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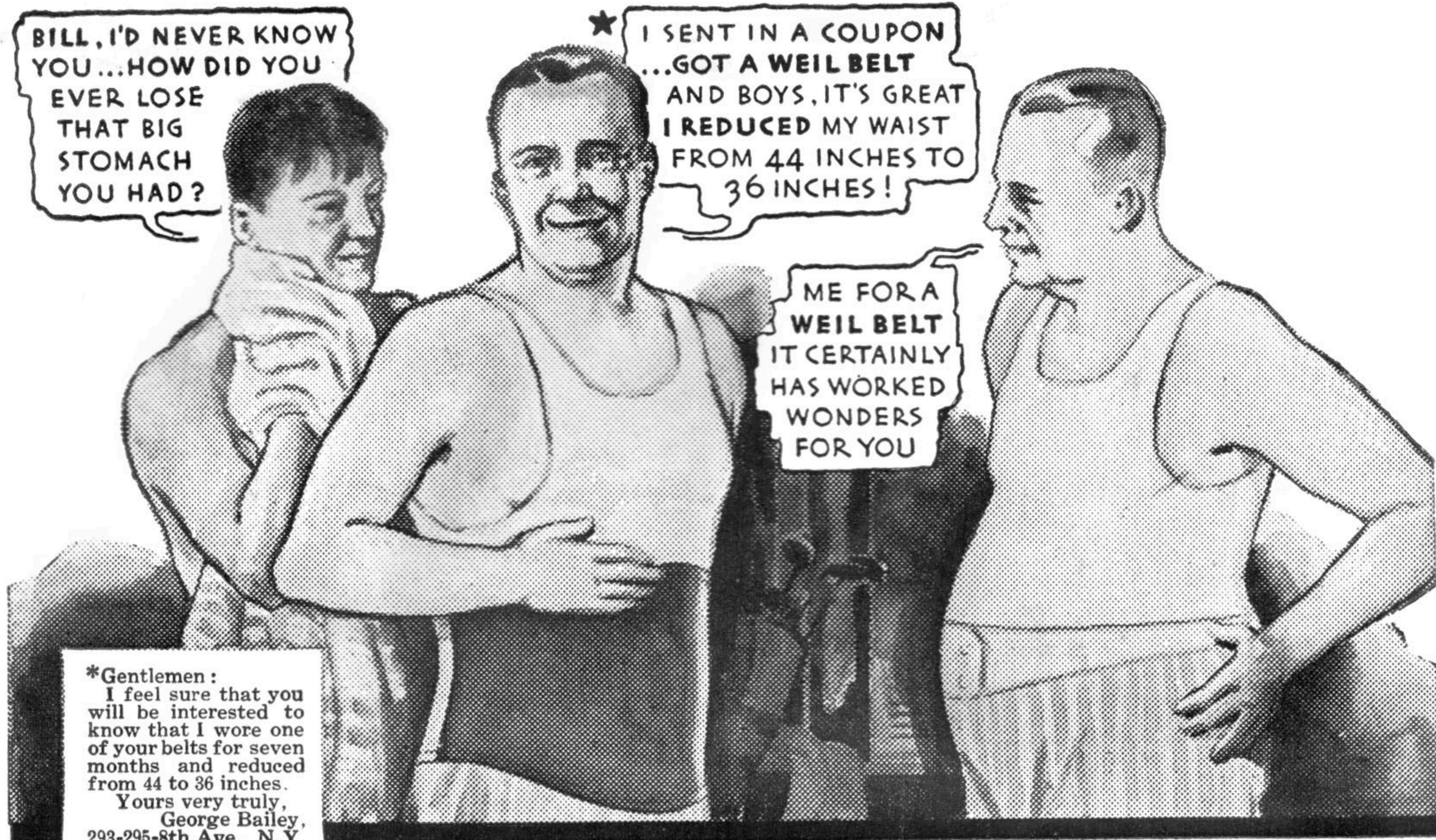
APRIL 1st

10¢ DIME

DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



THE CRIMSON WHIP
by EDWARD PARRISH WARE
FIVE FATAL HOURS
by T. T. FLYNN
CORNELL WOOLRICH AND OTHERS



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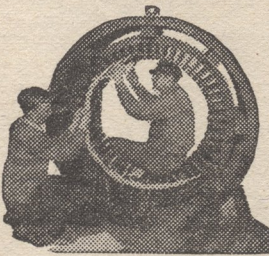
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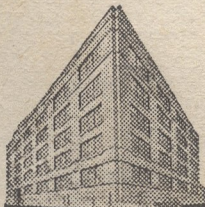
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Vol. 17

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Story Illustrations by John Flemming Gould

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Watch for the April 15th Issue

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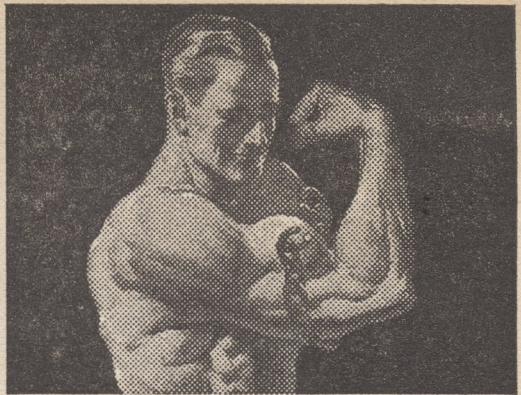
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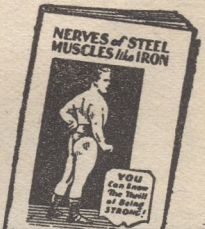
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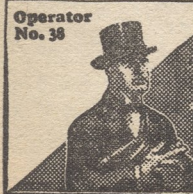
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FIVE FATAL HOURS

by
T. T. Flynn

Author of "House of Dread," etc.



"You see I—I've just—killed a man." That was the calm announcement that greeted Stacy Wall when he entered his apartment and found the lovely Cissy Brantt usurping his favorite armchair. He never guessed her visit would plunge him along a murder trail that would end in five short hours by the clock—five ages of thrill-crammed terror if reckoned by their danger moments.



Glass crashed—and Stacy brought his knee up as the other stooped to shield his face.

CHAPTER ONE

"I've Just Killed a Man"

WASHINGTON was distinctly not at its best this evening. The breeze had a touch of rawness, and the rain, lancing delicately through the limousine headlights, misted in milky halos

about the curb lamps along Connecticut Avenue. As the wet suck of tires died away at the familiar green marquee, Stacy Wall came out of his preoccupation, glad that he was home.

Hans opened the door with a flourish. Stacy Wall straightened under the marquee, a slender, well knit figure. Thirty-

six, debonair as the down-tilted brim of his soft brown hat, he might have been anything from a successful young business man to an "arrived" artist.

He had been successful in business; probably would be again. The briefest look told that he had mastered life. The snap of it was in his gray eyes; the tolerance of infinite contacts was in his remark to Hans.

"Nothing more tonight. Put up the car and take the evening off."

Hans towered a head taller, looming vastly in his great-coat. The grin on his face was a trifle sheepish. "I was wondering about running over to Baltimore this evening, Mr. Wall."

"The young lady lonesome again?"

Hans grinned hugely.

Stacy chuckled. "I thought so," he said. "You'll not be much good until you see her. Take the car. I won't need you until tomorrow."

"Thank you, Mr. Wall." Saluting enthusiastically, Hans almost ran back to the steering wheel.

A red-faced policeman, who had been talking with the doorman, smiled broadly as Stacy lifted a hand and spoke. "How are you, Hannigan? The boy all right now?"

"Doctor says he'll be out of bed in another two weeks, Mr. Wall. I was waitin' here to thank you for those toys. He's crazy about the train. The missus sends her thanks, too." Hannigan winked after the departing car. "Is that big Dutchman mooning about his girl in Baltimore again?"

Stacy smiled. "I'm not telling tales on Hans. He suffers enough as it is."

A WARM glow went with Stacy to the door of his apartment. It was something to have friends everywhere; Washington, Baltimore, New York, points east

and west. The financial turn was easier because of it.

Hans should have known tonight how matters stood; but it was kinder to let him have the Baltimore trip before telling him that he'd have no job at the end of the month.

Waiting before his door, Stacy looked along the softly lighted corridor with its deep rug on which his shoes had made no sound. Luxury, of course. He'd enjoyed having it. Absently he wondered in what hall he'd be standing six months from tonight.

Li, the ageless, opened the door. Neat, slender, grinning as always, Li made his jerky little bow of welcome and stepped back. Closing the door he took hat, coat, muffler, gloves.

"I'm dining in tonight alone, Li. Having it sent up. I've ordered over the telephone."

Li bowed. "Young lady wait in library, sar. Miss Brantt."

Stacy wrinkled his forehead. "Cissy Brantt here?"

"Yes, sir," said Li, astonishing at times with his collection of accents from various parts of the world. "I tell Miss Brantt maybe you plenty late. She wait." Li hesitated. His voice dropped. "Maybe better you see quick, sar."

Never before had Li put in a suggestion like this. Stacy stared at his man; but Li's bland face had no expression. Nodding, Stacy turned toward the library. "Bring us tea," he directed.

Li bowed impassively. "Tea sarve to Miss Brantt already, sar." Which was another facet of Li's perfection.

But what about Cissy Brantt had called forth that low-voiced warning from Li?

The brass ship's clock on the mantel was striking eight as Stacy entered his teak-paneled library; and Cissy Brantt put down a book—his Persian Art, Stacey noticed—and turned effortlessly.

There had always been a touch of the effortless about everything Cissy Brantt did or said. A touch of the unexpected, too, like this interest in his Persian Art. Then Stacy was shocked, concerned. Cissy had never looked like this before. Trouble lay heavily on her.

"She—she looks hunted," Stacy thought. "Afraid."

Had he heard it from someone else he would have laughed. Not Cissy Brantt, hunted; anyone but Cissy. He found a quick smile for her.

"What luck finding you here, Cissy!"

She managed a wan smile. "The darling of the dowagers drops into his apartment for a brief call," she said. "I was wondering if you'd make it at all this evening. How goes the tea-table chatter?"

That was Cissy's little joke of years' standing, which she knew wasn't so. But her hand in his was cold, as if Cissy were shivering inside.

WHEN Stacy chuckled as he did now, people within hearing were apt to smile also. Cissy did smile, and some of her trouble went away for a moment. While he waited for her to talk, if she wished, Stacy airily assured her: "Haven't seen a tea table for a week. Matter of fact that's all over."

"Impossible," said Cissy.

"Truth. I'm going into exile."

"Exile?"

"Sad," said Stacy, smiling, "but true. You see, Cissy, my dear, a bank failed and a company went into receivership and a thing or two happened beside. The neat little block of money I retired on when I sold out in the plane factory a few years ago is no more. I am—hold your breath—broke."

"Stacy, you *can't* be."

"But I am," Stacy chuckled. "And if you look sad I'll laugh at you. Matter of fact I was getting bored with doing noth-

ing. In a few days I'm off on my own again, and I'm going to have a corking good time getting another stake."

"What are you going to do, may I ask?"

"That is where the fun comes in. I don't know. This afternoon I was dallying with torpedoes. Chap I met in Panama several years ago bobbed up with something new in the way of underwater destruction. He's been wearing out his heart trying to get a hearing before the admirals. You know how the red tape goes."

Cissy nodded.

"I suppose everything is all right now. You settled it as you do everyone's troubles."

"Hardly; but I did take poor Peterson by the hand and lead him in to Admiral Fowler. You know, the liverish one the ensigns dubbed Goose-flesh Fowler."

"I've met him," Cissy admitted, and the hunted look was still with her.

It was serious of course; had to be serious to make Cissy look this way, keep her waiting so late here when a note or a telephone call would have disposed of any casual matter.

Stacy suggested: "A spot more tea? . . . No? Something on your mind, Cissy?"

"Yes," Cissy said. "You want a job, Stacy. I have a job for you. And if you are successful, I'll sign a blank check to your order."

Stacy looked at her closely.

"Not a cent from you, ever, of course," he said gently. "It's trouble, isn't it? Forget about my worries, and blank checks, and whether I'll starve. My word on it, I won't. What's the trouble? Bad, I suppose."

Cissy nodded, her eyes on his face. "It's a mess, Stacy. I—I don't quite know where to begin. You see, I—I've just killed a man."

From the right pocket of her old belted

coat, Cissy drew a small automatic pistol and held it out to him.

STACY took the small pistol inarticulately; and so perverse is the human mind under shock that memory flashed back through the years to Cissy as a long-legged, restless girl, a bit apt to kick over the traces, and startle. Witness seventeen-year-old Cissy landing by the sixth green at the Congressional Country Club in her own tiny little monoplane, secretly purchased out of her allowance, and casually requesting crusty old Senator Landreth and his foursome to get her some gas.

They had done it too; and staid trustees had wiped perspiring brows when they heard about it. But that had been some years back, when it had seemed that Cissy's staggering allowance from her father's estate must ruin any young girl.

Cissy had thrived on it. The long legs were not so evident now; matter of fact had they ever really been long? A hint of curves had replaced angles. Cissy's face demanded attention. A trifle long—but what a line from cheekbone to jaw—and a mouth that could be humorous, thoughtful, firm or soft in quick changes.

Hair an indeterminate shade between blond and brunette, which most women would have worried over; but Cissy obviously never thought of it, any more than she did the old belted coat and felt hat she drew down carelessly over one eye. You got only the effect in any case. Cissy's flair for appearance equaled her flare for life.

A very remarkable girl, for all her dozen-odd millions, this Cissy Brantt. The little automatic was a dead weight in Stacy's hand and Cissy was looking at him with haunted eyes. The ugly shadow of murder was there in the room with them.

"You killed a man?" Stacy repeated lamely, eyeing the pistol.

Cissy shivered, nodded. "The police are looking for me now, of course. It's ghastly, Stacy. I know what it feels like to be a hunted criminal."

Stacy turned to the telephone. "Just a minute," he said. "I want to see about my car." He called Hans' room, breathed easier when Hans answered. "Sorry," Stacy said. "I'll need you after all."

"Yes, sir," Hans replied gamely.

Stacy hung up, waited a moment, called another number. "I know Dan Steele, who covers crime for the *Morning Express*," he said as he waited. "He'll know if the police are looking for you."

"Stacy, you're not going to tell them I'm here? I'd like a little time, b-before I have to face it."

"Not going to mention you." And pity stabbed him that Cissy Brantt should be brought to this shaken state.

He tried one number, hung up, called another. "Steele's at police headquarters," he said. "Have everything in a jiffy now."

Then Dan Steele's nasal tones came over the wire, frank with surprise when Stacy identified himself.

"Something wrong?" Steel inquired with a shade too much eagerness. But you couldn't blame him. News was Steele's living.

Stacy lied with a chuckle. "What could be wrong? I feel like a bit of excitement this evening, and wondered if you could put me on to any, Steele."

"Crap game interest you?"

"Hardly. Haven't a fresh murder on tap that would furnish a thrill, have you?"

"Nothing like that." Steele's nasal tones sharpened. "Any reason for thinking there might be one?"

Stacy laughed again. "Sorry I'm not psychic, Steele. I'd have you put me on the payroll if I were. That was all; sorry to have taken you from your crap game."

"Wait. Are you calling from your apartment?"

"I am—not that it makes any difference. Be seeing you."

But Steele went on talking, shrewd as usual. "Queer, you calling me like this, Wall. I've had a hunch all evening something was due to break. Not holding out on me, are you?"

"How would I know anything to hold out?" Stacy countered.

"You usually have an idea what's going on."

"Tell me that at lunch some day soon. I'm looking for excitement now. Good night."

STACY hung up, met Cissy's haunted inquiry with a cheerful, "Not a thing known about it yet. Steele's at headquarters where he'd know. Sit down now and tell me about it."

But before Cissy could speak the telephone rang.

"Just wanted to see if you were calling from your apartment," Dan Steele said urbanely.

"I hope you're satisfied."

"As much as I'll ever be," Steele replied ambiguously. "I had an idea you might be kidding me. So long. Hope I didn't startle you."

"Now what the devil did he mean by that last?" Stacy wondered to himself as he hung up. But he smiled Cissy's mute question away. "Steele again. His bump of curiosity is working. Sit down, child, and relax."

The difference in their ages was not enough to warrant the fatherly tone; and Cissy paid no attention to it anyway. Moving as she talked, two steps to the left, two steps to the right, she worked her fingers together nervously.

"I'll stand. I—I can't relax. You were the first one I thought of, Stacy. You know everyone, know what to do. I was numb. I couldn't think. I came

straight here—and I've been waiting here seeing his face, his eyes—"

Flush replaced the pallor as Cissy's voice tightened, faltered. She looked past Stacy, beyond the room, to recent gruesomeness.

"Steady," Stacy urged calmly.

While Cissy moved restlessly, he poured her a jigger of cognac, the only thing handy at the moment. Cissy drank it obediently, reached with a wry face for the water he served from a waiting thermos pitcher.

Returning the glass she said: "Thank you. That helps. I'm sorry to be so wobbly about it, Stacy. B-but it's the first time I've ever killed anyone."

Cissy tried to smile. The effect was rather ghastly.

"Who was it?" Stacy inquired.

"Archie Hoyt."

Stacy showed his surprise. "That rotter? What were you doing with him?"

"It was business," Cissy said miserably. "At least business is as good a name for it as any. It was all my fault. I knew all about Archie—the gossip about why he left the brokerage firm, his reputation at cards, his clubs dropping him. But—but he still had one of the keenest eyes for a good horse that I know."

"No doubt of that," Stacy agreed.

He had known Arch Hoyt, who was some six years older than himself, for many years; had witnessed Hoyt's rise through the late twenties and early thirties. Keen mind, splendid manner in those days, good family.

A shade too good, the Hoyts; the men at least, if one got to the root of it; bred in for goodness until the shadow was there without the substance.

The elder Hoyt had clipped coupons, spent the capital behind them, married his daughters off hastily and well, and lived on his sons-in-law for eight satisfactory years with the smugness of a

parasitic plant incapable of putting roots down into the good productive earth itself.

And a shade too gratefully and lacking in appreciation. Arch Hoyt had accepted from one brother-in-law a minor brokerage partnership with Hoyt and Franklin. He may have worked some at it, if one were inclined to be kind. But the sudden termination of that partnership had been in bad odor; and a year or so later there had been no doubt about the mess at cards. It got around, of course, and finished Hoyt's easy money.

From then on Arch Hoyt's decline had been steady. One might say inevitable also. He hung on until studied avoidance and plain words cut him off at this place and that. The company he kept grew shadier; looks and manner changed with it; one could see the first small rotten spot spreading over the inbred, unsubstantial whole.

NOW Arch Hoyt was dead; and even in death he had managed to contaminate another, as a decayed fruit spoils the good fruit it touches.

"So the business was horses," Stacy prompted.

Cissy answered miserably. "I thought so until tonight. I've been trying to build up a better string at the Middleburg place. Everyone asks top prices as soon as I'm interested in an animal. I'm supposed to be an inexhaustive mine of gold. Archie Hoyt seemed to be the answer. Everyone knew he had no money, and he could judge a horse better than the seller. He was buying for me on commission, holding his purchases at a small farm near Upperville he hadn't been able to sell."

"I know the place; well back in the country and isolated."

"Yes."

"And you went to see Hoyt out there alone quite a bit," Stacy guessed.

"I did," said Cissy. "In town also. It was quite all right. He didn't forget himself. Archie wasn't interested in me as a woman at all."

"I can believe that," Stacy said. "Money was the only thing that would interest him. But—you had money."

"I found that out tonight," Cissy said wretchedly. "I'd given Archie various checks. He paid for the horses himself. This afternoon I drove out to see the string, and found it gone, the place closed. And when I got back home my bank statement was waiting. Something made me examine it at once. The checks I had given Archie this past month had all been raised to staggering amounts. I think the total was about a hundred and sixty-three thousand over what I had given him. It was skillfully done too. I was almost willing to swear I had written those large checks."

"So Hoyt finally got down to forgery," Stacy observed grimly. "I didn't think he had intestinal fortitude enough for that. The swine would try it on a girl, of course."

"I wish that were all of it," Cissy said in a low, hard voice. "I was furious, naturally. I drove to his house at once."

"His house?"

"Where he was staying. He had ingratiated himself with a man named Harwell, who is here for the winter lobbying for some Middle Western industry. Harwell took a furnished house in Georgetown, and Archie was living there. I suppose because the man wasn't aware of Archie's reputation and a Washington insider seemed a valuable asset."

"Easy to understand."

"I went to the Georgetown house," said Cissy. "It was getting dark. No one was at home. I waited across the street for a quarter of an hour before Archie showed up. He didn't seem surprised to see me. In fact I think he rather ex-

pected me, since this was the first of the month and the bank statement was due today. He had been drinking."

"Probably nerving himself for arrest."

"I think he looked for me first, Stacy. When I caught him at the door, he leered and said, 'You're here promptly.'"

"Swine. I wish I'd been there."

"I'm glad you weren't," Cissy gulped. "You might have been mixed in this too. I went in—I shouldn't have, but I was too mad to think of anything but having it out with him."

"We went into the living room. He said, 'Harwell's in New York. We can make ourselves at home.' He offered me a drink; and when I refused he stood there drinking alone while I talked to him."

Cissy shivered again.

"The house was quiet," she said huskily. "Like—like a tomb. In the hallway the staircase woodwork creaked now and then. All I could hear was my own voice. Archie just stood there leering at me; and I began to be afraid. He—he suddenly wasn't the Archie Hoyt I'd known. It was like turning up a board and seeing a beetle you've known all brown and friendly in the sunlight, crawling there in the dampness, white, soft, sluggish and—and nasty-looking. Like seeing a ghost. I was afraid, terrified. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Trapped

THE teak-paneled library was very quiet also; the rain's fine caress against the window was very like the stirring of some living thing trying to get in; and Cissy was pale, terrified as her husky voice trailed away between them.

Stacy transferred the little gun to his other hand. His palm was sweating.

"Go on," he urged.

Cissy's breasts lifted with the breath she drew.

"Archie didn't deny anything," she said huskily. "He laughed, admitted it, and stepped between me and the door and asked how much it was worth to me not to marry him."

"He was drunk—and I think I was slightly hysterical by then. I laughed at him too, told him what a filthy beast he was, and told him I was going at once."

"And then he gave me a letter; he had a packet of them in his coat pocket, in the envelopes I had mailed him. The letter was on my paper, with my engraving, and it was my handwriting, and I was writing to him as if I were insanely in love, enclosing a check. I didn't need to read the other letters. He'd forged a lie, trapped me in a miserable, filthy mess."

"And a handwriting expert would have torn the letters to shreds," Stacy said harshly. "He couldn't have used them."

"How many people would have believed the handwriting experts after a bombardment of newspaper headlines?" Cissy asked, white-lipped. "I couldn't even pretend, Stacy. I've been fair game all my life. Fortune hunters, criminals, beggars, weaklings, flatterers—they've swarmed after me like insects about a honey dish."

"I'll not cry 'Poor little rich girl.' I've loved having money. Who wouldn't? But I thought I had grown wise, able to handle the dangerous side—and I was tripped up by a man I'd known most of my life. I'd been seen places with him lately; I'd written him letters; I'd gone to his farm and his house. Perhaps legally I was safe; actually he had my reputation there in his pocket and he knew it."

"Cissy, my dear, shooting him was the best thing you ever did."

"I tried to get past him, out of the house, Stacy. He caught me: I pushed him back against the door, and he stag-

gered and struck his head. It infuriated him. He hit me then. I think he meant to kill me. So I shot him, and snatched the letters and ran. It was dark outside by then; and I came here."

And Stacy heaved a sigh of relief.

"You got the letters?" he asked.

"Yes. Here they are."

He waved them back. "Burn them. If no one saw you leave, and the body hasn't been found yet, say nothing. You can afford to lose the money he stole, and there's nothing in abstract justice that calls for you to smear yourself over the front pages and be publicly acquitted."

"But my wrist watch is gone, Stacy. I discovered that when I came here. It must be back there with the—the body. He caught my wrist. My name is engraved on the watch back—and I don't dare return for it. When the police find that, they'll know. I—I might as well give myself up now."

Stacy whistled softly.

"Bad," he muttered. "Couldn't it be in your car, Cissy?"

"I looked. It's not."

POCKETING the automatic, Stacy walked to the end of the room and back. "Harwell is in New York," he muttered. "The body hasn't been found yet. Chances are it won't be tonight. First, are you certain you killed him? This gun isn't so large."

"He fell and rolled over on his back," Cissy gulped. "His eyes rolled up at me, and then closed. Blood was on his forehead. He was hit in the head. He couldn't have lived."

"I suppose not, hit there."

"Stacy, you know everyone—know what to do. Isn't there some way it can be hushed up? Life, and a decent reputation, are still rather precious to me."

Pity stabbed him again. Cissy was so young to have such bitterness thrust on

her. The world in which she moved, shallow for the most part, willing to condemn and loath to acquit, would brand her for life, no matter what the outcome of a murder trial; but he had to tell her—

"I'm afraid there isn't a way that's sure, Cissy. Money has its limits. Political bosses don't sit in the District of Columbia; the police are honest—and murder, homicide, that is, accidental or otherwise, is something that will probably have to be faced."

"I knew it," Cissy assented miserably. "I just thought I'd ask."

The telephone rang again.

It was the doorman, reporting the car downstairs.

"I'll be down in a few minutes," Stacy said.

And Cissy asked: "What are you going to do?"

"Get that watch," Stacy said briefly. "Give me the house address, and wait here for me. I think I can do it easily enough. I'll take a flashlight and slip in. I suppose you left the front door unlocked?"

"I think so. But you can't do this, Stacy. If you're caught in there, or even seen, you'll be drawn into this. It's my trouble. I—I'll go back."

"Nonsense. I'm going, and you're staying here."

Stubbornly Cissy said: "If you're going there, I'll ride with you at least."

"Come along then. That can't hurt you. We'll have to hurry. I'll get a flashlight. Better leave this gun here also."

Stacy dropped the gun in one of the drawers of a small, walnut secretary. Cissy said: "Put this with it, Stacy. I had presence of mind enough to see it on the rug and snatch it up."

In his palm she dropped an empty cartridge shell, smiling wryly as she did so. "What a pity I didn't think of the watch and get it, too."

"We'll do that now." And as they left

the apartment, Stacy spoke to Li. "Miss Brantt and I are going for a ride. She hasn't been here, you haven't seen her, and don't know where I have gone."

Li bowed. "Heah nothing, see nothing, know nothing," he said.

And down at the curb, when Hans opened the car door for them, Stacy said: "I'll make it up to you, Hans. Tomorrow, if I can."

Hans looked less lugubrious as he saluted. "Sure, it's nothing, Mr. Wall," he said with some appearance of the truth. "I was glad I hadn't got my clothes changed yet, and left."

"Georgetown. Tell you where to go when we get there."

CISSY directed them to a quiet, dimly lighted Georgetown street, where the houses were prim and severe, as if forever conscious behind the patina of age on their old bricks that this venerable suburb of Washington had been a town and port before the swampland down the Potomac had been thought of as a site for the new, upstart, capital city.

Majestic trees reached out in a leafy canopy over the street, and the fine rain dripped slowly from the foliage, and long, grim shadows lay across the sleek blackness of the pavement—and Cissy Brantt's voice broke in despair:

"Stacy! That's the house! The one with the lights, with the cars in front! It—it's too late!"

"I'm afraid so. That's a police patrol car," Stacy said. And, abruptly, to Hans: "Pull in to the curb here."

"Stacy, what are you going to do?" Cissy gulped. "Turn me over to them here? Make me go inside and s-see it all over?"

"Not the slightest idea of that. You're safer here in the car, right under their noses, than any place I know of. Sit tight,

and low in the seat, and wait for me. I'm going in and see what's doing."

"But—"

Stacy caught her nearest hand for a moment as the car stopped and Hans came around to the door. The hand was still icy cold.

"I think it's quite all right. Don't lose your head if anyone looks in the car." And as he straightened by Hans, Stacy spoke under his breath. "Keep an eye on the young lady. She doesn't want to talk to anyone."

"Yes, sir," said Hans. "I'll stay right here by the door."

Leaving the towering figure on guard, Stacy walked to the lighted house before which two police cars were parked—and heard the siren of another in the distance as he went. Discovery had just occurred, evidently.

The lower rooms of the red brick house, with the prim, white window-trim, were lighted. A uniformed officer stood by the door. Inside, men were talking, moving about. And, rather debonair, with his coat collar turned up and his hat brim snapped down in front, Stacy addressed the officer briskly.

"Something wrong here? I'm calling on Mr. Hoyt."

"You're a little late, mister. Hoyt's dead."

"The devil you say! How so? What happened to bring the police?" Stacy hoped his surprise sounded as genuine as he tried to make it.

"Somebody shot him," said the officer briefly. "Guess you better go in. They'll be wantin' to ask you some questions." And the officer called through the open doorway: "Sergeant Crisp—here's a man that's come to see Hoyt!"

Stacy entered a narrow, high-ceilinged reception hall, and through an open doorway at the left a thin, alert man stepped quickly, stared, said: "I'm Detective-

sergeant Crisp, of the homicide squad. What did you want to see Hoyt about?"

STACY had heard of Crisp, seen his name in the papers often. Rather a dynamic personality, this Crisp, with a habit of getting to the bottom of crimes without much delay. It was hard to tell much about the man right now. An old gray hat, damp and limp, was shoved carelessly on the back of Crisp's head; his gray, single-breasted suit needed pressing, necktie was a bit awry in his collar, and he could have stood a shave.

Sergeant Crisp had, Stacy guessed, been busy for some time on other matters when called her. But behind the bit of stubble the jaw lines were long, clean and firm, the mouth was thin and determined, and above a hard, sharp nose Crisp's eyes were direct, candid, searching.

Here was a man whose mind was evidently shrewd and quick, who was more apt to drive to the heart of a problem than bumble around after obscure clues.

All that Stacy noted carefully, for in Crisp he saw a man who was apt to cause trouble for himself—and Cissy Brantt. But he was in it now, for better or worse, and Stacy smiled ruefully.

"This was the last thing I expected to find. Poor devil. I'm afraid my business wasn't very important. I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by and see if Hoyt could give me some information about horses. I understand he's been buying a few lately."

"Friend of his?" Crisp questioned.

"I've known him some years. We weren't close. I'm Stacy Wall. I know Richardson, on the homicide squad, if he happens to be on this case."

"He's upstairs." Crisp's glance was all enveloping, as if he was storing away all possible impressions for future use. "Hoyt was shot," he said. "Murdered, evidently. Do you know anything which might have bearing on it?"

"I haven't seen Hoyt for some time. He wasn't expecting me tonight. I only came here on the spur of the moment."

Crisp turned, spoke into the next room. "Mr. Harwell, come here, please." And when the man stepped through the doorway, Crisp said: "Have you met this gentleman?"

Looking pale, haggard, Harwell shook his head. He was a medium sized, stoutish man, with a growing patch of baldness at the front of his hair and blinking eyes behind rimless eyeglasses.

"I haven't had the pleasure," Harwell said.

"Mr. Wall," Crisp said, and without moving his position managed to give the impression that he was standing back-eyeing their faces.

"Howdy," Harwell said uncertainly. He reached to a hip pocket, drew out a handkerchief, wiped his face. He was not perspiring visibly, but seemed to feel that he was. "Terrible thing, isn't it?" he stated uncertainly to Stacy. "It's been a great shock, walking in this way and finding him."

"One would think so," Stacy agreed. "Sergeant Crisp, have you any idea who could have done it?"

Crisp shook his head; and just then a man out in front spoke sarcastically. "Some guys who rush out for beer miss things."

The familiar voice of Dan Steele answered.

"Never can tell what a bottle of beer will turn up, Harry. I got here finally. What's the row?"

"Murder. Fellow named Hoyt."

"Archibald Hoyt?"

"No other."

"I thought he'd make print one more time anyway," said Dan Steele, and he walked into the house with a quizzical smile and looked at Stacy Wall.

"Hello," Steele said. "Now who would have thought of finding you here?"

STEELE was a rangy, lanky man in his late thirties. His briskness, and vague elation, might have been that of one tackling a job he was interested in. Stacy took it a different way; Dan Steele was suddenly a man to be feared, even when Steele said: "I was talking to Mr. Wall over the telephone this evening. Neither of us thought at the time we'd meet at a murder. Did we, Wall?"

Ruefully Stacy damned the impulse which had made him call Steele. What was coming next, he wondered. What was Steele going to do? Despite Sergeant Crisp's understanding nod, careless shrug, Stacy's uneasiness increased. Crisp's next remark, while welcome, was hardly reassuring.

"Don't leave just yet, Mr. Wall. I may want to ask you some more questions."

Crisp left.

Dan Steele, still quizzical, asked: "Any idea how long Hoyt has been dead?"

"How would I know?" Stacy answered.

"Search me. Let's see what we have in here."

Nothing had been said about Cissy, or her watch. As he went into the living room with Steele, Stacy looked for some sign of it.

The room was brightly lighted. Detectives were working calmly, efficiently. A fingerprint man was taking a picture with a box camera. On a tripod, a larger camera waited to snap pictures of the body.

Outside a siren wailed to the curb and died down.

Arch Hoyt lay there on the rug, as Cissy had pictured him, face up against the faded green rug pattern. There, just back of Stacy, was the white-painted hall door against which Hoyt had backed to block Cissy's exit. There between door

and body was the space where they had struggled.

The watch should be in that space, but it was not there, nor did anyone seem to be aware of it.

Feet tramped into the hall and past the uncertain and shaken Harwell, who had lingered in the background, brushed a stocky man whose unmistakable professional air and small leather bag labeled him a medical man.

Crisp said: "You made it in a hurry, Doctor."

"I'm in a hurry. What have we here? *Hmmmm. . .*"

From a snap case the doctor fitted glasses on his nose and bent over the body.

"He was shot by a thirty-two automatic," Crisp said, and broke off with a frown of annoyance as feet scuffed in the hall and several young men Stacy had not seen before crowded into the doorway. "You fellows keep quiet," Crisp threatened, "or I'll have you outside."

"Steele's in there. Playing favorites, Sergeant?"

"I'll favorite you, Hannigan!" Crisp said belligerently. "Pipe down if you want any of this! As I was saying, Doctor, it was a thirty-two automatic. Here's the shell. Found it under the chair there. The bullet went clean through his head and the carpet at the edge of his hair there, an' stuck in the floor. See?"

Stacy kept his face expressionless with an effort. Someone was wrong. Cissy's gun had been a twenty-five caliber. Cissy had shot Hoyt while Hoyt was on his feet. Cissy had taken the shell away with her.

Yet Crisp had his thirty-two-caliber shell there; and the doctor bent forward and grunted agreement as Crisp's finger indicated the bullet in the floor.

A shout in the silence could not have been more startling.

Dan Steele cocked a quizzical eye at Stacy.

It took an effort to return a wooden stare. Stacy knew the moisture in his palms, the new throb in his pulses, was only nerves. The feel of death, of something waiting in this old house was nerves too. Couldn't be anything else.

Cissy had fled from fear; but as Stacy stood there, listening, he had the feeling that Cissy had fled from fear into greater danger, as a helpless wader, struggling on a steeply sloping bottom, flounders into the remorselessly engulfing water.

Crisp spoke again, with the irritating calmness of professional scrutiny.

"Powder marks on the forehead too, you'll notice. Looks almost like suicide at first—except that the gun isn't here, and his pockets are empty. The only thing in them is this gold pencil, carrying his initials."

"Shot while lying here on the floor," the doctor said. "The position of the bullet makes that certain. But why? *Hmmm*. Queer, isn't it?"

"Not so queer," Crisp answered readily. "Maybe he was knocked down there and shot before he could get up."

"Possible," the doctor agreed. "But here, dammit—look at this. See where the bullet went in?"

"I'm not blind," Crisp replied with a shade of sarcasm.

"Look back here, in the hair," the doctor went on, tracing with his finger. "See this furrow? He's been hit there hard enough to stun him or even cause a mild concussion."

CHAPTER THREE

A Hot Lead

PAIN warned Stacy that he was biting his lower lip. Breathing faster too. He wanted to cry out with relief, point out the obvious for them to check. A grazing bullet, knocking a man down,

bringing unconsciousness, blood, could have caused that raw furrow.

A twenty-five-caliber bullet, fired wildly, in fear, could have merely grazed the scalp, left Hoyt apparently dead. In that case the bullet would be imbedded in the wall back of where Hoyt had been standing.

Ignoring the scene before him, Stacy turned his attention to the walls. A tiny bullet-hole was hard to see. A word from Cissy as to which way Hoyt had been facing would make it simple.

Crisp's startled, "Here, what's this?" drew Stacy's attention.

The doctor had rolled the body on its side. Crisp had bent over, was straightening with a wrist watch and metal band which he had caught from under the body.

And with dismay Stacy wondered if ever a more sardonic twist of fate had been perpetrated.

In death Arch Hoyt had given the law evidence of first-degree murder, deliberate, calculated; and with his own body Hoyt had guarded evidence which would falsely point suspicion to Cissy Brantt.

Sergeant Crisp whistled sharply.

"My God!" he exclaimed, and dropped the watch in his pocket.

"Whose watch is it?" Dan Steele asked quickly.

"Don't know," said Crisp. "Don't bother me."

Steele said nothing more. He was smiling faintly. But the newspapermen in the doorway, scenting evidence, would not have it that way.

Hannigan, young and irrepressible, said: "Come on, Crisp, loosen up. You've got something there."

And the man next to Hannigan begged: "We need a good woman angle to this."

Crisp turned on them, scowling. "Beat it!" he ordered. "Out of the house for awhile! Go on—scram! Donnelly, put these mugs out!"

A chorus of protests met that; all but

Steele, who said: "Can Wall go along with me for a little, Crisp? You through with him?"

"I guess so," Crisp said impatiently. "Donnelly, come in here and run these guys out!"

And while the uniformed officer at the door came in and goodnaturedly tried to put the press out, Steele spoke under his breath to Stacy.

"Come outside and I'll tell you who did it."

Steele pushed through his colleagues without looking back, evidently certain that Stacy would follow. He was right. Outside the door Stacy lighted a cigarette to quiet his jumpy nerves. From the corner of his eye, in the flare of light from the match, he saw the mail box, level with his shoulder; and in the box a long white envelope, unclaimed as yet by the owner.

Harwell would have taken that envelope had it belonged to him. It looked like a bank statement. Steele was the only other man on the porch at the moment. A quick movement of a hand and Stacy stuffed the envelope in his inside coat pocket.

He had an idea, a wild one, but anything with a vague glimmer of hope was worth chancing now. So he broke the law; and Steele saw him do it and said nothing.

Inside the house Hannigan was urging: "How about it, Mr. Harwell? What woman was Hoyt close with? Just her name, that's all. Wait a minute, Donnelly; leggo my shoulder."

"Want me to call the wagon an' give you a ride?" Donnelly threatened. "You heard the sergeant. Come on."

And Steele, walking to the sidewalk, said: "Let's sit in your car and talk a little, Wall."

DAN STEELE'S voice had touch of mockery. In the light from the house his shoulders were hunched under the up-

turned collar of his coat and, under his hat brim, his look was shrewd.

Feeling like a fencer making a *riposte*, Stacy replied: "I'd rather talk here on my feet. What's on your mind?"

"Do I have to tell you?"

"Obviously."

"I doubt it," Steele said dryly. "But, if you insist: I had a hunch something was behind that telephone call tonight. I drove to your place at once. When you came out with Miss Brantt, I was parked at the curb."

"Mistaken there, aren't you?"

"About Cissy Brantt? She's been copy too long. I followed you both here. Miss Brantt is waiting in your car now."

"Quite a snooper, aren't you?"

"Happens to be my business," Steele said, unabashed. "It usually does the public more good than harm. The other day I happened to hear our society editor mention that Miss Brantt had been seen several times with Archibald Hoyt. She seemed to think it was news."

Steele paused, waiting for some comment, and moved on along the sidewalk as Donnelly herded the other newspapermen out on the porch. Stacy said nothing.

Steele went on. "I don't think for a minute you killed Hoyt. But you came here for a reason. When you telephoned me, Miss Brantt was at your apartment. You both knew about this then; and you came straight here for some important reason."

"Running wild on amateur deductions, aren't you?"

"My guess," said Steele in a detached, impersonal manner, "is that you came here to get something. Say a woman's wrist watch. And you got here too late and went in anyway. But there wasn't any chance to get the watch because it was under the body; and now Crisp has it and knows who killed Hoyt. Am I right?"

Stacy answered bitterly. "I haven't

any intention of feeding your scandal mill."

"Suit yourself," Steele replied indifferently. "Perhaps Miss Brantt will feel differently about it."

"For God's sake, must you be obnoxious about this?" Stacy protested. He was edgy, dismayed, trying to chart some plan of action, and Steele's clever probings were getting on his nerves.

Steele's manner shifted to the personal side.

"Sorry," he apologized. "I thought you understood. It's my job—and it'll all come out anyway. Don't think for a minute Crisp hasn't a good idea right now. I don't know what was on that watch, but I know Crisp. He's getting ready for some quick action. And, in case you've forgotten about it, old man, we're more or less friends. At least I still consider myself one. I'll give you all the break I can."

"Mean that?"

Steele's hand went to his. The friendly pressure, saying more than words, was welcome.

"Sometimes," Steele said gruffly, "this job of mine makes me wish I were digging ditches for a living. This is one of 'em. I don't enjoy seeing people in trouble, having to write about 'em. I'll do anything I can for both of you, short of throwing my paper down."

Stacy made his decision quickly.

"Thanks," he said. "I'm going to ask a lot from you, Steele. Miss Brantt was the woman. She's caught in something she couldn't help, and which seems about to destroy her. I'll give you her side, since it's bound to come out."

TERSELY Stacy related the incidents which had led up to Hoyt's death, and what he himself had found out since entering the house. "Miss Brantt didn't kill Hoyt," he said earnestly. "But someone is trying to make it look as if she did.

If there's any decency in either of us, we'll get her out of this."

"The public—"

"Damn the public!" Stacy burst out. "You know the public better than I do. You can't even kid yourself about it. This will be a seven-day sensation, and then the public will turn to something else, and no matter what the final outcome, Miss Brantt will be left holding the bag. Crisp and his men will arrest her at once, probably—and the damage will be done right then."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Hold this story. The vital parts, anyway. The police don't know where Miss Brantt is. She'll be safe right there in my car for some time. Give me a chance to find who really killed Hoyt, and why. Can't you see it's a frame-up as it stands?"

"And what a frame-up," Steele agreed. He hesitated. "Anything in mind?"

"I've a theory or two. Those forged letters for instance, and the raised checks. Hoyt wasn't penman enough for that. Or crooked enough to have thought of them."

"Right, there."

"He's been keeping progressively worse company the last few years. Somewhere, in that time, he's met someone who could have thought of shaking Miss Brantt down. He's had contact with that person since Miss Brantt started buying horses. If I can pick up the end of that thread, I'll have something promising to follow out. A stranger didn't walk in there and murder Arch Hoyt in cold blood."

Steele looked at his watch.

"Nine thirty," he said. "The deadline for my paper is about two A.M. I might stretch it until two thirty; say two thirty. I'll wait that long before I put the story in, provided Miss Brantt will give herself up by daybreak."

"That's not much time."

"Five hours. They'll get her anyway, and the morning papers will have her name. If she doesn't give herself up then,

it'll look bad for her. It's the best I can do and protect my job. I'll want to work with you, of course."

"Take you up on it," Stacy said curtly. It was the best bargain he could make. Steele's presence couldn't hurt, might help.

"What did you get out of that mail box?" Steele asked.

"Hoyt's bank statement and checks, I think. Hope so anyway. I had a thought his checks might tell a story."

"Might," Steele conceded. "Let's get away from here and see what's in the envelope."

Cissy was waiting silently when Stacy got in the car, followed by Steele. Hans drove smoothly off, and Stacy said: "This is Dan Steele, whom I called from the apartment. He knows everything."

"Was it necessary, Stacy?" Cissy was steady now, but keyed tight, waiting.

Stacy told her what had happened in the house. "No use beating around the bush about it," he said gravely. "It's a devilish tangle."

Cissy's voice quavered a little in spite of herself. "I could be sentenced to die on that evidence."

"You won't be."

"You're being kind," Cissy said forlornly. In the darkness of the back seat her hand groped out and clung to his.

Dan Steele cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Let's see what's in that envelope," he suggested. "We've got to work quick."

Stacy was already thinking that. Five hours. Five fatal hours! Sergeant Crisp's homicide squad could do a lot in that time—and they were two, Steele and himself.

THE envelope was from the Southern Trust and Savings. Thirty some checks were inside. In the glow of the side lights he went through them, handing each in turn to Steele.

Eleven of the checks were drawn to Hoyt himself, for large amounts. Steele said: "He got the money all right. Took it out in cash right away. Smart guy. Hard to trace all that. Look at this, thirty thousand at one crack on the fourteenth of the month."

And a moment later Steele said: "These three checks made out to cash, four hundred, seven hundred and fifty, and six hundred, are endorsed by Jimmy Lafitte—the gambler. Hoyt was pushing his luck at Jimmy's place. That's the hottest spot to go for a tip. Hoyt could have been there with a crooked friend easy enough."

"It's an idea," Stacy agreed. "We'll run out there. I know Jimmy himself."

"So do I," Steele said. "Too well. He told me to stay out of the place. I ran a story he didn't like."

"I'll handle it then. He'll do a favor for me."

Stacy picked up the speaking tube and gave Hans directions.

You went out in Maryland to Jimmy Lafitte's place, three miles beyond the district line, and there, behind a quarter-of-a-mile-long line of sign boards, back in a grove of tall trees, dark, apparently deserted, stood the staid three-story Colonial house that was known through all the east as "Jimmy's Place."

Hans, who had been here many times before, stopped at the inconspicuous ground-floor entrance, and opened the door on Steele's side.

"I can't go in, can I?" Cissy said. It was the first remark she had made in some minutes, and in it there was an undercurrent of forlornness.

"'Fraid not," Stacy told her as he prepared to follow Steele out of the car. "Women are not allowed inside; and if they were, there'd be someone sure to recognize you."

In a sudden flare of low-voiced passion, Cissy said: "I know how Marie Antoin-

ette felt on the way to the execution. She wondered how much longer the ride was going to last and—and why the minutes didn't pass faster."

Stacy could have told her about four hours and thirty minutes longer, at the most, in this case. But he didn't; didn't care to think about it himself.

"We'll be out in a few minutes," he promised, and followed Steele through the narrow door into the familiar little anteroom furnished with a pine table-desk and a stool.

Two impassive men were in there, one seated on the stool, one standing; and the standing man said to Steele: "You can't get in. Jimmy left word about you."

And to Stacy: "Hello, Mr. Wall. Go right up."

"Mr. Steele is with me," Stacy said. "We'd like to see Jimmy. I suppose it's all right if we go up to his office?"

The man at the table shrugged. "Up to his office," he said, and he pushed a button at the corner of the table. A lock clicked in a heavy oaken door at one side of the room.

TOGETHER they mounted wide stairs beyond the door, and just off the spacious second-floor landing a door opened and Jimmy Lafitte stepped out to meet them. He was a spare man, about forty, wearing a sober, double-breasted suit, and, smiling, he greeted them with surprise, quite as if he had not been warned of their coming while they were ascending the stairs.

"Good evening, Mr. Wall. Haven't seen you here for some time. I hope you do well tonight. Er, hello, Steele. Something you wanted?"

Dan Steele grinned. "Told you I'd be back, Jimmy. Take the chip off your shoulder. I'll do better next time I write you up."

"Don't write me up," Jimmy grunted. "I get too much publicity as it is."

Stacy said, casually: "Is Archie Hoyt here tonight?"

"I don't think so, Mr. Wall. I was upstairs a few minutes ago and I didn't see him."

"Too bad. I want to get in touch with him. Any of his friends upstairs?"

"I can give you his telephone number."

"I know his house. Who does he come here with oftenest?"

"Most of the time he comes alone," said Jimmy. "But I've seen him several times with a fellow named Merrick. He's upstairs now: been here three or four hours."

"Merrick? Who is he? What do you know about him?" Jerry asked.

Jimmy's glance was speculative, first at Stacy, then at Dan Steele. "Anything in this that'll tie up with the house?" he questioned bluntly.

"Not a thing," Stacy assured him. "My word on it, Jimmy."

"That's good enough for me, Mr. Wall," Jimmy said promptly. "And I'm telling you the truth when I say I don't know anything about this Merrick. Mr. Hoyt said he was all right, so we gave him a card."

"Thanks. Will you come up and point him out to me?"

"Sure."

To Steele, Stacy said: "You might wait a couple of minutes before coming up."

Steele nodded, waited there on the second floor while Stacy walked on up to the third floor with Jimmy Lafitte.

CHAPTER FOUR

Merrick Entertains

THE third floor of the house had been converted into one huge, high-walled room. To the right of the head of the

stairs was a roulette table, to the left four dice tables in a row, in the middle of the floor a blackjack table. There was a chuck-a-luck table, a faro layout, and blackboards for the racing results of all tracks covered the end wall. They were flanked by betting windows and the pay-off window.

The room was crowded, men standing two and three deep around some of the tables. A blue haze of smoke floated in lazy currents under the lights, and the voices of the house men, the calling of bets, and conversation, blended in a steady, throbbing drone of noise.

Jimmy Lafitte looked about the room, passed slowly along the dice tables, and said under his breath: "That short fellow with the little black mustache at the corner of this next table is Merrick. Guess he's not playing now. He'll talk to you."

"Thanks," said Stacy, and strolled over alone, came up behind Merrick and touched him on the arm.

Merrick swung quickly, face going strained for the space of a second. One couldn't tell much from his look, other than that he startled easier than most men, from such a trivial bid for his attention.

"I beg your pardon," Stacy said politely. "Can you tell me where to find Arch Hoyt?"

Merrick's chin could have been stronger; but then his sloping shoulders could have been straighter and the striped pattern in his gray suit a bit less loud. He was in his middle thirties and his manner was quiet as he stepped away from the dice table and faced Stacy.

"Hoyt? Why ask me?" Merrick said.

"I've seen him with you several times," Stacy lied cheerfully. Twisting the truth was becoming somewhat a habit by now, as he followed the devious trail of Cissy Brant's trouble.

Merrick considered that, and nodded.

"I see him now and then," he admitted. "He isn't here this evening."

"Do you know where I could find him?" Stacy said. About Merrick there was nothing one could put a finger on definitely. He talked well enough, dressed decently, seemed harmless enough. If he had a crooked strain it did not show—other than that quick, startled turn when his arm had been touched.

"Why don't you try his house?" Merrick said.

"No one answered."

"Anything important? I could tell him if I see him?"

"Rather. I think there's a warrant out for him," Stacy prevaricated cheerfully. Merrick blinked, stood still, staring.

"You a dick?" he asked slowly.

"Do you mean a detective?"

"That's right."

"Not at all. I've known Hoyt for many years. My name is Stacy Wall, in case he's ever mentioned it."

"He hasn't." But Merrick's manner grew a trifle less wary. "Who issued the warrant?"

"The District."

"When?"

"Look here," said Stacy, "I didn't come here to be cross-examined, even by a close friend of Hoyt's. All I want is for him to know about this."

"If I see him before you do, I'll tell him," Merrick promised. "Funny—I wonder what he did to draw a warrant."

Stacy shrugged. "Does it matter? I can't stay here very long, so keep an eye out from him."

AS he left Merrick there, Stacy saw Dan Steele loitering near the blackjack table, where he could watch them. Ignoring Steele as he passed near, Stacy walked over to the roulette table, and Steele took the hint and remained away from him.

Merrick had left the spot where he had

been standing, was not in sight now. Steele drifted across the room to a corner occupied by two telephone booths. He entered one of the booths, was still in it when Merrick popped out of the other.

Merrick was shaken. He wiped his brow as he looked about, saw Stacy and came to him. Something warmer than the hot telephone booth was still bringing a faint dew of perspiration out on Merrick's face as he said thickly—

"I just called Hoyt's house. He's dead."

"Good heavens. What happened?"

"I don't know," Merrick confessed with visible agitation. "I think the police are there."

"Couldn't have been a natural death then," Stacy guessed. "Perhaps he heard about the warrant and committed suicide. Poor devil."

The last remark was sincere; not for the Hoyt who had swindled Cissy Brantt, but for the Arch Hoyt of earlier years and the decency he had possessed then.

Merrick wiped his brow again.

"Something's happened," he muttered. "I—I'll run out there and see if there's anything I can do."

"Give you a lift?"

"No. I've got my own car. Thanks. Goodbye."

Merrick left hastily, departing down the stairs. Steele was out of the telephone booth now. Stacy hurried to him.

"I think we'd better follow Merrick," he said hastily. "He's gone to his car now. Go down ahead of me and tell Hans to come to the door."

"No hurry," Steele replied. "I heard him order a taxi."

"He refused a lift from me; said he had his own car." Stacy smiled faintly. "I think we *had* better follow him, since he's so anxious to go it alone."

Steele went back to the parking lot first. A few minutes later Stacy followed. He saw no sign of Merrick on his way

out, but as the car rolled down the dark driveway to the highway, the headlights brushed across a pacing figure off under the trees. It looked like Merrick.

Stacy gave an order to Hans. "Run up the road, north, out of sight of this place, turn around and come back a short distance to where you can see a car turn in, and stop there with your lights out."

They rolled north along the highway, and Cissy switched on the light beside her and said: "Ten minutes to eleven. Did you have any luck, Stacy?"

"I think so," Stacy said, and wished he didn't feel so doubtful about it. Almost an hour and a half of the five hours was gone. By now the hunt for Cissy was on. Three hours and a half left—and suppose Merrick turned out to be merely an excited friend?

Hans parked by the roadside within sight of the gambling-house driveway. Traffic rushed by in both directions, between Washington and Baltimore. An automobile came out of the driveway, but in silhouette against an oncoming pair of lights it was plainly a coupé. Not a taxi.

Then a machine slowed, turned in.

"I think that's the one," Stacy said, looking past Hans' shoulder. Through the speaking tube he said: "Go ahead slowly."

They were very near the driveway entrance when a car emerged and turned toward Washington, gathering speed. "That's a taxi," Stacy said sharply. "It must be Merrick's." And to Hans: "Follow that machine."

IT picked up speed rapidly. Hans had to pass other cars to keep it in sight. In a few minutes they were across the district line, and shortly were threading streets toward the business district.

Down Pennsylvania Avenue the taxi rolled, and swung in to the front of the Willard Hotel, at Fourteenth Street.

"I'll take him from here," Steele said, with a hand on the door. "He doesn't know me."

He stepped out while the car was still in motion; and Stacy followed with not much haste, telling Cissy: "Circle the block until I stop you."

Steele was abreast of the hotel entrance when Stacy reached the sidewalk. Passing up the hotel, Steele turned left on Fourteenth Street. Half a block behind, Stacy made the turn, just in time to see Steele crossing the street toward the big National Press Club office building on the next corner.

Pausing a moment there Steele went inside the building. Following more leisurely, Stacy met Steele in the lobby.

"He's upstairs," Steele said. "Wait for me out on the corner and I'll find where he went as soon as the elevator comes down. I know the boys."

But it was at least ten minutes before Steele came out. He looked puzzled.

"Merrick's a regular here," he said. "Works in an office up on the tenth floor. There's no name on the door. He's inside sleeping."

"Sleeping?"

"Making no sound anyway, that I can hear. Looks like he's holed in for the night. I can't figure it." Steele lighted a cigarette, spoke glumly. "I went up to the Press Club and called the paper," he said. "They've got a couple of other men on this story and the editor's wild because I haven't been in touch with him. The early editions are coming out with the story now. Crisp has promised a quick arrest that will clear everything up, but he hasn't leaked about Miss Brantt yet."

Steele flipped the cigarette away.

"Tastes bad," he said wryly. "I'm in hot water at the office. Crisp will broadcast Miss Brantt's name as soon as he finds out she's not around. I've got to get this story in for the morning edition,

or be looking for another job. And that mug upstairs, we wasted all this time on, has crawled into his hole and pulled it in after him. Doesn't look like we'll get anything out of him. I met a friend of mine at the club who's going to keep an eye on Merrick. What do we do next? Stall around?"

"Hardly. I've been studying these checks again. Four are made out to cash, and endorsed by J. N. Norris, cashed through the Dixon Trust and Savings. I looked in the telephone book and called information. There is no J. N. Norris listed."

"Looks like you're stuck there then."

"Don't think so," Stacy said thoughtfully. "I know Willis Hearne, first vice-president of the Dixon Trust. Trounced him at bridge three weeks ago."

"Is there anyone you don't know?" Steele said, half in admiration. "Let's see what the man can do for us."

"I've called him. He's on his way to the bank now. We're to meet him there."

They crossed the street, waited until Hans drove slowly around the block once more, and Stacy hailed him. As the limousine stopped, Steele rapped out: "My God, there's Sergeant Crisp! Watch it!"

A POLICE car had swung around the slowing limousine and stopped ahead of it. Sergeant Crisp jumped out and turned back, calling: "Just a minute, Mr. Wall."

They met at the fender, and Crisp said: "Saw you there on the curb as I was passing. Where did you go? I've wanted you."

"I seem to recall you told Mr. Steele you were through with me," Stacy replied calmly.

Crisp was suddenly suspicious. "You still with Steele?"

"Why not?"

"What's the idea of you two getting chummy so suddenly?"

"Steele is running down a story on the Hoyt case. I'm accompanying him."

"Know anything about it?" Crisp demanded brusquely.

"I believe you asked me that once to-night, Sergeant."

Crisp grunted, left that subject. "Hoyt had a woman-friend by the name of Brantt, didn't he?" he asked suddenly.

"Did he?" Stacy said calmly; at least he hoped it was calmly. Cissy was sitting there in the back of the car within ear-shot. Within view also, if Crisp looked into the back. Stacy stood squarely in front of Crisp, trying to block him there at the front of the car.

"He did," Crisp said. "Do you know her?"

"If you mean Miss Cissy Brantt, I do."

"Where can I find her? I want," said Crisp casually, "to get some information from her. Steele, you can put that in your paper if you want to. We'd like to ask Miss Brantt a few questions about Hoyt."

"I suggest you try her house," Stacy said.

"She's not in. I've telephoned there."

"And probably left half a dozen men hidden around the yard," Stacy thought; but he said: "You'll probably locate her shortly. It's about time for people to be getting home now."

"We've picked up her car," Crisp growled. "She's up in the Connecticut Avenue section somewhere. That's all." He turned to go, and then swung around. "By the way, Wall, where do you live?"

"In the Connecticut Avenue section," Stacy said calmly. "You'll find it in the telephone book, Sergeant. Good night."

The police car sped on ahead of them. Steele waited until he was in the car before he spoke, and then it was from the heart.

"Whew—that was close! I thought it was all up then!"

"I heard him," Cissy gulped. "I was waiting for him to pull me out of here. Stacy, I guess you might as well take me to headquarters and get it over with. Don't you see, if they've found my car, they probably can poke around and find where I was? You're going to get into trouble sure."

"Don't count your chickens too soon," Stacy chuckled but inwardly he was damning himself for the oversight of leaving Cissy's car at the curb near his apartment house. He should have known that Crisp would get her license number, have the city combed immediately for the car.

But it was too late to remedy that, and he rode to the Dixon Trust with a growing uneasiness about the matter. He couldn't put away the feeling that Sergeant Crisp had a purpose in bringing up the subject of Cissy's car, and then asking where Stacy lived. Suspicion was there in some degree; perhaps far more than Crisp had betrayed.

THERE was a light inside the bank, a night watchman standing inside the door, and Hearne himself came out a few minutes after Stacy got to the locked door. Hearne was in tails, had evidently just gotten in from some formal function; and he was decent enough about it, considering the inconvenience. He handed Stacy a slip of paper.

"The name is Miss Jeanne N. Norris," he said. "There's the address, and the drinks are on you. Keep this quiet, please. It's strictly irregular. If I didn't know you so well, I'd have to refuse."

All Stacy could do was thank the man and get back to the car and give Hans the address written on the slip of paper. It was an exclusive apartment house in the Meridian Park section, on north Sixteenth Street.

Dan Steele grew almost cheerful when he heard Hearne's information.

"Now we're getting somewhere," he said. "A 'Miss' living in that neighborhood and getting checks from Hoyt made out to cash sounds like hot stuff."

Cissy Brantt spoke slowly. "Something about that name is familiar," she said slowly. "I've heard it recently, I'm certain. But I can't think; I meet so many people."

"Try," Steele urged. "We need anything we can get on her."

Cissy sat thinking hard as the car rolled swiftly north on Sixteenth Street; and suddenly said: "I have it. I met a Miss Norris at a bridge luncheon given by one of the charity boards I'm on. I recall her because she was so stunningly beautiful. I heard her say that she hadn't been in Washington long."

"If it's the same woman, she's been here long enough to get over a thousand dollars from Hoyt," Stacy commented. "We'll soon see. I'll call her, Steele."

But getting to see Miss Norris was not so easy; the girl at the desk in the lobby turned from the telephone.

"Miss Norris does not know a Mr. Wall," she said impersonally, "and does not care to be disturbed tonight."

"Tell her I'm calling about our mutual friend in Georgetown," Stacy directed.

Miss Norris changed her mind.

He went to a front apartment on the third floor. A *chic* maid answered his ring, ushered him into a small drawing room done in pale gray.

She came in a moment later, from the rear of the room, and Stacy looked once and knew this must be the young woman Cissy had met. Washington could hardly hold two such women, blond, slender, delicately featured.

Her color reminded Stacy of the exquisite tints of an old Chinese print. But she wasn't an Oriental type, and her man-

ner was grave and quite direct as she confronted him.

"I don't know you, I'm sure," she said. "And I'm rather curious as to what you meant about 'our mutual friend in Georgetown.' To whom did you refer?"

"Archie Hoyt," Stacy said, watching her closely.

"I have met Mr. Hoyt," she admitted. "But I don't see how the fact is known to you, or in what way it concerns you."

Stacy chuckled. "A great many things concern me," he said. "And for a newcomer to Washington, you're rather well known, you know. Miss Brantt has mentioned you to me."

Her level gaze looked startled for just an instant, and then she shrugged. "I have met Miss Brantt just once. I can hardly say I know her—and I still don't understand about Mr. Hoyt."

"It's very simple," Stacy said. "I'm trying to get in touch with Hoyt. He seems to have left Washington. From what I know about your relations with him, I'm sure you can tell me where to look for him."

SHE flushed, slowly, faintly. White teeth caught her lower lip, hard. Those were the only indications of the storm of emotion he sensed within her.

"I've heard of you, Mr. Wall," she said colorlessly, "and nothing I have heard would suggest you would come here and insult me. I must have misunderstood you."

Stacy had a horrible moment of doubt; and while he was wavering toward an apology, Miss Norris continued coldly.

"I think you can find Mr. Hoyt at the house of a close friend who lives out beyond Georgetown. I can't give you the address, but if the matter is very important I can drive you there."

"It's rather important," Stacy told her, and she shamed him further by her nod of

assent and ready preparations to leave.

His wrist watch showed twelve forty when she joined him, pulling on a pair of dark gloves. Still pale and cold behind the pert half-veil of her small hat, she went down in silence to the street, and unlocked a Packard coupé at the curb.

Several hundred feet ahead his own car was parked. Steele would follow, of course. Stacy did not look behind as they drove off.

Without speech Miss Norris drove to Georgetown, and beyond, to the straight Chain Bridge road, deserted at this hour of the night. On the left of the road were the dark waters of the old Chesapeake and Ohio canal; and beyond that the wide channel of the Potomac ended against the heights of the Virginia shore. On the right of the road, wooded bluffs went up steeply. At intervals, steps scaled the bluff to some invisible building above.

She stopped at one such flight of steps.

"Up there," she directed coldly. "I don't know the man's name. I understand he is peculiar; but I think you'll find Mr. Hoyt there."

She ignored his word of thanks, drove on as soon as he closed the door.

His car was not in sight. Something had gone wrong there. But time was getting tragically short. Stacy went up the steps alone, up between trees and tangled underbrush. The rotting wooden step-treads creaked underfoot. The place seemed uncannily desolate. It was hard to believe such a place existed so near the crowded city.

Winded, he reached the top of the lofty flight of steps. There in front of him was the house, standing among trees, with the lower windows curtained and lighted inside. A radio was playing inside, and it continued to play when he knocked on the door, and knocked again.

The door opened abruptly. A wild-eyed young man confronted him; a young man

whose dark hair was touseled, whose cheek was bruised rather badly and whose manner was peculiar.

Before Stacy could speak the other addressed him hoarsely.

"Come in."

The man was unarmed. He seemed more fearful than threatening. Without a doubt this friend of Hoyt's was peculiar. He closed the door as soon as Stacy stepped inside—and the weak-chinned, overdressed Merrick was standing behind the door in a half-crouch, holding a revolver!

Stacy's hands went up. It was either that or get shot he knew after one look at Merrick's face. The man's chin had the viciousness of weakness cornered; his face was drawn, snarling with threat.

The snarl was in his voice as he jerked the revolver and said: "So you're still looking for Hoyt? Back up against the wall there while I frisk you! Both of you!"

Somewhere back in the house a clock struck one, hollowly.

CHAPTER FIVE

Final Fatal Hour

THE young man obeyed hastily. Stacy stepped over beside him, and Merrick threatened them both with the revolver while he ran a hand through Stacy's pockets.

He found the long envelope, jerked it out, backed off a step, and fumbled out the contents with one hand and saw with a glance what they were.

"Hoyt's checks, huh?" he grated.

Stacy said nothing.

Merrick eyed him malevolently.

"You handed me a smooth line out at Lafitte's place," he said. "I fell for it too. What a sucker. I suppose you put this guy on my tail. He says he's a newspaper guy. And I've got a line on you;

you're a high-flying society hound. What's the idea of running around asking about Hoyt? He's dead."

"Is he?" Stacy asked.

His arms were still up. He was trying to fit together the pieces of a puzzle that made, he was certain, a clear pattern if only he could get them together. First, had this man killed Hoyt? If he had, he had not used that revolver. It would not have ejected the thirty-two-caliber shell the police had found. The gun he now held looked like a thirty-eight caliber.

But why Merrick's agitation, peculiar actions? If he hadn't known Hoyt was dead, there at Jimmy Lafitte's place, what connection did he have with the matter? What was he doing here? Was he Hoyt's close friend, entangled in some way with the business?

Merrick cursed him. "You know damn well Hoyt's dead!" he said violently. "I told you; but you knew it then. You knew it before you came to Lafitte's place asking about him!"

"How do you know that?" Stacy asked with interest.

Merrick swore at him again, stood glaring at the two of them. He backed off a step. Purpose began to take form in his manner. And from the corner of his mouth Stacy spoke to the man next to him.

"You're the chap from the Press Club, aren't you?"

"Yes. How d'you know that?" The man was nervous, hesitant. His eyes were fixed on the revolver in fascination.

"What happened?" Stacy asked him.

"This man caught a taxi. I followed him in another taxi, out along Conduit Road. He paid his taxi off and walked over this way. I followed him; but he must have spotted me. He jumped me from the thicket, knocked me dizzy, and made me walk here to the house. What's it all about anyway?" the young man asked plaintively.

Merrick showed his teeth.

"It's about curtains for you two," he said. His chin, that weak chin, was wobbling slightly. He took another step back.

Until the last instant, Stacy did not think the man would do it. It was too cold-blooded, too deliberate. Why, it was slaughter—but he saw the gun shift slightly, center, and the trigger finger start to squeeze; and Stacy yelled—

"Jump! He'll kill—"

THE blasting report of the revolver drowned out his last word as he launched himself away from the wall at Merrick. And Merrick stumbled back against the opposite wall, flipping the revolver muzzle over at Stacy and firing again as he went.

Like that—two shots in the time it took Stacy to hurl himself two long steps across the hall. The second shot was almost in his face, so that the hot, biting sting of powder particles registered against his cheek. And low in his left shoulder a hammer-blow swung him off balance, so that he stumbled and drove his right shoulder against Merrick, pinning him to the wall.

The left shoulder was cold, helpless, numb. The arm would not work, and instinctively Stacy forgot it and smashed hard with his right fist to Merrick's cheek.

Merrick staggered—the revolver blasted again and the shot must have missed, for nothing stopped the fury of Stacy's attack. The weak-chinned Merrick had turned into a killer. Words would not stop him. The slowest man would end up on the floor dead. From the corner of his eye Stacy caught the briefest glimpse of the young stranger down on his knees against the wall, head down and one hand clutching his chest as he tried to keep from collapsing.

And then Stacy's rush drove Merrick staggering against the door. Glass

crashed behind the curtains, and as Merrick twisted away, half stooping to shield his face as he brought the revolver up again, Stacy kicked up with his knee.

Square under the jaw that knee landed, driven with a savage thrust of powerful leg muscles. Merrick's head snapped up, twisting queerly, and through the ringing echoes in his ears Stacy thought he heard a dull snap.

The next sound was the clatter of the revolver on the floor. He saw that. And Merrick was dropping, was on the floor, was lying there without a movement.

Uncanny, that quick ending. Breathing hard through his teeth, pulses hammering, Stacy stood with his legs spread apart staring at what he had done. Merrick's face was digging into the floor boards and still he wasn't moving.

"Merrick!" Stacy said.

He had the grisly feeling that he was trying to call the dead back to life. Dropping to a knee he scooped his right hand under Merrick's head and lifted; and the head wobbled up limply, rolling grotesquely in his hand.

Merrick's neck was broken. He was dead.

Stacy felt stupid as he got to his feet. He was the one who had killed after all. His left arm, hanging limp, drew his attention. Still there was no pain. Only that queer numb feeling, but when he looked at his shoulder he saw the dark, spreading stain of blood coming through the coat fabric.

The young stranger was down on the floor now, twisting, groaning. He lifted his face to Stacy, smiled almost apologetically. His words were understandable, but husky.

"He hit me," the stranger said.

They said no more, for feet tramped on the porch and the door started to open.

Catching the revolver off the floor, Stacy faced the door. Merrick's body

rolled on the floor as the door shoved it back. A loud voice came ahead of the man who was entering.

"Hands up in there! It's a pinch!"

A POLICE revolver shoved in first. A burly officer followed; another came after him, half stumbling across Merrick's body. Then Sergeant Crisp slipped in, carrying a drawn gun also.

Stacy dropped the revolver as he saw the first uniform. He was standing quietly when Crisp came to him.

"I thought I'd run you down," Crisp said. "What the hell's happened in here? Who shot them guys? You?"

"Would you believe it, Sergeant?" Stacy said. "You're very welcome. I suggest you get an ambulance quickly for that young man. The other one is dead. I'm afraid I broke his neck."

"What's that? Broke his neck?" Crisp stared at Merrick, stooped, lifted Merrick's head a little by a handful of hair. "By heavens, you did!" he exclaimed. "So it's murder for you, too, Wall? I had a hunch I'd corner you in something."

"What do you mean 'it's murder for me too?'" Stacy inquired a bit unsteadily. He was feeling the reaction now.

"I've got Miss Brantt for the murder of Hoyt," Crisp said with satisfaction. "Pretty smart of you to be carrying her around in your car under our noses. Fooled me completely when I talked to you downtown. But when I got to headquarters and picked up a report that you'd left your apartment house earlier in the evening with a young woman answering Miss Brantt's description, I had you nailed.

"I sent out an order to pick your car up on sight," Crisp went on. "And it wasn't long after that before a patrol car in Georgetown nailed it neatly, with Miss Brantt inside with Dan Steele."

"Very clever of you," Stacy said mechanically. "Where are they?"

"Down on the road. I shot out and questioned them in Georgetown as soon as I heard you weren't in the car. And Steele came through with some kind of cock-and-bull story to the effect that they were following you, and you had gone on ahead with a woman."

"So I had," said Stacy.

"Where is she?"

"She went on, somewhere. Home, I suppose."

"And I've got a nice little home with bars all around it for you," Crisp replied. "It's a good thing I cruised down this way to check Steele's story. If we hadn't heard those shots, you'd have been on your way again."

"Not very far with this shoulder, I'm afraid, Sergeant."

One of the uniformed officers came into the hall from the back part of the house.

"I telephoned for an ambulance," he said. "It'll be along in a few minutes. We won't need the wagon, will we?"

"We'll need the coroner," said Crisp, "and some more men to watch this house."

Pain began to steal through Stacy's shoulder. The bleeding, for some reason or other, was no worse. Clotting, probably. The clock back in the house struck one thirty. And the sound had hardly died away when the telephone rang sharply, back near the clock.

"Answer it, Rice," Crisp ordered. "No, I'll get it."

"Wait!" Stacy said. "Did you leave a number to be called?"

The officer who had telephoned shook his head.

"Don't answer that then," Stacy begged as the bell rang again.

"You're nuts," Crisp told him. "Sure I'll answer it. Want me to lose a lead?"

Stacy stepped over, barring Crisp's way.

"If you answer that telephone, and it's who I think it is, you'll probably lose a chance to get the person who really killed Hoyt," he said sharply. "Miss Brantt didn't do that."

Crisp scowled and put a hand against Stacy's chest. "Get out of the way! Who's running this? Grab him, Rice!"

And as the officer caught Stacy's right arm roughly, the telephone rang again. Crisp went back to it. But in a few moments Crisp was back, furious.

"They'd hung up!" he raged. "You made me miss that call! I ought to have you mussed up for that! I'll add another charge against you!"

Stacy drew a breath of relief. "That's the luckiest thing that's happened to you tonight," he declared. "I meant what I said. Miss Brantt didn't kill Hoyt. And if you act bull-headed now and let the real killer get away, I'll have your job, for I'll see that the best lawyers money can buy make a fool out of you in court. I mean that, Crisp."

White-lipped from pain and anger, Stacy faced the detective. If he had been an unknown, Crisp probably would have ignored him. But Cissy Brantt's wealth and prestige—and mayhap Dan Steele's power with the press—brought Crisp up short.

"Who did kill Hoyt then?" Crisp demanded, almost sulkily.

"I don't know—but take me where I tell you to and I think you'll break this case quickly. Really break it."

Crisp stared at him, abruptly said: "All right. Where do you want to go?"

AN OFFICER helped Stacy down the long flight of steps. Stacy resented the weakness slowly creeping over him, but couldn't help it. His limousine was at the bottom, bracketed by two police cars, and he said to Crisp: "Can't we go in my car? There's room for you."

Strangely enough Crisp assented. Ordering one of the police cars to follow, he helped Stacy in and sat, himself, on one of the folding seats.

Stacy gave an order to Hans. They turned, swept back toward the city. Cissy didn't know he was wounded. She was calm now, resigned. "I'm only sorry I've involved you two," she told Stacy.

Dan Steele was rather silent before the trouble he now faced. Stacy told them what had happened in the house on the bluff, and Steele's interest revived.

"You killed Merrick?" he said, sitting up alertly. "And he was waiting there with a gun? Lord, what a story this is building up to!" Steele remembered and sighed. "And Crisp is dealing me out of writing it at all," he said.

"Wait and see," Stacy said.

He told them no more; not even when the limousine stopped once more in front of the Meridian Park apartment house. Crisp, and an officer from the car which had followed went in with Stacy.

A young man was at the switchboard now. Backed by the law, Stacy tossed a flat order over the desk. "Don't ring any apartments while we're going up."

And he led Crisp and the officer to the apartment of Miss Norris and pressed the bell. The maid opened the door—and uttered a cry of protest as Stacy pushed past her into the apartment. Even Crisp snapped behind him: "Hey, wait, you can't do that, Wall!"

Stacy didn't answer, for past the maid's shoulder he had seen a pile of luggage. He plunged into the drawing room, with fire running through his shoulder and weakness sapping at his muscles, and kept on ahead of Crisp through the empty drawing room, back into the apartment.

A door started to close in front of him, framing the vanishing figure of Miss Norris. She was dressed for the street, even

to her hat, and she closed the door violently.

Stacy hit it with his right shoulder, driving door and woman back as he surged through into a large bedroom; and her cry of fury and anger was anything but calm and cold.

"Eddie! Give it to him!"

A door across the room, which was also just closing, swung back—and, as a man ran back into the bedroom, Stacy faced a gun for the second time that night. An automatic this time, coming up to cover him as the man rasped: "Get out of the way, Jeanne!"

The man gripped a small leather case in his other hand; a case he had been carrying away with him, and Stacy noticed subconsciously how the man held onto the case as he lifted the automatic to fire.

Stacy fell flat to the floor as the gun went off. The muzzle followed him down, but not fast enough. The shot missed—and Crisp shouted something behind Stacy. The automatic fired again over Stacy's head, in the face of a burst of shots from the doorway he had just passed through. The man fired one last shot, clumsily, and wild, as he went down.

Crisp was at him before Stacy could get to his feet.

Crisp kicked the automatic to one side, swearing mightily, demanding: "What the devil are you doing here?" And in the same breath snapping: "Hold that woman, Rice!"

And Harwell, the stout lobbyist with whom Arch Hoyt had lived, writhed there on the floor and seemed not to notice that his eyeglasses had fallen off and the black leather case was no longer in his hand. He had been shot through the body several times.

Miss Norris was crying: "Eddie, what did they do to you?" And trying to break away from Rice and get to Harwell. She

struck at the officer, swore at him—and Stacy wondered how he had ever thought she was such a lady. She was no lady now.

"Shut up!" Crisp ordered her. "Who is he, your husband?"

"He's my brother—and if you've killed him, I'll kill you if it's the last thing I do!" she screamed at Crisp. "Get a doctor, you fool!"

STACY picked up the leather case. Harwell had been too anxious to take it away with him. He opened it on the bed—and pens, pen-points, little bottles of ink and chemicals, erasures and small tools, with which he was unfamiliar, lay there in view.

Crisp gave one startled look. "What the devil! That's a penman's outfit!" he exclaimed.

"A check-forgers' outfit?"

"And a complete one!" Crisp snapped.

"What caliber is that automatic he dropped?"

Crisp picked it up. "Thirty-two," he said.

"Then you'll probably find it's the gun that matches the shell you found by Hoyt's body," Stacy said, sitting down heavily on the edge of the bed. Collapsing was nearer the truth. He hadn't known he was so weak or that his shoulder could hurt so much. "The ballistic experts can prove that, Crisp. Has Miss Brantt told you anything?"

"She wouldn't talk."

"Get her up here and she will now. Hoyt forged checks—at least he banked checks she gave him that had been raised to large sums. I knew Hoyt couldn't do it. He wasn't skilful enough with a pen. Harwell did the check-raising evidently. Miss Brantt went to Hoyt's house tonight and charged him with this thievery. She had to shoot to get away in safety. That's how her watch happened to be there. But

she shot him with a twenty-five automatic—evidently just grazed him. You'll find the bullet in the walls of that room I think. It knocked Hoyt out, made that furrow in his scalp. And Harwell must have found him and grown afraid of what might happen if Hoyt talked—or perhaps there was more money in it if Hoyt was dead.

"Harwell saw Miss Brantt's watch—and left there after he killed Hoyt with a bullet in the same spot Miss Brantt had grazed. It was almost a perfect crime. Miss Brantt, herself, thought she had killed Hoyt. If Harwell had had a twenty-five caliber automatic, he would probably have gotten away with it. He reported the matter calmly enough, stayed there with the body and pulled the wool over everyone's eyes.

"But," said Stacy, "when I saw that thirty-two-caliber shell I knew something was wrong. Steele and I began unraveling it to save Miss Brantt from arrest for something she didn't do. These two had at least one other man working with them; probably connected as a blind with Harwell's office and professed business of lobbying. They were crooks, I suppose, who found Hoyt good material to work with."

"Who is this other man?" Crisp demanded.

"Merrick, he called himself. I broke his neck accidentally when he tried to kill me, and also that other chap, a friend of Steele's, who had been following Merrick for Steele. But before Merrick died he gave me one link which hooked everything up with this woman."

She was quiet now, listening. Harwell was groaning on the floor.

"Hoyt had been giving her money," Stacy said. "I think she may have roped Hoyt into all this. Anyway, I had run Merrick down earlier this evening. He called Harwell's Georgetown house and discovered Hoyt was dead, and told me.

And then hurried to an office in the Press Club building which is probably Harwell's office. From there he must have talked to Harwell or this woman over the telephone—for when I met him a second time he accused me of still pretending to be hunting Hoyt. I'd told this woman that. He could have known it only by hearing from her.

"And," said Stacy, "he could only have wanted to kill me and that other chap because he thought we were going to pin Hoyt's murder where it belonged. I didn't know who had killed Hoyt, but I knew this woman would know—and when the telephone rang I was certain it was a call to find out what had happened to me.

That's why I asked you not to answer it—and why I brought you here. And," said Stacy, "I'd like a doctor myself, and you'd better tell Miss Brantt there's been a mistake and she's not under arrest."

Crisp stared for a moment, and then nodded shortly.

"Go down and tell her, Rice," he ordered. "And call another ambulance on your way out. And then bring me that reporter in the big car. He's just got time enough to get word into his paper that we've broken this case."

Stacy smiled and let it go at that. His wrist watch showed ten minutes until two thirty.

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When Detective Galbraith hopped into his usual pre-dinner tub, he never guessed that before he'd even have time to work up a good lather his home-life was going to be ruined for the evening by—

The Body Upstairs

by

Cornell Woolrich

Author of "Murder in Wax," etc.



"Come on in again, baby," I called.

I GOT home that night about 6:15. "Have a hard day?" the wife wanted to know as I pitched my hat at the chandelier. "Supper's ready.

"With you as soon as I polish off the body," I said. I went in the bathroom, stripped and hopped into the tub.

Halfway through, I stopped and looked around me. Either I was cockeyed or there was something the matter with the soap. It was Healthglo and it was red, like it always is, but the color seemed to be running from it. Apparently it was dyeing the water a pale pinkish shade all around me. Very pretty but not my type of bath.

All of a sudden something hit my shoulder and made me look up. I let out a yip. The whole ceiling over me was sopping wet. The stain kept spreading around the edges and a single drop at a time would come to a head right in the middle of it, very slowly, and then drop off. There must be a man-sized leak in the bathroom above, I thought, and what a leak—a young cloud-burst to make it come all the way through like that! But that wasn't what was pe-

cular about it. If it had been only a leak it would have been the plumber's business and not mine. This was a *pink* leak! It was water mixed with something else. It was even changing the color of my bath-water little by little as it dripped into it. What that something else was I hated to think but I had a rough idea.

I JUMPED into my pants and shirt, wet the way I was, and came tearing out of there. I nearly knocked my wife down getting to the door. "It's the Frasers," I said. "Something's happened up there!"

"Oh, that poor woman!" I heard her say in back of me.

"You keep out of that bathroom for awhile," I grunted.

I chased up the stairs without waiting for the elevator. We were on the third, and they were on the fourth. There was a guy standing outside their door just taking his hand away from the knob when I got up there. When he turned around I saw that it was Fraser himself.

"I can't seem to get in," he said. "I went off and forgot my key this morning." He gave me a strained sickly sort of smile with it. He was pale good-looking guy, with his hat over his left ear.

I didn't answer. Instead I turned and hollered down the stair-well: "Katie!" She wouldn't have been a woman at all if she hadn't been out at the foot of the stairs listening instead of staying inside the flat where she belonged. "Call up the super from our place and tell him to bring his passkey with him."

It didn't seem to dawn on Fraser that something might be up. After all I only knew him by sight. You'd think he'd wonder why it was up to me to worry about whether he got in or not. If he did, he didn't let on. All he said was: "You don't have to do that, my wife'll be along any minute now."

"I doubt that, buddy, I doubt that," I

said, but I didn't explain what I meant. That'd come soon enough.

The elevator door banged open and the super came hustling out. I put out my hand for the key. "Give it here," I said, "I'm doing it."

Fraser for the first time showed some slight surprise. "I don't get you," he said. "What do you want in my place?"

I just said: "Save your breath, you're going to need it," and went in first. The first room, the living room, was perfectly O.K., neat as a pin, not an ashtray out of place. From there a short passageway led into the bedroom (same lay-out as our place) and in between the two was the bathroom. The bathroom door was closed tight and you couldn't notice anything for a minute until you looked down at the floor. A pool of water had formed just outside the sill, still as glass. But when I opened the door—boy! It was about a foot deep in there, and the tub was brimming over. But that wasn't it, it was what was in the tub that counted! It—or she—was in the tub, completely submerged. But she wasn't undressed for a bath; she was clothed. There was a flat-iron in the tub with her. Her head had been pounded to pieces and you couldn't have recognized her any more, even if you had known her. It was a blood-bath if there ever was one! No wonder it had come through to our place.

It was Fraser's wife all right. I heard a sound in back of me like air being slowly let out of a tire. Fraser had fainted dead away in the super's arms. The super himself looked pretty green in the face, and my own stomach did a half-turn. "Take him downstairs to my place," I said.

I locked up again to keep the other tenants out and followed them down. "Katie, do something for this man, will you?" I said, dialing Spring 7-3100 on our phone.

"Murder?" she breathed.

"And how. Pour me out two fingers will you, it's the fiercest thing I've ever seen." She wasn't a detective's wife for nothing; she didn't ask any more questions after that.

"This is Galbraith, chief. Reporting from home. There's been a murder right in my own building. A Mrs. Fraser, Apartment Four-C. Head mashed with a flatiron."

"Orright, get busy," he snapped. "I'll have the medical examiner with you right away." *Click!*

"You stay away from there, I told you. Keep that door closed." This to Katie, whom I caught standing outside the bathroom staring hypnotized up at our stained ceiling. "We'll have to have that replastered tomorrow."

I had my dinner by turning the little whiskey glass she'd handed me upside-down over my mouth, then I ran back upstairs and let myself in.

I TOOK a look at the chamber of horrors through the door and sized her up. She was wearing a flowered kimono and house-slippers with pom-poms. I reached over, closed my eyes, turned the tap off and pulled up the plug to let the water out of the tub. Then I got the hell out of there.

I went around and took a look in the bedroom. They had one of these double photograph-folders set up on the dresser—one of him, one of her—and that gave me a good idea what her face had looked like while she still had one. Not pretty, but intelligent—lots of brains. They were all over the bathroom now, I thought to myself, for anyone to see. I threw open the bureau drawers and had a look-see at them. His junk was all crowded into one little top drawer, all the others were full of hers. Liked her own way, had she? Next the closet. He had one suit, she

had nine dresses. A funny thing though, the air in the bedroom was clear and odorless but that in the closet smelt distinctly of stale cigarette smoke. I quickly closed the door, took a deep breath on the outside, opened it again and sniffed inside. It was fainter than the first time but still there.

"Yeah, I'm in here, don't bother me, go look in the bathroom," I hollered out to the medical examiner and all the boys, who had just then arrived. A cop was hung outside the door to keep the reporters out, and everyone got down to work. When they began to get in my way I went down to my own place to give myself a little more elbow room, taking with me an insurance policy on Mrs. Fraser's life I'd found tucked away in the bottom bureau drawer and two hairpins, one from the carpet in the bedroom, one from the mess on the bathroom floor. The policy was for ten grand and the first premium had been paid just one week before, so it was now in full swing. I phoned the salesman who'd made it out and had a talk with him.

"Naw, he didn't, she took it out herself," he told me. "She said she was doing it because he wanted her to very badly, kept after her about it day and night."

"Oh-oh," I grunted. "Go any idea who this Mrs. Drew is?"

"Some woman friend of hers. She did that because she said she'd heard too many cases of people being killed for their insurance money, so she wasn't taking any chances. Wouldn't make her husband beneficiary, just in case."

But that didn't go over at all with me. No woman that crowds all her husband's belongings into one little top bureau drawer and appropriates all the rest for herself is afraid of her husband doing anything like that to her. She has too much to say over him. Or if she really had been afraid, why take out a policy at all,

why not just lie low and steer clear of trouble altogether?

I went in to ask Fraser a few questions, ready or not. He was sitting on the edge of the sofa in our living room, sticking his tongue in a glass of spirits of ammonia mixed with water and having St. Vitus's dance from the waist up. Katie and the super, one on each side of him, were trying to buck him up. "Out," I said to the two of them and jerked my thumb at the door.

"Now no rough-house in here," Katie warned me out of the corner of her mouth "I just had this room vacuumed today."

"How much do you make?" I asked him when they'd both gone outside. He told me. "How much insurance y'carry-ing?"

"Twenty-five hundred."

"And your wife?"

"None," he said.

I watched him hard. He wasn't lying. His eyes went up at me when he answered instead of dropping down.

I took a turn around the room and lit a butt. "What was her maiden name?" I said.

"Taylor."

"You got any married sisters?"

"No, just a single one."

"She have any?"

"No."

I went over to him and kicked his foot out of the way. "When was the last time you saw Mrs. Drew?"

"Who?" he said.

I said it over, about an inch away from his face.

He screwed his eyes up innocently. "I don't know what you're talking about, I don't know any Mrs. Drew."

I had him figured for the nervous type. Slapping around wasn't any good. It wasn't in my line anyway. "All right, Mac, come on in the bathroom with me." I hauled him in by the shoulder. He let

out a moan when he saw the ceiling. I made him sit on the edge of the tub, then I grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and held his head down. It was still coming through. It was mostly water but he couldn't see that. He squirmed and tried to jerk back when the first drop landed on the back of his head. Sweat came out all over his face like rain.

"Why'd you do it?" I said.

"I didn't, my God, I didn't," he choked. "Let me out of here—"

"You're going to sit here until you tell me why you did it and who Mrs. Drew is."

"I don't know," he moaned, "I never heard of her." Another drop landed, on his pulse this time, and I thought he'd have convulsions.

"Why'd you do it? Who's Mrs. Drew?"

He could hardly talk any more. "I didn't. I don't know her. How can I tell you if I don't know her?" He kept waiting for the third drop that was coming. All of a sudden his head flopped and he fainted away again.

IT may have been cruel, but I don't think so. It saved his life for him. It convinced me he hadn't done it, and that he didn't know who Mrs. Drew was. I got him over to a big chair and went and flagged Katie.

"Maybe you can help me. What made you say 'that poor woman!' when I started up the first time. How is it you didn't say 'that poor man!'"

She looked indignant. "Why he abused her! You were never home enough to hear what went on up there. They used to have terrible rows. She dropped in here only this morning and told me he'd threatened her life."

"I didn't know you knew her that well."

"I didn't," she said. "As a matter of fact today was the first time she'd ever been in here."

"I don't get it," I remarked. "Why should she come to you to spill a thing like that, if she hardly knew you at all."

"She mentioned she'd found out from one of the neighbors that I was married to a detective. Maybe she was looking for protection."

Or maybe, I said to myself, she was planting evidence against her husband. First with the insurance salesman, now with Katie. Somehow it smelled a little fishy to me. Women will gossip about other women's husbands maybe, but never their own. This one had. She hadn't just talked at random either. She'd shot off her mouth where it would do the most good; she'd created two star witnesses for the state in case anything happened.

"Wait a minute," I said. I went and got the two hairpins I'd picked up upstairs and rinsed off the one I'd found on the bathroom floor. Then I went back to Katie. "You're a woman," I said. "How was she wearing her hair?"

It took her four and a half minutes to tell me all about it, without once repeating herself. Then I showed her the two hairpins. "Which would go with that?"

"Why, the amber one of course." She nearly laughed in my face. "Only a man would ask a thing like that! How could a blonde like her use a black hairpin like this other one? It would have stood out a mile off."

"Here's four bits," I said, "run along to the movies, you've earned it. And I don't want you around when the boys come down to see Fraser."

I jiggled the two hairpins up and down in my hand. The black one was the one I'd found in the bedroom. Something told me that Mrs. Drew, when she showed up a few months from now to cash in on that ten grand, was going to turn out to be a dark-haired lady. But I wasn't going to wait until then to make sure. I very much wanted to meet her now.

I got my claws in the superintendent and hauled him in from the hallway, where Katie had lingered to give him instructions about kalsomining our ceiling. "Mrs. Fraser had a woman visitor sometime during the day today," I told him. "Think hard."

"I don't have to," he said. "She came right up to me and asked me which entrance to take, it must have been her first visit." The building is one of those inner-garden things with four wings.

"She had dark hair, didn't she?"

Then he goes and spoils my day. "Nah, she was as blond as they come."

I recovered after awhile. Just because he'd seen one caller didn't mean there hadn't been others later on that he hadn't seen. "You didn't see her when she left, did you?" That was asking too much. But not of him, it turned out; he seemed to know everything that was going on. "I think I did at that," he said. "I ain't sure."

"Whaddye mean," I said impatiently. "If you got a good look at her going in how could you miss knowing her when she came out?"

"I don't know if it was her or not," he said. "I saw someone come out of there that looked like her, was dressed just like her, but when she went in she was alone and when she came out there was a guy with her. I wasn't close enough to her the second time to tell if it was the same one."

"That's because y'mind ain't trained," I snapped. "Now forget all about her coming out and just concentrate on her going in. That ought to be easy because you said she stepped right up to you. All right, got it?" He nodded dumbly. "What color was she wearing?"

"Black."

"Well wasn't there some ornament, some gadget or other on her that would strike your eye, catch your attention?"

"I didn't notice," he said.

"Close your eyes and try it."

HE did, then opened them right up. "That's right, there was," he grinned happily. "I saw it just now with my eyes shut. She had a big bow on the side of her hat." He snapped his fingers. "Yeah, it must have been her I saw coming out, the second one had it too. I spotted that same bow all the way across the court."

"See how it works?" I said. "Drop around sometime and we'll be glad to give you a job—scrubbing the floor." So she had a guy with her when she left. That explained who had done the smoking in the clothes closet up there. Clothes are too sacred to a woman, whether they're her own or not, for her to risk getting sparks on them. It would take a man not to give a damn where he lit up.

It was still all balled up to me. The best I could do was this: the lady-visitor had arrived first, openly, and been let in by Mrs. Fraser. Then when Mrs. F. wasn't looking she had slipped a male accomplice into the flat and he'd hidden in the closet and waited for a favorable opportunity to jump out and give her the works. I scratched the part out of my hair. That was lousy, it stank. First, because the woman had gone right up to the super of her own free will and let him take a good look at her when it would have been easy enough to avoid that. Second, because she was a blonde, and the hairpin I'd picked up was a black one. Third, because it was Mrs. Fraser herself and not anyone else, who had gone around planting suspicion against her husband. You might almost say that she had lent a hand in her own murder.

I went up to 4-C again, giving myself a scalp treatment on the way. The cop was still outside the door. "Never mind trying to hide your cigarette behind you," I said, "you're liable to burn yourself

where it won't do you any good." No more reporters, they had a deadline, and the medical examiner had gone too. She was still in there, on the living-room floor now, waiting to go out. "Oh, by the way," I mentioned, "I'm holding the husband down in my place, in case you guys want to take a look at him." They almost fell over each other in their hurry to get out and at him. "He didn't do it," I called after them, but I knew better than to expect them to listen to me.

I followed them out and right away another door down the hall opened an inch or two. It was just Mrs. Katz of 4-E trying to get a free look at the body when it was carried out. I beckoned to her and she came the rest of the way out, pounds and pounds of her. I liked Mrs. K. at sight. I bet she cooked a mean bowl of noodles. "Maybe you can tell me something I'd like to know."

She finished swallowing the marshmallow she was chewing on. "Sure, sure, maybe I'll get my name in the papers, huh? Poppa, come here."

"No, never mind Poppa. Did you see anyone go in there yesterday to call on her, in a black dress?"

"No," she said, "but somebody in a black dress was coming out. I met them down by the elevator when I was coming home from the grocer, a man and a woman together. They didn't live in the building so maybe they was wisiting."

"Big bow on her hat?"

She nodded excitedly. "Sure, sure."

"That's them. Blond, wasn't she?"

"Get out! Dark—darker as I am even."

I wheeled her around on her base and pushed her back in again. I had it now! The super met her coming in and he said she was blond. Mrs. Katz passed her going out and said she was dark. Well they were both right. She'd come in blond and she'd gone out brunette.

I ran all the way downstairs to the

basement and dragged the super away from his radio. "What time do you start the fire in the incinerator?"

"Not until after midnight," he said. "Let it burn out between then and morning."

"Then all today's rubbish is still intact?"

"Sure. I never touch it until the tenants are all asleep."

"Show me where it is, I've got to get at it." We took a couple of torches, a pair of rubber gloves, and an iron poker and went down into the sub-basement. We should have taken gas masks too. He threw open the doors of the big oven-like thing and I ducked my coat and started to crawl in head-first.

"You can't go in there!" he cried aghast. "They're still using the chutes at this hour, you'll get garbage all over you."

"How the hell else am I going to get at it?" I yelled back over my shoulder. "Which of these openings is fed by the C-apartments?"

"The furthest one over."

"It would be! You go up and give orders no one in the building is to empty any more garbage until I can get out of here."

I DON'T ever want a job like that again.

Pawing around among the remains of people's suppers is the last word in nastiness. Slippery potato peels got in my shoes and fishbones pricked my fingers. Holding my breath didn't help much, I was in there over half an hour. When I was through I came out backwards an inch at a time and took a good sneeze, but what I came out with was worth it. I had two fistfuls of human hair, blond hair cut off short at the scalp. Cut off in a hurry, because one of the hairpins that had dressed it was still tangled in it. It hadn't come from the dead woman's head; there was no blood on it. The hair-

pin was amber, mate to the one I'd found upstairs. I also had the crumpled lid of a cardboard box that said, *Sylvia, Hairdresser*, on it. It looked like a hatbox but it wasn't, hairdressers don't sell hats. I didn't really need it, I had a general idea of what was what now, but as the saying goes, every little bit added to what you've got makes a little bit more.

Upstairs I hung my duds out on the fire-escape to air and put on clean ones. Then I beat it over to headquarters to talk some more to Fraser. I found him in the back room where a couple of the boys had been holding hands with him since he'd been brought in. I got the cold shoulder all around, to put it mildly. "Well-well," said one of them, "look who's here. Nice of you to drop in. Care to sign your name in the guest-book?"

"I remember now," said the other. "Isn't Galbraith the name? Weren't you assigned to this case just tonight?"

"He wouldn't know. It didn't happen close enough to get him steamed up," said the first one. "The corpse only just about landed in his—"

I stuck my hands deep in my pockets and grabbed hold of the lining. "What's that paper you've got in your hand?" I cut in.

"Why this is just the confession of Fraser here that he killed his wife, which he is now about to sign. Aren't you, Fraser?"

Fraser nodded like a jack-in-the-box and his eyes seemed to roll around all over his head. "Anything, anything," he gasped. They read it back to him and he almost tore it away from them he was so anxious to sign and get it over with. I just stood by and took it all in. It didn't amount to a hell of a whole lot. In fact it stacked up to exactly nothing. "Phooey!" I said. "You've got him punch-drunk that's all. Who the hell

couldn't get anything out of that nerve-wreck!"

His hand wobbled so that he could hardly put his name to it. They had to steady him by the elbow. "Now will you lemme alone, now will you lemme alone?" he kept murmuring over and over.

"Get wise," I said as I followed them outside. "Why don't you save yourselves a lot of razzing and tear that thing up before you show it to anybody?"

"Get that!" one of them laughed.

"Green with envy," added the other.

"Look," I said patiently, "let me show you. He didn't have the key, couldn't get in to do it even if he wanted to."

"That's what he tried to hand us, too."

"I know it's the truth because I found his key myself, found it on the living-room floor right in my own flat. The super had dumped him on the sofa, see, with his feet higher than his head."

Did they laugh! They made more noise than a shooting-gallery.

"Know where it had been all the time? In the cuff of his trouser. Dropped in when he was dressing this morning and stayed there all day long. It's a natural, one of those crazy little things that do happen every once in awhile. That's why I believe him. If it had disappeared altogether, I wouldn't have. But who'd think of planting a key in his own trouser-cuff? If that ain't enough for you dimwits, I checked up on where he worked, called his employer at his home, found out what time he left his office. He'd only just gotten to his door when I came up the stairs and found him standing outside of it."

But I could have saved my breath, it was like talking to the walls. They had their suspect in the bag and were going to see that he stayed there. They shook their heads pityingly at me and went on out to break the glad news to the chief. I went in to Fraser again and sent the cop out of

the room. His hair was all down over his face and he was just staring out under it without seeing anything. I couldn't help feeling sorry for him, but I didn't let him know it.

"What'd you do that for?" I said quietly.

He knew I meant signing that cheesy confession. "It's no fun when they jab cigarette butts up under your armpits."

"Can that." I gave him a hard look. "I don't want to hear about your troubles. If there's anything yellower than killing your wife, it's saying you did it when you didn't. Now try to snap out of it and act like a man even if you're not. I want to ask you something." I called the cop and told him to bring him in a cup of coffee. While he was slobbering it all over the front of his shirt and sniffing into it I said: "You told me you've got an unmarried sister. She blond?"

"Yeah," he sobbed, "like me."

"Where can I get hold of her?"

"She don't live here, she's up in Pittsfield, Mass., with my folks."

"How'd she get along with your wife?"

"Not so hot," he admitted.

I let him alone after that. "Put him back in mothballs," I told the cop.

In the chief's office the two half-baked rookies were all but doing a war-dance around their embalmed confession, while the chief read it over through his glasses. Embalmed is right, it smelled out loud.

"You showed up smart on that last case," the chief said to me sourly.

"Why it hasn't broken yet, I'm still with it," I said quietly. "That guy in there, Fraser, didn't have anything to do with it."

"Who did?"

"A Mrs. Drew," I said. "I'll show her to you as soon as I can. G'night."

I RAN up a big bill by calling Pittsfield, Mass., long-distance, but it didn't take me long to find out all I wanted to know

about Fraser's sister. Which was simply that she wasn't there. The last anyone had seen of her had been the night before, waiting around the depot for a train. I wondered if even a girl from Pittsfield would be dumb enough to think she was disguising herself by changing her hair from blond to dark—still you never can tell. Every once in awhile one of those 1880 twists crops up in a 1935 case. Apart from that, I found out there wasn't anyone named Drew in the whole of Pittsfield.

Even so, I had a pretty good set-up after just twenty-four hours' work. I had the two angles of the triangle now—the two women—Fraser's wife and sister. All I needed was the third angle, the man in the case. And that wasn't Fraser, he was just the fall guy in this.

Who the guy was, that had smoked in the clothes-closet and then stepped out to turn Mrs. Fraser's head into caviar wasn't going to be any cinch. Starting from scratch I had this much on him: both the super and Mrs. Katz had lamped him on his way out, which wasn't much but it was better than nothing at all. In addition there was one other little thing I didn't need to be told by anybody. I was as sure as though I had been present at his christening that his name was going to turn out to be Drew, the same as the lady who was down on the insurance policy as beneficiary. But that was only a detail. He could call himself Smith for all I cared just as long as I got hold of him. As far as Fraser's sister was concerned she could keep. The point being that wherever Drew was, Mrs. Drew wouldn't be very far away. And if the Fraser girl happened to be Mrs. Drew, with or without benefit of clergy, that was her tough luck.

The first thing I did was to get hold of the super and Mrs. Katz, one at a time, and quiz them to get a rough idea of what he had looked like. It took hours and used

up thousands of words, because neither of them were exactly Einsteins, but I got a couple of interesting facts out of them. The super, who had been all the way across the court from him, could only contribute that on his way out he had taken the woman who was with him by the arm to help her manage the two very low, harmless steps that led down to the sidewalk level. Mrs. Katz, who had been waiting to go in the elevator as they came out, enlarged on this trait of gallantry he seemed to possess.

"Well, one thing, he was no loafer," she said approvingly. "I had my arms full with bundles, so what does he do, he turns and holds the elevator door open for me, I should go in."

Darned polite, I said to myself, for a guy who had just committed a murder. Politeness must have been an awfully strong habit with him, a hangover from whatever line of business he was in. Mrs. Katz was certainly no spring chicken, and I've seen better lookers. Who, I asked myself, is trained to be polite to women of all ages, no matter what they look like? Who has to be, in order to earn a living? A gigolo. A headwaiter. A floorwalker in a department store. An automobile salesman. A hairdresser—

Sure. I might have known that from the beginning. Hair seemed to have a lot to do with this. This woman had gone in there blond and come out brunette. I'd found a lot of blond hair cut off in a hurry, in the incinerator, without any blood on it. This unknown guy had been up there at the time, although nobody saw him go in. And he's so used to handing out the oil to his customers that even when he comes out with that butchery on his conscience, he instinctively holds the door open for one woman, elaborately helps the other down a two-inch step. What you might call a reflex action. And to cinch the whole thing, there was that crumpled lid

of a cardboard box that had been thrown down the garbage chute; the one that said, *Sylvia, Hairdresser*, on it.

That gave me a pretty good idea of how he had employed his talents up there in the flat, apart from mangling Mrs. Fraser. But all the same it took my breath away, left me with a hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach. The guy must be a monster. Was it possible for a human being to batter one woman to death and then right on top of that, in the very next room, calmly sit down and go to work giving his accomplice a quick treatment to change the color of her hair?

He must have said: "Anyone see you come in?" She must have said: "I had to ask the superintendent where it was." He must have cursed her out for being ninety-nine kinds of a fool, then said: "Well, I took a chance on someone spotting you. I brought something that'll fix it so they won't know you as you go out."

Well, I could fix it so nobody'd know either one of them this time next year, and I wasn't wasting any more time about it either. I looked up *Sylvia's* in the directory, and luckily there were only three of them to buck. If it had been *Frances* or *Renee* I would have had half a column to wade through. Nothing doing with the first two; I got to the third a little before five in the afternoon.

IT was a whale of a place. Twenty-two booths going full-blast and a lot of steam and perfume and cigarette smoke all mixed up. It gave me the creeping willies to be in there, especially after somebody's face with black mud all over it nearly scared me out of ten years' growth. I stayed close to the door and asked to see the proprietor. It turned out *Sylvia* was just a trade-name and the proprietor was a man after all. He came out rubbing his hands, maybe he was just drying them off.

"You got anybody named Drew working for you?" I said.

"No," he said, "we had an expert named de la Rue here until the day before yesterday, but he isn't with us any more."

That interested me right away. "Come again, what'd you say the name was?"

He made a mouth like that guy in the hair- tonic ads. "Gaston de la Rue," he gargled.

I flashed my identification at him and he nearly jumped out of his skin and forgot about being French. "Break down," I said, "I'm not one of your customers. Nobody on two legs ever had a name like that. Was it Drew or wasn't it?"

"Sh, not so loud," he said, "very bad for business. They like 'em French. This is just between us. Please keep it to yourself. Well yes, in private life I think he was called Gus Drew or something like that. But what an artist, he could have put a permanent-wave in a porcupine—"

"Let me see your appointment book for the past few weeks." He took me back in his office and showed it to me. Mrs. Fraser's name was down there three times in one month, and right next to it each time were "de la Rue's" initials. "Why'd she always get him?" I wanted to know.

He shrugged. "She always asked for him. Some of them, they like to flirt a little."

"Flirt with death," I growled to myself. "Is he due back here for anything?" I asked him.

"He's got a week's pay coming to him, but when he called up and I asked him about it he said he wasn't coming in for it. He told me to mail it to where he lives."

"And did you? When?"

"Last night at closing time."

It was just about being delivered. "Quick," I said. "Got his last address on record? Fork it over."

He gave it to me, then made a crack

that nearly killed me. "Why 'last,' did he move?"

"Oh no, he'll probably wave to me from the window."

He followed me back to the front of the place again, sort of worried.

"What's he done?" he said. "What do they want him for?"

"The chief would like to have his mustache curled," I answered and walked out.

I TOOK a taxi and rode right up to the door of the address Mr. "Sylvia" had given me. I didn't expect him to be there any more and he wasn't. "Just moved out yesterday," the janitor said. "Didn't say where. Nice quiet fellow, too.

"Where's that letter you're holding for him?" I said. "Did it come yet?"

"Just now. He said he'd be back for it." His mouth opened. "How'd you know?"

"This is who I am," I said. "Now get this. I can't be hanging around the hallway. He mayn't show up for days. I'll take one of your rooms. You give him his letter when he asks for it, but watch yourself, keep a straight face on you. Then ring my bell three times, like this see? Don't let him see you do it, but don't wait too long either—do it as soon as he turns his back on you. Now have you got that straight? God help you if you muff it."

"Golly, ain't this exciting!" he said. He showed me a sliver of a hall room at the back of the ground floor, with exactly three things in it—a bed, a light-bulb, and a window. I paid him a dollar apiece for them and after that I lived there. I tested the doorbell battery by staying where I was and having the janitor ring it for me from the vestibule. It was no cathedral chime but at least you could hear it, which was all that interested me.

They say you should be able to see the two sides to any story. Sitting here like

that, waiting, with the walls pressing me in at the elbows, I saw as much of Drew's side of it as I was ever likely to. No wonder ten grand had seemed a lot of money, no wonder murder hadn't stopped him, if it meant getting out of a hole like this. Not that I felt sorry for him, I just understood a little better than before. But there was one good angle to it. The ten grand wouldn't be his for a long time yet, not for months. Meanwhile he needed what was in that envelope the janitor had, needed the little that was coming to him from "Sylvia's," needed it bad. He'd be around for it. I couldn't lose.

Once in awhile I'd hear a step on the stairs, the old wooden stairs that seemed to go right up over my room, when somebody in the house came up or went down them. Once some woman hollered down from the top floor for her kid to come up. That was all. Silence the rest of the time. The minutes went like hours and the hours like weeks. I didn't even smoke; there wasn't room enough for two kinds of air in the place. I just sat, until I had a headache.

It came a little before eight, sooner than I'd expected. He must have needed it bad to come that quickly, or maybe he thought it was safer to get it over with right away than to wait a few days. He'd probably read in the papers by now that Fraser was taking the rap, anyway. And once he had this letter in his pocket and had walked around the corner, try to locate him again, just try.

Ding-ding-ding peeped the bell battery and the air in the room got all churned up. I hauled the door out of the way and loped down the dim hallway. The janitor was standing just inside the street door waving his arm to me like a windmill. "He just went away," he said. "There he goes, see him?" His cheap khaki waterproof was a pushover to tail.

"Get back!" I snarled and gave him a

shove. "He's liable to turn around." I waited a second to get set, then I mooched out of the house, took a squint at the sky, turned my coat-collar up and started down the street in the same direction. He did look back from the corner just before he turned, but I'd finished crossing to the opposite side and was out of his line of vision.

I gave him a lot of rope for the first two blocks, then I saw a subway entrance heading toward us and I closed up on him in a hurry. He went into it like I'd been afraid he would. It's about the best way of shaking anyone off there is, but he had to change a dime or something, and when I got down the steps myself he'd only just gone through the turnstile. There was a train already in, with its doors wide open and jammed to the roof. He took it on the run along with a lot of others and wedged himself in on the nearest platform just as the doors started to slip closed. There was just room enough left to get my fingernails in by the time I got there, but that was all the leverage I needed. They were the pneumatic kind. Back they went and I was standing on his feet and we were breathing into each other's faces. "Whew!" I thought to myself, and kept my eyes fixed on the back of a newspaper the fat man next to him was reading.

HE squirmed and yanked at 110th and tugged himself free. When I got up to the street myself he was just going into an A.&P. store. I took a look in the door as I went past. He was standing at the counter waiting his turn. Evidently they hadn't even had the price of groceries until he called for that money that was coming to him. I walked all the way to the next corner, then doubled back on the other side of the street and finally parked at a bus stop and stood there waiting. But the right bus for me never seemed to come along.

He was in there over ten minutes, and then when he came out his arms were still empty anyway. Meaning he'd ordered so much that he couldn't carry it himself. So they were going to stock up for the next few weeks and lie low, were they? I just barely kept him in sight after this, only close enough to tell which building he'd hit, as I knew there would be a last look back before he ducked. He finally got where he was going, gave a couple of cagy peeks, one over each shoulder, and then it was over. He was in—in Dutch.

I sized it up from where I was, tying my shoelace on somebody's railing. It was a President McKinley-model flat on the south side of 109th, crummy as they come, without even a service entrance. That meant the groceries would have to be delivered at the front door when they came around, which was a chance for a lot more than groceries to crash in. No lights showed up in any front windows after he'd gone in, so I figured they had a flat in the rear. I eased myself into the vestibule. Half of the mailboxes had no names in them, so they were no help. I hadn't expected his to have any, but if the rest of them had I could have used a process of elimination. It was so third-class the street door didn't even have a catch on it, you just opened it and walked in.

I worked my way up the stairs floor by floor, listening carefully at the rear doors on each landing. There was a radio going behind one of them, but nobody seemed to be in any of the others. If I had them cornered they were lying mighty low. I hated to think I might have slipped up in some way. I started soft-shoeing my way down again, and just below the second floor met the groceries coming up in a big box about twice the size of the lad struggling with it. "Where they going?" I said.

"Fourth floor, rear."

I had him put them down, then I thumbed him downstairs. "I'll see that they get them." He was too exhausted to argue. I unlimbered my gun, gave the door a couple of taps, and flattened myself out to one side of it.

Not a sound, not even a footfall, for a couple of minutes. Then all of a sudden a voice spoke from the other side of the door, only a few inches away from me. "Who's out there?"

I thinned my voice to make it sound like a kid's. "A. & P., boss."

A chain clanked and fell loose. The lock, I noticed, was shiny and new, must have just been put on. I reached out with my heel and kicked a can of tomatoes to give him confidence. The door cracked and before it was an inch wide I had the gun pushing in his belt buckle. "Up," I snapped. He lifted them all right but couldn't keep them from shaking. He didn't have anything on him though, so the precautions must have been just to give them time to make a get-away, and not because he'd intended fighting it out. There was no hall and the door opened right into the living room. I cuffed him to me and started to push in.

"What's all this about?" he tried to stall, and I heard a window go up.

"Hold it!" I yelled and covered her from across his shoulder just as she raised one leg to go over. "Come on in again, baby."

There was my black-haired lady, a little pale around the gills, eyes nearly popping out of her head. There was something funny about her which I couldn't dope out at first. I took a second look and nearly keeled over. If I had though, they wouldn't have hung around waiting for me to revive, so I gave a long whistle instead and let it go at that. I gave her a shove with my knee to show her which direction to take. "Get started, you head the daisy-chain going downstairs."

THE chief was damn near bowled over when I brought them in to him. "So your Mrs. Drew wasn't a myth after all and you finally found her," he opened.

I knocked the black wig off her head with the back of my hand. "Mrs. Drew your eye. If you're holding Fraser for killing his wife better turn him loose. This is her right here." Her blond hair, clipped off short, stood up funny all over her head.

One of the boys who had used Fraser's armpits as ashtrays spoke up. "Then what was that we saw in the bathtub—"

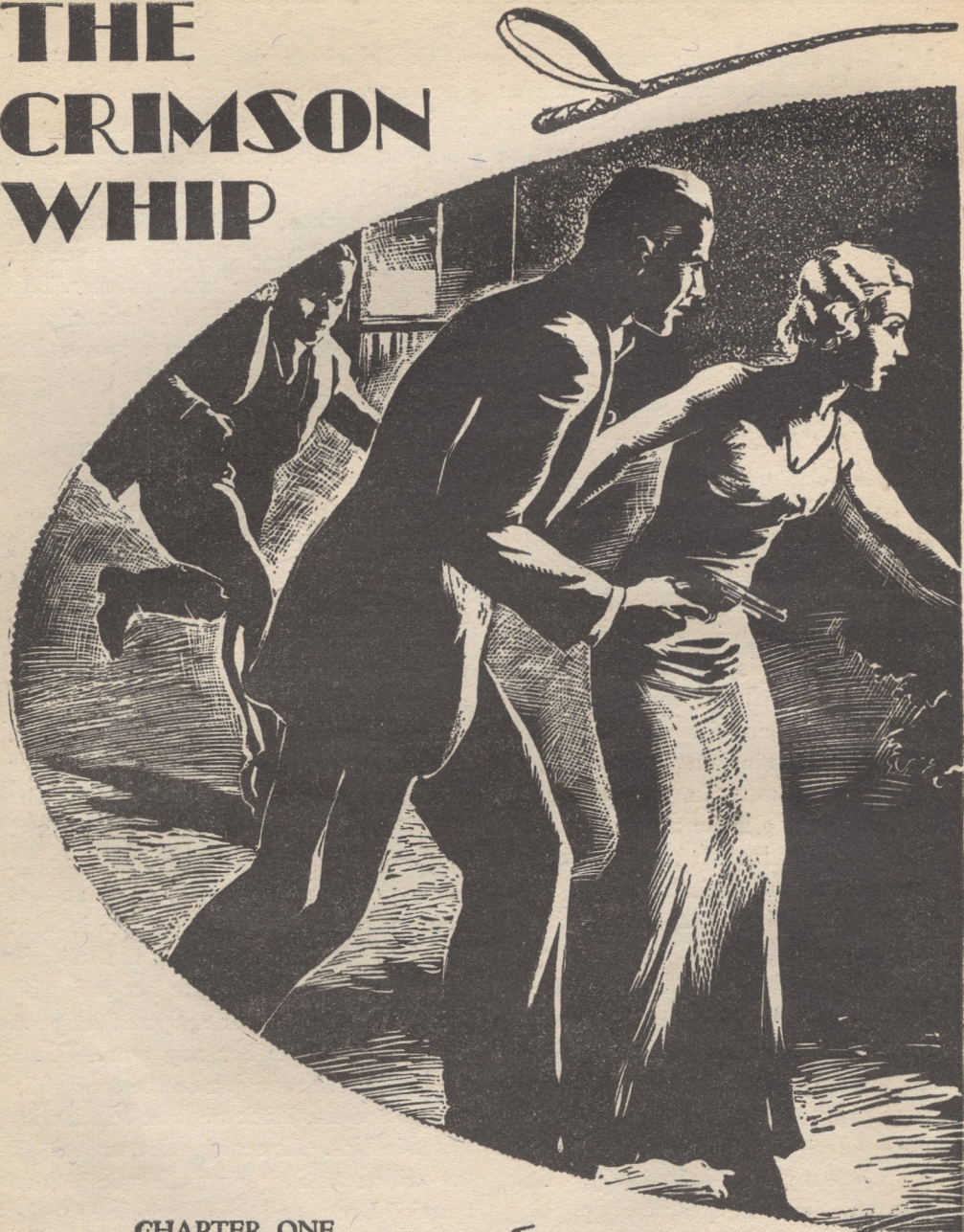
"That was Fraser's sister, poor kid," I said. "She left Pittsfield that day and hasn't been seen since. Fraser didn't know she was coming but this pair did—maybe they got her to come down some way—but she must have walked in unannounced and spoiled their big love scene. Drew hid in the closet until time to come out and do his stuff. Mrs. Fraser probably led up to it with a quarrel. She and the sister didn't hate each other. Anyway they had the frame all planned to pass off her body as his wife's and let him fry for it. They dressed her in Mrs. F.'s kimona, dumped her in the tub and then proceeded to mutilate her face with the iron until even her supposed husband couldn't recognize her any more. Then the real Mrs. Fraser put on the dead girl's clothes and this black wig and beat it with her side-kick. As soon as Fraser had hit the ceiling at Sing Sing she would have married Drew, and then there would have been a Mrs. Drew all right to collect that ten-grand premium on her own life."

I shoved all the evidence I had across the desk at him and went home.

"Supper's ready," the wife said. "Should I wait until you've had your bath?"

"Just open the windows," I said, "you don't catch me in that tub again until Nineteen Forty."

THE CRIMSON WHIP



CHAPTER ONE

Unseen Death

RONALD CHASE, wealthy realtor of Kaw City, climbed the long flight of marble steps to the front door of his residence on Park Drive. The hour was ten in the evening. He was admitted by Rainer, the butler, who relieved him of hat and cane.

Chase walked leisurely down the en-

*Herald of doom it was—that
crimsoned tip was laid, murder
What was the ghastly meaning of
Why had an innocent-appearing
symbol even grim*

by
Edward Parrish
Ware

Author of "Romany Kill," etc.



"Don't Durant—for God's sake—don't!" The plea came from Marcia Kent.

bloodstained lash—for where its fell close in its whistling wake. the raw-hide death messenger? riding whip suddenly become a mer than the knout?

trance hall and entered his study. Just across the threshold, he stopped short, glance fixed upon something on the top of his orderly desk.

On the desk lay an object wrapped in brown paper. It was about three feet in length, and slender in the fashion of a curtain rod. Outwardly, its appearance was innocent enough.

Ronald Chase's face paled at sight of it. Then he went an angry red to the roots of his sleek black hair. He flung

around toward the door and shouted for the butler.

"Rainer," he demanded, his face purple, "how did that—that damn thing get there?"

He pointed a shaky forefinger toward the brown paper parcel.

"It came by messenger at three o'clock this afternoon," Rainer replied in a soft, purring voice. "Is there anything wrong, sir?"

Chase stalked around back of his desk, his body shaking. He stood beside the chair, gaze averted, then: "Unwrap it, Rainer—damn it!" he snapped. "Unwrap the infernal thing!"

Rainer obeyed promptly. When he had stripped the brown paper away, he held in his hand an ordinary rawhide riding whip. Ordinary, that is to say, except for the flexible lash. Two-thirds of the length of the whip was encased in the usual black haircloth. The remaining third, the lash end, was brilliantly red.

"By God!" Chase rasped out the oath, while his face went almost black. "By God—I won't stand it! That damn crimson whip! I—won't—stand—it. . . ."

Under the startled eyes of the butler, Ronald Chase suddenly stiffened, and a look of consternation, pain, incredulity possessed his features. One hand faltered up to his throat, tore at the collar. He staggered backward a few steps, groaned, and pitched to the floor on his face.

Rainer took one look at his master, then dashed for the telephone in the hall. In a frenzy of fear and excitement he called Dr. Krebbs, Chase's physician.

Krebbs came at once, knelt beside the sprawled body on the rug, then arose with his face set in grim lines.

"Call police headquarters, Rainer," he ordered tersely. "Your master is dead—and it's a case for the homicide squad!"

DEAN DURANT, Kaw City's Commissioner of Police, sat on an edge of the desk in Ronald Chase's study, his lean, patrician face as emotionless as if it really were the bronze mask to which it had been likened. Murder was an old story to Durant, who had been chief of the detective bureau before he became head of the whole police organization. Captain Braden of homicide, who had arrived before him, was speaking.

"Tell the commissioner your story, Rainer," he directed the butler. "And all of it, mind you—every detail."

"Yes, sir," Rainer answered, and gave a graphic account of the scene in the study, not omitting the details of his master's arrival at ten o'clock, the call to the study, the terrible effect the presence of the whip had had on him. It was a very complete account.

"Describe the messenger who brought the parcel," Durant instructed.

"A short, heavy-set, dark-skinned fellow of about thirty-five, sir. Dressed in a brown uniform, with a cap that had the word, *Messenger*, printed on its band. He came to the tradesmen's entrance, handed me the parcel and said it was for the master—that it was expected. That is all, sir."

"Any address on the wrapper?"

"None, sir. It was tied at both ends and in the middle with ordinary white twine. No marks whatever on it. I placed it on the master's desk, sir, and forgot about it."

"How long in service here, Rainer?"

"Lacking two weeks of one year, sir. I followed Simmons, who was dismissed."

"Know why Simmons was dismissed?"

"I was not informed as to the cause, sir," stiffly.

"During your term of service, had you encountered before such a parcel as the one which came today?"

"Never, sir."

"And you saw nothing, not even a flash of flame, outside the window?"

"I saw nothing, sir."

Durant queried the rest of the servants, but learned nothing of the least importance. He then turned to Dr. Lane, the medical examiner, who had finished his task.

"What about it, Doc?" he inquired.

"Shot in the back, Durant," the examiner announced. "Right through the heart. It was a bullet, and not excitement over a silly whip, that took him off—although I don't wonder at Rainer's mistake."

"You heard nothing that sounded like an explosion, when your master staggered back from the desk?" Durant queried the butler.

"No, sir. The master was raging so over the whip, that I heard nothing else but his voice. It could hardly have been a loud explosion, sir, I should think."

"A silencer," Braden put in succinctly.

Durant crossed the room and stood beside an open window which was in a direct line with the back of the desk. A small hole in the lower screen told its own story. The killer had stood on the ground outside and fired the fatal shot through the mesh.

"All right, Braden," he instructed the captain, "get busy. Search the house, and bring me anything unusual you may find. Especial attention to letters, and things of that kind."

Braden vanished into the hall, and Sergeant Kelley came in.

"Lots of grass under the window, sir," he reported. "It appears to have been trampled, but there's nothing there we can get our teeth in."

Durant nodded absently, and took up the riding whip. He studied the crimson lash under a reading glass, and said: "Red enamel, put on with a brush."

"Do you think it has a bearing on the

murder, Durant?" Dr. Krebbs asked interestedly.

"It both frightened and enraged Chase," Durant replied. "That much is certain—which makes it equally certain that the whip had a very pronounced significance. Draw your own conclusions, Krebbs."

Captain Braden returned to the study and beckoned the commissioner into the hall.

"Come with me, Durant," he requested. "You can see it, better than I can tell it to you!"

THE captain led the way up the stairs and into the millionaire's bedroom. In one corner of the large apartment stood a priceless, old-fashioned walnut wardrobe. The nimble fingers of the detective-captain had already picked the lock.

"Look under the clothing in the back, in the left-hand corner," he directed.

Lifting aside the clothing as instructed, Durant found, hanging from hooks by their wrist-straps, three riding whips. The lash end of each was stained a brilliant red!

Durant looked at the whips, one by one, saw that each had been enameled by means of a brush, then closed the door of the wardrobe.

"Lock it," he instructed Captain Braden. "And say nothing at all about the whips. Have you examined this room thoroughly?"

"No. Had just begun. Found the whips, and thought you'd better know at once."

Durant sat down at a small desk in a corner and began going through the drawers. In a lower one at the right, which he had to pry open, he found something that instantly claimed his interest. What he found was a woman's photograph.

The pictured face was young and very beautiful. But it was not that which interested the commissioner. It was the

fact that the original was known to him, as well as to horse-lovers the country over. Marcia Kent's stable of thoroughbreds, show-horses as well as racers, regularly took blue ribbons wherever they were shown, and had won races on every important track in the country.

Across the photograph was written in a firm feminine hand—

*To Ronnie, with love,
Marcia*

Dean Durant, up to that moment, had not known that Marcia Kent even knew Ronald Chase. Chase, a bachelor of perhaps forty years, had not betrayed the slightest interest in horses, or sports of any kind save golf. And he was notoriously woman-shy. Yet in the dead man's desk, locked away, a photograph of Marcia Kent, bearing the name of a famous New York studio, had been found. A photograph sentimentally inscribed.

Durant realized that he knew very little about Marcia Kent. She had come to Kaw City some five or six years before, bringing her horses and stablemen with her and installing them on a farm on the upper river. She had purchased a residence on Park Drive, had been accepted in the higher social circles, and was personally very popular. That, in fine, was about all Durant knew of her.

For that matter, what did he actually know about Ronald Chase? Very little, now he considered it. Chase had come to Kaw City about four years back, had invested heavily in mining property and had made a great deal of money. He lived quietly, richly, and seemed to have not a care in the world.

Durant slipped the photograph, a large one, under his vest, and made certain there were no letters or papers in the desk which might shed light upon the association. Then he got up and went back downstairs.

As the commissioner descended the stairway he was in time to witness the arrival of a man whom he had expected for the past half hour. Rainer was in the act of admitting Theron Cole, Ronald Chase's attorney. Cole was a man of perhaps forty, lean, athletic, and a Beau Brummel as to dress. He was regarded as a brilliant counselor, and had *entré* to the most exclusive homes. Durant knew him indifferently well.

"Since you are here, Commissioner," Cole said, eyeing Durant queringly, "I take it that Ronald's death was not due to natural causes?"

Durant explained the situation in a few words, watching the still, cold face of the attorney closely for any sign that he knew more perhaps than he would tell. He had only his trouble for his pains. Cole's mask expressed only hurt concern.

"That crimson-whip business," the attorney offered, "must have been some damn foolishness or other. Too silly to be important. Rainer was drawing largely on his imagination when he described that scene in the study."

"Rainer," Durant said quietly, "does not strike me as being at all an imaginary type. On the contrary, he seems very literal. But we'll know more about the whip later, no doubt. Tell me, Cole, do you know whether or not Chase ever had a serious love affair?"

At that, Cole shot the commissioner a quick, disturbed glance. Durant eyed him steadily, and waited.

"I see," Cole said after a brief pause, "that you know about it. As Ronald Chase's legal advisor, I naturally know something of his private life. You refer, of course, to the affair between my late client and Marcia Kent. Well, what about it, Durant?"

"I should like all the particulars, Cole," Durant told him.

"I can't give them!" Cole snapped.

"That means, I won't! I will, however, go with you to Marcia's home—and let her tell you as much or as little as she cares to. That will have to satisfy you."

Durant nodded. "It will," he said. "And let's get out there at once. My car is outside."

THE brick-and-stone Kent home stood in two acres of ground at the extreme south end of Park Drive, fully a mile from the Chase residence. When Durant and Cole reached the place, having made the trip without exchanging further words, they found that the iron gates across the driveway were locked. However, a small gate giving onto a cement walk was open. They entered the grounds and saw that lights were burning on the three floors of the house, indicating that Miss Kent was probably at home.

"I hope she hasn't heard the news," Durant said as he led the way along the shrubby-bordered walk. "I'd like to be the first to make it known—and get her real reactions."

Cole made no answer. The commissioner turned and glanced back, stopping abruptly as he saw the attorney had done. Cole was looking off into the shrubbery which grew tall, profusely, on the north side of the walk.

"What's up?" Durant called.

Cole did not answer, but remained in a tense, listening attitude, head bent forward as though he were trying to probe the shadows cast by the shrubs.

With startling abruptness something broke from cover at the point under Cole's scrutiny. It was impossible for Durant to determine its character. Something huge, far too big to be a dog, running on all fours, charged swiftly across the green carpet directly for the seemingly paralyzed lawyer. A sound, an admixture of both roar and snarl came from the creature's throat—

Cole finally roused himself and tried to escape—but the huge figure was upon him. At the impact, Cole went down as though he had been made of straw, his attacker upon him, snarling, mouthing him.

"Durant—help!" Cole's voice was labored, smothered.

Durant had not waited for the call, but was already attempting a rescue. He saw at a glance that the creature's fangs were fixed in Cole's right shoulder, and that the weight of its body held him pinned helplessly on the ground. He seized the attacker with both hands, jerked with all his strength, then jerked again.

The creature suddenly released its hold on Cole, reared with lightning-like rapidity to a height towering above Durant—and the commissioner was seized, raised high and sent flying into a clump of shrubbery ten feet away.

Cole, finding himself free, got to his feet unsteadily, a revolver in his hand. There was, however, nothing for him to shoot at. The creature had gone off into the shrubbery, running on all fours with the speed of a monkey.

Durant had marked the route, and was after it at once, a gun in his hand also. Toward the rear of the place he was led, guided by the sound of the creature's progress. Then everything became still. Not a sound disturbed the dim-lit silence.

Durant kept on, carefully avoiding the shrubbery, and stopped again within forty or fifty feet of a vaguely seen wall at the rear of the premises. Something moved along the top of the wall, silhouetted against the sky. The thing which had attacked Cole! It was running easily along the top of the masonry, on all fours, as agile and sure of foot as a gorilla, which it so much resembled.

Durant raised his weapon, considered for an instant, then lowered it. He would not shoot the thing unless it again attacked.

It did not come down from the wall, but, while the commissioner looked on helplessly, the creature suddenly leaped from the wall, caught the limb of a tree which grew just outside, swung for an instant—and dropped.

WHEN Durant climbed to the top of the wall there was nothing, nobody, in sight. He retraced his way to where he had last seen Cole, finding him there on the walk, revolver still in hand.

Cole's face was ghastly, and his voice jerky. "Where did it go?" he asked. "And—and what the devil was it?"

"It went over the back wall," Durant answered. "As to what it was, your guess is as good as mine. It had on some sort of clothing, heavy drill or denim it felt like when I touched it. Looked and acted like a gorilla, but there are no gorillas hereabouts—and they don't wear clothes. We'll have to give it up, Cole, until later. Let's go in, now, and get this business over with."

"It bit my shoulder, but I don't believe the teeth went very deep," Cole said as he followed the commissioner onto the veranda.

Durant merely nodded. He was thinking of the queer, animal-like thing they had encountered. He believed that it was human. A man, a gigantic figure of a man, who for some reason of his own went about on hands and feet in the manner of an animal. Whatever it was, wherever it came from, it was extremely dangerous.

Cole rang the bell, was recognized by the elderly butler and promptly admitted. Four persons were in the drawing room, only two of them known to Durant.

A slender, medium-tall chap, standing before the mantel and smoking a pipe, was a stranger. His lean figure was clad in whipcord breeches, tan riding boots, and a gray sack coat. His face was youngish, sharp of nose, and muzzled almost like a

fox. He had gray eyes which were hard and cold.

Lounging on a divan, a half-filled cocktail glass in hand, was a small, blond young woman who appeared to be slightly drunk. She was clad in vividly flowered lounging pajamas.

Calvert Stone, mining engineer, big, young, well known in Kaw City and the surrounding country, was a third. Durant remembered vaguely that he had heard sometime or other of an affair between the lovely horsewoman and the big engineer.

Marcia Kent, light of hair and eyes, was as usual the person one would look at longest in any gathering. Although certainly near thirty, she looked more like twenty-two. Her greeting of the two callers was friendly, but Durant thought she was hiding intense agitation by a great effort. He knew their call had been inopportune.

"Before I explain why I wished to talk with you, Miss Kent," he said, "I'd like to use a phone. Preferably in another room?"

"Of course, Commissioner," Marcia told him, and led the way into the hall. "You will have privacy in the study."

She opened a door, and Durant found a phone on a desk in a corner. Observing that Marcia had not entered with him, he sat down and gave the number of police headquarters. Captain Rhule answered.

"Send half a dozen good men to the vicinity of the Kent place at the end of Park Drive," the commissioner ordered Rhule. "A big man who runs on hands and feet like a gorilla, attacks without provocation, is loose somewhere near. He was first seen in the Kent grounds, climbing the back wall of the garden. He is probably somewhere on the commons lying between the Kent home and the river. Be careful, because he is dangerous. Report to me here for the next half hour. After that, I'll be in the office. Goodbye."

Durant got up, turned toward the door—and stopped in his tracks, eyes slitted narrowly.

Marcia Kent was standing on the door-sill. The blood had drained from her face, leaving the skin dead-looking and sallow. Her large blue eyes were mirrors of terror, her fingers so tightly closed that the white of her knuckles showed. She stared at the commissioner in horror, lips spread but no sound coming from them. Only for an instant did she stand thus, then she tottered toward Durant.

"Commissioner!" she said in a strained whisper. "Commissioner—for the—love of God. . . ."

She wavered, closed her eyes and collapsed on the floor.

CHAPTER TWO

The Beast-Man

DURANT bent above the young woman, felt her pulse, decided she had only swooned, and went to the drawing room. At his announcement that Miss Kent had fainted in the study, everybody rushed out.

When Durant entered behind them, Marcia stirred, her hands closing and unclosing spasmodically. Almost at once she moaned pitifully, then sat up. Calvert Stone dropped down on his knees and put a supporting arm around her.

"Why," Durant asked, giving her a cold look, "were you listening, like a snooping housemaid, at the study door?"

"Don't speak to her like that!"

The small man with the foxlike muzzle turned on the commissioner and snarled the words. His gray eyes blazed with a nasty glow.

Durant eyed him calmly, then turned again to Marcia, repeating the question.

"You listened at the door, Miss Kent," he said. "Why did you?"

"You don't have to answer this chump, Marcia!" Fox-muzzle exclaimed hotly. "Don't tell him anything!"

"Whoever you are," Durant said to him quietly, "I advise you to keep still. You'll only make it harder on yourself, if you don't."

The tiny woman with the glass burst into high-pitched, raucous laughter, teetering unsteadily on her small feet.

"'Whoever you are'," she mimicked, almost smothering with mirth. "He said that! Say, tall boy, don't you know Banty Marshall, best trainer in the horse business. Say, don't you?"

So the obnoxious young man was the famous trainer, "Banty" Marshall? Durant was familiar with his name. But the name carried not an ounce of weight with the commissioner at the moment.

"I'm waiting, Miss Kent," he reminded her.

"Can't you let her alone, Durant?" Cal Stone snapped angrily. "Is your question so damn important as all that?"

"Never mind, Cal," Marcia told him, getting up with his assistance. "I have no reason for not answering. I heard your orders to your men, Commissioner," she explained. "It was inadvertent. Recalling that there was no telephone index in the room, I was returning to ask if you required one—and—and I heard what you said."

"Well, what did he say, Marcia?" Stone queried.

"Shall I tell, Mr. Durant?"

Durant nodded assent.

"He told somebody that—that there is a queer, gorilla of a man in the vicinity," Marcia said with halting breath, her eyes holding a light of fear. "That he had been seen in my grounds, and that he was dangerous. Now, do you—any of you—wonder that I was frightened almost to death?"

There was a chorus of excited comment

at that, and Durant found himself wondering if, after all, Marcia Kent had not fainted because of just the reason she gave. Surely, hearing that a dangerous person had been seen in the grounds of her home that night would be terrifying news.

"I apologize, Miss Kent," he told her sincerely. "And now, if we may talk with you privately—Mr. Cole and I—we'll be off shortly and leave you to yourself—"

"And that prowler?" the trainer cut in anxiously. "What about him?"

"He will be corralled shortly, I don't doubt," Durant assured them all. "There is a hunt on now, and it isn't likely he will escape. How about it, Miss Kent? Will you give us a few minutes?"

"Of course," she consented. "I should like to go up to my room first, however, and take something for my head. It's splitting!"

MARCIA hurried up the stairs, and Cole, Stone and Marshall went to a buffet in the dining room. Durant followed the tiny woman back into the drawing room.

"You've been informative about somebody else," he told her, sitting on the divan beside her. "Perhaps you won't mind telling me who you are?"

She gave him a stare of amazement, then again came that high-pitched laugh. When she sobered a bit she said: "Why, tall boy, I'm Midge. Midge Marshall, the torch-singing fool of radio! Now, please, don't break my heart by saying you never heard of little Midge?"

Durant laughed. He had heard of Midge Marshall. Her broadcasts had amused and entertained him more than once. That she was staying in Kaw City was news to him.

"Your fame has penetrated even to police headquarters, Midge," he assured her.

"Surprised to find you in our town. Your husband trains for Miss Kent?"

She almost dropped her glass. "My what?" she gasped. "My husband? When did it happen—me getting married, I mean? Gosh, I haven't been that badly crocked, have I?"

Durant grinned. "The bantam-weight isn't your husband, then?"

"Hell—he's my no-good brother!" she snapped, and downed her drink. "Sticking to horses, a servant if you please, when his little sis is a top-notch on the stage and over the air. Can you beat that?"

That Midge Marshall was feeling real disgust was comically patent, but Durant was saved from commenting by the return of Marcia. She looked very pale and ill, but never more charming.

Midge Marshall got up a trifle unsteadily, and joined the men in the dining room, Cole coming into the drawing room a moment later. He closed the door and sat down beside Marcia on the divan.

The door swung open again, and Calvert Stone, his firm chin jutting, entered the room.

"I've got a right to hear this—inquisition," he declared unpleasantly, eyes flaring at Durant. "If Marcia hasn't told you, I will—"

"Sit down, Cal," Durant told him. "No objection, so there's nothing to get rough about."

"I'll sit, all right," Stone grumbled, and promptly did so.

"It hasn't been announced, but Cal and I are engaged," Marcia informed them in a quiet voice. "So he really has a right to be here. And now, please, just what are you here for?"

"I wish to know something about your past association with Ronald Chase," Durant answered with instant directness, "and this is the reason for my curiosity."

He drew the photograph from under his vest and handed it to Marcia. Her

eyes grew large and round, her lower lip trembled, and she nodded in silence, handing the picture to Stone.

"Well," Stone growled, "this isn't news to me. I know all about the affair. What the hell, Durant, are you up to?"

"Nothing—only Ronald Chase was mysteriously murdered at ten o'clock to-night," Durant said coldly. "So I am naturally curious about his past connections—especially those involving him with a woman. It is quite clear now?"

The effect of the commissioner's words on the young woman was even more startling than he had expected. She started almost to her feet, a moan escaping her bloodless lips. A long, bewildered stare at Durant—then she sank back and closed her eyes.

"Damn you, Durant—"

The commissioner cut Stone off sharply. "That will be all from you!" he snapped. "Your manner is one I don't like even a little bit, Stone. You'll be wise to change it. I came here in an official capacity—and I'm prepared to go all the way to aid my investigation. Do you get that?"

"Sorry," Stone apologized. "But this is hell on Marcia, who doesn't deserve it."

"Perhaps so. But Marcia can tell me what I want to know, and that may end it. How about it, Miss Kent?"

Marcia opened her eyes, and Durant was moved at the anguish in them.

"It happened six years ago," she related in a low voice. "Back east. Ronald Chase and I thought we were very much in love with each other. We found, within a short while, that we were not. That ended it. I gave Ronald that photograph when the affair first began, and supposed he had destroyed it long ago. That is the story, Mr. Durant."

"How soon after you moved here, Miss Kent, did Ronald Chase appear?" Durant asked.

"A year. Perhaps it was nearer two years. At any rate, he came because of his interest in the mines, and for no other reason."

"And you acted toward each other as strangers?"

"Yes. However, I'll admit that Ronald, when he first came, made overtures. Wanted me to make it up. Needless to say, I refused—and from that day on we never exchanged a word, written or spoken. That is the truth, Commissioner—and I beg you to believe me."

BEFORE Durant, convinced of Marcia Kent's honesty, could reply, the drawing room door opened and Midge, now almost wholly gone, teetered in. At sight of her, Durant was almost guilty of a start of surprise. Midge, highly amused, was not alone.

On her left shoulder sat a small monkey—Marcia's, Durant learned later. The animal's tail was curled tightly around her neck, and its fingers were nimbly inspecting her curly, blond hair.

But that wasn't what had caused the stir inside Durant.

Dangling from a strap around the monkey's right wrist was a riding whip—the leash stained scarlet!

"Gee-Gee is sush cute li'l trick!" Midge muttered thickly, teetering toward Durant. "Don' you think sho, C'mis'ner? Thatsh rish!"

Durant would have been amused, had it not been for that crimson whip dangling from Gee-Gee's wrist. He started to speak, to ask questions, but a startling diversion at that moment prevented.

Through an open window on the north, near which the commissioner was sitting, there came the sullen bark of a revolver. It sounded very close at hand. Durant got up, and as he did so another report rang out. Without a word to anybody, he

ran into the hall, snatched his hat from the rack and rushed out.

Around the house and through the shrubbery on the north Durant ran, his revolver out and ready. Nothing stirred on the lawn, and he reached the rear wall without having seen anything suspicious. That the shooting had occurred out on the lonely commons which lay between the house and the Kaw River, now was certain.

Durant leaped, caught the top of the wall and drew himself up. Standing on the wide surface at the top, he looked off into the fields, lighted now by a full moon. It seemed to him that some figures were moving to the north of him. He started that way, remaining on top of the wall so as to keep the moving figures in sight. When he had reached a point near the shadows, he prepared to leap down. Then, as he was about to leap, a movement on the wall back of him caused him to whirl swiftly and bring his weapon up!

He fired once—but missed! The next instant Durant was folded in arms like tempered steel, lifted high and held there! From beneath him came strange whimpering sounds as though the giant creature, beast or man, suffered pain. Durant tried to break its grip, but his struggles were futile.

Then, from somewhere in the grounds of the Kent place, there came a high-pitched, wailing cry, weird, meaningless, puzzling. The effect on the giant was instantaneous. The powerful frame stiffened, the whimpering ceased.

Again came the weird cry. But it was much closer now, and appeared to come from the foot of the wall. The gigantic creature shivered, lowered Durant and dropped him to the ground outside the wall.

The fall was so unexpected that the commissioner had no time to protect himself. He fell sprawl, his head striking

against the base of the masonry. He was up almost on the instant, dazed, groping for the revolver which had dropped from his hand. A glance at the top of the wall informed him that the creature was no longer there.

"Steady as you are!"

THE command came from Durant's right, and he looked up to find Sergeant Blake of the police running toward him, revolver in hand. The sergeant was followed closely by a policeman in uniform.

"It's all right, Blake," Durant called. "I've just encountered the monster! The thing escaped somewhere into the Kent grounds. What was the shooting about?"

"It was me, sir, firing a signal," Blake answered grimly. "You see, Commissioner, I found Officer Matt Moore under a tree out on the commons. He was dead—his bones busted like he'd been run through a rock-crusher! Dead, sir—and still warm!"

"All right—over the wall we go!" Durant snapped. "This thing, whatever it is, killed Moore. No doubt of that. He'll kill others, if we don't get him now. He's in the grounds. Shoot him on sight. Take no chances."

They climbed over the wall and scattered. Somebody among those at the Kent house knew all about the strange business. Knew that the creature was prowling somewhere about—and, more than that, knew how to call it off. That was the meaning of those weird wails, Durant felt certain. They were calls the strange creature knew and obeyed.

Who in the Kent group, family, servants, guests, was under cover?

A piercing scream stopped Durant in his tracks, then took him on the run toward the front of the house. As he rounded the corner onto the front lawn, porch

lights flared up, lighting the place almost like day.

On her knees some twenty feet from the verandah crouched Midge Marshall, screaming, wringing her hands. Durant ran to her. She pointed to something that squirmed frantically beside a clump of lilacs two dozen feet away.

"Gee-Gee!" she cried. "It got Gee-Gee!"

It was true. The little monkey lay there against the lilac bush, its small body contorted, eyes almost human in their piteous appeal. The scarlet whip still dangled from a limp wrist. As Durant looked down at the animal, suspecting that its spine had been broken, Gee-Gee gasped long and shudderingly—then died.

He turned abruptly on Miss Marshall.

"What about it?" he demanded. "What were you doing out here—with Gee-Gee?"

"I came out to see what the shooting was about," Midge wailed. "Gee-Gee was on my shoulder. Then something ran toward me, and Gee-Gee leaped down. The little monk skipped toward the thing—and then it happened. I hid my face, and don't know which way it went when—when it was through with Gee-Gee. Oh, my God—it was awful!"

Calvert Stone and Marshall came racing from the shrubbery beyond the far corner of the house, and the lawyer, Theron Cole, joined them from the verandah.

"Marshall and I followed you, Durant," Stone said excitedly, "but evidently went the wrong way! What happened here?"

Durant pointed to where the dead monkey lay, which was explanation enough.

"Who gave that weird call, a few minutes ago?" he demanded. "Somebody in this group did—I know it! Better speak up now, because this matter has taken on a criminal aspect. That thing that runs like a beast, whatever it is, killed a policeman on the commons tonight—and my orders are to shoot on sight!"

"How the devil would any of us know anything about it?" Marshall demanded, a trace of truculence in his manner.

"It was in these grounds earlier this evening," Durant said. "Then it escaped over the garden wall. It climbed into a tree out on the commons, and dropped out on Patrolman Moore, crushing him to death. Then it came back, climbed into a tree beside the wall—and attacked me when I climbed up. That means," he finished, pausing to give effect to his words, "that this place holds an attraction for it. Also, those weird calls were heard and obeyed. Still dumb, all of you?"

"Look out, Durant—he's coming!"

SERGEANT BLAKE roared the warning from the shrubbery—and the next instant a huge, shaggy figure broke cover and ran on hands and feet toward the group. Durant whipped up his revolver, thumbed the hammer back—

"Don't Durant—for God's sake—don't!"

The plea came from Marcia Kent. She ran from the shadows beside the verandah, pushed the commissioner's gun arm down—then advanced fearlessly toward the beast. Durant watched tensely, gun ready for quick use.

Marcia spoke in low, soothing tones as she walked steadily forward. The creature stopped, then raised itself erect, and a pair of enormous hands went up to clasp against its temples. Complaining noises came from its lips.

A man! Face and head a mass of beard and hair, yet recognizable in the strong light as a human being. A terrible caricature of a human being.

Marcia laid a hand on the man's arm, spoke again—and down he went once more on hands and feet, rubbing his body against her legs just as a big dog would do.

Then Marcia broke the deathly silence

which had for the past few moments held the group.

"To shoot him would be a crime," she said in a low, choked voice. "He—he—is my brother!"

CHAPTER THREE

Murder Tip

AT nine o'clock next morning, Durant entered the cell-like room in the city hospital where Marcia Kent's idiot brother lay in a quiet sleep induced by opiates. He had heard Marcia's story the night before, and the details were fresh in his mind.

She had told him of the terrible morning nearly six years before when Banty Marshall, then assistant trainer at the Kent stables, had found young John Kent lying in a boxstall with Redfern, a half-broken stallion, pawing the ground near him. Why John, a horseman, had gone into the stall with the stallion had never been made clear, but the animal had trampled him into a broken mass of bones and flesh.

Two years in a sanatorium had followed. John had regained his great strength, but his mind was almost completely gone. Lucid for brief spells, he would then become a mere muttering semblance of a human being. But he had been regarded as harmless. Therefore, when Marcia had moved to Kaw City she had caused her brother to be brought there. She kept him in her town house secretly for a year, then had him taken to her farm. For the sake of safety, the windows of his quarters had been barred, and a male nurse had always been in attendance. Naturally, the matter had been kept secret.

John had been allowed considerable liberty about the farm after nightfall. That, for the sake of exercise and fresh air.

Marshall, the trainer, and Marcia Kent had always been able to handle him, and it was Marcia's call to which John had responded the night before.

Then John killed his keeper and escaped. In some manner he had found his way back to Marcia's town house. When Durant and Cole had arrived, Marshall and Miss Kent had just come in from searching for him, with no success. What followed thereafter was something they could not have helped, and for which they were not legally responsible.

Durant found Dr. Reardon, the psychiatrist, in the cell with the sleeping giant, along with a male nurse.

"What have you determined, Doctor?" he asked.

"You were curious about why he walked and ran on hands and feet," Reardon reminded. "That has an easy explanation. This man's spine has been badly injured, and when he stands erect that position causes terrific pains in the head. When in the other posture, on hands and feet, the pressure causing the pains is relieved. Naturally, the poor chap prefers the latter position. As for his tremendous strength, he had it prior to the injury, and still does."

"Any chance for recovery?"

"None whatever. He may live for many years yet, but he will never be different physically. He may possibly get more rational, but I would not encourage anybody in hoping for it."

"And you believe he may have been injured in the manner described by his sister and Marshall?"

"Yes. Were you doubting it?"

Durant was seeing a crimson whip, dangling from the wrist of a pet monkey. Another such whip lying on a dead man's desk. Three more of them hanging in a wardrobe beneath a suit of clothes.

"I wouldn't think of questioning your opinion in the matter, Doctor," he re-

plied politely. "If there is nothing else you have to tell me, I'll get along and leave you with the patient."

Durant went his way. He was thoroughly dissatisfied. Exhaustive questioning of all those present at the Kent house the night before, including the servants, had brought unshakable denials on the part of all as to knowledge of the crimson whip which appeared on the monkey's wrist. Nobody admitted having seen it before, and nobody could account for its presence.

Unquestionably, the two crimson whips linked together the dead speculator and one or more occupants of Marcia Kent's home. Farther than that rock-ribbed belief, the commissioner could not get.

HE went from the hospital to the offices Ronald Chase had occupied, and found Theron Cole and Wade Stewart, a local banker, awaiting him. Cole and Stewart, it had developed, had been named as executors of the dead millionaire's will.

It was the contents of the desks in the offices and of the safe in which Durant was interested. An hour later, he decided that nowhere in Ronald Chase's office was there a single clue bearing upon the mysterious crimson whips. Not a scrap of paper to indicate the source whence they had come, the purpose for which they had been sent.

Cole and Stewart both expressed the belief that the whip had been sent by either a crank or a prankster. But Durant knew better. He had knowledge of the three whips in the wardrobe, which knowledge the two executors lacked.

He took his leave, carrying with him a feeling that Theron Cole had not revealed all he knew about these matters. The suave attorney would be the last person one would suspect of withholding facts pertinent to a criminal act involving

the death of his own client—yet Durant felt certain Cole knew more than he had volunteered. A hard man to intimidate, too, Durant mused.

From the offices of the dead millionaire, Durant went to his residence once more. He wanted to have another chance at the place while it still was under police guard, and before anything had been removed. The whips had been secretly taken from the wardrobe and, along with the one found on Chase's desk, sent to headquarters. They had been searched for marks and fingerprints, but nothing had been found.

Durant went over the premises with great care, ending his task in the study without having uncovered a thing of moment. It was in the study that he became attracted by a framed painting on the wall back of Chase's desk. It was a portrait of a man in red riding silks—a gentleman jockey, and it had not before caught the commissioner's eye. Now he raised a curtain and gave it closer attention.

It was a picture of Ronald Chase. A much younger Chase than the man Durant had known. But that it was Chase could not be questioned. Durant found himself concentrating on something Chase held in his right hand. At first he thought the object to be a riding crop. Certainly a crop might be expected with such a costume. It was not, however, a crop.

In his right hand, the pictured Chase grasped the butt of a riding whip.

"Damn queer," Durant muttered, eyeing the whip. "Professional jockeys carrying whips—yes. Gentlemen jockeys do not, supposedly, flog their mounts."

DURANT went back to his own office with his eyes unseeing, his wits groping. He had not been in the office long when Sergeant Bullard brought in a visitor. One glance at the man identified him

as a servant of some kind. He had that manner.

"I am John Simmons, sir," the caller stated. "Formerly butler in the employ of the late Mr. Ronald Chase."

Durant sat erect. "All right, Simmons," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"It's about that crimson whip, sir, that the newspapers told of being on Mr. Chase's desk. It was that which caused me to come here, sir, to tell you what I know about some other whips. It is very little, but it may be of use to you."

"Let's have it, Simmons. What about those other whips?"

"Yesterday was the tenth day of August, sir, as you no doubt know," Simmons said with solemn intonation. "It was on that date in the first year of my service with Mr. Chase that a whip, partly dyed or painted red, was delivered at the home. When Mr. Chase saw it, he was puzzled—and then he became angry. On the same date, one year later, another such whip was delivered at the home—and Mr. Chase again became furious. When the third whip, exactly like the other two, arrived in the same manner on the tenth day of August of last year—Mr. Chase knocked me down, sir, in a rage he seemed unable to control. Then he dismissed me out of hand. And that, sir, is what I came to tell. I know nothing else about the matter."

"Did the same messenger bring all those whips?" Durant asked.

"I believe so, sir. A short, heavy-set, swarthy, Italian-appearing person he was, sir."

"Would you recognize him, should you see him again?"

"I believe I would, sir."

"Where are you now employed, Simmons?"

"I am headwaiter at the Criterion Club, sir. You have been attended there by me, many is the time, Mr. Commissioner."

"Very good. I remember you now, Simmons. Stay on there, and if I should need you to identify the messenger I will know where to find you. Thank you for coming."

The sending of those whips, each on the same date of four succeeding years, smelled of blackmail several miles off! So it was for a blackmailer, man or woman, the net should be spread.

With that thought in mind, Durant clapped on his hat and went out. Wade Stewart, president of the Kaw City National Bank, was in his office and would see the commissioner at once.

"Wade," Durant stated, "there is good reason to believe that Chase was a victim of blackmail, or at least attempted blackmail. You can help me on that angle."

"Glad to, Dean. Just tell me how?"

"The dates I want checked," Durant explained, "cover the past four years, although the final one doesn't count. I'd like to know if Chase, on or after the tenth day of August, last, drew a considerable sum in cash from your bank. That should be easy."

AND easy it proved to be. On the eleventh day of the previous August, Ronald Chase had drawn, in person, twenty thousand dollars in cash—instructing the cashier not to record the serial numbers of the notes, obviously to protect the blackmailers. Further search revealed that on the eleventh day of the second year of his residence in Kaw City, a like sum had been withdrawn in the same manner, and with the same instructions regarding the numbers of the notes. On the fifteenth day of August in the first year after Chase's coming to the city, he had drawn twenty thousand in the same manner.

It was clear that it had required considerable pressure on the first occasion to cause Chase to heed the demand of the

scarlet whip—but he had yielded. Too, Chase had intended that those banknotes should never be traced.

"It's certain that Chase wanted to keep something mighty dirty under cover," Durant concluded.

What Durant needed now was information from back east about Ronald Chase, Marcia Kent, Charles "Banty" Marshall, and, perhaps, the charming but irresponsible Midge. If the crimson whip business had its roots in the histories of those concerned, surely it should not be amiss to give them a going-over.

An hour after Durant returned to his office, Theron Cole came to see him. Cole, immaculate, self-assured, was more affable than usual in his greeting. Durant wondered at that. He and Cole had not been especially friendly.

"I see you are no worse from that tumble off the wall, Dean!" Cole exclaimed heartily. "That was a close call, seeing what happened to Matt Moore. Lord, but that chap must have powerful arms."

"Like a gorilla. If it hadn't been for Miss Kent calling him, I'd probably not be here on the job today."

"Very likely not," Cole agreed, then got down to business. "Wade Stewart was talking with me a while ago, Dean. About those withdrawals of my late client. Withdrawals about which I knew nothing. What do you suspect?"

"What would be a logical inference from the circumstances, Theron?" Durant countered.

"Blackmail. But I dislike to think it. Who do you suppose could have had enough on Chase to bleed him that way?"

"I haven't even a good guess."

Cole became thoughtful, then spoke carefully.

"Make what use of this you can, Durant—and don't ever let it out that I gave you the tip. I happen to know that Ronald was pretty well gone on Mary Marshall—

Midge, to the stage and radio. That was after he and Marcia broke things off. Don't know much about it, only there was something rather unpleasant in the papers, involving Midge and Chase. I thought you'd like to know about it."

Durant nodded. "I'm interested in anything at all bearing on Ron Chase's past life. Anything else you have on your mind?"

"Frankly, yes," Cole answered, and his face became graver than Durant remembered ever to have seen it before. "There is Cal Stone. Cal is in love, if ever a man was. I know that Marcia told him all about her affair with Chase—only a few days ago. Cal came to me with it, knowing I was Chase's counselor, and wanted to know what I had heard in the matter. He was in a dangerous mood, Dean, and I cautioned Ron to be on his guard. Not that I believe Cal Stone would shoot a man in the back, understand—but all these things look important, now that somebody has. Do you attach any importance to that?"

"Everything of that nature in his past is important. By the way, who inherits the Chase estate?"

"A sister and three nephews. They live in Canada. Montreal, I believe. A few local bequests. Ron's estate will run high."

COLE departed, and after he had gone, Durant sat for a long time in deep study. Was it possible that the crimson whips had had nothing to do with the killing of Ronald Chase?

Then the telephone rang, and Durant lifted the receiver. "Durant, police commissioner's office," he said.

"This the commissioner himself?" came in a gruff and guarded voice.

"Yes, this is Durant speaking."

"You wouldn't know my name, Commissioner, even if I was minded to tell it.

I ain't. What I want to tell you is this: it'll pay you to watch the Chase house tonight around midnight. Mebbe nothing will happen tonight, but if nothing does, then you can bet something will tomorrow night. This is from a guy that likes to see justice done. Goodbye."

The receiver was hung up, Durant having had no chance to say a word. He ordered the call traced, knowing the futility of the move.

A hoax? Perhaps. There had been something vaguely familiar in the voice, disguised though it was. He would have sworn that he had heard the voice before.

"Watch the Chase house." Something was due to happen there, either that night or the next. What could happen at the Chase house, now that the owner was dead?

Durant had no idea, but he did know that anonymous tips frequently paid good dividends. As matters then stood, he could not afford to overlook the slightest lead, no matter if the chances were strong that the lead would prove phony. He'd watch the Chase house, certainly.

Durant gave orders to canvass the messenger-service companies for an employee answering the description of the one who delivered the parcel at the Chase home. He did not expect much from that. The sender of the whip would not be likely to employ a messenger who could easily be traced. However, there was a chance.

LATE that afternoon, Durant had a surprise visit from the little radio singer, Midge Marshall. She was in a chastened mood, probably due to her fright of the night before. Sober, Midge looked as innocent and angelic as a child, and was even more attractive than she had appeared before. She lost no time in getting to the reason for her call.

"Aside from just naturally wanting to see the big, bad cop again," she told Dur-

ant, "I had it in mind to tell you something. Of course you will be digging back into Ronnie Chase's past—and you'll surely find little Midge in it. Ronnie was sold on me once, honest."

"That's understandable," Durant told her. "Go ahead and tell something that will surprise me—if it's that kind of a yarn."

"It isn't. Just the same old story. Ronnie finally got funny ideas, and I put the skids under him. You know what I mean. Bird-in-a-gilded-cage sort of thing. Not for Midge. So we split. That's what I came to tell you."

"You preferred telling me yourself, which is most commendable. There are others who would profit by doing as you have. Tell me why you helped conceal the fact that John Kent had killed his keeper and escaped?"

"I didn't," she denied promptly. "I was as surprised as you were, Mr. Durant, when Marcia announced it last night. I came to this deadly dull village four days ago, and had not been out to the farm. Damn horses, anyhow. So I had no way of knowing. Banty and I have seen each other exactly twice in the last five years—and he isn't talkative at all. Give me a clearance on the charge, Mister Policeman—please?"

Durant smiled. "O. K., Midge. Perhaps you can tell me what time Cal Stone arrived at Marcia's home last night?"

"I was pretty well organized," Midge confessed frankly, "but I remember it was only a short while, perhaps fifteen minutes, before you and that frozen-faced shyster got there. I'm sure of that. And now, Officer Durant, save for telling you my real age, I've spilled all I know. Good-bye until I see you again—perhaps at dinner, sometime, and maybe a dance afterward? Yes? O. K., Midge is dated. Give her a ring."

Amusing, yes, Durant thought after

Midge had gone. But might not there be depths not apparent, cleverly covered by an air of impudence and irresponsibility? Maybe a dinner-date, with plenty of wine included, might be profitable after all.

AT five o'clock Durant was called by a nurse at the city hospital. John Kent's condition had taken a turn for the worse, and Dr. Reardon wanted the commissioner to come at once.

Durant hurried there, and found that Kent's condition had indeed changed for the worse. The man was dying.

"Just one of those things, Durant," Reardon told him, "that can't be accounted for. The old injuries getting in their deadly work at last. I called Doctor Railsback in consultation, but nothing can be done. Kent was partly rational a while ago. Asked for Marcia—Miss Kent. I have sent for her—"

The dying man's lips moved. "Marcia!" he exclaimed, his eyes fluttering open. "Marcia!" he repeated.

"In a little while," Reardon tried to soothe him.

"Maybe—too late!" Kent cried. "He threw—me in. Tell Marcia—that. Stunned me—first—then put me in—with Red—"

Kent struggled up, his eyes suddenly wild, features contorted.

"Steady Redfern—steady boy! Quiet now—it's me—John— God—Redfern—don't. . .!"

He dropped back, struggling with the covers, trying to cover his head. Terrifying screams came from him, and Durant and the doctor were barely able to hold him in his bed. Then Kent grew strangely quiet. The doctor drew back the covers.

Kent opened eyes that were glazing in death, and muttered:

"Marcia—watch him! He did it! Always, Marcia—beware—of—the—crimson—whip!"

Then John Kent's suffering ceased.

"Reardon," Durant requested, "when Miss Kent comes, repeat to her exactly what her brother said. It's important—highly so. It may even result in clearing up what is now a muddled mystery. Do that, and let me know her reactions. Let her know that I was here, and heard it. I'll appreciate it."

"Surely, Durant, I'll do that," Reardon agreed, and Durant left the room.

Not wanting to meet Marcia there, the commissioner left the hospital by a rear door, and returned to his car after seeing Marcia Kent and Cal Stone go in. He drove rapidly to his office, and shut himself away from everybody.

Durant felt that he had the solution of the crimson-whip murder case lying in his hand—and it only remained to prove his theories.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Crimson Whip

DURANT remained in his office after supper. He fully expected to get a telephone call from Marcia Kent, but none came. That being so, it would be up to him to force her hand. She had been given her chance, and had refused it. The next move would be Durant's.

He called Captain Braden into the office.

"One of those anonymous tips, Braden," he told the officer, "but we'll look into it. The policeman on watch at the Chase place was pulled off at six o'clock tonight. I ordered it. But we want a man there. Send Claxton. Have him herd the servants into their rooms upstairs, and see to it that none goes below or has a chance to communicate with the outside. Be ready to go there with me at eleven."

"What do you expect will break, Dean?" Braden wanted to know.

"Probably nothing at all. This bird said watch the house—that something would

happen tonight or tomorrow night about twelve. We're going to watch."

"Damned if I can make head or tail of the business, so far," Braden grumbled. "You got anything for sure?"

"I've got this much," Durant returned grimly. "Marcia, Ron Chase, John Kent and that trainer, Marshall, have all been mixed up in something rotten, and they all understand the significance of that crimson whip. So, Braden, the Chase murder will kick clear back to the Kent outfit—and maybe involve one or more of them. John Kent died this afternoon—with a warning for his sister on his lips. A warning to beware of the crimson whip. Does that spell anything, or doesn't it?"

"Makes it look bad for the Kent folks, I'll say!" Braden declared. "I'll be ready at eleven."

Fifteen minutes later, Braden called over Durant's phone.

"We got another murder, Commissioner," he said. "Fellow in a taxi, out on South River Road. Motorist just called in to report it. Chap in the front seat, his head bashed in. Car not damaged, so I guess it's murder. You wanta go along?"

Durant joined the captain, and they drove out to the place, a lonely spot two miles from the city. The taxicab, one belonging to a licensed company doing business in Kaw City, stood beside the road. Both doors were tightly closed. Slumped down in the front seat was the driver. He had been killed by a terrific blow on the top of his head.

Durant watched while the medical examiner looked the corpse over, and the ambulance men removed it. Then, flashlight in hand, he made his own examination. He had not progressed far before he found himself thinking of the messenger who had delivered the crimson whip at the Chase home.

"A short, heavy-set, swarthy, Italian-looking person," Rainer had said.

The dead taxi-driver tallied with that description. Moreover, he wore a brown uniform, as had the messenger.

Durant left the body and began prowling the cab. In a door pocket on the driver's side he made a discovery.

It was a black band lettered in gilt. And the letters spelled—MESSENGER.

That clinched it. The dead taxi-driver and the messenger who delivered the crimson whip were one and the same.

Another murder had entered the crimson-whip affair!

DURANT wasted no more time there. He drove rapidly back to town, and parked at the taxicab office out of which the dead driver had worked. The night manager, informed of the murder, expressed genuine surprise.

"Why that's Mike Barretto, Commissioner, and one of the best men we ever had!" he declared. "Never knew him to be mixed up in a racket of any kind. Always sober and reliable. Who would want to knock off poor old Mike?"

"Do you know where Mike and his taxi were at about three o'clock yesterday afternoon?" Durant asked.

"I'll look over the record of calls. Maybe it'll show something."

It did. At half past two on the previous day, Mike Barretto had been called to the phone in the office. It being a call for him in person, the record gave it that way. Mike had reported out immediately afterward, and reported in again at twenty minutes past three. That was all.

"Do your drivers make a practice of carrying things like this?" the commissioner asked, and showed the manager the lettered band.

"Never heard of it, if they do," was the answer. "Did Mike have it on him?"

"It was in a pocket of his car. Mike has been doing a bit of messenger work on the side—and that was why he was

murdered on that lonely road tonight. Did he receive another personal call late today, or do you know?"

"Mike left here before I came on," Durant was told. "Said he had a long trip on, and would be back around seven o'clock. He failed to come back, and I naturally thought his fare had retained him for a wild party. That often happens, you know."

"The fare retained him for a party, right enough," Durant said grimly. "A murder party. Well, Shores, I'll let you know if I get anything more on it. Good night."

The third killing obviously perpetrated by the one or ones who wielded the power of the crimson whip—Ronald Chase, John Kent, and now, Mike Barretto! How many more had it accounted for in the past, and how many more would it account for before the end?

As things stood, Durant could only keep on fingering the snarl in hopes of eventually finding the right thread—the end of which, when skillfully manipulated, would reduce the tangle to a single thread, with a definite beginning and a still more definite end.

AT ELEVEN o'clock that night, Durant and Braden let themselves quietly into the darkened Chase residence. Braden made certain that Officer Claxton had ridden herd on the servants as he had been instructed, then went outside and took his stand back of a clump of shrubbery. From that spot he could watch both the front and rear entrances.

Durant sat in the dining room. There in the darkness he began to concentrate on the voice which had given him the tip on the phone. It had been, of course, disguised. The more he thought about it, the stronger became Durant's conviction that the disguised voice, should he place it, would vastly aid him in breaking the case.

A LOCK clicked somewhere in the house, and Durant stiffened, hand on the butt of a gun. A moment later there came a light tap-tap-tapping on a pane of a dining-room window. Braden's signal that somebody was entering the house.

The tip had been a good one after all!

Durant listened, heard nothing, and got to his feet. He went silently to the door giving into the sitting room. Again he listened. That time he heard a door hinge squeak. The sound came from directly across the hall, as best he could determine.

Suddenly, the darkness of the room across from Durant was illuminated by a flashlight. The illumination was only brief, then darkness again. Durant walked lightly to the door. Again a light flashed briefly. Somebody was prowling Ronald Chase's study!

When Durant located the prowler again, he was bending over a section of wainscoting at the west end of the study. Growing bolder, the intruder had set the catch on his flash, and that section of wall was clearly illuminated by a steady beam.

A moment, and a square of wainscoting swung aside on oiled hinges, and the door of a small wall safe was disclosed. The prowler's fingers began manipulating the combination, and in a very short time he opened the safe.

Durant stepped inside, and waited.

The prowler reached into the safe, took up a thick manila envelope, inspected it carefully, and the door of the safe clicked shut. The flashlight went dark—

Durant reached out, touched a switch, and the room was flooded with light.

A startled oath came from the prowler. He whirled around, flash in one hand and the envelope in the other. Durant was looking at the white, scared face of the lawyer, Theron Cole!

"Sorry to frighten you, Theron," the commissioner apologized ironically, "but

folks who prowl other men's houses must expect little things like that. Doubtless you have a perfectly good explanation to offer?"

Cole had recovered his usual unruffled demeanor. He even smiled, although there was not much mirth evident. He looked at Durant steadily for an instant, then said: "Sit down, Commissioner. We may as well be comfortable. As you suggested, I have a good explanation for what I have done."

CAPTAIN BRADEN came in then, and stood by the door. He made no comment, but the revolver in his hand suggested what was in his mind. Cole saw the weapon, and smiled.

"Put it away, Braden," he said. "I am not armed. My mission here was not one in which even a thought of violence had a part."

"Suppose you get to the thing in hand, Cole," Durant said coldly, "and stick to it."

"I shall. Several months ago, my client, Roland Chase, made a request of me. It was this. Should he die suddenly, either a natural death or one of violence, I was to open the wall safe in his study, take out such documents as I found there and destroy them—unread. He showed me, later that night, the location of the safe, and gave me the combination. I thought it a singular request, but, upon his assurance that the documents were purely personal matters and affected nobody but himself, I agreed. So, Durant, that is why I came here tonight. To carry out my promise to my dead client."

Braden gave a scarcely audible grunt of derision. Durant's face remained an expressionless mask.

"That would be a fairly good yarn, Cole," the commissioner commented, "except that it doesn't explain why you found it necessary to carry out that promise at this hour of the night, sneaking into the

house like a common yegg, when you could have accomplished it—"

"You should know why I had to do it secretly," Cole broke in. "Had I attempted it with the knowledge of your men, one of whom has been stationed here right up until tonight, I'd never have got away with it. So your precautions, Durant, forced me to come here like, as you have so aptly expressed it, a common yegg."

Durant nodded. "Something in that, too," he agreed. "Well, hand over the envelope, Cole. You're caught—and you'll be damn lucky if this ends the matter for you. Hand it over, and let's see what we can find."

"But, Durant!" Cole protested. "This envelope contains the personal records of a dead man—"

"I don't give a damn about that!" Durant cut in angrily. "Put that envelope on the desk, or I'll take it away from you! I'm fed up with nonsense. Put it down!"

Cole dropped the envelope on the desk, and sat down in a chair near at hand. His eyes glared when he looked at Durant.

"You may regret this highhandedness, Commissioner," he threatened. "Right now, of course, I'll have to submit. I'm helpless."

"Exactly. You're helpless—and see that you remember it."

Durant ripped open the envelope and spilled out two folded documents which had a legal appearance. In addition to the two legal documents, the envelope contained three small envelopes, none of them bearing an address. Durant opened the small envelopes, and spread out a sheet of notepaper which he took from the first. Written in a feminine hand was the following—

August 11, 1933.

You are safe for one more year.

M.

Durant, without comment, read the second and third. They were exactly the same

as the first, except for the dates. One bore date of August 11, 1932, the other August 16, 1931.

Durant pocketed the envelopes and the notes, then gave attention to the two legal documents. He unfolded the thinner of the two, glanced at it—and the ejaculation of surprise which escaped him was as genuine as it was unintentional. He read the document through rapidly, than skimmed through the other. It was as surprising as the first.

"Cole," the commissioner asked as soon as he could trust his voice, "have you any knowledge of what these documents reveal?"

"I have not," the lawyer stated earnestly. "My client never gave me a hint. And, believe me or not, I meant to burn the papers without reading them, as I had promised to do."

Durant considered that statement briefly, then nodded toward the door.

"You had better run along, Theron," he said. "You're guilty of breaking and entering, it's true—but your explanation has satisfied me. Let him out the front, Braden—you understand?"

Braden looked at Durant for an instant, then nodded quickly.

"Sure, Commissioner," he answered, walking ahead of Cole through the hall. "I understand."

COMMISSIONER DURANT leaned against the mantel in the Kent sitting room. It was two o'clock in the morning, and he had arrived five minutes before, bringing Cal Stone, under protest, with him.

Marcia Kent, in dressing robe and pajamas, lacking rouge and lipstick, was pale but calm.

Midge Marshall, likewise in robe and pajamas, was frankly angry at being disturbed. She yawned openly and frequently.

Banty Marshall, the trainer, paced the floor in restless suspense, and Stone looked steadily at the commissioner, face set and hard.

Durant seemed as cool and unconcerned as if he had been an honored guest, rather than an intruder of whom everyone wished they could speedily be rid.

"I might say a lot to you three, Miss Kent, Stone and Marshall, about what constitutes good citizenship. I might even get nasty about it," the commissioner said without preamble. "However, all I'm going to say is this—

"No matter how right you may have been at the start, when murder came along that was your cue to talk."

Durant took out a manila envelope and exhibited the contents. Two legal documents and three small, white envelopes.

"Proof that the little affair between you and Ronald Chase was much more serious than you said, Miss Kent," he said quietly, watching a look of consternation come into her eyes. "Certified copy of yours and Chase's marriage certificate, this one. Certified copy of the annulment proceedings which occurred six months after the marriage was consummated, the other. Anything you wish to say, Miss Kent?"

"Yes!" Marcia declared, her eyes flashing. "There is plenty! Six months was all I could stand. I soon discovered that I had married a brute. One who could not control his temper even with those he professed to love. A beater of women and of horses. The most vicious man who ever lived, without a single exception, was Ronald Chase. When, one night after a quarrel, he beat me nearly to death—things came to an end—"

"By God!" Cal Stone exclaimed, his big hands opening and closing. "How I should have loved to choke the life out of him—with my bare hands!"

"Go on, Miss Kent," Durant said, his manner softening a bit. "You left Chase

and had the marriage annulled. Now, how did this crimson whip come in?"

"My family has always loved horses," she explained rapidly. "My father, John and I. Ronald owned a fine string of hunters and jumpers. We all belonged to the same clubs. It was soon observed that Ronald Chase always rode with a whip—and the whip, after a race, was invariably wet with blood. His temper again. Should his mount lag, he got the lash—brutally. Soon most of his associates were cutting him dead. Then my poor brother, John, scorned Ronald Chase openly.

"John referred to him, in the hearing of others, as 'The Man With the Crimson Whip.' After that, Ronald Chase was seldom called anything else behind his back. Some were not particular about it being behind his back, for that matter. Ronald, of course, resigned from such clubs as had not already closed their doors to him.

"We retired to our farm in Maryland—and then came the injury to John. As God is above, I did not know that Roland Chase had been responsible for John's terrible accident. I found that out only yesterday—after John had died. Now, Mr. Durant, do you blame me for acting as I have? For wanting to keep the whole terrible thing secret?"

"No," Durant told her, "only for not telling me, when he was mysteriously murdered. But we will pass that by. Ronald Chase got part of what was coming to him—though less than he deserved. However, here is another phase of the matter. Do you recognize these?"

HE PLACED the three notes before Marcia. She read them, and gave the commissioner a look of such complete astonishment he could not doubt its genuineness. Nor could he punish her longer.

He walked to the door into the hallway, opened it and called.

Captain Braden and a plainclothesman came into the sitting room. Theron Cole stalked between them. The lawyer looked angry and a little strained.

He looked at Durant steadily for an instant, then demanded: "Explain this second piece of highhandedness, Commissioner—and be quick about it!"

"In a moment," Durant told him. Then he spoke to Marcia Kent. "Theron Cole became Chase's lawyer. He soon discovered that Chase had an unsavory record back east, and, being more than somewhat curious, he secretly investigated. When he obtained complete and accurate information, he blackmailed his client, Miss Kent, in your name. It was easy enough.

"Cole had secured a specimen of your handwriting, and he was able to do quite a creditable forgery. On August tenth, in the first year of Chase's residence here, he sent him a letter in your name, demanding the immediate payment of twenty thousand dollars. He threatened that if refused, you would reveal the degrading circumstances of his career in the east, and tell of his responsibility for the injury to your brother. As a sure proof that the letter really came from you and meant business, Cole sent to his house a riding whip, the lash enameled red. The Crimson Whip.

"Chase stormed and raged—and then consulted his attorney, confirming the facts Cole had gathered. The attorney, Cole himself, naturally advised him to pay up. Chase did—and used Cole as his supposed go-between. Cole was safe enough. He knew you two would never come together and compare notes, the circumstances being what they were. So Cole pocketed the twenty thousand dollars and, in accordance with his client's orders, brought to him a short note purporting to come from you. It assured him that he was safe for another year. On the following August tenth, he sent along another crimson whip as a reminder—and again collected. So it was

the next year. But then he had to eliminate Ronald Chase. Only Cole knows exactly why he *had* to kill Chase. Perhaps he will tell—when he knows how strong the case is against him. How about it, Cole?’

“Do you take me for a damn fool?” Cole demanded. “Perhaps you do, since you take even these good people to be foolish enough to believe the rot you have been telling them!”

“All right,” Durant said, “I’ll go the limit to expose you. Only you, Cole, could have known that you intended to burglarize the Chase house tonight. That is something you would not have told to anybody. Yet I was tipped off. How? By you, Cole. You wanted me to get possession of these documents which would make the guilt of Marcia Kent seem certain, while you could hide behind an alleged duty to your client. So you tipped me off in order that I might catch you in the act.”

“You saw me take those papers from that safe!” Cole shouted, his face feverish with anger and excitement.

Durant gave him an ironical grin. “Lieutenant Phelps, our expert searcher, found that little wall safe in the study without any trouble whatever—and *he found it empty*. That is something you didn’t know. Phelps found the safe absolutely empty yesterday morning. How, then, did those papers get inside it last night?”

COLE’S face went deathly pale. Too late, he saw the trap into which he had walked. He sat down weakly, staring at the man who had pinned two crimes on him. The crime of blackmail and the crime of murder.

“It may interest you to know, too, Cole,” Durant went on, “that you were seen in the cab with Mike Barretto—and only half an hour later he was found dead. Both Rainer and Simmons have positively identified him as the man who brought the whips to Chase’s door.”

That was a lie, but it was all that was needed to completely break Theron Cole’s nerve.

“I killed Chase,” he confessed, “because a few minutes after I had sent the last whip, Chase came to my office and I reminded him that he was due to pay twenty thousand dollars to Marcia that day. He replied that he did not expect word from her, as he had written Marcia refusing to pay more. So he had, but I had the note, of course. He then told me that, should he receive another whip or a dun, he would go directly to Marcia and have it out with her. And he would have done so, exposing the fraud, had I not killed him.

“When I came to the house after the murder, I had not been told whether or not a crimson whip had been found—so I carried one along. It was thrust down inside a trouser leg. I wanted the whip to be found there, as it was my intention to point suspicion toward Marcia Kent. But the whip was there. I brought the other along with me to this house, since I had no chance to dispose of it. Then I had the opportunity, and slipped the thong around Marcia’s monkey’s wrist. Durant would see it—and that would be proof to him that somebody at the Kent house was the sender of the whips. That’s all, except that I killed Barretto to keep him from telling his story. Now, Durant, I’d like to get to wherever you’re taking me—and rest. I haven’t slept well these past few nights.”

Durant signaled the officers to take him away. As he followed them to the door, Midge Marshall stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“How about that dinner, Commissioner?” she asked. “You promised, you know!”

“So I did!” Durant agreed heartily. “Tonight’s the night, Midge. This business has left a bad taste in my mouth. We’ll go out and celebrate together!”

"I yanked the dough and told him to figure it for hush money."



The Man Who Looked Sick

A Peter Kane Story

by
Hugh B. Cave

Author of "Bottled in Blonde," etc.

Kane had wandered out to the track to do a little drinking and put a small sum on the nose of his favorite gee-gee, not get himself mixed into a series of cock-eyed murders. But the best laid plans of even the smartest dick can go astray, as he soon found when Soulful Sammy marked his program for a killing that couldn't be cashed in on at any tote window in the world.

CHAPTER ONE

The Body at the Track

THE ponies came down the stretch and thundered past the rail where Peter Kane stood glaring. Five of them were bunched, scrapping for the lead. The sixth splashed through mud on the outer rail after running wide on the turn.

Kane made a face as the trailer walloped by. The mud-splattered Number 4 on the nag's broadside, under the cricket boy's flailing leg, matched the Number 4 on the tote ticket that Kane hauled from a vest pocket. From atop the judge's coop, a basso voice boomed through the address system: "The public is cautioned not to destroy any tote tickets. Remember, the result of the race is not yet official."

"Phoocy!" Kane snorted. His lean fingers ripped the ticket twice, flicked the scraps over the rail. "Phoocy!" Disgustedly he reached for the pint bottle in his inside coat pocket.

"Your luck ain't so good, mister, huh?" A wet gray figure sidled close to Kane's big bulk and turned a sallow face so Kane had to look at it. The face was sad and looked as though it had been that way since birth. It had large protruding ears and a pointed nose and puckered lips and dark soulful eyes that seemed on the verge of tears. It had lived maybe twenty-five years.

"Listen, mister," the face murmured. "Nobody ever beats the ponies by shootin' blind. My goodness no. *Tsk*. Now if I was to put you wise to some inside dope on the next race, would it be worth your time listenin', huh?"

"Scram!" Kane growled.

"Now listen, mister. Honest, I ain't foolin'. It don't cost you a dime. You shoot the works on this nag here see?" Sad-eyes thrust out his program and un-

derscored, with the black crescent of a sharp fingernail, the name of a horse. "You go on Moralist, see? Go the limit. This here is a muddy track and on a muddy track Moralist could shed a foreleg and still gallop that bunch of goats into the ground. See? You do like I say, mister, and if you feel like passin' me a ten spot after you clean up, I'll be seein' you here after the race."

Kane glared, stuffed the pint bottle back in his pocket, choked, and hiked away. A sigh gurgled in his throat. "Maybe I change complexion when my nag chases them all home," he mumbled. "Something must be wrong with my looks when Soulful Sammy picks *me* for a sucker. My God!"

The "My God!" had nothing to do with Soulful Sammy's dumbness. It came convulsively, as Kane's legs stiffened under him and he stood stock-still, gaping. He forgot about Soulful Sammy. His eyes bulged and he took a hesitant step forward, caught a quick noisy breath that inflated his chest.

FACING him, a dejected figure sat propped against the red front of a refuse barrel. The man's head hung on his chest and the word *Waste* gleamed above his mop of hair, as if tagged to him.

His eyes were wide and his rubber legs snaked out in front of him with the toes of his buckskin shoes pointing to ten past ten. He had a look of pain and amazement on a face strangely empty of color. Above the V of his vest his pink-striped madras shirt was clotted with sticky-looking red stuff that bubbled from within, and out of the red stuff protruded the bone handle of a knife whose blade was deep out of sight.

Kane said again: "My God!" And added almost inaudibly: "D'Amino. Louis D'Amino. Croaked!"

Louis D'Amino had a reputation

around town for being a greasy-faced, self-satisfied racketeer, a pool-ticket dispenser, a dealer in spurious "import" whiskeys, and the unperturbed focal point of innumerable hates.

"Dead," Kane said. "Dead as hell."

He was drunk, and the sight of D'Amino's blood-soaked shirt made him feel vaguely ill below the belt. When he knuckled open the door of the track police office, moments later, he had to lean against the door jamb and take time out to steady himself before mouthing his report.

Then, while pop-eyed officials went out to collect D'Amino's body, Kane sat down and played an imaginary piano on the table top. With the body came Moroni.

"Always when I get a day off," Moroni snarled, "some punk gets rubbed out in front of my nose." He had been losing money and was sore. Sore, too, because a gawking crowd had accompanied the passage of D'Amino's corpse from the refuse can to the track police office, and Moroni, spotted by an alert track cop and drafted into service, had consequently been pushed, mauled, stepped on until wrath had exploded within him.

Kane smiled discreetly, said nothing. It was a pleasure to see Great Brain Moroni slaving while he, Peter Kane, private shamus and therefore ineligible, could sit and observe. A pleasure indeed.

Moroni labored. In half an hour Moroni had netted three very dissimilar individuals, had herded them into the office and, behind closed doors, had worked on them in typical Moroni fashion, linguistically, with gestures. Kane, nursing a quarter-full pint bottle, looked on with interest and maintained silence. Track officials regarded Moroni with awe and respect.

"Listen, you," Moroni growled. "What's your name?"

The lady's name was Mabel Jilson. She

was a good-looking lady if one looked not too close. She was perhaps thirty-five years old and running to fat. She sat with one shapely leg crossed over the other, revealing the rolled top of one sheer stocking. She had been Louis D'Amino's broad until Louis had "gone nuts over a flat-chested, bedroom-eyed doll." The words were her own, muttered vindictively through very red lips that curled above an angular chin.

"What's more," she snapped out, "I used to be on the stage and I done a knife-throwing act. Make something of that, Glue-face!"

"I'll make plenty of it later," Moroni threw back. "And get this, sister. I knew who you were and what you were before you even opened your mouth. And you were seen talking to D'Amino less than half an hour before we discovered his corpse. That's why you're here." He swung on Number 2 of the round-up and spat cigar smoke in her face. "And you're D'Amino's new dame, huh? You're the broad with the bedroom eyes."

"I'll thank you," Miss Birdie Brooks said acidly, "to leave personalities out of this!" Certainly her eyes had no bedroom look in them now. They were smouldering coals in a face so devoid of color that the generous applications of rouge and lipstick stood out like splashing from a paint-pot. She was small and twitchy and as high-strung, though perhaps not as high-bred, as some of the nags in the paddock.

She had been with D'Amino all afternoon. Had left him, so she maintained, to go cash a tote ticket. On her return, she had failed to find him at the appointed meeting place, and spent the next ten minutes rubber-necking through the crowd in search of him.

She had not in the least wanted to come to the track police office. Would not have had to come, either, if Mabel Jilson had

not pointed her out to Moroni and said viciously: "There she is. That's the little squirt Louis dropped me for. Ask *her* who knifed him!"

NOW that Birdie was in the office, she vehemently desired to get out of it. She said so, with an outburst of temper that sent the words shrilling between her very white teeth. Moroni said: "Sit still and shut up!" and turned to exhibit Number 3.

Number 3 was Soulful Sammy, the sad-eyed tout.

"Listen, mug," Moroni growled. "When I last talked to D'Amino he had an eye open for you. It's a good thing for you he's turned into a stiff, otherwise he might have caught up with you and squared things for the sucker tip you handed him. What I'm figuring is maybe you knew he was out to get you, so you fixed things first. That wouldn't've been too hard, even for a skinny rat like you. D'Amino was plenty drunk this afternoon." He narrowed his eyes, took a menacing forward step and applied the famous Moroni psychology. "What'd you kill him in a place like this for?"

Sammy's soulful orbs expanded to enormous bigness and took on white rims. "I didn't do it! So help me, mister, I never went near the guy after I sucked him in. Geez, I only took him for a fin. A guy with all his dough wouldn't be out to get me for a measly fin!"

Birdie Brooks uttered words that compelled attention. "Listen, dick. When I last saw Louis he had a roll. Abe Broberg looked us up and handed Louis a roll, a bank package of ten new century notes. I knew because it was me that took the wrapper off and counted the notes, on account of Louis was too drunk." She peered past Moroni's looming bulk and focused her gaze at a pile of junk on the table. The junk had come from Louis

D'Amino's pockets. "I don't see any hundred-dollar bills there," she said.

Soulful Sammy swallowed hard and made a stabbing movement toward a pocket of his wet gray trousers. He caught himself before the movement was completed, but Moroni saw, snarled, and jerked forward.

"Search this mug," Moroni said nasally to the track police.

Sammy cringed in his chair and his big eyes grew bigger. Terror thickened his tongue. He wailed despondently: "You don't need to search me. Geez, I admit it, I got the dough." His hand trembled violently but finally got in and out of his pocket and held a wad of bills toward Moroni's snarling face. "But I didn't knife the guy for it, so help me! I—I seen him get what was comin' to him, and I seen the killer frisk him, and then I mooched over and spoke my piece and got the dough for hush money. Honest to God, that's how it happened! I ain't lyin'!"

The bills fascinated Moroni. He gaped at them and unfolded the wad and bunched it together again. He glared into Sammy's terrified face and rasped: "Say that again, slow!"

"It was like this," Sammy moaned. "I was moochin' around out back of the grandstand and I seen this guy proppin' the body up against one of them big waste barrels. I figured the droopy one was drunk. Then I seen the blood all over the front of him, and a knife stickin' out, and I seen who he was. The killer guy didn't see me because he was too busy fishin' through D'Amino's pockets." Sweat gleamed on Sammy's pale forehead and he wiped it off with the tips of his fingers. "So then I moseyed over and grabbed this guy's arm, and while he was standin' there gawkin' at me, scared stiff, I yanked the dough out of his hand

and told him he could figure it for hush money. Then I lammed."

"And maybe you know what this guy looked like?" Sarcasm dripped from Moroni's question.

"Well, I didn't get no close look on account of it was rainin' so hard. He was a thin, sallow-faced guy, kind of, and he looked sick. He had on one of them lap-around trench coats, and white shoes like what I got on, only cleaner." Sammy pushed thin fingers under the bead of his hat and swallowed again.

"Why didn't you call a cop?"

"Geez, why should I? The cops never done me no favors, did they?"

Moroni said acidly: "You can't even lie straight and make it sound convincing. If you want to tell fairy stories, tell 'em to Kane here. He's got imagination." He slapped the wad of bills on the table behind him. "Maybe you can tell us where your thin, sallow-faced guy went after he handed you the hush money."

"He beat it."

"Where to, sweetheart?"

Sammy was rattled. "I ain't sure. But he didn't lam out of the grounds, I know that! He made a bee-line for the clubhouse and I seen him hoofin' it up the stairs like bloodhounds was after him. Honest, I ain't kiddin'."

"Honest," Moroni sneered, "you ain't kiddin'." He waved one arm in a sweeping gesture that included Sammy, Mabel Tilson and Birdie Brooks. To the track cops he said indifferently: "Send for the wagon and give these mugs free transportation to headquarters. I'll be down later. This is my day off." Still sneering, he hiked to the door and barged out. Peter Kane stretched up from the table and strolled out after him.

KANE steered a crooked course for the clubhouse and the amplified voice of the public-address system growled around

him: "The horses are approaching the barrier. You still have time to make your wagers." He made a face and snorted. An acquaintance pawed his arm.

"My Gawd, Kane, did you see who won that last race? Moralist by three lengths! Three hundred and eighty bucks for ten!"

Kane thought of Soulful Sammy's "hot tip" and felt the need of a drink. He had a long one that gagged him. When he got upstairs in the clubhouse he had four legs instead of two and prowled down the corridor like a seasick first-timer on the upper deck of a liner.

According to Soulful Sammy the sallow-faced guy who looked kind of sick had made a get-away in this direction. Maybe. Kane looked around and scowled. The crowd here was leaner than the crowd in the grandstand. Aloud Kane said: "Sure as hell the guy never chased up here to lose himself in the mob. Must be he had a destination."

He poked around and did a little bleary-eyed snooping. After a while he tried a door marked *Private*, and the door jarred open to his shove, let him into a small office. The office was empty but a washbasin in an alcove was wet and dirty and a damp towel hung from one of the faucets.

Kane looked around, slouched out, closed the door and caught a uniformed attendant. He said: "Listen, buddy. Whose hangout is that?"

It was the private office of Mr. Anson Lacey, who was fortunate enough to own a large slice of the track and conjunctive interests. "Mr. Lacey," said the attendant, "went south several days ago to look over a string of horses."

"That office supposed to be locked all the time?"

"Certainly. Mr. Lacey has the **only** key."

"That's what you think," Kane murmured. "Look again."

The attendant was astounded. Undoubtedly Mr. Lacey had gone away and left the door unlocked. Was there anything else the attendant could do?

"Sure," Kane mumbled. "You can find for me a thin, sallow-faced guy who looks sick and—" He sighed, shook his head sadly. "Never mind. Skip it. Remind me to fill a Christmas stocking for Moroni. He believes in Santa Claus."

CHAPTER TWO

The Brolberg Angle

IT was late when Kane got to the Beacon Agency offices on Washington Street. The office was empty; a stack of mail had been placed neatly on Kane's desk, had fallen and fanned out. He pawed through it, stuffed most of it into his pocket and went uptown to Limpy's Place. After three hookers of Scotch and a fistful of saltines he hiked downtown to police headquarters on LaRonge Street and found Moroni, Moe Finch and some men from the track gathered in the back room.

"We been wondering when you'd sober up and pay us a visit," Moroni said irritably. "Don't forget it was you that discovered D'Amino's body. You got a few questions to answer for the record book."

"You're always picking on me," Kane whined. "I won't stay another minute—"

"Cut the comedy."

Kane sighed and sat down, tipped his chair back against the wall and hooked his heels in one of its rungs, hunched himself comfortably. Apparently the racetrack men had been here a good while. Moe Finch, behind the desk, looked tired and exasperated and was biting little pieces out of a thumbnail and spitting them at the floor. Moroni had an air of largeness and importance. One of the racetrack men said wearily: "We don't care what

you do or how you do it, but this business has got to be kept out of the papers. It's the wrong kind of publicity."

Kane said quietly: "Whereabouts down south did Anson Lacey go to?"

"Who?"

"Lacey. You heard the first time."

One of the track men scowled. "Lacey's at Bowie, looking over some yearlings. He won't be back till the first of the week."

"Where's he live?"

"What the devil difference—"

"Where's his home address?" Kane insisted.

Anson Lacey's home address was in the 800's on Commonwealth Avenue. Kane puckered his lips and murmured, "Dough, eh?" The front legs of his chair bumped the floor and he stood up. "I got a date, Moe. Maybe later I'll be back."

He went out and took a cab. It was a long ride. Limpy's three hookers of bad Scotch began to take effect long before the meter had reached its total of five dollars and twenty cents. When the cab stopped and Kane got out, Lacey's home looked three times as big as it was and it was big enough in actuality to be an eyesore. Kane told the cab-driver to wait and walked crookedly up a flagstoned path that played tricks with his feet. A French-looking maid with much front opened the door to him. Kane said warily: "I've an appointment with Mr. Anson Lacey."

"Mr. Anson Lacey?" The girl wrinkled her face out of shape. "But he is not at home."

"It's important."

"But he is not here. Only Mr. Gerard Lacey is here."

"Anson's son?"

Gerard Lacey was Anson's son. "Tell him," Kane said, "I want to talk to him. Kane's the name. Peter Kane. From headquarters."

The girl's eyes opened wide and she

retreated step by step down the corridor. Kane had a drink while he waited, was stuffing the bottle back in his coat pocket when the maid returned. The younger Lacey was standing wide-legged, midway down the hall, and stared holes in Kane as Kane advanced.

He said: "You're—an officer?"

"Detective."

"Well," Lacey frowned. "I—I guess it's all right." Apparently he was not sure. He walked slowly into a big living room, sat down and continued to stare. "May I ask," he said, "what is the trouble?"

HE had a face that Kane at once disliked. A thin face, habitually pale, with puffs under its eyes, pale wet lips, and a line of loose flesh under the chin. A dissipated face and a scared one. The hands that went with it were soft and flabby and moist. Something about the face was familiar, and Kane tried in vain to figure out what.

"We'll skip the preliminaries," Kane shrugged. "I guess you know what happened this afternoon at the track. I guess they told you."

"Yes, of course. But—"

"Spend a lot of time out there, do you?"

"No, I don't." Lacey's wet lips whitened in a sheepish grin. "As a matter of fact, I'm forbidden to set foot inside the gates."

"Huh?"

"I may as well be frank with you. My father is the old-fashioned type, Mr. Kane—stern and strict. He didn't like the way I went through college and, well, after college I got into one or two scrapes that annoyed him."

"What kind of scrapes?"

"Well, gambling if you want to call it that. Father is quite convinced that gambling is a grave weakness of mine. Therefore I'm forbidden to go wherever

gaming instruments are found, and that includes the racetrack. It's a lot of silly nonsense, but father controls the exchequer and I do what I'm told."

"You've never been out to the track?"

"I won't say never, but never except in father's company."

Kane scowled, said curtly: "When do you expect father back?"

"Not until the first of the week at the earliest."

"H'm. O.K., son." Halfway out of his chair Kane stiffened, dropped back again. "Say. How long have you been out of college?"

"A year."

"Was it your picture they plastered all over the front pages for taking part in that college play that raised such a stink?"

Again that sheepish grin ran to the bulges under Gerard's eyes. "That was just another of the things that got father sore." Unaware of Kane's narrow-eyed scrutiny, he leaned forward to take a cigarette from the package Kane held out.

"Well"—this time Kane got fullway out of the chair and reached the door—"thanks anyhow." Scowling, he hiked down the hall, took an eyeful of the French maid and went out.

On the way back to town he sprawled in the cab, stared at the label on a pint bottle and said aloud: "Maybe the Brolberg angle goes deeper." He was thinking of what Birdie Brooks had said in the track police office, about ten one-hundred-dollar bills. Brolberg had looked up Louis D'Amino and delivered the dough. Brolberg had then faded.

Abe Brolberg, short, fat and of questionable nationality, ran a downtown dine-and-dance joint called The Palms. On the side he ran other things including a big lottery ring that rivalled the one controlled by Louis D'Amino, a gambling layout where everything was crooked except the wires of the police alarm, and a

South End print shop which turned out, for fights, football, hockey games and similar sporting contests, the best no-good tickets a sucker ever paid top price for.

Abe Brolberg and Louis D'Amino, big shots in competitive, small-scale racketeering puddles, had seldom professed any great devotion for each other.

Kane went to The Palms.

IT was a frowsy joint on a one-way side street off Stuart, and he looked both ways along the street before entering. He was not known here; the doorman peered at him suspiciously because he was not wearing evening clothes. Funny, Kane thought—the dumpier a joint got, the more the suckers doll up to come to it.

He left his hat and coat with the check-girl, lit a cigarette and pushed forward through darkly draped swing doors that muffled a drone of dance music from the room beyond. The hour was about nine; the band was playing for the benefit of a few scattered couples, mostly half-scared kids who thought they were being hellions and went through dizzy contortions on the dance floor. Kane stood and looked around until a headwaiter came up to him and said: "Yes, sir. A booth?"

"I'm here to see Brolberg," Kane flicked ashes on the carpet and glared into the waiter's eyes. "Where'll I find him?"

"Is he expecting you?"

"Yeah."

The waiter seemed to doubt it, but turned and walked stiffly down an aisle between booths and tables. At the end of the aisle he held a door open for Kane, said, "This way, sir," and took the lead again. Out back he stopped with his back toward Kane and knocked on a small dark door.

After a while he knocked again, then tried the knob, found the door unlocked and opened it. He took one step over the sill and called out not too loudly: "Mr.

Brolberg? Mr. Brolberg?" As if bewildered by Brolberg's apparent absence, he paced slowly forward. Kane reached the threshold in time to see him timidly push out an inner door that had tacked on its panels a magazine picture of a leggy girl with tights on.

The other room was dark and the waiter spoke Brolberg's name again before fumbling for a light switch. Kane had a feeling dynamite was about to explode.

It did when the light went on. The waiter stiffened, made saucer eyes at a thing that sat humped up on the floor with its back jammed against the front of a desk and its head lolling. He said hoarsely, "Brolberg!" and took a faltering step forward.

Kane beat him to it. On one knee, with one hand palmed against the floor to steady himself, Kane raised Brolberg's lolling head and peered into the man's face. It was a scared, contorted face. The mouth was agape and the tongue was jammed way back in. The eyes were wide-open, rimmed with white, and glassy as frosted marbles.

A bullet had drilled the starched front of Abe Brolberg's dress-shirt just above the second of three black studs. Blood had oozed from the hole and drooled in a thin stream to his trousers, puddled the floor between his splayed legs.

Kane said slowly with a knot in his voice: "That guy's—dead."

He felt funny inside and it was not Limpy's bad Scotch that made him feel that way. A minute went by before he could lean forward to move the body. He had an idea the bullet had gone clean through.

It had, but there was no mark on the desk. Kane stood up, walked around the desk and examined the wall. The wall was flecked with splatterings of blood, and the plaster was pulverized where a slug

had smacked into it. Kane gazed at the waiter and said: "Whoever shot Brolberg took time out afterwards to prop the corpse on display, just like D'Amino's corpse was propped." The waiter stood pop-eyed, wringing an imaginary dishrag with his perspiring hands.

THE slug-hole in the wall was not deep; apparently the bullet itself had fallen to the floor. Kane stopped, stared, straightened and said grimly: "Whoever gave Brolberg the works was careful not to leave any souvenirs. Listen, you!" He swung to the waiter's gaping face. "Who was in here this evening? Who had a date with Abe?"

The waiter had to swallow twice before his voice worked; then it was thin and whiney. "I—I won't do any talking. I should call the police."

"You're talking to the police!"

The man's mouth sagged and he caught a quick noisy breath. "You—you mean you—" Kane palmed a badge that Peter Kane, private shamus in the employ of the Beacon Agency, had no legal right to possess.

"Who was here to see Brolberg this evening?"

"I wouldn't know. I wouldn't know for sure." The badge had a numbing effect on the waiter's ability to concentrate. "I only been on since five o'clock."

"Brolberg's only been dead an hour or so, mug."

"Well—well then, it might have been a man who came in here about eight thirty." The waiter was again wringing dishrags. "The place was empty and he said he had a letter for the boss. He showed me the envelope and said he had to deliver it in person, and he knew where Mr. Brolberg's office was, so I let him go in—"

"What'd he look like?"

"I don't remember. I didn't pay much attention."

"Damn your soul, *think!*" Kane roared.

"Well, he—I think he had on a gray suit and a gray hat, and he was kind of thin and he looked sick, sort of. That is, he was pale and sallow in the face, as if he was sick most of the time, not sick with anything in particular. I mean—"

"I get what you mean," Kane said slowly. "I—get it."

"About half an hour before that," the waiter said, "a woman came in and went straight to Brolberg's office. She looked as if she knew what she was about, so I didn't pay any attention to her."

"Who was she?"

The man made a feeble gesture with his hands. "I wouldn't know."

"You work here, and you don't know the names of the dames who have free tickets to Brolberg's private office?"

"I've only been here two weeks," the waiter mumbled.

Kane glared at him and felt resentful. The man's hands were red and sticky and were still wringing dishrags. Kane slapped them apart, growled: "For God's sake, don't do that! You give me the creeps!" The waiter stared at him pop-eyed as he strode out.

He hiked with long lithe steps past the dance floor and into the lobby, jammed his big frame into a phone booth, thumbed a nickel into the slot and dialed headquarters. The desk man answered the call and Kane said tersely: "Gimme Moe Finch."

Then he said: "Listen, Moe. Get this down. Abe Brolberg was murdered tonight, shot, by either a dame or a thin, sallow-faced guy that looked sick. Yeah, the same guy that looked sick at the track. The job was pulled on the quiet and was a nice clean job without any labels. Me, I'm on my way out of here. Moroni can mop up what's left."

Moe Finch wailed: "Kane! Where you goin'?"

"I got a hunch this is a grudge killing. D'Amينو, then Brolberg, see? Those two guys liked each other so much they wouldn't even spit on the same sidewalk. Brolberg's boys rub out D'Amينو, so D'Amينو's boys return the compliment." Kane's lips left a wet ring on the mouth-piece. "Get it? I'm gonna call around and see what I can catch."

He hung up. The pop-eyed waiter was standing in the middle of the lobby, nervously wringing his hands. Kane glared, said savagely: "Someone ought to put you in a strait-jacket." On his way out he slammed the door so hard that the glass shivered.

Hours later when he let himself into his own three-room apartment on Queensberry Street, he was bleary-eyed and top-heavy on his feet. Calling around at various joints frequented by the hirelings of D'Amينو and Brolberg had involved the imbibing of some very bad liquor. The Kane constitution, though inured to such things, had taken a terrific tossing.

He threw hat and coat on the studio couch, kicked his shoes off, hiked into the bathroom and mixed a double bromo, gulped it and gagged. When he went to bed, the electric clock in the living room was chiming the half hour between three and four, and Kane's last thoughts were of hands, human hands—the restless, sweaty paws of the head waiter at The Palms and the thin, flabby hands of young Gerard Lacey.

CHAPTER THREE

The Corpse That Looked Sick

MOE FINCH took a sodden cigar butt out of his mouth at eleven o'clock the next morning, stared over the headquarters desk into Kane's hang-dog face and whined plaintively: "I thought you

were gonna help me out and be a pal o' mine. Now look! Plastered to the gills!"

"Someday," Kane said, "you'll discover the difference between a skinful and a hangover. I got the hangover." He put his hands behind his back, teetered up and down on his toes and gazed with innocence at Moroni. "And what have you got that's eating you up, sweetness?"

Moroni had an important look on his face and for the past three minutes had been making strange, uncouth noises that went with the Moroni process of deep thinking. He came out of his trance, aimed a stiff forefinger at the top of Moe Finch's near-bald head and growled with much distortion of the lips—

"Listen. Last night's killing may be mob stuff like Kane thinks. Also it may be something else, see? Two times we been told about this thin, sallow-faced guy that looks sick. When a tip comes twice, from parties that don't even figure to know each other, it means something!" Moroni lowered his big body into a chair and hunched forward. "Listen now. That thin, sallow-faced stuff fits Soulful Sammy, don't it? Isn't he thin and sallow and sick-lookin'? And we gotta get this guy before he bumps someone else off, don't we? I say let Sammy loose, put a couple of men on his tail, and watch what he does!"

Kane murmured softly: "What a large brain you have, grandma!" But he didn't feel funny. His head had cobwebs in it and the bad liquor of last night had lined his mouth with flannel. He made for the door. "You guys can argue all you want. Thank God I'm just a private shamus and can ring out when I feel like it."

Moe Finch gripped the sides of the desk and wailed frantically: "Kane! Where you goin' now?"

"I gotta see Limpy about a pick-up," Kane said, and went out.

He went to Limpy's, prowled into Limpy's back room and sat in a booth. He had three of Limpy's unfailing revivers and decided, after the third, that he was sober enough to begin getting soused again. He was very soused when Limpy wallowed through a fog of cigarette smoke, thrust an anxious face forward and said: "Moe Finch is on the phone and near crazy from wantin' to talk to you."

Moe Finch said over the phone: "Listen, Kane. It must be I'm crazy or something. So help me, I let Moroni talk me into turnin' Soulful Sammy loose. Do somethin', will you? Kennedy and Mowens are tailing him and neither one of them could tail an elephant down Tremont Street!"

Kane grinned at the phone and gurgled: "For you, *padre*, I'd even do that." When he forked the phone and turned around, he was scowling. To Limpy he growled: "Moroni. Bah!" He was thinking not of Moe Finch but of Moe's wife, Alma. Before marrying Moe, Alma had tried hard to separate Peter Kane from liquor and make marriageable material of the Beacon Agency's ace dick. She had failed through no fault of her own, had finally, in despair, accepted Moe Finch as the next best alternative. But there was still a big something between her and Kane. There always would be.

He thought now that if Moe Finch went on the mat and lost his job, the chief sufferer would be Alma. He thought also that Soulful Sammy, on the loose again, would most likely have gravitated back to his habitual haunt, the race track.

Kane went to the race track.

THE cash customers were hopefully wagering their savings on the second race when he got there. The ponies were on parade. Kane elbowed through the

crowd drifting from paddock to track, hiked down the slope to the judge's stand and peered around. He was drunk, but it was a good clean drunk now and not a hangover. He spotted Kennedy and Mowens, the headquarters dicks, first, then saw Soulful Sammy and eased himself down to the rail where Sammy was operating.

He did so without attracting Sammy's attention, and for that matter it would have been difficult indeed to attract Sammy's attention at that moment. "Listen," Sammy was saying to a large-bosomed lady who listened closely. "Listen, lady. It ain't possible to beat the races by shooting blind. Now I been around the horses for many years, lady, in fact I was once one of them little cricket men that you see aboard the ponies this very moment, but I got overweight and had to become what is known as a trainer. It is not possible to beat the races unless you are in the know, lady, because the races are very crooked. Now I am in the know on this race and I say to you, bet every cent you own on this goat named Happy Lad. A goat is race-track language for horse, lady."

The lady was much impressed. She was facing Kane at a distance of about six paces but she either failed to see, or did not realize the significance of, the dry smile that played about Kane's face. She said to Soulful Sammy: "Are you *sure* Happy Lad will win?"

"Lady," said Soulful, "this race is what is known locally as in the bag. If you will look in the book you will see how in his last four starts Happy Lad has been a terrific last, which means, lady, that he was held back so the odds would be very much higher on this occasion today. I am not a tout, lady. I am giving you good information and if you are in the mood to hand me one or two fins—that is, five-dollar bills to you, lady—after you have

cleaned up, I will be seeing you here after the race."

The lady made gurgling sounds and hurried away to bet much money. A grin wrinkled Soulful Sammy's thin face and with the black crescent of a tapered fingernail he underscored the name of Happy Lad on his program. All other horses in the same race had been underscored similarly, with penciled notations marked beside their names so that Soulful Sammy would not be confused when he sought out his winning client after the contest was over.

With a gentle sign indicative of work well done, Sammy relaxed against the rail and lit himself a cigarette.

Kane was staring at something else.

The object of Kane's stare was apparently trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. He wore a soft felt hat with the brim turned low to shadow his face, and looked about him with anxious eyes, furtively, as he maneuvered through the crowd near the rail. He stiffened with a convulsive jerk when he met Kane's level gaze, and he stood stock-still, gaping, as Kane bore down on him.

Kane said: "I thought father never let you hang around here."

Gerard Lacey essayed a weak-lipped smile and took a backward step as though fearful of being slapped. "Father doesn't know," he said. "He isn't back yet."

"Oh."

"I had a tip on a sure thing," Gerard faltered, "so I—well, I sneaked out here." He made movements with his hands to show Kane that he was wearing shabby clothes, apparently his own brilliant idea of a disguise. "Listen. You won't let on you saw me, will you? I mean, if father should be talking to you some time—"

Kane snorted, moved away and centered his attention again on Soulful Sammy. Sammy had moved, because the large-bosomed lady had made a reappearance

and if a horse by the name of Happy Lad failed to win the coming race—as a horse by the name of Happy Lad figured to do—Sammy wished to be where the large-bosomed lady would fail to find him.

It was a mile event and the horses were lined at the barrier in front of the judges' stand. They were off as Kane aimed a cursory glance into the crowd. A wave of sound belched from the grandstand and Kane saw Moroni hoofing down the slope.

HE sighed, because he thought Moroni had money on the race. But he was wrong. Moroni was steering a frantic course for Kennedy and Mowens, the men assigned to tail Soulful Sammy. He saw Kane, changed his course, pawed Kane's arm and blurted: "I can use you, Kane. There's been a killing in the clubhouse."

Kane said sourly: "Save it. I'm not that drunk."

"I said I could use you!" Moroni belted. "Get Kennedy and Mowens and tell them to drag Soulful Sammy over to Anson Lacey's office. Be a help for once!"

Kane stared, saw the fever in Moroni's eyes and hunched his shoulders. "Anything," he said, "to oblige." He wondered vaguely who had been murdered, and how.

He found out five minutes later when he hiked down the second-floor corridor of the clubhouse and pushed open the door of Anson Lacey's office. The office was jammed to the walls with men in uniform and men not in uniform, track attendants and track police and chiselers who had managed to wriggle in for an eyeful of what lay on the table. There was much talk, and Moroni, in the hub of the mob, was yelling above the others to make himself heard.

The thing on the table was a thin, sallow-faced man of about Soulful Sammy's build and looks. His ankles overhung the

table-top, the Adam's apple in his neck bulged toward the ceiling, and a trickle of blood ran from under him into a crack in the table where it had formed a dark red pool.

Kane peered into the man's face and said: "His name is Coutu. Paul Coutu. He's a small-time thug and was up two months ago for peddling fake tickets on a sweepstakes. Who did it?"

Moroni said nasally: "How the hell do we know who did it?"

Coutu had been stabbed in the back. "We found him," a track attendant told Kane, "hanging over the verandah rail, like he was looking down at the people below. He didn't look dead; he looked sick. He might have been there like that for a long time."

Kennedy and Mowens came in with Soulful Sammy between them. Sammy looked scared, was trying to make words of protest come through pale lips that twitched convulsively. Moroni said grimly: "Listen, you guys. Did this mug get out of your sight even for a minute since we turned him loose?"

"Not even for a minute," Kennedy said.

"Was he up here in the clubhouse at any time?"

"He was not. He spent all his time fishing for suckers in the grandstand."

"Then he's out," Moroni growled. "And this here looks like another link in a series of gang killings. First D'Amino was rubbed out, then Abe Brolberg, and now Brolberg's boys have taken care of the mug that shot Abe. This here is the sallow-faced, sick-lookin' guy we've been trying to check on."

"And they all," Kane murmured, "lived happily ever after."

"Huh?"

"Hooley," Kane snorted. "Hooley and more hooley." Mumbling to himself, he elbowed his way out of the office. Deep down inside he felt ornery and disgusted,

and the only cure for a feeling of that kind was a quantity of Limpy's very bad liquor.

AT nine P. M. by Limpy's clock, Kane was sprawled in a booth at Limpy's, languidly studying the manner in which whiskey burned with a pale blue flame when spilled on the table and ignited with a match. At nine thirty the phone rang and Limpy came in back to say grumblingly: "It's for you, from Moe Finch, if you ain't too plastered to get up."

Moe Finch said: "If you hadn't been in such an unholy rush to get away this afternoon, mister, you'd've been in on something. First place, Moroni found the knife that killed Paul Coutu. Yeah. Found it jammed behind a pipe in the washroom in Lacey's office. Second place, Lacey himself was prowling around, trying to keep under cover."

"I had a talk with him," Kane said.

"Not with this Lacey you didn't. This was Anson Lacey in person, the old man himself. We tagged him for questioning but he swore up and down he don't know a thing about the murders. Says he got wind that his son was gambling again, so he sneaked up from the south to check up. Maybe so, maybe not. Anyhow, Moroni claims the whole thing is gang stuff."

"So what now?" Kane sighed.

"So we're keeping an eye on Brolberg's place and on the side we're tabbing the Laceys. Also Soulful Sammy."

"What," Kane demanded, "ever did become of Birdie Brooks and that Mabel Jilson dame?"

"They're around if we need 'em. What I'm telling you is to be careful, kind of. You been acting like you knew a lot. Maybe some of Brolberg's boys will be worried about guys that know a lot. I don't have time to attend any funerals."

"Thanks," Kane said. "I already thought of that angle."

He went back to the booth and Limpy said: "For God's sake, Kane, do you *got* to burn my tables? Ain't it enough you come in here to get plastered, without—"

With gestures, Kane got into his overcoat and jammed his hat on his head. He felt good, but he felt sleepy. He put both hands on Limpy's shoulders, murmured gently: "My pal. You'd come to my funeral, wouldn't you?" Unsteady on his feet, he prowled out the back way and walked home.

Twice, on the way home, he lingered in dark doorways and tried to get a good look at the man who was deliberately following him. But the man had very good eyesight and was clever enough to keep just far enough behind to be only a shadow.

"Moe Finch," Kane muttered, "had the right idea." He was thinking of the funeral.

When he let himself into his apartment, he was careful to close the door until the lock very definitely clicked; then he paraded into the living room, turned on a couple of lights and the radio, and poured a drink.

He didn't need the drink now, but reflected grimly that he might need it, and more like it, before the night was over. When Brolberg's boys figured you knew too much, you sometimes abruptly ceased knowing anything at all.

THE radio played dance music and Kane sat on the studio couch, made a church-and-steeple with his hands while the Kane brain worked overtime. In the end he hiked into the bedroom and dragged back the sheets of the bed, pulled a mound of blankets from a bureau drawer and went to work with the blankets, a length of rope and a wad of towels. It took him fifteen minutes to arrange the resulting contrivance on the bed, pull the covers over it and add the finishing

touches by poking and patting wherever necessary.

"So help me," he said proudly, "it even looks like me."

He tossed a coat and a pair of pants on a chair near the bed and threw a soiled shirt, two socks, undershirt and shorts on top of them. Then he kicked two shoes across the floor and the whole thing looked very much as if Peter Kane, drunk, had sloppily discarded his wearing apparel, sprawled into bed and was now dead to the world, slumbering blissfully beneath a warming tangle of covers.

Kane put out the light, went back to the living room and turned off lights and radio. Then he pulled a chair into deeper darkness away from the window and sat there nursing a pint.

Half an hour later a window creaked in the kitchenette and Kane opened his eyes very slowly, turned his head toward the hall doorway—and stared.

The window stopped creaking. Something heavy thudded to the floor. In a moment the something heavy moved again, tiptoed warily along the hall and steered a course for the bedroom, moving with such sluggishness that Kane had both shoes off and was on his feet before the bedroom door creaked open.

Sitting still so long had made Kane drunk. Prowling into the hall, he came within an inch of colliding with the door frame, had to stand there holding his breath and shaking his head to get his bearings.

The hall was empty. In the bedroom a loose floorboard creaked as the intruder tiptoed toward the bed. Kane heard a dull thud, a sudden squeak of the bed-springs and a guttural exhalation of breath. Next instant a dark shape streaked over the bedroom threshold and lurched down the hall toward him.

Kane heaved out from the wall and swung a knotted fist at the man's head.

He missed because he was too plastered to see straight, and because the killer, after plunging a knife into the dummy on the bed, had gone panicky and acted with unforeseen speed. Ordinarily such a killer would have stabbed three or four times with the knife, then realized that something was not according to Hoyle, and been easy prey for the surprise attack Kane had figured on. This one had messed things up.

Kane's fist made crunching contact with a wiry shoulder and the killer staggered in midflight, let out a hoarse grunt and careened against the wall. In the dark of the hallway Kane's eyes focused too slowly to be of any help. He swung again wildly, missed, went off balance. The killer made whimpering terror-sounds and streaked past him, made a bee-line for the kitchenette. The window groaned and the fire-escape rattled to an impact of pounding leather heels.

With a scowl on his face that would have soured milk, Kane pushed himself up, hipped his hands and stood swaying. He was drunk and sore with himself for getting drunk. He said aloud: "You dizzy damn dope, maybe some day you'll learn." Muttering maledictions, he clicked on a light switch and limped into the kitchen.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Grooved Knife

THE window was wide open and from the alleyway three stories below, under the fire-escape, came a noise of fast-moving feet thumping over concrete. Kane closed the window and hiked dolefully into the bedroom, thumbed another light switch. Gaping at the bed, he made a wry face and his stomach did a turnover.

The killer had evidently known the layout of the apartment, the exact location of the bed and the probable position of

any prospective victim who might be slumbering therein. The hilt of a long, wicked-looking knife protruded unpleasantly from that portion of Kane's dummy which in Kane himself would have been the heart. With a shudder, Kane drew the knife out and made eyes at it.

It was a very ordinary cheap knife with a soft, wood handle. The handle bore a number of thin grooves. Kane narrowed his eyes at the grooves, scowled, and thought they were interesting.

He carried the knife into the living room, parked himself in a chair and had a long, stiff drink to clear the fog out of his brain. During the next half hour he had many more drinks and centered his attention on the knife and the grooves. Especially the grooves.

"I guess the guy was nervous," Kane said. "I guess, on his way here, he had the jitters."

He wondered if the killer actually thought that Peter Kane, the Beacon Agency's gumshoe, was dead. There was one good way of finding out. Go ask him.

He wrapped the knife in a sheet of newspaper and stuffed it into his pocket. While he was lacing his shoes the phone rang. He scowled, got up and answered it, and Moe Finch said: "Kane? That you, Kane? *You?* My God, I thought you were done for! Listen, never mind asking me questions, but get down here to headquarters in a hurry!"

Kane went to headquarters.

When he walked in, a sleepy-eyed desk man blinked at him without emotion and said: "They're waitin' for you in the back room." In the back room Moe Finch was fidgeting at his desk, Moroni was chewing savagely on a thick cigar, and Mabel Jilson, the ex-girl-friend of Louis D'Amino, was saying things in a shrill, excited voice.

Kane looked around, sat down and said curiously: "Well?"

Moe Finch looked at Mabel Jilson and said: "Tell him, Mabel."

"It's like this." Mabel caught a deep breath and leaned forward. "I was on my way to your place to have a confidential talk with you. Never mind what I wanted to talk about; it don't matter now. The point is, just when I got there I saw this guy sneaking out of your place through a window. I backed up and kept my eyes peeled, and the guy came streaking down the fire-escape and faded around the corner.

"Well, I followed the guy, see? I didn't get a good look at him, but I know this. He went straight to Birdie Brooks' apartment house on Camp Street!"

"And that," Moroni put in, "is where you and me are goin' right now, Kane. Drunk as you are."

Kane opened his mouth to speak, changed his mind and transferred his gaze from Mabel Jilson to Moe Finch. He aimed a cigarette at his mouth, stood up and said without blinking his eyes: "O. K., Moroni. Let's go."

Scowling, he followed Moroni outside and got into a police coupé that stood at the curb. Moroni drove. After a while Moroni said gutturally: "This sort of clears things up, don't it? Either that or the Jilson dame is screwy."

"Either that," Kane said, "or we are."

A CLOCK, uptown, bonged the half hour between two and three as Moroni braked the car on Camp Street. Kane slid from the seat and stared at the apartment house where Birdie Brooks had three rooms. It was a big house with dirty white pillars out front and an amber light glowing above the doorway. Kane hiked up the steps, entered the vestibule and ran a finger down the row of names.

He put a finger on the button beside the name Brooks and pushed hard. Moroni said nasally: "You got a gun,

Kane?" Kane shook his head. Through the tube a woman's voice droned in weary sing-song: "Hello? Who is it?"

Moroni told her. Moroni also did the talking when he and Kane got to the door of Birdie's apartment. Birdie listened, standing with both hands jammed on the doorframe and her small, wiry body filling the entrance. She had pajamas on—pale blue ones, wrinkled from being slept in. Her eyes were circled and her mouth looked as if it had a bad taste. She said irritably: "Listen. I'm not even interested. I was in bed."

"One side, sister," Moroni growled. "We're lookin' around."

A scared look came into Birdie's haggard face and she stepped back, stood flat against the wall as Moroni and Kane walked past her into the apartment. Lights were on in the hall, the bedroom, the living room. Moroni put his head in the bedroom, peered at a crumpled bed and a chair full of feminine garments and growled: "I guess you were in bed, all right."

He put a hand on the girl's arm and said: "In here, sister, where we can keep an eye on you." She flung his hand off, walked stiffly into the living room and plunked herself down in a chair. She was sore. She said savagely: "Will you tell me what the hell this is all about?"

Moroni was already snooping. Kane stood in one place, stared around, picked out a chair and sat down. The apartment was hot and the heat did things to the whiskey in his stomach. He stuck his feet out and made himself comfortable.

"Listen." Birdie's voice had a wail in it. "For the love of God, what is this? Loosen up, will you, before I go nuts completely?"

"Ask Moroni," Kane said. "He thought it up."

"Thought what up?"

"Darned if I know."

The girl subsided with a noisy explosion of breath and an air of long suffering. After a while she turned the radio on. A dance band played two hot numbers and was beginning a third when Moroni appeared in the doorway.

Moroni's lips were curled, a cigarette drooping between them. His arms were full of junk. He dumped the junk on a chair, glared at Birdie and growled thickly: "So you can't figure out why we're here, huh?"

The stuff on the chair was mostly clothing. The main items were a man's gray suit and a pair of soiled white shoes. From a pocket of the coat Moroni pulled a .38 caliber automatic, a handful of loose shells and a bone-handled knife. "I found this mess," he said grimly, "under a pile of junk in one of the bedroom cupboards. That's all I want to know, sweetheart. Just as soon as we get you to headquarters, you can do the talking."

Birdie Brooks opened her eyes very wide and helped herself to a long, shuddering stare. Violently she lurched erect. Hysterically she wailed: "No. No! It's a frame!"

SHE said more than that at headquarters. Sitting in a straight-backed chair behind closed doors in Moe Finch's back room, with Moroni standing wide-legged before her, she hung onto her knees and stared mechanically at the bottom button on Moroni's vest and moaned: "I didn't do it. Honest to God, I didn't. It's a dirty plant."

Moroni was working up to a display of the famous Moroni psychology. Eyes narrowed, mouth rolling around a sodden cigar, he hooked his thumbs in his belt, pushed his shoulders up around his ears and glared holes in the girl's colorless face. "I'm warning you, sister, you'll save yourself a lot of grief by coming clean before we crack down on you. You killed

D'Amino and Brolberg and Paul Coutu, or if you didn't do the jobs with your own lily-white hands you were working with the thugs that did. Spill it!"

Across the room Mabel Jilson was doing things to her scarlet fingernails, and seemed indifferent. Moe Finch had both elbows on his desk and his knuckles jammed against his jaw. He had a wife at home and a soft streak under his leathery skin. Apparently he was not enjoying Moroni's methods. Neither was Peter Kane.

Kane said: "If it's all the same to you, I'll get my entertainment elsewhere." He opened the door, took a last look around and went out. Moroni took off coat and vest, tossed them on the desk and went to work in earnest.

"Maybe," Moroni said to Birdie Brooks, "you can explain away the stuff we found in your apartment. Go to work on that."

"I told you it's a frame!"

"And you don't know how they got there even? Try again, sister. Maybe you think this is a kindergarten. Maybe you think I'm Kane."

Moe Finch said: "Listen, Moroni. Let me talk to her. Maybe she'll come clean with me."

He was wrong. She wouldn't. For half an hour she sat stiff and straight, stared with wide wet eyes and moaned the same answer to every question. "I don't know, I told you. The whole thing is a frame-up, so help me God!"

Moe Finch gave up in despair, went back to his desk and mopped perspiration from his face. Mabel Jilson gazed indifferently at Birdie and murmured: "Well, anyhow, the girl's got guts." Moroni got sore, let his voice rise to a hoarse bellow and worked himself into the usual Moroni lather.

"Sister, all I'm warning you is, don't

get me mad! Don't make me lose my temper! If that happens—"

The door opened and Moroni jerked around, stood glaring. Over the threshold came Peter Kane, and Kane had one hand on the trembling left arm of Soulful Sammy. Moroni took a long look at the red welt on Sammy's jaw, at the crumpled condition of the greenish-gray suit he was wearing, at the frantic, scared expression on his face—and blurted out: "What the hell is *this*?"

"When I walked in on him, in the tenebment where he lives," Kane murmured, "he wouldn't come quietly like I told him to. So I had to do a job on him."

Moroni wrinkled his face and gaped. Moe Finch stared. Mabel Jilson stiffened in her chair, stopped cleaning her fingernails, and focused a narrow-eyed, unblinking gaze on Soulful Sammy's battered face.

Kane said quietly to Soulful Sammy: "Have a seat, little one, and tell the people all about it." He shoved Sammy forward. Trembling legs let Sammy down into a chair beside the desk and he shot a startled glance around him, saw Mabel Jilson for the first time and shuddered violently. Evidently he and Kane had already had a long talk. Almost inaudibly he whined: "I—I gotta get a lawyer. Ain't I entitled to a lawyer?"

"Tell Moroni," Kane snapped, "how you knifed D'Amino at the track the afternoon D'Amino was plastered."

The answer came from Mabel Jilson. She was out of her chair, snarling as she heaved herself forward. "You can't believe a word that rat says! He's a dirty, damn liar!"

"Tell 'em," Kane insisted, "how you got five hundred dollars for putting a knife in D'Amino."

SAMMY made sobbing sounds in his throat and stared wide-eyed at Mabel Jilson. He didn't answer Kane. He jerked

backward in his chair and shrieked: "Don't let her get at me! Keep her away from me, for God's sake! She'll kill me!"

She would have, if Moroni had not grabbed her and wrestled her into a chair. Kane was unscrewing the cap from a pint bottle. He took a long drink, leaned against the desk and wiped his mouth with the back of a blood-smearred hand. The hand was bloody from contact with Soulful Sammy's jaw.

"It's like this," Kane said. "D'Amino tossed Mabel over for Birdie Brooks, after he'd played around with Mabel for years and she helped make him a big shot. Tossing over a girl like Mabel is risky business. She got sore and paid Soulful Sammy five hundred bucks to square things for her. In order to keep Sammy out of trouble, she coached him on that hooley about a sallow-faced, sick-lookin' guy, so he'd have a talking point if the cops happened to tag him.

"The trouble was, Sammy yielded to temptation, mixed pocket-picking with murder, and made a mess of the whole business. And that was too bad."

Kane sighed, had another drink and successfully navigated the distance to the nearest chair. He was drunk and he was enjoying himself. "Well," he said, "it looked like Sammy might get out of it even at that, but someone else nosed into the affair. Abe Brolberg knew all about Mabel and D'Amino, figured things out for himself and called Mabel up to congratulate her—or something like that. Anyway, she had to get rid of him, so she went to his place and shot him, just like that.

"And, having killed him, she figured to build up this hocus-pokus about the thin, sallow-faced guy that looked sick, so she hired a guy who was sallow-faced and thin and sick-looking and paid him a few dimes to go to Brolberg's office and deliver a note or something. Just so the

cops would find out that this very sinister saw-toothed guy, whom they had already heard a great deal about, was in Brolberg's office just about the time of the shooting. Damn clever, these Jilsons!"

"It's a dirty lie!" Mabel Jilson belated. "It's a rotten dirty lie!" She was not looking at Kane. Her eyes were smouldering coals in a face utterly drained of color, and if Moroni's paws had not been curled around her arms, holding her down in her chair, she would have been at Soulful Sammy's throat.

Moroni stared daggers at Kane and seemed very annoyed at the grin on Kane's face. Moe Finch and Birdie Brooks merely sat. Soulful Sammy huddled low in his chair and made whimpering sounds, stared at Mabel Jilson as if terrified that she would yet find some way of destroying him.

"That Coutu business," Kane sighed, "was exceeding clever, so help me. Just what Mabel told Mr. Coutu, I wouldn't know for sure, but the guess is that she instructed him as follows: 'Mr. Coutu, you go into Brolberg's outer office with this letter, and if Brolberg is not there you wait a few moments and walk out again.' In that way she made very sure that Mr. Coutu would not discover Abe's body and report to the cops about it, because Abe's body was in the inner office behind a closed door.

"Or on the other hand, maybe Mr. Coutu knew all about everything. Anyway, it was very good pinochle to get Mr. Coutu out of the way so the cops could not tag him and make him talk too much, so Mabel trailed Mr. Coutu to the racetrack and bumped him off. She used Anson Lacey's office to clean up in afterwards. I imagine Soulful Sammy, being that sort of person, had a number of keys to various private places about the track. I found some of them in his room. Also I imagine Mabel has been involved in

many gang killings in the past, and the art of murder is nothing new to her. Furthermore she was once very clever in a knife act in vaudeville.

"And finally," Kane murmured, "Mabel decided to get rid of me because I was supposed to know many things which I did not know." He had another drink to drown the frog in his throat. "She dispatched Soulful Sammy to my place, to destroy me, and at the same time she arranged an elaborate frame on Birdie Brooks, because Birdie is the gal who stole Louis D'Amينو away from her in the first place. It is very sad business, being in love."

HE emptied the bottle, put it on the floor beside him and relaxed with a sigh of contentment. "And that," he said, "is that. Am I not very good, even if I did have to throttle Soulful Sammy to get the most of it out of him?"

Moroni, red in the face, made sputtering noises. Moe Finch said feebly: "What are you, one of these guys that play with crystal balls and tea leaves?"

Kane said elaborately: "I never use tea leaves because I never drink tea. It was like this. Soulful came to my apartment and murdered me and left a knife sticking right in my tummy. Or maybe it was my heart. Anyway, here is the knife." With exasperating lack of haste he fished the weapon out of his pocket, unwrapped it and held it in the palm of his hand.

"It is a very cheap knife for such a noble task, but look. It has many little grooves on the handle and the grooves were made with a sharp fingernail. Now many times at the track I have seen Soulful Sammy use a fingernail to underscore the name of a horse on his program. In fact he did it to me, myself, when he advised me one time to play Moralist, which I will always regret not doing.

"Anyhow, I looked at this knife with which Sammy murdered me and I said to myself, 'Mr. Kane, undoubtedly the owner of this knife is Soulful Sammy. Because why? Because these are fingernail marks. Undoubtedly,' I said to myself, 'Soulful Sammy was very nervous when he came here to commit murder. He had this knife in his pocket and he kept digging at it with his fingernails because he had a case of the jitters.'

"So then I thought: 'if Soulful Sammy is the man who murdered me, perhaps he is also the man who murdered D'Amino and Broberg and Paul Coutu. I will have a talk with him about those things, and I will ask him about these fingernail marks.

They are very little things, to be sure, but little things are sometimes very important.' So I had a talk with Soulful Sammy and—"

"And now," Moroni snarled, "you're soused to the gills. Bah!"

Moe Finch said softly: "What I think is, we should get some of Kane's liquor and feed it to some of the big-mouthed dicks in this department. Maybe it would save us a lot of running around."

Kane opened his eyes wide and gazed lovingly at Moroni. "It is very good liquor," he said. "It is much too good for Mr. Moroni."

With a sigh of contentment, he passed out.

FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

CROOK FOR A NIGHT

— By —
LESLIE T. WHITE

In which Toby Laird turns amateur cracksmen at the bidding of a mysterious lady who materializes out of the storm, only to find that a life of crime is no more a bed of roses than being an out-of-a-job newspaper reporter was.

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MURDER ALLEY



He used the girl as a shield.

by
**John
K. Butler**

Lonergan went into the whole thing blind, which was anything but smart for a dick who was supposed to know the ropes. It wasn't long before his eyes began to open, though, and thanks to the rats and a red-headed girl he managed to crash through with a minimum of murders involved and only a hundred grand hot money to cool off in the blood bath.

CHAPTER ONE

Chinatown Rendezvous

LIGHT from Oriental shops and from paper lanterns strung across the narrow street filled Grant Avenue with a festive radiance that fought to

support the weight of the fog. The roof of mist was cold and damp as it swirled down long, wraith-like arms, drawing clammy fingers across men's faces.

Lonergan kept walking, but he was aware of the man who was shadowing him. In the ups and downs of his career

as a dick, Lonergan had done some shadow work himself; he knew the tricks.

Lonergan walked leisurely. Now and then he stopped before a shop window with its display of brocaded silks, carved teakwood and shiny brass. But always he had an eye for the man who shadowed him.

Chinatown has two sections. The first few blocks of Grant Avenue are bright with light even on a foggy night, and white tourists and visitors saunter along the sidewalks, gaze curiously into show windows, go into the shops of the prosperous Chinese merchants and finger silks and jades and other importations. This section ends abruptly. Further down, no more paper lanterns across the street, no more bright show windows catch the Occidental trade. This is the deeper Chinatown, the Chinatown for the Chinese.

Lonergan passed the border-line. He saw two tourist women, arm in arm, turn back with a giggle of feminine fright as they discovered themselves beyond the lights and the protection of familiar sights and sounds.

The street was dark and hushed, fog clustering about the street lamps in a moving mist. Sometimes a sliver of light showed under the drawn blinds of a shabby store, and, from inside, often came the musical drone of Chinese voices, the faint click of chips and dominoes.

LONERGAN stopped, turned. He dropped his hand into his overcoat pocket, his fingers slipping over cold steel till they closed on the gun butt. The man, his shadow, came on, his arms swinging carelessly at his sides.

He stopped a few paces before Lonergan, inclined his head in a greeting. "Guess you're Rex Lonergan," he said.

In the light of a street lamp Lonergan saw a pale, smooth-shaven face, thin lips twisted into a lopsided smile. Lonergan

noded an admission to his identity and said: "It's about time you opened up. Maybe you think I get a kick out of having a guy match steps with me halfway through Chinatown."

The lopsided smile remained as the thin lips moved. "Orders, Mr. Lonergan. Just come this way." Over his shoulder, as he stepped forward, he added: "My name's Smith."

Lonergan fell in step with the man, but he was nobody's fool and he kept his right hand in his pocket.

"What's all this about?" he asked. "I'm a curious man. I like to have some idea what's up when I start down dark streets with strangers."

Smith looked at him and winked. "It's O. K. If you don't like the set-up, you can keep that rod in your pocket on me. I don't like it but it's O. K. if it makes you feel any better."

"I still want to know where I'm going," Lonergan said. "I get a screwy letter down in L. A. I'm told to hop the day train for Frisco. I'm told, by parties unknown, to be on Grant at California Street in Chinatown at ten P. M. To start walking north. It might've been a spot."

"It didn't seem to scare you out," Smith grinned.

"The letter made me curious."

"Oh, sure," Smith said sarcastically. "It was just the letter. The five hundred bucks didn't have a thing to do with it."

They stopped before a drab store with windows darkened by green blinds. The blinds were cracked with age, and threads of light showed through in patterns like golden cobwebs. Smith looked up and down the street before rapping on the door. He gave three, evenly spaced raps.

The door had a glass panel backed, like the windows, with a green blind. Lonergan saw, written on the glass in crude worn letters, the name—*Kwong Hong Fat*.

At first the door only opened a crack, a Chinaman with a face like a mask peered out. Then the door opened all the way and Smith nodded for Lonergan to follow him.

Inside, the air was musty and too warm. A couple of fantan games were going. Expressionless Oriental faces turned toward Lonergan and his companion, turned back to the games again as though the entrance of the two white men had been an anticipated development. No word was spoken. The Chinaman who had opened the door closed it with a clicking of bolts, and seated himself upon a teak-wood stool; his hands tucked up the sleeves of his loose black jacket, he sat there in moody impassivity.

Smith led the way along a counter laden with rice cookies, moon cakes, lichee nuts and candied ginger. There were teas, too, everything labeled with red cards bearing black Chinese characters.

"This way," Smith said.

HE SHOULDERED through a curtain of strung beads, went along a narrow, foul-smelling corridor. Uncovered, and dusty light bulbs burned dimly in open sockets in the ceiling. Doors to left and right were closed. There was no sound but the slapping footsteps of the two men.

Lonergan said: "This proves something I've suspected for a long time—I'm a sap."

Smith didn't turn, didn't say anything. The corridor lifted steeply in a flight of wooden steps that creaked underfoot. It turned twice, then came to an abrupt end against a wall of tongue-and-groove pine. Smith didn't slacken his pace. It seemed he was going to bump open-eyed into the wall. But he didn't. He flipped a metal switch and a panel of the wall the size of a door popped inward a few inches. He caught the edge of the panel, opening it back, holding it for Lonergan to pass through.

Lonergan said tonelessly: "Is this a gag?"

And Smith winked one eye and smirked lopsidedly as the ex-detective, bodyguard or what-have-you stepped into darkness and a sudden chill of foggy air.

They were in an alley, the light from the secret door shut off as Smith snapped it into place.

"Follow me and pick up your feet," Smith suggested. "You never know what you're gonna trip over in these Chink alleys."

They continued through the alley, passing steep cross streets that fell away to Grant Avenue. Then they were on the California Street hill, a half a block above the brightly lighted section of Chinatown. Smith turned up the hill.

Lonergan swore. "Is this some kind of ring-around-the-rosie? You pick me up down there, tail me halfway through Chinatown, lead me through a Chink joint, back through an alley, and I'm only a few yards from where I started. What's the idea?"

"I only do what I'm told," Smith said.

"Sure," Lonergan agreed quickly. "And you were told I might be careful enough to have a friend or two on my tail. So you draw me through knot-holes just to be on the safe side."

"You know the answers," Smith said, "so why ask the questions?"

They ascended California Street. A cablecar passed them, going down the hill, bell dinging, the gripmen working their long levers fore and aft. When the car had slid away it left the street very silent except for the rhythmic hum of the cable in the slot between the tracks.

At the top of the hill, the wind blew strong and the fog about the street lamps moved in swift clouds. Lonergan saw the window lights in towering hotels and apartments, veiled by fog. There was a

high brick wall beside him and a heavy iron gate which Smith swung back.

The great mansion behind the wall was known to Lonergan. It was one of San Francisco's oldest, a place of outmoded brick architecture with tall chimneys and many gables. As they turned in the gate, the mansion showed itself—a bulking black shape without a single light, like a prison in the fog.

"From a Chinese dive to a millionaire's mansion," Lonergan commented. "It's a game and I'm it."

Smith pressed a button in the dark doorway. A bell rang faintly inside and Lonergan heard the door open, saw a black square of emptiness where the door should have been. He crouched back, but Smith, at his elbow, said: "Go on in, Mr. Lonergan. Millionaires don't kill."

WITH the clicking of the front door after them, lights flashed into sudden radiance. Lonergan was in an immense hallway with drawn red drapes and gold-framed paintings. A butler, in formal attire, stood by the light switch. He bowed stiffly from the waist, came forward for Lonergan's hat and coat.

For a moment Lonergan hesitated at slipping out of his overcoat, thinking of the gun in the pocket. Then the grandeur of the mansion reassured him; he gave up the coat.

"This way, Mr. Lonergan, sir," the butler bowed.

Lonergan followed him but Smith didn't. As Lonergan passed through the tall door which the butler held open for him, he glanced back and saw Smith sitting on a bench with his hat in his hands. He gave Lonergan a crooked smile and a mock salute, muttered softly: "Happy landings, buddy."

Lonergan was ushered into a great room, a place of bookcases, drawn drapes and flickering firelight. The man who rose

from a deep chair by the fire was huge. He had a square, ruddy face over a pair of mighty shoulders. His hair was gray and his eyes were gray.

He extended a strong hand and said: "So you're Rex Lonergan. Take a seat."

Lonergan sank back on the cushions of a davenport and watched the gray-haired man build a pair of highballs with big, active hands. He took cakes of ice from a small bucket with a set of silver tongs, dropped the cakes into the glasses.

"My name is George Varney," the host said. "If you were in San Francisco ten years ago, you may remember me. Politics. I ran for mayor but the best man won. I left the city to get into the oil game. I made some real money."

Lonergan said he hadn't been in Frisco ten years ago. And he didn't know anything about the oil business. But this mansion was plenty of evidence that Varney had made money.

George Varney squirted fizz water into the glasses and handed one to Lonergan. "I'm glad you decided to come, Lonergan. I thought maybe the—er—unusual way of sending for you might scare you out."

"I don't scare easy," Lonergan told him. "And five hundred bucks looked pretty good to me. Things weren't breaking for me down in Los Angeles. You see—"

George Varney stopped him with a wave of his hand. "You can't tell me anything about yourself that I don't know already. I learned a long time ago it's a good idea to look into a man's record before hiring him. So I looked into your case pretty thoroughly. I know you were a good man on the homicide squad down in L. A. You were all lined up for a promotion. Then a political boss wanted to crush an indictment and you wouldn't play ball. He figured you were too honest to have around any more so they switched you over to the liquor detail and when

the smoke blew over they kicked you off the payroll for accepting a bribe. I guess it was a neat frame-up."

LONERGAN eyed the man in surprise, looked into a ruddy face smiling with knowledge of Lonergan's affairs. The big man sipped his drink complacently and asked: "Surprised I know your history?"

"No," Lonergan said. "I've had my history tossed at me every time I look for a job. But they don't give me the story as complete as you do. They don't say anything about a frame. Everybody seems to think that when a cop gets bounced he must be bad medicine."

George Varney frowned into his highball glass like a fortune teller looking into a crystal. Without looking up, he said: "I guess you've had a hard time living down that bad break. And I guess the Warrington case didn't help your reputation any."

Lonergan's eyes narrowed. He didn't like veiled statements, subtle remarks. A man accustomed to saying exactly what he had in mind, he demanded the same frankness from others.

"What do you mean by that crack?" he challenged.

Varney smiled. "I mean it's just another unfortunate incident in your career. You get bounced from the sheriff's office down in L. A. You and I know it was a frame to get an honest officer out of the way but others won't believe it. Then you get a job up here as a bodyguard to Sidney Warrington. You're working for him only two months and the old boy gets kidnaped right out from under you. And you can't show the police a very good alibi as to where you were at the time."

Lonergan rose abruptly from his seat on the davenport. He towered over Varney, glaring down at him. His knuckles were white as he gripped the highball glass.

He swore, saying, "I've heard enough. I was cleared in that investigation and you know it. If you think I'm going to sit here and swallow your damn accusations. . . ."

George Varney sat relaxed in his chair, suave and calm. His coolness was accentuated by Lonergan's show of temper.

"Sit down, Lonergan. Nobody's making any accusations. I don't think there's another man in the city more convinced of your innocence than I am. But coming on top of your trouble in L. A., this Warrington kidnaping was a bad break for you."

Lonergan sat down. "You're telling me?" he said sourly.

"The police had to dismiss you for lack of real proof but a faint cloud of doubt will dog you till the real kidnapers—or kidnapers are found. It's a mighty serious case. A hundred grand paid out in ransom, none of the bills ever showing up, Warrington's body found floating in the bay, and no clues."

"So what?" Lonergan asked bluntly.

"Just this, Lonergan. I'm offering you a chance to clear your name forever. And I'll pay you two thousand dollars for doing it."

CHAPTER TWO

Framed

VARNEY allowed Lonergan time in which to be impressed. Lonergan polished off his drink and grinned at his host. "At the tender age of seven," he said, "I stopped believing in Santy Claus. So you can just cut out the build-up and give me the facts. Where do you come in?"

Varney chuckled. "I like you, Lonergan. Have another drink." Pouring Scotch, fizzing water from the syphon, he went on: "I'll tell you exactly where I

come in. I'm still a politician at heart, Lonergan. I may have cleaned up in oil but I want to get back to the old game of politics, honest politics, just as you want to get back your reputation as an honest law officer. I want to crash the gates again. But things have changed around here since I got out. I don't have contacts. The only way I can move into quick power is to pull something sensational. I'll make the public call for me and then the established politicians will have to move over and make room for me."

"It sounds good," Lonergan said. "What's the gag?"

"Just this, Lonergan. I'm going to solve the Warrington kidnaping. I'm going to bring the murderers of that fine old man to justice. And I don't intend to share one ounce of credit with the police. I'll work in the dark and, as a newspaperman would say, I'm going to scoop the town."

"And how do I earn two thousand bucks?" Lonergan asked.

"I'm not a detective," Varney said. "You are. My chauffeur—he's that fellow, Smith, who brought you here—managed to pick up a bit of information on the case. He may help but I need a real sleuth on this. I think you have the ability, for one thing. But you have still another value to me. You and Warrington's secretary, that Miss Jordon, came up for a lot of hard police grilling. They wanted to prove it was an inside job with you and the Jordon girl pulling together. I think they'd still like to hang it on you and the girl."

"They'd like to hang it on anybody," Lonergan said.

"Exactly. But I'm going to use both you and the Jordon girl to bust open the case. It'll make the law machine look pretty silly when I break open the kidnaping with the assistance of the only

suspects the police ever dug up. See the publicity angle? 'George Varney uses police suspects to trap real Warrington kidnapers!'"

Lonergan chuckled. "When do I start? And how?"

"Right now. But remember we have to move quietly. I don't want the police to know you're in town. If they do, they'll watch you and you won't be able to do anything. And if they learn what we're up to, they'll hamper us—and when the big blow-off comes everybody down at the city hall, including the office clerks, will grab the credit."

"I can handle it," Lonergan said.

VARNEY smiled and nodded. "I know you can. But I don't want to be connected with this thing till I show my winning cards. You stay away from me and I'll send you orders through Smith. To begin with, I have to get some information from the fingerprint bureau. That'll be tough. They may start wondering what I'm up to and watch me. Therefore, I don't want you to come near this house again. Tomorrow I'll get word to you as to how you can reach me without coming here and without using a phone."

"Swell," said Lonergan. "Any idea yet who we're looking for?"

"Enough to know our game won't be a cinch. The Warrington kidnaping and murder was no amateur job. We're up against a gang. I don't know who the ringleaders are but they may be powerful enough to grease some of the political machinery around here. We'll know more by tomorrow."

Varney rose and pulled twice on a cord which dangled from a tapestry on the wall. He shook hands with Lonergan, saying, "Smith will speak with you before you go."

The butler appeared, holding the door open for Lonergan to pass through into

the hall. He closed the door again and got Lonergan's hat and coat.

Smith, rising from the bench, sauntered over to Lonergan, a cigarette in his thin lips that bobbed as he talked.

"Mr. Varney wants you to check out of your hotel," he said. "He has a house at the beach and you're supposed to go there right away, tonight. Take a cab. The house is down in the sand dunes near the Fleishacker Zoo. The number is Nine Fifty-six. Think you can remember it, or do you want to write it down?"

Lonergan glared into the pale, smirking face and found himself loathing it. He took the key Smith handed him and said sourly: "If I forget it I'll ask a seagull."

Smith took the cigarette from his thin lips and stood staring at the curling blue smoke. "I'll be down there to see you tomorrow sometime. You just wait around. There's Scotch in the kitchen."

Lonergan clapped on his battered felt hat and buttoned his overcoat. The butler had one hand on the front doorknob, the other on a light switch.

"It's Mr. Varney's wish, sir," said the butler with verbal dignity, "that I turn down the lights as you leave."

Lonergan was outside, crossing the dark, wet garden of the mansion which was like a forgotten prison when he looked back at its bulking, black shape. Damp fog swirled about the street lamps and from the bay came the mournful hooting of ferry boats, the dismal wail of fog sirens.

A gloom, like the fog, settled over Lonergan. A few moments before, he had felt elated at the chance to clear himself of the stigma which blotted his police record with the incident of the Warrington kidnaping and murder. But as he thought it over he had a definite feeling that there was something wrong with the whole set-up, something that didn't ring

true. He didn't know what it was, couldn't put his finger on it.

But it was there. Definitely, undeniably, it was there. It spelled trouble.

THE red tail light of the taxi vanished in the thick fog that rolled in from the sea. The Pacific was nearby; Lonergan could hear the steady boom and hiss of the surf.

Varney's beach-house stood back from the main highway. Lights showed in downstairs windows and a light burned on the front porch, dimly revealing the house number. Lonergan wondered at the lights as he set down his Gladstone bag on the porch and tried his key in the door.

The key worked but the house lights went out simultaneously. It was as though the click of the key had by some mechanical means snapped off the lights. Lonergan swung the door back, standing aside. Nothing happened. He picked up his Gladstone, entered. His voice sounded loudly in the stillness of the dark room as he ordered: "Turn on the lights and let's talk this over."

The lights snapped into being. The gun, a snub-nosed .32 revolver, pointed at Lonergan in a small, steady hand.

"Oh, it's you," said the red-headed girl, lowering the gun. "I was expecting somebody but I didn't know who. This beach has been getting on my nerves. So desolate—just that constant roar of surf, and the fog rolling in."

Lonergan closed the front door, sat down on his Gladstone bag and said: "How've you been, Vivian? Long time no see."

She remained standing. Her black dress was long, bringing out the lithe lines of her figure. Her red hair fluffed, a thick lock of it coming down over her forehead in a red swirl.

She eyed the piece of luggage Lonergan

was sitting on and asked: "Are you staying here?"

"It seems like I am," Lonergan nodded.

She compressed her red lips. "I might have known there'd be some catch in it when Mr. Varney sent me down here. He said I'd meet a detective and we'd work together on the Warrington case. He didn't say the detective was you."

"Does that change everything?" he grinned.

"It does," she said coldly. "I came here because secretarial work has been hard to find since the Warrington case. Nothing was actually pointed at me but the stigma is there. I told Mr. Varney I was ready to do anything I could to clear the thing up, purely from a selfish viewpoint. But I'm not ready to spend my nights fighting you off."

Lonergan removed his battered hat and sailed it across the room into a chair. "There're two incidents in my life I can't seem to live down. One is Warrington's getting snatched out from under me. The other is the time I tried to make a pass at you. I've been really drunk only two times in my life, and those were the two times."

Vivian Jordon went to a hatrack and took down a black fur coat with a flourish. Eyeing Lonergan up and down, she said: "There's a case of Scotch in the kitchen—so I won't stay."

"Don't rub it in, Vivian. It won't take a third time to prove to myself I'm a heel when I'm plastered. Stick around and let's put our heads together on this Warrington thing."

She studied him a while, then put her coat back on the rack. "All right, but remember the Warrington case is the only thing we put our heads together on."

"Swell," Lonergan said. "You're as fast with me as if you were with your own grandmother."

Humorous crinkles gathered about

Vivian's eyes. Her lips smiled as she said: "You don't know my grandmother!"

Lonergan laughed. "Now that that's settled, what do you think of George Varney?"

She seated herself on the davenport, tucked one leg up and clasped the ankle. "I think he has a wild idea for smashing into politics, but if he can solve the Warrington case he'll be an angel as far as I'm concerned. Of course, if the police find out they'll stop him. They don't want ordinary citizens solving their unsolved crimes."

Lonergan said: "He's taking care that nobody finds out. You should have seen the letter he sent me down in L. A. Unsigned—it was a regular Black Hand letter. But he thoughtfully enclosed five hundred bucks—that got Lonergan."

"I guess you've had a tough time yourself," Vivian said.

"Tough doesn't half cover it. But if I can help bust open this Warrington case, I'll be able to get back into the old line of work as an honest dick. Then maybe people will believe I was framed when I got bounced off homicide down in L. A."

HE ROSE and stretched his arms over his head. Slipping out of his overcoat, he said: "All this serious talk makes me thirsty. Mamma, can little Rex have one teeny-weeny Scotch?" He held up his hand to her with thumb and forefinger just one inch apart to illustrate what he meant by "teeny-weeny."

She answered him by illustrating with her own thumb and forefinger, but the fingers were only half an inch apart. She wrinkled her nose at him.

He found a whole case on the kitchen drainboard. Very thoughtful, he concluded happily. He took a bottle and a glass and stepped into the hall. He decided to play fair with Vivian and let her see him measure out his half-inch teeny-weeny.

The hall commanded a view of part of the living room. Vivian Jordon, her back to the hall, was bending over his Gladstone, working at the catch on it with small quick fingers.

Lonergeran tip-toed into the room, stood back of her.

"Anything I can help you find in there?" he asked sharply.

She straightened up, faced him, her face flushed.

"I'm sorry," she explained, "I know it looks bad, but I only wanted to borrow a pair of pajamas. I forgot mine."

Lonergeran bowed from the waist. She wasn't fooling him any. He said, mockingly: "Anything I have is yours, of course."

Lonergeran took one of the upstairs bedrooms. He stood by a window with all the lights out and listened to the dull, monotonous roar of the surf. The fog completely misted the glass.

A sliver of gold light came under the hall door. He heard the tapping of high heels on wooden flooring and knew Vivian Jordon was preparing for bed. He hoped she'd like the pajamas he'd lent her.

Then he heard her call his name. He jerked open the hall door quickly and she was standing out there in the bright gold light wearing a filmy feminine nightgown and a silk negligee.

Lonergeran looked her over and said challengingly: "I didn't remember that my pajamas looked like that."

She blushed, saying quickly: "Oh, yes, I didn't need yours, after all. I didn't know I brought anything but—"

"Never mind piling up the little white lies," he told her. "I know you just wanted a peek into my suitcase."

She let it pass, blushing a little still. "I called you because I heard something scratching in the attic over my room. It might be rats. I don't like rats. I thought you could do something about it. There's

a trapdoor in my closet; I guess it goes to the attic."

Lonergeran passed her, going into her bedroom. She was behind him as he reached the closet door. He handed her a small key and said: "This opens my Gladstone. Maybe you'll want to frisk it while I'm in the attic."

She didn't say anything, ignored the key. He dragged a light chair into the closet while she stood there, watching him. He stood on the chair and pushed up the trapdoor. He lifted himself through the opening and sat on the edge to strike a match.

He said: "If there are any rats here, I don't know what I can do about it."

THE match glowed in his hand, flickering light showing him the dusty framework of the roof. The planking under him was dusty, too. No, it wasn't; not all of it. He saw where the dust had been smeared and wiped up by somebody's clothes. Then, as the match burned his fingers, he saw a box.

He groped for it, got hold of it. He didn't strike another match but held the cardboard shoebox in the light that came up from the closet. There was nothing to hold the cover on. He removed it, saw a stack of currency inside—crisp, green bills.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he muttered.

Another match flared in his hand but didn't show him any more boxes. Feeling reasonably sure the attic was empty, he dropped to the chair in the closet, stepped down.

In the bedroom Vivian Jordon eyed the box under his arm.

"Did you see any rats?" she asked.

"No," he answered meaningly, "but I smell one."

He turned the box upside down over the bed and the neatly bound stack of paper money tumbled out. He picked it

up, thumbed the bills. Then a look of surprise came over his face. He ripped off the binding and examined the money more carefully.

"Is it the McCoy?" Vivian Jordon asked.

He gave a hard laugh. "Is it? Baby, this is five grand of the Warrington ransom money. Five grand of some of the hottest cash in the country and Mrs. Lonergan's little boy, Rex, stands here playing with it and waiting for some curious law officer to ask him how he got it!"

She gave a little gasp. "You mean you can tell—by the serial numbers?"

Lonergan nodded grimly. He folded the stack of crisp bills in half and slipped it into his pants pocket. Vivian's face had a startled look as she said: "But this is Mr. Varney's house. Do you suppose somebody's wise already to his scheme to break the Warrington case and they're trying to throw a monkey wrench into the works before he gets too far?"

"It's an idea," Lonergan told her, "but right now I've only got one thing in mind. We've got to scam out of here. Do you realize what would happen if the police walked in and found Vivian Jordon and Rex Lonergan, two former suspects, loafing around a house full of ransom bills?"

She bit her lower lip, nodding wide-eyed. "Do you think there's more of it around here?"

"There's ninety-five grand more somewhere," he said. "It was never passed."

"Shall we look for it?"

Lonergan laughed bitterly. "You're always forgetting how we stand with the law, particularly *me*. They tried pretty hard to tie me up with that snatch and I'll probably be a suspect till I prove myself otherwise." He added with sarcasm: "Do you think I can walk into the city hall with the ransom money and say, 'Here's the stuff; I found it—honest'?"

"Of course," she said, but she under-

stood his point. "What do we do next?"

"You get into your clothes and we scam out of here. I'll have to get in touch with Varney."

"But he said to stay here; he'd get in touch with us."

"I know," Lonergan said, "but he probably didn't count on this angle. This sort of changes the rules of the game."

As Lonergan strode out of her bedroom she was already pulling off her negligee, revealing the smooth curves of her silk-clad figure.

"Shall I call a cab?" she asked from the doorway.

"No," Lonergan said. "The wire might be tapped."

CHAPTER THREE

Mystery Mansion

THEY walked down the beach highway in the fog to the end of the carline. Lonergan carried his own Gladstone and Vivian Jordon's grip. He was silent, thinking. He couldn't quite figure Vivian out. Of one thing he was fairly certain; she couldn't be closely tied in with the kidnapers or she would have known of the ransom money hidden in the attic. She wouldn't have allowed him to make his discovery by sending him up there to look for rats. Yet he had caught her trying to go through his suitcase. What was she looking for?

The car was empty at this late hour of the night. It hummed, roared and rattled as it swayed through Twin Peaks Tunnel to Market Street.

"It's too late to do anything now," Lonergan told Vivian Jordon. "You go to the Chandler Hotel. Register under the name of Mrs. Vera Johnson. Lie low till you hear from me."

"Why the Mrs.?" she wanted to know.

"That's to keep the clerks and the lobby

Don Juans from thinking up reasons to talk to you. I'm going to the Y.M.C.A. Nobody would ever think of looking for Rex Lonergan in a joint like that."

IT WAS eight o'clock in the morning when Lonergan turned in the gate at the top of California Street. The big mansion stood there in ageless silence, like a monument to the architecture of yesterday. The fog had lifted from the bay and sunlight sparkled on the water.

Lonergan nodded to a gardener, went to the door, rang the bell. He got no answer to repeated ringings.

The gardener came up. "They're not home," he offered.

"Where are they?"

"In Europe," the gardener said.

"You must be mistaken," Lonergan told him.

"No, sir. They went to Europe last month. They won't be back for a year."

"That's crazy," Lonergan said. "I was here last night. I spent maybe half an hour with Mr. Varney."

"Who?"

"Mr. Varney. The man who lives here."

"Nobody by that name lives here," the gardener said slowly. "You must have the wrong house. Mrs. Lawson and her two daughters live here. They went to Europe. The house is closed up."

Lonergan pushed his hat back on his head. He took out a quill toothpick and probed breakfast out of his teeth. "You mean to say nobody else lives here? They didn't lease the house, or sublet it, or anything?"

"What would they do that for?" the gardener asked. "The old lady's got more money than the mint. They just laid off the help and closed it up. There's nobody here but me and the watchman. I come in the day and the watchman comes at night."

Lonergan's eyes squinted slightly but

he seemed to be absorbed only in the process of picking his teeth. "You tell me where I can find that watchman. Maybe he can tell me where the people are—the ones I visited here last night."

"You must have the wrong house," the gardener insisted.

"Nuts," Lonergan said. "How could I? Is there any house around here like this? All hotels, apartments. This joint sticks out like a ferry boat in a mill pond."

The gardener thumbed through the pages of a worn notebook. "I don't know where the watchman lives but his number is Mission Two-five-five-nine. His name's O'Brien."

Lonergan fished ten dollars out of his wallet. "One buck of that is for the information; nine is to forget I asked for it. Forget anybody came here at all."

The gardener nodded, his face showing utter bewilderment—like a stage comedian overplaying a part. Leaning on his rake, the ten dollars in his hand, he was still gaping after Lonergan as the ex-detective rounded the gate.

A woman with a thick Irish brogue answered the phone at Mission 2559. She said Mr. O'Brien hadn't come in yet. He should have come in over an hour ago and she was worried about him.

"I'd be worried too, if I was you," Lonergan said, and rang off.

The Chandler Hotel was just a few doors down Powell Street from the corner drugstore. Lonergan told the desk clerk he wanted to speak to Mrs. Vera Johnson on the house phone. Vivian's voice, answering, sounded sleepy.

"Listen, Mrs. Johnson," Lonergan said, "I want to talk to you. Put on your Eskimo suit; I'm coming up."

TWO minutes later he was in Vivian's room, sitting on the edge of her rumpled bed, his battered hat stuck on the back of his head. The red-headed girl sat in a

chair by the window, her fur coat over her nightgown.

She said: "You have a mighty casual way of sitting around a girl's bedroom."

"Cut out the chatter," Lonergan told her. "Tell me how I can get in touch with George Varney."

She gave him a puzzled look, her small fingers playing through the fur collar of her coat. "I haven't any idea. I thought you knew some way. You said you were going to get in touch with him when we left the beach. I thought of course you knew how to do it."

"So did I. I just went up to his big house on the hill and a gardener gave me a funny story. Said nobody by the name of Varney lived there. Of course Varney told me not to go back there. The gardener might have been planted out there just to give me that story. But I'll see Varney if I have to break in a window."

Vivian Jordon stared down at her fingernails, saying, "I didn't even know where his house was. He came to my apartment, told me the proposition and said he'd get in touch with me at the beach house. Maybe we'd better go back and wait."

Lonergan rose from the bed. He walked to Vivian's chair, stood over her, aiming a thick forefinger straight into her face like the barrel of a gun. He frowned as he demanded: "You wouldn't lie to me, would you? Maybe there's some reason why you don't want me to reach Varney."

There was a half-smile on her lips as she looked up at him. "Don't be silly," she scoffed.

"Have you sent out any calls at all since you registered here?"

"No!" she said. "And I don't like your third-degree methods."

"O. K.," Lonergan said, heading for the door. "You just stick around here close till I see you again. I've got to get an answer to this mess."

Downstairs, Lonergan stopped at the desk. He leaned a big hand on the hotel register and said to the clerk: "Mrs. Vera Johnson is checking out this morning. You can send a boy up for her bag in about twenty minutes. In the meantime I want to settle up the bill."

The clerk eyed him a moment. But it wasn't the custom of the hotel to question who paid a bill as long as it was paid. He brought the bill out and Lonergan glanced at it. The ex-detective saw what he had hoped to find; his trick had worked. On the bill was listed a telephone call to Golden Gate 9009.

"Is that the only call we owe you for?" Lonergan asked.

The telephone switchboard was right back of the desk. At that instant a red light winked on and the operator answered. "Golden Gate Nine-o-o-nine," she said mechanically, "just a moment, please."

Lonergan smiled. He had expected this. Evidently the red-headed girl was calling someone to tell of Lonergan's visit.

To the clerk, Lonergan said: "I guess that call will be put on this bill, too."

The clerk spoke to the operator. "Yes," he said to Lonergan, "Mrs. Johnson is calling that number again. That'll be another five cents."

Lonergan laughed. "It's worth it," he said.

Suddenly the telephone operator spoke over to the clerk. "That call to Golden Gate Nine-o-o-nine was canceled before I made connection. You don't have to put it on the bill."

Lonergan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He settled up the bill mechanically, his mind on other things. Why had Vivian Jordon suddenly canceled that call? Who had she contacted before at that number?

HE WENT back to the drugstore at the corner of Powell and Post, and shut himself into a phone booth and called

Golden Gate 9009. A brisk voice answered at that number, announcing: "Bay-view Apartments. Whom are you calling, please?"

Loneragan didn't know. He rang off. It had been a wild-goose chase up till now but he felt he was getting warm.

He phoned to uptown police headquarters, asked to speak to Inspector Hubert Rawlins. There were plenty of decent cops in the world and Hu Rawlins was one of them. His friendship with Rex Lonegran had stood pat even when Lonergan got bounced from the force in L. A. And through Lonergan's bad days when he was investigated closely as a suspect in the Sidney Warrington kidnaping and murder, Rawlin's regard for him had not wavered.

"Hello, Hu," Lonergan said when he got the connection, "this is Rex, Hu. Can you talk?"

"What're you doing in this neck of the woods?" Hu Rawlins asked without enthusiasm.

"I guess only a couple of people know I'm in town—"

"Oh, yeah?" Rawlins cut in. "What's on your mind?"

"Just this," said Lonergan. "I seem to be all mixed up in something. Maybe it's a jam."

Again Rawlins interrupted. "You're telling me?" he said.

"Say, what is this?" Lonergan questioned. "You seem to know something."

"I know plenty, Rex. Things don't look very good for you. Stay right where you are and I'll come down and talk with you."

Loneragan started to give Hu Rawlins his location but the officer cut in: "I know where you are; I traced the call. You're in the drugstore at Powell and Post. Now get this, old man, I'm giving you a break. I'll come down and talk to you—alone. But if you run out on me, you've thrown

away your last chance. Every cop in town's looking for you now."

Loneragan demanded: "What the hell's happened?"

There was a click on the wire. Lonergan hooked up the receiver. There was nothing to do but wait for Hu Rawlins.

Loneragan was never a man to run from a fight but he liked to know what and whom he was fighting. That's what burned him now; he didn't know what he was up against. Since his coming to San Francisco, it had been a run-around. Something was up, he, Lonergan, was deeply mixed up in it—and that's all he knew.

His hand, poking in his pants pocket for a match to light his cigarette, contacted crisp paper. Five grand of the Sidney Warrington ransom money, perhaps the hottest cash in the country. Thanks to rats scratching in the attic of the beach house, Lonergan had discovered this hidden money. He was certain he did the right thing in clearing out of that house with Vivian Jordon when he did. It would have been pretty nasty to have the police find them there with all that hot cash around.

But what was Vivian Jordon's secret? Certainly, she couldn't have known of the box of marked money in the attic or she wouldn't have sent Lonergan up there. It might follow, then, that the red-headed girl was not tied in with the kidnapers. But Lonergan couldn't be sure of that. It was a cinch she wasn't playing entirely square with him—trying to frisk his luggage, calling that Golden Gate number, and lying about both.

THE whole set-up from the beginning, through the interview with George Varney to the present, seemed like a lot of unrelated episodes strung together. The mystery mansion at the top of California Street which, in the night, was luxuriously

occupied and in the morning, according to the gardener, absolutely vacant. This bothered Lonergan no little. And now, from what Hu Rawlins had said, Lonergan was wanted by the police.

He decided to unload the hot cash from his person at once. At the drug counter he bought an envelope and a stamp. He addressed the envelope to Raymond Lloyd, care General Delivery, San Francisco. He could call for it whenever he wanted, or if necessary, he could leave it there forever.

He was on the point of turning back to the phone booth where, in privacy, he could slip the hot money into the envelope, when he became aware of the expression on the drug clerk's face, and a voice behind him said: "All right, Rex Lonergan, this is a pinch."

Lonergan turned slowly. There were two men in felt hats. One had a waxed mustache, the other a broken nose. And there was a glint in their hard eyes which indicated that they meant business.

Lonergan left the stamped envelope on the counter. He was taken by either arm and walked out of the store.

"What's all this about?" he asked.

He wanted to stall for time. He felt certain Hu Rawlins hadn't double-crossed him by sending these dicks down ahead of him to make an arrest. Rawlins ought to be along any minute.

In the doorway of the drugstore Lonergan pulled back and said: "You boys better wait here a minute. I'm going to meet Hu Rawlins from headquarters—"

The man with the waxed mustache grinned sourly. "You must think Frisco dicks are still wet behind the ears. We won't take any stall, so save your lungs."

They pushed him roughly into a Buick sedan parked at the curb. A man in civilian clothes sat behind the wheel; he kicked the starter. Lonergan, in the back seat with a man sitting on either side of him, began to doubt that this car was a police vehicle.

He had seen nothing to identify it as such, no siren, no spotlight.

The big man with the broken nose eased Lonergan's gun from his pocket as the car lurched forward. He stowed the .45 away, clucking his tongue and shaking his head mockingly.

"Naughty, naughty," he smirked. "Little boys shouldn't carry nasty big cap-pistols."

The Buick ran to Grant Avenue and turned north. Lonergan eyed his captors suspiciously.

"I thought this was a pinch," he said. "Where you taking me?"

"The lock-up," snapped the man with the broken nose.

"I never heard of a lock-up in Chinatown," Lonergan told him. "The city must have built a new can since I was here."

"It'll be new to you!" was the swift answer.

Then these men weren't officers, Lonergan thought; this wasn't a police car. In a way he was relieved. Arrest by the San Francisco police while he had five thousand dollars in hot cash in his pocket wasn't a desirable situation.

But whoever these men were, Lonergan had no intention of going with them without a battle. Had they merely been taking him to George Varney they would have explained it. Besides, Lonergan couldn't imagine such men being employed by the oil magnate and politician.

Lonergan's chance came as the car swung left for the Sacramento Street hill. The driver had his wheel cramped over for the sharp turn, the tires of the car wailed on the pavement as they slid.

Lonergan drove himself forward. He caught the driver's neck in the crook of his right arm. The car swung crazily, out of control. In that instant Lonergan's left hand snapped the door handle down, his purpose to pitch out of the car with the opening door.

He wasn't fast enough. Hands seized

him. He was jerked backward, and he fell heavily on the floor, all out of position for action. His alert eyes caught the swing of a blackjack as it swished downward. He tried to duck. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

At Kwong Hong Fat's

THE room was dark, the air stuffy and foul with body odors. A single lamp with a tiny, wavering oil flame burned on a teakwood table. A rat scuttled into a filthy corner as Lonergan rolled over on the floor.

His arms were tied behind him; his ankles were bound securely. Every bone in his body ached and his skull pounded with pain. He shook his head to clear his brain for thinking, looked around at the empty room and its flickering shadows.

There was no window, just a tall, closed door. Aside from the table and lamp and two dirty mattresses, the place was barren of furnishings.

Lonergan's brain was sluggish and his mouth tasted bad. He had recollections of fiendish nightmares in which he went to the gallows a dozen times for the kidnaping and murder of Sidney Warrington—a net of circumstantial evidence piling up against him. There had been strangely pleasant dreams, too, but they were broken, all jumbled up with a house on a foggy beach, a red-headed woman and a package of ransom money with the "hot" serial numbers on the bills in huge neon lights.

In the dream, Lonergan had tried and tried to rid himself of the marked money but the currency stuck to his person like fly-paper. He ran through the streets, chased by giant law officers who pointed accusingly at him, saying, "That's the killer; he's got the money on him now!"

And now, in this foul-smelling room of flickering shadows, he was awake. His

brain was clearing. But he had no idea of time. It seemed ages since he was slugged over the head in his attempt to escape from the auto as it swung a corner in Chinatown.

To his ears now came a faint creaking. He didn't have to move his head to see that a small panel in the center of the lone door had opened. And in that black opening he caught the vague outline of a face, light from the tiny oil lamp shining on the sleek surface of a cheek. Lonergan didn't move. And in a moment the panel creaked closed again.

Lonergan waited. Nothing happened. So he set about trying to free himself. But it didn't take long to realize that escape from the ropes which bound him was next to impossible. No slack in the ropes, no chance to draw up his knees and work his bound wrists over his shoes in order to have his hands before him where he could bring his teeth into play. His hands were, and would remain, behind him. Nevertheless, he struggled.

He was twisting about in the floor when he heard the click of a key in a lock. He lay perfectly still, studying the door through half-closed eyes as it swung silently inward.

A FIGURE backed into the room, a figure clad in the black trousers and jacket of the Chinese. Lonergan made out the lines of a skull cap.

The door was closed noiselessly and the figure turned. Lonergan saw, to his astonishment, that the face was white!

The man came to his knees beside Lonergan. "We're both in a fix, buddy," he whispered with Irish accent. "And in a spot such as I figure, two is a damn sight better than one."

Lonergan studied the man's features in the flickering light. "I don't seem to know you," he said, "but you're sure welcome."

"Keep your voice down," was the cau-

tious answer. "All I know is they dragged you in here this morning and shot you full of hop."

"Morning?" Lonergan gasped. "What time is it now?"

"It's near midnight, buddy. I been waiting for the dope to wear off before I came in. There's a Chink that peeks in at you through the door about every half hour. I been peeking in myself. Think you're ready to blast out of here now?"

"Just get these damn ropes off me," Lonergan said, keeping his voice down. And as the stranger went to work with a long knife, he asked: "Where the hell am I?"

"In a place called Kwong Hong Fat's. It's some kind of a Chink store on Grant Avenue, but there's a racket on the side. The Chinks seem to be mixed up with some whites. The white guys are pulling something, tonight."

Lonergan smiled at the name, Kwong Hong Fat. This was the place the man Smith had taken him through on the run-around trail to meet George Varney.

Lonergan's hands were freed. He rubbed his sore wrists, and on an inspiration shoved a hand into his pants pocket. He searched all his pockets quickly. The five thousand dollars in ransom money was gone.

"Swell," he muttered. Then to the stranger at work on the ankle ropes, he said: "How do you figure in this?"

"My name's O'Brien. I'm a watchman on the Lawson house up on California Street. Some guys got behind me last night and slugged me. I came to in a cellar down below with a Chink guardin' me. I left him gagged and tied up in my clothes down there. If anybody looks in, not too careful, they'll think it's me. It's worked so far, but I only been free an hour. They had me up here for a while. Then I guess they got worried about keepin' us together."

LONERGAN'S ankles were free now. He sat up, rubbing the circulation back. Wrists and ankles were swollen. His body and limbs were so stiff he could hardly move.

"What've we got to blast with," he asked, "besides that knife?"

"A gun I got off the Chink," O'Brien said, pulling a .38 revolver from his belt. "Only six slugs, though."

"That's O. K.," Lonergan told him, "we'll manage to make six go around. Besides, you'll scare 'em plenty with that freak get-up of yours."

"Well," the Irishman said, "they'll have to look twice to tell me from a Chink—and, if I can help it, they'll only look once."

O'Brien generously extended the gun to Lonergan, but the ex-dick wouldn't accept it. "Keep it," he said, "you earned it."

"Well, one way or another we better start blasting," O'Brien suggested. "The only way out I know is through the front of the store. I sneaked down a passage and looked down on it from a balcony—right into the store. There's half a dozen Chinamen down there and two tough-looking white guys."

"That's all, huh?"

"Yeah, but they've got it in good and plenty for you. I heard 'em talking from the balcony. They was going to ride you down the bay in a boat and toss you overboard with an anchor around your neck."

Lonergan moved to the door. His head whirled; he was still dizzy from the dope. He put a hand to his eyes.

"Give me a couple minutes more, O'Brien. If that Chink comes back we can take him here as well as any place. I'm groggy. They must have fed me an awful dose of it."

"Sure they did," O'Brien agreed. "I heard 'em say you might not come around till they had you out in the boat—tomorrow."

Lonergan opened the door cautiously,

looked into a dimly lighted corridor. He closed the door again, and said: "I've been in this joint before. If that's the hall I went through, then there's a trick panel at the end of it that opens into an alley. We can give it a try, anyway."

"We'll try anything before we smoke our way out. I been prowling around and that's the only hall I know about except the passage that goes to the balcony over the store."

A severe physical dizziness came over Lonergan and he clutched at the door jamb to support his swaying body. But his brain was still functioning. He managed to focus his eyes on the Irishman.

He said: "What else did you hear from the balcony?"

"Plenty. But it don't mean anything to me. There was a fellow down there they called Smith—"

Lonergan shook his head dizzily and said: "Smith, huh?"

"That's what they called him. He had a suitcase. This was just a while ago. He phoned somebody and said something was all fixed. He said he was going to the Lido Club right away and check the suitcase. Then he said something about a safe in the club and a guy named Joe Malone."

"What about Joe Malone?" Lonergan asked quickly.

"Well, he said Malone was greased. Malone would take a walk while the stuff could be swapped. Smith said the whole play would only take a minute. But I don't know what he meant."

Lonergan was tense. He opened the door again and looked out, saw nothing. He closed it softly and said: "Talk, fast, O'Brien—we're getting places! What number did Smith call?"

"It was Golden Gate something or other."

"Golden Gate Nine-o-o-nine?"

"That might be it." O'Brien looked

worried as he added: "Should we stand here gabbing? I can think of a lot better places for a talk."

"So can I," Lonergan whispered quickly, "but we don't know what we're going to meet on the way out and I'm just getting some mighty interesting answers to things."

LONERGAN'S brain was working fast. Golden Gate 9009 was the number Vivian Jordon had called from the hotel when she denied calling any number. Whoever was located at that number was undoubtedly the big brain behind this entire mix-up. That meant Vivian Jordon must be in it to the ears.

Lonergan put a hand on O'Brien's shoulder. "Listen," he said, "Big Bill Wilson owns the Lido Club. Did Smith say anything about Wilson on the phone?"

"He did. He said tomorrow was Sunday and Wilson couldn't get to the bank till Monday morning. Smith said everything would be in the club safe when it closed for the night. And the bank would be on the look-out for Wilson on Monday morning. Smith finished up by saying a guy named Lonergan would be on the bottom of the bay and everything would be jake."

Lonergan cursed softly. "I'm the guy named Lonergan, but I won't be on the bottom of the bay and everything won't be jake. Mrs. Lonergan's little boy, Rex, is beginning to see the great big answer. And somebody's going to get his fingers burned. Did you hear anything else, O'Brien?"

The Irishman nodded, fingering the revolver and looking worriedly at the door. "Smith told the guy on the phone they'd all meet here when things were fixed at the Lido Club."

Abruptly Lonergan pushed his hand against the Irishman's mouth. They both heard the creaking of a plank out in the corridor. Lonergan gestured for O'Brien

to flatten himself against the wall. Lonergan himself drew into the shadows beside the door.

They heard the panel slide open, shut quickly. Then the door itself snapped inward and a Chinaman moved in swiftly on silent feet, a knife gleaming in his hand.

Lonergan let fly a right hook with the power of his whole body back of it. Perhaps his sudden concentration on smashing power was what affected his accuracy. But, though he missed the jaw, his fist connected with the Chinaman's ear, staggering him.

O'Brien did his bit quickly and efficiently. He caught the Oriental's wrist and wrenched the knife away while Lonergan corrected his first error by the delivery of a very solid and accurate blow to the side of the jaw.

They eased the body of the unconscious Chinaman slowly to the floor. Lonergan said: "This may be a break. We'll rig this bird up with my coat like you rigged the Chink downstairs."

O'Brien shook his head doubtfully. "Why waste the time? Anyway, if too many Chinks disappear those birds up front in the store'll come back to see what's up."

"And maybe they won't," Lonergan said. "Those birds'll be mighty anxious about Smith putting over his deal at the Lido Club. Even if it won't work I can cover it . . ."

They slipped Lonergan's coat on the Oriental, bound him, gagged him and dragged him to the corner of the room deepest in shadow. He had no gun on him.

"O. K.," Lonergan said. "Let's go!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Hot Cash

THEY went down the dimly lit corridor on the balls of their feet. Doors to right and left were closed; now and then

an ancient board in the flooring gave an ominous groan under the weight of the two men.

A flight of stairs led upward; Lonergan remembered it vaguely as though it had been a dream. Yet last night the man named Smith had led him through this same musty corridor.

At the blind end of it, Lonergan found the switch, flipped it. The panel snapped back and he caught the edge, pulling it wide for O'Brien to pass through.

They were outside now, safely, in the dark alley wet with fog.

"Here's where you come in," Lonergan said in low tones, "if you want to help me bust up one of the toughest gangs in the city."

"If it's the bunch that slugged me, I'm game," O'Brien responded quickly.

"O. K., then," Lonergan said. "You wait here till something pops. Unless they miss us and get frightened off, Smith'll come back here with that suitcase. He'll probably use this alley entrance. But if anything goes wrong those birds'll scam just as soon as Smith gets back with the suitcase. I want you to follow Smith, if that happens. Don't bother with anybody else, just Smith or whoever carries the suitcase."

The Irishman gripped his revolver. "Then what?"

"Don't lose him; hang on his tail till he gets planted somewhere. Then phone me at the Y. M. C. A. I'll come with the whole damn police force and we'll make the arrest of the year."

"O. K.," O'Brien said. "I'll hide out right here."

Lonergan shook hands with him. Then he went down the alley to the first intersection, walked down the hill and picked up a cruising cab on Grant Avenue.

It was cold without his coat. The chill fog reached damp fingers through his clothes, causing him to shiver.

"The Lido Club," he said to the taxi driver, "and make it snappy!"

THE Lido Club, owned and operated by Big Bill Wilson, wasn't strictly within the law, but neither were the other gambling places in the state. Wilson ran a dozen gambling tables in a small room with bright lights. Then he had a big room with soft lights and a two-dollar cover charge for a white tablecloth. Here there was dancing, a fair orchestra and a shapely girl who occasionally did a fan dance in the glow of a blue spotlight.

Lonergan was shown into Wilson's private office which was off the reception hall and next to the hat-check booth. Wilson grinned with a false good cheer, shook hands with Lonergan and said: "It's Rex Lonergan! Well, well."

Wilson was a huge man, at least six feet five, and broad. He wore a tuxedo, the starched shirt-front emphasizing the width of chest and stomach. His shrewd eyes appraised Lonergan. He noticed that Lonergan carried no hat—it had been lost somewhere en route to his prison in Chinatown. He noticed the absence of a coat and the dirty trousers in which he had lain on that filthy floor in Kwong Hong Fat's.

"Been riding in boxcar Pullmans?" He asked.

Lonergan ignored this. "If you think you're going to be touched, you're wrong. You can put your guard down."

Wilson's grin displayed some gold teeth. He pointed to a chair. Lonergan sat, took the cigar offered.

"I hear the police are looking for you," Wilson said casually, holding flame to Lonergan's cigar.

"What else do you hear, Bill?"

Wilson sat on the edge of his fine desk, bit off the tip of a cigar and spit it away. "It seems they got sore at the way you all of a sudden pull freight out of L. A. Then somebody down at the beach turned in a

call that there was funny business in a house down there near the zoo. They checked up and found out you rented the house."

Lonergan stroked his chin, smiling bitterly. "Oh, so *I* rented it, did I? Isn't that just swell?"

"I guess you rented it all right. They found your fingerprints around. Even in the attic. They know you were there with the Jordon girl. But you both did a disappearing act. They figure the Warrington case has blown open again."

"Well," Lonergan said, "they're right in one thing—it has blown open again." He pointed his cigar at Wilson's white shirt-front. "Only this time *you're* in it."

Wilson's big face drained of color. "What the hell do you mean?" he demanded.

"I'll tell you in a minute, Bill. First answer me a few riddles. What does Joe Malone do for you?"

Wilson kept shrewd eyes on Lonergan. "He watches my safe over weekends—why?"

"Where's the safe, Bill?"

Wilson slid off the edge of the desk and caught Lonergan's arm in a powerful grip. "Say, what *is* this?" he challenged.

"Answer that question for me, Bill—"

"All right," Wilson snapped impatiently, "the safe's in a room back of the orchestra stage."

"Swell," Lonergan muttered slowly. "When does the night's take go in the safe? What does Joe Malone do?"

Lonergan's eyes met those of Wilson squarely, didn't flicker. The muscles in the face of the club owner worked and twitched as he said: "The take goes in the safe when we close up. That'll be in about an hour. Malone stands watch outside while the money's on the tables. Then he plants himself in the room where the safe is after we put the money to bed."

Lonergan sighed wearily. "O. K., Bill.

Just one more thing and I'll spill some interesting news to you. Go out to the check-room and ask the girl if a guy checked a suitcase there a while ago. Sneak that suitcase in here. Tell the girl, if the guy comes back before we get through, to stall him till we can sneak the suitcase back into the booth."

"What the hell is this, Loneragan?"

"I'll show you when you bring the suitcase."

BIG Bill Wilson was gone only a couple of minutes. He returned with a suitcase in his hand, closed the door after him. Loneragan took the suitcase and swung it to the desk, saying, "Lock that door."

Wilson did so, and said: "The girl says a tall guy with a funny grin on his pan checked it a half hour ago."

Loneragan nodded in a bored way. Wilson stood back in silence, puffing his cigar while Loneragan gave the works to the lock on the suitcase with a series of keys on his ring. Finally, one clicked.

Loneragan swung open the suitcase, turned a frozen smile on the big man. Wilson looked; his mouth opened and shut again, tighter than ever with lips compressed. He swore.

The suitcase was well packed with bundles of fresh currency.

Wilson fondled the bundles with thick fingers. "Must be well over half a hundred grand!" he said quickly.

"I'll bet it makes a full hundred," Loneragan smiled.

"What's it doing here?" Wilson demanded.

"Waiting for a chance to enter your safe, Bill."

Wilson's face had a curious grin of forced humor. "I'm willing. I don't mind people putting things like that *in* my safe. It's when they take it *out* that I get sore."

"You won't want this in your safe,"

Loneragan smiled stiffly. "It's the Warrington ransom dough, Bill."

Wilson swore violently. He grabbed Loneragan by the collar and swung him around. His face was close to Loneragan's, muscles working, as he snapped: "You're crazy if you think I'll monkey with that, damn you! That's the hottest cash in the country! I'll give you five minutes to get the stuff out of here, or you go out stiff."

Loneragan knocked Wilson's hand down. "Cool off, sap—"

"I won't call the cops," Wilson said. "They wouldn't believe I was in the clear. But I have ways of taking care of guys like you, Loneragan."

"Cool off," Loneragan repeated. "This isn't my money. I don't want you to fence it. I'm trying to save you the jam of your life. Stop yelling at me and listen. The Warrington kidnapers want to plant this stuff in your safe—tonight after you put the gambling take in the safe. Malone's greased. They're going to yank the so-called honest dough you've milked from gambling suckers and put this hot stuff in your safe in its place. When you go to the bank Monday with your profits, the serial numbers will be checked and you'll go through a trial so fast you'll still be dizzy when they drop you through the trap with the rope around your neck!"

WILSON'S face had gone as white as his stiff shirt; his hand, holding the cigar chest-high, trembled till gray cigar ash spilled down his tuxedo. "Who's doing this?" he managed.

"Some guys that are pretty smart. They figure it's a cinch to frame the Warrington job on you. After all, you're not the cleanest citizen in the city—"

"I've never pulled a snatch in my life!" Wilson snapped.

"You'll have a hard time proving you

didn't pull this one if you walk into a bank with the ransom dough."

"They won't find me doing anything like that, see?" Wilson ran thick, nervous fingers through his hair. "They'll find Malone and all the rest of these snatch artists and framers floating face up in the bay!"

"Evidently the trail's too hot for them," Lonergan said. "They haven't been able to unload the dough. They need a guy or guys to take the rap for them. So they picked on me at first but I gave them the slip. They got the idea of pinning it on you. It's a better idea than the first one because with me they could only plant a few grand, enough to convict me—they'd still have the rest of the hot cash to unload and it might take years before it cooled enough to pass. With you, they have a perfect set-up. They just raid your safe of all your gambling take, substitute the hot cash and leave you holding the sack."

Wilson paced the floor, running fingers through his hair, cursing between clenched teeth. "I'll get those guys—"

"We've got time," Lonergan went on. "They can't make the switch till you put your take to bed. They must have lined up your routine from Malone. I guess you count your take from the tables when you close. You put the money in bags. So there's no reason for you to look at it again till you get to the bank on Monday with the hot cash—"

"That Malone!" Wilson cut in, swearing, "I'll put that guy in the bay! And these dirty sons—"

"Listen," Lonergan interrupted. "Get a load of this. We go to work on these crisp bills, crumple them, make them look old, mix up the serial numbers. We stow the whole lot in your safe in your regular bags. Then when you close up we take all your paper from the tables, bind it in bundles with the newest-looking stuff on

the outside of each bundle and load it into this suitcase. We get the suitcase with the good money in it out to the check-booth—"

"This is crazy—" Wilson began.

"Shut up, Bill," Lonergan said quietly. "We lay low till this fellow, aided by Malone, makes the switch in your strong room. Get it? They think they're planting the hot cash, but really they're putting your dough right back where it belongs and going out with the hot cash again."

"Nuts," Wilson scoffed impatiently, "suppose they check the serial numbers while they're at the safe?"

"They won't," Lonergan said. "They won't have time. This trick depends on speed. Malone can't let the guy take his time. It has to be done in a split minute and they won't be suspecting a double-cross."

"I don't like it," Wilson said. "I'm getting so damn nervous now with all that hot cash in my office—"

LONERGAN cut in with: "It's the best plan. If you try to nab Malone and the suitcase guy, a fellow named Smith, you'll have a fight on your hands. I don't think you can afford a fight in here. You'll have to answer too many questions to the police. And you still won't have the big guy back of this frame-up."

Wilson nodded in nervous agreement. "You're right."

"Sure, I am, Bill. And we can double-check on this so there won't be any slip. Plant a couple of your boys outside to tail Smith when he leaves with the suitcase. That's just a safety because I'm pretty sure I know where he's going. Tip off some more boys to watch a Chink joint on Grant, a joint called Kwong Hong Fat's. Plant a few in the alley back of the place because they've got a slip-out door. We phone the police—"

"Police?" Wilson muttered question-

ingly. "We don't need 'em. My boys'll fix those dirty—"

"Keep your head, Bill," Lonergan told him quickly. "We're going to call the police from outside the club and warn 'em to stand by for a riot call in Chinatown. That'll put cruising cars in the vicinity. Then as soon as your boys spot Smith and his suitcase going into Kwong Hong Fat's, they call the police and tip them off to the joint. Let the police handle the fireworks. That leaves us both clear and catches the Warrington snatchers and murderers red-handed."

"How does it catch the big brain back of it?" Wilson asked.

"I've learned that that mug plans to meet Smith at the Chink joint. The only thing that might spoil the play is if I'm missed and they change the meeting place. But even that won't spoil it because your boys'll be tailing Smith. It'll only change the place for the blow-off. We've got 'em now."

Abruptly Wilson turned full on Lonergan, his shrewd eyes boring with the intensity of a hypnotist at work. He chewed his cigar in thick lips and said: "Wait a minute, Rex. How do I know you ain't mixed up in this double-cross. You're pretty hot with the police, you know."

Lonergan relaxed casually and sighed, eyeing Wilson up and down. "That's dirty, Bill. But if you feel that way you can put one of the boys on *me*. He can let fly with a rod any time you think I'm putting one over."

Wilson said gruffly: "Forget it, Rex. I'm jumpy."

Without a word, Lonergan went to the desk and spilled out the bundles of currency. He began crumpling the crisp bills in his hands. Big Bill Wilson joined him, his thick fingers mauling the bills.

Lonergan said: "I'll take care of this end, Bill. Lock me in. You organize the

boys. Have the hat-check girl identify Smith for them so they can tail him; he's probably pretending to enjoy an evening in there. Send the bunch to watch Kwong Hong Fat's. Tip the police to stand by for a riot call. In a little while we're starting a picnic."

CHAPTER SIX

Murder Alley

THE Warrington ransom money had been thoroughly aged, synthetically, in twenty minutes, the bills wrinkled and then pressed out again with a rolling pin Wilson had produced from the kitchen of the club. It was a new use for a rolling pin, pressing folds, flattening crisp wrinkles, in a hundred thousand dollars in currency. Face powder from the hat-check girl, lipstick, smudges of rouge and ink from Wilson's desk had added a final disguise to the money for which every bank and law agency in the nation had been looking.

And now the money, in Wilson's neat bags, reposed in a drawer of the big desk. Smith's suitcase, empty, was in the closet off the private office—with Rex Lonergan.

The Lido Club was closing for the weekend. Guests were departing rapidly. The music had ceased.

Lonergan, in the closet with the suitcase at his feet, heard voices in Wilson's office.

"O. K., Malone," Wilson's deep voice said easily, "I want to count this over. You can go have a drink on the house. I'll give you the nod when I'm ready to put it to bed."

"Right, chief," was the answer. "I'll be at the bar when it's ready."

A door closed, a lock clicked into place. The closet door whipped open and Wil-

son, with a jerk of his head, motioned Loneragan out.

The money was on the desk. Loneragan swung up the suitcase and they worked on the currency from the gambling tables, the bar and the cabaret with swift hands. They stacked the bills into bundles, taking care to keep the newer ones on the outside. They tied up each bundle neatly with the paper wrappers which had come off the ransom money, stacked the whole lot in Smith's suitcase, snapped the lock.

Wilson brought an armload of coats, hats and mufflers from the closet. He arranged the wearing apparel to completely cover the suitcase underneath. And just as he did so there was a light rap on the door.

A feminine voice said: "Hat-check girl. Those parties are ready for their things, Mr. Wilson."

Loneragan ducked back into the closet but didn't quite close the door on himself. The hat-check girl was in on the play enough to know she had to stall the man who had checked the suitcase, enough to know he mustn't know the suitcase ever left the check room.

Through the crack of the partially opened closet door, Loneragan saw Wilson load the girl's arms with the coats, hats and mufflers, the suitcase carefully concealed under the pile. She went out with her hidden burden, her innocent-looking load of checked apparel. She closed the door after her but Loneragan made himself comfortable in the closet; he couldn't risk a slip at this stage of the game.

Big Bill Wilson took the bags containing the disguised ransom currency from the desk drawer. That part of the club's money which hadn't gone into Smith's suitcase, the silver pieces, he scooped into a metal cash box. This silver, as Loneragan had informed him, would be safe. The plot of the kidnapers was not, in a sense, theft. It was a substitution of ran-

som money for currency which was not hot. To remove anything else from Wilson's safe would attract his attention before he went to the bank on Monday and that way spoil what the kidnapers planned—a perfect frame-up.

WILSON went out, with him the cash-box and the bags of bills. He was gone twenty long minutes, Loneragan, in the closet, impatiently watching the minutes go by.

The chatter of voices as the customers left, the goodbyes of the musicians and other employees had diminished until the Lido Club settled into early morning silence, a silence in which the click of heels on flooring sounded like footsteps in a tomb.

Wilson left the office door open when he entered. He called briskly to Loneragan: "Come on out, Rex. The party's started."

Loneragan came out. "What happened up to now?" he asked.

Wilson, pouring out two stiff whiskeys at a liquor cabinet, said: "I gave Malone the nod when I passed the bar. He went to the safe room with me while I put the stuff away. I told him to shut the safe and walked out. He knows the combination but I was making things easy for the dirty—"

"Go on," Loneragan urged.

"I went back to the bar where they were closing up. I had a good view of the dance floor in a mirror. This guy with the suitcase went in there, pretending to look for something. He had the suitcase. When he thought the coast was clear he ducked back of the orchestra stage. Malone came out to the bar and talked to me. He was nervous. It only took about a minute. This guy crossed the dance floor with the suitcase. I had the check-girl stall him while I gave the safe a

quick once-over just to be sure. He fell for your trick all right."

Loneragan nodded, tossed down the drink Wilson gave him. He said: "If the girl muffed the stall, Smith'll get wise something's up."

"She didn't muff it. But I wasn't taking any chances of that guy getting out with the club's dough and leaving me stuck with hot cash."

"How about lending me a roscoe, Bill?" Lonergan asked.

Wilson's eyes narrowed. "What do you want with firearms, Rex? My boys'll handle it."

"This thing isn't washed up yet, Bill. I've been pushed around and I want to know who's back of it. I want an orchestra seat for the blow-off and I want to know how a certain red-headed damsel fits into it."

Loneragan heard a scuffling of feet in the reception room. He saw two men pass the door, dragging a third along between them. The prisoner was a little man with a white, twitching face. He held back at the door to Wilson's office and looked in with wild eyes.

"Geez, chief," he whined pleadingly, "what is this?"

The two men yanked the prisoner along, his feet dragging. Wilson flashed Lonergan a hard smile and explained: "That's our friend Malone. He don't feel well. The boys'll take him down the bay. The fresh morning air'll do Malone a lot of good."

From the hall outside came Malone's voice, screaming like a woman, calling on God to help him. There was a dull thud, a groan and no more was heard from Malone. A door slammed.

"Jerry!" called Big Bill Wilson.

A man who looked like a prize-fighter appeared in the doorway. He lounged against the door jamb with a smoking

cigarette hanging from the corner of loose lips. He nodded to Wilson.

Wilson took a .45 automatic from a drawer in the desk and handed it, butt first, to Lonergan while his eyes went to the man in the doorway.

"Jerry," he said, "Mr. Lonergan wants to see the blow-off. I don't want him to get hurt so you go along with him. He's been pretty square—so far."

Loneragan gave Wilson a sour smile. "Still don't trust me, huh, Bill?"

Wilson waved a hand with a cigar in it. "Sure, I do, Rex. I don't want nothing to happen to you, that's all."

Loneragan kept smiling knowingly into the eyes of the big shot gambler. He slipped the cartridge clip from the heel of the automatic. It was empty.

"Come clean, Bill," Lonergan said. "How about giving me a clip with slugs in it."

Wilson forced a laugh, answering: "Why, sure, Rex. I thought it was loaded. . . ."

LONERAGAN went down the alley in Chinatown where his quest had begun. Jerry, the man Wilson had sent along for his "protection," was right behind him. They moved cautiously, like two shadows in the deeper shadows of the early dawn.

A vague light seeped through the fog and gave a drab grayness to the dirty alley. A man loomed in a doorway.

He said: "O. K., Jerry. The guy with the suitcase dropped out of a cab a few minutes ago. He went through a trick door down the alley. Dopey Donnelly went to put in a call to the cops."

Loneragan went on, Jerry with him. At a point which Lonergan judged to be opposite the secret entrance to Kwong Hong Fat's, they drew into the shadows of a recessed doorway.

Jerry cursed, startled, and drove a

hand under his left armpit. Lonergan caught it.

"If it ain't Mr. Lonergan," said O'Brien softly.

Jerry's jaw hung in limp amazement as his eyes made out the figure in the shadows, a figure in the garb of the Chinese but with a white face and an Irish brogue you could cut with a knife.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Jerry muttered. "Maybe I'm crazy!"

"This mick isn't as funny as he looks," Lonergan explained to the gangster. "He's been spotting the place for me."

"There's been some queer goings-on," the Irishman whispered. "A big fellow all bundled up in a coat to his ears came down alone and went in the door. Then a half hour more and a car came along and stopped. I think it was a Chinaman driving. Two fellows got out, carrying somebody. When the secret door opened I got enough light to see it was a lady. She had red hair. Her mouth was covered with tape but she kicked like a fighting Irish lady. They carried her in and the car went away. That's all till this fellow Smith went in with his suitcase."

"Nobody come out?" Lonergan asked.

"No—not a one—"

A police siren wailed distantly, the sound cutting like a sharp knife through the hush of daybreak.

"That's on Grant Avenue," Lonergan said quickly. "If a cop car doesn't shoot down this alley *pronto*, we'll have to stop the guys ourselves—they'll be pouring out of that blank wall like rats scrambling from a sinking ship."

THE siren on Grant Avenue died, moaning. A second siren wailed and stopped with the same dying sound. The crash and tinkle of breaking glass, the shouts of determined men gave sudden violence to the stillness of Chinatown.

The secret door to Kwong Hong Fat's

burst open, literally, with a splintering of wood and a wrench of hinges. The man who plunged through, sprawled to his hands and knees on top of the fallen door.

His answer to Lonergan's command to lift his hands was a shot—quick, banging, while he remained on his knees.

Lonergan let fly, the heavy automatic bucking in the heel of his hand. O'Brien and Jerry were shooting too. Bullets struck brick wall and screeched as they glanced off. An ashcan rang like a cracked bell.

The man on his knees in the alley was Smith. Evidently knowing he was making a target of himself in the golden light of the doorway, he got to his feet, ran.

It had all happened in a second of banging guns. Smith fired wildly over his shoulder as he ran, but he didn't get far. A slug caught him and he pitched to his face, sliding along, lying limp and sprawled, grotesquely.

There was firing over on Grant Avenue now, but still no radio car cruised down the alley.

"I've got three slugs left," Lonergan said bitterly.

"Have some on me," Jerry offered, slipping a cold, steel clip into Lonergan's palm. To O'Brien he said: "Forty-five?"

O'Brien shook his head. "That won't help the Irish none. Me, I'm stuck with a lousy thirty-eight."

Running feet pounded over boards, the sound muffled. It was in the corridor, someone in it, someone racing out. Lonergan slipped the full clip of cartridges into his pocket; no time for exchanging now.

A woman, red hair streaming, appeared first. Lonergan acted before he spoke. His hand chopped down on O'Brien's leveled gun as it fired, spoiling the aim as instinctively as the Irishman had shot. At the same time, Lonergan threw him-

self against Jerry who had been quicker than O'Brien, lowering his gun.

THE man who appeared after Vivian Jordon had caught her by the arm, snapping her around. The bang of O'Brien's gun warned him instantly of the danger in the alley. He tried to use the red-headed girl as a shield, swinging a black gun into action. But Vivian Jordon fell to her knees, pulling the man off balance; he bumped against the door jamb, crouching, shooting.

Lonergan, sighting his automatic, pressing trigger, recognized the man. It was the tall fellow who had been the butler at the mansion of George Varney on the hill. Gone was the butler's dignity now; the man was a desperate, fighting fiend.

Lonergan fired rapidly, using his three shots in haste. He didn't trust the marksmanship of his two companions in the doorway and it was close shooting to miss the girl in that scramble across the alley.

Splinters of brick bit Lonergan's cheek as the last shot from the man at the entrance of Kwong Hong Fat's struck the wall. But Lonergan's bullet or bullets got him. The man's gun turned impotently, hooked to his finger by the trigger-guard. The weight of his body was against the door jamb and he slid down it and doubled into the alley.

A siren wailed; tires sang as they skidded on a turn. And the headlights of a police car showed down the alley in the gray light of dawn. The car was coming fast, its spotlight playing in the alley, sweeping around, picking out ashcans and dim doorways.

"Let's beat it!" Lonergan sang out. "Let the cops pick up the pieces."

He crossed the alley in three long bounds, jerked Vivian Jordon to her feet, throwing her over his shoulder.

He ran in a direction away from the approaching police car, ducked down the

first intersection. Jerry, Wilson's gangster, swiftly outdistanced Lonergan and his feminine burden, disappearing around the corner of Grant Avenue.

Lonergan slowed to a walk. O'Brien, panting heavily, was beside him, saying, "Can I give you a lift with the lady?"

"No," Lonergan responded. "Beat it. I'll give you a ring on the phone some day and buy you a drink."

"Fine," said O'Brien. "My number is—"

"Mission Two-five-five-nine," Lonergan finished quickly.

"Well, I'll be damned!" O'Brien panted.

THEY were the only two customers in the place—Lonergan and the red-headed girl. They sat at the counter, having bacon and eggs and coffee, fortifying themselves as morning brought gray light into lower Market Street.

A radio back of the counter announced the seven o'clock news broadcast.

Lonergan said: "I apologize. For a while I thought you were in with the gang, trying to frame me."

Vivian Jordon smiled wearily. "I guess I was, but I didn't mean to be. After that grilling we got from the police on the Warrington case, I couldn't get a job anywhere. I guess I was in the same spot you were, nothing proven but everybody doubting us. This man Varney sent for me. I believed his story, that he was a politician trying to win his way to popularity by scooping the Warrington mystery. He offered me some money to help him. I needed it."

"Sure," Lonergan said. "Same here."

"Well, Varney sent me to that house on the beach. He said you might have the ransom money with you. I was to work you and get a look into your luggage. You caught me trying to peek."

Lonergan grinned. "Now that we're putting cards on the table, tell me why

you called Golden Gate Nine-o-o-nine after I planted you at the Chandler Hotel and why you canceled a call to the same number right after I left you yesterday morning."

Her blue eyes grew very big and pretty in surprise. "You know everything," she told him. "Well, that's Varney's private number, an apartment house. I didn't know anything about a mansion on the top of California Street till you told me about it. It sounded a little funny."

"Pretty broad, he was," Lonergan said. "Has the boys sock the watchman, moves in for a couple of hours in luxury, puts on a front with a phony butler—and little Rex falls for it, hook, line and sinker."

"I fell as hard as you did. When I got to the Chandler I called him and told him what you'd found in the attic. I thought somebody was double-crossing him, that man Smith. Then when you came to the hotel in the morning and told me about the empty mansion I started to call for an explanation. Then the whole thing began to dawn on me. I canceled the call."

Vivian Jordon turned interested eyes on Lonergan. She said: "Big Bill Wilson can never repay you for saving him that frame-up. That was clever, aging the ransom money and switching it into the safe like that."

Lonergan grinned, laughed. "Yeah, I saved Bill. But some rats saved me."

"What do you mean rats saved you?" she asked.

"I mean those rats you heard scratching in the attic at the beach. If I hadn't ducked up there, I wouldn't have spotted the box of money. Varney would have tipped the police—did, in fact. They've been looking for me up to now. Well, the cops would have found us down there with all the hot cash—"

Vivian laughed lightly. She was very pretty, very red-headed. "There weren't any rats. When that man Smith took me

to the house he planted the box in the attic. He didn't know I was aware of it, but I was. He didn't bring the box down again; I guess he thought he put it over on me. So I didn't hear rats at all up there. I smelled one. I thought you ought to know about it—so I sent you up."

THE radio interrupted their conversation; they listened as the announcer chattered excitedly, saying, ". . . from the lips of George Varney, alias Al Levy, alias George Solden, the police secured a complete confession. However, when first found in Kwong Hong Fat's, Varney attempted to bluff his way out, insisting that the money in the suitcase was Chinese lottery winnings. He appeared surprised, even shocked, when the police pointed out the serial numbers on the bills, the numbers of the Warrington ransom notes. Varney shouted, 'I've been framed!' as he made a break for the door. He was instantly shot down by Officers Sully and Dickey. Immediately, the interior of Kwong Hong Fat's became a bedlam of gunfire. But no member of the Varney gang escaped. In his dying confession Varney accounted for all members. . . ."

Vivian Jordon pressed Lonergan's hand. "I guess that clears you. I like the way the police hog credit when you neatly dropped the whole case in their laps."

"I was sore," Lonergan told her. "I didn't like all that pushing around and I was in a tough spot with the cops. I had to get out. That was the best way."

The radio announcer continued. "There is one angle which interested police investigators. Upon examination, the Warrington ransom currency appeared very worn and used, the serial numbers mixed up. The explanation, according to police, is that Varney and his gang doctored up the bills to make them easier to pass. . . ."

Lonergan and Vivian Jordon looked at each other and laughed.

READY for the RACKETS

By

S. Theodore Granik

Assistant District Attorney of New York County

As Told to John Gunn

**"WATCH OUT FOR THESE RACKETS!"
SAYS THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY**

Racketeers and swindlers of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to rob or cheat you of your hard-earned cash. All you need, in order to thwart them, is a knowledge of their schemes, so that you may guard against them. Motivated solely by a desire to be of service to the public, S. Theodore Granik, Assistant District Attorney of New York County and nationally known director of the WOR Sunday Forum, is making public the following information taken from his files, only the names of the criminals and their victims being changed. Mr. Granik is contributing this series purely from humanitarian motives; he has refused to accept compensation for them.

I.

THE BEAUTY SHOP RACKET

ANY day your wife or sister may become a victim of the *Beauty Shop racket*, which has thrived for some years throughout the United States. While the monetary loss of each victim is small, thousands of women have been defrauded, and a large number of beauty parlors have suffered irreparable damage to their reputations.

Here is the way in which the racket is worked.

The doorbell rings. Mrs. Housewife answers it and finds an attractive young woman—or sometimes it's a dapper young man—standing there. Let's assume, for the sake of explanation, that upon this occasion the beauty-shop racketeer is a man.

"Good morning," he says, raising his hat. "Do you know the Blank Beauty Parlor?"

"Of course," replies Mrs. Housewife. She knows it well. It is one of the largest and best beauty shops in town.

Then the racketeer goes into his act.

"I have come to offer you one of our regular seven-dollar-and-fifty-cent permanent waves for only a dollar," he says. "Here are my credentials."

From his pocket he takes a printed book of coupons, each of which entitles the bearer to a permanent wave. Mrs. Housewife has read the advertisements of the beauty shop and knows that their permanents usually cost \$7.50. But perhaps she's still a little suspicious of such a large reduction, and asks the reason for it.

"We're putting on a drive for new customers," the racketeer explains. "We want to add five hundred new accounts from the better-class families in the next month. That is the only reason why we're selling this service at far less than it costs us to give it. It's merely to advertise the store."

"Well," says Mrs. Housewife, "it sounds interesting. Maybe I'll go down this afternoon and get one."

"Sorry, madam," says the crook, "but you'll have to wait until the end of the week. We're putting off all appointments on Friday and Saturday just to take care of the new customers who are taking advantage of this great saving. Everybody who comes in today or Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday will have to pay the regular price."

"All right," says she. "I'll go on Friday. Thank you for telling me." And

she starts to close the door on her caller.

"Just a minute," says the racketeer. "You'll need one of these coupons. You pay me the dollar now and I'll give you the coupon, entitling you to the permanent. There's nothing else to pay."

Mrs. Housewife, being a careful woman, reads the coupon carefully before parting with her money. Just as the man has said, it states that in consideration of one dollar, paid to their representative, the holder of the coupon is entitled to one regular \$7.50 permanent wave on Friday or Saturday of this week. The dollar is to be full and complete payment.

So the woman parts with her dollar and tucks the coupon safely away in her purse.

Friday, when she goes to the Blank Beauty Shop, she finds it teeming with angry women. She goes to the manager and presents her coupon. The manager is nearly frantic, for Mrs. Housewife is only one of hundreds of women to show up with a coupon—a coupon that was never authorized by the beauty shop, given out by a "representative" of whose very existence they were totally unaware.

The racketeer works the town during the first four or five days of the week, telling his victims to stay away from the shop until the last day or two, thus avoiding detection until he has cleaned up and left. He may make ten or twelve sales an hour during an eight-hour day, getting a dollar from each victim. This can easily

amount to more than three hundred dollars a week.

But, fortunately, a few women are sufficiently wise to realize that you never get something for nothing. One of them—a New York woman—told the racketeer to wait while she shook the money out of the baby's bank. Rattling the bank in one hand, she picked up the telephone with the other and called the beauty parlor the crook said he represented. The beauty-parlor operator was astounded, and phoned our office, one of the most important duties of which is to protect people from the machinations of the unscrupulous.

District Attorney William C. Dodge, of New York County, promptly put officers on the trail of the racketeers. Our detectives have investigated these petty thieves so intensively that this particular swindle has been almost completely eradicated in this area, and will, we are confident, soon be a thing of the past.

Many variations of this racket are employed, other businesses besides beauty shops being used. Be on your guard against anyone offering you something for nothing, or even far below its usual cost. Santa Claus is active only around Christmas time, and the strange man or woman who offers you a tremendous bargain only wants to get your money. Report such cases to your local police or district attorney and help stamp out crime in America.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE—*The Real Estate Racket*, as told by S. Theodore Granik, Assistant District Attorney of New York County.

And in the meantime—if you yourself have been the victim of some ingenious racket; if some plausible swindler has managed to part you from your hard-earned savings—write to the "Racket Editor" of this magazine, explaining in detail the methods of operation of the swindle by which you have been bilked. He will be more than pleased to publicize your experience in these pages as a warning to possible future victims, or see that the proper authorities are informed of them so that they may be on the lookout for the gyp-artists' tactics and procedure.

Kane's Old Man

MORE than a good many gallons of high-powered whisky of one sort or another have gone down the hatch since that day last August when Peter Kane first saw the light and, with what was practically his first gesture, reached for the familiar square bottle. Up to now he has staggered his way through only four issues of DIME DETECTIVE but already he has become a favorite character of you action-mystery fans. It's high time you got acquainted with the fond parent of this insatiable human tank.

Meet Hugh B. Cave—the guilty party.

Here's what he's got to say for himself.

This is more painful than a book-length novel. A page to fill and mighty little to fill it with. You begin by being born and end by wondering why.

Began writing when I was fourteen or thereabouts. High School stuff and plenty terrible.

Then college. Wrote godawful sonnets anent the Great Outdoors for a Boston newspaper . . .

and got so doped with the idea that I went down Maine to see what the woods really looked like. Liked 'em so much I go back every Spring with a duffleful of fishing-tackle, home-made trout flies, and a bucket of fly-dope. Some day the black-flies will massacre me, to the huge delight of magazine readers everywhere.

Avocations: Photography in out-of-the-way places; fresh-water swimming with a partiality for Vermont's Lake St. Catherine; fishing of all kinds even to the goofyness of getting up at four A. M. on frosty mornings; trying to worm the Chrysler through Maine lumber-roads and tote-roads intended for wild animals and garter-snakes. Also fire-fighting when drafted, Paul Whiteman, Edgar Arlington Robinson in small doses, and Popeye's pal Wimpy. Play a devastating game of ping-pong, can drink most anything except Martinis, and would drop work anytime to park in front of my electric phonograph and dig through the 500-odd recordings picked up over a space of ten years or so.

Have held down various odd jobs during a short lifetime. Bell-hop, dirty dish conveyor, showcard artist deluxe, blueprint salesman, editor of a string of trade journals now non-existent, and book-jacket designer. Some of the designs would give Frankenstein's monster the horrors. Also been a proof-reader, rewrite man, official slave in a book-publishing house, "literary editor," book reviewer, and a "Hey-why-don't-you-empty-this-wastebasket!"

Mild life but dotted with high-spots, such as the day I tumbled off that log-boom into sixty-mile-an-hour white water on the Rip, all alone in a first-class wilderness. And the day of the thundersquall on Lake Harrington, when the Johnny with me was so plastered he tried to paddle the sinking canoe with a bait-bucket. And that day the drunk in the speakeasy took me for a State Copper because I was decked out in whipcord breeches and riding-boots. He was too soused to aim straight, but one of the two slugs from his thirty-eight



Hugh B. Cave

reached the door before I did . . . and I can still see splinters flying.

They tell me I did a bit of travelling when a kid. Borneo, the South Seas, India and points adjacent. I wouldn't know for sure, but it may be true. Anyway, the pedal extremities do occasionally get restless even now . . . And I go big for horse-back riding . . . and once in a while put a small ro-so on some goat that looks "hot" . . . but if one of 'em ever came through I'd be too stunned to go collect.

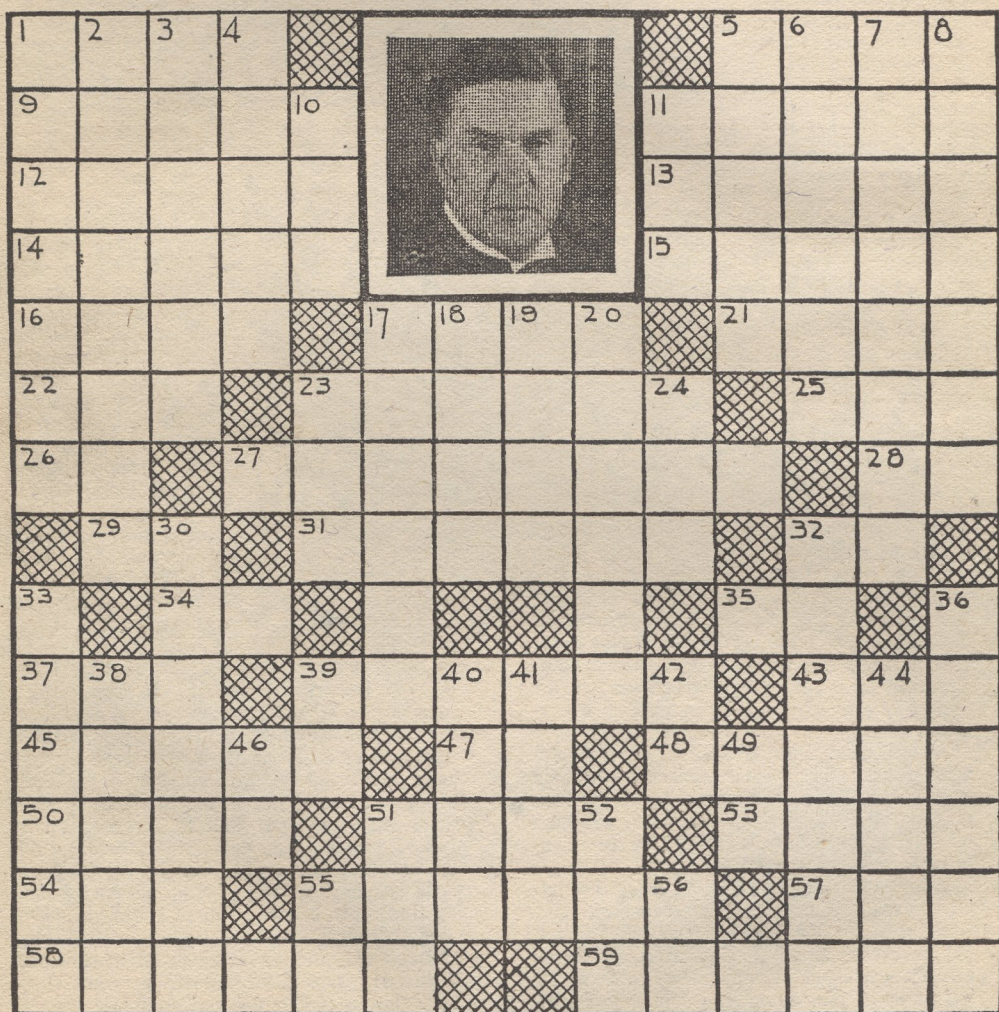
Work best at night, and no complaints on that score because I'm still without wife. Began selling popular fiction in 1928 or thereabouts and have squeezed some hundreds of yarns past the editors since then . . . shorts, novelettes and complete novels. Kane's my favorite. I hope he lives long before he gets cirrhosis of the liver.

More power to Kane, say we, and may Cave never wean him from the bottle.

CROSS ROADS OF CRIME

by

RICHARD HOADLEY TINGLEY



Int. News Photo—

The pictured man was a famous penologist. Who was he?

ACROSS

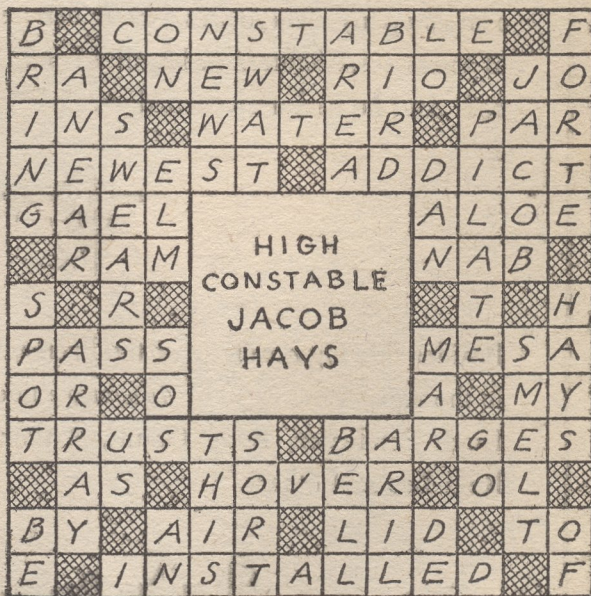
- 1 Father of Jehu (1 Chron. ii-38)
- 5 Post on a ship to which a cable is made fast
- 9 River in Spain
- 11 Light boat
- 12 Blossom
- 13 Astringent mineral salts
- 14 Pointed arch
- 15 Cusps
- 16 Slight elevation
- 17 The pictured man's middle name
- 21 Wither
- 22 Demon worshipped in Siam
- 23 Soft hat
- 25 Dung beetle
- 26 Fourteenth letter
- 27 Science to which the pictured man gave special study
- 28 A wall (Scot)
- 29 Thereabouts
- 31 Contribute
- 32 Further
- 34 Jumbled type
- 35 Into
- 37 Perennial climbing herb
- 39 To value for taxation
- 43 Guido's highest note
- 45 Egg-shaped
- 47 Chaldean city where Abraham lived (Gen. 11-31)
- 48 More certain
- 50 Lump
- 51 Monetary unit of British India
- 53 Small sheet of water
- 54 Goddess of malicious mischief
- 55 A goldsmith in Shakespeare's "Comedy of Errors"
- 57 An Indian tribe
- 58 Sitting on the haunches (as in heraldic terminology)
- 59 Institution of which the pictured man had great knowledge

DOWN

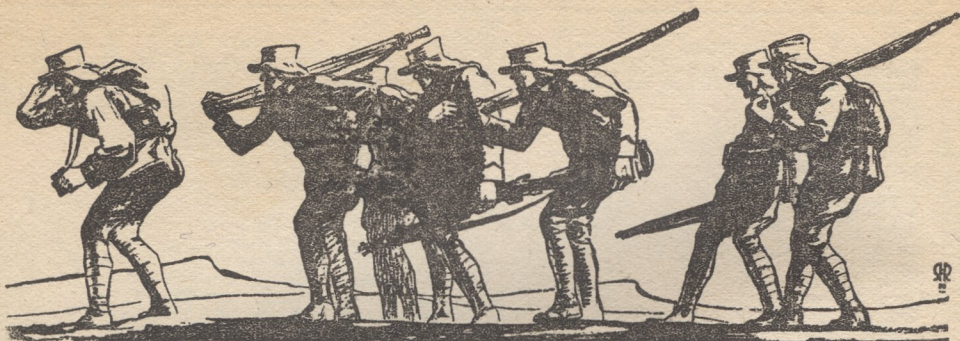
- 1 The pictured man's last name
- 2 Inhabitants of a kingdom of Northern Europe
- 3 Self-satisfied person
- 4 Propelled
- 5 Short Turkish saber
- 6 Habituated
- 7 Name assumed by the pictured man
- 8 Cube of stone or glass used in making mosaics
- 10 An uncle (Scot)
- 11 Part of a locomotive
- 17 Minnows—variant spelling
- 18 Variant spelling of the name "Otto," or "Otho," Roman emperors
- 19 Ancestor of the Tolaites (Numbers xxvi-23)
- 20 Pledges of mutual faith
- 23 Nourished
- 24 Era
- 30 Contradictory
- 32 Burdensome
- 33 The pictured man's first name
- 36 Official position held by the pictured man
- 38 To greet with loud applause
- 39 Paid publicity
- 40 Warbled
- 41 Sea-eagle
- 42 Steamship (abbr.)
- 44 Slowly, as in prayer (musical)
- 46 Part of the verb "to be"
- 49 Elevated
- 51 Insect
- 52 Lofty mountain
- 55 One
- 56 Gold (as in heraldic terminology)

HIGH CONSTABLE
JACOB HAYS was making a reputation as a one-man crime-prevention agency in New York City as early as 1817. Unlike Vidocq, the famous French criminal who turned detective to form the *Brigade de Sûreté*, Hays was a strict Presbyterian who learned about crookdom at second hand. They were contemporaries. Hays was the first to establish a detective bureau in conjunction with the New York City Police Department; creating, in 1836, the post of "roundsman" to which duty were appointed 192 men. These were attached to what was then called the "Watch Department" totalling 453 men. From this beginning has evolved the modern New York City police force. For their service, the roundsmen earned twelve shillings a day, or about \$2.90. Hays' successes

were so sensational that his fame spread to every civilized nation and, even 20 years after his death, the N.Y.C.P.D. received requests that he be "lent" to foreign nations to help with their crime problems.



Last Issue's Puzzle



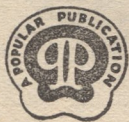
FOOLS FOR GLORY

by Georges Surdez

Fortane looked on the battle with disinterested eyes. He had his medal, which was all he had joined the Legion for. Then he saw the skirmish line sag a little on the left—the skirmish line of his own company. There was a river between him and them, and a tribe of the fiercest fighters in North Africa. But he could swim, couldn't he? And he had nine cartridges. . . .



Besides this big novelette of the French Foreign Legion you will find in the April First issue of *Adventure* fine stories by Jacland Marmur, Hugh Pendexter, Eddy Orcutt, Arthur D. Howden Smith, Robert Reid Lee and others.



Adventure



The April First Issue is on Sale March 29

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— Plus Three Short Masterpieces of Gripping Terror —

— by —

Paul Ernst — John Knox

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Beyond the Law Frontier

By Ray Nafziger

Last of the Fighting Dons

By Malcolm Reiss

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The Rolling R Rides to Glory

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The Whistler's Gallows Trap

By E. B. Mann

Guns for a Nester

By Harry F. Olmsted

Short Stories by

Bart Cassidy

George Armin Shaftel

John E. Pearsol

— And —

Other Features

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All I want to know is: Where do you want big, powerful muscles? How many pounds of firm flesh do you want distributed over your body to fill you out? Where do you lack vitality, pep, and robust health? Where do you want to take off flabby, surplus fat?

Just tell me, give me a week, and I'll show you that I can make a New Man of you, give you bodily power and drive, and put you in that magnificent physical condition which wins you the envy and respect of any man and the admiration of every woman.

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You begin to FEEL and SEE the difference in your physical condition at once, without using any tricky

weights or pulleys, any pills, "rays," or unnatural dieting. My *Dynamic-Tension* is a natural method of developing you inside and out. It not only makes you an "Atlas Champion," but goes after such conditions as constipation, pimples, skin blotches, and any other conditions that keep you from really enjoying life and its good times—and it starts getting rid of them at once.

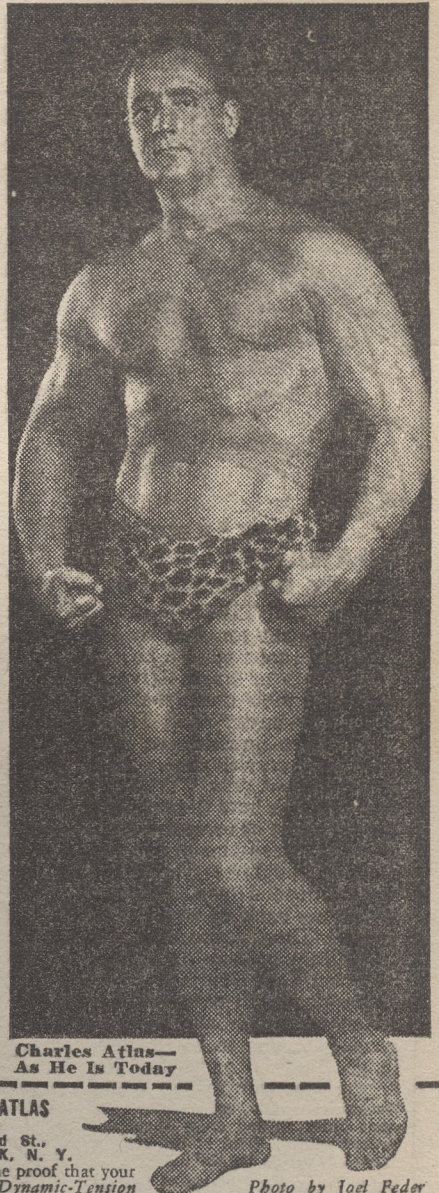
Let Me Tell You How

Gamble a stamp today by mailing the coupon for a free copy of my new illustrated book, "*Everlasting Health and Strength*." It tells you all about my special *Dynamic-Tension* method. It shows you, from actual photos, how I have developed my pupils to the same perfectly balanced proportions of my own physique, by my own secret methods. What my system did for me, and these hundreds of others, it can do for you too. Don't keep on being only one-half of the man you can be! Find out what I can do for you.

FREE BOOK

Where shall I send your copy of "*Everlasting Health and Strength*"? I o f your name and address down on the coupon, and mail it today. Your own new "Atlas body" is waiting for you. This book tells you how easy it is to get my way. Send the coupon to me personally.

CHARLES ATLAS
Dept. 834
115 E. 23rd St.
New York, N. Y.



Charles Atlas—
As He Is Today

Photo by Joel Feder

CHARLES ATLAS

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I want the proof that your system of *Dynamic-Tension* will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "*Everlasting Health and Strength*."

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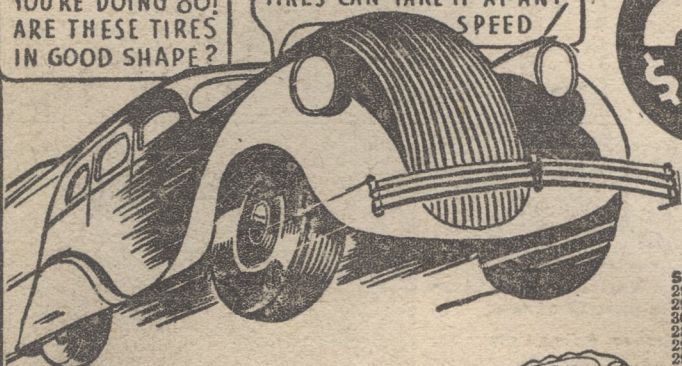
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Size	Rim	Tires	Tubes	Size	Rim	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40	-21	\$2.15	\$0.85	30x5.25	-20	\$2.95	\$1.15
29x4.50	-20	2.35	0.85	31x5.25	-21	3.25	1.15
30x4.50	-21	2.40	0.85	28x5.50	-18	3.35	1.15
28x4.75	-19	2.45	0.95	29x5.50	-19	3.35	1.15
29x4.75	-20	2.50	0.95	30x5.00	-18	3.40	1.15
29x5.00	-19	2.85	1.05	31x6.00	-19	3.40	1.15
30x5.00	-20	2.85	1.05	32x6.00	-20	3.45	1.25
28x5.25	-18	2.90	1.15	33x6.00	-21	3.65	1.25
29x5.25	-19	2.95	1.15	32x6.50	-20	3.75	1.35

REGULAR CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3	\$2.25	\$0.65	32x4 1/2	\$3.35	\$1.15
30x3 1/2	2.35	0.75	33x4 1/2	3.45	1.15
31x4	2.95	0.85	34x4 1/2	3.45	1.15
32x4	2.95	0.85	30x5	3.65	1.35
33x4	2.95	0.85	33x5	3.75	1.45
34x4	3.25	0.85	35x5	3.95	1.65

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5 Truck	\$4.25	\$1.95
34x5 Truck	4.25	2.00
32x6 Truck	7.95	2.75
36x6 Truck	9.95	3.95
34x7 Truck	10.95	3.95
36x8 Truck	12.45	4.25
40x8 Truck	15.95	4.95

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
600-20	\$3.75	\$1.65
650-20	4.45	1.95
700-20	5.95	2.95
750-20	6.95	3.75
825-20	8.95	4.95
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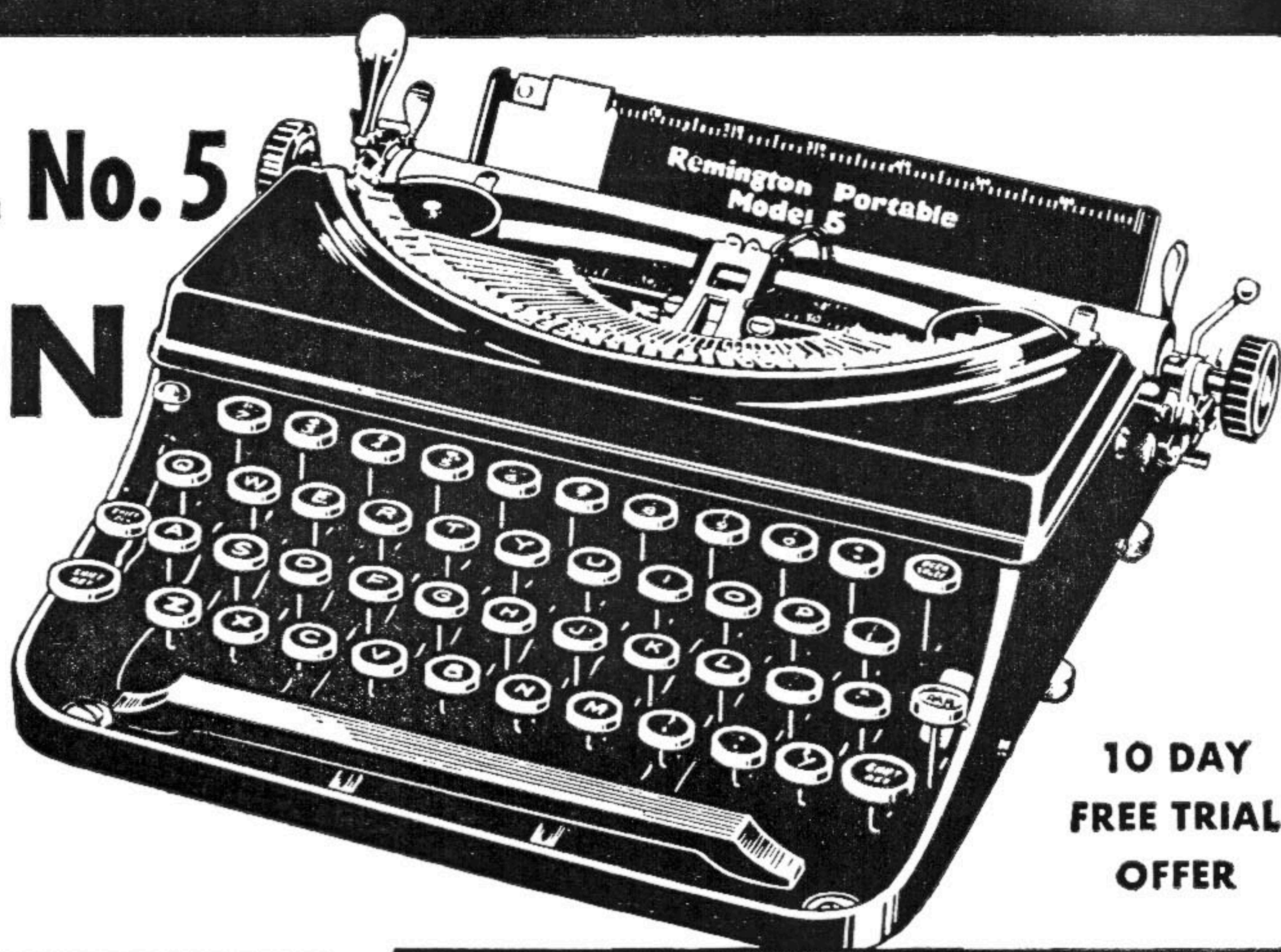
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BRAND NEW MODEL No. 5

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represents the height of economy...unequalled economy in first cost...unequalled economy in service.

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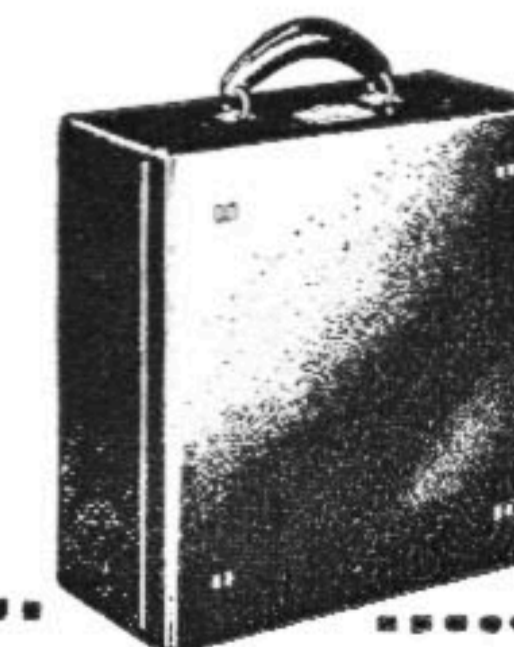
When you get your new Remington No. 5, you will get with it... ABSOLUTELY FREE... a 19-page course in typing. It teaches the Touch System, speeds up work. It is simply written and well illustrated. Instructions are easy as A.B.C. Even a child can understand this method. A little study and the average person, child or grown-up, becomes fascinated. Follow this course during the 10-DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER that we give you on your typewriter. At the end of that time, you should be able to dash off letters faster than with pen and ink.



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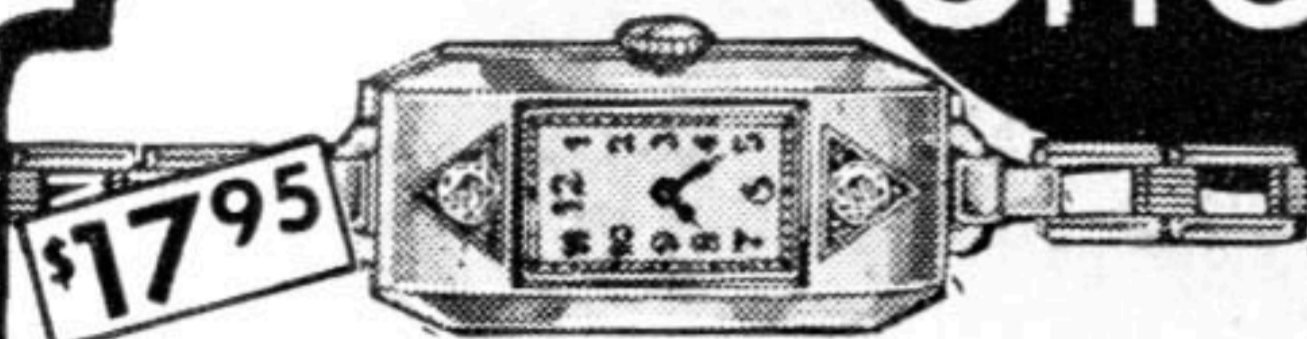
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MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

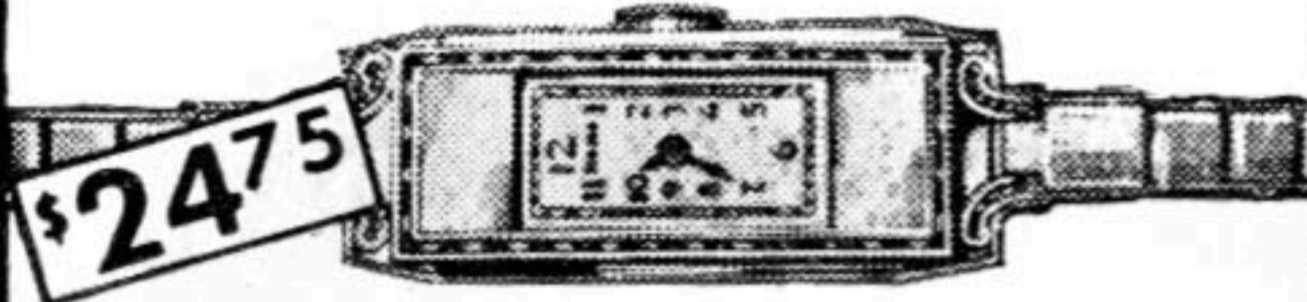
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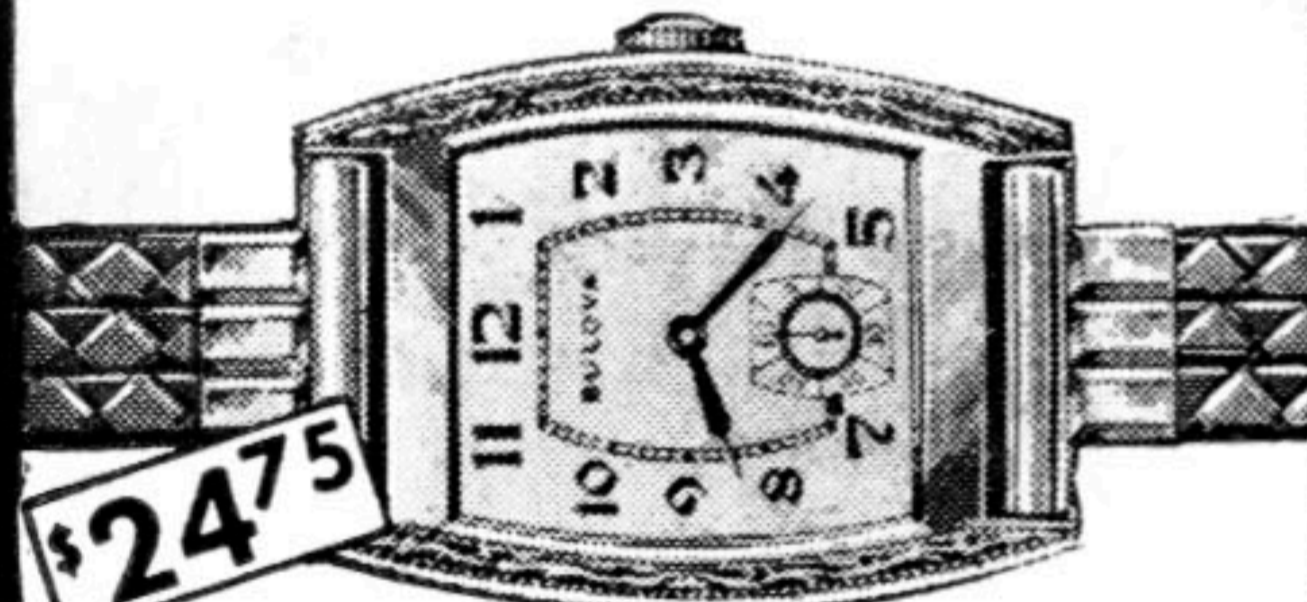
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1521—Bulova's "Miss America"—a tiny Baguette with 7-jewel movement. Last year's low price.
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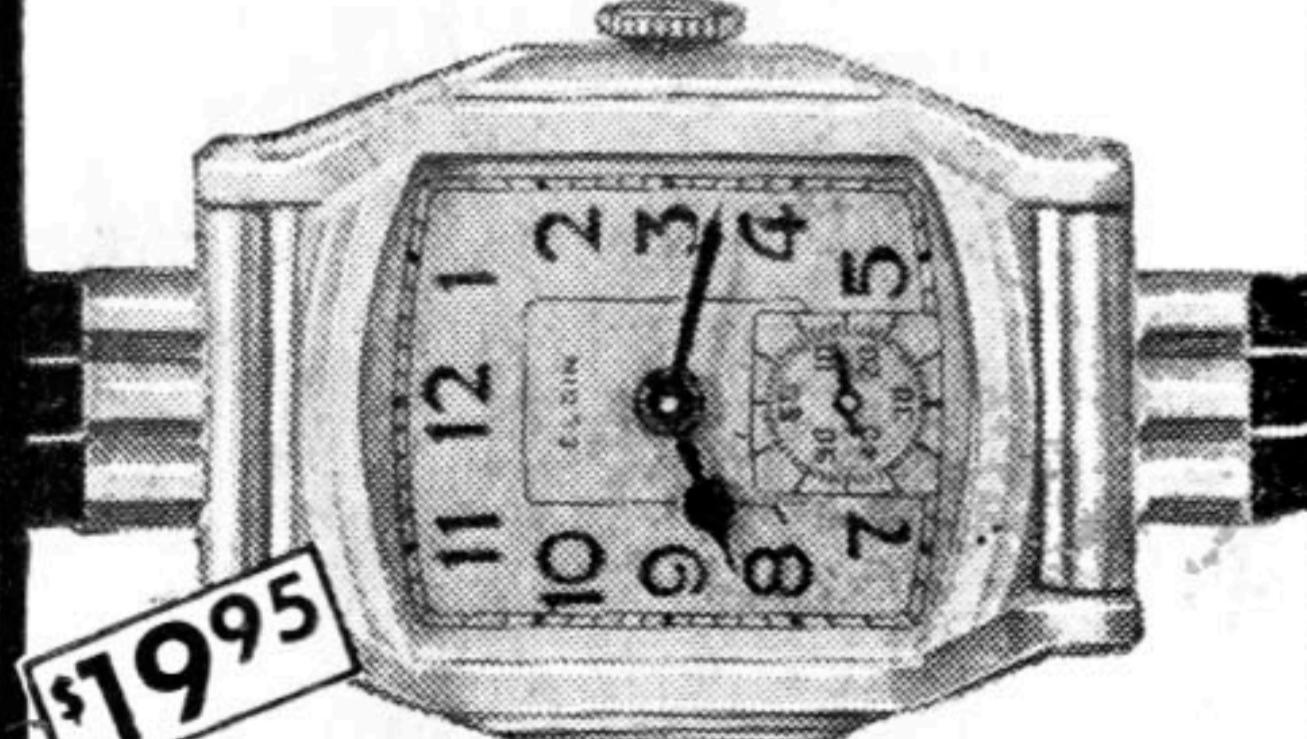
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