

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE



APRIL

10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

**THE ARM OF
MOTHER MANZOLI**
A STORY OF THE DEAN
by **MERLE CONSTINER**

**NO HAUNTING
ALLOWED**
by **G.T. FLEMING-ROBERTS**
AND OTHERS





MEN!

**Maybe You Wouldn't Dream
of Dyeing Your Hair... But**

**NOW YOU MAY CHECK GRAY HAIR
with**

Panates VITAMINS

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At Temples, Roots and Parting or Your Money Back

If your hair is gray, graying, streaked, faded or off-color, modern science offers new hope without dyeing. A lack of certain vitamins in your daily diet can cause hair to turn gray. Improve your diet, get extra supplies of these "anti-gray hair" vitamins by simply taking the original 2-way Panates Vitamin treatment. You too may be amazed and delighted to see the gray spread stopped, restoration of normal natural original color to the hair at roots, temples, parting, a great improvement in your hair beauty. You can now test Panates yourself on an iron clad guarantee that leaves no room for doubt. PANATES is different—it not only contains a powerful supply of "Anti-Gray Hair" Vitamins but "staff-of-life" Vitamin (E) Wheat Germ Oil as well. Panates is not a hair dye. You have nothing to fear . . . no mess, no fuss. You can test safe, healthful Panates

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- Three Months' Supply, Special \$4.79
- 100 Day Supply Special \$5.00

HOW TO TEST AT OUR RISK
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Now you can test amazing PANATES Vitamins yourself on our iron-clad guarantee . . . If not satisfied with results from the first treatment return the empty package and your money will be refunded. Don't wait. This is your chance to try PANATES, the 2-vitamin way for restoring color naturally to gray hair due to vitamin lack. Mail this special trial coupon today.

Send your new PANATES 2-Vitamins as checked in square opposite. I will pay postman, plus postage, on arrival on your money-back guarantee. (If you send money with your order, PANATES pays all postage charges.)

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LESSON

GET BOTH FREE

64 PAGE
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HOW TO TRAIN
AT HOME AND
Win Rich
Rewards
in Radio



See How I Train You at Home in Spare Time to BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN



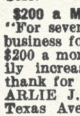
J. E. SMITH
President
National Radio
Institute
(Our 30th
Year)

I Trained These Men



\$10 a Week in Spare Time
"I repaired some Radio sets when I was on my tenth lesson. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made \$600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of \$10 a week—just spare time."

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ARLIE J. FROEHNER, 300 W. Texas Ave., Goose Creek, Texas.

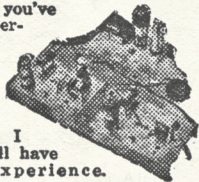


1st Lieutenant in Signal Corps
"I cannot divulge any information as to my type of work, but I can say that N.R.I. training is certainly coming in mighty handy these days."

RICHARD W. ANDERSON (address omitted for military reasons.)

YOU BUILD MANY CIRCUITS WITH PARTS I SEND

By the time you've built this Super-heterodyne and many other Radio circuits with the six big kits of Radio parts I send, you will have valuable experience.



Here's your chance to get a good job in a busy wartime field with a bright peacetime future! There is a real shortage today of trained Radio Technicians and Operators. So mail the Coupon for a FREE sample lesson and a copy of my 64-page, illustrated book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." It describes many fascinating types of Radio jobs; tells how N.R.I. trains you at home in spare time; how you get practical experience by building real Radio Circuits with SIX BIG KITS OF RADIO PARTS I send!

More Radio Technicians, Operators Now Make \$50 a Week Than Ever Before

Firing Radios pays better now than for years. With new Radios out of production, fixing old sets, which were formerly traded in, adds greatly to the normal number of servicing jobs.

Broadcasting stations, Aviation and Police Radio, and other Radio branches are scrambling for Operators and Technicians. Radio Manufacturers, now working on Government orders for Radio equipment, employ trained men. The Government, too, needs hundreds of competent civilian and enlisted Radio men and women. You may never see a time again when it will be so easy to get started in this fascinating field.

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The moment you enroll for my Course I start sending you EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that show how to earn EXTRA money fixing Radios. Many make \$5, \$10 a week EXTRA in spare time while learning. I

send you SIX big kits of real Radio parts. You LEARN Radio fundamentals from my lessons—PRACTICE what you learn by building typical circuits—PROVE what you learn by interesting tests on the circuits you build.

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The opportunity the war has given beginners to get started in the fascinating field of Radio may never be repeated. So take the first step at once. Get my FREE Lesson and 64-page, illustrated book. No obligation—no salesman will call. Just mail Coupon in an envelope or paste it on a penny postcard.

—J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 4DS9, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

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MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 4DS9
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Mail me FREE, without obligation, your Sample Lesson and 64-page book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." (No Salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

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10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 45

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AND—

We want to know if you are

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Cover—"There was a bright lance of flame and the yap of a gun."
 From *No Haunting Allowed*.

The May Issue will be out April 7th

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LIGHTER MOMENTS with fresh Eveready Batteries



*"Fox, old boy, looks as if you'll have
to find yourself a manhole!"*

ALMOST our entire production of "Eveready" flashlight batteries is going either to the armed forces or to essential war industries. So please don't blame your dealer for being out of stock.

*Before you buy anything else, be sure you've bought
all the War Bonds and Stamps you can afford.*

**FRESH BATTERIES LAST
LONGER... Look for
the date line** →



The word "Eveready" is a registered trade-mark of National Carbon Company, Inc.

THE MAY THRILL DOCKET

YOU have all been hearing about the importance of saving paper these days. The nation's pulp stock is just as vital a weapon of war as guns or tanks or planes. In doing its part to further the war effort DIME DETECTIVE has suffered casualties. Forty-eight pages have had to be amputated in the past year. Undoubtedly you've noticed their absence and commented on it. We hope you noticed also—and if you haven't we want to call your attention to it now—that despite the necessary lopping-off you are still getting just as much reading-matter for your dime as you did before the emergency operation. This has been accomplished by decreasing the width of the margins and the use of a slightly smaller type face. Pulling in our horns in such fashion we have been able to offer as much fine fiction as we ever did and you don't need to worry that you're not going to keep on getting full value for your money.

For instance—

Next month we bring you three gripping novelettes about three of your favorite series characters!

Frederick C. Davis gives a new twist to an old adage with a little murder maxim—*A Stiff in Time Saves Nine*. Bill Brent *alias* Lora Lorne, the *Recorder's* he-man heart-throb specialist-in-spite-of-himself, pulls the strings that make the assorted alibi artists go into their *danse macabre*. "Lamming my way?" he queries as they troop one-by-one through his cubicle, and one-by-one he eliminates them in a script-tease trap till only the killer remains to prove that curtains have to be rung down on murder shows as well as any other kind of performance.

C. P. Donnel, Jr. brings back Colonel Kaspir of Section 5 in another war-time Washington counter-espionage episode.

And T. T. Flynn lets us ride at the heels of Mr. Maddox once more in a brand-new race-track murder sequence.

Plus shorts and features by other favorite yarn-spinners.

This great MAY issue will be on sale APRIL 7th.

Ready for the Rackets A Department

Racketeers and swindlers of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to rob or cheat you of your hard-earned cash. All you need to thwart them, guard against them, is a fore-knowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in, telling us your own personal experiences with chisellers and con men of various sorts. It is our intention to publicize—withholding your names, if you wish—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. No letters will be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding same. Address all letters to The Racket Editor—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 E. 42nd St., N. Y. 17.

SINCE many war plants and government agencies require birth certificates from their employees, a new squeeze has reared its ugly head—proof of your birth—for a fee!

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Dear Sir:

Some time ago I got a job for which I needed a birth certificate. I did not have one, but one day I passed a place and saw a sign on the window saying: DO YOU NEED A BIRTH CERTIFICATE? WE GET THEM FROM OTHER STATES.

I went in and was told it would be only a short time till they could get me one. But each time I went back I had to pay them additional money for looking over old files, etc. I paid them \$50.00 before I finally got wise to myself.

Mrs. Carl Peterson
Minneapolis, Minn.

THE mounting casualties being suffered by our armed forces have brought about one of the most wretched schemes of this war.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Dear Sir:

This parasite preys on the anxieties and sorrows of the homes into which have come telegrams telling of the wounding or death of a loved one. Drifting from city to city, he carefully reads the local newspapers for the names and addresses of people who have been notified that their sons and husbands are reported missing, wounded or dead. Within a few days he appears at these homes and introduces himself as a special investigator from some fictitious government bureau or private agency whose purpose is to obtain more definite information about the missing person, the nature and seriousness of his wounds, his burial place, etc. He guarantees that he will have this information in a few weeks, at the same time collecting a fee which usually ranges from \$5 upwards. By allowing himself this period of time, he is able to cover each community thoroughly before moving on to fresh territory.

Cpl. John A. Johnston,
Presque Isle, Maine.



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Imagine being able to get *safe*, liberal life insurance protection for only \$1.00 a month (less than 25c a week). And what a policy! No premiums to pay after 20 years. Generous *cash* and *loan* values. Popular *double indemnity* feature at no extra cost. Attached \$100.00 sight draft for emergency use, and many other extra liberal features you'll like. Issued to any man, woman or child in good health, age 1 day to 55 years. Amount of policy depends upon age.



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No doctor's examination required when you apply for this policy. No long application to fill out. No embarrassing questions to answer. No red tape. No agent or collector will ever call on you. Everything handled by *mail*.

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Although this company maintains agency service in more than 100 cities, many persons prefer to apply for AMERICAN LIFE insurance protection and benefits this quick, easy, inexpensive way. You, too, can save money by dealing direct with our *Mail Service Department!*

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You don't have to risk one penny to get this policy for 10 DAYS' FREE INSPECTION! Examine it carefully—compare its liberal features—then decide whether you want to keep it. No obligation to buy. Nothing to lose. So DON'T DELAY. Fill out and mail the coupon *today!*



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THE ARM OF MOTHER MANZOLI

By **MERLE CONSTINER**

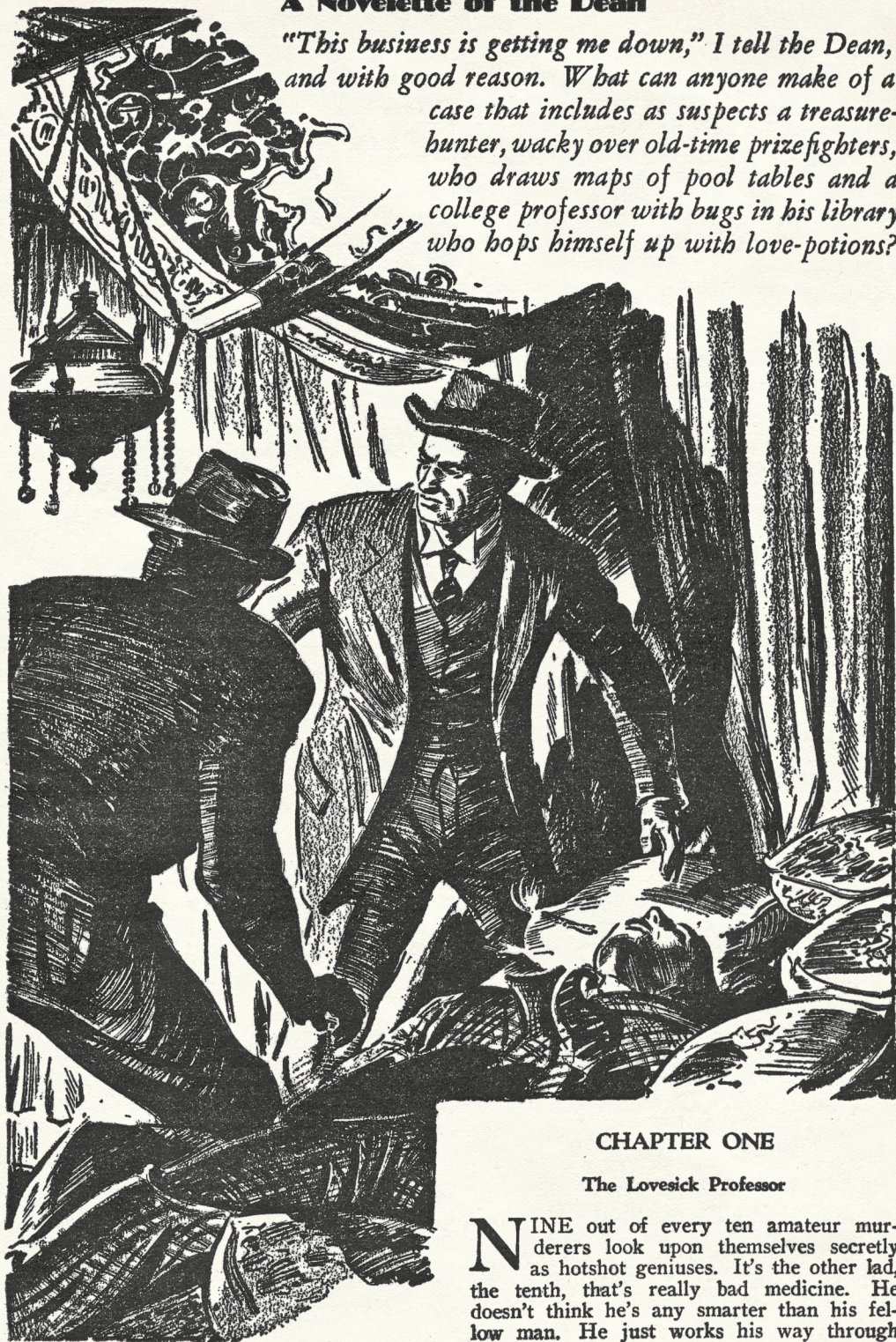
Author of "The Affair of the Pharmacist's Fudge," etc.

A cruel, husky voice spoke up from behind us. "Turn around—and slow!" It was Sam the Switchman and his dapper bodyguard, Virgil.



A Novelette of the Dean

"This business is getting me down," I tell the Dean, and with good reason. What can anyone make of a case that includes as suspects a treasure-hunter, wacky over old-time prizefighters, who draws maps of pool tables and a college professor with bugs in his library who hops himself up with love-potions?



CHAPTER ONE

The Lovesick Professor

NINE out of every ten amateur murderers look upon themselves secretly as hotshot geniuses. It's the other lad, the tenth, that's really bad medicine. He doesn't think he's any smarter than his fellow man. He just works his way through

the night school of homicide the hard way, plugging along, planning ahead, taking care of details. He's original, cagy—and can do a lot of killing before he's scotched.

This was the sort of baby behind the University Court slayings—as crafty and vicious a murder-sequence as we ever tackled.

We'd just finished lunch and were in the office-bedroom. I stood at the window in my stocking feet, deftly balancing a saucer of peanuts and a glass of tepid ale. The Dean was fiddling at his workbench beneath his green student's lamp.

I recognized the signs and they worried me. He was sulking. There was no telling why. Maybe it was something that had happened at breakfast, maybe it was some minor irritation he'd been subjected to last week and just got around to brooding over. I asked: "What's your favorite song, chief?"

He looked startled. "Song? I can't say offhand. Why?"

"You're griping about something you can't even remember. As long as you stay this way we'll starve. I thought perhaps you'd like to join me in a little two-man community sing. Psychologists say it's elevating to the spirit."

He parted his angry lips to loose a withering retort when there was a noise out front. We heard the door open and the sound of footsteps in the reception room. I cut my eye at the chief. He said mulishly: "Tell them to get out. No clients today, please."

I said: "What's the matter with me? I'll take over." I put on my house slippers and left the room.

THERE was a brace of them, assorted—one male and one female—sitting side by side on the Dean's *ante bellum* loveseat.

The little brunette was just a kid, in her late teens or early twenties, and plenty attractive. She had sulky lavender eyes with long lashes and a boyish little figure, but there was an air of helpless feminine humility about her that rang about as true as a lead quarter.

The lad with her was right out of the sporting ads. Obviously wealthy—and super-obnoxious. He was middle-aged, powerfully built, and dressed in as gaudy a swatch of hound's-tooth check yardgoods as I've seen outside a tailor's window. He had a big red face with silky silver eyebrows and tiny, porcelain-cold eyeballs that lurked back in their fleshy caves, frosty and suspicious.

I tried to mimic the Dean. "Well, who was here first? Raise your hands, please."

He blinked, took a short, gasping breath. He'd had a speech all ready to reel off and I'd mixed him up. He drew himself up, said crossly: "I'm sure your insolent tone is accidental, sir. I am J. Bogardus Keane." He paused. I looked blank. He added petulantly:

"You know, Keane, the—ahem—retired woolen goods magnate. This is Miss Marcia Cowen. We're not competing, as you rather crassly imply. We came in together and wish to consult you jointly. You're Wardlow Rock, I presume."

"Monkey food! I'm Ben Matthews. Mr. Rock is engaged. What do you want?"

They exchanged questioning glances, decided that while I was just riffraff, I was better than nothing. Miss Cowen straightened her short dress modestly, said: "I wish to retain you. Mr. Keane is sort of sponsoring me, so to speak. We'd like your help on two points. The first is the love-potion. I understand Mr. Rock is a student of medieval alchemy. I want him to stew up some kind of an antidote. That's the main thing. Then there's Mr. Saxby, my fiancé, who's beginning to show signs of being mentally upset. We want you to find out what it is that's injuring his reason and remove it."

Already I was in over my head. I tried to get organized. "Let's get this clear. Then J. Bogardus, here, isn't your betrothed?" They both looked horrified. I asked: "Who are you people? And who is this Saxby, and if he's your fiancé why does he have to hop himself up with a love-potion?"

Miss Cowen waved me down with a gesture of her limp hand. "It's not that way at all. We all live out in the University Court neighborhood. That's why we're all friends. Steve Saxby and Beanie, here—the sporty man smirked—"and myself. Well, up on the corner in an old run-down house, lives Professor Eggleston. He has some kind of tenuous affiliation with the college but he's getting rather ancient now and spends most of his time at home. He's quite a character."

I listened patiently. "No doubt, no doubt."

The kid continued: "University Court isn't snooty—it's just that we all have kind hearts. Of late, Professor Eggleston has been walking the streets in a rather shabby condition."

Miss Cowen went on: "It is just heartbreak to watch the poor old fellow. Bogardus suggested the professor needed a feminine hand to guide him. I volunteered. Every morning I drop in for an hour and fix him up—mend and darn and see that he has clean linen."

I said gustily: "I bet the old professor likes that!"

"He didn't know how to refuse at first, so he tolerated me." The gal frowned. "I sure wish those days were back! In the meantime, he's mixed up this love-potion for himself, and now he just sits and drools while I sew. He keeps this drug in a bottle, says it's cough syrup. I've brought it along without his knowledge—" She produced a small parcel twisted in brown paper, laid it on the table. "I want Mr. Rock to analyze it and prescribe an

antidote. It's a pathetic thing to see a dignified old man in the throes of puppy love."

J. Bogardus looked indescribably sad. "Marcia's right. It fairly wrings your—"

"I know." I cut him off. "What's this about Mr. Saxby?"

"I'm worried about him." Miss Cowen smiled somberly. "We're practically engaged and he's beginning to do such erratic things. Last month he decided to be a treasure-hunter and went out and made maps of the neighborhood. He's given that up, thank goodness. The other day he suddenly went in for prize-fighting. I don't mean he fights; he's making a study of all the pioneer pugilists. He has pictures of these coarse persons all over his house! Something is making him do these strange things. We want to know what."

"You and Beanie?" I grinned. "You folks are certainly hounds for charity work. O.K., you've hired a detective." I ushered them to the door. At the threshold, the big man hesitated. He fumbled in his pocket, came out with a glossy, pigskin wallet. "Here, sir, is fifty dollars—your retainer fee."

Mr. Keane closed the door behind them. Abruptly, he re-opened it, called through the slot: "You are now in my employ. Remember, no man can serve two masters! Tallyho!" Before I could retort, the door slammed.

UNIVERSITY COURT! I knew I had something hot. I ambled into the office-bedroom with the banknote and the package.

The Dean was lolling in his broken-down Morris chair, his eyes closed, the black snip of a Cuban cigar screwed into the corner of his mouth, when I drifted in. I gave him a detailed review of my seance with our new clients. When I'd finished he tried to belittle me, but his heart wasn't in it. "What fol-de-rol! Treasure-hunters, prizefighters—and love-potions!" He reached forward. "So this is Professor Eggleston's cough syrup?"

He unwrapped the stiff brown paper. It was an ordinary four-ounce medicine bottle—empty. He glanced at the label and almost dropped the vial in his astonishment. "Good Lord, Ben! Take a look at this."

I peered over his shoulder. The sticker was a messy job, pasted over the regulation drugstore label. It had been typed on an old-fashioned typewriter and said:

1,000 parts strass
8 parts oxide of copper
0.2 parts oxide of chromium

"What is it?" I asked. "Some slow-acting poison?"

"Benton, my boy, this is big—and there's going to be big money in it for us. It hurts me to reprimand you but I must take

this occasion to inform you that I am the proper person to interview prospective clients, and that by exceeding your authority we are indeed fortunate that you have not jeopardized . . ."

The same old merry-go-round! I swear, I wonder a dozen times a day how I ever manage to hang on. The Dean likes to pose as an amiable crackpot, and as long as I've known him, sometimes even I can't figure him.

I used to be a troubleshooter for a small safe company. He picked me up when I was down and out and gave me a job. I'm no big-brain. All I know is guns and locks.

I said bitterly: "Clients come. You turn deaf. I take them on. And now you're graveling because—"

"But University Court, Ben. That was the tip-off. You should have run screaming for me when you heard University—"

ACTUALLY, I didn't kid myself—I knew he was right. It was a strange mix-up. The case had broken about four months ago. The papers were full of it. Nobody could make heads or tails of it. An old lady named Taggart lived alone in a ramshackle mansion out in the University Court section. One night she had two lodgers and about ten the next morning, when they didn't answer her knock for breakfast, she entered their room and found them dead in bed. A man and his wife. They'd been shot at close range and a rusty old Iver Johnson lay on the coverlet.

Miss Taggart told the law that she didn't have the slightest idea who they might be. Around six, the night before, they'd come up on her porch and said they'd like a room for the night. They'd seen the "Tourists Accommodated" sign in her parlor window, they said. They were fortyish and seedy looking, but shabby through neglect, she judged, rather than through poverty. The man was bald-headed and his wife wore a pair of those nose glasses with a black ribbon. They looked somber but respectable. She took them in, and during the night they killed each other.

The tragedy must have occurred about eleven because that was the time she always took Ophelia, the cat, out for her walk. There were no shots after Miss Taggart returned—on that point she was definite.

The law had put it down as a suicide pact. There had been a mild flurry of mystery to it at first—the mystery of the third andiron. It seemed as though the couple had been extremely cautious about destroying all marks of identity. They'd cut out the window screen, laid it on the andirons in the fireplace, like a grate, and had burned the woman's pocket-book, the man's wallet, and an assortment of private papers. That part was natural enough, but the andirons themselves presented a rid-

dle. The two regular ones had cats on them, and in between the cats was a third—an andiron with an owl on it. Miss Taggart said she kept this set in a storeroom at the end of the hall. She had no further explanation.

So it was a suicide pact, and the newspapers gave it a heart-throb banner. But the next day it almost jelled into murder. Almost but not quite.

An anonymous telephone call informed the police that Miss Taggart wasn't in the habit of taking in tourists. The speaker, a man, said that he was a neighbor of the old lady's, that he'd passed the house many times and seen no sign in the parlor window. He suggested flatly that Miss Taggart had placed the placard in the window the morning of the deaths, that she'd found the bodies, grabbed a pen and ink, and dashed off a "boarders-taken-in" card—after the murders.

Miss Taggart, confronted with this new evidence, admitted exactly that. She said never before had she taken roomers. However, the man and his wife introduced themselves as friends of Professor Eggleston's, in town for the night. The next morning, when she'd discovered the corpses, she phoned the professor. To her astonishment, he violently disclaimed any knowledge or relationship with her guests whatever. It was then that Miss Taggart, panicky, drew up the fake sign.

A month later, Miss Taggart, alone in her big house, died from an overdose of sleeping powders and gimmicked the whole affair tighter than a drum. The mysterious guests were never identified.

"And now the guy pops up again!" I exclaimed. "Eggleston, and this time he's love-sick. In my opinion, he's—"

"Let's not rush to any shaky conclusions, Ben. Maybe we'd better have a brief chat with this scholarly gentleman." Out front the reception room door opened. The boss frowned. "More visitors. And I think I recognize those stalwart hoofbeats."

CHAPTER TWO

Homemade Emeralds

THIS TIME it was the law. Lieutenant Bill Malloy and Captain Kunkle. The captain was holding a cheap straw suitcase clamped beneath his arm.

The Dean bowed stiffly, said: "Greetings, sires." He pointed a peremptory index finger at the suitcase under Kunkle's arm. "May I inquire, Captain, as to what you're mothering so tenderly? I seem to sense that this is somehow the object of your visit."

Captain Kunkle took three short steps forward, placed his polished shoes at careful right angles. "First, I wish to state that our

call here is unofficial, you might even say social. The lieutenant and I were having a bit of an argument and, as we happened to be passing, we thought we'd drop in and get you to settle it. Ahem. Now here is our puzzler—you know those wax figures of famous criminals that you see in penny arcades and carnival concessions. Here's what we want to know. What do they look like underneath their clothes? The limbs, for instance. Are they crudely shaped or are they carefully sculptured like the hands and faces?"

"And the color," added Malloy. "Underneath the clothes are those wax people all grayish and drab?"

The Dean was getting nettled. "What is this? Stop beating about the bush!"

Kunkle laid his straw suitcase on the table beneath the lamp, opened the lid. We stared. The captain said hoarsely: "Isn't it grisly? Isn't it horrendous?"

INSIDE, on a nest of shredded newspapers, was an arm. It looked exactly like a human arm, except it was a faded sort of gray. It was a large arm, bent slightly at the elbow, and heavily muscled. I could hardly believe it was artificial. You even could see the texture of the skin and the fingernails looked almost alive. The upper end had been modeled in a gruesome way, as if the arm had been lopped off by a surgical instrument. You could make out veins and arteries and stuff.

The Dean was speechless with admiration. Finally, he spoke. "Gad! This is a pleasure I never expected. I can hardly believe it! It's a gem, isn't it? What a beauty?"

Captain Kunkle looked nauseated. "To me it's highly revolting. What makes it so gray?"

"Because it's so very old. No, this is no makeshift from a carnival concession." The chief closed the suitcase affectionately. "Treat it with great care. It's very valuable. By the way, where did you get it?"

Malloy shifted his feet. He said gruffly: "Thanks, Rock. For what, I don't know. We'll be getting along, eh, Captain?"

"I'll make a deal," the Dean said hastily. "I admit I've been holding back on you. You tell me how it came into your possession and I'll tell you what you've got. That's one of the arms of Mother Manzoli. The Manzoli family were skilled craftsmen in wax figures. They lived in the middle of the eighteenth century in Bologna and specialized in anatomical models. Their works are museum pieces. How came you by this treasure?"

The officers paused on the threshold. Captain Kunkle showed beads of sweat across his brow. "It's all so confusing. This suitcase with its contents was found on the doorstep of the Elite Diner this morning when the proprietor opened up."

The Dean pursed his lips. "The Elite? I don't believe I—"

"A greasy-spoon lunchwagon out by the college. In the University Court neighborhood."

"I see," the Dean answered vaguely. "I see. Well, good afternoon, gentlemen."

After they were gone, the chief said briskly: "Just as I suspected—the Taggart-Eggleston affair is a long way from being closed in the official books. Well, let's be on the move. We've a mighty busy evening ahead of us."

I'm tenderloin born and raised. I didn't go for it. I said: "Boss, this job's too spooky for me. A treasure-hunter wacky over old-time prizefighters. A wax arm. And a college professor doping himself on love-potions!"

"Love-potions?" The Dean looked bewildered. "Oh, you mean the bottle. That wasn't a love-potion. That romantic touch was the product of Miss Marcia Cowen's neurotic imagination." He chuckled. "Strass and oxide of copper and oxide of chromium! That's not out of *Materia Medica*! Strass is a kind of clear glass. The prescription on the bottle is not a prescription at all, but a formula the professor hoped to conceal from prying eyes. It's the traditional formula, tried and true, for *imitation emeralds*! Yes, the venerable scholar, for some reason or other, intends to turn out a batch of homemade gems!"

TO MY surprise, I learned that the Dean was perfectly at home in the University Court neighborhood. It developed, too, that he had made a purely academic study of the district months ago, at the time of the tragedies, and wasn't entirely unfamiliar with the names and addresses of our clients. He was one man you simply couldn't calculate.

The Court was a dreary little community a few blocks from the college campus. A bizarre mixture of the old and the new, of ancient rotting mansions in their groves of gnarled and blighted oaks interlaced with patches of tiny, modern bungalows, trim and spanking in new paint. The sodden afternoon sky was breaking into layered clouds, lipped with dull silver, and the desolate yards of pavements were illumined by a watery, sepulchral light. The Dean slowed up, said: "Well, here we are."

My first look at Professor Eggleston's home clashed with my mental image of it. The gal had referred to it as "an old house on the corner" and I'd conjured up a picture of a stark, ominous place with broken window panes and a front lawn overgrown with weeds. The neat story-and-a-half structure was set up on a terraced, close-clipped plot of grass. It was of white brick and almost clinical in its severity. A small one-room

annex was built out at one side, like a garage, but there was no drive leading from it. "The professor's workshop," the Dean explained. "See. There's a light showing. He's tinkering around at something."

We ascended the tired steps, took a narrow cement walk around the side of the building, and knocked. Leisurely footsteps sounded from within, the door opened.

I goggled at the little man in the doorway. It was difficult to believe that this was the fellow whose name had been jumping into the case so frequently and so unexpectedly at every crook and turn. He was a twisted, dwarfish chap, turnip-shaped, with big shoulders and a chest that dwindled away to scrawny thighs and tiny midget feet. His baggy black suit was rusty with age. A small, round baby head emerged from his tieless collar. He nodded and beamed and wagged his chin in an ecstasy of pleasure at seeing us. "Visitors!" he rhapsodized. "Visitors. Well, I do declare! Come in, gentlemen, come in. Old Eggleston gets so lonely!"

We walked into the workshop.

"Professor Eggleston," the Dean said politely, "I am Wardlow Rock, and this is Benton Matthews, my firebrand assistant. We're detectives. We've come for a bit of information. I understand that since you've retired from teaching you accepted the responsibility of the curatorship of the college museum."

Eggleston seemed pleased. "That's right. So you've heard of me? I'm curator. We're building up quite a valuable accumulation. It's slow work, but we're building it up. . . ."

The Dean sympathized. "Through bequests, eh?"

"That's right. Rich collectors die and leave us their collections."

We took in our surroundings. The workshop was bare, with a bench along one wall, a rack of nondescript tools. On a table in the corner was a screw press with an iron wheel. The Dean strolled over, said with interest: "Binding a book, I observe. You're quite a talented craftsman, sir."

"Rebinding a book, Mr. Rock." Professor Eggleston looked annoyed. "I'm bothered with deathwatches!"

The boss clucked his tongue, suddenly grinned at me. "Don't look so impressed, Ben. Deathwatch sounds macabre but it's simply the proper term for bookworm. When the beetles and their larvae get into a library, they can certainly devastate it. What is this book, sir? And may I ask how long you've had it?"

Eggleston was enjoying the sociability. "It's a rare and valuable volume from my personal library. I've had it for many years. It's a medieval lapidary."

"A lapidary?" The Dean was intent. "Tell me about it."

A GREAT emotion suddenly filled the little professor. He tried unsuccessfully to conceal his excitement. "To you and your friend, jewels are baubles, ornate toys to embellish your garb. The ancients knew differently. Gems, gentlemen, are more than mere stones. They have power, power for good and evil. The wise ones, the scientists of ancient times, understood the ruby and the diamond and the emerald. However, they erred in attributing this inner power of gems to latent demoniacal influence. The scientist of the future will understand the true nature of the energy of gems! Take the mineral radium, sirs. Can anyone deny its brutal force?" He controlled himself. "To answer your question, a lapidary is a treatise on jewels and their peculiar influences on the human body."

The Dean bowed courteously. "A very enlightening discourse, Professor. Er—you say you've had the volume for quite some time?"

"Goodness gracious, yes. For twenty years at least. Everyone seems to ask the same question. Bogardus Keane and Miss Cowen were quite persistent on the point. Even Steve Saxby registered curiosity." Professor Eggleston's baby face broke into a rollicking, cherubic smile. "By the way, you said you are detectives. May I inquire why you honor me with your presence?"

"It's about Anna Morandi Manzoli, the Italian wax sculptress of the eighteenth century." The Dean chose his words carefully. "I've been informed that the college museum has an arm done by that eminent *artiste*. I thought perhaps, as curator, you might remember seeing this piece—"

Professor Eggleston rubbed his stumpy fingers. "You're on the right road, but you've left the cart before the horse. You're no doubt referring to the Simpson collection. Mr. Simpson, an extremely wealthy manufacturer, and one of our most respected alumnae, passed away not long ago and left us his private collection. It's rumored that Simpson, among his other treasures, possessed a Manzoli arm."

"What do you mean, it's rumored? Haven't—"

"No, we haven't received the stuff yet. It should be along any day now."

The Dean looked puzzled. "Most private collections have a catalog."

"That's true. Indeed they do. But Mr. Simpson considered catalogs barbaric and impersonal. He loved his art objects as though they were—"

The Dean spoke casually. "Generally, after a death come the appraisers. I wonder how Mr. Simpson's collection avoided such an invoice?"

Eggleston said helpfully: "It appears that Mr. Simpson was intending to erect a tiny

museum on his estate. He had the stuff crated up, ready to move. Nobody bothered to unpack it. They're shipping it along to the college in the original crates."

We picked up our hats, prepared to leave. The Dean paused in the doorway. "I want to thank you for an edifying visit, sir. Believe me, I don't intend to run a subject into the ground, but this Simpson collection—did it contain any rare volumes, such as, say, lapidaries?"

The dwarfish little man contorted his neck affably. "I wouldn't know."

"Did it contain any priceless gems, such as rare historical emeralds?"

"Quite possibly." Professor Eggleston glowed happily. "We'll find out when the crates get here, won't we? Good day, gentlemen, good day."

Outside, on the sidewalk, I got my brain to working. We walked along a bit in silence. Finally, I said: "This job's shaping up fast, isn't it? Like you always claim, if you get enough facts the picture materializes all by itself. You know who I've been thinking about, chief? Sam the Switchman. I bet you ten to one he's got a finger in this somewhere. What say we drop in on him?"

"And just who is Samuel the Switchman?" The Dean laughed, added seriously: "No, Benton, this is no time to be introducing new personalities. Let's not fly off at tangents. Saxby, Eggleston, Keane and Cowen—three merry gentlemen and a lonesome maiden. Somewhere within this charming little group of cozy humans lurks the lethiferous motive which—" He cut his eye at me, remarked queerly: "Is it possible that you've reached some sort of conclusion so soon, that you've already solved the case?"

I looked innocent, said: "To quote lovable old Professor Eggleston, I wouldn't know. I'll give you a hint, though. How are you making out on that imitation emeralds formula? Break that down and you've got the motive."

"I've been trying to," the Dean said, nettled. "There's something devilishly elusive about it. I think I've got it and then it evades me. Frankly, I fear we'll have to garner a bit more information before it makes sense." We turned from the pavement, through a pair of low pink boulder gateposts, found ourselves on a broad, landscaped lawn. "The domicile of Mr. Stephen Saxby," the Dean announced gustily. "We shall now see what we shall see!"

It was a big, lumpish house of gray fieldstone and red Spanish tiles, set in a scraggly clump of silver poplars. It looked like money. The Dean took a dirty envelope and a pencil stub from his breast pocket, made a quick, swashbuckling crisscross of lines. "This is University Court, Ben. These are the resi-

dences of Keane and Miss Cowen. This is Saxby's. Here, where I make the X, is the late Miss Taggart's. On this corner, back here, is Eggleston's. Do you observe that our principals reside in a rough circle about the Taggart place? Let's always keep this diagram in mind." Before I could retort he was off up the drive.

I followed him onto the impressive flagstone porch. He dropped the knocker on its escutcheon, said from the corner of his mouth: "Hold on to your hat. Here we go again!"

CHAPTER THREE

S. Saxby's Secret Sorrow

THE fellow that answered our knock was lanky, slight-framed, with the gaunt hatchet face of an incurable busybody. He had a lock of tousled hair over his bony forehead, an oversized aristocratic, chisel-bladed nose that flared into two hairy nostrils over a fussy, V-shaped mustache, and a team of hungry little brown eyes that skipped ceaselessly over you, here and there, never meeting yours, always checking and analyzing and estimating. I wouldn't have trusted him to run up to the drugstore and bring back the deposit on a pop bottle. He was wearing a showy,

quilted dressing-robe and had a stag-and-hound meerschaum drooping from his clenched jaw. He waited hostilely for us to explain ourselves.

The Dean said pleasantly: "It's a beautiful afternoon, isn't it, Mr. Saxby? May we step in a moment? We've come to certify you."

Saxby's malevolent little brown eyes bugged out. "Certify me? Who the hell are you, anyway? You mean you think I'm balmy?"

"Ah-ah-ah!" The boss shook a reproving finger. "We didn't say that—yet. There have been reports, you know, and—ahem—complaints. We're employed by Mr. J. Bogardus Keane. He asked us to sort of—er—examine you. The procedure is perfectly painless. It's rather like a guessing game. May we . . ."

Saxby's rodent lips writhed in fury. When he spoke, his voice was icy calm. He said: "So Keane's behind this? Just come inside, please. I'd like to do a little examining on my own."

We entered a small ante chamber. Inside, the house didn't seem so grand—it was jerry-built, flashy but cheap. The rug on the floor was imitation Oriental. To our left, the staircase ascended upward to the second floor. The massive newelpost with its ram's-horn was imitation mahogany, and so was the banister. It was here in the hallway, alongside a cheap

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reproduction of an antique grandfather's clock, that we saw our first prizefighter. This was something different—a genuine collector's item. The Dean strolled forward and examined it with interest. Matted in the center of a rather large gilded frame, it hung exhibition-height, about on the level with your eyes. It was the picture of a barrel-chested boxer, an old-timer, with handle-bar mustaches. He was dressed in tight pants, naked above the waist, and held his fists raised stiffly in a boxer's guard.

"Figg!" The Dean exclaimed. "The king of the bare-knucklers! That's a nice print, sir. Gracious, I'd like to own it!"

Saxby said: "This way, please."

We turned right, through an archway, and followed our host into a great parlor. Same old tawdry imitation of wealth—huge imitation marble fireplace, more imitation Oriental rugs. In this room, there were more prizefighter pictures, one on each of the four walls. We passed through the parlor, through an open door at the rear, and found ourselves in Mr. Saxby's cut-rate den.

The cubbyhole was offensively swanky. Goat hides on the floor, a bookcase loaded with gaudy bindings, mail order mooseheads and Indian blankets. Suddenly, I realized that Saxby had run out of prizefighters. There were no boxing pictures in the den.

OUR hatchet-faced host gestured us rudely to chairs, sat down confronting us. "So you're hirelings of Beanie Keane's, eh? So now he's trying to sock me in the nut foundry! First he steals my gal and now he's trying to—"

The Dean cleared his throat insinuatingly. "We're men of justice and honor. And ethics. We desire to represent only the most worthy of clients." He rolled his eyes, added slyly: "For a minor increase in honorarium we can be persuaded to, well, shift our allegiance."

Saxby shook his head. "No soap. You don't scare me. There's no reason for me to deal with you at all. Here's the set-up, as I get it. Keane and Marcia came to you, asked you to fiddle around and frighten me off. To tell the truth, I don't give a hoot or the kid any more, but I don't like being pushed around. We're engaged, I've got letters to prove it, and I'm damned if I'm going to release her under pressure. Men can sue for breach of promise, too, you know!"

The Dean assumed a wheedling attitude. "Why not forget the girl entirely? Why not sign a paper I've got here in my pocket, rejecting all claims on her? Be a good sport. Don't force us to publicize your—er—eccentricities."

Saxby purpled. "Eccentricities! So that's the frame-up. I'm as sane as you are."

"Miss Marcia doesn't say you're completely gone. She feels, however, that it's sneaking up on you. She seems to feel that Professor Eggleston is somehow upsetting you. A healthy young man like you under the spell of an old cat's-pot like—"

"I'm not under anyone's spell, and Marcia damn well knows it!" Saxby's jaw pivoted from side to side in suppressed rage. "Such nonsense! How can she say such things! She associates with the professor as much as I do, and lately, more. As a matter of fact, it was at one of the professor's Hello-Neighbor parties that she met that fat slob, Beanie Keane!"

"Just a second," the Dean put in. "I don't quite follow you. What's this about Hello-Neighbor parties?"

"It's a goofy name, isn't it? Just the kind of idea an academic recluse would dig up. Some weeks ago a handful of us University Court residents received notes from Eggleston. He said that he was getting lonesome in his old age and was ashamed of not knowing any of his neighbors any better. He suggested that we gather at his house once a week for old-fashioned corn-popping and horse-and-buggy sociability. Well, we felt sorry for the old boy and accepted his invitation. We've been meeting ever since. Had a meeting last night, as a matter of fact. Pretty boring, but it seems to cheer him up."

"Last night?" The Dean arched his eyebrows. "Then he showed you the book he was binding?"

"He didn't show it to me—I happened to notice it. Funny thing about that book. He says the bugs are getting in his library and that he's rebinding it to protect it. Well, for one thing, he's got at least a thousand volumes. One at a time like that is ridiculous. Secondly, you don't strip the back off a rare book, as you would a banana peel, to 'protect' it. That's sacrilege and would completely devalue it. However, if you had a stolen book, say with a name or other identifying marks on the end-papers, you might find it advisable to do just that—rebind it."

THE Dean wasn't listening. He asked casually: "About this Hello-Neighbor club, it actually fascinates me. By any chance did the late Miss Taggart belong to your little group?"

"Yes." Saxby nodded. "She did. Eggleston organized it just after she'd had all those unfortunate doings at her home. At the time, we all suspected that he was really thinking of her, that he was attempting to cheer her up through her period of adversity. When she died from too many sleeping powders, we all chipped in and bought her a big wreath. Now, we don't much miss her."

"Nor she, you." The Dean grinned. "Well,

Saxby, though I wouldn't want to be quoted, you seem perfectly sane to me. My personal advice is that you release the girl to Bogardus if you really want to get even with her. But you seem to have contrary opinions on the subject. By the way, off the record, you know she can make out a pretty good case of lunacy against you. She claims you're entertaining delusions that you're a treasure-hunter, that you've been out mapping the surrounding community."

"That's true. I like charts. They're my hobby."

"Phooey, sir!"

Saxby smiled wryly. "Take it or leave it."

"We'll leave it for the time being. Now, Miss Marcia Cowen is most concerned over these prizefighter pictures which embellish your halls and chambers. She declares that she's quizzed you on this point and you respond that you've suddenly taken an interest in old-time bare-knuckle boxing. "Now why did you hang these boxers? There must be a reason. What is it?"

Saxby looked embarrassed. He said quietly: "I'm going to do a strange thing, I'm going to tell the truth. I've got a quirk in my brain, had it ever since I was a kid. I've got to be a bigshot, put on the dog. I have a small income and I spend it all on front. I picked up this house for a song. It's a rat-trap, an orange crate. It looks good on the outside but in here it's cheap as hell! Floors sag, baseboards don't meet, and so on. I try to cover everything up but it seems as though every few days something else goes bad on me. I had those old prints up in a trunk. They're mementos of better days. I was forced to get them out and put them to work. Take a look at this."

We followed him into the parlor. He swung a picture out on its wire, gave us a glimpse behind it. The plaster had crumbled from the laths in a patch as large as your hand. He replaced the frame. "If I have it replastered I'll have to have the entire room repapered, and the same out in the hall. And I don't have the kale. It would be torture for me to stare at those telement house blemishes!"

The Dean asked: "How long has it been since these walls got this way? You imply that it happened rather abruptly."

He took us to the front door. "Abruptly, hell. The Saxby mansion has been slowly disintegrating ever since I moved in. To answer your question, I should say those walls went bad on me about a month or so ago. I remember it was while I was attending one of Professor Eggleston's parties. Keane and Miss Cowen walked as far as the gate with me. I asked them in for cake and coffee but they declined. When I got inside, I was glad they didn't come. I would have died of mortification if they'd witnessed my actual poverty."

The Dean said gently: "My friends somehow enjoy looking at cracked walls and patched wallpaper. I guess they just don't know any better. Good afternoon, sir."

ALL the way back to town, the chief seemed smugly self-satisfied. I grabbed the old pump handle and got to work on him but the more I questioned him, the tighter he clammed up. Finally, I said: "Boss, I've changed my mind. Eggleston's out and Saxby's in. Yep, Saxby's our baby. You know that patch of bare lath behind the picture he showed us. Let me tell you something. That plaster didn't fall off—it was chiseled off. Saxby removed it himself!"

"It's a man-made job, all right," the Dean agreed. "But it brings up a delicate problem which we'd better not go into just at this moment." He came to a stop at the curb, said: "You go back to the apartment. I'm half expecting our clients to make a return visit. Not in pairs, this time, but in singles. I have a feeling that they were—er—inhibited this afternoon by each other's presence. Take them as they come, find out what they have to add to their original story, and give them the bum's rush. I'd rather they'd not meet." He paused. "And keep an eye peeled. It might interest you to learn that we're in deadly peril. I'll be along shortly. Just a little stroll to settle my nerves—and I'll join you."

Nerves. He had no more nerves than that wax arm in Captain Kunkle's straw suitcase. Always, when a case really got rolling and the pressure began to gather, he'd amble off and leave me hanging on to the safety valve. He had friends in all walks of life, folks I'd never seen—bartenders, elevator operators, newsboys. When he needed some particular tidbit of information, he'd fluff me off and do his circuit alone. He usually came back with the dope, too. I never asked him where he'd been. Confidential information was just that to the Dean, and wild horses couldn't force him to betray a friend.

All at once, I had an idea. I put on an act. "I'm just a bond-boy," I griped. "Just a peon. Go back to the apartment, he says loftily, and I needs must fly. I'm nothing but a robot, and he's the master carrying my brain around in his watch-case." I groveled, asked servilely: "And which route must I select on my return, sire? Shall I go by Cherry Street or shall I go by Fourth?"

He said frostily: "Quit clowning. Go any way you like. This is no time for amateur theatricals, this is murder!"

So I returned home via Dorrigan's Alley. Of course it was ten blocks or so out of the way, but Sam the Switchman kept shop in Dorrigan's Alley.

The neighborhood was bleak and grim,

squalid with run-down eateries and cut-throat hockshops. Tenderloin—and lowgrade tenderloin at that. The setting sun struck through the cloud splits in the sodden sky, painted the shabby storefronts in lavender-and-rose in the exact iridescent tint of putrifying meat. The sidewalks were deserted. Here, the denizens didn't leave their holes until nightfall. I only hoped I came out of this all right. The Dean had one strict rule—no free-lancing on my part—and I knew he'd really melt my ears down if I bungled it. I turned at a dingy second-hand clothing emporium, and entered the brick-paved channellmouth of the alley. I'd peddled papers as a kid and since then, in one way or another, I'd knocked about our fair city until I knew it pretty well. This was one section I kept away from.

Dorrigan's Alley was plenty mean.

Just a half-block long, and dead end, it was a warren of filthy flats, deadfalls and hide-outs. A sullen double row of blank, blistered doors set in the windowless brick facing. I poked my way through the littered trash, the foul ashcans and the stinking refuse, and began counting doors. The Switchman's, I'd heard, was on the ground floor of Number Seven—down toward the end of the line.

The guy's real name was Sam Franzell and he was one of the town's leading fences. The story, as I'd gotten it, was that he was strictly upper bracket, that if there was any big stuff floating around you could bet that the Switchman had taken a peep at it. He was reputed to be as cagy as a vixen—and dangerous.

I twisted the nicked china doorknob, stepped into a dank hall lit by a feeble, fly-specked bulb. If Mr. Saxby was allergic to cracked plaster and stained wallpaper, he should have seen this place. I walked the length of the vile corridor, knocked at the door at the end of the hall. A cheery, melodic voice sung out an invitation to enter.

THE Switchman's office was rigged up like a flophouse bedroom. The warped floorboards were bare of rugs, there was an iron-pipe bed, a dresser with peeled veneer, a kitchen table—and a safe. Like I said, safes used to be my profession. This box stood in the corner and was of the vintage of the Spanish-American War. Beside the safe was a closet door.

Franzell was seated at the table. He was a sloppy-looking fat man, unshaven, with a wet, pendulous under-lip and smoky green eyes. His fawn shirt was wrinkled and dirty and he was dressed in a shoddy gray suit, like a respectable tradesman in hard luck. He had a deck of cards in his hand and was dealing out a little Canfield. There was a score-pad by his elbow. He dropped the cards on the table-top, wheeled around on his chair seat and

asked: "You the rent collector?" His rich baritone was jovial, ingratiating.

I laughed. "Hardly. I got hot news for you. My brother-in-law sent me."

"Who," the Switchman asked blandly, "is this brother-in-law?"

"An old reliable customer of yours, Mr. Franzell. A guy that's got your best interests at heart. We'll let it stand at that. He's been here to see you many a time."

Franzell waited, deadpan.

For no reason at all, I kept worrying about that old-time safe. A big dealer like the Switchman would have a better box than that. I glanced about the walls. They were bare, no tell-tale pictures. Then I doped it. He had a floor-safe. He had a floor-safe—in the closet. I'd installed many a similar job myself in the past. I said: "This is for free, just to be sure we're being honest with each other, Mr. Franzell. A college professor named Eggleston is all set to make up a batch of phony emeralds. Does that make sense to you?"

Did it? He batted his eyes like a frog snapping at a horsefly. "No, friend, it makes no sense whatever. I never heard of anyone named Eggleston, and I'm not interested in emeralds, genuine or fake. However, as a token of mutual trust I give you Doctor Mary and Doctor John. How are we doing?"

I frowned. "Not so good. I don't get it."

The Switchman fingered his juicy hanging lip in reverie. "Let's go back to the beginning. I'd dearly love to hear a bit more about this brother-in-law. Just who did you say he was?"

"Sorry. No can do. He's just a gink that trades with you. Once you did him a favor—now he wants to even things up." I lowered my voice, spoke urgently: "The cops are wise. They know you've been tampering with the Simpson collection. They don't know how you did it, but they know you've managed somehow to get to it! If you've still got the stuff in your possession you'd better put it back where it came from, and quick. The law's about ready to crack down!"

Franzell shook his flabby jowls sorrowfully. "I swear on my dear mother's grave that I've never heard of the Simpson collection. Frankly, I consider it a figment of your enterprising imagination. I believe I finally make you. You almost fooled me for a moment. You're just another live-wire sharpshooter trying to move in on me! It's an old story to me, son. And, as usual, I've got a good answer. I'm going to hate to do this, but a man in my position, you know—I've got a reputation to keep up. . ."

While he was rambling on, I happened to take a gander at the pad on the table by the deck of cards. He hadn't been totaling his Canfield wins—it was a pinochle score, for

two players! One column was headed *Me*, that was Franzell, and the other said *Virgil*. I'd busted into a sociable little game. And where was Virgil?

I thought I knew, and I didn't enjoy the thought. Virgil was behind me, in the clothes-closet, no doubt holding a bead between my shoulderblades. I decided to scam. I said carelessly: "You got me wrong, Mr. Franzell. I'm trying to be a pal. If you feel that way about it, I'll be going. So-long. I've said my piece. You don't seem to relish my presence—"

"But I do!" The fat man smiled nastily. "I do relish your presence. In fact, I'm going to request that you remain." He raised his voice, called softly: "Oh, Virgil. I seem to be needing you."

There was the sound of footsteps behind me. I half turned my head, got a glimpse of the open closet filled with coat-hangers and dirty linen, saw Virgil ambling toward me.

I know a gunman when I see one. This specimen was crying for trouble. He was the smart-aleck type, and that's the worst, resplendent in flashy tweeds and with a fancy marceled hair-do that had everything but ribbons and perfume. He held a big-caliber automatic in his bony, effeminate hand. He ignored me, asked: "What's on your mind, Mr. Franzell?"

"Take him out to the quarry."

Just like that. No arguments, no long sermons. I began to sweat. I said calmly: "O.K., let's go, Virgil. I want to talk to you."

The dapper gunman smirked. "What you want to tell me?"

"I want to talk to you about my brother-in-law. He's got quite a noodle on his shoulders. Ben, he says to me, the Switchman's a funny one. Take a big-shot fence like Franzell—imagine all the dough he has to keep on hand! Yet he's only got a tin-can safe that you could open with a tackhammer. It isn't logical, he says."

Virgil was entranced. He nudged me with his gun muzzle. "I ain't interested. Let's get going." His tone was nervous, excited.

I went on. "My brother-in-law is a good friend of Mr. Franzell's, but he's quite a curious fellow. Every time he's been here, he sort of cases the place. The safe there in the corner, he thinks, is a blind. The money's hidden somewhere else. Where? Well, my brother-in-law favors the clothes-closet. He says—"

Virgil cut me off. "On your way, bud. Let's get going." He spoke in a monotone but he couldn't conceal a note of eagerness.

Franzell made up his mind. His big, mobile face had been twisting itself in indecision. "Put the gun away, Virgil," he ordered. "We'll give him another chance. I just wanted to show him I mean business." He ad-

dressed me: "You—get the hell out of here! Keep out of my affairs! And tell that brother-in-law of yours to button up his big mouth before he catches himself some misery."

The Switchman's roly-poly face wasn't so merry now. His smoky green eyes bored into mine in cloudy hate. I said: "Methinks I will now promenade. Good day all."

When I hit the street, my armpits were wringing wet. It was a mighty close call in anybody's book, and I knew it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Highbrow Pocket Pool

DUSK had fallen by the time I returned to our apartment. From the light in the reception room window, I saw we had a guest.

J. Bogardus Keane, the retired self-styled tycoon, this time alone, was giving the poor folks an encore of his exalted personality. Obnoxious in his hound's-tooth plaids, he was posed on the loveseat as though it were a throne—elegant wrist poised on meaty thigh, his big red chin ensconced impressively in the cupped palm of his other hand. No telling how long he'd been holding the position. He looked as if some serf had swiped his crown and scepter and someone was going to get scolded. His head reared back as I entered, his tiny porcelain eyeballs popped open in their little sacs of withered skin. He said angrily: "You've kept me waiting twenty-four minutes and thirty-one seconds!"

I used one of the Dean's favorite tricks. When clients got high-horse with him, he put them in the old mortar and ground them down to a fine powder. I said absently: "Oh, hi there, whatchumacallit! Come back tomorrow. This is our busy day."

That rocked him. He changed his manner to a wheedle, said: "I'm Mr. Keane, remember? I paid you a fifty-dollar-retainer this noon. You're working for me, don't you recall? Miss Cowen and I—"

"The lady, I remember—you, I forget. What's on your mind?"

"Ah, yes. Sweet Marcia!" He tried unsuccessfully to appear boyishly bashful. "What a lucky chap I am to be favored by her tender affection! Which happens to bring me to the point of my visit. On our earlier call, under the stress of emotion, Miss Cowen got her story a bit jangled. Now if you're going to help us, and her in particular, I felt that I'd better drop by and straighten things out—just for the record. You see—"

"Make it snappy. This is after closing hours. I'm getting ready to lock up." Closing hours, I thought. What a blissful pipe-dream!

He could talk fast and sensibly when he

had to. "It's this. I believe Miss Cowen stated that these little visits she's been paying to Eggleston's—you know, the button-sewing and patching and so forth—were our idea, her's and mine. It's an act of sacrificing charity on her part and I only wish I could share in the glory. However, the actual facts are a bit different. I have the definite impression that these calls were started at the professor's instigation, not Miss Cowen's. Maybe a phone call, maybe a note. The professor's a great note writer—"

"What about the old man's puppy love?"

"That part's true enough. He begins throwing calf eyes every time she heaves into sight. Another thing—he has his own goofy pet name for her. She says whenever they're alone he always calls her Doctor Mary. It's so strange it scares her. He just ogles her and it's Doctor Mary this and Doctor Mary that!"

"No kiddin'? Does he, by any chance, refer to you as Doctor John?"

Keane looked irritated. "Never. I'm a man, sir. Men don't call each other by pet names. I'll be extremely relieved when you people get this all cleared up. I didn't say so this noon, but I feel sinister forces at work. There's much more here than shows on the surface. I'm getting the gradual impression that the goings-on out at University Court, the Hello-Neighbor Club and all that, are somehow linked with that Taggart tragedy! I feel that perhaps there's more to come!"

"And what," I asked sternly, in the Dear's best manner, "and what brings you to that morbid conclusion?"

"There's a man in our neighborhood who has been spying on us all. This person has been sneaking around, prying. He's been in my backyard, and in Marcia's, and no doubt Professor Eggleston has seen him prowling about on his premises, too. When he's confronted and questioned as to his disgusting behavior, he laughs brazenly and spouts nonsense about searching for treasure. Please don't ask me to name him. He's an old beau of Marcia's and I feel it would be more proper to keep him anonymous."

"You mean Saxby?" I yawned. "You told me all about him before."

"Gracious! Did I? Did his name slip through my lips?" Keane got to his feet. "I'll be getting along. Er—I never hired detectives before. What's the customary time, I mean how long before I can expect results?"

I ushered him to the door, said as he departed: "An inferior agency can usually crack a simple case like this in about three months. We're twice as good as most agencies so we should be able to do it in twice the time. Give us six months and I guarantee—"

He stamped down the hall, puffing and snorting.

IT was the Dean's habit, when a tough case really began to barrel, to forego all thought of food. The Lord only knows how many meals I've skipped since I've been with him. Bearing this in mind, I took advantage of the lull which followed the exit of J. Bogardus. I retired to the kitchen, tossed up a stack of sandwiches and brewed a pot of coffee. I'd just placed the grub on the table when the chief came in through the back door. Without a word of greeting, he pulled up a chair, sat down, and cleaned the platter before I realized what was happening. By sheer luck, I salvaged a child's portion for myself. I wrestled him for the coffee pot, said angrily: "Hey!"

"I need sustenance, Benton," he explained amiably. "I've been out on the campus, poking around in cellars and so on. I found it. It was back in a sort of sub-basement under the old abandoned Library Building. Gad, it was a sight to behold! I phoned Malloy, disguised my voice, and reported it. Has Bogardus Keane been in?"

I nodded.

"The girl?"

"Nuh-huh. Not yet."

He yanked out his huge antique silver watch. "We'll give her a quarter of an hour. And then we must be off. Things are crystalizing. It's about all over now. It's a peculiar affair. I know who, but I don't know why!"

I saw he was trying to suck me in but I couldn't help it. I asked: "What did you find in the basement of the College Library? Another corpse?"

"You need a bromide," he declared solicitously. "You're developing acute necrophilia." We heard the *clickety-clack* of spike heels in the corridor. "There's Miss Marcia Cowen. And she sounds like she's loaded for bear!"

We reached the reception room just as she came steaming through the door. That fake attitude of helpless feminine humility had completely disappeared. Her boyish little figure was tense. She asked curtly: "Has Mr. Keane been here?"

"Beanie?" The Dean knotted his brows. "I haven't seen him. If he came, I was out. Why?"

She looked relieved. "I'm glad I got here first. If you should see him and he has anything to say, don't believe it. I swear, I have the worst luck with my men. Steve Saxby goes lunatic on me and I shift to Beanie. Beanie welcomes me with open arms, so to speak, and at first we get along O.K. The last few days it's been different. I've had the queer sensation that he's using me somehow, that I'm a kind of a tool. Golly, I think I'll go hogwild and marry Old Eggleston!"

The Dean appeared mildly amused. "You feel Mr. Keane is using you? In what way?"

"It's hard to explain. Take Steve Saxby. Beanie rants and raves over him and asks me dozens of questions about him. At first I put it down to jealousy but he's so persistent that sometimes I get the idea he's not really envious at all, that he's just pretending, using that as an excuse to quiz me about my ex-fiancé. I even get the impression that he doesn't care for me at all and that his only interest in me is my previous relationship with Steve. Now Professor Eggleston comes in for abuse. It's the same thing all over again, like with Steve. What did the professor say to me, how did he act, did he give me any presents?" Her delicate jaw went hard.

"I'm not particularly adept in the field of domestic relations," the Dean said timidly, "but I can't help wondering why, if Beanie's so nauseating, you don't boot him out of your pretty little life?"

"And go back to Steve Saxby? Hardly!" She looked suddenly frightened. "Steve's essentially a dangerous man. He's vindictive and he holds a grudge. Like I keep telling you, he's stark, raving mad! What do you think of this?" She opened her pocketbook, handed the chief a sheet of note-paper. He laid it on the table, studied it. I joined him.

It was a diagram made in heavy pencil. There was a longish rectangle and on the inside of the rectangle, diagonal lines cut criss-cross from one side to another. At the corners of the rectangle, and halfway down each side, were small circles. Down at the bottom of the paper was written: *Mercator's Projection, 19 feet above sea level. Scale one quarter inch to one foot. S. Saxby, cartographer.*

"What in the heck is it?" I asked.

The Dean was befuddled. "Believe it or not, it's a map of a pool table! This heavy rectangle is the table, these little circles are the pockets, these lines must represent banks or caroms. I can't seem to figure it. This Mercator's Projection, sea level, and so forth, is all malarkey, of course, to confuse the issue." Suddenly he grinned. "Gad! I've got it. Think of that!" He turned to the girl. "How did this come into your hands?"

"One night, some weeks ago, while I was still going with Steve, I dropped in to visit him. He had a cold and was back in his study amusing himself by working on this. When I left, I hooked it. I don't know why, except I guess even then I realized his mind was buckling."

"Does Steve have a pool table?"

She shook her head.

"Do you?"

"Heavens, no." She considered. "Beanie Keane has one, up in his attic. It's past the state of being usable. The cushions are no good, the felt is all torn. Why?"

The Dean was brusque. "I must ask you to leave now. Here are my final instructions. Be at Steve Saxby's tonight at nine. And bring Mr. J. Bogardus Keane."

She faltered. "Beanie won't come. He loathes—"

"I don't mean for you to put a halter on him and drive him there. Just phone him that you're spending the evening with your ex-fiancé. He'll come galloping up, tossing his mane, flinging his fetlocks. And don't tell anyone you've been here."

After she had gone, I began to gripe. "Now it's a map of a pool table! Before it was a wax arm, imitation emeralds, and the mystery of a third andiron!"

He looked disgusted. "Are you still harping on that third andiron? Andirons come in sets of two. It's never been the mystery of the third—it's actually the mystery of the fourth! Where is the extra one?"

I was just about to tell him about Keane's visit and my adventure with Sam the Switchman when Lieutenant Bill Malloy walked in on us.

MALLOY had an ominous cat-and-the-canary gleam in his eye, as though he finally had the Dean just where he wanted him. He said softly: "I'm glad I caught you in, Rock. Remember that Manzoli arm the skipper had, the one that was found on the doorstep of the lunchwagon out at University Court? Well, there have been developments along that line. Would you be interested?"

The Dean nodded eagerly. "Indeed I would. What—"

"After we left you this noon, the skipper checked on your story. He found out that the arm was really a museum piece, like you said, and that it came from the collection of a man up-state, a rich hombre, recently deceased, named Simpson. This Simpson, it appears, left his art treasures to the local college. We got in touch with the university museum and they informed us that the stuff was no doubt in transit, was expected daily."

"Gad. Think of that!"

"Yep. Well, tonight comes the payoff. The janitor of the college phones us that he's discovered some big boxes in the basement of the Library Building. We go out and find this Simpson collection. The crates had been ripped open, the stuff laying around on the floor. We haven't been able to learn as yet if anything's missing—other than the arm, of course. How does it sound?"

"Very intriguing, I must admit." The Dean seemed entranced.

"You haven't heard it all, at that." Malloy grinned. "The college janitor told us he hadn't phoned."

"Maybe," the Dean suggested suavely,

"it was the assistant janitor, Lieutenant."

"Maybe it was. I'd like to have a talk with him. He used such fancy language—all loaded with expressions like Jove! and Gad!"

"Jove, sir!" the Dean exclaimed. "I can hardly believe it."

"Rock," Malloy said quietly, "how did you find that cache? The express company says it was delivered last week and signed for by a Dr. Douglass. There's no Douglass on the faculty. What does it all mean?"

"It's the sequel to those deaths two months ago, out at Miss Taggart's. It means murder!"

Malloy flinched. "The Taggart case again, eh? I hoped that mess was settled with the old lady's suicide."

The Dean scoffed. "Suicide. Phooey! You're just taking the easiest solution. Listen, according to you, either the two victims committed suicide or they were slain by their hostess. Who, in that case, committed—oh, baloney. It was murder, three times. Miss Taggart was a victim—not a killer."

"And the slayer's still at large?" Malloy was hesitant. "I can't say that I agree. The old lady must have done it. Here's why. Recall the old lady took her cat, Ophelia, out for a stroll every evening about eleven? The conclusion was that the shots let loose while she was gone. Perhaps. But—we asked a few questions around the neighborhood. This so-called walk Miss Taggart always took wasn't a real walk at all, just a turn up to the corner and back. Grant that the pistol went off while she was out of hearing. Even then she must have returned right on the heels of the detonations. According to you, the killer must have been in the house at that moment. And he must have stayed. Remember he rifled the bodies and burned wallets and such—that takes time."

"Could be, Lieutenant."

"Unlikely. Here's the reason. The old lady always locked all the doors from the inside with turned keys. The keys were untouched the next morning. The windows have old-fashioned clamps that hold them half open. No chance of a prowler escaping there. And furthermore, the old lady was a light sleeper. Her room was on the ground floor at the foot of the stairs. She was hopped up over having strangers with her and swore she didn't sleep a wink, said that the upstairs hall and the staircase squeak at the slightest provocation. She heard absolutely nothing."

"Maybe," the Dean said, leering horribly, "maybe he's still there! Living in the cabinet under the kitchen sink. A loathesome creature, ragged, bearded, creeping out at night, stalking through the old mansion to stretch his legs. Half-man, half-ape, living on rats and moths and bats!"

Malloy looked shocked. "That's no way to talk!" He picked up his hat, arose.

The Dean said: "Don't go away mad. Actually, Lieutenant, it's about finished. Meet me tonight at nine, at Steve Saxby's out in University court. Bring Professor Eggleston. We shall see what we shall see."

CHAPTER FIVE

Doctor Mary and Doctor John

THE instant Malloy left us, and we were alone again, I got it off my chest. I gave the boss a detailed report of my experiences in the interim, while we had been separated. I started off with Keane and then, because I couldn't see any way out of it, I made a clean breast of the matter and related my adventure at the Switchman's. I expected him to fly off the handle in a tantrum of violent sarcasm—he was mighty temperamental about me free-lancing—but, to my astonishment, he patted me on the back as if I were a water-spaniel and said: "Good boy, good boy!"

All at once his eyes went blank. He looked as though he'd been socked on the skull with a maul. He said: "Do my ears deceive me? Did you say Doctor Mary and Doctor John? Did Malloy say Douglass?" He rubbed his jaw in trancelike concentration. "It's the master-key, Ben!" he exclaimed jubilantly. "Just a minute, please, while I make sure."

He hurried into the office, came back with a thick paper-bound volume. I got an upside-down look at the title while he thumbed the pages. *Catalog Historical Gems, Private Collections, Foundations, Etc. 1933-1943*. He found his place, read eagerly: "Doctors Mary and John Douglass. Private Traveling Collection. Lectures by Owners. Exhibits, preferably academic, can be arranged by contacting owners, Two Stag Ranch, R.F.D. 2, Meadville, Colorado." He closed the book, laid it on the mantelpiece. "That does it. Now we know the motive. That explains Professor Eggleston and his formula for imitation emeralds! And Steve Saxby's prizefighters! Let's go!"

Darkness had settled down over the desolate landscape by the time we paid our second visit to University Court. If the neighborhood had been dreary in daylight, it was downright sepulchral in the shifting moon-glow. We passed by Saxby's, and the sidestreet where Keane and Miss Cowen lived. I figured we were heading for Old Eggleston's, but we passed the professor's white brick cottage, too.

A block beyond Eggleston's, we turned left and, after three more squares, left once more. Abruptly, the chief stopped. "The Taggart house," he said quietly. "Keep your wits

about you. Anything can happen from here on in!"

All afternoon we'd been skirting around it—finally, we'd come to case it. Two months had elapsed since the deaths. I couldn't believe it might hold any importance at this late date.

I didn't like its looks. A cumbersome old frame mansion, it sat back in a weedy lawn, waiting for the gentle hand of time to shove in its sagging roof. It must have been a knockout in its day but now its gingerbread scrollwork had rotted from the cornices, its clapboards were warped and cupped from the siding. I followed the boss across the unkempt yard to the rear. We stood a moment in the shadow of a grape arbor while he scrutinized the back of the building. He did it leisurely, studying the dilapidated facing from eaves to foundations.

Directly opposite us was a one-story summer kitchen built flush to the side. The kitchen roof sloped up twelve feet or so to a row of three second-story windows. Three black windows, like three missing teeth. I said: "We don't need to go in, do we? We can solve it by just peeping, can't we? Maybe we should have brought camp stools."

The Dean was unruffled. "Peeping, like everything else, has its place, my boy." He stepped into the moonlight and approached the summer kitchen. I tailed along.

The summer kitchen had no basement and there was a kind of lattice grille between the floor joists and the ground. The Dean reached down, removed a section of this latticework. He bent forward, threw the beam of his flashlight under the porch. "Ah," he said. "This is more like it." I stooped over, took a look.

There, on the ancient, spongy earth, lay the fourth andiron. An owl andiron—and beside it was a neat coil of hair-thin wire. "Well, well," I murmured. "Now we got it, what do we do with it?" The Dean straightened up. "We leave it where it is. Let's get inside. I want to see the murder room."

The lock on the back door was an old-time mortise job. I opened it with a dime-store skeleton key. Old houses have a queer, stale human smell. We went through a high-ceilinged kitchen, into the front hall. There, as Malloy had said, next to the parlor and at the foot of the stairs, was Miss Taggart's bedroom. We ascended to the second floor.

THE murder room was at the end of the corridor and hadn't been touched since the slayings. It was a melancholy tomb—eighteen-ninety flowered wallpaper, a red rug, dusty knick-knacks and faded crayon portraits. The three andirons were still in the fireplace, and so was the patch of window screen. The bloody bedclothes were gone, of course, and the mattress had been turned over to hide

the blemish. The Dean made straight for the window. I heard him chuckle. "Observe," he whispered. "Observe and ponder."

A small awning hook had been screwed in the center of the trim above the window. Smugly, he showed me the hole in the top of the upper sash. It was a tiny auger hole and if he hadn't pointed it out, I would have missed it. "From a legal point of view," he declared, "this is a momentous discovery. It proves that the murder was done by an outsider who, as a consequence, is still at large."

"How—how. . ."

"Miss Taggart came home and went to bed while the slayer was still in the house. The slayer anticipated this and had made plans for it. The shots were fired while she was away, the escape was made after she had retired. Now observe this window. It presents quite a problem for an escapee. It's old-fashioned and has no sash-weights. Little spring clamps in the sides of the sash can be adjusted to hold the window half open, not clear open—and half open isn't enough to permit the convenient exit of a fugitive."

"How did he do it?" It had me stumped.

"Quite simply. He used the andiron as a counterweight. He opened the window, fed his wire over the awning hook and through the auger hole, tied the andiron on it and lowered it to the ground. He'd doubled the wire so that later, when he was out, he could reeve it back to him. The loop-end he slipped on the finger lift at the bottom of the sash. The lower sash was thus held open for him. The screen, I might add, was pure genius. He was confronted with a screen, so he cut it out of its frame, laid it across the andirons in the fireplace and pretended to use it as a grate. Once outside, after he'd climbed down the kitchen roof to the ground, he pulled his wire back to him, the window lowered itself, and the spring clamps caught it, held it half open!" He smiled happily. "Wait till Bill Malloy hears of this!"

We descended to the ground floor. We'd started again for the kitchen when we noticed the portieres. Heavy mildewed velvet curtains, on a pole and rings, about a third of the way down the hall. Curiously, the Dean thrust forward an index finger like a rapier, parted them, and swung his flash beam into the opening. "Jove!" he exclaimed. "This is a treat! I didn't imagine any of these things had survived." He stepped inside. I strolled in after him.

We were in a small, musty room and such a room I'd never conjured up—even in my wildest dreams. There was a Hindu *punkah* on the ceiling, a big oriental divan in the corner piled with silken pillows. The walls were draped in rotting, purple brocade and everywhere were incense burners and *hookahs* and

Asiatic brass lamps. I couldn't grasp it. I asked: "What is this? An opium layout? Did the old lady hit the pipe?"

"Nothing of the kind," the Dean retorted crossly. "This is a Turkish Corner. They were very much the vogue in faddish homes about the turn of the century. To us now it seems foolish and silly but the maidens of yesterday considered them very exotic and romantic. Miss Taggart's Turkish Corner, however, is getting a little on the putrid side."

I said: "It's very adorable and all that, but who does that foot belong to? That foot sticking out from those comfy pillows on the divan?"

We shoved the cushions aside, and uncovered the portly body of J. Bogardus Keane, deader than a nickel's worth of stew-meat. His forehead had been bashed in and I'm here to tell you he made a mighty repulsive corpse. He lay there spread-eagled, his tiny bird-eyes glazed, his sporty checked suit bagged and lumpy about his elbows and knees. I said moodily: "He knew this was coming—he just the same as told me so!"

The Dean showed no sympathy. "He brought it on himself! When you go messing around in murder, you can expect disaster to—"

"Ain't that the truth!" A cruel, husky voice spoke up from behind us. "Turn around—and slow!"

THE Switchman and his dapper bodyguard, Virgil. And they weren't fooling. They were a couple of earnest tradesmen working on a project, and they were all set to do a professional job. They carried big-bore guns close to their hips in the best hoodlum style. Franzell brought his huge body to an easy stop, asked: "Why'd you knock off the stiff on the couch, there?"

The elegant Virgil, his hat back on his head so you could see his beautiful marcel, echoed his boss: "Yeah, why?"

The Dean said archly: "I'm a detective. If you wish to ask me questions I must ask you to deposit a retaining fee with Mr. Matthews, my assistant. If you're just a couple of gawking sightseers, fan out of here! We're busy."

In his own mind, the Switchman considered himself a big-shot. It was like slapping him in the face. He flushed. The Dean turned to Virgil, the dapper underling, said: "Evidently you are here for a purpose. As you, sir, are the best dressed, I presume you are the headman and this ragamuffin is your servant. What brings you to this house?"

Virgil looked pleased and flattered. He patted his fancy hair-do, said: "I ain't exactly head-man. We're sorta partners. You see—"

Franzell cut him off viciously. "I'm the number-one man in this little party, my friend.

And I'll ask the questions." He lashed out verbally at the Dean. "*Where's the rest of the Douglass collection?*"

"Oh-oh!" The Dean exclaimed. "I place you now. You're Franzell, the fence. Gah! You're a filthy looking specimen, I must say. I know all about you. I've been anxious to meet you."

The Switchman's jowls quivered in insensate rage. "You know all about me?"

"I do indeed. Two months ago a man and woman came to this old house and asked Miss Taggart, the owner, for a night's lodgings. These people were Doctor Mary and Doctor John Douglass. I, like yourself, am interested in gems, but from a slightly more honest angle. I've known about the Douglasses for years. They possessed a most valuable collection of historical jewels. They took this collection on tours, in person, and gave lectures to academic groups. How they happened to be here in town is another story."

Franzell sneered. The Dean continued: "About eleven o'clock on the night of their arrival, they were murdered in their beds. The slayer stole the gems and escaped through the window."

"Are you saying that I murdered these—"

"No. Not actually—but later you became involved. The killer, an amateur, wasn't certain just how to market his plunder. He selected a few less valuable items and contacted you. You beat him down so mercilessly on his blood money that he decided to hold back the rest until a better market came along. You wormed out of him where he had acquired them, but you didn't suspect that the batch you bought wasn't the sum total. Didn't suspect it, that is, until Mr. Matthews, here, visited you this afternoon and set you back on the trail. You came here thinking the slayer might have secreted them here in some hiding place—"

Franzell said: "Nuts! If these Douglasses were so important, why aren't they missed?"

"They are missed—out in Meadville, Colorado, at Two Stag Ranch. Their visit to town was obviously a side trip and went unreported." He paused, added: "Any way you twist it, you see, it's murder and you're an accessory after the fact. Now, I guess we'd all better be getting down to police headquarters, eh?"

That did it. He was deliberately goading them. Virgil was nervous, undecided. Franzell was trembling, loose-lipped in fury. The big man broke first. He swung his gun muzzle and I went for the bulldog in my belt. It was like living in two worlds, a world of sound and a world of movement. The Dean's hand bent suddenly at the wrist and his big, blue Magnum came out from its shoulder-clip, firing as the gunsight cleared leather. Virgil got in two rounds and then the deep-throated .357

of the chief smacked my ear drums, three times, hand-running. Franzell's enormous body buckled and collapsed. A little purple blossom appeared on Virgil's cheek. He splayed his fingers, dropped to the floor as if he'd been blackjacked.

One second the racket was stunning, the next the room was dead still.

The Dean said: "Ben?"

"Yes, chief."

He pointed to my short-gun, limp in my grasp, half out of my belt. "Touch that thing off. Fire a charge in the ceiling, son."

"In the ceiling? Why?"

"It's repressed. Relax it. It got to the party late—all dressed up and no place to go!"

I tried to take it but it was wormwood and gall to me. Sometimes I get to thinking I'm a little better than I am with a hand-gun and when I fall down he always rubs a pinch of salt into my wounded vanity. He does it for my own good, and I know it, but it's mighty hard to swallow. I said: "Let's get out of here."

SAXBY met us at his front door as if we were a couple of typhoid carriers. His anemic, hatchet face twisted itself into an expression of extreme distaste. We edged by him into the hall, sauntered into the living room. Bill Malloy and the professor had not yet arrived. Marcia Cowen was perched daintily on the edge of the sofa, her handkerchief balled in her lap, her pretty eyes red-rimmed. It was obvious that our genial host had been working on her, trying to talk her into returning to him. A strange picture it was, the barn-like room with its cheap rugs and borax fur-

niture, the domineering, pigeon-chested little man—and the weeping gal. I sat down on a pseudo-Duncan Phyfe chair, hooked my hat on my knee.

No one said anything. The Dean remained standing. He kept yanking out his watch, studying it. That didn't settle our nerves any. When the doorbell cut loose, we all jumped. Saxby left the group, returned with the lieutenant and Old Man Eggleston. Malloy was poker-faced, lowering. His dwarfish, bespectacled companion gazed about in dreamy confusion. The Dean said heartily: "Welcome, Professor. You're just in time. I'm about to explain the bizarre enigma of the arm of Mother Manzoli!" He addressed Miss Cowen: "Did you contact Mr. Keane?"

"I phoned," the kid said, "but I couldn't get an answer."

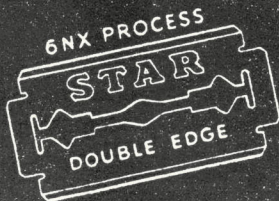
"Well, we won't wait. We might as well begin. It won't take long." The Dean began to lecture. "Two months ago, a Doctor Mary and Doctor John Douglass, possessors of a valuable gem collection, stopped in at the home of your neighbor, Miss Taggart, to spend the night. They were murdered in their beds, the killer escaped with the jewels. Later, as a safeguard, he killed the old lady, too. Somehow their identity got out to a closed group here in University Court. Maybe Miss Taggart remembered things about her guests and relayed them to her neighbors. Anyway, a pack of jackals got on the trail of the stones. Everyone spying on everyone else!"

Saxby listened gravely. Professor Eggleston said: "Tsk! Tsk!"

"It was you, Professor," the Dean continued, "who had the cleverest scheme, and if

I USED TO HATE THESE BLACKOUTS!

THAT WAS BEFORE I DISCOVERED STAR BLADES!



I hadn't come in when I did, doubtless it would have worked. It was this elaborate stratagem of yours, by the way, that revealed the whole unholy mess to me. We'll never know what your intentions were—I'm inclined to give you the benefit of the doubt and say that you were working for law and order in your own devious way. You knew that the gems had been stolen, for it was you, I imagine, who invited the Douglasses to town and sent them to Miss Taggart's for lodging. After the theft you set about after the recovery of the stones and the exposure of the criminal."

Eggleston looked bewildered.

"Don't deny it," the Dean said. "First you formed your Hello-Neighbor Club to get everyone together. You invited the girl into your home as a helpmeet—to pump her. This was all preliminary to your big plan. You knew the Simpson collection, a collection of some fame, was due to arrive in your custody. You put out the word to your friends. You carefully implanted in their minds the impression that you were about to loot it. Take the rebound book, for instance—even Saxby thought it was illegally acquired."

Malloy frowned. The girl started to speak, stopped. The Dean went on: "The Simpson collection arrived. You tore open the crates, took out the arm of Mother Manzoli, left it on the lunchwagon steps for the police to find and investigate. You wanted publicity. When the time was ripe, you would anneal a nice big imitation emerald and flash it surreptitiously to your Hello-Neighbor Club. That was the bait to bring the killer again to action. The thief's natural deduction would be that you had pilfered a priceless stone from the Simpson collection."

Professor Eggleston gave us all a toothy smile. "So I'm a murderer?"

"Of course not. You're evidently misunderstanding me. You're not even guilty of petty larceny. The wax arm is back where it belongs, the book you were rebinding is one of your own." He turned to Lieutenant Malloy. "Saxby's your man, Lieutenant. Watch him—he's a four-time killer!"

Saxby smirked. "Don't be silly! Where's your proof?"

"You prowled the neighborhood pretending to make treasure-hunting maps, spying on

your friends. Keane suspected you, so finally you were forced to eliminate him."

"Proof," Malloy insisted. "You've not offered one single grain of evidence!"

The Dean herded them all into the den at the rear. "Wait here." He disappeared toward the front of the house, was gone a moment, showed himself again in the living room. "Keep your eyes on me," he called.

He walked to the picture on the wall, the picture of Dutch Sam, the prizefighter. Deftly, he lifted the print from the frame. Behind the mat was a mirror.

We stared at him as he worked. Abruptly, a startling thing happened. No sooner had he revealed the mirror than three other mirrors sprang up in its reflection. We found ourselves looking around three walls, through two rooms, into the front hall, at the staircase.

"There were no glasses over Mr. Saxby's boxing prints," the Dean remarked. "There couldn't be, because they had to be removable. He had it arranged so he could sit back there in the study and watch. It was a problem in angles of reflection and incidence—the same proposition afforded by a pool table. As a matter of fact, he used a diagram of a pool table to help him calculate."

Saxby said viciously: "So what? I can sit back here and watch my front door. Does that make me a killer and a robber? There've been so many murders going on, I'm scared of my life!"

"But you're not watching the front door," the Dean corrected. "You're watching—"

"The stairs, eh?" Malloy shook his head. "It's suspicious, all right, Rock. But it's no case!"

The Dean began to gripe. "Won't anyone let me talk? I've got important things to say. He's not watching the stairs, or the front door, either. *He's watching the newelpost!* He's got the loot hidden in the hollow of the newelpost!"

Saxby scrambled to his feet. Quick as a flash, Malloy had the cuffs on him.

The Dean picked up his hat. "Good night, Miss Cowen. May the Fates be more solicitous of your love-life in the future, And good night to you, gentlemen. I will now go home, bite my fingernails, and wait for the insurance company to mail me its customary percentage-reward."

IF YOUR COPY OF THIS MAGAZINE IS LATE—

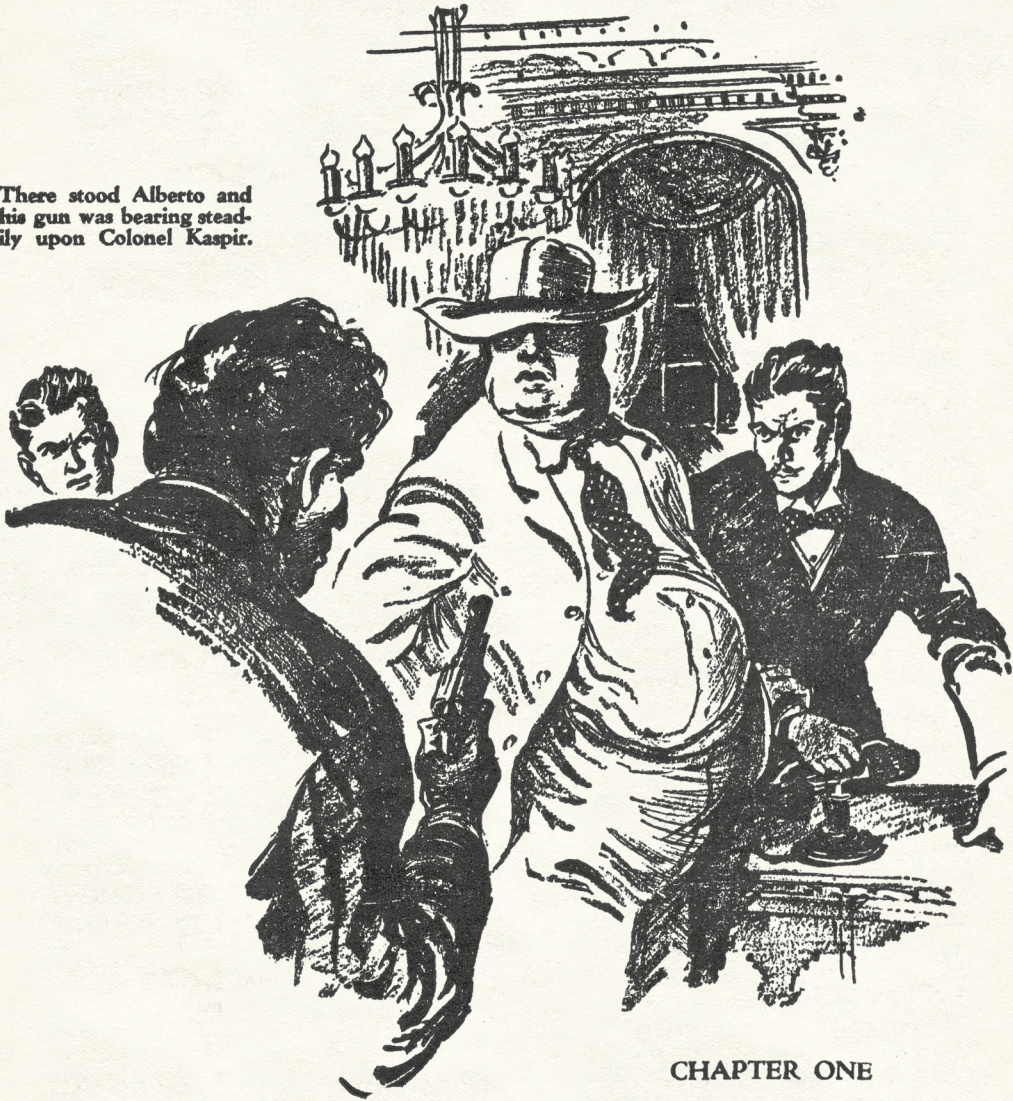
We regret that, due to the difficulties of wartime transportation, your magazine may sometimes be a little late in reaching you. If this should happen, your patience will be appreciated. Please do not write complaining of the delay. It occurs after the magazine leaves our offices and is caused by conditions beyond our control.—*The Publishers.*

THE BIG FOUR

By C. P. DONNEL, Jr.

Author of "The Flyin' Icebox," etc.

There stood Alberto and his gun was bearing steadily upon Colonel Kaspir.



CHAPTER ONE

"A New Hand in the Game"

**A Colonel Kaspir
Novelette**

MAUDE aimed a scarlet-nailed thumb at the door of Kaspir's office. "Superman," she said, "is having a siege of the vapors."

"Big vapors or little vapors?" I inquired wearily. I had just reported in from a very tiresome job in New Orleans and had asked for the news.

"King-size."

"Whence and wherefore?" I dabbed at the smudge of lipstick at the corner of my mouth.

"Only Allah knows. Maybe the moon's in the wrong phase." She spoke lightly enough, but there was a drawn look around her mouth and eyes. "He says the town's sick."

I sighed. I knew what she meant. Colonel Stephen Kaspir, my chief in the counter-espionage branch known as Section Five, is normally no more perturbable than an elephant with a clear conscience. However, like the beast he obscurely resembles, he is peculiarly sensitive to atmosphere—particularly the atmosphere of Washington, which is a neurasthenic woman of a city, addicted to periodical psychic sprees. When these occur, Colonel Kaspir vibrates sympathetically and turns un-

a lump last month, over and above our so-called budget. The Hon. Quick immediately wanted to know what the hell. Luckily, before the newspapers got hold of it, the comptroller brought him and Steve together for a quiet, unofficial chat. I"—she swung one shapely leg over the other and smoothed her tan shark-skin skirt—"went along. As a witness."

"Did you wit?"

"I didn't even know he'd drawn it," she said plaintively. "To make a long and interesting story short and boring, the Hon. Quick said he'd drop the matter if Steve would only explain what he'd done with the money. Whereupon Steve replied, as offensively as he could, that he'd put it in his right—no, his left pants pocket, and that shortly afterward he had handed it over to certain nameless parties as an investment in the security of the country. Then he offered to resign."

"Resign! You couldn't pay him to resign. Not with \$20,000."

Colonel Kaspir says a kraut in the bush is worth two in the hand, if you keep your eye on the bush. But this case had too many bushes and too many Himmler boys concealing themselves in free American foliage—Weston, the Congressman's brain-boy, Don Ramón Vincés, the irate hidalgo from Franco Spain, and the rest of the compass-clique—all set to blow up inter-Allied confidence and dispose of Boriska Sibilger, the gal from Dachau who gave Hitler the screaming-meemies, on the way.

manageable until the trouble is diagnosed and brought under control. It looked as though Maude and I were in for it. I demanded particulars.

"First of all," she said, "right after you left for New Orleans we were investigated by Congress. Or rather, by Congressman Quick." She had to grin.

I bowed my head. "Over what?"

"Money."

It was my turn to grin. The accounts of Section Five are weird and wonderful things, being kept by Colonel Kaspir—when he keeps them—on the backs of old envelopes. Fortunately our drawing account, because of the nature of our work, is an elastic proposition, and the comptroller is an old friend of Kaspir's who knows full well that Kaspir invariably ekes out our funds with slices from his own considerable private income.

"It seems," said Maude primly, in answer to my rising eyebrows, "that the Hon. Quick somehow learned that Steve drew \$20,000 in

"THE hell you say!" Colonel Kaspir can move very quietly when he chooses. He stood in the doorway now, mountainous in his untidy white linens, his rag-tag Panama jammed over his ears. His full moon of a face was sagging in sulky folds. I could see he had lost weight, as is his custom when morose, and his baby-blue eyes were stormy with outraged vanity.

He ignored me and addressed himself directly to Maude: "If you can spare a moment from the fascinatin' opinions of Captain Kettle," he said nastily, "I got a job for you. Get over to the Wardling Arms Hotel and hole in opposite Don Ramón What's-his-name. I want to know who calls on him. Ten P.M.'ll be time enough to start—he's over at the State Department now, speakin' his piece."

Maude, who had jumped a foot at Colonel Kaspir's unexpected appearance, was having trouble composing herself. "Rendered into English," she said, "what might that mean?"

He was worse than insulting; he was pa-

tient. "Don Ramón Vines, of the Spanish Government," he said in slow, clipped tones. "Special representative of the great Franco. I think he's here tryin' to chisel some more gas. Or wheat. Or folding money. Or nylons. Anyhow, he just got in this morning, and there's already been trouble. . . ."

"Not like Petrovsky?" I said quickly. I'd read about the Petrovsky incident while I was in Louisiana.

"Same general idea," said Kaspir gloomily, forgetting he was mad at me, a sure indication that he was not feeling as casual as he sounded. "He hit town this mornin', checked in at the Wardling Arms, dropped around to visit his gang at the Spanish building, went back to the hotel and immediately had a fit of screamin' meemies. Somebody'd been through his bags, Paris Sureté style, slashin' the leather where they didn't bother to pick the locks. Whereupon our courtly Castilian hidalgo raised juicy Hades and accused the FBI and the Secret Service and everybody else but Madame Perkins and the janitor at Western High. Nothing stolen, incidentally. Whoever it was just took a look-see and went out, leavin' the mess in plain view."

Maude looked grave. I felt grave. It was exactly the sort of thing that makes the worst possible propaganda abroad. And the Spaniard would be sure to paint his picture luridly to the press.

Colonel Kaspir puffed out his underlip and looked through Maude. "Whole damn town's sick," he exploded suddenly. "I tell you, somebody's gonna get hurt."

I felt uncomfortable. Colonel Kaspir seldom prophesies, but his occasional, fragmentary, disjointed pessimisms have a nasty habit of coming true.

He pondered. "Stinkin', nasty business," he meditated vulgarly. "Try to put your finger on it and—squirt!—it gets in your blinkin' eye."

"What is?" I said incautiously.

"Everything." Suddenly he recalled that he and I were not on speaking terms at the moment. He said to Maude: "Take Mike Kettle with you over to the Wardling Arms. You two might's well hold hands while you're peekin' through the keyhole at the door."

"Shall I take my black silk nightie with the peekaboo top?" simpered Maude.

Colonel Kaspir flushed. So did I. Kaspir said, in a low, deadly tone: "You can take your nightie and. . . ." He pursed his cupid's-bow lips and strode from the room, his face dark.

In the doorway he turned. "I'm goin' down to the second floor for a spot of intelligent conversation," he informed us. "Mind you keep your noses out of here. You hear, Maude?"

"As if I would deign to interfere with your

amours," said Maude thinly. He stalked out of the room.

"THIS is a delightful ward to be in," I mused. "What's on the second floor? Or rather, who?"

Maude looked annoyed. "A mysterious guest," she said, wrinkling her alabaster forehead. "Been here three days. Whether male or female, I do not know. One of Steve's brain-waves, I suppose. Joe's been bringing him-her meals from Karlsborg's Restaurant, and I can't get a word out of Joe."

I smiled internally. Just the sort of thing to keep Maude's curiosity at fever heat. And Kaspir knew it.

"Let's get back to the congressman," I suggested. "What happened?"

"Oh, Steve quieted down finally, and Congressman Quick backed water and said he had only wanted to make sure things were done in order. Then the comptroller explained what a hell of a job Steve was doing with the Section, and Steve gave Congressman Quick a hundred bucks for that League for Rehabilitation and Lasting Peace he's so passionate about—you know, the one that's building up a fund for milk and stuff for kids in Europe after the war. So they quit friends, although I don't think the Hon. Quick will drop it entirely. And it upset Steve. Then came the Petrovsky business. . . ."

"Just exactly what was back of that?" I said, wincing at the thought of it.

"We don't know any more than the papers carried, Mike." Maude was solemn again. "Petrovsky was coming as a personal emissary from Joe Stalin himself, about Lend-Lease and probably more important stuff. Well, you know how those Russians travel—one secretary and no fuss and feathers. Petrovsky arrived in New York by clipper and was due here on the four o'clock train. Steve himself—he used to know Petrovsky in Budapest—and a couple of Secret Service men were waiting at the station. You can imagine Steve's frame of mind when Petrovsky wasn't on the train, and when the conductor said that Petrovsky and his secretary had been taken from the train in custody by two 'FBI' men at Wilmington. Naturally, all hell broke loose. Then, right in the middle of it, Petrovsky shows up on the six o'clock wearing a small, tight smile. The 'F.B.I.' men, it seemed, had been fully equipped with credentials. They told Petrovsky he was in 'protective custody'—an ugly phrase to a Russian, by the way—took him to a house outside Wilmington and went through his baggage. Then they dispatched him by cab to the station in time to make a later train. The whole thing"—Maude shook her head—"was utterly senseless. Simply staged to create a bad impression in Moscow and every-

where else. Of course, the FBI didn't know a damn thing about it. And what use were apologies?—simply admissions that we had let a couple of smart kraut agents get away with murder—if they had chosen to make it murder. And coming when it did. . . .”

I nodded. That was what had hurt worst—the timing. Just a few days after the Russian-Polish business and then that horrid British-German peace-conference yarn that broke in *Pravda* on January 17. Just in time to pry wider a very serious breach in the general Allied intramural confidence.

“Of course,” said Maude, “Petrovsky was very nice about it all. That is, he smiled with his teeth. But a few days later, Steve says, the State Department got a very stiff-lipped little note from Stalin out of their foreign office. What worries Steve is that he believes it's a new hand in the game.”

A prickling sensation, originating mid-way up my spine, mounted slowly into my short hairs. To those who are unacquainted with the inner machinery of counter-espionage, “a new hand in the game” may not sound overly important. That is because you are unaware of the immensity of the job of spotting and checking up on enemy agents in an agent-ridden city like Washington. In dealing with an agent, counter-espionage is chiefly (once you have him and his type of work fixed in your mind) letting him be, giving him rope enough to hang himself and his friends.

Colonel Kaspir says a kraut in the bush is worth two in the hand, as long as you keep your eye on the one in the bush. I happened to know that six weeks before, he had allowed himself to bask in the impression that Section Five was up-to-date on all Nazi agents currently operating in the capital. “A new hand” argued the appearance of an agent or group of agents operating independently of the existing espionage organization. It might be weeks, or months, before the new crowd could be brought under the microscope of surveillance, and in that time major damage could be done.

I began to see the source of Colonel Kaspir's “vapors.”

I GLANCED at my watch. It was a few minutes after six. I looked long at Maude. She was good to look at.

“Well,” I said, on a hollowly optimistic note, “don't rush yourself. I'll take you to dinner at Karlsborg's and then we can get over to the Wardling Park in plenty of time for our vigil on Señor Don Ramón Dubbygrums Vincés. Although I can't undersand why Kaspir thinks we. . . .”

Enter Joe, the Negro houseboy, followed by a large, pink-faced gentleman of pregnant bearing. Joe had his white serving-jacket on, and his special down-on-the-old-plantation

manners. My eyes, accustomed to the peculiar contours of Joe's jacket, noted with mild shock that he was not wearing his usual shoulder-holstered .45 automatic under the jacket. He was wearing a pair of them, one on each side! I remember thinking that Joe must be getting melodramatic.

The pink-faced gentleman cleared his throat in the manner of the orator. His face was vaguely familiar.

Joe bowed. “Is Kuh'nel Kaspah in, Miss Maude?” Joe has a law degree from Columbia, and his rank and pay in Section Five are identical with my own. The “Kuh'nel Kaspah” lingo is his *langue de guerre*. “Congressman Quick heah is most anxious to see the kuh'nel.”

Congressman Quick cleared his throat again.

Maude said: “The colonel's on the floor below.” She added, rather quickly: “I'll just run down and get him. Captain Kettle”—she waved a hospitable hand at me—“will show you into Colonel Kaspir's office, sir.”

“Ha-hum,” said Congressman Quick and bowed. Maude's violet eyes and smartly-garbed figure are apt to be overwhelming at times.

Joe raised a polite hand and looked Maude in the eye. “I'll jes' run down and get him mahself, Miss Maude,” he said, and vanished.

Maude, thus bilked of an excuse to penetrate the below-stairs mystery, bit her lip. We all shuffled into Kaspir's office. Congressman Quick sat down, rather suggesting a critic seating himself at a doubtful play. His large eyes rested with marked disfavor on an open box of chocolate cherries on Kaspir's desk.

Maude offered him a cigarette from her gold case. He declined. On impulse, I proffered the chocolate cherries. Again he declined, coolly, scenting irony on my part. We all shuffled our feet and wished Kaspir would hurry.

Kaspir did not hurry. This, I knew, was deliberate. I think Congressman Quick divined something of the kind. He ran a finger inside his collar—he looked slightly windblown from the three-story climb—and remarked that it was very warm for this time of the year. Maude and I agreed solemnly. A heavy silence fell. Congressman Quick began to play with his watch-chain.

I watched him with some interest. I respected the man, even if I did not delight in his personality. For all of his demagogic appearance, I knew him for an individual of rigid integrity and of surprising energy and brain-power. A veteran of the House, he was one of the powers that be on several important committees, including Foreign Affairs, and one of the big sub-committees on finance (hence, I suppose, his interest in Kaspir and the elusive \$20,000). Also, he was known for his

sponsorship of any well-meaning organization tending to better the condition of any human being in the world. One of these, the League for Rehabilitation and Lasting Peace, he had built, through his own energies, into a solidly-financed affair that was just straining at the leash of peace before rushing into stricken Europe with food and clothing for the starveling children everywhere, including Germany.

Congressman Quick perked up at a footfall in the outer office, and I thought I saw his wide, loose mouth tighten a trifle. We heard Kaspir having one last muttered word with Joe. Then Kaspir came in, his broad face bland as a June morning. Congressman Quick stood up. Their greetings were formal and guarded. Then Congressman Quick cleared his throat for the last time and looked pointedly at Maude and me. "If we could talk privately . . ." he said to Kaspir.

CHAPTER TWO

The Late Widow Murphy

A FILM dropped over Kaspir's eyes. Congressman Quick was a large man, but Colonel Kaspir's great, tubular figure topped him by inches. Kaspir jerked his thumb at us. "They know the worst o' me," he said stubbornly. "You can talk. Go ahead."

The congressman hesitated. Kaspir's face was now blank and adamant. Congressman Quick shrugged his heavy shoulders. "I come here," he said slowly, "reluctantly, on an unpleasant errand." He stared at the floor, choosing his words.

Colonel Kaspir fidgeted.

"I feel it my duty to warn you," continued Congressman Quick, looking up, "that I am about to make an issue of that matter of \$20,000 we discussed a while back."

I glanced, as did Maude, at Kaspir, expecting a snort and a curl of the lip. To my amazement, I saw the color leave his face. He was staring at Quick with an odd intensity.

"Through sources I cannot reveal," went on Congressman Quick inexorably, "I have learned how the money was spent."

"I don't believe it," said Colonel Kaspir flatly. "You're bluffin'." But there was no conviction in his eyes, only hope.

"I am not bluffing," said Congressman Quick calmly. "No one could hope more than I do that you will be able to adduce evidence that I have been misinformed." His face acquired several definite angles, and when he spoke again his voice was harsher. "But I cannot," he said, "permit the people's money to be spent in buying one unimportant individual. . . ."

I saw the hope die hard in Kaspir's eyes. ". . . out of a German concentration camp,"

concluded Congressman Quick. "At the same time," he added, "indirectly involving the government of the United States. . . ."

"For the love o' God, man"—I am not often sorry for Kaspir, but I was now, for the words were wrung out of him—"do you know? Do you really know?"

"Her name, I believe, is Boriska Sibilger," said Congressman Quick. I could see he was impressed, not by the name, but by the emotion it was inducing in Colonel Kaspir.

I felt Maude's fingers close on my arm. A chord of memory began to vibrate deep in my mind. Boriska Sibilger? An absurd name. And yet. . . .

So still was the room that I could hear the ticking of my wristwatch. As I watched, I saw Colonel Kaspir get control of himself. He seemed to grow bigger in that moment.

Congressman Quick's face showed a touch of alarm. He said, as though to reassure himself: ". . . a crazy fortune-teller—a wild-eyed astrologer. . . ."

Boriska Sibilger! I had it now. The little Hungarian prophetess! The woman who predicted accurately the death of George V of England and the abdication of Edward VIII within a year—who in 1938, long before Chamberlain went to Munich, forecast the date, to the very month, of Hitler's march on Poland—who in 1940 foretold the debacle of France and Italy, and who missed by a few days only the exact date of America's entry into the war.

Colonel Kaspir said: "Then why was Hitler afraid of her?"

Congressman Quick smiled. "Really. . ." he began.

"Why do you suppose they moved heaven and earth to put her in Dachau?" demanded Kaspir, so fiercely that Quick stiffened. "Did you know that each time she prophesied disaster for Germany—and she did—Adolf's nerves gave way?" Kaspir's big hands were fists, and the fists trembled. "Gettin' her out for twenty thousand was a freak bit o' luck," he bayed. "I'd ha' paid a hundred thousand—my own cash, if necessary. . . ." He caught himself. The flurry was over. His eyes narrowed for business. "Who told you?" he said softly.

I KNEW now who our guest on the second floor was. I could see her in my mind's eye—I had seen a picture of her once in a French newspaper. A small, pleasant-faced woman, meager in a black dress. A pitiful woman with an undistinguished mouth. Yet what issued from that mouth plucked at Adolf Hitler's nerves and sent him into fits of depression and uncontrollable weeping. . . .

"Who told you?" repeated Colonel Kaspir, still softly.

"I cannot reveal that. It was told me in confidence," said Congressman Quick with a sort of feeble belligerence.

Colonel Kaspir eyed him up and down as though probing him for soft spots. Then he shifted his ground. "Who else knows of this?" he demanded. Congressman Quick was silent, confused. "Does Weston know?" Kaspir fired at him. "I insist on your answering me. Does Weston know?"

Congressman Quick was folding. He clutched at the fragments of his dignity. "Caesar Weston is my secretary," he said. "Before I left the office this afternoon I dictated several letters to him—letters calling the attention of various departments to the matter of Boriska Sibilger and your inexcusable waste of the public moneys. . . ."

Kaspir was swelling dangerously. At the same time, I saw the light of inspiration flare in his eyes. "Weston told you," he yelled.

The shot struck home. One look at Quick's face was enough.

"Of course Weston told you!" Kaspir was not addressing Quick now. He was thinking aloud. "Who else would have been so positive?" He chewed this over in his mind. "But how did Weston know? Who could have told Weston? Surely they haven't let it out over there." The development of the idea set my pulses racing. "Someone must have arrived here from Germany in the past few days. . . ."

Congressman Quick's pride attempted his rescue. "By God, sir!" he said angrily—a cheap line, but somehow redeemed by his genuine sincerity—"If you're trying to insinuate that I, or my secretary. . . ."

I saw Kaspir arrive, without warning, at the breaking point.

"Why, you damned old fool," he shouted, "I've had a man on Weston for the past three months!" He snorted now. "And I was about to call him off. . . ."

Maude, watching the congressman, remonstrated: "Steve, really. . . ." Her violet eyes were dark with anger.

"Weston never made a false move," said Kaspir, reducing the violence of his manner by a visible effort. "That is, until he spilled the beans about Boriska. . . ."

It was here that the phone rang.

MY "HELLO" was delivered absently. The scene between Colonel Kaspir and the perspiring representative of the people held a peculiar fascination. While I deplored Kaspir's ferocity, I could not avoid a certain detached, clinical interest in the degree of it. I have seen my towering chief "upset" on occasions too numerous to mention, but I have never seen him in a state of pathological anger unless it was an act. This was not an act.

A voice, far away and curiously thick, as

though the man were speaking through a mouthful of food, mumbled unintelligibly. I said: "I beg your pardon." I was watching Kaspir and Congressman Quick, who were ogling each other like strange dogs.

The receiver at my ear hummed in silence a moment. I was about to hang up when my subconscious mind reminded me that Kaspir's phone is a blind number, one you are not apt to get by accident. I hung on. A second later the thick voice said, quite intelligibly this time: "Tell Kaspir . . . big four . . . big four. . . ."

I woke up. "What?" I barked. Kaspir and Congressman Quick turned. Kaspir opened his mouth. I held up my hand.

A woman's voice, tense with excitement, came over the wire. "Let me have that phone. You must lie down. You must, I tell you. . . ." Then a mutter, as though the thick-voiced man were shaking his head and fending her off.

"Who is it?" I pleaded. "What's the trouble?"

"Tell Kaspir"—it was the man again. This time he sounded terribly tired or sleepy. "Peace . . . peace. . . ." I could feel him thinking hard, trying to concentrate, like a man going under ether.

"What about peace?" I had begun to tremble. "Who is this? Who are you?" Around me the silence grew, as though the others in the room were holding their breath.

"Big four," said the man again, with just a trace of irritation. Then: "I know . . . points of"—he was dozing off again—"points of. . . ." Then, rallying for the last time, with fierce energy: "Tell Kaspir—must come . . . hurry! . . . HURRY!" This last was a feeble sort of shriek, followed by a dull sound, as if the speaker had dropped to the floor.

"Hey!" I yelled. "Hey!" I wanted to get the woman.

She was on the phone almost immediately. "This is Mrs. George Smith, 1124 Fairview Drive, just outside Chevy Chase," she said very quickly. "There's been some sort of trouble here. A taxi stopped near my house. There was some sort of a fight. Then the taximan staggered up here and asked to use the phone. My husband's gone down to see. . . . Are you the police?"

I said: "Yes. Is the taximan badly hurt?" I was afraid if I denied being the police she would hang up.

"Just a minute. He's on the floor. He fainted." I heard her put the receiver down and could visualize her kneeling beside an unconscious man. Then I heard: "Oh, my God!"

I have to hand it to Mrs. George Smith of Fairview Drive. She has good nerves. When she picked up the receiver again, her voice

was almost calm. "He's dead," she said. "He's terribly battered about the head. Yes, I'm sure. I'm a nurse's aide."

"We'll be right out," I said. My hand on the receiver was damp.

I was about to hang up when she called: "Wait a minute, here comes my husband." I heard footsteps approaching her phone, heard her say: "What was down there, George? . . . I've got the police on the phone."

"Here, give me that, Alice." The man's voice was quick and authoritative. He said: "Hello, I've just been down to the taxi. It's parked on the edge of a clump of woods just below our house. There's a dead man in the road beside it—and then this fellow in the house . . . I found some papers scattered around. It looks as though the dead man is a congressman's secretary. . . ." He paused to catch his breath.

Oddly enough, I was quite calm now. It was no surprise at all when he went on. "His name seems to be Caesar Weston, secretary to Congressman Quick. You fellows better hustle right out here. It wasn't an auto accident. The taxi's not damaged. My wife and I heard some kind of a fight going on, and afterward we thought we heard a car drive away. It looks as though the taxi driver tried to rob this fellow Weston, and. . . ."

"We'll be right out," I said, and hung up. To Congressman Quick I said: "Where did your secretary live?"

"Several miles beyond Chevy Chase. Why?" He was twirling an emblem on his watch-chain. He was white around the mouth.

Kaspir said roughly: "What the hell's going on, Mike?"

I TOLD them the last part. The first part, the talk about the big four, I saved for Kaspir's private ear. An ugly suspicion was growing in my mind. Section Five has men in some queer jobs in Washington, including at least three piloting cabs.

Congressman Quick sat down heavily.

Maude took one good look at his face, then dived for a bottle of Scotch and a glass that Kaspir keeps in his desk drawer. She stowed a healthy swig inside Quick before he could defend himself. He hiccoughed. It didn't seem to do him much good.

Kaspir said to Quick: "You'll come with us?"

The Congressman nodded. "In a minute," he said weakly. He hiccoughed again.

"Take your time," said Colonel Kaspir absently. His eyes were thoughtful. I took him aside to tell him the first part of what the taxi driver had told me, or tried to tell me. Before he would listen he loosed a mighty bellow: "Joe, get a cab!" then lent me his ear.

He repeated after me: "Peace," and "points of. . . points of. . . ." He ground his teeth. "Points of what?" he yelled suddenly. "You sure you were listenin'?"

His tone rubbed me raw. "Yes," I said, "I'm sure I was listenin'."

"Big four," he mused. He looked at Congressman Quick who was refusing another belt of Scotch. Maude took one herself, coughed in a ladylike manner and touched her carefully-drawn lips with a handkerchief.

Congressman Quick stood up. "I'm quite ready," he said, squaring his shoulders. I could see he had been a powerful man once.

"Then let's get out there," said Kaspir vaguely.

Going downstairs, we moderated our pace to that of Congressman Quick, whose knees seemed a trifle uncertain. There was a queer, dream-like atmosphere over our sedate little procession. I had a feeling we should be clattering, plunging down. And a second later, we were. At least Kaspir and I were. Maude was boxed behind Congressman Quick on the narrow stairs.

There was no mistaking the two sounds. They were shots, all right—flat, vicious, cracking sounds totally unlike the hoarse bark of an automobile backfiring. They sounded very close to our front door.

SIGHT TESTER

THIRST BESTER

Guess which line is the longer—
but don't bet on it



ANSWER:
ne fooling—measure them
—both are the same—



Kaspir took the last flight of steps in about three leaps, and I all but fell over him in my haste to keep up. We shouldered each other painfully getting through the front door together.

There was a flash of white passing the house. As we reached the little porch, I saw that it was Joe's white coat. Joe was running like mad. Even as we watched, he stopped dead. The two automatics appeared in his hands and in that instant the street filled with thunder. It lasted only a couple of seconds. Then Joe shook his head and even as he pushed the guns back in their holsters he was turning and running back toward us. To my amazement, he ran up the steps of the house next door and bent down out of sight behind the stone partition railing. Parenthetically, let me say that Section Five's headquarters are in one of a block of old brownstone houses in southwest Washington, identical buildings with high, small porches.

It came to Kaspir and me simultaneously that someone was lying on the porch. I was utterly confused as I clumped down our steps after Kaspir. The house next door was owned by a widow named Murphy, whose husband had been a police lieutenant.

Joe stood up as we ran up to him. He shook his head. It was then that I saw the small black bundle at his feet.

KASPIR went to his knees with a thud. I stared down, trying to get my thoughts in order. From our porch, a dozen feet away, Maude was calling: "Mike, what is it? What's the matter?"

I looked down at Mrs. Murphy. Kaspir had one big arm under her thin shoulders. He was breathing heavily through his nose.

Blood ran out of Mrs. Murphy's small mouth and across the back of the hand Kaspir was holding under her chin. She was quite limp.

"Shot from a car," said Joe between his teeth. "She was just going in the house." He drew breath. "Shot in the back." He exhaled with an angry sound. "I was up at the other corner looking for a cab." He sounded reproachful. Then, very slowly: "I sure would like to have got me a piece of those boys."

Kaspir laid Mrs. Murphy back very gently and stood up. I saw incredulously that a crowd of several dozen persons had gathered at the foot of the steps. A youth called up: "You want I should call the cops, mister?"

I nodded automatically.

"You didn't get the license, Joe?" said Colonel Kaspir, frowning.

Joe shook his head.

Kaspir said: "Better get back next door." He lowered his voice. "Don't budge off that second floor. Not for anything."

Then the light dawned. Mrs. Murphy, small,

frail, dressed in black, entering a house next to our headquarters and identical to it!

Maude and Congressman Quick came up the steps. Maude's hands were small, hard fists, and her knuckles were white. Congressman Quick merely stared, his lower lip trembling violently.

I was awfully afraid Colonel Kaspir would jump on Quick, but he didn't. The congressman was in no shape to weather harsh words. The events of the past ten minutes had been about all he could take.

Colonel Kaspir merely said: "Somebody must have mistaken this lady"—he nodded downward—"for my \$20,000 lady next door, Mr. Quick. You understand now why I was trying to keep my lady under cover, sir?"

Congressman Quick inclined his head. He looked sick and helpless.

"It ain't your fault," said Kaspir kindly.

Behind us, an official voice said: "What's all this? My Gawd, ain't that Dan Murphy's widow, Colonel?" Jabonsky, the man on the beat, joined us. Kaspir, with great economy of words, told him what Joe had told us, omitting, of course, any mention of Boriska Sibilger.

Fortunately, Jabonsky knows us well. We left him in charge and, trailed by Maude and Congressman Quick, hurried up to the corner and waved down a cab.

I took the small seat and gave the driver the Fairview Drive address.

Kaspir patted the floor with a large foot, looked unseeingly out the window and hummed one of those annoying, shapeless tunes he hums when he is lost in thought.

Maude looked at me with frightened eyes. The taxi tires whined on the macadam. I had a feeling in my chest exactly like severe indigestion, a feeling that was mirrored in Congressman Quick's face. It was not, I know, indigestion. It was Washington. Kaspir had said the town was sick. It was. And we were all catching it.

The illness was building up to something big. There was no doubt about that in my mind. And Kaspir knew it, had known it for some time. It came to me that he had probably been undergoing for some weeks the sensation that was bothering me so badly now, and in the light of this realization I not only forgave him for that scene in his office, but also felt more than a little ashamed of certain harsh judgments I had passed upon him then.

CHAPTER THREE

Endorsement for Death

CONGRESSMAN QUICK said: "Our League is going to miss Caesar Weston terribly." We were bowling along through a

residential section at the time, well on our way. They were the first words Quick had spoken since we left headquarters. "Caesar, whatever his faults may have been, was a bundle of energy. It seems impossible that he can be dead. I don't know what we shall do without him. I am so busy with other matters that in recent weeks he has simply taken the League off my hands. And he is most valuable about getting contributions." The man was babbling, as though some emotional dam inside had sprung a big leak. Maude and I, out of compassion, assumed expressions of polite interest.

Colonel Kaspir paid no attention. He had stopped patting and humming, but he was still miles away, eyes half shut, lower lip sticking out like an open bureau drawer.

Congressman Quick accepted a cigarette from Maude and a light from me. His mind was still on Weston—understandably, since we were on our way to view Weston's corpse. "May I ask, Colonel," he said, "how your organization became interested in Weston? I knew that his parents were naturalized Germans—the name originally Westen, I believe—but Caesar himself was born in this country. Of course, he studied in Germany in the 'Thirties, but I always understood it was his disgust at the rise of Nazism that brought him back to this country before he finished his courses. He was at Heidelberg, I believe, and. . ."

This volubility told on Kaspir. He said: "What time did Weston leave your office this afternoon?"

Congressman Quick looked puzzled. "Shortly before I did. About five-thirty. He was taking some work home with him—League work."

Kaspir was still looking out of the window. I could tell from his manner, rather than his words, that he was following no definite line, but simply feeling around. "Weston always take a cab?" he said, with no great interest. "Ain't it a kind of an expensive ride for every day?"

"It was^a on account of the typewriter," said Congressman Quick. "You see, the portable typewriter he uses—used—at home was broken, so he had to take his office typewriter home with him tonight and it's rather a heavy affair to carry on a bus, so he took a cab. He was intending to begin our latest solicitation drive for funds for the League, based on testimonials he has been accumulating for—"

"Testimonials?" mumbled Kaspir, in the tone of a man who has got into a dull conversation and is anxious to get out.

Congressman Quick brightened at the thought. "Perhaps I should call them endorsements. It was an ingenious idea of Caesar's and took a bit of wire-pulling on my part to

put it through. Caesar typed out a number of very brief endorsements of the aims of the League and sent them, accompanied by bits of our literature, to some of the highest officials in the government. . . ."

"For example?" said Colonel Kaspir. I saw him beginning to wake up.

CONGRESSMAN QUICK named them with some satisfaction. It was an impressive list. "Then," he said, "that was where I came in. I called upon these exalted gentlemen and obtained their signatures to the endorsements of the League's aims. It was Caesar's idea that we would have mimeographed copies made and use them for pulling power when we mailed out our literature soliciting funds." He added very earnestly: "Whatever Caesar may have done along other lines, Colonel, there was no doubting his loyalty to the League. In fact—"

Colonel Kaspir said, in a strange, far-away voice: "You ain't got one of those endorsements on you?"

"No, Caesar was taking them home with him, as I told you, to use in mapping out our campaign for funds—"

"The body of the endorsement," interrupted Kaspir rudely, "that was kind of short, eh?"

"Just a few brief, telling lines," said Quick, obviously baffled by this attention to trivial detail.

"Plain paper?" pursued Kaspir. He was using a gentle tone now. It sounded as though he were trying, for some reason, not to alarm Congressman Quick. Maude's ear caught it, too, and she cocked an inquisitive eyebrow at me. "I mean," said Kaspir, "no letterheads?"

"No. You see, we could not very well obtain, in advance, letterheads of the various state offices. On the other hand, it would have looked odd if a cabinet member, for example, had written his endorsement on our own League paper. So we decided on plain paper. You have no idea, Colonel, of the pulling power of a great name when you are soliciting funds."

"I got a rough idea," said Colonel Kaspir. I noted an elusive, hard glitter in his eyes. For some reason my heart began to beat faster.

"Caesar even had hopes of obtaining the White House signature," went on Congressman Quick. "But finally we decided, after some discussion, that it was too small a matter to lay before the President at such a time. Later, of course. . . ."

"Uh-huh," said Colonel Kaspir. He had a taut look about him. He barked at our driver: "Step on it, chum."

Five minutes later we turned into Fairview Drive, a side road indicated by a fancy signpost with scroll woodwork and old English lettering. It was a secluded stretch, sparsely

settled, with wooded areas between the very few houses. At the second clump of woods the road wound around, and we came suddenly upon a taxicab parked on the grass shoulder. A man stood beside the parked cab. He peered at us, flagged us down.

Beyond the parked cab, on the grass, lay a body in a gray suit. Congressman Quick leaned back, shut his eyes as though composing himself for the ordeal. I saw Maude nerving herself.

The stocky man who had waved us down was Mr. Smith. Expecting police uniforms, he eyed us with some suspicion until Colonel Kaspir produced from his wallet the peculiarly-shaped little gold badge that he shows only on rare occasions.

Mr. Smith preceded us, guide-fashion, to the body. Congressman Quick took one look over my shoulder. He said: "That's Weston," in a voice so faint that Maude hastily took his arm. She led him back to the parked cab and he sat down on the running board and put his handsome head in his hands.

COLONEL KASPIR stood up. "You were right," he said to Mr. Smith. "Broken neck."

Caesar Weston lay on his back. The gray suit was grass-stained and badly rumpled. Weston's lean face and Roman nose bore minor lacerations, such as might have been acquired in a fist-fight. There was ample additional evidence that hand-to-hand fighting had taken place, for the grass was trampled and a bush showed signs that someone had fallen or been thrown into it.

I was expecting Colonel Kaspir to want to get up to the Smith residence at once, since I myself was having mounting apprehensions as to the identity of the dead cab driver who had survived the battle long enough to make his way to the phone. But Kaspir displayed more than a casual interest in the scene at hand, although there was little enough there to hold his attention. I followed him to the far boundary of the little battleground at the edge of the woods and saw tire marks that did not belong to the cab, and which recalled Mr. Smith's statement over the phone that he and his wife thought they had heard an automobile drive away after the scuffle.

Colonel Kaspir made no comment. He returned to the Weston taxi and spent some time inspecting the back seat. Then I remembered something and, feeling like a fool, stuck my own head inside the cab and looked at the driver's license and picture, placed, according to law, on the partition where the passenger can view it. Then I understood why Kaspir was in no hurry to go up to the house. I swallowed and beckoned to Maude who was hovering vaguely about Congressman Quick and

keeping her eyes averted from Weston's body.

Maude looked. She said: "Oh, Mike!"

Kaspir heard her, and grunted. His nostrils were flaring and he was greenish about the mouth. He said: "It's Trencher, all right."

There was no difficulty about identifying the cab driver, even from the bad photograph of the passport type. I swallowed again. It seemed impossible that Andy Trencher could be gone. Why, he had been a member of Section Five long before Kaspir ever borrowed me from Army Intelligence. He had been a crack insurance investigator at a gaudy salary when he tied up with Kaspir in 1940. I knew Kaspir regarded him as one of the top men of the Section. He was a man in his late fifties, but stronger and more agile than most men of thirty—a fanatic on the subject of self-conditioning, and expert at wrestling and jiu-jitsu. Jiu-jitsu! I looked out at Weston and the sickening angle of his neck and head.

Kaspir phrased the thought before it formed in my mind. "Weston never got Andy Trencher by himself. I'd say it took at least two more guys." He got out of the cab, shook Congressman Quick by the shoulder. Quick raised a pale face apprehensively.

"What would Weston have been bringin' home besides the typewriter?" demanded Kaspir.

"Only his briefcase," faltered Quick. "He was taking home the testimonials and some of our literature. I told you, you know, that he was going to start mapping out our campaign—"

"Yeah," cut in Colonel Kaspir impatiently. "But they ain't here. Neither briefcase nor typewriter." You might have thought it was Congressman Quick's fault.

"Perhaps," suggested Quick diffidently, "Caesar was held up by the cab driver—he might have thought Caesar had money. . . ."

Colonel Kaspir, I regret to say, made a vulgar sound with his lips. Quick looked hurt.

"Mike," said Kaspir suddenly, after a dozen seconds of intense and painful thought, "you and Maude have a look around these woods."

Maude glared at him, thinking of her stockings. He glared back. She obeyed. There are times when it is not healthy to argue with Colonel Kaspir, and this was one of them. She contented herself with murmuring over her shoulder as we separated and began to push aside the undergrowth: "If I find any mare's nests, I'll. . . ."

I DID not catch the rest, for Mr. Smith joined me and began to talk. He seemed most anxious to get away from Kaspir. Ill-temper was emanating from Kaspir as fumes emanate from a chimney. Weeks of nervous tension were beginning to tell on Kaspir. I could only hope that we got through the day

and night without an explosion worse than the blast he had directed at Quick. Kaspir, in this mood, is capable of anything.

Maude's voice came excitedly from the woods to my left: "Steve, I've got it!"

Then Kaspir's bellow: "The briefcase?"

"No, the typewriter."

"Hell!" said Colonel Kaspir. "Let's go up to the house."

We trooped up a flagstoned walk to the Smith residence. A plump woman rose from a porch swing, her round, pleasant face grave.

Mr. Smith, in the lead now, said: "Alice, these are the—" There he stopped. He seemed at a loss as to how to describe us. I could hardly blame him.

His wife nodded. Colonel Kaspir bowed. We murmured things.

"Come right in," she said. "He's in the hall."

Maude took my arm. Congressman Quick shuffled in ahead of us with the air of a man too beaten down by circumstance to raise his head.

"Here," said Mrs. Smith simply.

Maude looked once, turned away quickly.

Andy Trencher, in a grimy uniform, lay on the polished hardwood floor beside a small telephone stand. Beside him was an overturned stool. His face was a mess, and the blood was brown and dry in his gray hair.

Mrs. Smith said: "I'm quite sure he has fractures at the base of the skull." She was standing quite close to her husband and looking not at Andy Trencher, but at Colonel Kaspir.

"I put him in the living room when he first came in," she said, "but he insisted on getting up and going to the phone. He would not let me call the local police. It was while he was talking to you that he collapsed. . . ." She sounded considerably less calm than she had on the phone. "He kept his right hand in his pocket all the time, except when he was dialing—" Her voice was beginning to break. "It was," she said huskily, "most upsetting." And with this she fainted quietly into her husband's arms. Maude helped him get her to the living room.

I took one more look at Andy Trencher. He had been horribly worked over. Some of the marks on his face looked as though pistol-butts might have been the weapons.

Kaspir knelt beside Andy, began to draw the stiffening right hand clear of the pocket.

Beside me, Congressman Quick said slowly: "I think I have seen that man before. I believe he has driven me several times. He has a stand just outside—"

"Yep, he had," said Colonel Kaspir, without looking up.

"Is he—" began Congressman Quick fearfully.

"Yep," said Kaspir again. "He's one o' my men. He's the man I had on Weston."

Congressman Quick was silent.

There was a crackling sound as Andy's hand appeared. Colonel Kaspir made a small noise in his throat. I saw the papers clutched in the thick, short-fingered hand. Kaspir tried to pry the fingers open, gently at first. Finally he had to exert the full strength of his own unusually powerful fingers. A second later he stood up, smoothing out two badly crumpled sheets. He read them with some care. There was no expression at all in his face. One was a single sheet of white paper. The other was a smaller page, and folded once.

"Try these," said Kaspir tonelessly, handing them over to Congressman Quick.

The congressman squinted first at the large, single sheet. "Why, this is one of our endorsements," he began. "I wonder—"

"Read it," snapped Kaspir.

Something in his tone made me step quickly to Congressman Quick's side. Uninvited, I read with him.

Congressman Quick's well-cared-for hands began to quiver. The paper edges fluttered as he read. He seemed hypnotized. So was I.

Kaspir finally had to remove the thing from his hands. "Now, read the other one," he directed, and thrust it at him.

Congressman Quick fumbled the unfolding of it. Again I thrust my inquisitive nose over his shoulder. Silence settled on the hall. The congressman's hands, to my surprise, ceased to shake. Instead, standing beside him, I could feel strength and resolution beginning to flow through him. And when he handed the second page back to Kaspir and spoke, his voice, for the first time in an hour, was no longer dull or ineffectual, but firm and more than a little grim.

"We must locate the rest of these endorsements immediately," said Congressman Quick. "Good God! Colonel, if such things got into certain hands—"

"Uh-huh," said Colonel Kaspir. "And where," he said, "would you suggest we look for 'em?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Diplomatic TNT

LOOKING back, I think it was at this precise moment that a sort of madness came upon our little party, for the subsequent events, as I review them now, are inclined to be a trifle fuzzy around the edges. Whether the madness came from Kaspir, or from Congressman Quick, or from the papers themselves, I could not say. I can only say that my pulses began racing and I had an absurd

desire to run—a feeling, I suspect, much like that which comes upon a dog at the start of a fit.

“Hot stuff, eh?” said Colonel Kaspir unnecessarily. The congressman’s teeth came together with a click. I could see he was thinking of Weston, for there was storm of wrath and frustration and, above all, outraged faith, in his eyes. He looked, at this moment, even more dangerous than Kaspir, and I could not help admiring the man for the way he was taking what must have been a devastating blow.

Colonel Kaspir said: “I got one tiny little hunch . . .” He looked speculatively at Congressman Quick, as though trying to estimate or weigh something in the man’s character. “It’ll mean,” said Colonel Kaspir provocatively, “breakin’ a few laws of God, man, and diplomacy.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Congressman Quick slowly, “but I’ll back you to the limit, right or wrong. If those things get out of Washington . . .” He left it there.

“You mean,” said Colonel Kaspir, “if they ain’t out of Washington already.”

Congressman Quick paled.

I was wild to get going. Where, I did not know, but just to get under way would be a relief. Kaspir just stood there, however, gazing down at Andy Trencher as though trying to read something in the bloody, contorted face. He said: “Big four . . .” Then: “Points of . . .” and shook his head helplessly.

He stalked suddenly into the living room and there was a mutter of talk and I could hear Mrs. Smith’s weak voice answering him. When he returned—he was gone less than two minutes—Quick and I looked hopefully at him, but saw at once, even before he wagged his head again, that he had had no luck.

“That’s all she heard, too,” said Kaspir. His chin came up. “Let’s get goin’,” he said. He raised his voice: “Maude!”

Mr. Smith came running after us. “What shall I do about the—” he called.

“Call the cops,” said Colonel Kaspir, and led the way to our cab. Our driver, a pale, pimply youth, held open the door. What he thought of the whole affair, I never knew. He looked too stupid to evince even a natural curiosity. “Where to, boss?” he inquired, without interest.

“The Wardling Arms,” said Colonel Kaspir thinly. “And fan this can o’ yours along, son.”

ONE thing—our driver could drive. Another time I might have been alarmed at his recklessness on the curves. But not now. It was dusk. We shot over a rise, and for

a few seconds the whole of Washington was spread wide, a forest of twinkling lights.

“A hell of a big city,” said Colonel Kaspir morosely. I could feel, inside me, the same frustration that was evident in his voice. It was a hell of a big city all right in which to find a dozen-odd sheets of 8½ x 11 stationery.

Maude said resentfully; “I know I’m simply a weak, foolish woman. But if either of you mental giants would break down and give me some idea of what this is all about, I would try in my feeble way to understand.”

Kaspir did not even look at her. It was Congressman Quick who finally enlightened her. The gravity of his tone, as he talked, was quite as expressive as anything I had read in those two papers which Kaspir had removed from the dead hand of Andy Trencher, and a leaden weight inside my chest seemed to grow as I listened.

Weston’s plan had all the beauty of simplicity. The simple endorsements he had concocted for the government greets to sign were as innocently worded as a child’s story. The one Trencher had acquired read: *Please count me among those who endorse enthusiastically the aims of the League for Rehabilitation and Lasting Peace as set forth in the literature you enclose.*

But it was the second paragraph, the one the signer had never seen—the one typed in by Weston after the original innocent paragraph had been returned signed—that held the joker. It ran: *Confidentially, your estimable League may be called to action sooner than you think. Certain drastic changes in our over-all policy, growing out of the Russian-Polish situation and the reported British-German separate-peace conferences, may be put into effect within a matter of weeks.*

There had been just room enough for this much in the space Weston had so carefully left between the initial paragraph and the “Sincerely yours.” Hence his economy of words. But he had achieved to perfection the insinuating note. Any foreign diplomat—say, Russian or French or even British—could read into that second paragraph anything he chose. By themselves, the typed words carried no particular weight. But when presented over the genuine and incontestable signature of cabinet members . . .

And if our hypothetical diplomat were in possession of a copy of that second paper—the smaller, folded one—he could reach only one conclusion. The second item was the draft of a pamphlet, purporting to set forth the aims and ideals of the League. I did not need Congressman Quick to tell me that it was wholly false and foreign to the harmless and humane principles upon which he had founded the League.

That pamphlet was an obscene thing, concocted in the best traditions of subversion. Reading it gave you a queer, raw feeling. I will not weary you with the details. Possibly you have seen other literature of the kind—*Why should we pull Europe's chestnuts out of the fire? Save the lives of American boys—Demand a separate peace . . .*

Maude made no comment as Congressman Quick talked. The picture was too clear to require any. Once those endorsements and pamphlets turned up abroad—and you could be quite certain Von Papen and his friends would see that they turned up in places where they would do the most harm. An inevitable wave of disaffection of the most perilous kind, distrust among allies, would rise and sweep through the capitals of the world.

Quick's voice lost some of its new resolution as he painted the picture. I must say one more thing for him—never, by word or inflection, did he indicate what he must certainly have realized—that his own honorable career was in danger of being shattered beyond repair, and that his name had every chance of becoming bigger and uglier than the name of Benedict Arnold. I warmed anew to Quick, for he was thinking only of the larger issue.

THE manager of the Wardling Arms received us in his office, his face carefully concealing whatever he must have felt in the way of surprise or curiosity at the appearance of our odd-looking little party.

Kaspir wasted no words. "You been checking up on Don Ramón like I asked you to, Anderson?" he said.

The dapper Mr. Anderson nodded. "Certainly," he said.

"You got a list?" Kaspir persisted. "I got to know everyone who's been up there today. Everyone. I suppose he's still out."

Anderson, reaching under a desk blotter, shook his head at the last question. "He's back," he said. "Hadn't you heard? He's checking out in the morning." He held out a typewritten sheet, but Kaspir did not take it at once. He was staring at Anderson's face.

"Checking out?" he said.

"First thing in the morning," said Anderson. "That business of someone searching his bags. He claims that the State Department has failed to investigate completely, that the whole thing was a clumsy business on the part of the government investigating agencies. He has been insulted. His government has been insulted. He is going to South America—"

"Gimme that list," said Colonel Kaspir. What he expected to find, I could not say. He handed it to me, saying at the same time to Anderson: "You're sure now—damned

sure—that that's everybody who's called on him today?"

Anderson nodded very positively. I glanced down the list. There were perhaps a dozen names, and they were all the names of journalists, ranging from Dewlett and Thurston of the *Times* and *Herald Tribune* down through John Gunther, who had just returned from Nevada. There were also the names of some of the foreign writers—Rassuden, the Dane, who did the inside stories on German atrocities in his native country; St. Antoine of the *Free French news service*; and Pentecost, the Englishman, representative of a group of English labor publications, who made the remarkable escape from Shanghai just ahead of the Japs.

"Chronological order?" snapped Kaspir, taking the list back from me.

Anderson said, a little stiffly: "That is the order in which they called on him."

Kaspir closed his eyes, stood teetering on his heels. His mouth was set and hard, but the bafflement was plain in the lines of his face. "War, bloody war," he murmured. "North, east, south and west." He repeated this.

"That's Kipling," I said.

He opened his eyes, impatient at this interruption of his thoughts. "What's Kipling?" he snapped.

I wished I'd kept my mouth shut. "What you were muttering," I said, flushing. It was a silly thing to be talking about at a time like this.

I realized that Kaspir hadn't even known, consciously, what he was saying. He stared at me until I felt irritable. "Otheris says it," I snapped back at him. "Somewhere in the *Soldiers Three* stories. 'War, bloody war—north, east, south and west.'"

You might have thought I'd struck him across the face, the way he stared. I braced myself for an outburst. To my astonishment, and that of Maude, none came.

"Hmrrrrrr," said Colonel Kaspir.

"Steve," began Maude.

"Shut up," said Colonel Kaspir, gently.

"North, east, south, and west," he reiterated, just above a whisper. He clouted me across the shoulders with such force that I was not sure, for the moment, whether the blow had been given in anger or playfully. Then he made a wry mouth and I saw he had reached some species of decision.

"We're goin' up to see Don Ramón," he said. "Come along, sir." This to Congressman Quick. "You're in so deep now it don't really matter."

Congressman Quick hesitated only momentarily at the name of Don Ramón Vines. "Lead on, Macduff," he said, with a ghost of a smile. Maude patted his arm.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Big Four

THE elevators of the Wardling Arms Hotel are built for swift ascensions. Almost before my stomach caught up with me we were treading the mossy carpets to Don Ramón Vínces' suite. Kaspír rapped sharply. An emaciated, sober-faced man of the valet type answered. When Kaspír asked to see Don Ramón, he hesitated.

"We're goin' in anyhow," said Kaspír. "Move out o' my way."

I do not know whether the man understood Kaspír or not. At any rate, he stepped aside.

We entered a gracious drawing room. A broad-shouldered, youngish man with coal-black hair jumped up from a desk.

Colonel Kaspír said: "Hi, Don Ramón."

The man looked hard at him from under heavy, black brows. "I do not quite recall . . ." he began, politely enough. Then the nature of our intrusion dawned on him. "May I inquire . . ." he began acidly.

"You must remember me," said Kaspír genially. "I was in Sofia in '37, Steve Kaspír. You were at the Spanish Legation then. Cleanin' out the spittoons, I think."

Dull red spots appeared high on Don Ramón Vínces' prominent cheekbones.

"I dropped around," said Colonel Kaspír chattily, "to pick up those papers." He moved, quite casually, a little nearer Don Ramón.

"Papers?" said Don Ramón. "I do not quite understand. Furthermore, let me remind you that I am here as a representative of . . ."

"We know all that," said Colonel Kaspír. "An' we won't keep you a minute, because I understand you're checkin' out soon."

There was a telephone on the desk. Don Ramón's hand strayed toward it.

He said: "I take it this is a sample of your government's methods, Kaspír. I had another sample this morning when I arrived. My luggage . . ." He was stalling for time.

"You did that yourself," said Kaspír. "I'm beginnin' to see why."

Don Ramón's hand closed over the phone. "May I ask . . ." he began again.

"Sure," said Colonel Kaspír. "And I'll tell you. You wanted to make such a stink that when you checked out there wouldn't be any possibility of anybody darin' to search your blasted luggage. Now just you unpack"—his voice was suddenly flat and hard—"those papers that South and East brought up to you and you can get goin'—to hell, for all I care."

Don Ramón's glance angled suddenly beyond Kaspír. He said: "Alberto—"

The hungry-faced Alberto was startlingly close. None of us had heard him come in.

He was standing behind, and a little to the left of Congressman Quick, and there was a gun in his hand. It was bearing steadily upon Colonel Kaspír.

Alberto's mistake was in ignoring Congressman Quick. I am not quite clear about the next few seconds, but I saw the congressman's arms sweep out. Simultaneously there came a muffled bellow from Colonel Kaspír and a strangled sound from Don Ramón's vicinity. The next instant I found myself, to my utter astonishment, with my arms wrapped around Alberto. He was as hard as steel wire. It was my good luck that Quick's action had knocked his first shot into the ceiling, for the second, to judge from the smudge I found later in my ear, came very close to taking some portion of my addled brains with it. There was no third, for Congressman Quick was clubbing Alberto, awkwardly but effectively, with a large hand, and in another few seconds I felt the man go limp in my arms. I let him fall and took the gun.

I rose to find a strangely satisfying tableau at the desk. Colonel Kaspír had Don Ramón Vínces by the throat and Don Ramón's eyes were protruding. Kaspír, watching the progress of the quieting of Alberto, let go, and Don Ramón Vínces fought for breath.

"Now," said Colonel Kasper, still genially, "you want to go get those papers East and South brought you? Or you want me to take this whole damn place apart?"

Don Ramón, a hand at his throat, looked at Kaspír for quite a while.

"It is an outrage," he said.

"It is that," agreed Colonel Kaspír. He took Don Ramón by the arm. Don Ramón paled.

"I will get them," he said. "But I warn you . . ."

"Oh, shush," said Colonel Kaspír wearily. He followed Don Ramón Vínces into the adjoining bedroom. It was hardly three minutes before they came out. Colonel Kaspír handed over to Congressman Quick a thin stack of stationery. Congressman Quick, his face the color of death, silently riffled through it.

Maude said: "Where do we go from here, Steve?"

"Karlsborg's Restaurant," said Colonel Kaspír. "I'm hungry."

He left the room without another glance at Don Ramón. We followed numbly.

KARLSBORG'S Restaurant offers perhaps the best food in Washington. It is a favorite hangout of the upper-bracket journalistic crowd.

It was packed when we got there. Kaspír looked around for Lars Nordensten who combines the dignity of owner with the hyperdignity of captain of the waiters.

Nordensten was bending over a tableful of newspapermen, chatting. He is a genial Swede, carefully pro-Allied in his sympathies.

Kaspir shouted, "Lars!" and Nordensten straightened up. He beamed. He hastened up. "You got a private room, ain't you, Lars?" said Colonel Kaspir. The newspapermen were looking our way. I saw Dewlett and Thurston and Rassuden and Pentecost there, among others.

"Upstairs," said Lars Nordensten. "You are really out for a party this evening, Colonel." He led us to a side stairway. Halfway up, Kaspir stopped.

"We're celebrating somethin' extra," he said. "Run back and tell that crowd o' ink-stained wretches to drop up for a drink."

"But certainly," said Nordensten. "First door to the right, Colonel. The others will be here in a moment."

He was right. We had hardly taken possession of the private room when a trampling of feet outside ushered in half a dozen men.

Kaspir was the perfect, if eccentric host. On some queer whim he chose to seat them separately. Dewlett and Thurston he put together at one end of the table. Akiss and Bernard he seated beside Maude and me. Congressman Quick he installed at his right hand. And Rassuden and Pentecost drew seats at the far end.

"The liquor'll be up in a minute," said Colonel Kaspir. "But before we drink, there are a couple of questions I'd like to get off my chest. Then I'll break you a news story that'll curl your thinning hair.

"Rassuden"—he smiled—"I'd like to know how it is you are able to get in and out of Denmark for those atrocity stories of yours?"

Eltig Rassuden, a big-shouldered, blond man, smiled back. "A trade secret, Colonel."

"Suppose I told you," said Colonel Kaspir, "that some o' those stories never happened."

No one laughed now. Dewlett and Thurston looked embarrassed. A journalist's professional honor is not a matter for joking.

"And Pentecost," said Colonel Kaspir, "how'd you happen to be so lucky gettin' out o' Shanghai? You didn't have friends out the other side, did you?"

Pentecost, a small, pop-eyed man, stood up. "You're drunk," he said. He turned to Rassuden: "I don't care much for this. Let's get out of here, Eltig."

"Wait a minute," said Colonel Kaspir. It was a command, not a plea. "Before you go, I'd better tell you that I just collected those papers you left with Don Ramón Vines. Thought it might cheer you up."

IT took seconds for this to sink in. When it had sunk in, there was a very different atmosphere in the room.

The look on Rassuden's face, the shade of emotion which passed over Pentecost's rabbit cheeks, repaid me for much I had been through that day. They stopped halfway to the door.

"The story," said Colonel Kaspir, addressing the other four, "is this—we got a new bunch showin' its hand in town. They pulled that Petrovsky business. They tried—just this afternoon—to knock off Boriska Sibilger . . ."

"Boriska Sibilger!" Akiss and Thurston spoke together. Akiss said: "Come now, Steve she's been in Dachau for—"

"She's in town," said Colonel Kaspir. "Furthermore, this new bunch killed an American agent this afternoon, near Chevy Chase, when he interrupted the transfer o' certain rather pregnant documents—" He shook his big head at Rassuden. "You shouldn't ha' left Andy Trencher for dead, Eltig. He lived long enough to identify the both o' you."

"That," said Pentecost, "is a lie."

"North, east, south, and west," said Colonel Kaspir. He laughed shortly. "West is dead. Unless I miss my guess, East and South are gonna be dead shortly—they hang you in the District, Pentecost."

There was a dead silence. Dewlett, watching the faces of Pentecost and Rassuden, whistled. "Well, I'll be damned!" he said.

"The Big Four," said Colonel Kaspir.

Rassuden said something under his breath. But it was really no use breaking for the door. Pentecost did not even try. It was Akiss and Bernard who leaped most enthusiastically after Rassuden and brought him back.

"What about this Big Four business?" said Thurston.

"Some o' that play-acting Himmler's boys indulge in to make themselves feel like grown men," said Colonel Kaspir jovially. "The Big Four—North, East, South, and West." He smiled benignly upon Dewlett, who had served a trick in Berlin once.

"What's German for west?" he inquired.

"*Westen*," answered Dewlett promptly.

"Right. And Caesar Weston is dead. That leaves three. What's Hun-talk for south?"

"*Süden*," answered Dewlett, without hesitation. A thought struck him. He looked quickly at Rassuden. "Rassuden—"

"Right. And east?"

Dewlett smiled. There was no use replying now. All of us knew that "east" in German—is *Osten*. All eyes swung to Pentecost. Akiss said: "All right so far, Colonel. But what about your north?"

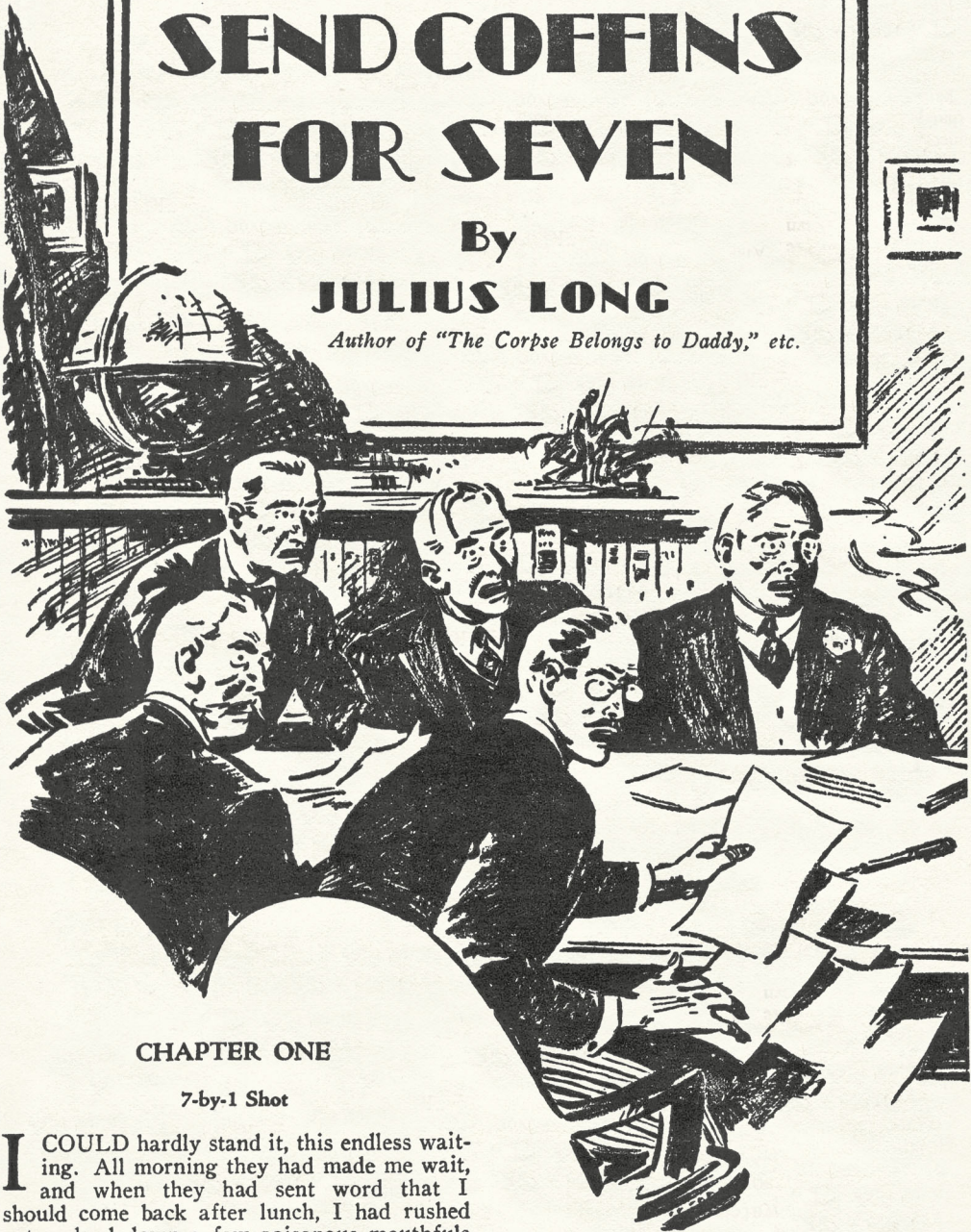
Dewlett stood up. He bowed to Colonel Kaspir. "North," he said, "is *Norden*."

"Then," said Colonel Kaspir, "just step over to the wall there, will you, Dewlett, and ring for a waiter? And when the waiter arrives, tell him to ask Lars Nordensten to step up here."

SEND COFFINS FOR SEVEN

By
JULIUS LONG

Author of "The Corpse Belongs to Daddy," etc.



CHAPTER ONE

7-by-1 Shot

I COULD hardly stand it, this endless waiting. All morning they had made me wait, and when they had sent word that I should come back after lunch, I had rushed out, gulped down a few poisonous mouthfuls and raced back again. Still they made me wait, and now it was four o'clock. I was beginning to believe that they meant to make me wait forever, that they were sitting in there amusing themselves at my expense.

Or perhaps they were playing golf.

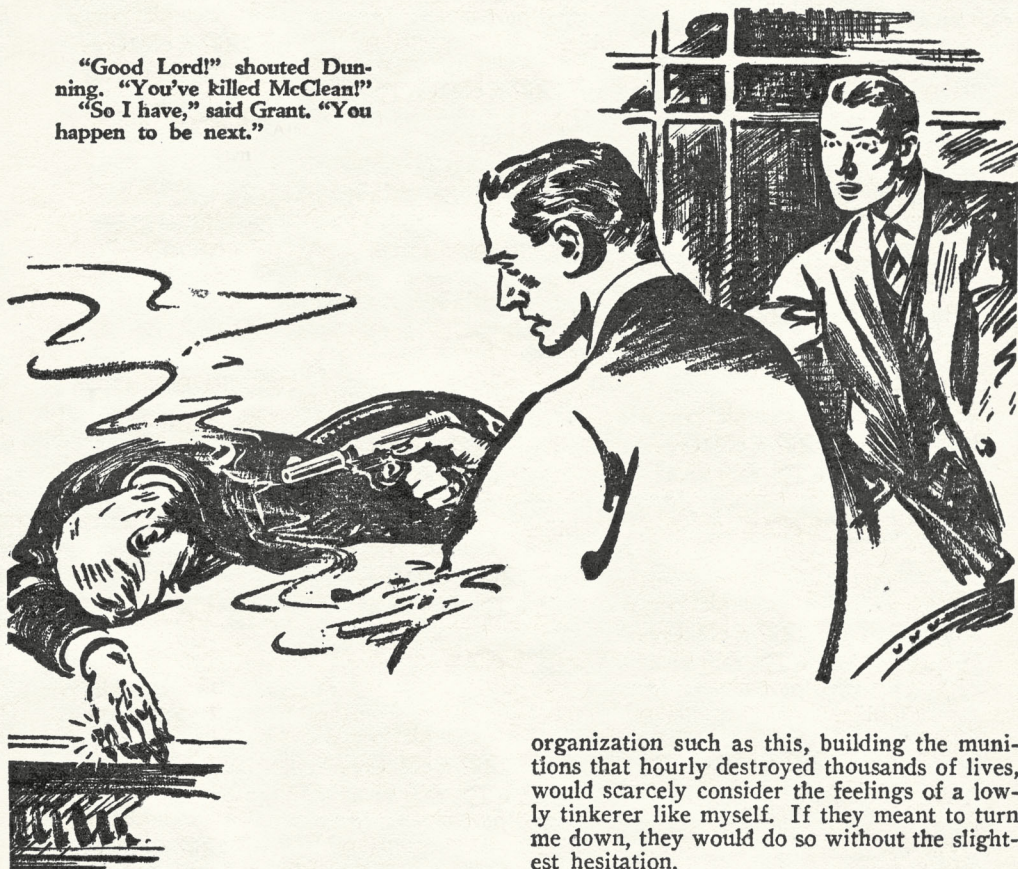
The ash-blond at the reception-desk had been my only company. All day long I had

been the only caller in the great walnut-paneled room that could easily have accommodated fifty visitors. At first I had been sensitive to the inference of self-importance, for it did seem that the day had been reserved for me alone.

But as it wore on, the strange absence of other callers filled me with uneasy foreboding.

"We'll tell the jury you saw red, that your mind went blank. Lucky for you there were seven—it's hard to imagine a sane man killing seven men," my lawyer counseled me. He was right—no one would believe me—not when Elwood Grant was known to be in England. And yet I had seen Grant kill all of them with my revolver that very afternoon.

"Good Lord!" shouted Dunning. "You've killed McClean!"
"So I have," said Grant. "You happen to be next."



What lay back of this long wait? Why had they kept me out here all day?

My appointment had been for ten o'clock sharp. And I had been fifteen minutes early. At first I had told myself that some of the directors must be late—any man who has achieved a directorship in a company so great as Warner Arms can certainly afford a modicum of tardiness. But by noon I had begun to suspect that the cause of the delay was more ominous. Had Warner Arms, after all, decided to turn me down? Were they hesitant in giving me the dreadful news?

But, no, that couldn't be. A coldly callous

organization such as this, building the munitions that hourly destroyed thousands of lives, would scarcely consider the feelings of a lowly tinkerer like myself. If they meant to turn me down, they would do so without the slightest hesitation.

There was something else. There was something important going on in that room beyond the walnut walls. Whatever it was, it affected me. It was painful to realize this and know also that I was playing no part in the drama upon which my fate depended. For I knew that my life depended upon the decision of a handful of men.

A voice said crisply through an inter-office phone: "Miss Donlan, send in Mr. Wright."

The ash-blonde looked at me. I got up shakily and walked to the door. It opened at my touch and, though no one visibly had unlocked it, I knew as surely as anything can be known that it had been kept securely locked.

A narrow hallway lay beyond and at its end was another door. It was of solid walnut, inches thick and heavy, but it swung easily, as if set in ball bearings. I closed the door behind me and stood within a rectangular, high-ceilinged room.

PROPORTIONATELY dimensioned was the table at which the eight men sat. A man sat at each end, three at each side. In spite of myself I tingled all over, for I was in the presence of some of the most important men in the nation.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," apologized the man at the far end of the table. His voice was not apologetic. He eyed me through narrow eyes over which hung bushy, dominating brows. He was thin and slightly bent, for he was past seventy. He was still the most important man in the room—Chairman of the Board of Warner Arms. His name was Edward McClean.

"We have been discussing your case all day," McClean explained, though his tone indicated that no explanation was really necessary. "There were a few matters that we wanted our lawyers to straighten up for us. I see that you have not brought your own lawyer."

"No, I didn't." I didn't bother to explain the reason, that Cliff Castle was trying a case. My summons to appear here had brooked no postponement. Coming without Cliff had been unavoidable. As for bringing another lawyer, Cliff was my best friend and the only man I would have trusted.

"Well," said McClean, "it really makes no difference whether you are represented by counsel or not. There is a popular belief that great corporations make a practice of robbing penniless inventors, but I think that you can satisfy yourself of our good faith by an examination of the contract we have had prepared."

McClean indicated the neat stack of papers which lay upon the polished surface of the table. The papers formed a stack because there were several copies of the contract. The contract itself, as I soon discovered, was a masterpiece of brevity. Its terse terms made my head swim.

For every semi-automatic small arm incorporating the "Wright Device" I was to receive two dollars and a half. There followed a sliding scale for every variety of firearm from sub-machine guns to sixteen-inch marine rifles. I could hardly believe my eyes as I saw the mounting figures typed in after each classification.

"You will note," explained McClean, "that you are to receive only a nominal consideration upon the execution of the contract—one hundred thousand dollars, to be exact. Of

course we will gladly advance any royalties you request, up to a million or more, but we do not recommend this, as the income tax law would strip you of virtually all of such a sum."

I knew that my mouth hung open foolishly as I stared. When I had discussed terms with Cliff neither he nor I had ever dreamed of so generous a contract. Of course there might have been a catch to it, but McClean's offer to pay a million on the spot bowled me over. Why haggle, I thought, why hesitate when signing would bring me more money than I had ever dreamed of possessing?

My mouth was dry as I said: "I think the contract is all right. I'll sign it."

"Very well," McClean seemed pleased. We will all sign as directors." McClean signed first, putting his signature on every copy. Then the others signed, and the contracts were turned over to me.

I blushed when I had to say: "I'm sorry. I don't have a pen."

Several of them laughed, and it was Elwood Grant, the financier, who handed me a fountain pen. My hand trembled as I began to use it. The mere presence of the names there was enough to make me nervous. There was the impressive scrawl of Lucius Graham, the implement manufacturer, the precise autograph of E. D. Knox, the automobile man, and the almost illegible scrawl of Jake Dunning, who built so many of the Liberty ships.

It seemed almost impolite for me to put my signature down with such names. But I couldn't help feeling that now I had graduated, that I was myself such a name. Why, my royalties would amount to millions!

BY the way, Wright, did you get my note?" asked Grant.

McClean raised his eyebrows. "Note?"

"Yes. I asked Wright to bring his model."

McClean frowned. "That seems hardly necessary. Our engineers will have enough to go on when he turns over his plans."

"Oh, that's all right," I said quickly, eager to accommodate. "I've brought the model. You can keep it."

I reached under my left coat lapel and drew out a black automatic. Its outward appearance was nnontrn unlike an Army .45, only flatter. It fired a 9-mm. Luger cartridge, though, and its magazine capacity was eight rounds.

I handed the gun to Grant. He accepted it and eyed it with admiration. He removed the magazine, smiled when he saw that it was fully loaded.

"I had an idea you might want another demonstration," I explained. "I'm satisfied that the model's perfect except for one minor detail that should be changed before it goes into production."

Grant shook his head as he placed the magazine back into the gun.

"There's nothing wrong with this gun that we can find. In fact, I'm conscious when I hold it that it's the most remarkable gun ever made. Thanks to this ordinary-looking pistol, every semi-automatic and automatic weapon ever made is obsolete. All artillery, too, will become obsolete, and the theory of aviation armament will be revolutionized. Thanks to the 'Wright Device,' even a 155-mm. cannon will be kickless when equipped with it!"

It was staggering, but true. My invention, the "Wright Device," as Warner Arms had seen fit to call it, had taken the kick out of the little automatic in Grant's hand, and it would take the kick out of the biggest ordnance. That meant you could mount a ten-inch gun on any plane big enough to carry it. The firing of the gun would neither reduce the plane's speed by its recoil nor shake it to pieces.

Originally I had meant only to ease the kick in automatic pistols. Thanks to the inertia of its moving parts, an automatic kicks more than a revolver of equal caliber and load. I had started out with a hydraulic recoil brake in an attempt to harness that inertia force. And then I had my brainstorm—through dumb luck I had hit upon the simple idea that applies an elementary law of physics and eliminates every last ounce of recoil.

I had never patented the device.

"Don't waste your money," Cliff Castle had told me. "You've been without a salary for months, ever since you quit your job to develop your idea, and you've spent a lot of dough on the model. My suggestion is that you have your plans photostated and attested with affidavits. That will preserve your common law rights, and no company, no matter how unscrupulous, will dare to pull a fast one if you've got that kind of evidence."

I took Cliff's advice as I always had. We'd grown up together, and though Cliff had gone away to college while I went to work in a machine shop, we still remained close friends. I trusted him implicitly. That his advice was good seemed proven by the contract in my pocket and the check which McClean now handed to me.

"You can do with this as you like," he said, "but my advice is to buy Warner Arms stock. That is, if you can buy any."

I KNEW that McClean referred to the fact that most of the stock was in the hands of the Warner family. They were mostly drunks, and occasionally some of them got drunk enough to part with Warner Preferred.

"You can say that again," said Grant. "Now that Warner Arms has this device, there'll be no ceiling to its stock." He drew

back the pistol's slide, pressed his thumb against a button, and a section dropped out of the slide. Grant caught the section in his hand and admiringly held it up. "Just think—this tiny gadget will revolutionize the history of arms, and that means the history of the world!"

As he spoke, Grant let go of the slide, and the retractor spring carried it back into place.

I said quickly: "Look out, Mr. Grant—the gun still shoots without the Wright Device. You've loaded a cartridge into the chamber. Better put on the safety so that it doesn't go off." Grant regarded me with polite interest. Then he dropped the slide section into his pocket and gripped the butt of the gun. His finger squeezed the trigger, and the gun roared.

A startled look appeared on Edward McClean's face. Then he pitched forward upon the table.

"Good Lord!" shouted Dunning. "You've killed McClean!"

"So I have," said Grant. "You happen to be next."

He sent a second bullet into Dunning's skull. Then he got the two men on either side of Dunning, then Graham, next the man at his own left and finally Knox at his right. Only Knox made any attempt to restrain him, but surprise enfeebled his effort. Like the others, he slumped forward upon the table. There was a bullet left, and I leaped toward Grant. He leveled the gun at my chest.

"Don't do it, Wright. You've seen what I can do with this thing. I won't bother you if you'll hand over that contract and the check. Don't make me wait, though, for I'd just as soon take them off your corpse."

I removed the contract from my pocket and placed it with the check on the table. Grant gathered them up together with the other copies of the contract and stuffed them into his pocket. Then he backed away toward an inner door.

"Don't try to follow me," he said. "I've got all I need. Killing you will be unnecessary unless you ask for it."

With one hand he opened the door behind him. Its walnut panels were six inches thick. Grant stepped into the opening, then tossed the gun upon the room's heavy rug. Quickly he disappeared, closing the door behind him. I leaped forward, snatched up the gun and flung myself at the door. It would not yield. For a moment I considered firing through the door, but I realized that even the powerful 9-mm. Luger cartridge would probably be incapable of penetrating six inches of walnut.

I stared dazedly at the gun. Without the section that had been slipped out of the slide it was very much like any other automatic. Its hydraulic recoil brake was still intact,

and it would reduce recoil to a certain extent. But the vital part, the little gadget that emasculated the gun's kick, was gone. It was in Grant's pocket.

With it as a model, Grant could sell my idea to anyone.

CHAPTER TWO

"The Pen Is Mightier Than the Sword"

I TURNED back to the seven men. They were slumped peacefully forward upon the table, and a casual visitor might have thought they were enjoying a directorial nap. Edward McClean had been the guiding genius of Warner Arms. It was to him that I first went. I lifted his forehead, still warm. There was an ugly hole through his double-breasted coat. There was no blood, indeed there was scant blood visible upon any of the corpses, for Grant's demonic accuracy had stopped the flow at once.

I moved dazedly from the room, using the twin doorway. I guessed that outside the room the shots had been unheard. I knew this was true as I opened the second door and beheld the ash-blonde. She looked up with mild curiosity, but that was because of the gun which I still carried.

She was not alone. Another girl, a striking brunette with high, dominating cheekbones, stood at the receptionist's desk. The brunette wore slacks and a loosely-buttoned blouse.

"So they're finally through in there?" she said, looking up at my approach. "Get me through, Donlan. Tell old McClean I can't wait out here all day."

The ash-blonde spoke into the inter-office phone, listened for an answer and got none. She eyed me with curiosity.

"That's funny. There's no answer. Aren't they through?"

I nodded dumbly, holstering my gun.

"They're through, all right."

The ash-blonde repeated her efforts. The brunette frowned with impatience.

"Damn it, Donlan, go in there and find out what's the matter with McClean."

The ash-blonde hesitated, then said: "I can't go in till they unlock the doors. They're locked from the outside. But you have the authority to go around back if you like."

I knew I had to leave. I knew, too, that the brunette was Rosetta Warner of the famous munitions family, that in point of fact her portion of the company stock was the largest, about one-fourth. She was always getting her picture into the papers, and tomorrow she would make all the front pages again, for she would be one of the two witnesses who had seen me emerge from the room

in which the Chairman of the Board and six of the directors of Warner Arms had been murdered.

I wondered if I would make it out of the building as I walked down the corridor to the elevators. A building as tall and massive as the Warner Tower probably had its own police system—certainly a call would be put in before I could reach the street.

But no one regarded me with the slightest interest as the car lowered me to the street level. When finally I stepped outside I knew that a miracle had happened—I was still free.

I wondered for how long. The time that I still had must be used. I hailed a cab, though the cab-fare would take half of the money in my pocket. My destination was Cliff Castle's office. I hoped against hope that the case he was trying was through, that there would be no more waiting.

CLIFF'S office was on the other side of town in an entirely different rent section from the famous Warner Tower. My watch said a quarter after five when I had paid off the driver. I entered the building and rode in a dingy elevator to Cliff's floor. There was still a light shining through his frosted-glass door. At least I had a break—Cliff was back from the courthouse, for his secretary would have closed up by now.

His door was locked, but he came at once in answer to my light rapping.

"Why, hello, Paul. Glad you showed up—I've been thinking about you all day!"

I walked dumbly into his office.

"Well, let's have it. What's the news? Did they buy your gadget?"

I didn't know how to begin. I was afraid to begin. I was afraid of what Cliff would say. If he didn't believe me, I knew I couldn't blame him. I stalled.

"Your case," I said, "how about it? Did you win it?"

"Yes, I won it all right. The jury was out only half an hour. It made the late papers. Look."

Cliff held up a late city edition, and there was a short bulletin about his case on the front page. A murder case. Cliff had made quite a reputation as a criminal lawyer. That was as it should be, for he was shrewd and capable. I was lucky having a friend like that. It gave me the confidence to tell him the truth.

When I had finished, Cliff was white. For seconds he said nothing, and this was unendurable.

"For heaven's sake, Cliff, say something! You believe me, don't you? You believe that it happened the way I said?"

Cliff did not answer. He picked up the newspaper again and held it out to me. I fol-

lowed the direction of his eyes. I suppose I would have noticed the picture the first time if I hadn't been so unnerved. Now, when I did see it and read the caption beneath, my head whirled.

It was the picture of Elwood Grant. There was no mistaking those narrowly staring eyes, that heavily-jowled face that revealed a life of hard, driving business. It was Grant, and the caption beneath said: NOTED FINANCIER IN ENGLAND. ELWOOD GRANT CLIPPER PASSENGER ON SECRET MISSION.

There was a London dateline, and the date was yesterday. I looked Cliff squarely in the eye.

"I know what you must be thinking, Cliff, but it's not so. Grant can't be in England. He was in that office today—committing the murder of seven men!"

Cliff lowered his gaze. When he forced himself to look up again his eyes met mine squarely with pained resolution.

"Paul, you don't have to lie to me. I'm your friend. And I'm willing to be your lawyer. I'll take your case and do the best I can with it. But I can't help you if you don't come clean with me. There's no point in holding out on your own lawyer. Come on, Paul, and tell me exactly what happened."

"I've done that. Please believe me, Cliff."

Cliff shook his head sadly.

"Let me tell you, then. Here's what happened—you took your gun with the gadget you thought so much of and went to keep your appointment with the directors of Warner Arms. They made you wait all day and that made you mad. You were mad when you went in there. And when they told you it was no go, that they couldn't use your gadget, you blew your top. The gun was loaded, and you let them have it, one after the other."

"When we give it to the jury we'll tell them that you saw red. Then your mind went blank. It's lucky for you that there were as many as seven of them there. It's hard to imagine a sane man killing seven men."

I STARED at him as it sunk in.

"Then you want me to plead guilty and try to get off on the ground of insanity?"

Cliff nodded.

"It'll work, I'm sure. You'll lose a few years, then you can pass a sanity test and be turned loose again."

I shook my head. Cliff's disbelief was hitting me pretty hard.

"No, Cliff. That's not the way. I've got to get to the bottom of this. You see, it isn't just that my own fate is at stake. It's my country's. Grant means to sell my invention to our enemies, and I've got to stop him if there's any possible way to do it."

Again Cliff lowered his eyes, and he spoke as if he couldn't bring himself to look at me.

"Paul, why don't you give up pretending that that gadget of yours is any good? A kickless gun! Why, the idea's absurd! That's why I couldn't let you get it patented—I didn't want you to waste any more money on a crack-brained idea. It's—"

"Damn it, Cliff, it's not a crack-brained idea! Why do you suppose Warner Arms was going to pay me millions if it wasn't any good?"

Cliff grimaced then, and I realized how absurd my question sounded to him. But I wasn't giving up—I had to persuade him of my innocence.

"You've got to give me a fair trial," I said. "You've never seen my gun work, so you don't know how miraculous its performance it. All you have to do is to shoot it your—"

I stopped short, and cold chills were running down my back. Fool that I was, I was overlooking an inescapable fact. Grant had removed the key section from the gun's slide. I had no duplicate. I couldn't prove my gun to Cliff—I couldn't demonstrate it to anyone. But I grasped at a straw.

"Maybe I can prove it to you from the plans," I said. "Even if you don't know anything but high school physics, you should be able to understand the simple basic principle. Get the plans. They're in your safe."

Wearily, reluctantly, Cliff moved into his private office where his heavy, old safe stood in a corner. He knelt and began to turn the dial. Finally the door was open, and Cliff reached into a pigeonhole.

The pigeonhole was empty.

"You—you must have put them somewhere else!"

Cliff shook his head.

"No. I'm the only one that ever opens this safe, and I know where I put the plans. They're gone."

I stood up. Cliff stood up, too. For a moment we stared into each other's eyes. I was thinking about his readiness to disbelieve me, his oldest friend. I was thinking, too, of his advice not to patent the gadget that would revolutionize the history of firearms. And I was thinking of his suggestion that I leave my plans, with the photostats, in his safe.

I swung from the heels. I never hit anyone harder than I hit Cliff. He dropped as if pole-axed, and lay still. I stared stupidly at his fallen body, wondering just what that punch had got me. Well, at any rate, it had enabled me to let off steam. I could think more clearly now. And clear thinking was my only possible chance.

Cliff still lay unconscious as I walked from his office. I kept on walking, for I didn't have the price of both a dinner and a cab in my

pocket. It was ironical—only a short time before I had had a check for one hundred thousand dollars, an offer of a million more. I knew that I was laughing aloud from the way people began to stare.

I got hold of myself then and began to move with an eye to policemen. For the first time in my life I was afraid of a uniform. Certainly my description must have been circulated by now. Every cop in town would be out for a promotion for making my arrest. But when a patrolman rounded a corner to meet me face-to-face, almost running into me, he apologized politely and continued on.

I MUST have walked ten blocks when I noticed the car. It was a popular make of sedan, and there were two men in front. I couldn't get a good look at the driver, but the passenger beside him was round-faced and in some need of a shave. At first I suspected that the pair were plainclothesmen, but when I had continued on in agony for another block, I knew that these men were not from the police.

They were following me, of that there could be no doubt. In fact, the round-faced man seemed scarcely trying to hide this, and once I thought he grinned. If a cat were capable of grinning at a mouse upon which he was about to pounce, it would wear such a grin.

At first the car had been driven half a block, then parked and driven on. Now that I was getting into the higher rent district the parking spaces were fewer, and the car's driver was embarrassed by his inability to stall. I realized that as traffic increased and as I moved nearer the brighter lights, I was growing safer.

Safer from what? Why these men should be following me was something I could not fathom. If they had meant to grab me, surely they had passed up their best chance blocks behind. And if they wanted to take a shot at me, well, there was nothing to stop them now. I was hardly in a position to call a policeman.

They knew this, of course. It was probable that Elwood Grant had put them on my trail. But why? Hadn't he thoroughly taken care of me already? What more could he hope to do to me?

Then I thought I had it. Grant wanted me picked up for murder, he wanted to put the finger on me for the police. Perhaps already a third passenger from the car had phoned in my whereabouts. These men could be continuing on to report the results. I was in a helpless panic when a man stepped out of a darkened doorway.

"Say, Bud, got a pen?"

The man held a paper impatiently. I shook my head.

"Sorry. I don't carry a pen."

The man grinned incredulously and said: "Sure you do! Why, there's one in your vest pocket!"

His hand reached forward. I realized suddenly that my coat concealed my vest pocket, that the man couldn't have seen its contents. And at the same time I remembered that there would be a pen there.

I knocked the man's hand aside. He grabbed desperately again, and this time I swung my punch at his jaw. He went sprawling. Then it was my turn. Momentarily I had forgotten about the men in the trailing car. It was the round-faced man who clipped me from behind. Only luck saved me from complete paralysis from that rabbit punch. Its main force caught my shoulder as I was straightening from my swing at the man who wanted the pen.

But the punch was tough enough to put me down. I flung myself at legs, half-rolled, half-pried with outstretched hands, and the round-faced man went over backwards. I leaped up. The driver of the trailing car was leaving its wheel. It was time to get out.

You can run when you have to, as I ran that half block to the corner. I didn't dare look back to see if I were being followed—not until a cruising cab rounded the curb and halted to my whistle did I see that I had not been pursued.

"Where to, Jack?" The cab driver was mildly curious at my panting. I climbed in and sat back in the seat, breathing heavily.

"Drive out on North Ninth. I'll tell you when to stop."

My rooming house was on North Ninth. I couldn't hope that the police weren't already there, but I couldn't afford not to find out. The incident of the pen had reminded me of something I had completely forgotten. And it had given me new hope, too, for it had made me realize that the Machiavellian craft of Grant was capable of mistake.

Grant had made a mistake that afternoon when he had loaned me his pen and forgot to ask for its return. Excited over signing the contract, I had thrust it into my own vest pocket. As the cab rolled up North Ninth, I took out the pen, scrutinized it with new interest.

The initials, "E.G.," were clearly engraved.

I had proof that Elwood Grant was not in England, that he had been in the room in which the seven men had been slain.

CHAPTER THREE

Dangerous Sanctuary

FURTIVELY I peered through the cab's rear window. The nearest headlights followed a full block behind. Perhaps, I hoped, the trio back there had been too thoroughly

disorganized to trail the cab. If that were true, if Grant hadn't sent someone to search my room, I had a fighting chance. For the attempt to get possession of Grant's pen had reminded me of something else. I had left in my room the letter that Grant had sent me, the letter asking me to bring my gun.

That ought to mean something—both the pen and the letter would corroborate my story that Elwood Grant had actually been in that room at the Warner Tower. How he had worked the deception that he was in England I couldn't guess. But he had, just as he had bought off Cliff Castle, my best friend. I tried not to think about Cliff. When I did, it seemed that the whole world had gone sour.

Two blocks from my rooming house I stopped the cab. Paying the fare took all of my change but a dime and two nickels. I went into the drug store on the corner, bought an envelope and a stamp. I put the pen inside the envelope and addressed it to myself in care of General Delivery. When I had dropped it into the corner mailbox I moved warily up the street, eyes alert for police cruisers, for the sedan that had trailed me.

I saw neither. Parked opposite my rooming house, however, was a long, low streamliner. I hardly gave it a second thought. Surely its driver was visiting some other house than mine. No one who drove a car like that ever visited a rooming house.

Of course the police could be lying in wait—the odds were that they were already in my room. It was a chance I had to take. I entered the front doorway softly, listened to the buzz of low conversation from the dining room. Many of the roomers boarded in the house—the fact that they were gobbling up their food as usual was encouraging.

My room was on the second floor. I moved down the hallway, growing tenser with each step. Outside the door I paused. This may be it, I thought. This may be my last moment of freedom. Breathe deeply of the free air that you may never know again!

I opened the door.

SHE smiled from her chair near the window. It was the brunette in the slacks and the loosely-buttoned blouse—Rosetta Warner.

I closed the door quickly behind me.

"You—what are you doing here?"

The voice that answered came from behind my shoulder.

"We just dropped in to make a social call."

I spun. I knew the man at first glance, though I had never seen him before. His pictures, however, had made his face familiar to millions. They had appeared so many times on the front pages of the country's newspapers, usually in connection with some sorry scandal, that Hal Warner, black sheep of the famous

Warner family, was even better known than his cousin, Rosetta. It was not a pleasing face with its alcoholic floridity, schooled insolence and jaded eyes. Hal Warner was hardly more than thirty, but his hair was thinning fast.

He looked very formidable now, thanks to the automatic pistol he leveled at my belt buckle.

"Sit down, Wright. Just take it easy. Rosetta, you get his gun."

I sat down in a straight-backed chair, the only other in the room. Rosetta Warner rose, crossed to me and took my gun from its shoulder holster. Viewing it as if it was an unclean thing, she drew back the slide. The last of its cartridges flicked across the room to Hal Warner's feet. He stooped, still leveling his automatic, and picked up the cartridge. Then he tossed it to his cousin. She dropped the cartridge together with my automatic in her handbag.

"Now," said Hal Warner, "we can get down to business. First, let me assure you that you have nothing whatever to worry about. We have no intention of turning you over to the police. Indeed, our reason for being here is that we want to make sure they do not catch you. The very fact that you returned here to your room is an indication that you don't know how to take care of yourself."

He said it with a practiced insolence that made me rage within.

"There is only one thing you can do for me and that is to get the hell out of here!"

Warner smiled in mock embarrassment.

"What a pity that you can't appreciate what we're doing for you! Why, you'd probably be in the clink already if we hadn't suppressed the news of your little party at the Warner Tower. Hadn't it struck you as odd that the cops weren't looking for you? Do you think they wouldn't have been camping here if we had chosen to turn you in?"

I sensed that he must be telling the truth.

"I don't get it. Why should you conceal what happened? Why should you talk about shielding me from the police?"

Hal Warner flashed a lightning look of shocked wonder to his cousin, then regarded me as he would a child incapable of comprehending a simple problem.

"Really, Mr. Wright, you amaze me. I'd think that anyone would be able to understand our motive. Consider the facts. You have just slain the Chairman of the Board and six other directors of Warner Arms! Can't you imagine what a sensation the news of your little massacre will make?"

"The stock market will see its wildest day when the news is released. And the party will be at the expense of the stockholders of the Warner family. Our precious stock that has kept us in diamonds and Dusenbergs will

crash to an all-time low from which it may never recover.

"You see, Mr. Wright, we are not a very bright family. Boozy is the word that best describes us. But we still have a few marbles between us, and when we pool our intelligence we know that our only salvation and that of Warner Arms is to keep its management in the hands of really brainy men.

"In that we have been very successful. By dint of releasing just enough stock to interest a few clever boys like Grant, Dunning and the others, we have secured their services. Last but not least, we got McClean, the real brains of the business. Only by kidding him along, making him think that he would someday be rewarded with more stock, could we keep a man like that.

"We were doing all right till you came along and upset the apple-cart. And boy, did you do a thorough job of upsetting! Thanks to you, we've got to unload our stock and get out of dear old Warner Arms. It'll be tough going—we'll have to work fast, for we can't conceal the truth more than forty-eight hours. But if we can keep things quiet we can unload, for so many people have been so eager to get their hands on Warner Arms Preferred that they'll grab without looking or asking any questions.

"I trust that I have made myself clear—even to you. Certainly you can understand that our interests are mutual. We both are vitally interested in keeping the cops out of this deal as long as possible. We offer you sanctuary. You, in turn, should cooperate to the extent of going along quietly."

I EYED Warner steadily, but not with the same casualness, I'm sure, that he exhibited toward me.

"Go along where?"

"Oh, not very far. We just want to take you to Rosetta's summer place where you'll be perfectly safe. It's been closed up this year, and even the neighbors won't guess that it's occupied. You couldn't find a better hideout if you tried."

That I would have no chance to try seemed perfectly obvious. Hal Warner might not have a very impressive appearance, but in one respect he did impress me—he would know how to handle that automatic.

Still I hesitated.

"I don't know that your proposition interests me. Perhaps I'd be better off if I turned myself in to the police. After all, I didn't kill your board of directors."

Hal Warner raised his brows, then smiled in mock concern.

"Oh, really? Now that is interesting. So you didn't kill McClean and the others? Would you mind telling me who did?"

"Elwood Grant."

Warner exchanged a look with Rosetta, then he laughed aloud.

"That's a good one, isn't it, Rosie? If he meant to blame the murders on somebody else, wouldn't you think he'd pick a guy that wasn't in England?"

I appealed to the girl.

"I tell you, it's true. I only took a gun there today because Elwood Grant requested that I should. He wrote me a letter. That's why I came back here. I wanted to get that letter to prove that Grant actually isn't in England."

Rosetta Warner was staring at me, but she didn't seem to be seeing me at all. It was the first time anyone had ever made me feel like nothing, not even fog.

"So Grant isn't in England, and so he killed those men!" Hal Warner was enjoying the absurdity of my statement. "Would you mind telling me just why a multi-millionaire financier like Elwood Grant would decide to branch out into wholesale murder? The answer to that one should be good!"

"The answer is simply that he wanted possession of my invention. I'm positive that he means to market it to enemy powers. If he succeeds, the history of the world may be changed."

Hal Warner laughed quietly. Rosetta Warner merely stared. There was something different in her eyes now. It seemed almost akin to pity—I knew she was thinking that I was hopelessly insane.

"We've wasted enough time, Wright. Let's get going."

I shook my head vigorously.

"Wait—I can prove what I'm saying by the letter." I got out of my chair then. Warner's alertness tensed, but he said nothing as I went to the bureau. The letter had been left in its top drawer. I opened the drawer. Then I ran my hands frantically through the neckties and handkerchiefs there. I turned slowly to face Warner. He smirked.

"Don't tell me that precious paper is gone!"

It was gone, all right, and I knew that further talking was useless. I said hollowly: "O.K. Let's go."

Rosetta Warner went ahead, and Hal followed. As I stepped into the hallway I realized that my premonition before entering the room had been right. I had drawn my last free breath. Though I didn't doubt that these two meant to hide me until they had unloaded their stock certificates upon an unsuspecting public, I was equally positive that they would turn me in at the first convenient moment.

The boarding-house diners continued their conversation as we left—there was no one to interfere. That I would have asked for interference was doubtful. Perhaps, I told myself, the Warners were really giving me a lucky break—something might turn up to clear me

before they could hand me over to the police.

But that hope burned dimly. I rode in glum silence in the rear seat of the streamlined car that had been parked opposite my rooming house. Rosetta Warner drove, and Hal guarded me competently, his automatic ready. A thought occurred to me.

"The blond girl at the desk—won't she go to the police?"

Hal Warner yawned.

"No, for the very good reason that she knows nothing about it. Those doors open at will from the inside but are locked from the outside. Rosetta kept her head when no answer came from within. She went around back through a private entrance. Then she got in touch with me, and we went to work."

"How about the rest of the Warner family? Will you tip them off, too?"

"No, that would be too risky. You must understand that we number among us some borderline cases. Borderline, that is, between high-grade imbeciles and low-grade morons. If we tried to save the whole lot of them, someone would be sure to drool the whole dreadful secret to the public. No, we can't take that chance."

I nodded my head meaningly. "I get it. The rest of your relatives will be your first customers for the stock."

Hal Warner nodded.

"But don't shame me—I'm acting only for Rosetta. She's a good stick and practically all of her eggs are in the Warner Arms' basket. You see, she owns a quarter of the stock. As for me, I have hardly any. I'm the poor relation of the family. Papa left me only ten million, and that was mostly in race tracks."

I WAS content to ride in silence after that. In a matter of minutes we were out of town, heading along a country road into the section devoted to the bigger estates. We passed many of them, then finally Rosetta turned the big car into a winding lane. We followed this a mile before we reached a low, sprawling bungalow-type of place. It had been out of use—that was certain from its contagious lifelessness.

"A good hideout, you'll have to admit." Hal Warner opened the door, got out and kept me covered. "Come on now—no fuss."

I got out. Rosetta went ahead and unlocked a door. The inside of the place smelled musty and unused. There were covers over the furniture, and Rosetta began to rip them off. When she thought that neither her brother nor I were looking, her face showed strain. I knew then that she wasn't such a bad sort. This whole idea was Hal's. He was forcing her to go through with it as surely as he was forcing me at the point of a gun.

"Sit down, Wright," he said. "We might

as well be cozy about this. You should be able to accustom yourself to the situation if I am. I can't say that I've ever before week-ended here with a killer of seven men."

I shrugged, sat down and faced Hal Warner. "Of course you won't believe this, but the fact is you're wasting your time holding me here. You're going on the assumption that I killed those men. I didn't. Elwood Grant did, and he's free to do as he pleases. Added to that, my one-time pal and lawyer, Cliff Castle, may go to the police himself."

Warner frowned and exchanged a quick glance with Rosetta. Then he eyed me suspiciously.

"Who's Castle?"

"The guy who sold me out. He had the plans to my gun in his safe. When I went to get them they were gone, and my pal was all for having me turn myself over to the police and plead insanity."

Warner reflected. Then, still watching me, he said to his cousin: "Of course the story about Grant is bunk, but it does seem that he's talked to his lawyer. That complicates matters. We can't afford to take any chances."

The girl paled.

"Hal, you're not—"

"No, nothing like that. I think this Castle can be handled easily enough. I never saw a lawyer that couldn't be bought."

"You—can't leave me here alone!"

"I'll have to. We can lock Wright in the fruit cellar. No one can get out of there. I won't be gone long."

"You're not even leaving," said a voice from the doorway. We all turned. In the doorway stood the round-faced man from the car that had followed me. Flanking him were its driver and the man from the darkened doorway.

Whirling, Hal Warner lifted his gun. Flame belched from a gun in the hand of the round-faced man. Warner cried out in pain as his hand became a shattered, bloody mass, his automatic skittering across the room. He looked incredulously at his wounded hand, whimpered helplessly in self-pity.

"Don't anybody else try anything," said the round-faced man. He moved into the room, glaring into my eyes. "You've been enough trouble. I'm fresh out of patience. Make another bright move, and you get it in the guts."

His two companions came past him and reached me simultaneously. One of them ripped open my coat, the other explored the pockets of my vest. Failing to find the object of their search, they ran through the rest of my pockets. Their search a failure, they turned to their superior for orders.

The round-faced man advanced. "Watch the girl," he told the men. "I can handle this punk alone." Then he raked the barrel of his automatic across my face.

CHAPTER FOUR

TNT for Two

THE light was feeble, but my eyes burned. I stared at the single bulb which gave the light, my brain too deadened to wonder where I was. Slowly curiosity rose within me. I tried to rise.

"Don't! Just lie here quietly."

It was Rosetta Warner's voice. I could not see her. But vaguely in a far corner I made out her cousin, Hal. His ordinarily insolent face was distorted with pain and suppressed rage. He held up his wounded hand so that the blood would not settle in it. The hand had been crudely bandaged with a handkerchief.

"Damn you!" he said. "Look what you have got us into!"

I rasped a sarcastic laugh.

"How you talk! It was you who brought me here. You have nobody to blame but yourself!"

Hal Warner grimaced his disgust.

"You know what I mean! What do those men want? Why don't you give it to them? If you do, they'll let us all out of here!"

"Out of where?"

"Out of this fruit cellar, of course. They locked us in here. I think they're waiting for their boss to come—it's plain they never counted on you holding out the way you did. Boy, how you can take it! I didn't know it was possible for anyone to take the shellacking they gave you and still live!"

I remembered it vaguely, painfully. After the round-faced man had slugged me with the pistol barrel he had really started to work on me in earnest. Of course he wanted the pen with Elwood Grant's initials, and he knew I knew it. So he hadn't bothered to ask for it specifically and Hal Warner hadn't found out what he was after.

"How long has it been since I passed out?"

"A couple of hours anyway."

I became aware for the first time that my head lay in Rosetta's lap. I sat up. I had been stretched out on a low bench and Rosetta had been sitting at one end. I eyed her curiously.

"You'd better lie down again," she said.

I nodded. My head was thumping furiously and felt as if someone had doused it in boiling water. The front of my coat and vest was bloodied. I was afraid to try to stand up.

"Isn't there any way to get out of here?"

Hal Warner made a face. "Not a chance! This room hasn't even a window and the walls are two feet thick. As for the door—you can see for yourself."

I stared at the door. It was made of heavy poplar bolted to an equally heavy frame. The lock was an old-fashioned type with a large keyhole.

"Can't you pick the lock?" I asked him. "Not a chance. Besides, there's a guy parked right outside on the basement steps."

I GOT to my feet, staggered and almost fell down, but made my way over to the lock. Hal Warner was right. The lock was an old-timer, but it had been made to hold. Kneeling, I could see a face through the keyhole. It was the man from the doorway. I rose.

"Where are the others?"

"I think they've gone."

"Then now is our only chance. We've got to break through that door."

He laughed hollowly. "With what?"

I looked around the room. The bench on which I had lain was secured to the wall. There wasn't even a loose stick that could be used to pry it loose. Then I saw Rosetta's handbag on the bench beside her.

"My gun—do you still have it?"

"No. They let me keep my bag, but they took the gun, of course."

I sat wearily on the bench. I tried to think, but my brain seemed a seething mass of pain. Then suddenly I leaped to my feet.

"The cartridge! Remember, you took it out of the gun! Did they take that, too?"

Rosetta shook her head. "I don't think so." She began to rummage through her bag. Finally she found the cartridge. I snatched it.

"What," asked Hal Warner, "do you think you can do with that?"

I didn't answer him. I went over to the door. With trembling fingers I inserted the Luger cartridge into the lock. It fit snugly. I faced Hal Warner.

"It will take two of us to do this. We may both get hurt. Are you game?"

He snarled: "Show me how to get out of this so I can take a crack at those guys and I'll do anything!"

"Fine. Now see if you've got a key on you." I felt through my own pockets, pretty certain that they had been thoroughly cleaned out. I was right. I saw that Hal Warner wasn't even trying.

"I haven't any," he shrugged. "All of my keys are on the holder that I left in my car."

Rosetta Warner dumped the contents of her handbag upon the bench. There were no keys, but I grabbed up the tiny nail file that fell out. Then I took off a shoe. It had a rubber heel, but I thought maybe it would work.

"One of us will have to hold this nail file against the cartridge's primer while the other hammers it with this shoe. The one that holds the file may get his hand blown off. I think we ought to toss for it," I said to Hal.

Hal Warner shook his head. "I've got one hand virtually blown off already. See if you can put the file between my fingers in a way that I can hang on to it."

I didn't argue. I managed to put the file in a position where he could hold it. Then he knelt at the keyhole and held the file against the Luger cartridge primer. I turned to Rosetta.

"Get out of the line of fire—that is, don't stand back of the keyhole."

She moved to one side. I took a few trial swings, then swung the heel of my shoe hard against the nail file. There was a blinding flash of flame. I knew that Hal Warner was crying out in pain, but I couldn't hear his cry for the deafening roar. His bandaged hand was a blood-soaked mass. My own hand was numb, for my shoe had been hurled across the room. I tried to snap out of it, threw my weight against the door.

IT GAVE. I stumbled on into the outside room, tripped and fell flat on my face. Immediately I got up, alert for the man on guard. I saw him then. It was his body over which I had tripped. I knelt warily and turned him over. Whether he had heard our movements within the room and tried to spy through the keyhole, I don't know. But it seems likely that he had. The Luger bullet had gone through his right eye.

"That's one of them!" said Hal Warner from the doorway. "When the others come back we'll clean house!"

I got my fingers on the dead man's gun and straightened. Hal Warner glowered.

"What does this mean?"

"It means that I'm taking over. I don't know what this is all about, but I do know that it's too deep for me. I'm handing the whole thing over to the police."

Rosetta Warner had appeared beside her cousin. She eyed me strangely.

"But they'll convict you for those murders at the Tower!"

"Maybe so. But I know one thing that you don't know—I didn't happen to kill them. Grant did, and he made one fumble. That's why these three gorillas showed up."

The girl eyed me intently. She wanted to believe me, but couldn't quite make it.

"But you'll ruin Rosetta!" Hal interposed. "At least give me a chance to dispose of the stock. One day is all I ask. I've already got a power of attorney—"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry—but not for the prospective purchasers that you counted on gypping." I eyed Rosetta. "You'll have to take it, just as I'll have to. Let's go."

They preceded me up the stairs. The house had been deserted by the rest of the visitors. We went out onto the veranda. Hal Warner's car, the big streamliner, was gone. There remained only the sedan that the round-faced man had used when he had trailed me.

We crossed to the car. The keys were

there. "You drive," I told Hal, but he did not move. He was looking toward the highway. I saw then, the lights of the car that had turned into the winding drive.

"They're coming back," Hal said. "We can't get by them in that drive, and there's no back way out. We're in for a fight. We've got to get clubs or something. There ought to be some tire irons in the trunk. Get the keys."

I got the keys, hurrying plenty, for the lights were speedily approaching in the drive. I found the one that unlocked the trunk and lifted the lid. There was just enough moonlight for me to see the face of the man doubled up inside. It was Grant.

I grabbed a jack handle and a hammer and passed them on to Hal. I dropped the trunk lid before he saw its contents. He turned toward Rosetta as the lights advanced to within a hundred feet.

"Go into the house. Use this if you have to." He tossed her the hammer. We both ducked behind the car. Hal's big streamliner stopped twenty feet away. Its lights flicked off, and the driver emerged. The round-faced man got out on the other side. Then a figure emerged from the rear.

"That must be the boss," said Hal. "They went to get him when you wouldn't talk."

I scrutinized the figure in the darkness. Then I caught my breath. I recognized the man only too well.

"Cliff!" I muttered, loud enough only for Hal to hear. "Cliff Castle!"

Blind fury made me lift the gun in my hand. At twenty feet I couldn't miss. I didn't mean to. My old friend Cliff had sold me out—there could be no doubt about it now. My finger squeezed on the trigger. But the gun never went off.

My arm went numb at the impact of the jack handle that swung downward. The gun fell to the ground. I stooped, tried to snatch it up, but a rabbit punch sent me following the gun. I lay paralyzed, struggling for breath. It was incredible. Why had Hal struck me down? He couldn't be in league with these men—they had almost shot off his hand!

But the round-faced man said: "Nice work, boss!"

CHAPTER FIVE

No Kick Coming

IT SEEMED so simple then. Hal Warner, owning virtually no stock in the Warner Arms corporation, had decided to get control of his cousin's share. He had plotted with Elwood Grant and with Cliff. When Grant had bungled regarding the matter of the fountain pen, he had paid for it with his life.

Warner had kept in the background, using Cliff as a go-between. The round-faced man and his friends hadn't known they were really working for Warner until they had driven into the city for instructions from Cliff.

That was the way I figured it out as I lay helpless at Hal Warner's feet. There was nothing I could do to stop him now—he had said only a few minutes ago that he had Rosetta's power of attorney. Of course she had heard and seen everything, but she would never live to tell it.

I was almost oblivious to what happened as the car's driver came forward and lifted me to my feet. I walked drunkenly into the house with his assistance. I wanted to be sick. The rabbit punch had effectively put me out of the fight. I was inordinately glad when I was dropped into a chair.

Hal Warner entered the room. Rosetta followed, Cliff Castle immediately behind her. I glared my hatred. I couldn't understand the puzzled, concerned look in Cliff's eyes. Nor that worn by Hal. It seemed odd that the round-faced man held a gun so that it covered both. Then my eyes froze at the appearance of another figure in the doorway.

Edward McClean smiled back. He advanced leisurely into the room, and the round-faced man stood aside with deference. He halted before me.

"We meet again. I had not looked for this second encounter. Its necessity has proved most annoying, but it cannot be avoided. If you cooperate it will be a painless affair for you. If you fail to do so, nothing that you have yet gone through will seem even a beginning to your ordeal. It's up to you."

I could only stare, first at McClean, then at Hal Warner. Hal shrugged.

"I had to do what I did, otherwise you would have shot your best friend. You were so blinded by rage that you failed to see McClean as he climbed out of the car. I got a pretty clear picture then. McClean was behind the whole plot. Castle had been picked up because McClean thought he might have whatever he was after. Right, McClean?"

McClean nodded. "Right. There need be no mystery about it—I'm looking for a fountain pen bearing the initials 'E.G.'"

"'E.G.' for Elwood Grant," I supplied. I added sadly, mainly for Cliff's benefit: "You wouldn't believe Elwood Grant was in America. His body happens to be in the trunk of the car outside."

McClean slowly shook his head.

"NO, IT'S not Elwood Grant you saw, but his worthless brother, Everett. I hired him to impersonate Elwood for the occasion, knowing in advance of Elwood's secret mission to England. The fact that Elwood actually

was in England would make Wright's story of what happened sound absurd.

"I can't afford to take any chances. My name and position are great enough to back me up when I tell the authorities that because I happened to be testing a bullet-proof vest I was merely stunned instead of being killed. I am seventy, so the story that I stayed out for hours should not be questioned.

"I counted on Wright's hasty examination failing to reveal that I wasn't dead. Actually I was unconscious, even when Rosetta came along later. You see, Rosetta, I had asked you to come at that precise hour knowing you would go around back, come into the room and behold the gory spectacle within. And I counted on you going straight to your favorite cousin for advice.

"It was a foregone conclusion that Hal would urge you to dump your stock in Warner Arms. My agents were in readiness to buy up the stock. Later, after Wright's story of the murders had been laughed out of court and he had been electrocuted for them, I would come up with that very ingenious little gadget of his which will revolutionize the manufacture of arms.

"So you see, Rosetta, I planned well that I should have my true place in the rising sun of Warner Arms. For thirty years I have made millions for you while you have kidded me along with the promise of a few more shares of stock. You may think my crimes unjustifiable, but I don't. Committing them was the only way I could get my just deserts."

"You mean to commit more still," I commented coldly. "Of course you'll have to kill us all now."

"I regret that it must be so. But everything will turn out all right for me, as I can buy Rosetta's stock cheap from the executor of her estate. I will be the only brain left in Warner Arms. Without me the stock would be worth nothing."

"Aren't you a little optimistic? You've admitted that you must find the pen."

"True, I must. It was untoward that Elwood and Everett should have the same initials. I daren't risk the conjectures that the FBI might have. But they will never get hold of it, for you are going to tell me where it is."

"Sorry, wrong number."

McClean sighed. He gave a scant look to the round-faced man, but the effect was instantaneous. The round-faced man aimed his gun at Cliff's right knee.

"First he will shoot off your friend's right kneecap," said McClean. "Then his left. He will continue to shoot him up until you talk. That failing, we will try all over again with Hal. And if the sight of his incalculable agony does not soften you, I fancy that the same treatment meted out to the beauteous Rosetta

will do the trick. But why force me to do all this? It would be so much simpler to tell me about the pen."

YES, it would be. I knew that I couldn't let the round-faced man fire a single bullet into Cliff. Hadn't I done him enough injury, suspecting him of trickery when McClean's men had robbed his safe? As for Hal Warner, I was beginning to like the guy. Him, too, I had done an injustice with my suspicions when he had kept me from killing Cliff. I had thought him the ringleader merely because the round-faced man had called him "boss," a term a flunky naturally uses when addressing someone in a superior station.

McClean knew he had me when he mentioned Rosetta. But she spoke up now.

"Don't give in! If you hold out, you can beat him! Even though we'll be dead, he'll be beaten!"

I faced her wearily. "No, Rosetta, even then we wouldn't beat him. The pen's in the mail, addressed to me, care of General Delivery. Without my explanation of it, it would mean nothing to the FBI."

McClean's eyes lighted.

"So that's where you put it? But how do I know you're telling the truth?"

"Well, you can hold us till the pen shows up at General Delivery. One of your stooges can pick it up."

McClean shook his head.

"That's out of the question. I must get back to the Warner Tower and pretend that I just came to before another hour passes. So I'll have to gamble that you're telling the truth. But then, the whole thing has been a gamble—a gigantic gamble with at least a billion as the stakes!"

I watched him as he drew an automatic pistol from his pocket. It was a familiar weapon, my own. From another pocket McClean drew the section that had been taken from the slide, the section that had made the gun kickless. He then took the magazine from the gun, jacked back the slide to make sure that it was unloaded and handed it together with the section to me.

"You will oblige me by assembling the 'Wright Device.' You are about to have the honor of being the first man killed by a gun equipped with your own invention."

My strength was returning now, but I knew it was useless to resist. There were only three of them, but two were fully armed. I resignedly accepted the pistol, pulled back the slide and inserted the device that I had hoped would make me millions.

"Do you recall," I asked McClean, "that during the board meeting I pointed out that there was one small improvement that should be made in the gun before it is marketed?"

McClean nodded impatiently as he seized the gun.

"Yes, yes, I remember. But I've seen the gun fired thousands of times, and whatever improvement you're talking about, my engineers will spot it in a matter of minutes. I'm not worried about that."

"You should be."

McClean inserted the magazine, which had been fully loaded with the powerful Luger cartridges. He jacked a cartridge into the chamber. Then he leveled the pistol at the bridge of my nose and squeezed the trigger. Orange flame blinded me, singed my eyebrows and hair. Even over the gun's roar I could hear Rosetta's scream. Blinded, I rose nevertheless and lunged to the place where I knew the round-faced man to be. Shock prevented his killing me before I knocked the gun from his hand, got both my fingers on his throat and squeezed for dear life.

From the scuffling sound I knew that Cliff and Hal had jumped the other man. When I let my victim drop inert and turned, I saw that they had done an excellent job. Their man lay unconscious between them. But they were not looking at him. They were staring at McClean, who lay sprawled on the floor.

McClean was no pretty sight. Blued-steel metal protruded three inches from the socket of his right eye. At least than many more inches of metal were buried within his skull.

"My God!" said Cliff. "What happened?"

"Over-confidence," I answered. "McClean should have heeded me when I told him that there was one minor improvement to be made in my gun. I knew he would overlook the significance of what I said, for he had seen the gun fired thousands of times, and it had functioned perfectly.

"He didn't know that this experimental gun had one egregious defect. The so-called 'Wright Device' had been made in such a way that it could be inserted not only as it should be, but *backwards!* I hadn't bothered to fool-proof it, for that could be done simply enough in the commercial model. When I assembled it for McClean, I merely reversed it. Instead of dissipating the recoil, it *doubled* it. The slide tore itself off the frame and buried itself in McClean's eye."

Rosetta Warner was pale.

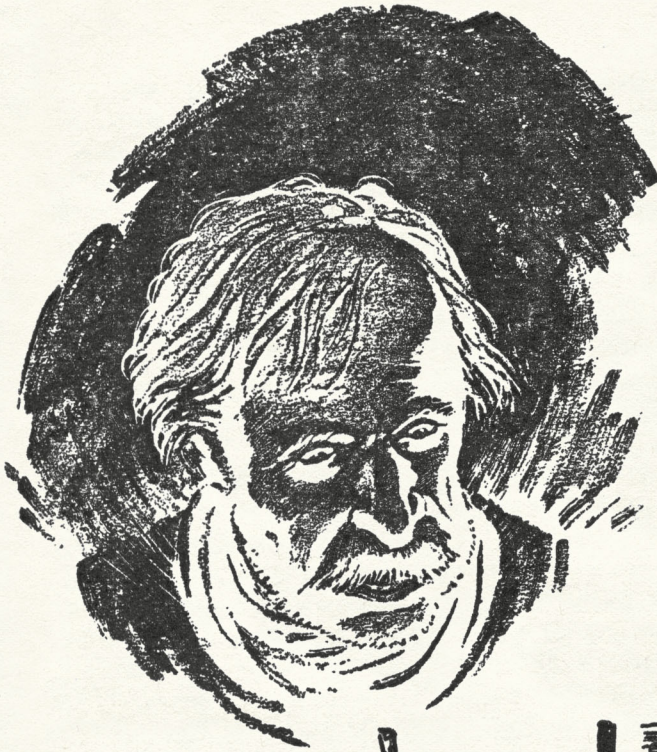
"But why weren't you killed?"

"Because the doubling of the recoil made the gun jump twice as much as it ordinarily would with normal recoil. Instead of hitting me between the eyes, the bullet merely parted my hair."

Rosetta eyed Hal searchingly. He nodded.

"It looks as if we've got some new brains for Warner Arms. Want the job?"

"Sure. So long as I build your guns, you'll have no kick coming."



"My husband's devotion becomes unbearable when it is not expressed in dollars. When he dies I want to be able to mourn luxuriously," Florence Tavell told Wren. No easy pickings for little Florence when Freya, the Valkyrie table-tapper, and Wilfred Doan with his "sure thing" schemes were also shekel-interested in the baby-talking Mr. Tavell. And when poor old Bobert turned up, strangled by three yards of best-grade ectoplasm, something was really cooking—with the flame turned up too high!



CHAPTER ONE

Table-Tapper

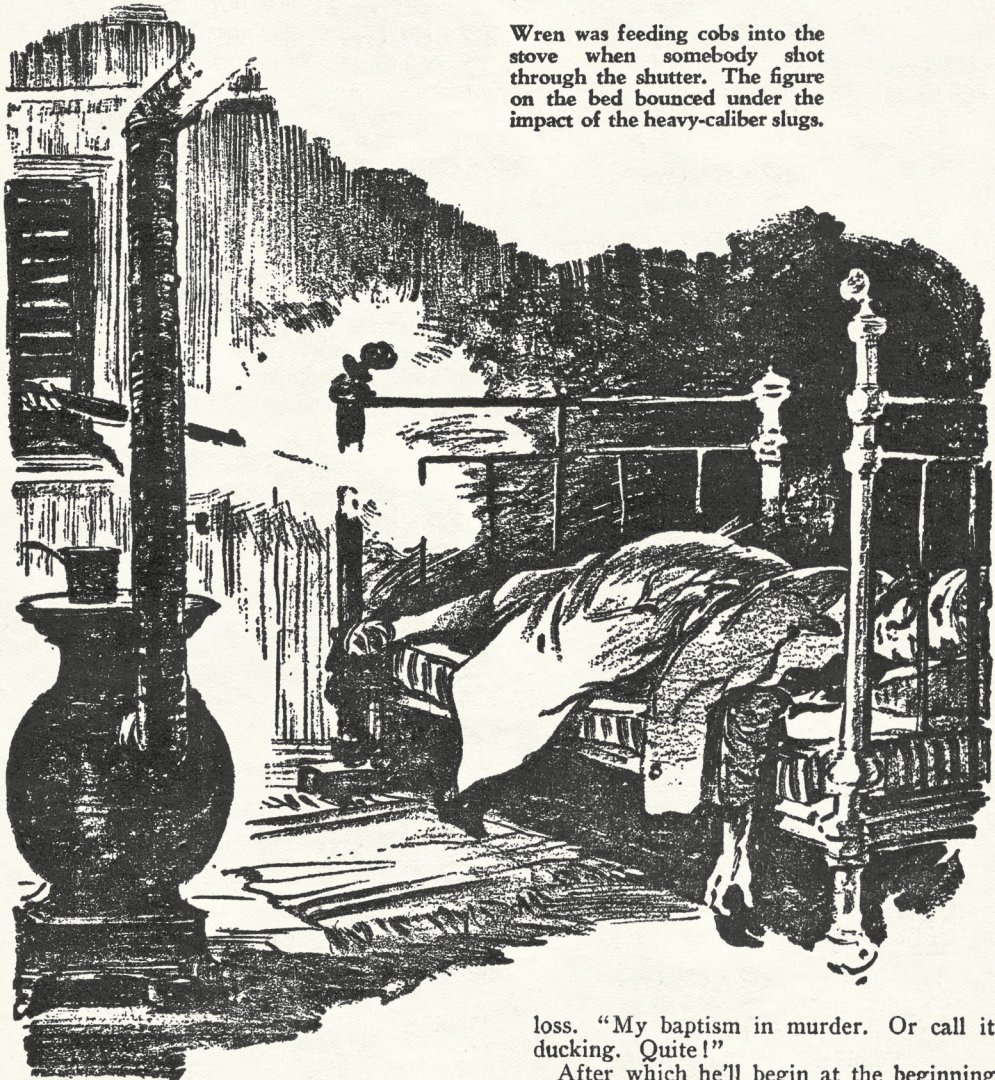
JEFFERY WREN frequently mentions the man who was choked with ectoplasm, especially at meetings of the Indianapolis Chapter of the Society of American Magicians

HAUNTING ALLOWED

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

Author of "There's One in Every Graveyard," etc.

Wren was feeding cobs into the stove when somebody shot through the shutter. The figure on the bed bounced under the impact of the heavy-caliber slugs.



where he has more listeners than are good for his ego. When he talks about the body his deep voice hangs crepe gently as though the corpse were that of someone dear.

It was not. He had never seen the man before, alive or dead.

"My first body," he usually explains to preclude the idea that he has suffered a personal

loss. "My baptism in murder. Or call it a ducking. Quite!"

After which he'll begin at the beginning—that dark five o'clock of a November afternoon when Florence Tavell and her pedigreed mink coat entered a glittering hole-in-the-wall shop on West Ohio Street.

Before the door was entirely closed behind her, Florence Tavell drew a shallow breath as if the air within were poison, and her eyes went slumming from counter to counter.

Souvenirs of leather, plaster, china, and pot-

metal, flash jewelry, comic novelties that ranged from the inane to the obscene, patent potato peelers, jokers' items that pricked, snapped, stamped, damped, soiled, startled, smarted and generally out-smarted the unwary—all were included in that disdainful glance that swept on to the thin, bloodless-looking clerk named Horace.

Horace's gaudy necktie lifted and waved, apparently of its own volition, but Florence Tavell ignored this minor miracle.

"Is Mr. Wren in?" she asked, producing an immediate fall in Horace's barometer.

Horace sighed. "Boss's upstairs with coupla suckers." He showed Florence Tavell the way with a gesture of his faintly blue hand.

SHE plunged through green curtains redolent with cigar smoke, hurried up a stairway to a door that bore the legend *Wren's Magic*. Beyond this was a small reception room. The walls were decorated with framed publicity photos which had appeared in newspapers when Jeffery Wren had played Keith's circuit—Wren at the climax of "The Linking Rings," Wren escaping from a straitjacket, Wren cheerfully decapitating a shapely young woman in black silk tights, and many others.

Florence Tavell poised like a swimmer about to plunge into Lake Michigan in mid-January, then pushed open the glass doors to enter the shop itself. Behind one counter, Wren, with a suggestion of being bored or a little tipsy, had reached the climax in a demonstration of "The Twentieth Century Silks" for a pair of customers. He gave Florence Tavell a heavy-lidded glance. His smile broke against his bronzed skin, twitched, and was gone—a slight and perhaps inadequate tribute to a lady of Mrs. Tavell's face and figure.

Wren was dark-complexioned, of medium height, with a heavy, squarish body. There was about him something of the sleek ostentation so admirably portrayed by Edward Arnold of the movies. Large, deft fingers ripped open a paper tube from which he took a green silk, previously vanished, which now appeared securely tied between a red and yellow one.

His customers glanced back at Florence Tavell, then huddled over the counter as though plotting to blow up the State House. "No pulls?" one whispered. "No double silk?"

Wren shook his head. "It's clean. You can work it close." He chuckled warmly. Leaving the silks for examination, he came around the counter to Florence Tavell.

"Mrs. Urban Malthus Tavell," she pronounced, her voice as cold as new-fallen snow. She gave him a little time to recover.

Wren's chunky black eyebrows elevated slightly. The name of Urban Malthus Tavell meant money—a lot of money.

"A policewoman. . ." Mrs. Tavell frowned, making heavy business of excavating from memory a name that was of no importance to her, "a policewoman by the name of Osbourn suggested that you might be able to help me. Of course I shall pay you well."

The offer of money had all the earmarks of an explanation as to why Mrs. Tavell happened to be discoursing with the likes of Jeffery Wren. He concluded that she was of the sudden-rich. He looked into her eyes. They were long, tapering, gray eyes with something of chilled steel about them, a suggestion of temper acquired by quenching in the cold waters of disillusion.

"My husband," she explained, "is being victimized by a table-tapper."

"Ah? One of those?" He led Mrs. Tavell into that thoughtful brown room that was his office and placed a chair for her.

"Cigarette?"

Florence Tavell had reached halfway toward his extended hand before she realized it was empty. And then, immediately, it was not empty, but held a lighted cigarette at fingertips. She drew back, startled.

"Come now," he said. "Magic shouldn't frighten you. Something of an illusionist yourself, aren't you? You haven't a lorgnette, yet you seem to be looking at me through one."

SHE flushed, drew a startled breath through parted lips. It was as though she had been slapped. Wren, having spanked her verbally, said, "Now, now," in his gentlest voice. Her sensuous mouth curved up at the corners, and she demonstrated contrition by accepting the cigarette.

"The table-tapper?" he prompted.

"Her name is Freya."

"Ah! A Norse goddess."

Florence Tavell's slender eyebrows peaked into arches of surprise. "You know her then?"

He shook his head. "The name was originally that of a Norse goddess. Rode a billy-goat or something equally uncomfortable. Freya would be tall, blond, statuesque. Strictly from Wagner. How's that?"

"Perfect."

"You might tell me how Freya operates," he suggested.

"She, my husband and I sit about a table in a fully lighted room, with our fingers resting lightly on the top. After Freya has established contact with her spirit control, the table taps. My husband then asks questions and the answers come, one tap for 'no' and two taps for 'yes.' The table is an ordinary card table, except that it has a glass top, so it's evident Freya doesn't kick the table leg."

His smile twitched. "She wouldn't do that. Too obvious."

"My husband has perfect faith in her."

He even consults her in financial matters.” Wren’s eyes became shrewd. “That’s what gets you down.”

“Naturally. For example, there is a man named Wilfred Doan who is trying to get my husband to sign some sort of an agreement whereby Mr. Tavell will give him financial backing to the extent of a hundred thousand dollars. Doan has designed some sort of a prefabricated, low-cost dwelling for war workers. Freya and her table recommend that Mr. Tavell back Wilfred Doan.”

“I see.” Wren waited for Mrs. Tavell to continue.

“We live out of the city limits,” she said, “not far from Carmel. Our nearest neighbor is a simple country woman, a spinster, by the name of Mary Maley. A few years ago her brother, for whom she kept house, died of some malignant stomach ailment and left Miss Maley quite a lot of money.”

“Excuse me,” Wren interrupted. “I fail to see what this has to do with your problem.”

“You’ll see in a moment. Village gossip has it that Mary Maley was responsible for Eben Maley’s death because her cookery did not adhere to the rigid diet rules set forth by Eben’s doctor. As a matter of fact, Eben liked rich food so well that he wouldn’t have dieted anyway. But the gossip has so affected Mary Maley that she built herself a small house and erected a steel fence around it. With a single Negro servant and two vicious Great Dane dogs, she lives virtually as a hermit.”

“Why the fence and the dogs?” Wren asked. “Going to extremes to avoid callers, wouldn’t you say?”

“That’s because Mary Maley doesn’t trust

banks,” Mrs. Tavell explained. “I understand she keeps all her money in the house.

“But the point is, Mary Maley trusts my husband. From Mr. Tavell she has heard of Freya and now she wishes to have Freya attempt contact with her dead brother, Eben. Mary Maley wants to know if her brother holds her responsible for his death. Freya has arranged a sitting for tonight at nine at the old Maley farmhouse which has been vacant since Eben Maley’s death.”

“Cheerful idea,” Wren mused. “You’re afraid that Freya may somehow manage to rook Mary Maley out of her inheritance?”

“It’s a possibility, of course,” Mrs. Tavell admitted, “though my chief concern is for my husband and myself. It occurred to me that tonight at this sitting you might manage to do something about Freya.”

“When she’s doing her table-tapping is the table placed on a carpet or on the bare floor?” he asked.

“On the bare hardwood floor.”

“Then put Freya and her table on a thick rug. Don’t think the spirit will cooperate then. Not on a rug.”

Mrs. Tavell raised a shoulder, shrugging aside his suggestion.

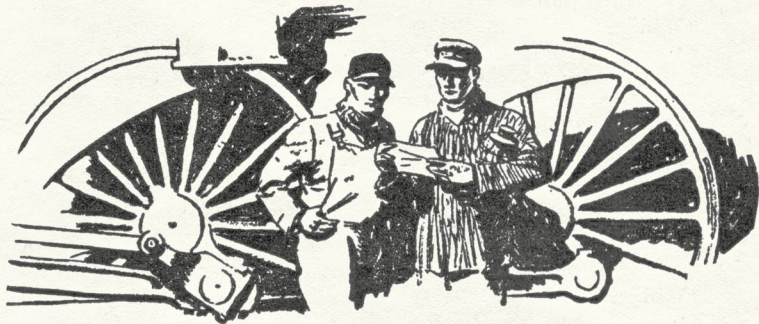
“That wouldn’t do, I’m sure. Freya would explain that the rug insulates the table, or something equally absurd. My husband is in his foolish fifties and receptive to such suggestions.”

SHE opened her purse, removed a fountain pen and checkbook. Her gray eyes priced Wren coolly.

“A thousand dollars?”

He laughed shortly, annoyed. “For what?”

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"I want you to discredit Freya in my husband's eyes—tonight. I won't have her swindling him. You see, Mr. Wren, I have every intention of outliving him." She leaned forward a little in the chair. "My husband is completely devoted to me, but such devotion becomes unbearable when it is no longer expressed in dollars. When Mr. Tavell dies I want to be able to mourn luxuriously."

"Black from the skin out," he said. "Probably becoming."

"And if it should become necessary to murder Freya to protect my future I shouldn't have to hire anyone to do it for me."

Wren said: "I see, I see." He drummed on the desk top while she wrote the check.

Shortly after Florence Tavell had left, the ringing of the phone brought Wren away from the latest edition of the City Directory. Zoe Osbourn was calling him from police headquarters to learn how he'd got on with Mrs. Tavell. When Wren told her of the check, the policewoman uttered a prolonged whistle.

He said: "I think Freya's real name is Gladys Frye of 1123¼ Alabama Street."

Zoe Osbourn grunted. "So you know her?"

"I'm afraid so. She's listed in the directory as a notary and public stenographer. Last time we met, she was doing seances—with trumpets, with ectoplasm materializing all over the place. If anybody could tell you what your late Aunt Hattie wanted done with her Postal Savings account, it was Gladys Frye. Let's meet at Tenth and Alabama around seven. I want to talk to you."

CHAPTER TWO

Dead—As in Murdered

WREN'S slow, bouncing stride took him down Alabama Street. At Tenth, the appointed corner, Zoe Osbourn was waiting for him in a fur-trimmed coat and matching shako that contrived to make her look like the least dashing of cossacks.

"How are you?" Wren touched his hat vaguely. "How're all the dirty crooks?"

"I'm fine." she had a husky bellow. "And there's no reason to suppose the dirty crooks aren't fine, too."

Zoe Osbourn was a copper's widow in her late forties. She was taller than short, more than pleasantly rounded, with hair that had frequently met henna. She owed her assignment of picking up fraud fortune tellers to prominent pale blue eyes that lent a wholly gullible expression to her heavy face.

"Look," Wren said. "It's big of me to help the police catch their spook-crooks. Don't you think?"

"It's wonderful." She was walking fast. "We should crack the Orphans' Fund to buy

you a loving cup to keep your thousand kopeks in!"

They turned up the approach walk of a square-faced, red brick building with blackened limestone trim. Inside the foyer, Wren pointed to a tarnished brass mailbox plate set in sea-green marble wainscoting. Gladys Frye's neatly-typed card was in its holder, proclaiming her a stenographer and notary public. Up carpeted steps and down a hall, they came to a door where a similar card was thumb-tacked to the panel.

Zoe Osbourn asserted her authority to the extent of knocking at the door. It was an imperative knock, but there were no takers. The door was locked.

"She's probably out at the Tavell place tapping the gold out of Urban Malthus Tavell's back teeth," Zoe suggested.

Wren took a hand out of his trouser pocket and wedged himself between Zoe and the door.

She said: "Here, no breaking and entering."

"No," he replied, already working on the lock with the cautious haste of Houdini escaping from a Chinese water cell in nothing flat. "Of course not. Who's breaking anything? Closer investigation simply reveals the door not locked, contrary to first supposition."

He twisted the knob, threw the door wide open. He stepped into the apartment, brushed a gloved hand up and down the wall to locate the light switch. Zoe Osbourn was right beside him. When the light came on, there they were, caught flat-footed with their tonsils showing.

A man was waiting for them.

HE STOOD beside a connecting door and against the west wall of the living room. A derby hat and a long dress overcoat lent height to insignificance. An automatic held low in a pigskin-gloved hand kept him from being a pushover for a pack of hungry rabbits. Above the up-turned coat collar was a narrow wedge of face with close-set eyes and a pinched looking nose. The end of the nose twitched. The muzzle of the automatic didn't.

"Put it down," Zoe Osbourn said steadily. "I'm from the police."

The man's attitude indicated clearly that the police could go kiss Santa Claus. He waved them away from the door with his rod and started across the room toward them. His eyes were narrow and desperate. When he saw Zoe Osbourn fingering the clasp of her purse he right away got the idea she was going to pull a gun.

"Drop it, sister. No kiddin'."

Zoe dropped her purse. She had got the clasp of it open and the butt of a revolver showed against the floor.

"Really, Zoe," Wren chided. "Don't you know jiu-jitsu or something?"

"That's for defending my virtue!" she snapped at him.

"I'm gettin' out of here," the man said. "Right now."

"Obviously." Wren bowed slightly. "Goom-by. Bon voyage."

The man drew a shivering breath. "I just want to get one thing off my chest. I didn't have nothin' to do with it. But I ain't gettin' railroaded neither."

"Zoe," Wren said, "for your education, those are double negatives he's tossing around. He's lousy with 'em."

The gun swiveled, covering them as the man took sidling steps. He stooped quickly, snaked Zoe's gun from her fallen purse, straightened, took another step. He was as close to Wren as he'd ever be.

Wren led with his right. The blow was straight out of the boiler but it came a long way and had an air raid siren attached. The man pulled out of the path of it. As Wren's hundred and seventy pounds followed through, he got rammed below the belt with the muzzle of a gun. He backed, seeing red, but feeling pea-green. The man had skipped out the door and slammed it.

Zoe Osbourn went for the doorknob like a West Indian diver after a penny, but didn't turn it because of the whispered warning that came from the hall.

"Don't neither of you show a hair out that door for three minutes. You got that?"

Wren kneaded his tummy with one hand, drew Zoe Osbourn back from the door with the other. The policewoman turned on him.

"He can't do this to me! Where's the back door out of this dump? I'll show the—"

He held onto her. "Don't try it. You're the weaker sex."

The name she gave Wren provided a family tie between him and the little gunman. She knocked down his detaining hand with a gloved fist and went pegging toward what had to be the kitchen door of the flat.

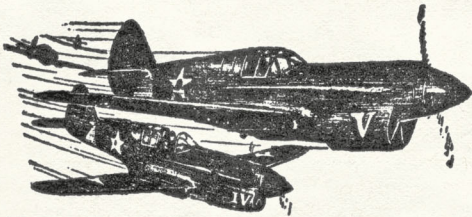
Wren said: "Aren't you interested in that 'I didn't have nothin' to do with it' stuff?"

She didn't hear. "You call headquarters and have a prowler car sent around." Then she plunged into the kitchen and slammed out the back door.

WREN looked around the room. It didn't spell home in any language except Neanderthal. There were no rugs. A chair of oak upholstered in brown leatherette, a desk that held a typewriter comprised the entire furnishings. He didn't see a phone.

He went through the connecting door that led to the bedroom, felt for the light switch while picturing Gladys Frye's buxom figure draped across the bed, gashed and hacked into any number of pieces. The light on, he found the bed empty, clean, smoothly made, and the dresser in order. He turned to the first of two doors placed side by side and recalled that sometimes the corpse was in the bathtub, swimming in gore. But in the bathroom white tile glared at him, innocent of stain.

The second door operated a light that switched on automatically to reveal a closet beyond, a closet large enough to have served as a dressing room. Wren couldn't see the back of the closet because of a folding frame



WINGS OF THE COBRA

"You were smooth and sharp, but now you're afraid—afraid of what I know! Sure, I can walk out of here, away from that firing squad that's waiting—and when I do you'll be outside, gun aimed to stop my mouth forever. It won't work, Warren—for I'm going to carry out the sentence of the court—execute the murderer!" "Wings of the Cobra," is David Goodis's latest novel of the battle-torn Pacific skies!

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of gilt gas-pipe hung with pleated black velvet drapes. The frame was a mediums' "cabinet" folded for packing. It had fallen sideways across the closet, and because of its height had wedged diagonally between a wall and the opposite baseboard.

Tumbled on the closet floor in front of the cabinet were three telescoping "reaching rods" and several spirit trumpets of aluminum. A pile of slates used for receiving spirit messages had been disturbed by a careless foot. One of them was broken, disclosing the secret of its inner flap.

Wren shifted to the left a foot or so to try and see over the mediums' cabinet, but as he did so the toe of his shoe touched one of the gas-pipe members and the whole contraption collapsed with a crash like a bull in a plumbing shop. A section of pipe fell across his toe but he scarcely noticed because of what showed up in the space beyond. Not much space, certainly, but brim-full of death by violence.

Between the fallen frame and the rear of the closet was a straight chair placed a little to one side of, and a foot back from a small window. In the chair slumped an old man, his rusty black coat drooping to the floor, his battered black hat at his feet. His head reminded Wren of a dandelion gone to seed. It looked as though one good puff of wind would dislodge the fragile white hairs. The face of the dead man was evident in the extreme, but something to be avoided. He'd been strangled—garroted, to put it properly—and by a three-yard length of cheesecloth twisted to attain strength and thickness and pulled tightly about his scrawny throat.

It was stagy. It smelled of herring. The way that mediums' cabinet had been balanced between the walls . . . why, if it had actually fallen that way it would have collapsed to the floor. And how could the killer have got back through the door without disturbing it, just as Wren had disturbed it? The whole scene was set up to look as though there had been a brawl in the closet. There hadn't been. Nobody would have stood in front of that window and strangled a man. Well, not with the light on.

Wren reached up to the electric socket in the ceiling, unscrewed the bulb far enough to darken the room. The picture was worse in the dark. Much worse. The cheesecloth glowed with white luminosity. The synthetic moonlight of it bathed the ugly profile death had left, bringing the highlights into sharp relief.

He screwed the bulb back to make contact. That hunk of cheesecloth was ectoplasm, the stuff that spirits are supposedly made of. Fake ectoplasm, of course, because it was always faked. Gladys Frye had probably used the

stuff to wave in a dark room during a seance to convince the customers they were seeing grandpappy's ghost.

Wren stepped forward cautiously, dropped on one knee beside the dead man. The crystal of a watch on the dangling left wrist had been smashed, stopping the hands at 9:28. Wren looked at his own watch, and it was not yet 7:30. He touched the dead man's hand, found it stiff and stone-cold.

"So it could have happened this morning," he muttered. "Or last night."

Anybody, he decided, as he straightened to his feet, could break a watch crystal, stopping the hands at any desired time. Either the broken watch marked the time of death exactly, or falsified it to provide the killer with an alibi. He had a hunch the watch breaking was deliberate in either case, because of the attempt at setting the stage to indicate that a struggle had taken place. And he thought he knew why the closet had been chosen as the scene for the death tableau. Living and bedrooms were all but barren, with only minimum essentials of furniture. Plenty of room to brawl in, but there was nothing in the rooms to upset or disorder to show clearly that a fight had taken place.

He went back into the bedroom and from there into the living room. On the desk he found, in addition to the previously noted typewriter, an empty pen stand, a notary seal, and one of those appointment calendars. Nothing else. The facing page of the calendar was that of November 23rd. And today was November 24th. A single appointment was noted on the page, lettered in pencil rather than written in longhand: MARY MALEY 9:30 P. M.

"Ah," he murmured. "The lady who inadvertently killed her brother with too much pastry—according to Mrs. Tavell."

Wren turned back a few leaves of the calendar, saw that other appointments had been printed rather than written. He looked up quickly from the desk and across the room. One chunky black eyebrow lifted as slowly as the door of the flat was opening.

A HEAD, bald except for a fringe of yellowish-white lamb's wool above pointed ears, showed itself. The face was smooth, ageless, and untroubled. The man looked at Wren from the corners of round, shining brown eyes. The eyes, the button nose, the pointed ears—all combined to lend the face a Puckish expression that was out of this world.

"I knocked," he said in a voice almost too soft to be masculine, "but you didn't hear, did you? Probably not. I hope I'm not intruding."

"Not at all," Wren said.

"That's good." The man came in and closed

the door. He had a pear-shaped torso and pot-hooked legs. His dark overcoat was too long for his shortish body, and he carried a gray felt hat in his hands. He came pussy-footing over to the desk and Wren noticed that he wore old-man shoes of pliant black leather. He breathed audibly and as he stood beside Wren at the desk his head was shyly downcast.

"You're Freya's brother, no doubt?"

Wren shook his head. He watched the man's gray-gloved fingers scamper across the desk and close on the handle of the notary seal. For some reason Wren was slightly startled. The man lifted the seal and looked at it.

"Notary seal," he said absently, and put it down. "So you're not Freya's brother. An uncle possibly? No, you are too young to be an uncle."

"Name is Wren, Jeffery Wren."

The man put a forefinger in the exact center of his chin and again examined Wren out of the corners of his eyes. His face was more than bland, it was blah. He clucked with his tongue.

"Why, you wrote a book about spirit mediums! I read it, to prove I'm broad-minded. But you're prejudiced about mediums, aren't you? All magicians are."

"Except Will Goldston, an English magician, who said . . ." Wren broke off, realizing that he was allowing the little bow-legged man to syphon off information without giving anything in return.

"Who are you, if you don't mind?"

"Urban . . . Malthus . . . Tavell," said the man with distinct spacing between the parts of his name. He smiled a futile sort of smile. "I am looking for Freya, as you possibly surmise. She has been a house guest of ours since last night."

"Ah? When did she arrive at your house last night?"

"I couldn't say really. I was busy in town until rather late and when I came home my wife and Freya were chatting in the drawing room."

Which did not provide Freya with any sort of an alibi.

Wren said: "If she's your house guest—"

"Why look for her here?" Tavell interrupted. "A logical question. She seems to have disappeared during the past two hours. I drove into town thinking that she might have returned to her apartment for something. Is she here now?"

The man was a whole radio quiz show, the questions and most of the answers delivered in the same breath. He was exhausting.

"No here," Wren replied. "No one here but the dead man."

"Then I've drawn a blank. And I do hope

that Freya will show up in time for that sitting tonight. No one here but—I beg your pardon." Tavell looked askance at Wren. "What kind of a man did you say was here?"

"Dead—as in murdered." Wren took hold of Tavell's thick arm and tugged him toward the bedroom. "You should see."

CHAPTER THREE

Alas, Poor Bobert!

IN THE bedroom Urban Malthus Tavell looked around dazedly until Jeffery Wren turned him to face the open door of the lighted closet. Tavell said nothing for a moment. He teetered up and down on the toes of his soft shoes. He blew his nose inoffensively, shook his head.

"Poor Bobert! Poor old chap!"

Wren reeled slightly. He removed his hat, took a handkerchief from his pocket, and patted his expansive brow.

"Now," he said with an elaborate show of patience, "once more. What did you call him?"

Tavell blinked. "An old chap—oh, you mean *Bobert*." He smiled shyly. "As a small child I was always troubled with the letter 'R' sounds. Hence 'babbit' for 'rabbit' and consequently 'Bobert' for 'Robert'."

"But you're a big boy now, aren't you?"

"Well, of course. But I distinctly remember the pleasure it gave him the first time I called him Bobert, and I was determined not to give up the practice to his dying day. . . . But of course this is his dying day."

"Yesterday, I think." Wren took a deep breath. "Now that we've established beyond a shadow of doubt that you were a cunning child, who in hell is the corpse?"

"Why, Robert Parkinson, of course. He was my father's lawyer. He gave up his practice to devote himself entirely to my father's interests and with the passing of my father, he became my financial adviser. Does that make everything clear?"

"Not quite. Roughly estimated, not by a jugful. What's Bobert doing here besides sitting in a chair with rigor mortis? You act as though he were part of the plumbing."

Tavell's lower lip trembled. His round brown eyes took on a tearful glisten. "But I'm deeply shocked! Mr. Wren, I was on the verge of investing a large sum of money in a new enterprise. I have consulted Freya and her table about the matter and through Freya's spirit control was advised to make this investment. But I wished to be absolutely sure that Freya was sincere and genuine, for I'll grant you there are many fraudulent spiritualists. So I asked Bobert to investigate her for me. . . ."

Tavell let that hang. He seemed hit by a sudden inspiration. He fingered the center of his chin and looked sharply at Wren.

"Why, you're the very man—you, with your skepticism!"

"I am?"

"Of course! You can take over the job that Bobert was doing for me!"

"When he was so rudely interrupted," Wren amended.

"You will observe one of Freya's sittings, and if you can offer proof that the phenomenon is produced by trickery then I shall suspect that Freya and Wilfred Doan are in cahoots and I shan't back Doan's project."

"You'll begin to suspect that, will you?"

Wren took Tavell's arm and led the man from the bedroom back to the desk in the living room. He pointed to the name of Mary Maley penciled on the appointment calendar.

"A neighbor of yours, isn't she?" he asked. "Lives practically inside a cage with two man-eating Great Danes. Keeps her inheritance in a sugar bowl."

"Eh?" Tavell gave Wren a piercing look. "One couldn't very well keep three hundred thousand dollars in a sugar bowl, could one?"

Wren chuckled. "Figuratively, of course. D'you know if Miss Maley kept that appointment last night or not?"

Tavell shook his head. "How should I know?"

THE back door of the flat opened and slammed gustily. Zoe Osbourn's heavy tread shook the floor even as her husky voice rattled the paper on the walls.

"Jeff, you doggone light-fingered son of the woman-sawed-in-half! Why the hell didn't you call a prowler car? With a little help I'd have nailed that dirty little—"

She came out of the kitchen and into the presence of Urban Malthus Tavell, puffing and blowing like a donkey engine. Her efforts to gulp back unseemly words and at the same time summon a smirk were nothing short of convulsive.

"Why, it's Mr. Ta—vell!" she whinnied.

"Don't mention him," Wren said, absently making false knots in his handkerchief and dissolving them with a wave of his hand. "Look, rather, upon the late Bobert. Then at me, heir-apparent to the shroud."

Zoe Osbourn followed Wren's pointing finger into the bedroom. She came out a second later in a scowling dither. Mashers, moll-buzzers, shoplifters and phony fortune tellers she could take in her heavy stride. But this was something else. With no phone in Gladys "Freya" Frye's apartment, Zoe had to go to the flat across the hall to phone headquarters. Before she got back two uniformed cops of the radio patrol had taken over.

After that came Homicide with its detectives and photographers, and a bit later the assistant coroner. Wren found himself shoved off in the corner like a piece of old bric-a-brac to be given to the washerwoman next Christmas. A few perfunctory questions were asked of Urban Malthus Tavell and then he was practically kissed good-by.

Finally a plainclothes cop with pinkish hair and puffy eyelids discovered Wren in his corner suffering from neglect. He took Wren's name and address, writing with a stub of pencil, his mouth screwed over onto one side of his face.

"You know," Wren said casually, "the victim wasn't killed in that closet. Not actually."

"No?"

"No. He was posed in the closet because that's the only place in the flat where evidence of a struggle could be faked. There had to be evidence of a struggle to account for the breaking of the man's watch crystal. But the gimmick in the murder trick, the little item that could lead us straight into a sucker climax, is why the watch was broken at all. You see?"

The plainclothes cop brought his mouth around front and center and scowled at the knot in Wren's necktie.

"The watch got broke when they was fightin'. Don't leave town without notifyin' headquarters, Mr. Wren."

Mr. Wren groaned. He stuffed his hands deep into the slash pockets of his greatcoat and left the flat at the slow bouncing gait of a bus negotiating a rough detour in comfort. Nobody stopped him. Nobody noticed him. He was the Invisible Man and it was killing him.

A few minutes later he sauntered into a cheesy taproom in the neighborhood of the murder flat and asked for a glass of tawny port at the bar. The barkeep asked right back what that was—something like beef, iron and wine? So Wren drank whiskey which he despised, then went back to the phone to summon a cab.

THREE-QUARTERS of an hour later Wren's taxi turned off a county road somewhere between the villages of Nora and Carmel and into a sweeping white horseshoe of a drive that lay before the Tavell mansion. It was a red brick, two-and-a-half-story Colonial house with gray slate roof, white shutters and towering white columns on the portico. The cab stopped directly behind one of those long, super-powered convertible coupes that pedestrians glare at and mutter: "I wonder where *that* guy gets his gas."

Wren paid his fare plus tip, got out, started up the short approach walk. Halfway to the

door he stopped, attracted by a glittering something half concealed in the frosted grass along the edge of the walk. He stooped, picked up a man's mechanical pencil with a barrel of chased gold. He put it in his pocket, went on to the imposing door. There was a knocker and an electric chime. Wren played them both with all the vigor of a bill collector.

A butler opened the door. He was a stocky man with a spatulate nose and a toupee that resembled an underdone pancake.

"Ah. Good evening." Wren stepped into a marble-floored reception hall and began stripping off his gloves. The servant closed the door without a sound, turned, self-consciously patted the right-hand pocket of his coat. The pocket bulged somewhat and sagged. The man packed a gun and he wasn't used to it.

"Your card, sir?" he suggested.

"Card?" Wren's smile twitched. He dipped into a pocket, brought out a whole deck of playing cards which he spread face down between his two hands. "Take one. Take any one."

Almost unwittingly, the butler had a card in his hand, and Wren said: "Nine of spades." He squared the deck, pocketed it. The butler looked dazedly at the card, turned it over, looked at the face of it. He uttered a dry little chuckle.

"Oh, but it's not, sir. Very sorry, sir. It's the queen of diamonds."

"Impossible." Wren took a sidling step to look over the butler's shoulder and incidentally to get his left hand near the man's right pocket.

"But it is, sir. The queen of diamonds."

Wren took the diamond queen from the butler's hand, held it at arm's length, facing them. "That? That's the queen of diamonds?"

It was, of course, and then it wasn't. Wren showed the back of the queen, flipped it around again. The card was now undeniably the nine of spades. And in Wren's left hand was the butler's automatic.

"It's a trick, sir!" the butler cooed. "Quite a trick. You must be Mr. Wren, the magician."

"Exactly. It's a trick. I'm Wren." He took off his coat and under cover of the bulk of it got the gun into his trousers' pocket. He handed coat and hat to the butler who took them across his left arm.

"If you'll step this way, sir." The servant pushed open a solid looking door beyond which was a dim, compact little room with oak paneling and bookshelves.

Wren shook his head. "Where's Mrs. Tavell?"

"Just step into the libr'y, sir."

"Don't like libraries. My mother was frightened by a bookworm."

"Don't be unreasonable, sir, I warn you. Into the libr'y!" The butler crowded into Wren. His right hand dropped to his coat pocket, groped, found nothing. He swallowed, backed off, looked dully down into his pocket. Wren dropped both big hands on the servant's shoulders, waltzed him around so that his back was toward the door of the snug little room.

"Tell you what, Jeeves. *You* go into the 'libr'y'!" He shoved. The butler had to back-step fast to stay on his feet. Wren slammed the library door, and then walked briskly along the hall to push open double doors and enter the living room.

THE fireplace was big enough to take the sofa that stood in front of it, but the man who lay at full length on the sofa would have overlapped a little. He put down a fine old illuminated volume of Dante on his sunken chest and looked at Wren from hollow eyes. Then he got up—a process which was not unlike the folding and unfolding of a carpenter's rule. He looked a little like Dante, Roman and esthetic with fine black hair that shagged over the tops of his close-set ears. He put out a hand that was like a bundle of lead pencils.

"You must be Wren. I'm Wilfred Doan."

"Right," Wren said.

"More power to you."

Wren cocked an eyebrow. "Meaning?"

"Meaning I hope you stand this table-tapper on her ear." He was pretty vehement about it. His long arms thrashed around a bit. "It gets me. Here I have in my pocket a down-to-earth money-making proposition for Urban Tavell. What does he do? He consults a fake soothsayer. A man of Tavell's wealth and supposed intelligence! It's disgusting!"

"Yet Freya backs you up. Recommends your proposition."

Doan nodded. "It's the idea of the thing."

"If I prove Freya is a fake, chances are Tavell won't agree to back your scheme. That's what he told me."

Wilfred Doan looked worried. His hollow eyes blinked. "In which case, we'd better make a deal. You'll be doing Tavell a left-handed favor." He reached to his hip pocket for his wallet, brought it out, laboriously counted bills. He had a hundred and ten dollars on him. He kept the ten, passed Wren the hundred.

Wren said: "I tell Tavell Freya is the McCoy?"

"That's the idea. After he signs the agreement I don't care what you do with Freya."

Wren took the money. "It's returnable if my conscience starts to bother me," he said. He turned, looked toward the end of the long living room. Florence Tavell was coming

down the winding stairway. She had on a gray tweed skirt, a white blouse, neat brown shoes with walking-height heels that didn't spoil the curves of her calves. She carried a three-quarter length mink jacket over one arm and an alligator purse in her hand. The smile she had for Wren was somewhat warmer than he had expected.

"I take it you've found Freya," he said.

"Not exactly. But shortly after Mr. Tavell left to hunt for her in town, I found this." She put her jacket down on a chair, opened her purse and took out a slip of paper. On it was printed in pencil: WE WILL MEET AT THE OLD MALEY HOUSE AT THE APPOINTED TIME. SPIRITUALLY YOURS, FREYA.

"Sweet," Wren said. "You know why she prints instead of writing in longhand?"

Florence Tavell shook her head. She took a cigarette case and lighter from her purse. "Why?"

"She was married to an architect," Wren told her. "She used to help with the lettering. Where's Mr. Tavell?"

"He went after Mary Maley," she replied, pointing vaguely, palm upward. She went to a mahogany commode at the end of the sofa, opened it, took out a bottle of lighter fluid. She was ignoring Wilfred Doan beautifully. But then ignoring must have been something she had practiced plenty. She brought the lighter and fluid to Wren.

"Would you mind, Mr. Wren?" she asked, paying him in advance with a smile. "These victory packages of lighter fluid exasperate me. I asked Mr. Tavell to fill my lighter before dinner, but he must have forgotten."

Wren uncapped the bottle, held a lead pencil across the mouth of it, poured fluid along the pencil and into the small fill-hole at the bottom of the lighter. He replaced the plug, handed lighter and fluid back to her.

He said: "I'd like to telephone."

She nodded toward a Regency secretary that stood open against the wall. "Or if you want privacy, there's a phone in the library."

"This will do. You've heard about the murder of Robert Parkinson?"

She nodded shortly, her eyes steady.

From the sofa, Wilfred Doan asked: "What's that? Somebody killed?"

"Somebody," Wren said. "In Freya's apartment." He went bouncing to the phone to dial the number of the flat occupied by Horace, his clerk at the novelty shop. "Police want Freya," he told Doan. "Want a little man in a derby—Hello? Horace?"

Sitting very straight on the sofa, his face lengthening, Wilfred Doan ran fingers distractedly through his hair.

From the phone, Horace's voice asked: "Izat you, Boss?"

"Me. Horace, I'd like you to come out to the Tavell place. Immediately. Are you sober?"

"Sure, I'm sober onna day before payday. What else? Where's a Tavell place?"

"North of town," Wren replied vaguely. "Remember the babe who dripped mink pelts? Use your instinct." He hung up.

THE front door of the house had opened and Wren could hear a murmur of voices and then footsteps on the marble floor. Urban Malthus Tavell pushed open the double doors, connecting hall with living room, for Mary Maley. Tavell's out-of-the-corner glance touched Wren and caromed to Florence Tavell to dwell appreciatively on the grace of her as she advanced to greet Mary Maley.

"Good evening, my dear." Florence Tavell put out two hands to Mary Maley who dropped a knitting bag grasping them.

"Oh, hello Mis' Tavell. Mis' Tavell, it's so nice—"

What was so nice was lost in the confusion of recovering the knitting bag. Mary Maley was middle-aged. She wore a silly little brown pork-pie hat and a three-piece suit of hound's-tooth check material, the outer coat trimmed with unnamable fur. She was large through the hips and nowhere else, as though she spent a great deal of time sitting and knitting. She knitted her brows, too, and her eyes looked sleepless and tired.

Tavell recovered the knitting bag for her and the ball of gray yarn that had rolled from it.

"I declare, I been so nervous lately. . ." Mary Maley's sentenced trailed off into embarrassed silence as her tired eyes found Wren and Wilfred Doan, both strangers to her.

Florence Tavell kissed Tavell on the mouth. It was a good kiss, but, to Wren, slightly nauseating after the frank discussion he'd had with Mrs. Tavell that afternoon. Then Tavell shook Wren's hand briefly, accomplished an introduction that included Mary Maley, Wilfred Doan, and Wren. Mary Maley acknowledged with downcast eyes.

"We're going right away, aren't we?" Florence Tavell asked her husband.

"Why not? Unless Miss Maley feels too nervous."

"Oh, no, I'm not too nervous." Miss Maley's hands fluttered on the handles of the knitting bag. "It's just that this thing has been on my mind so long. Mis' Tavell, you don't know how it is. A loved one passes on and then people say you had something to do with it. Makes you grasp at straws, like this table-tipper. Of course, Freya isn't a straw exactly, I guess. If Mr. Tavell has faith in her, why that's good enough for me. And it would be such a comfort to know—"

She must have realized she alone was talking, and into an interested silence. Her lips closed tight and a deep flush spread upward across her wrinkled face.

Wren looked at Doan. The latter hadn't gone very far from the sofa, as though he expected to have to collapse on it any moment. He was worried. For that matter, so was Wren. There was something cooking on the back burner and the flame was turned up too high.

"You're going, Doan?" Tavell asked. "But I don't suppose you are."

Doan shook his head. "None of that spirit stuff for me."

Then Tavell rang for the butler, ordered him to bring Wren's coat and hat, then went to help Mrs. Tavell on with her jacket. There was no doubt about his being devoted to his beautiful young wife. His eyes tagged at the heels of her every movement like a pair of adoring puppies.

She said: "We're walking, aren't we, darling? It's only a little way straight back if we cut through the woods, and the path is clean."

"Walking?" Tavell said. "Dearest, you know I'm not much for walking."

She pouted. "But I'm dressed for it." And then the pout became a smile, and she patted his smooth cheek affectionately. "We'll ride if you want. It will be warm in the sedan."

Wren thought as they trooped out: *Yes, humor his little whims, lady, and later mourn luxuriously.*

CHAPTER FOUR

Kill-Trap

THE Tavell sedan was even longer than the convertible, and through the medium of its super-power it accomplished a mouse-into-man transformation over Urban Malthus Tavell. Tavell sent the car out of the drive like a rocket from a trough. The middle of the road was exclusively his and to hell with anything that got in his way. Wren found himself unaccountably in the back seat with Mrs. Tavell, and once, when the car swerved perilously, she caught his hand and held it tight for a moment. Her touch gave Wren a little chill.

It was a short, breathless trip. The big sedan simply executed three sides of a square across gently rolling countryside dotted with suburban homes and old farmhouses. Then Tavell turned off the road into frozen ruts that squirmed up to the old Maley house. It was one of those narrow, awkward houses, neither pleasing nor practical. Shutters were fastened across the windows. The roof was low-pitched, of sheet iron, that for tonight had regained its original gleam from frost

and starlight. The wood that Florence Tavell had mentioned as separating the Maley place from the Tavell property began close upon the back door.

Tavell killed the motor. In the front seat, Mary Maley drew a shivering breath.

She said: "It's dark."

It was dark. Wren and Tavell got out on the same side and assisted the women. From the lane to the front door was a scant thirty feet through crackling weeds and matted grass. There was no porch on the place. A broken rocking chair was propped up against one end of the step and remained the only sign of attempted comfort. Wren got to wondering how anybody who had inhabited such a house had ever got to be worth three hundred thousand dollars. But, conversely, simply to live in such a house at least offered the opportunity of accumulating a fortune.

Tavell and Mary Maley were on the step, Wren and Florence Tavell just behind. Tavell knocked his timid knock. There was no answer.

"Odd, isn't it?" he said. "Freya should be here." He took hold of the knob, twisted, pushed the door open.

Out of the dark interior of the house came a bright lance of orange-red flame and simultaneously the nasty yap of a small-caliber gun. It was a single shot, fired low to angle up. Wren heard the whine of the spent bullet over his head.

Florence Tavell screamed and flung both arms around Wren.

"Here. Don't!" Wren broke the hysterical clinch, pushed Florence back from the door. He saw that Tavell had somehow accomplished the heroic. He had flattened Mary Maley across the doorstep and, not so heroic, he was cowering on top of her.

"Don't shoot!" Tavell's voice was high-pitched, spineless.

Nobody shot. From the house came nothing but the dim echo of Tavell's voice. Wren plucked a pencil-flashlight from an inner pocket, beamed it through the door. The spot of it caught a card table with a glass top, and on the table was some sort of a rigging composed of pine blocks, cabinet-makers' clamps, and a small hand gun—pistol or revolver, he couldn't tell which. A set-gun, a kill-trap that hadn't killed.

Tavell got on one knee above Mary Maley. He said: "Good Lord, Wren, it—it got her!"

"No, Urban!" gasped Florence.

"Couldn't have." Wren was gruff about it. He hated hysteria. He went to the step where Tavell crouched over Miss Maley. The woman lay partially on one side and there was blood on the step near her head. She uttered a faint moan, twisted convulsively onto her back, seized Tavell's arm with one hand, pulled her-

self to a sitting position. Wren got a supporting arm behind her back. Her eyes were rolling frantically, and there was quite a bit of blood flowing from a gash at her temple.

"Now then," Wren said gently. "You just hit yourself on that rocker. That's all. When Tavell threw you—"

"On—on that rocker," she whispered faintly. "I told Eben someone would fall on that rocker some day."

Wren slid his right arm under her knees. "Get back," he said to the Tavells. "Get her inside. Get a doctor."

"No. No! Don't take me in there. Not in that house!" She was kicking feebly at the air.

"There won't be any more shooting," Wren assured everybody. "People who plant set-guns don't stick around."

"Take—take me home," Miss Maley sobbed. "*Don't take me in that house.*" Her head rolled sideways against Wren's shoulder and then back, her funny brown pork-pie hat going over her left ear.

She'd passed out cold.

THEY couldn't take Miss Maley home. As Urban Malthus Tavell pointed out, while Wren carried the unconscious woman toward the car, nobody could get near Miss Maley's house because of the dogs that guarded it. You couldn't summon Little Joe, Miss Maley's aged Negro servant, from the gate in Miss Maley's fence because the house was too far away. Therefore Little Joe couldn't corral the dogs. The only way to get the dogs tied up was to telephone Miss Maley's house and tell Little Joe to tie them up. Which meant finding a phone. Which meant taking Mary Maley to the Tavell house.

Wren, who was carrying Mary Maley while Florence Tavell pointed the way with the flashlight, had one foot inside the car door and was bracing up his burden with his knee, when Florence uttered a cry of dismay. Wren looked over his left shoulder at where the flashlight spotted the left front tire. It was as flat as it would ever be.

"Those damned ruts!" Tavell said.

"Your witless, reckless driving," said Florence Tavell coolly. The "darling" she added as an afterthought scarcely took the sting out of her words.

"Back to the house," Wren said, "where we should have put her in the first place. Must be some means of making a fire. Got to have heat—" He stopped talking. It took breath. He hadn't too much breath because Mary Maley seemed to be gaining weight.

He got her across the sill with Florence lighting the way. The slender beam from the flash pointed out stiff, friendless furnishings, finally found a downstairs bedroom where

there was a small heating stove. There was a mattress on the bed, but no covers. Wren put Miss Maley down gently, peeled off his heavy coat, and threw it over her. Florence Tavell, in the meantime, had located an oil lamp, lighted it with her cigarette lighter, placed it on a marble-topped dresser.

"All right." Wren turned from the bed. "How long would it take you to get back through the woods to your place?"

"Five minutes, maybe ten," Tavell said.

"Seven, if we hurry," Florence thought.

"Then get going. Get a doctor out here as soon as you can. She's not in a bad way at all, but these scalp wounds bleed."

The Tavells went together. No sooner had they left than Wren was regretting that one of them hadn't stayed. There was a lot for one man to do, and since he had to carry the oil lamp with him, he had virtually only one arm.

Back in the kitchen he found cobs, paper and kindling in the woodbox behind the cook-stove. He brought some of each into the bedroom, laid a fire in the iron stove. When he struck a match to his handiwork, he discovered damp in the chimney. Either that, or he hadn't regulated the draft properly.

Choking, coughing, and shivering, he shook the grates, fiddled with the damper, and was finally rewarded with clean, roaring flame visible through the mica window of the stove door. He turned, looked back toward the bed. Mary Maley hadn't moved. The gash on her head was bleeding freely, but her breathing was regular.

He stripped off suitcoat and vest and then took off his white shirt which he tore into strips. With this he stanching the bleeding somewhat. But by that time the fire needed attention and he was damned near frozen. He put on his vest over undershirt and then added his suitcoat. He picked up the lamp, started back to the kitchen, but paused a moment in the front room to take a closer look at the set-gun.

It was a simple arrangement. A single-shot, twenty-two target pistol was wired to two wood blocks and the blocks were held to Freya's glass-topped table with clamps. Black linen thread was attached to the trigger, led back to a screw-eye in a block, then up to the ceiling, across to the side of the door, and thence to the corner of the door itself where it was anchored. There was just enough slack so that the door could swing nearly all the way open before the trigger tripped. If the gun elevation had been calculated a little better there was no doubt but what somebody would have taken on lead.

But who? Had the thing been designed for Tavell, for Florence, Miss Maley, or for Wren himself? He shook his head, then

glanced at his watch. The Tavells had been gone about thirteen minutes.

HE HURRIED back to the kitchen, got more cobs, returned to the bedroom for a hasty look at his patient. His bandages hadn't done a whole lot of good. He was a better fireman than a doctor.

He was kneeling on the floor, feeding cobs through the stove door when the fireworks started. Outside the house, somebody shot through a chink in the shutter, shattering glass. Wren twisted around on one knee, stared open-mouthed at the window and then at Mary Maley on the bed. Three more shots, so close together as to create a prolonged and deafening roar. Wren saw the figure on the bed bounce under the impact of the heavy-caliber slugs. And then he shook off the fear that had hold of him.

He bounced to his feet and toward the dresser. The gun barrel in the chink of the shutter swiveled. He actually saw it turn, saw the cold hollow eye staring at him. He blew down the chimney of the lamp as the gun at the window roared. The lamp chimney exploded into fragments right under his nose. Needles of glass caught him in chin and cheeks. He bounced back from the dresser, dug into his trouser pocket for the automatic he had taken from the butler and lurched into the total darkness of the living room.

Of course he ran into Freya's table. The damned thing was right in front of the door and he'd forgotten about it. He kicked the table aside, got the door open, bounced over the step to turn to the left. Somewhere at the back of the house was a sound like somebody dropping a plank onto a pile of lumber. He skirted the side of the house, came to the rear where shadows from the woods encroached on the silver of the night. He didn't see anybody or hear anything. He was a perfect target for anybody who happened to be back among those trees, but there were no shots. He was feeling pretty futile when he noticed the acutely slanted doors of the cellar opening against the back of the house.

He tiptoed to the cellar entrance, stooped, felt across frost-glistening boards for the cold tongue of the hasp. The metal tongue hung down instead of bridging the twin doors to buttonhole the staple. He knew what the sound like piling lumber had been. Somebody had dropped the cellar doors.

Wren pulled back on the hasp tongue and the door swung open on creaking hinges. Moonlight showed him sagging skeleton stairs against a ramp of hard earth. He gripped the cold butt of the little automatic, took a deep breath, and started down the stairs. Ahead was darkness, but it was more welcome than the light. He skipped the last three steps, came

pounding down on a rammed earth floor. He waited a moment, listening.

Somebody groaned.

Wren groped for matches, got one, scuffed the head with a thumbnail. The flare of light showed a brick-walled basement room, roughly twelve feet square, empty except for cobwebs. In one wall was a door of stained car-siding, and on a rusty nail hung a lantern. Wren reached the lantern, got it down onto the earthen floor before his match went out. He could detect a gurgle of oil in it.

The groaning came from behind the door.

Wren lighted another match, got the lantern going. While he was adjusting the wick he noticed a small piece of straight wood lying about six inches out from the foot of the door. It was a wood skewer, and attached to the blunt end of it was a yard-long length of black thread. This murder had more black thread attached to it than a magician would use in a dozen levitations.

He left the skewer where he found it, straightened. The door had a black porcelain knob and was locked by a key that had been left in place. He twisted the key, got the door open, entered with the lantern held high in his left hand and the automatic in his right.

IT WAS a vegetable cellar with no vegetables. On the bare earth floor was a long, hippy blonde. A mangy raccoon coat concealed some of her hour-glass contours. She wore large-sized, high-heeled pumps, but no stockings. Her nice legs at the moment were wearing a coat of makeup and goose pimples. There were handcuffs on her ankles and also on her wrists. The features of Gladys "Freya" Frye, Wren thought, were horsy, and her face showed hardening of the forties.

She sat up painfully, squinted at the light and at Wren.

"Heh," she grunted. "It's you, the magi."

"Me. What do you represent—America waiting to be discovered by Columbus?"

"Spare me that stuff." She groaned and pressed the palms of her manacled hands to her forehead. "I came over here late this afternoon to set up my table and look the spot over. Somebody slugged me. I got a taste in my mouth as if somebody poured dope down my throat. I just came to when I heard you fooling around out there."

"That's your story," he said. "You know about the shooting and you damn well think you've got an alibi. You haven't. On the floor outside the door is a wood skewer with a thread attached to it. You could be in here and lock the door on the outside with a skewer and a thread."

She looked daggers at him. Her lips were purple because the blue cold showed through the red rouge. She sneezed violently and

wiped her nose on the furry sleeve of her coat.

"You get me the hell out of here, Wren. If I get pneumonia and die it's on your head."

Wren chuckled. He worked the slide of the automatic, throwing a cartridge into the firing chamber. He squeezed the trigger experimentally and got quite a jolt when the gun yapped and the bullet struck the brick wall to come whining back at him.

"It works," he said. "I'll count ten, Gladys. By that time you'll be out of those handcuffs, or I'll put you beyond the reach of the best medium in the business. One . . . two . . ."

She blinked at him. She named him foully. ". . . three. You better get that gimmick out of your heel."

He meant it. She could see he meant it. She told him what he was again, with embellishment, but she got to work on the cuffs. She doubled over, got her hands on her right shoe, slipped it off. She hadn't a pretty foot. The joint of her big toe was enlarged.

"She said: 'What the hell if the gimmick isn't here?'"

". . . four. It'll be there."

She held the shoe by the counter, jerked on the heel, twisted. The heel swiveled around, off center, revealing its hollow construction. The medium shook a thin piece of steel a quarter of an inch wide and an inch and a quarter long from the heel. An inch-long channel was cut up the center of the piece of metal forming a flat, two-tined fork. She thrust the fork not into the keyhole of the bean-pattern cuffs but into that narrow space where the saw-tooth jaw enters the lock. She yanked and the jaws of the left cuff sprang open.

Wren said: "I'm up to seven. You're behind schedule. If you were doing this in a mediums' cabinet you'd be ready to wave the ectoplasm around by now."

SHE had the right cuff open, was working on the set that confined her ankles. She was free on the count of ten and threw both sets of cuffs at Wren's head. He didn't duck. She was chilled to the marrow and her aim was bad. He picked up the cuffs, dropped them into his pocket while Freya was getting into her shoe.

"Now," he said. "Out of here. Ladies first."

They went out and up the steps. Wren forced her into the house, past the set-gun, and back into the bedroom. For a moment it looked as though she were going to embrace the stove. And then she saw the poor, bloody thing on the bed.

"She—she's dead!"

Wren nodded. "Those shots. Only two of them missed. The one from the set-gun and the one intended for me. All the rest are . . ." and he shrugged.

"We found Robert—or Bobert—Parkinson in the closet of your flat in town. Three yards of best-grade ectoplasm strangled him. You're in a spot."

She said: "I haven't been in town all day."

"Bobert died last night," he insisted relentlessly.

"But I caught the ten o'clock bus for Carmel—"

He was shaking his head. "Bobert was strangled at about nine-thirty, according to the smashed watch on his wrist."

"But—but I left at nine. Listen, Wren, you've got to believe me. I left that apartment at nine o'clock. I—I can't prove it."

"You won't have to. They'll just show you the chair and tell you to sit in it. Tavell says Bobert was investigating you. To the police it will look as though Bobert discovered you were out to rook Tavell, and you killed Bobert to shut him up. About the time you were doing that, Mary Maley showed up for her appointment—"

Freya goggled at him. "I never had an appointment with the Maley woman." She thumbed at the bed. "That's the first look I ever got at her."

He shrugged. "That appointment is noted on your date calendar in the flat. Nine-thirty last night. Cops will say Mary caught you killing Bobert. So Mary had to die. They'll say you tried with the set-gun, then tried again, direct method. They'll say you shot through the window, then dashed down the cellar to lock yourself up and frame a story about a big, bad Unknown who conked you and handcuffed you. But the conk and handcuff alibi won't hold because everything was at hand to prove you could have got out whenever you felt like it. You're in a jam."

Wild-eyed, she stared as though at the eight-ball that was rolling steadily in her direction.

"Wren, I—I didn't! I was out to rook Tavell, sure, but the sucker was practically asking for it. I didn't kill anybody!"

He picked up the lantern, motioned her toward the door with the automatic. "You know the path back through the woods to the Tavell mansion? Let's hit it. Exercise will do us good."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Runt of the Litter

THEY made it in six minutes flat with the cold as a spur. Around in front of the Tavell house Wren saw that the big convertible was gone and in its place was a four-wheeled heap of junk with Varga girls pasted on what was left of the windshield. The jalopy could have belonged only to Horace.

He pushed Freya ahead of him through the front door and into the marble-floored hall where there was quite a to-do about something. The lanky Wilfred Doan was pacing back and forth like a distraught Hamlet to-being or not-to-being. In front of a closet door the butler crouched, washing his hands in the air and peeking through the keyhole. On the other side of the door small fists pounded and Florence Tavell's voice was pretty much in evidence.

"Get me out of here, Jason! Get me out at once or I'll discharge you!"

"But, madam, the key—"

"Get an ax!" madam cried.

That was how things were when Wren and Freya entered. Then Wilfred Doan saw Freya, stopped his pacing, said something short and dirty under his breath. Wren kicked the front door shut behind them, bounced over to the closet to nudge the butler out of the way. The butler saw the gun which was his and which was practically frozen in Wren's fist.

He said: "So you took it, sir."

Wren waved the gun. "And I'll use it. Who told you to waylay me at the door when I first came here, anyway?"

"Why—why . . ." The butler turned, looked at Wilfred Doan. "Why, it was Mr. Doan. He told me to put you in the libr'y and then—then tap you gently on the head."

"I did?" Doan shouted. "You're a dirty liar!"

"Everybody's a dirty liar," Wren said.

"Mr. Wren? Is it you? Can you get me out of this closet?" Florence Tavell wailed.

Wren looked at the lock. It wouldn't even require picking. He took out his key ring, employed a skeleton master and opened the door. Florence Tavell, flushed and beautiful, almost fell out of the closet and into his arms. Wren steadied her on her own two feet and backed off.

"Come on," he said. "Give."

She gave breathlessly. "A little man in a derby hat. He had a gun. I'd just telephoned—"

"Whom did you telephone?" Wren cut in.

"First I telephoned Dr. Bayne in Carmel," she told him. "My husband had already started for Carmel in the convertible to get Dr. Bayne because he's old and slow—the doctor, I mean—and I was to phone him to be ready. And then I had to call Mary Maley's house to get hold of Little Joe, her servant."

"What for?"

"To have Little Joe tie up the dogs. No one could take Mary Maley back to her house unless the dogs were tied up."

Wren said: "That does it. Go on. A man in a derby—"

"First," Florence went on, "there was that

—that person of yours, that clerk. He came in while I was phoning about the dogs and asked where you were. And right after that the man in the derby came into the library where I was phoning, turned a gun on us, forced us into the closet."

"He'd heard what you were saying about the dogs over at Mary Maley's place," Wren said. "Where's Horace?"

Horace came out of the closet on all fours. He got to his feet somehow, leaned against the wall, and looked balefully at Wren. Horace had a beaut of a mouse and a bluish egg on his forehead.

"You don't look so hot yourself, Boss," he said.

Wren knew he didn't. He couldn't, being somewhat decolleté in suitcoat and vest, but no shirt. And then there were those places on his face where the glass from the lamp chimney had hit him.

"The man in the derby knocked you out, I suppose, when you were defending Mrs. Tavell?" Wren asked Horace.

Horace shook his head, jerked a thumb at Florence. "She defended herself inna closet." He sniffed miserably. "I don't have a way with women, do I?"

Wren took out one pair of handcuffs, tossed them to Horace. "I'm leaving you in charge. Shackle anybody who wants to go home. If Freya's too tempting, you might shackle yourself."

Then Wren reached into the closet, got the first overcoat he could lay his hands on, struggled into it. He turned to Florence Tavell.

"You'll have to go with me to show me the way to Mary Maley's house."

Florence Tavell preened herself momentarily from force of habit, drew her mink coat about her and took Wren's arm. As they went out the front door, a despondent Horace could be heard to mutter: "The boss always hadda way with women even if with the Army he's 1-AH."

WREN borrowed Horace's jalopy and with Florence on the front cushions beside him, he drove out onto the road to turn right following her instruction. The car was patriotic! Thirty miles-per-hour was its limit and you were stuck with it.

"Mary Maley's dead," Wren said shortly.

Florence was silent a moment. Then: "You mean she died before the doctor arrived? You mean from that scratch on the head?"

"I mean from four shots, none of them misses. Then I ran out of the house. Somebody banged the cellar door, which was bait for me. Down in the cellar was Freya, looking as if she had an alibi that wouldn't hold water. Freya's headed for the chair. Fast. Too bad to

have to stop her. She didn't kill Bobert or Miss Maley. Freya's just a spook-crook trying to get along. And she made the perfect fall guy."

He sighed heavily, importantly. "Can't let justice down, can we? Freya didn't kill Bobert. Freya wouldn't have used three yards of luminous cheesecloth to strangle Bobert. Somebody who didn't know the cheesecloth was luminous did the killing. And, as I pointed out to the police, Bobert didn't die in Freya's closet. The actual murder probably took place in the bedroom or living room of Freya's flat. Then the corpse was carried to the closet and evidence of a struggle was staged. The time of Bobert's death was fixed exactly, a time when Freya was on her way to the bus station and therefore without an alibi.

"Then, to prepare a motive for Freya killing Mary Maley, the murderer printed a note on Freya's appointment calendar, indicating that Mary Maley had a date with Freya at the exact time of the murder. It would appear to the police that Mary had caught Freya in the murder act and therefore knew too much. Since Freya has the habit of printing instead of writing, the forgery was simple. Clear?"

"No," Florence replied. Her voice was quiet but utterly controlled. "Of course I know nothing of—of what happened to Bobert except what Mr. Tavell told me, but—"

"Of course you don't."

"But you said Freya wouldn't have strangled Bobert with that piece of luminous cheesecloth. Why?"

"Oh, that. Merely that the cheesecloth sets up quite a glow in the dark—something the killer didn't know—and there was a window in the back of the closet. The glow might have been seen by somebody in the apartment across the alley, and the police would have been called to investigate prematurely. Bobert's body, according to the killer's plan, ought not to have been found until Mary Maley was dead. Because if the police got the chance to question Mary and learned that she did not have—and did not keep—that appointment at Freya's apartment, then Freya would have no conceivable motive for killing Mary Maley."

"And you simply asked Mary whether or not she had made or kept such an appointment?"

Wren shook his head. "I didn't ask. I knew that when your butler tried to railroad me into the library for a possible knockout that every effort would be made to prevent me from asking such a question. So I didn't ask. Liking to live as I do, I maintained complete silence on the matter. But then Mary told me. Inadvertently. She told me she had never kept an appointment with Freya when she referred to Freya as a table-tipper."

Wren chuckled. "Two schools of thought on what spirits do with tables. Some say spirits tip or tilt them. Others, like Freya, think the well-mannered spook should knock or tap. Yet it's a different technique the medium employs, and a table-tapper is not a table-tipper."

WREN braked the car suddenly and pointed to the left, to a high steel fence backed by straight row plantings of catalpas.

"This the place? Or is it something that belongs to the War Department?"

Florence said this was Mary Maley's. Wren had to back up a little to come abreast of a narrow gate in the barrier. He cut the ignition, took out the key.

"Maybe you'd better stay here," he suggested.

She uttered a short, strained laugh. "I intend to."

"Close up, murder's not too funny, is it?"

She gave him a quick, gray-eyed glance. "If this is intended as an object lesson, Mr. Wren, because of the way I talked in your office this afternoon, save it, won't you? My opinion on the occasional necessity of murder hasn't changed."

Wren got out, stepped to the gate. Even before he had opened the latch the dogs began baying furiously. But then they were tied. They *had* to be tied, otherwise the killer could not have accomplished his point.

A well defined path of crushed limestone led through the grove of catalpa trees. The house, a good two hundred feet back from the road, was merely a modest frame cottage that couldn't have cost any more than the fence which surrounded the property. Lights burned at the windows, and as Wren stepped onto the porch he was aware of a steady, rhythmic *chink-chink-chink* sound coming from somewhere inside.

The door was not locked. Wren stepped into a tiny hall that gave into the living room. Lying full length on the red-tiled fireplace hearth was a middle-aged Negro about six feet and four inches tall—or, in this case, long. Little Joe, Mary Maley's keeper of the hounds, undoubtedly. The big man was out cold, and the conveniently near-at-hand poker must have been the weapon employed.

Wren stooped over the man briefly, assured himself that Little Joe wasn't in a bad way. Then he straightened, turned, his eyes traveling back toward the adjoining dining room. The *chink-chink* sound, coming from somewhere in the rear, had given way to the grinding of metal on metal and the high whine of an electric motor.

Wren took a quiet step toward the dining room, paused to stare down at a mahogany magazine stand that was laden with periodicals.

dealing with astrology as well as several paper-backed books of instruction devoted to the occult.

Back in the dining room, he stopped in front of a glass-fronted china cabinet. The door stood ajar, and there was some evidence of plundering. A Spode sugar-and-creamer set had been permanently ruined. The sugar bowl, of ample proportions, had been knocked off the shelf and a sizable chunk had been broken out of it on falling to the floor. He picked up the bowl and something rattled inside. He turned out of the bowl and into the palm of his hand a little heap of small change—dimes, pennies, quarters.

"I'll be damned!" he said distinctly, then poured the money back into the bowl, replaced it on the shelf beside the creamer.

From the dining room, two doors led into kitchen and bedroom respectively. He opened the latter, being very quiet about it, his right hand in the pocket of his borrowed overcoat and clenching the butt of the automatic.

INSIDE the bedroom, Mary Maley's closet door stood wide open. Crouching on the floor, the soles of his shoes and the seat of his pants toward Wren, was a man. He had a flashlight on the closet floor, and an electric cord leading from a baseboard outlet was connected with the power drill he was employing. Wren could just see the top of a safe over the rounded crown of the man's derby hat. And the safe expert was utterly oblivious to the fact that he was not alone.

Wren kicked the bedroom door shut. The man in the closet cut the power from his drill and turned around on his knees to look into Wren's gun.

It was the same little man who had turned up in Freya's apartment, the same narrow face with the same twitching nose. He said with some vehemence that he'd be damned, and stuck up his hands.

"You know what?" he moaned. "I case this damn joint for three lousy months, tryin' to figure a way to get past them dawgs. Tonight the Maley dame has a accident, the dogs is tied, I get a break, and now look at me!"

"No thanks," Wren said. "I've seen you." He stepped a little closer and looked over the man's shoulder. "How far along are you?"

The safeman had knocked the dial off with a lead mallet and was in the act of drilling out the lock.

Wren said: "Well, what's keeping you? Get on with it. You've no finesse with locks, but every man to his forte."

The little man in the derby goggled at Wren and waved his upraised hands in a sort of hopeless, helpless gesture.

"You mean—"

"I mean what I said. Get the safe open.

I'm a dirty crook and I'll split fifty-fifty, down to the last penny."

The blank expression on the little safeman's face cracked into a grood grin. "Geez," he said. "Geez, I guess you're O.K."

"I guess so, too." Wren pulled a stool from in front of a vanity table and sat down to watch as the little man returned to his can-opening. It was a matter of five minutes before the last hole was drilled and the lock knocked out. Trembling fingers pulled the door open, and the man's light flooded the interior. Wren stood up, looked over the derby. Neither said anything for a moment, but you could see the little man's shoulders steadily drooping right along with his spirits.

"Three lousy damn months I case this joint!" It was close to a sob. "Tonight I get a break—"

"Uh-huh," Wren grunted. "And the safe is empty. Three hundred thousand kopeks sifted through our eager fingers. Tsk! But I'm not surprised."

The little man missed the jingle the pair of handcuffs made as Wren pulled them from his pocket. In his dazed condition, he couldn't have been aware that Wren had clamped one of the bracelets on his right wrist until Wren was tugging him out of the closet. And then he was sore about it. He scooped the sewers of his vocabulary for epithets to describe Wren. Boiled down and cleaned up for mailing, it all added up to a statement to the effect that Wren was no longer his pal.

"No," Wren admitted. "No profit in it. Besides, the police want to know how you happened to be in Freya's flat tonight."

"An' who's got a better right in her flat?" the little man raved. "Ain't I her brother? Ain't I Bud Frye?"

Wren cocked a chunky eyebrow at Bud Frye. "Her brother? The runt of the litter, I suppose."

CHAPTER SIX

Table Taps

BECAUSE Wren was inconvenienced with Bud Frye, Florence Tavell had to drive them the mile back to the Tavell mansion. It was a good thing the heap was so well ventilated because Florence's haughty nose certainly would have had a lot of trouble sharing the same air with the likes of Bud Frye.

Jason, the butler, let them in, viewing Bud Frye with pardonable dismay. It did seem that guests at the mansion became progressively more peculiar with each new arrival. Florence Tavell went straight back to the living room without removing her jacket, but Wren lingered to superintend locking Bud Frye in the library. When that was done,

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Wren started back toward the double doors that opened onto the living room to find Horace coming toward him nursing a brandy sniffer in his hand. Only when it was brandy, Horace apparently didn't sniff. The bowl was more than half full.

Horace took a swallow of the brandy and said: "Gah! Think what these rich sons-a-which's livers must be like!"

Wren put a hand on Horace's arm and then turned to Jason who had just come from the library.

"Jason, if you'll set up a card table in the living room—some place on bare floor."

"Yes, sir. As for Miss Freya, sir." The servant inclined his head, went back into the living room.

Wren said: "Is Mr. Tavell back?"

"Yeah," Horace said. "An' just a minute before you came in a coupla city dicks were here. I got it they were lookin' for the horsy blonde, but when Tavell got through with them I think it was you they were after."

Wren pursed his lips, smacked. "Come again? And be more lucid."

"Two dicks at the door. Tavell talked to them, see? It seems some dame named Mary Maley got her head hurt inna accident and she was in your care while Tavell went after a doc. When the doc and Tavell got to where this was, you wasn't, and the Maley dame was dead from gun shots. So the coupla dicks went to view the remains and possibly pick you up if convenient."

Wren nodded. "They'll be back. We've got to work fast. I think in a few minutes somebody will try to dispose of a key." He scowled. "Must be a key to Freya's flat. And the killer wouldn't have disposed of it up to now. You mustn't let that happen, Horace."

Horace blinked. "I mustn't, huh?"

"No. Stand in the hall doorway and watch."

Wren went into the living room and toward the little group clustered about the fireplace. Freya was looking pretty regal in a wing chair. Wilfred Doan stood on the hearth and looked completely unattached. Florence and Urban Tavell made a nice family group on the sofa, holding hands.

As Wren approached, Tavell looked askance at him. "Why did you leave Mary Maley to the mercy of that gunman?"

Wren did not reply. He looked around, spotted the card table which Jason had set up. He bounced over to the table and crooked a finger at the others.

"Might confine our questions to the spirits," he suggested. "Freya, if you please. And Mr. and Mrs. Tavell. We've a few things to settle before the police return to make themselves obnoxious with questions and searchings."

No Haunting Allowed

Wilfred Doan said: "Another one of those crazy seances? In just ten minutes, Mr. Tavell, I'm going home. I've showed you a good proposition, given you the chance to get in on the ground floor of a new enterprise. But there's an end even to my patience."

"You aren't going anywhere, Doan," Wren said. "Just collapse somewhere. Tavell will know whether he's backing you or not in a few minutes."

Freya came to the table and sat down in the chair Wren indicated. She was pale except for her nose. Her nose looked as though she had a bad cold. She sat opposite Wren while the Tavells sat on either side of him. As Freya set the example, all rested their fingertips lightly on the top of the card table.

"Be very quiet everyone, please," Freya said in a practiced Garbo contralto, though Freya herself looked as if she might break into hysterics any moment.

Wren looked at Florence Tavell. Her coloring was high, almost feverish, her gray eyes bright in anticipation. Urban Tavell, on the other hand, registered nothing at all.

A SILENT minute ticked by. Freya's eyes were closed, her lips compressed. If this was a trance, it was an unconvincing one. And then the tapping began. It was a little like the snapping of a toy gun, and if you had a fair imagination you might conclude that the sound came from the table itself. Wren's eyes narrowed purely for effect. He took a slow breath, then ducked his head to look beneath the table. The tapping went on uninterrupted, with no perceptible movement of Freya's feet. Wren straightened.

"Phenomenal!" he whispered, also for effect.

Freya's eyes popped open and she gave him a startled look across the table. Wren winked. Freya closed her eyes quickly. Across the room Wilfred Doan unfolded from his chair and tiptoed to the tapping table. He caught Wren's eyes and winked. Wren could feel a warm spot on his right cheek. That was Florence Tavell glaring at him. As for Urban Tavell, his eyes were downcast in the solemn attitude of prayer.

Wren said: "I shall ask a question—the acid test. I shall give a series of names, one of which was the first name of my great-grandmother. Should the tapping of the table choose the right one, I shall be convinced."

Another moment of silence and then Wren began, pronouncing the name *Clarissa*. From the table came a single tap for *no*. Wren kept on through *Alicia* and *Hannah*. On the fourth name, *Virginia*, there were two taps for *yes*. This was all news to Wren who hadn't the slightest idea what his great-grandmother had been called, but he accepted it as gospel.

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Dime Detective Magazine

"Well?" It was Tavell's voice, high-pitched, tremulous.

Wren drew a long breath. He inclined his head. "Yes, that is my great-grandmother's name. No one present except myself could know it. There is no explanation other than the supernatural."

Wilfred Doan rested a gaunt hand on the back of Freya's chair. "If Wren believes, who am I to doubt? Maybe I owe you an apology."

On Wren's right, Florence Tavell sat stiffly in her chair. Her nostrils flared slightly, and her long gray eyes had narrowed and were staring daggers at Wren.

Doan took from his coat pocket a long, legal-looking document which he plopped down on the table in front of Urban Tavell.

"Last chance, Mr. Tavell. Are you signing or aren't you?" Doan's fingers trembled across his vest-front, searching for a pen to offer.

"Something to write with?" Wren asked quickly, his hand coming out of his pocket. "Here's a pencil I found on the front lawn. Yours, isn't it, Tavell?"

Tavell's gnome-like eyes widened as he saw the pencil with the chased gold barrel. He reached for it, fingers clutching. His indrawn breath made a strangling sound.

"Yes. On the front lawn, you say? My—my pencil!" His laugh was a sickly thing with a sob in it.

"Better sign in ink," Doan suggested cheerfully. "Make it legal."

Florence Tavell raised her voice decisively. "He's not—" And that was when Wren kicked her ankle unmercifully. She pushed back from the table, more angry than hurt. Tavell pushed back, too.

"I'm not signing," Tavell said. "I—I . . ." his eyes went on a tour like a Prohibitionist looking for hip-flask bulges. "I strongly suspect that you are all in cahoots, plotting against me. In fact, I'm dropping the matter and I think I shall go to bed. I don't care if I never see Freya or Doan or Wren again."

He stood up, gave them each a reproachful look and went out of the room, a mite of a man stalking sedately on bow-legs.

FLORENCE TAVELL stood up, too. Wren looked at her, told her to sit down. He was curt about it. She did so, slowly, composing her beautiful hands in her lap. Her gray eyes watched him and a faint smile played at her red mouth.

Wilfred Doan said: "You fixed it—but good, Wren!" He dropped a hand on Freya's shoulder. "Come on, toots. Let's go pack our bags."

Wren said: "As a husband and wife team, you'd do better in vaudeville. Now that vaudeville's back, Freya, maybe you could put that

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double-jointed big toe of yours to better use than popping it to make like spirit taps. You know"—he chuckled—"you know, that's not the first time I met with a case like yours. Joint-cracking is one of the favorite methods. You hold your foot firmly against the floor and it makes quite a pop."

Freya's face was wooden, sulky. "How long have you known Doan and I were married?"

Wren shrugged. "Never met Doan before. But I'd heard that Gladys 'Freya' Frye had married an architect. And an architect was just the guy to proposition Tavell on a pre-fabricated housing scheme. Accent on the *fabricated*. But then you didn't fool Tavell, either. He knew all the time it was a rooking. I just played along with you two tonight to see if Tavell would follow through."

"Come on, toots," Doan said. "Let's start packing. The magi is too fast company." He led Freya from the room.

Florence Tavell put her elbows on the table and rested her chin on a bridge of slim, laced fingers. She was perfectly calm.

"If Urban knew that Freya was a fraud why did he pretend to believe in her?" she asked.

"He needed a fall guy," Wren said. "And he needed someone he could use as a decoy to get Mary Maley out of her stronghold. Mary was a believer in things occult and creepy and she trusted your husband. Urban Tavell's pretended belief in Freya was all build-up for tonight, for what took place at the old Maley house. You understand about the set-gun?"

She shook her head. Wren guessed that already she was mourning luxuriously.

He said: "The set-gun wasn't intended to kill anybody. Aimed too high, you see. But it gave Tavell an excuse to knock Mary Maley down and injure her as though by accident. Thus in seeming to have played the hero, he diverted suspicion. But the 'accident' was the thing. It provided the excuse for phoning Mary Maley's cottage and having Little Joe chain the dogs. You did the phoning, of course, while you thought Tavell was on the way to get the doctor. He wasn't. He had two things to do. He had to get back to the old Maley place and kill Mary. Then he had to swing over to Mary Maley's cottage and steal something out of a sugar bowl. After that, he went for the doctor."

"What did he steal?" Florence asked.

He shrugged. "I can only guess. Maybe it will come out at the trial. It might have been a receipt or a promissory note. A receipt, probably, which he promptly destroyed. You see, Mary Maley trusted him, even though she didn't trust banks. I think she handed her three hundred thousand-dollar inheritance over to Tavell to invest for her—which was what Tavell had been working for. He was

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broke, or had been until he got his hands on Mary's money. Then, to keep the money, he had to kill Mary and destroy the receipt. Had to kill old Bobert, too, because Bobert knew of Tavell's financial condition. It would be difficult to explain to Bobert where Tavell got three hundred thousand to prime the pump."

"When," she asked, as though she found all this morbidly fascinating, "when did you discover all this?"

WREN'S gaze was remote, his brow furrowed. "It came a bit at a time, like olives out of a bottle. Little things. Something you said in my office this afternoon helped. You said Tavell's devotion *becomes* unbearable unless it is expressed in dollars. You said *becomes*—not *would become*. Indicating, possibly, that there was an interval when Tavell was broke.

"And other things. When I spoke figuratively about Mary Maley keeping her inheritance in a sugar bowl, Tavell nearly jumped out of his skin. Which meant nothing until I found a broken sugar bowl in Mary Maley's cottage. She must have kept the receipt for the money in the sugar bowl with her loose change, indicating how much trust she had in him. Didn't even bother to put the receipt in her safe. And Tavell knew where she had put it."

"What about the pencil?" Florence asked him.

"Oh, that? Simple. There was neither pencil nor pen on the desk in Freya's flat tonight. Nor last night, when Tavell took Bobert there to murder him. Tavell had to forge that note on Freya's appointment calendar as part of the machinery to frame both killings on Freya. He used his own pencil. Then some time tonight Tavell discovered the pencil was missing.

"He had a key to Freya's flat, you know. He'd necessarily have one to get Bobert there and to get Freya's handcuffs for the set-up in the cellar of the old Maley house. And when he found his pencil gone, his brain went back to the night before, and he thought he'd left it in Freya's flat. So he went back to look for the pencil, didn't need the key because the door was unlocked. I was there. He was afraid I'd found the pencil. I think he tried to nerve himself up to bashing my head in with a notary seal. And in the flat he found out I'd noticed the appointment with Mary Maley written on the calendar. Which accounts for his ordering Jason to waylay me if I came here tonight. Jason, the faithful retainer, tried to put the blame for that on Doan."

She said, and seemed worried about it: "But you haven't any material evidence."

"That's right—unless your husband still has that key to Freya's flat. I'm gambling that he kept it, thinking he'd take another look at

No Haunting Allowed

Freya's flat to see if he could find the pencil. Now that he's got the pencil, and knows I found it on the lawn, he'll probably try to get rid of the key. But he won't get away with it. Not with Horace's eagle eye out for just such a move. Nobody will get away with anything, except you, my dear."

Florence took a short breath, held it a moment. "What do you mean by that?"

He turned his big white palms upward, shrugging with his hands. "That you're the real murderer. The untouchable murderer. Inadvertent? I don't know. But Tavell is the tool of the circumstances. Get the picture: Here's Urban Tavell, physically unattractive, an introvert, extremely shy. He's never earned anything, not excluding self-respect. Realizing his own inferiority, how does he express his inner yearnings? By batting around corners in powerful cars, borrowing personal power from a multi-cylinder engine.

"And, of course, the greatest satisfaction he got out of this world was possessing a beautiful woman for his wife. He'd bought you at a lavish price. No ceiling on you, is there? He bribed you to remain his wife, to stay with him in hope of inheriting a fortune someday. And then when he went broke, you were practically packing. He begged you to stay, said he'd get more money. And he got it from Mary. Had to kill to keep it. Had to kill to keep you!"

Florence hadn't moved. Her smile was fixed, satisfied, assured.

Wren said: "Tavell's pitiable. You're not. You're just beautiful. You'll find somebody else. But—" he shuddered slightly, "not me."

Her slim brows arched and her eyes cooled. "Oh? You flatter yourself, don't you?"

"I don't think so. I don't—"

HE BROKE off. Something bumped the floor hard on the second story of the house. And then there was the sound of water rushing swiftly through a pipe.

"Boss!"

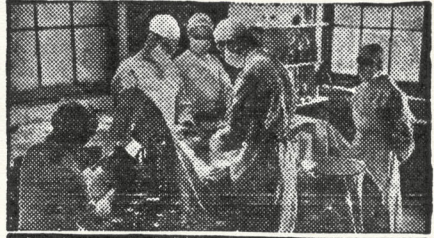
It was Horace's voice, sounding faintly from the upper floor.

Wren bounded to his feet, looked toward the twisted stair at the end of the living room.

"The front stairway," Florence Tavell urged. "It's closer to the master bedroom." She was already leading into the front hall.

Wren passed her. Two police, one in uniform, came barging through the front door as Wren bounced for the stairs. They shouted at him, but he was halfway up the steps by then. In the hall upstairs were Gladys "Freya" Frye and Doan, hurrying toward the stairway, bags in hand. From the open door of the front bedroom came the sounds of a struggle.

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Wren turned through the door, was vaguely aware of the presence of Jason, the butler. Wren got his gun out and dived for the adjoining bath, a modest little room about the size of the Aquacade. On the floor, thrashing it out, were Horace and Urban Tavell. A bright nickel door-key lay on the floor near the base of the toilet.

"All right. Break it up!"

That was when Tavell bounced Horace's head against the tile floor. At approximately the same time, Jason came through the bathroom door and neatly knocked the gun out of Wren's hand. It all happened very fast. There was Horace, inert upon the floor. There was Tavell with a heavy-caliber revolver in his hand. There were Wren and the cops looking pretty foolish, with Florence and the others somewhere in the background. Tavell had them all at bay, a bow-legged Puck with a big gun in his hand.

Tavell said: "Florence, we're getting out of here. You get the gun that Wren dropped while I hold them off."

From the background came Florence's rippling laughter. "Darling, I couldn't possibly. Not with a murderer, you dope!"

Which was what really shook Urban Tavell. He turned green, his gunhand trembled. And then Horace, who must have been doing a 'possum act, kicked at Tavell's shins.

Wren dived low to finish what Florence and Horace had started. Tavell's gun roared once, but the slug smashed into tile wainscoting. He came down hard to strike the foot of the lavatory pedestal with his head. And it was over, with Wren and Horace standing up.

Horace pointed a shaky forefinger at the key on the floor.

"He was gonna flush it downa—" he gulped. "Flush it . . ."

"Uh-huh," Wren grunted. "We get the idea, Horace."

He walked back into the bedroom. Florence Tavell was waiting for him. He bounced to the door, and she dogged him, haunted him out into the hall.

"Even if I'm not appreciated," she said, "you ought to let me thank you."

"You're appreciated," he said. "You witch." At least it sounded like "witch."

THE END

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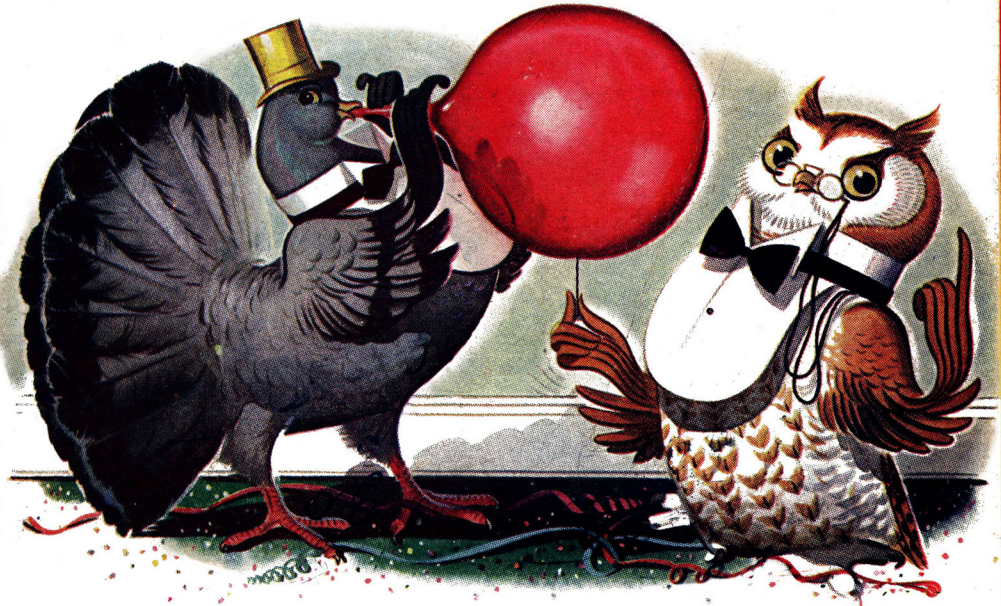
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