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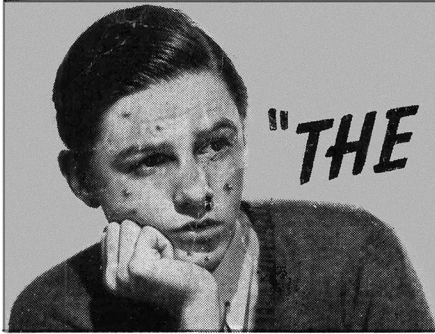


LESLIE T. WHITE
JOHN LAWRENCE
AND MANY OTHERS

THE **SIGN OF MURDER**
A CARDIGAN STORY
By **FREDERICK NEBEL**

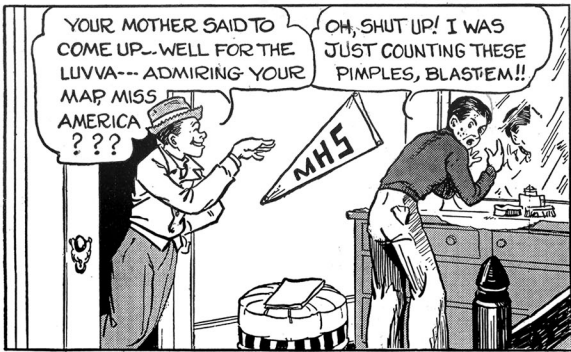
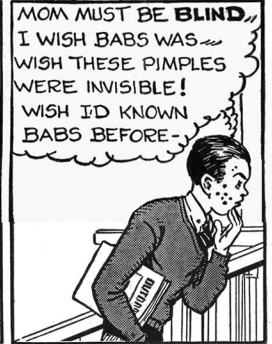


THE **CASE OF THE
SILENT GIANTESS**
A CARTER COLE STORY
by **FREDERICK C. DAVIS**



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EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW

Vol. 20

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Watch that big dick from Cosmos spill out

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That put the "Not Guilty" tag on the Bourke girl when lead poison for Ivy was in the cards.

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Watch for the April Issue

On the Newsstands March 5th

Published once a month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second class matter June 29, 1935, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyrighted 1935 by Popular Publications, Inc. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscriptions in U. S. A. \$1.00. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although all care will be exercised in handling them.

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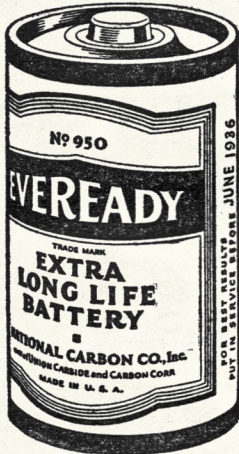
But Edward Eiskamp and Six Companions Cheated Death in Underground Maze

Edward Eiskamp who, with six companions, had this thrilling experience in the Sam's Point caves in the wilds of the Catskills.

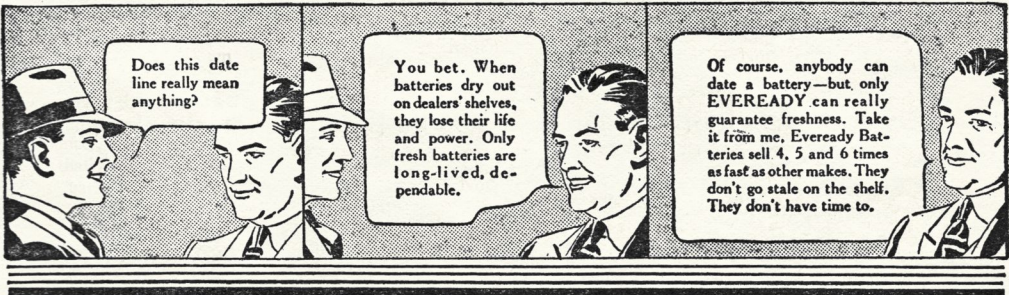


"*Splash . . .* our tiny rock-bound world went black! I had dropped our flashlight into a pool of icy water at the very bottom of that cavern-maze that burrows for miles in every direction under the Catskills. Without light, here was our living tomb. In weeks or months or years someone would find seven skeletons in this crypt.

"But the light continued to burn. Up through eight feet of water came the bright halo of hope. We fished up that flashlight, and those powerful fresh Eveready Batteries lighted our way back from Eternity."

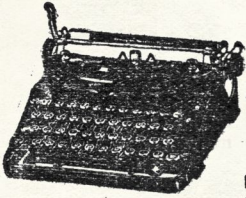


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Dear Sir:—

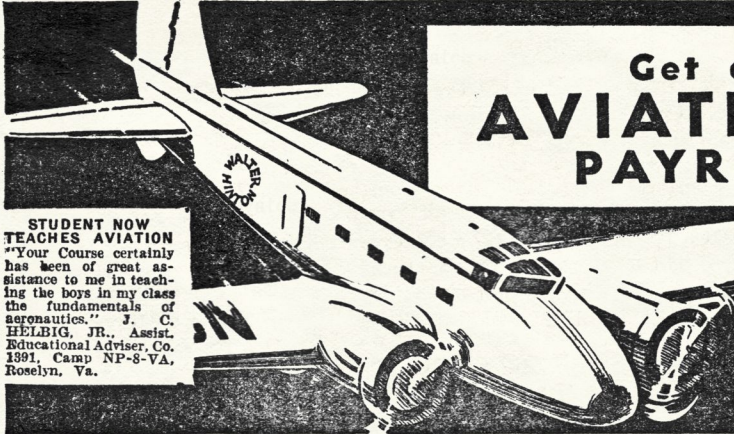
Here's a smooth one. My friend Midge (not his name but it will serve here) has a house, a wife, a sixteen year old boy and a dog. Pal, the dog, is well mannered and a gentleman on four feet. He wouldn't hurt a fly. Two weeks ago a man rang Midge's doorbell. Pal was on the lawn, barking furiously. The man had a stout cane in his hand, a three cornered tear in his trouser leg, blood on his leg and apparently deep indignation in his soul. He claimed to have been walking innocently by on the sidewalk when without warning, the dog attacked him. He could secure witnesses he said. What was Midge going to do about it? Profuse apologies and twenty bucks from Midge squared it.

Four days later a business friend of Midge's told him a similar story. The two got together on it and the dog-mauled man's description tallied. The thing smelled and Midge mentioned it at home.

Midge's boy—a potential Wm. J. Burns—happened quite by chance, to see Mr. Dog-bite Victim on the street several days later. Some high class shadowing—business of cane shaking at somebody's pet dog until he barked and growled—business of doorbell ringing et cetera—a hasty telephone call to Dad from a drug store by an excited sixteen-year-old, all followed.

Midge got on the 'phone to the police. Would Mr. Midge appear against the man to give evidence? Well—oh all right if absolutely necessary. It was unnecessary. Complete confession followed arrest.

Yours truly,
R. A. B.



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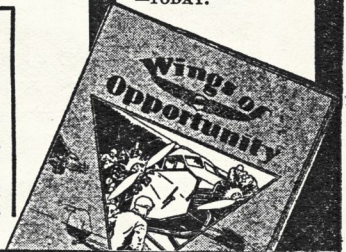


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EX-COP

YOU may recall, a couple or three issues past, that we ran a column under the caption *Author's Correction*, and made a plea to you DIME DETECTIVE fans to crash through with an occasional "reader's correction" when you spotted an error in fact, or some glaring improbability, in one of the yarns herein. You've done nobly to date and we appreciate your interest as do the authors on whom your wrath has fallen—not always correctly aimed wrath we hasten to add, leaping to the defense of ourselves and our prize fictioneers—but appreciated nevertheless as an indication of the properly critical and interested spirit. In the next issue we'll let you have a look at a couple of the devastating barbs hurled at us—and also show how the authors concerned parry them.

All of which is mere prelude to a few words about the author of *Matches in Hell*, Mr. Leslie T. White (Inspector White, to give him his old title) and one author you're going to have to get up before daylight to catch in any errors where police routine or investigative procedure is concerned. Like Erle Stanley Gardner and Arthur Train, who were successful practising lawyers before they started to write stories with legal twists to them; like Mary Roberts Rinehart, who was a trained nurse and the wife of a doctor before she wrote fiction laid around hospitals and the medical profession—Leslie T. White was for years a practising detective in the Los Angeles district attorney's office. He knows his stuff, knew it thoroughly before he ever wrote a line of crime fiction, and in his new series about Todd Naughton, arson dick, you can be sure you're getting authentic background as well as neat plot and exciting action. He's going to alternate the Naughton stories with more about Duke Martindel and his criminal-lawyer wife.

And here's a tip-off. His book—an autobiography of his crook-chasing days—will appear soon. We'll tip you off as to publication date when it's officially announced.

The Editor.

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MATCHES IN HELL

By Leslie T. White

Author of "Mother of Murder," etc.





He fired into a wall of flame.

Todd Naughton, arson dick, knew the old maxim about the uselessness of matches in Hades. But it wasn't till he tangled with that trio of fire-bugs who were ringing in three-alarm murders week after week that he realized the old proverb could have a double meaning—with a blazing kick-back at each end.

CHAPTER ONE

Arson Dick

TODD NAUGHTON, hunched in the lee of the thundering pumper, glared at the tottering front wall of the Bilsky Building. While searchlights

played across the gutted structure, tongues of flame licked against the night sky and smoke billowed from the windows to bend hungrily toward neighboring roofs, mocking the water-wall thrown up by the blackened fire-fighters.

An ambulance wailed into the night.

In obedience to the hoarse shouts of battalion chiefs, a dozen nozzles arched as many streams of water into the inferno, which returned most of it as steam and dirty spray. An aerial truck churned up front, started to rise as screaming sirens heralded the arrival of another second-alarm company.

Naughton cursed, and moved back to the police lines. There was nothing an arson dick could do until that smoky hell was conquered—nothing, that is, save keep his eyes open and his mouth shut. An ache of frustration came over him; this fire would be like the others—incendiary—but the evidence would go spiraling up in those coils of brown smoke, his reputation with it. He glimpsed a white helmet bearing down on him and braced himself.

CHIEF SLATTERY'S white slicker was black-streaked; so was his smoke-bitten face. His iron-gray mustache was singed and damp, but there was nothing smoky about his eyes. They glittered like buffed globules of case-hardened steel.

"Naughton!" he spat through blistered lips. "This is another one! Started like those other eight—and all within two months. That's an average of one a week in your district!"

The arson dick nodded, glum. Since Slattery spoke the bitter truth, there was little he could reply. There was no use trying to alibi or kid the Old Man; Slattery had been eating smoke since Naughton was a baby.

"I've covered every known bug in town," Naughton said between clenched teeth. "It's outside talent. I'm doing my best . . ." His words trailed off in the noisy confusion as Number 11 Company began laying out their lines.

A battalion chief bellowed for the Old Man. Slattery flung him an answer over

his shoulder, swung back on Naughton.

"You're best isn't good enough! I've sent two of my boys to the hospital tonight—that makes nine since this damn series began. By God, Naughton, I don't mean to lose any more! Either turn in the bugs responsible for these fires, or turn in your badge! This is your last fire. Naughton—one more, an' s' help me, you're through!"

His eyes flamed emphasis to his words. Then he turned abruptly and tramped over the maze of hose checkering the ground.

Naughton didn't blame the Old Man; it was only too true about the eight fires. Within the short space of two months they had destroyed well over a million dollars' worth of property and—what worried Slattery more than any financial losses—had seriously injured a number of firemen. The conflagrations had all been incendiary, deliberate arson. Naughton's job, on the arson squad, was to find out how the fires were started, by whom, and to get enough evidence to convict those guilty.

That was the rub—evidence. In a murder case, a dick can search the theater of the crime. He may find the lethal weapon to trace; he's pretty certain to find something. Robbery is much the same—fingerprints, entry marks, or perhaps a trace of the loot. But in arson, if the bug knows his business—and Naughton had to admit these arsonists certainly were adept—the fire itself is the confederate that covers, or wipes out entirely, all evidence.

It was no trick to learn that these fires were incendiary in origin; they were much too perfect to be anything else. The timing—the theater-hour when the streets were flooded with traffic to hold up the departmental apparatus; the too-casual arrangement of draughts that gave the flames a quick impetus; and always the

air-tight alibis of tenants or owners who stood to gain.

No, it was no trick to know the jobs were arson. It was the *how* and *by whom* that stumped Naughton. The insurance companies were making their own investigations and voicing ugly rumors about collusion. The fire department blistered under the criticism and looked to the arson squad for its defense. So Slattery, when Naughton couldn't get results, had issued his ultimatum—"Turn in the bugs . . . or turn in your badge!"

A disturbance along the police lines caught Naughton's attention. He saw a short, fat man break free of the restraining officer and charge, wailing, toward the blazing building. His crazy rush, however, terminated in the arms of a smoke-blackened ladderman who all but heaved his hysterical catch into the ready grasp of the pursuing policeman. Despite the squawls and gesticulations of the fat man, the cop propelled him back to the roped-off safety zone.

Naughton scowled, went over. He recognized the dumpy figure as Max Bilsky who leased the upper four stories of the six-storied building bearing his name. Bilsky operated a suit-manufacturing plant. His blatant, gold-lettered sign that read *The Home of Klassy Klothes* had fallen before the second alarm went out.

AS the arson dick came up, Bilsky was frantically shrieking his identity to the unsympathetic cop. The excited manufacturer spotted Naughton, whom he knew by sight, and clawed at him. "Tell him—the *gonif!*" he shrieked. "Tell him he's gotta let me by! This is my business, ain't it?"

"Was a business," the cop corrected, unimpressed.

Bilsky wiped sweat from his moon-face. "I'm ruined, ruined!" he wailed.

The cop exchanged glances with

Naughton. "Yeah?" he breathed cynically.

Naughton squirmed from the clutch of the manufacturer. "There's nothing you could do in there now, man. Why the roof went down nearly half an hour ago! You're covered by insurance, aren't you?"

Bilsky emitted a strangled sob. "Maybe in part," he groaned. "I got some coverage with Transcontinental Fire. But I had a lot of stuff in there what wasn't protected. I'll lose my trade . . . *oi!*"

"Just hear about it?" Naughton queried.

Bilsky took his hat off to wipe the sweat-band with a grimy handkerchief. The glow of the fire found a scarlet mirror in his bald pate. "Sure I just heard! Me, I got dinner with my alderman and seats for a show. My wife she call the box-office and say, 'Maxie, Maxie, we are ruined . . . !'"

The cop looked at Naughton, and a sardonic grin toyed with the corner of his mouth; he was a veteran of this sort of thing and knew an iron-bound alibi when he heard one.

So did Todd Naughton. If Bilsky was with his alderman, the arson dick would have to look elsewhere for his evidence. He murmured a word of sympathy—it had a sour note, however—to Bilsky, and melted into the crowd. He elbowed his way through and circled over to the south corner where the police had a sort of improvised field-headquarters.

A hand touched his arm, held him. He turned to face a girl, and the man with her. "Todd! I've been watching for you—knew you must be somewhere on the ground. Oh, it's terrible, isn't it?"

Clare MacGilray came of a smoke-eating family; there was no morbid fascination for flame and sooty smoke in her.

Naughton nodded glumly. "It's pretty bad," he admitted. "Slattery tells me two of the boys were hurt. He didn't say who."

The man who stood beside the girl answered. "Knuteson of Number Seven was struck on the shoulder when the sign fell. The other one was Torrence. You knew him, didn't you?"

Naughton winced. "Young Torrence of Number Nine? Lord, yes! Hurt bad, Rolph?"

"I'm afraid so. Caught inside. Chest, I heard. Isn't expected to come out of it, poor devil."

Naughton's mouth tightened. "You'd better take Clare and swing over to the other side," he suggested grimly. "If that wall goes, the mob may stampede this way."

Rolph nodded. "I had the same thought. Perhaps we'd better shift now, Clare." He put his palm under the girl's elbow but she pulled free and grabbed Naughton by the arm.

"Todd, have you seen Keith?" Keith was Clare's younger brother.

Naughton frowned. "No, is he here?"

"Somebody said they saw him around. He worries me sick the way he prowls around these fires. I'm so afraid—"

"I'll keep my eye peeled, Clare. Now, don't you worry—" He stopped as he heard his name called. Turning, he saw a soot-streaked driver barging through the police lines. "Here, Clancy!" he shouted to guide the fireman.

The driver lumbered over. He was tired, and showed it. His rubber slicker was torn and his boots slogged on the wet pavement. The scarlet number on his helmet was bent double and his eyes were smoky and bloodshot.

"The Old Man's combiner the lines for you," he rasped harshly. "Get over to St. Barnabas hospital. Torrence has come to. He's askin' for you. He found somethin' in there"—he gestured toward the gutted structure—"before he got jammed. For God's sake step on it! He's . . . dyin'!" He

sobbed out the last word and swung sharply away.

NAUGHTON swore. As he turned back to the girl, they heard the hoarse shouts of police officers trying to force the safety lines back. A strange rumbling came from the doomed building. Flame danced more madly above the tottering front wall.

"Get back, Clare!" Naughton growled. "Rolph, take her back of the lines. You can see just as much from there and this wall is about ready to collapse. They're calling off the boys from this side."

"But Keith—" began the girl.

Naughton waved her away. "I'll have the boys watch out for him. Now you two got to get out of here."

Rolph gently forced the girl back into the crowd as Naughton swiveled and elbowed his way over to a cluster of headquarters men. He cursed young Keith; the damned kid wanted to be a smoke-eater like his father had been before him, but he was only seventeen and too puny for the hard training involved. But he was Claire's brother and old Duncan MacGilray's son—and that meant a whole lot to Todd Naughton.

He located the lieutenant in charge of the uniformed coppers and asked him, as a personal favor, to have the boys try to spot young MacGilray and keep him beyond the lines.

"That damn youngster hasn't missed a blaze since he could walk," grumbled the lieutenant. "O. K., Todd, we'll ride herd on him."

Naughton had lost precious minutes in seeking the lieutenant, but now, having fulfilled his promise to Clare, he roughly shouldered his way through the gaping throng. As he neared the outskirts of the crowd, he heard the audible gasp from a thousand throats. He paused. Over the clamor came the harsh, half-scream of

old Slattery . . . answering shouts . . . the measured thunder of the big pumper's mechanical heart . . . then a weird moment of calm during which brown smoke billowed skyward . . . and the rear of the crumbling wall.

Even Naughton was gripped by the scene. A hoarse bellow went up from the crowd, fused with the thunder of crashing masonry and the screaming orders of the battalion chiefs. Then, as though a million scarlet floodlights had been turned on, a hot glow lighted the tense, eager faces of the throng.

Naughton whipped around and charged down the street. He found his own car wedged against the curb by a double-parked sedan. He had to find a cop to help him move the machine and while the cop, at Naughton's angry suggestion, started to write out a traffic tag for the delinquent and absent owner of the double-parked, Naughton pulled his roadster away from the curb, knuckled on the siren and roared across town toward the hospital.

Churning through the traffic, his mind was on the injured fireman. He always hated to hear of any of the boys getting cracked up, but Ernie Torrence was his friend; it had been Torrence who had first taken him up to old Duncan MacGilray's house, the mecca of all the smoke-eaters in the district.

The sudden coughing of his engine jerked Naughton back to his immediate job. The machine sputtered a few times—and died almost in the middle of an intersection. Naughton swore savagely, jockeyed it over to the curb and jumped out before it had stopped rolling. The cop on the corner panted up; he had heard the siren. Naughton ordered him to call the official garage and have the "damn thing" towed in, then he ran into the street and commandeered a passing coupe.

Five minutes later they pulled up in front of St. Barnabas.

Naughton growled his thanks and charged up the stone stairs. He started to punch open the front door when he glimpsed three men run from the side of the building and dive into a cab parked in the shadow of the drive. He recognized none of the trio but something about their movements gave him the impression that they had sought to avoid him. He hesitated an instant, wondering, then with a shake of his head, pushed inside the hospital. It must be his imagination was getting the better of him.

NAUGHTON did not pause at the information desk; he knew where the emergency ward was located from bitter experience and he headed down the gloom-filled corridor. He encountered a young interne coming out of the ward.

"Hello, Saunders. I'm looking for—" He stopped. The truth was printed on the interne's features. "Gone, you mean?" Naughton blurted, as though the other had already spoken.

Saunders nodded. "I'm sorry, Naughton. He asked for you. Friends, eh?"

The arson dick jerked his head, tried to cover up his personal feelings under the brusqueness of business. "I understand he found something—inside. Wanted to tell me about it. You know anything about that?"

"Not much. Hansen, the nurse on duty, was with him and got the whole story for you. I came in too late—he was going then. All I heard was something about Keith MacGilray. I suppose that's old Dunc's kid, eh?"

Naughton felt a queer nervous ache in the pit of his stomach. "Torrence was a friend of the Old Man. Where's this nurse, Hanley?" he growled.

"Hansen," Saunders corrected. "Ruth Hansen. She's downstairs. You duck in here"—he pushed open the door of an

empty room—"I'll have her sent right up."

Naughton nodded, walked into the room and began to pace the floor. Had Ernie Torrence lost his life playing nurse-maid to young Keith? The kid was crazy about fires; he'd been raised on them. At the MacGilray home you woke to fires, had 'em for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Company was always connected with fire-fighting in some way; so was the conversation.

Keith wanted to be a fireman, but, by some fluke of nature, he did not have the build. Naughton had never seen Mrs. MacGilray; she was only a frail, elusive memory, for she had died when Keith was a baby. But it was a dead cinch that young Keith did not get his anemic physique from his father, even if he did inherit his love of the fire-fighting game from him. Old Duncan had been a giant in his day and he had been the toughest, shrewdest, and best-loved chief the department had ever had.

Naughton's musing was broken by the appearance of a girl in nurse's uniform who entered quietly on rubber-soled shoes. "I'm Ruth Hansen, Mr. Naughton. Doctor Saunders sent word you wished to see me."

Naughton bobbed his head. "Sit down, please. Saunders tells me you were with Fireman Torrence when he—passed away. I understand he left a message for me."

The girl shrugged, hesitated. She was young, giddy-looking—and pretty. Her nose was tilted a trifle, giving her a pert look, and even the severity of her starched uniform failed to hide the full-blown curves of her figure.

Naughton was not affected by her charms; he merely classified them in the course of an almost automatic analysis.

"It was hardly a message, Mr. Naughton," she said in a low, husky voice. "You see, he was in considerable pain and we

had administered a hypo. He talked to me, but, I'm sorry to say, it was rather—well—disconnected."

Naughton felt the blood creep into his face. He sensed the girl was hedging, deliberately.

"Just what did he say?"

THE nurse flashed him a full glance, then averted her eyes. "Oh, he spoke about getting trapped. It seems he was caught between a back-draught or something like that. He tried to crawl out of it and a brace of some sort fell on him."

"Did he mention any names? Did he see anything wrong in there?"

"Why—nothing wrong, no! He asked for you, of course, but I can't remember—"

Naughton crossed over to her chair. "Now wait a minute," he snapped. "Just what are you trying to cover up? I happen to know that he mentioned the name of MacGilray. Quit stalling, or you and I are going to have trouble!"

Color stole into her smooth cheeks. "Oh, yes, I had forgotten. He did speak of MacGilray. I gathered he was some sort of a chief at one time or another."

"Did he say anything about Keith MacGilray?"

She stalled quite frankly this time. "I can't be sure. You see, Mr. Naughton, I was a little upset. The man was dying." Her voice rose sharply. "What sort of an inquisition is this? I'm telling you what I remember! That's what you want, isn't it?" She was plainly defiant.

Naughton was puzzled. This blond dame was covering up for some reason. She didn't want to name young Keith. Why? Good Lord, nobody suspected the son of old Duncan of. . . . Naughton felt his heart pound. He tried to force the insidious suspicion from his mind. It was hellish! Yet—Clare had seemed unduly worried about Keith's presence at the fire. Of course they all knew the

kid was foolhardy, that he was everlastingly chasing the ladder-trucks in the hope that he might get a break which, in some unforeseen way, would bounce him into the department.

He eyed the girl. She was staring straight at him now and it was his turn to feel disconcerted. Had Torrence found something, something that would hurt young Keith, or, worse still, the Old Man or Clare? Was Nurse Hansen covering up to protect the very people he himself loved?

It was incredible, impossible. This blonde wasn't the type who would jeopardize herself to protect anyone else; she looked much too self-interested for that. And now she sat stiffly before him, waiting.

"Perhaps you are a little upset," he admitted at last. "But the fact that Torrence sent for me especially, shows that

he had something to tell me. I'm working out of headquarters on the arson squad—"

She paled visibly. "A—detective?"

"That's it. Now I want you to take it easy and try to remember everything Torrence said. Everything. Whether you think it relevant or not."

"I told you all I know."

Naughton grunted. "I'll let you think it over tonight, and I'll see you again tomorrow. If you want, I'll have Saunders get you released from further duty tonight."

She shook her head. "I'm off at twelve anyhow. I'll try to remember, but I'm sure I've told you everything."

Naughton started for the door. "Think it over," he growled, and went out, the conviction Hansen had lied to him still dunning his brain.

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CHAPTER TWO

Three-Alarm Murder

NAUGHTON caught a cab, gave the driver instructions to proceed to headquarters, then countermanded them two minutes later. He'd have a talk with the kid. Although it was close to midnight, he knew the MacGilray household would still be up. And if you had any connection with fire-fighting—from smoke-eating to adjusting claims for insurance companies—you could get a welcome, and an argument, day or night, from the MacGilray clan. They were that kind of a family.

Old Mac was a smoke-eater of the old-school. What he failed to know about hydraulics and such of the new era of scientific fire-fighting, he more than balanced with his knowledge of fires and men. His red-flecked old eyes could settle on a distant streamer of smoke and in five minutes he could tell you more about the blaze behind it than all the subsequent investigation would show. Even at fifty-eight—before he was permanently crippled by a falling timber—he could snarl his way up a swaying *pompier* with the best of the boys; and if you know the guts it takes to hook that slim, pole-like *pompier* ladder through a window and monkey up it a dozen stories above pavement, you can appreciate the old veteran.

But you can't direct a fire from a wheel-chair, and MacGilray went on his pension. When he blasphemously complained, the doctors told him he was damned lucky to be alive at all—which he was. The peppery old smoke-eater had retorted that he wasn't afraid of dying because hell was one fire he'd like to try his hand at quenching, especially before a lot of noodle-headed doctors got there and spoiled it for him.

So when Old Mac couldn't get down to visit his boys, they came to him in his

little home opposite Number 7 Station-house. The older ones came for companionship and to reminisce; the youngsters for advice. They were all welcome. When Todd Naughton, as a rookie patrolman on the police department, had made a lucky pinch of a couple of notorious fire-bugs and was subsequently placed on the arson squad as a reward, an older dick advised him to cultivate MacGilray.

"You make Old Mac like you, kid," the veteran copper had suggested, "an he'll teach you more about fires an' the sort of swine that start 'em than you could learn any other way in a thousand years. And"—the sage had smiled—"you'll probably be like all the other young bucks that haunt Dunc's house—you'll fall for that girl of his."

Todd Naughton had both followed the advice and fulfilled the prophecy. He had gained Duncan MacGilray's friendship, and fallen—hard—for Clare.

He felt guilty, somehow, as he paid off the driver and dismissed the cab in front of the little brownstone house. Across the street the wide open doors of Number 7 showed the lighted interior of an empty station-house. Light reflected on the gleaming brass pole by the folded doors. Ernie Torrence would never wear out any more pants sliding down that brass shaft.

The thought of the dead fireman stiffened Naughton. He turned, trudged up the steps and punched the doorbell. As he waited, he became conscious of his own condition. He mopped his face with a handkerchief, and it came away black with soot. His hat was a soggy mass and his topcoat was damp and shapeless from the steam and spray. He hoped Clare would not be home and glanced over his shoulder to see if Rolph's car was around. Strict traffic regulations prohibited parking in the immediate vicinity of the station-house, especially across the

street; the giant ladder-truck of Number 7 needed the whole width of the street to swing clear. Visitors at the MacGilray residence parked well down the block. Naughton knew Rolph's red coupe by sight, and when it was not visible, he concluded they had not yet returned from the Bilsky conflagration.

THE housekeeper admitted him into the parlor where he found the old smoke-eater slumped in his wheel-chair by the window, where he could watch the station-house across the street. MacGilray always fumed when there was a fire, but he welcomed Naughton with a greeting as sincere as it was profane.

There was something tragically incongruous about Old Mac in a wheel-chair; it was like seeing a polar bear in a perambulator. The useless legs were carefully concealed beneath a plaid blanket, but from the waist up he was big-chested and massive. His sorrel-leather face was blocky, square, and his hair was the soft gray of hair born brown. Even his eyes had mellowed somewhat and were vein-streaked. His grip was hard and firm.

"Well, damn it, Todd, I'm glad at least one young pup had the decency to paddle over an' tell me what's happened. Bilsky Building, I hear? Bad? Anybody hurt? How many streams? Three-alarm, ain't it? Well, what in hell are you mopin' about?"

Naughton tried a grin. "Gutted it completely, Skipper." They still called him Skipper although he hadn't officially, given an order in seven years. "Incendiary . . . worst of the eight."

MacGilray whipped his head around. His pale, smoky eyes peered from under a hedge of iron-gray brows. "Other eight? You think it's a series then?"

"Not much doubt about it," Naughton said grimly. "I've raked the local angle

pretty sharp and haven't got—" He suddenly remembered what the nurse had told him, and added the word "much."

"Well, you got *some*thin' then," snapped MacGilray. "That's good. They ought to hang these bugs, or fry 'em. That would be better—fry 'em. Let 'em know what it's like to blister to death, by God! Any of the boys hurt, I asked you?"

"Torrence."

"Torrence? Not Ernie, Todd?"

Naughton nodded reluctantly. "He went out like a—well, Skipper, like a fireman."

"By God!" MacGilray swore, scowling out the window. "Ernie! I was a pallbearer for his dad and now— Why, hell, he was in here only last night tryin' to kid me." He banged his hairy fist on the arm of his chair. "That's murder, Todd! By God, if a man goes out with a gun an' shoots somebody they call it murder, but when a dirty, dog-whelped rat sets off a fire like this where a lot of decent boys risk their lives and then die in agony, they call it arson. Arson, bah! It's wholesale murder! If you find out who did it, kid, don't you make no arrests! Don't trust 'em to the care of some dirty, no-account, crook-lovin' jury. You take that blackjack an' beat the livin' hell out of 'em. Take 'em dead, an' that's too good for 'em. Ernie Torrence. . . . By God!"

Naughton felt strangely uncomfortable. He was grateful when the front door opened and he heard footsteps in the hallway. His first thought was that Clare had returned, but a moment later a gangling youth stepped through the arch:

Keith MacGilray did not resemble his father in either build or manner; he was slim, rather pale of skin, and a little sullen. Naughton suspected this sullenness came as a result of an inferiority complex due to his physique. Yet, despite the discrepancy in stature, both MacGilrays had the same pale eyes, the same dogged

set to their jaws, and a certain directness, or lack of subtlety. Clare had the same traits, in a gentler form.

The boy stopped when he saw Naughton, and the dick sensed the lad's surprise. "Oh, hello, Todd. Hi, Dad." To Naughton he said: "Thought you'd be at the blaze."

Naughton remarked casually: "Was. Looked around for you. There, weren't you?"

The boy gave him a sidelong glance. "Why, sure. I went over on the second alarm." He yawned carelessly. "You'll be kept busy enough with all these jobs, I guess. Well, I'm off to bed." He thrust his hands deep into his pockets and sauntered into the corridor.

Naughton pulled his face into a troubled frown. He scooped up his hat, mumbled something barely intelligible about having work to do and started for the archway. Old Mac made no attempt to stop him. The shock of Torrence's death seemed to daze him.

KEITH was halfway up the stairs when Naughton walked into the hall and called his name. He turned with obvious reluctance and tramped slowly down.

Naughton said: "Come on out on the porch, kid. I want to have a talk with you."

Keith hesitated, opened his mouth to argue, but the detective shook his head, inclined it toward the room where the old man sat hunched in his chair. The lad shrugged, shuffled down the hall and pulled open the front door. He glanced over his shoulder, saw that Naughton was right behind him, and stepped onto the small porch. The dick followed and quietly closed the door.

"Keith," Naughton began grimly, "Ernie Torrence was killed tonight. He made a statement before he died. In it he mentioned your name. This is mighty serious, kid. I want you to tell me just

where you've been ever since dinner-time."

The boy stiffened, took a backward step that brought his shoulders against the stone front of the house. "Say, what are you driving at, Todd?"

"I'm not driving at anything. I'm asking you a question. Were you in the Bilsky Building today? Come on, come on, don't try to think up an alibi! Tell me the truth."

"No!"

"You weren't in the building? But you were at the fire all evening? Right?"

Keith nodded stiffly.

"Came directly home from there?"

"Sure."

Naughton shoved close to the boy. He raked his fingers over his own face and they came away grimy with soot. He showed them to the youngster. "See that grime? Well, I was at the fire, too, but my face is black. Yours is spotless, but your brows and lashes are singed. You were in that building, kid, and Torrence knew it! You've gone someplace and scrubbed your face! Now I want to know—"

Keith tried to worm past him. "Lemme alone, Naughton! You can't bully me just because you chase my sister. What if I was at a fire? What darn business is that of yours? I don't have to tell you—"

Naughton caught him by the collar and shoved him against the wall. "Answer my question, Keith!"

The boy wriggled loose, made a dive for the front door. Naughton grabbed his arm, spun him around and slammed him into a corner of the porch. Keith continued to fight, so Naughton whipped up his open hand and slapped him smartly across the face.

"Cut it!" he snapped. "Where did Ernie Torrence see you tonight?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

Naughton knew he was lying, and the

knowledge angered him. He thought of the Old Man, of Clare, and of Ernie Torrence, and so he brought up his hand again and see-sawed it back and forth across the flaming cheeks of the sullen lad.

"You dirty little sneak!" he growled. "You talk or I'll jerk you down to headquarters! If I thought for one minute that you were in any way responsible—" He drew back his open hand again.

"Todd . . . !"

NAUGHTON released his grip on the boy and turned to face the girl who darted up the steps, tiny fists balled, face aflame with anger.

"You struck Keith!" she accused.

Naughton bit his lip. He couldn't tell Clare that Keith might be tied into the fire; he had no proof and he did not want to believe it himself. While he fumbled for an explanation, the boy came out with the bald truth.

"He thinks I set the damn fire!" Keith blurted. "He was slapping me so I'd take the blame or something!"

Clare swayed back as though someone had struck her, then her slim body went rigid. "You . . . Keith?" She jerked around until her flushed face was close to Naughton's own. "I wouldn't have believed that of you, Todd Naughton!" she snapped. "Oh, it's contemptible! My own brother and you—you—" She choked to a stop.

Naughton jerked his neck. "Keith knows something," he growled doggedly. "He's hiding some—"

"He's crazy!" Keith cut in sullenly.

Clare pointed to the door. "Go inside, Keith!" she ordered crisply. "I've something to say to Mr. Naughton."

The boy shrugged, gave Naughton a defiant scowl, and sauntered into the house and closed the door. The girl turned, glanced at Rolph who stood embarrassedly in the shadow, then swung on the arson dick.

"I'm sorry to say this in front of Jack Rolph, Todd," she announced grimly, "but since I don't expect to talk to you again I've no other choice. I am shocked and disgusted to think that you would be cheap enough to take advantage of my father's friendship, to say nothing of mine, and try to cover your own incompetence by seeking to bully a confession out of a youngster like Keith."

Naughton floundered in his mind for a defense but the presence of the other man disconcerted him. Rolph was an insurance adjuster and in that capacity was tied in with the big insurance companies. He didn't want to start a rumor that might involve the MacGilrays; not, at least, until he was forced to in the pursuit of his duties. Lord, he hoped it would never come to that!

The girl was talking again. "Please go now and—it will be better if you do not call again. Good-night!" She turned sharply away.

Rolph looked at Naughton, shook his head in sympathetic understanding. "Just a minute, Clare," he said mildly. "Why don't you give Naughton a chance to explain."

Clare pushed the front door open. "I saw him strike Keith. There is no way he can explain that!" She flounced into the hall, and with a shrug, Rolph followed.

When the door closed, Naughton was already halfway down the steps.

CHAPTER THREE

Fire-Bugs Folly

IN THE months that Naughton had been a regular visitor at the MacGilray home, it was his custom, on leaving at night, to drop in at Barry's Lunch Counter on the corner for a cup of coffee. Habit took him there tonight. Hunched over a steaming mug at the far end of the

counter, he tried to settle his seething mind. The genial Barry, fat and bald, made a gay attempt at conversation but was quick to sense Naughton's mood, and soon left him alone and went up near the cash-register to peel potatoes.

Naughton did not feel he was in the wrong. Keith, he told himself, was withholding some information; whether it was evidence that implicated the lad, Naughton had no idea; he was, in fact, a little reluctant to dwell on that possibility. Yet Torrence had died with Keith's name on his lips.

Ernie, knowing the growing intimacy between Clare and Naughton, had sent for the dick on his death-bed. That was significant in itself. Then the nurse, Hansen, had tried to shield the lad's name. The recollection of those three men hurrying away from the hospital on his arrival leaped into the detective's thoughts. Was there a connection? Had someone reached the nurse, knowing that he was headed there? Grim thoughts, half-formed began popping in his head. That parked car that hemmed his own roadster to the curb . . . the dying of that same roadster on his rush to the hospital. . . .

He spun off his stool and went over to the phone, got the garage on the wire, and had a brief talk with the foreman. What he learned was grimly suggestive. The gasoline line had been knocked loose; he had simply traveled on the fuel in the vacuum tank, and when that was gone, he had stalled.

After thanking the garage foreman, he called police headquarters. From the sergeant in charge of traffic, he learned that the officers working the Bilsky blaze had not filed their night's reports. However, the sergeant promised to find out the name of the individual who owned the sedan which had double-parked by his roadster.

Naughton hung up, spun a coin down the counter and barged into the street.

He flagged a cruising owl-cab and snapped the location of St. Barnabas Hospital. The arson dick wanted another talk with Nurse Hansen.

At the hospital, he found that the girl had gone off duty. The serious-minded young lady at the desk refused to divulge Ruth Hansen's address, but after a brief talk with the supervisor of nurses, Naughton learned that she had a bachelor-suite in the Rowland Apartments on Sutter Street.

Luckily, Naughton had kept his cab, and in less than five minutes he paid it off in front of the Rowland. Again luck seemed to favor him for the big glass door, usually worked by an electric buzzer controlled by the tenants, was ajar. He paused at the mail-slots only long enough to note that Miss Ruth Hansen resided in 302, then slipped into the deserted lobby, and trudged up the stairs to the third floor. He knocked firmly on the door marked 302.

It was opened by a short, stout man in shirt-sleeves. He held the knob with one hand and a tall, half-filled glass in the other. Ice tinkled in the glass and radio music blared through the open door.

Naughton hesitated. "I was looking for Miss Hansen's apartment," he said.

The fat man grinned. He was bald, with owlsh, knowing eyes and blue jowls that made him look as though he needed a shave. "You found it, brother," he chanted jovially, stepping aside for Naughton to enter. "Join the party. Hey, Steve, tell Ruthie we got some more company." This last remark was directed at an unseen individual in the room where the music originated.

Naughton frowned, but walked in. He meant to get the girl aside; the last thing he desired was to broadcast the purpose of his visit. He passed through a small entrance-hall into a living-room. There

he saw the man apparently called "Steve". The Hansen girl was not in evidence.

STEVE reclined in a deep chair. He was a fox-faced individual with sleepy lids and a twisted nose. He gave an impression of absolute boredom. "Hello, Naughton," he yawned. "What do you want to see Ruth about?"

The detective frowned. He had an excellent memory for faces, yet he couldn't place the expressionless pan of the man in the chair. However, it was obvious the latter knew the detective.

"It's a personal matter," he commented crisply. "Suppose you ask her to step in here."

"Aw now, copper, you wouldn't want us to disturb the little lady at this time of night, would you?" jeered the fat man who had opened the door.

Naughton spun on his heel, stiffened immobile. The fat man had traded his half-filled glass for a .38 automatic. The muzzle covered the arson dick's midsection.

Again there flashed across Naughton's mind the picture of three men scurrying away from the hospital. One of the trio had been short, dumpy; another—he whipped his head around to look at Steve again. Slim, lithe, a human panther. But there had been three. . . .

Steve unlimbered himself from the chair. "Get those mitts a little higher," he drawled, "an' face the wall over there."

Naughton shrugged, complied. The fat man backed over to the radio and turned on more volume. The dick knew what that meant; they'd shoot if they deemed it necessary.

Steve frisked him with slow deliberation, removing his service revolver, his sap and bracelets. "We can use these," he commented, and handcuffed Naughton's wrists behind him.

"Was this party arranged for me,"

Naughton asked, "or did I butt into something?"

"It went off accordin' to the book," Steve admitted sardonically. "Now don't give us an argument. Just play smart an' you won't get hurt. Get tough an' see what it gets you."

The fat man chuckled. "Yeah, see what it gets you," he echoed, with painfully obvious meaning.

Steve produced a roll of adhesive tape from his pocket and jerked his head toward the chesterfield. "Sit down, copper," he suggested. "An' stick your pan up. I'm gonna tape your big mouth."

Naughton looked at the fat man's gun, and obeyed. In a moment he found his mouth painlessly and efficiently sealed.

The fox-faced individual surveyed his work with saturnine satisfaction. "Now, Manny," he addressed the fat man, "suppose you take our pal into the bathroom while I make a phone call."

The man with the gun steered Naughton into a small bathroom and shut the door, leaning against it. The radio quieted for a moment and Naughton heard Steve, at the telephone, ask the operator for Sherwood 2400. He went a little sick.

Manny heard it, too. He scowled, sidled over to the bathtub and turned on the water. The resulting roar successfully drowned out all further conversation in the other room.

But Todd Naughton had heard enough to confirm his worst fears. Sherwood 2400 was the number of the MacGilray residence. No wonder Steve had ordered him out of the room.

At last Steve punched the door open and beckoned them out. Manny pushed Naughton into a chair with his back to the hall door.

"You'll have to sit on this job until we get done, Manny," Steve explained. "Keep that damn radio down so the tenants don't send the janitor up here squawkin'. But

don't take any chances with this mugg; we don't want to gum the works now."

"When'll you be back?" Manny wanted to know.

"That'll depend. We oughtta be set by daylight." He hunched into a slim-waisted topcoat, cocked a snap-brimmed felt over one eye and touched four fingers to his forehead in a mocking salute to Naughton. "Be a nice boy, copper," he leered, and went out.

MANNY took a slow walk around the room, peering at pictures and reading book titles. Periodically, he whipped his head around to look at Naughton, but the big dick sprawled on the divan, helpless. At last Manny ducked into the kitchen but returned immediately with a quarter-filled gin bottle and a saucepan of cracked ice. He loosened his tie, set up the gin, the ice, and a fresh package of cigarettes, on a small end-table beside his chair, and settled down to wait in comfort.

The chair in which he squatted was directly opposite Naughton, so placed that Manny covered both the hall entrance and the detective at the same time. "Sorry you don't drink," he jeered, and upended his glass.

Naughton made a futile attempt to slip his manacles, but they were Peerless cuffs and Steve had ratched them tight. Failing, Naughton surveyed his genial guard.

There wasn't much chance there. The fat man kept him under nimble-eyed surveillance. Manny belonged to the deceptive type that looks sleepy and logy, but can get into action with the rapidity of a coiled snake. As for the gin, there wasn't enough in the bottle to give Manny a good glow, much less dull his alertness.

Naughton broke into sweat at the recollection of that telephone call. Sherwood 2400! Where had Steve gone? Why were they holding him, and where was the nurse? He couldn't fit Ruth Hansen into the picture. He was certain that

Steve and Manny were part of a ring responsible for the Bilsky fire, and that meant the other eight blazes that had preceded it. Had Ernie Torrence stumbled onto some hot evidence? Was that why they were holding him? In that case, the Hansen girl must know about it.

His thoughts took him around in a futile merry-go-round. It just didn't make sense that the nurse should be a part of the ring; not the particular nurse that happened, by merest chance, to be alone with the particular fireman that happened, also by the slimmest accident, to have stumbled onto the only piece of evidence so far uncovered. It was fantastic, improbable; the element of coincidence was too strong to support such a hypothesis.

Naughton's bewildered reverie stopped abruptly. His eyes were drawn to a door directly behind his guard. It was stealthily opening!

Naughton snapped his eyes back to Manny. The fat man grinned, raised his glass in a mock toast and sipped the contents with obvious relish. Naughton scowled and let his gaze wander back to the door. Ruth Hansen was easing into the room!

She met his eyes and they begged his silence. She placed a trembling forefinger vertically across her lips. Her right hand was folded around the neck of a quart milk bottle, club-like.

Naughton was dumbfounded, but her intent was obvious. He dropped his gaze back to Manny and found the latter staring at him with quizzical eyes. The radio was moaning out the raucous endeavors of a dance orchestra, but Manny had softened it in obedience to Steve's order. Suppose he should turn his head. . . .

Naughton glared, edged forward in his seat. He banged on the floor with his feet.

Manny slammed down his glass and sat upright. "Hey, cut that!" he snarled. "Do

a trick like that again an' I'll belt you on the konk!"

Naughton shrugged, risked a quick glance over Manny's shoulder. The nurse had sidled into the room and was now less than six feet behind the gunman's chair. Naughton tore his eyes away, nodded at Manny in token of surrender.

"That's better," sneered the fat man. "You won't get hurt just so long as you—"

The heavy bottle caught him squarely in the center of his bald spot! Naughton dove across the room as the blow struck, but his charge was unnecessary. Manny was out cold as a politician's conscience. Todd jerked around to face the nurse.

She had retrieved the automatic, but it hung limp in her hand. Her eyes, wide with terror, were riveted on the detective's face. Suddenly she loosed a quick sob and ran toward him, tore the tape from his mouth. "I'm afraid I've killed him!" she choked.

"I'll be disappointed if you haven't," Naughton growled at her. "Get the key out of my vest pocket and take off these cuffs."

She hesitated. "Are you—will you arrest me?"

"That will depend a lot on how you act and what explanations you can make."

SHE fished the key from his pocket with fingers that shook and managed, finally, to unfasten the cuffs. When Naughton's arm swung free, she recoiled and

shrank in a scared little heap on the chesterfield.

"Where did your friend Steve go?" Naughton demanded.

"They're not friends!" she stammered. "Honestly, I've nothing to do with them!"

Naughton scowled. "This is your apartment. You lied to me once; don't try it again!"

"I know, I know!" she whimpered. "But they threatened me. I've read what happens to people that get into trouble with crooks. I was afraid!"

"You ought to read what happens to people that get into trouble with the police," Naughton reminded her grimly. "Are you ready to tell me what Torrence told before he died, or do we go down to police headquarters for a—"

"No, no! I'll tell you. Torrence saw this Keith running out a rear door of the Bilsky building when he first went in. He asked me not to tell anyone else but you. He seemed to think it was important."

Naughton winced inwardly. "Why didn't you tell me that in the first place?"

She avoided his eyes, stared at the inert Manny. "Three of them came to the hospital just ahead of you. First they told me they were detectives and I repeated the poor fireman's story. Then they took out guns and threatened to kill me if I repeated it to you. They knew, somehow, that you were coming. I was scared."

Naughton took a slow turn around the room. "Why were these rats waiting here for me? Or were they?"

IN THE APRIL DIME DETECTIVE

NO FOOLING!

RACE WILLIAMS

CARDIGAN

THE RAMBLER

by

by

by

CARROLL JOHN DALY

FREDERICK NEBEL

FRED MacISAAC

THREE IN ONE!



It'll be out on MARCH 5th.

She nodded. "I think so. When I went off duty at twelve, this Steve and Manny were waiting for me. They brought me here, tied me up and left me in the bedroom. They promised not to hurt me if I kept quiet, but I was scared. I managed to wiggle loose after I heard you come in and then when Steve telephoned—"

"You heard that?" Naughton asked quickly.

"Yes. He called this Keith. They are going to set another fire tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Uh-huh. Steve said something'd gone wrong, and that they would have to fire the Coast Wholesale Grocery Warehouse tonight and clear out. Of course I could only hear what Steve said, but I gathered that this Keith is either in charge or tied in with the ringleader. Steve talked as though he were just working for someone. They talked about me—and I was afraid they meant to do away with me. That's why I—I—" She nodded mutely at the unconscious Manny.

Naughton's mouth contracted into a thin, bitter slash. He picked up the cuffs, rolled his ex-guard onto his face and shackled his hands behind him, taped his lips with the same gag which had so lately sealed his own. A thousand questions burned in his mind, but he asked only one.

"Then Steve left here to meet Keith MacGilray?"

Her head bobbed affirmatively.

Naughton frisked his prisoner in the hope of recovering his own lost revolver, but apparently Steve had taken it. He turned slowly. The automatic was still held in the nerveless fingers of the girl. She offered no objection when he took it from her but crouched in beaten silence while he ascertained that there was a slug in the chamber.

"You've got one chance to undo the damage you've done," he told her bluntly. "Telephone police headquarters and ask

for Captain Taylor of the arson detail. Tell him that I want a couple of men to come out here and take care of Manny. They'd better stay right here in case I miss Steve and he should return. Don't mention Keith MacGilray unless—well, unless I don't come back. Is that quite clear?"

She nodded. "And you?"

"That won't concern you," Naughton growled, and went out.

CHAPTER FOUR

Matches in Hell

THE Coast Wholesale Grocery Warehouse, while only four stories high, covered an immense ground area. It was a gloomy, tri-cornered structure that would have been condemned by the fire-inspectors if the owners had not been so well connected politically. It presented a dangerous hazard owing, not only to its age and condition, but to its location, and the fire-department and the arson squad kept it under surveillance. Squatting on the fringe of the old section of the waterfront, it abutted the water on one side, a narrow street on another, and the third grimy wall faced a spur of the railroad. The original building had been brick, but additions had been added through the years that made it a veritable fire-trap. Fire-trucks could only approach by the single street; only the departmental tug, stationed several miles away, could attack a blaze from the water side.

Naughton thought of these things when he dismissed his cab two blocks from the warehouse and stumbled down the tracks. If Steve and his confederates were there ahead of him, they would probably have a look-out in the street.

He tried to keep Clare and old Duncan MacGilray out of his thoughts—without much success. Keith, a member of an arson ring? Possibly the leader? The old man's ringing words seeped into his

mind, crowding out all else. "Don't make no arrests! . . . Take that blackjack an' beat the livin' hell out of 'em, kid! . . . Take 'em dead, an' that's too good for 'em!" Would the blasphemous old smoke-eater say the same thing if he believed his own son implicated? Naughton thought he would. But Clare . . .

Freight cars dotting the spur allowed Naughton to approach without much danger of being spotted. He stole a glance at his wrist-watch. The luminous dial put the time at two thirty. The warehouse watchman should be starting his semi-hourly tour about now. Then Naughton rounded the boxcar nearest the loading-platform and glimpsed the lighted window of the watchman's office.

A high fog blanketed the sky. Keeping well in the shadows, Naughton boosted himself onto the platform and rubber-heeled toward the office. He wanted to catch the watchman before he started his rounds.

Down the Bay he heard a ferry whistle for the right-of-way, and somewhere up the tracks a yard-engine's bell tolled monotonously. Naughton braced his shoulders, unlimbered the automatic and moved quickly to the office door. To his surprise, he found it ajar.

Remembering the last half-open door that had lured him into a neat trap, he moved warily. He thumbed the safety off the gun, kicked the door open the rest of the way and sprang aside. He was not challenged.

Inside, he found the reason.

The watchman, a bony old pensioner, sat mutely against the wall opposite the door, legs grotesquely straddled apart, bloody head bunched forward on his chest. He had been dead only minutes. The time-clock had apparently been torn from his shoulder for the strap lay on the floor beside him, but the clock itself was gone. Evidently the killers were somewhere in the great storeroom beyond.

There was a telephone on the battered little desk within arm's length; a brief call and Naughton could have the district surrounded by police officers.

"Don't trust 'em to the care of a dirty, no-account, crook-lovin' jury, kid. . ."

Naughton remembered. He deliberately turned his back on the instrument and eased open another door that led into the vast darkness of the warehouse. Dank, stuffy air fanned into his face. The smell of spices, wooden packing cases, the indescribable odor of tens of thousands of cans, sacks of sugar, molasses, vinegars. . . . What a hell would be loosed if a blaze started in this place!

A night-light glimmered wanly at the far end of a corridor of packing cases. Naughton, pressed into shadow, listened. The silence was heavy, threatening. He moved crab-wise toward the light.

"I don't expect to talk to you again . . . ever!" Clare had said.

Forget it, Naughton! Somewhere ahead of you are men who have just committed murder, who are going to fire this vast building! One of them is the brother of the girl you love but you've got a job to do! Keep your mind on business, man, or you'll be joining Ernie and that poor old watchman!

A GRIMY, metal-caged bulb marked the entrance to the basement. The big fire-door was propped open with a case of canned goods; propped open to make a better draw for the flames. Naughton worked closer. Sounds—furtive, suggestive sounds—stole up the stairs.

Those stairs would be watched; he couldn't chance them—not alone. But he had to get down there. He backed away from the opening, sidled on down the corridor. There had to be another entrance to that basement somewhere.

A cat darted out of a shadow-pit, star-

ting him. Sweat beaded on his head, dripped onto his cheek like a tear.

And then he found an elevator shaft. The lift was somewhere in obscurity above, but heavy, inch cable offered a way down. Naughton hitched his belt, buttoned his coat and clamped his teeth on the automatic. Then with an ejaculation that was half oath, half prayer, he reached for the cable and swung into the blackness of the shaft.

Thick grease ruined his hold and he went plummeting down, down. A loose strand of wire pierced his hand; tore into it and out again. Then his feet crashed into the cement base with a jar that knocked the wind from his body. But his fall had been practically without sound.

He ducked under the slatted gate and found himself in a dim-lit corridor of packing-cases. Even without being able to read the printed words, he knew from the deep, retangular shape of the boxes, the contents.

Kerosene! Thousands of gallons of kerosene piled ceiling-high; two five-gallon cans to a box!

He came to the intersection of two walk-ways. The murmur of voices was quite audible now, although he could not distinguish the words. Dropping to one knee, he inched his head around the bulwark of cases. A grim sight met his slitte eyes.

ETCHED in relief by a light behind them were three men, their long shadows stretching toward his hiding-place. Naughton felt his pulse pound. He had expected to trap young Keith down here, but somehow, with the boy now in front of him, he found it difficult to credit his sight. But Keith was there and so was Steve. A third figure crouched on hands and knees before a long, snake-like ribbon that wound across the floor to disappear finally among the maze of boxes.

Although nearly a hundred feet away, Naughton knew instinctively what they were doing. That black, coiling shadow was an oil-soaked strand of wicking; a fuse, which would burn until it carried the fire directly to those cases of highly inflammable goods. From his position, Naughton was unable to determine whether the fuse led to the kerosene or to some other equally dangerous substance. Once ignited, however, it would give the arsonists just time enough to leave the warehouse before the whole basement would burst into a flaming hell.

Even as he stared, the bent figure raked a match on the cement floor and touched off the fuse.

"Run!" shouted Steve.

Naughton started to his feet. He meant to charge straight toward them, stamp out the fire and come to grips with the trio. But, abruptly, he froze immobile. For as the fuse glowed alive and the man with the match made a dive to join the already moving Steve, Keith MacGilray suddenly produced a gun and covered them. His words rang down the hollow tunnel of cases.

"Stay where you are!" he warned grimly.

The pair hesitated, paralyzed with surprise.

"What the hell!" rasped Steve. "Are you nuts? We gotta get out of here before that—"

MacGilray shook his head. "I've finally got you rats where I want you!" he shouted.

"Stool!" snarled Steve.

The boy edged around, menacing them with his gun, and backed toward the crawling flame.

Naughton, as surprised as the two firebugs, paused to see what the lad had in mind. Was young Keith pulling a fast one? Was he trying to play copper? A faint glow of understanding, of hope,

crawled into the arson dick's consciousness.

Keith kept his gaze on his two victims and pawed around with his foot, seeking the fuse.

"Look out . . . the coal oil!" Steve roared suddenly.

INSTINCTIVELY MacGilray turned his head. All Naughton could do was shout a warning. The distance was too great for him to risk a shot in the narrow corridor. Helpless, he saw Steve whip out a gun and fire. Young Keith spun around and pitched against the wall of boxes, slid to the floor within an arm's length of the still burning fuse.

Naughton was running now. He heard a startled yelp of warning from the other man, saw Steve whirl—and then lead spewed at him.

Todd threw himself flat against the cases, steadied his arm and fired . . . once . . . twice. Then the pair were out of sight behind the boxes.

Naughton gave up all semblance of caution now. A wild exultation surged through him. Keith had been on the square. Perhaps he was dead, but he was straight! Naughton vaulted over the body of the boy and charged for the foot of the stairs.

He ran into a pool of flame!

The bugs had thought fast; they had dumped the contents of a five-gallon can over the stairs, over the floor, and over the tiers of boxes, then they had hastily dropped a match in the kerosene, throwing up a wall of flame to cover their escape.

Naughton leaped backward to drag Keith's body to one side, throwing a last shot through the roaring furnace as he did so. Simultaneously the big metal-covered fire-door slammed!

As the blaze licked and sucked at the cases, Naughton read menace in the con-

tents. They were filled with matches. Millions of combustible matches, gallons of kerosene—and the fire-doors closed against him!

He whipped off his coat and beat futilely at the dancing flame. Oil splashed on his coat; it, too, burst alight. He dropped it hastily and looked above. The ceiling was criss-crossed with a sprinkler system. He jerked a box around, scrambled up to the pipes and beat off the valve-head with his gun. Hope flamed—and died as a weak, useless dribble trickled out. The arsonists had cut off the water.

A sudden fear clawed at Naughton as he saw the burning oil seeping along the floor toward the body of the boy. Throwing his now useless gun from him—guns were no good when the very walls were likely to explode into flame—he scooped the inert figure into his arms and ran for the elevator shaft. That was their one chance.

Halfway to his goal, the lights went out! The main switch had been pulled! The basement was illuminated now by the flames. A case of matches burst ablaze with a loud *whoosh* and the acrid odor of sulphur rode ahead to herald billows of smoke. Kerosene fumes threatened to suffocate him even before the flames put in their claim!

At last Naughton made the shaft, only to confirm his fears; the elevator, with the power cut off, was useless, completely out of commission.

He laid the boy on the floor. Keith, he found, was still alive. Blood streamed from his head, but a hasty examination convinced Naughton that the slug had only creased the skull.

Todd doubted whether he could climb up the greasy steel cable and make good his own escape. With the boy it was out of the question.

He swiveled—and his breath seemed to sear his very lungs. The cases of matches

were roaring and sputtering like Chinese firecrackers. Any minute the kerosene would go up. Now he caught another odor—the smell of burning sugar.

Out of the files of his memory popped tales repeated by veteran smoke-eaters. Burning sugar, rivers of molten syrup crawling hungrily along the floor, eating shoes, boiling the very flesh from one's bones. Intense, unspeakable agony, slow death! Better the quick finish of flaming oil than the insufferable torture of boiling sugar-syrup!

The boy at his feet stirred, rolled over and tried to lift his head. Naughton dropped beside him.

"Keith, Keith! It's Todd! Can you get up, kid! We're trapped!"

MacGilray tried, gamely. Naughton raised him to his knees, but it was useless. The boy put out one leg, only to have it buckle under him, send him sprawling. "I nearly had 'em!" he moaned. "I nearly had 'em, Todd!"

Naughton lifted him to a sitting position. "For God's sake, kid, what brought you down here?"

"Wanted to catch 'em myself."

"But why didn't you let me help you, especially if you knew who it was?"

"I don't know! Somebody big's behind 'em. Steve an' Ike an' Manny only work for somebody!"

Another case of matches ignited with a terrifying eruption and blue light splayed over the scene in eery shades.

Keith looked at the flames, and sweat pearly on his face, but he understood. "Beat it, Todd! You can't get me out of here!"

"I can't leave you, kid!"

Keith tried to shove him away, but the effort was too much. "Don't be a damn fool!" he managed. "You got to get the guy back of this. He's going to meet Steve an' Ike—"

"Ike is the man who touched off the fuse?"

Keith nodded. "Ike Wycoff, yes. This is their last job locally. They're going to meet the big-shot for the pay-off. I tried to play detective—you know why—but I wasn't man enough."

"Where they going to meet, kid?"

"Ike's got an apartment—" He keeled sideways and lay still.

Somewhere in the distance, a siren wailed. Todd Naughton felt an insane desire to laugh. This was the last fire of the mob, and it would be his last, too. All chance of exit by the stairs was cut off by the flames; the elevator shaft was at once their only feeble hope and their worst enemy, for the shaft acted like a great chimney and was sucking the fire toward them. Soon the flames would engulf them and roll up the shaft to spread over the entire structure.

He thrust his head under the gate and glared up the shaft. It faded, overhead, into a vague blackness, but the greasy cement walls in front of him were dancing with the light of the advancing death. It was impossible, definitely impossible! He had to discard even the thought of going up alone on the chance that he might get help. He could never beat those flames.

As his mind feverishly whipped from one impossible idea to another, there came to his ears the imperative bleat of a river tug. It was a sound that he heard daily; a part of the heart-beat of the river-traffic, of the city itself. But cornered there in the cellar of the ancient warehouse, the noise geared into a blank space in his brain, churning his thoughts into a new channel.

The river!

Only one thick, cement wall separated him from the river. Boats plied that watery artery, boats that delivered freight to warehouses such as this one. That was the reason for its location. Somewhere

along the wall there must be an entrance from the waterway; there had to be, he reasoned frantically.

HE glanced down at the boy. Keith was limp, out. Naughton paused only long enough to orient himself, then started fighting along the wall, groping, squinting through a fog of smoke. The stuff burned his eyes, blinded him. Twice the flames cut him off, but each time he managed to circle the blaze by crawling over piles of cases, for the fire followed the open corridors, drawn by the suction of the elevator shaft.

At last he found it, high up on the wall; two great iron doors clamped by a heavy bolt. From it a metal chute coursed to the floor.

Naughton tried to struggle up the chute, but it was like climbing a wall of greased glass. The metal surface had been polished smooth by the rush of countless thousands of boxes and bags shot from river barges and freighters. He abandoned the attempt and turned to the tiers of crates. Working feverishly, he dragged a half dozen of them to the clearing under the iron doors, piled them into a rough pyramid and swarmed up them to his goal.

The bolt stuck, but using a case of canned goods as a maul, he battered it open. Clear air belched in to meet the advancing wall of smoke, only to turn tail and flee before the billowing fog. The new draught turned the tide of the fire, accelerated it.

Naughton saw his danger. With eyes stung shut, he managed to paw the doors shut and hook them temporarily. The smoke, robbed of its escape, engulfed him. He eluded it by dropping to floor level once more, crawling back to the shaft along the surface of the cement floor.

The blaze was already licking toward the cases of kerosene. Naughton glimpsed

it and his stomach dropped. Once the flames reached those cans, sealed as they were, the resulting explosion would push the main floor clear through the roof.

He found Keith by sense of touch alone, for the place was opaque with smoke. Naughton blessed the many tips he had received from old McGilray; tips on how to conserve the few precious drops of air in your lungs, how to find pools of oxygen in a hell of smoke. He needed every trick of the smoke-eating craft to reach his pyramid of boxes again, but he made it.

Blinded, he groped his way to the top of the cases, jerked open the doors. The first cool rush of damp air revived him. He drank deeply of it before the rolling smoke chased it away and with his lungs full, dove back and dragged the limp body of Keith to the top, heaved him over the sill. He fell, rather than clambered, out after the boy.

For a couple of minutes they lay inert on a small wooden platform that ringed the water-side of the building. Smoke and flame clutched at them with hot, nebulous fingers, but Naughton knew he had won through. Then he remembered the danger of the kerosene and crawled to his feet. He half dragged, half carried, Keith beyond the danger-zone, and propped him against a fence.

The lad stirred restlessly, opened his eyes.

Satisfied that Keith was all right, Naughton stumbled back to the little office on the main floor. Smoke had filtered there ahead of him and below he caught the rumble of fire. He grabbed the telephone and rasped out a curt warning to the operator. Halfway to the door, he noticed the body of the watchman. He couldn't leave him there to be cremated; furthermore, that poor dead body was evidence of murder. Hefting the corpse onto his back, he staggered from the building.

Two minutes later, the basement of kerosene exploded! Before the thunderous echo had faded, the Coast Wholesale Warehouse was a flaming furnace!

Naughton left the dead watchman hidden behind a tool-shed across the tracks and ran toward the spot where he had left young Keith. The rich flavor of success was in his being. With Keith conscious, he would learn the location of the meeting where Steve and Ike Wycoff were to receive their pay from the man responsible for the wave of incendiarism; for the death of Ernie Torrence, and the watchman; and the injuries of the firemen. And Naughton knew they were going to pay, for he fully intended to follow MacGilray's grim advice.

" . . . take 'em dead, an' that's too good for 'em. . .!"

He reached the fence, stopped. Elation drained from him and the taste of success went sour in his mouth.

Keith MacGilray was gone!

CHAPTER FIVE

The Fourth Man

TODD NAUGHTON slumped wearily to a pile of railroad ties. His first thought was that Steve and Ike might have watched them come out and taken the kid, but cold logic knocked that theory into the discard. It was unlikely, in the first place, that the bugs would linger at the scene of their crime and so risk detection. And granting they had, there would be no purpose in kidnaping the boy; they would undoubtedly have killed him where he lay.

To clear up that point, Naughton made a quick, but thorough, examination of the ground. There was no sign of a struggle, or a body. On the contrary, he found the prints of Keith stumbling along the tracks. Hope had a quick rebirth, and he followed the faltering impressions. They

told a story. Keith had recovered his equilibrium as he walked, for the prints steadied, became longer as the boy apparently hit his stride. It was obvious that his scalp wound had been superficial; just enough, evidently, to knock him out.

Two hundred yards from the roaring building, the trail left the railroad tracks and disappeared onto a cement street. There it ended.

Naughton stopped, patted a tremulous hand to his blistered face. His skin was scorched, brows gone and the hair beneath his limp felt was curled ash.

The air was alive with the odor of smoke and the wail of sirens. Naughton looked back. A fiery halo ringed the gray-black pile of the warehouse. There was no use going back there. Slattery would be waiting for him. This meant the end of his career.

Had Keith double-crossed him? New doubts began to assail Naughton. Was the boy innocent, or had that tableau in the basement been just a gag?

Well, he had one ace-in-the-hole . . . Manny!

He yanked his hat down on his forehead and ran to the nearest intersection, hailed a cab. The driver was reluctant to receive such a filthy scarecrow for a passenger but Naughton chopped short his protests by flashing his shield. "Get going," he ordered. "This is official business!" He gave the address of the Rowland Apartments.

When the taxi skidded to a shuddering stop a few minutes later in front of the Rowland, a squad-car was standing at the curb. Naughton hit the pavement almost before his cab stopped rolling, tossed a bill at the driver and pushed into the lobby. He was surprised to encounter several reporters usually assigned to the headquarters beat. They advanced in a body, but he waved them away and took the stairs, three at a time. An uncom-

fortable premonition of trouble gnawed at him. Panting, he reached the door of Apartment 302. He knocked and it was yanked open by Captain Taylor, his immediate superior.

"Thank God!" Naughton gasped, striding into the room. "Was afraid maybe my man escaped."

Taylor eyed him grimly. "He's still here," he growled. "In the bedroom. Take a look."

Naughton crossed the room in three strides, and met Nunnally of the homicide detail coming through the doorway. The medical examiner was behind him. He shoved past them, stopped.

Manny lay stretched on the double bed. His wrists were still joined by Naughton's cuffs, his lips were still sealed. But he was dead.

He was not alone. The body of Ruth Hansen rested beside him. A blackish stain on the front of her dress told the story, at least part of it anyway.

Naughton's knees buckled. He grabbed the foot-post of the bed and jerked around.

Captain Taylor gave him the answer. "A girl called—I guess it was this kid—for she said her name was Ruth Hansen an' that you'd told her to get us over here. I brought Criss an' came myself. We found 'em dead. The girl was doubled over near the door, like she was drilled when she opened it to admit someone. This other mugg'—he indicated the deceased Manny—"was shot while he crouched on the davenport."

"Who did it?" Naughton stammered, and the moment the question left his lips, he repented it.

Taylor gave him a cold stare. "We expect that information to come from you."

NAUGHTON turned and walked unsteadily into the living-room. He picked a cigarette from a humidior, lighted

it absently, and dropped into a chair. He felt, rather than saw, the headquarters men ringed around him, awaiting the explanation he could not give.

Lord! Had Keith—

"Who was this girl?" Taylor prompted.

Naughton sighed. "She was the nurse at St. Barnabas' Hospital who was with Ernie Torrence when he died."

The medical examiner whistled softly. "I thought I'd seen her before," he muttered.

"Well?" from Taylor.

Naughton explained. "I was at the Bilsky fire when Torrence was injured and taken to the hospital. He sent for me, wanted to make a statement of something he had seen. Before I got there this lug, Manny, and his confederates had reached her. They put the fear of death into her and threw me off the trail for a while."

Taylor scowled. "If you went straight out there," he grumbled, "I can't see how they could get enough start on you to scare off this particular nurse. How'd they know about Torrence making a statement?"

Naughton shrugged. "I went right out, but they must have known I was heading that way for they disconnected the gas-line on my car and before I even got into the car I was delayed by some damned fool who'd parked—"

He stopped, jerked erect. Ruth Hansen had told him the men knew he was coming, had warned her of his impending visit. They had torn his gas-line loose to detain him. Why not that car, too? It had cost him as much time as the broken line. . . .

He dove off the chair and caught up the telephone. While the detectives stared, he called the traffic detail at headquarters. The sergeant on the desk had been as good as his word.

"That sedan," he said, "was registered

to Sarah Wycoff, Forty-nine Thirty-six West Fourteenth Street. It was a Thirty-four Buick—”

But Naughton didn't wait to hear any more. He pronged the receiver, came to his feet. "No more wild-goose chases, Naughton," Captain Taylor growled. "You've got a lot of explaining to do right here, young fella."

Naughton walked over to his chief. "Skipper, you can't take this one chance away from me!" he challenged. "I'm satisfied I know the man back of these fires!"

"You know him?"

Naughton bobbed his head, lips taut. "I can't name him yet, but give me two men, and a gun—"

Captain Taylor looked deep into his eyes, then scooped up his hat. "Criss, loan Naughton your gun. You stick here. Nunnally, you can—" But Nunnally was already halfway to the hall door.

Naughton paused only to receive the borrowed gun, then followed the two veterans to the street.

Taylor took the wheel of the powerful car himself and as the engine thundered alive, he growled: "All right, kid, name it!"

Naughton pawed his way into the front seat. "Fourteenth Street West. The Forty-nine-hundred—" His words were lost in the snarl of gears.

As the big squad-car caromed around the first turn, the siren began its imperative wail. The streets were deserted save for an occasional truck. The headlight beams reached into the semi-darkness like the feelers of a great bug. Already the sky was suffused with the dull steel of an approaching dawn.

CONVERSATION was impossible, for which Naughton was grateful. Suppose the address was a phony? Suppose Ike and the others had already lammed? It

seemed, as they hurtled through the night, a slim chance. But it was the only fragment left of the case. If this clue blew up in his face, Naughton was finished. He harbored a vague certainty that now he knew the man behind the string of fires, but unless he caught up with Ike Wycoff or Steve, he had no proof. And Keith. . .? He tried to shove the thought out of his mind.

The siren quieted and two blocks further Taylor wrenched the big car around a corner. "Here's the Forty-nine-hundred block!" he shouted. The headlights swept the narrow street in a wide arc.

Naughton clawed open the door at his side. "Look!" he yelled. "That Buick!"

A Buick sedan was parked on the wrong side of the street in front of a dingy brownstone house. Its lights were on dim and the vague outline of a woman was discernible behind the wheel. But it wasn't the woman, nor the sedan, that held the attention of the three dicks.

Etched in the glare of the police headlights, four figures moved across the sidewalk between the brownstone house and the Buick. Two men supported a limp form, half dragging it between them. The fourth figure, a tall, slim man, brought up the rear, hands hidden in the pockets of a topcoat.

The trio sensed their danger as the light struck them. The leading pair dropped their burden and made a dive for the open door of the sedan. Simultaneously, the machine started from the curb.

"That sedan!" Naughton screamed in Taylor's ear. "Crash it!"

Taylor nodded, braced himself, and swung hard on the wheel. Naughton was half out of the car when they smashed into the Buick. The impact hurtled him to the pavement, but he took the fall rolling. As he scrambled to his feet, he saw Nunnally firing from the running-board. Gun-fire snarled above the roar of locked cars.

Headlights painted crazy shadows against the stone walls of the building.

Ike Wycoff was on his hands and knees in the middle of the street. Steve was shooting it out with Nunnally. The veteran homicide dick was firing as coolly as though he were practicing on the range. Taylor, half out of the front seat, was exchanging shots with the woman driver of the Buick who blazed at him through a shattered windshield. The still mound on the sidewalk in front of the house was Keith MacGilray.

The fourth man was gone!

Naughton limped to his feet and ran for the open door of the house. He cleared the figure of young MacGilray without a glance and ducked into the house. Two shots pinged past his head and he threw himself sideways into a pool of shadow.

A flight of stairs stretched to somewhere above—a ladder of darkness. Naughton fired at the top landing, and followed the slug as fast as his legs would carry him. As he pounded up the first flight, he caught the sound of running feet above.

The second flight of stairs carried him to a long corridor under the roof. As his head topped the landing he caught the outline of a man in an open doorway. A slug ripped the hat from Naughton's singed head and he dropped to his stomach, pushed his gun above the last step and fired twice. Then a door slammed, and he took a chance on raising his head.

He swung erect cautiously, moved with his shoulders sliding along the wall. Five paces from the closed door, he stopped. "Come out of there with your hands up!" he commanded.

Silence!

"If you find out who did it, kid, don't make no arrests!" Old Mac had told him.

Naughton's lips formed a bloodless line across his face.

"Come out, or I'm coming in after

you!" He reiterated his command without moving those taut lips.

Three shots ploughed through the thin panel for an answer; three pellets of lead that missed him by inches. It was the answer he wanted.

HE PRESSED against the wall to gain momentum, fired twice at the lock, then catapulted ahead. His flying foot struck the lock, and the door crashed open, hanging crazily on broken hinges. He glimpsed a man crouched near the window and hurled himself sideways as a gun belched at him. Naughton squeezed the trigger . . . twice.

The first shot missed . . . the second was a dull click on an empty shell.

"I quit!" yelled the man, raising his hands. "My gun's empty!"

Naughton groped for a switch and flooded the room with light.

"I've got you, Rolph!" he rasped.

The insurance adjustor shrank before the detective's savagery. There was little of the debonair business man about him now as he swayed there, hands half raised.

Naughton talked, slowly, with the grim finality of a judge pronouncing sentence. "I've got you, Rolph, cold! I didn't suspect you, you rotten rat, but I should have. It was you who heard Clancy tell me that Torrence had talked, and so you sent those three bugs out to silence the girl. You had a swell spot, Rolph, hanging out at the MacGilray's where you could hear everything connected with departmental affairs. Perhaps when we come to it we'll find out you killed Manny and the Hansen girl."

"You can't prove a thing, Naughton. Give me a break. I can pay—"

"Pay!" yelled the detective. "You're going to pay right now. I'm going to take this gun and beat the life out of you. You've got you're break! Start fighting!"

Rolph suddenly whipped down his

gun. Naughton realized he had been tricked, and sought to throw himself sideways. The other's gun exploded almost in his face. The slug tore into his shoulder, spun him around. He went down to one knee, shook his head to clear it and reversed his own revolver. Clutching it like a club, he came erect.

Rolph gaped, eyes distended in terror. In the weird, scorched face of the other man, he read a courage that cowed him and he retreated slowly.

"Don't, Naughton! I'll confess. I hired those bugs . . . Stay back. Don't stare at me like that! You're mad!"

Naughton laughed. His head spun dizzily. It was difficult to keep the weaving figure within the focus of his blurred vision, but he stalked doggedly, his whole consciousness centered on a single purpose.

And then—to his everlasting amazement—the man before him vanished, leaving the room filled with the echo of his scream!

Naughton stopped, bewildered. He shook his head savagely to dispel the blindness he was certain had descended on him. An understanding came to him as he staggered over to the shattered window casing. Shouts came filtering up from the street below. With a sigh of finality, Naughton turned and stumbled back to the stairs.

Captain Taylor met him at the door and helped him over to the squad-car where he collapsed in a weary heap on the running-board. From there he surveyed the scene. Nunnally was bent over a black mound on the sidewalk. For a moment Naughton thought that mound might represent young MacGilray, but the homicide dick walked over and disabused him.

"Rolph's finished," Nunnally growled. "Landed on his head."

Taylor touched the wounded shoulder. "You're hit, kid," he said gently.

Naughton pushed him aside so he could look around. "Where's Keith MacGilray? Is he—" He hesitated.

Taylor shook his head. "Pretty badly beaten up," he explained, "but nothing serious." He took a long breath, added: "I was afraid the kid had something to do with this arson mob; got a tip from the hospital that it was Keith that Ernie Torrence spotted at the Bilsky blaze. Afraid you were coverin' him, fella."

Naughton wagged his head. "No, it wasn't that. I just couldn't figure him. Well, you know Old Mac; a son of his couldn't—"

"How'd you spot Jack Rolph?"

THE arson dick shrugged wearily. "I wasn't absolutely sure until I went into that building after him. I only connected him when you were questioning me at the Hansen girl's apartment. It had to be him, though." He summarized the events leading up to the blow-off, explained wearily.

"Young Keith tried to make a case of his own; he wanted to succeed where we had failed, make a place for himself on the arson detail. Somehow he must have wormed his way into the mob without knowing—maybe he guessed it, though—that Rolph was back of it.

"The kid probably went into the Bilsky blaze to see if he couldn't snag a piece of evidence; he doesn't know fear around a fire. Torrence spotted him. Perhaps Ernie figured the kid was part of the mob, or maybe he realized the truth and wanted to tip me off to protect Keith from anything rash; we'll never be sure of that now. But that's what started things. Rolph was present when I was told that Torrence wanted to give me some information. The only way I can figure it is that he sent Wycoff's wife to block my car—he knew it well—while the bugs chased out to squelch Hansen. I dunno why they didn't bump her first, though."

"That checks," Taylor said quietly, "with the story Sarah Wycoff just delivered. She just belched out the whole thing, practically wrapped up for court. Only there ain't gonna be much need of a witness for Nunnally shot the hell out of Steve an' I got my doubts whether Ike'll ever be much good again either. We'll get Bilsky, though.

"But it went like you said. Rolph, of course, had a swell set-up. Him bein' an insurance adjustor, he was in a pretty spot. He started the fires, soaked the insurance companies all the traffic would stand, and took a big split from the insured. He knew what Keith was up to, but figured to use him while he could. When he heard about the Torrence episode, and then saw you workin' the kid over, he decided the thing had about run its course. He got the mob together an' they planned to do one more job an' have the pay-off.

"They let you hear them telephone young Keith on purpose. The plan was to kill him an' leave him on that warehouse job so's it would look like he was guilty of killin' the watchman. Torrence's incomplete statement would point to the idea that the kid was back of the Bilsky fire, an' both you an' the nurse would have to think the same thing when you heard Steve telephone the kid. Rolph also figured, so Sarah Wycoff tells us, that you'd

be permanently out of the runnin' with this girl of Old Mac's.

"But Keith outsmarted them at the warehouse, an' so did you, by bein' there. They figured you two was dead, caught in the basement, but there was still the Hansen dame. Rolph hopped over there an' killed her. She must have delayed calling us. Maybe she was scared on account of what she'd done an' took too long to see the light. Then Rolph shot Manny rather than waste time trying to get those handcuffs off him. It just meant one less to split the take with. You broke up a bad mob, kid, an' I'm proud of you."

Naughton loosed a bitter laugh. "Me? Hell, it was the kid that—"

Taylor flagged him silent.

"All right, don't high-pressure me. We'll see that the kid gets all the breaks that's comin' to him; I'll even promise him a job on our detail when he's old enough. In the meantime, he's got one hell of a lot to learn about team-work, an' I can't figure anybody better suited for the job than one of his own family. So I figure about the best thing you can do is to hop over an' see this here gal of Old Mac's an' sort of get things started in the right direction. Nunnally an' me ain't so old we can't handle this cargo of cold meat."

Naughton chuckled again, but this time the bitterness was gone.

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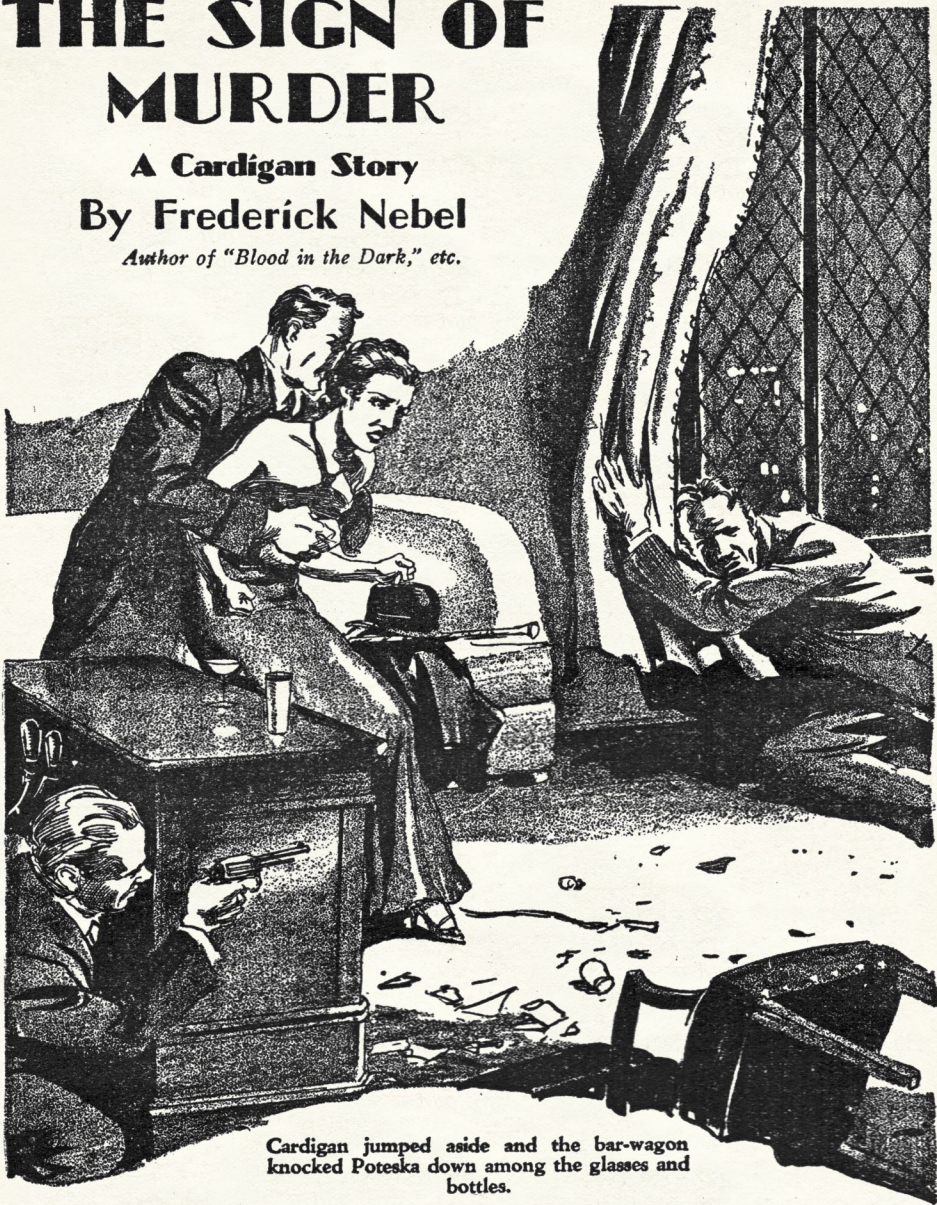
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PROBAK JUNIOR

THE SIGN OF MURDER

A Cardigan Story
By Frederick Nebel

Author of "Blood in the Dark," etc.



Cardigan jumped aside and the bar-wagon knocked Poteska down among the glasses and bottles.

CHAPTER ONE

On the Heels of the Rain

CARDIGAN woke up with a bell ringing in his ears. His bedroom light was on and there was a book on his chest and he knew that he had fallen asleep reading again. He heaved away the covers and reached for the phone,

realized it wasn't the phone ringing, and with a yawn and an absent-minded oath climbed out of bed, his wrinkled cotton pajamas twisted around his big body. He tramped on bare feet into his living-room, punched the button that would open the hall door downstairs and weaved back into the bedroom for robe and slippers. The alarm clock on the bed-table said one

That big dick from the Cosmos Agency was always ready to slip a fin to a pal in need —and the Bourke girl was no exception. But he hated the idea of having her go up for murder before she could pay him back —particularly when he was certain she was not guilty and that the whole cockeyed set-up was just poison for Ivy, and lead poison at that.



A. M. He went into the living-room yanking tight the cord of his robe and pushed out into the corridor to see who was coming up. He could hear rain on a skylight.

Ivy Bourke came up, soaked from head to foot, and Cardigan, scratching his touseled head, said with scowling curiosity: "Swell night for puddle jumping." Otherwise, he seemed lazily to take things for granted; though a visit from Ivy Bourke at this hour, or any other hour, was far from usual.

"I saw your light," she said, "or I wouldn't have—"

"Yeah. I was reading." He followed her into the living-room and heeled the door shut. "Lady, are you soaked! I better give you a drink."

"No, Jack. Listen—"

"Not until you have a shot."

He swung into the pantry, poured out a jigger of rye and carried it back into the living-room.

"Mix it," she said, grimacing.

"Nix. What do you think I buy good rye for, to spoil it with water? Here. Chuck it down."

"Well. . . ." She took it straight, making a face and shaking her head from side to side.

HE didn't stare expectantly at her but went around the room looking for a cigarette. He knew just how she looked—very white and with a touch of strain on her small, triangular face. There was rain on her cheeks and chin and her lips looked blue with the cold. He knew she was shivering and he could hear the drops of wet falling from her clothing.

"Jack. . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Will you—will you lend me five dollars?"

"Sure."

He crossed the room and entered a

closet, searching in the pockets of a suit he had hung up before going to bed. The phone rang and he called out "Catch that, Ivy. It may be the office."

She went into the bedroom, picked up the instrument and said: "Hello? . . . Hello, hello? . . ."

"Who is it?" Cardigan yelled, coming out of the closet.

"I don't know. There's no one on, Jack."

"Hang up, then."

She hung up and as she came into the living-room he said: "No kidding, Ivy, this is a hell of a night for you to be slamming around New York. What's the answer?"

Her lips tightened and her eyes shot swiftly from left to right.

He shrugged and handed her the five-dollar bill. "O. K., forget I mentioned it," he chuckled roughly.

"I—" she began.

"Huh?"

"Well, I was up to George and Helen Shepard's and I had just enough to get home on and then when I did get home I didn't have my key along. I had the one to the hall door but not the one to our apartment."

"Wasn't Steve with you?"

She dropped her voice and looked away. "No."

"Wasn't he home?"

"No."

"Well, why didn't you wake up the janitor?"

"Oh, he's a cranky old man. I would have if I hadn't found you up. And you were pretty near, only five blocks, so—Well, I'll spend the night at a hotel. Thanks a million, Jack. I'll give it back to you tomorrow."

"No hurry, Ivy," he said, going with her to the door. And then, "Wait about two minutes. I'll get dressed and take you to the hotel."

She turned, her smile tired. "No, Jack. Don't."

"Nuts. It'll take only—"

She put a palm against his chest, shook her head. "I'll be there in five minutes. Thanks again."

He watched her go down the stairway, then turned and went back into his apartment scowling darkly. Ivy used to be a stenographer in the Cosmos Agency office up until the time she married Steve Bourke, two years ago. When she married Bourke her father washed his hands of her. Bourke's reputation was no good at all, it never had been any good. He had never held a newspaper job longer than three months at a time and when he had been kicked off every sheet in the city—the last about a year after he married Ivy—he had gone to work for Gus Poteska, who ran a string of bars and restaurants in the Forties and Fifties. He still worked for Poteska, as far as Cardigan knew, handling the outfit's publicity and still getting as plastered as ever. Cardigan had lugged him home once or twice, not because he liked Bourke, but for Ivy's sake. But Bourke had an idea that Cardigan was on the make for Ivy and after one scene Cardigan never spoke to him again. Ivy had got a rotten deal but Cardigan had never heard her complain. She was always sure that she could straighten Steve out.

The rain was still beating against the windows when Cardigan climbed back into bed. He turned out the bedlight, then turned it on again, picked up the telephone and called his office. He recognized the night man's voice and said: "'D you ring me, Oscar? This is Jack."

"When?"

"Oh, ten minutes ago."

"Nope."

Cardigan hung up, leaned on his elbow for a minute, then shrugged and yanked the covers up to his chin.

CHAPTER TWO

The Sign of Murder

THE house in East Thirty-fifth Street was three-storied, not counting the basement. It had brown sides and a new gray front and the doorway and vestibule were level with the street. In the rear was a courtyard and when Idlemann the janitor put his cat out at six in the morning the sky was clear, the air had a cold, washed rain. Idlemann was a clinker of a man, small and dried up and testy-looking. He had a nut-cracker face—his nose almost met his chin.

Three ashcans usually stood in a row outside the back door, but this morning one of them was overturned and ashes lay spread on the cement courtyard. Idlemann cursed. He hopped out into the courtyard—and stopped short. There was a man lying on the cement and there was dark color on the paving and the man's body looked broken, out of joint. Idlemann's mouth became a gaping O. He turned almost stealthily, crept back through the doorway and bolted up the corridor. He reached Thirty-fifth Street with his eyes bulging.

"Police!" he screamed.

Patrolman Carpintero, picking his teeth on the corner of Thirty-fifth and Lexington, heard the bleating sound and turned his eyes absently down the side street. He saw the hopping, arm-fanning figure of Idlemann and proceeded leisurely to meet it, sucking at his cleaned teeth. People were beginning to thrust their heads out of windows.

"Officer, officer!" panted Idlemann.

"Hahn?" said Carpintero.

"A man—a man"—Idlemann pointed toward the house—"is back there dead—dead!"

Carpintero took a final sharp suck at his teeth, said, "Well, let's take a look," and motioned Idlemann to go in. The patrol-

man followed the janitor to the courtyard, stooped without bending his knees and rolled the body over. "For a minute," he said, "I thought you was kidding. You wasn't. This lad hit smack on his puss. Who is he?" Carpintero looked up at the rows of windows.

The janitor grimaced. "I can't tell—account of the face—but it looks like Mr. Bourke."

"Top floor?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"Well, a top-floor window's open. Let's go up."

They climbed to the top floor, Idlemann way ahead, the cop taking his time. The janitor was waiting outside a door when Carpintero finally arrived.

"Locked?" Carpintero asked.

"Yes—locked."

"I could bust it, buddy, unless you got a key."

Idlemann took a fat ring of keys from his hip pocket and opened the door. He cringed, not wanting to enter. The cop looked in, then entered and strolled through a living-room, a bedroom containing twin beds, a dining-nook and a kitchen. The kitchen window was the one that was open.

Carpintero looked out, pulled his head back in and said: "Yop."

The shade lay on the floor. It evidently had been yanked off, for one of the brackets was missing. Carpintero took note of it but did not pick it up. He strolled into the living-room, picked up the phone and called his precinct station-house. As he hung up he saw Idlemann standing timidly in the doorway.

"You c'n come in," Carpintero said, "but don't touch nothing."

Idlemann's nose and chin worked toward each other as he gagged out: "Is—is Mrs. Bourke d-dead too?"

"Ah, so there's a Mrs. Bourke," said Carpintero. He made another tour of the

apartment, this time looking in all the closets. "Nope. Nobody here." He sat down and hung his cap on one knee. "Any minute the sergeant'll be over. Now don't touch nothing."

"Can I sit down?" groaned Idlemann.

"Sure, pal. Only don't sit on a chair with arms account of you might touch the arms."

AT six-twenty-five Detective-Sergeant Grover Block walked in through the door, said, "Hiyuh," to Carpintero and cruised noisy-heeled through the apartment. He reappeared in the living-room and grunted: "Well, where's the body?"

Carpintero said, "Well, it's down in the courtyard out back there." And to Block's partner, Whitey Fife, "The sarge crabs—"

"You lug-head, what's the idea of making me climb two flights of stairs when the body's down in the courtyard?" Block demanded.

"But this is where it fell out of," said Carpintero.

"What the hell do I care where it fell out of! First I want to see a body, then I'll—"

"But I thought—"

"You're not paid to think! When you're paid to think you won't be wearing harness, you'll be wearing plainclothes! Who are you?" Block chopped at Idlemann.

Idlemann told him.

"You stay here," Block said; and to his partner, "Come on, Whitey."

They went out and Carpintero, squinting at the door, took a slow spit into a wastebasket and said: "That fr you, Sarge."

Ten minutes later Block and Whitey returned and Block dumped onto a desk a handful of odds and ends he had taken out of Bourke's pockets. His voice, always short, blunt, toneless, said: "Keys. Cards. Fountain pen. Pencil. Watch—broken—stopped at twenty minutes past

twelve last night. Twenty grand from his pockets. Ten in thousands, nineteen five-hundreds, and nine one-hundred-dollar bills and a hundred bucks in tens. He's got his topcoat on, so he was either about to leave or he'd just come in when it happened."

"Maybe he committed suicide," suggested Carpintero.

"There you go again—thinking." Block slapped the packet of bills across his palm and grunted: "A guy with twenty grand in his pants is going to commit suicide, I suppose." He dropped the money to the desk. "That," he added, pointing to the money, "is the sign of murder. I'll show you another, bright eyes. Come in here."

Block strode into the kitchen and pointed to a fireplace poker that lay beneath the sink. "It don't belong in here, it belongs in the living-room. Open your eyes and you'll see fresh porcelain chipped off the sink—there's the bits on the floor." He picked up the poker between thumb and forefinger, halfway down the shaft. "And there's a bit of white on the poker."

"I don't see no blood, though."

"Wouldn't have to be. A quick sock on the head don't always leave blood in a second, dummy. The guy was hit and then whoever hit him threw away the poker, scared. Or maybe the sink was hit by accident."

"Maybe Bourke was drunk and slipped and fell out the window."

Block flexed his flat hips. "Maybe. But I don't think so."

"Well," said Carpintero, "once we get hold of his wife—"

"His wife!"

"Sure. Idlemann in there says he has a wife, only she ain't here—she wasn't when I got here."

Block went streaking into the living-room and shot at Idlemann: "When'd you last see Bourke's wife?"

"Well—you see—I—I—"

"Come on, come on—take the marbles out of your mouth."

Idlemann belched: "Six o'clock last night."

"Where?"

"Leaving—going out."

"Alone?"

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir."

"You don't have to 'sir' me, mister. 'D you see her come in again?"

"N-no."

"Hear her up here later during the night?"

"No."

"Hear anybody else up here?"

"No."

"Did you hear any noise, a crash, at about midnight?"

Idlemann shook his head, gulped. "No—no."

"My God, you sleep down there in the basement and you mean to tell me a guy hits the cement outside and you don't hear him!"

"I—I always take sleeping powders."

BLACK groaned and rolled his savage dark eyes. Then he growled: "Well, who else lives in this house? Whitey, go down and see who all lives here and see if they heard anything."

Whitey said amiably, "Wait . . ." and crossed the room, shoved aside an arm-chair. He picked up a loaded suitcase and skated it out into the middle of the room, pointed to the initials on it. "Bourke's, I guess."

Block threw him the bunch of keys, saying, "See."

Whitey got it open and dumped the contents. "I guess so. He must have been going to leave for places."

"With twenty grand, sure. But why—" He stopped short. "The motive wasn't robbery," he said, pointing rigidly.

"The wife," said Whitey.

Block snapped his fingers. "Hell, yes!

He was going to leave her. She caught him—came home late and caught him and—”

“I’ll go down and ask people questions, like you said,” Whitey drawled, leaving.

The phone rang and Block crossed to it, picked it up and stared solemnly straight ahead at nothing. “Hello,” he muttered.

“Oh, Steve, there,” a man’s voice said. “Golly, I guess I just about caught you. Listen, Steve. When you get there, look up Ben Rossberger right away and tell him I’ll give him two hundred a week to run the Bandstand. You know how all the people there’s been asking where’s Ben, where’s Ben. I think he’s worth two hundred, so tell him.”

“Who is this?” Block growled.

“It’s me, Steve. It’s Gus.”

“Gus who?”

“Hey . . . who is this?”

“You’re talking to Detective-sergeant Grover Block.”

“Oh, well. Well, put Steve on.”

“He’s dead.”

“What!”

“Come on, who are you?”

“Who am I? Damn it, I’m Gus Poteska!”

“Well, I never met you, Mr. Poteska, but I’m going to. Put your pants on and come down here.”

“Hey, listen! Wait!”

“Put ’em on and come down, Mr. Poteska.”

Block hung up and found Carpintero smiling smugly at him. Carpintero was holding up something. “Here’s something you didn’t find, Sarge.”

Block crossed the room, plucked a ladies’ diamond ring from between Carpintero’s thumb and index finger. “Looks like an engagement ring,” he muttered.

“It is, I guess. Take a look inside the band there.”

Block looked. Finely engraved were the words *From Stephen to Ivy*.

“What’s his wife’s name?” Block asked Idlemann.

“Ivy,” said Idlemann.

“Where’d you find it?” Block said to the patrolman.

“Under the gas range in the kitchen.”

Block stepped to the bedroom door, stood there for a moment. Turning, he headed for the telephone saying: “Neither bed slept in.” He picked up the phone and did some official business. “Yeah,” he said, toward the end, picking up a photograph of Ivy Bourke, “I got one of her. . . . Oh, hell, we ought to pick her up in no time, unless she chucks herself in the river.”

He cradled the receiver and set down the instrument as the newspapermen arrived.

AUGUSTINE POTESKA was about five-feet-two. He was cone-shaped, his small pointed shoes being the point of the cone. He had small white chunky hands and a white square head, bald on top, with a small patch of black hair slicked above either ear. His lips were thick, red, with definite lines. His nose was small, pointed. He had wide-open large blue eyes, full of nothing. He was supposed to be worth plenty of money. His clothes were expensive, dark and snug. He sat on a straight-backed chair in the Bourke living-room, his toes barely touching the floor, his chunky little hands folded on his paunch.

Block was ripping out in his blunt, hard voice: “I don’t give a stinking damn who you are! Twenty thousand bucks is twenty thousand bucks. You want it. You want it because you say it’s yours, you say you gave it to Bourke to fly south this morning to the Meadowforth Track. You wanted him to bet it for you right at the track. Now that he’s dead you want the

money so you can send it down with somebody else. The hell you say! How do I know it's your money? Suppose it is? All right, we'll say it is. But it's got to stay impounded till we prove it."

Poteska said in a chilly smiling voice: "You ain't ever worked up in my territory, have you, Block?"

"No. So what?"

"I don't take guff from flatfoots."

Block's face was wooden, narrow. "I talk plain, brother, and if you can't take plain talk to hell with you. I said to hell with you and what are you going to do about it?"

Cardigan appeared in the doorway and said: "Kick him in the teeth, Gus, and see if they're false."

Block turned. "I thought I phoned you an hour ago to get over here. How long does it take you to get five blocks?"

"I ate breakfast."

"This is more important than breakfast, damn you!"

"Not my breakfast."

"Hello, Jack," said Whitey.

"Hello, Whitey," said Cardigan. "If your partner gets wound up anymore he's going to spin like a top."

Block snapped: "I've heard funnier jokes than that at funerals, sailor. But when I phone you and tell you—"

"To hell with you, Grover!" Cardigan snapped back at him. "You're not my boss and if I want to eat any breakfast before I come around I'll eat it. Just because Gus Poteska gets you riled is no reason why you should land on me—so don't try it. One more beef out of you and I'll turn around and walk out. What time was Bourke killed?"

"Exactly twenty past twelve last night, loud-mouth."

Cardigan leaned back against the wall, pulled down one side of his heavy mouth in a smile, said: "Where do I fit in and

who was the guy with the stop-watch that clocked the exact time?"

Block pointed to the desk. "There's his watch—smashed—at twenty past twelve. I took it out of his pocket down in the courtyard."

"All right. Now tell me where I fit in, Toots."

Block's face looked very narrow, very watchful. "I been checking up on the phone here. There was a call made from here to your place at five past one—exactly forty-five minutes after Bourke's watch stopped."

Cardigan's eyes were not fooling now. "My phone rang about that time, Grove. But there was nobody on it."

"I'll give you a couple more answers, Jack."

"You got the right one. Ask Oscar at the agency office. I hung up and then after a few minutes I thought it might be the office, so I phoned Oscar. He said no, it wasn't him."

Block wore a sad wooden half-smile. "Nice work, Jack. Nice figuring."

Cardigan said: "All right, then. You make up the puzzles, so you give your own answers. Listen, everybody. This is going to be good."

BLOCK was unimpressed. "Bourke's watch stopped—he was killed at twelve-twenty. A call is made from here to your apartment at five past one. Bourke's wife used to be Ivy Trant and when she was Ivy Trant she worked in your office. The answer is this: she took a crack at her husband with a poker, stunned him, and he pitched out the window. She didn't know what to do. Then she thought of you. She phoned you."

"And I told her to run away. That would be just about the brightest thing in the world for me to do."

Block said: "She phoned you at five

past one this morning. Bourke couldn't have phoned you because—"

"Because he was dead. He was dead at five past one because his watch—smashed—showed he died at twenty past twelve. Now how would you like me to tell you that this twenty-past-twelve theory of yours might be cockeyed?"

"Tell me."

"You say he was hit with a poker. All right—if somebody comes after you with a poker you're going to defend yourself—you're going to hold up your arms. The watch might have been smashed by the poker and not by the fall."

"He's right there," drawled Whitey.

Block flexed his lips. "O. K. One of us is as right as the other on that—except for the reasoning. From what I heard from some reporters that were around here a little while ago, Jack, you and Bourke were not on speaking terms. So why should Bourke call you up?"

"I didn't say he did."

"I know you didn't. I said his wife called you up for advice after she smacked him with the poker. It's got to be that way!" he growled. "Robbery wasn't the motive. He was leaving her and she fought with him. Her engagement ring was found on the kitchen floor. Maybe she flung it at him, I don't know. But there you are. With twenty thousand on the body—"

Cardigan darkened. "What twenty thousand?"

Block told him and Cardigan looked at Gus Poteska.

The door opened and a tall, handsome brunette swaggered in, took a bored look around the room and said to Poteska: "Well, I got here, Gus."

Block snapped: "Who are you?"

The brunette looked him up and down casually. "I might ask, *what* are you? I might, cowboy, but I won't. There may be children present."

"Now, Gloria," soothed Poteska. "Be nice. Sergeant Block, this is Gloria Bell, my secretary."

Gloria chuckled. "That's Gus all over, Sarge. He always calls his girl friend his secretary, just in case the vice squad's around."

"Young lady," said Block bluntly, "if this is a rehearsal you're putting on, pass over it. There's a murder quiz going on here and we don't need any stooges. We got one here already," he added, digging his dark stare at Cardigan, "and we don't need any more."

"Hello, big boy and whatever your name is," she said to Cardigan.

Cardigan said: "Hi, beautiful."

She sauntered across the room, helped herself to a cigarette from a box on the table.

"Madam," said Block, "I wish you'd get out of here, unless you got business here."

She picked up the poker, which was lying on the table, and pointed it at him. "Sarge, control yourself—"

"Damn it, drop that! That was a weapon—"

"Oh-h," she said, letting go of it as though it were hot. "Little Gloria pulling boners again." She raised a hand. "Hold it, Sarge. I just dropped by because Gus asked me to."

Poteska nodded. "Yes. Gloria was present when I gave Steve the twenty thousand dollars. She is my witness. I asked her to come."

Block looked at her. "Is that right?" he demanded.

She touched her hair languidly. "Gus took the words right out of my mouth."

Block said: "Well, you can come around when the formal hearing's held. But the money stays in custody for the present. If it's Mr. Poteska's, and I guess it is, he'll get it back—but I'm only a sergeant, I

can't hand it over. And now you can go, Miss Bell."

"I didn't intend hanging around," she said, moving back across the room. She was a head taller than Poteska. She patted his cheek. "Be seeing you, snooksy-wooksy."

"Whoops!" guffawed Carpintero.

She drawled at him: "Do you speak, too, or do you just make animal sounds? . . . So long, boys." She drifted out.

Block moved his shoulders inside his coat, said: "Now to get back to—"

Cardigan interrupted: "I thought you said Bourke was going to Florida."

"I did."

CARDIGAN stooped over Bourke's suitcase, which still lay open on the floor. He picked up a pair of fur-lined gloves, a woolen sweater. "Since when do people pack these things for a visit to Florida?"

Poteska jumped.

"Sit down, you," Block snapped.

Poteska sat down.

Block stared at the gloves, the sweater. He mused out loud: "I think I get it. Bourke maybe was supposed to go to Florida—but he figured, with twenty grand, to run out."

Poteska jumped up again, pointed, cried: "Now don't say sit down! Don't tell me, now!" He looked very small and comically indignant.

"You know," said Patrolman Carpintero, "it's funny about that gentleman there. Sitting or standing, he looks the same. If he was behind a bar, f'r instance, I'd think he was kneeling."

Poteska colored. The red color swept across his white face like a flame. A vein on his temple bulged. His wide-open eyes stared at Carpintero with a touch of fierce, glassy hatred. Sweat oozed out on his skin.

Carpintero looked sheepish. "Geez, did I say something?"

"Anything you say," Block told him, "is too much." The gaunt sergeant turned to Poteska. "And what were you going to say?"

Purse-lipped, Poteska sat down. "Nothing."

"Nothing my eye," Block grunted.

Poteska moved his lips, moistened them with his tongue, then dried them with the side of his index finger. "Well . . ." His eyes dropped, flickered. "Well, it's just tough to believe that Steve Bourke would have double-crossed me by running off with the dough I gave him to take South."

Block broke a dry cigar in half and stuck one half in his mouth, chewed it to pulp. "What about women? Was he ga-ga on any gal?"

Poteska scratched the back of his left wrist. His eyes were expressionless again. "I don't know about that. I never noticed. I don't think he was. No, I don't think he was."

"When was the last time yesterday you seen him?"

"Seven o'clock last night, when I gave him the money."

"Where?"

"At my place, my apartment where I live. West Fifty-second."

There was a knock on the door and Carpintero opened it. A young man, with his hat in one hand and a sheaf of papers in the other, said: "Is the lady of the house in?"

"Hah," chortled Carpintero.

The young man looked a little puzzled. Block rapped out: "And what would you want with the lady of the house?"

"Well," said the young man, "I'm selling magazine subscriptions and I thought—"

"Hah," chortled Carpintero.

"You shut up," Block told him; and

to the young man, "Sonny boy, if I knew where the lady of the house was, I'd go out and get drunk as a celebration. If you find her, sonny boy, tell me. Do tell me. I'll get us both drunk."

"Oh," said the young man.

"Magazine subscriptions!" exploded Block. "Those harness bulls downstairs would let in an elephant if an elephant could get through the door! Beat it!"

"Beat it!" echoed Carpintero as he slammed the door shut. "That's telling him, Sarge."

Cardigan crossed the room and picked up his battered old fedora. He slapped it on his head, gave the front of the brim a downward yank. He buttoned his shabby ulster.

"You guys have your fun," he said. "I work for a living."

"You just wait!" Block said.

"I know, I know. Ivy Bourke phoned me at five after one this morning. We had a long talk and she told me she killed her husband and I told her she'd better take it on the lam." He strode to the door, turned, snorted: "Grow up! It's the last thing in the world I'd tell her—to beat it! If you want me again, you know where you can find me."

"I'll want you again, all right, all right."

"Swell. Only make it interesting."

CHAPTER THREE

The Dead Visitor

THE phone in George Hammerhorn's private office rang at half-past one that afternoon. Hammerhorn was the head of the Cosmos Agency. He was a broad, blond man, well groomed in dark gray. His movements were slow, deliberate. He reached out slowly, deliberately for the phone with his right hand, removed a half-smoked cigar from his mouth with his left.

"Yes?" He watched the smoke rise from his cigar. "O. K. Hang around, though." He slid the receiver into the prongs and said across the office to Cardigan: "That was Floom, watching the Bourke place. She hasn't turned up yet."

Cardigan was standing with one foot on the floor, the other on the radiator by the window, and leaning cross-armed on his knee. He scowled down at the traffic on Madison Avenue, his big face brown and saturnine, his wide mouth drawn down at one corner.

George Hammerhorn leaned back in his leather-upholstered chair. "She did it, I guess."

"And why the hell shouldn't she have?" Cardigan growled, his black eyes stirring, not seeing the traffic. "That guy Bourke stank. A handsome, glib, fast-fingered guy-about-town."

"That has nothing to do with the law, Jack. She should have stayed there, held her ground—called it self-defense or something. When they find her, they'll be tough."

Cardigan swung his foot off the radiator and spaded his hands into his hip pockets, facing Hammerhorn. "Don't read me the law, George, for cripes' sake. I know she should have held her ground. But the poor kid was scared, she didn't know what to do—"

"She knew enough to come over to your place and borrow five bucks."

Cardigan dropped into a chair and knuckled his chin.

Hammerhorn said: "I think you should have told the cops about that call, Jack. It would have cleared up one angle—the fact that she couldn't have made that phone call at one five because she was at your place."

"That's not the main angle. The main angle is that Bourke's watch was smashed at twelve twenty. I can prove, if I have to, later, that she was at my place at five

past one. It's going to make a stink. The scandal-mongers are going to link her to me in a nasty way. The main reason I didn't tell Block that she was there was because I wanted to be free to move around. He hasn't got her, so he'd have held me as a material witness or something—maybe even an accessory after the fact. All right—I can prove she was at my place when the phone call was made, but I can't prove where she was at the time Bourke's watch was smashed."

"Who did make the phone call, then?"

Cardigan got up and took a caged walk around the office. "There's a fluke somewhere. I knew there was something wrong when she came into my apartment last night—I could tell it. Maybe she did sock him, say, at twelve twenty, and broke the watch. Then maybe she left. Maybe Bourke tried to get me and fainted before the connection was made—or changed his mind and hung up. Maybe he was sick. Maybe he stuck his head out the window for some air and fell out."

Hammerhorn was gravely logical. "The fact remains, Jack, that she hasn't come back to the apartment. That's an indication of guilt. We can assume—"

Angry, impatient, Cardigan slashed his hand through the air. "We're wasting time. There's just one thing I've got to do. I've got to find her before the cops do. Guilty or not guilty—I've got to find her first, George!"

"How about the place where she said she was last night before she came home?"

"I checked that. I went up there right after I left Block at the apartment. Helen Shepard said she left there at eleven thirty last night in a cab. That's the last she's seen or heard of Ivy. Helen knows we're friends and she promised to let me know if she got any news." He scooped up his overcoat, shrugged into it. "Take any message if she calls. I'm going to find out where Ivy spent the night."

"Want a couple of men?"

"No. Just keep Floom watching if Ivy shows up at her apartment."

"Keep your nose clean."

CARDIGAN grabbed his hat and swung out. He went down to the Grand Central Terminal, changed a dollar into nickels and went into the men's smoking-room and across to the telephone booths. He took down a classified directory and spent ten minutes checking off the hotels within ten blocks of his own address and then made another check of the ones Ivy would be likely to stop at. Then he began telephoning.

"Is Miss Ivy Bourke registered there?"

His fifteenth phone call brought a "Yes, sir" from the operator at the Whiteledge.

"Ring her," said Cardigan.

There was an interval of silence and then the operator said: "Miss Bourke does not answer."

"Send a hop up and make sure."

He waited, put in another nickel when he was told to; waited another minute. The operator said: "Miss Bourke's key was found in the outside of her door. She apparently checked out. Her room was paid for in advance."

Half an hour later he called the Cosmos office, said: "Any news about Ivy from Floom?"

"No," said Hammerhorn. "I just heard, though, that the medical examiner reported Bourke must have been pretty tight when he died."

"No poison or anything?"

"No. Just alcohol."

"Get me a list of the bars that Gus Poteska owns and runs, George. I'll call you back. I know some of them but I want all of them."

When he called back half an hour later Hammerhorn gave him a list of six; added: "And no word from Floom."

Cardigan figured it would be a waste of

time to go around to the bars before five o'clock. He stood outside the terminal, on the corner of Forty-second and Vanderbilt, watching the moving crowd with narrowed, hunting eyes. Ivy was somewhere in this city. Walking, probably; walking endlessly. If she had paid three dollars for a room, she had two left. She could not go far on two dollars. The police had her photograph. They would be combing the streets for her, watching the theater lobbies. The evening papers would carry her picture too. Her father would hear of it days later—he was down in Central America somewhere with a survey outfit.

Cardigan began to tramp the streets around Ivy's apartment, knowing that a guilty person often haunts the neighborhood of a crime. He worked back and forth across town down to Thirtieth Street, where he lived, and dropped into his vestibule to see if there was any mail. There was a letter bearing the name of the Hotel Whiteledge. He tore it open.

Dear Jack,

I must have looked a fool and acted a fool the way I barged in on you at that hour. Warm and dry here now, in the hotel room, I feel very embarrassed. I guess the rain and the cold just upset me. But you were always so good to me when I worked at the agency, and afterward with Steve and all, that you were the first one I thought of to bother. Please excuse me. It's two o'clock now and I'm going to bed and as soon I get home, about eight or nine, I'll send you the five.

Gratefully,
Ivy.

It was postmarked at eight A. M. Cardigan crushed it into his pocket, hiked up the stairway to the second floor and fished his apartment key out of his pocket. He flung open the door and shouldered in, still confused by the contents of the letter. Taking the letter out, he read it again, trying to find something between the lines. He shrugged, put it back into his pocket

and went into the pantry for a drink. As he reached over the sink to wash out the jigger, he saw a few red spots on the porcelain. He put his finger on one of them, smeared that spot into another. The spots were still wet. They were blood-spots.

He turned slowly, his brows coming together, his lips parting a little, and stared out into the living-room. The sun lay in three slanting bars across the carpet. He pushed out of the pantry, stood for a minute in the middle of the living-room, then moved with slow heavy steps into the bedroom.

A man was lying face down alongside the bed, near the bedtable. The phone was on the floor, a broken wire curving upward. The man wore a light gray overcoat. His hat was about two feet away, upside down. His heels were worn on the outer edges. A blond man.

Cardigan took a few more slow steps, bent over, grabbed hold of a shoulder and turned the man half over. Blood dripped from between the man's coat lapels to the floor, where more blood lay in a dark wet patch. The man was Whitey Fife, Block's partner from the station-house. He was dead.

Cardigan let him fall back on his face. He said, "*M-m-m*," through lips that slid tautly back and forth across each other. The phone had been yanked out. The only sign of a struggle was a twisted small rug.

Cardigan went back into the living-room, lit a cigarette and stood nibbling quick little drags at it. He turned suddenly, strode to the door and went out into the corridor; locked the door and wheeled toward the head of the staircase.

Block was standing there leaning against the banister. The sergeant said: "Boy, you've been doing a lot of running around and telephoning since I clamped on your tail."

"Where'd you come from?"

"Wherever you came from. You ain't kidding me, Jack. You know plenty about that little affair over in Thirty-fifth Street. I just thought I'd follow you around."

Cardigan swiveled and went back to the door, saying: "All right, follow me in here."

He opened the door, strode into the living-room and with a jerk of his chin said: "Take a look inside."

Block shot him a suspicious sidewise glance, stretched his gaunt legs across the living-room and disappeared into the bedroom. Cardigan heard him bawl out: "Good God!"

Cardigan took a few steps and leaned in the bedroom doorway. "Now say I did it," he said.

Block had turned the body over and was feeling around. "A knife did it. Poor old Whitey . . ." He dropped to his knees, felt the arms, the legs. "He ain't been dead long. He ain't been dead over an hour. What's this?" he said, slapping at the broken telephone wire. He crawled on his knees and pulled a gun from beneath a chair, looked at it. "Whitey's gun." He stood up and turned and his long, narrow face was bitter, sinister. He rasped: "Nobody said you did it! I know you didn't because I been tailing you for a couple of hours.

"Thanks," said Cardigan.

"You got nothing to thank me for." Block's voice was hard, blunt. He pointed. "I'll tell you something, though. I sent Whitey around here a couple of hours ago, just about the time I clamped on your tail. I sent him over to watch this place, in case the dame showed up looking for you. I told him to hang around across the street and watch. So here's his body—in your room. He tailed someone up here. He followed someone up here. Now who would he have followed up?"

"No matter what I say, Grove, you'll

naturally say he tailed Ivy Bourke up."

"Sure I'll say it!"

"And Ivy Bourke, who's about five feet tall and weighs a couple over a hundred pounds—she drove a knife into a man's chest—and the man was armed."

Block stretched his gaunt neck and his eyes were dark, hot, alongside his bony beak of a nose. "A knife slides in easy, Jack. I only know this," he ground on doggedly. "I told Whitey to keep an eye peeled for the woman. Now who else would he have followed up here?"

Cardigan was gnawing at his under lip. "Try this," he said suddenly. "Whitey saw some known gangster go in the building. A guy he recognized. He took a Brody and followed him in. He found the guy in the apartment here, got the drop on him and was starting to make a phone call when the guy jumped him, stabbed him. Then the guy yanked the phone out in case Whitey wasn't all dead."

Block threw out the cylinder of Whitey's gun, counted the shells. "None gone. Hey, wait! One nicked. Whitey tried to fire and the shell didn't go off."

"There's blood in the sink in the pantry. A few drops. The guy that killed Whitey washed his hands, or his gloves."

"You're pretty sure it was a guy, huh?"

"And a smart guy, Sarge. He washed his hands, he even locked the door after he went out—using a skeleton key, which he used to get in with."

Block's eyes were shrewd. "You sure this dame didn't have a key to your apartment?"

"You wouldn't want to get your face caved in, would you?"

CHAPTER FOUR

K. K.

IT was seven o'clock when Cardigan swung into the foyer of the Rio Club. He had already been to four of Gus Po-

teska's bars. The Rio was in Fifty-fifth Street, west of Fifth Avenue, and the brunette leaning at the checkroom desk was small, pop-eyed, and chewed gum with a sliding motion of her jaws.

Cardigan said: "Hello, Gert."

"Well, look what the wind blew in."

"I thought you worked over at the Bandstand."

"I used to. I been working here a week."

"Like it?"

"It's a living. Some of the trade's kinda crummy but— Say, would you like to buy a chance on a round-trip airplane flight to Chicago? Only two bits."

"Nix, Gert. The sight of even an air-mail stamp makes me airsick. Were you on last night?"

"Sure."

"Know Steve Bourke?"

"Hey, wasn't that tough about him? Didja read in the papers about how—?"

"You knew him, then."

"Well, to see him, yeah."

"Was he here last night?"

"Oh, boy, was he here—and how!"

Cardigan frowned. "What's the joke?"

"No joke, Jack. Some guy poked him and nobody knows why."

"Who was the guy?"

"Nobody knows. Just a customer, I guess. He socked Bourke in the men's washroom. Nobody seen him do it but we put two and two together, because a guy came streaking out here for his hat and coat and I saw him wiping what looked like blood off his knuckles. And he looked plenty mad. He couldn't find his check and he snapped at me, 'I can't find it. Gimme my hat and coat.' So I says to him, 'You'll have to describe them, mister.' And so he describes them, exasperated all the time, and still mad, and I give them to him."

Cardigan said: "That's a nice hair-

wave you got, Gert. How did he describe them?"

"Well—oh, yes, I remember. Ha—I had to laugh. He says, 'There's K. K. stamped in the hat.' And I says, 'Ha, another K and you'd be a Ku Kluxer Klanner.' And then I says, 'Now describe the coat.' Well, he says it's a black one. I ask what the label is. He says he can't remember. He points out a black one and tells me that's it. But I says, 'Maybe there's something in the pocket you can describe.' By this time the guy is berling. But he snaps, 'My hotel key! The Hotel Whiteledge!' So the key is in the overcoat and I give him the coat and he slams out."

Cardigan was staring slit-eyed at her. "The Whiteledge, eh? You wouldn't remember the room number?"

"Gee' Jack, no. All I remember is the Whiteledge and the K.K. business account of like I said, did he have three K's—"

The door opened and two well dressed young men grooved smoothly into the foyer and stood eyeing a painting on the wall. They said nothing to each other. One wore a brown raglan overcoat and a derby. The other was dressed in a dark blue Guards coat and a dark blue fedora with the brim turned down over his right ear. Their faces were clean-shaven, smooth, expressionless.

Cardigan finished talking with Gert, started off still looking at her and saying good-bye, and almost crashed into the two young men. Both stepped aside nimbly, dropped their eyes.

Cardigan said, "Excuse the truck, buddies," and heaved out of the Rio.

AN east wind slashed up Fifty-fifth Street, made Cardigan duck his chin into the collar of his old ulster. The street was jammed, noisy with auto traffic through which a mounted patrolman, his

face beet-red, pranced his deft-footed horse. Cardigan couldn't catch a cab until he reached Madison Avenue.

"The Whiteledge," he said.

The Whiteledge was in East Thirty-sixth Street, between Park and Lexington. It raised a gray-white front leanly into the darkness and a short marble tunnel led from the entrance into the small, well appointed lobby.

Cardigan said to the man at the desk: "Is Tom Buffo around?"

"I think he's in his office on the first floor."

Buffo was sitting behind a plain oaken desk in a small, plain room. He was a knob-nosed fat man wearing horn-rimmed glasses. He was the house officer.

"Well, well, speaking of the devil—"

"Hello, Tom. Want to do me a favor?"

"Probably not. Want to buy a chance on a round-trip airplane flight to Chicago?"

"Oh, my God."

"All right, I just thought I'd ask. What's on your mind?"

"I'd like to find out who's name K.K. would stand for. He's living here."

Buffo took off his glasses and put them right back on again. He gave Cardigan a short, weary look, rose and left the office.

In five minutes he returned saying: "We have three. Katherine Kern in Two-one-six, Kirk Keersage in Five-o-two, and Kenneth Klæberg in Six-two-one."

"The woman's out. Know the other two?"

"Keersage's a permanent here. Fat guy, about like me, middle-aged. Klæberg I don't know. He checked in three days ago."

"Thanks, Tom."

"Don't mention it. Now this round-trip airplane—"

"Listen, Tom. I can't do it. A pal of mine died that way. In a parachute jump.

Choked himself to death. You know the ripcord is over the heart, because when a guy falls they figure he'll reach for his heart. Well, this pal o' mine's heart was in his throat when he jumped and so—he choked himself to death."

"M-m-m," brooded Tom Buffo as Cardigan streaked out.

Cardigan rode an elevator to the sixth floor, got out and took a swinging look at the nearby room numbers. He went toward the rear of the corridor and found 621 near the end. He shifted his revolver from his shoulder holster to his right-hand overcoat pocket and kept his hand in the pocket with the gun. With his left hand he knocked on the door.

A man's voice said: "Who's there?"

"Electrician. I got to check up on the telephone. The operator downstairs says she can't get you."

Feet came up to the door, a latch was turned and the door swung open.

Cardigan said dourly, "I'm not really an electrician," and jammed himself in between the door and the frame.

The young man who faced him was the one who had appeared at the Bourke apartment that morning as a subscription salesman for magazines.

Cardigan took no chances. He pulled his gun and said: "Back up, bud. I want to talk to you about magazines. Just in case you get any foolish ideas, put your dukes up high. That's nice." He entered, shut the door and locked it.

The man before him was steady-eyed, watchful. He looked to be in his young twenties, slender, narrow-hipped, with broad shoulders and a strong, lean neck.

Cardigan said: "And what magazines do you sell?"

"Skip it."

"Sit down."

"I'll stand."

"Sit down."

"I said I'll stand."

CARDIGAN kicked him on the shins and the man sat down promptly, his lips writhing tightly. "Get over the idea," Cardigan said, "that I'm kidding." He stood in front of the man. "What was the gag about selling magazines this morning?"

"I wanted to see if they had the woman."
"Why?"

"That's my business."

Cardigan said: "You know she spent the night here at the hotel, don't you?"

Klaeberg started. His voice popped when he said, "No!" He started to rise but Cardigan motioned him back, muttered: "How long do you know her?"

Klaeberg scowled at him. "Five years—a little over."

"What's your interest in her?"

Klaeberg sat back and clamped his lips tight.

Cardigan said: "You socked Steve Bourke at the Rio Club last night. Why?"

Klaeberg's lips twisted, his eyes darkened, flashed. "To hell with you!"

Cardigan pulled over a chair and sat down. His face was very dark, grim, threatening; his voice was low, grave, heavy. "Buddy, I've got no scruples against breaking your neck. This gal is a friend of mine. And when I say a friend, I mean a friend; I don't mean a sleepy-time gal. I've got to find her. I've got to find out things that led up to what happened last night. I'm going to find out, buddy, and you're going to help me."

Klaeberg snapped back at him: "You're wasting your time! I'd like to know where she is myself. Damn it, if I knew where she was, do you think I'd be sitting here?"

"Listen, buddy, I tell you I'm a friend of Ivy's. Ivy is in a spot—"

"Ivy who?"

"The gal we're talking about."

Klaeberg's hands slapped to the arms of the chair, gripped them. His mouth

opened, his eyes popped wide with confusion.

Cardigan jumped to his feet, lashed out: "I get it! We're talking about two different gals!" He towered above Klaeberg. "What gal are you talking about, Klaeberg? Come on, boy, spit it out!"

"No!" rasped Klaeberg, jumping to his feet, starting a swing.

Cardigan snapped a left to his diaphragm, clipped him on the chin and dropped him to the floor. He muttered, "Fool!" under his breath and for half a minute watched Klaeberg lying motionless. He strolled across the room and saw an opened envelope lying on the bureau. It was addressed to Kenneth Klaeberg, Hotel Whiteledge, New York City. He pulled out the letter, read it.

Dear Ken,

I hope you find Vivian. I know you'll try hard. Please explain how everything is, how I haven't much more time to live, and that all I do is pray that she'll come and see me, just once, just for a little while. Then I'll die happy, Ken.

Your grateful brother,
Willy.

Cardigan looked at the back of the envelope. Written there was, *William Klaeberg, 12-20 Grove Road, Kansas City.*

Klaeberg sat up, shook his head.

Cardigan swung his gun toward him. "How about it? Going to talk?"

"Go to hell," mumbled Klaeberg.

Cardigan picked up the phone and called the Cosmos Agency. "This is Jack, George . . . Send a man over here to the Hotel Whiteledge, Room Six-two-one. Right away . . . Yes, I'll be here."

Fifteen minutes later there was a knock on the door. "Who is it?" asked Cardigan.

"Eddie Shore."

Cardigan opened the door and a short,

stocky man said: "Hi, Jack. George said—"

"Yeah, Eddie. Just sit here and keep this lad good."

"That all?"

"No rough stuff—unless he tries to leave. I'll be back—or phone you."

AS he stepped out of the elevator at the lobby floor a page boy was droning: "Call for Mr. Cardigan. Call for—"

"Here, boy."

"Mr. Cardigan? There's a phone call for you. Booth Three—across the lobby."

Cardigan gave him a dime and swung across to Booth Three, crammed into it and picked up the receiver, heard the hotel operator say: "Go ahead."

"This you, Jack?" said a girl's voice.

"Yeah."

"Jack, listen, this is Gert. I hoped I'd catch you there. Listen, Jack, do you remember those two fellas you almost bumped into when you was leaving?"

"Yeah, kind of."

"Well, I think they're following you. No kidding. Because you know how they came in and stood looking at the wall. Well, when you left they turned around and left too."

"Thanks a million, Gert."

He stepped out of the booth, stuck a cigarette in his mouth and cupping his hands over the match, peered around the lobby. He saw the two well dressed young men standing at the other side of the lobby, near another bank of telephone booths. He headed past them, pretending not to see them, then turned suddenly and entered one of the booths, closing the door. He heard the door of the next booth creak, deposited a nickel, called the agency office and said: "I won't be able to eat dinner with you," in a loud voice. "I've got a hot date with a gal who's on the spot, only she don't know it . . . Forget it, forget it . . . Sure I am, screwy as hell."

As he hung up he heard the door of the next booth creak, caught a glimpse of the man in the brown raglan hurrying to join his companion. Both men strode rapidly toward the front door. Cardigan stretched his legs in the same direction, went out and out of the corners of his eyes saw them entering a cab. He ran out into the middle of the street as though he were in a great hurry and flagged down an empty cab headed east. As he climbed in he heard the other cab get away with a roar.

He said: "Follow that one."

They swung north on Lexington. At Forty-second Street the cab ahead shot through a changing light. Cardigan's driver braked sharp on the red and Cardigan pounded on the window, shouted: "You'll lose it!"

"And eef I'm going through a rad light and gattin a ticket who's to be paying de fine?"

Cardigan stormed: "Damn it, you could have made it through!"

"Mebbe yass, mebbe no. So I didn't going through de rad light, so I'm not gattin de ticket, so by me hit's hukkey."

The other cab was lost in the welter of traffic. Cardigan thought of Gus Poteska, figured that possibly Poteska might know about Bourke's relation with the woman Vivian.

He said: "Go over and head up Fifth Avenue."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Cocktail Hour

POTESKA was wearing a maroon velvet smoking-jacket, faced with black silk, when his houseboy ushered Cardigan into the penthouse living-room. The tiny man stood in the center of the vast room drawing on an enormous cigar.

"Good evening, Cardigan," he said, with a wary downward look in his eyes.

"Hello, Gus. I thought you told Block there was no woman in Steve's life."

Poteska looked with blank wide-open eyes at his cigar. He shrugged. "Well, Steve used to kid around with a little girl over at the Rio. Some blonde."

"What's her name?"

Poteska took a drag at his cigar, gave Cardigan a sly look. "I don't know."

"Rats!" snapped Cardigan. "You don't have to beat around the bush with me, Gus!"

Poteska was calm. "I ain't beating around the bush. And you don't have to yell. I tell you I don't know her name. Maybe Gloria knows. I seen her talking to Gloria once. I was just about to go over there to Gloria's. I'll get my things. You go along with me."

"Sure."

He went up a stairway to a gallery and entered a doorway beyond. In a minute he reappeared wearing a tight black overcoat that made him look smaller, and carrying a derby, a pair of calfskin gloves and a snakewood stick, silver-knobbed.

"Let us go," he said.

They drove across town in a taxi, went a few blocks north on Park, then east again. The cab stopped in front of a large, pale apartment house and Cardigan followed Poteska down two steps into a low-ceilinged lobby walled with cream-colored stone. They went up to the eleventh floor in a cream-and-brown elevator and as they walked down the eleventh-floor corridor Poteska drew a key from his pocket, slipped it into the keyhole of 1105.

The apartment foyer was triangular in shape. Off one point of the triangle was a door leading into the living-room.

"Greetings, Gloria," sang out Poteska, taking off his hat and overcoat.

She sauntered into view, her hand holding a cigarette. She wore a green evening gown, cut low all around. "You're

early, Gus. A couple of friends just dropped by."

"Good, good, Gloria."

She had to bend over to touch his lips with a kiss. She looked over his head at Cardigan. "And you, big boy? How'd you come to be rung in?"

Cardigan's head was too full of business to be playful. He said, "Hello," and scaled his ancient hat and ulster onto a chair.

"Come in," she said.

POTESKA went into the living-room after her and as Cardigan bulked in the doorway he saw two young men standing at the other side of the room.

Poteska was saying: "Gloria, you remember that little gal Steve used to kid? You know, the blonde, the one with big blue eyes? Where is she?"

"Maxine? She went to Mexico City a month ago. You know that."

Poteska turned to Cardigan. "That's it—Maxine."

Gloria was saying: "Gus, this is Vincent Bates and that's Stew Morgan. Boys, this is Gus Poteska and this is—"

"Cardigan," said Cardigan dully, eyeing the two men. They eyed him back. They were the two he had bumped into at the Rio and whom he had seen in the lobby at the Whiteledge.

Gloria had a hand on a rakish hip. "How about a drink, fellas?"

Vincent and Stew kept their eyes lowered politely. Poteska gave Vincent a long, puzzled look, then shrugged, said, "I'll mix the drinks," and went over to a bar-wagon. "Cardigan?"

"Anything straight." He was scowling.

Gloria said: "Cheer up, big fella."

"Can I make a phone call?" he said.

"I'm supposed to meet a gal uptown. Maybe she can pick me up here."

"Sure, sure," called out Poteska.

Gloria smiled. "Of course."

Cardigan looked up the phone number of the Whiteledge, called it and asked for room 621. When he heard Eddie Shore's voice he said casually: "Listen, palsy, I'm uptown and I won't be able to pick you up. You pick me up." He gave the address and the apartment number. "Make it snappy . . . Oh, that? Bring it along. And what will you drink? . . . O.K., kid."

He hung up, said: "That gal's fancy. She drinks Bacardi cocktails."

"I'll have it ready," Poteska said, very deft with his short white fingers. He looked up at Vincent again, then looked down at his drink-mixing and whistled a few bars. Vincent looked at Poteska's bald head.

Stew went over and turned on the radio.

Poteska protested: "Please, I can't stand radios. Gloria knows that."

Stew snapped it off. "Sorry, Mr. Poteska," he said, and went over to a case-window, staring out across the lights of the city.

Poteska said: "Play the piano, Gloria." And to Cardigan, "You know, Gloria used to be on the stage, Cardigan. She can play like anything."

She played. Poteska sat and watched her and every now and then he looked at Vincent. Gloria played one song after another and presently her eyes became filled with strain, her mouth was drawn. She began to fumble the keys and at last she stopped, wiped her forehead, got up.

"I need a drink—straight."

Poteska rose to get it.

A buzzer sounded.

She said: "The maid's out. You get it, Gus."

Gus went drumming his little heels out into the foyer. There were voices. He returned leading Eddie Shore and Kenneth Klaeberg. Gloria dropped the drink she had begun to pour and her hand flew to her throat.

Eddie Shore said: "Gee, Jack, the guy here just got bad news as we were leaving. A telegram. His brother died."

Klaeberg's eyes were burning across the room on the woman. "You did it, Vivian," he ground out. "You left Willy and he died of a broken heart."

Poteska said: "Look here, you're mixed up, son. This is Miss Gloria Bell."

"Is it?" panted Klaeberg. "It's Vivian Klaeberg, my brother's wife. She stole his money and ran away from him."

The woman's face was red, vicious. "Get out!" she screamed. "Get out! Get out!"

Poteska stood spellbound.

KLAEBERG pointed at Gloria. "I came to New York to find you, to beg you to come back to Willy. I didn't know where to look but I remembered how crazy you were about John Barrymore. So the day I arrived, there was a picture that had just started with John Barrymore in it. I went there and stood outside and never moved while it was going on. And on the second day, in the afternoon, I saw you go in with this fellow that was killed last night—Bourke. So I waited until you came out and then I stepped up to you and said, 'Hello, Vivian.' And you looked cold at me and said, 'You're mistaken.' I tried to talk to you and Bourke shoved me away and you both got in a cab and I lost you. But I remembered the cab number and I looked the driver up and asked him where he'd taken you. He said he dropped you off at the corner of Park and Sixtieth but that he took Bourke to the Rio Club.

"So I went there last night and hung around. I saw him come in. I followed him into the men's room and told him I wanted your address. He laughed. Then I begged him, I told him why I wanted it, that Willy was dying and asking for you. He was tight, I guess, for he laughed

again and I knocked him down. I was afraid I might get pinched, so I left in a hurry. But I waited outside and watched until he came out and then I followed him and he met you at the corner of Park and Forty-eighth and—"

She screamed: "Gus, make that idiot leave!"

"No he don't," said Cardigan.

Vincent and Stew looked at each other.

Cardigan said: "Go ahead, Klaeberg. What then?"

"I followed them to that house in Thirty-fifth Street, where Bourke was killed."

"What time'd you follow them there?"

"Eleven thirty. I saw them go in, I saw a light go on on the top floor. I figured that was where she lived, so I went away. All I wanted to know was where she lived. I went back this morning, to see her, talk to her—and found the police there when I knocked on the door. I knew by the talk downstairs that there was something wrong, and I didn't want to get involved, so I said I was a magazine salesman." He swallowed. "I didn't answer your questions at the hotel because I wanted her—for Willy."

"You lie!" screamed the woman, shaking her fists.

Cardigan said dully: "Sister, I got a sudden brainstorm. That was pretty neat this morning, the way you picked up that poker offhand and pointed it at Block. You picked it up because your fingerprints were already on it! You made it useless for the police by picking it up there—"

"You—you—" she panted.

"You," he said, "socked Bourke with the poker."

She spun on Vincent and Stew. "My God, what are you waiting for?"

Vincent said, "This," and fired through his pocket at Eddie Shore. Shore stooped over, then crumpled. Poleska stood rooted, his hands pressed to his thighs, his eyes wide. The woman ran screaming

behind a divan, then along the wall toward another room. Klaeberg dived after her, caught her by the wrist and held on grimly.

Cardigan weaved under the second shot from Vincent's gun and had his own out. He twisted and fired at the same time, upset Vincent and dodged Stew's first blast by less than an inch.

Gloria yelled: "Make him let me go!"

STEW swung his gun toward Klaeberg and Cardigan fired and hit Stew in the leg, staggering him enough to make the aim on Klaeberg wild. A mirror shattered, its pieces flying, ringing against a window. Poteska had not moved. He did not move now. He seemed transfixed, his face white with terror. The woman was clawing at Klaeberg, kicking him. He held on, crying: "You killed Willy! You killed Willy!"

Vincent threw himself behind the big cabinet radio, stuck his gun around a corner of it. Eddie Shore, sitting now beside a chair, fired into the radio. Mixed with the roar of his gun was the sound of something shattering inside the cabinet.

Stew gave the bar-wagon a kick and sent it racing at Cardigan. Cardigan jumped aside and shot over it and Stew slammed back against the wall, clawed against the wall, yanked down a window drape. The bar-wagon scooted across the floor and knocked Poteska down. It toppled over on him and he fought his way through bottles and glasses.

Cardigan took a running broad jump, hit the radio with both feet and piled it on top of Vincent. Eddie Shore fired across the seat of the chair and nailed Stew to the wall. Stew's gun went off pointing at the ceiling. He collapsed with the window drape twisting around him. Cardigan put his foot against the overturned radio, gave it a shove and sent it tumbling to oneside. Vincent raised his gun and Cardigan kicked it out of his hand. Vincent,

white-faced, whipped out a knife and slashed at Cardigan's ankles and Cardigan lifted his foot and took the slash across the sole of his shoe, then jammed his foot down on Vincent's arm. He reached over and took the knife.

Poteska stood up and Cardigan turned and went across the room to where Klæberg was holding the woman. Cardigan came up to her, took her by the throat.

"If Ivy Bourke didn't kill Steve, and she didn't," he said, "she had no cause to disappear. Where is she?"

"You're cho—choking—me—"

"That's what I thought," he muttered. "You're like a lot of other wise babies that didn't touch third on the way home. Where's Ivy?" he gritted, pressing harder.

She dropped to her knees, gagging. He let her go and she sat on the floor, bent over, braced on her arms. Her eyes swept around the room, saw Stew lying mixed up in the window drape, Vincent lying heavy-eyed, droop-mouthed, against the overturned radio. She looked at Poteska. The little man stood with his heels together, his palms pressed against his chubby thighs. There was no recognition in his eyes. It was as though she did not exist. But suddenly rage flamed in his face and he flew across the room screaming: "You dirty double-crosser, after all I done for you!"

His hands dug savagely into her throat.

Cardigan grabbed him by the back of the neck, ripped him off. "I catch on, Gus. Only take it easy."

Poteska writhed and tussled in Cardigan's grip. His hands clawed the air. He cried: "Let me at her! Let me—"

She crouched on the floor, terror-mad.

Cardigan said: "Do you talk, sister, or do I let Gus at you?"

"Don't—don't let him at me!"

Klæberg was weakening. "Don't let him at her. He—he's raving! He's—"

"Exactly," said Cardigan. "But I'm interested only in Ivy Bourke."

The woman drew shaking fingers across her gaping mouth. She nodded. "I—I'll talk. Only don't let him—let him—"

CHAPTER SIX

Poison for Ivy

CARDIGAN climbed the narrow stairway in the rank-smelling house on Eleventh Avenue. He stood for a moment in the upper hall, sweeping his flashlight beam back and forth, counting doors. He need not have counted them—all were open but one. The rooms were empty, damp. He went toward the door that was closed, stuck a rusty key into the keyhole, opened the door and stood in the doorway of a dirty, littered room.

Ivy lay among the débris. Chains were round her wrists and ankles and a chain round her waist was fastened to a ring-bolt on the floor. A dirty rag was lashed across her mouth. He muttered, "The bums," and his big feet were hard, heavy on the floor as he crossed it. He sank to his knees. Her eyes fluttered.

"Hiyuh, kid?" he mumbled.

He had other keys with which to open the locks that held the chains. Then he cut away the gag. She didn't stir but lay there with her eyes opening and closing. Wrists and ankles were bruised, swollen. It was bitter cold in the room.

Cardigan didn't say anything. He picked her up in his arms, took her out of the room and down the stairs and out into the street. There was a streetlight beneath which he stood for a moment looking down at her pale face.

"Poor kid," he muttered. "But I put 'em in the hospital . . ."

A shade of a smile appeared for a moment on her lips. Then her eyes closed and he could tell that she had fainted.

When a cab came along he stopped it, said: "The nearest hospital."

She was unconscious when they took her in at the hospital. He gave his name, paid for a private room and a nurse, explained briefly and left his phone number.

GEORGE Hammerhorn was getting ready for bed when Cardigan walked in on him. Cardigan said: "I found Ivy."

"You look mussed up a bit, Jack. Drink?"

Cardigan shook his head. "Gus Poteska's gal, Vivian Klaeberg, killed Steve. People thought she was Gloria Bell—that was the name she used when she was on the stage for a while."

Hammerhorn put on his pajama coat and sat down. "What happened to Ivy?"

"That's it. Poteska gave Bourke the twenty grand to take South but Bourke and Vivian were going to run away with it, together. She was married to a guy named Willy Klaeberg, he was an invalid, out in Kansas City. She left him, taking some cash with her, and the poor guy went heart-broken. He got sicker and sicker and at last his brother Kenneth came to New York to find her and beg her to go back to Willy, just so's he could die happy. Well, Kenneth found her—saw her on the street one day with Bourke. He spoke to her, called her Vivian, but she ignored him. But Bourke made her come clean. She admitted she was married, a thing Poteska didn't know. That scared her. Poteska wanted to marry her but she was holding off and digging into him meanwhile for a fair living. She also had a crush on Bourke. With Kenneth in town, she was afraid Poteska would find out about her Kansas City marriage. She hated the little guy but she liked his dough.

"So Bourke suggested they run away together when he found out Poteska was going to send him South with twenty grand. She met Bourke last night on a street corner and he had quite an edge

on. She'd checked her bags at the Grand Central but he had to go home for his. She didn't want to go there with him but he said his wife was out and wouldn't be home and he was tight enough to insist.

"Meantime Kenneth Klaeberg was tailing him, thinking that he was the guy was living with Vivian. He tailed them to Bourke's apartment, saw them go in and then left, planning to come back in the morning to see Vivian. Bourke packed his bag, staggering around a bit, and according to Vivian's story she tried to get him to hurry. Then they heard footsteps coming up the stairs and Vivian ran over and shot home the bolt. Ivy tried to unlock the door but she couldn't.

"Bourke yelled through the door that he wouldn't let her in. He told her if she couldn't come home early, she couldn't come in. She argued, trying to pacify him, according to Vivian. Then Vivian sneezed and Ivy said, 'Steve, you've got a woman in there. This is the final insult. I'll go. Slip me five dollars under the door, so I can get a hotel room.' He was just drunk enough to refuse it. 'All right,' she said, 'I'll go down the street and borrow it from a friend. I'll be back here in the morning and see that you're out.' So she left. She came down to my place.

"Vivian was sore. She bawled Steve out. But then he was getting sore at something else. He began to drink some more. He fell down and cracked his wrist watch—that was at twelve twenty. Vivian wanted him to hurry up and finish packing, so they could get out. Then he said, 'I know where she's gone,' and called my place. Vivian didn't know it was me he called. He just phoned and Ivy happened to answer it and he recognized her voice and hung up. Then he was all for coming down to my place and beating me up. He was blind drunk. He picked up Ivy's engagement ring off the bureau and chucked it. Then Vivian tried to stop him

from going to my place. She finally picked up the poker and chased him into the kitchen. She hit him with it between the eyes and he pitched out the window."

CARDIGAN butted his cigarette in an ash tray and continued.

"She was plenty scared and ran out and nobody saw her. But she was afraid Ivy might have seen her come in with Steve, or known about them. So she called up two heels named Vincent Bates and Stew Morgan, met them and offered them a thousand each to pull a little trick. She knew that Ivy would return to the apartment in the morning, so Stew was to stand at one end of the block and Vincent at the other, and they were to ask every woman that turned in that block if she was Ivy Bourke. She also gave them a description of Ivy. She figured the cops would suspect Ivy if she vanished.

"Stew was the one that picked Ivy up. He held a pocketed gun against her, walked her to a roadster he had parked a couple of blocks away and drove her to a dump on Eleventh Avenue. Then he contacted Vincent and Vivian. Vivian wanted them to feed Ivy poison or chuck her in the river, to make it look like suicide. But these boys wanted the cash first. She promised it to them in forty-eight hours. They said when they got the cash they'd get rid of Ivy, and not before.

"Then they made Ivy tell them if she'd got in touch with anybody from the time she left the apartment last night until the time Stew picked her up. She said she'd written me a note, nothing important. But Vincent went down to my place to look for it. Whitey Fife, Block's partner, had a tail on my place. He recognized Vincent as a punk and followed him in and it was in my apartment that Vincent knifed him. The letter he was looking for didn't arrive till later, and I got it. It was that letter that made me feel Ivy wasn't guilty."

He paused for a drink and finished his story as he finished the drink. He added: "Eddie's wound's not serious."

Hammerhorn said: "Well, there was plenty double-crossing all around." He chuckled. "But they had you guessing!"

Cardigan reached for his hat. "Ivy'll be O.K. tomorrow."

Hammerhorn held up his finger. "Oh, before you go, Jack. I was over at the club tonight and—" He crossed to a desk, picked up a small rectangular book, held it out. "Take a chance. It's only two bits and you might—"

"Don't tell me," cut in Cardigan.

"Don't tell you what?"

"That I might win a round-trip airplane flight to Chicago."

Hammerhorn blinked. "How'd you guess it, boy?"

Cardigan slammed out.

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The Case of the Silent Giantess

Compiled from the Case Book of Carter Cole, M.D.

By Frederick C. Davis

Author of "The Case of the Crazy Witness," etc.



Beyond the sill a weird being was standing.

Over that ancient mansion hovered a horror-shadow, for there, in that gas-lit hark-back to the past, lived a drooling monster who guided the lives of all who dwelled within. What was the secret the silent giantess hid behind her mumbling gibberish? Why was Carter Cole alone able to interpret those animal sounds that sealed the mystery of the rabbit-doom?

CHAPTER ONE

Doctor's Dilemma

STEPPING through the entrance of the house on Court Road, Carter Cole, M. D.—whose prominence as a psychiatrist was equaled only by his

reputation as an investigator of unusual crimes—found himself transported from a hustling modern world into the musty quaintness of the gaslight era.

Incandescent mantles burned with a steady whisper in the bronze brackets

along the broad, deep hall. The flat white glow, with its semblance of full moonlight, added to the outmoded somberness of the gingerbread furniture, the faded tapestries, the gloomy oil portraits. Forty-five years of progress seemed to vanish with the closing of the door behind Cole.

Yet there was nothing old-fashioned about the girl who had admitted him. The stained smock she wore only emphasized the smartness of her trim pumps and gossamer stockings; set off vividly the ripe color of her cheeks and full lips.

Cole introduced himself. "I have come," he said, "in response to a call from Mr. Homer Morehouse."

Miss Celia Ashurst gave him her name and a capable hand. "Mr. Morehouse isn't here now, but he'll probably be right back. Do you mind waiting for a few minutes?"

"Not at all. . . . It concerns," Cole added, "Mr. Ronald Fairlee, about whom Mr. Morehouse is considerably worried. As I understand it, a mental condition which I am to diagnose and treat."

The girl's poise did not completely conceal her surprised concern. "I am Mr. Fairlee's assistant," she explained. "I've got to go back to the laboratory now. I'm finishing up an important experiment. Won't you come with me and wait there?"

COLE thanked her and chatting briskly ascended the stairs with Celia Ashurst. "I've heard of Ronald Fairlee's work. He is isolating certain hormones of the endocrine system, isn't he—particularly the pituitary? A most important field—the very frontier of medical research. I never expected to find such an attractive young woman as you, Miss Ashurst, absorbed in the problems of the ductless glands—nor a splendid labora-

tory like this in such an antiquated dwelling."

They had reached a large, glittering room equipped with the most modern apparatus for biochemical research—with the striking exception that here too electricity had not penetrated. Welsbach gas mantles illuminated the orderly benches and shelves.

As the girl turned to a retort in which a meaty hash was simmering over the blue flame of a Bunsen burner, she answered with a warm smile. "I love it. Working with Ronald Fairlee is thrilling—scientific pioneering—and we're getting somewhere. Let me return the compliment, Doctor Cole. I've heard of you, as everyone in medicine has, but I pictured you as an officious old man with a stringy white beard."

They laughed together at the absurdity. Cole, glowing with dynamic health, had the tapering physique of an athlete. Humorously piercing eyes looked out of his unusually large head that housed a lightning-quick brain. His achievements in the field of psychopathology, remarkable for one so young, mile-stoned by his classic treatises, had evolved from his experience as director of the famed Cole Sanitarium on Long Island—located not far from the Fairlee home—where he lived among more than a thousand patients representing the full category of mental derangement.

The girl's smile faded as her dark eyes searched Cole's. "Mr. Fairlee is a rather queer man, but we're all a little bit queer, aren't we? Mr. Morehouse—Mr. Fairlee's brother-in-law—has seen much less of him than I have. Mr. Morehouse's concern is unwarranted—it was silly of him to consult you."

"Just what, Miss Ashurst," Cole asked quietly, "is the nature of Mr. Fairlee's idiosyncrasy? Has it something to do with his preference for gaslight over electricity? Has it any connection with this

laboratory being located in his home instead of, say, a college building? Might it be related to the mysterious disappearance of Mrs. Fairlee two months ago, and—"

Celia Ashurst's eyes widened with alarm. Cole knew at once that his incisive questions had struck at the roots of some strange dread that haunted her. She was shaking her head in anxious protest when his words stopped—stopped because, suddenly, a peculiar mumbling scream rang through the house.

"Alice!" The girl blurted.

Cole spun, stepped from the lab. He strode toward a branch hallway while Celia Ashurst, her experiment forgotten, hurried frantically after him. "Please!" she begged, catching at his arm. "Please come back!"

Just past the corner he stopped short, not in compliance with the girl's entreaty, but because cold amazement halted him. The gas bracket of the hall angling into the ell was not burning, but white light fanned into the gloom through an opened door. Beyond the sill a weird being was standing—a monstrosity belonging to a nightmare world. It was huge, towering more than seven feet, with an enormous bulbous head, great dangling hands, tremendous feet—a hideous creature—a giantess.

THE monster was whimpering with terror, yet an uncanny stupidity made her face blank. One side of her loose white dress was reddened with flowing blood; the fabric was slashed over a bleeding knife wound. The blade was gripped in the hand of a man who stood facing her—a man of average build, clad in a loose smock, dwarfed by the appalling stature of the giantess.

His back turned to Cole, he sidled from the room in which the wailing giantess stood, too stunned by the attack to retreat.

Cole's quick footfalls, Celia Ashurst's voice, had warned him. The grotesque creature in the room vanished as he slapped the door shut. The gloom swallowed him and he twisted the key in the lock, flashing a terrified glance over his shoulder. Cole caught the glitter of eye-glasses, glimpsed a dark blot of blood on the smock as, with a leap, he crossed the hall to the opposite door. Suddenly he disappeared into darkness and a bolt clicked into its socket.

Cole strode to the second door, thrust at it, found it fast. Turning, he saw Celia Ashurst fumbling a key from the pocket of her smock. "Alice—don't be afraid!" she called through the opposite door. The pitiful babbling of the giantess was audible through the panels. Cole stepped to the girl's side, said quietly, "Perhaps I'd better," and was startled when she turned on him in frantic protest.

"Please go! Leave the house!"

"Leaving the house," Cole answered firmly, "won't eliminate me from this affair. I've been witness to a felonious assault, perhaps an attempt at murder. Who was the man who rushed out of this room? Ronald Fairlee?"

The girl inserted the key, looking up hopefully as rapid footfalls sounded on the stairs. A young man hurried into the hall. "What's happened?" he blurted—and Cole realized at once, his concern was for Celia Ashurst.

She answered him breathlessly: "Alice is hurt. I'll take care of her. Show Doctor Cole out, Steve."

The young man's response was immediately to grasp Cole's arm.

Celia Ashurst opened the door, stepped quickly through. Cole again glimpsed the giantess. She had fallen back across a bed. Her tremendous head was lolling on the coverlet and she was crying helplessly with pain. Only the whites of her

protruding eyes shone beneath lids not fully closed. The scene ended in a flash with the slap of the door and the click of the bolt.

"Good-night, Doctor Cole."

Cole looked intently at the handsome young man gripping his arm. "Who are you?"

"I'm Steven Vaill, Mr. Fairlee's secretary. You're not wanted here."

Cole peeled Vaill's fingers off. "I haven't the slightest intention of leaving until I see the man who summoned me. I shouldn't advise you to try to eject me forcibly. Where is Mr. Fairlee?"

Vaill's jaw squared. "This is none of your business," he countered. "If you'd rather have Mr. Fairlee himself order you out, all right. He's resting in there." Vaill indicated the door through which Cole had seen the giantess' assailant flee.

Cole's eyebrows arched. "In there?"

"That's his study. He was very tired after dinner and lay down for a nap."

Vaill rapped on the panels with startling violence. "Mr. Fairlee," he explained bitingly, "sleeps very soundly." He pounded again.

Cole looked from one door to the other. Through the first he could hear the whimpering, childish crying of the giantess, the crooning reassurances of Celia Ashurst. From the other came a husky, "Who is it?" and slow footfalls. The knob of Ronald Fairlee's study turned. A drowsy voice said: "That's odd—I don't remember bolting it." A rattle, and the man appeared hooking a pair of rimless eyeglasses to his ears. He was of average stature and wore a smock.

IT was Ronald Fairlee, the noted biochemist. "Is anything wrong?" he asked in bewilderment. "This is Doctor Carter Cole, isn't it?"

Cole looked at the side of Fairlee's

smock while Vaill explained. The garment of the man who had fled into this room had been spotted with blood. The smock Fairlee wore now was stained by chemical reagents, but on it there was no trace of red.

"But what could have happened to Alice?" Fairlee asked Vaill. "You say you heard her cry out? I must have slept through it—I didn't hear it at all." He strode to the opposite door. "Alice! Is she all right, Celia?"

"I was having dinner downstairs," Vaill added. "I haven't the straight of it yet. Celia said Doctor Cole is to be shown from the house. He refuses to go. It's up to you, Mr. Fairlee."

The door of the giantess' room opened before Fairlee could answer. Celia Ashurst slipped out, challenging Cole with a forbidding glance. Ronald Fairlee went into the room quickly.

The girl said quietly to young Vaill: "Steven, bring the first-aid kit from the lab—quickly. She has a cut in her side, painful but not dangerous. I'm sure I can dress it properly. Doctor Cole's services will not be necessary."

Cole smiled wryly. "I have seldom," he said, "found my presence so undesirable, especially when, in the first place, it was requested. I'll wait, if you don't mind, for Mr. Homer Morehouse—he sent for me, you'll remember."

Steven Vaill had hurried toward the laboratory. He paused, looking down the stairs, at the sound of the opening front door. "Mr. Morehouse has just come in," he said, and went on.

Celia Ashurst stood her ground at the door of the giantess' room. She caught Cole's arm, her eyes pleading, as he bowed affably, started away.

"Please forgive me. I'm only acting out of consideration for Mr. Fairlee. He has tried to keep Alice a complete secret—her very existence. It would mean cruel

gossip if it became known. Please understand that Steve and I are completely loyal to him."

"Quite," Cole smiled. "Whoever she is and wherever she's here, Alice is an interesting case of marked glandular unbalance—doubly interesting in view of Mr. Fairlee's researches. Please count on my cooperation if you wish it. Good-night."

He went down the stairs to find a middle-aged, bald man shedding hat and coat in the hall. "Doctor Cole—here in response to your call," he introduced himself, gripping Homer Morehouse's fattish hand. "I find myself profoundly interested in Mr. Fairlee's case, whatever his trouble may be. Shall we discuss it privately—and frankly?"

"Yes, yes," Morehouse agreed nervously. "Frankness is vital—vital."

He led Cole into a somber library—lighted, as was every other room in the house, by gas mantles—and blurted out in a husky whisper: "I called you here because I am afraid—afraid Ronald Fairlee is stark mad—afraid, Doctor Cole, that his madness may drive him to murder."

CARTER Cole remained silent as Homer Morehouse pulled a chair close, eyes narrowed with thought. The bald man spoke at last as if choosing every word with painstaking care.

"Ronald Fairlee's wife Ethel is my sister. You have doubtless read in the newspapers that she disappeared two months ago. It occurred while I was in London on business. I heard of it aboard ship, while I was returning to this country. I am unmarried, and she is my only living relative—if she is still living. I have been staying here the past four weeks. This explains my connection with the case."

Carter Cole nodded.

"I was disturbed first"—Morehouse

resumed his systematic recital of facts—"by the strange circumstances surrounding my sister's disappearance. One evening, after dinner, she simply vanished—suddenly and completely, from this house—but Ronald Fairlee did not report it to the police. Day after day passed and she did not return, but he made no move to find her. I think it is most extraordinary."

Cole nodded again.

"The neighbors and the tradesmen missed her. They inquired. Ronald made excuses for her absence—flimsy and unsatisfactory, apparently, for through one of the neighbors the police learned of the matter. When they investigated, Ronald admitted Ethel had been missing three weeks. They began a search at once."

The police, Morehouse's story continued, had brought other unusual circumstances to light. None of Mrs. Fairlee's suitcases or traveling clothes was missing. Even the dress she had worn that evening was found in her bedroom. Evidently she had vanished while preparing to retire. It seemed extremely unlikely she had left the house, but the police were continuing their hunt for her before taking more drastic steps. So far they had been unable to find any trace of the missing woman.

"I have no theories as to what happened," Morehouse concluded. "The police are doing everything possible to find my sister, and with that we must be content. Your profession, Doctor Cole, doesn't involve finding missing persons. I wish your advice on a phase of the matter the police cannot touch. I am afraid something else will happen in this house—something horrible, to any one of us—if Ronald Fairlee is actually, dangerously insane.

"You suggest he's somehow responsible for his wife's disappearance?" Cole said

quietly. "I've had only a glimpse of Mr. Fairlee, but he seemed quite rational. What makes you believe him unbalanced?"

Morehouse leaned forward tensely. "He and Ethel were not happy together—but could a normal man care for his wife so little as not even to report her disappearance to the police? Do you know that for three years Ronald Fairlee has scarcely stepped outside this house—that he has never, literally, in all that time, left the grounds? And there is another thing—some weird power, some strange fear that haunts him—something he calls the Dynamo God."

"The Dynamo God?" Cole repeated.

"Have you noticed there is no electricity in this house?" Morehouse asked huskily. "Ronald won't permit it. He mortally fears it. It comes from this dread thing he calls the Dynamo God. The same fear keeps him prisoner here—fear that the Dynamo God, which dominates the outer world, will destroy him. Doctor Cole, you've got to learn what this thing is that's festering in his mind—or it may mean the deaths of those around him."

"Is Mr. Fairlee willing to put himself in my hands?" Cole asked alertly.

"He refuses to explain himself to me, because he insists I couldn't understand, but when I suggested he receive treatment from you, he was eager. Perhaps I'm wrong to think him dangerously irrational, but after all my sister is still missing—and delay may cost innocent lives."

Cole said decisively: "I'll see him at once."

CHAPTER TWO

The Locked Door

COLE was stepping from the library, with Morehouse nervously following, when a sharp rap sounded on the en-

trance. Morehouse admitted two brusque, grave-faced men. Cole knew them both—Wellsmore, chief of police, and Blake, ace plainclothesman of the town in which both the Cole Sanitarium and the Fairlee home were located.

Immediately, anxiously, Morehouse asked them: "Have you found my sister?"

Chief Wellsmore was a grizzled, tough-skinned veteran. His hard lips tightened as he answered with characteristic bluntness: "I have a warrant for the arrest of Ronald Fairlee on suspicion of murder. Where is he?"

Morehouse stood speechless.

As Wellsmore and Blake started for the stairs, Cole fell into step with them. Climbing, he asked: "What makes you believe Mrs. Fairlee has been murdered?"

Wellsmore's explanation was crisp and to the point. "We're convinced she never left this house. Nobody would be keeping her here a prisoner alive. If she'd died a natural death or committed suicide her body wouldn't have vanished. The only conclusion is murder. The circumstances justify the charge."

"I quite agree," Cole answered, "but Fairlee's make-up—a scientist laboring night and day in the most difficult field of medicine to assuage sickness and preserve health—is hardly that of a murderer."

Their quiet exchange had been overheard by Ronald Fairlee. He was standing dismayed in the entrance to the laboratory, staring widely through his rimless eyeglasses. Beyond him, near a work-bench, Celia Ashurst and Steven Vaill were side by side, silent in consternation.

Chief Wellsmore's brass-tacks methods made Cole wince. "Mr. Fairlee," the chief said, "we're determined to get at the bottom of your wife's disappearance. We think it's a case of homicide. Do you care to read this warrant? You're com-

ing with us to headquarters for further questioning."

Fairlee did not glance at the document. "Gentlemen, I've already told you everything I know—everything. I'll answer any questions you wish, gladly—but please ask them here. I implore you not to take me out of this house."

"Why not?" Wellsmore asked bluntly. "Is there something here you're afraid to leave? Something you think might be discovered because you're absent? I can't agree to that. Come along."

"No—no, it isn't that," Fairlee answered tautly. "Anything you like, here, but don't—I beg of you, don't take me away." His lips trembled with fear, his face was drawn. "I can't explain but—I can't leave my home."

"We let you get away with that before, but not this time. You're going to headquarters and you're going to stay there until you come clean. Get into your hat and coat."

WELLSMORE gripped Fairlee's left arm, Blake the other. He tried to tear away from them, but they pulled him protesting to the stairs, forced him down step by step. As Fairlee approached the entrance his attempts to escape became desperate.

"Don't! Don't take me out! Let me stay here! You don't understand what you're doing to me! I can't leave this house—I can't!"

But they maneuvered him out the entrance while he resisted with all his strength. Morehouse, watching in the hall, muttered: "It's pitiful—brutal!"

Cole, eyes compassionate, was descending when Celia Ashurst hurried to his side. She seized his hand and exclaimed: "Doctor, I don't know any better than anyone else why Mr. Fairlee dreads to leave the house—but it's torture. I know he hasn't done anything wrong—they're

making him suffer unjustly. Please help him—please try to get him back."

Cole turned, a question on his lips. "Do you agree, Mr. Vaill—" he began, but he didn't ask it. The expression of horror on Vaill's face silenced him. An ashen pallor surrounded the young man's eyes. Stark fear shone out of them. Astounded, sensing a strange emotional storm breaking within the man, Cole waited for him to speak. But he didn't say a word. Instead he turned abruptly, strode into the laboratory and slammed the door.

Vaill's consternation communicated itself subtly to the girl. She hurried anxiously after him. Quietly thoughtful, Cole went down to the entrance. Morehouse, wheezing with agitation, blurted, "I'm going with them," and rushed out. Cole slid into his coat, donned his Homburg and took up his stick. He reached his parked Duesenberg, just in time to witness an astonishing scene.

Chief Wellsmore and Detective Blake were literally dragging Ronald Fairlee to the police car sitting in the drive. The chemist was fighting madly to escape. He dug his heels into the gravel, braced against the running-board, blurted incoherent protests. Wellsmore answered with a puffing, "Cut it out—put you in a straight-jacket!" A powerful heave slammed Fairlee to the seat. Instantly Blake dove upon him, pinning him down.

Cole watched silently as Wellsmore sent the car rolling toward Court Road. Morehouse, intent on following, hurried to a coupe standing at the side of the house. Cole ducked into the Duesenberg.

The squat, bull-necked, rusty-haired young man at the wheel of the powerful car said abruptly: "Geez, Doc, you're gettin' into another one of these screwy cases!"

"Follow them, Brick," Cole directed.

Brick Kelly, Cole's strong-arm assistant and handyman, promptly weaved the

massive vehicle down the drive and onto the cement, turned after the police car with a frown. "You know me, Doc," he said expansively. "I think you're the swellest guy alive. I don't know how you can keep your nut, livin' night and day in that loony-bin of yours—"

"Watch that car!" Cole blurted.

The police sedan had been, until that moment, traveling at a good clip over the straight-away concrete. Abruptly it began to waver. Its body rocked like a boat in a swell as it shuttled from curb to curb. One of its rear doors burst open and a man scrambled onto the running-board, wild with desperation—Ronald Fairlee. While the car was still swerving dangerously, Fairlee leaped. He sprawled violently on the pavement in the shafts of the Duesenberg's headlamps, sprang up, plunged into the darkness.

Kelly toed the Duesenberg's brakes as the police sedan slapped to a stop. Chief Wellsmore wrenched out of it, his collar torn, tie askew, a police positive glittering in one fist. Blake heaved after him, his jaw bruised, a cut over one eye.

Cole, hurrying from the Duesenberg, heard Wellsmore blast: "Choked me! Where'd he go? He can't get away! I'll have every cop on Long Island after him!"

Pointing, Blake blurted: "He beat it over there. Better flash the alarm, Chief. He won't get away from me next time—he'll be out cold!"

"Gentlemen." Carter Cole put a restraining hand on Blake's arm, stepped in front of Wellsmore. "There's no need to call out the militia. Locating Ronald Fairlee is not going to be a difficult task. I think you'll find he only wants to get back home."

Wellsmore snapped: "If that's so, he'll be damned sorry for it! Cole, you don't know what you're talking about. He's heading for the tall timber—because

he's guilty of murder. Out of my way!"

"Watch back there by Fairlee's driveway," Cole directed firmly. "I think he's keeping in the shadows and working back to it. Yes—there he is!"

A dark form fluttered between the gateposts at the entrance of the Fairlee grounds. Before Wellsmore could bring up his gun it disappeared swiftly. Cole, running to the Duesenberg, snapped orders to Brick Kelly to reverse it. The motor surged with power and accelerated toward the drive. Across rolling, gloomy grounds Cole spotted a running man. In a minute Ronald Fairlee shouldered desperately at the front door of the house, thrust in, and vanished.

KELLY pulled over to let the police car whizz by, plunge between the posts, wind up the drive and buck to a stop at the entrance. Wellsmore and Blake charged in together, guns in their hands. When Cole's car stopped, he sighed, opened his silver case, said: "Have a cigarette, Brick."

"Thanks, Doc!" Kelly exclaimed. "Looks like them two's all set to commit mayhem. Ain't you goin' to do anythin' to save him from the majesty of the law?"

"The law resents interference, Brick," Cole observed, "as much as I resent stupidity in psychopathic problems. Wellsmore and Blake are ready to tear this house apart in order to capture a man who is no more guilty of murder than they are."

"What makes you think he isn't, Doc?"

"A man," Cole answered cryptically, "wearing a bloodstained smock and eyeglasses rushes out of a room in which he has knifed an unfortunate girl more than seven feet tall, and ducks into another room across the hall. In a moment he reappears, wearing a smock which is not stained, putting his eyeglasses on as though he had just awakened from a nap.

Either it's a trick or he's not guilty of the attack. If he's guilty it doesn't make sense. Until I find a sound psychological reason for believing—"

A loud, hammering sound, issuing from the house, broke into Cole's words. A husky voice bawled: "Open that door! Open it or we'll break it down!" Another snapped: "Look out, Chief, he's liable to shoot through!"

Cole reluctantly tamped his cigarette. "The stag is at bay," he remarked to Kelly. "Wait here, Brick." He went into the house quietly, climbed the stairs, saw the reason for the turmoil.

Wellsmore and Blake were shouldering at the door of the giantess' room. They crashed against it, drew back red-faced. Celia Ashurst and Steven Vaill were watching them, speechless with dismay. Cole heard whimpering cries of pain which meant that the giantess was still inside.

Wellsmore, stabbing a forefinger at Celia Ashurst, burst out: "We know he's in there! We heard his voice. Somebody must have a key to that door. If you don't unlock it, we'll break it down!"

"In that case," the girl answered in a cold rage, "go ahead and break."

Cole smiled his admiration while Wellsmore and Blake gathered themselves for another assault on the door. They paused in surprise as Ronald Fairlee's voice sounded through it. The scientist was speaking breathlessly, entreatingly. "Alice! Don't you understand, Alice? You saw the man who did it. Tell me who it was. Alice, you've got to tell me! Alice . . . ! Alice . . . !" But his only answer was the pained, mumbling whine of the inarticulate giantess.

COLE went quietly into Fairlee's study. He closed the door, bolted it. Diagonally across the room another door stood, he noted, opening into the main

hall. It was unlocked. Cole shot the bolt, began a swift examination.

He looked first in a closet, exclaimed "Ah!" when he saw a smock hanging on a hook, inspected it intently. It was burned by acids, tinted by aniline dyes—and colored with the crimson of human blood. That it was the blood of the giantess, Cole could not doubt. He replaced it, concern shining in his eyes, to turn to a desk. While he probed thoroughly into the drawers, crashing sounds in the hall marked Wellsmore's determined attack on the door.

Cole stiffened with dismay. He had lifted a sheet of stationery to find an encarnadined weapon. It was a long-bladed, keen-edged kitchen knife, still redly wet. Cole did not touch it but closed the drawer, turned, looked at the studio couch on the opposite side of the room. It bore the impression left by a resting body; the pillow showed the indentation of a head. Cole was attempting to add up his findings when a violent smashing noise indicated the achievement of Wellsmore's purpose.

Stepping from the study, Cole saw the chief and Blake standing stock-still just inside the other room. They had torn out the socket of the lock, had lurched in after their man—but now they were staring, frozen with horror, at the apparition rearing at the foot of the bed.

The giantess was bleating her fear, cowering back from the broken door, her protruding eyes staring blankly in the shadow of her bulging forehead. A flowing nightgown now concealed the dressed wound in her side. Her gigantic hands dangled from its sleeves, her enormous bare feet were visible beneath its hem. She was a thing out of a distorted dream, yet she was a living, breathing being whose grotesque proportions made the men in the room seem puny.

Ronald Fairlee said piteously: "She's only fourteen. She is my daughter."

Cole stepped back to allow Celia Ashurst to enter. Fairlee's assistant appeared even smaller beside the gargantuan Alice, her beauty even more striking in comparison with the ghastly abnormality of the giantess' features. She took one of Alice's massive hands, spoke as if to an infant.

"Don't be frightened. They won't harm you. You know I'm your friend. You must tell me now—now, before it's too late. It wasn't your father who did it to you, was it, Alice? Do you hear? Tell me, Alice—please."

The touch of Celia Ashurst's small hands on her own mammoth ones brought a pathetic peacefulness to the face of the giantess, but it could not wipe away the blankness of her expression. Her protruding eyes remained vacant as she turned her heavy head slowly to blink at Ronald Fairlee. Her loose, wet lips made mumbling noises, unintelligible to Cole, yet they brought shining relief to Celia Ashurst's eyes. The girl interpreted in a whisper.

"She said no—no."

Carter Cole gently took Ronald Fairlee's arm. He gestured Wellsmore and Blake out, led the chemist after them as they went dazedly into the hall. Leaving the giantess alone in the room, he closed the door. He smiled at the chief's horrified expression, spoke quietly.

"That unfortunate girl, gentlemen, is a victim of one of nature's cruelest tricks, an example of what might have happened to any of us if the balance of our ductless glands had somehow been upset. She

is human as you are—at birth she probably was not deformed at all. Basically she differs from the normal—from you, gentlemen—only in the slightest degree."

Wellsmore and Blake listened in bewilderment.

"In a bony cup beneath the brain, gentlemen, lies the pituitary gland, one of a number of ductless organs which control our destinies. It is no larger than the kernel of a hazelnut, and it weighs only one-fiftieth of an ounce, yet it secretes at least eleven powerful hormones. One of these determines our stature. An anti-pituitary defect causes enlarged hands and feet and head, as well as extreme height, as you have seen. It is most unfortunate but easily explained, thanks to Mr. Fairlee and others who are making such admirable progress in the field of endocrinology."*

Wellsmore and Blake were silent.

"Those not familiar with this phenomenon," Cole went on quietly, "may reach grievously wrong conclusions. Mr. Fairlee has confessed himself the father of this unfortunate girl, but that indicates nothing. The layman might assume her condition points to an abnormality in her father or mother—not at all. Most certainly it has no connection with Mr. Fairlee's mental condition. It is very important, gentlemen, that you understand this clearly."

Wellsmore flushed. "I'll take your word on it, Cole, but a jury will have the final say in this case. I'm surer than before that Fairlee's behind his wife's disappearance. I'm going to get a confession and I'm going to find the body. What's more, Fairlee's going to head-

*Research proceeding apace in the subject of endocrinology (the study of the system of ductless glands in the human body) reveals that these strange organs hold the key to most of the mysteries of life and death. They produce sideshow freaks, fanatics, neurasthenics, loafers, executives whose energies seem to have no limit. Abnormalities of the ductless glands may produce geniuses or morons. Their imperfect functioning cause such afflictions as diabetes, goiter, Addison's, Graves' and Simmonds' diseases. Space does not permit even a bare outline of the various glands and their known functions, but even with the wealth of material at hand, science has not yet advanced beyond the kindergarten stage in its knowledge of them. It is certain, however, that the hormones poured into the body by the ductless glands are its high explosives.—F. C. D.

quarters with us and he's going to take a grilling."

Fairlee recoiled in dismay. "Don't take me away again! Don't force me to leave this house! I beg of you—"

"You're coming with us this time, all the way!"

Cole's eyes narrowed. "Chief," he said quietly, "I am interested principally in psychological truths. If murder has been done, I am as eager as you to see the guilty person punished, but you're making a regrettable mistake. You're not in the mood to listen to any further explanations—so I'm obliged to promise you, you're going to find me right in the middle of this case until it's cracked wide open."

"Mistake?" Wellsmore barked. "If you think Fairlee's innocent of this job, you're making a bigger one!"

Cole smiled. "In the interest of justice, Chief, allow me to give you some vital information. A short time ago the girl Alice was attacked with a knife, perhaps with intent to kill. Miss Ashurst and I are witness to the fact that the assailant escaped into Mr. Fairlee's study. In that room you will find a bloody knife and a bloodstained smock. They are evidence pointing to Mr. Fairlee as the attacker of his daughter. If Mr. Fairlee is guilty of one crime committed in this house, he may logically be presumed guilty of another—possibly the murder of his wife.

"But, gentlemen," Carter Cole added firmly, "I'm convinced Ronald Fairlee is absolutely innocent, and I stake my professional reputation on a promise to prove it. Good-night."

He stepped past the stricken Fairlee, the dumfounded Wellsmore. Celia Ashurst's haggard eyes followed him as he passed Homer Morehouse, who was standing in the branch hall. Looking back, Cole saw again, on the face of

Steven Vaill, that expression of numb fear. He went out, climbed into his Duesenberg with a sigh.

"Home, Brick," he ordered.

CHAPTER THREE

The Invisible Prison

THE Cole Sanitarium sat amid spacious grounds bordered by a high fence topped with barbed wire, a retreat peopled by more than a thousand mental patients. Some toiled in the gardens, rolled the gravel walks, basked in the sun living vegetable existences. Others shrieked with ecstasy or moaned with stark despair or sang or preached—a cacophonous chorus of the demented that never ended. While he strove to cure their derangements, Carter Cole, M. D., reigned supreme over their destinies.

The sprawling building was a labyrinth of hallways, along which, by day, blank-faced men and women interminably pushed heavy blocks based with felt, a mechanical routine which eased their minds while it burnished the floors. Along one of these bright corridors Carter Cole strode, having returned from the Fairlee home, to his offices. As soon as he appeared, two pretty and efficient nurse-secretaries came alertly to his desk.

"June, Jane," he addressed the Misses Day, "I need accurate information quickly. You've a big night's work ahead of you. A man's life may depend on what you find."

"Yes, Doctor," said June Day. And "Yes, Doctor," said Jane.

They were perfectly alike—identical in every detail of their pert faces, their slender figures, their quiet voices, their trim uniforms. If they had family, friends, sweethearts, Carter Cole had never gleaned a hint of them. He knew only that the twins were ideal, tireless secretaries, whom nothing ever ruffled,

who could perform any bizarre task with efficient dispatch. And—a confusion which he often thought might some day make him a patient in his own institution—that he was forever calling them by their wrong names.

“To begin with, June, some first-class snooping must be done. Fairlee’s neighbors will be only too eager to oblige, I think. Is Miss Celia Ashurst in love with Ronald Fairlee or with Steven Vaill? Is Mr. Fairlee in love with Miss Ashurst? As to whether Mr. Vaill is in love with the girl I need no information—he is. Before you leave, June, please bring from the files the newspaper clippings concerning the recent disappearance of Mrs. Fairlee.”

The girl he was looking at said: “Yes, Doctor—but I’m Jane.”

“Ah, yes,” Cole sighed. “You always are. June, information also on Fairlee’s brother-in-law, Homer Morehouse. Particularly, was he actually in Europe at the time his sister disappeared, and on the high seas, returning from London, when he heard of it? How much does the missing woman mean to him? Also what does Fairlee stand to gain, if anything, by his wife’s death? On your way.”

Jane Day promptly brought Cole a folder of newspaper clippings and left him alone at his desk. The twins would not rest, he knew, until they had placed in his hands the complete answers to his questions. Now he glanced over black headlines announcing the startling disappearance of the chemist’s wife, and singled out a few paragraphs.

Mrs. Fairlee’s probable movements, just prior to her disappearance, were evidently her usual routine. She prepared herself a stew, dined alone, tidied the kitchen, then retired to her bedroom. No one witnessed these movements but, following the discovery of her disappearance next day by her husband, indications were found, he related, pointing to these actions.

The police investigation revealed the situation in the Fairlee home to be an unusual one. Though Mr. and Mrs. Fairlee lived under the same roof, they were estranged. During the course of several days the wife might see nothing of her husband, since his laboratory research work absorbed him completely. While she prepared her own meals in the large kitchen downstairs, Ronald Fairlee and his assistants ate at irregular hours, their meals being prepared by Celia Ashurst, the chemist’s assistant, in a kitchen adjoining the laboratory. Fairlee’s waking moments were confined to the laboratory and his study, while his wife occupied a separate bedroom and made use of the rest of the house. This situation was generally known to the neighbors. Mrs. Fairlee was said to have been preparing an action for a legal separation at the time of her disappearance.

The missing woman is Fairlee’s second wife. Fairlee’s first marriage occurred in 1921, to Marie Ostend, of New York. A few months after the birth of a daughter, Alice, in 1922, the first Mrs. Fairlee obtained a divorce in Nevada on the grounds of mental cruelty. She remained in New York with her daughter until her death three years ago. Mr. Fairlee remarried in 1930 to Ethel Morehouse, also of New York, the missing woman.

The telephone interrupted. A strained, anxious voice came from the receiver—Homer Morehouse’s. Cole listened alertly to a rushing message.

“For God’s sake, Doctor Cole, come to police headquarters at once. They have Ronald here. He’s behaving as though he’s lost his last vestige of sanity. They’re trying to force him to talk—it’s frightful. Somehow you’ve got to help him—or anything may happen.”

“I’m on my way,” Cole answered promptly.

He touched two pearl buttons. One would summon Brick Kelly to the entrance with the Duesenberg. The other brought a remarkably personable young woman to his desk. She was Doctor Mary Grafton, his first assistant, whom he had met in one of his most amazing

cases and literally saved from the electric chair. In a moment she was in hat and coat, ready to leave with him.

"A case, Mary," he told her, "which needs your understanding and sympathy. Notebook and pencil for a statement. Let's hurry."

UNDER Brick Kelly's masterly handling, the Duesenberg whirred along the broad cement road which led to the trim police-headquarters building. With Doctor Grafton, Cole went into Chief Wellsmore's outer office. Through a connecting door he heard the chief's flat voice, Blake's growling tones. They were shooting out questions at machine-gun speed.

"Why didn't you report your wife's disappearance?"

"Where have you hidden her body?"

"Why are you afraid to leave the house?"

"Where did you hide her after you killed her?"

"What are you afraid of now if you're innocent?"

"Where did you hide your wife's body?"

"What are you afraid of?"

An answer came, blurted and husky, in Ronald Fairlee's voice. "The Dynamo God—the Dynamo God!"

Cole's lips tightened as he stepped into the inner office. Fairlee was slumped in a chair in the corner. Two pairs of handcuffs shackled his wrists to its arms. He was staring wildly, possessed by an uncontrollable fear. Wellsmore and Blake were leveling accusing forefingers in his face. Cole went toward them quietly as the grim question rasped again.

"Where did you hide your wife's body?"

"Gentlemen." Wellsmore and Blake turned impatiently. "You are laboring under a cruel misunderstanding. You are mistaking Mr. Fairlee's agitation for guilty knowledge. The truth is, he is beside himself because he is a victim of a distance phobia."

Wellsmore growled: "Doctor, I think you'd better keep out of this. If he's insane, it's all the more reason for thinking he killed his wife."

"Another error," Cole said calmly. "Mr. Fairlee is not insane. We all have phobias in some degree, some very slight, some marked. Many women are afraid of thunder—that's called astraphobia. Others are afraid of blood—hematophobia. A great many persons are afraid of high places—acrophobia. Mr. Fairlee's happens to be an acute fear of being away from home. An awful thing to him—but it is not insanity."*

"Yes—yes, that's true," Fairlee murmured. "At home I am safe. Here—the Dynamo God—" He closed his eyes convulsively and was silent.

"Suppose," Cole went on, "Mrs. Fairlee is found dead—murdered. Unless Ronald Fairlee is cured, by having the roots of his fear pulled out of his mind by a skilled psychiatrist, he will behave in just this same way if he is forced to appear in a courtroom—merely because it is far from his home. The jury, totally unversed in the lore of the mind, will believe Mr. Fairlee a raving maniac. It will inevitably mean the chair for him."

"If my hunch is right, he'll deserve it!" Wellsmore countered.

"But if you're wrong, you'll have an in-

* At birth infants possess only a few inherited fears—fear of falling, of loud noises, of restriction of movement. Some fears are learned by children from others—as, for instance nyctophobia, or fear of the dark—others are acquired through emotional shock. A mild phobia may manifest itself as shyness (fear of ridicule) as a "New England conscience"; in an extreme case the phobia may become a constant dread powerful enough to determine the whole course of life. Fear of disease accounts for the publication of health columns in newspapers and fear of loss accounts for the institution of insurance. There is—weak or strong—some form of phobia in the make-up of everyone.—F. C. D.

nocent man's death on your conscience," Cole firmly pointed out. "Listen, Chief. Questioning Fairlee like this will get you absolutely nowhere. He can't think straight here. Suppose you turn him over to me. I promise you it will mean progress in the case."

The chief scowled. "What do you want to do with him?"

"Take him back home," Cole said.

Wellsmore's jaw squared. "All right, go ahead. We'll make it a party. I'll bet a million Mrs. Fairlee's body is hidden somewhere in that house. While you're trying to find out about this thing he calls the Dynamo God, I'll be tearing the place apart. Go ahead—Fairlee's in your hands, and you're responsible."

Pathetic relief shone in Fairlee's eyes. Cole gently unlocked the handcuffs, took his arm. With Doctor Mary Grafton, they went out to the Duesenberg. Brick Kelly's eyes widened with alarm at sight of the wildly staring Fairlee. The car whirred back to the broad cement. Cole said nothing, but watched the chemist. While he stared out the windows, seeking familiar landmarks, Fairlee's tension eased.

"Thank God you understand, Doctor Cole!" he said fervently. "I can leave the house, and go to the edge of the grounds, without feeling this horrible fear. If I go a few yards beyond the gate, it begins to burn in my mind. A few steps more and I tremble. It is absolutely impossible for me to go beyond a certain point, of my own volition. For years—for an eternity—I've lived in an invisible prison."

KELLY shot the car into the Fairlee drive. The instant the gate posts were behind him, a vast sigh of relief came from the chemist's lips. When he stepped from the Duesenberg he was quite composed. Once beyond the entrance he

was completely unafraid. Cole chuckled and slapped his shoulder reassuringly.

"Doctor Grafton," he said, "will talk with you awhile in the library. I feel sure we're going to demolish the walls of your invisible prison. Forget everything else—be at ease. Have I ever told you I'm deathly afraid of crowds. That's called ochlophobia. Go along, now."

Ronald Fairlee, smiling, went into the library with Doctor Grafton. Cole turned back to the entrance. A police car had drawn up behind the Duesenberg. Wellsmore, Blake and two other men were piling out of it, carrying shovels, picks, crowbars. They trooped in with the tools, determination grimly pictured on their faces.

"Get at it," Wellsmore directed. "Start with the cellar. Dig it up. If we don't find a woman's dead body tonight I'll call in a wrecking crew."

They marched along the hallway with their implements, opened a door at the rear of the house, went down into the darkness of the cellar. Cole, climbing the stairs, met Homer Morehouse. Morehouse made an agitated gesture.

"They ordered me out of headquarters after I phoned you. I was only trying to help Ronald. Even though he may be guilty of everything they say, I couldn't let them torture him that way. What is this thing he keeps calling the Dynamo God? Doctor Cole—is he mad?"

"You'll soon be satisfied on that point," Cole answered and went into the laboratory. Among the glittering apparatus he found Celia Ashurst and Steven Vaill. They eyed him uneasily, the flat gaslight heightening the pallor of their features.

Cole said with startling abruptness: "Vaill, you're concealing something."

Vaill stiffened, but said nothing. Celia Ashurst's eyes searched his anxiously.

Cole went on: "I don't believe Ronald Fairlee attacked Alice tonight. It was another person, wearing one of his

smocks and his eyeglasses. When it happened he was asleep in his study. If you'll come with me, I'll show you exactly what I mean."

They followed him wonderingly as he strode into the branch hall. Out of the corner of his eye Cole saw Vaill restraining a torturous anxiety. Suddenly Vaill stopped short. The girl paused at his side, startled by the gasp of dismay which broke from his lips. They listened to irregular thumping sounds echoing dully through the house. The noises of heavy blows were issuing from somewhere below.

Celia Ashurst asked tightly: "What's that?"

"I believe," Cole answered, "it's Wellsmore digging in the cellar—hunting for the dead body of Mrs. Fairlee."

A single word broke past Vaill's numb lips. "God!"

Cole searched Vaill's face intently, then abruptly turned away. He opened the door of Fairlee's study, pointed across it to the other door connecting with the main hall.

He explained quietly: "The person who attacked Alice rushed into this room, bolted the door, put the bloody knife in the desk, hung the stained smock in the closet, left the eyeglasses, then went out the other door around the corner of the hall, slipping away without being seen. All the while Fairlee, a heavy sleeper, lay there on the couch. It's reasonable to suppose, isn't it, that if Fairlee had made the attack, he wouldn't have put the knife and the smock where they'd be so easily found. The guilty person left them to fasten suspicion on Fairlee."

"But why?" Celia Ashurst asked the question tensely while Steven Vaill remained white-faced and silent, listening. "Why should anyone want to make Ronald Fairlee appear guilty of trying to kill that unfortunate girl?"

Cole gave the answer. "That person's

purpose was to make Fairlee seem dangerously insane. Perhaps the police investigation was proceeding too slowly and this act was calculated to hasten it. With his insanity apparently established, Fairlee becomes suspect of any other crime which may have been committed—for instance, murdering and concealing the body of his wife."

FROM below, the noise of chuffing shovels and driving picks continued. The irregular rhythm lent a ghastly undertone to the aura of horror hovering over the house—it seemed like the hand of doom knocking at the door.

Cole, eyes sharp, said to Celia Ashurst quietly: "There is a bond between you and Alice. She trusts you, and you can understand her. Because she is mentally an infant, because she is inarticulate, she can never take the stand as a witness in her father's defense—yet she knows the simple truth. She has already told you Ronald Fairlee is not the man who wounded her. It remains now for you to induce her to tell you who actually is guilty."

Celia Ashurst moved at once to the door of the giantess' room. She had no need to use a key because Wellsmore's attack had broken the lock. She stepped in and stopped short, struck with dismay. The grotesquely long bed was empty. The girl was not in the room.

"Alice!"

Alarm quickened Carter Cole's movements. He jerked open two closets in which huge dresses were hanging, looked into the adjoining bath. There was no sign of the giantess. He turned to Celia Ashurst.

"She slipped out—probably she's hidden herself in the house somewhere because she's frightened. It's a perfectly natural impulse. She's vital to the cause of proving her father innocent because she knows and can tell who actually

knifed her. We've got to find her quickly—before anything happens to her.”

Cole allowed the girl to lead him on the search. Celia Ashurst repeatedly called “Alice!” as they went into room after room. Determined to overlook no possible place where the giantess might hide, they climbed into the cobwebbed attic—but she was not there. The lower floor yielded no clue to the girl’s whereabouts. Cole avoided the cellar because the thumping of picks and shovels told him Wellsmore’s men were still busy at their ghoul’s work.

He stepped out the rear entrance. “Possibly somewhere on the grounds,” he suggested, shrewdly eying Steven Vaill. “Look everywhere.” He started off at the side of Celia Ashurst.

The gardens were a gloomy baffling maze of shadows. A path led to a shed in the rear against which a covered outdoor pen was built. Cole paused, hearing a gentle hopping sound, vaguely saw small bushy animals rearing curiously on their hind legs.

“Rabbits,” he said. “Why rabbits?”

“Homer Morehouse sent them,” Celia Ashurst answered, scarcely aware in her anxiety of what she was saying. “At the time he left for London—Mrs. Fairlee liked them for dinner. He sent eight and there are six left. Nobody’s touched them since Mrs. Fairlee disappeared. . . . Doctor Cole! Do you think something has happened to Alice?”

“There is the fact,” Cole answered tightly, “that the man who attacked her knows she can identify him.”

They went on, circling the grounds. The fruitless hunt brought them back to the rear entrance. They were entering when quick footfalls sounded on the cellar stairs. Chief Wellsmore face streaked with cobwebs, stepped into the light, grinning grimly. His eyes shone with triumph as he bluntly announced: “We’ve found her.”

Celia Ashurst’s hand rose in terror to her lips. Steven Vaill, just entering the rear door, stood transfixed. Cole looked sharply at them both, shouldered past Wellsmore. He went down gritty wooden steps into a dank, musty underground room buttressed by ancient beams. Picks and shovels had ripped up half its flagstone floor. Three men were turning the beams of their flashlights upon a wall.

The walls of the cellar were large stone blocks. One of the blocks had been torn from its bed. The light of the torches was shining into a cavity. Rich black dirt had crumbled away, exposing a bed of white. “Quick-lime,” one of the men murmured as Cole stared. Framed in the hollow was a shrunken, waxy face. Like a rough-hewn statue in process of excavation the dead woman stood upright in the shroud of lime—the missing wife of Ronald Fairlee.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death to Rats

CARTER COLE said quietly: “I am surer than ever, gentlemen, that Ronald Fairlee is not guilty of murder.”

The detective snorted at him. He turned as Chief Wellsmore trudged down the stairs. The chief announced: “Leave her just like that until the photographer shoots the whole layout. Everybody upstairs.” He squinted at Cole. “Well, Doctor? What did I tell you. He killed her with rat poison.”

“What!”

Wellsmore pointed to a tin container embedded in the lime near the dead woman’s head. He lifted it from its socket. It had rusted and most of the printed label had become illegible, but the trade name of *Ratex* remained and a line promising *Sure Death to Rats*. Wellsmore shook the can and a liquid sloshed inside it. As he replaced it in the hollow Cole looked impatient.

"Have you stopped to wonder, Chief," Cole asked dryly, "why Fairlee, a chemist, should make use of rat exterminator for murder purposes when he has a number of far subtler poisons in his laboratory, some of which are almost impossible to detect?"

"I'm satisfied with this case. You've certainly missed fire this time, Cole. Blake, be sure the back door's bolted. Everybody out of the cellar. The rest of this is just routine. I've got Fairlee cold."

"I consider," Cole observed quietly, "my professional reputation is still intact."

Celia Ashurst and Steven Vaill had been standing on the mouldy stairs, peering at the corpse. They hurried up. Cole, waiting while the headquarters men filed into the hall, watched Wellsmore lock the cellar entrance. He saw Doctor Mary Grafton leaving the library with Ronald Fairlee.

Wellsmore strode grimly to the chemist, bluntly announced the discovery of the woman's body. Stunned, speechless, Fairlee sank into a chair. Doctor Grafton passed her notebook to Cole. He read three pages of terse stenographic observations and nodded his satisfaction. He went at once to Wellsmore.

"This," he said, "explains Ronald Fair-

lee's phobia. First, an unforgettable nervous shock suffered in early childhood—a violent scare caused by the explosion of a generator in an electrical power house. That didn't cause the phobia, but planted the seed. Second, another shattering experience later in life—the discovery that his only child, whom he hadn't seen since she was a few months old, was a horrible monstrosity. The two forged a mental chain binding him to his home. I will gladly supply you a copy of this report, Chief."*

"That doesn't matter now," Wellsmore answered. "Sane or not, we're nailing him on a murder charge."

"May I," Cole asked with a sigh, "ask a privilege in the interests of justice? Please allow me to go to the cellar, say with Miss Ashurst, for a brief inspection of my own. My word of honor for good behavior. I think it's vital."

Wellsmore grunted. "You know the seriousness of concealing or removing evidence, Cole. But— Sure, go ahead."

Cole removed his coat, turned at once to Fairlee's laboratory assistant. "We have not yet located Alice," he reminded the girl. "Keep hunting for her outside, will you, Vaill? Miss Ashurst, bring a test tube from the lab, and a cork. Hurry!"

* Carter Cole has kindly furnished me with a full report of the case of Ronald Fairlee, of which the following are excerpts offered so that the reader may grasp a clear understanding of his phobia.

"My father was an electrical engineer. As a boy I often went to the power house where he worked because I was fascinated by the huge switches, fuses and meters. I was particularly interested in the whirring dynamos which sent their magic power out into the city. . . . One day, while I was standing near a huge dynamo, something went wrong. Sparks like lightning flashed out of it. It seemed to explode with a terrific thunderclap. I was so struck with fright that I obeyed my first impulse. . . . I ran home, as fast as I could, for dear life—home because it meant safety.

"I forgot the incident in time, except that its effect was to make me afraid of everything concerned with electricity

"An emotional shock equally violent was when I saw my daughter Alice for the first time since separating from my first wife. I had not seen her, even a picture of her, since she was a baby. My first wife had concealed her deformity from me, probably through consideration for my feelings. When Alice's mother died, Alice was brought to my home by distant relatives. My first glimpse of her was an overwhelming experience that tortured my whole being. It was then I began strongly to experience fear of leaving my home. My duty to Alice demanded that I care for her constantly—a duty I would have gladly evaded though I could not—and the world outside the house became, in my mind, a domain dominated by electricity—the Dynamo God—into which I dared not venture."—F. C. D.

STEVEN Vaill hastened out the entrance as the girl ran up the stairs. Wellsmore unlocked the cellar door for Cole. He took an electric torch from Blake as Celia Ashurst came to him with a glittering tube in her hand. Her face whitened as she went down the swaying stairs with Cole. He paused at the opened wall, the beam shining in the dead woman's face.

He looked up. Bracketed to the beams above the hollow was a wooden shelf loaded with old cans of paint, bottles of turpentine and oil. "The rat poison," he observed, "might easily have fallen off, been walled in by the murderer without his knowing it." Cole wedged his torch in a niche in the wall. Carefully he lifted the rusted can from the bed of lime and pried the lid off, poured the test-tube full of the poison.

"Listen!" Celia Ashurst blurted, backing instinctively to the barred window.

A faint, scraping sound came out of the gloom. Cole turned quickly to the opposite wall. It rose head high to an air-space between leveled ground and the floor joists. The light probed far back into the flat space, reaching the brick base of a chimney. Something was crawling from the shadow behind the column—a huge being with bulbous head, great hands clawing to drag itself forward.

"Alice!" Celia gasped.

The giantess' face was smeared with grime. She made a whimpering, pleading sound in answer to Celia Ashurst's soft call. She had, Cole conjectured, retreated to the cellar to escape the fear of things unintelligible to her undeveloped mind and at the approach of Wellsmore's men, had dragged herself into deeper security. The instinctive sympathy she felt for Celia Ashurst was drawing her from her hiding place. Slowly, laboriously, she crawled to the edge of the wall.

"Poor Alice—come to me. There's

nothing to be afraid of. You know we're your friends. Come—come."

The giantess crawled down, stood with lips lax, eyes vacant, yet somehow evincing gratefulness. Celia Ashurst spoke to her crooningly.

"Alice—do you remember the man? The man who hurt you—you remember? He made the blood come and ran away. Tell us who he is, Alice."

The answer came, not in the slaving mumble of the giantess, but with the sharp, lethal crack of a gun plus the sound of shattering glass.

Cole, who had been watching the hesitant approach of the giantess, whirled, the poison still in his hand, to see an arm encircling Celia Ashurst's throat through the bars of the window. In the same split second the arm was withdrawn and Cole caught the gleam reflected from a disappearing gun. A man took a running step past the broken pane and was gone.

Cole jerked back as an animal moan broke from the lips of the giantess. She was swaying forward, her lids drooping over her protruding eyes. A black hole with a tangent of red marked the center of her bulging forehead.

Cole corked the test-tube, slid it into his pocket and whirled as Celia groped to break the fall of the giantess. He bounded to the rear entrance of the cellar, fought the rusty bolt. He slapped out of a bulkhead, sprang past the low window. Bringing his 9 mm Luger into his hand, he ran along shadow-matted gardens. Suddenly he stopped in the glow from a window, staring at a young man moving toward him—Steven Vaill.

"What happened?" Vaill exclaimed. "I heard a shot. Is Celia all right?"

Cole said grimly: "Through no fault of yours."

Vaill started, broke past. Cole let him go and followed along the path. When he reached the front of the house he saw

two headquarters men skirmishing out, alarmed by the report. "In the cellar!" he snapped at them. He heard an outbreak of action in the rear of the house while he circled the grounds. He caught no other sound, saw no movement while he searched. Entering the dwelling at the front, he went rapidly along the gaslighted hall, paused when he saw Celia Ashurst hurry from the cellar.

The girl whispered: "She's dead."

"I expected that," said Cole.

He looked into the library. Ronald Fairlee was standing uncertainly beside the table, too overwhelmed by mental confusion to move. Homer Morehouse was grasping one of his arms, saying: "Keep hold of yourself, Ronald."

Cole turned back, stepped to the side of Doctor Mary Grafton with, "Wait for me in the car." He was striding toward the cellar entrance when Chief Wellsmore stepped up.

"Doctor, did you see the man who killed that poor girl?"

"Unfortunately, I did not," Cole answered. "Nor did Miss Ashurst. He got away across the grounds. I think it best, Chief, that I retire until your official furor subsides. You can always find me at the sanitarium. I only have one statement to make tonight—that the man who shot Alice is the man who knifed her and the man who murdered Mrs. Fairlee. And one question: Where was Ronald Fairlee when the shot was fired?"

"He was with me," Chief Wellsmore answered confusedly, "in the library."

Cole smiled wryly as he went out.

CHAPTER FIVE

Murder Feast

THE manifold duties of directing the Cole Sanitarium kept Cole in his office until long past dawn. Once routine matters were dispatched, he took up the

terse, typewritten reports prepared for him on the Fairlee case.

The life of Ethel Fairlee was insured for \$100,000, half of this payable to her husband in the event of her death, half to her brother.

Mr. Fairlee's financial condition is strained. He is desperately in need of funds to carry on his researches.

Mr. Morehouse's relationship with his sister was quite casual until he learned she was not happy with Fairlee, at which time he began writing her letters and sending her gifts, in a brotherly attempt to cheer her.

Mr. Fairlee's domestic unhappiness was definitely due to his phobia and to the presence of his monster daughter.

Mr. Morehouse was attempting to close an important contract in London, England, at the time of his sister's disappearance. He failed his purpose, which placed him in an even more pressing financial situation than that which had forced him to make the trip. He immediately booked his return. The captain of the *S. S. Ultima* confirms his presence on the ship, en route from London to New York, at the time his sister's disappearance was reported to the press. He went immediately to the Fairlee home.

JD

The ringing telephone drew Cole's hand. The voice of Chief Wellsmore reached Cole with a triumphant chuckle. "News, Doctor," the official said, "which will interest you. An autopsy has been performed on Mrs. Fairlee. Reinsch's test shows arsenic. Practically everybody knows some rat poisons are mostly arsenic."

"But," Cole inquired, "is arsenic present in the particular rat poison you found in the woman's grave? And, furthermore, did you find any in Fairlee's lab?"

Wellsmore growled: "None in his lab, but that doesn't prove there wasn't some there two months ago when his wife died. I'm turning a sample of the rat poison over to another chemist for checking. Why did Fairlee bury the poison with her if he didn't use it to kill her? I tell you, we've cracked us a case."

Cole disconnected, sat musing. He rose, climbed to the spacious laboratory on the upper floor. He took from his pocket the tube he had filled with rat poison at Mrs. Fairlee's lime-packed grave and began a systematic qualitative analysis. When he reached a positive indication he murmured: "The digitalis, sea onion type."

He returned to his desk, touched a button, smiled when Doctor Grafton appeared. "Mary," he said, "can you cook?"

"I've cooked for myself," she answered, "and survived."

"Good. First, please telephone everybody connected with the Fairlee case and invite them to have dinner with me at eight o'clock at the Fairlee home. Allow none of them to refuse. Later, I'll personally make arrangements with Chief Wellsmore so that Fairlee will himself be present—with a certain article of evidence. Once you're assured everyone is coming, hie yourself to the Fairlee home and make ready. I'll telephone you the menu later."

"Something plain and simple?" Doctor Grafton asked.

"Tonight," Cole answered, "we shall all partake of a very special dish."

Mary Grafton left wondering. Cole again took up the reports prepared by the Day twins. He was reading a note concerning Steven Vaill when one of his personable secretaries appeared to announce that Mr. Vaill was calling. "So?" Cole said. "Show him in, June."

Reaching for the bookcase, he moaned with despair when Miss Day answered: "Yes, Doctor—but I'm Jane." He tugged down a copy of *Webster's Toxicology* and another volume entitled *Tolerances and Their Relationship to the Endocrine System*. He looked up to find Steven Vaill, pale and anxious, staring across his desk.

Vaill began without preliminaries: "You know I'm hiding something. I admit it. I've got to. I can't stand it any

longer. You think I murdered Mrs. Fairlee—but it isn't true. I—I—"

Cole said quietly: "Sit down, Mr. Vaill."

VAILL perched on a chair. "It's all got to come out sooner or later," he resumed, "and I want to clear myself in your eyes because you insist Ronald Fairlee is innocent. I'll probably go to prison—it was a mad impulse—but I did it for Celia's sake."

"What," Cole asked, "did you do?"

"Mrs. Fairlee," Vaill hurried on, "was a nagging, spiteful, suspicious woman. She thought Celia and Ronald were in love with each other. She accused him of an affair with her more than once. It wasn't true. Celia was going—was going to marry me. Ronald's is a paternal affection for Celia—but his wife put the worst possible construction on it."

Cole asked: "'Was'?"

"This will make marriage for Celia and me impossible—if I'm made to suffer for what I did. I was desperate to avoid a scandal—to keep Celia's career from being ruined—to keep her name from being dirtied in the papers and the courts—but now it's all gone for nothing. You can't realize how I felt when I found Mrs. Fairlee in her bedroom—dead."

Cole sat up. "You found her?"

"Dead," Vaill repeated huskily. "That night Ronald and Celia were working late in the lab. I went downstairs for a bite to eat. Passing Mrs. Fairlee's bedroom, I saw her door open. She was lying on the floor. She'd been in robust health—there wasn't any wound—I knew immediately she'd been poisoned."

"Acute arsenical poisoning," Cole observed, "leaves no visible symptoms."

"But I knew it!" Vaill insisted. "Can you realize what it meant? Someone in the house had killed her. I hadn't. I

swear I hadn't. I had no reason for it. But the gossip going about—suspicion would point either to Celia or Ronald. One or the other of them getting rid of the wife in order to be free for each other. There was nothing to it—nothing—but I knew it wouldn't be looked at in any other way. It would ruin them both."

"Yes?"

"I hid her body in the cellar wall."

Cole jerked up. "You?"

"Hoping they'd never find her, praying it would never come out. It was a crazy thing to do—but Celia and Ronald both mean so much to me. I waited until Celia had gone home, until Ronald was asleep—he sleeps heavily, you know. There was some construction work going on next door. I stole several bags of lime to help destroy the body. God! You don't know what it's been, living and working there in that house, knowing a dead woman was buried in the cellar."

"Do you think," Cole asked quietly, "Roland Fairlee poisoned her? Do you think Celia Ashurst did it? And—have you told me the whole truth?"

"Celia—certainly not! Ronald—what else is there to think? Yes—I've told you everything!"

Cole frowned. "Young men in love," he observed, "are truly addicted to regrettably foolish acts. I advise you to say nothing of this to anyone else. Let that phase of the case remain forever unsolved—it's your only hope of escaping a prison sentence, at the very least, for disposing of a dead body. You might, you know, find yourself up for murder."

"But I tell you—" Vaill blurted it, jerked up, began again. "I tell you I didn't—"

"I know, definitely and beyond all doubt who the murderer is," Cole interrupted him. "I have a special reason for withholding the information a little while. I plan to announce the murderer's identity at a little dinner party I'm giving to-

night at the Fairlee home. You'll be present of course. I hope you'll excuse me. I have a great deal of reading to do."

Vaill stared. "What are you talking about?"

"You'll find the dinner, I think, most intriguing," Cole said as he began to read.

He was completely absorbed in the weighty treatises when Vaill went baffled from his office.

IN the dining-room of the Fairlee home gaslight gleamed on silver and crystal and china. Immaculate linen shone on a table set for eight. In the kitchen Doctor Mary Grafton, assisted by several women brought from the sanitarium, was preparing the repast. In the library the guests were waiting, silent and mystified. The appointed hour was at hand but their host, Carter Cole, M. D., was absent.

The silken hum of the Duesenberg announced his arrival. Stepping from the massive black car he directed Brick Kelly: "Wait here, Brick, and keep a wary eye on that door." He strode into the house, followed by the twin Misses Day in smart tailored dresses exactly alike. Smilingly entering the library, he affably greeted his waiting guests.

"Sorry. So sorry. Important researches delayed me. Gracious of you to permit me this privilege, Mr. Fairlee. Good evening, Mr. Morehouse. Miss Ashurst, Mr. Vaill, you look fresh as daisies. Why the scowl, Mr. Blake? Ah, Chief—you've brought the bit of evidence I mentioned. I'd like to have it now, if you don't mind."

Chief Wellsmore, uneasy in a new suit, opened his briefcase and handed Cole the corroded can of rat poison found in the murdered woman's secret grave. Cole sloshed its contents cheerfully. "Cocktails, my good people?" he inquired. Even as he spoke a uniformed maid appeared,

bearing a tray. Cole waited until all his guests were served, then took up his own glass—empty.

"You will be glad, I'm sure, to learn," he said, "that we have reached the root of the trouble which has kept Mr. Fairlee imprisoned in this house for years. Half the cure is his realizing the cause of the phobia. The treatment is simple—merely short trips, farther away each day until he becomes sure the outside world holds no terrors for him. A toast, good people? Let us say—Here's to crime."

They stared, but they sipped. They stopped sipping when Cole pried open the can of rat poison. Quite deliberately he poured his cocktail glass full of the stuff. Holding it jauntily, he resumed: "You will also be happy to learn—all but one of you, that is—that it is equally simple to prove Mr. Fairlee innocent of murder. The dead body found in this house was, as you know, packed in quick-lime. Quick-lime was used for the purpose of destroying the corpse. Many murderers have learned, much to their regret, that the action of quick-lime on a body isn't destructive at all. Quite the contrary. It's preservative. Mr. Fairlee, being an eminent scientist, knows that—but the murderer didn't."

"You aren't drinking," Cole chided his guests. "Come, let's get on with it. Here, again, is to crime."

He was raising the glass of rat poison to his lips when Wellsmore blurted in dismay: "Cole, for God's sake, that stuff'll kill you!"

Cole's hand paused. "Interesting mixture," he observed. "It is composed of digitalis, the juice of the sea onion or sea lily, and other aromatic substances added to attract its victims—but no arsenic, Chief. When rats get it into their systems it paralyzes their respiratory apparatus, drives them into the open for

water, and soon makes an end of them. Deadly indeed—to rats."

While seven people stared aghast, too stunned to speak, Carter Cole raised the glass of poison to his lips and drained it.

"But not," he went on, "to humans. I assure you the last thing I wish to do is to die. I promise you I will suffer not the slightest ill effects. You, Chief, a layman, weren't aware of the interesting properties of this stuff. To Mr. Fairlee and me, men of science, it is not at all surprising. It is one more point in the proof that he did not use this stuff to poison his wife. He'd have known it couldn't kill a human."

Chief Wellsmore grumbled: "Well I'll be damned—but if you fall over dead any minute, Cole, I won't be surprised."

"Don't worry," Cole assured him. "I hope, Chief you're still not wondering why Mr. Fairlee didn't report his wife's disappearance. Since she was planning on a separation, he probably thought she'd merely left him. Perhaps he hesitated because of his unusual mental condition, wanting to avoid having it paraded in the newspapers. He is a highly intelligent, sensitive man and naturally—"

Fairlee blurted: "I dread—dread that people will think me mad—capable of any irrational act!"

"Naturally," Cole agreed. "Shall we go in to dinner?"

COLE led the way into the dining-room. His guests were ill at ease but he was affability itself. He made sure each was comfortably seated. The blaze crackling in the fireplace lent a warm cheer.

The tension was beginning to ease when Cole, pausing at his own chair, laconically remarked: "I believe it was directly below his room that the body of Mrs. Fairlee was found hidden in the wall, wasn't it?"

Cole's guests winced. He smacked his

hands zestfully when Doctor Grafton appeared carrying a huge, steaming tureen of stew. Deftly serving it in the topmost of the stack of dishes placed before him he explained: "This evening we will sample a rather unusual dish. Finding six rabbits penned behind the house, I asked and received Mr. Fairlee's permission to make use of them. This, ladies and gentlemen, is rabbit stew. I hope you like it, because I'm going to give you generous portions. Mr. Fairlee?"

The murder suspect accepted his plate silently. Cole began filling another.

"A most interesting animal, the rabbit," he went on. "Having decided upon this dish, I took the trouble to learn something about them. The rabbit—*Oryctolagus cuniculus*, of the family *Leporidae*—is, you may be surprised to learn, a rodent, which is distinguished by its peculiar incisor teeth. It is a first cousin to the rat, the gopher, the porcupine, the beaver, the hairy muskrat, the elegant chinchilla and the unfortunate guinea pig. . . . Miss Ashurst?"

Cole passed a plate to Fairlee's laboratory assistant and went on: "I was surprised to learn that the rabbit is found in a greater number of variations than any other mammal on earth except the dog. On the one hand there is the old English lop-eared rabbit which has ears six inches in width and measures twenty-three inches from tip to tip—truly a considerable amount of ears. . . . June?"

"Thank you, doctor," Miss Day said, taking her plate. "I'm Jane."

Cole went on blithely: "Inevitably, you are. . . . There is, on the other hand, the Pica rabbit, which is quite small and has no tail. There is also the Angora, prized especially for its fur, the Albino, and the Flemish, which is the biggest of all rabbits. Jane—I mean June?"

The second Miss Day took her helping of rabbit stew and Cole continued: "The

rabbit must not be confused with the hare. It is distinguished from the hare by its smaller size, its shorter ears and feet, the absence of black on the ears, its gray color, the fact that its young are born naked and blind, and also because it lives in burrows. . . . Mr. Vaill, please.

"Very prolific, the rabbit. It begins to breed at the age of six months, breeds from four to eight times a year, each time producing three to eight young, and lives seven or eight years. Each rabbit therefore, in the course of its lifetime, becomes approximately two hundred rabbits, barring accidents, such as this dinner. . . . Yours, Mr. Morehouse."

IN spite of themselves, the guests were listening to Cole's happy discourse with rapt attention.

"Being so prolific," Cole went on, "it was practically inevitable that the rabbit, which originally inhabited the western half of the Mediterranean, should soon spread over the entire globe. Besides being made into stew, as at present, the rabbit may also be roasted, curried, and jugged—one variety of the jugged rabbit being *hassenspheffer*. Rabbits, furthermore, ladies and gentlemen, are not only eaten but worn. . . . Chief Wellmore?"

The chief took his plate with an expression of complete wonderment.

"Rabbit fur is the most popular low-priced fur. Furriers call it cony, but it is known under literally several hundred names. You can buy any one of a long list of furs, and still get rabbit. I was amazed to learn how many rabbits we humans consume in the form of adornment. From Australia alone some seventy million rabbit skins are shipped annually. . . . Mr. Blake? Now for myself. I can hardly wait."

Homer Morehouse asked slowly: "Did you say this stew was made from the rabbits kept in this back yard?"

"Why not?" Cole asked. "If something weren't done with them the place would soon be simply flooded with bunnies." He was filling his own plate. "You are probably now aware, gentlemen, that your felt hats are made of rabbit fur—also your derbies. Forty or fifty skins make a dozen hats. Well, enough of talking about rabbits. Let's eat them."

Hesitancy was evident on the part of the guests, but Cole went at his plate with zest. "Delicious!" he exclaimed. Looking around the table, he asked eagerly: "What do you think of it, Miss Ashurst? June, Jane, whichever you are, or both of you, do you like it? Very tender, don't you think, Mr. Fairlee? Delightful for a change, Chief, wouldn't you say? Marvelous flavor, eh, Mr. Vaill?"

"It—it is good," Celia Ashurst answered.

"Very nice, Doctor," said Jane Day.

"Very nice," June Day echoed.

Fairlee observed: "I—I'm not very hungry, I'm afraid."

"Never," Wellsmore opined, "tasted rabbit before. Not bad."

"A little," said Steven Vaill, "like chicken."

Cole said: "Delicious! I didn't dream Doctor Grafton was such a talented cook. Mr. Morehouse, you're not eating."

Morehouse jerked up. "Don't! For God's sake, don't touch this stuff! It will kill you!"

Cole calmly spooned a generous helping into his mouth. "What in the world are you alarmed about, Mr. Morehouse? You sent these rabbits to your sister as a gift, and for eating purposes. It doesn't taste deadly at all."

Morehouse stifled a dismayed shout. He rushed to the window. He peered across the grounds, at the rabbit cage. Cole said calmly: "Don't you believe me? It's empty, isn't it? Really delicious stew." Morehouse jerked back. No one but Cole was

was eating now, but Cole was eating ravenously. Morehouse shouted in a frenzy: "It's poison! It's certain death! Doctor Cole, for God's sake, stop!"

Cole put down his spoon. "What Mr. Morehouse really means, Chief," he said calmly to the staring Wellsmore, "is that Ronald Fairlee is not guilty of murdering his wife, but Homer Morehouse is guilty of murdering his sister in order to acquire the tidy sum of fifty thousand dollars."

Wellsmore sprang up to blurt: "By God, if that's so—"

MOREHOUSE kicked his chair away. He stumbled around the table, lurched out of the room. He was running crazily along the hall when Cole sprinted after him. Morehouse slammed out the entrance, kept running. Cole shouted: "Stop him, Brick!" Kelly was already away from the Duesenberg's wheel, diving after the fleeing man.

Morehouse glimpsed him, desperately swerved away. Cole sprang, dropped directly into Morehouse's path. Morehouse struck out wildly, blindly. Cole took a stiff jolt on the jaw, poised on toe-tips, slammed a left, then a right, between Morehouse's eyes. Morehouse sprawled down. Glittering gunmetal twinkled. Cole grabbed at a whisking revolver.

He lunged on Morehouse. A frantic struggle rustled the grass. The gun whipped out, then down between Cole's and Morehouse's bodies. Abruptly a muffled explosion sounded. A smell of scorched clothing wafted into the air. Wellsmore, Blake, Kelly stared appalled. Neither Morehouse nor Cole was moving. It was Cole who pulled up.

"Anybody hit?" he asked. "Morehouse wasn't. I'm glad of that. He deserves the chair."

Suddenly Wellsmore and Blake were gripping Morehouse's arms, dragging him.

Cole extended the revolver to the chief, saying: "You'll want that. He must have used it to kill Alice." He went in first into the house, entering the library.

Ronald Fairlee had hurried from the dining-room, was staring incredulously. Celia Ashurst and Steven Vaill had a hysterical, hopeful look in their eyes. The Misses Day were unperturbed. Cole stood by while Wellsmore and Blake maneuvered the sobbing Morehouse into the room. They forced Morehouse into a chair—he slumped.

"You'll get a confession, I'm sure," Cole told them. "In case any of you ate any of the stew, let me reassure you. The rabbits formerly in the pen—those sent to his sister by Morehouse—are now at my sanitarium. Those dedicated to the stew were purchased today and are quite innocuous. Mrs. Fairlee—"

"Wait a minute!" Wellsmore blurted. "Morehouse was in Europe at the time his sister died. How can he be responsible for her death?"

"He murdered her as surely as though he had shot her in the heart," Cole answered. "The logic is simple. Fairlee didn't murder his wife—I've been sure of that from the start. No one else in the house had a motive. Therefore, someone outside the house. The only possibility was Morehouse. Morehouse didn't commit the crime personally, so he did it indirectly. His agent must have been one of his gifts—gifts that began coming probably when he first determined on his plan, to pre-

pare the way for the rabbits. Living rabbits, Chief, are the instruments of murder."

Wellsmore snarled: "How the hell could they be?"

"There is one more interesting fact about rabbits," Cole went on. "Morehouse knew it long ago, somehow, and I learned it today because logic forced me to the answer. Just as rats succumb to certain poisons to which man is immune, rabbits are immune to a poison which is deadly to man—arsenic.

"Sprinkle generous quantities of arsenic on lettuce. Feed it to rabbits. The rabbits eat it, but do not die. The arsenic remains in their systems, impregnating their flesh. Made into stew, they become a deadly dish. The fact is simple to prove. By killing the rabbits remaining from the shipment Mr. Morehouse admittedly sent, and analyzing their tissues, we'll find arsenic. You have your man, Chief—and I'm still hungry."

Cole reached for his coat, hat and stick. "Chief you and Blake are going to be busy with Mr. Morehouse, aren't you? Mr. Fairlee, there is an excellent inn a short way down the road—I'm sure you'll enjoy having dinner there. June, Jane, Celia, Steve, Mary—it's still a party, and it's waiting for us."

Cole smiled as, steering Fairlee to the door, he noted a new confidence in the chemist's eyes. "We shall all have," Cole said with a chuckle, "a toothsome vegetable plate."

THE END

IN THE APRIL ISSUE

THE LIVING LIE DOWN WITH THE DEAD

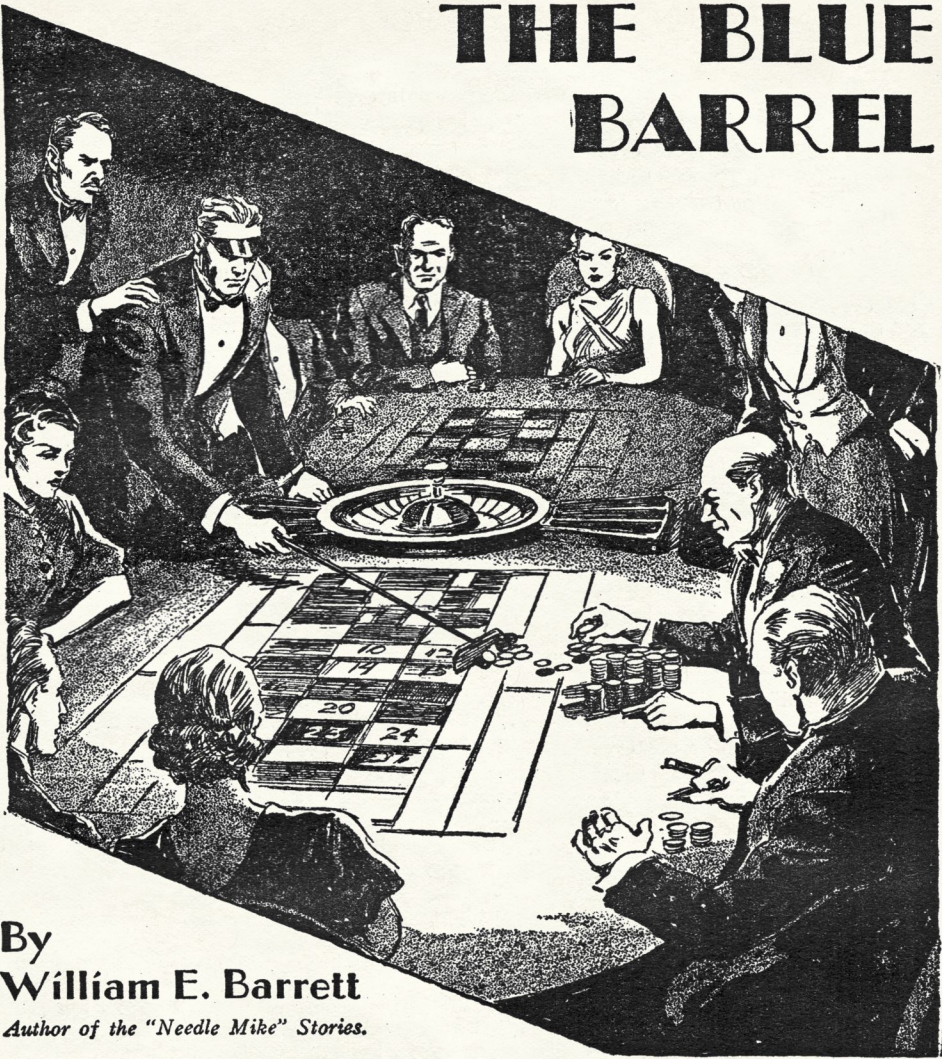
A Smashing Horror Mystery by

CORNELL WOOLRICH



The APRIL DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE will be out on MARCH 5th.

THE BLUE BARREL



By
William E. Barrett

Author of the "Needle Mike" Stories.

Healy collected a small bet on the red.

No one called Dean Culver the Blue Barrel—for no one knew he was the author of the underworld-gossip column signed with that name each night in the Star. If the easy-money players had ever guessed that the man who paid them off at the Twin Moons was the Walter Winchell of the other side of the law, he'd be cashing in his own checks at the first turn of the wheel, instead of those of the gamblers he spun it for.

DEAN CULVER sat behind the spinning wheel and the clicking ball at the big table in the Twin Moons and no one noticed him. Before

him nightly there passed the parade of plungers, chiselers, big shots and suckers that swell the human tide of a big-time gambling-house and into his ears there

passed the gossip, the rumor and the stark staring truth about the human undertow.

There were at least three men in the room right now who would have killed Dean Culver without a qualm if they knew their man, and fifty or more at large in the city who would have helped them; not counting those in the big house who couldn't help, nor those who would have turned over in their graves if Culver stepped on the sod above them.

The human tide ebbed and flowed and Culver sat impassive with the tiny rake in his hand, the stacks of chips before him and the green eyeshade pulled low. He was the man that nobody noticed, the croupier, the dealer of roulette; hired man for the Goddess of Chance.

But Dean Culver was also the Blue Barrel.

The bulldog edition of the *Morning Star* had just hit the street and from immaculate tables in the best hotels to the cracked counters of the greasy spoons, eyes were eagerly scanning the leaded type of the Blue Barrel. What Walter Winchell had done for Broadway, the Blue Barrel was doing for the underworld, the half-fringe and the indiscreet circle of society that refuses to stay where it belongs. Above the column was a line-drawing cut of the weapon from which the column got its name; a savage-looking automatic with a thin wisp of smoke drifting from the muzzle.

The column, too, laid chiselers and double-crossers low, beside passing on the items that were hot news to those who read it. Tonight there was a typical item that named no names for those who were not in the know, but that identified the man mentioned by one significant word for those who did know him.

The toughest hard-times streak in the history of local put-and-take parlors broke Tuesday night and is still breaking. The

hard-times champ is gathering to himself a load of roulette while the moons shine. . . .

The casual reader got nothing out of that except some doubtful slang and the glow that comes from knowing that somewhere a hard-luck streak has broken. To a great many people, however, there came a great urge to head for the Twin Moons in the hope that they might see the climax of another dramatic attempt to "break the bank at Monte Carlo."

CULVER sat in the middle of the excitement with his face impassive and emotionless. Across from him sat Dan "Hard-times" Healy who was still riding his streak behind a staggering stack of chips; a middle-aged man whose forehead was lost in a great bald expanse of skull, and whose quizzical gray eyes, level through years of all varieties of hard luck, were level still.

"Twenty-three on the black."

The crowd gasped as 23 came up for the fourth time in fifteen minutes, with Healy pulling in an enormous pile of blues. Healy had been on 23 every time that it had hit and he'd been off it when it missed. There was something uncanny about that to the spectators but Culver was unimpressed; outwardly or inwardly. Things like that happened when a man was hot and they didn't call for a logical explanation any more than did the fact that the ball never stopped in 23 when the man who played it was not hot. Streaks came and went but men didn't change very much. A man was fundamentally lucky or he wasn't. It had taken Dan Healy years to win the nickname of Hardtimes Healy; he wouldn't lose it overnight—nor overcome the effect of those years either.

"Twenty-seven!"

Healy collected a small bet on the red and Paul Berlinger, the big, florid, double-chinned man on his left, cursed bitterly

with no regard for the women in the gallery.

"Seventeen hasn't hit tonight," he complained.

Culver was raking the Berlanger chips off 17. Berlanger was as good an example as Healy for a book on luck. Berlanger was fundamentally lucky and streaks such as he had been having lately didn't change the fact. The man had been born with a diamond-studded gold spoon in his mouth and with a satchel full of good rubber-company stock in each fist. He had set a record for expensive idleness ever since, and he had never cared sufficiently for anyone but himself to be seriously hurt by the march of events.

"I'll take over, Culver."

It was his relief and Dean Culver slid out of his place to permit Larry Dane a spot behind the wheel. Few people noted the change. The wheel kept spinning no matter who the croupier. As he passed the check-girl on his way to the Twin Moons dining-room, Culver picked up his regular copy of the *Star*. It was left for him every night and, like most of the other regulars, he turned to page three and the Blue Barrel. He was reading it with a coolly critical eye when Healy, Paul Berlanger, a couple of hangers-on and three girls passed on the way to the big center table. Healy waved one plump hand.

"Couldn't do business without you, son," he said genially, "Thought it was time to lay off—"

He was past before Culver could answer and Culver didn't try. Nobody else in the party had given him so much as a nod but their voices reached him clearly. None of them was the soft-spoken type. Berlanger had folded back a copy of the *Star*. One of the others had the Blue Barrel already turned up. He showed it to Healy. Healy swore goodnaturedly.

"That 'hard-times' phrase instead of hard-luck is the tip-off," he said. "I'll

have every moocher in town after me for a touch."

"The bird that writes that column is going to be found in an alley some day." The man who had presented the paper looked hard. "You might be maybe annoyed but some guys have been plumb ruined by things he prints."

Healy accepted a menu from the hovering waiter. "Nobody that I could ever worry about was ruined by it," he growled. "Mostly chisellers and muggs and double-crossers and—"

He was interrupted by a roar from Berlanger. "Listen to this! Just listen. I'm going to sue the hell out of this sheet if it's the last thing I ever do."

Sputtering with wrath, the big man stopped all conversation within range of his voice as he read the Blue Barrel's second-to-the-last paragraph aloud.

"The rubber industry has made a lot of millionaires but none of them left any formulas for stretching ordinary money as one of the heirs is finding out. Said heir had better get busy right away, too, on a formula of his own for taking the bounce out of rubber checks . . . too many of his have bounced right out of the banks they were written on . . . and good nature doesn't always stretch, either."

DEAD, stricken silence greeted the reading. One of the hangers-on rubbed his chin and looked at Berlanger furtively. He knew as the others did that Paul Berlanger had inherited the Berlanger balloon fortune which had had the taint of World War profiteering on it before he got it, and that had nothing constructive associated with it since he inherited. The spots has been wondering for years how deep the Berlanger pocket-book actually was.

"Maybe the guy didn't mean you . . ." The hanger-on seemed to realize that that would have been better unsaid. Ber-

langer's narrow eyes glared at him and one ponderous fist hit the table.

"Me? Of course, he can't mean me. That's the poison of it. People who don't know any better will think so. That item is going to hurt me . . ."

Hard-times Healy was looking across the table thoughtfully. "You're just calling attention to it, Paul," he said. "Ignore the damned thing. Let's order—"

Culver had not looked up but he had heard every word and a faint smile curled the corner of his lips. Fatty Berlanger had had his cake. And he'd eaten it. And it was a darned late day for Berlanger to start worrying about his honor or his reputation.

Upstairs in the safe of the Twin Moons there was about five thousand dollars in checks of Berlanger rubber that were guaranteed to bounce out of any bank—and the Twin Moons was only one bright spot in the far-flung night-life lines. It amused Culver to imagine the reaction of Berlanger if the man knew how close he was to the Blue Barrel in person!

It mightn't be very amusing at that.

By the time that Culver had finished his dessert and coffee, gaiety had returned to the big table. Culver didn't look toward it as he rose from his place. It was bound to be gay. Healy had taken nearly thirty grand away from the Twin Moons tonight alone. There were only two places in the city that could stand a tap like that and the Two Moons couldn't stand many more like it.

Dollar Hanlon was standing in the foyer when Culver came out. Hanlon ran the Twin Moons, owned most of it and played the game on the square. He knew a lot about Culver that nobody else knew and he still trusted him; if he suspected more than he knew, he kept his mouth shut.

"Healy's carrying the big kick," he said, "and he's tired. He's not going back to

the big room. He's going to shake those chirpers and go home."

Culver nodded. "You want me to go along."

"Exactly. And listen, Culver—"

"Yes."

"You're hard-shelled and you don't believe in luck. I'm just as hard and I do. It just ain't in the record of a guy like Healy that he should spend big dough. A guy with luck like his always draws kings against aces when it looks like he's doing all right."

"What about it?"

"Just watch yourself! Watch him, too. He's a good guy and, if he wasn't, we got to think of ourselves. Anybody that wins big sugar here has to get home with it."

"They always have." Culver's tone was curt.

Hanlon turned away. "Yeah," he said. "They always have."

Culver lighted a cigarette, looked thoughtfully at the flame and moved toward the phone booths in the alcove. He'd anticipated this job because he'd done others like it but he wasn't going to enjoy himself. Big winners were always escorted home from the Twin Moons and the job often fell to Culver. Dollar Hanlon covered gentlemen with gentlemen rather than with hoods and Dean Culver was a gentleman from away back; he just happened to be a gentleman who was also handy with a gun. He entered the booth and dialed a number. When a girl answered, his voice deepened and he asked for the city editor.

"Randall? Blue Barrel. Get this. I've got the low-down on the Smoky Kendall kill. Run it 'flash' on top of the column like this: 'The poultry racketeer who was fowl-ly murdered in the park the other night did not blink out in a gang feud. He got the curtain call because his play-fellows suspected him of being a see-man for the G-men.'"

Culver hung up and turned away. It was a nice item on a case that was being headlined with bad guesses. He'd got it by listening when he could have been talking. He shook the ash from his cigarette, then stiffened. The door of the other booth banged open and he almost slammed into the big figure that erupted. He cursed his own carelessness for not hearing the man come in and raised his eyes to the other's hot stare.

The man was Paul Berlanger.

For a moment there was something like fear in the big man's eyes; then a look almost of triumph. Culver nodded indifferently as one nods to a casual acquaintance. Berlanger didn't return the nod but Culver felt the man's eyes on his back as he went toward the foyer. He shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

He was no longer playing with the idea of what Berlanger would look like if Berlanger knew that he was the Blue Barrel; he was wondering now IF he knew.

HARD-TIMES Healy was waiting; a blocky man whose well worn topcoat took the edge of elegance off his evening attire. He was smoking a cigar and he was alone. He was generally alone. He'd lost a wife and three sons in four separate accidents and several fortunes in bank failures. His weakness was neither women nor liquor; merely cards and roulette.

"H'areya, boy! All set to lead me by the hand past all the bad, bad wolves?"

Culver grinned. "You made it lots of times without me."

"Never with money. Not out of here." Healy shifted his cigar and looked at his watch. "We'll go in Berlanger's car," he said. "I've got to stop at his place for a minute. Matter of business—"

"No dice." Culver shook his head. "I take the responsibility and I see you right home—my way."

Healy looked at him. "That way, huh."

He shifted the cigar again. "Berlanger will be alone, kid," he said. "I owe him favors. His chauffeur and the servants have the night out. We'll take his car from his place to mine by ourselves. I pretty nearly have to do it that way."

Culver frowned. That servant gag, of course, was Berlanger's. Maybe Healy believed it, maybe not. It was one of the things that made Berlanger a mugg. He'd kept his staff as long as he could—and all of them were trying to collect their salaries while Berlanger continued to play the gay-boy of the hot spots on the proceeds of his no-bank play money. If the big slob had ever done favors for Healy, he'd done them as he did everything else; publicly and with a flourish that would advertise his own great-heartedness. Still—

Healy was chewing the cigar. "It's either that, kid, or I sign a waiver of protection with Hanlon and you don't go."

Culver made up his mind between the two motions of a shrug. "I might come in handy," he said.

Berlanger appeared with a showy blonde draped on his arm. He was patting her hand and he ignored Culver who had started over to the checkroom for his topcoat. There was a white-tie-and-ermine group of late arrivals who had just recognized the notorious Berlanger and were whispering about him. Berlanger changed his course to pass close to them and patted the blonde's hand again.

"Tomorrow at Audrey's," he said. And his voice made no secret of it. Audrey's was a spot where men bought things for women and where the mention of price was as vulgar as the payment of a price was necessary.

"Sorry if I kept you waiting, old chap." Berlanger's voice was full of the old arrogant patronage as he steamed up to Healy. Culver trailed along unnoticed. The car was in a no-parking zone three doors up

the block. Berlanger tore up the ticket that was on it and slid under the wheel.

"Rather an adventure to drive my own car for a change," he drawled. Culver lighted a cigarette. Berlanger had been having that sort of an adventure for over a week. Culver, alone in the back seat of the sedan, did not talk. It was not his business to; he was a human machine again, a man with a blue-barreled gun instead of a man with a little rake.

HE was still a machine when they entered Berlanger's bachelor bungalow behind Berlanger's key, but he dropped the role when Berlanger stopped before the sliding doors that led to his private study off the library and still ignoring Culver's presence, addressed himself directly to Healy.

"We can speak in here *privately*," he said.

Culver stiffened and, ignoring Berlanger as completely as the man had ignored him, held out his hand to Healy. "If I'm still responsible," he said, "you can give me your stake to take care of; if I'm not, you can shake hands and I'll get out of here."

"You mean to insinuate—" Berlanger was aware of him now, bristling.

Healy looked pained. "Hell, boy, I'd trust you with more than that but I'm not going to give it to you for personal reasons. I'd like you to—"

Culver shook hands with him. "Good-night, then," he said.

He was on his heel and headed for the door, cursing himself inwardly as a fool but heading away just the same. He'd had enough of Berlanger and the high hand-shake and the royal razoo. The man had brought Healy out here to make a touch on the strength of past favors and that, of course, was why Healy was hanging on to the poke. Well, let Healy

stomach the big slob; he didn't have to.

Culver was blazing mad inside. Some wary monitor kept warning him that he was not his own man right now; he had taken a job and all that went with it and he was walking out on it for personal reasons. He could hear Dollar Hanlon's gruff voice again.

"You don't believe in luck I do We got ourselves to think about . . ."

The phrases were a ding-dong insistent chorus by the time that he reached the sidewalk and he stopped. The house was dark except for a weak lamp in the hallway and the lights behind the drawn shades of the study. He lit a cigarette, cursed.

"I'll swallow it," he growled. "Healy is a good guy. But I'll wait here. I'd have been on the outside anyway."

He took a half-turn, then flinched instinctively and dropped his right shoulder low. Somewhere in the house a heavy-caliber gun boomed and three sharp banging sounds were all but swallowed up in the echo.

Culver went in, charging. He was conscious of Berlanger's hoarse bellow which had sounded on the heels of the shot and of the fact that the man was calling out now as though for help. The fact that it was Berlanger's voice—and not Healy's—chilled him. After all, there had been a shot.

His worst fears were confirmed. Just inside the door to Berlanger's private study, Dan Healy lay face down. One arm was crumpled under him and the other stretched out, fingers curved talon-fashion, as though, dying, he had striven to crawl toward Berlanger's big desk which was broadside to the open window. Berlanger was making gobbling sounds in his throat and waving his hands, but Culver dropped on one knee beside Healy.

This time the hard-times streak was definitely over.

The bullet had caught him squarely in

the forehead and the eyes were glazed now and hazed with blood. Culver straightened, his body taut.

Berlanger seemed to be finding his voice. One of his waving hands held a gun but he was not pointing it. "Stick-up," he rasped. "Fellow came in the window, took all our money, Healy tried to jump him—"

"Yeah? I'll look at your gun." Culver's lips were a thin line. He had not made a motion toward his own armpit, but his eyes were narrowed and his hands were in the clear. Berlanger sneered and the panic seemed to drop away from him. He presented the weapon butt-first. It was a Smith & Wesson revolver, .38 caliber, and it took only a glance to show that it had not been recently fired.

"Satisfied, wise guy?" Berlanger's thick lips curled. "It hasn't been fired, has it?"

"Maybe it should have been." Culver moved to the window and looked out. The two front windows were closed and he had never been out of sight of them himself. This one opened out on a side porch that was screened by dense vines trained along a wire network except on the side toward the rear of the house. A man could have run that way or a gun could have been thrown that way; but a man would leave tracks and a gun could be found. He didn't know if there were either tracks or gun out there, but that could be found out. He turned back into the room. Berlanger's face was grim, his fleshy jaw hard.

"How did you mean that last crack?"

"The way it fell. You had a gun. If there was another fellow, why did he do all the shooting?"

"I wasn't the gunman hired to protect Dan Healy."

IT was a straight, hard shot. Culver took it without blinking but it hit home. He was in a bad spot. At its best, his

story of his reasons for walking out was bad; but Berlanger's story could not be expected now to substantiate his and Dan Healy couldn't talk. He'd been framed once before by just such a slob as this and his nostrils were sniffing danger. He met it head-on, his stare hard on Berlanger.

"Suppose we let the cops find out if there was another man in this." He moved toward the phone on the desk. Berlanger rested his shoulders against the wall. He had never once shown an interest in the fate of Healy nor in the sprawled body on the floor.

"If there wasn't another man, there'd be a gun," he said. "Suppose you find one, Sherlock."

Something in his tone stopped Culver in the act of reaching for the phone. The man was too sure of that touch about the missing gun, too try-and-prove-it in his general attitude. He'd be different, of course, when the cops came; the "sorrowing friend" probably. Right now he was being himself and Culver knew this man's gambling habits well. Paul Berlanger was a system player, not a player of long shots.

He knew instinctively now that the police would not find a gun. He didn't know why they wouldn't, but he knew.

Dan Healy was on the floor, shot to death. His money, no doubt, was gone. His dear friend, Paul Berlanger, would be grief-stricken and the only witness. There would be no gun and Dean Culver, the man assigned to protect Dan Healy, would have no story that would stand up anywhere. After that, there would be the digging up of skeletons and Culver's old record would dangle before the public.

Berlanger's smile was hard, tight. "The money is gone, too," he said viciously. "Maybe you know something about that. You tried to get your hands on it before—"

Culver grunted. So that was the way that the story shaped! "O.K.," he said grimly. "The gun and money are not in

the room. I'll take your word for that. I won't take your word that a man took them out." He passed up the desk and the telephone, moving once more to the window. He was remembering the banging sounds that had followed almost immediately upon the report of the gun.

He looked out of the window this time with an eye to detail.

The porch was dark and it angled around the front of the building; screened thickly with vines run on wire the whole way. A man who plunged through that window and turned to the right would have crossed the path of Culver inevitably as Culver ran back into the house. Going the other way, he would have run ten yards at least over a cement walk before he could get clear of a hedge fence into the grounds—or continued on another ten yards to a high picket fence.

Culver shook his head, stiffened. His hand had brushed a hook screwed into the wood of the sill; a strong hook of the kind that is used to hang hammocks.

"Seen enough?"

The new note in Berlinger's voice brought him around fast. The man was sneering at him and the gun was no longer being waved around vaguely as an accessory to a lot of gestures. It was pointed squarely now at Culver's belt line. Culver eyed the gun, lifted his eyes to Berlinger.

"That doesn't buy you a thing," he said grimly. "A second kill would just make it twice as hard for you to wiggle out."

BERLANGER chuckled. The triumphant mood of the super-egotist, proud of his own planning, was coming back to him. "What I need," he said bluntly, "is a fugitive to make the tracks that a man with a gun would make. This play-acting has gone far enough. I kept it up only while there was a chance of some yokel being attracted by the shot.

You, my jail-bird friend, are going to be the fugitive. . . ."

Culver's face didn't change expression. He might have been Fortune's hired man still, dealing wealth or disaster from behind a clicking ball, for all of the emotion that he showed. Inwardly, he was rocked. There had been a chance that Berlinger had heard his telephone call and knew him for the Blue Barrel; that had worried him. He had not suspected this. Berlinger's face was like wet plaster with the strain that was on him, but there was a sneer on his lips, a chuckle in his throat.

"Surprised you, didn't I? Well, I've made it my business lately to find out such things about men who handle money—or protect it. You see the spot you're in?"

Culver did see. It was true, of course. He'd done a rap in Illinois. He'd been a crack newspaperman in Chicago until the blow-off in the Lingle murder case gave some big shots the idea that newspapermen could be made fall guys for a lot of things. Culver had been the horrible example and he'd stepped into a frame while chasing crime news; a frame so perfect that his own paper believed it. The jury was a cinch with memories of the Lingle "exposé" still fresh. Culver had taken the rap standing up.

He'd become the Blue Barrel since he came out and a lot of framers, chiselers and double-crossers had bitten the dust. He wouldn't stand a chance with his record, with his present job as employe of a gambling house and with the prestige of the Berlinger name against him. It was almost as neat as the last frame that he'd stepped into. Berlinger held the gun steady.

"All I know," he said, "when the cops come, is that a lone gunman stuck us up and shot Healy, that he took nothing of yours and that you made no effort to either stop him or pursue him. Naturally, after that, I held you for the police. . . ."

Culver shrugged. "I know a box when I see one. What's the out?"

"Now you're talking sense. You just take it on the lam. I'll give you a head start and then call the cops. The rest depends on your luck. Stick around here and you won't have any luck."

Culver almost laughed aloud. It was fantastic that a thing like this could happen to anybody, but experience had taught him that even worse things happened. The weight of a prominent man's testimony against a man with a record was insupportable. Berlangier's associates might know that he was a heel but once he became a state's witness, nobody would be allowed to tell that to a jury.

"I'll take the lam," he said. "It's a better bet."

THE grounds were dark and Culver faded into them like a shadow losing itself in shadow. He did not have his ears cocked for sirens because he did not expect any for a while. He believed that Berlangier would take his time about calling the cops; not because Berlangier would respect his word to Culver but because it would serve his purpose best to delay.

Right now Berlangier would be changing his story; eliminating the accomplice and putting the entire blame for the shooting of Healy upon Culver whose flight proved it. He wouldn't have forced Culver to take the lam if there hadn't been a weakness in the frame-up that he'd hung so neatly around Culver's neck. And Culver wouldn't have taken the lamister as the way out if he hadn't suspected that that weakness existed.

A gun and thirty thousand dollars didn't vanish without a trace in the time that it takes a gunshot echo to die.

Culver was circling back to the house; coming in from the front but hugging the shadows low down and with his eye on the porch. That porch was a regular cage

for a man inside the vines and the wire network that supported them; but it was a ladder to the second floor for a man outside. He'd thought of that.

He moved in on them silently, tested them and went up softly. The porch roof was sloping and a trifle slippery but he clung to it and worked his way to the edge, above the window to Berlangier's study. There was a room directly above the study that opened out on the porch roof and it was closed. Beyond the edge of the roof and on an angle away from the study window was another second-story window that was open.

Culver smiled grimly and measured the distance to the sill from the edge of the porch. It was only a moderate jump for a man in condition but he wasn't worrying about the jump; he was worrying about making the jump to the sill, vaulting into the room and still retaining a hand free for his gun. That couldn't be done.

He moved over to the closed window but, as he suspected, that window was not only closed but locked. Under normal circumstances that wouldn't have worried him a lot; but it was no time or place for jimmy-work now. Any bit of business like that around a murder job could be juggled into evidence and confuse the issue. He went back to the porch edge. He looked at the narrow sill with distaste, shrugged—and took the jump.

His hands took the sill with a sure touch and he went into the room with a vaulting follow-through on his jump momentum. Paul Berlangier spun around from a bent position before a cabinet on the far side of the room and came up with his gun leveled.

Culver's hand moved toward his armpit and stopped. "So what?" he said.

Berlangier was shaken. He gripped the cabinet with one hand to steady himself and he remained in his crouch. His grip on the gun, however, was firm; the grip

of grim determination. When he recognized Culver, the palsey left him. "You!"

There was puzzled wonder struggling with relief in his voice. He drew his body up so that his bulk concealed all except the general contour of the cabinet. Culver was eyeing him coldly.

"Sure, me! You needed a fugitive to put yourself in the clear; I needed a gun to clear myself. It looks like my pot."

"You're crazy."

"Yeah?" Culver eyed the gun in Berlinger's hand. It was the same one that he had looked at before and it was not the murder gun. Still it was a gun in the hand of a man who had committed murder.

"When I saw that hook on the sill and remembered how your family made its money," he said, "I knew how the gun and the money could have gone out of that room. When I climbed up on top of the porch and saw this open window, I knew where they could have gone. When I found you up here I knew I'd found them."

BERLANGER'S finger went white on the trigger and Culver, too far across the room to hope to jump successfully, tensed anyway; then Berlinger laughed. "A pipe dream. You're—"

Culver's eyes narrowed. "And when the cops come," he said, "perhaps you'll let them open that cabinet and look at the big rubber band fastened inside—"

Berlinger didn't shoot. He came across the room like a charging rhino, the gun held forward. Culver didn't draw and he didn't have time to duck before the avalanche was on him. He lashed out twice with his left hand, missed his grab for the menacing gunhand and brought Berlinger to his senses with a ploughing right that landed just above the belt.

The big man reeled back with the gun just out of Culver's reach; his left hand

stabbing. "I'll shoot if you take another step."

There was panting hatred in it and Culver believed him. A man in Berlinger's fix didn't have a lot to lose. Berlinger was backing at an angle away from the cabinet.

"You're right," he said. "The gun's in there. In a bag with the money. It ought to have your fingerprints on it. Take it out."

Culver smiled and moved on the cabinet. It had double doors that opened out and they were hard to open. Once he had one side open, he had to wedge his body against it to keep it open. Strong rubber bands were fastened to each door-half. Inside there was an ingenious cage in which a canvas sack was neatly cradled. Culver saluted the ingenuity of the man who had devised it.

The cage was funnel-shaped and had, obviously, been fitted into the two halves of the cabinet door to keep them open against the pull of the bands. The wide end of the funnel had faced the open window and a long and powerful rubber band had been drawn through the hole in the funnel from a ring in the back of the cabinet. This band had been drawn down to the floor below and fastened to the hook outside the Berlinger study window with a canvas sack on the end of it. It had been ready for the first man with money whom Berlinger could entice into that room.

All that Berlinger had to do was hold Healy up, get his money and shoot him. While Healy's body was falling, he was able to whirl to the window, toss gun and money into the sack—then slide the sack off the hook.

The snap-back of that band had taken it right back to the ring in the back of the cabinet upstairs, and as it slammed through the funnel-like cage, it had taken the device right in with it; permitting the

cabinet doors to close. Who would search for a layout like that?

Culver picked up the sack and held it in his hand. He raised his eyes to Berlanger. "What a fool you'd be," he said softly, "to let me get my hand on a gun even with the drop you've got."

Berlanger hesitated. There were greasy beads of sweat on his white face.

"Let me worry," he said. "Get that gun out!"

Culver let the sack dangle in his right hand and reached with his left. "And what a fool I'd be to fumble in a sack for a gun!"

His right hand snapped with the sudden fury of a tree that snaps back against a let-up in a high wind. Berlanger had been too intent upon one thing and the weighted sack caught him like a sandbag.

There was a thundering boom as his gun spoke, plaster cascaded from the wall and Culver leaped in behind the sack. His own gun jumped into his hand and he clubbed Berlanger's wrist as he charged. The big man's gun thudded against the floor and Berlanger sank after it on one knee. He was holding his wrist with one hand.

"Wait, Culver . . . Wait!" he said. "I'll treat you right. Half the cash if you'll back my story. More when I get on my feet. I was broke, desperate . . ."

Culver's lips curled and he pocketed the gun. With his left hand, he swept the sobbing mass of blubber to its feet and

the fury of the night's upsets went into the swinging right that he threw personally for Hard-times Healy.

As Berlanger folded, the sirens shrieked and Culver's eyes widened. He didn't get it at first and when he did, he laughed unbelievably.

"You were so sure you'd get this evidence out of the way that you even phoned for the cops," he said. "How damned obliging of you."

THEY had Berlanger whining his heart out in the station-house before Culver could get away to a private phone. When he did, he dialed a number wearily, got the city editor and leaned back against the booth. "Blue Barrel," he said. "Kill that rubber-check item and the change-of-luck item for the final. Here's a new flash. Catch it!"

He had a pencil in his hand and he scribbled the words down as he dictated. "Not even the specialized knowledge of a rubber king is sufficient to beat the stretch for murder. The murderer of Hard-times Healy didn't stop to figure. When you steal the luck of a hard-times champion, that luck is sure to be bad."

He snapped the pencil in two as he left the booth. The dawn brigade would be battling the wheel at the Twin Moons and he was going back for a voluntary trick to relax. It would be nice for a few hours to sit around where nobody knew him and nobody gave a damn.

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Murder met Colin Barr on arrival in Graveson—and murder was the last thing he encountered before he packed up to go home. But it wasn't the first kill or the final one that made his visit a twenty-four hour hell. It was the ghastly business in between plus what he learned from—

THE DOPE IN THE DEATH-HOUSE

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He jerked up his gun and fired twice at the thick rope.

CHAPTER ONE

The Man With the Blackthorn Stick

BY THE time the crack train rushed them into the outskirts of Graveson, Colin Barr's nerves were strung tight. Dark, lean, rangy in well

cut blue clothes, two fiery spots high in his youngish, deeply tanned face, he stood braced against the lurching of the state-room. Jet-black eyes stared down at the stork-like Zimmerman, sprawled in the

window-seat, and at the creased telegram beside the gangling operative.

"If Britton Hanley says he's fighting a killer—he is. If he says he needs help desperately—he does. If he says the thing he's up against has to be blocked—then it has to be blocked. There's no argument. Britton Hanley is the salt of the earth. He was my father's lawyer—and his friend. And when my father died, he was a second father to me. I'm not kidding when I say I'd go to hell for that man, Zim—and be glad of the chance."

"All right. All I asked before the cyclone broke was—have you any idea what we're supposed to do when we do get there?"

They both looked at the seat—at the long, curiously imperative telegram.

COLIN BARR,
NO. — BROADWAY,
NEW YORK CITY.

HAVE STUMBLER ON FRAGMENTS OF MURDER SCHEME HERE WHICH MAKE MY BLOOD RUN COLD. SIMPLY MUST BE BLOCKED. REASON TO FEAR LESS THAN FORTY-EIGHT HOURS LEFT TO DISCOVER IDENTITY OF ONE BEHIND IT AND STOP CRIME THAT WILL STUN STATE IF SUCCESSFUL. AM AT END OF MY RESOURCES. IN FOUR WEEKS HAVE FAILED UNCOVER PROOF OF WHAT I KNOW. BELIEVE LOCAL POLICE HAVE BEEN REACHED. AM IN CONSTANT DANGER FROM THEM. NEED HELP DESPERATELY. CAN YOU COME AT ONCE SECRETLY GRAVESTON? REGISTER CADILLAC HOTEL AND WAIT FOR ME TO GET IN TOUCH.
BRITTON HANLEY.

Barr said: "Sure. We're going—under cover—to crack this scheme and turn up the rat behind it—a rat that's apparently got a way to turn police loose on us."

"Hell, that's in the wire."

"Yes, it is. But it's all I know—except

that now there's only thirty-six hours left to dynamite it in. We'll check in at the Cadillac and wait. When he gives us a lead—we'll hit it. Don't go mentioning my name where anyone might hear it."

GRAVESTON, second largest motor city in the Middle West, owns a station built on the side of a hill. The train sheds are higher on the hill than the rotunda and the waiting-room. A series of inclined passages lead down from the track platforms to end in flights of steep steps, which descend into the high-ceilinged, black marble rotunda. Directly across the monster concourse, facing the stairs, a high arch in the wall leads between two huge cigar-and-news counters, into the waiting-room beyond.

Barr came down the ramp to the top of the stairs, leading the bespectacled, gangling Zimmerman and two red-caps. Impatience and caution warred in his eyes, as he sent a sharp glance darting out over the heads of the milling crowd, close-packed around the foot of the stairs. He saw Britton Hanley, beside one of the newsstands in the arch.

Spare, tall, distinguished, erect in gray tweeds, his fine ascetic face turning this way and that, Hanley stood scanning the passersby with bright blue eyes. Though a fringe of silver hair showed beneath the brim of his black hat and he carried a blackthorn stick in his hand, there was no infirmity in the military set of his shoulders, the alert poise of his fine head.

Surprise stopped Barr momentarily on the top step. Then, as he hurried down, he clipped over his shoulder at Zimmerman: "Hanley—he's here—by the newsstand. Tweeds—stick. Something's up."

Plunging into the milling crowd, Zimmerman caromed up to shout in Barr's ear: "What are you going to do? You can't brace him here. Cops'll see you—if no one else. Get the bags in a cab—"

"All right. You bum a match. Get a word in his ear who you are."

Zimmerman nodded, took the lead.

It took a good three minutes fighting to get within twenty yards of the old lawyer. Then there was a sudden opening in the streaming crowd and Hanley spotted them. He started, then his head turned away swiftly, but not before Barr had seen the quick, blazing relief in his eyes. Hanley turned slowly, meaningly, toward the exit, threw one quick look over his shoulder at Barr—and the crowd closed in again.

Barr checked Zimmerman a second to let the old lawyer get ahead of them, started the red-caps for the cab-rank, then they angled through the crowd toward a point that should bring them out close on Hanley's trail. They broke through the edge of the stream, eyes searching ahead. He was not where they had estimated.

Zimmerman found him. He nudged Barr, nodded back along the edge of the newsstand.

Britton Hanley had hardly moved from where he had been standing. He had turned round, was leaning far across the counter of magazines, his stick flat on the rack, one hand propping him, the other out of sight. He was looking in the opposite direction toward the counterman, busy at the far end. They waited.

For thirty seconds neither of them realized that anything had happened. It was not till Britton Hanley's supporting arm suddenly buckled and the old man went flat on his face that awful understanding seized them.

Barr's wild cry was choked. For once his brain went frantic, shock-frozen.

Zimmerman's hasty, "Hey, wait—don't show yourself—" was lost. Barr, livid-faced, tried to tear from the operative's clutching grasp, tried to dive toward the sinking man. Zimmerman spun himself

in front of Barr, smashed him back, drove into his face: "Keep your head, Colin—for God's sake! Stay out of sight, till we see! I'll see!" He heaved the wild-eyed detective backward, turned and clawed his way toward Hanley.

BARR staggered, caught himself, stumbled after. Through a rift in the now suddenly roaring, stampeding crowd, he saw Britton Hanley slide slowly off the news counter. He saw Zimmerman, on his knees, grab the falling man's white head; saw the black hat roll across the stone floor into the crowd. Zimmerman's free hand flew to Hanley's breast. Hanley's head jerked unexpectedly on the operative's arm. He was trying to speak, his patrician face a hell of white pain, his whole body arching. Blood spurted over the hand he had clasped to his stomach. Zimmerman's head was down, his ear to the stiff lips. Then Hanley slumped, and the operative eased the white head down swiftly to the floor.

It was like a knife in Barr's heart. He dived through the fringe of the crowd, his face like dough, tried to drop to his knees, grab the old lawyer's shoulders.

Zimmerman twisted, even as Barr dropped. His crooked elbow hooked suddenly under the detective's chin. He jumped to his feet, literally lifting Barr erect. He glared as though he had never seen him before, yelled, as he drove him staggering backwards: "Back—get back—everybody—give him air!"

Not till he had driven Barr like a wedge, deep into the now thundering, shouting crowd, and they were lost in the press, did the cool-headed operative release his grip on his partner, bark at him with furious intensity: "Are you trying to throw your friend's fight into the ash heap? If we're going to bat for him you've got to get your brain working! He's hurt badly—shot in the stomach.

Take it easy! You're not going to find the gunman in this crowd. Nobody even heard the gun, what with all the racket there is here. If you're going to get him—you've got to turn up what's behind shooting Hanley. And being under cover may be worth plenty. If you don't get out of here fast you'll be spotted by the very cops he was afraid of! Listen—

"He tried to tell me something. He didn't get enough out to make sense but he said, 'My office . . . Senator . . . stop him . . . one o'clock.' He wanted us to stop some Senator doing something at one o'clock, as near as I can guess. I know it isn't much to work with, but you might try his office. There's a chance you'll get a lead there anyway. I'll stick with Hanley to the hospital, and phone you at the Cadillac Hotel about his condition." His teeth clicked as police whistles knifed above the din. "There they are. Don't let them nail you!" He turned and plunged again into the press, shouting authoritatively: "Get a doctor—somebody get a doctor! Police! Man shot here—"

Barr, shaking, livid-faced, hung where he was, fighting the instinct that urged him to Hanley's side.

Pandemonium was loose. A half dozen police whistles were shrilling, bells clanging. Hoarse, angry voices bellowed a way in for white-clad stretcher-carriers, and then bellowed one out as they raced the now still, sheet-covered figure across the waiting-room to an ambulance, the morbid crowd white-faced at their heels.

AT last the ambulance shot away, its bell clanging fainter and fainter—till the roar of the crowd around Barr blotted it out. Now the fog was gone from his brain as he realized he had a possible opening at hand.

Hanley's office! One o'clock! His eyes jumped to a wall-clock. It was five minutes past noon! Could Hanley have

meant *this* one o'clock, coming up now?

He turned swiftly toward the line of cabs, only to halt, jaw clamped, as he realized he could not recall Hanley's address. He flung himself back into the bedlam of the terminal again, in search of a directory. He located a row of phone booths directly across the seething room, and churned into the crowd once more, driving his way toward the booths. He fought his way clear of the crowd finally, into a little backwater of clear space in front of two banks of phone booths. A niche between them held directories.

The thundering terminal seemed not to have quieted any. What seemed the same enormous crowd milled, streamed. Police were sifting through it, asking questions, but it was a perfunctory, routine gesture. From the corner of his eye, Barr saw a tall raw-boned man in brown clothes, with a face the color of walnut-stain and the features of a witch—chin and bony nose almost curving together—barking down at a meek householder. The witch-faced one had his coat turned back to show his shield and a fawn fedora was thumbed back on his bullet-head.

For a second, Barr had the quick fear that he had attracted the detective's attention, and kept his eyes resolutely on the page of the directory that showed Britton Hanley's Vanderveer Street office address. When he risked another glance, the witch-faced officer had drifted away into the crowd.

He turned, strode for a booth, and—

White-hot metal slammed the extreme tip of his left shoulder, half spun him around. His left arm went completely numb and glass exploded in a phone booth behind him. Because no gun sound had topped the station roar, he had staggered up to balance again before he realized that someone had shot him!

Moisture was on his dark forehead as

his hand flashed to his hip; he crouched, glittering eyes whipping a circle, while his brain shouted frantic, split-second warnings. His hand stayed in his pocket as he faced the blank, streaming crowd, most of whom had not even heard the crash of glass—and faced the furious realization that the killer had scored another natural. He was swallowed even now among five hundred people.

From a point in the mob to Barr's left, a nasal, savage voice rapped, "Out o' my way—it's the law!" and Barr's head whipped around to see the witch-faced detective pawing through the crowd.

Fury mottled Barr's forehead with dull red, flattened his thin lips—but he had no choice. To fall into police hands now was disaster. He darted into the crowd, his numb arm a sagging weight, burrowed swiftly toward the exit.

Thoughts ran over the mill-wheel of his mind. Hanley's killer! He suddenly realized that the rat who had shot Hanley from ambush must have been near *him* every minute since—must have guessed his identity—or known it in advance. Barr's teeth were on edge as he understood fully the savagery he was up against—the unhesitating attempt to pile murder on murder, simply because they were afraid he might get in their way.

Or was that the reason? Could they have known, or suspected, that Barr might be sent to Hanley's office now—before one o'clock—before— He galvanized as the further worry hit him—would the police have identified Hanley? Would they, too, be heading for the old lawyer's office?

Racing in a cab toward Vanderveer, he set his teeth grimly, examined his wound as they thundered over rough streets. It was nothing—the bullet had barely ticked his shoulder. He folded a handkerchief inside his coat to absorb the bleeding and feeling started to surge back into his arm.

CHAPTER TWO

Death by Appointment

HANLEY'S address was a modest, ten-story stone building facing the Criminal Courts. The directory in the lobby gave his office number on the sixth floor. An elevator shot Barr up.

As he got off, a young man in expensive clothes, carrying chamois gloves, turned from a side corridor far in the rear of the hall, came toward the elevator. He had a Florida tan, and walked with his head tilted above the horizontal; his blue eyes gave the impression of looking down disdainfully at Barr. He was so arrogantly and blatantly aristocratic that Barr turned to regard him as he stepped into the brilliantly lighted elevator. He was surprised to see beads of moisture on the young man's forehead, stark fear in the corners of his eyes.

But it was not till Barr started down the hall, looking for Hanley's room number, that he got a stab of worry about the other. Hanley's office seemed to be at the rear and Barr walked straight to the corner around which the blond aristocrat had appeared, turned it—and cursed. The only office in the short corridor was Hanley's. By the time he had charged back to the elevator, the car was silent.

It took him four precious minutes to find out exactly nothing. The blond aristocrat had walked out the front door and was gone. No one in the building had seen where he went. No one in the building had seen him before.

Back on the sixth floor again, Barr found Hanley's door locked. It was a simple lock and he picked it easily, entered a tiny, neat, two-room suite. Dust lay thick over everything. There was not a scrap of paper to be found, nor was there any place where papers might be

stored out of sight. It seemed evident that Britton Hanley had not used this office in weeks. Barr left in disgust and when his cab got away from the curb in front, it was not more than half a block ahead of a sirening police cruiser that swung in and stopped before the building door.

When he reached the Cadillac he was clutching at straws. He scribbled across the register, "*Frank Zimmerman and Colin Barr, New York,*" in a hand no one could misread. One look was enough to size up the effeminate, blond clerk. Barr's black eyes bored into his light blue ones. "I'm the detective from New York. Maybe you've heard of me?"

The clerk lied hastily, "Oh, yes, indeed," but Barr had caught the eager light in the youth's eyes, quickly veiled. He was satisfied that the news of his arrival would spread—to any ears that were interested.

His phone was ringing as he followed bell-boys and baggage into his room. He flung them money, closed them out, and snatched off the receiver.

Zimmerman's voice was low, muted. "Colin?"

"Yes. How—how is he?"

"He's making a fight for it. He's delirious. I think he's trying to tell me something—but his vocal cord was hurt by the bullet. We don't know what'll happen yet. But listen—get a pencil and paper."

At Barr's hasty, "Ready," Zimmerman went on.

"I found this telegram balled up in his hand. He didn't have a scrap on him otherwise. I think this is important. He must have received it last night, just about an hour before he sent the one to you."

Barr's pencil began to make words, as Zimmerman dictated them, and absorbed, excited light began to grow in his eyes.

WINSTEAD, —, OCT. 2

B. HANLEY, ESQ.
707 FLACK BLDG.

GRAVESTON, —

NORMAN HAPP, RECENTLY ADJOINING CELL FRANK AIDO, RELEASED ON PARDON HERE FIVE O'CLOCK THIS AFTERNOON. WIRED SENATOR YOUR CITY APPOINTMENT ONE O'CLOCK TOMORROW.

CURTIS VEALE.

Barr burst out: "That must be what he wanted stopped at one o'clock! The appointment between this ex-convict and the senator."

"Yeah. Does that fit—did you get anything at his office?"

"Nothing—except a very grandiose blond kid of twenty-six or -seven was there ahead of me. And I'm not under cover any more—apparently."

"Hell! You mean the cops—"

"No. The pups we're after. They tried to cut me down, too—before I left the station. I can't talk now, Zim. It's twenty-five to one. If I'm going to—"

"O.K. You can call me here—I've greased it. Get Miss Higgins, ninth floor, and she'll handle it. Will you be at the hotel—"

"I don't know. Keep in touch here anyhow."

It took a matter of five minutes to get a call through to Winstead, to the local office of the phone company there, and learn, to his amazement, that Veale was the head guard in the death-house of Winstead Prison.

As the elevator whisked him down again, Barr's eyes were divided between his watch and the address he had copied down from the telegram—the address at which the Winstead guard had wired Hanley the night before—707 Flack Building.

He stopped at the desk, asked the effeminate clerk: "You don't happen to

know where the Flack Building is?"

"Why, yes, I do. It's practically across the street. Two doors that way—on the other side."

THE Flack Building was an ancient, sagging, brick structure, square as a box, with a gray arch in its center, at street level. Steps under this arch led up to a musty gray lobby, almost devoid of light. There was one caged elevator. Hanley's name did not appear on the directory in the lobby.

A rattling lift took two minutes to wheeze Barr up to the top floor. When he had threaded the dark wooden hall—old and crumbling, and creaky—to the door that carried 707, he told himself that this must be a secret office. There was no other lettering on the frosted glass upper panel of the door. It opened under his hand.

A breathtakingly pretty, small, dark girl sat at a typewriter desk, just inside the wooden railing that walled off the benches for waiting callers. Her velvety skin was pale under faint rouge, and her deep blue eyes held a queer mixture of attempted impersonality, and sheer fright. Her dark hair, done simply, gave her face a heart shape; dark lashes starred her eyes, and knitted blue dress deepened their color. One tiny hand was on the desk in front of her, covered by a blue crocheted hat, but the hat had slipped a little to one side, and Barr realized that he was covered by a small automatic pistol.

Her young, dainty loveliness stopped him dead for a second. Crimson swept over her face under his direct, burning stare. He came out of it, finally, to ask: "You're Mr. Hanley's secretary?"

"Yes. What—what do you wish?"

Barr's jaw was grim. "Mr. Hanley has been shot—murdered."

Her face went white, and the back of

her hand flew to her mouth to smother the frightened cry. She jumped to her feet, her eyes blank with terror, dropping the hat. The gun was in full view, out at arm's length, the muzzle shaking.

"Stay there! Don't move!" she cried out.

"Take it easy," Barr said. "I'm a friend. I'm Barr, from New York."

It didn't register. Carefully, with the tips of his fingers, he took the identification folder and Hanley's wire from his coat pocket, tossed them on the desk. "Look at them—quickly. I've a job to do for him—at one o'clock. I need information—his papers—whatever you can tell me—and I need them in a hurry! If you want to do something for Mr. Hanley—give me some help!"

Her desperate eyes went to the folder, the wire, came back to him. The gun muzzle wavered. "I—"

Barr came through the gate. "What case was he working on?"

"I—I don't know. I've only been here three weeks—he didn't tell me. He was afraid of someone. He gave me this gun to— He said always to be ready to shoot—that no one would come in unless—"

"Where are his papers?"

She gave a little sob, ran ahead of him, and opened the door to the private office. "He—he kept the filing-cabinet in there! And the safe. . . !"

Barr's quick black eyes roamed the office—bare, musty, its window opening on a court. It contained a scratched flat-topped desk, with a swivel chair, one wooden armchair. Across the desk, against the far wall, was a steel filing-cabinet, in the corner, a floor-safe—

He tried the filing-cabinet, found it locked, swung back and went at the desk. The drawers looked as though they had never been used. He had barely begun when he knew nothing would be found in it. He shot at her quickly: "You must know something! Listen: Mr. Hanley got a wire last night, from a guard in the

death-house at the Winstead Prison. The wire said a Norman Happ had a one-o'clock appointment with some senator here. Norman Happ was a cell neighbor of a man called Frank Aido. It's a fair guess that this Happ is bringing the senator a message from Frank Aido.

"Mr. Hanley brought me here to help him fight some criminal scheme. All I know is that it's sensational, a big one. They've already tried to kill me as well as Mr. Hanley. I've got less than thirty hours before it comes to a head; it's got to be stopped before then. I'm pounding blindly at it now. But if I can locate this Happ, or this senator, and break up their meeting, I think I can at least find out what it's all about. Some of those names must mean something to you!"

She swallowed, shook her head.

Prying an instrument into the filing-cabinet, Barr's memory jolted him. "Did a very snooty blond lad—about twenty-six or -seven—rich, to look at—did he ever come here?"

Her voice was barely audible. "N-no."

Desperate, Barr tried: "Veale—Curtis Veale. Did you ever hear that name? He was the guard at the death—"

Her gasp was excited. "Yes! Yes! I think there's a copy of a letter to him—out there!"

She ran out and he heard drawers being jerked open. He snapped the lock of the filing-cabinet, pulled out the top drawer. It was half full of papers. Hope jerked into his dark eyes. He started through them, page by page—

In four precious minutes, he was halfway through the two dozen cardboard files—and the hope was dead. He was looking at records of old, dead cases that Hanley had handled. He flipped the rest of the file headings under his thumb—and caught his breath. The last file was labeled, *Frank Aido*—and it was empty, cleaned out.

Frank Aido had been, then, a client of Britton Hanley! That fact ought to mean something—even though the file was bare! If he could find out why Aido was in the death-house—

He swung to the door of the safe, new hope glowing in his eyes. But the box was a modern steel product—it would take a cracksman to open it.

He called the girl—and swift lines slashed his smooth forehead. He jumped to the connecting door. The outer office was empty. Hat, gun and girl had vanished!

Barr vaulted the wooden railing, whipped open the hall door only to meet complete silence. Four long, noiseless strides took him to the head of the marble-treaded stairs. He went halfway down the almost totally dark flight, as swiftly and silently as a cat, ears strained for footfalls below. He realized now she had had plenty of time to escape while he was searching the files. He had fallen like a sap for a clever act and . . .

Movement in the hall below, pulled his eyes from the stair-well.

A MAN stood halfway down the hall before the opened door of an office, looking slowly in a puzzled fashion up and down the hall. He was a portly, impressive man, in an old-fashioned Prince Albert coat—grandiose, ruddy-faced in the light that streamed from the opened office door behind him. His eyes were small, roguish blue, under heavy, coal-black eyebrows, and his large head was a magnificent flowing mane of snow-white hair. As Barr pulled back into the black shadow of the flight on which he stood, the stately, white-haired man took a heavy gold watch from his pocket, looked at it, pursed his lips, and went slowly back into the office.

A queer hunch held Barr, swept the girl from his mind. The door closed and

something hot sprang alive inside him. The gold lettering on the ground-glass half of the door was in graceful old English script. It read—*Senator W. R. Mays*. Barr's eyes jumped to his watch. The luminous hands pointed to exactly one o'clock.

The senator! Whatever crazy route had put Barr here—he was at the senator's office at one o'clock. And—there was no misreading the portly, white-haired man's impatient movements. He was awaiting someone's arrival. Whatever it was worth, Barr was in time to intercept the ex-death-house convict, Norman Happ, before he reached the senator.

Barr came silently on down the stairs, his dark, youngish face a grim mask. At the bottom he stood silent. The last three steps of the stairs curved round to avoid creating a cul-de-sac. Slowly, Barr bent his knees, eased himself down on one hand, till he sat on the third step, his feet on the hall floor. He took out his gun unhurriedly, held it in his lap—and waited.

There was the door of an office in the front wall of the hall, its doorknob well within his reach, but the room seemed completely dark; no light showed through its ground-glass panel and there was no lettering on its face. He had no fear that anyone would emerge from it and discover him.

The slim, dainty young girl who had escaped him, was in his mind, but thought of her clogged his brain, confused him. He drove the riddle of the girl aside, filed her mentally for later consideration. Now— Suddenly he smelled blood!

For a second, he thought his senses were tricking him but there was no mistaking it—that sweetish, sickening odor of freshly spilled human blood. It shot him to his feet like a stab in the back, eyes jerking around at the stairs, the floors. And he saw it!

From under the door of the office beside which he had been sitting calmly, blood ran in a small trickle. The broken, out-of-plumb boards of the hall made a small, neat furrow, into which the shiny, dark liquid seeped.

BARR'S hand whipped for the door-knob. He checked himself before he touched it, bent swiftly and put his ear against the glass. Something like a low murmur vibrated inside, but he could not identify it. Then his eyes picked out the tiny, broken corner of the ground-glass panel, where a bit of glass no larger than a five-cent piece was missing from the pane. He stepped over the blood, bent to the tiny hole—and the vein on his forehead was suddenly a whipcord.

A man's voice, muffled, almost to a whisper—but a nasal voice, with a suggestion of hair-lip in it—was talking swiftly. “. . . blind luck. I was getting out of a cab when I see this Norman Happ heading here, so I come up and waited for him. Sure—he's sitting here looking me in the eye—but he ain't listening to me. . . . What?”

There was a long silence. Barr, crouched outside, felt hot and cold waves go over him. He slid the safety catch off the gun in his hand. Norman Happ! Norman Happ was inside and—

The voice came again, grimly, tartly. “Butcher? All right. I'm a butcher. . . . Sure I'll do what you tell me—when you're here to tell me. You're the boss, sure—nobody's arguing. Only—with a million dollars—more maybe—in sight, and the blow-off practically here, I'm taking no chances. If that stir-bird had of got to the senator, there's no telling what . . . Like hell. Mays never played straight with nobody in his life! He'd cross us up like that! . . . Tell them? Why should I tell my own squad anything? . . . Sure they're on the way here now. I

phoned headquarters just before I called you . . . Nuts, my report reads I got a tip from a stool-pigeon and came up here and found him with the knife stickin' in him. . . ."

Far away, just barely audible to Barr where he crouched in the dark hall, sounded the thin wail of a police siren. His spine snapped as he came erect. Horror, shock, alarm, had hit his churning mind so fast that for a moment he was frozen. Norman Happ was dead—killed. He lay behind that door—a few feet from Barr—with a knife sticking in him. Intercepted and knifed—before he could reach the senator with his message from Frank Aido.

Barr had missed him by minutes! But the murderer hadn't—the murderer that sat inside this office now, gloating over his kill, congratulating himself and his chief that they had cut down the convict before he could relay information that might have caused the senator to double-cross that same killer and his chief! Most startling of all was the indisputable fact that the killer beyond that door was a police officer—and from the way he had spoken of his squad—a ranking officer. No wonder Hanley had called the police a danger!

CHAPTER THREE

Gentleman of the Press

THE police siren sounded again and Barr's teeth clenched as he fought away the mad urge to drive in, grab the knifer—copper or no copper—and beat the truth from him. He could hardly assimilate the dizzy whirl of happenings that had put him, unknowingly, on the brink of smashing the whole evil mess—only to whisk the opportunity away before he was even conscious of it—and leave him trapped between this renegade, mur-

dering copper, and the squad that was closing off his escape. Flight was the only answer now. Barr turned—and ran.

The lobby was empty when he shot down the last flight of marble stairs, and he hit the street while the wailing police cars were still out of sight. Already, people were being attracted by the sirens; Barr mixed with them.

By the time the first of three police cruisers had squealed to a halt beside the curb, the crowd was dense enough for Barr to get across the street unnoticed. He slipped back into the hotel lobby as the grim black morgue wagon came trundling along.

He burst into his room, dragged open a bag and clawed out a pair of opera glasses. With every blind pulled down, except one facing the street which he left open a few inches at the bottom, he knelt, watching the excitement opposite.

It was three quarters of an hour before the routine array of experts and specialists had entered the building, done whatever they had to do, and left. The body came out in its wicker basket. Two of the police cruisers drove away. The crowd began to disperse.

It was practically gone, fifteen minutes later, when the last knot of uniformed men appeared in the doorway. It was then that the wild suspicion which had been aroused in Barr by the voice of the killer in the death room as he spoke over the phone, became a certainty.

Three uniformed men came through the gray arch, stopped, turned back, obviously listening to someone who still stood under the shadow of the arch. Finally, they saluted, marched toward the last police car.

Swaggering leisurely in their wake, emerged a tall, bony man in brown clothes, and fawn fedora, smoking a cigar. He was the witch-faced detective that Barr had seen in the railroad station!

When the cruiser moved away Barr sprang to his feet, no doubt in his mind that the witch-faced detective was the butcher who had murdered Norman Happ. And he was also, almost beyond all possibility of doubt, the cowardly bushwhacker who had shot Britton Hanley from the ambush of the crowd—and followed that with the attempt on Barr!

What next? Barr stood there motionless, trying to decide where to turn. Frank Aido? What information could a death-house convict hold that could disrupt a scheme that—according to what the killer had intimated—meant millions!

Barr lifted the phone receiver, asked where Winstead Prison was, and was informed that it was fifty miles due north, on the highway. He hung up, snatched up his hat—and knuckles rapped at his door—beating out a playful drum-roll.

Barr jerked the gun from his hip. He threw his hat back on the bed, stepped to the door, keeping to one side. "Who is it?"

"The Press," a whisky voice said. "The good old Press!"

Lines slashed Barr's forehead. He opened the door a crack—then opened it wide.

THE man who stood in the hall was a grotesque spectacle. Tubby, blond, he had the face of a dissipated angel. His apple cheeks shone; his droll eyes were merry, red-rimmed, owlsh. His baggy suit approximated gray, had no shape; a two-inch strip of soiled shirt showed between his vest and trousers; a sweat-stained fedora clung by a miracle to the back of his untidy blond hair. He hung thumbs in his vest pockets, sneezed, and said: "Do you know Charlie Plummer of the *A. P.* in New York?"

Carr blinked. "He's a very good friend. Why?"

One chubby, grimy hand turned up-

ward, opened to display a folded sheet of flimsy. Barr took it and read—

LOUNSBURY, GX

IF COLIN BARR IS IN YOUR TOWN
STRING WITH HIM. NOT ONLY
NEWS BUT HE'S A PAL. ANYTHING
YOU CAN DO FOR HIM WILL BE
APPRECIATED BY YOURS TRULY.

CHARLIE PLUMMER

It was a private telegraph blank—the kind used for intercity wires between offices of the *Amalgamated Press*.

"You're Lounsbury?"

"In the flesh. Futhermore"—he jabbed a finger into the air three times—"furthermore, the recognized authority on the buried treasure of Frankie Aido! I may say, without exaggeration, that I am considered standard equipment by all you buzzards—excuse it, please—by all you investigators. See me—and you don't need to see anyone else."

Barr swallowed hastily. "I—well, come in and have a drink, at any rate." And when Lounsbury was on his spine in the wing chair, nursing the whisky bottle, "I think you've got a bum steer. What makes you think I'm interested in this Frank Aido?"

Lounsbury's young-old face grimaced. "*Tsk! Tsk!* Mustn't fib to Father Lounsbury! You—by actual count—are the thirty-seventh private gumshoe to visit these shores since the wop killed our favorite millionaire motor magnate and playboy, W. R. Ducharme, looking for the vanished hundred thousand berries."

There was no acting to Barr's bewildered look. For a second, his head swam with wonder as to whether this death-storm he was mixed in was aimed at no more than a hundred thousand dollars—but only for a second. The killer's words, in the office across the street recurred to him. "A million dollars—maybe more—in sight . . ."

He asked curiously: "Who told you I was here for that?"

Lounsbury eyed him reproachfully. "Come, come, my frand. I know you're here for that, without being told. As for knowing you were here at all, our local radio station has a half hour of gossip every day. They announced your arrival, as though you were the King of England, on today's broadcast. I suspect the fine Italian hand of Mary, the room clerk—" He shrugged. "I—excuse it, please—in my ignorance, not having heard your august name, wired N. Y. to find out who you were, and—hence the pyramids."

Barr said: "I give you my word, I didn't come here to look for any buried treasure of any Frank Aido. I didn't even know who Frank Aido was."

"He's the wop that killed Ducharme. He's frying for it tomorrow night." Lounsbury flushed. "I'm not swallowing this gag, understand, about you not knowing. Ducharme's death made national headlines—"

"I remember reading about it, vaguely," Barr said, "but I never heard his killer's name."

"Then what are you here for?"

"Don't ask me that. I don't want to lie to you. If I click, I may have an interesting bit, and I give you my word, you'll get it first, but I can't talk now. Go on telling me about this Frank Aido."

Lounsbury's shrewd, bibulous eyes searched Barr's face for ten seconds. "I'm damned if I get this, but I'll pretend I believe you." He got a sheaf of clippings from his pocket, thumbed out a long, square, four-column spread. "This poem in prose tells all—or nearly all. Written, I might add, by a master of his craft—Emmanuel T. Lounsbury."

Barr's eyes ate it up.

W. R. DUCHARME, stormy petrel of the motor industry, world-famous stock-market plunger, mechanical

genius, and playboy, had been, up till four months ago, spending a year in retirement at his home in Graveston.

On June the second, at noon, he had drawn from his bank a hundred thousand dollars in cash. At eleven o'clock that night, Ducharme, who had been to a night-club, alone, arrived at his home and dismissed his servants for the night—Just before leaving, the butler had seen Ducharme take the hundred thousand dollars from a brief-case and place it in the wall-safe.

Almost exactly at midnight, the Protective Agency Patrol had received an alarm, rung by the smashing of a window at the Ducharme house, and their prowler car had reached the spot within minutes. The patrol had arrived in time to see Frank Aido burst from the French windows of the library, in the corner of the house, and run across the lawn.

It was an open lawn, with no chance for concealment. The agency men ordered him to stop. Aido's gun went off, but when they reached him, it appeared that he had shot himself. There was no sign of the money, and the terrain was such that it was utterly impossible that he could have contacted a confederate between the time he left the library and his capture.

Aido, when he recovered from the self-inflicted wound in his head confessed that, acting on an underworld tip, source undisclosed, he had gone to Ducharme's house, to steal the hundred thousand dollars, arriving at a few minutes after eleven. Seeing the light in the library, and not knowing the exact location of the money, he had knelt there, waiting, watching Ducharme inside.

Finally, Ducharme accommodatingly went to the wall-safe and removed the money, laid it on the table. Aido then, he had confessed, burst in the window and covered Ducharme. But the million-

aire had elected to fight. Aido had shot him, but the shot had not stopped him. They grappled, and eventually Aido shot Ducharme four times more, in the head and chest, then snatched up the money and ran out. But the delay caused by the scuffle had undone him, and he ran almost into the arms of the agency patrol. Aido, queerly, insisted that he had shot himself by accident.

Of the money, which he admitted having in his hand as he left the library, there was no sign. Aido claimed that the head wound he suffered had driven recollection of what he had done with it, from his memory. No subsequent search had unearthed it.

The strange part was that, from the moment he was arrested and made his confession, with the short exception of a few words confirming his confession to the representative of the *A. P.*, Aido had steadfastly refused to see or talk with anyone—not even the lawyer appointed for him by the court. He had remained mum in jail, in court, and in the death-house after his conviction. He had flatly refused any and all visitors. He was apparently utterly uninterested in any hopes of rescue from his sentence.

An attempt, on the basis of this, to have him declared insane, had been made. It failed. On the night of the murder, Aido had visited a night-club which he frequented, and been seen by, and talked to, employees of the place—one Giuseppe Palerno, a waiter of 42 Cadieux St., and one Jane Driscoll, an entertainer, of 465 Elm. Both these persons declared that, at ten o'clock—within an hour of the time Aido reached Ducharme's house—he appeared perfectly sane and normal.

That was the crime for which Frank Aido had been convicted.

BARR laid the clipping on the table, his blood pounding. How could any-

one read the printed account without being literally smacked in the face with the few thunderingly important items in the mass of chaff?

Frank Aido had reached the millionaire's house at eleven o'clock. Yet he had not burst into the library till nearly twelve. Why? What had he seen that held him there—crouched outside the French windows—for three quarters of an hour? Had he seen or heard something that had now become the very heart of this frantic murder scheme? Why had he shot himself in the head—and then tried to pass it off as an accident? And why had the Italian suddenly become mum—and kept mum—practically from the moment of his arrest till now?

Had Britton Hanley—the old lawyer appointed by the court for Frank Aido—learned the answers to these questions? Had Aido—in spite of appearances—managed to communicate his secret to the murderous crew that Hanley was fighting? Or—what was more probable—did the unknown chief—the man for whom the witch-faced, murdering detective and the senator were working, know the secret? Did he know that it must, at all costs, be smothered by murder, jealously guarded until . . . Until what?

That Frank Aido held a secret—the heart of everything—seemed nearly certain. That the murderous scheme of the trio Barr had unearthed—the witch-faced detective, the senator, and their chief—had something to do with this secret, also seemed inevitable—but what? And Hanley had said they must be stopped before some smashing culmination of their scheme could take place! Stopped—it seemed indicated—sometime between now and the hour when Aido would burn.

If only Aido would talk to him, Barr thought. But Aido would not talk to anybody—would not even see anybody! And he was in the one place in the world

where he could keep himself successfully hidden away from visitors if he so elected—in the death-house.

Suddenly aware of the solemn, owlish stare of the woozy reporter, Barr grabbed desperately at the opportunity to learn what he could from Lounsbury. The newshound would certainly know the witch-faced detective's name—might be able to give him information about the senator. Yet long experience with newspapermen warned Barr against betraying his true interest. He tried to think of a conversational gambit.

"Very interesting," he said, folding the clipping.

"That's not all of it," Lounsbury said. "Frank Aido's lawyer—an old gent named Hanley—was shot down this morning. The governor of the state—Munroe—came to town at noon today, to hear Hanley's last appeals for commutation and such. It looks as though maybe somebody didn't want to give the wop even that chance—though between you and me he hadn't any. He was guilty—and everybody knew he was guilty. I saw him at the trial. All he gave me was, 'I did it and I'm going to burn. Leave me alone.' Furthermore—a convict named Norman Happ was knifed across the road from you not two hours ago. This Happ had the next cell to Aido in stir and there's something damned queer about *that*. Especially, about the place where they found him."

Barr nodded. "I got caught in the crowd just as the law arrived. Some copper that looked like a witch took a pass at me."

"That's Umble—lieutenant on the headquarters squad—one mean cop. You—uh—you don't get much of a break from the cops in this town, Barr, unless you're in right, if you know what I mean."

"I smelled as much. You were saying

about where they found this Happ—"

"Yeah. Well, they found him in a vacant office, just a few doors from the sanctum of one of our prize products—Senator W. R. Mays. Only he isn't a senator. He was—years back—and he's hung onto the title like glue. Years ago Mays was a power in this state in politics. He had a big organization—swung half the state. Today he ranks nowhere, comparatively. Do you know why? Because the guy is a congenital double-crosser. His organization just drifted away—as fast as they could get out from under. It got so even his best friends wouldn't ask him the time of day. You'd think crossing his friends was a religion with him or something. Anyhow, this Norman Happ was found cold, right near his office, and if you want to know what I think—I think this Norman Happ came from Frank Aido with a message to the sen—"

The phone by the bedside pealed shrilly.

BARR'S heart skipped a beat. Zimmerman, of course. Did it mean Britton Hanley had gone under? He reached for the phone, answered, tight-jawed.

A resonant, orotund voice said smoothly: "Mr. Barr? Mr. Colin Barr?"

"Yes."

"This"—the voice cleared its throat—"this is Senator W. R. Mays."

Something went off inside Barr's chest, sent his pulse leaping. "Yes," was all he dared say.

"I have just—uh—heard of your presence here, Mr. Barr. I—may I ask you a question? Does the investigation which brought you to Graveston—for I presume you are here—for some such purpose—does it—would it permit you to—ah—engage in other work? . . . Wait—let me finish. It so happens that I need the services of a man like yourself—for a very short time this evening. All told, it should not be a matter of more than three hours. I—to be frank with

you—hearing of you was like a providential thing. I—for certain reasons, I cannot enlist local aid, and—well—in short, for your services for the length of time mentioned, I am ready and willing to pay a thousand dollars—if it is possible to interest you.”

It was like a bolt from the blue. But Barr choked over putting his head into such a suicidal trap as this seemed to be. “Why me?” he stalled.

“I—when I heard of you—I took pains to look up your record, Mr. Barr—the Overholdt kidnaping, the Foster-Vogel murder, and so forth. I shall consider myself very fortunate if you will say yes to my offer.”

“When is all this?” Barr asked.

“Ah—at—well, if you could come to my house at five o’clock?” There was a faint, uncontrollable eagerness in the voice. “I—the matter will involve a motor journey of some length—and a meeting. I—to be frank, I wish a bodyguard.”

For just a second longer, Barr hesitated. If he had a single other promising lead—but he hadn’t. “All right,” he said.

“And will you come secretly?” The words came swiftly, anxiously. “It—it is absolutely vital that no one know. In fact, someone may be watching my house.”

“Sure,” Barr said. “I understand.”

He hung up, to meet Lounsbury’s scowl. He looked at his watch; it was quarter to four. “Was there any more about this Frank Aido?” Barr asked.

“No. I thought you weren’t interested anyway.”

“I’m always interested in a hundred thousand dollars.”

“Was that call the business you’re here on?”

“Yes and no,” Barr said. “Don’t crowd me. My promise goes—if I click, you get in first. Where can I reach you?”

“This is the bum’s rush, huh?”

“Don’t be like that. I’ve got to do my work, same as anybody else.”

Lounsbury scribbled a phone number on a card. “I’m supposed to be covering the governor’s doings, till he leaves. I was on his campaign trip with him and we’re pals. If I’m hanging around his entourage, you can get me at this number. Otherwise, the *A. P.* office can probably tell you where I am. I’m counting on your promise.”

“You can,” Barr said, and let him out.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blue Alibi

THE phone book, plus a street map of the city, told Barr that the senator’s residence was a good half-hour trip. He let the window-shades up, locked his bag and stepped out into the hall. Barr’s room was in the front left-hand corner of the ancient hotel. Strictly speaking, the elevators were directly behind him, but he had to walk through corridors, around three sides of an oblong bank of rooms, to reach them.

He had gone the length of the corridor on which his own room opened, turned right along the short side of the oblong, and was within a yard of turning again to the right, toward the elevators, when he heard a low, harsh voice mention his own room number, questioningly, and a thin, nervous voice repeat it, in confirmation. The thin, nervous voice said in a pleading undertone: “Can’t you wait till he leaves the building, boys—please!”

Barr’s hand flew up to check himself against the very corner he had been about to turn. He flung a swift look around him. The hotel was the type that does not have a private bath with each room and one of the half dozen or so hall bathrooms was within five yards of him. He made absolutely no sound, as he dived into it.

He could feel, rather than hear, men's feet on the corridor rug, passing the door. After he had given them sufficient time to turn the next corner—he eased silently out again. They had evidently already knocked on his door. There was a long moment's silence. Then an ominous voice said dully: "Come out, Barr—"

The thin, nervous undertone cut him off. "Please, boys—I'll open the door—please don't make any disturbance!"

A key rattled in a lock. Barr heard a door open. After a moment, the husky voice said: "I thought you said he was here."

The thin voice said hastily: "The clerk said so. He's been popping in and out ever since he registered. But now you can wait outside and get him when—"

"Nuts! What sort of a house dick are you, anyhow? You can beat it, now—we'll handle it."

The nervous voice pleaded desperately: "Boys—have a heart. The manager raised hell last time you guys made a pinch here. He don't understand—he says I'm responsible. Listen—I'll get Barr when he comes in—I'll take him to headquar—"

"I bet you would!" the harsh voice said grimly. "He'd chew your head off. Besides, the lieutenant don't want him at headquarters. That's why he called the precinct house and got us sent over."

"Why?"

"Tough guys usually talk a little more in a precinct house. At headquarters, you never know who's going to interrupt."

"What's he done?"

"Murder! He knifed a guy—right across the street!"

The nervous voice said incredulously: "My God! Have you got the goods on him—on the level?"

"We got enough," the tough voice said carelessly. "Enough to go with a confession. Now go on down to the lobby and watch for this bird. We'll take a plant

here. Make it snappy—and give us a tip-off when he—"

Barr was around the corner and heard no more. His long legs, noiseless on the thick carpet, scissored him at a sprint, toward the elevators. He did not wait for a car, however. The staircase yawned just before he reached the elevator bank, and he swung down, three steps at a time, raced the four flights downward. Evidently, they had made no arrangements to have anyone waiting below. He stepped out into the lobby, forced himself to a casual saunter—and made the street, walked swiftly away.

So the witch-faced Lieutenant Umble had put police machinery in motion to get him! They had been afraid that he would not fall for the crude trap—the senator's alleged need for a bodyguard. Whether they could frame him for the murder of Norman Happ was a question. That they could arrest him, and hold him, was beyond a doubt. He had no alibi—no shadow of one—and the elevator operator in the Flack Building would identify him as having ridden up in the lift—and then vanished. Not convicting evidence, but Umble was not out after convicting evidence. Even if we were taken alive—not killed "resisting arrest"—there was the back-room of the precinct house to face and Barr had no illusions as to what would happen to him if they once got him there. . . .

He reached the place he had been heading for, the offices of the U-Drive-It Car-renting Agency. Even as he asked himself what he was to do now, he knew there was only one answer. His time was short. That the alarm for him would be broadcasted yet, he doubted, but it could only be a matter of an hour or two till every policeman on the force would be his potential killer. He had no alternative but to go on with the senator's "job." If they had not expected him to fall for it—if they had not expected him

to show up, there was a faint chance that his boldly doing so might throw them off stride. It was a feeble chance, but he had to take it.

BARR'S watch showed four minutes to five, as he parked his rented car before a billboard, two blocks from the senator's charming, ivy-covered, lawn-bordered old house, in the exclusive Graveston suburb. It was exactly five when he swung over the fence from the alley that bordered the rear of the senator's grounds, to find himself within a few paces of the garage.

He found the little back door to the garage, slipped inside—and a dim form rose from a chair in the gloom within—a butler, in livery, knocking out a pipe. Barr's throat tightened. The butler's voice was respectful, that of a well trained servant and nothing more, as he said: "There is a covered passage into the house, sir. Senator Mays would like to see you in the library a moment before leaving."

As Barr and the butler appeared noiselessly in the doorway, the stout, white-haired client was bent over a library table, his back to the door. He whirled suddenly and stepped sideways to hide two identical yellow pigskin wallets that lay on the table. His ruddy face was a little drawn, and his bright eyes had frightened shadows deep within them, but his voice was calm, dignified as he dismissed the butler.

"Startled me for a moment," he told Barr. "I'm mighty glad to meet you—mighty glad I'm going to have you with me, Mr. Barr. We—we have none too much time. You'll excuse me if I overlook the conventional formalities and plunge straight to business, I'm sure." He turned his back momentarily, jerked open the table drawer and took out a map. "Just come around here a moment, will you?"

Barr stepped beside him. The wallets

were gone from the table and the map spread out.

"Our objective," said the senator, "is here. This road"—he ran a plump finger straight through the heart of Graveston, and to a point beyond the city limits—"is the highway. We are only a few blocks from it. We follow it out of town—to *there*. At that point—not marked on this map because it is abandoned now—is a road. It once led to marble quarries, some six or seven miles back in this wooded country. It is very hilly, naturally, and this one road is the only means of entry to the spot. There is an old cabin in the middle of the quarries. I am meeting a man there tonight."

He turned and looked Barr in the face. "Of course, you are curious about the mission. I can tell you very little. It is my earnest hope that you will not be called on to do more than keep carefully out of sight. I am meeting a man there who is—is going to buy something from me. Because of—well, our respective positions—neither of us can risk having our meeting observed. Because of the nature of the—merchandise—neither of us would allow intermediaries.

"I believe this man is quite sincere—but I am not sure. Some months ago he asked me to put a price on a certain something—something which I do not wish to sell. I did so—as a matter of form—a ridiculously high price. For three months he has urged me to come down, without avail. Today he made this appointment with me, promising to pay my original asking price. It seems incredible to me that anyone should be willing to pay so much, and because I do not understand, I wish—well, I feel much more secure to know that I have you at hand in case—well, in case of need. That is all. You are armed, of course?"

"Yes." The smoothly given explanation was superfluous to Barr. He would have accepted any story. "You can give

me definite instructions on the way out. I don't have to know all your business."

THERE was one unexpected addition to the plans that Barr took with mixed feelings. When they stood in the garage, beside the powerful, slightly old-fashioned, gray touring car, the senator coughed gently. "I—I trust you will not mind driving—uh—lying in the rear, under the rug. I do not like to take the chance that someone—some interested party—might observe the fact that I was not alone. You—you understand?"

"I understand," Barr said grimly, and added to himself: "Someone might see you drive out with me, you white-haired pack rat, and come back alone." Aloud, he queried: "We've a long journey?"

"Eh—well, yes. About a two-hour journey. I am not a fast driver, and we will just make my appointment. Being on the edge of town here, of course, makes it a little shorter."

The senator drove and nothing happened, on the way out. When they finally turned from the highway onto the disused marble-quarry road, the sun was gone, and dusk was settling. They plowed up and down slopes, and for practically four miles they were on the thin edge of a razorback wedge—the only passage through a tremendous valley, the bottom of which was a weed-covered swamp.

Then they were rushing down a long slope and the senator cut the ignition. They coasted to a stop in another hollow, surrounded by trees. Then Mays turned and spoke in a scarcely audible voice.

"From here you can see the cabin—it's in the middle of a large clearing. The door faces us directly, and you can see anyone entering or leaving through the windows at the sides. There is no opening at all in the rear. Also, the clearing is large enough—there is fifty yards between the house and the edge of the woods at any given point—so that you

should have ample warning if anyone advances from the woods even in this light. I—well, I leave everything to your discretion—unless I should call for your assistance."

"Suppose I go in and take a look at the place before you," Barr ventured softly.

"No, no. The interior is one room only. I can take care of myself to that extent. I—" He broke off suddenly, as the sharp hum of a motor became audible, far down the road. "It's he!" the senator said quickly. He climbed out of the car. "Remember—he must not know you are here, except in—in extremis!"

Barr said nothing, as the hurrying footsteps of the senator drew away. Then he was out of the car, on the side opposite the direction the senator had taken, easing silently back into the woods. The last of the twilight was just fading, but he caught a glimpse of the dilapidated shack, set in the bottom of the bowl that was the clearing.

The senator's flashlight lit up the door of the cabin for a second, then vanished within.

The hum of the motor down the road suddenly ceased.

Ten minutes passed, fifteen. The clearing sat silent, its last outline finally blotted out by pitch blackness. The woods surrounding it began to rustle with night noises.

Barr, fifty yards from the parked machine, crouched on one knee, tense, ears cocked. Footsteps sounded suddenly—softly—coming down the road. The man had evidently left his car a good mile away, beyond the top of the last rise.

The steps pad-padded straight down the road. They hesitated a minute by the senator's parked car, then went on—across the clearing, toward the cabin. As they reached the door, there was the short flare of a flashlight, a rumbled greeting—then the shack door closed, and a flickering light went on, inside.

Five more minutes slipped by—ten. Frogs were beginning to croak from the swamps now. After ten more minutes, the light in the cabin suddenly flickered out. Barr jerked to tauter attention.

For no less than fifteen more minutes, he hung there, positive with each passing second that the break would come. And suddenly it did! Far back along the road, over the brow of the hill, the sudden whining of a car's starter threshed—then the motor caught, and, like an explosion, a car thundered into gear—going away!

EVERYTHING in Barr's mind blew up into frantic confusion, but out of the welter, one fact clamored—the person who had come to meet the senator was now escaping!

Barr dived for the senator's car, piled over the door into the seat, and snatched for the ignition key. Cold madness went over him. The key was missing! And the roar of the vanishing car was fading.

Barr sprinted for the house, whipping a flashlight from his pocket. He slid to a stop before the door, kicked it open and dived in. Something bulky and soft smashed into him, sent him staggering backwards. His light beam threshed upwards—and cold sweat drenched him. "Oh—my—God!" he croaked wildly.

A thick rope dropped from a beam in the ceiling. Senator Mays hung by his throat from the rope, his face purple, his tongue lolled out, his clothes slashed to ribbons—swinging gently.

In one corner a trap-door yawned in the floor. And on the edge of the trap, lay one of the two yellow wallets Barr had seen on the senator's library table.

One ghastly, torturing thought hammered in his head. He had been desperately, fatally wrong! Mays—however crooked he might have been—had employed Barr in good faith, had been on the level with him, had sought him as a guard against a death he more than half feared

—and now he'd met that death within rods of the detective! Then the senator was not one of the vultures of the gang!

There was white, crazy desperation in Barr's face as he jerked up his gun, fired twice at the thick rope—then dived to catch the fat, white-haired corpse as it tumbled down. They crashed to the floor together, Barr's fingers jerking the noose from the thick folds of the clammy neck before he rolled upright. The very touch told him he was too late. He flung to his knees, felt for a pulse—only to confirm the fact. He found the ignition keys in a vest pocket, leaped for the door.

He was only a few steps from the cabin when he realized that he was too late. The roar of the motor down the road had died to a thin hum. The killer was gone.

Barr's scalp crawled and he ran a convulsive hand through his thick black hair. The man who had killed the senator under his very eyes, must have been the mysterious chief! It was not the witch-faced Umble! Barr had had enough of a glimpse of the murderer's outline to know he was not built like the lieutenant! And this unknown had been within twenty yards of Barr—had passed calmly by him—and escaped! Barr was wet with cold sweat as he flung round, shot back to the shack, threshed his light frantically over the interior. He snatched up the yellow wallet by the trap-door. It bulged with papers and he laid the flash down swiftly, riffled them over. Gradually, bewildered amazement spread over his face.

There were letters, canceled checks, scribbled notes. Even a child, after one glance at the strained, wavering lines of the writing, could have told they were a forgery of something else—and the work of an amateur! Taken together they told a complete and ugly story.

A MAN named Parker Allen had evidently been state bank examiner, seven years before. There was an institu-

tion called the Cornelian State Bank in Graveston at that time. Two of the officers of the Cornelian—Murdoch and Pettingill—had been in criminal conspiracy to mulct the bank, with the help of Parker Allen, the state examiner. They had drawn off a huge sum and the bank had failed, unexpectedly. One short, final note from Murdoch to Parker Allen read—

Pettingill has taken it—and let us out from under. Keep mum and we've nothing to fear. His suicide note takes all the blame on himself, and we will never be suspected.

Apparently the papers had nothing to do with the shooting of Britton Hanley. But, whoever owned the originals of the data contained here, would hold Parker Allen and the man Murdoch completely in his power, wherever they might be.

Barr saw the whole picture of what had taken place in the shack, as clearly as though he had been there. The senator had held this blackmail material over the heads of Allen or Murdoch or both. He had contracted to sell this "merchandise" to the murdering rats that Barr was fighting. But the senator had been unable to resist the attempt to double-cross them. He had tried to palm off forgeries—and they had given him short shrift!

Parker Allen! Murdoch!

Barr sprang to his feet. These men—or one of them—must be vital to the murder scheme Hanley had been uncovering! The chief had had to have these things to force Parker Allen or Murdoch to. . . .

Barr thought of something else! Norman Happ had been killed because the information he was carrying from Frank Aido would have told the senator something about the value of these documents! Something that would have made him refuse to go through with the deal!

Two men—in a city of half a million—but men who had been prominent! Barr had twenty hours before it would

be too late—twenty hours to find them—and. . . . He jumped for the trap-door. Its very existence more than hinted of the trick the killer must have worked.

The vegetable cellar under the shack—the rude tunnel leading underground to a disused well, just beyond the edge of the woods—he guessed these at sight. But he traversed the tunnel nevertheless, found nothing, went back in the house.

There seemed nothing more and he was on the way out, when he threw the beam once more on the fat dead man—and stopped. From between the tightly clenched fingers of the senator's left hand, a wisp of green protruded.

Barr forced the hand open, moved the contents under the light beam. He had two hundred-dollar bills, and half of another. Part of the pay-off that had not stuck! It was when he sorted them, turned them over, that the blue slip floated to the ground from between them.

Spread open, it was a street-car transfer, punched for some intersection in Graveston—Elk and McManus Streets—dated for three o'clock A. M. the morning of October third.

It was ten seconds before the jolt hit him. Then he had to check his memory twice to be positive. Today was October second! The transfer was punched for a time still six hours in the future! Why?

SOMETHING cold jabbed Barr's stomach, put water in his veins. An alibi! The chief had arranged an alibi for himself for six hours from now! Why? What was going to happen at that time? Could this whole murderous, ruthless scheme be rushing to its climax so soon? Was that the zero hour? Desperately, he tried to tell himself that it couldn't be—that indications were that he had till tomorrow night—but he could not deceive himself. The chief had provided himself with an alibi. Nothing short of the final blow-off would be of enough importance

to warrant that! Then Barr had only six hours left—no more—in which to block it somehow—whatever it was.

And his only hope was to try and locate the two men—Parker Allen and Murdoch—in those six short hours, with the police scouring the streets for him and the killers gunning for him, also.

Something else had been jabbing at his mind. Why had the killer of the senator made no attempt to get Barr, too? He evidently had expected Barr to be here—else why the trick exit from the shack? And then Barr realized that the preparations—the digging out of the earth to make the tunnel—must have been completed long before the senator had even hired Barr. They had—or the chief had—merely gone on what he knew of the senator's character, and had prepared for the double-cross as insurance. . . .

Not till then did it strike Barr how precarious his own position was while he remained at this spot. Already being hunted on one murder charge, if he were found here—the senator's butler to testify his employer had gone out with Barr. . . . He fairly flung himself toward the parked touring car. At last he got it into motion, jammed down the accelerator.

He was a hundred yards from the highway when the police siren shrilled, off to his right, no more than a quarter mile toward the city. He floorboarded the throttle, his heart in his throat, and the big car fairly leaped out to the highway. He swung hard over, took the corner—going away from town—on two wheels, scuttled around a bend, and whirled into a dark, wooded side-road, two hundred yards further along the highway. He snapped off ignition and lights simultaneously, sat rigid, breath caught, as the siren behind him swept off into the road he had just quitted—drew away, farther and farther into the quarry lands.

The killer had tipped off the police! No one else could have known of the

murder! And Barr sat in the automobile of the murdered man! The realization swept him that only minutes were left before a description of that car would be on the police radio—until he would have to ditch it— He whirled it back onto the highway, pointed its nose toward town.

In an outlying suburb he abandoned the car, got a taxi, and rode to within a few blocks of where he had left his own rented coupe.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Man in the Death House

BARR sat in the coupe for four minutes flaying his brain, grasping at straws. Thought of the girl came to him. Where did she fit? And the blond, aristocratic youth? What, in this ghastly design, was his part? Barr tried desperately to think of any place where a girl would fit—and a queer gasp came from his lips.

His hand dived into his inner pocket, whipped out the clipping the moon-faced newshawk had given him—the write-up on the killing of W. R. Ducharme. He scanned it, found the line he was seeking. . . . *night of the murder, Aido had visited a night-club which he frequented, and been seen by. . . one Jane Driscoll, an entertainer, of 465 Elm. . . .*

Could the girl he had seen in Hanley's office be this entertainer of the night-club? He hastily scoured the clipping again, picked out other bits. *W. R. Ducharme, playboy, millionaire, motor magnate. . . had arrived home the night of the murder. . . having visited a night-club.*

Could the tie-up be there? Barr whipped open his street map with shaking fingers—and got a break. Elm Street was less than a mile away.

For the whole of that mile-long drive, Barr's brain was spinning. On the wild guess that the lovely dark girl was Jane

Driscoll, and the night-club Ducharme had attended the night of the murder the same night-club which Frank Aido frequented, Barr soared to the sensational conclusion that Aido had been convicted of murder on the wrong motive!

As he flashed round the corner into Elm Street, he realized there were gaps in his theory—but they were inconsequential. They wouldn't be gaps much longer if he were even near the truth.

Now he caught sight of a street number under an arc light and braked hastily. The last block to 456 he covered at a silent trot. The house was a modest little bungalow, set back in a grass plot. The street was almost deserted but there was a light inside 456. It was quarter to eleven as Barr read his watch on the steps.

One hand on the gun in his pocket, he rang the bell.

Nothing happened and he rang again. When his third ring had gone unheeded, he whipped a leather case of skeleton keys from his pocket. He had one almost in the keyhole, when the door swung inward. Barr stared into the face of the blond, aristocratic youth that he had seen in the corridor leading from Hanley's office that afternoon!

"What is it you wish?" the blond youth asked. His face was pale and strained, but there was no recognition in it.

"Miss Driscoll, please," Barr said.

The blond youth ran a tongue over his lips. "She—Miss Driscoll is not here."

"No?" Barr put his hand in his pocket. "Then may I leave something for her?" As he finished, he stepped into the doorway, crowding against the blond youth quickly, and jammed a gun into his stomach. "Back up!" he snapped, and as the other retreated Barr closed the door. "You're the boy friend, eh? What's your name?"

The blond youth's head tilted upward a little. "Really—I don't believe it's any of your damned business!"

Barr's teeth set. "Another time, I might appreciate that. Now get this into your thick head: my best friend is lying at the point of death. I'm looking for the rats that got him. I've gotten myself involved so that the police are looking for me with orders to shoot me on sight. And the killers that got my friend are after me, too. One of the most sensational criminal jobs ever pulled in this country is rushing to its climax—with nobody but me to stop it. You and Miss Driscoll can tell me what I want to know—what I've got to know—to stop it. So now—think it over before you start giving me phony answers. Because if you don't talk—and talk straight—in about three minutes I'm going to put a bullet—"

Curtains at the rear of the hall whipped aside and the dainty dark girl that had posed as Hanley's secretary stood with a hand to her throat. Fear made her blue eyes sapphire pools, her face starch under her rouge. "No! Wait!" she pleaded. Then, "Oh, my Heaven—it's the detective from New York!"

THE blond youth sucked in breath; his eyes blazed. Barr snarled at him: "One belch out of you and I pinch Miss Driscoll for the murder of Norman Happ—and you as a material witness! Shut up—she'll do the talking!"

"Johnny—please!" the girl cried desperately. "What—what do you want me for?"

"I want you," Barr said, "because W. R. Ducharme was killed by Frank Aido because of jealousy—and not for the purpose of robbery!"

For a split second, Barr stopped breathing. He tried to read her expression—and ice was in his heart as he saw only blankness in her face. Then tears welled into her eyes, and she dropped into a chair, sobbing. "Oh, Johnny—I'm so sorry!"

Barr roared at her: "Stop that! Men's

lives are hanging on what you tell me! Stop it, I say, or I'll slap you out of it! Come clean with me—all the way—fast! Who is this duck?"

The girl stood up. There was desperation in her eyes. "He's—he was—my fiancé—till now!"

"What do you mean—till now?"

It was like undoing flood gates. Her words suddenly rushed out, desperate, pleading. "His—his father—is Philip Marberry—the rich one—they're the oldest family in Graveston—they'll never let John marry me now! That's what we've been afraid of! That's why we hurried to Mr. Hanley's office today—the minute we knew he—knew something had happened to him—so we could get anything he had that mentioned my name. When—when my name was in the paper—just as a witness—John's father refused to let us marry. John can't do anything—he's only twenty and we can't get a license in this state without his father's permission. If we went to another state—he'd—I don't know what he'd do. Oh, can't you see—we're desperate—and now—if you arrest us the newspapers will—"

Barr snapped: "All right, I get it. That's why you didn't come forward at the trial and admit that Frank Aido, one of your boy friends, had killed W. R. Ducharme, another one, eh? So you'd keep your name out of the papers? So you'd be able to marry this monkey! Well—"

"No! No!" she cried wildly. "Oh, you mustn't say that! I—it was the cabaret. I had to talk to anybody. Aido—"

Barr said, "Wait a minute," and spun on young Marberry. "You get into that room for a minute!" He flung open a door near him and drove the blond youth through, slammed the door.

"Now—come clean," he told the girl.

She wrung her hands. "I will—oh, I swear I will! Aido"—she put out a hand in a pleading gesture—"you—oh, God—you mustn't think that I—that he—I

swear I hardly knew him. He started coming to the cabaret months ago. He told me he was in love with me. I was afraid of him. He used drugs and he talked wildly. But I had to sit with him. He spent a lot of money and I would have lost my job if I'd refused. I didn't like him—didn't want him to come near me. He—he begged me to meet him outside. I never did."

"But he was in love with you?"

"Love!" She put her hands to her head. "I—I guess he called it that. But he threatened me! He said he'd tell everyone I'd gone with him. I didn't dare let him get angry with me—it would have—"

"You never went out with him?"

"Oh, never. I swear it!"

"How far had things gone with you and Ducharme?"

Her hand flew to her mouth, terror was in her eyes. "Oh! Please! You're not going to pretend I—"

"Are you going to answer or not?"

"Oh, yes, yes! I swear there was nothing—on my side! He offered to back me—to help me with a career, if I—"

"You were supposed to go to his house the night he was killed, weren't you? That was why he sent all the servants away, wasn't it?"

"I—maybe it was. But I didn't ever—"

"Aido got wise to it—maybe from a waiter who'd overheard him proposition you. Aido got coked up, took a gun and went up there in a brainstorm, didn't he?"

She seemed to shrink. "I—I guess so."

"Were you there?"

"Oh—no—no—I swear to God! Mr. Ducharme came into the club and told me he was going to be alone—and that if I wanted to, to come. But I didn't—I told him I wouldn't. I told him about Johnny, but he didn't quite believe me—"

"Me, too," Barr said. "All right. I've got what I came for. You want to be kept out of the newspapers, so you can marry your blond boy. Why, God only

knows. Well, I'll give you the best break I can."

"You mean you'll not tell anybody—"

"I mean if Frankie Aido doesn't crack on the truth, I don't know anyone else that will! I'm going to see him now—oh, he'll see me, all right—and I'll try and put a bee in his ear that'll make him keep his trap shut till it's too late to do any good to open it. The rat killed Ducharme and he's going to fry for it—though he doesn't think so."

The girl put out a hand, asked breathlessly: "Why did he say he went there to steal that money? Why didn't he mention my name?"

"Because, beautiful, with his record, he was cooked if he admitted he went there just because of a girl. His only hope was if somebody on the outside thought it was worth while to pull political strings to get him out." Barr's eyes fell on his watch. "I can't go into it now. Which way do I take to get to Winstead?"

"Straight out the highway—about fifty or sixty miles."

BARR was lucky. Somehow, he made the nightmare trip without the dread sound of a police siren closing in behind him. It was one o'clock when he was shown into the warden's office.

The warden was a saintly, kindly looking man with silver hair and red-rimmed eyes. "Of course you know this is outrageous, Mr. Barr," he said, "but I—well, when a man is within a few hours of eternity, I am willing to do almost anything that might oblige him."

"I counted on that," Barr said. "I may be here on a wild-goose chase. On the other hand, I have reason to believe that Aido was convicted on false evidence. I want to see him—and then I'll know."

The warden's eyes clouded. "It is perfectly impossible to see him. Even should

I be willing to ignore prison regulations, the man himself will see no one."

"Would you let me send him in a note—without having it read by anyone?"

The warden's thin hand ran through his hair. "I can't. I simply can't. It would mean my automatic release from office. Only the governor could authorize such a thing."

Barr jumped. The governor! Lounsbury's pal! Then his heart sank as he remembered the hour. Lounsbury would hardly be with the governor at one o'clock.

"The governor isn't at his home. I—uh—called there—" he parried.

"No, but I can get him for you," the warden said eagerly. "I know where he is—in Graveston. He's leaving there late tonight. He'll still be available." He lifted the phone receiver before Barr could stop him, and spoke a number.

Barr's hand went swiftly to his pocket, found the card Lounsbury had given him. The number on it and the one the warden had called were identical. Fresh hope surged up in him as he reached over quickly and took the phone. "Let me speak to him first—"

The ringing at the other end ceased as the receiver was lifted. An unctuous, respectful voice said: "This is the residence of Lieutenant-Governor Parker Allen."

Barr's breath almost blew from his lungs. Parker Allen! The lieutenant-governor!

The voice at the other end said anxiously: "Hello! Hello!"

Barr said hastily: "Is Mr. Lounsbury of the *A. P.* there?" and added his name.

There was a moment's wait. Barr's brain was juggling the new information wildly. Where did Parker Allen fit—

A burst of profanity came over the wire. "Where the hell are you?" Lounsbury finished.

Barr told him quickly, and finished with: "I've found the hiding-place of the

hundred thousand dollars you were looking for—only I don't think it's exactly that. I've got to see Aido—or send him a note. Use your drag with the governor to get the warden to let an uncensored note go in."

"What kind of note?"

"None of your business. I'll let you know within an hour or two."

"Where is this hiding-place? Have you been there?"

"No. I'll try and let you in on the party when I go—if you'll swing the governor for me now."

After a long, maddening minute, Lounsbury said: "All right."

BY THE time the warden had finished talking with the governor, Barr's anxious fingers had scribbled the note on prison stationery, sealed it in an envelope.

Frankie:

I know the real reason you fixed Ducharme. I know what you're doing now. I think your plan is going along. If you'll talk to me now, I'll keep my trap shut. If you don't, I'll call the newspapers and give your whole show away. Give me what I want and I'll keep mum—about both things.

Colin Barr

The look of astonishment was still on the face of the warden as he backed out of the office, fifteen minutes later, to leave Barr alone with Frank Aido.

He was young—not over thirty. His denim slacks hung over his shoe tops. A scrawny neck was visible in the opening of his coarse shirt. He was thin, bony, with a swarthy, narrow face, oily black hair. Dark brown eyes glittered like those of a cornered rat.

Aido wasted no time. His lips were tight around his words as he jerked out: "What do you mean—you'll keep quiet about both things?"

Barr made his voice just as crisp and his eyes bored into Aido's. "About what

I already know—and about what you're going to tell me. Don't stall—there's no time for that. We're both so close to death that a wrong move will finish either of us. Your wrong move would be to hold out on me. Shut up—I'll talk first—and you'd better realize that I know too much for your good if I decide to cut you down. Listen—

"I know that you went to Ducharme's house that night in a hop-dream of jealousy over the girl, Jane Driscoll, to kill Ducharme, and possibly her, too—if she was there. When you got there, you peeked in Ducharme's window—for forty minutes or more. The only reason I can think of was—that Ducharme wasn't alone—and that you overheard his conversation and maybe saw him pass the hundred thousand berries to his visitor! When the visitor left, you went in and blew Ducharme down! Then, when you ran out and saw the patrol unloading, you tried to conk yourself.

"By the time you came out of it, and out of your coke trance, you started to use your head. The cops accused you of taking the hundred grand. You admitted it. You admitted it, because you knew you had only one hope of escaping the flame chair—and you had to take it. You knew that if you admitted the killing was over a girl—you, with your record, would get the works. But while you were waiting outside Ducharme's window, you saw something or heard something—some information—that you realized was worth enough to someone to spring you on political influence—in a return for that information! You pulled the wise trick. You dummied up. You got your message out—to whom I don't know. I figure you just sent the one, telling what you had to offer and offering it, the minute you hit the bricks and not before. Then you clammed up—and you're still waiting!

"Your plan is working. Your friends have turned Graveston into a slaughter-

house to get you out. They'll probably make it—but they won't make it if I prove to them that the killing was about a girl—and make them believe that you're stringing them about this other stuff!

"And I'm going to tell them, Frankie—unless you come clean with me on every detail. You can't cross me—because, unless I lay my hands on the stuff within the next few hours, I'm going to blow the works! This is your chance to talk—straight. What did you see through Ducharme's window—and what did Ducharme get from his visitor for his hundred grand—and who was the visitor?"

Sweat was running down the Italian's face. His voice was a croak. "You—you're not going to take the stuff?"

"The stuff that you saw Ducharme get for his hundred thousand? You bet your sweet life I'm going to take it!"

"But for God's sake—what'll I give them? I won't have anything if they get me out! I'll—"

Barr's eyes were glowing coals. "That's your worry, Frankie—not mine. Come clean with me and I keep mum. Your friends may yank you out—as long as they keep thinking you went to Ducharme's with advance knowledge about the stuff. Once I speak, they'll figure you were playing them for suckers—and they'll just quit on you—and you fry. Talk to me—and you'll have trouble probably, when you get out, but—you'll be out. Cross me—and you never get out!"

THE Italian's thin tongue whipped desperately across his lips for a long minute. Then he croaked: "You'll gimme a chance? You'll keep mum till I get out?"

"I said what I'd do."

The Italian sent furtive eyes over his shoulder, took a long breath and fixed white-rimmed eyes on the corner of the desk. "You—you got it right. I—I went up there in a fog. The dame—I don't

know what was wrong with me—I'd been playin' her for months. She had me crazy. I—a waiter told me she was goin' to Ducharme's that night. I went up thinking to catch both of them. Well, when I got there, he was talkin' to a guy. The guy was thin, funny-lookin', with spectacles—like one o' these college professors. Ducharme and him talked. They had some blueprints all over the table. Finally, Ducharme went to the safe and got the wad of dough and give it to the guy. He said to him, 'I'll stake my reputation as a motor engineer that you've got exactly what we started after. There's a million a year apiece in this for us. Leave me these plans and you hop back to your woods and adopt it for airplanes, too. No one's discovered your laboratory?' The guy says no, and Ducharme shows him out and says, 'If you need more money, wire me. The sky's the limit'.

"When Ducharme come back in the room after lettin' him out, he went over and fooled around and put them plans somewhere in the fireplace. It was when he was getting up from the fireplace that he seen me—through the glass."

Aido ran a sleeve across his forehead. "On the level—all this time I was waitin' for the jane to show up. I was numb in the head. It was all registerin', if you get me, but I didn't pay no attention. It was only afterwards I thought it over.

"Well, anyhow, Ducharme made a dive for his desk—I guess he had a rod there. I had to jump in and plug him. I wasted a couple o' minutes wrasslin' with him and when I got outside and seen I was sure to get pinched by that patrol, I all of a sudden see what a sucker I was, and I guess the hop was still workin'. I took a crack at the Dutch—only it didn't work.

"When I came to, they started askin' me where was the hundred grand, and like you said, it dawned on me where I stood. I thought fast. I had no dough to hire a big-shot mouthpiece. Anyhow,

with my record, I never would of got by with a second-degree rap or a plea. I knew that. My only chance, like you said, was to get some political big-shot on the outside to spring me, cold, no matter what. And I was rememberin' every detail of them plans and things by then. I knew of a guy that had a lot of political drag in this town a little while back, and I thought he could still swing the deal. I sent him a message—sayin' what I knew, and that I'd turn the business over to him if he got me out—and only when he got me out. Nothin' doing in advance, and all that.

"I didn't hear nothin' about whether my plan was clickin' or not. Normie Happ got sprung a while ago. I told him about it and told him to go and see the senator and find out was the deal on or wasn't it." He gulped. "An'—an' that's all. I ain't heard."

A sudden thought came to Barr's head. The girl—Jane Driscoll—and her blond youth. Suddenly, he realized that he could play this game out without involving her—and he decided to do it. He said to Aido grimly: "That's plenty. I'll play ball. But the way things are going, you may not get your reprieve till the last minute—so don't go watery."

CHAPTER SIX

The Killer Next Door

FIVE minutes later Barr was thundering through the night, back toward town—and the blow-off! The monstrous, mysterious mess was no longer an enigma. It was exposed, at last, for the simple, clear thing it was. Just a fight over a girl—with one of the fighters an underworld gunman, the other a playboy millionaire. And the gunman had crashed into the other half of the millionaire's life—had fallen onto vitally valuable information—

and had somehow used his head enough to offer it in exchange for his release!

Britton Hanley must have been digging, like the honest, conscientious old gentleman he was, and—in his quest for anything that would help his client—have unearthed enough of the truth through the girl to guess the rest—and sent for Carr.

The chief and his witch-faced, renegade copper partner—with their plans running full tilt to get Aido freed—had suddenly realized that Hanley was a danger. If they had found out in advance that he was sending for Barr, it was an easy tip-off that he had learned too much. So they had gunned him out and tried to finish Carr.

But the senator—with the blackmail ammunition that was the remnant of his past glory. Why had they wanted to buy that data from him? Why? The reason for that was directly ahead—was the thing Barr was racing through the night to learn!

The dashboard clock showed ten minutes after two when he still had thirty miles to go. His foot was level with the floor, the little car a rocking comet, eating up the night as Barr reached down and turned on the radio, swung it to the short-wave station.

He had fifteen minutes to wait till he heard what he knew he was going to hear. And then it was not the original broadcast, but an addition to it—"All cars! Add to message regarding Colin Barr . . . This man is now wanted on suspicion of two killings. He may be dangerous. He is armed. Officers will take no chance in arresting this man. That is all!"

As Barr thundered into Graveston, the clock read ten minutes to three. He screamed around corners, zoomed on straightaways, till he checked his mad careening within three blocks of the address the warden's phone book had given as that of Parker Allen, the lieutenant-governor—the man the mysterious chief

had bought, body and soul, from the senator.

He was just screaming to a stop by the curb when his radio spoke again. "All cars! Governor Munroe's car will take the Post Road to Sterling. He is leaving in five minutes. Cars along that route please extend courtesies. That is all."

Then Barr was out and running, both guns out, swinging around the corner into that street of wide unfenced lawns, aristocratic homes—the street where Parker Allen lived. He spotted the house at once the third from the corner—by the long black limousine at the curb, a footman already loitering by its door.

Broad steps led up to the front door, the small front stoop of the stately, old-fashioned graystone house. Carr could see the little cluster of dark figures on the stoop, even as he raced. A uniformed chauffeur came down the steps with two handbags, stowed them in the car.

BARR'S noiseless sprint slowed to a cat-like walk, as he reaced the house next to the lieutenant-governor's. His eyes pierced the darkness, trying to make out the figures on the stoop. Then a match flared, and he saw them in its quick radiance—the tall man in long topcoat and Homburg hat, shaking hands with a little fat man in dinner clothes. There was one other ungainly figure with them—probably Lounsbury, the newshawk.

And then Barr's heart jumped into his throat and he flung himself against a tree-bole. In the house before which he crouched—the one next door to Parker Allen's—an upstairs window had been softly raised, and even as Barr, kneeling, peered round the tree-trunk, the long, shiny nose of a repeating rifle slid out, glinting in the reflected street light.

Barr's guns jerked up.

Flame and roar shattered the night—twin streams of spitting orange from

Barr's guns—one crashing shot from the rifle of the man upstairs. Barr fired again and again—and the glass in the window above shattered. A heavy body crashed forward, hung over the sill for a second—and began to slide.

Even as the assassin in the window began to fall, Barr flung a quick, frantic look up Parker Allen's short cement walk. The tall man in the Homburg hat and the ungainly figure that was now plainly Lounsbury, had been on the walk when the firing started. They were now scuttling wildly up the steps again, diving for cover. The footman was down on his knees by the side of the car, one hand clutching his arm, groaning.

Barr roared "Lounsbury! It's me—Colin Barr! I got the killer!"

The dark form above slipped over the sill's edge, came hurtling down, to crash to the pavement almost at Barr's feet. Barr jumped back, then forward again, his flash beam shooting down at the riddled shattered face of the witch-faced Lieutenant Umble, now in plainclothes.

The yelp of relief that came from the reporter's throat was ludicrous.

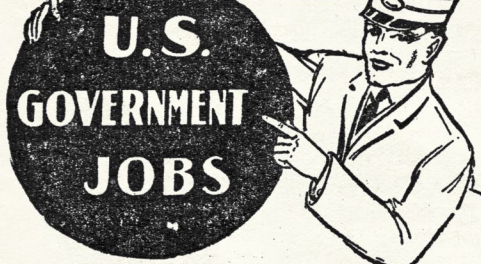
Servants were crowding out of the house, running to lead the wounded footman indoors. The party on the stoop hurried down to the street to meet Barr as he ran toward them.

"What was it?" Lounsbury cried hoarsely. "Was he—was that guy trying to get the governor?"

"Just that!"

"But what—but why?"

"I'm not able to explain it yet," Barr said with sudden inspiration. "My client, Mr. Britton Hanley, is the only one that had brains enough to figure it out. It's something about some master crook holding the lieutenant-governor under his thumb—but not the governor. This master crook wants another certain crook out



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of the death-house. With the governor dead, he could force the lieutenant-governor to issue the pardon. You'll have to get Mr. Hanley to explain it all."

The governor was mopping a lean, spare face. His honest, fighter's eyes were aghast. "You—who are you?" And when Barr told him, he said huskily: "I have you to thank for my life, Mr. Barr. I don't know what to say. I don't—"

"Mr. Hanley will explain. Take a look at that corpse yonder. He's a cop—the cop that has tried to frame me for murder. If you'd been listening to the short-wave radio, you'd know that I'm a wanted man, Governor. If you want to thank me for my part in saving your life, call off the cops—just for ten minutes. I've still the most important thing of all to do!"

"My God, yes! Anything—"

Barr swung toward Lounsbury. "Come on, newshawk—I'm keeping my promise. Have you got a gun?"

"No, but I'm coming! Are we going to dig up that—"

"That—and grab the rat behind all this, I think," Carr said, as he led the way at a run to his coupe.

ALL the way to the Ducharme house, Barr rattled the amazing story at the breathless, stunned reporter. Lounsbury whipped copy paper from his pocket, scribbled notes, yelping in excitement.

At last they piled out in front of the dark, towering Ducharme house, ran together to the rear corner, took the French window of the library together. They crashed into a room utterly bare of furniture. The dead man's heirs had evidently been at work.

Barr's eyes flew to the fireplace. It was as though someone had been deliberately pointing out the thing they had to do. With the room cleared of furniture, the ornamental brass match box nailed to the wall just beside the fireplace stuck out like a sore thumb.

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Barr fiddled only for a moment before he found that it turned on its axis. Four bricks in the hearth flipped suddenly erect, as though on spindles, disclosing the aperture underneath. His "Ahhh!" was a whistling sound, as he dropped to his knees.

It was a neat move, that drop, but his knees barely touched, till he was bouncing up again, whirling, his gun in his hand. His first shot nailed Lounsbury in the hand that was drawing a black automatic from a shoulder holster.

The gun dropped and Lounsbury tried to drop on top of it. Barr's second shot got him in the shoulder, slammed him back against the wall. Then Barr shot a leg out from under him, bringing him down, a good ten feet from the gun.

The detective walked over and kicked the gun into a corner of the room. "That's for shooting down my pal, Britton Hanley. I could have taken you without hurting you. I hope to God they get infected, put you through hell before you burn."


Lounsbury's chubby face was dingy, tight with pain, his eyes sour with fury and hate. "You four-flusher! You didn't know it was me back of this till I went for the gun!"

"I knew enough when I was out at the prison to tell you I already knew the hiding-place of the blueprints you wanted. I knew that you wouldn't dare refuse to swing the governor to do my favor if you thought I knew—because if I got there first, all your efforts to get ~~Aide out~~ were absolutely worthless. You had to stay on my right side. Though don't kid yourself—I knew long before that."

"Yeah? Well, kid somebody else. You had nothing on me at all. I worked on newspapers all my life. I'm not a crook. Nobody but me knew I suddenly got tired of working, and—"

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(Continued on next page)

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29x5.25-19	2.60		
30x5.25-20	2.60		
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must be crazy if you don't see how damn plain it was. For God's sake, you were the only person that Aido opened his mouth to, since he was pinched! It had to be you that he sent the message through—the message that was meant for the senator, but never got there. What I don't see is why you took that butcher Umble in with you. Didn't have the guts to carry it all yourself, huh?"

"I had the guts all right, wise guy. I didn't have the money to buy that dope from Mays. That's why I—" He toppled over in a dead faint.

Barr dived for the fireplace, dug out a handful of blueprints. He was trying to study them as he ran for a drug store.

ZIMMERMAN'S voice was frightened when Barr called him. "Ring off—they've got this wire tapped—"

"That's all right. They won't be after me in another minute or two. The case is broken. How is Britton?"

"He's conscious! He'll get better. But you—we heard the police broadcast—"

"Forget it. Get in and ask Hanley this question—fast. I've got blueprints here that seem to be the model for a new type of gasoline motor. W. R. Ducharme said they were the goods—that they were worth millions. He's got some engineer experimenting in a lab out in the woods somewhere—some guy that probably doesn't even know yet that Ducharme is dead. Maybe Hanley knows about the blueprints. Ask him what to do with them. And—wait a minute—I can hear the sirens of the police cars now. Listen—I've seen the governor—saved his life—I told him it was all Hanley's doing. On second thought, I think I'd better beat it up there now and tell Hanley exactly what's happened. The governor will be all over him. It's a nice chance for him to swing some sweet political graft. I'll be right up."

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IT was a strange coincidence that the same paper carried all three items. Barr stood, his long legs braced against the lurching of the blue-upholstered state-room, as the crack train rumbled out of Graveston. He was reading the headline—

**GOVERNOR APPOINTS GRAVESTON
LAWYER HEAD OF STATE
CRIME COMMISSION**

and in a lower corner of the paper—

DUCHARME KILLER DIES MUM
Frank Aido Goes to Chair Without
Breaking Silence

Zimmerman, his stork-like, gangling figure stretched in the window seat, beamed at the item on an inside page—

MARBERRY HEIR TO WED SINGER

Barr put the paper down, slid flat hands in his coat pockets, stared out at the dingy outskirts of Graveston. "Well, now we're getting somewhere," he said.

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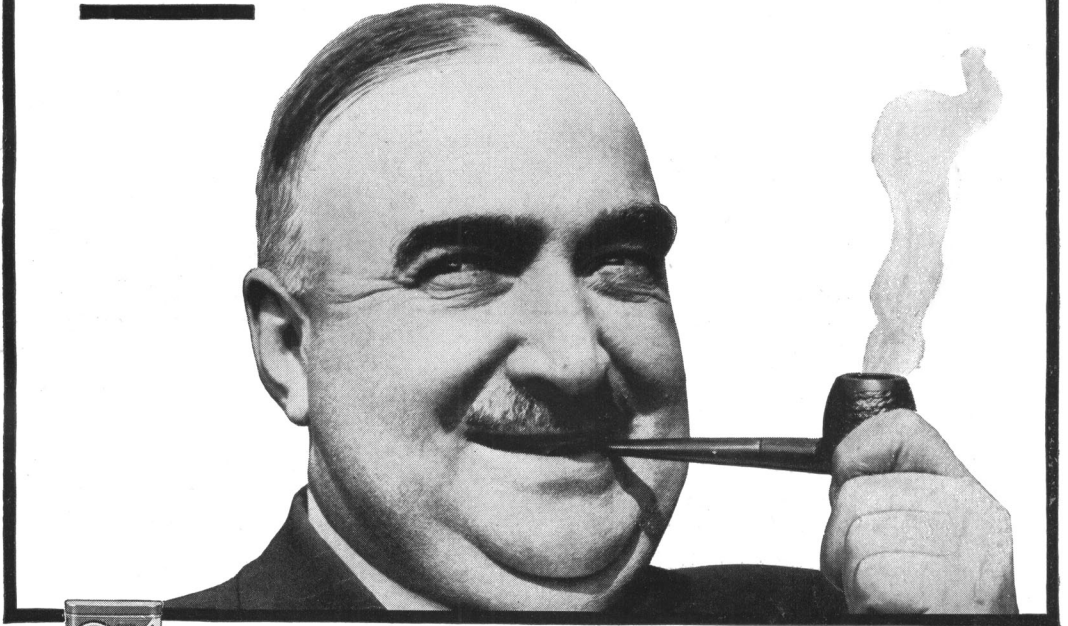
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