

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE

NOVEMBER

10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



DEAD HANDS REACHING

A RACE WILLIAMS

NOVEL BY

CARROLL

JOHN DALY



OSCAR SCHISGALL
HORBERT DAVIS
JOHN K. BUTLER

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... they
changed
this ugly
nickname**



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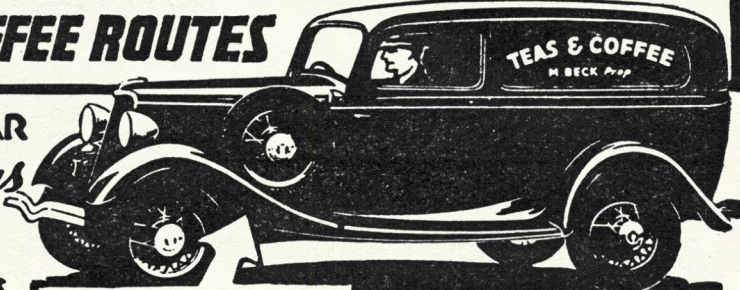
—clears the skin
by clearing skin irritants
out of the blood

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ALBERT MILLS, Route Manager
7671 Monmouth Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio.

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City..... State.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

10 DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW

Vol. 19 CONTENTS FOR NOVEMBER, 1935 No. 4

SMASHING NOVEL-LENGTH RACE WILLIAMS ACTION MYSTERY

Watch a pair of

Dead Hands Reaching.....Carroll John Daly 10
To murder, while that easy-to-dumfound dick sits trussed-up and waiting for the shooting season to open on a covey of human vultures.

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On the crimson blood trail of an invisible elephant who never forgot the order of a kill-sequence that had started eight years before and half a world away.

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We want to know if you are

Ready for the Rackets.....A Department 125
In this revealing series giving the low-down on currently popular swindle schemes. Here's a chance to test your ability as a reporter and win \$5.00 at the same time.

No. 22 in the exciting puzzle series

Cross Roads of Crime.....Richard Hoadley Tingley 126
Who is the man of mystery this time?

Meet a

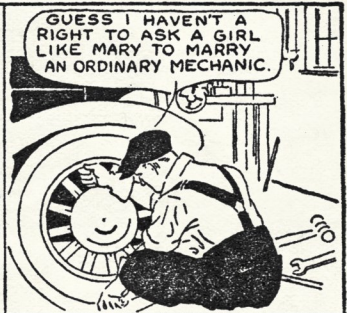
Man from the Coast.....Editor 6
Who can find his way through Frisco fog with his eyes shut and, what's more, steer you along with him among the mystery lanes of that colorful city. Introducing John K. Butler.

Cover—"He Seized the Coldly Curving Blade".....Walter Baumhofer
From *The Devil's Scalpel*.

Watch for the December Issue

On the Newsstands November 5th

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Man from the Coast

YOU DIME DETECTIVE fans have been acquainted with Rex Lonergan for several months now but this is the first chance you've had to meet his old man. Here he is, in person. John K. Butler, whose hard-boiled offspring, Rex, appears in this issue's *The Stairway to Hell*, and who first made his bow in the April 1st issue in *Murder Alley*, Mr. Butler's first published story. We'll let the author introduce himself—



John K. Butler

Born in San Francisco, where I had an early ambition to be a gripman on a cable car. Later moved to a small town in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, the historic country of the California Gold Rush.

Next south to Los Angeles. And this is always the most traitorous move a native San Franciscan can make. Frisco, forgive me; I'm still fond of the Old Town. Started writing stories as a kid. Enthusiastically wrote my way through, and almost out of, several schools. My university experience was largely fall attendance at football games. Have been a mail clerk and an automobile salesman.

Once went to New York with the intention of taking magazine offices by storm; had an idea my services would be invaluable to some lucky editorial staff. But no storm darkened the Manhattan sky, no job opened, and magazines were published just as when Butler lived three thousand miles away.

Some Hollywood-earned gold sobbed in the Butler pockets, crying to be spent, and Europe was just a few thousand miles across the Atlantic. So Butler boarded a boat. And when he hit New York again, sometime later, no crying sounds emanated from the region of his pockets.

Somewhere along the line I started work in Hollywood movie studios—not acting, though I once picked up a few bucks that way. My work in the flicker-factories was with stories, both editorial and writing ends of the game, and mostly the former. Altogether I did about an eight-year stretch at this.

My first published magazine stories appeared in DIME DETECTIVE. I hope all the DIME DETECTIVE readers enjoy the yarns half as much as my wife does.



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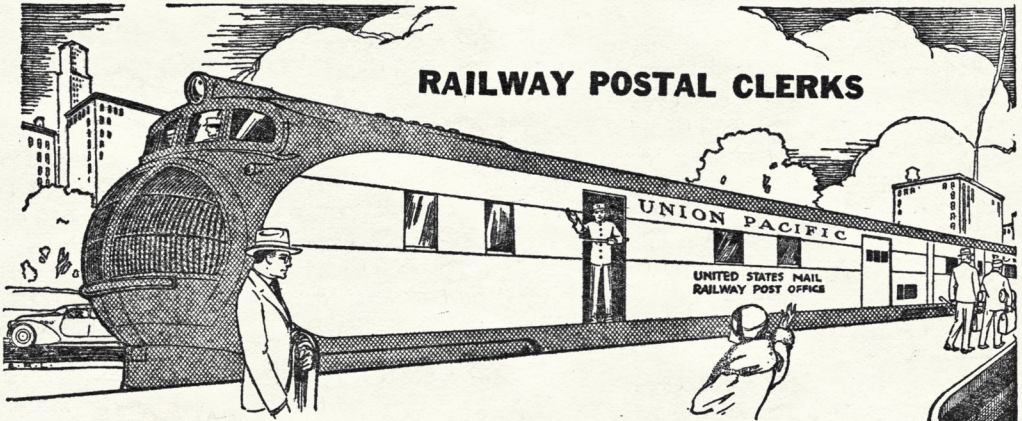
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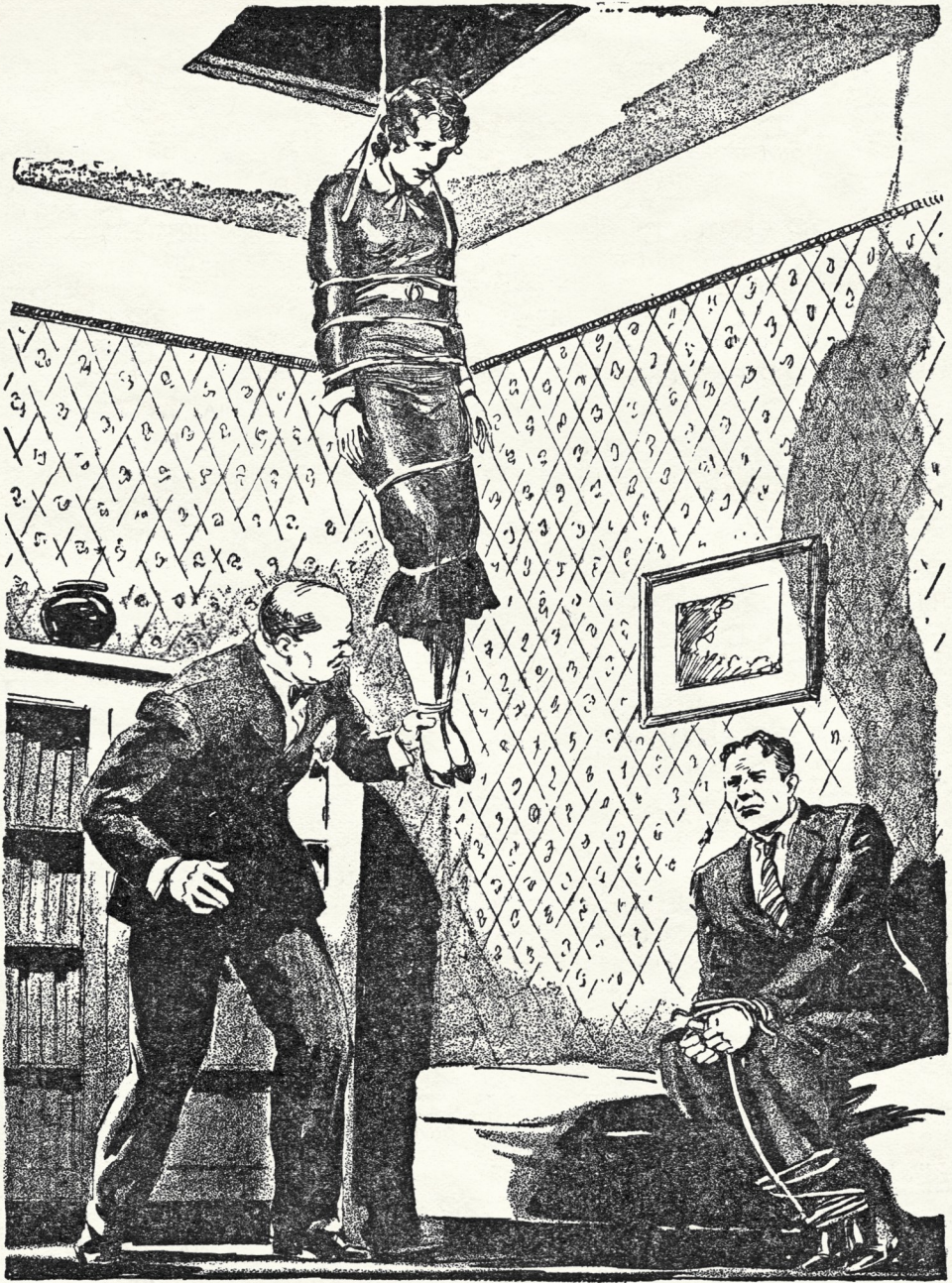


CHAPTER ONE

Blond Gunman

THEY were doing a poor business at the bar of the Royal Hotel—just a couple of customers up front. I walked down the length of it, stood at

It all began with a slug of bad that was supposed to keep that he hadn't even heard about. Of utes later he was in it up to his self putting up an equal amount dubious privilege of gunning



rye and a ten-grand bribe-offer easy-to-dumfound dick off a case course he refused but ten min-neck, and startled to find him-of his own money for the highly out a covey of human vultures.

She spun slightly as her body came down.

the far end. When the bartender, who didn't have any drinkers to serve, kept wiping glasses, I tapped on the mahogany with a two-bit piece.

He looked annoyed, glared at me, then, wiping his hands on his apron, came

slowly down. He didn't say in so many words that I should have come up, but he meant it when he mumbled: "What'll it be?"

"Rye—straight." And when he started carrying the sour puss away with him, I added: "And not the kind of whisky that tosses you for a loss."

He walked leisurely back with the glass, pounded it on the bar, and stood watching me as I ran the liquor below my nose, made a face and let it roll. Then I spun him a quarter.

He stopped it by planting his index finger on the edge, held it so, said: "Thirty-five cents, mister. You asked for good stuff."

"Sure," I agreed. "I asked for it, but I didn't get it. The two-bits stands."

He flipped the quarter into the air, caught it in the palm of his hand, leaned both his hands on the bar, said: "You're looking for trouble, eh?"

"I'm always looking for trouble. Name of Williams—Race Williams. Now what?"

The ugly sneer went off his face as if you'd grabbed up the bar rag and rubbed it away. His hands came off the bar and he rocked back slightly. The ruddy complexion wasn't so good either. And I liked it—damned if I didn't. Conceited? Maybe. But it's nice to know you've built up a name along the old Avenue that saves you a lot of back-room brawls.

The bartender said—and a sweetness had crept into his voice, a sweetness that you'd never suspect from that hole in his face: "I didn't recognize you, Williams. On the level, Race, I didn't place you." And after a gulp, "The boss said you'd give me the tip-off. Go through that door there, down the hall to the right, and up the stairs." He shot the quarter along the bar to me. "On the house, Race. It's an honor to have you drop in."

I picked up the quarter. It was as good

in my pocket as in his, and the liquor was lousy.

THE hall was rather dark but there was enough light at the top of the stairs. A figure moved in the darkness, came into the light on the floor above. I knew him all right. His name was Armin Loring, but that didn't tag him for the kind of a gent he actually was.

Armin had been around the rackets for a long time—not of them, understand, just around them—a lad who appeared here and there for a price. Armin was a lad you could talk to. He didn't play at being a tough guy, he didn't need to. You just naturally knew he was dynamite. He had both his hands in the side pockets of his dinner jacket now and I said as I reached the top step and faced him: "Is that the way it's going to be?"

He looked at my right hand in my coat pocket and laughed, pulled both his hands into view and made use of them. One ran his oily hair straight back. The other pulled at his collar. His shoulders moved and he shrugged. I followed him along the hall.

"I've got nothing to tell you, Race," Armin said pleasantly enough. "I'm just here to announce you. You know who sent for you?"

"Sure," I said. "Gentle Jim Corrigan—who used to be big things in politics."

"That's right"—he nodded—"Gentle Jim, always doing someone a favor, never thinking of himself. That's what put him down; and out of the state for awhile. You remember him, of course."

"Of course," I nodded. "Dear old Jim, who got his start in life by poisoning his own mother."

Armin Loring stopped dead in that hallway. His eyes narrowed, his lips tightened. "You know me, Race," he said abruptly. "One Man Armin. I work for one man—myself. And I haven't any

special interest in you. But I'm telling you this. Don't take that attitude with Gentle Jim. You got some cash coming to you—the easiest you ever made."

Voices came in a mumbled, hushed monotone from behind a heavy door.

"That's the door, Race." Armin's voice was somewhat sulky now. "I'd take your word and all that, but I got orders to search you for weapons—and relieve you of them."

I leaned against the wall and took a laugh. "No joking, Armin," I said to him. "Certainly you didn't believe I'd trot in on the boys without a gun."

"You got a gun then?" He didn't speak about a search now.

"Two of them, boy," I told him. "Two of them—and the will to use them."

His shoulders shrugged. He turned his back on me and walked to the door, tapped—three long and two short. A bit of wood slid open almost at once. Armin spoke. "Williams is here and sporting a couple of rods. What's the answer?"

The slit closed—a long moment of silence—then a whisper from inside I didn't hear. But I heard Armin Loring's answer, and I liked it. He said: "No, I didn't try to take them from him. Hell, ain't I still alive to talk to you?" And after another pause, "And I didn't sign any suicide pact either. He's in or out as he stands. Take your choice."

Heavy feet lumbered across thick carpet behind that door. A latch clicked, a chain clanked, and the door came open. For the first time in over two years I got a look at Gentle Jim Corrigan.

HE hadn't changed any. Perhaps he had added a chin or two, but his face wasn't any older—it couldn't be. There was no way to tell. He had a face that was always in motion. The wrinkles ran in and out of it while he talked. Blue veins became tiny flowing rivers that dis-

appeared entirely, someplace up in his forehead.

He reached out both hands to grasp mine, but he only got one—the left one, as I half swung my body so as to be facing both Armin and him. But Armin had already started back down the hall. He called over his shoulder: "Stop at the bar on the way out and have a drink with me, Race." And he was gone. As for me, it was just as if I gripped a bag full of loose clams and the bag had split—moist and slippery and rolling. Gentle Jim still held my hand.

"Race Williams! Good old Race, the pride of the Avenue," Jim was saying in that soft, gentle voice of his. "I never expected to see you again. Never expected a fellow like you to live so long. You know, Race, when I went away for my health, I said to myself, 'There's one name I can scratch off the books if I ever come back to New York.'" He laughed then, a bird-like laugh. "Well, you did get in my hair then"—he touched the baldness of his roof—"what hair there was. But I never hold grudges. I never—" He backed into the room ahead of me, closed the door and snapped on the chain.

I was expecting almost anything. That's why I kept his huge body between me and the rest of the room. But I got a look-see just the same. I'll admit I was surprised.

The other two men in that room did not have the courteous manner of Gentle Jim, and maybe for that reason alone they were not as dangerous. But if Jim wasn't there you'd easily say that one of the other two was the most dangerous man in the country today.

Albert Swartz was tall, slightly graying at the temples, and his face was hard and straight and intelligent. Albert had been the beer king in better days. He had also seen repeal coming, had sold out at a good price, evaded the government's in-

vestigation of his income tax, and disappeared from view.

But Albert was not a talker. He just looked at me and nodded unpleasantly. The other man was like him, perhaps a little younger—say around twenty-five, the time when the public enemy becomes ripe, most dangerous because he's fully aware of his own power. The swaggering type of racketeer who has just reached the top and doesn't know how to settle on it.

You don't see many of them in the racket today. They don't live long enough. While they last they're just killers. I didn't know his name, and no one gave it to me. But he came to his feet, swaggered forward and looked me over contemptuously.

"So this is the dick we pay good money to buy off. If I had my way, I'd—"

But Jim Corrigan was talking—low, gentle. "Williams is a fine fellow—really one of the boys. One of the boys who, through a peculiar quirk of fate, is on the wrong side of the fence. One of the boys who—"

But I wasn't listening then, and I didn't have to keep an eye on the big blond bad man, for he had turned and was looking at a picture on the wall—his back to me.

I WAS looking at the other figure in that room. The figure in black—all in black. A black cassock like a monk's, and a hooded cowl like a monk's but, unlike a monk—at least the pictures of monks I have seen—that cowl was pulled down completely over the figure's head. If there were holes for eyes, I could not see them. If there was a slit to breathe through, I could not see that. Nothing to see but that all-enveloping black cassock, and the toes of two shoes. Man, woman or child—take your choice. The figure seemed to double into itself so you couldn't tell.

"So you've gone in for the heavy melodrama, eh?" I said to Jim as I ignored the seat he offered me and pulled a chair up with its back to the wall and sat down.

"Just a touch of color." Gentle Jim rubbed his huge hands together and let that smile run up and down his face as his little blue eyes popped in and out.

The blond stranger went to the long table, flopped down in a chair, and banged his hand upon the table. "Damn it to hell, Jim," he said abruptly, "you've got a Hooded Menace here—and now this flat-foot, Williams. Why, Williams was simply to come in and sit down at the table, take the cash, and go and buy himself a trip—all friendly and sociable. Now what? He sits with his back to a wall, tucks his thumbs beneath his vest, and almost has two guns falling into his hands."

"Tut, tut, Bertie." Gentle Jim went over and laid a hand on the other's shoulder. "Race Williams sits with his back to the wall because he is most susceptible to drafts. That's right, isn't it, Race?" He smiled pleasantly at me.

"Correct," I agreed. "Especially drafts let in by bullet holes." And I added so the boys might as well know from the beginning where I stood: "If that big, yellow-haired punk thinks he's so handy with a rod, he's perfectly welcome to jerk one out and show what he can do with it."

The yellow-haired punk swung. Corrigan grabbed his gun-arm; spoke to me. His voice was still soft, but the gentleness had gone out of it. "Why make trouble, Race?" He tried to keep the threat out of his voice. "You had my word that you'd be safe here."

"I know, Jim." I didn't try to keep the sneer out of my voice. "But I'm willing to release you from that word if the bad boy whose puss I can't place feels like showing off."

No one spoke after that. All looked at the black figure in the big chair in the

corner. The black figure had stamped a foot—just once.

Gentle Jim arranged things. He pushed the long table closer to me. I had only to rock forward, jerk the chair up a bit, and I was at the end of it.

Jim's words were coaxing. "Come, come, Race. Make things easy for me. I'm simply going to offer you a business proposition. Now boys"—as he sat down closest to me—"hands on the table—all of us. Honest and above board, eh, Race?"

I watched the three pairs of hands come onto that table—white empty hands. I jarred my chair to the table, sat there with my thumbs in the armholes of my vest.

"Well—" Gentle Jim even honeyed that soft voice of his up a bit. "We got to talk, Race, honest and friendly. How about spreading out your paws? You're pretty good aren't you—not going soft?"

"Or yellow," said Bertie.

Albert Swartz smiled lazily. I simply jerked my head toward the Masked Marvel, said: "I'd like to see some white hands shining over there and—"

Black moved—black arms that were like the huge wings of a bird—and two delicate, well shaped hands came into view and folded on black knees.

"All set." Gentle Jim leaned forward.

"All set—but for one thing." I put both my hands on the table now. "This punk, Bertie—I don't know him. I can't place him. But he knows me or you've told him about me and he still thinks he's good. Maybe he is. So—just a warning. I'll do him the honor of believing he's as good as he thinks he is, and if his hands leave the table—either of them—I'll shoot him to death. Fair enough?"

ALL of us, including the Masked Marvel, looked at Bertie. He grinned, twisted up his mouth, narrowed his eyes and I guess thought that he was smiling.

"You may be hot stuff in this town, Williams, but you're just a laugh to me. You're to be offered a proposition, and you'd better take it." He paused and did his big act. You could see it was big by the contortions he put his face through. "If I want a gun—your hands won't be off the table before I'm making use of it. Remember that!"

"I'll remember that," I said very seriously, and we got down to business. The proposition was not entirely new. Gentle Jim Corrigan put it a little better, that was all.

"It's like this, Race," he said. "Me and my friend"—he jerked a finger toward the silent, dark figure—"and the boys here are back in the city and we're going into business. We're offering you ten thousand dollars to take a cruise around the world. If you wish, you only have to leave the city for a few weeks, and if things go wrong, turn down a client later—a client it's a hundred to one shot you'd never get anyway. It's a lot of money, Race—and it's the top price. You know me. I don't bargain."

"And you know me," I told him. "I don't take a run-out powder at a price."

"But it isn't that, Race. It's simply—we're engaging your services."

I shook my head. "You've given me straight talk, Jim, and I'll give you straight talk. There's a case coming my way. I might not have taken it. Now it'll have to smell to high heaven to get me to turn it down. I hope you don't get burnt, Jim."

"That's enough." It was friend, Bertie speaking and his voice was ugly. "I was against this from the beginning. I'd have taken half that dough you offered Race Williams—and seen he didn't take the case, or any other. Now—"

And when Jim would have interrupted him, "You did a flop, Jim. I'll talk now.

I'll talk the kind of language this bird will understand."

He killed me and cut my body up in little pieces, at least with his eyes. Then, "It's like this, Williams. You take the cash now. You get out of the city now. You keep your word that Jim thinks is worth something—or in twelve hours I'll blast you right out."

I laughed. That's right. It wasn't a fake either. This boy really meant it. I hadn't had a lad talk like that to me in years. Then I didn't laugh. I looked him over good—said: "Buddy, I can't place you and that face. But you're playing the big time now. You've got something, of course, or the boys wouldn't have you here. But keep it for rainy nights, dark alleys—and staggering drunks. Enough?"

He blew up higher than a kite—his face, his eyes, and even the words that spewed out of his mouth. Despite his two-hundred-dollar suit, the seven-fifty necktie, and the tiny point of the handkerchief that showed from that breast pocket, he was talking from the gutter he came out of.

Cutting out the filth, he said: "Why do you figure you came here? Why do you figure you got one grand mailed you for just ten minute's talk? Why do you suppose I'm here—me who's popped them off like flies and never got a jolt. You either knuckle down, take the jack, and beat it—or you'll never leave this room alive."

I half glanced at Gentle Jim. "So that's your word, eh?"

Great shoulders moved. "That's the way it looks, Race. I never for a moment thought you'd back down on me. I hate to see a guy like you, whom I've known for years go out like that. But the room's padded and—"

"You took the thousand bucks and came here didn't you?" Bertie was at it again. "It wasn't all curiosity, then. You found out something—maybe got in

touch with the client and came here to see what you could learn. Don't tell me you ever suspected we knew. You thought you'd see just one man—and could handle things. You never suspected a trap—a death trap. You just pocketed the single grand Jim sent you and came."

"I've known Jim for a number of years"—I came slowly to my feet, both my hands in plain view on the table—"and I certainly suspected almost anything. Yes, even the death trap."

"Aw"—Bertie was talking through his teeth now, the old trick of the gunman, working up to the kill—"you can't make me believe that."

I nodded slowly as I leaned heavily on my left hand. Where my right hand rested on the table and seemingly helped to support my body, it actually did not. But the leaning position did flip open my jacket a bit wider, and did throw a shoulder holster into a rather nice position.

BERTIE went on talking. He liked his own voice, his own words. He was pretty loud. He was one tough guy. He knew it, admitted it. He liked it and in a way so did I. But he said: "So you suspected more than one person, and you came. You suspected even a death trap, and you came. Why?"

"Why?" I said quietly. "I sized up the situation at the door. But I came in because I didn't think you could make good. And I don't think you can now."

Despite his talk this lad, Bertie, was good. Gentle Jim thought he was good, for he sat quietly by. Albert Swartz thought he was good, for his hands still stayed on the table. I saw the whole play, and it was a tough one. Bertie was there to start the fire-works.

Gentle Jim Corrigan said sharply: "Let it go, Bertie boy. You can't bluff Race. All right, Race. You had my word, beat it along. No one will bother you."

Yes, I was sure of the play then. I started a glance toward Gentle Jim—just started it, mind you. Then I threw my eyes sharply back to the Boy Wonder, Bertie. And I was right. One of his hands had gone—or at least was going—

Fair is fair. You'll have to admit it was every man for himself after that. Bertie's glaring eyes weren't five feet away now. Then his gun flashed almost in my face. There was a single shot. But it wasn't from Bertie's gun. I had jerked up my right hand and damn near shot his head off.

I know Swartz and I know Gentle Jim, and I know that it wasn't fear of me that made them drop their hands back empty upon the table. It was Bertie, the horribly dead gunman. It was good shooting—damn good shooting on my part. But there was nothing artistic about it.

Albert Swartz got up from the table—walked to the window that was heavily padded. He was trying to remove the pad.

I said simply: "Don't do that, Albert." And when he turned back and was nearly crashed by the hooded figure who was disappearing through a door in the rear of the room, I added: "The cops aren't going to like it."

"No, no," said Corrigan. "But they don't need to know, Race. We can take care of our own dead." Gentle Jim even gulped. "You heard me tell Bertie to let you go. I had no intention—" He stuck a cigar so suddenly into his mouth that I nearly killed him. Then he said: "God! Bertie was a dead shot. He said he was the fastest shot in Philly."

"You musn't let guys kid you like that, Jim."

Swartz coughed, said: "He was off balance, Race—when you gave him the dose."

"Sure, sure," I agreed. "You want to remember that, Albert."

"Remember it. Me? Why?"

"Oh"—I stuck my gun indifferently against his stomach—"you might get off balance yourself some day. Don't forget to sit up with your dead."

CHAPTER TWO

The Girl At The Bar

ARMIN LORING was leaning against the bar talking to a dame when I swaggered in. She was sitting on the edge of the mahogany, swinging her legs against the side, but she dropped so suddenly to the floor, and turned toward the bar, that I didn't get a chance to see her face.

I never cut in with gunmen and their women, and I didn't now. I just said, "Hello Armin," and moved to the front end of the bar, not far from the big plate-glass window that gave onto the street.

And the tough-pussed bartender was there. But he wasn't so tough then. His arms trembled, though he laid his hands flat on that bar for support. His voice shook when he spoke. I nodded and smiled. Maybe he wasn't in on the thing. But it was a cinch he'd never expected to see me alive again.

I liked that. I gave it to him hard. Here was a guy who didn't want to play rough any more. I said simply: "Rye—bonded stuff. And don't make a mistake this time."

Armin Loring moved down the bar leaving the girl at the rear end. He asked calmly: "Well—which one was it, Race?"

I grinned my appreciation. "So you didn't expect me back either."

His shoulders moved. He said simply: "It can't be Jim or they'd need me. It can't be Albert Swartz, for he's got too much of a head. It"—he grabbed my arm—"it wasn't— Not—"

When he paused I gave it to him.

"It was a lad who rather fancied him—"

self with a gun. Boys had kidded him into thinking he was fast. Went by the name of Bertie and—”

Armin's fingers closed on my arm, his lips grew tight, his eyes brightened. "So." He hardly muttered the words then. "It was Bertie Logan, the fastest, the quickest—"

"Sure," I broke in. And letting the liquor burn added: "That's what Bertie thought, too. Hell—what was that?"

I turned. The girl was slim and wiry. You couldn't tell much from her face. It was painted like a camouflaged cruiser in war time. But the picture at least had plenty of action.

She had been standing right at the end of the bar—around the side of it. A man stepped out of a little side door, held it open with his foot and made two quick motions with his hands. One hand shot over her mouth—the other around her neck. Just a quick jerk and she would have disappeared through that doorway. You can see it in the movies any time.

But this dame knew tricks that the movie men didn't. When he lifted her off the floor, she kicked back with both feet, closed her teeth into his hand and when I turned and looked, it was the man who was making a squawk, not the girl. Armin turned toward her, cursed softly. As he ran up and gripped her arm the girl shrieked; shrieked straight at me.

"Don't go, mister. Give me a break. Get me out of here!"

I was pretty close to Armin then—not too far from the girl either. At least I got a good look at her. You couldn't tell if she was young or not, the way she was painted.

"You did your trick." Armin turned to me. "I like the girl but she wants to swallow the whole bar. Better beat it along. I'll handle her."

I TURNED and started toward the door. I had had my fun and was well paid for it—a thousand just to call on Gentle Jim. And the girl shrieked again.

"Race—Race Williams," she cried. "I need you now—if you dare chance it. If you don't dare now, try later and—"

It wasn't the word "dare" that got me, and maybe it wasn't the direct appeal to me by name, for most of the boys and girls along the Avenue who know anything know my mug and my moniker. I think it was the thing in her voice—the sudden change in her voice. It was not only sober, but it didn't belong in the Royal Bar.

Anyway, I swung back in time to see the lad in the doorway slam his hand across her mouth again, and Armin sink his fingers into the white flesh of her shoulder above the low evening gown.

I only swung understand. Nothing in my mind exactly. Then I stepped closer. There was something in the girl's eyes—blue eyes, deep blue, no film over them, no doe-like, soused look. They were proud too, but I didn't see much of that, for they changed so quickly—changed as the hand that belonged to that thick arm started to drag her through the doorway.

I said: "I want to talk to the girl."

He was a big bruiser but nothing to be alarmed over. Oh, hot stuff to beat up a woman or kick a few drunks around. But as real tough boys go in my line, I couldn't see him at all. Yet he still held the girl.

I said again, and this time put pressure into my voice: "Take your hand off her mouth, fellow." And when he didn't move I, added simply: "If you've got any desire to live at all."

His hand dropped as if you'd hit it with a crowbar. Armin spoke to the girl before she could say a word. "You stay here." His strong fingers bit into her flesh

"You must know what will happen if you talk now."

The girl's lips set tightly, grimly. She winced under the pain.

I looked at her a long moment. The make-up was certainly on thick; too thick even for a real tough moll. She wasn't of the night, that was a cinch. I said to her: "If you want out I'll take you out. Come! Yes or no."

"Yes. Oh yes, yes!" She wasn't doing so good now. Her knees were beginning to give.

Armin Loring said: "Take it easy, Race. Don't cross me like this; not with a woman."

The girl trembled. Teeth bit into her lip. Blue showed on her shoulder as Armin's fingers tightened. But she didn't scream. I rather liked that. I said: "Take your hand off her shoulder, Armin." And when he sneered I flipped my fingers up under my left shoulder. A gun slid easily into my right hand. No one but Armin could see it. His black eyes grew wide—more with surprise than fear, but he held her shoulder just the same.

I said: "You've got five seconds to remove your hand, then I'll shoot it off at the wrist."

Armin spent three of those seconds looking from my gun to my eyes. Then he said: "No fooling, Race?"

I didn't laugh, just told him the truth: "No fooling, Armin. At the wrist."

His hand fell from her shoulder to his side. He said simply: "You're making a big mistake, Race. I don't like what you're trying to do. No, I don't like it."

"We can't have everything we want in this world, Armin." I shed a tear with him. And to the girl, "All right, kid—get moving."

"You're not going!" Armin did the Trilby act with his eyes.

THE girl spoke to me, and she had hard work getting the words out. "He's right. I'm not going." And after a moment's hesitation, "Besides—I—you. You couldn't get me out—with safety to yourself."

"This is no time for funny cracks." I smiled at her.

"The girl says she's not going." Armin's face was livid, but his hands were directly in front of him. He had will power, all right. Another man with a temper like his would have pulled a gun and—well, he wouldn't have had that temper to bother him any more.

The girl also started to say she wasn't going. But I was through playing guessing games. I jerked her quickly, sent her half staggering toward the door, said: "The thing's out of your hands now—and yours too, Armin. The girl goes out."

And out she went, with a frightened look over her shoulder, but still anxious to get through that door. I closed it behind us and we were in the dimly lighted hall.

I clutched the girl's arm, stood still. There was a slight rustle on the stairs. A woman came down. Her face was hard, determined, the face of a woman who had lived. Yet, I knew that face could be young and soft and beautiful. That's right—I knew the woman. It was the Flame—Florence Drummond—the Girl with the Criminal Mind. A woman of good—a woman of evil. Take your choice. There was a time when I could see only the good side of her.

Sergeant O'Rourke—my real friend among the cops—had said I was in love with her. I don't know. But I don't ever remember O'Rourke lying to me.

How did I feel about her then? I don't know. But I do know that I called out her name there in the dimness of that hall; called it as she turned beneath the light. I saw her face, just for a split sec-

ond, and it didn't seem hard or cold. It was young and the sparkle of youth was in her eyes. But it was the thing she carried that got me—a black garment. Plainly I saw the hood which hung over her arm.

Then she was gone.

Maybe I stood there dumfounded or maybe just dumb, with my left arm caught under the girl's right—half supporting her. Then I snapped out of it and dragged the girl down the hall and out the front door.

And the coincidence of no one else being in that bar was no longer a coincidence. The door was locked on the inside. When I made the street I saw the sign—*Royal Bar Closed for Alterations*. Alterations was right!

I saw something else, too. I saw the Flame swing out the main entrance of the hotel and grab herself a taxi. By the time I got another one, she was gone.

Since I didn't have any special directions from the girl, and wanted to get moving, I called to the driver: "Hit it for Central Park."

He nodded; the car jumped forward. The girl leaned close to me and whispered hoarsely: "But if they follow us! Central Park—it'll be dark and they'll—why they'll catch up to us!"

I looked down at the little face in the darkness; smeared as if she had cried a lot, dug her knuckles into her eyes, and made a grinning clown out of her face. Mascara was running wild and no mistake.

My answer will show you the kind of humor I was in. "If they follow us and catch us," I told her flat, "I'll mess up that park so that the city will need to hire a dozen new street cleaners before morning."

Of course, it was the Flame who had put me in that state of mind. Was it possible that she, the Flame, could sit be-

neath that black outfit and see me shot to death? And the answer apparently was—she could. Yet I didn't believe it. At least I told myself I didn't believe it. Sure, I'd have gotten a kick in shooting it out with the boys right smack in Central Park.

THE girl leaned on my shoulder. Little hands clutched mine. She was sobbing softly. And suddenly my lust to kill was gone. She was warm and soft and young and—yes, and clean.

"They'll kill me. They'll kill me!" she cried over and over, and when I patted her head as if she were just a child, she added a humorous thought—"And they'll kill you too."

"Don't you believe it, kid." I gave it to her straight. "The boys aren't really bad." And when she turned those blue, tear-dimmed eyes up at me I said simply: "I'd pop them off—one, two, three. Now, why do they want to—to—" I swallowed once, took out the word "kill" and tried: "Why do they wish to harm you?" I put it all light and gay and happy.

And she said: "They want to kill me because I saw a man murdered."

Light and gay and happy did I say? The kid had dumped over a trunk full of words in that single sentence. I must have put black-and-blue marks on her arm, I gripped it so tightly.

"Kid," I told her, "that's bad—real bad. Do you mean you can stand up in court and send someone straight to the chair?"

"Yes," she said. "I could do exactly that. I try to tell myself that I must do it. Yet I don't do it." She wrung her hands now. "I can't. I can't! You'll help me—save me—won't you?"

You've got to admit that things looked tough—real tough—for me. It's one thing to do the noble "unhand that woman" act, and drag the girl from the villain's

grasp. But it's quite another thing to have the unhappy maiden anchored on you. Racketeers, gunmen, even yellow rats will take a chance on putting a bit of lead in a girl's back if it keeps them from sitting down at eleven o'clock some night and later being lifted off fried.

Somehow the girl didn't seem such a knock-out now; she didn't seem so soft and warm. But if I make a play I finish it. There were just two things to do. Give her a few twenties and let her skip, or call up Sergeant O'Rourke who'd give her protection while she spilled her story. But she broke in just as I was about to offer her those alternatives.

"Of course, Mr. Williams," she said, "you've done so much for me already, and what you will do I can never repay with money. But I am going to ask you to work for me. I'm going to offer you nine thousand dollars—now or when it's all over."

Funny how things change. She seemed warm and soft again, and certainly attractive. But I'm a cautious man. "How old are you?" I asked.

"Twenty," she told me.

"Oh—who's to put up the dough?" I know it sounds brutal, but you don't give things away in your business—and you don't extend credit to minors either.

"I will, but you musn't tell, because I saved the money out of my allowance. You must say you are working for nothing. Because—well"—she did a bit of nose-rubbing on my shoulder—"because I am a woman in trouble and you like me."

The "like" part wouldn't be hard at any price—at nine grand it was downright infatuation. But I said: "Why exactly nine thousand dollars?"

"First," she demanded, "will you take my case? Protect me and save someone's life?"

Nine thousand sounded like a lot of jack, but I gave her a fair answer.

"You're under age, but I'll take your case. If it doesn't fit in with my ethics I'll drop it, shoot eight grand right back to you, keeping one for my trouble."

"Ethics?" She shuddered slightly. "I'm afraid I'll lose you then, Mr. Williams. I'm afraid it is not entirely—maybe far from—ethical."

I gave her a smile and a pat on the back. "You put up the money, kid," I told her. "You'd be surprised what I can do with a bunch of ethics." But I didn't add, "For nine grand." I said: "Now why—just nine?"

"Well"—I think she bit her lip for she talked indistinctly for a couple of words—"I was told that you would be offered ten thousand dollars to turn me down and that I should offer you eleven to take the case." She paused a moment and then, "I had heard about you, read about you, and I didn't believe—couldn't believe—that. So I'm offering you a little less. It will make you seem more like the man I've pictured. Like the man I'd like to have helping me."

Hot stuff, eh? Some compliment! Sure it was. For a moment I nearly broke down and offered to save her for nothing. But something protected me from that noble act. Maybe it was the excitement of actually believing for the first time that I'd get the money. Yes—it looked like this was the client. The client that I'd been offered ten grand to turn down.

So what! Could she take me to her home and talk to me? I'll say she could!

CHAPTER THREE

Family Skeleton

IT was a dignified brownstone family front on a good street, even if she did take me in the back way, up some stairs and right smack into her bedroom. She closed the door. Then, damn it, if she

didn't enter a bathroom, close that door and take a shower. Said something about feeling dirty, which might have meant the boys at the Royal Bar.

I took a look-see around that bedroom. A small cupboard caught my eye. It struck me that it might contain good liquor, so I got up and gave the tiny knob a whirl—locked. I grinned, pulled out my nail file, snapped the lock back and opened the door. Nothing there but a white bit of folded paper. I looked at the bathroom door, still heard water splashing and unfolded the paper. White powder, known to some people as "happy dust." Sure! It was dope.

I folded it up, found an envelope in my pocket, put it carefully away, pressed the heel of my hand hard against the door and the cupboard clicked locked again.

I felt like a real detective. A clue! I took another look under the bed, but neither the Chinese Ambassador nor a Malay strangler was lurking there. The breaks were against me. I sat down, lit a butt and the girl came out.

If she had wanted to make a hit, she sure did. No woman of the night now—young, clean-faced, clear-eyed. She wore a negligee which in love stories is supposed to be hot stuff in anybody's bedroom. In her case, it was just a swell bathrobe that hid her slim young body like a tent. She curled up on a chair and gave me an earful. Her first crack was a beaut.

"You like me, don't you?" And there was nothing of the dame on the make in her voice or eyes as she said: "I like you too."

And there's a love scene that should knock you flat on your back. It did me. There was nothing funny about it either.

"I'm Mary Morse." She went into her act before I could even mention the money. "You know Morse and Lee, of course. The jewelers." There was a touch of pride in her voice. "My grandfather,

Frederick Morse headed that firm, and some day it will be mine—all of it. You know all about the business, and how I happen to own it?"

There was no use to lie to a client, so I shook my head, and she rattled the bones of the family skeleton.

"My grandfather had two sons. One, Joseph, my father; the other, Frank, my uncle. My father went into the firm. My uncle"—she shrugged her shoulders—"well, there was some trouble there. I'm not sure but—well, Grandfather was very narrow, and I think it was about Uncle Frank wishing to marry an actress. Anyway Uncle Frank went away.

"My father married, and I don't think my grandfather was overpleased when I was born. He expected a boy to carry on the family name." She smiled. "I guess he always hoped for a male Morse until Father died and my mother married again."

I said: "That must have hit your grandfather between the eyes. Busted the line of Morses higher than a kite, eh?" Hell, a lad had to show an interest when she was so serious about it.

"No"—she shook her head—"Grandfather was rather pleased at Mother's second marriage. You see, she married Conklyn Lee—Grandfather's manager."

I DIDN'T say: "So what?" I just waited. And she proceeded to give me a little more of the family tree.

"Then Grandfather died and Uncle Frank came back for the funeral. Oh, that's ten years ago. And well, I guess I coaxed Father to take him in the shop where a Morse really belonged and—"

"Young lady"—I shook a finger at her—"I've been following your family better than you think. You said your father died, and your mother married the manager of your grandfather's jewelry business—Conklyn Lee."

"She did," Mary Morse hurried on, "but he's a real father to me. He made Mother very happy and he made me very happy, and since Mother died he's been everything to me. I call him Lee."

I said I thought that was nice and waited. Affectionate step-fathers are not in my line.

"Uncle Frank is just on a small salary, though I'll give him an interest in the firm some day. That will be a surprise. If Uncle Frank ever led a fast life he certainly has changed. Never takes any drink but port wine, reads the most tiresome books and is just about the model man. Grandfather was rather peculiar."

I had gathered that, but I didn't crack wise. I asked Uncle Frank's salary.

"Ten thousand a year and the house here to live in. It's mine, but I'm going to give it to Uncle Frank when I'm twenty-one. That's a surprise, too."

She was as full of surprises as a pair of dice. But I stuck to business. "And your step-father, Conklyn Lee. What is his salary?"

"Oh, he receives fifty thousand a year. Grandfather fixed that when Lee married Mother—a wedding present. Lee is president of the company, but he's really holding down the position for me. I'm to be Morse some day."

"You will own the entire business?" I guess my eyebrows did theatrical tricks.

"Yes, I will, when I'm of age."

Things get around. I said: "I heard the business wasn't so hot." She simply smiled. "All business has been bad—and especially the high-class gem trade like ours. But nothing could happen to Morse and Lee."

"That's what you think," was on my lips, but didn't get out. I wasn't there to lay crape all over the place. "I heard"—and I gave it to her straight—"that Morse money was being dumped

into the business by the tens of thousands to keep the doors open. Was that your dough?"

"Some of it," she admitted. "Lee had to get an order from the court. He's my guardian you know." I didn't know, but it sounded interesting. Then she threw another. "Lee has put every penny of his fifty thousand-dollar salary back into the business for the past few years."

"Did you see him put it back?" I asked. "Did you see the books?"

"Why no, he just told me once when I wanted him to use more of my money. But only this week he was to go before the court with me."

"And he didn't go with you?"

"No." She paused, leaned forward. "That's the trouble. He disappeared."

That's a woman for you. Lets me sit there and try to figure out family relations, and then smacks out suddenly that her step-father has disappeared. I simply said as I leaned back and lit a butt: "Let's have it, kid."

And she did—smack in the face. "That's it," she said. "If I tell what I know, they'll tell the federal men about Lee. That's why I was made up tonight. That's why I followed a man to the Royal Hotel—the man who brought me the threat. Then I was recognized and you—"

"Just a minute. Federal men?" I could see that nine grand going. "Is this step-father of yours, Conklyn Lee in trouble, or is someone trying to frame him?"

SHE looked at me a long time; looked at the door, found a key and opened the little cupboard I had searched. A board creaked and she turned with a stack of bills in her hand.

"Nine thousand dollars." She slapped it right into my hand. "That's for your

help and your confidence—and your word never to tell.”

It was a lot of jack. Innocent she may have been, but she knew how to hold a lad on a spot just as he was ready to jump off it. Oh, I'll take a chance at anything. But it's different with G-men. The best lawyer, the finest mouth-piece on the Avenue will always tell you: "Sorry, boy—no can fix."

I guess a dozen times I said to myself: "Get thee behind me, Satan." Then the bills would sort of crinkle and slip between my fingers. And Satan won—at least for the time being. I was simply protecting an innocent and fine girl. With that happy and noble thought I buried the wad and told her to shoot the works—with the understanding there were strings.

She finally said, simple and direct: "I don't think the government suspects, but Lee has been smuggling in narcotics. He has always been very close to the steamship people. With his knowledge it might be easy for him."

I looked at that innocent young face, gulped the words: "Did he tell you that? How in God's name do you know?"

"He didn't tell me—that is, not until after he was gone. I was told over the phone; asked to search his private study, burn everything I found there that might be incriminating."

"His study! Where?"

"I lived with Lee. After he disappeared, Uncle Frank brought me here. He seemed very much disturbed. But if he knew, he told me nothing. But then he wouldn't. He knows how much I love Lee. He was afraid it would hurt me."

"This Lee, your step-father—he telephoned you?"

"No, someone phoned for him. It was a disguised voice, but it wasn't his. I think it was a woman."

A woman! My mind rushed to the Flame. But I said: "Then what?"

"I burnt or destroyed everything I found in the study. Letters—strangely worded letters. Some tins too, and a paper I brought here to the house to have analyzed. It's"—she turned to the cabinet, swung back white-faced—"it's gone," she said. "But how? Uncle Frank never visits my apartments when I'm staying here. I have a separate staircase."

"I have the paper," I told her. Then tried: "Did you know what you destroyed? Know what it meant? The personal danger to you?"

"Yes, I knew." She nodded. "But I did it for Lee."

"You thought someone was framing him?" I tried to get some reason out of her.

"No, I didn't think that. He had been nervous for days. Talked to me funny—about the Morse name, and how I was to buck up." And suddenly, with a bang, for I guess I was staring at her, "Don't look at me like that! What he did was to save the house—the name of Morse. He was straight and honest and kind. He did it for me. I know—I know about the government. Well, I chanced the government. I'll chance it again. He's my father, and I love him!"

It was a nice speech and if I'd just met her casually I would have patted her on the back and let it go at that. She went on.

"When I was a little girl I liked wild flowers. I wanted them in a wreath, and he'd go off into the county—" She stopped, looked at the ceiling and smiled rather sadly. "Sometimes he'd forget his gloves and his fingers would be torn and cut. He does it yet. He— You can't understand. He's everything to me. And now he's in trouble. Every cent of the money he made that way went back in the firm for me."

I had to admire the kid. Yet I had to set her straight. I dare say the dirty crook would make her a wreath today, and if there was anything in it for him he'd lay it on her chest—her dead chest. But there was no use to up and tell her he was playing her for a sucker. A guy has to be slick in my game. So I went to work on her.

It's not easy to break down the love of a woman, and such a woman. But I got out the old tear towel and cried all over the place. I pictured what happened when dope was smuggled into the country. I pictured little children going to school—drugs put into their candies. Then I had the children grow up—creeping shadows in the night, with a knife in their hands and murder in their hearts.

I put on a great show, but believe me it wasn't all show. I would have preferred to have taken that nine grand and laid a gun-full of lead in dear old step-father's middle. At the end I hit my stride. By God, you'll have to admit I'm good. I had the tears rolling down her face with the grand finale.

"This man you love even better than your own father. Would he disgrace the name of Morse? Wouldn't he rather see you dead than have you live to know that because of you thousands of helpless, drug-crazed men, women, and children slink through the city streets?" Yep, I laid it on with a shovel.

I stopped. I had her. I came to my feet and held her in my arms. She sobbed so pitifully. Sure, I felt sorry for her. Why, I had damned near broken my own heart.

"You're right, Mr. Williams—you're right," she sobbed. "And you make me feel so ashamed of myself. To think that I could believe that of Lee for a single moment. Of course, he never could have shipped in those narcotics. He couldn't have done it. You must save him."

So my fine words bounced back and hit me smack on the chin. Yep, the nine grand flapped its wings and tried desperately to get out of my pockets, but I held it tightly—for a bit yet. You'd put up a fight for that amount in these days, too. Besides I liked the girl. And I did make a deal with her. I agreed that he was probably innocent, but that if he wasn't why he'd have to take the rap. How did I do it? By getting her to laugh—laugh at the very idea of his being guilty.

Now if I got mixed up with the G-men I could recall our conversation, and be working both for the girl and the law.

She felt better too, showed me Lee's picture, pointed out all the good features in his face. To me, he was just an ordinary little runt, with his eyes set too closely together.

Mary Morse, pepped up considerably flopped on the side of the chair, half put an arm about my shoulder and talked.

"I won't be afraid any more. You understand now. These men framed Lee, put that stuff in his room, maybe threatened to do terrible things to him or to me. Then they kidnaped him. Maybe the narcotics came through our firm, and Lee found out. Some unfaithful employee—"

She had a thousand reasons and a thousand excuses for Lee's innocence, and not one moment of doubt. I took a sigh and let that angle hang, tried the other. "You say you saw a man murdered. Who? And how?"

"I don't know who." She shook her head. "It was the night I went back to our home and searched Lee's study—after the phone call. I was just going to leave, was at the front door, when the man came up the steps. He was bent and was carrying heavy books—like ledgers. Then I saw the other man, saw him pass directly beneath the light, run easily up those steps and"—she held her face in her hands—

"he raised the knife. I saw it flash. Oh God, I thought I heard it drive in! I'm not sure if I cried out. When I looked again another man was helping the first to put the dead man in a car." She shuddered.

"But you saw the man who did the killing?"

"Yes, yes—and I saw him again to-night at the Royal Hotel. I don't know his name. Someone called him Albert." And she gave me a description of friend Albert Swartz that was as finely drawn as a police identification.

"And you threatened to—" I started and stopped. Mary Morse stiffened and came to her feet. I, too, was standing now. The house was old; boards creaked in the hall. Feet were doing their stuff. I grinned—just one pair of feet.

The girl whispered hoarsely: "No one ever enters this wing of the house. They've come to kill me!"

"Nonsense," I whispered. "The party's mine now. Stay there."

CHAPTER FOUR

Port Wine and Happy Dust

I took up a position close to that door. But I twisted my shoulder slightly. If it was crashed open I wasn't going to take it on the head. I waited.

Feet came—stopped. Silence—then another creak. The knob turned noiselessly; then it clicked. The door opened slowly.

A big moment that. A hair-raising thrill! Well, maybe, if you're a lad who doesn't get around, but it was nothing to me. If any guy thought he could slip into a lighted room and take a pot shot at me, he was welcome to try.

The door moved further. I watched it as my gun dropped into my hand. My eyes widened. The door stayed about a foot ajar. A white hand came through—

a white hand that held something black. Yep, a .38 automatic was gripped by thick fingers. There was hair on the back of the man's hand, part of his wrist.

I stepped forward quickly, reached out with my gun and rapped Mr. Hairy Hand a crack on the knuckles that crashed his gun to the floor. Then I grabbed that wrist, pulled open the door, twirled our visitor in and closed the door behind him.

I didn't laugh. The villain in the piece didn't seem to be such a villain after all. He was a little lad who should have been safe in a girls' boarding school. His hair was gray with streaks of black in it. He had a tiny mustache, a hooked nose, and glasses that should have been on that nose, but were now dangling from a black ribbon. His get-up was a knock-out. Bath-robe, slippers, and a slight shiver.

The girl said: "Why, Uncle Frank! Your asthma, and the draft in that hall!"

That was no surprise to me, except maybe the draft. Uncle Frank was straight and stiff now like a toy soldier. He was trying to get back his dignity which finally came when he got the glasses on his nose. So I leaned against the wall and waited for his explanation—an explanation that did not come. Instead, he started in to bawl me out—me and the girl. It was rich—at least in the beginning.

"Mary!" He said the name like someone else had buried it in a load of dirt and he had dug it out himself. "So that's why you always wished your own apartments. A male visitor, and you—like that."

The girl tried to get in a word, and did actually start a sentence. "Uncle Frank, this man is—"

But Uncle Frank turned on me. His words started off to be dignified and scathing, but my grin must have touched off what dynamite the old boy had yet—

and it was plenty. There was talk of the police and the scandal in the same voice.

"It's men like you"—he pointed a finger at me—"gaining this young girl's confidence." Then he threw in some pretty mean words at which I moved my head to let go by to hit the wall. And finally his masterpiece, which I didn't like worth a damn.

"You feel safe because the Morse name won't permit a scandal. She is young and innocent, then you come along. A man your age—"

Perhaps "your age" is what got me. Maybe it was the chin-sticking act, for he did push his face close to mine. Anyway I just popped up a thumb and sent his teeth clicking against his tongue right in the middle of a word. Then I threw it at him.

"I'm a business man. I'm here to protect your niece, and you walk in and try to make a bedroom farce out of it."

"Protect—" he started, and I clicked his chin again. I had the floor.

"Yes, protect her. But I didn't have any idea it would be from old codgers running around in bathrobes and talking like a dirty book. I'm a detective, if that will help you any."

"A detective, but why—" And after a burp that ruined his dignity and laid it on the floor with his gun, "The girl—Mary—she knows."

My eyebrows went up. It looked as if he knew something. But, of course he must.

I jumped in with, "She knows enough to get herself in a pile of trouble, and you too. My name is Williams." I grinned down at his hand. "Race Williams."

His smile was not unpleasant. It wasn't rich in the vitamins of brotherly love either. He touched his chin, looked at his hand and said: "Perhaps, Mr. Wil-

liams, you and I should go below and talk." He walked over to the girl. "I'm sorry, Mary. I am sorry you did not place more confidence in me." And after a moment while he held her hand, "But I am doubly sorry, and entirely to blame, that I did not give my confidence to you. Be sure, child, that it was to save you pain. Mr. Williams and I will talk in the library. I may be able to help him."

I LOOKED at the girl. She nodded, came to the door, patted Uncle on the back, kissed his cheek. He looked at her rather sternly, but finally he smiled, put an arm about her shoulders and said: "That's her way with us all, Williams. She does just as she pleases with herself, and just as she pleases with Conklyn and me." His face hardened. "Maybe you'd better come down and join us, Mary. I don't know what you have learned. There may be some great danger hanging over your head."

"Not with Mr. Williams in the house," the girl laughed. "Things are all locked up, every door snapped behind me. Besides I—" And as he shook his head, "All right, I'll get dressed and join you. But I believe, Uncle Frank, you simply want an excuse for an extra port." And to me, "I always humor him despite what he says."

The door closed. I followed Uncle Frank down the dimly lit hall, through a heavy door and into what must have been the main part of the house.

"It's the first time that I have broken in on her privacy, Mr. Williams," he told me as we descended the steps to the ground floor. He led me into a pleasant library. "I was worried for her safety. By God, I should go to the police, but I can't. I can't! Should I send her away?"

He went across to a couch before heavy curtains, stood looking at his trembling

fingers, tried to steady them before he lit a cigarette.

I noticed the rawness of his knuckles and did the high-class gentlemanly stuff. "I suppose I owe you an apology," I said.

"Maybe we both do. I don't think I have ever before been irritable with the child, for we look on her as a child. I have been worried—frightfully worried—and with good cause."

I watched him half collapse on the couch, point to a small closet door and mutter something about port.

"You'd better have something yourself," he added as I poured him a drink and set the bottle on the mantel beside an old urn of some kind.

HIS thought about my guzzling a drink was noble, but the contents of that closet were not for me. Port is, no doubt, damn good for some, maybe for him. But I'm no invalid, and I like my liquor to burn me. He made his apologies, and despite his trembling hand managed to sip the wine.

"All these things"—he moved his head and his left hand as he tried to take in the entire room—vases, urns, pots of different periods—"they were priceless years ago, and are beginning to sell again now. I'm sorry there is nothing stronger than port in the house. I am not a heavy drinking man. Yet things are coming back" And when I thought he was referring to a little real liquor, I found out it was just the business he was talking about.

"Yes, we go in for the Chinese on a rather large scale. Conklyn Lee was strong for it. You see, many of his *objets d'art* and certainly those in our establishment are too rare to be stolen. Any collector would recognize the piece and its value at once. Really, the port won't hurt you."

I said, by way of intelligently butting

into a monologue that jumped from port to vases: "This Chinese business with vases, Mr. Morse, does that fit in at all with the family trouble?"

His eyes widened. "She suspects then?"

"I'm not talking about her," I told him flat. "I'm talking about Conklyn Lee. He's been running in happy dust. You know. Narcotics, if you want to be fancy. Where do you stand?"

"Me? I—" He stuttered and spluttered.

"Hell," I said. "Let's get down to business. To what extent are you involved?"

"I—" He straightened slightly, brushed his shoulders against the huge curtain behind him and sent it wavering, almost lifted himself from the couch. "Really, Mr. Williams, I must say you are an outspoken man."

"Right smack from the shoulder." I nodded my head. "The girl's life is in danger. More immediate than you think. It's up to you to talk out or come under suspicion. Truth is truth. I'm damn near ready to go right to the G-men myself. Now, what's on your chest?"

"Good God! You can't think—" He stopped and I jerked a thumb toward the urns, vases, junk, or what have you.

I said without beating about the dictionary: "You spoke of China. You do heavy business with the Orient then. Have you or this Conklyn Lee been using the Morse name to pick up a piece of change in the drug market?" Then I thought of Albert Swartz, Gentle Jim Corrigan, the Flame, and even Armin Loring and whistled softly. "Hell," I finished, "it looks as if someone is in with a gang who want to do big business."

His face turned ashen, fingers gripped into the soft cushions of the couch. He said: "I am offering you ten thousand

dollars to work for me. Now—a check at once. I need a man like you, Williams.”

I could believe that. But I said: “I’m working for Miss Morse—Mary Morse. If you’re looking for justice, her interest should be your interest.”

“Mary? Mary! Why she had no money to engage you.”

“I like her and I’m working for nothing.” I damned near choked over the words, but I got them out anyway. After all, she was my boss.

“Race Williams! That doesn’t seem like you—the things I’ve heard about you.”

“No, it doesn’t.” I had to admit he was right there, so I added: “I have no explanation to give.”

“In plain words—you won’t work for me.”

“That’s right. I won’t.”

“But if my interest is her interest, and the Morse interest and the firm’s—”

“That’s too much interest.” I shrugged my shoulders. “If you want to talk before she comes down—talk. If you don’t, then I’m simply warning you that I may run into things that will embarrass you.” He licked at his lips, seemed about to speak and hesitated as I leaned on the low mantel. “It won’t embarrass me,” I finished.

HE was a sharp-eyed little runt. Knew his way about, too. You could see him measuring things behind those green eyes of his. Finally he said: “What would you like to know?”

I gave it to him straight. I said: “Conklyn Lee was bringing in dope. Did you know that?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “I knew that.”

“Were you connected with it?”

“No.” He paused a long time. “I don’t think I can be connected with it.”

“Don’t think,” I gasped. “Hell man, don’t you know!”

And Uncle Frank gargled a cheek full of port. He started: “It is quite possible that I may be in serious trouble—the house of Morse in serious trouble. Mary, who idolizes Conklyn—” He coughed once, moved slightly on the couch. The curtains wavered behind him.

“Yes, I did know. Conklyn Lee was doing a rather heavy business with China—cheap stuff compared with what our house used to send for. It was not hard for him to get things through, and I did wonder about the money. Then one night I found him there below the shop. There were other men, but I waited—waited until they left. Opium I believe it was. Conklyn Lee broke down, and—and—he was doing it for the Morse name.”

“You aided and abetted in his crime? You let it continue?”

“No, no!” He almost cried out the words. “He swore to me that it would never happen again, that he was only doing it for Mary, for the house. God, Mr. Williams, I couldn’t report it to the government. I couldn’t send him to jail.”

“You believed him, eh?”

“I had to believe him. For a long time he was putting back every cent of his salary—fifty thousand dollars a year—into the business. It kept the business alive.”

“So,” I asked him, “how did you know he wasn’t drawing half a million out of the dope racket? Did you watch him after that?”

“I did, yes. That is I popped in at times. But he wasn’t about the shop so much—never at night. And his shipments of urns stopped coming to the shop.”

“To the shop,” I cut in with. “Do you know that they didn’t keep on coming to his home—elsewhere?”

But he was talking of the Morse name, of his friendship with Lee over the years, of Lee wanting to take him into partnership, of Mary. He talked on. I got a word here and there. And I got something else. I moved and stood almost directly in front of Morse, the full width of the room between us. The curtains were moving behind him, just back of his head. He wasn't jumping around then. He was sitting straight, rather stiffly erect. I tried to spot what did move, couldn't place it, couldn't be sure. There was a slit in the curtains just to the right of his head. That slit seemed to be moving, maybe moving toward the back of Uncle Frank's head—or maybe it was moving toward—

And by God I knew the truth! Death was behind that curtain.

CHAPTER FIVE

Behind That Curtain

A MAN was behind those curtains. A man who held a gun—a gun that was trained either on the back of Uncle Frank's head or on me. One thing was certain—a killer was taking his time. A killer was getting ready. A killer who never hurried but always did a clean job, was arranging to do a clean job now. And I couldn't shoot without putting lead through Uncle Frank's head first.

I guessed or tried to guess just who that lad would be. Not another Bertie Logan; not a wild coked-up boy of the night who'd come straight to his feet shooting, but a calm, quiet killer. I thought I knew who he was—a lad who would wait until he was sure, until my back was turned.

I turned my back for a split second, swung quickly, dropped to one knee and was facing the curtain again.

The shot came just as I hit the floor.

From between those curtains blue flame flashed into a vivid yellow. The urn on the mantel rang like a gong in a shooting gallery and crashed to the floor.

Did lead follow me to my kneeling position? It did not. The black nose of a gun did. And a white hand did. And perhaps also a keen pair of eyes through the now widening slit in the curtain. But the hand and gun were dropping as the man ducked quickly behind Uncle Frank—that is, partly behind him. He never quite made it. I slapped three bullets just above that white hand, even inside it. Three shots that must have been close enough for Uncle Frank to feel the heat.

Those bullets didn't flatten the killer. Funny that! They brought him to his feet, erect. I could see the outline of his tottering body, his left hand outside the curtain clutching at it, the gun hanging in his right hand. A gun that didn't point at me, but dropped forward directly over Uncle Frank's head, just as the whiteness of a forehead showed between the slit.

I closed a finger once and put a blue hole in the white. The killer didn't cry out. He just twisted like a cork screw, clutched the curtains and crashed to the floor dragging them down upon him. Yep, Mr. Would-Be-Killer rolled himself into a knot and dropped out of sight behind the sofa.

What did I do then? Jump forward, lean over the couch and hold a gun on him? Not me. There was only room for one man behind that couch and that one was there. I slid my gun back beneath my arm, got Uncle Frank a port and held it while he drank it. That is, half drank and half spouted it out on my three-dollar tie.

It was Uncle Frank who spoke first. "There may be others. He—they—Someone would have killed me. I—"

And he came to his feet dumping the port

altogether. "Who could it be? God, man, look. Find out!"

I shrugged my shoulders. "The lad's name is Albert Swartz," I told him. "I don't need a look. Swartz is a slow worker, likes to shoot at a guy's back, especially a guy like me. That's the reason I made myself a target for him." I grinned slightly. "But I warned him about being off balance."

Uncle Frank clutched my arm, said: "You saved my life. I owe my life to your being here tonight. How could he get in?"

"Albert Swartz?" I shrugged. "Oh, lads like him get in when they want in. And don't stew so much about things. I saved your life, yes, but I had to save mine first."

"But Mary, my niece!

HE staggered across the room and went to work on the port himself now as he held his left hand against his heart. "She didn't tell you about any such person, did she?" And without waiting for an answer, "I—I never heard the name. Why should he want to kill you?"

"Never mind that," I told him while he played with his heart as if he were tuning up a harp. "He had his reasons—plenty."

I walked to the couch, looked behind it, reached over, jerked the twisted curtains slightly. "It is Swartz," I told Uncle Frank. Then I walked to the flat desk and started to lift the phone.

"What are you doing?" He grabbed at my hand and when I told him I was calling the cops he shook me off. That is he tried to shake me off before I shoved him back on the couch with enough force to drive the furniture against the body. Uncle Frank bounced back from that couch like an acrobat as I buzzed Sergeant O'Rourke. And while I waited for my connection, Uncle Frank spouted how

impossible it was to have the police in, spouted about the good name of Morse, the firm—and what have you.

"Listen, Mr. Morse." I gave him straight talk. "I don't know exactly what your method is for moving undesirable bodies. It may be excellent. But this is my corpse and. . ."

"Hello, O'Rourke? I've got a stiff for you up at Frank Morse's house. . . Sure, Morse and Lee." And after giving him the address, "Of course he's dead. He died from being overcautious. . . Hell, no. Not a bit of trouble. You'll be glad to take a look at him. It's your old pal, Albert Swartz. I hope you like it."

"Wait. Listen, Race!" O'Rourke's eagerness kept me from hanging up. "We just identified a dead body found in Brooklyn. His name is Boise. Andrew Boise, accountant for Morse and Lee—been with them for years. He was stabbed in the back. Do you think—"

"Hell, I never think," I cut in. "But the guy who killed him is lying here waiting for you—Albert Swartz. He's hiding behind a couch. 'Night." And I dropped the receiver into his ear.

I turned and faced Frank Morse. Inwardly he seemed calm enough. There wasn't much back behind his eyes that looked like the jitters, but outside he was not so good. He kept running his hand back and forth over his mouth like the kids do when they change faces. No, I didn't think it was the time to tell him about Boise's murder.

Finally he spoke. "You're the most cold-blooded man I ever met, Mr. Williams. I hope you'll help me—help us—help Mary. Help, if possible"—he choked slightly there, but got it out—"yes, help Conklyn Lee."

"Help Lee?" I put the eye on him. "Help him down to the federal prison at Atlanta. That's twice tonight Lee tried

to lay the finger on me. He's lucky if he meets up with the G-men, instead of finding himself carting around a belly full of lead. Oh, I try not to be fussy, Mr. Morse—I laid the sarcasm on thick—"but I have peculiar ideas. Little oddities that I try to hide. Being shot in the back is one of them."

I turned, walked to the door, flung it open. "Mary," I said. "She must have heard the shots and—"

God! My feet sank into the floor as if it were soft cement. At least that's the way they felt. Somewhere—just above me in that house—a woman screamed. And then a slamming door and above it all a single word—a single name.

"Race!"

I have heard women scream. I have heard their screams cut off with a hand across their mouth or fingers biting into warm flesh, and I've heard them cut off with the thunder of a gun. But this time—that single name, "Race," was dragged out as if—as if—well, as if it had died in her throat. Why I thought of a knife, I don't know. But I did think of a knife. And I was on the run, out into the hall, up the stairs.

Right here I'll give Uncle Frank credit for having the guts when the time came. He was still trembling. But he did follow me just the same as I made those steps two and three at a time. And as I ran I was loading my gun. Not dropping my eyes understand. I've done it enough to keep my eyes ahead and not slip.

Loring, Corrigan, the Flame—called for two guns; two fully loaded ones. Believe me that idea was not nerves, it was just good sense. Never undervalue your opponent or you'll wake up, the late lamented, with some guy tossing dirt in your face.

I made the hall and reached Mary's apartment door, threw my body against

it. Then the patter of feet behind me, the wheezing breath and frightened words of Uncle Frank. He was saying, and his voice trembled: "Is she safe? Do you hear her? I've got a key someplace. You can't break that door in. Heavy wood. Strong lock. Mary's idea that—"

I watched him fumbling in his pocket, watched him for a single second—and took another leap at that door. Maybe one more—maybe two more.

Maybe the door wasn't as strong as he thought. Maybe I'm built for a strong man at a circus. Maybe the wood the lock ran into didn't have the stuff. But I like to think it was the kid, Mary, and the child-like faith she had in me. Anyway the door went in. Yes, by God, my hundred and ninety pounds damned near tore the wall apart with it. And I was through, guns raised, blazing death along the narrow strip of darkness.

Letting bullets go? Sure, why not? If the girl was there she'd scream. If she was so that she couldn't scream, she'd be flat on the floor. If Armin Loring, or any of the crowd that Gentle Jim would pick were waiting, they'd be motionless figures in the darkness. Hell, no one but a fool stands in the light and lets the boys who are used to shooting take turns trying to knock him over.

There were no running feet, no cries of pain, no falling bodies. And I was down the hall, had reached the girl's door, thrown it open and snapped on the light.

I looked under the bed, in the closet, in the bathroom, across the hall in a living room she used. It was then that I knew the truth. There was no dead body for me to find, no blood to show that she was murdered.

Living or dead, Mary Morse had been carried away.

Poor Uncle Frank! He tried so to help but only got in the way. He suggested so many places to look—impossible ones. I

guess he wasn't used to taking his thoughts on murder and putting them together properly.

By the time we reached the door at the bottom of the stairway, I knew it was a useless job. Certainly the kidnapers or killers were gone in the night.

We had light now and I swung suddenly and faced Uncle Frank. You could have knocked me down with a ton of brick. There was a gun in his hand, and—yes, viciousness in his eyes, in the twist of his mouth.

I said quickly: "Lower that gun. You might shoot me in the back."

He didn't speak. He just stood there, looked at me. I pushed his gun down. I said in actual admiration: "By God, Morse, you'd have killed them yourself if you had come across them."

THE viciousness left his face almost at once. His eyes regarded me peculiarly—puzzled. His smile was not much of a one. He staggered slightly, dropped the gun from his hand. We can't all take sudden and violent death followed by a kidnaping as I can. After all it's my business. But Uncle Frank had good stuff in him. I half pushed him, half helped him up the stairs. I didn't speak, I couldn't. It wasn't simply that the kid had dumped nine grand into my hand. I liked her. Yes, liked her a hell of a lot, and I had just let a load of gunmen snatch her from under my nose.

Uncle Frank said, and his voice didn't have much to it: "The police—the government—all should have been told. And now"—he straightened—"I'll tell them at once."

I clutched his arm, said: "Forget about Mary being kidnaped. Forget about the dope and Lee." And as I shook him, "Don't you see, man! They took her alive—or why take her? Conklyn Lee will want to protect himself through

Mary Morse, keep you silent through her."

"But the law—the police you sent for."

"The girl was safe when I sent for the police." I bit my lip, realized the chance I was taking and plunged right into it. "We'll beat it along now. Right down those stairs and out. God, man! It may mean your life. Don't you see, you're the last to know—the last alive to know. Mary dead, you dead—and Conklyn Lee is safe."

He stared at me, looked toward the stairs—at his bathrobe. He didn't fully understand, but I got him to his room and into his clothes. O'Rourke would be there any minute. Twice I started to tell Uncle Frank about Andrew Boise, the Morse and Lee accountant, but I didn't. Hell, I didn't want him to collapse right then.

I did leave him for a minute, though. I ducked down the front stairs, back into the library, and after scribbling a message on a card, planted it smack in the center of the table.

O'Rourke—

Frank Morse's life is in danger. He left for the night. You'll find the stiff behind the couch. Don't do anything until you hear from me.

Race.

That last line ought to get him. When he'd hear from me, I didn't know—if ever. But I had plans for the night which carried death—death for someone.

When I got back upstairs Uncle Frank asked: "What of the police? What can I tell them?"

"I'll tell them." I was hustling him toward those rear stairs again, there wasn't much time to waste. "I'll buzz O'Rourke, tell him there's a threat against your life, and that I advised you to leave the house and stay at a hotel. You're the only living man who can put

the finger on Conklyn Lee, on the crowd of tough boys he's in with. Come on."

I didn't take any chances on O'Rourke being ahead of us. Maybe Uncle Frank didn't like it. I'll bet it was the first fence he had hopped in years. Sure, that's right. I took him through the yard behind, half lifted, half pushed him over the high wooden boards. We reached the street beyond, and I pounded along the pavement after my tottering charge.

I tried to pump Uncle Frank after I had shoved him into a taxi. He seemed in a cold sweat. No one could tell me the port wine he had downed could have made him wobbly. And there was no reason for him to keep silent if he knew anything more. So I told him about Andrew Boise getting knocked off. It didn't matter if he passed out now.

"Andrew Boise." His words sounded like a man about to break up. "He must have known something or suspected something. And he's dead." A long moment of silence. "My niece learned too much and she has been taken away." He suddenly grabbed my arm, held it tightly. "You understand, Mr. Williams! You must understand! I know—I know just as they knew. And I'm alive and free." His voice went a little shrill. "You must protect me, Mr. Williams. You must protect me!"

I said: "A few minutes ago you were all for saving the girl. Now it's yourself." And feeling the man shaking violently there beside me in the cab, "Of course you'll be safe. You think Conklyn Lee is planning your death and the girl's?"

"No, no. I can't think that. It must be those he works with. He can't be doing it alone. Not after tonight and the dead man who tried to kill me. Conklyn Lee thought a lot of Mary and of me. We were like brothers."

I let the sentiment slip by, said simply: "And he knew the Chinese market well?"

"Yes, very well indeed. There is no doubt of that. You ask your own price, Mr. Williams. Any amount you name." His eyes blazed in the darkness now. "You know the underworld of the city. I have read about you often. Do something—anything. Pay for Mary's freedom. Get her safely away. There is enough money for her to live comfortably on. Maybe even enough to save the firm if the court permits it."

"And then?"

"Then I'll talk—to the police, to the government. Ten thousand dollars a year is all I have in life. But if I must, I'll let the house of Morse face it. Let the crumbling walls of a great name come tumbling down upon me. Mary must be saved. In the morning I shall go straight to the police."

It sounded as if he talked right out of a book, but he looked the kind who would. Yet, he was right about the house of Morse. It was common gossip in the jewelry trade that it was tottering, and of course, I'm more or less informed about the gem business.

I said: "Could Andrew Boise possibly have discovered what was going on? I mean about the drugs."

"Hardly." And after resting his chin upon his chest, "Yes, he could have. I sent him down to the shop several nights. I thought his being there might prevent Lee from continuing with his—his evil practice. . . . It is probably the truth, Mr. Williams, that I sent Andrew Boise to his death."

I thought of that too, but it was rather late to bring it up and toss it in his face. It wouldn't make Andrew Boise, the good and faithful servant, any less dead. So I let it slide.

I gave Uncle Frank straight talk. "You go to a hotel and register under another

name. I'm going to play a long shot. Mary is still alive. They have her so that she can't talk. Now"—I pounded a finger against his chest because it isn't often that my brain turns out a Sherlock Holmes—"you know more than any of them. You've kept silent to save the name of Morse. If you talk, the show is over. If they harm Mary you will talk and the government will hop in. Mary has to live as long as—well, as long as you can talk."

After he digested that one, I gave him the fruit of my brilliant mind.

"They'll want to do business with you. Don't see anyone. Don't talk to anyone. I'll be your agent and see what can be done. They'll want silence for Mary's life. I'll figure it out."

I didn't want to figure it out for him then. He didn't look like a lad who could take much more, and death alone brings silence.

The taxi reached the Nicholas Hotel. I picked it myself. It was not big and flashy, just small, and fairly respectable. Uncle Frank disappeared in the lobby.

I gave him a few minutes then followed him in, took a look-see at the register and handed myself a grin. Damn it, he had signed his name John H. Smith. Deep thinker, Uncle Frank. But I'll give him what credit was due him. The "H" was original.

So on my way, and ready for work. I had a feeling that I was going to meet the boys again tonight and that Armin Loring was going to lead me to those boys. A nice lad, Armin! He was fond of money; other people's money.

CHAPTER SIX

The Flame

OF course, I knew where to find Armin Loring. He had been in the Royal Hotel and must have guessed, if not ac-

tually known, that Albert Swartz had been sent to the Morse residence to kill Morse or me. And he himself might have been in on the kidnaping of the girl.

I knew he would be alone. One Man Armin was his name, and One Man Armin was his business. So I couldn't see Loring mixed up with this outfit. He worked for no gang and every gang. He took a single job, collected for it and was through. That's why he was still walking the streets a free man. He seldom made mistakes of his own, and he wouldn't get himself mixed up in the mistakes of others. At least that's what he thought.

So I was sure where I could find Armin. In the attempted killing and kidnaping at Uncle Frank's, or not, he'd be fixing himself up a nice alibi. So I went straight to that well known supper club, the Colonial Blue Grass.

I'll admit I didn't like it when a captain of waiters spotted me, gave one of those half-bows which tempt you to pull up a right and keep it moving until he takes his chin away—and the rest of his body with the chin. But it was his words that got me then.

"You are looking for Mr. Loring, Mr. Williams?" And when I just stared at him, "Mr. Loring is keeping a place at his table for you if you came particularly to join him."

All right. There was nothing sarcastic about the captain's remarks. I can take it. I let it go as score number one for Armin Loring, and hinted to Boiled Front that a seat at Mr. Loring's table was the greatest desire of my life.

Loring was using a booth almost directly opposite the center of the dance floor which had about as much privacy as a fish bowl. But I guess he wasn't looking for privacy at that time. He didn't rise as I laid a hand on his shoulder. He

simply said: "Sit down, Williams. I've been expecting you."

The captain left. I slid into the seat opposite Armin, faced him squarely and said: "So you expected me? You know why I'm here then?"

Loring's eyes were steady, not sneering and certainly not smiling. "I can make a guess at it," he said. "Something went wrong and you intend to threaten me if I don't right it." He blew smoke from the cigarette he held in his left hand. His right was below the table. "It's rather public for any melodrama, isn't it, Race?"

"If anything happens to the girl you'll ride with the others." It was best not to kid around with Armin. He liked to hear straight talk, and I liked to give it.

"So they took her away from you." And as I held my gun tightly below the table, a steady finger ready, "I know you, Race. Know that time and place doesn't matter when you're on the kill. You're on the kill tonight. I'm covering you below the table, too. Neither shot would be fatal. We'd both make ourselves ridiculous."

Armin beckoned the waiter, ordered champagne then continued easily: "Now Race, I was paid to see that you came nice and easy to meet Gentle Jim. I was paid to see that the girl was protected. That's straight, Race. I was paid to see that she didn't leave the hotel. You took her. Now, outside of threatening to kill me what else have you to offer?"

HE paused, came suddenly to his feet. He was an easy shot for me then with his hand still below the table, and his gun certainly pointing downward.

"You have met," he said, "Miss Florence Drummond. Will you slide in and let her sit beside you, or do you prefer to step out and let her have the inside. As you see, her wraps are beside me and there is no room."

I hesitated. If I stepped out I'd have

to park the gun. If I stayed in, it would be clearly visible in my hand to the Flame. If I shot him to death—and the temptation was certainly there to do it—well, what good would that do Mary Morse? It would just raise a lot of hell around the dance floor.

The Flame took over the conversation as she slid in beside me. "You know I wouldn't kid you along, Race. I was watching from another table. It was my cue to come to this one as soon as you sat down."

"Make it look like I killed him over a woman, eh? Well—" I stopped and looked at brown eyes; soft, alluring eyes that could be so cold and cruel.

"So." She looked straight at me. "You won't say it out loud, but to yourself you are thinking I am very beautiful. And you are remembering that once I—well, hinted that I liked you." She patted Armin's hand, said: "There, you won't mind about Race."

"Not me." Armin looked at her and there was admiration in his eyes. "If Race can take it." His hand closed about hers.

Maybe my eyes did widen. Why not? One Man Armin—the man without a weakness. And now he was taking Florence into our conversation.

I said: "I came here to talk business and you have a woman in on it." I let him glimpse my gun going back in its shoulder holster. There didn't seem much sense in putting a bullet in him, and I wasn't out for a pleasant evening. I put it to him this way. "I'd like to find a certain girl, Armin. The one you would have kept from me tonight. There will be a good price paid for her return."

Armin Loring just said: "What do you mean, a good price? And who will pay it? Certainly not you."

"The girl's uncle will pay it. He—"

And Armin laughed, finally said:

"Frank Morse, eh? I keep my ears open. The house of Morse can't pay its bills." And leaning closer, and twisting his face at my jerking head that indicated the Flame's presence was not exactly desirable, "Florence has got more brains than either one of us. She thought you'd come tonight. And she thought it would be about the girl. She—"

"I'm not interested in the Flame's psychic powers," I told him flat. "Talk real talk."

Shoulders moved. He said: "You know me and I know you. We've both lived a long time. We don't kid. I know every rat and every big shot. Maybe I give a guy information once in a while. Maybe I do a little clean work. But I'm a one-man worker. I did my work tonight—I'm through with it. I've got an alibi if this Mary Morse was snatched."

"By God!" I leaned even closer now. "If anything happens to the girl—bing—like that. You go out."

"That," said Armin slowly, "is a threat. I can neither protect nor harm the girl. I don't like threats. I could get a hundred guys to knock you over for half a grand."

"To try to knock me over, you mean."

"Well, try then," he admitted. "You cost me a piece of change tonight, Race. I'm not exactly your best friend."

THE Flame said: "The Conklyn Lee racket is washed up, Armin. No one can stick a finger on you. Why not—" She hesitated, looked at me. "Armin might make a damn good guess where the girl is for a price. Cash on the line, Race."

"How much?" I looked at Armin.

He did tricks with his tongue in his mouth, finally said: "Ten grand now—and forty grand more if she comes out of it safe."

I looked him straight in the eye. "I shoot straight," I finally told him. "You

know that. I can't promise that Frank Morse can lay his hands on that amount."

"I can promise he can't," Armin laughed. "Listen, Race, there isn't a big guy from the millionaire to the picker throwing a front that I can't put a price on. Morse and Lee are bouncing on and off of the rocks."

"So they ran drugs and—"

"I don't want to know anything about it," Armin cut in quickly. Then, "I know it's a stiff price, Race." And suddenly "Look here, rustle up ten grand and I'll tell you where they have her, how to get in and"—he paused, shrugged his shoulders—"how to get out will have to be your business. Hell, the girl's got money in her own name. If she's grateful you might shake her down for twenty-five grand—twenty anyway. Want to gamble ten of your own money?"

That nine thousand dollars the girl gave me burnt hell out of my pockets. I damned near agreed to put up the jack when a new angle came up. Armin wanted the ten thousand before he talked.

We were at what's known in the best circles as an *impasse*. Which means we were raising hell back and forth across the table, when the Flame spoke.

"It's our music, Race. Remember?" She hummed with the orchestra. "You can't have forgotten that night."

If there was such a night, I had. But I didn't say so. My mind was blank on the subject.

The Flame said: "Let's dance." And she was on her feet, dragging me from the booth. Now there were only two things to do. One was to smack her down right before all those people. The other was to dance with her. And as far as I knew Armin still had his gun in his lap.

Oh, you might say that common sense would teach me he wouldn't shoot there. But you can't tell me that common sense

would take the lead out of me if he did.

Anyway I found myself dancing with the Flame. Her hair was against my cheek. Her eyes were young, the sparkle was there now. Perfect red lips—slender white neck. Yes, an armful of beauty.

And me? Hell, I was trying to keep an eye on Armin Loring and the gun beneath the table.

"You're so romantic, Race," the Flame laughed. "Why not twist around so that any bullets would strike me in the back?"

"Not a bad idea." I swung her quickly and kept her back to One Man Armin, then asked: "How did you get mixed up with that punk, Florence?"

She didn't flare into abusive language—not the Flame—that was her great strength. Her laugh was even pleasant. "I take what men I wish," she told me. "The 'punk' as you call him reminded me of you—and our love."

"Our love—" I grunted a bit, but she was a nice armful. I mean on another occasion. "No, Florence, I'm one man you never got."

She nodded very slowly. "I spared you, Race. I don't know why. Unless it was that I really loved you. But there were times, my boy, when I could have led you to your death. Times when you trusted me. Times like tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Yes, tonight. You want to save Mary Morse. She'll be dead by sunrise."

"She can't die," I told her. "Frank Morse would talk then."

"She's a good girl, Race," was all she answered. "Pay Armin Loring the ten grand now—tonight. Or the girl will be dead by morning. That's a fact."

I LOOKED at the Flame's eyes now. They were deadly serious, peculiar eyes, as if they opened up almost smack in the center of the pupil and let you look inside for a second—to learn exactly noth-

ing; except perhaps to sense the reason why men smacked down hard for her. The Flame. Her name had come from the many "moths" she had destroyed. For it was written in the book of the night that to love the Flame was to die.

I said: "Look here, Florence. Suppose I had the money or could get it. Why Armin would simply send me to a trap—to death. I wouldn't be out the door before he'd have Gentle Jim or this lad, Conklyn Lee, or some of the boys on the phone and preparing them to mow me down."

The Flame laughed. "That's why I loved you, Race. That's why I still—well, like you. You're dumb—so terribly dumb except when you have a gun in your hand and death in your heart and a human target to shoot at."

"All right—give me the answer to that one."

And the Flame gave me the answer. She said: "You pay him the ten thousand, then he tells you where the girl is. I'd tell you myself, Race, if I knew and—"

"Yeah. After he gets the ten, then what?"

White shoulders rose and fell. "Then put Mr. Armin Loring in a position where he won't be able to tell. Must I advise you how to do that?"

Good? Of course it was good. The Flame was always good. But if she was good for one lad, she was naturally bad for the other. Now which lad was I?

She went on: "You don't trust me, Race. That's it, isn't it?" And she made the words soft.

"And what the hell is queer about that?" I gave it to her straight. "You're mixed up with a guy who makes murder a business. You have looks. You have poise. You have courage. You have everything. Yet there are times when I actually believe

you don't know the difference between right and wrong. I fell for it once—"

"Race"—she raised her hands, placed both of them squarely on my shoulders—"you're not suggesting the little home in the country—the slippers and newspaper?"

"Not unless I expect a bullet to go through that newspaper. This queer criminal mind of yours, Florence, may be swell stuff to you, but not to a lad who wouldn't care to find a knife in his back when he leaned over to pick up the slippers."

Her laugh was pleasant. "Armin has a lot of you in him, Race, except that he has more ambition and is more careful. But in an emergency he'll go out, just like you, and use his own gun. I wouldn't cross him again as you did tonight. It took me some time to talk him out of knocking you over."

"Huh," I told her. "In plain words you didn't think he'd look nice on a slab." And suddenly as we swung back near the table, "Hell, Florence, several times you've gotten away from the rotten criminal world only to drop back in it again. Why?"

She said without emphasis or regret: "I like to eat well, dress well, and I like excitement." And suddenly, "Are you afraid to save the girl? She'll die, Race."

"Yeah—" I looked steadily into those now child-like eyes. "How do I know if you're the beautiful young girl tonight or the Flame with the criminal mind?"

She threw back her head and laughed. "That's what makes it sporting, Race. That's what makes me the delightful woman I am. And you the man I loved—maybe could love again."

"And maybe could hate," I said as we swung back to the table.

"Maybe!" And she wasn't smiling now. Her eyes were very grave—very cold. "That's for you to figure out. I won't

promise you your life tonight, but I'll promise you the girl's life whether I love or hate you."

SO romance entered our peaceful little kidnaping and murder if you can see lead in the belly and a beautiful woman in your arms at the same time.

We were at the table when the Flame spoke again, gave it right out to Loring. "I've been talking to Race, Armin." She leaned slender arms on the table. "He'll lay ten grand right here on the line. You'll tell him where the girl is—and he'll forget us entirely." And when Armin just looked at her, "Well, I've put money in your pocket before, Armin. Race is a right guy, at least for tonight. He won't talk if it's a bust, and won't squawk for the ten back if you've given him the break—an honest break."

Armin took a small sip of wine, said to me: "You'll pay, eh? And keep your trap shut."

"I'll pay and I'll shoot you to death tomorrow if you've given me a wrong steer."

"That's your idea." Armin leaned back, gazed at the ceiling. "If I give you a wrong steer you won't be alive to shoot me to death. Maybe you won't even be alive with the right one. I can only tell you where Mary Morse is. You'll have to handle things uptown your own way. I wouldn't want to go there tonight, but if I did, I'd walk in with a gun in each hand—and begin shooting the first time I saw a figure."

"As bad as that?"

"Just as bad," he told me. "Maybe worse. You and I never crossed until tonight. If you start shooting they'll kill the girl; if you don't, they'll kill you. I'm not especially anxious to play with you on this."

But enough of all that. It was a ticklish job all around, and where I can use my

head, I can use my hands a damn sight better. We finally agreed to his taking five grand right then, and another five grand within an hour—neither of us to leave the table during the time.

I let him think I had to send for the rest of the money. Get it? I had a note I wanted to reach Uncle Frank Morse. Armin didn't mind my having to send for the second five but he wanted the whole ten before he spoke. It was the Flame who fixed it up.

"We'll play Race's way, Armin. Ten grand is ten grand. You owe the boys nothing. Gentle Jim ceased being gentle when he found out the girl, Mary, had gone with Race. Jim's a big shot, Armin. The big shot you're going to be. The big shot I'm going to make you."

Armin's eyes were slits when he looked at her. "I'll be big, kid," he said to her. "And I'll drag you along with me. I never toss over a friend."

"Hell," I said, "you never had one. Well, are you still going to beef around?" And he wasn't.

I slipped the five grand to him under the table. He counted it without a visible movement of his hands, folded the bills and put them in his pocket.

He didn't waste time then. He said directly: "The place is in Mount Vernon. It's a big house with plenty of ground. The street number is—" And he finished by tracing out the road right to the house.

"Are you sure?"

"Sure. I covered the car that took them there." He grinned. "No, I'm not double-crossing them. They hired me to see that they reached the place safe. They didn't pay me any ten grand to see that you didn't come later." And turning to the Flame, "News to you, too, sweetheart. Well"—his shoulders shrugged—"you couldn't talk if you didn't know. Now, Race, dish up the rest of the money."

The waiter plugged in a phone and I

called to my home. Jerry, the boy I had picked up in the underworld, answered almost at once. "The Colonial Blue Grass, Jerry," I told him. "I want you right away."

Silence after that as I jerked a page from my notebook and wrote, my hand shielding the writing from both the Flame and Armin. Armin sipped wine slowly. The Flame stared at the top of my head as if she would read the message I was writing. But the message had nothing to do with money though Armin thought it had. It was directed to John H. Smith at the Nicholas Hotel—simple and direct.

I'm making a bid for Mary's freedom tonight. If you don't hear from me by eight o'clock in the morning, I'll be dead. Give O'Rourke a ring. Spill your guts.

I hesitated there thinking of Uncle Frank's dignity, and crossing out the last three words, wrote instead—

Tell O'Rourke everything. Your life depends on it.

When I signed my name there was plenty of room left on the paper. I chewed on the pencil a second or two, finally wrote—

Jerry—

Deliver this note above in person. Say nothing. Return and wait outside in the car. When I bring a guest out, hit him on the head with a wrench.

Not very elegant, but it was the Flame's suggestion. She might do it in a more refined manner, but me, I like a wrench.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Car Behind

ARMIN didn't like the note business. He wanted to know why I couldn't telephone to the friend who'd lend me the cash.

I said simply: "Someone might listen in. He wouldn't want it to be known that Race Williams could hit him for five grand at one in the morning. O. K.?"

"O. K.," he said.

Things went according to schedule. Jerry came and took the note. The Flame put her hand on Armin's arm as he half came to his feet. I said as he sat down again: "Don't come in with the money, Jerry. Wait outside."

Armin kicked a bit, but Jerry was gone. There was nothing to do but wait, and convince Armin that I wouldn't leave him, that he could come out with me for the money.

"And the Flame, too," I added.

"No—not her." Armin shook his head. "I rather fancy Florence. She'll stay inside. I don't want her to get hurt." His look at her was suggestive of the very thing of which I was afraid. That Armin would give me the right house, but that he would also advise them of my coming—of my coming alone. And now I wondered if he was leaving the Flame behind for that very purpose. Perhaps it isn't gallant to admit it, but truth is truth. I was wondering just then if a wrench on the Flame's head would be very much out of place.

The waiter came at last to tell us the car was outside. Armin and I got to our feet. Again he looked at the Flame, then he turned his back on her. For a moment her face was sideways to me. If she gave him a reassuring look or not, I don't know. Then he turned, and for a moment the Flame and I faced each other. Her brown eyes held a dull luster; a silken film came and went before them. Brown and good and honest and—

It was on my tongue to insist that the Flame come with us—but I didn't. Maybe it was her mouth forming words, words that seemed to say: "I can't promise you your life, but I promise you the

girl's." Words that seemed to mock me, mock my courage. Yet her eyes didn't mock. They were beautiful. They—they

Hell, I don't know. Maybe I'm a sap, but I left her there standing alone by the table, and followed Armin Loring from the room.

We went out the door, were on the street, when he got cagey—a little talkative. "Look here, Race, I'm playing the game with you and—"

I said: "There's my car—and here's the money."

That got him. He swung around to face me when he saw the money in my hand. He must have known then that I had had the money with me all the time. But greed got the better of him. He backed slightly from me as I stretched out my hand. He hardly gave a glance at Jerry standing there by the side of the car.

Armin was quick—Armin was clever. There was a gun that I didn't see appear, nestling in the palm of his right hand. A small toy pistol—but death if a man knows how to use it and where to put the bullet.

But greed got him. He watched my left hand as I gave him the money with my right. He started to shove the money into his pocket then decided to take one quick look at the bills.

Something warned him then, but his natural instinct got the better of him. He ignored the warning. Though he raised his gun-hand he stuffed the cash away in his pocket. Certainly instinct told him of danger or maybe just the shadow behind him—the slight push I gave him as my extended hand fell only lightly on his chest.

But I don't think he was ever fully aware of the real danger. Then Jerry struck. A soft thudding sound as the wrench crashed and Armin's dapper gray hat bounced slightly on his head.

Two men were passing then, but I'd

lay ten to one that neither one knew what was happening. Jerry pulled and I heaved. Armin just left the sidewalk and disappeared inside the car—legs and all. Sure, it was a neat job. But, of course, it wasn't the first time we'd done it. Not by a damn sight.

One good look in the car and I closed the door. "Nice work Jerry." I patted his back. "Drive him around; he'll need the air. But after you get him a few blocks put the cuffs on him and tie him up. He's too valuable to lose. He's got ten grand of mine in his pocket. If you don't hear from me by eight o'clock, why that ten grand belongs to you. Pocket it."

"To me—you mean to you."

"No, Jerry"—I shook my head—"to you. I won't be alive then."

"So that's how it is." Jerry knew the ways of the night. "If you don't show up at eight, how about—" Jerry tapped his hip pocket. I never could get him to go in for a shoulder harness. "How about giving him the dose?"

I gave that one a little thought. "Sure. He'll have it coming to him. Just—" And then, "No, Jerry. Don't you understand? That would be murder." One must teach the young the correct way to live—and die.

I WATCHED Jerry drive off. Then I walked toward the corner, hopped a taxi for a few blocks, reached the garage where I kept my own car, and was on my way. I drove up Broadway, turned at Van Cortlandt Park, up the hill above the golf links, then alongside Woodlawn Cemetery.

I felt pretty good—rather noble if you're at all sentimental. Mary Morse had given me exactly nine thousand dollars to take care of her. With that and the one grand I was about even on the deal. Not only that, but I was taking a ride that might end with death. But it wasn't

sure death by any means—at least not for me. Shooting is like swimming. It's hard to get started, but once you're in, things go along all right.

Alone in the night. Bright moon. Girl to be saved. What more could you want? Besides you might as well die now as forty years from now with cramps in the stomach.

Alone in the night. And I quit looking into the mirror, cut my speed again and looked back through the rear window. I couldn't tell on Broadway, but I did have a feeling that a car might have followed me up the lonely Van Cortlandt Park hill and along by the cemetery.

Now I was sure. Twin curb lights went dark as I looked at them, leaving a small black blur in the road—a black blur that slowed down to my speed. I recognized the type of car in the moonlight. A little devil that will jump you so fast it could hop on the roof before you even knew it.

It's useless to try to beat it away from a car that will catch you and open fire with machine guns. There was just one thing to do—and I did it. I jammed on my breaks, tossed open the door nearest the curb, hopped out and crouched beside the car. If some boys felt like a little loose lead, why I'd give it to them, and give it to them first.

The boys behind evidently didn't want to play that game. The car stopped, lights flashed on and off a couple of times, then the brights stayed put. A figure climbed from the car, walked directly in front of that light, and came down the road toward me. Yep, you guessed it. It was the Flame, the Girl with the Criminal Mind, and which way it was working now is anybody's guess.

"All right," I called out. "If you're alone—let me have what's on your chest."

She didn't laugh this time. She said: "I've known you long enough, Race to know the way you work. So I didn't

drive up, I walked. Here's the lay. You want to save the girl. Well, I want to help you. Take me with you, and I'll get you safely in the house."

"Yeah," I told her. "Why didn't you have that pretty thought before I laid out my ten grand?"

"Because," she said, "I didn't know where Mary Morse was until you spent the ten grand. One Man Armin doesn't give me his entire trust. I don't ask for it. I'll have that later. If you go alone to that house—you'll die before you get in."

"All right." I shrugged. "How do we start? No use trying to change your plans, Florence."

She tried to look at me, then nodded. "I'll ride with you. Wait while I pull the little car to the curb."

"You'll have hard work explaining its being there in the morning if anything happens tonight."

"Why?" She laughed as she left me. "It's not my car. Don't look at me like that. It was handy and I took it."

SHE was back in three minutes, in beside me. She nudged my arm, said: "I left a ten-spot on the seat to pay for the gas and the trouble."

"To ease your conscience."

"Not mine—yours," she told me as I knocked the big purse she carried to the floor and started to drive on. Then, "There's a lot of the boy in you, Race—the bad boy. But I wasn't going to shoot you, and I'm not going to be dropped out on the Parkway and told to walk home. Don't look at me like that. That's what you intended to do, of course."

I had, but I didn't say anything. I let her go on. Let her do exactly what she intended to do; talk me into taking her with me. But it wasn't the past that got me. It was the damned common sense of her argument.

"I'm not saying you should trust me, Race. I'm not saying that you ever actually loved me. But I loved you once, and could have brought you right to my feet as I will Armin. Maybe I didn't because I loved you. Tonight, if I had wanted to trap you to your death, I had only to lift the phone and warn them you were coming. So, why go with you to a death I could so easily have arranged?"

There wasn't much of an answer to that. I only said—and I couldn't help my words: "You've got everything it takes, Florence. You even admit it. What keeps you in the racket? You have risked your life for society—for the government—for—well, perhaps for me. Now, you're in with crime again. Hell, I was willing to stake you any time you wanted it."

"That's right." She was emphatic now and not laughing either. "But maybe it isn't furs and cars and money I want. Maybe it's the excitement, the thrill of it. Tonight for instance—you and I and the moon, with sudden death perhaps, at the end of the trail. I can love you at times like this, Race. I can! You're so sure, so confident. A guy who thinks he's good and doesn't care who knows it. I—"

"All right—all right." I switched off the Parkway at Mount Vernon. "Now—just how to get in this house where Mary Morse is held."

"Right in by the front door," she said. "They'll let me in. They'll be sure Armin gave me directions and they'll be expecting Armin. You'll have your chance. Only Gentle Jim Corrigan, a couple of tough boys, and the guy under the hood."

That rocked me. I put it to her straight. "It's a guy in the hood—not a woman?"

"Yes, it's a guy in the hood, not a woman," was all she said.

"I'll chance it," I said. Then we shot up the grade between high trees to the big old house standing on the hill.

SHE was matter-of-fact as she stepped out, picked up her purse, pointed out a good place for me to park the car. She looked at the gun in my hand, nodded, gripped my arm and whispered hoarsely: "You've got to trust me, Race, or chuck the thing. I'm promising you Mary's life—and, I hope, your own. I know what's in your mind. To crack me down here and go it alone. Don't do it, Race. Walk straight up that narrow path there with me. They'll take you for Armin. Come on and be a sport." And when I took a laugh, she threw both her arms about my neck and kissed me—full on the lips. Even there in the darkness I saw the thing in her eyes; bright, exciting, and—damn it—honest.

I shook my head as she let me go. It was like a strong drink. But I said: "All right, Florence. Let's go." And as we started I added: "Just remember that there is no sex in crime."

Up that path we went. We reached the house, mounted the front steps. Silently—or fairly silently—we crossed the porch, my eyes darting left and right. Then we passed right into the dark vestibule which gave to the inner door.

The Flame whispered: "I wouldn't double-cross you, Race. The door will be unlocked, but to ease your suspicion I'll go first. Then they'll have to kill me to get you."

And that got me—got me more than you think. I held my right hand close against my hip, gripped the knob of the door with my left hand, turned it slowly—and pushed it.

I stepped into that house—into blackness—a blackness that didn't last but was suddenly illuminated. Just the click of a button, the glare in my eyes, and I was facing a man across the hall. A man who held a tommy gun that was directed straight at my chest. And the man was

Gunner Slade, the meanest, dirtiest murderer in the entire city.

I don't know if he spoke. I don't know if his finger started to close on the trigger. I only know that I saw the gun, the hands, the glaring hateful eyes that meant death. And my own finger closed three times. And three bullets pounded into Gunner Slade. I won't say all three went into his heart. I wasn't out to make any record for fine marksmanship. But I will say as I dropped back in the shadows of the vestibule that Mr. Slade of the fancy fingers and hateful eyes was stiffer than a mackerel even before he followed his tommy gun to the floor.

Trap, eh? Maybe yes—maybe no. Certainly when Slade saw my face there in the doorway he intended to blast it out of sight. But my shots would echo through the house and—I was ready now. Standing in darkness, looking into light, I waited for things to get hot.

Get the picture? They had expected Armin, but they were ready. And then, I mowed down the Gunner, stood outside the fire of anyone who entered that hall. Of course, I felt cocky. I felt—I felt—

Yep, that's right. I felt the gun in my back, the hard nose of it smack against my spine. The hand that held it didn't tremble. The words that came were cold as dry ice.

The Flame said: "There is no sex in crime, Race. Drop your rods. You've been played for a sucker. Drop them!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rope's End

THOUGH I expect to die by lead some day, I'd like that lead to be found in my chest not my back. I held my guns. Not that I didn't think the Flame would shoot. Just that if I was going to die anyway, I might as well go down with a gun in each hand.

Two other round, hard, pipe-like objects pounded against my back. I heard the Flame say: "Don't shoot yet. This man, Williams, may have something to say. Don't shoot."

A rough voice or maybe two, and my guns crashed to the floor. There were others beside the Flame there now. Lads with voices that sounded as if they wanted to kill. Plain common sense told me that I wouldn't be worth a hell of a lot to Mary Morse dead; or to myself either, for that matter.

Guys held guns against my back. One was a cheap hood called Louis. I didn't know his last name—if he ever had one. The other was a new one on me.

Out of a side room walked Gentle Jim Corrigan. His voice was soft—the ripples rolled steadily up his face. "Dear me, Race—dear me. You have such atrocious manners." And to the Flame, "Nice mess. Slade was so valuable. You assured me on the phone that there would be no trouble."

And the Flame swung by me. I started to speak to her and didn't. The word "rat" died on my lips. By God, you wouldn't know her. Nothing of the slim, cultured girl, now. Her beauty was still there, but a sinister sort of beauty—hard and cold—as she looked into the suspicious little eyes of Gentle Jim.

She swung a contemptuous look at me. "Can't you trust anyone, Jim? I called you up and blew the show. Walked Race right into the trap. And there was to be no shooting. If this thick dick, Williams, had made me go first, I'd have been treated like a sieve." And before Jim would speak, "Anyway you can get a hundred guys better than Slade. You hadn't paid him had you?"

"No, no—" Gentle Jim seemed pleased as he walked toward me, said: "Put a gun in his back, Louie." And when the gun planted itself hard against me again,

he frisked me for a third gun, ran his hands along my legs and arms.

"You've been looking at the funny sheets," I told him. "Now what?"

"Now what?" He bobbed his head up and down. "You turned down ten thousand dollars early tonight. You picked death instead." And going over to the Flame and putting his arm about her shoulders, "I really didn't think any woman could put it over on Race. Besides, I wasn't sure you'd go through with it." He squeezed her arm. "You're a wonder, Miss Flame—quite a wonder. If it wasn't for Armin I might risk"—he patted her cheek—"death myself, for the Flame."

The Flame said in that rough, low voice I hadn't heard in years: "You'd have to get rid of thirty or forty pounds first, Jim." And looking straight at him, "But you're coming along—coming along big in the racket."

"Flattery, flattery. I'm far too old and far too careful." And with a laugh, "And perhaps as you suggest, a little too hefty to sprout wings and become a moth. But this is business tonight. So get along. Good-night."

The Flame turned, passed out the front door and closed it behind her.

We went up two flights of stairs. Not one gun, but two were against my spine now.

LIGHTS went on ahead of us and we entered a pleasant room. There was a door at the other end of it—bookcases, couch, and a large chair something like the one the hooded figure had been in at the Royal Hotel. There were four of us. Myself, Jim Corrigan, and the two gunmen. The one I didn't know carried the tommy gun. Plainly I saw red on it. Slade had been careless in death.

They made a monkey out of me then, tying my hands before me, running the

strong cord from my wrist to my feet. Then I was pushed onto the couch. I struggled to gain a sitting position.

Gentle Jim Corrigan began to grin. You'll excuse me, Race, but I've never seen anything quite so funny. And a woman, too. Pitiably, my boy, with a career like yours. But they say the Flame has her way with men." He shivered slightly—sarcastically. "I hope she doesn't go after me. Are you prepared to listen?"

I just nodded.

"Very well." He got up from behind the small table and walked across the room, opened the opposite door. A small figure slid in—same black outfit, same cowl pulled over the face. White, slender hands seemed to fold upon the knees as he sat down. He? I wondered. The hands were very slender, rather beautiful. I remembered that the Flame wore two rings. These hands were stripped of jewelry. If there were marks where rings might have been, the light where the figure sat was too dim to tell.

I did get the idea that the hands were not those of man and—and—hell, the fingers didn't even move. They might have been dead hands except that they were very beautiful, very much like a woman's—a beautiful woman's.

Gentle Jim was back at the table. He leaned on his elbows and talked very slowly and very distinctly, choosing his words very carefully. Occasionally he lowered his hand and his fingers played with a piece of paper before him.

"You have no cards, Race Williams, to lay on this table. But I am laying mine. No matter how you arrange them or rearrange them they'll always be the winning hand. Certain people had a prosperous business smuggling narcotics into this city. Morse and Lee were the agents. Unforeseen circumstances interrupted that business. Interrupted it I say, for it is intended that it be resumed. Andrew Boise,

the faithful accountant discovered the little plan, and was removed. Mary Morse discovered the little plan, and is now awaiting her removal." And raising his voice, "If you please, Joe. Our first scene. And be careful you don't strangle her. Joe," he explained, "is our head prop man. Look up, Race. You'll be surprised."

I did look up—and I was surprised. A trap door had opened above me, slid noiselessly back in the ceiling. And being lowered through that trap door was a woman. She spun slightly as her body came slowly down. Rope was wrapped about her body, holding her hands tightly by her sides, and the rope that lowered her was caught under her arms.

I would have come to me feet if I could have. It was not a pleasant sight. There was something fiendish about it. I saw her face—her white, pale childish face. It was Mary Morse. And I saw something else too. I saw the red trickle of blood coming from her lower lip—coming as white upper teeth bit tightly to prevent her from screaming.

There was fear, horror, everything in that girl's face—yet a determination not to cry out. A determination that was broken the moment her eyes rested full on mine.

"Race—Race!" she cried. "You've come! I knew you'd come."

GOD, the hell of it! She didn't know, didn't realize, that I too was a prisoner as the huge bulk of Corrigan moved quickly across the room, caught at her feet and sent her spinning around. She was jerked up then. I lowered my eyes so as not to see. But I heard the thud of her head, the moan—a short moan as if her head hitting the ceiling had knocked her unconscious. The trap remained open.

Gentle Jim was speaking. "That is her first appearance. Her next"—Jim was

back at the table now—"the rope will be about her neck. The ceiling is rather high. She will drop so that the bones in her neck will snap almost before your face. You can prevent that."

"How?" My lips set tightly.

"Oh, you can't save her life or yours," Gentle Jim said softly. "You know that. She knows too much and you know too much. But you can determine the nature of her death—your death—the violence of it"—he leaned far forward—"the horror of it. Whether you're to sit there and watch the twisting of a young body—the body of a girl who trusted and believed in you."

And I cut in. Fear, horror, all left me suddenly. I had a trump card—and I had forgotten it. Now I played it. "If I am not alive—if the girl is not alive by eight o'clock tomorrow morning, each one of your names will be turned over to the police."

"Each one," Gentle Jim said. "How?"

"I wrote a note—sent my boy with a note." And when he just smiled, and the lad with the tommy gun eased himself against the wall, and Louie leaned on the mantel to light a butt, I added: "Ask the Flame. She and Armin thought the note was for money."

"Did they really?" Jim picked up the paper he had been fingering and deftly shot it across to me. "You're not referring to that?"

The paper hit my hands and my fingers were free to open it. But it was as much of a shock merely to recognize it, know exactly what it meant. It was the note of warning I had sent to Uncle Frank, under the name, John H. Smith, at the Nicholas Hotel.

Gentle Jim answered my question before I asked it. "We don't need to worry about him," he said. "He'll never talk about it."

"So you killed Morse." I guess there

was a helplessness in my voice. "What's the game then? Who else could know—who else could I tell?"

"There's your friend, O'Rourke." And suddenly, "By God, you didn't tell him! It's on your face. It's death now, Race."

I might have tried—intended to try. That was what they feared. O'Rourke was my friend. It would have been easy to have left a note for him at headquarters, but I hadn't. I couldn't see how they could have gotten Frank Morse—poor nervous Uncle Frank. Jerry, the clever Jerry—product of the underworld—must have been followed.

"It's death now!" Gentle Jim almost cried the words out this time. And I heard the sound above me. I looked up. There was Mary. She was going to die like that—now. Vengeance—simply vengeance against me for killing Bertie earlier that evening, and putting it over on Gentle Jim Corrigan.

I saw Mary's face. Was she coming down head first? Then I saw an arm—a bare, slender arm. Her hands were free then, her— And I saw the thing in that hand, saw it drop, moved my body quickly to receive it.

Of course I knew what it was and of course I knew what to do with it. I didn't care what had gone on up above. I didn't care about the dull, blurred face behind Mary. Somehow the kid must have gotten a gun and was dropping it to me.

Hands tied? Sure—but only at the wrist. Legs tied? Sure—but I didn't expect to use my feet.

The gun turned twice in the air. I slid slightly on the couch and it pounded down. Pounded right into the palm of my hand as the lad Louie swung, cursed, jerked up his gun, and parted my hair. The rod, a thirty-eight, dropped into my hand, turned over once, and I placed a bullet in the wide-open mouth of the lad Louie.

CHAPTER NINE

Dead Hands Reaching

LUCK? Sure, it was luck. A break? Sure! Wasn't I entitled to a break by this time? The others? They were knocked cock-eyed. There's nothing like a stiff or two about a room to throw fear into the hearts—rather stomachs of killers. They just turned and looked at Louie. And I had them.

"Rats," I said as they turned back, "make a move and I'll open you up—one, two, three—and see what you had for supper."

They looked in my eyes, the hooded figure through the black slits. Gentle Jim's eyes widened as he knew fear. I don't know what he saw in my eyes, but it was there. I knew it was there. The lust to kill.

I guess it was my face as much as it was the gun in my hand that held them. It must have been, for I was trussed up like a chicken. Mad? I was damn near a raving maniac. Have you ever been that close to death yourself? Do you know the feeling of getting a gun in your hand, and a chunk of meat like Gentle Jim to shoot at?

Did Gentle Jim know it? Why, his hands went into the air so high that his vest and trousers parted company.

The lad with the machine gun whom I couldn't place went panicky. Anyway, he suddenly opened up with that tommy gun, opened up while it was directed at the floor. I stopped it before he ever raised it an inch.

He just looked sort of dazed and surprised as he slid slowly to the floor and sat there. There was a single hole right in the center of his forehead. I wasn't wasting lead.

I kept my eyes on Gentle Jim and the Hooded Silence. Jim's eyes met mine.

Then I turned to that figure. Hands were still crossed upon black covered knees.

I said: "Put them up or I'll—"

And the shot came. Cripes, it tore a piece clean out of my shoulder. I was dumfounded more than stunned—or maybe just dumb. For the shot had come from the hooded figure; the figure that sat there with hands folded—white hands—empty hands.

I threw myself across the couch as the second shot came. This time I saw the yellow-blue flame—and felt it too. I was almost hidden by Jim then, yet the shot burned my cheek.

Gentle Jim had never read the line about giving up your life for your friend. He jumped six feet when my first shot flashed across his front. The figure in the chair jarred. You know the kind of jar—the jar that comes with the soft thud of a bullet smack into a body.

Flame flashed again from the figure. Plaster fell ten feet from me and I put two more slugs into the Hooded Wonder. The figure started to fall forward then didn't. It seemed to sort of change its mind and slumped in the chair. A gun fell to the floor.

After I fired—after I saw the body jerk—I wondered if it was the—well, the Flame. But it couldn't be. The Flame didn't have three arms. But then no one else did either.

I snapped out of it, shook my head. Three-armed people, eh? I must have been shot worse than I thought.

I straightened on the couch. Blood was warm and wet on me. "Jim," I said, "get a knife. Come over and cut me loose." And before he could get the words out, "If you haven't got a knife, I'll fire."

Would I have fired? To be honest I think I would have. There was a dizzy feeling in my head. If I had to pass out, why I'd sleep more comfortably knowing Jim was there on the floor.

JIM cut the ropes. It wasn't pleasant having his huge body leaning over me the long sharp knife in his hand. But I wanted it that way. For my gun was pressed hard against his stomach while he set me free. And I whispered sweet predictions of intestinal troubles if he made a slip with the knife.

Then Jim was talking. He was a good talker, too. "We don't want this thing public, Race—bad for your client. Certainly you cleaned things up. Now, if I were arrested I'd have to talk, and that would be very bad for the Morse firm. You're puzzled about the shooting, eh boy? The hands on the lap."

He walked over to the slumped black figure, jerked off the two hands and tossed them across the room. "Just fake arms and hands," he said. "Ingenious I'll admit, but quite simple. Pickpockets work it now and then in the subway and on trains. Their hands are apparently visible while their real hands, from beneath their coats, explore their fellow passengers' pockets. Damn it, Race, that was some nice shooting. How the girl got loose I don't know. Must have bought Joe over and—"

And I stopped him. Jim was alive. The others were dead, and I— Hell, I felt lousy. I called out, "Mary," and she answered me. What's more she was able to crawl to the trap and—damn it—I made Gentle Jim catch her when she landed. It was funny to watch him. Gentle isn't strong enough for the way he handled her—and spoke, too.

"There, there—poor child." He untied her very carefully. "A most unfortunate circumstance that brought you into this. I would have protected you, my dear. My whole idea was—" She shrank away from him, suddenly saw the bodies and placed her hands over her eyes.

That was the moment. That was when she must know. That was when she had

to be convinced that Conklyn Lee, her loving step-father, was the murderer behind the whole rotten show.

"Mary," I said "you've got to take it. "Look"—I lifted her head—"he murdered people. He shot me. He would have had you horribly murdered. You might as well face it now. He's dead there."

"Who—who are you talking about?" Her little hands clung to my arms.

"Who? Why, Conklyn Lee, your step-father, of course. And—and—what are you glaring at?"

She *was* glaring too. She finally swallowed and said: "You've been hurt. You've been hurt! My step-father, Conklyn Lee is in that room above the trap. I must get to him." And Gentle Jim was lifting a ladder from a corner and putting it up for her.

I turned toward the dead body beneath the hood. I had never really thought—never really believed it was the Flame. Now—now—I staggered back, gulped the words: "The Flame—so it was the Flame."

"The Flame?" Mary Morse looked at me queerly as she mounted the ladder. "I don't know what you mean."

I turned toward the dead body beneath the black hood. Slender, frail it must have been in life. I'll admit the Flame had double-crossed me, triple-crossed me. She—she— But it's hell to kill a woman—and such a woman. I stooped, grabbed at the hood.

Gentle Jim spoke. "You're in for the surprise of your life, Race."

I hesitated, then lifted that hood, swept it off. I stared a long time at that dead white face. Then I laughed—leaned against the wall and laughed. For the face beneath that hood was Uncle Frank's; dear old Uncle Frank himself in person. I was never so glad to see anyone before.

AFTER that Mary came down and fixed my arm, Gentle Jim hopping back and forth with water. Part of the truth I got from Mary, part from Gentle Jim, but the bulk of it came from Conklyn Lee himself. It was the same story Mary had told me, but with reverse English. Frank Morse pulled all the stunts his partner, Conklyn Lee, was supposed to have pulled.

"Yes, I caught Frank at it," Conklyn Lee explained. "And I was desperate. The firm was shaky enough anyway. I don't know why I kept silent at first. Perhaps for Mary—certainly not for my job. The books will prove that. Then I found Frank had broken his word, and was still bringing in the drugs from China. It was he and not I who handled all the Oriental trade. I was determined then to go straight to the government men.

"That's how I was fooled. This man here"—he pointed to Gentle Jim—"and another came to see me. They represented themselves as Department of Justice men. They said Frank Morse had brought them a full confession. They wanted me to go with them. I went—and have been a prisoner ever since."

"That is correct," Gentle Jim said easily. "What you didn't know, Mr. Lee, was that Frank Morse served ten years in jail. That was why he was not admitted to the firm, and not because of any simple romance with an actress. No one knew this but his father. The black gown was to hide his identity from others. I was simply a sort of agent."

But enough of that. As I said, Gentle Jim was a good talker. I wasn't anxious to explain all that shooting. Conklyn Lee would find it tough telling why he had not gone immediately to the authorities. And Mary Morse would have the jewelry firm dumped over into her lap.

Gentle Jim made things simple and

plain. He was a fair-minded man. He was willing to forget if we were willing to forget. And what's more he'd cart the body of Frank Morse off and hide it away so that it wouldn't be found for a week—or ten years if we wished. As for the dead in that house—just another gunmen's battle.

So that's the way it was when we left. I got my guns back, and damn near shot Gentle Jim's hand off when he had the nerve to pat Mary playfully on the back. Yep, he acted as if we were all mixed up in a pleasant conspiracy to defeat the law. And hell, in a way I suppose he was right.

Oh, I'll admit that he had fat front that even a guy with his first hunting license couldn't miss—and I was tempted to put four or five slugs in his middle. Why didn't I then? I don't know. But I had a feeling that someday I— But hell, you've got to admit that at that moment at least, Gentle Jim was better to the girl alive than dead.

And the Flame. What of her?

In the car, I asked Mary how she got the gun.

She looked blankly at me. "Why, your assistant dropped that—the young lady who was above there with us. Just after she had stuck that same gun in the back of the man called Joe, forced him down the ladder out the window saying something about orders from Armin. She left right after she pushed me to the opening and we were safe."

Conklyn Lee insisted I come to his house, and he explained just how Frank Morse had planted the evidence, had someone telephone Mary it was there, and fixed things so if anything went wrong, Lee would be the suspected one. And, being dead, would be unable to defend himself.

Then the phone rang. It was for me—the Flame. Her voice was low and

pleasant. You'd think we had just parted at an afternoon tea.

"I'll clear up a few things for you, Race, to save you from racking that master brain of yours. It was I who first telephoned Mary Morse and told her to get you for the job. Of course, she didn't know. I pretended the message came through her step-father, Conklyn Lee. And it was I who told her to clean the evidence out of his house. Of course, after the girl saw the murder, her life wasn't worth much.

"There, don't thank me for tonight, Race. Things went wrong. You damn near took the dose. And don't worry about Jerry. I paid him a little visit, took Armin home, and you'll find the car in Doran's Garage on Fifty-eighth Street. I'm mailing you the parking ticket."

I got a word in at last. "What—what was the point of your telephoning Jim, and then helping me. A change of that criminal mind?"

"Oh, I don't know. I've got a horror of killing people, I guess. Maybe I was

brought up better than you were. But you see, Frank Morse knew something about me that would have hurt me with Armin if he'd told him; something that was enough to make me carry his black kimona in and out of places for him. Since Armin is going to be the big shot, why I didn't like that." A long pause and then, "So you really did me a nice turn. Thank you for killing Mr. Frank Morse."



I hung up after a few seconds. There's not much satisfaction in talking to yourself. Then I decided to go home. Mary clung to me, her hair brushed my cheek. But she didn't speak.

"Not bad news, I hope." Conklyn Lee was plainly interested.

I pushed the kid's arm down, looked at the tears in her eyes—tears of happiness. "In a way." I shrugged my shoulders. "I just lost ten thousand dollars. Take care of yourself."

So I went down the steps to the street. Just a sucker? Sure. What's so damned funny about that?

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The Stairway to Hell

A Rex Lonergan Story

by
John K. Butler

Author of "Fog Over Frisco," etc.

It was the first time the toughest copper out of the D. A.'s office had had to play nursemaid to the spoiled brat of a billionaire. And as far as Lonergan was concerned, once was more than enough. He could handle an underworld killer "with the greatest of ease" but the Manhattan Madcap was something else again. A swift pain in the neck from the beginning—even if she did lead him down the stairway to hell and point the way to the biggest vice-ringing clean-up the city had known since the old Barbary Coast.

CHAPTER ONE

Dope and A Dip

REX LONERGAN strolled out of the Tuey Far Low restaurant and stood at the edge of the sidewalk, looking up and down the street. Evening fog blew over San Francisco in scattered, swiftly moving clouds, and the lights of the city gave it a reddish glow as a night fire gives color to smoke. The air was

• • • • •

... and that nude, screaming human was
Carmen Patterson Carroll.





cold, damp, chilled Lonergan to the marrow.

Grant Avenue, Chinatown's narrow main artery, glared with electric brilliance. The bright shops, the paper lanterns strung overhead across the street, the people jostling each other on the sidewalks and gathering in groups to gaze into windows, gave the Chinese quarter the atmosphere of a big carnival.

Lonergan strolled along. He bought a newspaper at the corner and then stepped into the lighted doorway of a drug store to glance over the headlines. The drug store was closed, but tourists crowded around the windows anyway to gaze and giggle at Chinese remedies—dried sea horses, cascara bark, mandrake root, bu-chu leaves.

Lonergan glanced over the paper. The featured news made him sore. It was more junk about Carmen Patterson Carroll, The Manhattan Madcap.

A MONTH ago Carmen's father, the Billionaire Biscuit King, had gone to Europe. Her mother had gone to Honolulu. And Carmen had gone to hell. She had blazed a fiery trail across the continent, getting engaged to Greek wrestlers, football players, icemen, and auto-race drivers. Her longest engagement lasted three days. In Los Angeles she had married a sailor on leave and had created such a disturbance that the mayor had invited her to get out of town.

So Carmen left. She also left her sailor. Her marriage wouldn't have held legally anyway because she hadn't had her parents' consent and had lied about her age. She was only sixteen.

The featured story in the Frisco paper said—

AUTHORITIES SEEK MANHATTAN MADCAP

According to a radiogram received late today by District Attorney Hannaman, Car-

men Patterson Carroll's mother says her wild daughter must be either tamed or chained. Mrs. Carroll is en route from Honolulu on the *S. S. Malolo*. In the meantime she has requested that authorities put the chains on Carmen until she can arrive to take charge and begin the curbing. But, alas, the sixteen-year-old madcap, whose mission in life seems to be painting the nation red, cannot be found. Investigators for the district attorney's office have been unable to locate . . .

Lonergan swore. Angrily, he flipped the paper open to another page. But he couldn't escape news of Carmen Patterson Carroll. Here was a picture of the blond hellion who looked twenty but was only sixteen. The girl was posed seated, and her cocky little chin tilted smartly. Her skirts were hitched high over shapely young legs and her upper person, in egotistical challenge, swelled tightly under her dress.

The caption read—

Manhattan Madcap Drinks Gin for Breakfast! Believes If All Women Had Body Like Hers, Nudism Would Be Blessing and Delight to Mankind!

Lonergan swore again, crumpled the paper in angry hands. As he did so, he saw several things at once.

He saw and recognized "Pockets" Magee. And he saw the thin, bony hand of the dip snake gracefully under the coat of a man who stood with his wife before the drug-store window, saw it snake out again with the victim's wallet.

Rex Lonergan tiptoed over. His arm swept down in a swift arc. Thick fingers clamped over the slim wrist. "Drop it!" he ordered.

Magee's fingers opened and the detective caught the falling wallet in his left hand. The victim, a paunchy, middle-aged man, turned quickly from the window. His eyes bulged as he recognized his wallet in the hand of another, and he groped in his hip pocket to assure himself that his money was actually gone.

"Here you are," Lonergan said, and handed the leather case back to its owner.

Pockets Magee stood only five feet-two; he weighed about ninety pounds. At one time he had been a jockey but the drug habit had gotten him. He had turned to lifting leather for a living.

Lonergan's grip shifted quickly from the slim wrist of the dip to the upper arm and Magee cringed like a frightened animal. His arm, under Lonergan's crushing hold, felt as though it had no flesh at all. It was like a broomstick with a coat sleeve over it. Magee, his nervous system shattered by continuous use of narcotics, began to weep. Big tears flooded his faded blue eyes and ran down sunken, wasted cheeks.

"Honest-to-God, Mr. Lonergan, you got me wrong! I seen this guy drop his wallet. I was just pickin' it up to give it back! And you pinch me—that's ironical, ain't it, Mr. Lonergan?"

"Oh, sure," Lonergan grinned.

Magee's mouth drew down at the corners and the big tears flowed.

The victim's wife said: "Poor man!"

And the victim said to Lonergan: "I don't want to press charges against this man, officer—I guess you're an officer."

Lonergan nodded that he was an officer, but said: "Don't let the water-works fool you. He's just full of hop. His arms are so full of needle-holes, they look like tea strainers—"

"It ain't so!" Magee cried. "I ain't had a bang in the arm for six months . . . Well," he corrected sobbingly, "I ain't had a jolt of the joy powder for six weeks anyway, honest!"

Lonergan grinned lopsidedly, sourly. "Can the oil, Pockets. You're all lit up. I'll bet you didn't have your shot of morphine more than six minutes ago."

The tourist looked at his wife. She made a disgusted face.

The husband said: "Give him a chance,

officer. Surely he didn't mean anything."

Lonergan's face grew hard. "You taxpayers," he snapped, "indirectly employ men like me to give you protection. Then when you witness a pinch of a hophead dip like Magee you get sorry. And when you see us shoot down a public enemy, you say we didn't give the guy a chance. The whole bunch of you make me sick!"

The paunchy man took his wife by the arm, walked her down the street, looking back at Lonergan with an expression which said plainly that all detectives were lower than the criminals they fought.

LONERGAN pinned Pockets back against the plate-glass window with one hand. "As for you," he said, "I'm getting tired of picking you up. One of these days I'm going to slap you in the iron house for keeps, just to get you out of my hair."

Magee's tearful eyes were big in their sockets. They turned down on the newspaper that Lonergan had dropped when he grabbed the dip. The black headlines—*Authorities Seek Manhattan Madcap*—met the pickpocket's frightened gaze.

"Geez, copper," he sobbed, "give a guy a break! I'll even tip you where you can find that society jane!"

Lonergan looked down at the headlines and scowled. The D. A.'s office was making quite a point of finding that wild little brat. Lonergan couldn't afford to disregard a tip which might lead to her.

"Talk!" he demanded of the pickpocket.

Pockets Magee wiped tears from his wasted face. "Sure, I'll talk," he moaned. "She's in a hop joint underground. A society heel brought her in—sightseein'. She's kickin' the gong around—"

"You're crazy," Lonergan snapped. "You're all gowed up."

"I ain't!" Pockets wailed defensively. "I just had a little bang in the arm. She's the one that's gowed up; she's lyin' on

her hip right now, hittin' the old pipe for all it's worth—"

"Listen!" Lonergan said. "You tell me where she is. If I don't find her there, I'll have you picked up. I'll personally beat hell—"

Pockets Magee broke out in a fresh flood of tears. "I wouldn't give you no bum steer, copper. You're like a father to me—you give me a break so many times—"

"This is the last time I give you a break. You tell it to me straight—"

"She's underground," Pockets gasped. "I seen her myself. This guy brings her in and she raises hell. She wants to try the gow. She heaves herself down on a bed and says: "Hand it to me, somebody!" Just like that, she says it. This society heel tries to get her out, but—"

"Where's this?" Lonergan demanded.

Pockets Magee looked up into the detective's face like a child begging for candy. "Don't let 'em know I stooled on 'em. It's Fook Wong. One of his places."

Naturally Lonergan knew of Fook Wong, the king of a narcotic and vice ring that operated below the surface of Chinatown. He was sought by police and even by the honorable Chinese tongs. But Fook Wong knew how to protect himself. He lived in tunnels underground—like a gopher. It was rumored that he hadn't seen the light of day in five years.

"How do I get into this joint?" Lonergan asked.

"You go to the Golden Dragon," Pockets Magee explained. "You walk in there and . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Manhattan Madcap

THE Golden Dragon wasn't the sort of eating place to attract anything but the lowest class of Chinese trade. Its glass windows were painted black as a back-

ground for crudely designed golden dragons breathing crimson flame. It was three blocks beyond the brightly lighted section of Chinatown, and only a single electric bulb, festooned with cobwebs, burned in the drab doorway.

Rex Lonergan pushed open the glass door. He had pulled his hat low over his eyes and dented in the crown. His coat collar was turned up and he walked with a slouch. By conscious effort he caused his hands to tremble—and that was as far as he went for disguise.

The restaurant was empty. Somewhere a bell *bonged* softly—with echoes.

Lonergan kept walking, flipped open a swinging door at the back. He was in a kitchen, a place of nauseating smells and buzzing flies. Meats hung in big ugly strips from the dirty ceiling. A cockroach moved among the greasy dishes on the wooden drainboard. A Chinese sitting on a stool inside the kitchen door looked at Lonergan but didn't say anything. His face was broad, flat, the narrow eyes brooding.

Lonergan shouldered through a curtain of strung beads, entered a passageway. Again he heard the *bong* of the hidden bell. Its echoes followed him down the corridor. Smells followed him, too; smells from the filthy kitchen mingled with other odors—stale smoke, dust, and decay.

The passage led to a flight of enclosed stairs, descended steeply, one flight down. The wood was old and each step creaked as Lonergan put foot on it. There was only one door at the bottom. Lonergan knocked three times and immediately a small panel slid back. He looked into the saffron face and said: "Kwong Hong Fat sent me." Pockets Magee had told him to say that.

Black eyes bored into the detective, eyes that sought some recognition. "You wait, *pliz*," the Chinaman said tonelessly. "Fook Wong like see."

Lonergan nodded. The panel slid closed noiselessly but in a few seconds it opened again. The Oriental who peered out this time was so short in stature that only his eyes came over the opening; the lower part of his face was hidden by the door. A red skull cap fitted snugly over the top of the head.

Lonergan was held by those eyes, fascinated, almost hypnotized by them. Eyes of mystery and malice, small, smoldering—the eyes of Fook Wong.

Nothing was said. The eyes remained on Lonergan until, back of him, the old stairs creaked. Then the eyes shifted to look beyond the detective. Lonergan turned casually. The Chinaman who had been posted in the kitchen of the Golden Dragon had come halfway down the steps. He didn't come any further, just stood there and said: "Man alone—nobody outside." Then he waddled fatly up the creaking steps again.

Bolts clicked in the big door and Lonergan was admitted.

THIS, then, was the great Fook Wong, this thick-waisted little Oriental with the red jacket, a jacket with sleeves so voluminous they almost concealed the hands. But one yellow hand darted out, and Lonergan saw fingernails so long they had to be protected from breakage by bamboo splints. The hand disappeared into the opposite sleeve, and by the movement of the cloth Lonergan could tell the man was greeting him by shaking hands with himself.

This was the evil Fook Wong, the man the police and even the honorable tongs could never locate. Yet Lonergan had walked into this place and met the elusive vice king as easily as if he'd been entering a speakeasy in the old prohibition days. That was the way the breaks came sometimes—easily and unexpectedly.

It was a great chance for an arrest,

Lonergan thought—a one-man scoop. But that had to wait. According to Pockets Magee's tip, Carmen Patterson Carroll was somewhere in this joint and the law wanted her.

The corridor beyond the door was short. Fook Wong led the way on shuffling, slippered feet, into a square, dimly lit room. Smoke drifted in the foul air in thick, suffocating layers. And around the four walls were bunks, double-deckers with uncovered mattresses and pillows on them—and people.

They were mostly Chinese but there were a few dissipated, derelict whites. They lay in the bunks, sprawled, some of them puffing stoically on long opium pipes; others sleeping heavily, the deep, frowning sleep of the drugged. In one bunk Lonergan saw four white people—two men and two women—crowded together, sleeping in their underwear, their bare arms and legs all tangled till they looked like a nest of snakes. And their huddled bodies stank of sweat.

Lonergan looked beyond that to the bunk where the blond girl lay alone, propped up on pillows. She was dressed in rich black velvet that hugged her young body tightly.

Diamonds on her smooth white hands sparkled in the faint light. Her lips were full and red as she sucked awkwardly on the long pipe like a child tasting its first tobacco. But it wasn't tobacco she was learning to smoke. . . .

The man beyond her, leaning against the bunk, was a foreigner—sleek, polished, well dressed. His black hair, combed flat to the shape of his head gleamed like metal. His eyes, sophisticated, curious, held on Lonergan.

Fook Wong had sensed something wrong. He shuffled close to the detective and in a yellow hand, the hand with the long bamboo-guarded nails, he held an opium pipe.

"Smoke, *pliz?*" he asked.

Slowly Lonergan shook his head. His eyes had fallen on something out of place in the opium den. It was on the floor at the feet of that handsome foreigner—a camera, flashlight equipment. But Lonergan didn't look at it very long because Fook Wong half turned from him, held out both yellow hands, palms down, in some sort of signal.

Lonergan took that as a warning. He snatched the long opium pipe from the blond girl's jeweled hands and flung it in the face of Fook Wong. Then his gun was out, the black muzzle fanning the smoky room. "Hold it!" he commanded. Then, bluffing: "This is a raid—police outside."

NO ONE said anything. In that tense silence Lonergan could hear the heavy breathing of those who slumbered with drugs. Fook Wong smiled with an air of triumph as though he, rather than Lonergan, had command of the situation. He spoke slowly, with awkward pronunciation of the English words. "It is unfortunate—*velly*—that you do this."

The detective ignored him and glanced at the polished foreigner who stood by the blonde's bunk. "Who are you?" he asked quickly.

The man bowed with a military courtesy. "I am Prince Nikolas Shatrov—the young lady's escort."

"Escort?" Lonergan sneered. "So you're the guy that brought her here! Well, you're under arrest for contributing to the delinquency of a minor—try and beat that rap!"

He felt a tug at his sleeve. It was the girl, Carmen Patterson Carroll—the infamous Manhattan Madcap. Her tongue was thick with drug but she managed to mumble angrily: "What's the idea . . . ? Sock the guy, Nicky . . ."

Prince Nikolas Shatrov smiled wearily.

"I am glad that you are here, officer. I am unable to manage the young lady. She has insisted on remaining here."

"I'll manage her!" Lonergan said emphatically.

He got the girl by the arm, jerked her to her feet where she swayed dizzily, clinging to him and pushing at him simultaneously. Her crimson lips twisted and worked as she mouthed curses at the detective. He held her with his left hand. She tried to bite it, and he twisted her arm behind her, holding her helpless, while the gun in his right hand never wavered.

"Only three people here are under arrest," he said. "This girl, Shatrov, and Fook Wong. Those people are coming with me."

Yanking the slim blonde with him, he kept his back to the bunks as he edged toward the exit. The prince followed obediently, but Fook Wong slunk along on slippers, that triumphant smile still lurking on his lips.

"You go through the door first," Lonergan told him, "I can't cover everybody in this den but if there's trouble you get a bullet. Savvy, Fook Wong?"

The Oriental inclined his head in a mock bow as he shuffled ahead of Lonergan down the short hall. One long-nailed hand came from the nest of his sleeve to open the door. He bowed again as he held the door open, smirking at Lonergan. Then, abruptly, he crouched, ran.

Instantly, Lonergan fired, but missed. He threw himself violently sideways, dragging the girl with him, bumping his back against the wall. He swung his gun around as one of Fook Wong's men leaped at him with a knife.

In that wild confusion in the narrow hallway, the struggling blonde knocked against Lonergan's arm, knocked his gun aside. The Chinese held the knife hip-high, swung it upward in an underhand

thrust. It never got to the detective. Prince Shatrov dove forward, caught the arm, gave it a wrench. All the force of his body was behind the violent maneuver. Loneragan saw the Chinaman flip in a somersault over the prince's back, pitch to the floor. Then the lights went out.

Shatrov's voice spoke hoarsely, close to Loneragan's ear. "I will follow you, officer. Can you manage Miss Carroll?"

"I can," Loneragan clipped.

He groped for a hold on the girl's body, in one heave threw her over his shoulder. He knew where those wooden steps were and he headed for them, keeping close to the wall which guided him. He kept his gun extended before him in the pitch dark. At the first contact with a living thing, he intended to fire.

He stumbled at the first step, caught his balance, went up. In the hall above light glowed faintly through the beaded curtain that shut off the doorway to the kitchen of the Golden Dragon. There was no resistance in the hall—nothing. Loneragan stopped at the curtain, back to the wall. He heard the footsteps behind him, said: "Go on through, Prince."

The man's figure parted the beads as he stepped into the filthy kitchen. "There is nobody," he announced, and Loneragan carried the girl through.

AS THEY put Carmen Patterson Carroll into a taxi on Grant Avenue, Prince Nikolas Shatrov glanced quickly up and down the dimly lit street. "I do not see the police of which you speak."

"No," Loneragan said. "That was a bluff."

"You will not call them to raid?" the prince asked.

Loneragan shook his head. "What for? In two minutes they could bust into that place and not find a thing. The opium den would be cleaned out—there wouldn't even be a mattress on the floor. I know my Chinatown."

As the taxi roared in low gear up the steep grade of California Street, on the way to Carmen Patterson Carroll's hotel, Loneragan gave the prince a sidelong glance, said: "You saved my life. That was a neat trick you pulled on that Chinaman."

The prince shrugged, inclined his head smilingly. "A little stunt I learned while traveling in Japan."

Loneragan nodded. Then, "How come you took this brat to a hop-joint?"

Abruptly Carmen Patterson Carroll snapped out of her drugged daze, cracked Loneragan across the cheek with her open palm. He was surprised. She tried to slap him again but he caught her arm, glaring at her.

The prince said: "She is a very wilful young lady. We began on an innocent slumming trip. When we arrived down there, in that place, I could not make her leave. There was nothing to do but stay with her—"

Carmen Patterson Carroll turned a pair of blazing eyes on the prince. She tried to hit him with her other hand, but Loneragan caught that one, too, held them both. "You!" she cried angrily at the prince. "You heel, I'll bet you called this rough-neck to take me away! You big lily—"

Loneragan shook her. "Shut up!" he snapped.

The taxi pulled up under the sidewalk awning of the hotel and Carmen Patterson Carroll went wild. She kicked with slippered feet, kicked Loneragan's shins. She struggled to pull his hands to where she could bite them. "Let me go!" she yelled. "You can't do this to me, you big tramp! I'm going back . . . I'm . . ."

"You're going into the hotel," Loneragan growled. "You can make an ass of yourself if you want, but I'm dragging you right through the lobby!"

The prince looked very pained, worried.

"This is the most unfortunate situation of my life," he moaned.

They got out on the sidewalk, and the prince paid off the driver. Then he looked at Lonergan and asked: "I am under arrest, officer?"

Lonergan thought a moment. The girl kicked his shin, hard, yelled things at him but he didn't bother to listen. "I guess not," he said. "We'll have to investigate the whole thing further. This brat seems to be an exceptional case. Just come to the district attorney's office tomorrow morning."

The prince bowed deeply. "My card," he said, and slipped a white pasteboard into Lonergan's pocket. The detective couldn't have taken it in his hand—he was too busy managing Carmen Patterson Carroll. The prince bowed again, turned away as Lonergan dragged the squirming, kicking, young female into the hotel.

THERE were people in the lobby—expensively dressed women, smoothly tailored men. Dance music floated from the Gold Room, a drone of voices from the Cocktail Lounge. It was all very dignified.

Everybody stopped, everybody looked. The desk clerk stared as though he had seen a ghost. The hotel manager came over to Lonergan and the girl. Dressed somberly in tails, he looked like an undertaker. "Please," he said softly, "the hotel . . . will you come quickly into my office?"

The blonde yelled: "Nuts to you! I'm not going into anybody's office! I'm going back to Chinatown!"

The manager looked more like an undertaker than ever. He glanced around at the hotel guests, smiled painfully. He seemed about to assist Lonergan; then he drew back, whispering: "Do you realize this is Miss Carroll—Miss Carmen

Patterson Carroll?" He said it in an awed tone that made Lonergan sore.

"I don't care who it is," the detective growled.

The manager led the way into his office. Carmen put up a last battle at the doorway. She braced one slipped foot against the door-jamb, pushed back against Lonergan.

"Please, Miss Carroll . . ." the manager said apologetically.

Lonergan wrestled her into the office but when he turned around he saw the manager couldn't close the door. A young man in a battered hat and a trench coat was trying to force entrance. It was Nathan of the *Examiner*, and he got in.

He eyed the girl and the detective with a broad grin on his face and said: "Naughty, naughty, big bad copper fights little weak girl—"

Lonergan shoved the Carroll girl backwards into a leather chair. He grabbed Nathan by the shoulders and shook him violently. "Listen!" he barked, "I'm rapidly going nuts, see? Now you scram out of here before I push your face down your throat!"

Nathan's teeth clacked together. When he got his head to stop jerking, he said: "What a story! Madcap Demoralizes Police Force! Drives Big Guy Lonergan Ga-Ga . . ."

"I'm giving you your last chance to get out of here whole!" Lonergan ordered. He pushed Nathan to the door. "Peddle your papers, newsy."

"I'll give you a story!" Carmen yelled at Nathan. "I was down in an opium den in Chinatown smoking a pipe when this big bum—"

Lonergan jumped over and clamped his broad palm over the girl's lips. While she struggled, he fixed his eyes on Nathan. "She doesn't know what she's talking about. Scram, Nathan."

The reporter gave a mock salute, said,

"O.K., general," and backed out of the office.

Lonergeran went over and slammed the door hard, turned the key in the lock. The Carroll girl just sat there in the chair, cheeks scarlet, blue eyes snapping.

CHAPTER THREE

Lonergeran, Nursemaid

THERE was a phone on the manager's big walnut desk, and Lonergan used it. He called the private number of the district attorney's home and got Hannaman himself on the line.

"Your office is handling this so I'm calling you instead of police headquarters," he said. "I've got the Carroll girl. Yanked her out of a hop joint in Chinatown. She was starting to kick the gong around—"

"What!" Hannaman's voice rasped.

"Yeah, hitting the pipe. I guess it was one thing she hadn't tried up till then. I've got her in the manager's office at the Hopkins. She's been raising hell. It was one of Fook Wong's joints. I tried to pinch him but the guys down there outnumbered me."

"How did she get to a place like that? Who took her?"

"One of her friends was with her," Lonergan told him. "But, if you ask me, she took him. Anyway, the fellow'll be into your office in the morning to explain. I didn't see any reason to hold him on a delinquency charge."

"All right, Rex," Hannaman said. "We've got orders from Mrs. Carroll to hold the girl in technical custody till her ship docks tomorrow. Then she'll take her daughter back to New York."

"Yeah, I saw that stuff in the paper tonight."

"I'll tell you what you do, Rex. You just take the girl to her rooms and hold her there—"

"Hey," Lonergan protested, "how do you get that way? I've had enough already. If I'm around this brat any longer, I'm liable to turn her sunny side up and—"

"You just control yourself," the D.A. cut in. "It'll only be for an hour. I'll have one of the women deputies sent down to relieve you."

Lonergeran glanced over at Carmen Patterson Carroll with a very pained expression while the D.A.'s voice squawked into the receiver. Carmen held up her little hand, with the fingers spread, and thumbed her nose at him.

"This brat's got me batty already," Lonergan said. "I've got a hunch she's going to run me into an awful mess of trouble before this night ends."

"If there's trouble, you're just the man for it," Hannaman said, and broke the connection. His voice, cordial and complimentary, only made Lonergan the more sore.

He wheeled to face Carmen, aiming an index finger at her. "*You . . .* it seems I have to keep you company for an hour!"

She stuck her tongue out at him and told him where he could go. He went over and pulled her out of the chair by one velvet-covered arm. He wasn't any too gentle about it.

The manager said in a hushed, frightened voice: "Miss Carroll's suite is Nine Twenty-four. I'm sorry, Miss Carroll—"

"Come on, beautiful," Lonergan ordered crisply. He unlocked the door, stepped out, pulling her along. The first person he saw was Nathan.

"Ah-ha," Nathan smirked. "So you did yank the Manhattan Madcap out of a Chinatown hop joint!"

Lonergeran looked sourly past the reporter to the hotel desk. One of the telephone operators was standing up at her switchboard. She gestured to the hotel manager and said: "I'm sorry, Mr. Mont-

gomery, but he grabbed the instrument right off my head—”

“How about telling me who the man was?” Nathan grinned. “How about giving your old pal a break?”

Lonergan turned his back and walked Carmen Patterson Carroll to the elevators. For once she offered no resistance. Nathan didn't follow but strode into a telephone booth.

A FRENCH maid in black and white, opened the door to Suite 924. Lonergan himself locked the door and put the key in his pocket.

Carmen Patterson Carroll walked to a davenport and plopped down sullenly. She crossed her legs, placed an elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand. She glared at the detective from under eyelashes heavy with mascara.

The French maid spoke very politely in her own language and Carmen's temper burst again. She leaped to her feet. “I don't want anything!” she screamed furiously. She picked up a china vase and threw it. The horrified little maid dashed through a door to the bedroom as the vase shattered explosively against the wall. Carmen looked around for something else to throw. Her eyes rested on a bottle of Scotch whisky which stood among glasses on an end-table.

She snatched up the bottle but she didn't throw it. Instead, she put the neck to her lips, tilted her head way back and let the liquid gurgle down her throat.

“Cut that out!” Lonergan commanded.

But she kept right on pouring it down till he went over and grabbed the bottle away from her. She turned on him in wild fury. “Who the hell do you think you are?” she cried.

Lonergan just stared coldly into her face till self-consciousness replaced her rage. He watched her while she plopped down again on the davenport. Then he

poured a stiff jolt of Scotch into one of the glasses.

“This stuff is for adults,” he said, and tossed it into his mouth, smacked his lips. “I needed it,” he finished, addressing himself in a weary voice.

Carmen sat there glaring at him. Finally, she said: “So I'm not an adult, huh?”

“You're a brat,” Lonergan told her in casual statement. “You're a squirt, a kid that ought—”

She jumped to her feet, stood there smirking at him, then drew her tight-fitting gown even tighter over a body that looked five years older than her age. “Lamp this, bum,” she challenged, “and tell me again I'm a kid!”

“Forget that baloney,” Lonergan told her flatly. “You don't get to me at all. You just get to the kind of male morons that have an eye on your father's money. They'll tell you anything, even that you're a big, bad woman.”

The girl's face flamed to a deeper red, but she didn't answer him.

“I'm here on business” he went on, “and if we talk at all, business is what we talk. Anything else from you makes me sick.”

“Just what is your idea of business?” she asked impudently.

“I want to know how you got to that hop joint in Chinatown. And you may get that Shatrov guy in a mess of trouble if you don't talk straight.”

“You leave the prince alone,” she clipped. “If you think he tried to make me smoke that pipe, you're crazy.”

“I don't think it,” Lonergan said. “Nobody could beat you to an idea like that. But how did you get to the place? Who steered you in?”

“The prince and I went slumming,” she said sullenly. “We found that place.”

“The prince knew about it?”

“Why not? Everybody knows about it.”

"Sure," Lonergan said bitterly. "Everybody but the police. Rich scum like you hide, support, and protect hop joints and dives, make vice kings like Fook Wong get his big ideas. Then when you get hurt you come yelling to the police that they don't know their business."

"What's Fook Wong done to you?" she asked.

Lonergan gave a hard laugh. "It's what he does to kids like you. Every now and then a white girl disappears. And then Fook Wong puts on a little show down under Chinatown. We hear stories of them but we can never catch up with him. A lot of low-lives and scum and gutter-rats pay ten to twenty bucks a piece to see one of those shows. I wish you could see one!"

He said it threateningly but she only giggled and said: "I wish I could, too. I'll bet it's hot stuff."

Lonergan swore, said curtly: "You should've seen one of the girls we found finally, after two years. The poor kid—it made you sick just to look at her. She killed herself just a month ago."

HE went over and helped himself to another drink. It was useless talking to a brat like Carmen Patterson Carroll.

"Who's this prince fellow?" he asked directly.

She giggled again. "He's not a real prince."

"You mean he's an imposter?"

She shook her head; blond locks danced. "How can he be an imposter when everybody knows he's not a prince? He tried to get away with it a long time ago but people found out. He was such a good sport about it that everybody liked him just the same. He's welcome in the best families. I met him through Laura Irwin. But of course you wouldn't know who Laura Irwin is."

"It happens I do know who Laura Ir-

win is." Lonergan smiled crookedly. "She's everything you'll never be. She has money and was never spoiled. She's a lady and you're a brat. She's grown up and you're a kid."

For once Carmen Patterson Carroll didn't flare up. In fact she was very calm and sincere when she said: "That's probably the only thing I agree on with you. Laura Irwin is a lady. She's swell." Carmen frowned. "But she has a tough time."

"How?" Lonergan asked.

"Her husband," the girl explained. "Jimmy Irwin is her second husband. He didn't have a dime till he married her. Instead of being grateful, he just chases. He drools over anything in skirts. He tried to make me, the paunchy fool."

Lonergan glanced at his strap watch. Then he sat down and read the paper for a while; read, without looking at the sulky girl, till she snatched the paper from his hands and dropped herself with sudden seductiveness into his lap.

"I'm bored to hell," she said, "let's neck."

Lonergan couldn't say anything. Speechless, he stared at her. What a dame! He tried to push her out of his lap but she threw both arms around his neck and pressed her lips against his, whispered: "I could go for you . . ."

Lonergan got up quickly, dumping her from his lap to the floor. He caught her wrist, forced open the fingers of one of her hands. She had the key to the door, had neatly snatched it from his pocket.

"You little tramp!" he snapped.

She got to her feet, burning with temper again. She drove out a kick but Lonergan sidestepped it and she mouthed a filthy word on angry red lips, dashed across the room to a door. Lonergan went after her. The door opened into a bathroom.

"Oh!" she spit at him. "Maybe you think your police badge gives you the right to watch me take a bath?"

He shoved her aside and went into the tiled room. There was one window, open. He leaned out and assured himself there was no fire escape by which she could give him the slip. "All right," he said, going out into the living room. "Take your bath; you probably need it."

She slammed the door and a second later he heard the water thundering hollowly into the tub. He was relieved to be rid of her for a time—the damnedest female he'd ever met.

He'd finished his second highball, and the paper, when he became aware that the water was still running in the bathroom. He glanced at his watch, realized the water hadn't stopped in thirty-five minutes. He rose quickly. There was a wet pool on the living-room carpet, a slowly moving pool that came from under the bathroom door. He strode over and knocked hard on the panels. He thought angrily: Now what?

Two bangs against the wood with his shoulder snapped the lock and he stumbled in on the tile floor, water splashing under his shoes. The bathroom was empty, and the water in the full tub cascaded steadily over the rim. Raging, he stepped to the window, leaned out. He half expected to see a crowd of people on the sidewalk nine stories below, milling around the crushed body of Carmen Patterson Carroll.

He saw nothing down there in the fog. But right under the window he saw an ornamental ledge. It ran along the side of the building, passed an iron landing of the fire escape. A human fly, an Alpine climber, might have made it . . . Carmen Patterson Carroll must have made it—in high-heeled slippers.

Anyway, she was gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blue Blood—and Red

AT the elevator bank in the corridor Rex Lonergan impatiently punched all four buttons for "Down." In a few seconds an elevator stopped but he didn't get in. He said to the operator: "Have you seen Miss Carroll in the last half hour?"

The answer was in the negative so Lonergan punched the other three buttons all over again. The next elevator brought him better luck.

"Yes, sir," the operator said, "I took Miss Carroll downstairs just about half an hour ago."

Lonergan stepped into the car. "How far down did she go?"

"All the way," the operator told him. "The last I saw she was going into the Cocktail Lounge."

In less than a minute Lonergan was walking through the Cocktail Lounge, surveying the customers at the modernistic tables. Everybody was smartly dressed in evening clothes and Lonergan's gray, unpressed suit attracted attention. People looked down at his wet shoes, wet from walking in that flooded bathroom on the ninth floor.

He toured the lounge without seeing Carmen. Then he spoke to the headwaiter, identifying himself as a detective.

"Yes, sir," the man informed him. "Miss Carroll was in here a while ago with Mrs. James C. Irwin. She joined Mrs. Irwin at a table. Miss Carroll had a copy of the recent extra paper, sir. They conversed for a few minutes. Then Miss Carroll left. She seemed to be in a hurry. Mrs. Irwin followed her shortly after, in a hurry, too."

Lonergan strode out of the Cocktail Lounge, went down a wide wall to the lobby where he paused, glancing alertly around. Then he saw Laura Irwin behind

the glass of a telephone booth. He knew her from society-page photographs. He met her as she was coming out of the booth, tipped his hat. "Pardon me, Mrs. Irwin," he said. "I'm the detective assigned to watch Miss Carroll. She slipped away from me about a half hour ago."

"Oh . . . yes," Laura Irwin remarked slowly.

Her age was about forty; her full-curved figure in an expensive but quiet evening gown seemed twenty-five. Everything about her showed good breeding and mature culture. But there was a worried haunted look in her eyes.

"Yes," she continued, "as a matter of fact I just called police headquarters about her. I'm afraid for her. You must find her—right away."

Loneragan led Laura Irwin to one side of the row of modernistic telephone booths. "We can help Miss Carroll better if you tell me what you're afraid of," he said.

Big tears came to the woman's eyes but she didn't weep. She blinked the tears away and her eyes remained darkly concerned, worried. "I can't tell you. Please . . . you must do something. That child's in danger. She's young and foolish but she's sweet underneath and I don't want—it can't happen to her—I won't let it happen."

"You'd better tell me, Mrs. Irwin," Loneragan urged her.

Mrs. Irwin pressed her fingers to her cheeks. Her voice was low, soft, but it had a tremble of fear and bewilderment. Loneragan felt she was facing a crisis and couldn't decide how to handle it.

"Oh, can't you understand? I was in this danger once—but not like Carmen. Carmen has just found out and she's wild enough, foolish enough—"

"What did she find out?" Loneragan asked crisply.

The society woman looked into his eyes.

She seemed about to tell him—then something spoiled it. Those dark eyes looked beyond Loneragan and the lips became tight.

He turned to scowl into the broad face of a big, plainly dressed woman, a woman in low-heeled shoes who spoke in a deep, masculine voice. "Hello, Mr. Loneragan," she boomed. "I'm the deputy from headquarters. I came down on orders from the district attorney to relieve you on the Carroll case."

"Nuts!" Loneragan snapped.

Everything was going wrong tonight; everything seemed to fall to pieces on him. Now, probably, Laura Irwin wouldn't talk—her mouth had a tight look which suggested frightened silence. He tried to win her confidence, soothingly, ignoring the big female deputy by showing her his broad back.

"What did she find out?" he asked again. "We'll help—"

"She found out and I found out—just now. But it may be *her* life."

"Then you can't put that young life in jeopardy—"

"Oh, let me alone!" Laura Irwin moaned. "Go away and let me alone! See that she doesn't go back to Chinatown . . . and let me alone."

Loneragan knew it was useless to press her further now. He turned to the woman deputy from headquarters and said: "Escort Mrs. Irwin to the manager's office. I'll be back later."

IN a few long strides Loneragan reached the lobby desk. He asked the clerk if he had seen Carmen Patterson Carroll go out, if she had called a cab. He got some odd information.

"Miss Carroll stopped at the desk about twenty minutes ago," the clerk told him. "She wanted to know where she could buy a camera at this time of night."

"A what?" Lonergan asked incredulously.

"Yes, sir. She wanted a pocket-size camera that used a super-sensitive negative. I told her there was a big all-night drug store at the corner. She rushed out . . ."

And Lonergan rushed out, too. There was a newsboy on the street, yelling: "Just out! Extra! Missing Madcap found in Chinatown! Police rescue girl from opium den! Read about it!"

The street was dark, filled with fog. Lonergan strode rapidly down the sidewalk and ducked into the corner drug store.

He was burning inside, furious. The papers would have the full story of his rescue of the Carroll girl, his guarding her according to the request of her mother, radioed to the D.A. from the S.S. *Malolo* at sea. And now the girl had gotten away from him. The papers wouldn't be long in getting that story, too. Even if the girl had only escaped on a lark, the publicity would wreck Lonergan's reputation. But it was more than a lark now. Laura Irwin's intimations plainly meant the Carroll girl was headed for danger. And Lonergan, unless he saved her, would be broken.

The druggist told him a blond girl in a black dress had left about ten minutes ago, having bought a Browning Super-sensitive Camera, Intimate Pocket Size. She'd called a cab from the phone in the rear of the store.

"Was it a Yellow Cab?"

Lonergan only waited for the druggist's affirmative nod to that question. He hoofed it up the street and strode into the hotel lobby again.

The woman deputy met him by the desk. Her big, broad face was worried. "I'm sorry," she began in that deep, male voice. "Mrs. Irwin got sick, said it was her heart. I went for the house physician

and when I got back she was gone."

"Marvelous," Lonergan growled. He slammed into one of the phone booths and called headquarters. "Listen, Hu," he said to the man in charge, "get in touch with the Yellow Taxi Company and find out what cab picked up a young blonde from the Owl Drugstore at the top of California Street, just down from the Hopkins Hotel. She was picked up just about fifteen minutes ago. Find out where that cab took her, a blonde in a black dress, no hat. It's the Carroll girl."

"I'll find out for you," Hu Rawlins responded casually, "but it may take a little time. If the girl went very far, we'll have to wait till the driver gets back to his stand."

"You hurry it," Lonergan told him.

While Hu Rawlins had been talking, the detective had fished around in his coat pocket with nervous, restless fingers. Now those fingers contacted something, a card. He took it out, saw the engraved name—*Prince Nikolas Shatrov*. There was nothing else on it.

INTO the phone, he said: "Also find out where Prince Nikolas Shatrov lives. A phony prince that plays in society. Try the city directory, the telephone book, or try waking up some of the bluebloods that might know him. Call me back at the Hopkins, and make it snappy."

"Is that all?" Hu Rawlins' voice inquired sarcastically.

"No," Lonergan boomed at him. He was thinking of something Laura Irwin had let slip—that Carmen Patterson Carroll might return to Chinatown. He went on: "Kick your Chinatown detail out of the pool room, the beer parlor, or wherever those mugs waste the city's time, and plant them in the Quarter to look out for Carmen Patterson Carroll. There's a tip she might be going back, maybe to kick the gong around some more. But

there's something fishy in it this time; she's headed for real trouble."

"You're telling us?" the headquarters man asked.

"And here's another thing," Lonergan rapped out. "Send out a radio call for the cars to pick up Pockets Magee, the hophead dip. Try the flop houses for him. Have the arresting officers take him to California and Grant Avenue and hold him there till I can drop around."

"Whew!" Rawlins protested. "You can sure dish it out!"

"Yeah," Lonergan said. "Now let's see you take it!"

"Wait a minute," Rawlins called. "The D.A. just walked in. He wants to talk to you."

Hannaman's voice rasped into the receiver. "Where the hell have you been?" he demanded loudly. "We got a call from Mrs. James C. Irwin that Carmen is loose and headed for trouble. What kind of a department is this when citizens have to turn in the reports for the cops? What have you been doing all this time, sipping a *pousse-café* in the Cocktail Lounge? Maybe you want us to send you down a dress suit! Maybe—"

"Listen," Lonergan snapped back—and he was seeing red. "I'll find that brat if it's the last thing I do! Then you can take the whole damned City Hall Building, lift it up dome first, and you can—"

The D.A. clicked off the connection.

Lonergan slammed back the booth door, shouldered out. And the first thing he saw was the grinning, smirking face of Nathan. Lonergan had all he could do to keep from taking a poke at it. He had a violent desire to take a poke at something, and the reporter seemed like a swell target.

"Is it true, Mr. Lonergan," Nathan began, "that you've developed such a fatherly fancy for Miss Carroll that you intend to take out adoption papers?"

"Listen," Lonergan snarled at him, "one more crack from you and I'll bum's-rush you down to the Examiner and feed you into the presses."

Nathan continued, undaunted. "Is it true, Mr. Lonergan, that Carmen made her recent escape from your watchful guard by brandishing a wooden pistol?"

Lonergan grabbed the reporter by the collar and the seat of the pants, danced him across the lobby and pitched him bodily into the manager's office. Then he yanked the key from the inside of the lock, jabbed it in the outside. He banged the door and locked it as the manager came up.

"Here's the key," Lonergan snapped. "Don't let that guy out till morning or I'll arrest you for aiding and abetting the escape of a fugitive from justice!"

IT was almost a half hour before headquarters called back. Lonergan took the call in one of the booths, saying: "What kind of cooperation is this? I'm trying to catch up with the Carroll dame and you take—"

"Don't be like that," Hu Rawlins corrected him. "I've been doing my best. That cab driver picked up another fare after he dropped Carmen. The taxi company had to wait till he got back to his stand."

"Where did she go?" Lonergan cut in impatiently.

"She went to Fourteen Forty-four Oakhurst Street. That's down near the Fair Grounds—"

"I know where it is. She's got about an hour's start on me. What's Prince Shatrov's address?"

"Fourteen Forty-four Oakhurst Street," Rawlins responded quickly.

AS the taxi sped over streets slippery from the fog, took corners sliding, Rex Lonergan sat back in the worn leath-

er upholstery and tried to figure answers to things. He didn't do very well because he didn't have enough facts to work on.

Carmen Patterson Carroll had been headed for trouble when she had dashed out of the Cocktail Lounge an hour ago and that trouble might put her life in danger. Laura Irwin had been plain enough in intimating that.

Laura Irwin's reason for silence, even at the expense of allowing the wild young Carroll girl to plunge head-first into this danger, Loneragan couldn't even come close to guessing at, however. That Laura Irwin was somehow involved in the same trouble seemed apparent. But it was a little hard to conceive how a woman of Mrs. Irwin's culture and standing could get herself mixed up in the Manhattan Madcap's type of trouble.

Yet, Loneragan reflected, you couldn't always tell about women. Those quiet, dignified ones sometimes surprised you.

He had a good idea why Laura Irwin had escaped from the female deputy at the hotel. The society woman didn't want to talk for fear she'd be forced to expose the nature of this trouble which she and the Carroll girl shared.

Furthermore, Loneragan was ready to bet that after slipping away from the deputy, Laura Irwin had gone in pursuit of Carmen Carroll in an attempt to save her from the danger, whatever it was. But the pocket-size-camera purchase Carmen had made stumped him.

FOURTEEN-FORTY-FOUR Oakhurst was a four-apartment flat building, two stories with a brick front facing toward the bay. Only you couldn't see the bay now in the fog.

"Wait," Loneragan told his driver.

He glanced along the sidewalk as he crossed it. Half a block down, under a dimly flickering street lamp, stood a man in a tan uniform, a watchman from a private patrol.

Loneragan stepped into the brick vestibule, saw a shiny brass plate with places for four cards and a push button by each. There were only three cards, the fourth place being empty and a sign over the plate reading—*Vacancy, Four Rooms, Furnished.*

Loneragan saw the name of the prince but he didn't push the button by it. Instead, he pressed the one by the card that read—*George Smith, Owner and Manager.*

He kept his finger on the button but he couldn't hear the buzzer going inside, there was too much noise. Radios, on different stations, made a conflicting, discordant racket. When the door opened, the noise from the radios doubled.

A thin, bald man in a greasy dressing gown held the door open. He squinted at Loneragan from under shaggy eyebrows. "What is it? At this time of night—"

Loneragan flashed his police shield in the palm of his hand. "I'm calling on Prince Shatrov."

The bald man got worried instantly. Loneragan pushed by him. The man said hurriedly: "I'm Smith, the owner here. I hope there won't be any trouble. I was just listening to Guy Lombardo's orchestra—"

"So I hear," Loneragan clipped sourly.

The music, tuned up loud, filled the hallway with sound. And across the hall on another noisy radio, one of Lombardo's competitors vied with him by blasting a rhumba tune.

"The prince lives upstairs," Smith offered meekly.

Loneragan was already going up. He went up two steps at a time and the bald man followed him, said: "It's that door. The other flat is vacant."

Loneragan knocked on the door. He got no answer, but there was sound inside, a voice going monotonously, softly. Then he realized it was a third radio. "Get

your key," he ordered, "and open this up."

The bald man had his keys in his pants pocket under the dirty dressing gown. He fished them out and jabbed at the lock with nervous fingers.

The door opened and there she was, lying sprawled on the floor, face down. The upper part of her body, head and shoulders, lay off the rug, and the pool of blood on the hardwood flooring was wet and dark, like spilled Burgundy wine.

Behind Lonergan, the bald man made gurgling noises in his throat and muttered: "Good Lord!"

Lonergan made no sound at all. His face didn't change expression. He just walked over slowly and looked down at Laura Irwin.

SHE had been shot twice, once in the forehead and once in the throat. It was the throat wound that had made most of the blood. The gun lay near her hand, .32 caliber, nickel-plated, with a mother-of-pearl handle. A dainty little weapon, but a damned effective one.

Over his shoulder Lonergan said: "This didn't happen more than a half hour ago. What do you know about it? Did you hear this gun go off?"

George Smith fidgeted nervously in the open doorway. He was afraid to come in, and by an effort he kept his round little eyes away from the body on the floor. "I didn't hear anything, sir. I was just—"

"I know," Lonergan interrupted mockingly. "You were just listening to Guy Lombardo. There was so much Lombardo blasting away down there you couldn't hear anything. Did you see anybody come into this building in the last hour?"

"I was in my flat—" Smith began apologetically.

Lonergan waved an impatient hand. "All right. Now go downstairs and call the police here. Ask the people across the

hall from you if they heard anything or saw anybody. I don't suppose they did. They've got a radio as noisy as yours."

"Yes, sir," Smith said. He seemed in a hurry to get away from there.

Lonergan strode to the door after him, saw the bald head already going down the stairs. He called: "Go down the street and ask that night watchman to come up right away. Tell him the police want to talk to him."

Lonergan stood in the middle of the room while the radio, with the eleven P.M. news broadcast, droned on steadily.

"And now for your local news," the announcer continued. "Carmen Patterson Carroll, the Manhattan Madcap, has disappeared again! Found early this evening by a police detective in an opium den where she had gone for one more thrill, the wild young daughter of the Carroll Biscuit Billions was taken to her hotel where she was placed in charge of the officer, pending the arrival of her outraged mother tomorrow on the—"

Lonergan strode over and clicked the switch. He had killed one radio, anyway. But the two downstairs blasted on insistently.

Lonergan began a methodical search. He went first to the desk in the corner because it attracted him first. The desk was of the drop-leaf variety, the leaf pulling down to make the writing surface. It was down now, revealing a section of pigeon-holes and drawers. One drawer, the largest, had had a system for locking with a small brass padlock. But the drawer had been forced out violently, the screws pulling from the wood. Papers which evidently had been taken from the compartment lay cluttered on the writing leaf.

Lonergan examined those papers—bills, mostly. Bills with inked-in demands for long-overdue payments. One of the prince's creditors was decidedly less for-

mal than the business firms. This was just a typewritten note, unsigned, on plain paper.

You pay me that ten grand, slug, or you will be on the inside, looking out! And when I say inside I don't mean the local lock-up—it's the Big House for you!

Loneragan put down the note, for his eyes had found something else—a little stack of photographs, half a dozen of them with their transparent negatives. They weren't portrait photos—they were far more interesting.

Each had been taken in the interior of an opium den. In five of them Lonergan recognized the den of Fook Wong from which he had rescued Carmen Patterson Carroll early in the evening. There were the lowly, drugged souls lying about in filthy bunks, the mixed yellow and white races. And each photograph featured a woman, a finely dressed Occidental woman, lying there in the foreground with an opium pipe by her side.

One of these pictures revealed the slumbering form of Laura Irwin!

LONERGAN looked from the photo over to the sprawled body on the floor. That secret of hers was beginning to leak. In life it had really been her secret; by her death it was becoming known.

"Is this the man you want to see, officer?"

The thin, bald-headed owner of the flat building had returned. With him was the private patrolman in his natty uniform. The patrolman stood staring at the body on the floor.

"The people downstairs," George Smith went on, "didn't see or hear nothing. They been alone all evening listening to the radio just like I was. My wife went to Sacramento to see her sister. Me, I've been alone. I was down there tuned in on Guy Lombardo—"

"I know, I know," Lonergan snapped. Then, to the patrolman, "You've been standing down the block. Who did you see come in or out of this building in the last hour?"

The patrolman wore an officer's cap with a glistening black visor. He pushed the cap back on his head and dug at his scalp, scratched thoughtfully with long fingers, all the time looking from Lonergan to the body on the floor.

"Well," he began slowly, "of course I'm not really watching this here place—"

"Of course," Lonergan agreed.

"But . . ." the man continued, "I did see some taxis come and go. First, about an hour ago, there was a taxi stopped and a woman got out. I noticed her particular because she didn't have no hat or coat and it's pretty cold out, with the fog and all. She was a blonde."

Lonergan nodded. That blonde, more than likely, had been Carmen Patterson Carroll.

"Well," the patrolman went on, "in about ten minutes she come out with a fellow and they drove off in the cab. I didn't notice him much. Well, that was all for a while—maybe twenty minutes. Then another cab pulls up and a man and a woman get out."

"The same man and woman?" Lonergan asked.

"I don't think it was the same woman because she had a hat and coat. She seemed different. They went in while the taxi waited. In about ten minutes the man came out alone and drove off. That was all till you come."

Lonergan eyed the patrolman steadily. "Think hard on this one. Was it the same man that came back the second time?"

The patrolman scratched his scalp some more. "I couldn't say," he muttered. "I didn't look close. I'm not hired to watch this place and—"

"That's all," Lonergan interrupted. "You're through till we need you again."

The patrolman went out after a last look at the body of Laura Irwin. He hadn't given Lonergan much and there didn't seem to be anyone who could give more. Lonergan turned his back on George Smith and walked to the desk again. He'd hardly reached it when a voice groaned: "My God!" It wasn't Smith's voice.

Lonergan spun around. "Come in," he invited coldly.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Trail to Fook Wong

BYOND George Smith, two men stood in the doorway. One of them, that is, stood there. The other, a short, thick-middled individual, advanced into the room slowly, steadily, eyes fixed on the body as though it were a magnet that drew him toward it.

He was perfectly dressed from gleaming shoes to rigid felt hat. His face had no color but that might be traced to the emotional stress that gripped him now. The magnetism the body on the floor held for him snapped suddenly, left him stranded in the middle of the room with a bewildered expression on his ghastly face.

"It is Laura!" he said—to no one in particular.

Then he dropped into the nearest chair. He was possibly forty but his face went suddenly years older. His eyes, haunted eyes, remained on the body. He bent his thick body forward in the chair, staring, and his overcoat bulged and wrinkled on him.

The man in the doorway hadn't moved. He just stood there stroking his long, pointed chin with slim fingers.

"I'm from the police," Lonergan told him. "Who's he? And who are you?"

"That gentleman," the man answered with an easy, controlled voice, "is Mr. James C. Irwin. I'm his lawyer."

Lonergan glanced at the man in the chair again. He knew by Irwin's dazed manner that he wouldn't be able to say much, so he directed his question to the lawyer. "Do you mind telling me how you happened to walk in here at this moment?"

James C. Irwin spoke first. He grasped the arms of the chair with both hands. His face, turned to the lawyer, was sternly commanding. "Don't say anything, Hal."

The lawyer gave Lonergan a faint smile, walked over and put a hand on Irwin's thick shoulder.

He said: "Don't be a damned fool, Jimmy. I know how you must feel, but the law has to know everything in a case like this. You can't save her now. She's gone. It's best to tell everything."

"It sure is," Lonergan added.

At that moment men came in, several of them. Frank Dale, chief investigator for the D.A.'s office, led the parade. He strode into the room, looked at the body, the people standing around. He was followed by a uniformed officer, probably from a radio car, and two men from the homicide detail. The homicide boys nodded casually to Lonergan.

Frank Dale didn't nod. He ignored Lonergan for a moment more, surveying the room. Then he glanced over and said: "Well, I see the marines have landed and have the situation well in hand."

Lonergan didn't react at all to Dale's crack. He just asked: "How come you're up and around at this late hour, Frank?"

"The Carroll girl," Dale said. "There was a tip that she came to this address in a taxi—I guess that was your tip. See anything of her?"

Lonergan shook his head, glanced toward the body on the floor. "When I got here I found Mrs. Irwin—like that."

Then, "Hasn't the Chinatown squad picked up the Carroll girl yet?"

Frank Dale grinned sourly at the question. "You lost her so well nobody can find her." With that Dale dug both hands deep into his overcoat pockets and rocked on his heels, frowning. "O.K." he said officiously. "Who are these fellows?"

"This gentleman by the door," Lonergan began, "is Mr. George Smith."

With all those official eyes on him, Smith fidgeted nervously and blinked watery eyes.

"Mr. Smith," Lonergan went on, "owns this place. He was downstairs, listening to Guy Lombardo."

Smith nodded vigorously and rubbed his bald head. "Yes, sir," he explained in nervous haste, "I was just tuned in to Lombardo when this officer—"

Frank Dale waved him to silence. "O.K., O.K."

"The gentleman seated," Lonergan introduced, "is Mr. James C. Irwin—the husband. The other man is his lawyer. They walked in just a few minutes ago. Mr. Irwin was about to explain."

IRWIN shot one appealing look to his lawyer. Then he nodded to the detectives. He removed his hat, held it in his pudgy hands. He kept turning it around in trembling fingers and he didn't look at the body of his wife any more.

"Yes," he said in a low voice. "I suppose I can tell. But I'll pay you men any amount if you'll keep this away from the papers. My wife was a fine woman. Maybe I didn't always treat her as I should—"

"What do you mean?" Frank Dale asked directly.

"Well—little quarrels, and things. But I loved Laura. I don't want her name dragged through any newspaper muck—even though she's gone." He shrugged limply. "Laura has been seeing Prince Shatrov for some months. I found out but

I never let on to her that I knew. I felt she'd get over it. A woman of her character couldn't feel anything lasting for a man like Shatrov. He's not a real prince, you know. He was exposed as an imposter some years ago but it didn't seem to make any difference to the people who wined and dined him. The women, mostly, thought he was entertaining—"

Irwin's eyes went down to the hat in his hands. His voice became so quiet Lonergan had to step closer to hear it all. "I spoke to Hal, my lawyer here. We both decided it was best to remain silent and let Laura lose interest in the man of her own accord. I followed her here once, saw her come in. I hated Shatrov then but I went home and tried to forget about it."

He looked up now, looked into the faces of the investigators, one by one. "Tonight," he began, "Laura came home shortly after ten o'clock. I don't know where she had been before that—"

"She was at the Hopkins till ten," Lonergan put in. "I saw her there."

"When she came home," Irwin continued, "she was highly agitated. I would have asked the maid to watch after her but she was not home. Laura went to her room. I was in the hall, but in a mirror in her bedroom I saw her. She took her pistol from a drawer, put it in her purse. When she came into the hall she just smiled at me rather grimly and went out. There was a taxi waiting for her and she drove off in it. I got the car out to follow but I lost her. So I went over to the club and got Hal. We came here—and this is what we found. The officer was already here."

Nobody spoke a word. Downstairs the radios went on with their dance music. Frank Dale glared at Smith, said: "Go down and shut those damned things off."

Lonergan went over and picked up the nicked .32 revolver in his handkerchief.

He held it before Irwin's eyes and asked quietly: "Is this the gun she had?"

Irwin nodded. Frank Dale took the gun away, in the handkerchief, slipped the shiny weapon back on the floor again where it had been. To Lonergan, he snapped: "What's the idea? You know we got to photograph this stuff."

Lonergan just smiled. "The position of that gun won't mean anything. She didn't kill herself. You look around, Frank. You'll find some interesting things. Photographs on that desk. Bills, and a demand for money."

"Yeah," Dale responded absently. He went to a phone on a table and called headquarters, requested that Prince Nikolas Shatrov be picked up for questioning in connection with the murder of Laura Irwin.

He was still talking on the phone when Lonergan walked out the door, saying: "I guess I'll have to go find my sweet little friend, the Carroll girl."

IT was shortly after midnight when Rex Lonergan paid off his cab driver at California Street and Grant Avenue in Chinatown. In the meantime he had made a hurried trip home to disguise himself, and when he first walked up to the police car standing in the shadows the officers didn't recognize him—nor did Pockets Magee.

Lonergan's disguise was simple and effective. It consisted of a change of clothes and a pair of spectacles. Department-store detectives have long recognized the value of a clothes-change; they can sleuth day after day in the same department of the same store without being spotted by shop-lifters, merely by this device. And a pair of glasses on a face known not to wear them is the final touch in disguise. Even Hollywood movie stars, with faces known around the world, constantly circulate among their fans, shopp-

ing at home and vacationing away from it, thus avoiding identification.

Lonergan wore a well used blue serge suit, a shabby topcoat, and a greasy felt hat. The glasses gave a peculiar expression to his eyes. He carried his regulation revolver under his armpit, and a Colt Super .38 automatic in his overcoat pocket.

"Well, I'll be damned," the uniformed cop at the wheel said, "if it isn't Hawkshaw Lonergan."

Pockets Magee, sitting forlornly in the back of the car, leaped forward and put a thin hand on Lonergan's arm. His tear-stained face gleamed yellow from a street lamp.

"Geez, Mr. Lonergan," he cried desperately, "I'm sure glad you come! You can tell these coppers they got a bum beef! Me, I ain't doin' a thing. I'm catchin' a little shut-eye in a flop house on Howard Street when these coppers come in and nail me—they say they got to charge me with bein' Public Enemy Number One! Geez, that's ironical, ain't it, Mr. Lonergan?"

Lonergan ignored the little dip. He asked of the officers: "Did the Chinatown squad pick up the Carroll girl yet?"

"Not a trace of her. They went underground wherever they could, pulled a few raids, but all they got was addicts, vags, and a few suspicious characters."

Lonergan turned on Pockets Magee. "Listen," he said, "you're in a bad jam and there's only one way you can get out of going to the iron house for keeps. I've got a tip that the Carroll girl you steered me to early this evening, has disappeared below again. I think she went back to Fook Wong. You're taking me there."

"I steered you to the joint once," Magee whined.

"It won't be that joint now," Lonergan said. "I scared Fook Wong away. He's

probably retreated to one of his other places, still deeper. And I've got to see if Carmen Carroll is there.'

"I don't know no more places," Magee wailed. "Honest to God, I don't know nothin' more . . ."

Loneragan's face grew hard. To the officers, he snapped: "All right, boys, take him away. Bury him for a few days; keep him off the junk. Then book him for everything he confesses to, including dope-peddling, picking pockets, vagrancy, and any unsolved crimes on the books—"

"Geez," Magee exploded in panic, "*you* treatin' me like that, Mr. Lonergan—that's ironical! But I just remembered somethin'!"

"I thought you'd remember," Lonergan said cynically.

"Yeah, I just remembered! Fook Wong's runnin' a show tonight in the House of Exquisite Joy—that's a funny name, but that's what he calls it. I got told about it by Dopey Donnelly but I didn't have no ten bucks. A-course," Magee corrected virtuously, "I wouldn't go to no low-life show like that anyhow. Me, I like a good clean movie—"

"How do we get there?" Lonergan demanded.

"Well the funny part is you go in by the Golden Dragon just the same. Only there's some trick stairs—these Chinks are great for thinkin' up stuff like this."

Loneragan and the officers listened attentively as Pockets Magee explained the intricate method of getting into Fook Wong's House of Exquisite Joy. The show, Magee informed them, had been scheduled for midnight but it might be late starting. Lonergan hoped to God it would be.

"All right," he said to the officers, "I'm going to that dive and get planted. A front-door raid would just drive them out some secret back way. And if the Carroll girl is there, we can't risk anything like

that. Round up the squad but give me a fifteen-minute start. Then bust in according to Magee's directions. And bust in fast because I'll probably have my hands full of Chinamen . . ."

CHAPTER SIX

The House of Exquisite Joy

THE single dirty light bulb still burned dimly in the doorway of the Golden Dragon. The street outside was dark, deserted, sunk deep under a sea of fog. Chinatown, the surface Chinatown, slept.

Pockets Magee rapped on the black-painted glass with a bony little fist, and presently the door opened only a crack. The fat Chinaman who peered out said curtly: "Solly, place all closed."

Pockets Magee removed his cap so the Chinaman could better see his face under the dim glow of the bulb. He said "Hello, Charlie. I got told about from Dopey Donnelly. This is a friend of mine. We want to see the show. You savvy?"

Slant-eyes held on Lonergan, little gleaming black marbles in a pale yellow face. It was the Chinaman who had been posted in the kitchen the last time Lonergan entered the Golden Dragon. Lonergan met those eyes frankly, waited. And the door opened wide for them to pass through; the disguise was a success—so far.

The interior of the restaurant was dark. The door closed behind them and Pockets Magee took Lonergan's arm, steering him forward to the sliver of light which ribboned under the kitchen door.

The Chinaman, Charlie, followed them only as far as the kitchen. Here, in a soft yellow light, he held out his fat palm. "Ten dolla', *pliz*," he said, "each fella."

Loneragan placed two limp ten-dollar bills in the hand. Pockets Magee smirked and winked. He led the way into the

narrow hall and down the steep wooden steps.

The big solid door at the bottom, the one through which Lonergan had been admitted before in his rescue of Carmen Patterson Carroll, stood open. Lonergan glanced into the room where the opium den had been. It was empty now. There was no sign of its previous use.

Pockets turned to face the wooden steps down which they had just come. And Lonergan faced them, too. He noticed what he hadn't seen before—that the risers of the steps were as worn as the treads.

He knew the answer, of course. And Magee demonstrated it by turning an ornamental knob at the end of the pipe railing that ran up the wall with the stairs as a banister. That knob turned like a light bulb in a socket.

A Chinese gong sounded softly, distantly, and those stairs began to sink slowly. The whole staircase in its narrow enclosed corridor was a hinged thing, hinged underneath the bottom step. The top step on the floor above had unfastened from some mechanical mooring, and there was a squeaking of pulleys, a creaking of wood, as the stairway sank down, leaving the upper corridor high in the air and unreachable—as a descending elevator leaves a landing. Lonergan watched it, fascinated, even though Pockets Magee had described it to him a little while ago.

The sinking stairs leveled off even with the floor on which the two men waited, jerked, and continued to sink. At the far end of it there was only darkness and the vague suggestion of running cables.

The stairs dropped in an arc and stopped at last with a final jerk. A moment before they had gone one flight up; now they went one flight down, and the former treads became the risers and the risers became the treads.

Lonergan and Magee walked down.

As they did so, the detective looked overhead. The landing behind the kitchen of the Golden Dragon was high above, and from the lighted opening the Chinaman, Charlie, impassively watched their downward progress.

When they had stepped off the bottom tread to the hallway below, the stairway went up again behind them, went up ominously, with a creaking and a groaning, to cut off any chance of retreat.

There was a door before them lighted by a single bulb. Pockets Magee palmed the white porcelain knob.

IT was weird, Lonergan thought, fantastic. They walked onto a level gallery. Nearly half a hundred men, the majority Chinese, sat on wooden stools facing the arena which was a dozen feet lower than the gallery.

Had there been a roped ring and spectators below, it would have been like an indoor fight arena. But the space below was small with a bare wooden floor, nothing else, nothing except the ten half-naked Chinese who stood in a group down there, jabbering to each other and calling remarks to Orientals in the gallery.

"Sit here," Magee said to Lonergan.

They took stools near the wooden rail, looked down on those ten men in the arena. They were big fellows, possibly Manchurians. Their bodies glistened with sweat because it was hot and the air was foul. Those bodies were scarred and their faces showed the marks of dissipation; when they grinned most of them had no teeth at all, others had only yellow, broken stumps back of parted lips.

Lonergan cast his eyes, behind the disguising glasses, around among the spectators. He saw a few familiar faces among the whites, men known to the police as dope addicts, drunkards, grovelers in vice. Two of the men had serious criminal records and one was a fugitive who'd

made an escape from San Quentin Prison a month before.

Carmen Patterson Carroll wasn't to be seen; there were no women in the audience.

The wooden walls resounded with voices, the spectators like an impatient crowd waiting for the main event of a fight or wrestling match. Chinese voices droned constantly, mixed with cat-calls and wisecracks that were anything but Chinese. A burly American with a seaman's cap, probably a sailor from some oil tanker, rose to his feet and cupped his hands to his mouth.

"Let's go-ooo!" he bellowed.

He sat down again. His face burned crimson from liquor. He took a bottle from his hip and poured a long swig of cheap gin down his throat.

Then it began.

Fook Wong, grinning lewdly, stepped through a wide doorway further down the gallery. Dressed magnificently in scarlet, he held his two hands locked together before his stomach and shook them. The crowd got noisier.

Lonergan now noticed the derrick down there with a hand crank for manipulating it. The arm of the derrick extended out of sight in the opening through which Fook Wong had made his grinning entrance. But now the Chinatown vice king operated the derrick. The arm moved out. . . .

A bamboo cage, like a great bird cage, hung from the derrick, and it held a human—a nude girl, forced to stand because of the narrowness of the cage. And that nude, screaming human was Carmen Patterson Carroll.

THE roar of applause and shouting became deafening, drowned out the shrieks of the girl. The derrick, under Fook Wong's hand, swung the cage over the arena.

Instantly two of the scarred, half-naked Oriental giants below drew knives and fell to fighting one another in mad, ruthless combat. And then Lonergan knew—understood.

The thought of it first sent a wave of sickness over him. Then it whipped up in him a wild fury. He knew the girl would be lowered in the cage to those decadent fiends below; they were fighting an elimination combat for her. She was the prize for the winners—while all the time these sin-drugged spectators in the gallery applauded sadistically, cried lewd suggestions. . . .

Lonergan kicked back the stool, knocked the glasses from his face and his hand dove under his coat, came out with his revolver.

He shouted, called out commands, but for a while it was like a nightmare in which the sleeper's voice is never heard. He didn't know what he called, didn't hear his own voice, but by the straining of his throat he knew he was trying to make himself heard above the din.

His gun banged twice, and that got attention. The noise became stilled suddenly. Fook Wong's hands came away from the derrick and the nude girl hung suspended in her bamboo cage. It swung with her gently while she pleaded sobbingly, incoherently, for help.

It was all mad, Lonergan thought. He had brought a temporary halt to this evil show, but only for a moment could things remain in his control.

Already those spectators were rising from their seats, all waiting for a leader among them to make the first move. Fear began to creep over Lonergan, prickle his skin, hollow out his stomach. Mentally, he battled that fear because control of himself now was his one chance in a million to control this crowd.

"Get the dirty son. . . ."

It was the burly, drunken sailor. An

automatic came into his hand, banged. Lonergan, backing toward the wall, shot him down, kept backing until the wall stopped him.

Two others tried it, digging into their pockets for guns. Lonergan got them both before they fired a shot. Then, at a frantic shriek from Pockets Magee, he swung the other way, toward Fook Wong.

He didn't see the flight of the knife, only saw Fook Wong's arm whip down. He had brought up his gun as he turned but it clicked empty under the trigger-pull.

And then a figure jumped in front of him, between him and that Oriental in scarlet. There was a dull *chuck* sound. Pockets Magee spun dizzily in front of Lonergan with the hilt of the knife protruding from his chest. Eyes wide, dazed, pathetic, the little dip stumbled against the wall, slid down it to the floor with both bony hands fixed on the knife hilt.

Lonergan saw all that in the instant it took him to dig out his automatic. And while conscious of the danger all about him, somehow he could only think of one target—that dwarfed little body of Fook Wong.

The little Oriental, running for the wide doorway, jerked, stumbled, as Lonergan fired. But he ducked through the opening.

LONERGAN had gone a couple of steps after him when a crash of sound caused him to spin around. Police surged through the door from the secret stairway. They waded into the mob of degenerates before them, swinging riot sticks, clubbing heads.

"Fook Wong!" Lonergan shouted. "This way!"

Two police heard him, responded to the call. Lonergan pointed through the doorway. He didn't follow. Instead, he went over and knelt down by Magee.

His own voice sounded strange, hoarse, when he asked: "What did you do that for, Pockets?"

The little dip's face seemed thinner, more pinched than ever. "Geez," he mumbled, and red flowed over his colorless lips, ". . . tried to catch the toad-sticker out of the air . . . like a baseball."

He looked down at the knife hilt in his chest as though he couldn't believe it was really there in his own pigeon-breast.

"What'd you do it for?" Lonergan asked again, quietly.

"Geez . . . I dunno. Imagine me takin' it like that to save a copper!" He gave the detective a sickly grin. "That's ironical, ain't it, Mr. Lonergan?"

Lonergan got up and yelled: "Hey! Stretcher for this man!" But he knew there was no need to hurry about it; Pockets didn't have a chance.

Lonergan walked to the derrick where Carmen hung suspended in the bamboo cage. He lowered her, then released her. He saw her clothes lying on the floor of the anteroom through which Fook Wong had run, handed them to her, inquiring: "You hurt?"

She was crying in great, choking sobs as she pulled on her clothes but she shook her blond head.

Lonergan said: "Just one thing more, Carmen. You brought the prince back here after you ditched me, didn't you? You got next to his racket by comparing notes with Mrs. Irwin, and you bought a pocket camera so you could trap him at it and get Laura Irwin's money back for her. But he caught you trying to trap him and he turned you over to Fook Wong so you'd never be able to expose him. Isn't that it?"

She nodded.

The two officers returned through the anteroom. "One of your shots must have got Fook Wong," one of them said. "He died in there just now."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Camera Shy

WHEN, late the next morning, Rex Lonergan pushed open the door to the D.A.'s outer office, flashlights exploded and his picture was taken by three different cameras before he got fully inside the room. Carmen Patterson Carroll sat there showing no sign of her horrible experience, looking as fresh and sweet as a morning flower. When she saw Lonergan, she blew him a kiss, saying to the reporters around her: "There's my hero!"

Three reporters had backed James C. Irwin into a corner, trying to force statements out of him. "Please," the man protested, "I've just come to see about getting the body after the autopsy . . . Please, I can't say anything."

At that moment Hannaman himself stuck his head out of the door to his private office. "Hey, boys," he frowned, "give the man a chance. You can come in here, Mr. Irwin." Then, seeing Lonergan, he added: "You come too, Rex."

Inside, Frank Dale and the police chief sat in leather chairs. They nodded greetings, and Lonergan asked: "Well, gentlemen, what's new?"

"The phony prince hasn't cracked yet," Dale said.

"Cracked about what?" Lonergan inquired.

"The murder. We've been talking to him steady for nine hours, ever since the chief's men nailed him at the Lido Club."

Hannaman offered James C. Irwin a chair, said sympathetically: "If you'd rather not hear the details of this, you can wait in a room down the hall?"

"That's all right," Irwin said quietly.

"He confessed to his racket, though," Frank Dale said to Lonergan. "Guess what it was?"

"I don't have to guess, I learned last night. Shatrov played up to prominent women who had reputations and who would be willing to pay money to keep those reputations spotless."

"You mean he was a blackmailer?" Irwin asked.

"Yeah," Lonergan nodded, "and of a very dirty caliber. He worked in conjunction with Fook Wong. Shatrov would take one of his unsuspecting victims out for an evening. They'd make the rounds of all the dives on a slumming party. Each dive would get worse than the one before and Shatrov would ply his victim with plenty of hooch until the woman would be feeling reckless. Then he'd suggest visiting an opium den under Chinatown. They'd go to one of Fook Wong's joints. And somehow he'd get the woman to try the pipe and when she was in a drugged condition he'd photograph her. How he persuaded them to try the pipe without arousing suspicion, I don't know."

"We do," Frank Dale put in, and it was plain by his expression that he didn't like Lonergan's knowing as much as he did about it. "He confessed to that. Some Chink down there would sneak up and give the woman a jab in the arm with morphine. The rest would be easy, just stretching her out on the bunk and taking her picture. Only in most cases Shatrov got into the picture himself. That was to divert suspicion when he finally closed the deal. He'd come calling on the victim late the next day, put on a big act. He'd have one of the prints with him which he claimed a friend of his on the city's narcotic squad got for him. This friend, according to Shatrov's story, could hush up the whole investigation for twenty-five grand. He would say a police undercover man had the pictures but hadn't turned them over yet.

"Shatrov had another angle for diverting suspicion. He'd pull a sob act about

how humiliated he was that the whole thing had happened, and he'd tell her he was trying to raise the money to stop the investigation and get the negatives and prints. Sometimes he'd let a few hours go by. Then he'd come back with some more sobbing and humiliation to say he could only raise ten thousand. The woman, naturally, would offer to get the rest, fifteen thousand. He'd promise to pay her back, turning on his personality again. Of course he never paid anything back. He would clear fifteen grand except for the cut he'd give Fook Wong and his assistants down there."

"That's the way he worked it." The police chief nodded. "So when Laura Irwin found out what he'd done to her, she raised trouble and he killed her to cover himself."

REX LONERGAN sat on the edge of the D.A.'s desk, lit a cigarette from a match flame cupped in his broad palms. He said: "That's fair reasoning but it's not the answer. Shatrov didn't kill her."

For a moment silence hung in the room. Then Frank Dale turned on a very sour grin, saying: "Oh, no?"

The D.A. tapped his desk with a pencil. "Why didn't he do it, Rex?"

"Because," Lonergan said, "he wouldn't be fool enough to commit the crime in his own flat."

"That's a rotten answer," Dale snapped. "Suppose the shooting came suddenly out of a passionate quarrel—"

"Even if it was one of those spontaneous homicides," Lonergan explained, "Shatrov had plenty of time to get rid of all that incriminating blackmail evidence in his desk."

Frank Dale started to say something but the D.A. shut him up with a wave of his hand. "Go on, Rex."

"This is the way it worked out," Lonergan began. "Shatrov, as we know by the

bills on his desk, had a lot of pressing debts. Somebody even had a threatening note there asking for the payment of ten grand—somebody, evidently, who knew of the racket because he threatened to spill it if Shatrov didn't pay up. So the prince was in a tight spot. He had to pull another job. He chose Carmen Patterson Carroll because he thought she'd lead easy and because he knew her mother could afford to pay hush money and would pay—even though Carmen wouldn't care a damn about the bad publicity.

"But," Lonergan went on, "I got Carmen out of the joint before he snapped his pictures. Even then I saw a camera down there; but it didn't mean anything to me then. An hour or so after that, Carmen gave me the slip in the hotel. She happened to meet Laura Irwin in the Cocktail Lounge. The extra paper was just out and Carmen had gotten a copy. She showed it to Mrs. Irwin and explained how Prince Shatrov was with her in the dive. Right then, the truth about Shatrov dawned on Mrs. Irwin. She knew it didn't make sense for Shatrov to take *another* woman to a hop joint after the experience she had there with him unless he had some hidden motive. She realized it was blackmail. Carmen, in her reckless way, probably talked about going back with the prince to try the pipe again and Laura Irwin, to save her, told her the secret. She was fond of the wild kid, and Carmen worshipped Mrs. Irwin.

"Carmen hit the ceiling. She was determined to trap the prince and get Laura Irwin's money back. She got the idea of buying a pocket camera and going back to the den with the prince to snap his picture when he tried to snap her picture. It's a crazy idea but Carmen is a little bats anyhow.

"I tried to trace her after she bought the camera. I met Mrs. Irwin who was worried about the kid, but she wouldn't

talk—wouldn't give the police her secret. Carmen raced over and got the prince, lured him into taking her to Chinatown again. The prince lured easy because he had all those bills hanging over his head. But when they arrived down at one of Fook Wong's places he got next to her game. If he didn't get rid of her, she'd expose him and he'd do one hell of a long stretch. So, not having the guts to kill anybody, he turned the girl over to Fook Wong, who has lots of uses for white girls and who never lets them see daylight again. Then Shatrov probably went straight to the Lido Club to buy himself an alibi in case he got involved in Carmen's disappearance."

"Who killed Laura Irwin then?" the chief asked.

"Her husband," Lonergan stated simply.

JAMES C. IRWIN lurched forward on his chair, face gone white, hands clutching the chair arms. "You're mad!" he screamed.

"Sure he is," Frank Dale agreed.

"You'll probably find out easy enough," Lonergan told them, "that Irwin didn't get along well with his wife. He chased with women. He didn't have a penny when he married her. He'll be rich now with her money, with freedom to chase."

"Where'd you get all this?"

"I ask questions of people," Lonergan said. "It's a good habit; helps you learn things. When Laura Irwin left the hotel, she went home in a cab to get her husband and her gun. She told Irwin the whole story and asked him to help her save Carmen from trouble with the prince."

"That's a lie," Irwin said. "She went out alone!"

"That's what you say," Lonergan told him, "but you admitted nobody else was in the house. You have no alibi. You

went with Laura to the prince's, got in with Laura's key. Together you raided the desk. You saw how you could kill her with her gun, scam, and leave the prince holding the sack. The motive against the prince was there on the desk. You killed her. You went home in the cab, got your car, and picked up your lawyer. Then you went back to the flat to 'discover' the murder with him."

Irwin cried: "This man is mad—he can't prove statements like that—"

"It can be proved by the taxi driver when we locate him," Lonergan said. "It can be proved by a private patrolman who saw Irwin go in with his wife."

The face of James Irwin became rigid. A shudder gripped his body. Then he fell limply back in the chair, said: "Yes—God, yes! It was like that! I'm glad you know . . ."

The D.A. got up quickly. "Take him downstairs, Frank. Have a stenographer get his statements." And to Lonergan, "What's this about a patrolman seeing him enough to identify him? You can't hold out information like that."

"That was a bluff," Lonergan admitted. "The patrolman couldn't give any identification."

When Lonergan went into the outer office, flashlights boomed.

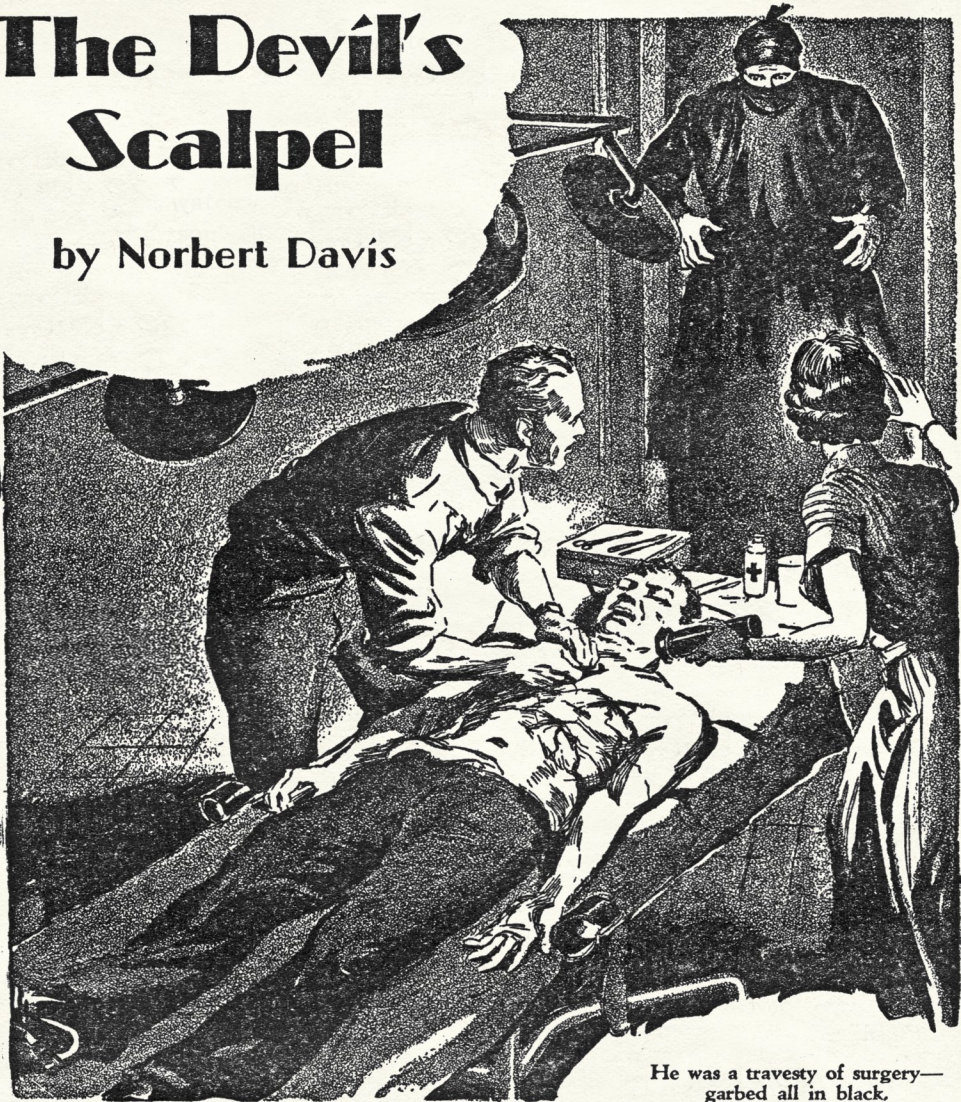
Carmen Patterson Carroll threw both her arms around the detective's neck straining upward to reach his lips in a long kiss. As Lonergan tried to wrestle free, cameras worked steadily amid the shouts of reporters. Carmen whispered: "Gee, Rex, I could go for you in a big way!"

He shook her off, fought his way through the reporters.

"What I need," he thought, "is the tallest highball ever built and if I never see that brat again it'll be too damn soon to suit me!"

The Devil's Scalpel

by Norbert Davis



He was a travesty of surgery—garbed all in black.

There in that hospital on the hill two corpses had been found—each slashed with the same ghastly criss-cross marks. And now, on the operating table lay Doctor Nolan's daughter, cringing under the scalpel of the surgeon in black. Who was this murder fiend who masqueraded as a medico? What grisly impulse prompted him to use the instruments of healing for his kill-fest?

THE blast of chill wind came swooping down the slope at Bill Ray, to spin him around in a whirling vortex of dead leaves and small twigs that bit at his face like vicious things alive. It buffeted and battered him malignantly,

whipping the thin duck trousers tight around his legs, snatching with greedy fingers at his uniform coat.

He bent his body against it, walked on up the slope through the barren trees like drear black sentinels, toward the spots of

yellow light blinking from the top of the hill. He had his hand cupped over his eyes to protect them from the hard-driven dust, and as he squinted up the winding gravel path, he could see another hurrying figure ahead of him. A queer, squat little figure, it was, with short legs driving hard, like some bug grown grotesquely large, scuttling for its hole.

Bill Ray recognized its blurred outlines. It was Doctor Nolan, the man for whom he worked, hurrying for the warm sanctuary of the little hospital on the top of the hill. Bill shouted at him—but in vain. The wind whipped his voice away from his lips with snatching fingers, ripped it to shreds. He put his head down, lowered his big shoulders, plodded up the path.

Bill Ray had taken this job to help pay his way through medical school. He was a sort of semi-interne and laboratory assistant to Doctor Nolan. The private hospital at which he worked was really an experimental laboratory. Doctor Nolan was an internationally known authority on paralysis. He was working on a theory of spinal injections to bring withered limbs back to life again; it was an honor to work for him. And then there was his daughter, Jeanette Nolan. Bill smiled a little wryly at the thought of her slim, soft beauty. Little use for him to dream of that. A mere medical student—

HE WAS at the top of the hill now. The glass doors of the hospital were just ahead. Doctor Nolan was scuttling up the broad stone steps, bent over, hurrying as he always hurried, as if life was too short and he had many things to do before Death reached for him with cold hands. He was tugging at the brass handles on the door, fumbling. He always seemed clumsily uncertain, except when he was handling the test tubes in his laboratory. Then he worked with artistic grace.

Bill Ray trotted up the steps behind

him. "Hello, Doctor," he said cheerfully. "Just a minute, and I'll give you a hand."

The effect of his words, shouted against the wind, was ghastly and startling. Nolan gave a thin, moaning sound of terror. He whirled around, flattening his squat body against the glass of the door. The lenses in his thick spectacles flickered coldly. He had a big blue-black automatic in one thin, acid-stained hand, and pointed it waveringly at Bill Ray's tall form, while the little scientist's lips moved and writhed in a frenzy of fear.

Bill Ray went down a step, away from him, staring in sheer, blank amazement. "What—" he began, fumbling for words.

Nolan collapsed against the door with a little moan of relief. With palsied fingers he tried to hide the automatic under the folds of his big overcoat. He attempted a smile with bluish, trembling lips. The effect was ghastly.

"H-hello, Bill," he said breathlessly. "Frightened me, coming up that way. The wind . . ." He turned quickly, hauled at the door, got it open and scrambled inside.

Bill Ray followed him, still blankly surprised, unbelieving. The thought of Nolan frightened was incredible. The little scientist was always so calm, so busily preoccupied with his experiments. But now terror had him close in its cold grip. He was leaning against the wall, as though he needed its warm support. In the dim light of the hall his round, plump face was shiny with perspiration, twitching.

"Is there anything wrong, sir?" Bill Ray asked hesitantly.

Nolan made a little gesture. "No, no. Don't mind me. Nerves—just nerves, Bill. Too much work, and too little sleep."

"Are you sure that's all?"

Nolan nodded quickly. "Yes, yes. That's all. Of course it's all. What else could it be?"

Bill Ray shrugged. "I don't know, sir."

Perhaps you'd better take a rest. You aren't going to work tonight, are you?"

"No, no," Nolan said nervously. "Just some accounts—some materials to order. Take me only a short time. Then I'm going to bed. Sleep." He said the word hungrily, wistfully, as though it were a thing to be greedily desired.

He gave a long, quivering sigh and turned, walked on down the corridor toward his office. He went a little uncertainly, as though his legs were wooden things under him, and there was a hunched tenseness about his back, as though he wished to turn and look behind him and was keeping himself from doing it by sheer will power. The door of his office opened, shut behind him. Immediately there was the flare of a light through the frosted panel.

Ray shrugged his shoulders. There was no use wasting time in idle speculation. Nolan had preferred to keep the secret of his fear, if it was a secret, to himself. And Ray had work to do.

He went up the rubber-covered stairs to the right of the hall. The hospital was deadly still, but Ray was used to that. There was no reason why there should be any noise. The capacity of the hospital was only five or six patients; there was no need for it to be any larger. Nolan's work was not only in the experimental stage, still, but it was tremendously expensive. Nolan had no intention of making money from his work, but until he had gone far enough to get an endowment from some charitable institution he had to charge patients what it cost him to treat them. His funds were limited.

THE hospital was in a remote district, far from the city. And now most of the paralytics who could afford its services had sought warmer and sunnier climes. Only one, Tenniwell, remained in the hospital. He was a little, dried-up man,

paralyzed from the waist down. His legs were shrunken things, skin hugging tightly to the bone. But he seemed to keep his hope up—a feverish, frantic hope that Nolan's genius would somehow bring full life to his withered body.

Ray would go see him now, have a little talk with him, cheer him up, if that were possible. But first he would stop and see Jeanette Nolan. She would be at the desk in the upper hall. She helped out at the hospital as much as she could. Stayed at the desk to answer phone calls, receive visitors, type her father's correspondence.

Ray topped the stairs, turned to the right. Ahead of him was the soft glow of a green light over a flat desk in a niche in the short corridor. He stepped forward with a smile, a gay greeting on his lips.

The smile died, and the greeting went unuttered. The chair behind the desk was empty. Bill Ray felt the coldness of the disappointment in him turn to a little gnawing doubt. Jeanette Nolan was always there to greet him when he came in. Never before had the little niche where she sat been vacant.

He came up to the desk and then stopped short. Fear came up and gripped his throat like an icy hand. Blood! Blood in a little glistening pool on the smooth top of the desk, winking redly in the soft light. Bill Ray's eyes, straining, found more crimson—in little drops, sliding down the side of the desk, on the wall behind it.

His brain refused to accept the mute evidence of those glinting splotches of red. No—he whirled around, the muscles of his throat tight and strained. Quick, tapping footsteps came down the hall. A soft voice was humming very cheerfully. Jeanette Nolan swished around the turn of the corridor and saw him there.

"Hello, Bill," she said, smiling at him. She was small and dainty. Bill Ray always had the feeling that she was tenderly

fragile, that she would break in his big hands if he touched her. Yet he knew that this was absurd. There was glowing health and strength in that softly rounded body.

Now he staggered a little and leaned against the wall. His relief was too great. It choked in his throat, and he could feel the cold dampness of perspiration on his forehead and the palms of his hands.

Jeanette Nolan came closer, staring at him anxiously. "Why, what's the matter, Bill? You look so strange!"

Ray pointed at the spots of blood. "I—I thought you—"

She stared with wide blue eyes. "Elsa!" she gasped. "I left her here! What happened? Where is she?"

Ray shook his head. "I don't know. I just got here. There was no one at the desk when I came."

Jeanette wasn't hurt. Thank God for that! It wasn't her blood glittering there so redly. But whose was it? Did it belong—had it belonged—to Elsa Winters? She was the trained nurse hired to take care of Tenniwell. A big, blond woman, now in her middle thirties, placidly strong, cheerful in her unruffled, stolid way.

"But—but what could have happened to her?" Jeanette Nolan was asking in a voice that was edged with panic. "Where could she have gone? She was talking to me here. She said Mr. Tenniwell was asleep for the moment. I left her to mind the desk while I went to get paper." She indicated the packet of typing paper she held in one hand. "Do you suppose that she could have hurt herself? A nose-bleed, perhaps?"

Bill Ray's lips were drawn into a tight line. "No," he said grimly. He indicated the blood spots on the wall. "Those are arterial spurts. It was more than a nose-bleed." Bill Ray jerked his wide shoulders. "We'd better go tell your father. Come on."

HE TOOK her arm, and she went with him unquestioningly. Together they went down to the end of the corridor, back down the rubber-covered steps. The lower hall was empty, as it had been before. The yellow light came cheerfully through the frosted panel of Doctor Nolan's office. They went toward it, and Bill Ray knocked softly on the door.

"Doctor Nolan!" he called.

There was no answer, except the echo of his voice coming back in a thin, hushed whisper to mock him. Jeanette Nolan pressed close to him, shuddering, and he grasped her arm tight, comfortingly.

"I don't like this," she said. "Father never leaves his light on when he goes out. Open the door, Bill."

Ray turned the knob with a soft click; the door went slowly back. He gasped then, once, and felt crawling icy fingers along his back-bone. Jeanette Nolan gave a little cry and hid her face against his arm, trembling.

The office was a small one. Stacks of dusty textbooks lined the walls. There was a small desk, littered untidily with papers, in front of the door. And behind that desk, sitting in Doctor Nolan's chair, was stark, freezing horror.

It was the partially nude body of a woman, sprawled there, arms and legs flung wide, head hanging down crazily. The face was untouched, but the eyes bulged in terrible agony. The bared torso was a criss-cross welter of slashing wounds, overlapping each other, laying the firm white flesh back redly. Blood was everywhere—on the floor in a ghastly purple pool, matted in the woman's long blond hair, streaked on her arms and legs in a weirdly macabre design.

Bill Ray stood in the doorway, frozen there, rooted to the spot, fighting the cold numbness that had clamped down over his brain and stopped the processes of thought. This thing wasn't so. It couldn't

happen. But the ghastly horror in the chair stayed there, never moving.

Jeanette Nolan's voice was a thin whisper, muffled against the cloth of his sleeve. "Is—is it Elsa?"

"Yes," Bill Ray said thickly. "You stay outside. I'll—I'll look at her. See if I can do something." But the words were an empty mockery. There was death there in the chair—beyond human aid.

"No!" Jeanette said quickly. "I'm afraid to be alone. I'll stay here in the doorway. I—I can't look."

Bill Ray approached the thing behind the desk on leaden feet, while Jeanette stood rigid in the doorway, both hands clasped tightly over her eyes, sobbing a little now in choked gasps. He felt for the pulse in one blood-drenched wrist. There was no throb of life there. He had known there would be none. But the flesh was warm. Death had been recent.

Ray was thinking more clearly now. This was murder, and the ugly sound of the word was like a breath of biting cold air. The numbness left him. He reached for the telephone on the desk. He would call the sheriff.

The receiver clicked emptily under his thumb. There was no wire-hum. He jerked again and again at the receiver, feeling the cold grip of panic close to him. Then very slowly, fighting for calmness, he put the telephone down on the desk again.

"The wire's been cut," he said, and his voice sounded very small and far away in his own ears. Where was Doctor Nolan? Had this slashing death overtaken him? Was this the thing he had feared?

The only answer to those questions was the whip of the wind past the building, the grind of dead branches one on the other, the clatter of a loosened shutter. And then, far away, faint through the yowl of the wind, there was another sound.

Human, this was—not the wind. Thin

and small and muffled by distance it came again and again. A scream—rising, rising to a crescendo. Fear, horror, helpless anger—all were expressed in that scream.

RAY felt little prickles at the back of his neck, and his face seemed like a wax mask, immovable. Jeanette Nolan was staring at him, eyes very wide and blue through her spread fingers.

"It came from upstairs," Ray said, and it surprised him that his voice sounded so calm. "Come with me. Stay close to me until we find out what's happening around here."

They went out of the office, and the door swished shut quickly behind them, as if it was anxious to hide the horror inside. They went down the corridor to the stairs, up the stairs, into the upper corridor.

And then that scream again—closer now, and weaker, too—freighted with its ghastly burden of fear and terror and helpless despair. It drifted into a bubbling wail, slid off into thick silence.

"This way," Bill Ray said. He had to say something, had to hear the relatively normal sound of his own voice. Jeanette Nolan was like a trembling shadow, close against him.

They went past the desk with its mutely glittering spots of blood, on down the hall. The scream had come from the end room, where the patient, Tenniwell, was lodged.

Ray walked straight to the door, put his hand firmly on the knob, turned it. He could feel cold horror welling up inside him. What would he find when that door opened? What new horror would be brought to light? Slowly he pushed on the door.

The scream came again—terror-stricken, ringing in their ears. It was Tenniwell. He was sitting up in his bed as straight as his skinny arms could thrust

him; fighting against the dead weight of his paralyzed legs, staring at the two in the doorway with fear-crazed eyes, while cold sweat beaded his high, bony brow, slid down gleaming into the thin hollows of his cheeks. The upper part of his emaciated body thrashed frantically back and forth in the bed. The lower part was as still as death itself.

He recognized them, and the scream died in his throat. His skinny arms suddenly gave out under the strain he had put on them, and the withered body dropped back limply on the bed.

"I thought," he muttered through stiff lips, "I thought—it was—coming back to get me." His eyes stared wildly. "Take it away! Take it away! The blood!" And he pointed with one claw-like finger.

It was on the floor as though it had been hurled through the door with one tremendously powerful sweep—a limply crumpled body. It sprawled there loosely and there was blood in a great red pool, those same criss-cross slashes that marked the horror in the room below.

Only this was the body of a man. He had been short, squatly powerful, with long thick arms, rippling with muscle. One of those arms had been broken, now lay angled out behind him. He had fought, this man—fought the horrible death that had caught him. There were blue bruises, puffy swellings, on his broad heavy-jawed face.

Jeanette Nolan made a faint choking noise. "Is it—is it father?"

"No," Ray said quickly. The man was a stranger; he had never seen him before. Ray stepped closer, and his eyes widened in stupefied amazement.

The man was still alive. Life still clung stubbornly to that squat body. In spite of the terrible slashes that criss-crossed his torso, in spite of the blood that had leaked out on the floor, breath came in faint little wheezes between the white

lips. Red little bubbles grew and burst regularly in time with faint, fluttering breaths. Ray had been wondering who this man was. How he came to be here. But at the sound of that ghastly, sputtery breathing he forgot all that. It didn't matter what had happened, what had dropped this man here in a mangled, broken huddle.

It mattered only that he was alive. He must be kept alive. All his fear, all his numbing horror, left Bill Ray's mind. His training came to the fore. There was a human life there on the floor, slipping fast away, waning. It was his duty to save that life. The puzzle of the disappearance of Doctor Nolan, the death of Elsa Winters—all must wait. Nothing was so important as guarding that precious flutter of life in the broken, slashed body on the floor.

Bill leaned over, picked up the squat body easily, heedless of its limp weight, heedless of the blood that smeared it. His voice was quick, sharply commanding. "Quick! The surgery! The bleeding has to be stopped! He hasn't much more blood to lose!"

AUTOMATICALLY Jeanette Nolan answered the command in his voice. She led the way across the hall, into the little room that served as an emergency surgery. It was a small room with glistening white walls, a big window in the slanting ceiling.

She pulled out the white operating table, switched on the big green-shaded lamp and pulled it low over the table on its linked steel chain. Ray laid the limp body on the table, straightened out the thick, muscular arms and legs with hands that were gentle and at the same time quickly efficient.

No time except for the scantiest of preparations. Two arteries were cut. Clips for those, to hold precious blood in the

weakened body, keep that sturdy heart pumping. Bandages in white rolls. Strips of thin, tough gut to close the gaping wounds. Disinfectant.

Ray's hands hurried, like separate things, each with a life and intelligence of its own; hurried with a quick efficiency, while Jeanette Nolan watched him, breath coming in tight little gasps, blue eyes startlingly wide in the chalk whiteness of her face. And the flicker of life sputtered weakly in the still, blood-smeared body on the table.

And then, with no warning at all, the lights flickered once and went out. Dead blackness closed down on them like evil, clutching hands. Jeanette gave a little breathless cry of fright. But Ray had no sensation of fear; only a quick, bursting anger. Rage that the life under his hands was slipping, slipping, and he couldn't see to stop it.

"Quick!" he said tensely. "On the table. The flashlight!"

It was always kept there, in case of emergencies just such as this when the lighting system might fail at a critical moment. He could hear Jeanette's feet stumbling across the room, hear her hands fumbling among the instruments on the table, raising little metallic rattles and clinks that sounded very loud in the breathless blackness.

Then the flashlight clicked in her hand, and the white, round circle of brilliance crept across the floor, found the operating table. Light once more. Bill Ray bent to his work, thinking of nothing but that. The light wavered and jerked in Jeanette's trembling hand. Bill Ray had no time to comfort her, no time to reassure her.

"Steady!" he snapped. "Hold that light steady! Rest your arm on the table!"

She gave a gasping sob, a small pitiful sound in the darkness. But the light steadied, centered on the sprawled body. Ray's hands worked on—quick, sure, deft,

never wasting a second, every movement relentlessly efficient.

The lights came on again, as suddenly and mysteriously as they had gone off. Jeanette Nolan screamed—the tortured cry of nerves strained to the breaking point suddenly giving way to hysteria. Bill Ray looked up with a jerk.

IT was there in the doorway, and Bill Ray knew this was the answer to the murderous madness of the night. It was a man, but you could hardly think of him as human. He filled the doorway—from side to side, from top to bottom. Immense, he was—thickly immense—dressed in black from head to foot. And as Bill Ray stared at him, he caught the macabre significance of that weird costume. It was a horrible travesty of a surgeon's dress—in black instead of white. But every detail was carried out with a sort of fiendish exactitude. Even to the antiseptic mask over the face, every detail was correct, only black instead of white. The mask hid all the face except the eyes. But they were enough. They were black and small, set wide apart, and they had the boiling sparkle of madness bubbling and seething in them.

Bill Ray, strangely enough, felt no fear, no horror, after that first surprised start. Then anger gripped him. A cold, vicious anger that his work should thus be interrupted twice by the senseless machinations of this monster.

"Get out!" he said, and his voice was flat and tense, lips pulled back thinly from his teeth. "You! Get out!"

They made a strange picture. The girl, flat against the wall, staring in horror. The thing in the doorway, silently sinister. And Bill Ray with blood in great smears on his shirt, on his hands and forearms, leaning across the still body on the table, protecting it.

"Get out!" he snarled again, and he

came around the operating table in tight little steps, crouching.

The black figure in the doorway said nothing at all. But it came forward a long step into the room, and its eyes were boiling pits behind the blackness of the surgeon's mask.

Bill Ray was tough, with a lean, bony toughness, thin muscles trained to steel-like strength. He knew it was useless to talk. Nothing but sheer force would move this monster. Its maddened mind was incapable of understanding a verbal threat or order, incapable of grasping the significance of words.

All that shot through Bill Ray's mind in one split second, and in the next he took two short steps and dove straight at the monstrous figure in a low, swooping tackle. The room was a queer, revolving blur before his eyes, as though it turned slowly on some monstrous pivot. He saw the blackness of the monster's costume floating toward him, saw it ripple with motion.

Then something hit him on the side of the head, seemed to jerk his neck loose from his body. The floor came up and smashed into his face, and he went down, down. Spinning into darkness that was cut with red little flashes that were pain; spinning down into unconsciousness with the scream of Jeanette Nolan ringing in his ears like the despairing, frantic cry of a lost soul.

BILL RAY came struggling up out of the void of spinning darkness. His head was swollen, hot, drumming in a booming cadence that was the pump of his own blood. His mouth was hot and dry, his tongue like a thin piece of leather. He fought with the blackness, beat it back. He forced the lids of his eyes open.

He was lying there on the floor exactly where he had fallen. The limp figure on the operating table was still there, but

there was something different about it now. It seemed smaller, deflated. Bill Ray knew the meaning of that look. Death! And he cursed with a weakly futile anger the monstrous black thing that had brought it about.

And then his rage turned dead and cold inside him and fear was like a mocking, gibbering thing in his brain. Jeanette! She was gone! Bill Ray could only think of that, and it squeezed every other thought out of his brain as though it had been a dry-wrung cloth.

He was on his feet and out the door now. And he stood there helpless in the corridor, staring first one way, and then the other. Which way? Which way? Time was going so rapidly. It was so precious, and it was slipping out of his cold hands.

Then there was a thudding bang from the end of the corridor. He whirled tensely. An open door, swinging in the wind. It opened now, slowly, like a pendulum, before his eyes, and then the wind caught it, slammed it again, empty. Bill Ray stared for a moment. That was the door that led to the stairs that traversed the back of the building, went down into Doctor Nolan's laboratory in the basement of the hospital.

And then suddenly he was running for it, head down, arms pumping like a sprinter's—through its black emptiness, down the bottomless well of darkness that were the stairs. On tip-toe, now—quiet as the drift of a shadow on rubber-soled shoes.

The big swinging doors to the laboratory, were directly ahead. One of them was ajar, just a little. And through that crack, light was seeping out into the darkness like a thin yellow knife. Bill Ray crept close, listening.

There was a thin, reedy voice raving in a tirade of gloating glee. Through the mist that seemed to float close about his mind, Bill Ray recognized that voice. It

was Tenniwell, the paralyzed patient. Cracked, his voice was—screeching. But not with fear—not with terror, as it had been in his room when Bill Ray and Jeanette Nolan had come in and found the bloody body lying on the floor beside his bed. Now it was triumphant, not terrorized.

“Do you remember, my dear Doctor Nolan? Do you remember that stormy night twenty years ago? I see you do. Yes, you remember. You needn't shake your head. I can see in your eyes that you do. My wife was sick, unconscious with the pain of bringing forth a new life. I was driving like mad through the darkness to get her somewhere where she could have comfort and aid. You remember, Doctor Nolan? Does it come back to you? That black night, with the wind howling like mad and the rain coming down in thick sheets, the roads like gray, slippery glue?”

Doctor Nolan's voice came then, strained, very tired, trembling a little. “I remember. Your name wasn't Tenniwell, then.”

The crazy voice shrieked with laughter. “No, no! No, my dear Doctor! It was Harvey! You lived in this same place, Doctor. This same cursed spot. And those two stone pillars were at the gate into the main road just as they are now. The main road curved past them. It was pitch-dark on that night. I had no lights on my buggy, and the horses were half-crazy with fear of the thunder and lightning. I was driving hard, hard. I didn't see the curve, and I overran it. My buggy smashed into your doubly-damned gates!”

“There were lights on the pillars,” Nolan said thickly.

THE thin voice screeched at him madly. “You lie! You lie! Dozens of your friends got up on the witness stand and swore there were lights there, but

they all lied! There were no lights! I smashed into the pillars in the darkness. The buggy smashed like paste-board. And you took care of us! You! You were drunk! You were a young, blundering fool, and you didn't care! My wife died! I was turned into the half-dead, crippled thing that I am! And my unborn son! You saved his life, but you made him into an idiot—a maniac! There he is! Look at him! All because of your blundering! Your criminal negligence!”

Doctor Nolan's voice was stronger now, and firm in a hopeless way. “You lie,” he said evenly. “You've concocted all this nonsense in your mind, because you've been brooding for years. That accident and what happened afterwards was entirely your fault. I wasn't drunk. I never drink. I did the very best I could for you. You were crippled because your spine was injured when you smashed against the pillars. Your wife was in a weakened condition. It was very doubtful if she would have lived anyway. The shock killed her. As for your son, the accident had nothing to do with his insanity. That madness was inherited—from you. You're mad. Your father was mad before you—and his father before him. I studied the history of your family at the time and your line is shot through with madness, generation after—”

“No! No!” The voice yelled at him frantically, refusing to accept the truth in those level words. “No!” There was silence then while Tenniwell gasped and choked, fighting for breath. His voice, when it came again, was lower—a thin, oily whine—gloating. “That's what you say. That's your excuse. Little good it will do you now, you fool. I waited—waited all through these years. And now it's my turn for revenge. Oh, I planned it carefully. My son was in an asylum for the criminally insane. I came here, knowing you wouldn't recognize me, waited

until the hospital was empty of patients. Then I engineered his escape from the asylum, had him brought here. He got out of hand tonight, hurried my plans. He killed the man I had hired to bring him here. Killed him in spite of the foolish efforts of your assistant to save him. He killed the nurse. But then his poor mind became puzzled and bewildered, and he came back to obey my orders again. He caught you, brought you here. And he caught your daughter and brought her here!"

"What do you propose to do?" Nolan asked wearily.

Tenniwell giggled, and the sound was an abomination. "You had great fun that black night twenty years ago, Doctor Nolan. Experimenting on me and my family. Fumbling with your drink-drugged mind. Now you'll have a chance to witness just such another performance. Only this time, it will be you and yours that are the subjects of the experiment. My son is under the illusion that he is a doctor—a great surgeon. Tonight he is going to operate on your daughter and you!" Tenniwell screamed in insane mirth. "How do you like that thought, my dear Doctor? Madness fumbling with a surgeon's scalpel. You're afraid! I can see you squirming! Now you can realize how I've felt for the last twenty years!"

Doctor Nolan's voice was very slow, measured. "You fool. You poor fool. I've faced death more times than you can count in the laboratory. Death more horrible than you could even conceive of. Radium—cancer—germs and diseases that you've never even heard of. Do you think you could frighten me? You, with your childish idea of revenge and your half-wit son?"

Tenniwell could only make thick, incoherent sounds of rage.

Doctor Nolan went on in the same slow voice. "Sooner or later, if you let me go,

one of those invisible means of death would get me, and I would die so horribly that even you would be satisfied. It's only my work that makes me try to reason with you. It's very near completion now. That's why I stayed here. I knew your son had escaped. I was sure he would come here seeking me. I could have gone somewhere else, somewhere I would have been safe. But I stayed. My work is more important than my life. When you kill me, you condemn a million people like yourself—some living, some unborn—to a life-time of misery and suffering. That's the price you pay for your revenge."

"Words!" Tenniwell raved at him incoherently. "Just words! They won't save you now!"

"And not only that," Nolan said evenly. "Are you such a fool as to think you can control your son's madness? Do you think he'll stop killing with myself and my daughter? You know he won't. He killed his keeper, a man he probably knew better than he does you. Do you think you'll be safe?"

"Lies!" Tenniwell screamed. "All lies!" His voice rose to a frenzy of raving. "Go ahead! Go ahead with the operation!"

BILL RAY, crouching there outside the swinging doors, heard then for the first time the voice of Jeanette Nolan. She gave a little gasping cry of terror—half-stifled. It cleared Ray's brain of the mist of horrified fascination that Tenniwell's words had placed there. Slowly he pushed the doors back, an inch at a time, silently, and as he did so, Doctor Nolan's voice came again.

"I'm sorry, my dear," he said, and his voice was freighted with helpless despair. "I can't help you. I tried. I tried. . . ."

"Can't help her!" Tenniwell chanted madly. "Can't help her!" He rocked with crazy laughter.

Ray had the door open now, and he

was looking down the three narrow cement steps, down into the laboratory. It was a long, low room with shelves of bottled chemicals lining its walls like weird modernistic decorations. A big floodlight hung on a long chain from the ceiling. Under the light was a white-sheeted operating table. And on that table lay Jeanette Nolan.

It was like some fantastic distortion of an operating scene. The big black figure that was Tenniwell's son dominated. There was a death-like intensity about it, and everything moved with nightmare slowness. The black figure there in the center of the room was solemnly preparing for his ghastly work.

Ray had the door open wider now, and he could see Doctor Nolan and Tenniwell. They were sitting side by side at the far end of the laboratory, in two chairs close against the wall. Tenniwell—shrunken, tiny, withered, demonic, holding a gun in a trembling hand. Nolan—white, strained, bound in his chair with a thick rope that was wound around and around him until he was swathed in it like a cocoon. Tenniwell had a blanket, evidently snatched from his bed over his withered legs, and he rocked back and forth, giggling, watching Doctor Nolan, watching his mad son.

The immense madman had bound Jeanette Nolan tightly to the operating table on her back, arms and legs spread wide, hands and feet fastened securely with strips of cloth drawn cruelly tight. He had wheeled up a little table with an array of surgical instruments on it, and he was solemnly pawing them over now, trying to select the one that, to his twisted brain, seemed the best suited.

It was an unbelievable scene, and the white faces of Tenniwell and Nolan were vague splotches. All that Ray could see plainly was that white figure on the operating table with hair tumbled like a golden cascade. Stretched there tautly, straining

against her bonds, she stared with an unwilling fascination at the weird black figure.

Suddenly, without any conscious volition on his part, Ray was moving. It seemed to him suddenly that his muscles were like electrically charged wires, endlessly powerful. There was no thought of self in him. Jeanette was in danger, and the thing that was putting her in danger must be destroyed.

He was through the door, down the three steps, while time seemed to stand still. Then across the laboratory floor, toward that table of surgical instruments. Tenniwell's mad scream of surprise and rage was a dim sound buzzing in his ears. The black figure, stepping back amazed, blocked his view, made him hold his fire.

Then Bill was at the table. In one swift, precise swoop he picked up a scalpel with a short glittering blade, curved coldly. He seized it and stepped back. The black figure made a thickly incoherent sound of rage, wordless, beast-like, muffled behind the black surgeon's mask.

Then it came for him, with one black-gloved hand grasping a scalpel the twin of the one he himself held. Ray knew now the tremendous rock-like strength in that bulky body. He ducked back instead of trying to stand against it. Ducked back and whipped the scalpel down in a slashing glittering curve as he ducked.

"Kill, kill, kill!" Tenniwell was screaming wildly, rocking back and forth in his chair, thrashing against the dead weight of his paralyzed legs.

Ray felt the scalpel cut through cloth and flesh in the one sweep. Sharp as a razor, that little knife was. He heard it grate sickeningly against bone. Then the big figure was whirling at him again, mouthing thick sounds of pain and rage, while blood made the black surgeon's gown blacker along one side. There was a long rip in the cloth there.

TENSELY Ray danced back, breathing hard. The other came forward with a rush.

Bill ducked, but not quickly enough. Those thick black-clad arms were immensely long. A glittering slash coming at him through the air, and he felt a red-hot wire drawn along his forearm. He could feel his own blood running down warmly, dripping off the fingers of his left hand. Jeanette made a low, moaning sound of despair. Tenniwell shrieked in glee.

The black figure rushed at him again. Bill was ready, dodging low, this time—clear down, under that long sweeping arm. He gave a quick backhand slash as he came up. Again the feel of the little knife cutting through flesh. And this time, a wordless scream from the black figure.

Then before Ray could fully recover his footing, it was on him. The glittering blade flashed in front of his eyes. A blindingly quick criss-cross slash at him, across his chest, ripping through the flesh in a great red X. Blood dripped warmly down across his stomach. He stumbled back.

The two figures were moving slower now. Ray's feet were like leaden things. It was a conscious effort to lift them. Stumbling, he staggered backwards, panting through his open mouth. And always that huge black figure was in front of him.

He couldn't lift his feet any more, and he stood there swaying weakly—waiting. Waiting with the little scalpel held out in front of him. It was as heavy as a lead bar now, and his hand wavered with the weight of it. The black figure was within reach of him now, and the thick arm went up and then down toward him.

It seemed to Bill Ray that the arm was moving very slowly. That it was taking it hours to reach him. His own arm was moving, too. Moving without any conscious command on his part, straight at the thin fold of cloth that hid the throat

under the black surgeon's mask.

The big arm brushed him then. He didn't even feel the pain of the slashing blade, but the force of the blow knocked him backwards, off his feet. He sprawled heavily on the floor, staring up at the black figure with despair. He was beaten.

But the black figure wasn't moving toward him now. Wasn't taking advantage of his fall. It was standing stiff and rigid, immensely tall, with both hands clasped tight over his throat. And as Bill Ray watched, not understanding, it began to sway as a tall tree sways. And then suddenly it fell full-length, crashing on the floor, blood gushing out of its throat.

There was an inhumanly shrill screech. It was Tenniwell. He had dropped the gun he'd never gotten a chance to use and now his hands were extended out in front of him, rigidly claw-like. The veins in his skinny throat stood out like thick pencils. Suddenly his thin face turned bluish, and his eyes bulged horribly. He fell straight forward out of his chair and lay rigid on the floor.

Bill Ray stared wonderingly. There was a thick black mist in front of his eyes that obscured everything. He was tired, tired.

"Bill!" Jeanette called desperately.

He answered the appeal in that loved voice—crawled slowly up. His eyes were smarting, burning things that had no sight. But he followed the sound of her voice across the room, staggering in short little rushes on legs that didn't belong to him, that wouldn't obey the commands of his brain.

Now he was fumbling with the strips of cloth that bound her hands—blindly. The little bloodstained scalpel cut through them easily. Then something gave way inside him, and he fell across the soft warmth of her, and he felt her arms, cool and soft and unbelievably comforting, holding him close while he slid swiftly downward into cool blackness.



They watched me as I came to.

There were three at that party the night before Eddie sailed for Europe and from the mute evidence that remained it was a simple matter of addition to see how—

3 + 1 = Murder

by Wyatt Blassingame

I'M NOT insane! I'm not! The story may sound crazy, but I'm not really mad. You've got to believe that. I barely remember him forcing my mouth open to pour something down it. His face looked as though it were floating without a body above me and I shut my eyes tight to keep from seeing him. I felt like hell and all I wanted to do was go to sleep or die. But I didn't die and I couldn't go to sleep with him working

on me; so I just lay there, feeling like hell. And even then, in those few moments that I was conscious, I knew that something terrible, something ghastly, had happened. I could feel it—and I was more afraid than I'd ever been.

I heard Paul saying: "I'm leaving you now, for good. As a friend and a doctor I've warned you about drinking so much. Now I'm through with you. You'll be through with yourself soon. You're act-

ing like a hophead tonight and God only knows what sort of trouble you've been in. A few more nights like this one and you'll be going to the asylum."

"You can go to hell," I answered. I don't remember anything else except that as I passed out the vague, shapeless fear was eating through my mind and my whole body was shaking with terror.

THE clock on the dresser said twenty when I awoke. The shades were up and the October sunlight was stabbing hot needles into my eyeballs. My whole body ached and something was beating on the inside of my skull with a hammer. My throat felt as though I had been drinking acid. And while I lay there, shutting my eyes against the pain in my head, that weird and nameless fear was still inside me.

When I stood up my hands were shaking, but I got a whisky bottle out of the cabinet and poured a drink. After the second, I left as though I had an even chance of living and my brain began to work better.

The first thing I remembered clearly was how frightened I had been, but I couldn't remember why. I knew that something gruesome and terrible had happened but it was like knowing there is somebody hidden in a dark room and not being able to see them. I've led a pretty tough life as a private detective and a man doesn't go in for that sort of thing if he's easily frightened. That's what made this so bad, because I knew that whatever had happened it must have been pretty ghastly.

I could remember Doctor Paul Dawson leaning over me saying that the liquor was getting me and that I'd go to an asylum if I kept it up. I got to wondering if I was going crazy and I turned to look at myself in the mirror. It was quite a

shock. I expected my eyes to be blood-shot, but I didn't expect one to be black and swollen and my lip to be split. There was a smear of blood across one cheek. And then, as if all this were tied up in some horrible way that I couldn't recall, I was more afraid than before and I wanted to scream at the thing hidden in my memory and jerk it out and see what it was—and I was afraid to know.

I got another drink down me, and turned on the cold shower and stood under it, thinking. The night had started off with Eddie Wallace and me drinking together. That was the way all the nights in the past few weeks had started, but last night was a special one since Eddie was sailing for Europe today. He had been very much in love with a young lady who had thrown him over for Dawson, though Eddie had been the favored boy until recently and nobody knew what had changed the lady's mind. So Eddie took to the bottle, and being his best friend I took to the bottle with him. Besides, I had made a little over five thousand on a case two months before and felt like celebrating. We had been at Eddie's apartment drinking when Paul dropped in to say good-bye to Eddie. We had all been friends before the woman entered the case, but last night Eddie and Paul had quarreled. Paul left, but Eddie and I kept on drinking. That was all I could remember until I was in my own bed with Paul prying my mouth open to put something in it.

In that blank period something had happened. My face was evidence enough of that. But it hadn't been any simple fight—

Back in my bedroom, I found that the clothes I had worn were bloody and my gun was missing. The shoulder holster and all was gone. "It must be at Eddie's," I thought. Simple enough to understand how I could have left it there, but some-

how the thought made me more afraid and I cursed myself for an idiot.

It was a quarter of three then, and his ship was due to sail at five. I hurried my dressing.

The elevator boy wasn't the same one who had been on duty during the night, but I learned that the other one had told him of my coming in around four, drunk and bloody. The boy had called Doctor Dawson and together they had put me to bed.

All the way to Eddie's I felt the tension inside me growing. It was like a wire stretched through my body, getting tighter and tighter until it would break any moment and when it did, my brain would go with it. "I must be going nuts," I thought, and again I remembered what Dawson had said.

A FELLOW went into the door of Eddie's apartment house just as I turned from paying my taxi fare. It was the night elevator boy, a dark square-faced lad in his twenties named Matson. "Hello," I said. "you're down early today."

"Oscar wants to go to the ball game this afternoon and we are swapping a few hours," he explained. Then he looked at my face and grinned all over himself.

I started to ask him if he knew what had happened last night, but didn't. I opened my mouth and shut it again, because I was afraid. Maybe I knew, subconsciously, what I was going to find when I got to Eddie's room.

The day boy told me that Mr. Wallace hadn't come out of his apartment so I rapped on the door, twisted the knob and went in without waiting for an answer. Just over the sill I stopped, frozen, head forward, mouth open. In that instant I forgot how my head hurt and my whole body ached. I forgot everything except the horror that surged through me, the terror that lashed my body like a storm

and set me quivering all over. It wasn't the fact that Eddie was lying sprawled on his back in the middle of a room in which half the furniture was overturned. It wasn't the dark, bloody stain over his heart or the ghastly paleness of his face. A private detective looks at death too often for it to frighten him, and though a man never has many friends like Eddie, it wasn't grief that brought the cold sweat on my body. But subconsciously I had known that Eddie would be here dead, and I knew how he had died, though I couldn't remember—and was afraid to remember!

Somehow I managed to close the door behind me, and lock it. Then I turned to the room again. It was evident that Eddie had put up a fight before he was killed. His face and knuckles were bruised. I raised both of my hands, palms down, but I was afraid to look at them and shut my eyes. I already knew that skin was missing from my knuckles. "Maybe—" I said the word aloud—"maybe we were fighting somebody else."

My gun was lying on the floor about ten feet from Eddie. I picked it up with a handkerchief and broke it. One shell had been fired. My hands were shaking when I went into the bath and dusted powder on the gun butt. And when I came out, knowing there were no prints on that gun except my own, I could scarcely walk. It seemed that my heart and my lungs had ceased to function and were hung like stones under my ribs and there were invisible fingers choking on my throat.

"I couldn't have killed him," I said aloud. "I couldn't kill Eddie. I—" And then, as if it had flashed on a screen before my eyes, I remembered our quarrel.

It was after Paul had gone and I had told Eddie he was a damn fool for running away to Europe just because some woman had turned him down. "Hell,"

I'd said, "there are probably fifty women in this house all as good-looking as she was." But he'd been drunk and got angry. I remembered we'd taken a few wild swings at each other and somebody had complained about the noise. But we were friends. "I couldn't have killed him. I couldn't!" I said aloud.

And then, all of a sudden, I remembered Paul Dawson saying that whisky was driving me crazy! The thought struck me like a fist above the heart. I stood gaping, feeling as though a thin spray of snow was beating inside me. Nothing but insanity could have made me kill Eddie Wallace. Even drunk we couldn't have been really angry with one another. Then it was madness . . . Whisky had soaked into my brain and the vital fibers were gone. . . .

I had to fight for enough calmness to study the room. I found my shoulder holster hung over the back of a chair, slipped my gun into it, and put both on.

"The police will learn I killed him," I said aloud. "I'll go to the electric chair."

THERE was no way for me to tell definitely that the bullet which had killed Eddie had come from my gun, but it had been a soft-nosed slug and I used them. My gun had been fired and a careful search showed no place where another bullet had landed.

The certainty grew on me, crowding into my brain, filling me with the single thought. I had gone mad and killed Eddie Wallace!

On a table near the far wall was a half-empty bottle of whisky. I poured a drink into a sticky glass and downed it. After the night before I had to keep drinking to think at all.

"There's only one other person," I said, "that could have killed Eddie. Paul was afraid Eddie would get the girl back. They were quarreling last night." I knew

that I was a drowning man grabbing straws. Paul had left the apartment long before I did. And in my brain there was that terrible picture hidden in blackness, the picture that I couldn't quite see though I knew it was there. "I'm not going mad!" I said. "I'm not!" But I was afraid.

I took another drink, went out into the hall and rang for the elevator. The dark, square-faced night boy was on and I tried to grin at him when I said, "Hello, Matson. Mr. Wallace and I are trying to remember just what happened last night. Can you tell us about it?"

I knew that the fear was showing in my eyes, but Matson didn't notice it. He just grinned. "I don't know exactly," he said, "but you sure drank an awful lot of liquor. About midnight Doctor Dawson was here and you sent me out for a bottle and about two, after the doctor had gone, you sent me for another. I had to buy an open bottle from the restaurant and both of you raised hell about it."

"Didn't Doctor Dawson have some kind of a quarrel while he was here? There's a lot of things broken and—" I put my hand on my split lip.

"I don't think you got that from Doctor Dawson, sir," Matson grinned. "He was arguing with Mr. Wallace when I brought that first bottle about midnight, but he left right after that. At two, you and Mr. Wallace were quarreling about something—a woman I think. A little while later the persons below you complained that you were throwing the furniture around and fighting. I knocked on the door and you got pretty quiet after that. I never did see you leave."

"Thanks," I said. "I couldn't remember who pasted me in the eye." I gave him half a buck, keeping my head ducked as I fumbled for it because I didn't want him to see the way my mouth was twitch-

ing. Then I went back into the room where Eddie Wallace lay dead.

That settled it. I *had* gone crazy—and I had killed Eddie Wallace. I stood there looking down at his body like a man hypnotized, thinking, “The police will find out soon. They’ll know I killed him. They’ll put me in the chair—or in an asylum. I’m mad. I’m mad. I’m mad!” The words began to beat against my ear drums.

I shook myself. Maybe Paul had told me I was going crazy because he wanted me to believe it. Maybe he had killed Eddie and wanted me to think I had done it—had killed one friend and tried to frame another.

And then, for no reason at all, I was very certain that was what had happened. “Why that lousy son—” I said. I was so angry that my hands were shaking and my teeth grinding together. My lips began to jerk and saliva drooled down across my chin. There was something in my brain that screamed like a banshee: “You are going insane, *now*. NOW!” But it was too late.

I STEPPED over Eddie’s body and went to the whisky bottle. I poured out a double jigger and turned. “Here’s to you, Eddie.” I gulped it down and smashed the glass on the floor. I was conscious of myself standing there, my whole face working, my eyes glaring insanely, my hands rigid and shaking in front of me.

And then there was a knock on the door. It swung open and closed again, and Paul Dawson was in the room with me.

How long before either of us spoke I don’t know. I saw Paul’s eyes jerk wide as they moved about the room, saw them fasten on the body in the center of the floor and horror smash into his face. I didn’t move, not even after he

had raised his head to look at me. I just stood there, feeling an insane anger lash my blood into froth. “Kill him. Kill him. Kill him,” I thought. And I stood there, gloating over the murder I was going to commit, feeling the weight of my gun against my ribs.

Paul Dawson said: “You’ve killed Eddie.” Then he stood there, his mouth open, eyes wide, looking as though he had never really seen me before.

I said: “I didn’t kill him.” I slid back along the side of the table and poured myself a drink, still looking at Paul.

“Who did?” There was a strange note in his voice.

I gulped the whisky, put the glass down. My hands were shaking because of the fury inside me. I wanted to do more than kill him. I wanted to bash his face in, to beat him into a pulp, to hear him scream. My voice quivered when I said: “You killed him.”

Paul looked as if I had hit him. “You’re crazy,” he said. “Insane.” Then suddenly his eyes narrowed and there was a new light in them. He leaned toward me. “I told you last night that whisky was driving you crazy, but maybe it was something else. Maybe it was just—”

“Damn you!” I yelled at him. I tried to get my gun out, but the sight caught. I kept tugging at it as Paul came at me with a rush. It was almost out when he hit me. I fell, barely missing the table and whisky bottle, spinning in the air. Sitting on the floor I got the gun free. But Paul was close to me, his foot swinging for my chin. I tried to move my head to one side and pull the trigger at the same time.

MY HEAD felt as if there were something inside trying to split its way out. I couldn’t see anything except a red mist but I wanted a drink. I had to have

one! I began to grope about with my hands, not knowing where I was reaching. Out in the mist somewhere a voice said: "Watch him, he's coming too."

"Where's the liquor?" I asked. I wiped my hand across my eyes and stared around me. The room was full of cops. Some of them I knew and some I didn't. Against the far wall was the night elevator boy, his face white with terror.

And then I saw Paul Dawson!

His head was almost touching Eddie's right hand. His eyes were wide and staring with a terrible fixity. His mouth was half open as if he had tried to shout and there hadn't been time. One of the cops had pulled his coat open and I could see the hole at the base of his throat where the flat-nosed bullet had struck.

Nobody in the room said a word. They must have been watching me, but I couldn't see anything except those two men lying there, dead. I must have looked at them a long time before I even felt anything except a dull, horrible disbelief. And then, slowly at first, the way a wind puffs and fades and puffs again stronger than before, terror and memory began to move through me.

"I've killed Paul." The words were like a small wind in my brain. "I went insane, crazy, and killed Paul. Then I've got to be the one who killed Eddie. Paul wouldn't have come back to this room if he had murdered Eddie. I did it because I was insane." And then that horrible dark picture was in my brain again, the memory of Eddie's death that I couldn't recall plainly though it followed me like a black and furious shadow.

I looked at the silent men around me. Not a one of them spoke and I turned, shaking, toward the table where the whisky bottle sat. "I want a drink," I said. "I've got to have a drink." I picked up the bottle and looked at it. It was empty.

Behind me one of the cops said, "You are carrying that bottle on the inside of you."

That made me angry, crazy angry, and I turned on the cops. "You're a hell of a bunch," I said. "Drinking all a man's liquor. I've got to have a drink and you've—"

A tall, gaunt detective named Peterson said: "Take it easy, Tommy. Nobody drank that liquor but you."

"But there was more in this bottle," I said. "I know damn well there was." I looked at the floor but there hadn't any been spilled. "I've got to have a drink," I said.

One of the cops got out a flask and handed it to me.

MAYBE it was the taste of the whisky being slightly different. Maybe the liquor just cleared my head until I could think a bit. But anyway things began to clear up then, all the little pieces to fit into place. And as the thing worked out, the vague picture in my memory came clear. I remembered Paul Dawson saying: "You are acting like a hop-head." And the last thing he'd said before I tried to pull my gun was: "Maybe it wasn't whisky driving you crazy. Maybe it was—" He hadn't had a chance to finish. There had been liquor in the bottle when we fought, but now it was empty—and I hadn't emptied it!

I asked: "How much money does Eddie Wallace have in his clothes?"

"About eight dollars and some change," Peterson said. "We've looked over the body pretty well."

My hands moved over my own pockets. I already knew there wasn't anything there, but I wanted to make certain. Then I said: "Eddie was sailing for Europe today. He had a thousand in cash on him

last night and Matson saw it when we sent him for the liquor."

I looked at the square-faced, black-haired elevator boy. "You got that money," I said. "You may not have it on you, but it won't matter because we'll find it, and we'll find the silencer you used so that nobody would hear the shot and get in here before you had time to fix things."

Matson made one spinning movement. His left hand whipped the door open and he dived through. One of the cops caught the knob before he could close it and another plunged after him. They caught him on the stairs.

There was an Irish potato with a hole in the center of it in his pocket. The hole was powder-burned. "That makes a fairly good silencer," I said. "You probably used it last night also."

"Matson saw the money the first time we sent him for liquor last night," I told Peterson. "The liquor stores were closed the second time we sent him out and he

got an open bottle from the restaurant. He doped it.

"Hopped up, Eddie and I got in a fight, then passed out. But I didn't pass out completely, and I must have seen him kill Eddie though I was too far gone to remember it. The thing has been haunting me ever since. Matson came in, killed Eddie with my gun, using a handkerchief to keep his prints off it, and took the money. But something happened—maybe the elevator bell rang, maybe he was too scared after the shooting and robbery to remember it then—that kept him from emptying the doped whisky.

"He came down early today, meaning to empty the liquor and then find the body. But I got here first. He knew that Dawson, seeing me hopped up again, was beginning to suspect what had happened. So, still using my gun, he killed him after Paul had knocked me out. Then he emptied the liquor and called you."

Peterson said: "Hell, he should have known you'd get anybody who meddled with your liquor."

FEATURED IN THE DECEMBER ISSUE

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Smashing Mystery-Action Novelettes By

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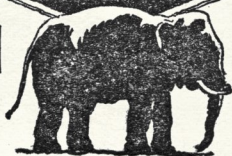


It'll Be Out on November 5th

He swung the lantern in a sweeping arc.



The Island of Fear



by
Oscar Schisgall
Author of "Gambling Man," etc.

The elephant never forgets! That was the death message that accompanied the first murder. And there in the sand—on the beach of that storm-swept Maine island—as if to point the warning, was the track of the jungle beast. How had it got there? What ghastly secret lay behind the crimson blood trail of the invisible elephant?

CHAPTER ONE

The Elephant Never Forgets

THE moment Octavus Reardon lit the kerosene lamp he saw the thing on the desk, and the sight made him clutch convulsively at the back of a chair. He sucked in his breath, stood paralyzed, his countenance going gray as his hair.

It lay there in the circle of lamplight—a naked human leg.

It was a muscular leg, evidently a man's, and it had been amputated just above the knee. A few drops of blood from the hideous wound had been absorbed by the desk blotter.

Octavus Reardon tried to utter a gasp and couldn't. He wanted to recoil from

the thing, but his muscles refused to respond. Icy chills tingled in his scalp and, paradoxically, a driblet of perspiration started down his cheek from his temple.

The room, a crude study, was dark, save for the splotch of yellow light that fell to the desk. There was no electricity on Evergreen Island. Neither was there a telephone, so that it didn't even occur to Reardon to communicate with the police. As he gaped at the severed leg, incredulously, as if the thing were impossible, he was vaguely aware of sea winds snarling through the trees outside. And the crash of waves on rocks became a dull roar in the back of his brain.

A full minute passed before he saw the paper propped against an ink-well. Words were printed on the thing, but Reardon's stupefied eyes couldn't at once focus. He had to blink, to shake himself, before he could comprehend the words.

This is your son's leg. Next you'll get your daughter's.

The elephant never forgets.

A hoarse sound at last escaped Octavus Reardon's constricted throat. He began to back away from the desk, from the horrible thing it flaunted. His eyes were still round in horror, and now perspiration coursed freely down his ashen face. He had almost reached the door before he was able to turn and plunge wildly out of the room.

"Ram!" he shouted hoarsely. "Ram!"

His mad outcry brought a slim, dark-skinned figure scurrying through the shadows of the corridor. Though the men wore the conventional mess-jacket of an American butler, his mahogany complexion, his eloquent black eyes in a sharply chisled face, and his sleek raven hair betrayed him as a Hindu. Ram Amari whispered: "Yes, sahib?"

"Where are the boys?" gasped Octavus Reardon. "Have you seen them?"

Ram Amari looked startled. With a gesture toward stairs that rose into blackness, he answered in surprise: "Your son Philip is in his room, sahib. Only five minutes ago I took a pot of coffee to him."

"And Carl?" desperately. "Where's Carl?"

"Mr. Carl," Ram Amari said dazedly in his precise British accent, "went out immediately after supper. He said he would try night fishing from the rocks. Why, sahib? Has anything—"

"Then it's Carl!" Octavus Reardon all but screamed, whirling to the door. "It's Carl's leg!"

He didn't stop to explain. Leaving Ram Amari to stare, Octavus Reardon plunged out into the darkness to seek the rest of his younger son's body. It was with terror verging on sheer insanity that he dashed through blackness against the angry drive of the sea wind. He went straight toward the rocks. And as he ran, four words blazed in his brain.

The elephant never forgets!

FOUR miles across the surging black water, at that particular moment, the express from New York pulled into the station at Coltonville, Maine; and even before the train stopped, Jerry Kanner swung down easily to the platform. A tall young man, sandy-haired and lean to the point of being rawboned, he peered about uncertainly. The wind lifted the brim of his felt hat. His right hand carried a heavy Gladstone; his left mechanically buttoned his gray jacket.

When he spied the girl at the far end of the platform, a quick, bright smile seized his features. He started toward her briskly. She came toward him, too—running. But as the station lights flashed on her features, Kanner's expression of pleasure suddenly faded. In its place came a look of concern. For Caroline Reardon,

he saw, was tense and strained, her lovely young face abnormally taut.

They wasted no time in formal greetings. Caroline Reardon caught his hand, squeezed it tightly, met his questioning stare with haggard eyes. "I'm so glad you came!" she said in a voice unrecognizably husky. "The boat's waiting at the dock. We can be out on the island in less than an hour."

Her arm slipped through his tightly. She began urgently dragging him away from the station. Jerry Kanner gaped at her in frank amazement. He'd never before seen her so tense. Her slender figure was encased in a belted yellow slicker, and a dark tam did its best to encompass her flying chestnut hair. She was, he decided, as beautiful as always, but the fear in her countenance lent it a hardness that was far from characteristic of her.

"Listen, Caroline," he pleaded as they hurried down a hill. "Let's get organized. What's all the excitement?"

She said tensely "I'll tell you about it in the boat—on the way to the island." Then she looked up at him searchingly. "By the way, I haven't told Dad you're a private detective. You—you'd better not let him know."

"Why not?"

"He's refused to have either policemen or detectives on the island. If he finds out, he'll order you off."

They were walking down a narrow street that led to the waterfront. As they bent against the wind, Jerry Kanner muttered: "This begins to sound interesting. If you didn't tell him I'm a detective, how will you explain my coming?"

"Why—" Caroline peered straight ahead. He had a vague impression that she was deliberately avoiding his eyes. Also, in the dim light that fell from the shop windows, he thought he detected a faint flush rising in her cheeks. She said softly: "I hope you'll excuse me,

Jerry. I had to invent some kind of excuse for getting you on the island. So I told Dad you—you'd proposed to me."

"What!"

"I—I told him I wanted to know you before I made up my mind. Even at that he objected to my asking you out at this particular time. But he couldn't do much when I said I'd already wired you, and you were on the way here."

After that they moved in agitated silence for a time. Despite himself, Jerry Kanner couldn't restrain an amused, even pleased little grin. It would be a pretty pleasant position to maintain, he knew, this role of courting Caroline Reardon. He didn't object to it at all.

"I'll try," he promised with a chuckle, "to play the lover as realistically as possible. And it shouldn't be hard. As a matter of fact, it'll probably give me the chance to say a lot of things I've been wanting to tell you for a long time in New York."

As if she hadn't heard him, she nodded to a small dock ahead. They'd reached the waterfront now. The sea stretched black, vast, infinite, with a salty wind whipping its surface into whitecaps. Caroline said: "The boat's at the dock. I'll tell you everything while we shoot across to the island."

KANNER discovered that a heavy-shouldered man, who must have been in his late fifties, was waiting for them beside the motorboat. He wore ancient oilskins, and a dilapidated sou'wester dropped its brim over a square, dark-complexioned countenance. As he took Kanner's Gladstone and tossed it into the boat, he mumbled dourly: "We better hurry, Miss Caroline. Looks like there might be heavy weather tonight."

Hopping into the boat, she explained to Jerry Kanner: "This is Bob Harrow. He's been caretaker of Dad's island,

winter and summer, for the past four years. If you need any help out there, you can count on Bob. You can trust him."

The old boatman smiled without humor. "Reckon you'll find things a little unusual this year, Mr. Kanner. But the fishin's good. Anything you want to know, I'll be glad to help with."

A moment later the boat was chugging its way out across the bay. It leaped and rocked and pitched over whitecaps. From its prow spray flew back in generous showers to deluge both Caroline and Jerry Kanner.

They sat huddled together in the stern, hunched against the cool wet wind. Bob Harrow was up forward—a bulky shadow in the darkness—and they could whisper without much chance of being overheard.

"Does Harrow know about me?" Jerry asked, his head bent close to the girl's.

"No. Nobody does. He thinks you're here for a week of fishing."

"All right," snapped Jerry, more briskly. "Now let's have it. What's it all about?"

Caroline swung her head around so that her eyes looked straight up into his. Their faces were scarcely four inches apart. She whispered tersely: "Jerry, it's a hard story to tell, because it's so—so vague even to me. You don't know my father very well, do you?"

"Only by reputation."

"And his reputation isn't of the best, is it?"

Jerry Kanner shrugged. He peered ahead in silence.

"Oh, there's no use trying to hide it," Caroline Reardon said bitterly. "I know. There are people who think Dad is cruel, heartless, ruthless. They think he made his money by killing his conscience. But I know Dad—and I don't think he's as bad as that!"

To this, too, Jerry Kanner offered no comment.

"Ours has been a crazy sort of family life," Caroline went on in that same bitter tone. "Until five years ago I hardly knew my father. He used to go away, leaving my two brothers and me with an aunt in New York. He made his fortune by seeking it in the farthest corners of the world. I suppose you know that."

Jerry nodded.

"Most of it was made in India," she said tightly. "Maybe you remember all the newspaper publicity he had a few years ago. He was exploring in the jungles of Bengal, when he came upon the rumors of gold up in the foothills of the Himalayas. Dad followed those rumors for I don't know how long. And he found the gold, all right. It made him a millionaire. He came back to America after that and stopped traveling. In fact, his only trips have been to come up here to Evergreen Island for the summers. The rest of the time we all spent together in New York."

Jerry glanced down at the girl with a puzzled smile. "Is all this a build-up," he asked, "toward a climax?"

"Put it that way, if you like," she grimly agreed. "Not that I can tell you much about the climax, either, except what I've seen for myself. Dad isn't the kind of man who confides his troubles even to his children."

THE motion of the boat sent the girl lurching against Jerry Kanner. He put a comforting arm about her, and she snuggled into it. When she recovered her balance, she went on.

"It started a week ago. At that time I was in New York with my brother Phil. My younger brother, Carl, was up in Hanover, at college. Dad had gone to Evergreen Island with the Zuydams for a bit of fishing. Suddenly Phil and I received a telegram ordering us to come to the island at once. So did Carl, in Hanover.

We couldn't make it out. We thought possibly something had happened to Dad, so we all dashed up here. But he was all right. When we questioned him, he didn't give much reason for the sudden family reunion. Still, all of us saw that something pretty terrible must have happened to Dad. He wasn't himself. He went around pale, strained, always on guard. As a matter of fact, he began to carry a revolver in his pocket—something I've never known him to do before—and even ordered the other men on the island to go armed."

"And offered no reason?" Jerry Kanner asked in surprise.

"No. He said the less we knew the better it would be for us. Then, without apparent cause, he fired all the servants who'd been with his less than two years. The result is the only ones left on the island are Bob Harrow, our old cook, Mrs. Flannagan, and an Indian servant Dad's had ever since he left India eight years ago—Ram Amari. Of course, there's old Erik Zuydam and his half-witted son, Julius—but they don't count. They don't do anything; they just bask in father's charity."

She mentioned the last two, Jerry noticed, almost with contempt. Peering ahead, he could see the island looming half a mile away, a black blot set in darkness. Trees probably concealed the rustic old house, for he could discern no lights. The wind had grown colder out here in the pitching boat. Jerry couldn't restrain a slight shudder as he turned up the collar of his jacket.

"So what," he asked presently, "do you want me to do?"

"I want to know what it's all about!" Caroline Reardon cried with an astonishing note of passion. "There's Dad going around like a man scared of his shadow. He's got us all cooped up on the island. He fired the servants, keeps a gun handy.

Why? . . . Jerry, it's all getting on my nerves! Dad won't tell us anything. If it's only for the satisfaction of my own crazy curiosity, I've got to know what kind of danger is threatening us!"

Kanner's expression became slightly cryptic. "Of course," he began, "if I poke around and ask questions—"

"You keep your eyes and ears open," she cut in savagely. "You're supposed to be a private detective. You ought to be able to dig into these things better than anybody else on the island. And when you find out, Jerry, what it is that's terrifying Dad, I want you to tell me."

Jerry said nothing. They sat in silence until Bob Harrow brought the motorboat into a shallow, placid cove and moored her to a rickety jetty. And they had scarcely stepped ashore when Kanner heard rapid steps pattering along a gravel path. He looked up quickly—and instantly knew a heightened sense of interest.

Even in darkness he could discern the Hindu features of the white-jacketed man who came running. The fellow looked distraught, his eyes round. As he caught sight of Caroline, he panted: "Memsahib, your—your father says you are to go straight to the house! Straight to your room and remain there!"

The girl gaped at Ram Amari in amazement. "What on earth for?"

Ram Amari looked behind him into the night with a kind of agony. When he stared back at the girl, it was to whisper: "Your brother Carl has been murdered! His body is on the rocks, where he went fishing after supper. Your father thinks you may be killed, too, tonight—unless you lock yourself in your room at once. Please, memsahib, go quickly!"

A FLOOD of ghastly pallor raced into Caroline Reardon's features. She caught her breath, snapped a hand to her throat. She swayed so dizzily that Kanner

dropped the Gladstone and impulsively caught her. He could feel the girl quivering, sagging against him. In a voice which was not her own she forced out: "Carl—Carl murdered?"

"Yes, memsahib!" stammered Ram Amari. His black eyes were luminous, like the eyes of a jungle beast. The wind wrought havoc in his long sleek hair. After a swift glance along the shoreline he turned back to Caroline to add: "It is much better, memsahib, that you go straight to the house. The sight of your brother will—will perhaps—"

But Caroline Reardon ignored the advice. Almost violently she wrenched herself out of Jerry Kanner's arms. Utterly white now, she gasped something indistinguishable and flung herself off through the darkness. Ram Amari thrust out an impetuous arm to stop her, but she beat his hand aside. As she leaped off the jetty and raced along the shore—her yellow slicker flapping behind her in the stiff night wind—she seemed wholly to forget the three men.

Kanner, too, sprang down from the dock. He was the first to follow Caroline. Immediately behind him, however, came Ram Amari and the stocky, hard-breathing figure of Bob Harrow. They plunged through darkness in the direction of the distant rocks where Carl Reardon had gone fishing—and been murdered.

JERRY'S mind worked furiously as he ran. He reviewed everything Caroline had told him in the boat, struggled to find in her story some clue that might lead to the explanation of Carl Reardon's death. But it was hard to think coherently while lunging over the rough ground, sometimes stumbling against trees.

Suddenly the path ended on the edge of a strip of beach. Here Jerry found himself trudging heavily over sand. He plodded along fast, lifting his knees high.

He caught up with Caroline, stretched out a hand to touch her arm. But at that instant, he saw something that halted him. He stood utterly still, letting the girl run on alone. His stare, wide in astonishment, fastened itself on the sand at his right. His eyes had become accustomed to the darkness and he could see things quite clearly.

Bob Harrow and Ram Amari reached him. Perhaps it was his astounded expression that forced both men to pause. Panting audibly, Harrow ejaculated: "What's wrong?"

Jerry Kanner merely pointed. He didn't have to talk, because old Bob Harrow himself had already discovered the things. He emitted a low exclamation of incredulity and started forward, abruptly checked himself.

"What—what on earth!" he whispered in a kind of awe.

What they saw in the sand were huge prints. They seemed to be the footmarks of some fantastic prehistoric beast. The regularity of the intervals between the tracks seemed to indicate that the creature, whatever it was, had deliberately walked across these sands in the direction of the distant rocks. It must have been an enormous beast—if it was a beast—for the spaces between prints exceeded seven feet!

"Do you know what kind of tracks they are?" Jerry demanded.

"I have seen such tracks often in India," softly said Ram Amari. "They are the tracks of an elephant."

Both Kanner and the boatman blinked at the man.

"An elephant?" the thick-set Harrow managed unbelievably. "What in blazes are you talking about, Ram? How could an elephant be on this island?"

"Still," insisted the Hindu, "those are the tracks of an elephant. I couldn't be mistaken about them. I studied them a few minutes ago."

"But there's never been an elephant on this beach!" harshly retorted Bob Harrow. "I tell you it's crazy—"

Jerry Kanner waited to hear no more. Following the ungainly tracks in the sand, he strode on through the darkness. He scowled; told himself savagely: "This thing's beginning to sound like a nightmare!"

CHAPTER TWO

Dutch Courage

THE scene Jerry Kanner encountered on the high boulders might have been the inspiration of a mad movie director. Four yellow lanterns, brought from the house, stood on the stones, throwing their sickly light over the sprawling dead figure that had been young Carl Reardon. Almost the first thing Kanner saw was the ghastly stump of the amputated left leg. Mercifully, what remained of the trousers concealed most of the wound. But as he stared, he saw enough to send a freezing tremor through him.

Caroline Reardon stood sobbing against her father's chest. The powerful countenance of Octavus Reardon, splashed by the uncanny light on the lanterns, looked, somehow, bestial and cruel. Perhaps the man was contemplating vengeance against the murderer of his son. And the hope transfigured him. One glance at that ruthless face under the wind-blown gray hair was enough to show Kanner why Reardon had been called heartless.

And there were other people in the splotch of yellow light.

A stout, bald man kneeled beside Carl Reardon's body. What he was doing, Jerry Kanner couldn't at once see. It seemed to him the plump man was trying awkwardly to conceal the stump of the severed leg from Caroline.

Farther away in the shadows—seated on

a rock, his head buried in his hands—was Caroline's older brother, Phil. Though Jerry didn't know the man personally, he'd seen his picture in newspapers often enough. The tall, dark-haired, undeniably handsome Phil had made quite a reputation for himself as a tennis star.

Jerry Kanner moved forward slowly, climbing toward the spot where the body lay on the boulders' highest point. Twenty feet below him the sea pounded the rocks barbarically. Its roar was endless, and a constant film of spray soaked everybody within the radius of the lanterns' light.

And then Jerry Kanner saw what the fat man was doing. He squatted there reading a slip of paper which he held close to the lantern beside Carl Reardon's head.

The first thing Jerry discovered was that the head, too, had been butchered. Its back was brutally split. He gulped hard, jerked his eyes away from the sight. He fastened his look over the stout man's shoulder on the scrap of paper and read.

This is only the first. Your other children will come next. And finally it will be your chance.

The elephant never forgets.

As Jerry blinked uncomprehendingly at the printed message, he heard Octavus Reardon rasp behind him: "I thought I'd left word for you to go straight to your room, Caroline! Why didn't you do as I told you?"

"I—I couldn't!" she sobbed. "I had to come and see—"

"You'll go there now!"

"But, Dad—"

"Go, I say!" Then Octavus Reardon called: "Phil!"

Kanner saw Philip lift a haggard, colorless face. Unsteadily he pushed himself to his feet—a tall young man, athletically lithe.

"Phil," snapped the senior Reardon, "take Caroline to her room. I want you

to stay there with her. Lock yourselves in. Don't let anybody enter until I come. Is that clear?"

"Ye-es," emptily.

"Go on. And take this with you."

KANNER saw the gray-haired man thrust a revolver toward his son. Philip accepted it without uttering a word. He slipped an arm around his sister, drew her off into the darkness.

"I suppose," Reardon flung viciously at Jerry, "you're Caroline's young man. You're the Jerry Kanner she wanted me to meet?"

"Right," quietly.

"You certainly picked a night for that kind of visit!"

The stout, bald man slowly rose from the body and turned to present a terrified face. Nodding to the slip of paper in his hand, he said hoarsely, with a foreign accent Kanner couldn't immediately identify: "Reardon, I think you had better send for the police from Coltonville. You can't take chances after this. Send Harrow with the boat."

"Not," rasped Reardon, "till we've searched the island ourselves. Those elephant tracks must lead someplace—and I'm going to see where!"

There were no such things as introductions at a time like this. Kanner, tugging his felt hat low over his forehead, decided the stout man must be the Erik Zuydam who'd been mentioned by Caroline. What he was doing here on the island, Jerry couldn't guess. He remembered, however, that Caroline had spoken also of Zuydam's half-witted son. He looked about quickly, but the lanterns' light revealed nobody else, save Ram Amari and Bob Harrow.

Erik Zuydam, too, discovered the absence of his son. He rose in sudden fear. His voice cracked as he cried: "Where's Julius?" When nobody answered, Zuydam

abruptly lifted his hands to his mouth. In a bellowing voice he roared: "Julius!"

His cry, tingling with increasing anxiety, rolled off into the darkness. The wind seized it, swept it away. Those around the butchered body waited in tense silence, listening for a reply, but no answer came. After a moment the stout man looked at Octavus Reardon with pathetic uncertainty.

"I've got to find him!" he quavered. "He can't take care of himself. If—if he should meet anybody—"

"Wait," snapped Octavus Reardon. "I'll go with you." He returned to Ram Amari and Bob Harrow, waved a jerky hand at the body of his son. "You two carry him to the house. Put him in his bed, cover him. Then come back and help us hunt."

Neither Harrow nor Ram replied. Visibly shaken, they bent together to pick up the mutilated body of Carl Reardon.

No one granted much attention to Jerry. Standing still—a tall, gangling figure with his hands in his pockets—he watched Octavus Reardon and the stout Erik Zuydam hurry down the rocks toward the beach. Both men carried lanterns. In the yellow light their figures appeared grotesquely distorted.

Jerry waited in silence until he'd watched Ram and Bob Harrow carry the limp body of Carl Reardon off into the blackness. Then he drew a long breath, picked up another of the lanterns, and started toward the beach.

"I've done lots of crazy things in my time," he told himself tightly, "but this is my first experience with elephant tracks on an island off the coast of Maine!"

He thought of Caroline's insistence that he investigate the secret of her father's terror, that he report his discovery to her. The recollection brought a bitter smile to his lips. "Neither of us," he thought, "was bargaining for anything like this!"

JERRY saw that the two men ahead of him scarcely paused at the elephant's tracks. Though they glanced down at the things in a kind of horror, both stumbled on. The stout Zuydam repeatedly yelled his son's name. His stentorian voice rolled off into the blackness but never brought a response.

Jerry Kanner saw them vanish into the night. He himself stopped beside the large prints in the sand. With the lantern hanging in his hand, he could study them clearly. They brought a frown to his lean countenance.

As the sea wind tore at his clothes, he followed the marks slowly. For some fifty yards they led along the beach in a line parallel to the foaming surf. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, they swerved left. He trailed them to the water's edge. There they disappeared.

"If we could go by appearances," he mumbled to himself, "there was an elephant here that walked off into the sea."

The idea made him grunt. For a while he peered out into the blackness, then turned, still swinging the lamp, and retraced his steps. The enormous prints led back to the rocks on which Carl Reardon's body had been found. On the stones themselves they vanished. But he clambered down the other side to another stretch of sand—only to discover that the beast hadn't come here at all. The beach lay smooth, untrampled.

Scowling, Jerry thoughtfully rubbed his chin. He looked from the sea back in the direction of the invisible house. If he were going to investigate this crazy affair at all, he decided grimly, the best thing to do was to begin by questioning Ram Amari and Bob Harrow. That would be simplest.

"And I'm entitled to a natural curiosity after what I've seen," he told himself. "They don't have to know about me."

He started up a narrow path that led

him among trees. Sometimes he had to stoop under branches. From far off—apparently on the other side of the island—he could still hear Erik Zuydam's panicky voice shouting: "Julius! Where are you?"

And then, of a sudden, Kanner halted. He swung around, his narrowed eyes blazing into the darkness under the trees. His nerves grew tense. Distinctly he heard a sound which wasn't caused by the wind.

It was an unmistakable rustle, as of something pressing through underbrush. He couldn't see the thing. He put down the lamp and receded slowly backwards from the circle of its light until a tree stopped him. Then he waited, his fists clenched. He wished desperately that he'd stopped to take his automatic out of the Gladstone. But there was no use wasting time in futile recriminations now.

Strangely, he could hear no more sounds—nothing save the incessant thrash of waves on the shore and the sough of the wind through tree-tops. Nevertheless he knew, with uncanny intuition, that something or somebody was close to him in the surrounding bushes.

Suddenly he heard a gasp.

At the same time he saw a figure leap out of nowhere with the abruptness of a jinni. It flung itself straight at him. At the sight of it Jerry ejaculated a hoarse oath, instinctively dodged.

THE man who came at Kanner was inordinately tall—well over six feet—and thin to the point of emaciation. High above his head he brandished a broken branch like a cudgel. And this, as he leaped toward Jerry Kanner, he swung down with all the strength in his arms.

Jerry didn't dodge too soon. He could feel the whiz of the club as it swooped past his head and shoulders to crash against the tree.

He flung himself off balance. As he

floundered on the ground, he cursed again. The lanky man in front of him swung around, lifted the club for another blow. He was silhouetted against the lantern light. Jerry looked up into a narrow, bony countenance that framed eyes that blazed insanely. Its disheveled hair dangled over its forehead. The club rose high—

Before it could plunge down again, Jerry catapulted himself up from the ground, sweeping up the lantern as he did so. The lantern swung in a glowing arc straight to the man's jaw and Jerry followed it with a fierce uppercut that banged squarely against the tall man's chin.

The fellow winced in agony. As his head snapped back, the club fell out of his hands. He reeled backward, staggering. For a wild, ineffectual second he tried to clutch at trees, but his distended fingers failed—and he collapsed on the path.

Once or twice he heaved himself about, groaning. Then limpness overcame his lanky figure, and he lay still.

Jerry Kanner, breathing heavily, stared down in amazement.

He was still there, trying to regain his poise, when he heard footsteps running along the trail. He spun around. Instinctively he stooped to curl a hand around the club. But he recognized, in relief, the familiar stocky figure of Bob Harrow.

"What on earth—" Harrow, seeing the man on the trail, halted. He jerked startled, incredulous eyes up to Jerry Kanner's taut face. "What happened?" he demanded hoarsely.

"I had to hit him," snapped Jerry. "Who is he?"

"That's Mr. Zuydam's son, Julius!"

"Julius? Why the devil is he running around swinging clubs at people?"

Bob Harrow blinked. He shook his head spasmodically. "There's no telling what Julius will do, Mr. Kanner. He—

he ain't responsible, exactly. He's kind of half-witted."

"Irresponsible enough to have murdered Carl Reardon?"

At that Bob Harrow said thickly: "I—I can't say, Mr. Kanner. Maybe yes—maybe no."

Jerry straightened. "You'd better go get his father and Mr. Reardon. They're hunting Julius on the other side of the island."

He himself remained motionless, frowning down at the unconscious figure of the extraordinarily tall man. He saw now that Julius Zuydam had a young, narrow face—strangely innocent, almost foolish. In the yellow glow of the lamp it didn't seem quite so horrifying as it had been a few minutes ago when Julius had wielded his club.

Kanner waited alone, the wind howling about him, until Ram Amari came down the path. As he squinted up at the white-jacketed Hindu servant, he thought doubtfully: "Well, maybe I can pump something out of *this* one."

RAM AMARI, however, proved a distinct disappointment. He stood over Julius, very straight and polite, almost expressionless, as if his dark complexioned countenance had been frozen. "I am sorry, sahib," he said quietly. "There is nothing I know. There is nothing I can say."

"You've been working for Mr. Reardon for a long time, haven't you?"

"Many years. Every since he came to India the first time."

"And you don't know if he has anyone to be afraid of? You don't know anybody with a motive to do this to his children?"

"I know nothing, sahib," Ram Amari said suavely.

Peering at him hard, Jerry knew the man was lying. In a way, however, he

couldn't blame Ram. The fellow couldn't be expected to betray family secrets to any stranger who happened along with questions. Perhaps his reticence was commendable. On the other hand, it was irritating.

Jerry frowned. "I suppose," he ventured after a moment, "Mr. Reardon used elephants in India?"

"Yes, sahib."

"So that there might be some connection between this business and his life in India?"

Courteously enough Ram Amari parried: "That I cannot say, sahib. It is a matter at which one can only guess."

"Tell me," Jerry Kanner inquired after a brief pause. "How long has it been since Mr. Reardon last went to India?"

"He returned from his last visit eight years ago."

"You were with him then?"

"Yes, sahib."

"And that was the trip during which he discovered—gold?"

"Yes, sahib."

The low-voiced, monotonous replies beat like blows on Jerry's nerves. He did his best to restrain his temper. Obviously, Ram Amari knew a great deal more than he was willing to tell. It was only the obligatory politeness of a servant that forced him to speak at all.

Just as Julius began to stir and groan on the path, his stout father came running out of darkness. Behind him followed the gray-haired Octavus Reardon and Bob Harrow, swinging lanterns.

"Is he hurt?" cried Reardon.

"Not much," Jerry said. "Just knocked cold."

Dropping to his knees beside his son, Erik Zuydam glared up at Jerry with unconcealed hatred. "You did this to him!" he cried.

"I had to," grimly. "He came at me with a club."

"Why didn't you yell for us instead of—of hitting the boy?"

"He didn't give me much chance to yell, Mr. Zuydam. He came at me pretty fast. I'm sorry I had to sock him, but there was nothing else to do."

FOR a few minutes after that they granted Jerry scant attention. Like Zuydam, Octavus Reardon bent over the scrawny boy, Julius. When finally he'd regained consciousness and sat up dizzily, he looked at his father with glazed eyes. He began to chatter hysterically in a language Jerry was unable to understand—Dutch, he supposed. Presently Julius was helped to his feet. When Erik Zuydam turned back to Kanner, his expression was vaguely sheepish.

"I—I'm afraid I owe you an apology, Mr. Kanner," he said limply. "Julius has just explained what happened."

"I wish you'd explain it to me, too," suggested Kanner. "Why did he come at me that way?"

"My son isn't quite—quite normal," Zuydam began uneasily, sending an unsteady hand over his bald head. "I mean—"

"I understand," quietly.

"After Julius saw Carl dead up there, he—he seemed to think he ought to go out to find the murderer himself. He loved Carl. Carl had always been very good to him. And when Julius unexpectedly saw you—a stranger he'd never before met on the island—"

"He thought I was the murderer?"

"Yes. It was only natural, wasn't it? To see an unknown man here immediately after Carl's terrible death—"

Dubiously Jerry Kanner looked from the stout Dutchman to his tall son. Julius' expression had become more foolish than ever. He was rubbing a hand on his bruised jaw.

"Well," Jerry decided with a shrug, "no

hard feelings on my part, if he'll excuse my sock." Then he turned to Octavus Reardon. "Don't you think, Mr. Reardon, you ought to send for the police?"

Caroline's father scowled down at the ground and Erik Zuydam seized his arm. "Of course you should, Octavus!" the fat man pleaded. "They've threatened the other children—they've threatened you! If only for the sake of Caroline and Philip, you ought to send for the police at once."

Slowly, perhaps reluctantly, Octavus Reardon nodded his gray head. Why he was so hesitant in sending for police, Jerry Kanner couldn't understand. He felt vaguely relieved to hear Reardon finally tell Bob Harrow: "You'd better go ashore as fast as you can, Bob. Bring the police back with you."

Harrow made no comment. He promptly went off in the direction of the jetty. As soon as he had disappeared, Octavus Reardon's manner changed. He appeared more certain of himself, more dogged and determined. Lifting a lantern, he snapped: "I'm going to have another look at those elephant tracks."

"Do you really think," Jerry asked softly, "they are elephant tracks, Mr. Reardon? Isn't that just a little bit fantastic?"

"Fantastic or not, they look like elephant tracks! I've seen enough of those things in my life to know."

"But how—"

"Don't ask me how they got here," Caroline's father said bitterly, leading the way down to the beach. "All I know is they're here. They were here last night, too. And the night before that."

"What!"

"Erik Zuydam and I saw them. The incoming tide washed them out, but invariably they reappeared."

"Then why," demanded Jerry, "didn't you tell the others about it? Why didn't

you all watch the beach tonight to see what left such tracks?"

Octavus Reardon emitted a harsh, mirthless crack of laughter. "You ask a lot of questions, Mr. Kanner."

"Because," snapped Jerry, "I find a lot of mystery."

"Well, I didn't tell my children about it," Reardon flung out, "because I didn't want to alarm them. As for watching the island, we did. Last night we found the tracks on the other side. That's where Zuydam and I were watching tonight, too. Nothing came. It fooled us. It appeared over here instead—where Carl was fishing. If only he'd told me he intended to go out tonight—"

Reardon didn't finish, save with a gulp. Watching him obliquely, Jerry guessed the man was suffering a great deal more grief than he evinced. He was fighting to control himself. When finally they reached the grotesque prints on the sand, they stopped. The lanterns swung over the marks, dropping their ghastly yellow light. Slowly, without speaking, the entire group moved toward the water.

And they had almost reached it when Bob Harrow came dashing back across the sands. "Mr. Reardon!" he yelled. "Mr. Reardon!"

The gray-haired man swung around, peered narrowly at the oncoming Harrow, and demanded: "What is it now?"

"The motorboat!" hoarsely gasped Bob Harrow. "Somebody sank the thing!"

CHAPTER THREE

With an Ax

BOB HARROW'S incredible announcement instantly sent the whole crowd running to the jetty. In the darkness, with lanterns swinging in their hands, they presented a fantastic sight.

Jerry was the first to reach the rickety

dock. The glow of his lamp disclosed the fact that the stern of the motorboat had sunk to the bottom of the shallow cove. Its prow, moored to the dock, was still held up by ropes. He held the lantern out over the water, scowled down into the clear depths. When the others reached him, he snapped: "Looks like somebody stove a big hole through her bottom with an ax."

"An ax?" gasped Erik Zuydam. "Good Lord, then maybe it was an ax that—that hacked off Carl's leg!"

Out of the depths of Octavus Reardon's soul, it seemed, rumbled a terrible oath. When he turned, his powerful face was savage with fury. "I don't understand the elephant tracks," he grated. "But this boat was sunk by a man—somebody who's on this island now! I'm going to learn who it was if it's the last thing I do!"

Zuydam groaned: "This means we can't send for the police tonight."

"Not," stammered Bob Harrow, "till morning—not till we can signal some passing boat."

Jerry Kanner didn't speak. Frowning down at the sunken motorboat, he thought: "As far as we know, these are the only men on the island—except Philip, who's with Caroline. If anybody sank the boat, it was one of these. Unless, of course, there's somebody around whom we haven't yet seen. The one who left the elephant tracks—"

The same thoughts must have been pounding in the mind of Octavus Reardon, for he swung suddenly to the others, his eyes afire. "We've got to know who sank this boat!" he lashed out. "It reached the island in good condition hardly twenty minutes ago." He pointed a quivering hand at Ram Amari. "You first, Ram! Where did you spend these past twenty minutes?"

Ram appeared staggered by the question. "Sahib," he said, "you know where

I was. First I helped carry the body of the boy Carl to the house. Then I returned, met this gentleman"—indicating Jerry—"on the trail. And since then I've been with you."

Octavus Reardon swallowed hard. He swung to Harrow. "What about you, Bob?"

"Why, sir, I helped Ram carry Carl's body to the house. Then I came out, found that Mr. Kanner had knocked out Julius, and hopped off to get you and Mr. Zuydam. I didn't see the boat till just now, when I came to the jetty."

Apparently it didn't occur to Reardon to suspect Erik Zuydam at all. He himself had been with the bald man almost every instant for the past twenty minutes. But he did look darkly at Julius. And in a voice that sounded like thunder, he demanded: "Julius, have you been near the motorboat?"

"Me?" cried Julius, like a hysterical child, in his guttural, alien accent. "No! No, not me!"

"Are you telling the truth?"

"I wasn't near the boat—never!"

That was when Jerry Kanner quietly put in: "Mr. Reardon, the chances are there's somebody else on this island—somebody we know nothing about. At least, someone I know nothing about."

"You've seen all the people here," bitterly retorted Caroline's father. "In fact, you've seen everybody except Mrs. Flanagan, the housekeeper. She's an old woman and crippled. She could hardly be the one who did it. I doubt if she has the strength to lift an ax, let alone swing it."

"You're sure, then, that it was an ax?"

"Positive. We had one hanging on the wall in the house—in case of fire. It's gone. We noticed its disappearance just before you arrived."

Jerry looked around thoughtfully until Zuydam suggested huskily: "I think, Oc-

tavus, we ought to start a thorough hunt across the island. We can cover every square inch of it in less than an hour. What do you say?"

Reardon concurred without argument.

So Jerry Kanner bent, picked up his Gladstone, unlocked it. He lingered behind the others when they moved off into the darkness. Nobody saw him take the automatic from the bag. He slipped the weapon into his pocket, thrust the Gladstone into the shelter of a bush, and strode quickly after the searching party.

"We'd better separate," yelled Octavus Reardon from somewhere ahead. "If you spot anything, shout!"

HALF an hour later Jerry Kanner approached the Reardon house alone. His Gladstone hung from his hand. He no longer carried a light, and his tall figure looked shadowy as he mounted the porch steps. Somewhat wryly he realized that though he'd been on the island almost an hour, he hadn't yet been admitted to its only dwelling. It was a large log cabin, rustic and simple, surrounded by pines.

The front door was locked. He had to knock half a dozen times before a frightened voice called from inside: "Who is it?"

It was a woman's voice; one he didn't recognize. On a chance he answered: "I'm Jerry Kanner, Mrs. Flannagan."

Then he heard rapid sounds. Caroline was saying in a kind of panic: "Yes, it's he. You can let him in."

He heard a click in the lock. A moment later the massive door swung open, and Jerry entered. The first one he saw was Mrs. Flannagan—small, gray-haired, a fragile little woman. Directly beyond her stood Caroline and Philip.

The girl wore a dark dress now. Her chestnut hair was still wet and disheveled, and her countenance seemed to have aged a dozen years in a single night. "Jerry,"

she gasped, lurching toward him, "have they found anything?"

"No," he said stiffly. He put down the grip, looked from Caroline to her strapping brother. "I thought your father had ordered both of you to remain locked up."

"Do you think we can jail ourselves," Philip grated savagely, "when all this is going on? The only reason I'm staying in the house is to—to look after Caroline. But we don't have to coop ourselves up in a bedroom!"

"Your father seemed to have a different idea about it," dryly suggested Jerry.

"If he's got other ideas, why doesn't he explain them?" Philip flung out resentfully. "We're not kids. We're old enough to be told what's bothering him. If he only wouldn't keep things secret—God knows, maybe Carl wouldn't be dead now!"

As Jerry Kanner went into a broad, low-ceilinged living room with an immense fireplace, he felt Caroline clutch his arm. "Where are they all?" she whispered. "What are they doing?"

"They're hunting the island for a possible glimpse of some unknown murderer."

"Ram told us the boat had been sunk!" Jerry nodded.

"Which means," snapped Phil, "we can't get the police till tomorrow. I suppose the murderer meant to give himself a chance to get away before the police arrived."

"Either that," agreed Jerry, throwing his hat aside, "or else he doesn't want the police here because he's expecting to commit more crimes before morning."

That announcement seemed to stun the room. Caroline and Philip and Mrs. Flannagan gaped at him in mute agony. Somehow he couldn't encounter their eyes. With a hand that wasn't altogether steady, he dipped into his pocket for a

cigarette. It was soggy, damp. As he straightened it, he muttered: "Where's—Carl?"

"Upstairs," whispered Caroline. "In his—his bed."

"Alone?"

"Yes," huskily. "Oh, Jerry, maybe it isn't right, but I—I just couldn't sit there with him! I can't bear the sight—"

"I understand," he said softly. Then, forgetting the cigarette, he looked earnestly from Caroline to Phil. Their faces were eerily illuminated by the kerosene lamps that glowed in the living room's corners.

"See here," he said abruptly, tossing the cigarette into the fireplace, "we're not going to get anywhere—and we certainly won't prevent more crimes—unless we understand what's happening. All I know so far is that somebody's been sending your father threatening notes, somebody who prints at the end of each letter—*The elephant never forgets*. He's threatened you two and he's threatened your father. If we're going to stop him, we've got to understand this thing."

Caroline spread desperate hands. "I wish there were something I could tell you, Jerry. But Dad never took me into his confidence."

"You don't even know why he should be threatened?"

"No!"

"How about you?" to Philip.

But Philip Reardon, staring darkly into the fireplace, growled: "I don't know any more than Caroline."

Their complete and abysmal ignorance rased on Jerry's patience. He jammed his hands into his pockets and glared from one to the other. "Isn't there anybody on this island besides your father who knows anything about this business?"

Philip shrugged. "Maybe Erik Zuydam could explain a few things," he said dully. "For that matter, Ram Amari probably knows more than he's willing to tell. Both

of them are as close-mouthed as Dad. They're the kind that would follow him into hell without ever betraying anything he wanted them to keep secret."

That interested Jerry Kanner. He asked: "What's Erik Zuydam's connection with your father, anyhow?"

This time Philip Reardon didn't speak at all. There was a silence which Caroline ended on a hopeless tone. "We've never really been able to figure it out, Jerry. Erik Zuydam and his son have been living on Dad for the past seven or eight years. Whenever Dad travels, they go. When he comes here for the summer, they come. It seems to me that Dad supports them—though heaven knows why."

"Zuydam has no occupation?"

"None I've ever been able to discover. As far as I know, he's just a parasite clinging to Dad's fortune."

Jerry Kanner grunted. "So the chances are that both Ram Amari and Erik Zuydam know things they're not telling. And their secrecy is endangering your lives."

He couldn't say much more then, because Zuydam and the lanky Julius returned to the house. They looked hopeless, forlorn, exhausted. As he sank into a chair, the bald man admitted the search of the island had yielded nothing.

Half a minute later Ram Amari entered, accompanied by Bob Harrow. And they, too, brought a report of ineffectual hunting.

So the entire party was there—all except Octavus Reardon himself.

Reardon didn't come back at all that night. . . . Completely and inexplicably he vanished from the island!

CHAPTER FOUR

The Horror From Hindustan

IT WAS maddening. Though all of them—including Caroline herself this time—made another desperate hunt, shouting

Reardon's name in the darkness, screaming for him against the force of the night wind, they discovered no trace of the man. By the time they reassembled at the house, Caroline and Philip were frantic, panic-stricken.

"I tell you," Philip cried hoarsely, "there's a curse over us—a curse on this whole damned place! It's that elephant thing, whatever it is! It—it must have got Dad the way it got Carl!"

Jerry Kanner's face was gray, grave. When he entered the house he heard Erik Zuydam say in exhausted futility: "It's useless to hunt further. He's gone. He's gone."

When they gathered in the living room, it was as if they sat with death. Their faces were colorless, worn. Nobody spoke. The very silence, challenged only by the incessant roar of the sea and the moan of the wind, held in it the horror of tragedy. All of them sank into chairs around the empty fireplace. At a husky request from Zuydam, Mrs. Flannagan and Ram Amari went into the kitchen to prepare black coffee. Bob Harrow, who'd come into the house with the others, gratefully accepted an invitation to wait and have a strengthening drink.

But Ram Amari had been out of the room scarcely a minute when he came back shakily, a paper in his hand. His eyes were round, with fever lurking in their black depths. At the sight of the note he carried, everybody in the room impetuously rose.

"I—I found this," he announced thickly, "in the kitchen. It must have been slipped under the door while—while we were out!"

Jerry snatched the paper from his hand. He read the printed words with a scowl—read them aloud, slowly, so that everybody might hear.

"Octavus has followed Carl. Next will be Philip or Caroline, and then Erik Zuydam and Ram Amari. All will go.

"The elephant never forgets."

For an instant there was a terrible hush.

Then Erik Zuydam, with perspiration dripping from his forehead, staggered forward and seized a chair. Glaring at Jerry Kanner, he cried wildly: "Why me? What have I got to do with it?"

Jerry eyed him in perplexity. "I don't know, Mr. Zuydam. That's something for you to answer."

"I had nothing at all to do with it!" shrilly shouted the stout man. "Neither had Ram Amari! It's unfair! It's—"

And then, as if realizing he was betraying too much, Erik Zuydam desperately gulped down the words that welled in his throat. He snatched a handkerchief from his pocket, daubed it helplessly over his moist bald head. As though something had suddenly beat the wind out of him, he sank helplessly into a chair.

Jerry, his lips taut, swung his eyes to Ram Amari. The Hindu stood as rigid as a soldier on parade. White-jacketed, lean, trim despite his hours outdoors, he looked stubbornly expressionless.

"What can you say about this, Ram?" quietly asked Jerry.

"Nothing, sahib."

"Why does the note threaten you?"

"I do not know, sahib."

"You know you're not telling us anything."

"I am telling you everything I can, sahib."

"You mean everything it's safe to say?"

RAM AMARI'S black eyes shot a swift, questioning look at Erik Zuydam. For a moment it seemed his stoicism was shaken, but he drew a swift breath. When he looked back at Jerry Kanner, he answered imperturbably: "I have nothing more to tell you, sahib."

Then, of a sudden, from somewhere upstairs came a wild, hysterical yell. It was so unexpected, so terrifying a sound, that everybody in the living room whirled to gape at the door. The shout was succeeded by paroxysms of shrill sobbing.

Erik Zuydam sprang to his feet, lunged toward the door. "It's Julius!" he blurted wildly.

The stout man raced up the stairs with Jerry Kanner immediately behind him. The others came, too, following in a kind of daze. So much had happened here tonight that the poignancy of any individual event was dulled by the terror of the whole drama.

They found the tall Julius on his knees in the upper corridor. He was outside Carl Reardon's bedroom. With his face in his hands, the half-witted man wept like a child. His father threw an arm over his shoulders, began chattering his name.

With tears streaming from his eyes, Julius lifted his emaciated face. He began drooling words in Dutch. What he said, Jerry couldn't understand. But later, when the boy's outcries had subsided, Erik turned shakily to explain in a hollow voice: "Julius went in and looked at Carl. He shouldn't have done that. It—it's too much for him, that awful sight."

Caroline said in an exhausted voice: "You'd better send him to bed. He can't help us now."

Dully Erik Zuydam nodded. He lifted his son to his feet, drew the shivering creature off along the corridor. And the rest slowly descended to the living room.

But not Jerry. Alone, he waited up there in the hall. Waited patiently, frowning, leaning against the wall, until Erik Zuydam reappeared.

A little while ago Mrs. Flanagan had told Jerry he might use the rear chamber on this floor. Now, as Zuydam approached, Jerry straightened. "I wish you'd come

into my room a few minutes," he said quietly. "I'd like to talk to you alone."

Zuydam narrowed suspicious eyes. "What for?"

"I'd rather not discuss it out here. Come inside. A smoke will do you good."

He caught the stout man's arm and firmly led him along the hall. When they entered his own chamber, Jerry Kanner lit the oil lamp. He offered the bald man a cigarette, and Zuydam accepted it with a trembling hand. It wasn't until both of them were smoking that Jerry said: "Look, Mr. Zuydam. I have an idea you know a great deal more about this whole mess than you've been willing to disclose. I take it you didn't care to speak in the presence of Caroline and Philip. Am I right?"

Zuydam raised his bald head. "What makes you think that?"

"I don't have to guess about it. Your attitude downstairs told more than words." Jerry sat down, regarded the plump man keenly, directly. "Look, Mr. Zuydam. Already two people have become the victims of that elephant affair, whatever it may be. So far we've worked out no defense against it. We don't know what it is or who it is. There's nothing to prevent it from getting Caroline and Philip and even you, as it threatened."

"But there's no reason for it to get me, I tell you!" hoarsely insisted Erik Zuydam.

"Maybe not. All the same, you read the note."

ZUYDAM gulped hard. He forgot the cigarette in his fingers. As the smoke streamed up about his head, he gaped emptily at the floor. A long, hushed interval passed before at last he looked haggardly at Jerry!

"Well," he whispered, "what is it you want?"

"The only way we can protect ourselves

against this thing is by understanding it. If you want to keep it to yourself, I suppose there's no way I can force you to talk. But what you're doing, actually, is sacrificing the lives of Caroline and Philip as well as your own. If you tell me what you know about this mess, this thing that leaves elephant tracks, maybe we can figure out some way of—of catching it."

"You don't understand, Mr. Kanner. I won't deny I know a great deal I haven't revealed. That's true. But I couldn't very well speak of it without—well, without throwing an ugly shadow over the life of Octavus Reardon."

Jerry nodded, eyed his cigarette. "That's what I thought," he muttered. "You didn't want to blacken the reputation of Octavus Reardon in the presence of his children."

"Exactly."

"But Reardon's gone. The best service you can render his children, to say nothing of yourself, is to tell what you know. It's only by having facts that we can fight intelligently."

At that, Zuydam's face hardened. For a few seconds the muscles of his jaws worked visibly. Then, grasping the arms of his chair, he bent forward tensely. "Maybe you're right, Mr. Kanner," he whispered. "Yes—I think you are!"

"Then you'll tell me?"

"I'll tell you what I know—but I'll count on you not to pass the information on to Octavus Reardon's children, unless it becomes absolutely unavoidable. Have I your promise?"

Jerry Kanner nodded.

"The story is this: Eight years ago I traveled in India with Octavus Reardon, when he ventured into the country just south of the Himalayas. While we were there we heard rumors of gold deposits in the foothills. The rumors emanated from a little village in which two boys—Hindu young men—were supposed to

know the location of those gold deposits. One night Octavus Reardon and a small party of his followers—among whom I don't mind confessing I traveled—kidnaped those two boys. We took them into the jungles. We demanded that they show us the way to the gold—and they refused. It seemed against their principles, if not their religion, to reveal such a thing to foreigners. Do I have to tell you that—that Octavus Reardon, when he wanted something, was often a ruthless man, a merciless man?"

"So I've heard."

"In this case he was more ruthless than ever before, because he saw tremendous wealth before him. When those two Indian boys refused to talk, he put them to torture. He tried all sorts of tricks—but the boys would give him no information. Finally he must have gone mad, berserk. The rest of us protested, but Octavus Reardon, who was the leader of our party, would listen to none of us. He took one of those two boys and he resorted to an old trick of torture. He bound the fellow's hands to the tail of an elephant, tied his legs to the tail of another elephant. Then, while his brother looked on, those two elephants were driven off—in opposite directions!"

Erik Zuydam stopped. His voice had fallen to a hoarse whisper. The scene he recreated brought Jerry Kanner sitting upright, incredulous, his eyes round.

"The Hindu boy was—torn apart?"

"In the presence of his brother, yes!"

AGAIN there was silence. Despite himself, Jerry Kanner shuddered. He rose, crushed his cigarette in a tray. "I don't much blame you," he mumbled thickly, "for not telling a thing like that in the presence of Caroline."

"That wasn't the end of it," bitterly said Erik Zuydam. "When Octavus Reardon took the ropes to the second boy and

threatened to do to him as he had done to his brother, the fellow collapsed. He began screaming he'd show us where the gold deposits were. Octavus Reardon was satisfied—it worked. For days thereafter we traveled through jungles, and the boy actually brought us to the gold. It made Octavus Reardon immensely wealthy."

"And what happened to that second boy?"

"We never knew. As soon as he showed us the deposits he vanished. Until that moment, of course, he'd been kept under rigid guard. But the excitement of discovering such a fortune made us forget for a while the presence of that second Indian boy. Yes, he disappeared. I suppose he—he went back to his village, told his father what had happened. It was a year later, when we were back in America, that Octavus Reardon received his first letter from the father of those two Hindu boys. Just seven years ago."

Jerry Kanner, who had begun to pace the room, whirled around. Standing rigid, he stared down at Erik Zuydam. "Did the father threaten vengeance?"

The bald head nodded helplessly.

"And you say this was seven years ago?"

"Yes. I saw that first letter myself. Octavus Reardon showed it to me. The father of those two Hindu boys said he was coming to America. Sooner or later, he swore, he'd repay Reardon for what he'd done. He said he'd do to Reardon's children what had been done to his son."

"So that," gasped Jerry, "explains the amputated leg! Retribution for the boy who was torn apart by elephants!"

"You'll soon begin to see a great many things," dryly said Erik Zuydam. He drew a long breath. He rose and steadied himself against a chair. "A week ago," he added, "Octavus Reardon received another letter from the father of those children. It told him the elephant was ready

to strike—that the elephant had never forgotten. You see the symbolic connection?"

"Of course! Go ahead."

"Reardon was really terrified. We were up here at the time, fishing. So he sent telegrams to his children at once, ordered them to join him on the island. He thought that here, on so small a spot, he could guard his family more effectively than anywhere else. Then two nights ago, when we saw the elephant tracks on the sand, we knew what that meant. It was a warning. It was a warning that the time had come. We've all gone armed since then, but what good has it done? Carl is dead. Octavus Reardon—"

Zuydam finished the fantastic story with a hopeless shake of his bald head. He went to the window, clasped his hands behind his back, and stared out haggardly into darkness.

For a long time Jerry Kanner said nothing. What if the "elephant" caught Caroline next? . . . Peering narrowly at Zuydam's broad back, he asked in a low voice: "How is it you have stuck with Reardon all these years?"

He saw Zuydam's thick shoulders shrug. Without turning from the window, the man replied: "I won't hide the truth from you, Mr. Kanner. What's the use? I have a helpless boy. Julius can't do anything for himself. He needs me to watch him. I'm not a rich man. For years I've accepted money from Reardon. I've lived on his charity. I suppose you'd call it a sort of blackmail."

"I see," Jerry said slowly. "He was paying you so you'd never tell what you saw him do in India. Is that it?"

"Put it that way, if you like."

"And Ram Amari?"

"Ram was with us, too, that time in India. I suppose that's why Reardon has been employing Ram all these years, pay-

ing him an exorbitant salary, to keep him quiet."

Stiffly Jerry sank to the arm of his chair. Glowering at the floor, he muttered: "So we've got to discover if the father of those Hindu boys is on this island—and who he may be."

"Either the father of those boys," grimly corrected Erik Zuydam, "or the brother who remained alive and escaped from us! Either one of them has ample motive to kill the Reardons—and to rip their bodies apart!"

THERE were sudden rapid knockings at the door. When Jerry called, "Come in," it flew open before Caroline Reardon. She looked more frantic than ever.

"Jerry!" she gasped. "What on earth are you doing?"

"Having a little talk," grimly.

"But what about Dad?" she cried. "Are we going to give him up for lost—just like this? Jerry, we've got to do something! We've got to! He may be dead—butchered like Carl!"

Jerry Kanner smiled twistedly. "Your Dad," he assured her, "is all right. He's down in the cellar."

A hush. . . . An incredulous "Wha-at!" from both Caroline and Zuydam. . . .

"Come on. We'll get him."

Had he dropped a bomb to the floor, Jerry couldn't have staggered them more effectively. The bald man moved away from the window, his face chalky, his hand trembling at his lips. "What—what is all this?" he croaked.

Jerry didn't look at him. He went out of the room, down the stairs. From a table in the lower corridor he took a lamp. Holding it above his head, he led the way down the cellar steps. He knew he was being followed not only by Caroline and Zuydam, but by Philip and Ram Amari now, too; and even the chunky Bob Harrow, drawn magnetically by a

sense of impending surprise, came running from the kitchen where he'd been having coffee with Mrs. Flannagan.

They found Octavus Reardon sprawling in a corner of the dark cellar, behind a couple of barrels. His ankles and his wrists were firmly bound. A burlap rag gagged his mouth. When the yellow lamp-light splashed over him, he glared up at Jerry Kanner in almost insane rage. His gray hair, dangling in disarray over his forehead, lent him an aspect of wildness that was terrifying.

"Dad!" gasped Caroline. Like Phil, she plunged to her knees, tearing frenziedly at the ropes that bound her father.

Jerry Kanner gently thrust the girl aside. Taking her place, he began to loose the knots that held Reardon captive. And as he worked, he confessed quietly: "I'm to blame for this. While we all searched the island before, I followed your father, waited till I had him alone. Nobody saw what happened. I had to jam a gun into his back to force him to come along. We entered the house the back way. I made him come here into the cellar, tied him up and gagged him. . . . Sorry I had to give you all such a bad scare."

"But why?" gasped Philip Reardon, seizing Jerry's shoulder. "What was the idea of doing a thing like this?"

Jerry didn't turn his head. He seemed unaware of the grip that shook him. In a voice whose quietness didn't alter, he explained to Caroline: "It was pretty evident that your father was holding a lot back from us. Also, considering the fact that Erik Zuydam and Ram Amari had been with him a good many years, I had an idea they, too, knew more than they were willing to spill. On the other hand, your life was in danger, Caroline—so was yours, Phil—and I felt that any trick I might resort to would be a justifiable protective measure."

"But Jerry—" Caroline began, aghast.

JERRY was still working industriously at the knots as he continued. "I had a notion that if everybody thought your father was done for, there wouldn't be much reason to suppress his story. If he were considered dead, there'd be no point in Zuydam's or Ram's continuing to respect his secret. It was only by finding out what that secret was, it seemed to me, that we could effectively fight whatever it is that's menacing this island. That's why I hid your father down here. I wanted to make Erik Zuydam and Ram Amari believe he was dead; wanted them to understand what further secrecy might mean—not only to you and Phil, but to themselves. That's why I wrote the last note and shoved it under the kitchen door."

"You did that?" cried Philip in outrage. "You?"

"Sure." Jerry couldn't control a tight grin. "I threatened Erik Zuydam, too, you noticed. It kind of scared you, didn't it?" Over his shoulder he glanced at the stout, bald man whose face was dripping perspiration. "Anyhow—" He had been about to add: "It worked. I got the story." He decided, however, to leave the words unspoken. They might necessitate too many immediate explanations.

So he unbound Octavus Reardon in silence. When at last the gray-haired man staggered to his feet, he leaned against the wall, glared at Jerry in unutterable fury, then suddenly and unexpectedly swung a tremendous fist at Jerry's head.

Fortunately it missed.

Before Reardon could attack again, both Caroline and Philip intervened, pinning him back against the wall, begging him to stop. Reardon fixed flaming eyes on Jerry, shouted: "This ends you! You'll get off this island! If I ever set eyes on you again, I'll beat the life out of you! Understand?"

Jerry Kanner shrugged. "You can order me off the island, all right," he conceded.

"The place is yours. But I can't leave before daylight. There's no boat."

"What in thunder gave you the idea you could carry on high-handed methods like this?" Reardon roared.

"You forget," dryly explained Jerry, "that I'm in love with your daughter. I figured any measures calculated to protect her life would be justifiable."

"So you took it on yourself to play detective?" savagely.

Jerry Kanner didn't reply. Looking quizzically about the dark cellar he encountered enraged glares everywhere. It was only in Caroline's haggard features that he perceived a hint of understanding. He didn't object to the fury of the others. After all, he told himself, his strategy had succeeded. He now knew the reason for Octavus Reardon's terror and for the "elephantine" menace that was hanging over the man's family.

Jerry backed as far as the stairs. Reaching them, he looked over the eerily lit cellar, smiled tightly. "Sorry I gave you all such a tough time, but believe me, it was worth it!"

"It was cheating!" screamed Erik Zuydam, starting forward belligerently, one arm raised high. "You deliberately tricked me into telling you—"

Jerry Kanner didn't wait to hear the rest. He turned and ran up the stairs.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Invisible Elephant

WHAT monstrosity had left elephant tracks in the sand? That was still a problem. . . . Jerry hurried down the gravel path that led to the little jetty. As he strode through darkness, his shoulders hunched against the wind, his hands were sunk in his pockets. One of them gripped the automatic.

He thought hard as he went. His mind was functioning lucidly again. And it was

engaged at the moment in a process of elimination.

Besides himself, there were six men on Evergreen Island: the two Reardons, Erik and Julius Zuydam, Ram Amari, and Bob Harrow. It was difficult to believe that any one of them was responsible for the hideous butchery of Carl Reardon; and yet, unless some undiscovered being were hidden on the place, what other conclusion could he reach?

Of course, if Carl had been murdered during the time Caroline was on the mainland to meet Jerry at the station, that fact eliminated Bob Harrow from suspicion. Harrow had been with the girl. Also, it was hardly likely that either Octavus Reardon or Phil would have murdered Carl. With those three eliminated, only Ram Amari, Erik Zuydam and his half-witted son Julius remained.

When Jerry reached the jetty he scowled down at the half-sunk motorboat. If, he told himself, he could determine who it was that had hacked a hole in the craft, the chances were he'd also identify the murderer.

"If the boat was scuttled with an ax," he muttered, "it's likely the ax wasn't hidden far from here. Nobody would be fool enough to go running over the island with the thing in his hand—especially while everybody was out hunting a possible murderer. He'd have too much explaining to do if he were found. And if he contemplated other crimes of the same nature he'd need the weapon handy."

So, working on the theory that the ax might be concealed close to the jetty, Jerry began a systematic search. Starting at a point fifty feet north of the little dock, he moved slowly southward. He stooped low, bending bushes and peering under them. He went back and forth again and again, hunting everywhere. But after half an hour he straightened and shook his head.

So far there was no trace of the ax—an implement which, possibly, might offer significant fingerprints. Uncertainly he looked about through the darkness. And then his glance swerved to the jetty itself.

It was built low over the water. Its platform, as a matter of fact, was scarcely ten inches above the surface. Erected on poles, it lay on the cove almost like a raft. Still, he saw there was a space of two or three inches between the sideboards of the jetty and the water. Probably at low tide that space was considerably widened.

What it was that gave Jerry Kanner the idea, he never knew. But frowning, he acted on it. He went out on the jetty, stretched himself flat on his stomach, lowered his head over the side until his hair actually dangled in the water. In that position, he was able to look up at the under side of the little dock.

AT THE beginning the utter blackness blinded him. He straightened again, brought a few matches out of his pocket, and made another effort. His arm was soaked as he thrust a flaming match through the little space between the sideboards and the water. Very effectively, however, the tiny flame illuminated the under section of the jetty.

And what Jerry saw tore a gasp from him.

The bottom of the dock was like an inverted box. Into its sides hooks had been fitted. Two of them, he saw, supported a long fire ax! And the others—

Thrust into concealment under the dock were four long poles, like stilts. One end of each displayed a strap that might readily fit around a man's ankle. The other ends were fixed to what appeared to be stumps of wood some seven inches in diameter. The match went out.

When Jerry lit another, he saw in

amazement that those wooden stumps were carved in very definite shapes. Carved, he saw, in the outline of elephant's feet!

That was when he heard somebody running along the path.

He dropped the match, straightened abruptly, and scrambled to his feet. His hand dived into a pocket to seize the automatic. But it didn't emerge. For he saw Ram Amari coming toward the dock. And Ram cried in relief: "Sahib, they have been looking for you!"

"What for?"

"Miss Caroline was afraid something might have happened. They haven't seen you in half an hour. She asked me to look!"

"Anything new at the house?"

"No—except they are worrying about you, sahib."

Jerry nodded. For a while he peered narrowly at the tense, dark face of Ram Amari. Then, stepping close to the man, he spoke in a low voice: "Listen Ram," he asked, "the people of northern India—are they very dark-complexioned?"

The question startled Ram Amari. He stared. "Some of them," he admitted after a pause. "But they are not quite as dark as the people of the south, of course."

"Not as dark as you?"

"Oh, no, sahib."

Jerry, frowning, considered the dock thoughtfully. On sudden impulse he groped in his inner pocket. Out of it he produced a pencil and a scrap of paper. "Ram," he said tersely, "will you write something for me in Hindustani?"

"In Hindustani? Why, sahib?"

"A great deal may depend on it—the lives of Miss Caroline and of Philip."

"But—"

Jerry thrust the paper into Ram Amari's hand. "You can write Hindustani, can't you?"

"Oh, yes, sahib. But—"

"Then put down what I tell you."

For a moment Ram Amari still hesitated. He regarded Jerry Kanner suspiciously, narrowly. But abruptly he drew in a swift breath, nodded his sleek head, and turned to rest the paper on a lifted knee. "Very well, sahib. What do you wish me to write?"

Jerry Kanner slowly dictated. "Translate this into Hindustani—I have found the elephant's feet under the jetty."

Ram jerked up his head in amazement. His lips parted. But before he could ask any questions, Jerry rapped out: "And sign it with your own name!"

Despite his bewilderment, the Hindu complied without offering a word of objection. But his face was drawn and tense, and his eyes were filled with incredulity, darting again and again to the dock. He had scarcely completed writing the message when Jerry looked up to see Bob Harrow running down the path.

"Say, Mr. Kanner!" Harrow called in relief. "We been hunting everywhere for you!"

"I'll be up at the house in a minute," promised Jerry. Then he took the paper from Ram Amari's hands and thrust it out to Bob Harrow. "Here," he directed, "take this up to Octavus Reardon and watch him closely while he reads it, will you, Harrow? I want to know how he reacts to the news!"

WITHIN ten minutes the whole crowd stood assembled on the rickety jetty. They shivered in the cool sea wind. But nobody was conscious of cold. All of them stared with round, dazed eyes at the exhibition Jerry Kanner had laid out.

Four lanterns illuminated the scene with their ghastly light. The ax lay to one side. Whatever blood and fingerprints it might have contained had been effectively removed by a dipping in the water. Near the ax lay the four curious stilts with their grotesquely carved feet.

Nobody spoke until Jerry, squatting beside the collection of trophies, peered up narrowly at Octavus Reardon.

"This explains almost everything," he muttered grimly. He looked quickly at Caroline. "You don't know the story yet," he told her, "so you probably won't understand the details. I—I'll leave it to your father to tell you the things that happened in India."

He scowled back at the stilts, lifted one closer to a lantern. As he turned it in his hands, he snapped: "This much becomes pretty clear now, Mr. Reardon. Somebody was trying to fill you with terror even before he attempted murder. The terror, I suppose, was part of his vengeance, like the warning notes."

"Listen," began Octavus Reardon, "I—"

"I learned the Indian story from Erik Zuydam," dryly cut in Jerry without raising his head. He continued as if there had been no interruption. "Yes, the elephant tracks were put on the sand so that you'd suffer a little agony of mind before any murder occurred. As I see it, a man could easily strap two of these stilts to his arms, two more to his legs, and with a little practice he could move along on all fours. In that way he'd leave tracks on the sand that might in darkness be construed to resemble an elephant's prints. He certainly carved those pieces of wood in the shape of elephant's feet, all right."

"But who?" cried the fat Erik Zuydam, his voice harsh. "Do you mean there's somebody hidden on this island—"

"No," said Jerry "The murderer is right here."

On the jetty the little group of people stood in deadly silence. Beyond the cove the sea roared incessantly. And through the trees above the wind moaned. But nobody heard those sounds. Every eye was fastened in a kind of horror on

Jerry Kanner's tense, lifted countenance.

"Mr. Reardon," Jerry rapped out, "some of the others here won't know what we're talking about. But you and I can figure things out together. We know, for example, that it's eight years since the incident of the two elephants and the boys in India."

Reardon gulped hard, swayed. He swept a wild, frightened glance from Caroline to Philip. But neither of them was watching him. They were staring in a trance at Jerry Kanner.

And Jerry went on heavily: "Suppose the father of those two boys had come to America immediately after you. He wouldn't have had much trouble learning our idioms. He probably knew English in India. All he'd have had to do was acquire an American accent. That can be done in seven years."

Jerry paused, pointed down to the stilts.

"It takes time to make things of this sort. Weeks, I should judge, simply to carve those elephant feet. Nobody could have done it while the rest of you were here on the island. But we know that Bob Harrow—as he calls himself—spent a great deal of time here alone, winter and summer. He was caretaker of the place while you weren't around. He could have made these stilts and hidden them—"

There was a gasp from the stocky, dark-complexioned Harrow.

JERRY looked at him narrowly. "Harrow," he snapped. "The way I figure it, you're the only one here—outside of Mr. Zuydam and Mr. Reardon—old enough to have been the father of those boys in India. You're pretty dark. A bit of skin bleaching could have lightened your original complexion. The only thing that had me puzzled about you was the fact that you'd been working here four years without making a move—and that you didn't look like a Hindu."

"Listen," hoarsely began Harrow, "I—"

"Suppose you let me finish," icily cut in Jerry. "As I see it now, you probably didn't want to die for what you were going to do to Reardon and his children. So, after you got a job with Octavus Reardon—who'd never seen you in India—you took your time. You decided that if you could work for the man a few years, the police would never suspect you of being his enemy. Yes, you waited four full years on this island. Then you sent Reardon a warning, telling him his children were in immediate danger. Reardon did exactly what you expected him to do—brought the young folks here under the family roof, where he could watch them. So at last you had them all on the island and you were ready to start."

"Lies!" roared Harrow, eyes blazing.

"The final thing that stumped me," said Jerry, advancing on the man, "was the fact that you looked more New England than India. That was why I had Ram Amari write that note in Hindustani. I thought I'd go up to the house and ask you to give that note to Mr. Reardon. But you saved me the trouble by coming to the jetty. I gave you the paper, trailed you along the path. As soon as you thought you were alone, you unfolded it, read it. Most New Englanders wouldn't know Hindustani from Amharic. But you, Harrow, read that note intently. By the expression that swept over your face, I knew you understood it. You whirled around in a kind of terror. Then you probably thought the safest thing to do would be to deliver the message and take your chances after that. So, since you'd murdered Carl tonight before going to the mainland, you—"

Jerry Kanner could go no further. At that instant Bob Harrow, crouching like an ape, ripped an automatic out of his pocket! He leveled it straight at the

crowd on the jetty. There was insane ferocity in his square face.

"All right!" he flung out hoarsely. And to Jerry's amazement, he hurled a stream of Hindu invective straight at Octavus Reardon. What the words were, Jerry couldn't understand. But finally Harrow returned to English.

"The man is right!" he grated. "I wanted to get your children first—the way you got my son—and leave you for the end! But I've changed my plans, Reardon. You're first!"

With the words, he fired. A crack, a jet of flame—and Octavus Reardon clutched frantic hands to his throat. He staggered, reeled.

Caroline screamed, sprang to him. So did Philip. But they were too late. Octavus Reardon pitched sideward to crash on the jetty. Even as he struck, two other weapons roared. One blasted flame from the hip of Erik Zuydam. The second crashed in Ram Amari's lifted hand.

Both bullets must have struck Bob Harrow at once. He threw his arms skyward. A shriek of agony ripped out of his throat. In the lurid light of the lanterns, Jerry Kanner could see a spurt of blood stream down the man's nose from the center of his forehead. Then Harrow fell backwards to splash into the cove.

Exactly what happened during the next few seconds, Jerry didn't know. He saw half the crowd kneeling over the prostrate figure of Octavus Reardon. He saw Ram Amari and Julius peering down into the water for a glimpse of Harrow's body.

Jerry himself remained motionless. His face was grave, hard and colorless. Once he glanced quickly at Caroline, sobbing over her father.

"It'll be dawn soon," he thought. "We'll be able to see boats and send for the police—though God knows what they can do here now! No, the elephant never forgets!"

READY for the RACKETS

A Department

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 to thwart them, guard against them, is a foreknowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in telling us your own personal experiences with chislers and con men of various sorts. It is our intention to publicize—withholding your names, if you wish—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. The following is the second letter from a flood of interesting material that has reached us from you reader-reporters. It's an example of exactly the type of thing we want. Address all material to The Racket Editor—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 E. 42nd St., N. Y.

Westmont, N. J.
July 19, 1935.

Dear Editor:

Enclosed is my story of a racket aimed directly at gullible, unemployed young men who chance to own a car.

I had been out of work a month and in looking over the 'want-ad' section of a Camden paper came upon an 'ad' which read much as the following:

Salesman, covering Camden County wishes to employ a reliable young man owning late model car. Salary \$3.50 per day and gas. Refs. Box No. 7.

About ten o'clock the following morning I received an answer to my reply. As I was out looking for work when my mother took the phone message which was to the effect that a Mr. H. had considered my reply and wished to interview me that evening at seven.

Shortly before the appointed time set for the interview, I presented myself at Mr. H.'s one-room apartment and presented my credentials to him.

To be brief, he accepted my credentials as 'the best he had received' and we were ready to go into the details of my new-found position.

The proposition ran as follows:

He was the traveling route manager for a reducing compound company whose product was a warranted, money-back-if-not-satisfied, reducing salts for overstout people.

The product itself was not for sale by stores but only could be had directly from the factory. He had an established route in the county of steady customers and same route took six days to cover calling at each customer's home.

As Mr. H. had a lame left leg, he was incapable of driving a car himself, thus the 'ad' in the paper, as his former driver 'had proved dishonest'.

I was to do no selling for the first week, just drive him about the route and study his method of selling. After I had mastered his routine and become acquainted with the regular customers, he would turn the territory over to me with a good salary and commission, while he went to develop a new route.

Some days he would be unable to go with me and I would have to collect considerable sums of money as the product was only delivered C. O. D.

At this point he explained that his previous driver had yielded to temptation, realizing that he collected far more in a day than Mr. H. paid him in weeks.

Therefore, he was sorry but he must ask a cash bond of \$35, which would be returned to me when I was given the Camden route.

I swore I'd have the money for him next morning by noon. He reminded me to meet him with the cash—NO CHECKS—the next morning, and I raced home to break the good news to the folks. We were broke, knew no friends from whom we could borrow it but at last hit on an idea of a finance company.

My poor dad, along with my mother went early next morning to a loan office, dad losing a half day's work to do so.

At eleven sharp I was at Mr. H.'s apartment. I found four other fellows there who had already paid him and were reporting for work—and smart boy H. had vanished into thin air, no clues—not even waiting to risk getting my \$35.

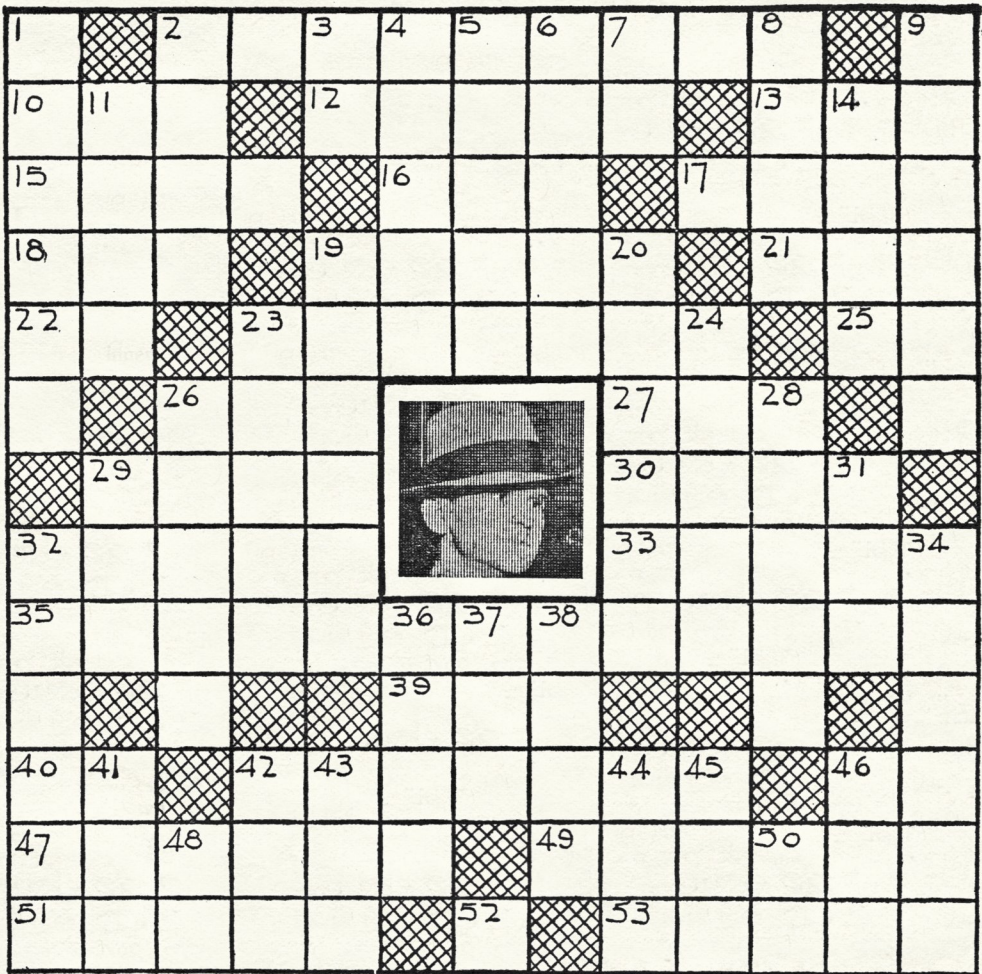
To close, seven fellows who did raise the money swore out warrants for his arrest. My dad lost a half day's work and I had to return my \$35 to the finance company plus interest on the loan. Finale—Found out no such compound ever existed; the circulars, labels and contents were all false.

J. LESLIE LEES.

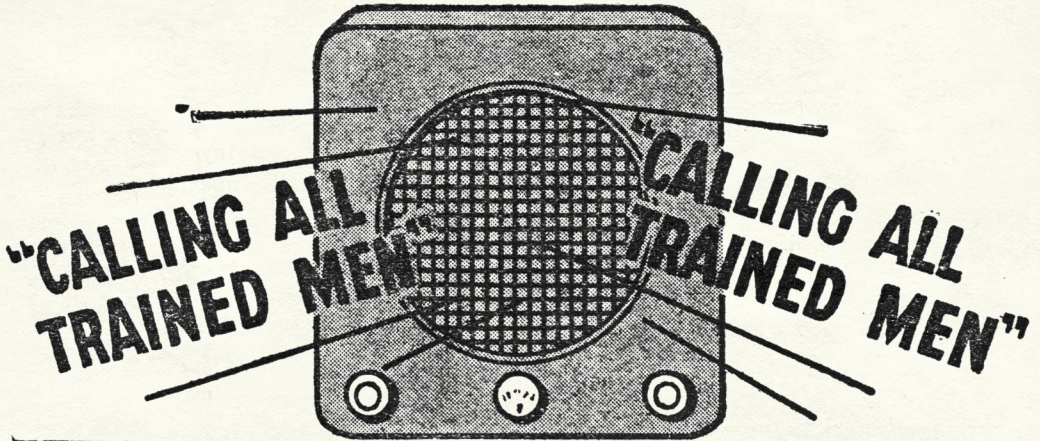
CROSS ROADS OF CRIME

by

RICHARD HOADLEY TINGLEY



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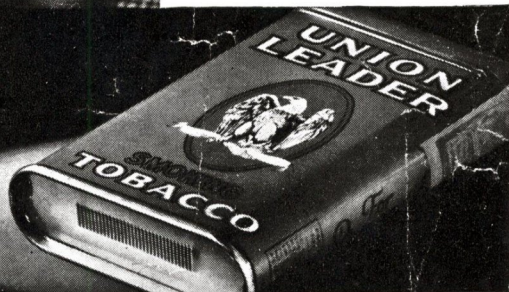
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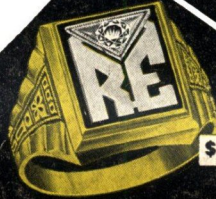


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