young man? You knew at the time the truth would come out! I've a mind to put you in irons!"

"What the devil are you talking about, Captain?"

Another radiogram was slapped in Sam's hand. Captain Fogg glowered at him while he read it.

PIPE TOBACCO POUCH AND TYPEWRITER RIBBON PURE FABRICATION STOP MAN CALLING HIMSELF SAM HASTINGS UNDOUBTEDLY IMPOSTER STOP SUGGEST STERN MEASURES BE TAKEN STOP SIC SEMPER TYRANNIS
SIGNED WILLIAM T ZOOKS
MANAGING EDITOR TRIBUNE

It was the last straw. Sam consigned Bill Zooks and the rest of the office force —who were undoubtedly in on the radiogram—to depths they probably would never reach.

They knew he was in trouble and were letting him stew in it. All day yesterday they must have deliberately delayed replying; now they were probably laughing and wondering what was happening.

But Captain Fogg wasn't laughing. He bit out: "I don't understand that fancy Latin at the end, but the meaning of the rest is plain enough. You've been lying to me! There's enough evidence against you now to justify locking you up!"

"Try it, Captain, and I'll make you sweat. There's no evidence. I reported my revolver stolen. And I wasn't near the safe while it was being robbed last night."

"That's the only thing that saves you," Captain Fogg informed him grimly. "Miss Young has assured me this morning that you were with her all the time."

"She came and told you?"

"I asked her."

Sam knew he hadn't been with her all the time. She had stretched the truth to help him. Another bit of mystery. The captain was speaking—

"I won't lock you up—yet. But I'm warning you again, you'll be watched. One off-color move and—"

Captain Fogg snapped his fingers loudly and ended the interview by turning away.

It was a merry trip, Sam thought glumly as he departed. What next? Wondering, he paced the deck, trying to fit the scattered bits of the puzzle together. They were maddening, confusing, without sense or pattern.

Kunz and the revolver—the death of the girl—Miss Chase's assertion that she knew nothing—her presence that first night with Smith, who had skillfully tried to pump Sam earlier in the evening—her company the next night with Seldon—the enmity and suspicion of Professor Young, his daughter and Seldon.

The looting of the safe was plain enough, as was the death of the assistant purser. But the stolen envelope and Seldon's anxiety about it did not jibe with

Dorothy Young's lack of anxiety at the same time. Kunz's effort to see Miss Chase the previous day, his walking away when discovered were as mysterious as Seldon's furtive visit to him after the robbery of the safe—and Kunz's bland feigning of sleep immediately after.

The mysterious Miss Fairchild, her warnings and his inability to find any trace of her among the passengers were as fantastic as the attempt on his life. Holbrook, the smiling Texan, and Brinker, were parts of the puzzle.

But none of it made any sense.

The night watchman remained unconscious. Sam stopped the doctor on deck and asked him about the man.

"He may live and he may not," the doctor said a trifle impatiently. "If these questions about his condition continue I'll have to start posting bulletins."

As the doctor started to move on, Sam asked quickly: "Who has been asking questions about him?"

"Half the passenger list."

"Can you give me any names?"

"I can," said the doctor tartly. "Starting with the captain and the mate and continuing through Mrs. Keenan, who discovered him, a Miss Chase and a Miss Young, a Mr. Kunz, a man named Holbrook. Is that enough for you?"

"You win, Doctor. I suppose a chap named Brinker and one named Smith also asked about him?"

"No—only Brinker. There will probably be a dozen more before I get back to my office."

The doctor walked on, clearly a harassed man.

Sam was hardly less harassed himself.

HE STOPPED at the radio room to dispatch a scathing message to Zooks, on the *Tribune,* for what the message was worth. They'd go to any length on the paper to carry out a joke. Sam had been in on a few himself.

Holbrook was in the radio room, sending a message. On the counter before the Texan was one he had evidently just received. Holbrook looked up as Sam entered, pocketed the message quickly. But not before Sam had caught a glimpse of two lines of garbled code letters and figures.

Holbrook's smile was lazy, his Texas drawl bantering as he said: "Not radioing back about the health of the chickens, are you?"

"It's about eggs," Sam grinned. "Great worry—eggs."

"I imagine," Holbrook agreed. "I suppose you feel at times that you're walking on eggs." The Texan's lazy smile was gently sarcastic.

Sam paid for his message and left, wondering about Holbrook. Why should an untraveled Texan be sending coded messages? And receiving them?

Sam found Dorothy Young alone by the rail a quarter of an hour later and stopped beside her. "Thanks for assuring the captain I was with you last night," he said.

"Not at all. I knew you had nothing to do with that, despite your rather peculiar treatment of me on the upper deck. Did you really mean that someone tried to hurt you?"

"Tried to kill me," Sam showed her the furrow in his scalp.

She said, half to herself, "I wonder—" And did not finish it.

"I wonder a lot of things," Sam said. "Last night, for instance, I was wondering what interests your friend Seldon had with Miss Chase? Did they know each other before they came aboard?"

She gave him a long, grave look. "Not that I know of," she admitted. "I was up there for the same reason."

"Does he know Kunz, the other chap in my cabin?"

"No. Why? Have you seen them together?" She was all interest.

"Last night, a few minutes after Seldon went out with Miss Chase, I saw him leaving my cabin. Kunz pretended to be asleep when I went in. And yesterday I caught Kunz on the point of entering Miss Chase's cabin."

Dorothy Young's hand was gripping the rail as she searched his face. In her own face the shadowy fear Sam had detected the first night out was swiftly deepening.

She said abruptly: "Thank you for telling me. I—I must go now." And she went, hurrying as if fear was stalking at her trim little heels.

Sam turned from the rail and almost bumped into Brinker, the big handsome man who had sat in on the first night card game. Brinker had approached almost soundlessly. His shoes were rubber-soled, he moved slowly with almost feline grace.

Smiling, Brinker said: "Pretty girl. Who is she?"

"A Miss Young."

Instead of letting the matter drop, Brinker said: "I saw her face as she walked off. It looked as if you had been giving her some bad news."

"Did it? You can't always tell by faces," Sam said calmly.

Brinker strolled on, and hadn't walked fifty feet along the promenade deck before his legs gave way and he crumpled to a heap on the white scrubbed planks.

IN broad daylight it was uncanny to see a man go down like that. It must be a bad heart, Sam thought, as he ran toward Brinker.

He thought too, as he knelt and looked into the pale, vacant face that Brinker was dead. But he found a pulse in the wrist a moment later. Brinker lived. Indeed his fingers still had enough strength to hold the cigarette which he had been smoking.

Sam spoke to the crowd which had quickly formed around the spot. "Someone help me carry this man to the doctor."

"Here—I will—I will carry him myself." Otto Kunz said that, calmly, masterfully as he knelt on the other side of the limp body.

Kunz reached over, plucked the smoldering cigarette from Brinker's fingers, pinched out the coal and swung Brinker up in his big arms with a grunt. As the crowd gave way before them, Kunz stalked inside with his burden ignoring Sam's suggestion that he share it.

Sam stepped ahead, opened the door to the doctor's office for Kunz, and then closed it against the crowd which had followed them.

The white-clad nurse, sitting at the little desk in the corner, was already on her feet opening an inner door. "Bring him in here," she said with professional calmness.

And, with a feeling of exultation, Sam followed Kunz and the nurse into the inner office. He hadn't recognized her until she spoke. Then he knew.

The mysterious Miss Fairchild had been under his nose all the time, here in the doctor's office.

Kunz had laid his burden on the white metal operating table. "I will go now," he said to the doctor. "Mr. Hastings can tell you what happened. He was there."

"What happened?" the doctor asked Sam, as he caught a stethoscope from his desk.

Sam told him the little he knew. The doctor made a hurried examination, frowning as it progressed. He pushed up one of Brinker's eyelids. "Heart and breathing are sound but slow," he mut-

tered. "You say he was all right when he walked away from you?"

"Perfectly."

"Was he eating anything?"

"Not that I know."

"He seems to be drugged."

"He was smoking a cigarette," Sam said. "You might test the others in his package. He put them in his right hand pocket."

The doctor's hand came out of the pockets empty. His look was sharp, suspicious as he snapped: "There are no cigarettes at all!"

Sam shrugged, conscious that Miss Fairchild was staring at him. "I'll go back and see if they were dropped on the way," he said.

And he went out with the feeling that Miss Fairchild didn't believe that. Sam didn't either. Only one thing could have happened to those cigaretttes. Kunz would know.

And, as if the thought had been pluked out of his mind, a crisp voice spoke at his elbow. "He probably threw them over the side."

Miss Fairchild stood there in her spotless white uniform, breathing a bit swiftly from the haste in which she had followed.

"Probably," Sam agreed. "He also took the cigarette Brinker had been smoking. Put it in his pocket. I didn't think anything about it at the moment. I've combed the ship for you. Never thought I'd find you in there. I've a lot to ask you."

She made an impatient gesture. "Not now. There was a reason for drugging that man. I've got to find it quick."

She knit her forehead in hard thought. And in broad daylight, in the plain nurse's uniform, she was as arresting as she had been at night.

"With Brinker unconscious, a man would have time to go through his cabin easily," Sam suggested.

She was already hurrying off. Sam kept at her side with long strides.

"You left me in the devil of a fix," he protested. "Who's gunning for me, and why? And who am I supposed to be? This ship has turned into a mad house."

She said swiftly: "You're a newspaper man watching Professor Young. Why deny it?"

"I'm not. Why should I watch him?"

Her reply was impatient.

"I know that the man whose place you took was assaulted in New Orleans and sent to the hospital the night before we sailed. Don't play the dummy with such foolish denials. The way you followed Young aboard was enough to show your newness at this sort of thing. If the whole story wasn't given you, it's public property. Read the illustrated article in the current *International Science* in the ship's library."

SAM didn't know where Brinker's cabin was. She did. Stopping him with a hand on his arm, she tiptoed to a door just ahead of them, listened, nodded with satisfaction, stepped back and waited.

"He's in there," she whispered. "We'll wait until he comes out."

From the inner pocket of her uniform she took a small automatic and held it against her side—out of sight. Several passengers walked past while they stood there, but gave them no more than causual looks. They were alone in the corridor when the doorknob of Brinker's cabin turned softly. The door opened quickly, a man stepped hurriedly out.

Miss Fairchild was as astonished as was Sam. The man who emerged was Martin Seldon. She acted without hesitation just the same, stepping quickly forward as Seldon saw them and started violently.

"What are you doing in Mr. Brinker's cabin?" Miss Fairchild demanded crisply.

Seldon stiffened; eyed them frostily through his nose glasses.

"I don't know that it's any of your business," he replied coldly.

Miss Fairchild replied with equal coldness. "It is our business. We were sent here to get some things from Mr. Brinker's cabin. You are evidently a thief. See what he has in his pockets, Mr. Hastings. Take him in the cabin first."

"See here—I'll have you both up before the captain!" Seldon protested indignantly. "Take your hands off me!" The last was to Sam.

"D'you want a punch in the jaw?" Sam grated. "Get in here!" He took a violent pleasure at the chance of action.

Seldon went back in the cabin ahead of them.

The place had been ransacked hastily, no attempt having been made at putting it back in order. Two locked suitcases had been slit open with a sharp razor which lay on the bunk where it had been carelessly tossed.

But in Seldon's pockets Sam found nothing that could have been taken from the cabin. Miss Fairchild was visibly disappointed.

Seldon adjusted his coat precisely, set his glasses firmly on his nose. "I saw what happened and stepped in to look around. I thought at first someone else might have been killed in here."

"And so you shut the door," Sam said.

"I was confused. I didn't think."

Miss Fairchild regarded him shrewdly. "Very well," she said abruptly. "But in the future I would suggest you report a thing like this to the proper authorities."

"I shall," Seldon replied stiffly, "I will leave the report of this to you." His back was erect, angry as he departed.

Miss Fairchild exhaled a breath softly as she looked at Sam and then around the ransacked cabin.

"Of course he did this," she said.

"I thought it would be Kunz."

"So did I," she admitted.

"But why Kunz? Who is the fellow anyway? I think he stole my revolver almost as soon as I was aboard. And it was found in the purser's office last night."

"How they do send lambs to the slaughter," Miss Fairchild said pityingly. "If you still don't know the tie-up, you don't deserve the story from me."

"I'm not after a news story," Sam said desperately.

"And it looks as if you're not going to get it," she said briskly. "I've got to get back. You might look up Kunz and see what he's been doing. But I'm sure it's too late to prove anything on him."

Miss Fairchild walked calmly out.

SAM followed her, half indignant, half angry. He felt like a small boy who has been corrected by the teacher. He wanted to shake her and make her talk—and he knew it would be useless. She was not going to tell him anything. For good reasons he was going to have to shift for himself.

Sam made for the main lounge, went to the magazine rack, found the *International Science Magazine* and took it to a chair.

Two minutes later he was reading, with absorption, a feature article illustrated with pictures and colored drawings. The heading was:

SCIENTIST DISCOVERS PHENOMENAL MYSTERY FUEL
WARFARE MADE MORE EFFICIENT

Professor Junius P. Young, eminent California scientist startled the scientific world recently with a practical demonstration of a new concentrated mystery fuel for internal combustion motors. Before a select group Professor Young ran an ordinary eight-cylinder automobile motor two hours and twenty-seven minutes on one gallon of the new fuel. It was estimated from the throttle-speed that the automobile would have covered a road-distance of approximately ninety miles.

Professor Young admitted that the present cost of seven dollars a gallon for the new mystery fuel, which cannot just at present be manufactured in quantity cheaper than five dollars a gallon, made it prohibitive for the use of the ordinary driver. Its value, the professor stated, would be in warfare where cost would be no consideration. Airplanes could stay in the air five times as long and the range of army motorized units would be quintupled.

"Warfare becomes, at a stroke, vastly more efficient and deadly," Professor Young stated. "For the present the secret of the new fuel is not for sale to anyone."

Sam put the magazine back on the rack thoughtfully.

No need now to wonder what had been in that envelope which had been stolen from the safe. Or to wonder at the professor's attitude toward a newspaper man. The man was traveling with the formula and wanted secrecy. Some news association had detailed a man to check the trip. Professor Young knew it; resented it. Miss Fairchild had said the newspaper man had been attacked and sent to the hospital in New Orleans—and Sam, rushing aboard on the heels of the professor and his party, had inherited the suspicion and ill-will which had been directed against that other newspaper man.

From the moment Sam had stepped aboard he had been in danger. He had landed in the midst of a whirlpool of intrigue. His death at this time was evidently more desirable than publicity.

Sam again felt the impending danger. At the same time he saw a rift in the murk surrounding the big story which was taking shape under his eyes, with no one aboard, except the parties concerned, evidently the wiser. What a story! What a chance to get it—if he wasn't killed first.

MYSTERY, the dread of the unknown, tripled fear. The same danger was there but he was, in a measure, armed against it now. Not entirely. He didn't know against whom to guard. Professor Young, Dorothy Young, and Miss Fairchild could be eliminated.

But Kunz, Martin Seldon, Miss Chase, Holbrook, Brinker, Smith, and possibly others—all were interlocked in a web of suspicious actions that had no sense or meaning and seemed to form no pattern of facts. The very absence of definite clues made it maddening.

But Kunz! Had he killed the assistant purser, robbed the safe, thrust that knife for no apparent reason into the breast of Miss Calhoun? Had Kunz tried to kill Sam with the air pistol up on the boat deck?

Sam found Miss Fairchild behind the little desk in the doctor's waiting room. They were alone when he closed the door.

"How is Brinker?" he asked.

"Gone," she said briefly. "The drug only lasted about two hours. He was a bit wobbly, but he'll be all right before evening."

"Did you tell him about his cabin?"

"Yes," said Miss Fairchild calmly. "And Seldon being in it." Miss Fairchild took a cigarette from a drawer of her desk and lighted it.

"He was upset," she said. "He fairly ran out of here, swearing as he went."

Sam perched on the edge of her desk

and grinned at her. "How much salary does the government pay you a month?" he asked. "And is Fairchild your real name?"

"The lamb kicks up his heels and makes a neat guess," said Miss Fairchild cooly. "If you know so much, figure the rest of it out. And may I suggest that if you babble loose talk around, my life won't be worth half as much as yours. A government operative on this boat, at this time, is in rather more than danger."

"Plain enough" said Sam, "after what appened to Miss Calhoun."

"The lamb," she observed after a moment, "has been weaned. Perhaps I've misjudged you. What do you know about Miss Calhoun?"

"Nothing," said Sam, "except that she was carrying one of your Washington department-store bills in her bag. Or is her real name Fairchild and you borrowed it?"

"Her real name doesn't matter. Fairchild happens to be my right name. She brought that bill aboard to give to me and didn't have a chance to."

"Because she was recognized as a government operative and murdered at once," Sam guessed, and grinned and waited.

"This," said Miss Fairchild, "begins to be interesting. How much more do you know, or think you know, Mr. Hastings? Or what is your right name?"

"Hastings," said Sam. "And I'll tell you a little secret—I've been trying to tell you all along. I didn't follow Young aboard. I had no interest in him. I'm a newspaper columnist who has been done dirt by a bunch of office buddies who think they've left me boiling in some hot water and are probably splitting their sides over it. I've been attacked, misjudged, suspected and generally ill-treated until I'm going to bust into the middle of this case in spite of hell and high water and see what makes it tick. I think if I find out who killed the assistant purser I'll find out who shot at me. And probably who killed Miss Calhoun, or whatever her name is."

She waved a slender hand generously. "Go right ahead. I'll be the last one to stop you."

"I'll need your help."

"Speak on," said Miss Fairchild. "I'm all ears, my rash young warrior."

"You're snooty," said Sam. "And hoity-toity and due for a lot of chastening. Tell me, young lady, if you know enough about nursing to give an opinion, how is the watchman getting along? Rumor has it that he's probably going to die."

"He may," Miss Fairchild agreed. "They're afraid to try an operation. And for your information, I'm a registered nurse and fully competent."

"Can you handle the doctor?"

"The doctor doesn't know who I am, but he'll listen to me. I was rushed aboard at the last moment with orders from the steamship company to let me have my own way."

"Then," said Sam, "order him positively not to give out any more information about the watchman or deny any reports he hears. Will you do that?"

Miss Fairchild regarded him speculatively.

"I think you have an idea," she said.

"I have, and it's a honey," Sam grinned, sliding off the edge of her desk. "All I need is a little cooperation."

IT WAS getting dark when Sam dashed into the doctor's office again. "How's the watchman?" he asked.

"Getting better, I understand," said Miss Fairchild. "Kunz dropped in a few minutes ago, very solicitious about him. He had heard the man would probably be conscious sometime tonight."

"I told him," Sam grinned. "In fact I've told quite a few."

"He won't."

"They think he will, which is good enough. What's the layout of the place he's in?"

"The hospital has two rooms," said Miss Fairchild. "They connect. That door behind you opens into the nearest one. The watchman is in there. Please excuse me a moment. I must look at him."

Sam opened a door at his left, looked into a similar room which was empty. Miss Fairchild beckoned him out. In the waiting room Sam grinned at her.

"I've just been to see the captain. He accused me of being drunk at first, and then listened to reason. I think he finally got tired of saying 'no.' The doctor is going to be in the salon tonight. The patient is going to be moved in that other room. You're going to be out most of the evening."

"Am I?" said Miss Fairchild. She cocked her head slightly, studied him. She nodded slowly with a trace of dawning admiration. "So simple, and yet so certain," she said. "Why couldn't I have thought of it?"

Sam chuckled.

"I see we're both thinking about the same thing. I'll be in here about nine. Got a few things to do in the way of stage setting."

CHAPTER SIX

Hospital Trap

AT nine-twenty Captain Fogg stirred restlessly and growled: "I think it's all poppycock. You're wasting my time, young man."

Sam said in a low tone: "Keep quiet. It's early, but you never can tell how fear will work on a mind."

"He's right, Captain," Miss Fairchild said.

They were in the doctor's inner-office. In one corner a dim night-light barely showed Captain Fogg's grim face and the .38 calibre revolver and flashlight which lay on the doctor's operating table. The desk light in the reception room was burning too. The two hospital rooms were dark. To all intents and purposes the medical department of the ship had closed for the night. The genial doctor was watching the dancing; where any eyes that were interested.

At ten-thirty Captain Fogg grumbled: "Damn nonsense! I feel like a fool sitting in here!"

"You'll feel like a bigger fool if you go charging out of here and give it away," Sam countered.

The captain glowered but kept his seat.

Miss Fairchild slipped like a white shadow through the doorway leading into the two hospital rooms. She returned noiselessly in a few moments.

"No change in the patient," she whispered.

At ten minutes to twelve Captain Fogg stood up—hunching his shoulders with an air of finality.

"I've had enough," he grunted. "Should have had better sense than to listen to a fool newspaperman's stunt like this. Spend the night here if you want to, but I'm going."

And at that moment someone entered the reception room. A woman's voice called: "Nurse? Are you there, nurse?"

Miss Fairchild edged the captain away from the door and slipped into the reception room. They could hear the woman speaking to her; a stewardess by the conversation.

"It's the lady in C Eighteen—Miss Chase. She has a slight toothache and wants you to bring some aspirin. She says not to bother the doctor about it."

"I'll go at once," Miss Fairchild promised. She whisked back into the room as soon as the stewardess departed—spoke under her breath as she opened a wall cabinet and ran a finger along a row of small bottles. "Miss Chase's mild toothache sounds suspicious to me. I suggest you turn out that light and leave the doors ajar as soon as I go."

Miss Fairchild filled a glass with water, dropped two tablets from the bottle into it and whisked out with the glass, closing the door behind her.

Sam turned a key that was already in the inside of the lock, caught up the revolver and flashlight from the operating table as he stepped to the light and turned it off. His guarded voice was cheerful in the darkness.

"Let's hope," he said, "that she's right."

Captain Fogg grunted.

The flashlight winked once as Sam moved to the door which gave into the first hospital room. He opened the door a foot or so, shot the light through for an instant to the bed, which was directly in his line of vision. The heavily bandaged head on the pillow, the figure bulking under the sheet did not move.

Captain Fogg cleared his throat at Sam's shoulder, started to say something.

Sam whispered fiercely, "Keep quiet! You're acting like a child!"

Surprisingly, Captain Fogg fell silent, making no reply.

They waited in black, profound quiet, through which the ceaseless pulse of the engine room could be felt rather than heard. It was a tense quiet—that steadily tightened as the seconds dragged.

It was broken by the soft click of the latch in the door which opened between the reception room and the small hospital room into which Sam looked.

THERE had been no sound indicating anyone had entered the reception room. The reception-room light did not show when the other door opened. Someone had turned it off, for abruptly a presence entered the blackness into which Sam was peering. Invisible, almost inaudible, it was betrayed only by the faintest pad of a step and the feel that someone was there, someone was moving toward the bed.

So suddenly that Sam almost jumped, a thin pencil of light flicked at the bed, moved quickly to it, gleamed down at the bandaged head. A hand flashed down through the light, driving a long, thin-bladed knife just below the chin.

A startled oath followed.

And Sam shouldered through the door, flashing the light he held.

"Too bad it's a dummy," he said. "You won't stop his mouth tonight. Drop that!"

Sam's light glinted on the weapon which was jerked from a pocket as the crouching figure whirled toward him, showing a masked face. No shot blasted from the gun. Only a soft *phffutt*—and a shock in Sam's shoulder which swung him half around in the dorway. The beam of his flashlight jerked erratically and tilted to the floor as sensation went out of that arm.

The crouching figure plunged for the reception room doorway.

Sam shot at it—once—twice—three times—four times—as fast as he could pull the trigger.

The crash of shots was deafening in that small space. But faintly, in ringing ears, after the fourth shot, Sam heard a chair overturn with a crash in the reception room.

Handling the flashlight awkwardly, Sam jumped for the dorway through which the masked figure had vanished. The man was in the reception room,

sprawled half across Miss Fairchild's desk, trying to push himself upright.

The gun lay on the floor behind the overturned chair. The mask was awry. He was straining, gasping with the effort; he made it, turned at bay with his back against the desk as Sam switched on the light. Blood was running down one arm, over the hand to the desk edge. A spreading crimson spot was staining the white shirt front inside the open coat. The tall, wiry figure was bent with pain.

Sam jerked at the crude cloth mask. The pain twisted face of Brinker glared at him!

"So you're the man who shot me the other night?" Sam said.

Brinker gasped thickly. "You put two bullets through me, damn you! Get the doctor! I—I'm dying!"

The outer door swung in. Sam lifted the revolver as the plump, affable Mr. Smith catapulted into the room. But Smith was unarmed; he had been shoved through the doorway. Behind him came Holbrook—the Texan—with an automatic pistol in his hand and a hard, set look on his heavily tanned face.

"You can't do this to me!" Smith blurted loudly; and then he stopped, his plump face going chalky as he looked at Brinker.

Holbrook said curtly: "This man was a lookout. He started for the office when he heard the shots."

"What are you doing in this?" Sam snapped at Holbrook.

The Texan smiled thinly. "I'm working with Miss Fairchild."

Sam stared, shrugged.

"I couldn't figure you," he admitted. "You'll be interested to see the knife Brinker left in the dummy's neck in the other room. I only got a glimpse of it, but it's a duplicate of the one with which Miss Calhoun was killed. One of those two murdered her. I guess killing the assistant purser wasn't hard after that."

The door opened again. The doctor bustled in. "I heard the shots," he said. was anyone injured?"

"I'm dying!" Brinker said thickly. He swayed. He coughed. A faint tinge of bloody froth appeared on his lips.

"Help me get him in the other room," the doctor ordered.

Holbrook called after them: "If he's dying, get him to make a statement. It can't hurt him now and it'll clear his conscience." And as the two men supported Brinker into the inner office, Holbrook added under his breath:

"It'll help me get this one for murder."

People were collecting outside again, all agog and excited at this fresh trouble. Miss Fairchild came in, carrying in her hand a long manila envelope which had been slit open at the top.

"So it worked?" she said to Sam. "Who was it?"

"Brinker."

"This man too," Holbrook said, shaking Smith by the shoulder. "Where did you get that envelope?"

"From the bottom of one of Miss Chase's bags," Miss Fairchild replied calmly. "It's the one that was stolen out of the safe. They evidently gave it to her to keep. Tonight she worked with them by decoying me out of the office. I suspected it. Instead of a mild dose of aspirin, I gave her a heavy sleeping potion. She dropped off in a few moments and I went through her things. Perhaps," Miss Fairchild added, "when she wakes and hears about everything, she'll be ready to talk."

Holbrook smiled. "Undoubtedly, after I tell her these two have confessed and implicated her. If I know my women, and I think I do, she'll be so furious she'll tell everything she knows."

WHILE they talked, Sam opened the door, beckoned to a steward who had taken a post outside. "Get Professor Young, his daughter, Mr. Seldon and Mr. Kunz," he said. "Tell them it's important."

Turning back into the room, Sam said: "After Brinker and Miss Chase talk, you'll have all the evidence you need against this man."

"We've got all we need now," Holbrook replied. "Y'see, we knew something was due to pop, but we didn't know when or where—and when it did, we couldn't put our finger on who was doing it. We know now."

Sam said: "I can't figure what you're doing aboard."

Holbrook's smile was fleeting.

"We've been watching Professor Young. Watching his blasted formula is nearer the truth. Washington knew he'd get big offers from outside countries; and, in addition, someone might try to steal it from him. A thing as valuable as that's supposed to be, isn't safe to have around. Show the average foreign power something which may help them win the next war and they'll bid fast and high for it.

"Young is a queer duck. He wanted to sell, but he demanded cash on the nail before he'd deal with anyone. He wanted a million, I've heard, half down in advance. Washington couldn't do that because of red tape, but the professor was finally persuaded to come to Washington and talk it over.

"We had tips that several agents were going to try to get it. Washington couldn't let anything like that happen. The professor doesn't know it, but Washington has had him watched for several weeks—taking no chances that his formula would get out of the country through sale or theft. We knew when he started east that he was being followed, but we didn't know who was doing it, outside of a newspaper man who was assigned to get a story about what the professor was going to do with the formula. He didn't try to hide his presence. Someone who was after the formula—these two I suppose—decided a prying newspaper man might trip them up, so they blackjacked him in New Orleans and sent him to the hospital. You were thought to be taking his place when you came aboard at the professor's heels.

"At first, I wasn't sure that you weren't after the formula. We were watching for it. As soon as the professor booked passage on this boat, arrangements were made to have him guarded aboard. Miss Fairchild was planted here with the doctor, and the young lady known as 'Miss Calhoun,' and I, came on the passenger list."

Holbrook's mouth became a tight line.

"When Miss Calhoun was murdered, I knew we were in for it. Someone evidently recognized her and put her out of the way. It could only mean they were going after the formula before the boat docked in New York. But, including you, there were so many suspects we couldn't pin it on the right one. Your idea of baiting a trap with the night watchman was a stroke of genius. When Miss Fairchild told me about it I was pretty sure it would work. In the clear so far, they couldn't take chances of having the man become conscious and tell whom he'd seen at the safe."

Holbrook shook his prisoner's shoulder.

"We've got the right one now," he said. "Smith, who are you working for? It must have been big money for you to murder so easily."

Smith swallowed twice. He was becoming more unnerved each moment.

"I didn't k-kill anyone," he groaned. "Brinker did it. I was merely working with him. It was his idea. He was going to s-sell the formula abroad. I don't know where. He had the contacts. Chase is his

woman. She'll lie for him—try to throw it all on me."

Smith shook as with a violent chill. "They won't!" he said. "I'll sign an affidavit. Brinker got that newspaper man in New Orleans—and when this man Hastings came aboard. Brinker had me search his bags at once, to see who he was. I didn't find anything but a revolver which I gave to Brinker. He left it by the safe. It wasn't I. Brinker recognized that woman he killed. He was afraid she'd remember him. Their paths had crossed in England."

Sam said: "So—Kunz didn't get my gun. I'd have sworn he did. Is he with you?"

"No," said Smith. " We think he's representing a European country. Miss Chase spotted him when he asked her questions about the dead woman. He wanted to know too much for a mere passenger. The fool didn't suspect who he was talking to. The professor's assistant did the same thing."

"I've got it!" Sam exclaimed. "Seldon is crooked! He's been dealing with Kunz. They suspected who got that formula out of the safe, and Kunz drugged Brinker and covered the evidence while Seldon had a clear field to search Brinker's cabin. He didn't find anything because Miss Chase had it. That explains why Seldon and Kunz were so thick."

Smith said: "Miss Chase tried to find out what Seldon was up to. She didn't, but she used Seldon for an alibi last night when the safe was opened. I know that."

The door opened. Professor Young barged in followed by his daughter and Martin Seldon. Glasses perched percisely on his big nose, the professor looked about.

"I understand there is more trouble," he said. "Why were we asked to come here?"

Behind him, Otto Kunz towered in the doorway impassively. The big man's bald head was bare, his big craggy face was still touched with the faint sinister cast. But he displayed no guilt or uneasiness as he looked around.

"I was called," he said simply. His glance fastened on Martin Seldon speculatively.

Seldon was visibly nervous, but he said nothing as Sam spoke.

"I sent for you, Professor. Your formula has been recovered. There it is on the desk. You're foolish to carry it around the country like this, especially when your assistant is not trustworthy. Did you know he was working with this man Kunz, who is thought to be an agent for a foreign country?"

"That's a lie!" Martin Seldon said loudly. He was pale, agitated.

Dorothy Young smiled faintly.

Professor Young cleared his throat, adjusted his glasses and eyed Seldon calmly.

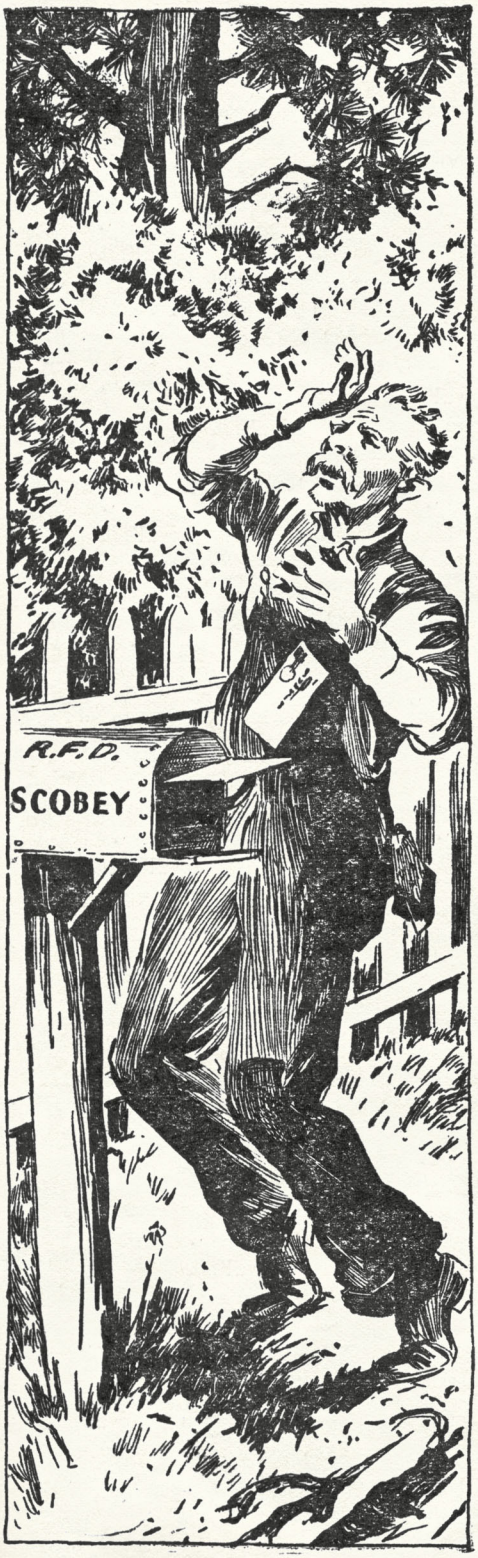
"I have suspected for some time that Martin was dishonest. I brought him along on this trip so I could keep an eye on him. He knew only a smattering of what I had been working on; but he was too anxious to find out more. I had him with me when I gave that envelope to the purser to put in the safe."

Professor Young coughed. "It was a mere precaution," he said. "The data on the sheets inside meant nothing. My daughter had been carrying the real formula."

Martin Seldon stood there speechlessly. His face slowly grew red.

Otto Kunz made the first remark, and it was scornful. "You fool," he said to Martin Seldon. "You waste my time on useless papers!"

Sam made the last, gleefully. "But what a story!"



The bullet dropped him at the mail box.

Murder, R. F. D.

by Jack Allman

It must have been an accident, was what everyone said, for there was no way old Tom Scobey's killer could have seen his quarry, or sighted the gun that fired the shot. But Lem Parker knew better. Knew that if a hunter is anxious enough to make a kill he can bag his game—even firing blind.

IN less than an hour after a bullet from Gil Tollop's rifle dropped old Tom Scobey at the mail box, Lem Parker was on the job.

In spite of the fact that a man had just been killed almost before their very eyes a snicker ran through the group gathered on the porch of the tall, narrow house as Lem's wheezy Model-T chattered to a stop in the back yard.

There was something about Lem Parker that always excited mirth wherever he went among the farmer residents of the little rural New York valley.

Perhaps it was because he took his job as deputy sheriff so seriously; or maybe it was due to the fact that Lem was never what you could call "cold" sober.

The minute you started talking to Lem Parker, you became suddenly conscious of the reek of hard cider, and, if you happened to glance in the back of his old flivver you'd have seen the ever handy glass jug, with its cork worn black and shiny from much use.

It was Lem's way, to never make a

fuss about anything; just went along paying back trick for trick. He knew that the farmers of Middle Valley laughed at him behind his back, but it didn't worry him one bit. No, sir, not a bit.

Hadn't he already proved that he was a good officer? How about that gun battle with the three city crooks trying to rob the Middle Village post office? Weren't two of them still in the pen; and the other in his grave?

Let 'em snicker, was Lem's attitude. He knew his stuff. And as far as the hard cider went—well, a fellow had to drink something, didn't he?

BEFORE Lem had wiggled his knotty little frame out from under the wheel of his car Harry Scobey was on the running board.

"Gil Tollop shot dad while he was getting the mail outta the box," he almost shrieked. "You better arrest him quick."

Lem glanced up to the porch rail above his head where young Tollop stood with four neighboring farmers. He lifted his battered old hat and dug at the roots of his stiff sandy hair, and then shot a brown squirt at the feet of an inquisitive chicken.

"Well, now, Harry," he drawled, "Let's see what it's all about." He made his slow, deliberate way to the steps with the dead man's oldest son jabbering at his elbow. Harry Scobey glared at Gil Tollop as he and the deputy gained the porch.

Both of the boys were in their middle twenties and there was little to choose between them. Each represented the typical farmer boy of the district, but while Gil, who had fired the shot, was as cool as a cucumber, the lad whose father's form lay stretched out near the top of the steps was aquiver with excitement and making all kinds of wild threats.

"Shucks, now," said Lem, "You shouldn't orter have moved the body, you fellers. Leastwise not till I'd had a chance to see just how it happened."

"He wa'n't dead yet when we got to him," one of the men with Gil explained. "We heered him yell just after young Tollop shot at the squirrel, an' we all ran out there in a jiffy. He was layin' right beside the mail box, an' in a minute or two, Harry here comes running down the road. Tom was still breathin', an' we fetched him in. He died a coupla minutes later."

Lem raised up from beside the still figure and swept his pale blue eyes over the entire group. They came to rest on the speaker.

"Let me get this right, Gabe," he said, slowly. "You was here when Gil shot."

The gaunt, year-worn farmer nodded his gray head. "'Yep, we was all here. We come over in Howie's car. Gil wanted us to help him butcher a veal. We was all havin' a leettle sip of elderberry in the kitchen when Gil shot."

"And old Tom here"—Lem jerked a thumb toward the dead man—"Old Tom was at the mail box?"

Again Gabe nodded. "Yep! Plain an' simple accident. Jest happened to be there when Gil shot."

"Jest happened to be there, eh?" snorted young Scobey. "You know as well as I do that Gil and that crabby old dad of his upstairs hate us like pizen ever since that boundary-line dispute. Accident! Hell! He knew my father was there and he shot to kill him."

"Now, Harry! Now, now," cautioned Lem, "jest let me handle this." He turned to Gil. "What's your side of this story?" he asked, without the least flurry of excitement.

Young Gil Tollop unfolded his arms and took one step away from the rail where he had been leaning. His big, calloused hands hung limp at his sides. He

looked the deputy straight in the eye as he spoke.

"As Gabe says," he explained, "It's an accident, Lem. I was sittin' right there on that old porch chair cleaning my gun to kill the calf with when the boys came. Gabe asks how about a drink and I told them there was a demijohn under the sink. They flocked into the kitchen, and just as I finished cleaning the rifle I saw a squirrel. I thought I'd try her out, and I took a shot at it. Then we heard someone yell. We all ran out."

LEM reached down and picked up a big gray cat that was rubbing against his ankles. He cuddled the tabby in his arms and stroked it a couple of times before speaking.

"Where did you see the squirrel, Gil?" he asked, most casually.

"Right there on the lower limb of that pine."

Lem's blue eyes followed the direction indicated by young Tollop's finger. There was a scraggly-limbed conifer in a direct line between where he stood and where the mail boxes would be behind a concealing row of lilac bushes.

A hundred and fifty feet from where he stood, the road that cut across between two highways lay hidden behind the screen of brush and old untrimmed lilacs. He moved about from one part of the porch to another, but from no point could he see through the thick foliage.

"How long were you on the piazza here before you shot at the squirrel, Gil?" Lem asked the question without even turning toward the man he addressed.

Young Tollop hesitated a moment. "What you mean, Lem? Altogether?"

"After Gabe and the bunch arrived."

" 'Bout ten minutes, I should say. What you think, Gabe?"

"Good ten minutes," agreed the old, gray-haired farmer. "We was on our second drink, and was just sittin' there listenin' to the radio. Ten minutes at least."

"And you wasn't off the piazza?" asked Lem of the man who had fired the shot.

Again Gabe answered, and the other three nodded that he spoke the truth. "We could see him sittin' there cleanin' the gun all the time."

"Ummm. Funny!" Lem put the cat down. "Gabe," he said, "You're the tallest of the bunch; even taller'n Tom. Go up to the lane there and walk down to the mail box, will yuh? Just like Tom must've when he came down."

Every eye on the porch was trained upon the line of the hidden road, and not one saw the tall, angular Gabe Lathrop until he came in the other way after passing the mail boxes.

"Nope," said Lem. "Completely hid by the brush. How many times you shoot, Gil?"

"Just once. Missed, too. Sights musta got knocked outta kilter on the old gun. 'Tain't more'n twenty yards."

"Ummm," hummed Lem, and just then a shiny coupé came tearing in the yard and braked to a stop beside Lem's old Ford. A big, wide faced and nattily dressed man climbed out from behind the wheel.

"This the place where the bird was bumped off?" he asked, and upon being informed that it was, re-lit an inch stub of cigar and mounted the steps.

"That's the city detective," offered one of the bunch on the verandah.

"Who sent for him?" asked Lem, with just a touch of heat.

"I did," snapped Harry Scobey. "I telephoned the city at the same time I called you. You and the Tollops here are too damn friendly."

Lem stiffened to his full five feet seven, and his blue eyes hardened. "Ain't nobody my friend in a case like this," he snapped.

The new arrival introduced himself as Detective Sergeant Reagan, and Lem reached into his pants pocket to show his star.

There were those on the porch who could remember when he used to wear it pinned to his suspenders—galluses, he called them—but that was before he had seen the moving picture where the secret-service agent flashed his badge from a coat pocket. Lem didn't wear a coat in the summer, so an overall pocket had to suffice.

There was an amused grin on the face of the city detective when he saw that there was a representative of the law ahead of him. "Well, Parker," he said after Lem had introduced himself, "you've had a chance to look the ground over. What's the layout?"

Harry Scobey started blurting out the story of what had happened. "Shut up," snapped the detective, "I wasn't talking to you." And then to Lem: "Who's this mouthy bird? Who did the shooting? Is he under arrest? What have you done since you've been here?"

"One question at a time, mister," retorted the deputy, angrily.

"Yeah, he's got a one track mind," sneered Harry, but a look from Reagan stopped any further comment on his part.

LEM took the questions in their order and answered them with patience—trying deliberation. Everyone there—with the possible exception of the city detective—knew that Lem was boiling inside. He always shoved his fists into the bottom of his overall pockets and teetered on his heels when he was angry.

As soon as he had the salient facts of the case, Regan took the play right away from him. He shot sharp, accusative questions at Gil, trying hard to trap him in a lie. Twice, he told Gabe Lathrop to shut up when the old farmer voluntarily offered testimony that backed up Gil.

He quizzed everyone in the crowd, and then put a bunch of questions to old Clem Tollop, confined to his bed on the top floor of the tall, narrow house. Old Clem had a reputation for being crabby even before partial paralysis had added to the grouchyness of his nature, and the city detective's interview was anything but satisfactory.

"Sure I can see the mail boxes from where I lay," he snapped. "What of it? You tryin' to accuse me of shootin' him?"

"Anyone close these windows since the shooting," asked Reagan. This time he turned directly to Gabe, whom Lem had assured him was an upright, honest farmer who wouldn't lie for anyone.

"Howie and I come up here to tell Clem what happened," Lathrop said. "The windows were down at the time, and I happen to know that he couldn't have closed them. His whole left side is paralyzed, and besides there ain't no gun in this room."

The detective made certain of this last point by giving the room a thorough search, even feeling under old Clem's mattress. He checked up on the possibility of Gil having taken a gun away and found that young Tollop hadn't been alone in the room since Scobey was killed.

Lem turned from where he had been teetering on his heels by the window. On his face was the nearest thing to a sneer that any of his farmer acquaintances had ever seen.

"You ain't overlookin' the point that there was only one shot fired, an' that from the piazza, are yuh?" he asked. "An' if you'll look at Tom's body down there you'll see that the bullet went through him level—not down at an angle."

"You're convinced then that it was an accident, eh?" asked Reagan.

"I ain't said so, have I?" drawled Lem.

"I say that it was a bullet from Gil's gun that killed him, an' that the shot was fired from the piazza. Gabe an' the other boys here'll tell you that again if you want 'em to."

Reagan chose to overlook the gibes. "All right, then," he said, nastily, "if it isn't an accident perhaps you can tell me how young Tollop here could deliberately shoot a man he couldn't see."

"Powerful rifle like that'll shoot through leaves without changin' the course of the bullet at that distance," pointed out Lem.

"Yeah, and maybe young Tollop here's got X-ray eyes, eh?"

That one kind of stumped Lem. Reagan had insisted upon trying out the plan of having someone follow old Scobey's route, and the repeated trial had proved conclusively that Gil hadn't been able to even see Tom approach the boxes, let alone know when he was standing before his own.

"You ain't forgettin' that these two family's been fightin' back and forth for nigh onto ten year, have yuh?" he replied, defensively.

"I'll grant you a motive for murder," snapped Reagan. "But you'll have to show me how young Tollop could possibly have known that Scobey was at the mail box."

"I ain't sayin' it's murder," bristled Lem. "But what if Clem had some way of signallin' Gil?" He turned back to the window. "I was just thinkin'—"

"What with?" cackled old Clem from his bed. A snicker ran through the room. Lem teetered back and forth on his heels, and his right thumb fanned his thin nose.

"What in hell are your ideas, anyway?" barked Reagan. Without turning around, Lem answered.

"Well, now, just supposin' that Gil and Clem here did plan to kill old Tom and make it look like an accident? Harry's told you about the threats."

"Yeah, then what?" prompted the city detective.

"Well, it wouldn't be much trouble to get a line on where to shoot so that the bullet'd pass over the mail box, would it?"

"Granted."

"All right then; Clem could see when Tom came down after the mail. It's already shown that he comes after it most of the time."

"Yeah, some time between ten and eleven in the morning. Now what?"

"Well, Clem could signal Gil when he was there, couldn't he? Then Gil could shoot." He turned around just in time to see the younger Tollop give his father a quick glance, but he apparently paid no attention to it.

"Understand," he said to Reagan, "This is just what you call a theory. I'm—"

"A hypothetical case. Yes, I understand," cut in the city dick. "How could he signal? You can't see the porch from this window."

Lem brushed his nose and turned again to gaze out toward the mail boxes. "Might pound on the floor, or something," he suggested.

"We'd've heard it if he did, Lem," said Gabe Lathrop, "And besides, the radio was playin'. He'd had to pound loudern' hell."

Reagan, remembering Harry Scobel's insistence that it was murder, gave Lem's hypothesis a minute's sober thought.

"Let's try your ideas out. That's the easiest way," he said, and then turned to Gil. "Let's see, your radio's in the living room, isn't it? Go down and turn it on."

"It's in the parlor," corrected young Tollop.

Reagan's heavy face twisted up into a broad, mock smile. "All right then. Turn on the radio in your parlor." He swung around to face Lem. In a half voice, and

to no one in particular, he said: "And within an hour-and-a-half of New York City, too."

"What you mean?" asked Lem.

"You wouldn't understand," replied the city dick, testily. "Go on down on the porch and see if you can hear me when I pound on the floor. Try it both with the radio on and off."

Lem visited the back of his old flivver, ran his lower lip up over the ragged line of his moustache, and then remounted the porch. A few minutes later he reported that he could hear the thumping very faintly when everything was quiet, but couldn't hear it at all with the radio going. He looked hopelessly about the disordered bedroom.

"It was goin' when we was sittin' in the kitchen," volunteered Gabe. "Playin' loud, too."

"Maybe there's a wire or something," suggested Lem.

AFTER an hour of thorough searching Reagan gave up that idea. "If there was any way of the old man signalling the kid," he said to Lem, "I'd have uncovered it. I've had plenty experience planting mechanical ears and running down tapped wires. The signal stuff is out. Any more good ideas?"

Lem Parker let the sarcasm pass over his head. He fanned his nose and let his pale blue eyes wander around the room. Then, slowly, he walked over to the table beside Clem's bed and rummaged through a collection of medicine bottles and dirty dishes. He even looked inside the shade of the drop light hanging above the paralytic's head.

"Ain't you got no lookin' glass here?" he asked of Gil.

"There's one over the wash bench by the kitchen door," offered young Tollop. "The only other one's in ma's old room an' it ain't been opened since she died."

"Ummm, guess that's out," said Lem half to himself, and then in answer to Reagan: "I figgered maybe he might have flashed a signal with a looking-glass."

"With the sun on the other side of the house at the time?" asked Gabe, quietly.

"By gum, that's right, ain't it?" Lem colored up as everyone laughed at his error.

"Well," snorted Reagan, "We've exploded your wire and mirror theories. Now what?"

FIFTEEN minutes later Lem and the city detective were out going over the ground again. Mrs. Scobey had arrived and was sitting on the top steps of the porch near the body of her dead husband. She was weeping bitterly; and Harry was trying to comfort her. Gil and the others were still up in the elder Tollop's room.

The two officers were walking from the mail boxes down to the path leading in through an old shrubbery-clogged gate. "You can see for yourself, Parker," Reagan was saying. "It's an open and shut accident. There was no way young Tollop could know just what minute—what second Scobey would be at the box. We've just proved that there was no buzzer or anything connected with it, and there's no lid or door that could make a noise."

They turned into the yard, and while the city detective sat down on the running board of his car to make some notes in a small book, Lem slipped over to the tonneau of his rattletrap. When he came back and sat down beside Reagan, the other sniffed, suspiciously.

"Interesting breath you have, Parker," he grinned. "That where you get all these clever ideas about how a man can murder another whom he can't see and has no way of knowing is there?"

Lem grunted around a three-finger pinch of Honest John Longcut that he was cramming into his mouth. "I been

expecting this Scobey-Tollop trouble to come to a head for a long time," he remarked in tune with his cud chewing.

"Still think it's murder, eh?"

"Can't convince myself it ain't."

"Any idea how you can prove it?"

Lem thought that over for some time, spat three times at a distant beetle and hit it twice. "It's that damned signal business that's got me stopped," he said, at last.

"Yeah, and it'll stop you in front of a jury, too. Go ahead and pinch young Tollop. Let the county feed him, spend a lot of money trying him, and then turn him loose."

"I'll admit it looks like an accident on the face of it," agreed Lem. "But these here Tollops ain't so dumb. Just like the pair of 'em to figger out some way like this. Some way so's they can settle their grudge and still go scot free."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned it's an accident," snapped Reagan, impatiently. "That's the way my report's going in. And it's going in with me right now. I got a dinner date in the city." He rose to his feet and ran his fingers down the crease in his blue trousers. "Put a murder charge against Gil Tollop if you're so sure. Go ahead. It's no skin off my elbow."

Lem took another long range shot at the juice-covered beetle. "Believe I will," he drawled. "Just got to find out one thing first."

The city detective wheeled around, and there was heat in his voice. "Well, I'm telling you one thing. If I'm ever dragged up here into the sticks to testify, I'll say accident, and my word carries weight. I've gone into this thing thoroughly, and there was no way the accused could know that his victim was at the mail box at the time he shot."

"Well, I dunno. Maybe!"

"Bah!" Reagan strode over and spoke for a minute or two with Harry Scobey. Then he jumped into his coupé and drove off without even saying good-bye to the deputy.

AFTER the city detective left, Lem started nosing around, asking occasional questions, and making frequent trips to the jug in the back of his car. Everyone except Harry Scobey and his mother gave him queer looks as he poked here and there. Those looks worried Lem a little.

Not that he cared what any of them thought of him, but if Gabe, Howie and the others who had been there when the shooting took place were so blamed sure it was an accident—well—Gabe and Howie weren't the kind who'd lie for anyone.

Lem's confidence was a little shaken, but still he wandered around, scratching his head and trying to figure out how it could have been done in case it was murder. "The old man must have signalled him," he told himself. "But how?"

Soon, Tom Scobey's body was taken home in Howie's car. His wife and Harry rode, but Gabe and the others walked along behind. Lem sat on the top steps of the porch and watched them disappear through a gap in the shrubbery that hid the lane.

Now that he was alone here with Gil and old Clem, what was he going to do?

When young Tollop came out to do the chores he tagged along with him. He knew he wasn't welcome—Gil's glances told him that—but it didn't stop him from making the rounds.

It might have been embarrassing to some people to go around chatting with the man they suspected of murder, but not so with Lem.

When the chores were done and young Tollop started cooking supper, Lem made himself comfortable in a chair at the table. He tried to get Gil to talk, but

without success, and fell silent himself. A half hour passed without a word between the two men there in the roomy farmhouse kitchen.

Suddenly, Gil Tollop turned from the stove where he was cooking beet greens. There was angry fire in his slitted eyes. His hands were doubled into huge knots at his sides, and there was four or five inches of thick wrist showing below the cuffs of his shrunken hickory shirt.

"What you hangin' 'round here for, Lem Parker?" he demanded to know. "Why don't yuh go and leave peaceable people be? What yuh waitin' for?"

Lem looked up with surprise in his pale eyes. "Well," he drawled, "maybe I'm waitin' for another idea, Gil."

"One like your wires or your lookin' glass, huh? Or some other damn fool notion."

"Never can tell when an idea is comin'," yawned Lem.

"You and your ideas. *Humph!* Sitting there like you was somebody important. You make me nervous watchin' every move I make like I was a crim'nal or somethin'." He turned and put his hand on the knob of the door leading into the hall. "I'm gonna turn on the radio," he said. "Damned if I'm gonna let a drunken deputy sheriff worry me."

Lem half rose from his chair and thumped the table with a clenched fist. "I ain't neither drunk," he shouted, but the denial was lost. From the front room came the soft strains of a dinner-dance orchestra.

When Gil returned to the kitchen he completely ignored Lem. He dished up some greens, a slice of boiled salt pork, and a boiled potato. He placed a tray on the table and put the food on it, together with a knife and fork. It was dark in the pantry when he went in to get the bread and he switched on the light.

Lem suddenly sat up straight in his chair. A bright light flashed in his eyes. Color mounted to his cheeks, and it wasn't from the hard cider, either. It was suppressed excitement. He'd had another idea fall on him like a ton of brick.

"Here," he said jumping up as Gil put the bread on the tray. "I'll take it up to Clem."

Young Tollop gave him a quick glance, then shrugged his shoulders. "Go ahead," he said.

AS LEM mounted the narrow, dark stairway he noticed with satisfaction that he could hear the radio very plainly. He rapped at the old man's door, and the moment Clem saw who it was he started cussing.

The sight of the deputy who had practically accused him and his son of murder a few hours before made him so mad that he probably didn't see the grin that flickered across Lem's leathery features as he turned on the light at the head of the bed.

"You and your little deppity job!" snarled Old Clem. "Why, the way you carried on 'round here you'd think somebody important had been accidentally killed instead of that worthless skunk, Tom Scobey."

"A life's a life, Clem, in the eyes of the law," drawled Lem.

"And an accident's an accident, ain't it?"

"It is if it wasn't planned ahead of time," replied Parker. Clem Tollop looked at him sharply from beneath his heavy white brows. Lem grinned back at him and then returned to the kitchen. Gil was wolfing a plate of food at the table.

Lem seated himself in the corner. "You know," he said, "These here electric radios got the others all skinned to death. I'm glad I got rid of my battery set. The old woman was always givin' me a burnin' for spillin' acid on her carpet."

Gil looked up from his plate for a moment, then returned to his food. Lem walked over to the stove, lifted the lid, and spat on the burning sticks of maple.

"Yep, great invention," he said. "Wiring in these old houses ain't so good, though, or maybe it's the switches. Noticed it?"

Young Tollop, with both elbows planted firmly on the table and his face a scant eight inches from his plate, shook his head without looking up. Lem noticed that his hands were trembling a little.

"Sure you've noticed it," he said. "Does the same thing at my house. Listen!" He stepped over and turned the switch of the unlit globe in the kitchen fixture. A sharp click broke into the radio music. "Does that when you turn on the light in your dad's room, too." Lem's words came out slowly, but they were freighted with meaning.

Gil's chair tipped over backwards as he jumped to his feet. There was a frantic light in his eyes, and his wide, flat body was tense.

"What you drivin' at?" The question was almost a screech.

Lem leaned over the table. "You know!" he snapped. "I got all the dope. How you got Gabe and the boys over here so's you'd have unsuspecting witnesses—how your old man turned on the light upstairs to signal you by the click in the radio when Tom was at the mail box—"

"You're just guessin'," croaked Gil. The blood had drained from his face, and his loose lips were trembling.

"Think so?" said Lem. "Don't forget I was just upstairs talkin' to Clem. Sick man like him can't stand much grillin', you know."

"So he told you, did he?" blurted Gil. "Spilled his guts out, huh?" A terrible mask of hatred came over his face.

He darted around the corner of the table and would have gained the hall doorway if it hadn't been for the old nickel-plated bulldog pistol that Lem whipped from his hip pocket.

"Not so fast, Gil!" For the first time, there was a cold note of authority in the deputy's voice. "Back up, and sit down. Ain't no cause for you to get het up agin your dad. He never snitched on you."

"But you said—"

"No I didn't," snapped Lem. "It probably sounded like it to you, but I didn't say that he told me. That's what us representatives of the law call baiting-by-inference. Good stuff, too."

Gil slumped in his chair and mouthed vile curses at himself. His face was as white as the oilcloth on which his knotted fists were resting.

"I told you you could never tell when an idea might pop up," said Lem with a little touch of self praise in his tone. "When you turned on the light in the pantry—click! There was the noise in the radio, and click—there was the idea. Pretty slick, Gil, and you'd probably got away with it, only I've noticed the same thing at my house too often." He managed to get a chew from his pocket with one hand. "And just wait 'till I see that city dick again," he grinned.

The Man with One O'clock Ears

Jagged puzzle-blocks of frosted glass tinkled to the floor.

by Allen Saunders

Detective Vic Wood didn't have much use for soothsayers, astrologers, palmists and such like until he ran into Doris Dell. "Your Life Is In Your Hands," her card read, but he thought that was all the bunk until the man with the one o'clock ears began shooting. Then he realized how right the card had been. That his life was not only in his hands, but particularly in the gun he held in his right one.

HE was still kneeling in an attitude of prayer, just as the bell-hop and manager had found him, when the coroner arrived. His arms were flung forward across the bed. Stiffened fingers were hooked in the yellow spread and the wrinkles they caused streaked out from the hands like beams of light. His face was hidden between his arms, but the neatly combed gray hair, shot with pure white, suggested that it was a handsome, perhaps distinguished

face. The body, clad in pin-striped pajamas, was supported by the low bed, the knees barely touching the floor, the toes bent under.

Dr. Marshall Drew, the coroner, set his scabby leather bag on the glass-topped dresser, ran a tongue under his lower lip and smiled cheerily.

"What's the matter, Alexis; did he decide this was easier than paying his bill?"

"He's paid up a week in advance," the Greek said testily. "For God's sake do your stuff and let's get him outa' here. I'm not running any morgue."

"Know him, Alexis?"

"Of course," the manager said. "It's Mr. Bloom, Mr. Carl Bloom. He's been a guest here for three weeks."

"What's his line?" Vic Wood asked.

Alexis turned to the chunky youth in the sloppy trench-coat and shaped his mouth into a smile.

"I never asked personal questions of my guests. I leave that annoyance to reporters." He started to move away from Vic, then changed his mind. "How is it you come here so soon? I was calling the police when you walked in."

Vic was careful not to look at the bell-hop. "Fellow I knew happens to have a room on this floor," he lied.

RORTY and Sibberling, the Tweedledum and Tweedledee of the homicide squad, walked away from the window where they had been sitting and spoke, almost in chorus.

Rorty said: "Let's don't waste so damn much time."

Sibberling finished for him: " . . . so dam' much time on a plain suicide." He pulled something out of his overcoat pocket, a slovenly package wrapped in a lace-edged handkerchief. "Here's what he done it with. Webley an' Scott forty-five. One chamber fired. It was layin' right in front of his hands on the bed when we come in."

"No fingerprints, it don't look like," Rorty said. "Not any clear ones, anyhow. We'll check it."

"We found the hankacheef in that armchair, too," Sibberling said. "Stinks pretty. Smell—"

Everybody in the room solemnly took his turn in sniffing the bit of cloth.

"That's Nuit de Joie," Vic announced. "I quit a girl once because she bathed in the stuff."

Sibberling shrugged and wrapped the handkerchief around the gun again.

"How about relatives?" Vic asked. "Been through his things yet?"

"Yeah, we thought of that," Sibberling replied drily. "We sometimes do things like that. There ain't a scrap of paper among 'em. Not surprising. They usually do that, on account of it might disgrace the family."

The coroner finished his examination and stood up. "That'll be all," he said. "Call the cart."

Rorty picked up the cradle phone from the bed-table, got the wrong end to his ear, swore and reversed it. "Get me Main Three Thousand," he told the operator.

The bell-hop muttered something about getting back to the lobby and slipped out of the room. Vic caught the door as it came shut and squeezed through into the hall. The bell-hop started walking swiftly toward the elevator. Vic overtook him on the tiled rectangle before the shaft and struck down the hand that was reaching for the button.

"Always ride down from the second floor, Flegar?" he asked him.

Flegar blinked and tugged at the tight collar of his uniform. "I just happened to think," he said, "I gotta go up on Fourteen."

The reporter put out his palm. "Come on. Give."

"What d'ye mean, give?"

"You know. What you picked up, under the desk blotter in there."

"You're nuts," Flegar stammered. "I'm not holding out on you. I wouldn't do that." He reached for the button again.

Vic caught him by the shoulders and pushed him backward till he fell on a settee opposite the elevator. With his fingers digging deep into the bell-hop's soft biceps, he bent forward till their faces almost touched. Flegar's face was losing color.

"I want it. Give," Vic repeated.

"Let me up. It's in my sleeve," Flegar said. "It don't amount to anything."

"Probably not," Vic said. He stood with his hand out till Flegar worked a small business card out of his cuff and turned it over to him. It bore a name, an address and a phrase in quotation marks.

DORIS DELL
"Your Life Is in Your Hands"
Room 212 Carver Hotel

"She's a guest here," Flegar explained placatingly. "I was thinking of the good of the hotel."

"Going company man on me, huh?" Vic said. "Maybe I'd better get a new contact here, somebody without quite so many ethics."

Vic was staring down the long, dim corridor. "Room Two Twelve," he said, "that would be at the other end of this wing, wouldn't it? Which makes it very convenient, very."

VIC drummed several times on the imitation wood panel of the door, but there was no response. A thin bar of light marked the bottom of the door.

He looked again at the card to make sure of the number. This was it, all right, 212. For the first time, he observed something about the card. It had dried glue on the back and a wafer of brown, coarse paper clung to it. A man who had grown up around a print-shop could explain that off-hand. The card was obviously a sample specimen which had been glued on the package of newly printed cards before they were delivered.

It might be foolish to attach importance to such an object. The card might easily have been left in the room by a former occupant. Perhaps Doris Dell herself had moved out of 203, now occupied by the mortal relics of Mr. Carl Bloom. However—

He lifted his hand to knock again. A voice at his shoulder startled him.

"Good evening."

He had not heard the woman's footsteps on the thick carpet of the hall.

"Miss Dell?" The woman nodded and smiled questionably. She was tall, dark and fortyish. Her eyes were large and suggested expert use of mascara. She wore a brown tailored suit and a mannish shirt. "I came to see you professionally," he told her.

The darkened lids drooped understandingly. A rich, sub-contralto invited, "Come in."

She let them in with her key and pointed to a table that stood in the center of the room with a straight chair on either side of it.

"Sit down, please," she said, carefully lifting off her felt hat. "I seldom give readings without appointment, and—or did you come through Mr. Schultz?"

Vic showed her the card. "I came through this," he said. "My name is Hurley, Irving Hurley."

She did not take her eyes from his face as she flung the hat on the bed and seated herself opposite him. "Your hand, please." She extended her own, with its large, tapering fingers and vividly enameled nails. And across the table drifted the cloying odor of Nuit de Joie.

"What would you say"—she looked up suddenly from his ill-manicured hand. —"if I were to inform you that your initials were V.W.?"

Vic swallowed sheepishly and tried to laugh it off. His eyes followed her's to the fingers that rested on her palm and he breathed a silent malediction upon his own clumsiness.

"I'd say you could read the message on my signet ring" he retorted.

She threw his hand aside and stood up.

"My work calls for faith and honesty in the client. There's nothing I can do for you. You may go." Her stern glance settled suddenly on the shapeless trench-coat he had not taken off. A scornful curl broke the thin line of her skillfully designed lips. "A newspaper reporter. I should have spotted you on sight."

"Anyhow," Vic taunted her, "you didn't read it in my palm. I don't believe you're a very hot fortune-teller."

"Did your editor send you up here," she began fiercely. "If he did—"

Vic made no move to get up. "I came on my own," he said. "Wanted to tell you what's happened to Carl Bloom."

If she lost poise, it was for only a second, then, coldly: "Bloom? Why should I be interested?"

"Because you're neighbors, as it were, and Mr. Bloom saw fit to puncture his heart with a very effective bullet this evening."

The mention of violent death put awe in her voice, as it might in any woman's.

"He—committed suicide? Here?"

"The coroner indicated that would be his verdict. You didn't know the deceased, then?"

SHE smoothed back her hair that made a sleek black cap, covering the ears and caught in a biscuit on her neck. "Know him? Not precisely. We met occasionally in the lounge, in the informal manner of people around a hotel, and exchanged introductions."

"Perhaps he was a prospect, for your services?"

"Certainly not. I keep my professional life and my private life separate. He knew me only as Miss Dell. But, I can't see that you have the right, young man, to—"

"Ever go to his room?"

The soothsayer crossed to the door with swift, long-limbed strides. "Get out of here!" she hurled at him. "Get out, before I call the manager!"

On his way to the row of phone booths in the lobby, Vic stopped to greet Kitty Shaw at the switchboard. She had heard about the suicide and was jumpy with excitement. He gave her the details which Alexis had withheld from her and struck the hot iron of her interest with some questions.

"Happen to know anything about this duck? Business connections, for instance?"

Kitty plugged in a serpent of cord as she shook her blond bob. "Carver Hotel-ll. I'll ring them." She leaned toward Vic again. "Us girls wondered about him, he's so handsome and millionairy looking. But, so far as we could find out, he hasn't done a thing since he's been here. In a business way, I mean. Used to go out now and then in afternoons.

"And how about that mitt-reader, Doris Dell? See them together any?"

"Not that I remember. I never saw her with anybody, not even her manager."

"Oh, so she's got a manager"

"*Umhum.* A Mr. Schultz. Slender, with curly brown hair and boudoir eyes. He'd be good looking, if it wasn't for his ears. They're like's on a jug, and set at a funny angle."

"Like this?" Vic twisted his own generous ears out and forward.

"That's Schultz, all rightie. He don't

live here. But I did see him once, going into the General Grant."

"Ever hear of 'one o'clock ears'?" Vic asked her seriously.

"What kind of a gag is that?"

"No, I mean it. Some scientists claim that if you have flap ears that would point to one o'clock on an imaginary clock dial, it's a sign of criminal degeneracy. Let's see yours." He put out a hand and drew the golden curtain from the ear nearest him. It was delicate and pink and naked-looking. He laughed as she looked up in alarm. "You needn't hide those little shells. They're safely pointed to eleven thirty."

TWICE in the course of the six-block walk from the Carter to the General Grant, Vic stopped and looked into brilliantly lighted shop windows. His gaze penetrated no deeper than the polished surface of the plate glass. And, reflected there, he saw at last the confirmation of his suspicions. The yellow cab was following him. It crept along at a pace which no self-respecting taxi-driver would have elected deliberately to drive. And it stopped a few yards behind him when he loitered at the shop windows.

Vic had never, to his knowledge, been shadowed before. It was not a pleasant sensation.

Directly opposite the Grant, he started across the street, jay-walking to save a half-block walk. When he was a few feet from the curb, the yellow cab speeded up and flashed past him. He had a glimpse of the interior. The lights from the street did not penetrate the shadows of the passenger compartment, but he either saw or imagined a pallid face under a brown felt hat.

The night clerk at the General Grant was well known to Vic. A one-time vaudeville actor named Eddie McKee, he was the city's most tireless benefit performer and publicity was still as sweet to him as in the days when a scrap-book meant something. He hailed Vic across the lobby.

"How about the prints of that picture your man got of me at the Health Camp picnic? Did you forget them?"

"Not a chance," Vic replied. "I'll see to that tomorrow. Is my old pal, Schultz, upstairs?"

Eddie studied his glossy nails. "Jake Schultz a friend of yours?" he asked without looking up. Vic said he guessed so. "Better tell that swivel-wristed nance the boss is set to give him the pitch, if he don't kick in for a month's rent. No, he's not in. Been out since dinner time, around six."

"That's funny," Vic said. "He told me to meet him here at nine. Has Miss Dell been in?"

Eddie shook his head. "Nope, but she comes around here a lot. They're sure bugs, those two?"

"Yeah?"

"I mean, he books her around at luncheon clubs, working for a thank you and salad. He tells me they want to break into vaudeville with her. He used to be on the Orpheum time, so he says. They got a swell chance! A palmist in vaudeville, can you feature that?"

Vic agreed that he couldn't feature it either. He tapped restlessly on the desk. "I don't suppose you could let me go up to Jake's room and wait? He told me to help myself to his liquor."

Eddie looked pained. "I really shouldn't. But, if you're sure—"

"Did I ever let you down, when I could do you a favor?" Vic pressed him. "Toss me that key."

The clerk was still shaking his head uneasily when he turned from the bank of pigeon-holes and handed Vic the tagged key.

"I'll have those prints over here in the morning," Vic promised streaking for the elevator.

When he quit the cage at the seventh floor, he broke into a run and arrived puffing at the door of 723. All he asked was time to frisk Jake Schultz's effects and get to the stairs before that gentleman arrived. What he expected to find, he had only the vaguest idea.

What he did find, on his first inspection of the narrow, tidy room, was exactly nothing, so far as his present interest was concerned. There were three suits in the closet, linen in the dresser drawers, tan shoes under the bed, a locked Gladstone bag on the luggage stand. It might as well have been the temporary home of Joe Zilch.

HE paused in the center of the room to have another look around before tackling the Gladstone bag. His glance fell upon the waste-basket, a glorified tin pail. It was stuffed with newspapers, rolled so tightly they all but plugged the mouth. Vic pulled out the roll, found a crumpled sheet of brown wrapping paper in the bottom of the container.

As he folded it to a size that would go into his trench-coat pocket, he made sure it was what it had at first appeared to be, the wrapping from a package of printed cards. It bore the name of the Keystone Print Shop. The creases defined the dimensions of a block of about a hundred business cards. There was dried glue on one surface, where the proof sample had been torn away. Not much of a link, but at least a hint that connection existed between the suicide in the Carver and the fortune-teller's manager in the General Grant.

He turned his attention to the suitcase. Lifted, it felt heavy. Surprisingly heavy, considering that the wardrobe and dresser drawers were full of clothing. The lock looked easy. Vic probed in his vest pocket and found a paper-clip, carried as a pipe-stem cleaner. He bent the end of it, explored the interior of the lock. In thirty seconds, the halves of the case split apart. What he saw made him sit back on his heels, eyes bulging, jaw agape like a steam shovel.

The two sides of the case were stacked full of paper, beautiful paper covered with florid designs in green and blue ink. The first packet he picked up contained ten folders. Each bore on its cover the information that it represented ten shares of preferred stock in the Arka-Tex Petroleum Co., Ltd. It might have been his imagination working overtime, but Vic was sure the scent of Nuit de Joie arose like an invisible cloud from the open bag.

He closed the case and snapped the end-clamps. The find was interesting, but no incriminating. He'd better think it over somewhere else than in a stranger's room. With one last sweeping glance around, he snapped off the light ready to leave.

The door opened into the room. He had a fleeting glimpse of a dark bulk blocked against the rectangle of light. An arm shot out like the thrust of a piston. The fist found the point of his chin, snapped his head back and sent rockets of fire volleying through his brain. He felt himself falling, clutched for support where there was none, stretched his length on the floor of the room he had started to leave. His assailant was on him like a cat. Against the light from the hall, he saw the merciless arm raised above him again. It started its downward dive. Then the black hood of unconsciousness sheathed him.

A SLEEPY chambermaid opened the the door of the room at 6:30 A. M. She squinted at the young man on the floor through strings of slate-colored hair,

cocked her head to listen to his loud, unnatural snoring, then shuffled off to call the night clerk.

Eddie McKee was just cleaning up his desk to go off duty when the maid plucked at his sleeve.

"They's something queer about the fella in Seven Twenty-three," she said.

"You're telling me?" retorted Eddie, who still imagined himself a repartee wizard.

"He's a-layin' on the floor, a'makin' funny noises."

Eddie lifted his eyebrows and turned to ring the manager. They went up together to 723 and found Vic. The manager muttered, "Blotto." But Eddie pointed out the lump on the reporter's forehead and they sent after ammonia and ice. It took about twenty minutes to bring him to. When he sat up and tried to focus on the swimming faces above him, he heard Eddie say reproachfully.

"That was a crummy thing to do, Wood."

"What'd I do now?" Vic answered, feeling his head. "And how many perished in that earthquake?"

"You're not expecting me to believe you didn't frame this with your friend Schultz?" Eddie demanded. "That you don't know he walked out in your coat and with his baggage?"

"Oh, sure," Vic said. "I just let him crack my skull open to make the story stick. Sure."

Vic struggled to his feet as he spoke. Neither man put out a hand to help him up.

"Anyhow, I think you'd better come with us and talk to the police," the manager said. "If you're not involved, you've nothing to fear."

"But I can't! I've things to do!" Vic wailed.

His eyes darted from one captor to the other. His head had cleared sufficiently that he could make out the stubborn determination written on each face. He closed his eyes with a shudder and let his knees buckle under him. The manager twittered as they let him stretch out again on the floor. "Get the ammonia again!" he shouted to Eddie. Under lashes that masked the slits of his eyes, Vic saw that there was no one between him and the open door. He jerked his elbows back suddenly and gave a grasshopper thrust that brought him, aided by spring in the knees, to his feet. Before the two men behind him had realized what had happened, he was into the hall, sprinting for the stairs.

He heard them shouting after him, felt the impact of their flying feet on the floor. He left the hall at the stairs in a leap that took him to the first landing, made the next short flight in two steps and dove through the green door marked *Sixth Floor.*

The clatter of feet on the stairs flailed his eardrums. He saw the elevator grill ahead of him. The arrow on the nearest dial was passing "7." He threw himself against the cage and rattled the metal mesh like a trapped animal. A colored boy with popping eyes braked his car to a halt and Vic fell aboard.

"Down fast! I'm from the police. After a prowler." As the car passed the floor level, he saw the door of the stair shaft open to belch out two well-dressed, red-faced men. And a few seconds later he was bounding through the lobby toward the street.

A block from the Grant, he flagged a cruising taxi, vaulted to the seat beside the driver before it stopped and gasped the address of the police station.

He found Inspector Jim Gahagen in the act of hanging up his overcoat and the cap with ear-flaps he had worn ever since his beat-walking days.

"On the job a bit airly, kid," Jim greeted him.

Vic dropped into a chair beside the detective's desk and took a long-delayed deep breath. Then he asked, "That suicide over at the Carver last night—what's new on it?"

GAHAGEN'S briary brows knitted. He sat down in his treacherous swivel chair and set a heavy foot on the edge of the desk. "Might say this was new," he rumbled. "Doc Drew claims it wasn't suicide. Not a smidgen of a powder burn on the old man's nightie, or on his chest."

"And the gun?" Vic pressed him eagerly.

"Couldn't be traced. Bought outa the country—Mexico maybe."

"Find the owner of the handkerchief?"

Gahagen said he hadn't tried very hard.

"I have," Vic said. He told him about the card, the visit to Miss Dell and the painful experience in Schultz's room. "If my nose knows," he finished, "all these people have the same taste in perfume. Which is odd, to understate it."

"There's one other thing," Gahagen said.

Vic, rapt, nodded vigorously.

"Eldon V. Whitehead called me this morning. He'd seen the paper, about the suicide, as they called it. Had me describe the man to him over the phone and when I got through he said, 'That must be him'."

"And who is him?"

"That's it. He wouldn't say—only that this fellow Bloom had been around to see him last week and had sold him something. When I asked what, he laughed, embarrassed like, and said he'd rather not divulge that. But he just wanted to know if this was the same Bloom."

Vic sprang from his chair and cracked his right fist against the palm of his left. "Look!" he shouted. "Whitehead's president of the Kiwanis Club, isn't he?"

"May be. I don't keep track of things like that."

"I do," Vic said, "and he is. Here. Shove me that city directory.

He pawed the flimsy pages of the fat volume till he came to the section headed "Clubs and Fraternal Organizations."

"Now, mooch over and let me at that phone for an hour or two. We'll start off with Hal Batdorf, lord high Wah-poo of the Booster's Club."

He spun the dial carefully. A drowsy maid informed him that Mr. Batdorf was out of town. He continued down the list of club officers. The next two did not answer the early call. The fourth try was successful in getting the man sought. Vic told him he was calling from police headquarters and asked if the club officer had ever had his fortune told by a palmist named Doris Dell. The reply was a bellowed negative.

"Wife probably listening in on an extension," Vic murmured as he broke the connection. "Hope I didn't sow seeds for the domestic relations court to reap."

The fifth man called was Eric Ronsen, president of the Civitas Club. His voice sharpened with interest when he heard Vic's question.

"Yes, I happened to have an interview with the woman," he said. "She offered a free reading to me, as president of the club, after she had performed at our luncheon. May I ask why you're questioning me?"

"Did this woman give you any advice—on business matters?" Vic asked, ignoring the query.

"In a way—yes. She did."

"Have you taken it? I mean, have you bought anything recently on the strength of what she told you?"

"Yes. But the—ah, order hasn't been delivered. See here, my friend, I'm on a

party line. Rather not discuss my business affairs this way. If you'd like me to come down to headquarters—"

"Never mind," Vic told him. "Let it pass. But, if you hear any more from that business deal—anything at all—phone Inspector Gahagen."

"Agreed. Certainly. But I still don't—" He hung up, mumbling to himself.

Vic pivoted around in the inspector's swivel chair. "I could do with a spot of breakfast before I go with this. Join me?"

Gahagan said he'd eaten at six. "But run along, and hurry back," he added. "You've got my bump of curiosity as big as that one on your forehead."

OVER his scrambled eggs and bacon, preceded by a shot of rye that washed away the reminders of the night on the hotel-room floor, Vic mulled the facts now on hand. He was just biting into his second triangle of buttered toast when a hunch hit him in the midriff, a hunch so fantastic he blushed for the mind that gave birth to it.

But, after all, what better explanation was there? He swallowed the bite of toast, pushed back the remains of his scrambled eggs, swigged down the rest of his mug of black coffee and stood up.

He tossed his change on the counter as he passed the cashier and made a bee line across the street to the city hall, one end of which was occupied by police headquarters.

"Inspector Jim was lookin' for you, directly you went out," the elevator man announced, as he boarded the cage.

"Much obliged. Drop me off on Second," Bill said.

Gahagan met him at the door of the bureau. His ruddy Irish face was alight with excitement.

"That fortune-tellin' dame has lammed out of the hotel," he called, as Vic came down the corridor.

"I knew that, when I came up here this morning," Vic said.

"Then why didn't you—"

"Because I didn't know then that I knew it. Come on in and make yourself comfortable. I've got the dagnabbedest yarn to tell you your calloused old ears ever listened to—And speaking of ears, say—"

"Wait a second. That's my phone," Gahagan said. He pulled out the lazy-tongs bracket that held the instrument and helloed brusquely into the transmitter. As he listened, his eyes widened, his mouth following suit. "Yes—yes, stay with him. Write him a check for a million, but hold him there. We'll be over, quick."

He hung the receiver on the fork and spun around in his chair. "That was Ronsen. The Schultz fellow is in his office now, to collect for something Ronsen bought from Bloom. Like to come along?"

"Not enough cops in this building to keep me from it. Let's get the lead out. That Schultz works fast."

Gahagen opened the drawer of his desk and took out his holster harness. As he peeled off his coat to slide an arm through the circle of leather that swung the weapon in the left pit, he nodded to the open drawer. "My Sunday gun's in there. The baby automatic. You might need to use it on your pal."

With three men in uniform holding down the back seat and Vic beside the inspector in front, the speedy little police car shot out of the garage and careened into Erie Street, siren caterwauling. As they laced through traffic against the second red light, the detective shouted from the corner of his mouth nearest Vic, "No time to waste. Ronsen's place over on West Monroe."

"I know. Wholesale office supply house. I've been there."

"Schultz came with proper credentials to deliver and collect for some oil-company stock Bloom had sold Ronsen yesterday."

"I know that."

"You know a hell of a lot, kid," Gahagen shouted above the hum of the motor. "Anything else you could tell me?"

"Sure. Doris Dell told Eric just what she told all the other club officers on her sucker list. That he'd make money this month in oil. They all flopped hard when Bloom happened along a few weeks later and put a good-looking proposition in front of them. Then, yesterday, Schultz found out that Bloom had been holding out on collections, so he dropped in and, while Bloom groveled for mercy, voiced his protest with powder and slug."

"Wrong there," Gahagen snorted, wrenching the wheel to miss a truck by millimeters. "The boys located another guest on the mezzanine lounge who said no such man had used the lobby stairs for an hour. Elevator boys back her up, too."

"Must've been three other fellows," Vic gave in. "There's Eric's joint, third on your right. And the tan hack is our quarry's sporty job, if I know underworld taste in rolling stock."

GAHAGEN brushed the curb with his tires and stopped, fifty feet behind the tan roadster. The officers in the back seat were on the sidewalk by the time he and Vic were out. They fell in step and advanced to the entrance of the Ronsen Office Service Co. A girl at the switchboard looked at them fearfully as they came in.

"Mr. Ronsen is up—" Her words dried up on her lips and she pointed toward the steps that led to a glassed-in balcony.

As the quintet started for the stairs, Ronsen came plunging down to meet them. He was a bald, blond man, bespectacled and chubby, a sort of domesticated Viking.

"Hey, Chief!" he shouted, his voice flat and thin. "He's up there! I must've said too much to him. He drew a gun on me and I—I—" He floundered across the big display room and dropped into a chair, wiping sweat from his face with a pink, fat hand.

The frosted-glass door at the top of the stairs was slowly swinging shut. No supernatural agent propelled it. There was a mechanical closer visible at the top. But the effect was eerie, sinister.

Gahagen ran over to Ronsen and shook him. "Any other way out but that door up there?"

Ronsen shook his head till his necktie was whipped out of his vest. "No. None. But be careful! He can see us through the plate glass. I left him back in the corner by my desk. It's hidden from here."

"Fine business!" the inspector growled. Then to the phone girl: "Get out of here. Anywhere, but don't hang around."

She scuttled away into the back of the building, squealing like a trapped hare.

"Now. You, too. Go along with the girl. You'll be in the way here in a few minutes." Ronsen started to argue bravely, thought better of it and walked with careful dignity to the back room. "Fine. Now, you boys, Riley and Cook, shelter yourselves behind those counters and cover me. Vic, get another angle, over at the phone exchange. Don't anybody pull any cowboy stuff. Probably be no need to shoot."

He drew his service revolver from its carrying place and advanced toward the foot of the steps, as unhurried and at ease as if he were approaching his own front porch. While the three pairs of eyes watched from below, he mounted to the

shallow landing in front of the door and paused.

"All right, Schultz," he called softly, "we've come for you."

There was no answer from beyond the wall of oak and glass. He turned the knob with his left hand, pulled the door toward him, his revolver steady, a little above the hip. When the door stood open, he craned his thick neck and took a long look, cocked his head like a wondering old Newfoundland and strode inside. The door with the frosted glass slowly closed behind him.

He reappeared a moment later in the panel of plate-glass windows. They saw him amble across the front of the office, his back to them, his head still tilted as he studied his surroundings. When he was almost to the opposite side of that part of the offices visible from below, his back to the door, he stopped, pushed up his hat brim and scratched his temple. Vic's eyes left him for an instant and strained in their sockets at what they saw.

THERE was a dark blot encroaching upon the milky glass in the door, a blot that, distorted though it was, he recognized instantly. It was the shadow of a tall man, his body pressed against the glass, his left hand lifted at an angle to his thin body. The hand was indistinct in detail, but the meaning of the shape that protruded from it, finger-like, was unmistakable. A gun-barrel is a gun-barrel, even in silhouette.

Now the door was opening, inch by inch. Four white fingers crept around the edge of it. The man's eyes were burning a hole in the inspector's broad back, half-hidden by the wood-work on the opposite side of the office. The door widened another fraction. Vic stared, hypnotized. Soon that door would be flung open. A man with death in his hand and desperate fear in his heart would lunge through it. What would he, trembling behind the phone-exchange cabinet, do in that emergency?

Suddenly, so suddenly that the events were almost simultaneous, Gahagen, startled, whirled in his tracks. The shadow of the arm jerked upward. Vic heard a crash, smelled the bitter smell of fresh-burned powder, saw dazedly that the smoke was curling up from the barrel of the blunt automatic in his own uplifted hand. Jagged puzzle-blocks of frosted glass tinkled to the floor of the landing. The office door, yielding to the pressure of dead weight from within, swung slowly open to spill a seemingly jointless form on the steps outside. The head hung over the third step and a dark stream ran down the neck and vanished behind the sharp, up-turned chin.

Now Inspector Jim was standing above the body, looking past it at Vic's white face below him. "Thanks, kid," was all he said.

As they carried the body down and stretched it on the floor of the display room, he broke the silence again. "He must've been hiding back of that roll-top desk. Now, if we could be sure about the woman."

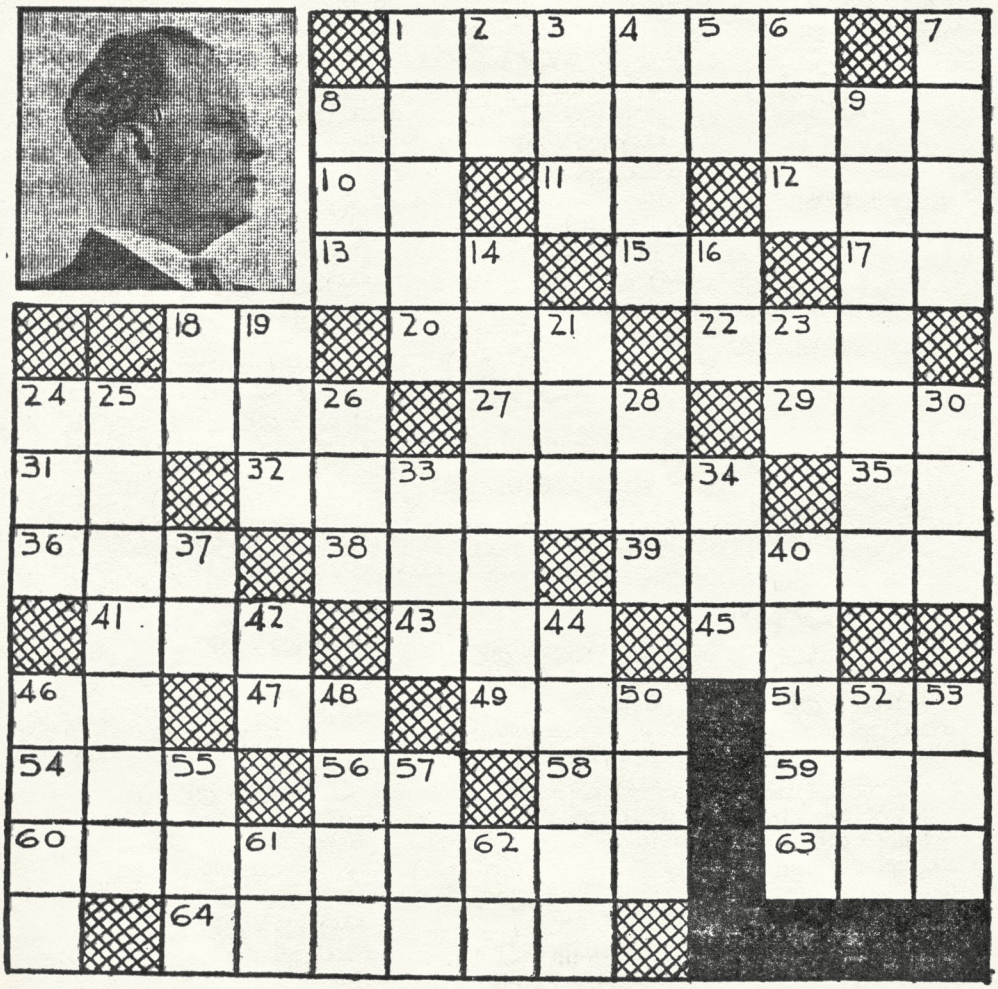
"You can," Vic spoke up. "All you have to do is put two and one together and make two." Gahagen stared blankly and Vic went on: "I'm betting my Christmas bonus that you'll find women's clothes in that car out in front. Schultz, an ex-vaudeville performer, was also Doris Dell. That saved a third split, prevented woman trouble."

In a suitcase under the rumble seat, they did find them, woman's clothes and a case of cosmetics. And, what clinched the matter, a handsome wig of black hair, combed low, as Vic pointed out—"The better to hide those 'one o'clock ears'."

CROSS ROADS OF CRIME

by

RICHARD HOADLEY TINGLEY



The pictured man is well known in the field of criminology and is the author of a currently popular book. The blackened space in the diagram forms the initial of his first and last names. Who is he?

ACROSS

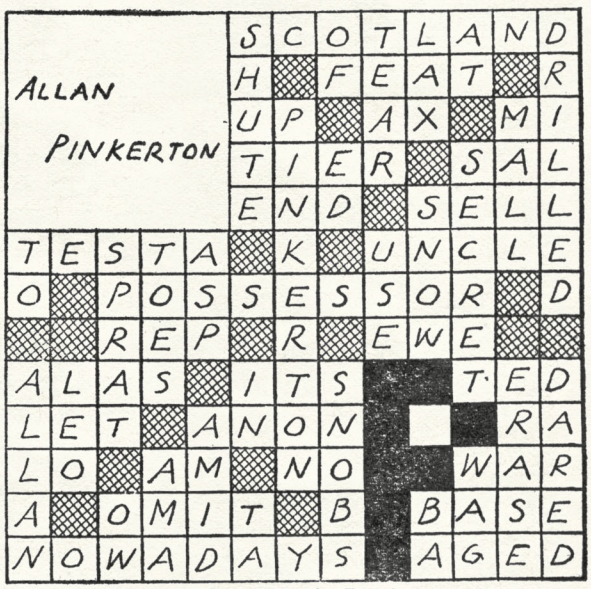
1 The place where the pictured man lives
8 The pictured man's associates
10 Behold!
11 Else
12 A protuberance
13 An ox-like bovine of Asia
15 Toward
17 The brother of Odin
18 The giant king of Bashan (Josh. xii-4)
20 Crime
22 An exclamation of disapproval
24 The last name of the pictured man
27 A distinguished Confederate general
29 Assay
31 Masculine nickname
32 Levers controlling a rudder
35 Point marked on a compass
36 An evil spirit
38 Portugese money unit
39 Assumed parts
41 An electrified atom
43 The insect to whom the sluggard was advised to go
45 Title of Col. Lindbergh's book
46 Arabian—(Abbr.)
47 Large river in Siberia
49 To talk nonsense
51 Path
54 Directed
56 That is—(Abbr.)
58 Knight of St. Andrew—(Abbr.)
59 Anger
60 Feigned
63 A collection of like things
64 The pictured man's title

DOWN

1 Swift sailing vessels of the Malayan seas
2 A small New England state—(Abbr.)
3 Prefix; "equal"
4 Kind
5 Upon
6 Novel
7 A slave or hireling
8 Exert with diligence
9 Higher courts often do this to the decisions of lower ones
14 This is done legally under direction of the pictured man
16 From
18 Exclamation expressing sudden hurt or pain
19 Obtain
21 Born
23 A neuter object
24 Rumanian coin
25 One who regards another with approval
26 Title used when addressing a gentleman
28 To make a mistake
30 An expression of assent
33 A meadow
34 Plant
37 Secretary Farley heads this government department—(Abbr.)
40 First name of the pictured man
42 None
44 Carried off
46 Mountains that Hannibal crossed
48 Coffin
50 Evil
52 Exist
53 Further
55 Condensed moisture in the air
57 Tail
61 Chemical symbol for Tantalum
62 From—used in foreign proper names

Note: The blackened letter in the diagram is the first letter in the pictured man's first and last names

ALLAN PINKERTON was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1819, and died in the United States in 1884. He founded the Pinkerton Detective Agency in Chicago, Illinois, in 1842 and developed it to such a high point of efficiency that, still functioning under the direction of his sons—to many people today the expression "Pink" means simply a detective and not the faintly red brand of parlor radical it connotes to others. Through the Civil War Pinkerton and his agents rendered valuable secret service to the Union cause and Pinkerton himself was Lincoln's personal bodyguard on many occasions, notably in 1861 when the President made his journey to Washington for the inauguration. The Pinkerton Agency was the first private detective force to hire out armed men to employers and corporations for the protection of property from strikers. Pinkerton rendered valuable service in breaking up the notorious Molly MacGuires and in quelling the famous Homestead strike. During the Civil War he was commissioned to organize the Federal Secret Service Department of which he was made the head.



Last Issue's Puzzle

The Hairy Death

From the other side of the world walked like a man, bringing with the mortician detective had ever rid, hairy death that choked all did it leave those grim portraits

CHAPTER ONE

Popcorn Balls

THE Cleveland pitcher shot a fast one, high and a little wide, across the plate. Unwisely, the St. Louis batter cut at it. It took a lazy hop toward short. The short-stop stuck out his hand. A second later, the hand was still

A Horatio Humberton Story

by J. Paul Suter

With a flourish he parted the curtains.

it had come, the Blind Beast that it the most grisly murder means encountered. What was that hor- who crossed its path? And why of itself after every crime?

extended, but it had missed the ball, and the batter was on first.

Detective James Clyde, at the game with his friend, Horatio Humberton, and Humberton's senior hearse driver, Ted Spang, let out a yell of disgust and jumped up and down in a first-base box.

"Wow!" he roared. "Yank him! Find some high-school team and hire a short-stop!"

Clyde was still standing as a woman brushed past him, on her way out. He squeezed back, so that she could step between him and the rear of the seat in front. She slid by, and at the instant of passage neatly transferred a brown paper bag from her hand to his.

"Open it after the game," she whispered—and was gone.

Though a baseball fan at heart, Clyde was also a detective. His glance at the departing woman's back was all-inclusive. She was short, a trifle stout, had grayish bobbed hair, dark red sweater and mannish shoes.

"Get that?" he inquired of Humberton, as he sat down again. "She's an old sport of some kind. Probably lives at the Y. W. C. A. and—"

"She is a distinguished artist," the tall funeral director replied, his voice just above a whisper.

"You know her?"

"Slightly."

"Hear what she said?"

Humberton nodded.

Clyde passed his hand over the surface of the brown paper bag. Unless all signs failed, it contained two popcorn balls. He was about to open it when his friend's long, lean fingers closed down on his. "She said 'after the game'."

"What difference does it make?"

"I don't know. Neither do you. Since you accepted the bag, suppose you follow directions."

Clyde snorted. The word "accepted" seemed to take a good deal for granted. But he shrugged his shoulders and settled back to enjoy the remainder of the game.

The game over, Clyde again turned his attention to the bag. But his curiosity was not yet to be satisfied.

"Open it in the car. We shall have more privacy," Humberton whispered.

"Oh, all right!" the detective growled; and he said no more till they were in the rear seat of the Humberton sedan.

"Shall I look in it now or wait for the next full moon?" he inquired, then; and as his friend ignored the remark, he unfolded the mouth of the bag—rather gingerly.

"Just what I thought—a couple of popcorn balls! I suppose she's one of these practical jokers. An artist, you say? What's her name?"

HUMBERTON reached for the bag and looked into it, then examined the popcorn balls. "This one comes apart," he said, quietly. A note—I thought so! The lady is Rosa Huxley Dorn, a well known miniature painter. Evidently she pulled the ball in two and slipped the paper inside—it's a bit of the tissue from a third ball. The writing is very light. Suppose you draw up to the curb and read it to us, Ted."

Clyde grabbed the paper and read it for himself.

"It says, 'Come to my studio at once—all three of you'," he announced.

"Her studio is in the woods, at Glenville," Humberton contributed.

"Well—" Clyde was still frowning at the singular summons, and turning it over and over in his hands. "Maybe it's a joke. Shall we go there?"

"Glenville, Ted," Humberton instructed. "Did you by any chance observe the lady's face just before you let her past, Clyde?"

"Her face?" Clyde put out a hasty hand to steady himself as Ted swung the car around. "I didn't even know she had a face."

Ted Spang glanced back over his shoulder. "She was sitting two seats to my right, sir," he remarked.

"So I noticed," his chief said. "Of course, we three always take in the Sunday afternoon games if we can, when the team is at home. And we always sit at first base. A good many people know that. She could easily buy a ticket near us, if she wished. Anything else, Ted?"

"I saw her write the note, sir," he answered. "She was glancing up all the time to see if anyone was watching her, when she split the popcorn ball and stuck the paper in. I almost missed that myself. I'd say she was worried about something—worried plenty!"

Humberton nodded. "That's what I meant about her face," he said.

"O. K.—step on it!" Clyde exclaimed, suddenly. "You fellows have got me going now. When a dame takes all that trouble to call us on the quiet, she must be scared—scared stiff!"

CLYDE'S urging was not needed. If any other car reached Glenville faster than the Humberton sedan, it had wings. With a few directions from his chief, the black-haired hearse driver turned into a tree-bordered road, angled from that into what looked like a cattle track, and stopped against a barb-wire fence which encircled a rambling log cabin.

"Is that what they call a studio?" Clyde exclaimed.

"I've met Mrs. Dorn a number of times. An independent soul, Clyde—a widow, a traveler—quite a genius. Comes of good family, but doesn't live with them. One of her private exhibits was held out here last year. I attended. We had to squeeze in as best we could between the strands of barb wire—her hint to uninvited guests. Several of the ladies tore their dresses. Our hostess laughed, and I understand bought them new ones."

Ted held the strands apart while his employer and the big detective climbed through. Swearing softly, Clyde made the transit without accident; but not so easily as Humberton. Then Ted placed his hands on one of the bark-covered posts, and vaulted over.

An iron knocker, made to imitate an Indian tomahawk, adorned the front door. Humberton knocked repeatedly.

"I wondered whether we wouldn't beat her to it," Clyde chuckled.

Ted Spang appeared around the corner of the cabin in time to hear the remark, and winked imperceptibly at his chief. Neither of his companions had seen him go. "Her car," he volunteered, "is behind the cabin, just outside the fence." He went on, addressing Humberton: "I've been around the house, sir. Funny place. All the windows seem to be in the second story, and there's only one door. The north window is a whopper. By the way, the hood of the car's still warm, I noticed."

Humberton's long face became grim. Behind the thick glasses, his eyes glowed with a kind of gloomy determination. He tried the door handle. "Unlocked! I don't like this, Clyde."

He pushed the heavy door open, and they walked in.

FOR a moment, the great northern window blinded them. Gleaming with the flat light of late afternoon, it was like an enormous square diamond set in the dark framework of the studio. There were two doors at the left. Ted opened these, and disappeared into one room after the other. Clyde, with one comprehensive glance about the big room, his right hand shading his eyes, began to look at the pictures on the walls.

"Pretty neat!" he commented. "I never expected to see so many little pictures all at once in my life. What d'you think's the trouble, Ho? Can't she sell them?"

"I understand she collects the works of others," his friend explained. "Her own miniatures are in great demand."

Ted came out of the second room.

"Everything in order?" Humberton queried.

"Nothing out of order, sir—if that's what you mean."

"The rooms are a bedroom and a kitchen, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir—and a bath."

Humberton looked hard at his black-haired assistant.

"What don't you like about them?"

"It's a picture, sir. Come in and look at it."

AS HE entered the little room—lighted by a single window high up in the wall—Humberton glanced at the bed. It was neatly smoothed. A regiment of miniatures were on the walls, as in the main studio; but three or four of them had been covered by a colored picture, carelessly tacked to the wall.

"There you are, sir," Ted remarked. "Looks Chinese, don't you think so?"

Humberton nodded.

"A hairy animal of some sort," he observed. "Might be a bear—yet not exactly a bear, either. Look at it, Clyde. It's not a bad specimen of Eastern art. I can't pretend to like it, though. The face is unusual, to say the least."

The big detective nodded, and shivered slightly. "Gives me the creeps. Look at that face, Ho. No eyes—only a smooth place where the eyes ought to be. It's the darndest thing I ever saw!"

"You were referring to the absence of eyes, Ted—that was what you wanted me to see?"

"Not so much that, as something else, sir." Ted lifted the lower edge of the yellow paper on which the odd picture was painted. "What would you call this?"

For a moment, all three men stood perfectly still. There was an irregular blotch on the back of the picture, near the lower right-hand corner. None of them had any doubt what it was.

"Blood!" Clyde exploded. "Where did it come from?"

"I'm going to look around a bit," Ted said, quietly.

"I guess we'd all better look around." The big detective began his own search by kneeling, with a grunt, to glance under the bed. "We're due to find something in this dump, or I miss my guess."

Humberton did not match his friend's display of energy. He stepped from the bedroom back into the studio, and gazed about him. For a minute or two he did not move, though Clyde had already rushed from bedroom to kitchen, where he could be heard opening cupboard doors.

"Nothing wrong in here, Ho," he announced. "Now we'll take the big room."

But Humberton was walking toward a huge bearskin rug, in one of the dark corners beneath the large window. Ted also had turned his attention suddenly in that direction. He reached the rug first. He did not touch it. Instead, he brought out his pocket flashlight.

"There's blood on this rug, sir," he said. "A lot of blood."

Humberton was beside him, peering at the sinister smears through his thick glasses.

"Here, Clyde," Then, with the big detective beside him, he carefully lifted one end of the rug.

THE search had ended. There was something uncouth and grotesque about the stout little body, in its red sweater and mannish shoes. It lay on its side with the knees flexed. The hands were clenched. But what made Humberton drop to his knees, with a hissing in-

take of breath, was the black substance protruding from the wide-open mouth.

He did not touch it. That was for the coroner to do. But he bent close, and closer still, until his face nearly brushed the hideous thing he was looking at. At last, he straightened up again.

"What do you make of it, Ho?" Clyde inquired.

"I think she was suffocated," he answered. "The blood came from her nose. No doubt it was a rough process."

"Suffocated? How?"

"Did you ever hear of the Princes in the Tower, Clyde?"

"Seems to me I have, Ho."

"They were smothered with pillows—at least so the story goes." He glanced down again at the gaping mouth, and shuddered, slightly. "This poor creature died the same sort of death, yet not quite the same. Her mouth is completely filled. There are marks on the face, too, which indicate that the substance used to fill the mouth was pressed down tightly over the nostrils. It served a double purpose—it was the means of death, and it shielded the murderer's fingers, so that no possible prints could be left on his victim's skin. I think, Clyde, this sets a new mark. I've never before seen or heard of anyone killed by just this device. It is hair—coarse black hair."

CHAPTER TWO

Open Season on Detectives

IT WAS ten o'clock of a gray spring morning—a morning made all the grayer by the disgusting health of the establishment's clientele. They had had no funerals for a week. The family of the distinguished artist killed the afternoon before was employing another funeral director—this in spite of the fact that Humberton had wasted most of the night in a fruitless search for clues.

Now Clyde met him at the front door of headquarters, and shook his hand.

"Understand they hired McCarthy, Ho," he said, sympathetically. "It burned me up when I heard it. There's no gratitude left in the world."

"It's not that." Humberton's long face was a little bitter. "I don't mind losing the funeral, but I should have liked the embalming job. She's an admirable corpse, Clyde. Solidly built, yet not fat. I could have done something creditable with her—I feel sure of it."

"Well, you may have another before this case is over," Clyde consoled him. "What kind of a job could you make of me, for instance?"

"Of you?" Humberton looked at him thoughtfully through the thick glasses—so very thoughtfully that Clyde shivered a little, in spite of himself. "You'd take a good deal of fluid, Clyde, but the results should be satisfactory. I hope your family will bear me in mind when the need arises."

"All right, Ho," the detective returned, hastily. "What I'm trying to tell you is that you came pretty close to having the job this morning. Maybe not so close, at that," he added. "She must have missed me by two yards."

"She?" Humberton's eyebrows lifted.

"Come on up to my office. Remember I said there was something I wanted to show you? Well, she's it."

Humberton followed silently up to the rather spacious office which Clyde rated, as chief of detectives. With the door shut, he relaxed in a chair—still without speaking—and lighted one of the long and very powerful cigars he affected. Clyde pulled out his bulldog pipe, but plunged into his story without applying a match to it.

"It was seven this morning, Ho," he began. "I was just starting for work—"

"Near your home?"

"Near enough to spit in the window. I hadn't any more than shut the front gate behind me when a bullet zipped past my head. So I turned. There was a dame standing by a tree across the street, crying fit to break her heart. Maybe she was crying because she'd missed. I don't know."

"A girl? Shooting at you?" Humberton tried, not very successfully, to conceal a smile.

"Laugh out loud if you want to, I don't care. Probably I'd get a snicker out of it too, if I had a sense of humor like yours."

"You're sure she was shooting at you?"

"She admitted it."

"But why?" the necrologist demanded.

"Listen. She said, 'Oh, Detective Clyde!' as I came running over to her. And when I asked if she was shooting at me, she nodded. But after that she was through handing out information. Who is she? I don't know. Did she think it was the open season on detectives or something? Is that why she tried to pot me? I'm drawing another blank. All she says is that she can't tell me. She's not hard-boiled or anything like that. But she isn't talking."

"Where is the lady in the case?"

"Here in a cell."

"You'd like me to talk to her?"

"Darned tooting I would!"

AT the first sight of the slender figure in a gray raincoat, cowering at the farther end of the cell, Humberton felt that it was someone familiar. She was sitting on the cot, her face buried in her hands. Clyde spoke softly to her, but there was no response. She might have been carved out of gray marble.

"That's the way she is, Ho. She don't do very much talking."

Humberton stepped up to her. He stepped so close that the edge of the gray raincoat touched him. From that position his near-sighted eyes could see clearly the few tendrils of curling blond hair which escaped from beneath her rather shapeless gray hat, and the slim, sensitive fingers hiding her face.

"Is she good-looking, Clyde?" he inquired casually. The prisoner's hands shifted a little as he asked the question.

"So-so," the detective returned, ungallantly.

"Fortunately, there is no matinée today. But I don't know how the evening performance can be successful without her."

The concealing hands dropped. Humberton found himself looking into a naturally pleasant round face, whose blue eyes were decidedly troubled at the moment.

"This is a pleasure, Miss Kitty La Rue," he said. "But a pleasure, of course, tempered by the circumstances under which we meet. Miss La Rue, Clyde, is leading lady in that excellent stock company at the Commonwealth."

"How did you know me?" the actress gasped. Her voice was a smooth, resonant contralto.

"Largely by your hands. You have a way of expressing interest or surprise by a peculiar sidewise motion of them. You see, Clyde"—the little actress had risen from her seat on the cot, and he was nodding toward her, much as a collector might nod toward one of the items pinned to his panel—"Ted and I rather enjoy stock companies. We have front-row seats reserved every week at Miss La Rue's performances. So I have grown to know her distinctive personality. That answers your question, my dear young lady. Now suppose you answer mine. Why did you shoot at Clyde? I don't like my friends to be shot at!"

Her lips set firmly. "I can't tell you," she said, almost in a whisper.

"You mean that you won't tell me?"

"I didn't hit him."

"You tried to."

AT THAT she seemed to wince, but she did not answer. Clyde, meanwhile, was staring perplexedly at her, like a St. Bernard dog that has cornered a kitten. The problem of what to do with his prisoner was evidently a matter of deep concern to him.

"Very well, Miss La Rue. We'll let that pass. What time do you usually get up in the morning?"

"About noon." She caught her breath, and darted a frightened glance at him. "That is—"

"Don't try to change it. I can easily check your statements. And I suppose you live some miles from Clyde's residence?"

She nodded.

"Yet you rose hours before your regular time, put on a disguise—it amounted to that—and made an early morning trip to Clyde's neighborhood to shoot him down as he started to work."

"I didn't—I didn't—"

"You didn't make the trip?"

"I didn't try to shoot him down. He wouldn't be alive now, if I had!"

"You shot merely to frighten him? Was that it?"

"Yes. That was it. I wanted to—to play a joke on him."

"So you know Clyde very well, I take it?"

She saw where the questions were leading, and smiled. It was a rather rueful smile. "I might have known you'd trap me. I shouldn't have talked. I'm not going to tell you why I did that mad thing this morning. You can question me all day, and still I won't tell. I dare not tell," she finished softly. "Whatever you're going to do with me, I guess you might as well do it."

Clyde broke in, suddenly. "If I were sure you weren't really trying to put a hole in me—"

"Is that all?" Her small, round face radiated relief. "I'm so glad to hear you say that, Mr. Clyde! I can prove I wasn't aiming at you. That is, if you have a pistol range here at the station. You have, haven't you?"

The detective nodded. He looked a little more puzzled than before. But Humberton smiled emphatic approval at him and also at his prisoner.

"An excellent idea! Suppose we go down to the range at once, Clyde? If Miss La Rue has any skill whatever with a revolver, she should be able to prove quite easily whether or not she meant to miss you."

"You'd put a gun in her hand?"

"Why not? She'd be insane to use it on you, here at headquarters."

"Maybe she is insane."

"Listen, Mr. Clyde." Kitty La Rue laid a hand on his arm. "You have a gun of your own, haven't you? Well stand behind me while I'm shooting at the target. Keep your gun handy. If I start to turn on you, let me have it. It will be quite all right. Mr. Humberton will swear you did it in self-defense, and I won't come back to haunt you."

It was Humberton's grin, as much as any argument, that decided Clyde. He submitted, suddenly, with a growl, though his face showed plainly what he thought of the suggestion. "Come on!" he said.

THE shooting range was in the basement of a building across the street from that in which Clyde had his office. It was an old building—the city hall of former times, now used for various municipal offices. Clyde led them through a dark entry and a darker hall to the

long narrow room utilized as the range.

"Here we are, Ho," he said, resignedly. "We've peeled the fingerprints from her gun, so she can have that if you say so. It's in the next room."

"Very well."

The room was dark, but as he went for the revolver Clyde snapped on the lights for the three targets, at the farther end. Humberton stepped forward, and carefully examined their smooth faces. Then he retired to a place beside them in the shadow.

"Care to shoot against me for any little thing—like my liberty, for instance?" Miss La Rue inquired, as Clyde handed her the revolver. He had not drawn his own. "No? Oh, well!" She raised the gun. "Three in the gold!"

As the third report died, Humberton leaned forward into the light, to examine the target.

"She did it!" he exclaimed, biting emphatically into his long cigar. "Miss La Rue, I—"

There was a fourth report. He put his hand up hastily, removed the cigar from his mouth, and looked at it. Kitty La Rue handed the weapon back to Clyde.

"Now I've done it!" she groaned. "I don't know what to say, Mr. Humberton. Really I don't. There you were in the light all of a sudden, with that cigar sticking out of your mouth. I snuffed it before I thought."

"You—you—" Clyde could not find words.

"But he wasn't in any danger, Mr. Clyde. I used to do that twice a day. When I saw that cigar before me suddenly, in the light—"

"Look here, girlie." Clyde spoke with heavy feeling. "I guess you weren't really trying to shoot me this morning. I'll grant you that. You could plug me all right if you wanted to. But when it comes to shooting Ho's snipe out—"

"If any injury has been done, Clyde, I am the injured party," Humberton put in, rather sharply. "I don't object to Miss La Rue's practice on me. It was good shooting—extremely good. I object much more to having my cigar described as a 'snipe'."

"Mr. Humberton, I want to explain." Kitty La Rue was a picture of blue-eyed dejection. "I was with the circus before I went into stock. I did trapeze work and fancy shooting. I still keep in practice—"

Humberton nodded. "I understand. Now, Miss La Rue, I have another test for you."

"Anything at all!"

"I'm going to pin a paper to one of these targets." He fumbled at an inside pocket of his black coat.

"You want me to shoot at it?"

"You were good enough to lend me this picture for examination, Clyde," Humberton went on, as he fastened it up. "I hope you won't object to my using it as a target."

"I'll give you back your gun, girlie," Clyde said; then he realized abruptly what the picture was. Humberton's body had concealed it. As the tall necrologist stepped aside, it became visible to both Clyde and the little actress.

SHE did not scream. She seemed to keep from it by sheer will power. Her cry was more of a hoarse moan of terror.

"The Blind Beast! The Blind Beast!"

"Yes, Miss La Rue!" Humberton whirled on her. "What do you know about the Blind Beast? Quick, now!"

"Nothing." Her breath was coming in gasps. "I—I—"

"You knew the name of it."

"Rosa told me."

"Who's Rosa?" Clyde demanded.

"Hush, Clyde. Yes, Miss La Rue. Rosa Dorn told you?"

"She was a friend of mine. That's the picture she had in her bedroom. I know its name because that's what she called it."

"Where did she get the picture?"

"She never told me that."

Humberton glanced at his friend of the official force.

"I haven't happened to read the morning papers today, Clyde. Tell me—did you permit the reporters to learn that we found this picture?"

Clyde was manifestly embarrassed. He cleared his throat and slowly scratched his head. At length, he said: "I didn't tell 'em the name anyway, Ho. I didn't know that myself.

"Miss La Rue—how was this picture hung in Mrs. Dorn's bedroom?"

"Pinned up—on the wall."

"Was that in the newspaper article too, Clyde?"

"I guess it was, Ho."

Humberton was silent. He stood with folded arms and feet far apart gazing down at the trembling little actress. She was frightened. That was very clear. Yet something in her manner made it equally clear that she was not frightened of anyone in that room. Her fear was more fundamental. Suddenly, he turned to Clyde.

"Clyde, is there a chance that anyone might be hidden in this room?"

"I'd never think so, Ho." The detective glanced about him, curiously. "What makes you ask that? Wait a minute."

He stepped to the wall and pressed a button. The long, narrow room became brilliantly lighted from an overhead light.

"There you are! It was a little dark before that, except around the target. Now we'll look behind the target. Nobody there. And not another place in the room a flea could hide. Does that satisfy you, Ho?"

"Perfectly. Now, Clyde, will you please go out and shut the door behind you? I want to be alone for a few moments with Miss La Rue."

Clyde departed with good grace, though evidently puzzled. As the door closed behind him, Kitty La Rue tittered.

"He didn't like that. And you won't like it when I still hold out on you. I know what you're going to say, Mr. Humberton—that no one can overhear us now, and that I can trust you to keep my secret. I'm sure I can trust you. I'm very sure. But if I told you anything—even in this empty room—they'd find out."

"Who would find out?" he asked quietly; but she shook her head.

"It's no use, really. Of course, you can keep me locked up; but that wouldn't help, either. All that might do would be to lose my job for me and wreck my career, if I couldn't go on tonight. It's a circus play this week, and my understudy hasn't had circus training. But I still wouldn't dare talk."

HUMBERTON was a man of both logic and impulses. On occasion, his impulses had been brilliant; and he was forced to admit to himself that, on certain other occasions, even the most elementary logic would have been better. He obeyed an impulse now. He asked the uneasy girl, standing before him in the brightly lighted room, what she would advise him to do. Her first look of astonishment melted into a smile.

"Will you promise to take my advice?" she asked. Then, before he could reply, "No, that wouldn't be fair. I'll give you the advice and see what you do with it. If I were you, Mr. Humberton, I'd let Kitty La Rue go free. You won't learn anything by holding her. She's afraid to talk, because she believes the thing that's

threatening her could hear, even in empty rooms. And she doesn't want to be locked up in jail, because it could reach her even there. I'd let her go and act in her play. It won't be a bit more dangerous for her, and it will save her job. But—"

She hesitated so long that he quietly said: "Yes?"

Even then, she was silent for a while. When she did speak, it was a barely audible whisper. "I'd have her followed —not by a regular detective—they're too clumsy; have her followed by your assistant, Ted Spang. But arrange it before you let her go. There mustn't be any gap. I don't look for anything till after the play tonight, but one never knows."

Humberton bowed, gravely. He did not refer to her advice. Instead, he opened the door.

"Call up Ted and ask him to come at once, Clyde," he said. He glanced at his watch. It is now ten o'clock. Suppose you release Miss La Rue at ten thirty."

CHAPTER THREE

Death in the Air

HORATIO HUMBERTON said gloomily: "I am almost tempted to have you stop the play, in the name of the law."

The companion to whom he spoke—both of them occupying excellent seats in the orchestra circle of the Commonwealth Theater—was none other than Chief of Detectives James Clyde. Mrs. Clyde—a small, silent, dark woman with a masterful chin—sat on her husband's right.

"If I was as nervous as you've been lately, Ho," Clyde was saying, "I'd give up those El Cabbagos and try something mild, like a pipe."

"I let her go," Humberton said, coldly ignoring the advice, "because there seemed no object in our keeping her a prisoner. We were learning nothing. This way, I thought, we might get a lead —simply by watching. I suppose you understand, Clyde, that Ted has been tailing her all afternoon and evening?"

"Where is he now?" Clyde asked.

"Backstage. That's the post of danger, I should say. But I don't know what the danger is or how to avert it."

"So you'd stop the play before it starts?" Clyde grinned sarcastically. "I've got plenty of respect for you, Ho—you know that—but I sometimes think that if the Lord had put fifty pounds more on your bones and taken half an ounce off your imagination you'd feel a lot better. What's that, Ruth?" He bent his head toward Mrs. Clyde, who had tugged his sleeve.

"That little platform—way up there." She pointed to a small, gilded structure at the very top of the auditorium.

"You want to know what it's for? They use it in the play. For one of Miss La Rue's stunts. That's what they've been advertising in the papers, you know."

Humberton, whose nerves had been calmed a little by the interruption, leaned across Clyde and smiled benignly at Mrs. Clyde.

"You'll find it very spectacular, Mrs. Clyde," he said. "Miss La Rue is a former circus performer. They say no other actress in the country could take this part except the one who created it, years ago, and she has retired from the stage."

"Well, if she drops, I hope she don't drop on any of us," was the lady's conclusion.

"Have you checked up with Ted?" Clyde inquired in a whisper to his friend.

"He has reported three times. Nothing of note."

"And won't be. Take my word for it.

I'm coming to see this thing in the right light now. The little dame's a publicity hound. She'd have strung us along till late afternoon—not too late for the home editions—then her lawyer would have come romping down with a *habeas corpus* and six reporters. And would the place have been packed tonight. They'd have been hanging chairs on hooks around the wall!" He looked about the auditorium. "It's a pretty fair crowd, at that."

WITH the rising of the curtain, Clyde was silent. He sank back into his seat, his face set into the severe, sceptical lines of one who defied the performers to entertain him. Humberton gazed idly about him. He scanned the wings for a possible sight of Ted; vainly, of course—Ted would hardly have pulled such a boner as that. But was Ted, he wondered, guarding against every probability? Or was some almost impossible danger, something grotesque and outrageous, the one they should have watched for?

In the middle of the second act, Mrs. Clyde poked a sharp elbow between the third and fourth of her husband's ribs. "I feel a draft on the top of my head," she whispered.

"Probably an electric fan backstage," he temporized; but she was not to be put off.

"I can tell a fan draft any time," she insisted. "This is a wind draft."

Since she was an incisive whisperer, the argument began to attract attention. Humberton, in turn, nudged Clyde. "Tell her to shut up," he requested.

Fortunately, that was not necessary. The lady suddenly sank back with a sigh which was even louder than her whisper.

"There! It stopped just this minute. Don't ever tell me I can't feel a draft when I know I can!"

"Why didn't we make this a stag?" Clyde groaned behind his hand to the necrologist; but Humberton mutely directed his attention to the stage. Kitty La Rue, who had now become a circus performer for the purposes of the play, was going into one of her big scenes.

"Think she's in danger in this one, Ho?"

"I haven't the least idea," his friend returned, rather tartly.

"Take it from me, her only danger is that she won't get enough advertising."

And when the curtain fell at the end of the second act, Clyde was even surer. Nothing had occurred to mar the smoothness of the performance.

The third act began without Kitty La Rue. When the minutes passed and she had not made an appearance, Humberton emulated Mrs. Clyde, and sat on the edge of his chair. He reflected that there could be nothing wrong. The action did not yet call for the heroine, that was all. Yet—was Ted watching? Of course. He would be as near his charge as possible. But would that be near enough, if anything should happen?

THEN she ran upon the stage. She wore a long red cape which glistened in the footlights. It did everything but cover her blond head and twinkling feet. She was the circus performer—the trapeze artiste—coming into the arena. Her quick steps left a little wake behind her in the sawdust—real sawdust.

"I've been reading about this one, Ho," Clyde said, excitedly. "She swings out over the audience. See that trapeze caught up there at the side of the stage? The rope to it isn't a real rope; it's stiffened some way so they can swing her right up to the roof. She lands on that platform up there, and—"

"I feel that draft again," Mrs. Clyde interrupted.

"You'd feel a draft if a fly flapped his wings," her husband returned, irritably. "What I was saying, Ho, is that she lands—"

"The trapeze is descending," Humberton observed, calmly. "I think she has some lines to speak, if you don't mind, Clyde."

Clyde subsided grumpily. Kitty La Rue spoke her lines, and a black-moustached gentleman, the ringmaster, spoke his: which indicated the necessity for trapeze work at that point. Then the trapeze descended, and the next moment Kitty La Rue, her red cape tightly gathered about her, was sitting upon the bar and swinging out over the audience.

Each return of the trapeze took her farther out. She swung three times; she was going very high. The black-moustached ringmaster stepped importantly to the footlights. He had an announcement to make.

"I get that draft on my face now," Mrs. Clyde said, querulously, to her husband.

"Where else do you expect to get it when you're rubbering that way?" he demanded.

The ringmaster was ready.

"Ladeez and gentlemen," he roared. "Miss Kitty La Rue, the world's premier trapeze artiste, will perform her terrifying, death-defying innovation, exactly as presented for the first time in the original New York production. Standing upon he flying trapeze she will divest herself of her cape, which will float downward before your eyes. Those receiving it will please turn it over to the ushers. She will then soar higher and still higher, until, with reckless disregard for her personal safety, she will jump to the tiny platform far above your heads. She will perform this amazing leap too swiftly for the eye to follow! Let everyone keep their seats! There is absolutely no danger to any person present tonight except Miss La Rue."

THE red cape had a golden lining. As it began to flutter downward, like an enormous and glorified bird, a spotlight from the balcony picked it out. The operator knew his business. He contrived to keep the fluttering fabric alternately lighted and shadowed nearly all the way down. The cape made eccentric dashes and sideslips, but his luminous pencil continued to follow. With the great audience breathless and almost silent, Mrs. Clyde's complaint again became audible.

"I feel that draft."

Clyde swore; but Humberton sprang suddenly to his feet.

"Blind fool!" he shouted. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"What's the matter?" the detective demanded, in a daze. His eyes still followed the spotlight, which was now swooping upward to catch the figure of Kitty La Rue. The light had done its work. It had distracted the audience's attention while Kitty made her transfer to the platform. Now they were to see her poised there for the downward flight. But Humberton grasped his friend's arm and dragged him toward the stage.

"The draft!" he exclaimed.

"I don't get this, Ho!" Clyde was strug gling ineffectually in Humberton's pincer-like grip. "Why not wait and see her on the platform?"

"That's why!" Humberton yelled a him; and at the same instant a slow, puzzled cry began to come from the multitudinous throats of the audience.

"I had everything covered—" Humberton's voice broke. He was on the verge of sobbing. "Everything but the place they struck. Drivelling, dithering fool!"

Clyde attempted to say something, but found himself led rapidly toward the corner of the stage where steps went up from

the auditorium. Ted Spang must have heard his chief's voice. He came running down the steps to meet them.

"The manager, Ted! I want him at once."

"He's right behind me, sir."

They were on the stage now. Humberton whirled on the stout, bewildered man who came from the wings. "Is there a trap door in the roof near that platform? Quick, man, tell me!"

"There is." The manager could be mystified, but not hurried. "We built the platform there for that reason. In the installation of the mechanism—"

"Take us up there—to the roof, I mean. No—wait. Give me someone who knows the building—someone quick on his feet. You remain here and handle your audience."

"Come on, sir," Ted volunteered, quietly. "I went over the building this afternoon with Miss La Rue."

IN a frenzy of self-reproach, Humberton permitted Ted to lead him by the hand. He could hardly have walked alone. He was scarcely aware of the questioning, excited actors among whom they elbowed their way, nor of the fact that Clyde was right behind him. He could not have found again the several flights of stairs they mounted. He was in a daze.

"This is the property storage room, sir. The steps to the roof are over here."

Then they were on the roof. The keen night air struck them. His mind began to clear.

"The trap door, Ted! We must find that."

"There's a sort of a little turret over in the middle, sir."

Ted ran ahead. He had a flashlight, as usual. Its beam could be seen through the dirty windows of the turret, as he disappeared inside. He was out again before either of them could follow him.

"In here, sir," he said. It was hardly more than a whisper.

"What?" his chief snapped.

"On the floor of the turret—"

Humberton snatched the flashlight. He brushed past Ted, and on through the narrow doorway. There he stopped for an instant, then whirled around again.

"Ted! Clyde! Search the roof and all these upstairs rooms! Look for a fire escape. He can't have much of a start. Take the flashlight, Ted."

Back in the turret room, he struck a match to look at the pathetic figure in pink tights which lay sprawled on the floor. The little circle of yellow light illumined the upturned face. The features were distorted out of all their prettiness. They were rigid with horror—the last emotion that had molded them. He laid his hand gently against the gaping mouth. At that his sensitive fingers discovered something which his eyes had missed. He swiftly withdrew a black, soggy ball from the stopped throat. It was a mass of coarse hair.

He remained kneeling quietly beside the body for a minute or two till his self-control returned. At last he lit another match, and saw by its light that the crumpled figure in the pink tights lay beside a crack in the flooring—the edge of a small trap door.

He found the ring of the door. It lifted easily. Propping it far enough with one arm so that he could look through, he could see a platform beneath—just beneath. A strong man could have reached down and grasped her as she stood there. But to drag her up, before she could loose a scream—

After only a glance at the colorful, milling audience far below, he shut the trap gently, and with the aid of another match examined the neck of the little actress. He found what he expected. It was encircled by a dark, pinched line. He

no more than glanced at that, either, then began to shuffle about on hands and knees with other matches, his near-sighted eyes close to the floor.

Ten minutes later, Clyde looked in.

"We haven't found a thing, Ho. Is she dead?"

Humberton turned, without rising from his knees. "You must apologize to your wife, Clyde," he said.

"For keeping her waiting? I'll be lucky to get away with an apology."

"I must ask her forgiveness, too. If I'd investigated, at once, when she felt that draft—"

"What's that, Ho?" Clyde's voice was edged with excitement.

"Kitty's murderer was peering through the trap—awaiting the right moment. That caused the draft. He dragged her up through the trap from her platform, by a noose."

"Strangled?"

"I think not." Humberton's words came with great deliberation. He found it hard to talk just then. "She was suffocated—with hair." He went on, as the detective responded with an inarticulate sound, under his breath. "I just found this on the floor, Clyde."

Clyde struck a match himself and looked at the colored rectangle of paper. Though not the same one that had startled the little actress in the pistol range, it was very much like it. It was the picture of a shaggy beast, without eyes.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Temple of the Beast

CLYDE'S cap lay on Humberton's work table, in the study back of the morgue at the funeral parlors. He himself, pipe in mouth, sat balanced on a stack of books, the while he scowled at his bespectacled friend through a thick fog of tobacco smoke. Humberton, whose long cigar contributed to the foul atmosphere, was staring back at him dejectedly.

"Eight P. M." Clyde was saying, doggedly. "Less than twenty-four hours since they did in poor little Kitty La Rue. Go back another twenty-four, with a few added, and we come to the nutty artist—same way of killing, same kind of pretty picture mixed up in it. You're the fair-haired boy who's with me on the case, but I'm not riding you, Ho. Don't get that idea. I never saw a human work harder than you've done these last two days. I'm just pointing out, for one thing, that we're hearing about it from the papers."

"So I am aware," the tall necrologist said, stiffly.

"And how do they get it all, I'd like to know?" Clyde went on. "Take that first picture—the one Kitty almost used for a target. We left it pinned up a while, and I guess we both forgot it till some time later. So of course the reporters saw it. I can understand that, all right. But I don't remember talking about any Blind Beasts, and I'll bet you didn't. Yet if there's a one-horse weekly printed on a hand press in Madagascar that hasn't got an extra out with Blind Beast spread across the top of it, I'll eat it with sugar and cream for my breakfast tomorrow. And the papers aren't just riding the police force this time, Ho. They're razzing you too—plenty. You're in the soup up to your cow-lick."

Humberton nodded, silently. There was really nothing to say.

"What have we found so far, for all our work? Outside of the pictures, the only thing that seems to tie these two dames together is the way they were killed. Did they know each other? Sure they did, though I can't find that they were very close. Did they have enemies? Well, friends don't go round stuffing your mouth with hair. But we haven't got wise

to any of the enemies, have we? Gentlemen friends? I checked up on that angle myself. Those that were at all intimate with these two ladies have better alibis than you and I. Fingerprints? The bird that killed these gals wasn't leaving any, thank you. So what? I'd say, Ho, that unless a break comes, we're treed."

Again Humberton nodded. "A good summary, Clyde," he said, "of what we have not found out. You could summarize what we have found in one word—nothing."

CLYDE had drawn a long blast on his pipe, no doubt preparatory to vigorous agreement, when there was a knock on the study door. Sadie Tatterton, assistant in the outer office, poked her head in. It was Sadie's red-haired charms which brightened disconsolate widowers coming to the parlors.

"Gentleman to see you, sir," she said to Humberton. "Wouldn't give his name. But he passed me this to hand to you."

She laid something face up on Humberton's table. It was directly in front of Clyde. One glance, and he sprang into the air with a yell.

"I had them locked up, Ho! In my safe, at the office—both of them!"

Humberton extended a long arm, which trembled a little, and drew the picture closer for examination. "This is not either of those pictures, Clyde," he said, in a moment. "I think—" He studied the garish colors thoughtfully. "I think, possibly, the break has come. Show the gentleman in, Miss Tatterton."

While showing him in, Sadie brought a chair for him, too; a mark of special consideration. Visitors to the study were not usually encouraged to linger by being made too comfortable. This visitor smilingly accepted the chair, and by his manner of doing so and his lithe ease of entrance proclaimed himself one whose muscles obeyed his bidding without argument. Through the thick glasses, Humberton had him sized up before he had offered his name: bronzed skin—a man who had lived much out of doors and in the tropics; steady, deep-set eyes—a man of action and courage; a continual smile, with something subtly wrong about it—a man with a nervous affliction which forced him to smile so.

Then Humberton read the proffered card.

"Wayne Crevitan!" he exclaimed. "You're not—"

Crevitan nodded, and his smile was intensified for a moment. "I'm the man who gives travel lectures," he said. "Glad you've heard of me. It's always pleasant to find one's self known. Not being sure my card would secure a hearing when no doubt you're extremely busy, I sent in this thing—" He jerked a finger toward the picture on the table. "Somehow, I thought it might make an impression."

"It did," Humberton admitted, curtly. He introduced Clyde; and the detective, after gripping a hand which was even more powerful than his own, made himself another seat of books.

THEIR visitor seemed entirely at his ease, yet in no hurry to talk. He leaned forward, his elbows on the table. His gaze shifted from Humberton to Clyde, then down to the picture of the Blind Beast. All the while he smiled with his mouth—his twitching, incessant smile—but not with his eyes.

"This picture—" he said, abruptly, looking at Humberton. "Do you know what it is?"

The necrologist shook his head.

"I thought as much. You're lucky not to. It happens that I know about it, so when I read in the papers about these two murders, I decided to drop in. Don't mis-

understand me. I'm not giving you anything. I'm selling it."

"You are selling information?" Humberton demanded.

"Not for money. I'll take my pay in something else—in protection."

Clyde's jaw stiffened at that. He looked hard at the celebrated lecturer. "Suppose you explain yourself, Mr. Crevitan," he suggested, gruffly.

"I mean protection in the most ordinary sense—for my life."

"I can promise you police protection, if that's what you want."

The lecturer smiled. "We can come back to that. We need to understand each other better, first. You see, gentlemen—" Once more he looked slowly from one of his companions to the other. "Though I know nothing about the actual murders of Mrs. Dorn and Kitty La Rue, I know a great deal about the probabilities. But I'd like to ask a question or two—to make sure I am on the right track. Of course, you are not obliged to answer them. I take it that you have found these pictures at the scene of the crimes—you must have done, or else my theories are all wrong?"

Humberton nodded. "I see no reason for denying that. It was in the paper—at least with reference to the first murder."

"We'll go a little further. Though you found the pictures, you found nothing else—no fingerprints or other indication of a material intruder—except that the mouths of the victims were stuffed with hair. Is that true, also?" Clyde sprang to his feet. "How do you know that? We kept it out of the papers."

"Bear with me just a moment," the smiling man returned, calmly. "You are two to one. You can easily arrest me before I leave. The answer to my last question—is it 'Yes?' "

"I guess so," the detective admitted, rather ungraciously. He sat down again.

"I'm sorry for this nervous affliction of mine, gentlemen. It makes me appear to smile all the time. If my face really mirrored my thoughts, there'd be no smiles whatever. I was hoping—against hope—that your answer to my questions might be negative. Even such a little thing as that might have offered me a chance for my life. Mr. Humberton, have you a map of Asia here?"

In response to Crevitan's request, Humberton's long slender fingers angled among the books at his right, and returned laden with an atlas.

"China?" he inquired.

"You are judging by the pictures. They do look Chinese. As a matter of fact, the map of India is what I want—northern India—the frontier provinces. Let me have the atlas."

HE rose, as Humberton pushed the book toward him. His left hand hovered over the map. It was more like a pair of dividers than a hand. Three fingers were missing; only the thumb and little finger remained.

"An Assegai did that for me, in Africa," he explained, lightly. "On the whole, I have few scars to show for the life I've led and the places I've been. There you are, gentlemen." His thumb described a line down the eyelash-like marks on the map which stood for a mountain range. "I'd rather not indicate it more closely. Walls have ears when one talks of these things. I won't even tell you how we happened into Afghanistan in the first place. It was made possible by our guide. Poor devil! He died the Hairy Death."

"Who killed him?" Clyde demanded. He was leaning far forward on his pile of books, his eyes fixed on their weirdly smiling visitor.

"Who indeed? I'd give a good deal for a satisfactory answer to that question. The high priest's men surrounded us in

the night, you understand. When we awoke in the morning, we were prisoners —the five of us. No chance to resist—it would have been madness. They took us to their temple, and, so far as we were concerned, the thing was already over. We had to agree to everything they proposed, or die."

"May I ask what temple this was?" Humberton inquired.

Crevitan laughed. "Well, if you want to use the name poor little Kitty used—according to the papers—it was the Temple of the Blind Beast. That's a rather free translation. I should say that the 'terror without eyes' is a little nearer the Afghan words. You can picture us—three men and two women—trussed hand and foot like fowls, carried on the shoulders of priests into that awful room of the god." He shot a swift glance at Humberton. "Have you studied the picture?"

Humberton nodded.

"Do you find it at all—what shall I say—disquieting?"

"I think it has that quality in quite a remarkable degree."

"Well, that picture—and any others you may have seen—are merely representations of the god, made by the priests. The idol itself is a thousand times more horrible. Little Kitty simply folded up—fainted—when she saw it. My stomach is strong enough, but I felt sick, too. As for our leader, Wysor Baw—he was older than the rest of us—"

"Wait a moment!" Clyde interrupted. "Baw! Wysor Baw! There can't be two guys with a name like that."

CREVITAN nodded. Again his perpetual smile broadened. "Not even one—now. Wysor Baw died the Hairy Death last year."

"Somewhere up in Minnesota?" Clyde was immensely interested.

"Not far from Minneapolis. Do you recall any of the circumstances, Mr. Clyde?"

"I do now, all right. But until you spit out that funny name I might as well never have heard of it. He was choked with hair—just like these two dames. Remember, Ho? They found a rummy picture, too! Sure they did! I must have been deaf, dumb, and pie-eyed not to think of it before. Why, that murder and the two we've had might have come out of the same barrel!"

Wayne Crevitan laid his mutilated hand on Clyde's arm. "Not only might—but did," he said, gravely. "I have no shadow of doubt on the subject. When I read that newspaper account I was so sure of it that I immediately took steps to have my home fortified against attack. I am a bachelor, living alone, so could do that without comment. You see, we had all taken the Oath of the Beast, the penalty for violating which is the Hairy Death, and I saw no reason why I should be spared, if they killed Baw. For the command he would not obey, I might not, either."

He paused. His eyes were fixed on the map, on the little claw marks where the Western Suleiman Mountains straggled through the Afghan wilderness. Clyde seemed on the point of making some comment, but at a warning look from Humberton he remained silent. Suddenly, Crevitan began speaking again. His voice had changed, subtly. Even the incessant, twitching smile on his face was almost smoothed out. He was evidently a man looking into the past and speaking from it.

"We swore by our mothers," he said, deliberately. "We swore by our spouses and our children—by the sight of our eyes, by the pains of cancer and the fires of hell; we swore with sharp blades pressing against our throats, close enough to bring the blood; we swore that through

whatever reach of time, in whatever distant land, when the command of the Blind Beast came to us we would obey. That was what we swore, gentlemen. That was the oath we took to save our miserable lives. I have no doubt that some command came to Rosa Dorn and to little Kitty La Rue. They were unwilling to obey, or else they tried to obey and failed. The penalty was death—the Death by Hair. And I am equally certain that this happened a year ago to poor old Wysor Baw. I don't mind telling you—it seems a queer thing to admit after what has occurred—that until I read of Baw's murder I thought this whole business preposterous. I didn't believe for a moment that the power of those oriental priests could reach over here."

"You have changed your mind?" Humberton asked.

"I've had to change it. Wouldn't you—under the circumstances? Rosa and Kitty and I have kept in touch, more or less, ever since that unlucky tourist excursion—the one which dumped us in the Afghan temple. So I warned them, after Baw's death. I told them to let me know if they received any strange command."

Clyde broke in: "Did they let you know?"

"No." Crevitan's voice was somber. "For some reason, they did not. Perhaps the command came in such a fashion that they were afraid to. I hadn't heard from either of them for a month or more. And as for the other member of the party—I told you there were five of us? Well, that other member was a rather weak chap named Ladderly. I'm told that he went from bad to worse—became a dope fiend. I lost sight of him, years ago." He stopped, abruptly. "There's my story, gentlemen. What shall I do?"

HUMBERTON blinked through his thick glasses. "Why must you do anything?" he inquired; at which the lecturer's arch-like left hand rested a moment on the picture he had brought.

"This," he said, "is why."

He spoke slowly. His deep-set eyes traveled from one to the other of them. When he went on again, he was staring once more at the picture.

"It was last night. I'd been to the theater—the Savoy. After the performance, I made my way to the street, with the rest of the crowd. The picture was thrust into my hand. I haven't the least idea who gave it to me. Then, after I was at home, a whispering, sniggering voice over the telephone told me my orders."

"What were the orders?" Clyde asked.

Crevitan's hesitation was barely perceptible. "I was ordered, Mr. Clyde, to kill Horatio Humberton before midnight."

Humberton shot a rather startled glance into the calm, level eyes of his guest—steady despite the perpetual smile beneath them; then he looked at Clyde; then, with one consent, all three men broke into a laugh. Crevitan was still laughing when the others had stopped.

"That's good!" he said, between gasps. "You don't know how good it is. I was beginning to think I'd never enjoy a real laugh again." He stopped, suddenly. "Well—now I've had my laugh. But it doesn't solve my problem, does it? Of course, I've no intention of obeying the command, Mr. Humberton."

"How about your fortified house?" Clyde inquired.

"Well—" he shrugged. "I've done everything possible to keep intruders out. You'll look through the house yourselves, I hope. Bolts—bars—electrical mechanism. I'm not poor, gentlemen, and I've spent money to try to save my skin. But do you know what I believe in my heart?" He leaned across the table, his fixed grin horrible, and gestured toward his mouth

with the mutilated hand. "I believe—unless some help comes from my visit here—I shall be found dead tomorrow morning, with matted hair in my throat."

Humberton had been gazing owlishly at his wrist watch. He raised his head with a jerk, like a man who has just begun to take an interest in the conversation.

"Nine fifteen," he announced. "You were given until midnight, Mr. Crevitan. Are you safe until that time?"

"I think so. I think they'll play the game. As long as I make no attempt to escape them, I look for no interference with my liberty—until midnight. Afterwards—" He spread his hands, expressively.

"You are welcome to remain here."

BUT the lecturer rose to his feet. He remained a moment with the strange left hand resting lightly on Humberton's table, and his eyes fixed on the disorderly rows of books at the farther end of the study; as if they, possibly, had been listening, and he awaited their verdict. Then he appeared to recollect himself, and replied in his deep, low voice to Humberton's invitation.

"You are kind—exceedingly kind. But unless you have a different suggestion, I prefer to go home and read a while in my library. It will calm my nerves. Am I to take it that you will look into my case?"

"You are willing, Clyde?" Humberton asked; and, as the detective nodded "We shall be with you, Mr. Crevitan, not later than eleven thirty."

"Thank you." His hand—the right one, this time—dipped into his vest pocket. "This is a duplicate key to the front door of my home. I live at Fifty-four Water Street—an old house down by the river. It is only a short walk from here. I make a point of not answering knocks at the door, so you will simply let yourselves in with the key. I shall be in the library—the first room on the right." He hesitated. "If you wish to bring a squad of police, I shall be glad to defray any expense that might arise from your doing so."

But Humberton gravely shook his head. "If the thing that threatens you is of such a character that Clyde and I cannot safeguard you, I fear a dozen could not," he said.

"Very well." And Crevitan was gone.

When he had left, Humberton smiled at his official friend, and nodded toward the study door.

"Want me to get out so you can think, Ho?"

"No doubt Ted is lying in bed playing solitaire. You might inform him of the little matter we have in hand. Tell him that I shall be up to see him before we go."

"I'll talk to him. But I'm just as glad he's not going along, Ho. Two of us can handle this all right. If that guy Crevitan has his house fortified the way he says it's probably as safe as a church." He walked around the table and spat into the tall brass spittoon which was one of the few luxuries the study boasted. This brought him into good position to see the picture which Wayne Crevitan had used for a visiting card. It still lay on the table.

"I never did like Chinese pictures," he said. "By the way, Ho," he went on, "do you really think there's any danger in this—for us, I mean?"

"Probably."

"I don't. But anyway, I'll stop off in the reception room and phone Ruth. She likes me to keep her posted. She'd hate like hell to get breakfast for two and then find I was lying on a slab."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Door Without a Key

HUMBERTON had just astounded his official friend by drawing a revolver from his pocket. They were descending the front steps of the parlors, on their way to Crevitan's house, and the black-and-white electric lamp over the door shone on it.

"Well, I'll be a spotted son-of-a-gun!" Clyde exclaimed, fervently. "I wouldn't insult you, Ho, but my impression has always been that you couldn't hit the side of a barn."

"No doubt a correct impression," the necrologist agreed, placidly. "Especially so since this happens to be loaded with blanks. You are armed, Clyde?"

"I've got my beanshooter," the detective confirmed. "But I don't quite savvy about the blanks, Ho. What—"

"I had quite an interesting talk with Ted, a while ago, Clyde." Humberton's long legs were carrying him toward Water Street with considerable speed, but the evenness of his voice seemed entirely unaffected. "Ted is observant—remarkably observant. Would you believe it? He saw a tall, thin man sitting not far from us at the ball-game, who had lost all the fingers of his left hand except the little finger and the thumb."

Clyde stopped short, and stopped his companion too by the simple process of hooking arms with him. "Are you kidding me, Ho?" he demanded.

"That is one point, Clyde—one point out of three. And I assure you that I never felt less inclined to wit and humor than I do at this minute. The second point has to do with art. Have you ever studied Chinese curios, Clyde?"

"All right—spill it," the detective answered, impatiently. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"There is something distinctive about Chinese art. It is difficult to counterfeit. Without going into details, I can assure you that the pictures of the Blind Beast have that distinctive quality. And that, Clyde, is interesting. Do you know why?"

Clyde shook his head, and Humberton went on.

"Because I have a little information about Wayne Crevitan. He is more or less of a famous character, you know. He is the son of a Chinese mother and an American father. His early education was acquired in China."

"Wait a minute, Ho," Clyde protested, as his friend showed signs of walking on. "Are you trying to tell me—"

"The third point is exceedingly simple," Humberton continued, disengaging his arm and resuming his pace in spite of Clyde. "It is merely this—that I noticed a curly black hair on Crevitan's coat. I'm not trying to tell you anything, Clyde. I don't know what to make of those three points. But I am asking something—I am asking you not to shoot unless I give the word."

"You mean that, Ho?" Clyde demanded, blankly.

"I do. This is Water Street. I see a large house just ahead, with a vacant lot on each side. Can that be the place?"

"The windows are all boarded up," Clyde objected. "Hold your horses a minute—I'll cross the street and look it over." In a moment, he beckoned from the farther side. "There's light between the cracks of some of the boards," he said in a whisper, when Humberton had joined him. "This is the place all right. Let me have the key."

BEFORE complying, Humberton stood on the iron-railed steps, and looked up and down the silent street. The house they were about to enter dated back to an older time, when the fashionable district skirted the river. It rubbed shoulders

now with oil warehouses and ship-supply stores. They were dark. So was the street itself, except that, at the corners of the long blocks, swinging street lights blinked through the rising mist.

"We'll go in," Humberton announced. "Let me enter first. Remember not to shoot."

"You've told me that twice now," the detective snapped, impatiently, as he unlocked the door. He paused, with it partly open. "What's the idea, Ho?" he whispered. "You figure we're apt to get in wrong by shooting too quick. Why?"

"A bullet is easier withheld than recalled," Humberton returned, cryptically.

"Who's trying to recall one? From what you tell me, this guy may be the Blind Beast himself. I don't mind potting him before he gets me."

"Clyde—" Humberton stared at him earnestly in the darkness, through the thick spectacles. His voice dropped to an even lower whisper. "Did you notice his willingness to have a police squad present? That seems unlike a murderer, doesn't it? Suppose this whole business is not what it seems. Suppose we are being tricked."

"By this lecturer guy?"

"Possibly not. Possibly by someone of whom he is the victim, or the unconscious tool. We simply don't know. Until we do know—until we've seen through the strange crimes of these last few days—we must walk carefully. We must take nothing for granted. Above all, we mustn't shoot without knowing why."

"O. K., Ho," the detective said, resignedly. "I only hope any guy that shoots at me is just as careful. Let's toddle in and see what Crevitan's reading. It ought to be his Bible."

He stepped through the doorway. Humberton followed, warily. But he hurried forward at a cry from Clyde, who had gone into the library at the right.

"Looks like they got him, at that, Ho!"

Clyde was standing in front of a comfortable arm chair—an old-fashioned Morris chair—on the flat arm of which a book lay open. The mellow light of a floor lamp at the left shone on the vacant seat. The wall behind the lamp was stocked with books from floor to ceiling. His gaze, however, was on neither lamp nor books, but on a picture pinned to the plush-covered back of the chair.

"Another one! That makes four," he said grimly.

"This one is more interesting than the other three," Humberton returned, examining it. "It bears our names!"

WHILE Clyde was exclaiming, Humberton, his eyes close to the crudely colored design, was studying it minutely. It was much the same as the other three pictures. It might have been done in water color by a none too skilful artist. Like them, it revealed the lack of perspective characteristic of Chinese painting. Unlike them, it bore two names, neatly printed in small black letters at the bottom of the picture.

Horatio Humberton
James Clyde

"There you are!" Clyde commented, as he read the names over his friend's shoulder. "That's what we get! My guess is they stuffed this lecturer guy with hair ahead of time, so as to have plenty ready for us at midnight."

"Shut the front door," Humberton directed.

"Why not prop it open, and one of us stand guard while the other searches the joint?" Clyde suggested. "We might want to get out of here fast."

Without waiting for a reply, he walked into the hall. Almost at once, he returned. His face was grim.

"The door is shut," he said. "Must have some kind of a spring in the hinge. Another funny thing—it seems to need a different key from the inside. The key that let us in won't open it now."

"You mean we are locked in?" Humberton demanded.

"As far as that door goes, we are."

"I think, Clyde, we should search this house at once."

"Darned tooting!" Clyde began by pulling aside a heavy window curtain. "Look here, Ho! Look at this! Half-inch steel bars outside the window pane! The window's boarded up, too—so as to make the house look unoccupied, I guess. We couldn't get out this way short of an hour's work with a hack saw. I don't like it. I don't like it a little bit. I'm going to look at the other windows."

He worked so energetically that Humberton hardly felt himself called upon to assist. Instead, he strolled about the library, looking thoughtfully at the titles of the books, and glanced at the book lying open on the arm of the chair. He called to Clyde, who was now tramping about the room across the hall.

"You'll be interested to know, Clyde, that he was reading the Bible. There is even a marked passage. Strangely enough, it might have been marked with some of the same red pigment that was used to paint the picture."

"The devil you say!" Clyde's heavy voice responded.

"The marked passage consists of the last six words of the Hundred and Second Psalm, the twentieth verse—*those that are appointed to death.*"

Clyde appeared in the doorway. "I don't like that, either," he said, earnestly. "It reads too darned personal. Say, Ho," he went on, "how about me searching this dump, by myself? I think that'll be safer than if we hang together. You can stay down here and kind of watch for surprises."

Humberton looked at his wrist watch. "Excellent!" he agreed. "It is thirty-five minutes before midnight."

"I'll be back here in fifteen."

HORATIO HUMBERTON could not have been called a man without nerves. In fact, he was decidedly high-strung. But his self-control at times was admirable. It enabled him now, in spite of an inner conviction that he and Clyde were in desperate peril, to move the Morris chair nearer the bookshelves—where no intruder could get behind it—and quietly seat himself to think. From where he sat, the entrance door was visible, and a Windsor chair in the corner of the hall beside it. He left the open Bible untouched. He had not even removed the picture of the Blind Beast from the back of the chair. He merely sat with his long legs stretched at ease in front of him, and let his eyes wander speculatively about the comfortable, old-fashioned room.

It was such a room as might have been found in a pleasant country house. Nothing about it suggested the barred windows and suspiciously locked door, or the nearness of the river front. He imagined that the rest of the house had much the same substantial furniture and the same air of homely simplicity. It was a place in which one could relax. Yet this house was in some way concerned with at least two murders, bizarre and barbarous in their method. Perhaps its owner already had been killed in the same way. Within a few minutes, perhaps he himself, and Clyde, would be fighting the unspeakable Hairy Death.

Clyde had the heavy policeman's tread. His footsteps were clearly audible in the

old house. Evidently he was going up and down stairs and examining every room. Humberton sprawled in his chair and listened. He seemed to hear a nearer sound. It was as if someone were there in the library moving stealthily about, but invisible.

He crossed cautiously to the opposite corner beside the hall door, and listened again. The quiet movement continued. Then it stopped. The cause of it might himself be listening. It began once more, and Humberton silently placed himself in various parts of the room. Still he could see nothing suspicious.

The sound stopped abruptly. He could hear Clyde descending the stairs. It was twenty minutes before midnight. An idea struck him. He wanted to check it with Clyde. He stepped into the hall.

"Every door locked, every window barred," the detective announced, from the foot of the stairs. "There's a telephone on the second floor, but the cord seems to have been cut. We're prisoners, Ho."

"Clyde—" Humberton whispered into his friend's ear. "How many were in Crevitan's party at the Temple of the Blind Beast?"

Clyde thought a moment. "Five," he answered.

"Baw was killed first." Humberton held up his hand. "Then Mrs. Dorn, then little Kitty. Crevitan himself makes four."

"Five's the dope fiend—don't you remember? What was his name—Ladderly?"

"Keep your voice down. It carries like a fog horn, even when you whisper. I am wondering about Number Five, Clyde. I—"

Both turned, swiftly. Wayne Crevitan, a revolver in his hand, stood at the door of the library.

CHAPTER SIX

The Blind Beast

CREVITAN swayed a moment, his revolver describing a circle in the air, then staggered forward. Humberton caught him. The Windsor chair, in the corner of the hall, was near. As he was helped into it, the lecturer's head drooped, but he pulled himself together with an effort, and spoke.

"Wait. I must tell you." The revolver seemed about to drop, and Humberton took it. "I shall want that in a moment—when I'm a bit stronger. Hold it for me now. I was sitting in my chair—reading—when everything went black. I think they hit me. I woke up in my secret room. The room of the Buddha. The Buddha! The Buddha!"

He began to laugh—a sharp-edged, harsh laugh.

"Stop it!" Humberton commanded.

"You're right—no time for hysterics. I must tell you. It's the room where I contemplate the Buddha. I'm a follower of the Way—not a Christian—though I read the Bible occasionally. It was on the wall—the picture of the Buddha. But now it's not that picture—"

He stopped, suddenly. His mouth worked, and his hands clenched and unclenched. Slowly he rose to his feet. When he spoke again, his voice was firm.

"I'm all right now, gentlemen. Whatever they did to me, it has passed. Let me have my revolver, Mr. Humberton, please. What I have been trying to say is that I had a large picture of the Buddha painted on the wall of my contemplation room—the room behind the book-case. I don't know how anyone could possibly break into this house and leave no traces. When I returned from the visit to you, my first concern was to examine all doors and windows. They were intact. Yet

something must have got in. That something made me unconscious. It moved me into that room. It also repainted the picture on the wall. Come! I'll show you."

Humberton, following him, with Clyde close behind, formed a vague conception with his near-sighted eyes of a long, narrow room bathed in rosy light. Then he discovered that the room was hung with red velvet; ruddy hangings covering all the walls, a velvety ceiling of dark, ominous red, a red rug into which the feet sank as if into moss. Floor, ceiling, and walls blended into one another so evenly that they seemed rather the boundaries of a pool of blood-colored mist than of a room.

Crevitan flashed a look at his guests—an accenting of his perpetual smile in which there was, even at that moment, a shade of triumph.

"You will never see another room like this, gentlemen," he said, proudly. "I hope you may live to examine it after my doom has overtaken me."

HE WALKED swiftly to the far end of the room. His mutilated hand rested lightly on the velvet curtain there. He seemed about to pull it aside. Instead, he turned again.

"Each night, gentlemen, before retiring. I have come here to contemplate the image of the Buddha, and to think on life and its mystery. I would have done so tonight. But look what has replaced that benign image! Even in my awaking stupor I had the wit to veil this horrible thing which I saw here for the first time. I veiled it then—but now I draw the curtains aside so that you shall see for yourselves!"

His right hand still held the revolver. The left, with finger and thumb like dividers, drew the velvet hangings.

Humberton breathed sharply. It was his only evidence of astonishment. Clyde muttered under his breath. A hidden light in the wall at that end of the room illuminated the great wooden panel which was revealed. It was a glowing, golden light, mingling with the soft red vapor from the other walls. Such a light could have made the kindly smile of the squatting Buddha seem alive.

But this was no squatting Buddha. It was a crouching Thing, larger than life. Its misshapen, furry legs, enveloped in yellowish mist, seemed ready to spring. Its hands, hairy of palm and with long talons instead of fingers, clutched a great mass of black hair—not painted hair but real hair projecting from the picture, the coarse strands of which vibrated with a kind of life. There was no neck. The head was flattened down upon the monstrous shoulders. There were no eyes. Where they should have been was smooth, white flesh. Yet the creature had some fearful sense beyond the power of sight. The sinister smirking smile of the face was a smile of knowledge. It perceived its victims, and rejoiced.

"The Blind Beast!" It was Clyde who gave it a name; and Wayne Crevitan slowly nodded. His own incessant smile was startlingly like that of the painted picture.

"You are right, Mr. Clyde. It is what I saw in the temple on the Suleiman Mountains. Can you forget it, now that you have seen it? I never did."

"You mean that this was painted in the course of the day, while you were absent!" Humberton demanded.

The lecturer shrugged his shoulders. "All I can say is this: this picture was not here last night."

"May I examine it?"

Crevitan drew aside. "You will think me a coward, Mr. Humberton, but I may as well confess the truth. I did not dare touch the thing. I merely covered it. You see, I have been in the temple of—This.

I have plumbed the depths of its horror. By all means examine it, if you will."

Humberton brought his eyes close to the fearsome figure, and at length rubbed his finger across it.

"The paint is moist," he reported. "We have very little time, Mr. Crevitan. It will be midnight in a few seconds. You spoke of fighting. What did you mean?"

"This!" The mutilated hand shot out behind him. A sharp click was followed by the sound of sliding metal. At the same moment the reddish glow went out. They were in the dark, save for the yellowish light which was reflected from the eyeless specter on the wall.

"We are in this together, gentlemen! You were kind enough to come; now I shall detain you till all is over. The danger proceeds from this room. The logical spot to meet it then is here—to defeat the foul Thing at its birth, if that be possible. You are locked in with me. You have no choice now. Have your revolvers ready—crouch behind me and—wait!"

FROM somewhere in the distance, the voice of a church clock began to toll midnight.

"Do not shoot!" Humberton whispered to the detective.

As the last vibration of the bell died away, there came the sound of shuffling footsteps. They seemed to be in the room. Humberton tried to pierce the luminous yellow darkness. He could see nothing. The steps padded closer. They were like the tread of a silent beast, creeping up until near enough to spring upon its prey; a beast too huge to be altogether soundless. Still nothing was visible within the red velvet hangings except, at the far end of the narrow room, the eyeless creature painted on the wall. Crevitan's breath came in great gulps. Crouched in front of them all, with pointed revolver, he appeared to be struggling desperately to control himself. He rocked slightly, but did not stir from his place.

Humberton stared at the monstrous figure on the yellow panel. Had it moved? Surely it was nearer than it had been.

Then he became aware that there was another figure with them in the room—a huge nightmare figure, which had shambled out from the blood-red wall.

Crevitan's sudden scream was that of a damned soul.

"Save me! Oh, God, save me!"

The figure paused an instant. Slowly then it continued toward him, its hairy arms groping for his face. Still screaming, he fired. He fired again and again. But it came on. It reached him, and his cries changed to a high-pitched yell of agony.

"Put up your gun, Clyde!" Humberton thundered. "Put up your gun, I say!"

He threw himself on the shaggy figure. His first assault stripped the mask from its face—a round, pasty face, with bead-like black eyes. As the mask dropped, a case knife dropped, too, from the masquerader's hand.

Crevitan staggered to the wall. He stood against the red curtains. The ghastly smile on his face, seen in the half-darkness, was in keeping with his livid cheeks and bright eyes. For a moment, intense astonishment seemed to hold him silent. Then he began to laugh—a terrible, hollow laugh, which gurgled in his throat.

"Think you've won, Humberton?" he screamed. "Think you've won, do you? You're a clever devil! I see what you did—you switched guns on me, and planted one loaded with blanks. Well, how do you like this switch?"

HIS right hand moved so swiftly that it was only a white flash in the sickly light. It tossed away the revolver he held, and snatched another from some hiding-

place in the red curtain behind him. He choked back the gurgling laugh, and his voice became firm.

"Don't move!" he rasped. "Don't move, any of you!"

"You're an excellent actor, Crevitan," Humberton remarked, calmly. "And you evidently know the value of stage settings."

"Think so? I'm not acting now. What do you imagine you've got on me, Humberton?"

"I expect to be able to prove that you murdered Mrs. Dorn and little Kitty La Rue—and probably Wysor Baw, also."

"You've got the nerve to say that while I stand here with a gun?"

"We all die sometime. Why stop acquiring knowledge on that account?"

Crevitan chuckled, grimly. "You're a game sport, Humberton. I admire a game sport. If I dared let you go, I'd do it. And you're clever. I said that before. You seem to have been clever enough to get wise to me, though you aren't telling how. You're clever enough right now to hold me in conversation in the hope that I'll relax a bit. Then one of you would feed me a bullet. Well, we'll fix that. Get your gun out, Clyde. The moment it's out, drop it and kick it this way. Raise it an inch, and I'll spatter your brains. I don't miss."

"Do it, Clyde," Humberton advised.

Silently, Clyde obeyed. The man with the ghastly smile eyed him as a snake eyes a bird.

"Now you, Humberton. You're clever, but not dangerous—with a gun." He glanced at the beady-eyed, man as Humberton's weapon dropped. "I don't suppose this poor boob owns a gun. Do you, Ladderly?"

The giant shook his head.

"Turn around, all of you. March to the wall. I'm going to search you for any other hardware you may have. Don't count on picking up a gun while I do it. I'm kicking them behind me, first."

As they lined up, Clyde stole a quick glance of inquiry at his friend. Humberton shook his head. Slight as the action was, Crevitan caught it, and laughed.

"Clever again, Humberton! Clever enough to know when you're trapped! The first funny move your flatfoot pal makes will be the last he ever makes. Know what I'm doing now? I'm taking time to satisfy your curiosity. Sit down with your backs to the wall, and I'll tell you what all this is about. Maybe I'm a little proud of the scheme I worked out. Maybe I want you to know about it before you die."

HE SWEPT their revolvers behind the curtain at his rear, and at the same time reached under and turned on a switch. The rosy light came on again.

"That's better. I like to see your faces. Humberton, did you believe my story of the temple in the Suleiman Mountains?"

"I did," Humberton replied, briefly.

"Wise man! The story was true. Ladderly there would confirm it if you asked him. He was one of us, you know. His mind was never quite right afterward, but he didn't forget the Suleiman Mountains. Neither did the two women. They couldn't tell where the command they received came from—the command of the Blind Beast—but it frightened them out of their wits. Wysor Baw—"

"Whom you killed," Humberton interrupted; and he was rewarded by a laugh.

"Still clever! He happened to be my uncle. By killing him, I inherited. You didn't know that, did you?"

Humberton shook his head, and the boasting voice went on.

"I made it a 'Hairy Death.' Even then, you see, there was a thought in my mind that the Suleiman Mountains story might prove handy. I fortified my house then,

for the same reason. Why? Because of this man, Ladderly. He trailed me. He saw what happened to Baw. I let him blackmail me for a while, but there was no doubt that some time I should have to stop his mouth. His mind is too unstable. I could never be really safe with him alive. Are you beginning to see, Humberton?"

"Did the women know, too? Was that why you killed them?" Humberton inquired. His voice was more and more calm and impersonal. For the moment he had forgotten even the unwavering revolver in their strange captor's hand.

"Did they know that I had killed my uncle? No! My plan was more subtle than that, Mr. Humberton—much more subtle. What will you say when I tell you that these women were only stage properties for me? I have no foolish scruples against murder. I told you that. And I was sure that the fright they got in the Suleiman Mountains had never died away. They had only to receive a picture of the Blind Beast and they would be terror-stricken. But to make certain—and to draw you gentlemen into it—"

Horatio Humberton nodded. His smile was a little contemptuous.

"I think I understand that part, Mr. Crevitan. My little actress friend was commanded to kill Clyde. And no doubt I was honored as the subject of the instructions given Mrs. Dorn. You knew neither of these ladies was likely to obey. Mrs. Dorn tried to enlist my help—secretly. As for poor little Kitty, possibly she felt that if she shot at Clyde and missed him, that might satisfy her persecutor. How was she to know that this particular Blind Beast had no scruples? You were out to create an atmosphere of horror. Murder was the very thing needed. If the victims were defenseless women, what was that to you?"

The grinning face darkened. The finger on the trigger twitched. Then Crevitan shrugged his shoulders.

So far your logic is excellent," he said. "Go on! Why should I tell you the story when you can tell it to me?"

"Ladderly had to die—of course," Humberton continued, slowly. He gazed thoughtfully through his thick lenses at the man opposite. "No doubt your plan was to have him killed by Clyde or me, if you could trick us into doing it, or even by the squad of police, if we had brought them, as you suggested."

"You know that?"

"It seems fairly obvious." He glanced compassionately at the beady-eyed giant, who sat like his fellow prisoners on the floor against the wall, but whose head was buried between his hairy knees. "This poor fellow was to take the blame for all the murders—without being able to protest, since he would be dead. I suppose you offered him money for his masquerade. His weak mind would agree easily. And once he had attacked, he was to have been killed. He was crazy—crazed by brooding over his awful experience in the Suleiman Mountains. What wonder if he decided to mete out the same death to the others in the party? Anyway, that would have been your story. Who would have questioned it? Clyde—"

Clyde started. "Yeah?"

"You remember when Crevitan bent over the man in my study?"

The detective nodded.

"I saw the gun then in his coat pocket. So I made a point of bringing another of the same general appearance—but loaded with blanks."

"So what?" Clyde retorted. "So he drills us with the rod he planted in the curtains!"

"One minute, Mr. Clyde." The lecturer's perpetual smile was directed at the angry detective. "My safest plan is to

shoot the three of you. The river runs behind this house. By the time your bodies are found they will be miles from here. Yet there might be another way. If you—or Mr. Humberton—should happen to shoot this fellow—in self-defense, of course—"

"You'd let us go?" Clyde demanded.

"I'd take real pleasure in letting you go. I admire you both too much—far too much—to wish you to die like rats."

"And all we have to do is pump a bullet into this dopy bird here?"

"That is all."

Clyde spat on the rug. "Well, any time you get ready to pull that trigger don't hold off waiting for me to do your dirty work," he said, disgustedly.

"Of course, I knew your answer." Crevitan bowed slightly. "Do you care to blindfold yourselves? If not—"

"Let me go, Ho! Let me go, you fool!" Clyde shouted.

HUMBERTON had pinned him down. He was in the very act of leaping for Crevitan like a tiger. He stopped now, with gaping mouth. For the threatening revolver had dropped to the floor. Crevitan himself crumpled gently after it. Stepping carefully over him, Ted Spang appeared from behind the curtains, a blackjack in his hand.

"Did I run it too close, sir?" he inquired of his chief. "I waited to let him say all he was going to."

"A little close, Ted," Ho returned. "But I saw your signal from behind the curtains. I didn't worry."

"Wait a minute! Let me get this!" Clyde's face was red.

"I merely arranged with Ted, Clyde, to trail after us."

"You arranged—" Clyde's indignation choked him for a moment.

Humberton went on, smoothly: "I take it, Ted, that there must have been a secret door by which Ladderly entered the house?"

"Down by the river, sir. I saw him slip in, so I slipped in after him. I was waiting in the tunnel all the time. It's behind that curtain."

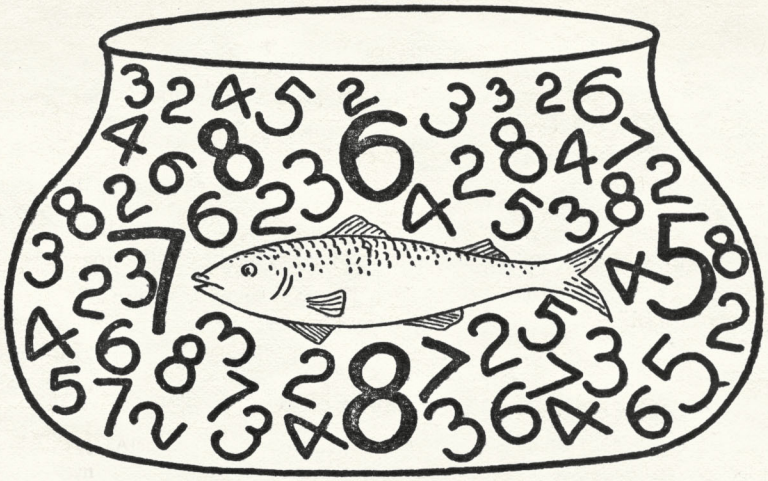
By now Clyde's face had turned from red to purple, and he had found his voice.

"All right!" he said. "I get it now. I couldn't get it better from a blue print. All the time I'm sitting here, wondering how big a funeral Ruth's going to give me, are you worrying? Hell, no! Why not? Because it's all arranged. You mentioned several points to me, but you didn't happen to mention that point. Some day, Ho, you're going to be found dead. And if I'm not caught it'll be because the Lord understands. But let me ask you this—suppose there hadn't been any tunnel? Suppose this poor stiff"—he glared at the weak-minded giant, who had hardly moved through it all—"had been only hiding behind the curtain. Ted couldn't have got in, could he? Then where would we be now?"

"I don't know, Clyde. I am not a clergyman. Perhaps I should have told you about Ted. Yes, no I doubt I should." He unbuttoned the breast of Crevitan's coat, and began a swift examination. "After all, one must take some chances," he went on. "I surmised that a fortified house, such as this, would be likely to have a secret getaway. If it had—and someone used that for an entrance—Ted's quick eye would surprise the secret. Ah! Ted, will you call an ambulance?"

"I didn't hit him that hard, sir," Ted protested; at which his chief smiled.

"I'm sure you did not, Ted. You can always be counted on to use discretion. As it happens, however—though Wayne Crevitan's iron nerve almost concealed the fact—he is in a bad way. He was stabbed—by a man who struck in self-defense!"



BOYS . . . .

Enter this Great Game and Win a CASH PRIZE!

HERE you are, boys....a little game for you to puzzle out....and we will give a cash prize to the boy who qualifies, and secures the highest number of points. Find the sum total of all the numbers in the fish bowl to qualify for the prizes. Read on, boys....you can win a cash prize of $15.00.

FIFTY POINTS BONUS

As soon as you have your answer, send it in with a letter, telling us what you think the numbers in the fish bowl total up to. **You must also send in the names and address of 4 of your chums between the ages of 10 and 14 years inclusive.** When you send your letter in, we will credit you with 50 points.

CASH PRIZES

1st	$15.00
2nd	$ 5.00
3rd	$ 3.00
4th	$ 2.00
5th	$ 1.00
6th	$ 1.00
7th	$ 1.00

LARGEST NUMBER OF POINTS WILL WIN!

These points will be allowed as follows . . . 50 points for sending in your entry and the names of your 4 chums, 100 points for a correct answer . . . and as soon as you send in your letter, we will tell you how you can win the additional points.

HERE IS THE IDEA!

Go carefully over the illustration and add all the numbers together. As soon as you have your answer, write us a letter, telling us your answer, and also the names and addresses of four of your chums.

The only numbers used in the fish bowl are 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8. It's easy!

There are no hidden figures and the number "9" is not used.

The decision of the judges will be final.

Contest closes October 30th, 1934

Contest open to boys, 10 to 14 years, inclusive, living in towns and villages, in Canada, who are not now members of the Young Canada Boosters' Club.

Send your answer to:—Contest Manager,

YOUNG CANADA BOOSTERS' CLUB

210 Dundas Street West, Toronto, Ont.

AT RANDOM

ERLE STANLEY GARDNER—just back in this country after three months of cruising through the South Seas—flew East from the Coast a couple of days ago and dropped in to sing the praises of Polynesia in general, and *kava* in particular. That last appears to be a native drink of somewhat dubious virtue but eminently effective, according to Mr. G. His visit served to innoculate the entire staff with a violent pox which would probably have been diagnosed as *wanderlust editorialis* if there'd been a medico there to perform after Gardner left. He'll be back in the fold with another one of his master mystery thrillers very soon. In one of the December issues as near as we can tell right now but we'll let you know definitely in plenty of time. We'll let you have some details about his trip in this department when he does appear.

ROGER TORREY writes from his home in Oregon that he was in San Pedro a few days ago, saw six fights in an hour and a half in one beer joint, and collected a flock of material for use in future stories. "Great for a writer—dangerous for an innocent bystander—but everyone seemed to be having a good time," was the way he put it. He's afraid the next election will tone down the "wide-open" atmosphere before he has a chance to get his fill.

AND to hark back to the *Gun Angles* we've been trying to square lately—T. T. Flynn, who started most of the discussion over blanks in automatics, encloses with no comment a catalogue description of a gun that seems to vindicate him completely. Here it is—

> The Stoeger Pistol—fires nine consecutive shots by merely pulling the trigger. It can only take a special short crimped cartridge, eliminating the possibility of inserting a real cartridge with a bullet. . . . It is loaded by means of a detachable loading tube which fits just below the muzzle and into which seven cartridges may be inserted while two more are in the built-in revolving magazine. As each shell is fired it is automatically ejected—the same as in a regular automatic pistol—

Incidentally, he's back home in New Mexico once more after having toured most of the East and South in his camp-trailer. Said he had to hurry home finally to check up on the Mexican kid he left patiently spraying water over the landscape before a new winter wipes out any proof of shirking. His intentions were, if he found things hadn't kept green in his absence, to sit his peon on a strawberry cactus. In other words, give him a lesson with a thousand points. He says he encountered plenty heat on his trip and ruined three typewriters en route. It seems that perspiration dripped in such a steady stream from the knotted Flynn brow that the keys rusted and— Well, it makes a good story, anyway!

How Do You Get That Way?

Maybe it's just plain animal spirits—and maybe it's the glow of satisfaction that comes from extra cash . . . earned by easy, spare-time work, with no delays in getting your money. This is your opportunity to share in the better times that are being felt in every line of business in Canada!

WRITE NOW FOR FULL DETAILS

You have a source of steady, dependable income right at your doorstep. MacLean publications lead the field for popularity throughout the Dominion . . . They are going into many of the best homes in your district and will go into many new homes during the year . . . You can share in this business by acting as local representative for the Trans-Canada News Company. Mail us the coupon and we will send full particulars.

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Please tell me in detail how I can make spare-time income by acting as your local representative in this district.

Name

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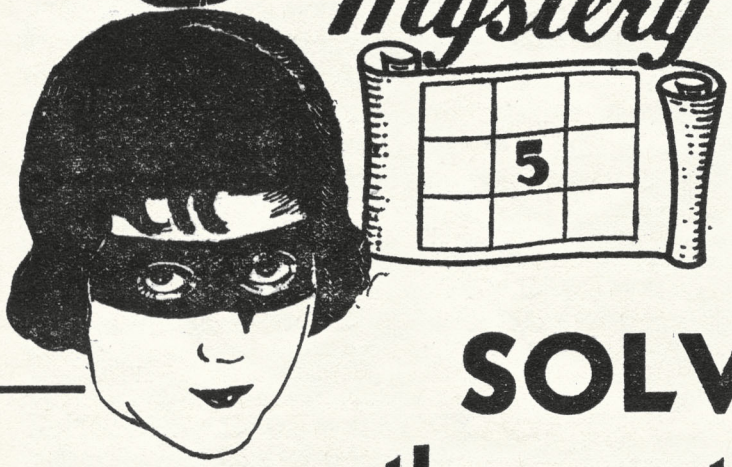
$3,500 Mystery



SOLVE the mystery!

Eight missing numbers will do it!

Solve the mystery. Eight missing figures will do it. Fill in the blank spaces above with the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 so that the total will be 15 when added in every direction—up and down, crossways and diagonally. No number may be used more than once.

Your answer will open an opportunity for you to win $1,500.00. You will hear from me promptly with complete instructions covering your next step toward the $1,500.00; date of prize payments, extra prizes in case of ties, and all other details.

MORE THAN $3,500.00 CASH TO BE PAID IN PRIZES.

First Winner gets $1,000.00. If prompt $500.00 Extra. Second Winner, $1,000.00. Third Winner, $250.00. BE A BIG WINNER. Someone is going to win. It might as well be you. BE PROMPT! Mail your answer NOW — don't delay — and be sure your name and address is written plainly on your answer.

Prize Manager, Box 100, Toronto, Can.