

DETECTIVE

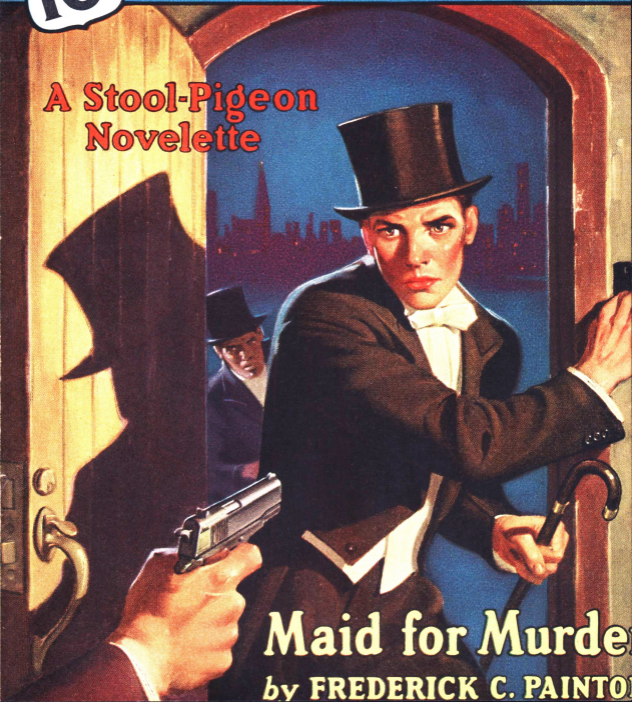
FICTION WEEKLY

FORMERLY FLYNN'S

MAR. 26
10¢



**A Stool-Pigeon
Novelette**



Maid for Murder

by **FREDERICK C. PAINTOR**



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DETECTIVE

FICTION WEEKLY



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Formerly FLYNN'S

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She stepped back, her mouth quivering. "It's empty," she said.

Maid for Murder

By Frederick C. Painton

Author of "Fink," "Me—Crook," etc.

I WAS having dinner with two morphine peddlers and a counterfeiter looking for a stake to start business when the waiter came to the table and said, "Telephone for you, Chick."

I knew at once that the call must be from Detective Pete Laird, the homicide dick that I stool-pigeon for. He was the only man who would know that I was eating in Dindy's at that time. I got up at once, of course, because Laird never called me unless he had a job he wanted me to fink on. But I was sort of sore. At the interruption, I mean.

I was digging information on nar-

cotic smuggling out of the two junk peddlers and I could sell this for plenty of potatoes to the Treasury dicks who were all hot and bothered over the amount of heroin being run into New York. If Laird had a job I'd have to drop the dope idea, and Laird only paid me twenty bucks a day and expenses.

But I went to the telephone. Pete Laird and I are friends, get it? True, he had caught me when I busted in a cigar store to blow the safe, but he had kept the pinch off me, and made me a stool-pigeon. And as you who have read some of my previous experiences

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This is the fourth of a series of stories based on the experiences of a New York stoolpigeon.

know, he finally had that burglary charge *nolle prossed*, so I didn't have the threat of a prison rap hanging over me.

Of course, after that I didn't have to go on stooling, but I did. For two reasons. First I felt that in helping him turn up the swine and rats in New York's underworld jungle, I was paying off the debt to society that I owed for the crimes I had committed when, desperate and hungry, I had turned burglar. Second, I liked the work. Because of my criminal record I couldn't get a license as a private shamus, so the next best thing was doing this undercover work.

Don't fool yourself: it's a supreme thrill to bet your life against death, fighting the jackals that try to make crime pay in New York. It's like dope or strong drink; you live for the second when only your own wits keep your feet from being frozen in concrete and your own carcass tossed to the East River crabs.

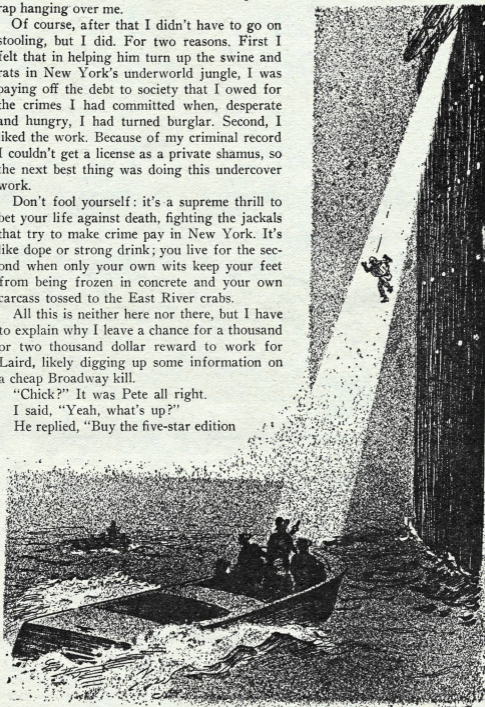
All this is neither here nor there, but I have to explain why I leave a chance for a thousand or two thousand dollar reward to work for Laird, likely digging up some information on a cheap Broadway kill.

"Chick?" It was Pete all right.

I said, "Yeah, what's up?"

He replied, "Buy the five-star edition

"As we approached, a dark shape hurtled from the giant liner."



of the *Globe*. Turn to page twenty-eight, column seven, at the bottom of the page. To want ad beginning, 'Wanted, skilled locksmith,' Read it on your way cross-town. Meet me in front of the Bond Building in twenty minutes."

"Okay," I said, "but what's it all about?"

"I can't tell you now," Laird said impatiently, "and I can't tell you much when I see you. The point is, snap right along."

I said, "Okay," and hung up. But I was surprised and mystified. Seeing as Pete and I are friends, I usually know as much about a case as he does when I start finking. It was unlike him to be so nervous, impatient and secretive. I went back to my table.

I winked at the two junk peddlers. "I've got to case a joint we're going to push in," I said. "But I want to talk to you later about the junk racket. It looks like soft dough to me and I'd like some."

Twisty Wrenn laughed. "It ain't as easy to bust in as the box you're gonna crack, Chick. But I'll get word to the front guy and work you in if I can."

Content with that, I said, "So long," and went down Broadway to Forty-second, picking up a *Globe* on the way. I walked east on Forty-second to Madison and stopped at the curb in front of the Bond Building. Meantime, I studied the ad.

Wanted: Skilled locksmith and expert on safes who is not afraid of unusual mission. High salary to one who can qualify. Applicants please call personally Suite 2860 Bond Bldg, East Forty-second Street, for further information.

I looked up from the ad to find Pete standing at the curb about three feet away looking up Madison Avenue.

Usually we met in taxicabs or cross-town trolleys so that my connections with the police would remain secret. A stool-pigeon remains a stoolie only so long as he isn't a suspect. When he's exposed he's a quick corpse. So I knew this was extraordinary, and curious as well as mysterious.

"I've read it," I said, talking without moving my lips, the way you learn to do in stir. "So what?"

He talked around the act of lighting a cigar.

"The girl who put that ad in the paper is Pamela Lockwood. Her old man is John R. Lockwood, whose ancestors bought New York from the Indians and sold it to the New Deal. They've got more millions than you've got hair."

I knew of the Lockwoods. Who didn't? You saw their pictures in the rotogravure sections, attending the polo matches, opening their Adirondack house for the winter sports, looking on the sands at the Surf Club in Palm Beach, or grabbing the *Queen Mary* to do some grouse shooting in their lodge in Scotland.

But they were clear out of my beat, get it? A stool-pigeon is valuable because he knows the underworld, and is accepted as part of it. He picks up gossip on the latest stick-up, the murder of guys like Dopey Benny, and steers his dick to the right pinch. He hasn't anything to do with Park Avenue.

"It sounds screwball," I said, "but go on from there."

"It is screwball, Chick. This Pamela is nuttier than a squirrel's cage. She's fed up with racing motor cars, airplanes and motorboats, so she's taken up being a detective as a hobby. She's got her offices upstairs, and she's got a private shamus' license. Her old man

fixed that. Her old man is also a friend of the commissioner's. And afraid that she may get hurt or snatched playing cops and robbers, he asked the commissioner to keep an eye on her."

"And you drew the assignment?" I asked.

"No. She's kind of smart in her way. Afraid her old man would cramp her style, she had the dicks at headquarters paraded. She immediately spotted two tails, so we know she's got a memory for faces, which puts us out. I suggested a bodyguard from outside and said I had one that could be trusted. The commissioner passed the buck to me, and I'm passing it to you."

I started to laugh. The idea of a stool-pigeon tailing a Park Avenue blueblood was bizarre enough to be funny. Then suddenly I knew it wasn't funny. Offhand I could name five guys who would snatch her for big dough if they got the chance to make the grab.

"No likee," I sighed. "I suppose I'm to answer the ad and tail her night and day?"

"Yes," he said. "If you get the job it makes the tail easier. Twenty a day and expenses. How are you fixed for dough?"

"I'll see you later."

"Okay." He hailed a passing cab. "You can reach me at the office or at home." He paused, worried. Then: "I'm putting it up to you, Chick. If anything happens to that girl it's my neck. No matter what you have to do *don't let any harm come to her.*"

I went into the Bond Building, not liking the set-up any better. There is nothing so monotonous as a tailing job. Your time is never your own; you're up all hours of the day and night. I disliked this Park Avenue baby before I even saw her.

I grabbed an express to the twenty-

eighth floor, and located the door that had *Lockwood Investigating Agency* on it. I went in—and smothered a gasp.

THIS outer office was done in pastel shades with white and black furniture in a color scheme that was made to frame the stenographer who sat there putting on a new set of lips. This gal could have walked right into a Ziegfeld chorus with no further addition.

"I want to see Miss Lockwood," I said.

"What was it about?" she asked.

"I'll tell her."

"I don't know if she'll see you." The girl frowned.

"Why don't you go and ask her?" I was sore and showing it.

"Fresh!" She got up and walked to an inner office. She walked like a model, knees close together, putting one foot straightly in front of the other, her hips slouching in a provocative manner. She came back in a minute.

"Miss Lockwood is not taking new clients," she began.

I blurted, "I came in answer to the advertisement!"

"The ad! You!" The girl was amazed.

She darted back into the office. This puzzled me. What in the name of the devil did she expect?

She came out. "Miss Lockwood will see you, only I must say you don't look the part."

"What part?"

She looked down her nose arrogantly. "Miss Lockwood will tell you."

"I'm overwhelmed," I grinned, somehow liking her despite the sudden snootiness. "Throw away the gum, baby. It spoils the picture you make against this ten thousand dollar background."

She gandered me up and down as I

opened the inner door. "The word is noots, Monsieur," she said, "spelled n-o-o-t-s."

I shut the door, still grinning. The grin went right off my face in one swipe. Maybe I staggered a little bit: I was entitled to. This was no office I had just entered; it was a boudoir. Done in shining white and black, it looked like a movie set. A vanity table in one corner in creamy white. A desk in white with a black blotter, and black fixtures. A couple of deep-stuffed white leather chairs. And sitting at a cream-colored desk, holding a cream-colored telephone, was a girl who made the blonde outside look like an upstart from Minzkey's revue.

"Don't be an utter ass, Jane," she was saying. "I'll meet you at the major's at eleven. . . . I know what I'm doing. You're being the fool, not I. Goodby."

She put down the telephone and stood up, gazing at me from under level brows.

She was so gorgeous, I stood there with my hat in my hand, gawping like a hick.

"If I pass inspection," she said in her husky voice, "we might get down to business."

"Lady," I said, "always let a man admire a masterpiece in silent awe. . . . Well, if you insist. I came in answer to the ad, and I'm so desperate I'll do anything."

Her level gaze traveled up my six feet. I was well dressed; they don't call me Chick "Dude" Maney for nothing. I had a sun tan from lying under the light at the gym, and I part my hair in the middle, collegiate fashion, to make me look younger. I thought I looked pretty good.

But she suddenly finished her gander and shook her lovely head.

"I'm afraid you won't do," she told me. "You see, I don't want an honest man. I want a burglar who can open safes and pick locks."

II

I SAT down in the white leather chair. I was kind of weak in the knees.

"Well," I said, "I can do that, too. I can open a box with a can-opener and pick locks with a nail file."

"You mean you *are* a burglar?"

I made my eyes look furtive and cunning. "Nothing doing, kid. I'm not talking for your dictaphone and a stretch in stir."

She grew excited, and swished around her desk, to stand in front of me.

"You're not lying," she said. "Just to get the job? I swear you'll come to no harm through me. Only I've *got* to have a burglar and I've got to have him tonight. I was going to try it myself."

"Try what?"

"Can you prove you're a burglar?" she countered.

Well, I couldn't laugh: she was so serious.

"My name is Chick Maney," I said. "Call Homicide and ask for Peter Laird. He'll give you my record and my fingerprint classification if you want to take my prints here for comparison."

She went to the desk and called Center Street. She didn't get Laird; he hadn't got back. But she talked to the fingerprint clerk and took the classification and my record. She got a glass cup and made me press it, dusted the prints in a professional manner and checked the classification. When she looked up from this there was awe, fascination and amazement in her deep eyes.

"You look like such a nice young man," she murmured. "So you're the most dangerous burglar in America." She reached into a drawer and took out a pearl-handled automatic, probably a .32 from its size.

"I'll employ you," she said, "but I warn you I'm a dead shot and I shan't hesitate to use this."

"Use it for what?" I asked.

"Why—why you're a dangerous—"

"I'm a burglar, not a gunman. You want to hire me. I can be had. What's there in it for me and what have I got to bust into?"

She put away the gun and laughed. "I'm a fool," she said. "Only I thought burglars were blue-jowled and hard—well, you're employed. The salary is fifty dollars a day and five hundred dollars if you open the safe I have in mind."

"Fair enough," I said. "Why do I bust into the safe?"

"That is no business of yours."

"No?" I said. "Listen, lady, I'm a two-time loser now, and if I get caught again, the judge will throw the book at me under the Baumes law. I don't crack any crib until I know what for."

"I could get you off. I have influence," she said.

"You're Park Avenue and the clothes you've got on would keep an East Side family for a whole year if hocked. But burglary is burglary whether it's committed by a guy looking for a meal or by a girl whose only worry is whether she'll wear mink or ermine."

I got up and started to leave.

"Wait!" she cried. "You seem to have intelligence even if you are a—"

"Burglar," I suggested, and sat down again.

"Crook," she corrected, and her face was suddenly torn by trouble. "I'm trying to prove that Arnold Bonnelle is a

crook. The proof of it is in the safe I want you to open."

"Who's Arnold Bonnelle and how do you know he's a crook? I mean, what makes you want to prove it?"

Her mask of reserve dropped, and for a brief few minutes she was just a little girl, torn by doubts and sorrow.

"Arnold Bonnelle has made my sister Jane love him," she replied softly. "Jane wants to marry him. She won't believe anything I say about him. To save her from making this terrible mistake I've got to prove him the swine he is."

"That's a reason," I admitted, "but you've got to say why."

I wondered if she had heard me; her suddenly pale face gave no indication; and she went on talking just as if there had been no interruption.

OUT of what she said I pieced together this: Jane was going around with a young man named Lacey Davis. Lacey Davis was the son of an old, fine family whose fortune had blown up in the Big Wind of 1929, leaving him penniless. However, Jane had enough for both, and the marriage was approved. Meanwhile, borrowing a stake, Lacey Davis was speculating in the stock market with phenomenal results. He was on the way to making a fortune even as great as the fortune his father had lost. So even this lack of money was no longer a bar to the marriage. Everything was serene.

Then, she told me, into the picture came Arnold Bonnelle. Just how he got into the picture she did not know. Even the parties of the rich nowadays have their gate-crashers. Bonnelle may have known a few of the right people; in any case, he met Jane Lockwood, fell in love with her and she with him. Violently.

Bonnelle went to Pamela's father, but when questioned about the source of his money, he was elusive, vague, admitting only that he was born on the East Side.

"Being born on the East Side," I interrupted, "may be a social error but it is not, as yet anyway, a crime."

Again she went on in a soft sad voice, bringing out the damning incidents that suddenly made me agree with her contentions. One of their set, a narcotic addict, had gotten morphine from Bonnelle one night. She had seen this happen when no one knew she was watching. One evening a man had come onto the Lockwood estate when Bonnelle was staying there. She had overheard part of the conversation.

"Then Jake will have to disappear," Bonnelle had said, "permanently."

The other man had laughed. "I'll say it will be permanent. Jake will die."

There was more talking that sound drowned out, and then she had heard. "The last cargo was two hundred pounds. You can get an idea of what the next run of junk will be."

They had laughed and drifted on. Pamela had talked with friends of her father and discovered that the mysterious head of a reputedly dangerous New York narcotic smuggling crowd was believed to be somebody in high social standing.

"Then," she said quietly, "then I knew that Arnold Bonnelle was that man. I tried to talk Jane out of seeing him. But she is insane, infatuated with him. She hates me now for what I have said. I had to go on alone."

That, she told me, was why she pretended to go in for detection. Why she took a private shamus' license. Why she was running down clues as they presented themselves. She had one good one. Following Bonnelle, she had

trailed him to an apartment on Park Avenue. He had this apartment under the name of Jason Gregory.

"That's where he keeps his papers, in a safe," she concluded. "I was in the room once—I had a key made. But I couldn't get into the safe."

I sat quietly, hiding my excitement, hiding my interest. The Treasury guys had been trying to crack this narcotic gang for two years. I could guard this girl and still maybe cut myself a large piece of pie.

I said aloud: "Have you gone to the Secret Service?"

"I warned them. They said they had no evidence pointing to Bonnelle. They said they were watching him, but nothing came of that." She paused. Then: "Bonnelle and Jane intend to get married next week. We can't stop her—unless we prove this point. Now, do you see why I *must* have this evidence?"

"And Davis—he's been helping you?" I asked.

"He believes I'm right, but he says Bonnelle will kill me if I don't keep out. He wants me to leave the issue to him."

In my heart I sympathized with Lacey Davis, but I said, "I'll bust the box for you. When do we do it?"

"Tonight at eleven. I had Lacey Davis arrange that Arnold Bonnelle and Jane go with him to Major Worthington's—it's a gambling house in the East Fifties where Bonnelle hangs out a lot. Davis will keep him there through ten to midnight.

"Okay," I said.

She gave me her hand. She was still a flustered little girl. "Jane hates me so," she said, tears welling, "I'm glad you think I'm doing the right thing."

I turned silently and went to the door. She halted me with a word. "I'll

meet you down front at a quarter to eleven. I'll have a green Rolls."

I nodded.

"And," she went on, "have you a white tie—I mean full dress clothes?"

"I can get them."

"Then do. We'll be less conspicuous and also, afterward, I want to go directly to the Major's gambling house and confront Bonnelle in front of Jane with the evidence." She came toward me in her tall imperious way. "Here's a hundred dollar advance—you may need it for the clothes."

I bought the full dress suit at a Broadway shop. I have what is called a ready-to-wear figure, and the fitting was easy. With a white vest and a stiff shirt, and a top hat that you press down and it flies out with a *plop*, I looked like something when I tried on the duds in my room.

I called Pete Laird, and told him the set-up. He was excited and enthusiastic.

"She may be dumb," he grunted, "but she's maybe stumbled onto something. It's out of my beat but maybe you can cash in some real dough. I hope so. Anyway, go through with it, and see she isn't hurt. That's the main thing."

AT a quarter to eleven I stood in front of the Bond Building, complete from top hat to patent leather slippers, a gold-headed walking cane and a dress topcoat. Even the cop on the beat touched his hat when he went by me. This gave me a laugh.

She came up in a green Rolls Royce, thirty feet long and worth a thousand dollars a foot. She had on ten thousand dollars worth of mink, an evening dress of some green that was the most beautiful green I ever saw. She was terrific.

"Got your tools, darling?" she laughed.

I was startled. Under her breath she said, "Call me darling in case anybody's listening in."

"Oh, sure, darling," I said. "Let's go and make moxie."

We rode uptown. At a red light stop, I was admiring her profile and said, "You aren't by chance in love with Bonnelle yourself?"

She withered me—that's the word. A hot blast that took all the sap out of me.

"Don't be insane," she said calmly. "I've never met a man yet who is worth the shoelather he stands in."

"Consider me squelched," I grinned.

She had, it seemed, already cased the joint, so all we had to do was park the car, take the elevator to the twelfth floor. She handed me the key that she had had made.

"I checked Bonnelle at the Major's," she said. "There's nothing to fear."

"Then don't look so pale." I grinned, and fitted the key. The door opened readily and we went into darkness. I found a switch in the living room. The place was beautifully furnished, but somehow lacked the personality of a place lived in. I spotted a tapestry on the wall that doubtless hid the safe. I peered into the bedroom to make sure nobody was in.

The bathroom door was half open. I could see a corner of the bathtub. Over the edge of the tub I saw two slim silk-stocking legs, dangling limply.

"You'd better stay outside," I said quickly.

But she was already beside me. "Why? She was breathless. 'What's the matter?'"

Then her gaze went beyond mine to the bathroom and she saw the legs. She staggered, fell against me.

"We seem to have come in time for a murder," I said.

III

I SHOOK her loose and told her to stay back and walked into the bathroom. But I guess there is a fascination about death, because she trailed after me and had a good look. She made funny sounds in her throat when she saw the haft of the knife, and she fell against me when she saw the glassy eyes, so fixed ahead, that no matter from what angle you looked at them, they seemed to stare back at you reproachfully.

She wasn't such a big girl, this dead brunette, but slenderly and gracefully made, and her face wasn't ugly even in death. I started to lean over.

Suddenly Pamela (I called her that to myself) began to shake. Her eyes grew wild and she pawed the air.

I walloped her across the cheek, and it was no light slap.

"Stop it!" I cried. "Get hold of yourself."

She gasped, shook like a dog, and her eyes became normal.

"That's better," I said. "Outside with you."

"I'm all right," she whispered, "only I've never seen a— a dead person before."

"If this is a starter you're liable to see more," I said.

She started toward a closet. "We'll put some clothes on her. She looks so cold."

"The cops don't like to have murdered people touched," I muttered. "Keep your fingerprints off that knob. Go on outside. I'll take a look."

But she came back, bracing herself, and stood quietly while I looked over the dead girl. I noticed the dozens of tiny blue dots on the girl's legs.

"A dope addict," I muttered. "The good-looking ones use the needle there so it won't show."

"Arnold Bonnelle killed her," she whispered. "That's his knife. It's a Renaissance stiletto that I've seen many times."

"Then he was a sucker to use it here. But why did he kill her?"

She said nothing. I kept on looking around. The single clue I got I found only by sheer accident.

I accidentally touched the left stockinged foot. They were sheer silk stockings, but the feet were reinforced on toe and heel and bottom, so you couldn't see through that part. But the hard, crackling thing I touched wasn't reinforced silk. I stripped off the stocking to find out what was there.

It was a playing card, the trey of clubs, cut elliptically so it would fit in the bottom of a high-heeled slipper. But the three pips were there and when I turned it over I saw a special design on the other side.

It was an intricate design of dots and dashes in red, and the top had the legend, *Made Specially for the Club Maurice*.

"Major Worthington's club," she whispered. "The gambling house where Bonnelle went so much—where he is now."

"Okay," I muttered, "but why was she carrying the three of clubs in her stocking? Who is she? And why was she killed?"

I was mostly talking to myself, asking rhetorical questions to line up the kill in my mind. But they snapped Pamela Lockwood out of it.

"We can find out those answers by going into the safe. That's what we came for."

I smiled. "Stout girl. Go over and sit down while I give it a look."

I laid the playing card on the table, intending to wipe it down for fingerprints, thinking to myself that I must get the chance to slip Laird a ring and tip him to this case. If he broke the kill and Bonnelle was guilty, then it meant a lot of kudoes and maybe pay increase if Laird did the breaking. I went to the safe.

It was a regular house bull's-eye safe that you can open with a breadknife if you forget the combination. This was even easier, because it was a new safe, and after listening to the tumblers I knew it had had but one combination, the one I was feeling for now. I went to work.

Pamela called in a muffled tone, "She was still warm?"

"Yeah," I replied. "I'd say she hadn't been dead more than a half hour. Her toes had warmth even. I'd say she was killed about half-past ten. What blood there was hadn't coagulated yet."

She didn't reply although I heard her moving around.

A thought came to me. "How can you tie this on Bonnelle if he's at the Club Maurice with your sister? That's a perfect alibi."

"He must have done it," she called excitedly. "Don't you see? This girl loved him. She was his go-between in the narcotic game. She found out that he loved Jane, and perhaps she threatened to tell on him. And he had to kill her to keep her quiet."

"You'd better find out about his alibi before you start building a case," I said.

The last tumbler fell into place; I turned the knob and the little chromium door swung open. I took a look inside. Then I felt sorry for her, honestly I did. I took my handkerchief and wiped down the chromium.

"The safe's open," I said.

She came with a swirl of silk, a breath of lovely perfume. She looked into the black hole. For a space she did not move at all. Then she stepped back, her mouth quivering.

"It's empty," she said.

I just nodded. As I watched she stuck out her adorable chin. "He killed her," she repeated, "and then emptied this safe and ran for it."

"That, Pamela," I said, unconsciously using her first name, "will take a lot of proving."

In the silence that followed I closed the safe, wiped it, and went to the bathroom to make sure I'd left no fingerprints. I halted and swore.

The corpse had a Japanese kimono, man's size, draped on it, and had been moved from the original position.

"What's this mean?" I demanded. "Don't you know the police—" I broke off. I had heard the outside door slam. I ran out of the bedroom, switched off the light with my elbow, turned the knob with a handkerchief and raced out after her. Then I remembered the playing card. Pete would need that. I ran back, used the key and went in.

But the playing card was gone!

The little fool! She had taken it and I had an idea where she was going.

THE green Rolls was gone when I reached the curb, but I hailed a taxi and told him to whip the horses to the Club Maurice. I saw her car parked up the street when I arrived. I lost more time while I argued with the doorman. The Club Maurice, downstairs, has the best food, the best wines, the nicest floor show and the highest prices of any spot in town. Upstairs you can bet the price of a yacht on the white ball and get faded by the house. But getting up there is the rub.

It cost me twenty bucks before I

made it. And only the difference of a few seconds let me in. The Major himself came over, frowning.

"I don't allow crooks in here, Maney," he said.

That he should know me was no surprise. The Major had the sharp, alert eye, the powerful, predatory face that would cause him to know and remember anybody who affected his business.

"I'm here with Miss Pamela Lockwood," I snapped. "I'm her bodyguard, and she told me to come."

"Oh, yes?" He ran a blunt hand through the white sheen of his hair. His face got cunning. "Oh, yes?" he repeated.

"Where is she?" I demanded. "I've got to talk to her right away."

He gestured to a roulette table at the far end. I started in that direction, but a tug at my sleeve from the Major held me. He was a big man and he had once used those hands for more than holding cards.

"Just a minute, Maney," he said.

I paused. He didn't let loose. "I know Miss Pamela's new hobby is being a detective, and she needs a bodyguard. But she might also get into trouble. I wouldn't like that to happen. I'd depend on you for a tip."

He let go his hold and said, "Shake on it." I took his hand and inside was a hundred dollar bill pressed against my palm. I knew he was buying me, but for what? Here was a complication that didn't fit in anywhere.

"You want me to give Bonnelle a break, is that it?" I asked.

"I'm very fond of Miss Pamela. I wouldn't want her to get hurt. That's all."

I didn't get it, but what the hell. I said, "Okay," and strode on the thick-piled rugs to where I could now see Pamela, and the attitudes of her and

those around her told me she was busy making a fool of herself. I hurried toward her thinking, I haven't called Laird yet, and a freshly killed brunette in the apartment.

There was a sudden commotion. Pamela jerked that silly little gun of hers and put the bead on a tall, darkly handsome young man who had the coldest, most sardonic eyes I ever saw.

"You're a murderer, Arnold Bonnelle," Pamela cried, "and you will put your hands up."

She may have known a lot about pop-guns, but she didn't know that guy. He faded forward with his hands up, and then they were down, and he had the gun wrist and twisted until she cried in pain. I lumbered up like the Seventh Cavalry and jerked my own .38 from the awkward back pocket.

"Just a minute, guy," I said, and put the bead on him.

IV

HE gave me a quick look out of those slumbrous, sardonic eyes. Then he smiled and the cynical twist turned down one corner of his mouth. "Pam's gunman, of course," he said. He had a quiet voice, cool as ice. He backed up, holding his hands out from his sides. I knew then that he knew men and guns. That one lightning glance of his had weighed me and his chances and he knew this was the answer.

Pamela started to pick up the gun that pain had forced her to drop.

"Let it lay," I said sharply, "Don't get into the line of fire."

She stepped back. For a brief space there was silence and no movement, but a tenseness, a sense of hatred. In that little time I had a chance to take a gander around and see who was who. I didn't know a soul, except that from

a faint resemblance I knew this good-looking blonde must be Pamela's sister. She proved it an instant later.

"You're mad, Pam," she breathed. "How dare you do this to me? And to Arnold? Take your man and get out of here. I never want to see you again."

"Take it easy, Jane," said the man next to her. "I think Pam knows what she's doing."

"You keep out of this, Lacey," cried Jane.

I gave Lacey a once-over. He was a tall, brown-haired man of thirty-one or so, with the shoulders of a college stroke and the beef of a football tackle. But good living had put a layer of fat on this fine physique, and night life had put rubber tires under his cool, greenish eyes. He had the look of a man of breeding, but something reckless, also. And I noticed an odd deformity: his ears had no lobes. Other than that, however, he was much the more impressive of the two men, and I couldn't see how Jane could fall for the dark, sardonic guy. However, that wasn't my business.

Pamela was beginning to make this hers. She said, "Arnold Bonnelle, where were you at ten-thirty tonight?"

He laughed. "On the night of June second, Miss District Attorney, at the time specified, I was in the Club Maurice."

"You're positive?"

"He can't be positive," snapped Lacey Davis. "I saw him go out myself at ten-twenty. He was gone until a quarter of eleven."

"He was not," whimpered Jane. "He was with me."

"Hush, darling," said Bonnelle gently. "Don't lie for me. Davis knows I was out because he followed me."

"I did but you lost me," rejoined Davis grimly.

"You rent an apartment on Park Avenue under the name of Jason Gregory," said Pamela.

"You probably suspect light o' loves there," laughed Bonnelle.

"And you own a Renaissance stiletto too. Jane and I have both seen it in your other apartment."

Everybody was quiet now, and Bonnelle himself was listening with a sudden strained intentness.

"That stiletto is buried to the hilt in the heart of a little brunette girl whom you murdered to keep her quiet." Pamela was talking softly, hardly raising her voice.

"She had this playing card in her stocking," Pamela went on, trembling. "I've seen you carry a Trey of clubs in your joking manner of doing card tricks. And this looks like one of the pack you carried. The police can find that out."

Well, she had made a case, now, and everybody knew it. Bonnelle's face was suddenly ghastly pale. He eyed the playing card as if it were a ghost. Davis was watching quietly.

Jane sprang forward and flung her arms around Bonnelle's neck.

"It's not true!" she cried "Pam's lying. She's lying, Arnold."

There was no triumph in Pamela. She made a sudden movement forward, her hand out to her sister.

"You had to know, darling," she said. "You couldn't marry him, knowing this."

Don't tell me society girls aren't human. With one hand around Arnold's neck, Jane's other hand flashed out, five crimson claws to rake Pamela's face. Pamela didn't move. The raking fingernails just missed her.

Well, I was so wrapped up in this little drama that I forgot my part. I started to push Jane back. And then

Bonnelle went into action. Don't ask me exactly what happened. I was alert as tense nerves could make me; I'm reasonably fast in a spot. But before I could get set, he had my gun wrist. I let go and went with the twist to save my arm from breaking. This flung me to the floor, an old wrestling trick. He had that gun, and he was up in one bound, so that the wall protected his back.

By the time I jumped to my feet, that gun muzzle was looking at all of us. And I knew men and I knew guns; and I knew this guy was desperate. I kept my mitts in sight and watched.

"I'll have the playing card, please, Pam," Bonnelle said quietly.

"Don't do it, Pam," Lacey Davis' voice was just as soft. "He doesn't dare shoot here. Give it to me."

He stepped forward to take the card from Pamela's relaxed hand. It was a move, as I suddenly saw, to cover the drawing of his own gun. It was too late for me to shout a warning. Too late to do anything. Davis grabbed for the card and drew his gun and fired, all, it seemed, in the same movement.

But his shot was second, and seconds don't win. The gun flew out of his hand that spurting blood. I made a flying dive at Bonnelle in all the excitement. But he had faded along the wall.

"Back, everybody!" he called, still with that glacial iciness. "I'm going out. Don't any one try to stop me."

Nobody did. Jane called despairingly, "Arnold!"

"Keep your chin up, darling," he called gently. "I'll be seeing you."

WELL, man, I was limp as a rag and pouring sweat from every pore. Lacey was saying, "It's nothing. The bullet grazed my thumb. The point is, have you got the card, Pamela?"

"Yes, and I'm going to keep it," rejoined Pamela. "I've tried to handle this alone. But the police are coming into it now. Lacey, take Jane home. I'm going to see where Bonnelle went."

I groaned inwardly. But she got her cloak and went out, and I had to stay with her. That playing card, I suddenly realized, was vitally important to Bonnelle for some unknown reason. And he might do her harm to get it. I also wanted to get her out of the way and call Laird and give him this exclusive tip.

"You've done plenty, kid," I said gently. "Why not let the cops do the rest? I'll give an anonymous tip by telephone and you won't have to figure in it—not now, anyway."

She stared ahead, driving automatically.

"Her eyes," she whispered. "How she hates me! Oh, Jane! And I've got to go through with it—for her alone."

"Sure, but the guy's got away. You can't find him. You couldn't do anything if you did. He's tough. Give me the playing card and you go home to bed. I'll take the card back and leave it, and then phone the cops."

She thrust away my hand. "I'm going home. Jane will come in. He'll get in touch with her, and through her I'll find him. And if I have to I will kill him."

She dropped me in front of her apartment. "Call the police," she said dully. "I have your telephone number. I'll call you tomorrow if I need you. Here is the five hundred for opening the safe."

She went inside and I watched for a moment, saw the attendant come out to put away the Rolls, and then I ducked for an all night drug store on Lexington and called Laird. He sounded sleepy when he answered, but he wasn't sleepy

when I told him about the freshly killed Brunette.

"This Bonnelle looks like the guy," I concluded, "and he's also, on that basis, the head of the dope ring the T-men are looking for."

"He'll have a long start," Laird said, "even if I get the blast on him right away." He paused. Then: "But if I get him and he is the dope ring guy, you cut in for sixty per cent of the reward."

I had an idea. "Listen, Davis apparently has been following Bonnelle off and on, and maybe he might know where he hangs out. I'll drop by and pump him, if you'll put a plainclothes man on Pamela. She's gone home but I'm not so sure she'll stay there, even at this time in the morning."

Laird promised to do so. I remembered then that I didn't know who the Brunette was, and asked Laird when he'd get back to Centre Street so I could call and find out. It might be important later. He told me about what time and I hung up. I went back and loafed around the Lockwood apartment until I saw a car discharge a heavy guy who also began to stand around. The dick.

About this time I saw Davis bring Jane in. He didn't stay long and when he came out I trailed him to a house on Fifth Avenue that was about the same size as a museum. I caught up with him as he passed through a gate in the high, forbidding wall and mounted a rotunda that gave into the front of the house.

"Mr. Davis!" I said.

He was fishing awkwardly for his keys, his thumb bandaged. I came up beside him.

"Oh, it's you," he said. "Get the key off the ring, please."

I did so and started to unlock the

door for him. "It's already unlocked," I said.

"Really?" He thrust against it and it opened. "Very queer," he said. "Mark's is off tonight and I distinctly remember locking it. However, come in and have a spot. Did you want to see me?"

He shut the door, fumbled for the switch and clicked it. The light came on. I saw the man against the wall, and my gun in his hand.

Davis said quietly, "Have you come to kill me, Bonnelle?"

V

BONNELLE smiled sardonically, and picked up the drink he had apparently been nursing in the dark. "Splendid Scotch, Davis," he rejoined. "Sit down and have a spot for yourself and Pamela's—er—torpedo."

"Why are you here?" Davis asked.

"A man has to hide. What better place?" Bonnelle grinned. "Lacey Davis, scion of the Bennett Lacey. Blood so blue you could use it for ink. Who would look for a narcotic smuggler here?"

He favored me with a lightning glance. "You're fast, Maney, but you'd never be fast enough. Better take a drink and keep out of this."

"Okay." I forced a grin and poured myself a drink. I needed it.

"Why did you come here?" Davis repeated.

"The playing card," smiled Bonnelle. "Don't you see how vital it is to me? Maney, turn his pockets inside out."

I wasn't fool enough to refuse or to tell him where the card was. I just emptied Davis' pockets, and then stripped him to his underwear. While I poured another drink Bonnelle went through this stuff, seam by seam. He did not seem too disappointed at his failure.

"You wouldn't have it," he said thoughtfully, looking at me, "so Pam has it. Ah, well." He moved away from the wall and toward the door. He smiled. "Thanks for the Scotch, Davis. Perhaps I can repay you some day. Maney, keep yourself and Pam out of this. I don't want my future sister-in-law hurt."

He grinned sardonically. The door clicked and he was gone. Man, I want to tell you this guy was something. Davis was picking up his clothes.

"He's very dangerous," he said quietly. "You'll have to watch Pam unless I can prevail on her father to ship her away."

"That would suit me," I muttered. "I know dynamite when I run into it."

"Well, to get back, Maney, why did you come to see me?"

"She—I mean Pamela—said something about trailing this Bonnelle. I wanted to know if you had any idea where he'd hide out. To keep her from going there I'd steer her the other way."

"I'll know where to find him," Davis said slowly, "but this is going to be something between him and me. You watch Pam. She won't find him." He smiled slightly. "She's swell but she isn't much of a detective."

"She's done all right so far," I said. I poured another drink and then I said good night and went out. The look on Davis' face made me feel queer. I suppose he hated to be bested by a crook, and besides I had seen he was nuts about Jane. Well, it was nearly three o'clock, so I went home. I called Laird but didn't get him until nearly a quarter to four.

"The brunette is Chalice Lane. She used to be an adagio dancer and then she took to the needle. Twice pinched for using narcotics, suspected of being

a peddler, and also of running in dope from Cuba. She's never been convicted though."

"Find anything else?"

"Nothing. What do you know?"

I told him how I had seen Bonnelle and lost him. He was all for going straight to Pamela and getting the playing card, but I asked him not to.

"You'll spoil my pitch," I said, "and the girl's in danger. She's just screwy enough to charge straight into this. I can get the card. I lifted one from the Major's tonight and I'll substitute it tomorrow."

That seemed to be that, so presently I rolled over and went to sleep. I needed it. The night had been tough enough without me batting in a league I didn't belong to, and playing a game blindfolded where others held the trumps. Nor was the next day productive of anything illuminating.

I hung around my room waiting for a telephone call from Pamela. This on the order of Pete, who said that my tailing was out unless she summoned me. She didn't call. Pete rang me up to say that there was no trace of Bonnelle, but that he was convinced the sardonic young man was guilty, and that he had put out a pick-up order on him for murder.

"What do the T-men say?" I asked.

"They're keeping hands off until the situation develops better."

So I hung around the room. Waiting. Seven P. M. Eight. And then ten. I was ready to yell with boredom.

And then Pamela called.

"Chick, come right away. I've got a line on Bonnelle. I know where he is."

BREATHLESS with excitement, she hung up on my questions. I was lying around in my shorts and I

jumped into the dress suit, slapped the top hat on. A gent for the night. A taxi dumped me behind her green Rolls twenty minutes later. Pamela, in a set of ermine and a chartreuse evening gown, was behind the wheel, the motor running.

The moment I slid in and slapped the door shut, the big car leaped away from the curb.

"Bonnelle telephoned," she whispered. "He telephoned for Jane. I took the message and imitated Jane's voice. He told her to come right away to his yacht. He's going to escape to sea with her and be married down south somewhere."

"She didn't get the message then?" I asked.

"No, she's been out all day."

A sudden sense of foreboding seized me. There is such a thing as an act being *too simple*. I got out the .45 that Pete had presented to me and shoved it into the top of my pants.

"Have you got that playing card?" I asked.

"Of course. Why?"

"Let me take it a minute. I've got a theory about those dots and dashes on the back."

She produced it. It was too dark to examine in here. I said, "What's the name of his boat?"

"The Viking."

Somehow, in some way, I had to get word to Laird about that boat. This girl was in deadly danger from I knew not what, and I couldn't play a lone hand. As she started to turn east into Daley Street, I told her to stop. "I've got to telephone."

"Why?" she flared, glaring at me.

"I want to talk to a man about a horse," I tried to kid.

"You're afraid," she blazed. "You were going to tip the police. Well, you

shan't. Not now. Jane shall be kept out of it. Nineteen," her voice died off softly. "Only nineteen, and she's got to have her chance. She mustn't do as I—" She broke off.

She hurled that mass of chromium and steel down the street so fast I thought we were going headlong into the East River. But a screeching of brakes swerved us into the turn and she pulled up at a dock where a mess of yachts and smaller boats were moored.

She knew that spot. Hardly had she stepped from the car when she gave a cry and said, "Bonnelle's *Viking* is gone."

"Just what I thought," I said. "You couldn't fool him with an imitation of Jane's voice. She came in the meantime, and he's lammed."

She didn't seem to hear. She ran along the slip and stopped before a steel yacht that looked like a miniature ocean liner, and not so miniature at that.

"Captain Larson!" she called, running up the gangplank. The sailor loafing there leaped to attention and touched his white cap. From somewhere in the cabins, a walrus-mustached squarehead came running out.

"The Viking, Larson," she panted. "Where is it? How long has it been gone?"

"Why, Miss Pamela, the *Viking*—there she goes now. Those riding lights pointing out to Quarantine."

Pamela leaned against the cabin side. Her face was pale, her eyes as large as stars.

"Get going, Larson," she said huskily. "Catch that yacht! Stop her if you have to run her down."

"But Miss Pamela, the *La Palisse*, the biggest ship afloat, is going down the harbor. A pursuit with her—"

"Get going, Larson," she reiterated.

"Jane's aboard that yacht—with a murderer."

He went away from there and a Jap servant helped me get Pamela into a place he called a *salon* but which was a swell floating living room, with fireplace and everything. She relaxed, her eyes closed, her mouth trembling. But presently her color came back and that jaw came out. She looked at me and actually smiled. But I don't think I looked funny, not with a .45 dangling from my hand.

"You're about the size of my uncle," she said. "In his cabin—Sato will get you a cap and some suitable clothes. Meet me on the bridge."

She went away from there with her tall, swinging stride. The cabin was fitted up like a room in the Ritz, and after Sato had rummaged, I came out with a yachting cap, a blue double-breasted coat with brass buttons and white pants and sneakers.

And there I was, Chick Maney, stool-pigeon, dressed for the occasion, riding a million dollar yacht into the black night. By now the sailors had cast off the ropes, and the yacht trembled and we slid out fast and headed after the green and red lights I saw far down the harbor past Staten Island.

I LEANED against what the skipper called the weathercloth, and watched, but we didn't gain. Or didn't seem to. Pamela cried out impatiently and ordered full speed ahead. Staten Island went by. We cut on our searchlight, for there was a mist low over the water.

And presently the ocean was a gray endless stretch of gossamer veils that yielded reluctantly as we carved into them.

Suddenly the captain started.

"Port your helm," he called, and

whistled into something and we began to lose way. I saw now that a motorboat without lights drifted in our path. I saw we were going to miss it, but I also saw that someone in the bow was waving a white cloth frantically.

"They're being carried out to sea, Miss Pamela," Larson said. "I'll have to pick them up."

My hand had fished for my gun, and fishing, came on the playing card. I suddenly realized I hadn't examined it to follow up my hunch.

I went into the chartroom, hearing Pamela say, "It sounds cruel, but someone will pick them up. Full speed ahead. Larson."

I didn't hear any more, but apparently she lost the argument because the yacht didn't tremble to the Diesel engines. I took out the card and gave the back a gander. I saw that my hunch was correct. This was a code. A dot and dash code, and I told myself that a dime would get fifty bucks that it was International Code.

The reason I knew was this: Years ago before I was a criminal I had wanted to be a wireless operator on an ocean liner. This probably tips off the time of my birth. I'll tell you that my ambition was aroused when Jack Binns became a hero by sending C.Q.D.'s from the *Republic*.

I even got so I could send twenty words a minute. So I knew International Code. And the way to test this was to try. Inside a fine yellow circle that made a design in the middle, began a series of dots and dashes like this: "— · — · — · — · — · — · —
—!"

I picked them out because they were slightly accented in tone as compared to the rest of the design.

In International Code, they translated, "*Arrivant*—"

French! But even so, I knew it must mean arrive or arriving. It made sense. I went on to the next one.

There was a sudden commotion on the deck. A sailor yelled and I heard the flop of his body. Feet raced along the deck. Pamela cried out, and Larson cursed in some foreign language.

I ran to the bridge to protect her, my gun out. But as I leveled it at a man holding Pamela, another figure came out from the shadow near the companionway and said, "Drop the gun, Maney."

It was Arnold Bonnelle's voice.

VI

THERE is nothing so unpleasant as a cold gun muzzle at the base of your neck. I said, "You're beginning to get in my hair, Bonnelle. I'm going to take you next time we meet." But I surrendered the gun when his powerful fingers closed over the barrel. He thrust me back and now I could pivot and see his face. His eyes were mockingly alight and I swear, actually, that he seemed glorying in this game of life and death.

"She hasn't got it, chief," said the man holding Pamela, and she shrugged him away to straighten her clothing.

"Then Maney has," chuckled Bonnelle. "Give, Maney."

The way he held the rod meant he could have anything just then. I gave.

"Thanks," he grinned. "Pam, darling, you're lovely, but you can never imitate Jane's voice. I just let you think you could fool me so you'd come and bring the playing card."

He studied the back in mischievous glee, his lips reading swiftly the transliteration he was making. He thrust the card in his pocket.

"Now, if I get Davis I'll be satisfied."

As if this were a cue, two men came bounding up the companionway ladder, drawn guns in their hands.

"Davis is not aboard, chief."

"Not aboard?" Bonnelle looked amazed. "But he must be. He—"

"He's not aboard, punk," I growled.

I wondered. Did the man's hatred of Davis go so far as to contemplate killing the man? Bonnelle frowned, and then suddenly his face cleared.

"Well, Davis can keep. Tie them up, Goff."

The man who had been holding Pamela began tying us up. Bonnelle watched, hugely enjoying himself.

"I'll drop your anchor here," he said, "and I'll have to leave you all tied and rather uncomfortable. But you see, I have to put Jane aboard so she won't get hurt. But I'll be back to pick her up later."

I said nothing to him, but to myself I swore if he came back I'd nail him if it was the last act of my life. I tried to get a little slack when the man Goff tied me, but it was no dice. He knew ropes and knots and ties. I was wound up like a mummy.

"Pamela," said Bonnelle.

She merely stared.

"Will you come to my wedding tomorrow?" Bonnelle grinned.

"If I do it will be to shoot you in front of them all," she rejoined.

He stared for a space, then said softly, "Damned if I don't think you would, too."

Then he glanced at a strap watch. "All right, men. Let's go. We haven't a minute to spare."

They rumbled down to the deck, and a second or so later I heard the rattle of the anchor chain in the hawse pipe, and then, as the yacht swung, came the burbling roar of a speedboat motor. The motorboat, the same, I now saw,

an uneasy sense that she was going to kill Bonnelle if she got a chance. I moved up back of the wind screen. I don't suppose the motorboat was making more than thirty or thirty-five miles an hour, but on water this is, to me at least, terrific speed. We seemed to fly.

Davis said, "I'm going to kill him if he resists."

"He's fast," I warned.

"I know him." He spoke contemptuously. "His real name is Konrad Weigel-Krieger. He's a German, and a dope smuggler. He just got out recently from doing time in Atlanta for running junk."

"I see," I said. I was silent after that, thinking probably harder than I had ever thought before, getting this thing in its true perspective. Idly I watched the flaring prow ride and pound the gigantic V of spray that we threw. And when, at last, I saw the black mass of the *Palisse* with her endless rows of gleaming portholes, I had all the answers. But I was going to let the play ride for a time.

The *Palisse* bore down upon us. Did you ever see a superliner of eighty thousand tons, charging down on you in the darkness? It looked like a skyscraper on her side, moving with express train speed. An Empire State building with the wanderlust, lights stretching back until you thought they would never end. She towered so high as she came closer that her bridge looked like the roof on a twenty-story building.

Davis apparently suddenly realized the danger from her sucking propeller blades, the terrific displacement of the water she was moving aside with her knife-like prow. He whirled the wheel to cut. A searchlight beat down from high up there, and a voice screamed, "*Gardezvous!*"

She went by in a howl of water, and I thought for a second, as we were broadsided on that bow wave, that we were going to trip our toe and roll end over end. But our prow came up and though we shook and shuddered, we stayed upright. Now the portholes slid by us as windows on a fast passenger train pass a flagstop.

But their light was a blessing. For coursing along, in the same direction as the *Palisse*, we saw a power boat. And almost as we saw it, some man on the *Palisse* took his life in his two hands and jumped. As he jumped, a flash-light signal came from the power boat, which started to curve to pick him up.

"We're in time," Davis muttered.

He recklessly whirled the wheel and we went helling down the froth of the *Palisse* to intercept.

VII

I DON'T think I've ever been closer to death than I was at that moment. I don't know how much water each revolution of those four terrific propeller-blades flung back, but the wake of the *Palisse* into which we were now caught boiled and ripped like no water I have ever seen before or since. We were shaken around, plunged nose under until we shipped water, as if we were a matchstick in a whirlpool. A dozen counter-currents fought the motor thrust and hurled us this way and that. But for the fact that this boat had a self-bailing cockpit, we would have been swamped. We stood knee-deep in water while the propeller, thrown out of the water, let the engine race until it seemed about to burst.

But somehow we weathered it. And weathering it we gained, because Bonnelle had stopped to pick up the poor devil who had made the jump. I could just make out his dark shadow against

the frothing water as he came over the side. The next instant we roared up. Davis' man in the bow hooked the Bonnelle boat's gunwale and we settled back, bow to bow. Davis leaped over the freeboard, and me after him. But almost as quick was Pamela.

Davis had a flashlight whose beam cut the night and imprisoned Bonnelle and his three men in the circle of its radiance. With them also was a man bundled to the ears in a life-jacket.

"Up with them, all of you," Davis rapped harshly.

There was death in his voice if I've ever heard it. They knew it, too, because Bonnelle laughed mirthlessly. "Davis at last!" he murmured. "Well, I must say I've been expecting you."

He put up his hands and so did his men. I heard a little sound to my left. I turned. Pamela, so help me, had found a gun some place, what kind I'll never know. But she was aiming pointblank at Bonnelle.

I hit her arm hard enough to break it. The gun barked weakly, and then flew out of her hand and she teetered against the gunwale and almost went over. The gun splashed into the sea; I pulled her back.

"It isn't cricket to kill a surrendering man," I said. "Anyway, kid, the show's ended. Or just about."

"Thanks, Maney," grinned Bonnelle. "The show is ended."

"In just a moment," said Davis calmly. "Where's the package the man took with him off the *Palisse*?"

Bonnelle laughed like an amused man.

"I've already opened it, Davis. I know what's in it, and I know Twisty here."

"You know too much," said Davis, and with no more warning than that, just lifted and lowered the gun to get the balance and aim of it.

I fired pointblank at his arm from two feet. The slug hit his forearm between the elbow and the wrist and smashed the bone. He fired the gun all right, but he didn't get the shot off straight. It thudded into the cabin.

For an instant there was no sound and you could even hear the blood dripping from his smashed arm to the deck.

Pamela whispered, "You've shot him! You've shot Lacey Davis."

"Yeah," I said dryly. "I wasn't trying to kiss him."

"But why? Why?" she cried fiercely.

"Because he was going to kill—or rather murder—Arnold Bonnelle. I shot him because Lacey Davis is the chief of the dope smugglers as Twisty over there will presently confess. I shot him because he was trying to cover up the murder of Chalice Lane. There may be other reasons but these ought to be enough."

"I don't understand," she whispered. "I—"

"You tell her, Bonnelle. Five will get you fifty that you're a Treasury guy under cover. If not, you're a rival dope-smuggler trying to cut in on Davis' pitch, and if you are, I'm going to start shooting at you."

"Save your powder, Maney," grinned Bonnelle. "You called the turn the first time, but how I'll never know. You—look out!"

Davis had knelt, as if collapsing. The gun had dropped from his bad hand, the hand I had hit, but he grabbed it with the other. Before I could lower my muzzle he cut loose. But he didn't hit Bonnelle, who had leaped aside. It was a lousy aim and he hit Twisty, the dope peddler I had been talking to in Dindy's.

Poor devil! He was hopped to the gills to make that jump with the dope, and he was hopped now. So when the

slug hit him in the chest, he just sank.

He said, "Well, I'll be a dirty—" and died.

While all this was happening Davis had turned the muzzle onto his own skull and squeezed. He had meant to kill Bonnelle and then himself. He didn't fail in the second respect.

WE went back to New York later that night on Pamela's yacht, the motorboats in tow, and then I found out that the package that Twisty had jumped with had enough heroin, when cut with sugar, to peddle for four hundred thousand dollars. I found out, too, the reason why Davis was frantic to meet that shipment. Inside was a playing card like the one I had taken off the dead girl. The code on it was from the French agent.

It said, Tell Lacey Davis that the last money did not come through. I send no more until five hundred thousand francs reach me.

That would hang a man in any court. Arnold Bonnelle (which was his real name, incidentally, and since he's leaving the undercover service I can tell it) told me the story back of the killing of Chalice Lane.

She had been Davis' mistress. Being also a dope addict, she knew all the tricks he was up to. And when he passed her up for Jane Lockwood she got sore and jealous. She had come to Bonnelle's hideout apartment after stealing the playing card from Davis. Intended to get him captured.

Davis learned of this (I found out later from Bonnelle) from Major Worthington, who was also in the dope circle with Davis.

"He trailed me to the apartment when I went to keep the date," Bonnelle said. "But actually he got there first because I was held up in traffic.

He killed Chalice, and lay in wait for me, and biffed me down. Just inside the door."

He shrugged. "The bathroom door was closed. I didn't see the girl in there. So I went back and you know what followed except for my reasons in acting as I did. I had to have that card because I knew it was code. The murder of the Lane girl had to wait on that."

He paused, stared at me curiously. "How did you get onto the curves?"

"I've been expecting that," I told him, "and I've been trying to get the right answer. About all I can say is that Davis tipped me. In the first place, he referred to junk for dope, and you and I know that only those in the racket use that term."

I paused. Then: "He used the word while referring to you as Konrad Weigel-Grieger, just out of Atlanta for dope smuggling." I grinned. "I know that undercover guys often do a stretch in stir to set up a background. And this together with what Pamela had told me about you started me to thinking. And the more I thought the more I could see that everything that pointed to you could also by a little mental switching point to Davis. He kept trying to get that card instead of going to the police like an ordinary man. Oh," I broke off, "just say I had a hunch."

"Smart," he nodded. And then, "Who are you, anyway, Maney?"

I gave him a straight look. "Just a guy hanging around."

He stared again and his eyes were no longer sardonic nor his mouth cynical. "I see," he said quietly. "Shake." We shook hands.

There only remains one more thing to tell about this hurdy-gurdy I got into. That was the wind-up between

Pamela, Jane and Bonnelle. I was in on it because Pamela telephoned me to come to her office to pay me off. She gave me a grand, ten one-hundred dollar notes.

"You deserve it," she said quietly. "you saved me from doing a terrible thing."

"Why did you want to do it?"

She looked off. "When I was Jane's age—in Paris—I met a man. Handsome as Bonnelle. I fell in love with him. I married him. He was a born crook. He swindled my friends; he robbed me. I had the marriage annulled after suffering things I don't want anyone else to suffer. I thought I was saving Jane from—"

She stopped. The door had opened and Jane and Bonnelle came in. Me being a good observer, I spotted the plain platinum band on her marriage finger.

"Congrats," I said.

Bonnelle shook hands, but his face was serious. Jane's face was aglow. Just then she was much the more beautiful of the two. Radiantly she gave me her hand and even when she turned to face Pamela her face was bright and lovely and there was no hatred.

"Pam," she said, "Arnold had to pretend to be a rival dope-smuggler to do his job. He never even told me who he was. He even put five vernal tablets in

my coffee so he could get rid of me when the danger came. Since I didn't know, and things looked so suspicious, I can understand how you must have felt. Knowing about Raoul in France and what you suffered—oh, Pam!"

They flew into each other's arms and I got all choked up because it was hard seeing a girl as lovely as Pam cry that way. We, that is, Bonnelle and me, went over to a corner of the room so we wouldn't embarrass her.

Bonnelle said, "Pete Laird has tipped me about you. I'll keep your secret, and there are no others alive to tell. I'm glad to say that you're being cut in for a slice of the reward."

We went back to the girls. Pamela walked unhesitatingly to Arnold Bonnelle.

"I've been a fool," she said quietly, "and I'm dishing all this—for now, anyway. Could you forgive me?"

"We start from scratch," he said gently.

I slid out on that line, and nobody noticed me go. Nobody ever does. I was thinking a stool-pigeon has a lonely road, and I'd leave the silk hats and the yachts, and go back to the jungle trails in the underworld, traveling alone always, and sticking to my own league. But I knew I'd dream of a girl, gorgeous and gallant, more times than I wanted to.

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ADV.

Alibis, Ltd.

By Bert Collier

Author of "Last Request," etc.

*Sing a song of homicide, a pocket full of lies,
Four and twenty murderers, all with alibis*

WHEN his wrist watch reached 9:41, Smiling Bill McKarr, business manager of the Café Owners Benefit Society, slammed shut the coupé door and walked down the dark street to the drugstore at the intersection. From now on his movements would be timed to a schedule as exact as that of a crack express train. Murder, he told himself with a grim, confident smile, must be planned to a gnat's eyelash.

It was raining, the drops plopping softly into the piled snow, turning it to mush. It made the going tough but

eliminated casual traffic, which was a good thing for Smiling Bill and his immediate future.

Pulling his hat down and his collar up, he shoved through the door, gave the sleepy clerk a wave to indicate he was not a cash customer, and went into the telephone booth. His nickel made music in the slot, the dial spun out the number of the Club 99. Luck was with him. Sammie Hearn, manager of that velvet-hung gambling salon, answered in person.

"Listen tight, Sammie," McKarr said without preliminaries. "In case



Smiling Bill sat up and said, "You dumb cops think I did it?"

anybody ever wants to know where I am tonight, I came to the Club 99 at a quarter to ten, I go to a private room with you and some of the boys, I play a few friendly games of blackjack until 10:30 and then go home to get some sleep."

"Check," said Sammie. "I'll rehearse the boys. What's up, Mac?"

"You shouldn't be asking," McKarr told him. "It makes it easier."

"Okay," Sammie said. "You know I'd do anything for you, Mac." His voice took on an overtone of admiration. "You sure know how to place a man where he ain't. You're smart."

Smiling Bill said, "You're telling me," and hung up, cutting short Sammie's cackling laugh. He went out of the telephone booth toward the door, the clerk eyeing him like a pushcart vendor seeing a customer escape.

"Tough night," McKarr said to appease the man, taking care to keep his face in the shadow of his hat brim.

"Yeah," the clerk said. "Tough night."

Smiling Bill gave him a wave and went out, walking away from his car. Things were clicking according to schedule. He could depend on Sammie Hearn building up an alibi. Sammie was a queer little duck, but Sammie would do anything for him—anything he wanted done. Even before the business in hand was attended to, Smiling Bill knew he had a full evening accounted for, an alibi covering the period from 9:45 to 10:30. That, he figured, would give him plenty of time to spare either way. It was a perfect setup for murder.

The section was one of cheap rooming houses and furnished flats, flimsy, crowded, where a man who wanted to avoid notice would be about as conspicuous as one more ant in an ant hill.

Before one building that stretched upward five stories Smiling Bill paused briefly, sending a look along the deserted street. Light from the doorway outlined him for an instant, a tall, well-fed, well-tailored figure as he removed his hat, flipped off the beaded moisture and replaced it firmly.

Smiling Bill knew the way perfectly. More than once he had called here on business. But never business as grim as this.

He walked to the second floor, tapped lightly at the door under the symbols 2-B. There was the sound of a scraping chair, a soft footstep, a cautious, rumbling voice that muttered, "Yeah? Who's there?"

"Open up!"

"Oh, it's you, Mac," the voice exclaimed. "Just a second."

A BOLT slid back, a chain rattled. The door came open, revealing a small, puffy man with shifty eyes, a nose that once had been broken and improperly set and fat hands covered with reddish hair. His face was the color of on unripe lemon. He made vague, excited gestures, backing away.

Smiling Bill kept his hands deep in his raincoat pocket and pushed the door shut with his hips.

He said, "You know what I've come for, Beaker."

"No, I don't, Mac," Beaker said, but his voice was a frightened bleat, lacking conviction.

"Stay out in the middle of the room and keep your hands in sight," Smiling Bill ordered. "I came after that five hundred you picked up last week from Vittor Monsky at the Russian Grill."

"That lug," Beaker said in the same choked voice, trying frantically to keep it from shaking. "He didn't pay up, Boss. He's stubborn. He needs a little

persuasion, a visit from the wrecking squad, maybe a—"

"Shut up," Smiling Bill said. "Monsky told me you got the dough."

Beaker cried in a desperate show of injured innocence: "That lying Cossack told you that?"

"Come across!"

Beaker began to whine. "I haven't got it, Boss. I swear Monsky put me off."

McKarr's voice was like a file. "When guys collect for me I don't ask no surety bond, Beaker. I look after those details myself. You got that money from Monsky. Hand it over."

While he talked his hands were doing things. He left unbuttoned his raincoat, his right slipped through the slit beside the pocket and gripped the automatic resting in the pocket of the coat underneath. The slicker came open, showing the black muzzle of the weapon. Beaker saw it, stared at it, talked to it.

"Don't shoot," he whimpered in a gasping, hopeless rush. "Don't shoot. I got the dough. Sure, I got it, like Monsky said. I dropped it on a race, Boss, a sure thing. I was stalling 'til I could pay it back, but I'll get it. I'll get it. I swear it before—"

The sound of the pistol forestalled his sacrilege. His nose suddenly was more crooked as the bullet struck him squarely, just below the eyes. He sagged to his knees, crumpled sideways. His lips worked, but no words came out.

Smiling Bill slipped the spring lock back and walked swiftly down the hall, leaving the door open a crack. Nothing had changed since he passed that way before. He went down the steps and out into the rain.

In the glare of the first street light he looked at his wrist watch. It showed

10:04. He laughed with satisfaction. This was one of his smoothest jobs of enforcing discipline. Everything set—nothing to worry about. Beaker was just a punk whose death would cause scarcely a ripple.

There was one little detail to make the picture perfect. For the alibi to be good, he had to fix the time of the shooting beyond question. He splashed back into the drugstore, lighting a cigarette to hide his face.

"My gal stood me up," he told the clerk. "But there's plenty more fish in the sea. Watch me snag another."

The clerk laughed. Smiling Bill went into the telephone booth, dropped in a nickel and dialed the number of the pay telephone in the hall outside Beaker's flat. He heard the click, then the buzz that meant the bell was ringing. Buzz—silence. Buzz—silence. Smiling Bill grinned. That was one call Beaker wouldn't answer.

He set the receiver down on the shelf, preserving the connection. That phone would ring until hell froze—or an irate resident came to answer it, and to stare through the open door, upon which they were due for a shock. Anyway they would remember what time it was.

Smiling Bill jerked his hat down and walked out. He snapped his fingers at the clerk. "It was easy—just like that," he said.

"Hi ya, Clark Gable," the clerk said, laughing. "Has she got a friend? I close up in thirty minutes."

Smiling Bill said, "I'm a lone wolf, buddy."

RAYS of the wintry morning sun invaded the \$500-a-month apartment of Smiling Bill McKarr. He sat up in his \$850 bed, kicked back a \$165 comfort and stepped out, wrapping

himself in a silk dressing gown that set him back an even four hundred smackers. Things like that tickled the vanity of Bill McKarr, were visible symbols of his power and affluence. When a guy spends his boyhood in gang fights down on the riverfront, graduates from the reformatory to smash his way up through the rackets with his fists and his brains, organizes and controls the Café Owners Benefit Society which shakes down a cool million and a half every twelve months, and has a few lucrative side-lines such as ownership of the Club 99 and a cut in the take of other gambling joints, he was entitled to put on the dog, just like any other successful business man.

You had to be tough to get where he was. And you had to be more than tough to stay when you got there. Every cheap crook in the country wanted to chisel in. Mugs like Beaker. You had to be able to handle mugs like Beaker and know how to get away with it. You had to be able to put fear into guys so they would lie and slug and toss pineapples for you.

Smiling Bill dressed slowly, expectantly. By this time the cops had learned all about Beaker, and dumb as they were they would discover that Beaker was a pick-up man for the Benefit Society. They'd be around any minute now for his alibi, since everybody knew the Benefit Society was Smiling Bill.

At that he was almost dressed and ready to duck out before the buzzer sounded. Smiling Bill answered the door himself. His ideas of putting on the dog didn't include a butler.

His eyes went big when he saw the grim-eyed man at the door. "Captain Allison," he grunted surprise. "The head man in person. How's everything at headquarters?"

Captain Allison of the Detective Bureau pushed his way into the room, taking in its garish furnishings at a glance.

"Never mind that," he snapped. "What's the alibi this time, McKarr?"

"Alibi?" McKarr queried blandly. "Do I need one?"

"What do you think?" Allison growled.

"I don't know what you mean," Smiling Bill said, "but if you want to know where I was last night—"

Allison said disgustedly, "Quit stalling, Mac."

McKarr's speech came pat: "I hung around the office until late, got some dinner at the Russian Grill and went to the Club 99 for a few rounds of blackjack. Just a friendly game."

"What time?"

I got there about 9:45 and stayed until 10:30. I was tired—"

"I suppose you got that all backed up," Allison said.

"Sure. Sammie Hearn—"

Allison made a face like he had a bad taste in his mouth. "Sammie Hearn," he repeated. "Why do you use him for your Charlie McCarthy, Bill? Wait a minute—I know the answer myself. It's because you can make him talk like any other dummy. That alibi is a fake from start to finish, and you know it."

"Try and tear it to pieces," Smiling Bill challenged.

"Maybe I will," Allison said. "Get you hat."

"My hat? Are we going places?"

"To headquarters. There's a few questions I want to ask you in the privacy of my office."

"About what?"

"Quit stalling," Allison said again. "About that murder."

"What murder?"

The detective captain rapped impatiently, "You know as well as I do. The murder of Jackson Coyle."

MCKARR had been all set to act surprised when Allison told him that Beaker Smaw was dead. But there was no acting to the surprise that twisted his features into a mask of wary watchfulness upon hearing Allison's statement. He had to jerk up short, to consider where he stood, to stall until he got more information.

Allison had given him a body blow, and he realized instantly the dangerous implications of the situation. When a guy works out an alibi for one murder and another crashes about his ears, there is always the possibility of trouble. He sank into the soft depths of an overstuffed chair and when he spoke his voice had a breathless quality, as if he had stopped a fist with his stomach.

"Jackson Coyle—murdered?"

Allison studied him with speculative eyes. He said, "McKarr, either you are a damn good actor or you've had a damn bad shock. I think you're acting."

"Tell me about it," Smiling Bill said in the same hushed voice.

Allison stared at him some more, the grunted "humph!" and went back to the door. He picked up a copy of the Morning Courier and handed it over without comment. Black headlines leaped up and smacked Smiling Bill in the face:

**GAMBLING RACKET
CHIEFTAIN SLAIN**

Body of Jackson Coyle Found in
Auto near River Bridge

His eye skimmed over wordy sub-heads to the bold type of the story itself. He read:

"Jackson Coyle, rising power in the organized gambling racket and said by police to be the only rival to Smiling Bill McKarr in that lucrative sub-division of McKarr's shakedown empire, was shot to death at 10:10 last night—"

Smiling Bill stopped reading and began to grin. "—Shot to death at 10:10 last night," he said. There was a break for you. That alibi for the Beaker job would cover this one also. He was getting Coyle out of the way, without trouble or risk, with a good-enough alibi ready made, in case anybody got suspicious, as Allison obviously was.

Smiling Bill! No wonder he could smile when things broke for him like that. He sat up and said, "You dumb cops think I did it?"

"Why not?" Allison said somberly. "We know how you work, McKarr, how you keep your mob in order. When some poor mug crosses you he wakes up dead in an ash heap and you show up with an alibi."

"Coyle wasn't my man."

"That's what was worrying you. Coyle was chiseling in. He was organizing the gambling joints from under you. He was taking money out of your pockets. He was on your list, all right."

McKarr's thin laugh expressed contemptuous amusement. He was enjoying this. It was a unique situation for him. Those other times he had been compelled to stay watchful and alert, protecting himself and his alibi. This time, for once, Allison was barking up the wrong tree. He pretended to be angry. "You've got a lot of gall, trying to pin a thing like that on me."

Allison said, "Any time a shady character gets knocked off in this town I'll lay two to one you have a hand in it. In the long run I'll make money."

Smiling Bill regarded him tightly.

He decided on a bold stroke, one of those spectacular, unexpected moves that had marked his career upward from the street gangs.

He said swiftly, his voice tinged with a sneer: "I'll take you up on that, Allison—five grand to ten—or are dimes your limit? I'll take that bet and I'll win it without any help from you. I'll show you what a bunch of hams you and your correspondence-school dicks are."

"Go ahead—let's see you pull rabbits out of your hat." Allison could sneer, too, and his tone infuriated Smiling Bill.

"I'll show you who's tops in this town," McKarr shouted. "I'll turn my boys loose on this case and before night I'll have the guy that killed Jackson Coyle—with evidence to convict. Maybe that'll convince you I'm innocent."

Allison said calmly, "Nice stunt if you can do it."

McKarr's eyes blazed with anger. He strode across the room, almost running. He snatched the telephone from the cradle and twirled the number of the Café Owners Benefit Society. "I'll get Lumpy Branzi on it," he told Allison. "He's a better man than any you've got."

"Send him around," Allison laughed. "I'll give him a job—if his record's clear, which I doubt."

Smiling Bill took out his fury on Branzi. He snapped, "Here's orders, Lumpy, and I want action. Use as many of he boys as you need. I want the guy that rubbed out Jackson Coyle and I want him in the office by two o'clock. I don't care what it takes."

Lumpy's voice was a metallic blur to Allison.

"I don't give a damn," McKarr yelled. "If I don't get action I'll make it hot for somebody."

The blurred response was short. The connection went dead. McKarr put down the receiver and turned to face Allison. Yelling at Branzi had relieved his feeling, restored his confidence.

He said suavely, "Be at my office at two. I'll have your man. And in the meantime, if you still think I did it and might take it on the breeze, you can put a tail on me."

Allison told him, "I've already seen to that."

PROMPTLY at 2 P.M. Captain Allison, whistling "Alibi Baby," walked into the headquarters of the Café Owners Benefit Society. A couple of hard-faced mugs masquerading as clerks eyed him with apprehension. He gave them an airy wave and pushed open the door marked "Private." Smiling Bill was sitting behind the desk scowling at the wall.

He jerked around to face the detective. "Right on the dot," he grunted.

"As always," Allison said brightly. "And you?"

Smiling Bill's fingers drummed on the desk top. "Give me a little more time," he said in a flat voice. "The boys are having some trouble."

Allison sat down, took out a cigar, bit off the end and began to chew it. "You better produce on your bluff, Mac," he said. "Things are looking bad for you."

Smiling Bill snarled, "I'll produce all right. You can't kid me."

"I'm serious," Allison told him. "We've been checking, too. We learned Coyle telephoned the Club 99 just before ten o'clock last night and talked to somebody there. It was a pretty rough conversation, from Coyle's end—a lot of threatening and cussing. Now you were at the Club 99—"

"Me?"

"That's what you said, anyway."

"Oh, sure, sure!" McKarr caught himself hurriedly. "I was there all right."

He got a grip on himself. Allison had a way of getting under his skin, surprising him, catching him off his guard. Allison was trying to back him into a corner. He had to think.

This business was getting complicated. Suppose that fake alibi flew back in his face. Suppose Allison should drag him into the Coyle job on the strength of his own assertion, backed up by Sammie Hearn and the boys, that he had been at the Club 99. That would force him to smash his own alibi, if he could, to save embarrassment. And that, in turn, would leave him wide open on the Beaker rubout.

McKarr fidgeted as the slow minutes under Allison's steady, inscrutable regard. There was just one exit to the muddle. He had to make good on his bragging. Branzi and the boys had to produce Coyle's slayer.

McKarr fidgeted as the slow minutes ticked away. The thing that drove him frantic was that he couldn't do anything but wait. He didn't even know where to reach Branzi.

But Allison seemed perfectly content. He slumped back in his chair, rolled his cigar around with his tongue as if he enjoyed the taste. McKarr swore silently. The only thing left was to ride his luck.

The telephone bell was like a file across his raw nerves. He snatched the receiver to his ear.

"That you, Lumpy?" His voice was anxious, then relief made it almost pathetic. He and Lumpy talked at once. McKarr kept saying, "Okay—okay—okay," his smile broadening with each, and in between Allison could hear the rasp of Branzi's voice. McKarr shot

out a final, "Great. Nope you did a good job. Now get over here quick!" He slid the receiver back and grinned at Allison.

"Well, I did your job for you," he declared. "The killer of Jackson Coyle is on his way over here. Branzi had to muss him up a bit, but he got the confession."

Allison said, "Good. Good." with real enthusiasm. "Who is it?"

"I didn't ask," McKarr said. "I don't give a hang who it is—you can have him."

"Well, thanks," Allison said. "You're quite a guy, Mac—you got a lot of say in this town. I don't mind telling you when Sammie Hearn told us you'd been at his gambling joint about the time we know Coyle talked ugly to somebody there, some of the boys at headquarters wanted to give you the works. I'm glad you missed that."

A CAR skidded to a stop outside, heavy feet stamped through the outer office. Allison pushed his chair around so he could see McKarr and the door at the same time. The door opened. Branzi and two other men came in, pushing a battered figure ahead of them.

The figure snarled, "What the hell, goes on, Mac?"

Smiling Bill jerked erect, fingers gripping the edges of his desk. The man had a bruise under one eye and his nose was damaged. He seemed to have a wad of gum in his cheek, a great swollen lump.

Seeing McKarr's astonished expression, Allison chuckled. "You ain't seeing things, Mac. It's really Sammie Hearn."

"You bet your sweet life I'm Sammie Hearn," the battered one spat out.

"I thought you were my friend, Mac."

Branzi cut in. "He did it all right, Boss. We had to knock it out of him but he came through. Here he is, delivered, like you said."

Hearn jerked away from Branzi, boiling. "What is this?" he howled. "A double-cross? I thought I was doing you a favor."

All the time McKarr had been standing glum and dazed, trying to get things straight. He muttered, "Doing me a favor?"

Hearn said bitterly, "Coyle was chiseling in. He had the gall to demand a percentage on the take at the Club 99. I knew you were itching to knock him off—"

"Shut up, you fool!" McKarr yelled.

"Don't get rough," Allison said in a quiet voice. "There's four dicks in the next room."

McKarr sat down. Allison went on sardonically: "You wanted Coyle out of the way. You'd've done it yourself, maybe, if you didn't have another job to keep you busy."

"What do you mean, another job?" McKarr stammered.

"Listen, Mac," Allison said, suddenly grim and business-like, "we had evidence from the first tying Hearn to the Jackson Coyle killing. Hearn was the one Coyle talked to at the Club 99. Hearn made a date with him. Hearn went out shortly before ten o'clock, carrying a gun. We knew all that. I let you think we were checking you on that job for just one reason. You said you were at the Club 99 from 9:45 to 10:30. I wanted you to tear down your own alibi. Who backed your statement that you were there? Sammie Hearn. But Sammie Hearn wasn't there himself after ten o'clock. He was out blasting Jackson Coyle. Your own gorillas slugged the admission out of him."

"But I *was* there," McKarr said with stubborn folly, not knowing anything else to say.

"I don't think so," Allison said. "There was a guy named Beaker Smaw shot to death in an East side flat last night. Beaker Smaw was a collector for your shakedown outfit. He was holding out on you. And the guy that killed him went to a lot of pains to fix the time of the killing close to ten o'clock. You went to a lot of trouble to frame yourself an alibi for that same time. What was that—just a coincidence?"

McKarr rasped, "You're crazy. You can't prove a thing."

Allison went right on talking. "A drug clerk in a store half a block from Smaw's flat says a man of your general description came in his place twice last night. He didn't see your face, but he says he can identify your voice. Now if we just had the gun Smaw was shot with, we'd have a case."

McKarr's eyes went shifty. The gun! What a cocksure fool he had been. That gun was in his desk drawer, almost at his fingertips. He seemed to shrink within himself as the steel jaws of evidence closed around him. He was having to take the rap on account of a louse like Beaker. With just half a grand involved. He, Smiling Bill McKarr, who had cleaned up millions. It hurt his vanity, after all those years of doing things in a big way.

Under cover of the desk top his finger inched toward the drawer. Might as well go out in a blaze, he told himself grimly.

The drawer was open, his fingers felt cold steel, his eyes became slits.

His face gave him away. Branzi yelled, "Hold it, Boss! It's suicide! The next room's full of dicks—"

Branzi was still yammering as Mc-

Karr jerked the pistol up and tried to level it at Allison. Allison bounced from the chair in a flying leap. He slid across the desk, scattering paperweights, ashtrays, telephone. His shoulder thudded against McKarr's chest.

McKarr and Allison crashed to the floor.

Men poured in from the outer office. A heavy boot kicked the pistol from McKarr's hand and kept on going, smashing against his jaw.

"Easy on that gun," Allison panted. "The ballistic boys will want it."

The detective captain scrambled to his feet. His men had taken charge, shoving Branzi out of the way, jerking McKarr upright, slipping handcuffs on McKarr and Hearn. Allison chuckled at the two dejected prisoners.

He said, "A double haul of killers. Pretty good for one day."

Hanging limply between two detectives, McKarr looked around for somebody to blame. His eye landed on

Hearn. "You clumsy fool," he snarled, "why did you pick last night of all nights for your shooting?"

"Why not?" Hearn said bitterly. "You had me fix a good alibi for you. I was swearing you was at the Club 99. That would make you swear I was there."

Allison took off his hat and rubbed his graying hair with an amazed expression on his face. He exclaimed, "You mean you two latched onto the same alibi?"

Hearn still had a pathetic pride in his boss. He said, "Mac is the best alibi fixer I know."

"Well, that beats me." Allison shook his head. "I've heard of two fellows marrying the same girl. That's bigamy. And I've heard of two guys planning the same murder. That's conspiracy. But I never before heard of two mugs using the same alibi. I guess you'd call that superfluity—or in plain American, one more than the traffic would bear."

Cipher Solvers' Secrets for Dec. 1937

(Continued from last week)

Nine—†Edna D. Brooks, Attleboro, Mass. Jay-En-Ess, Denver, Colo. Charles V. Lewis, San Francisco, Calif. H. McGeorge, Bala-Cynwyd, Pa. T. U. O., Woodcliff, N. J. Kenneth H. Riggs, Wollaston, Mass. Segro, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Eight—Richard K. Trepane, Bronx, N. Y. Russell R. Willard, Coopersville, Mich.

Seven—King Cedric, Oneida, N. Y. Iris Goldthorpe, New York, N. Y.

Six—Herbert E. Batho, Avalon, Calif. Stanley Bentz, Cleveland, Ohio. R. B. B., Brownwood, Tex. *T. F. B., Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. I. Givup, Rifle, Colo. †G. N. G., Key West, Fla. Gracias, Chicago, Ill. H. J. Haewecker, Brooklyn, N. Y. F. M. Hansen, Minneapolis, Minn. Gilmore Hill, New York, N. Y. *Kriptobens, Hope, N. Mex. Max Merker, New York, N. Y. Nappan, Sparrows Point, Md. CanNaRev, Stanhope, Quebec, Canada. †Elmer Richardson, Brooklyn, N. Y. Bob-on-the-Road, Dayton, Ohio. T. G. S., Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. †C. H. Spencer, Washington, D. C. Xanthias, Brooklyn, N. Y. W. X. Y., Los Angeles, Calif.

Five—Mu Altair, South Chicago, Ill. Leo

Crutchfield, Natchez, Miss. †Denarius, Detroit, Mich. Pip, Philadelphia, Pa. Tex II, Detroit, Mich. Wally, Roxbury, Mass. †Little Willy, Johnstown, Pa.

Four—Marion Gray, Brooklyn, N. Y. Mrs. H. A. H., Carlsbad, N. Mex. Joseph F. Older, New York, N. Y. Re, Clarksville, Tenn. Seegie See, Golden, Colo. †Mrs. B. C. Squires, Thomaston, Conn. †John T. Straiger, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Three—R. P. M., Terre Haute, Ind. †Will Will, White Plains, N. Y.

Two—C. S. Bruner, Hawesville, Ky. Isabella Grady, R. N., Fall River, Mass. Fred Hallack, Dallas, Tex. Carl H. Johnson, Jal, N. Mex. Wm. H. Smith, North Adams, Mass.

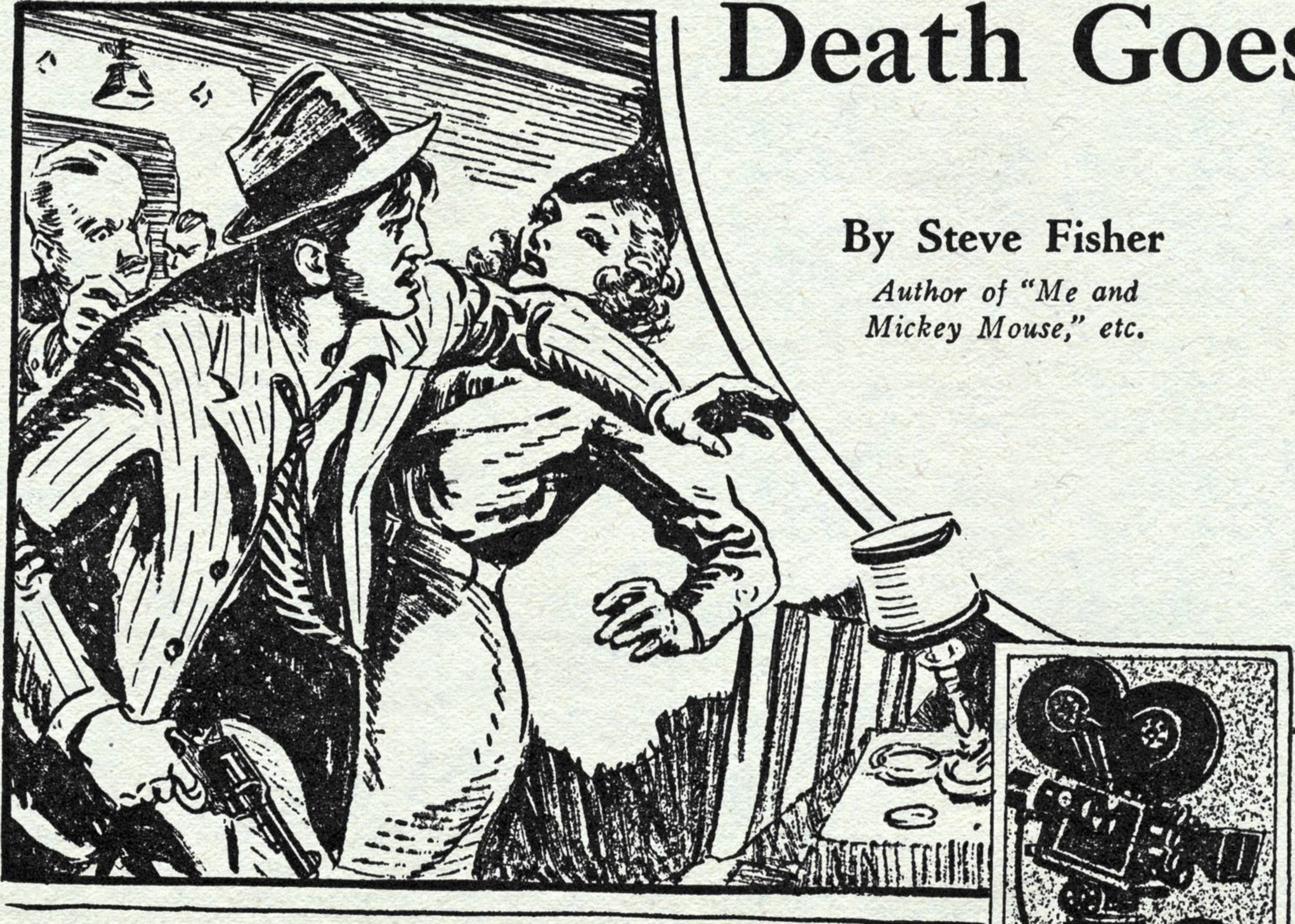
One—*W. F. P., Galesburg, Ill.

Corrections—†Satex, 5 answers for Nov., not previously credited. H. McGeorge, 4 answers for Nov., not previously credited. *R. L. Blaha, 30 answers for Oct. instead of 24. *W. R. W., 27 answers for Oct. instead of 21. †Vegee, 25 answers for Oct. instead of 20. Woduva, 24 answers for Sept. instead of 12, and 30 answers for Oct. instead of 18. H. M. Williams, 21 answers for Sept. instead of 22, and 26 answers for Oct. instead of 21.

Death Goes

By Steve Fisher

Author of "Me and Mickey Mouse," etc.



"Stay away from me. I'm settling a few grievances."

HE lifted his blood-shot eyes from the amber of the cocktail and looked at the clock. Four in the afternoon. Daylight still pressed against the shaded windows, and a radio, somewhere behind the glittering bar glasses, was broadcasting a record that would be interrupted in a moment by a shrill, excited voice recounting which horse had come in at Santa Anita, and which had made place, and which show. Except for this there was silence, the bartender wiping a glass and looking absently toward the door; the tables quiet and empty.

Marti's on Hollywood Boulevard at four in the afternoon, and he, Tom Thompson, was the only customer in the place. Tom Thompson, publicity man supreme, the jobless genius; the eight-hundred-dollar a week wonder of six months ago; the "Why don't you come and see me *next week*, Tom?" of

the moment, all of which means, "You're

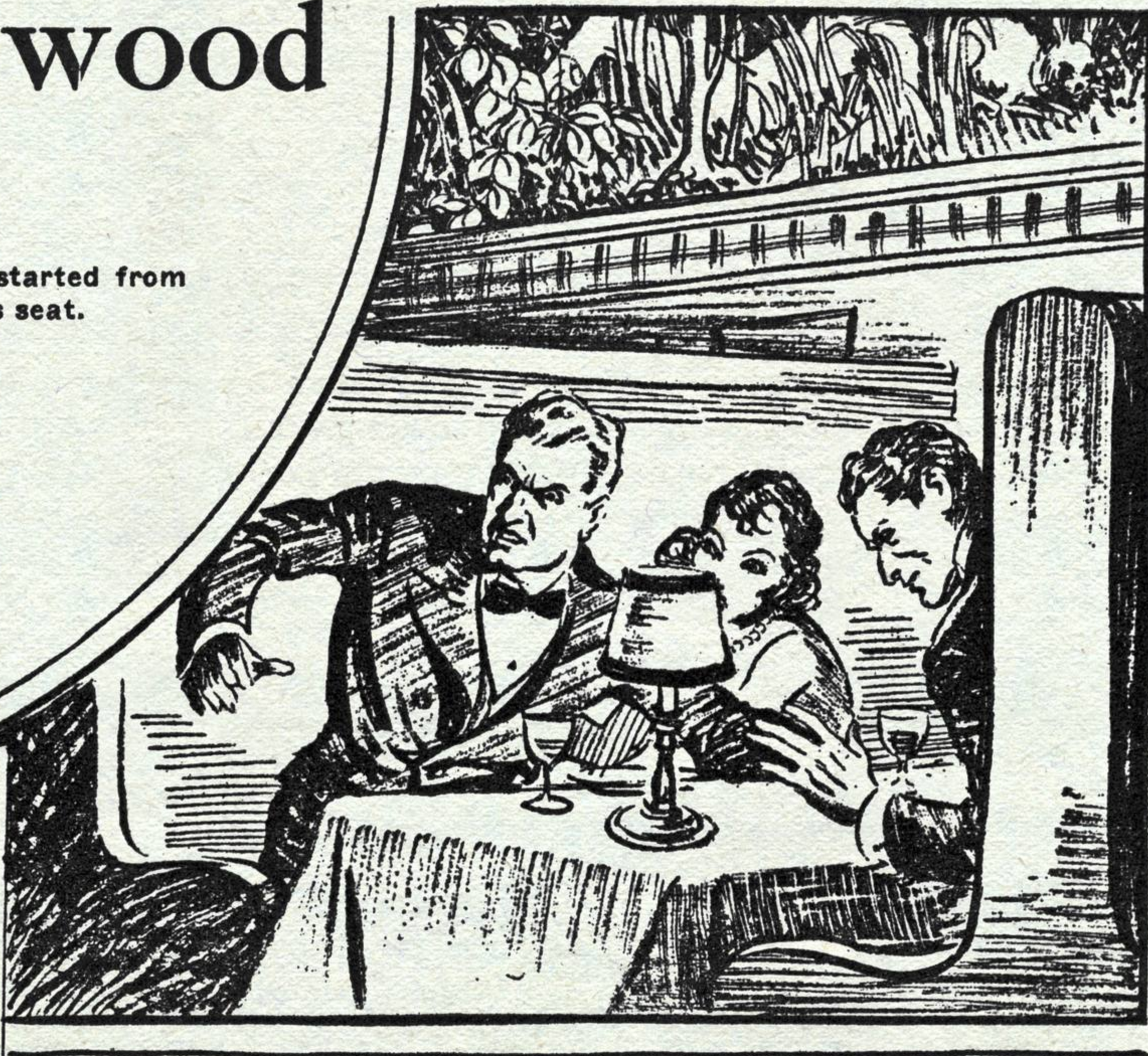
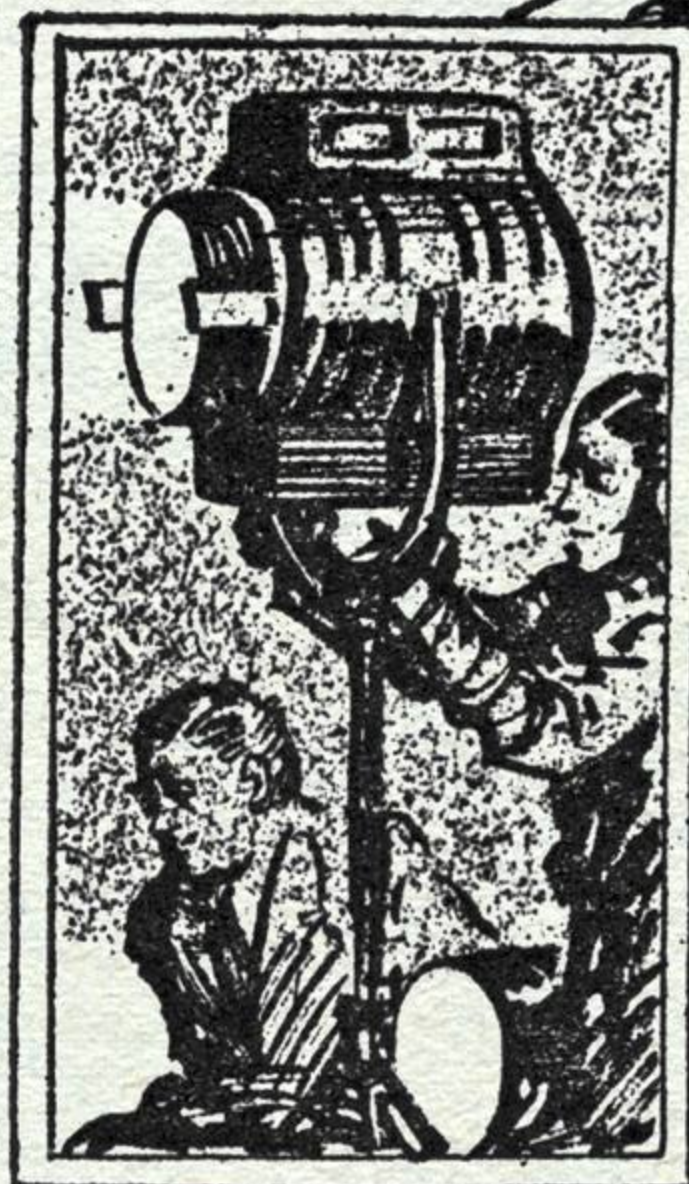
washed up, you dope, so why embarrass us by coming around?" Tom Thompson, too spoiled to leg it for a New York sheet, too big to take a sixty dollar a week post on a Los Angeles rag. The writing whiz for the movie mags and newspaper screen pages who had suddenly lost his knack and his fire.

He sat there, looking at the clock, then back at his cocktail, munching on honey yellow popcorn from a bowl in front of him.

The record on the radio suddenly went off. Tom Thompson looked up, waiting; he glanced at the bartender wondering if he knew, if *anybody* knew that all of his money, the last two thousand to his name was on a

Hollywood

Ransom started from his seat.



Three persons walked down Hollywood Boulevard that night—and each had murder in his heart

horse named Magpie. The voice was coming out, shrill and loud, false with an excitement it did not feel; "In the fifth race, three year olds, win: Barney Google; Place: Hamper; Show: Allez Oop. I'll repeat that. Barney Google wins at four to one. . . . Hamper . . ."

The cocktail glass broke in Tom Thompson's closing fist and the amber liquid dribbled across his fingers, mingling with blood. He looked at the bartender, his eyes burning, his face white, and said:

"Set them up again. A Magpie just flew away with two thousand dollars."

He said that, but his voice was hollow, and when his cocktail came he stared straight into it. He was conscious now that he must drink. He must

drink just one helluva lot. He must get drunk, and then for the first time in his life he must be a gentleman and take the old gun that was in his pocket, put it in his mouth and pull the trigger. There was nothing else now. There was no pretending, no hoping; nor was there any good in thinking he would go back to New York and start over. He wasn't a kid anymore. He was eighty at thirty-five. So he must get drunk. Sober he would never have the courage to kill himself.

He must get drunk.

HE was not accustomed to drinking. Not even during these six months while he had careened so endlessly through the blackness, hurtling

down the path that had taken so long to climb, had he drunk to excess, for there had been Margot, and with her, hope. There had been Margot and because he loved her he had remained sober.

So he drank, and the nostalgia of this place—of Marti's on Hollywood Boulevard—seeped into him like a slow poison; the figures, the ghosts of people who lived, but were not here, swirled around him so that he wanted to reach out to touch them, or speak to them. He saw white evening wraps, and mink; he saw top hats, and tux, and white ties and tails; he saw tweeds, and sports in checkers, and gray business suits. He heard stories, and films, and production, and who was going to be cast where, and who was going to direct what, shop talk and gossip. He saw and heard all these things though there was nothing but emptiness in Marti's, emptiness and the music from the radio, and now and again a plug for men's clothes.

Four . . . and four fifteen . . . and four thirty . . . time passing, his wrist aching from lifting it so many times. Sitting in the same stool, his back hardened to the position, his mind moving swiftly over everything.

Then suddenly, rising from his bitterness, his disgust, his hatred for the injustice of this town that had made him and broke him, there came the vague idea of creating publicity that would be real and genuine.

Publicity that *was* publicity. The biggest story to break in this town of stories.

His visionary mind, the mind that had invented publicity for stars, was seeing things again. It was seeing Tom Thompson shoot the men he hated! The biggest mogul first, Harold Ransom, the giant producer—after him

Dan Martin, the cameraman. And there were others who crowded around him in a fog of grayish hate.

It was a marvelous idea. It was a tremendous thing. Much better than putting a gun in your mouth and pulling the trigger. He must tell the bartender, though he must not tell too much.

He motioned blindly for the barkeep to come to him, then he said: "A gigantic enterprise is in progress. A colossal typhoon of emotion is to be loosed on the Boulevard tonight. Hollywood will be hell. The *fifth* horseman will ride; a horse of hatred, revenge; bitterness will triumph. Yesterday will laugh at tomorrow!"

He rose and said: "Well, Jack, cuff it," and walked out, knowing you didn't cuff things in Marti's if you were ever coming back. The shadow of five o'clock fell across his face, and the scented air, filled with sunshine, brushed across his cheeks as he hit the street.

He began walking. His face was set. His hand was on the gun in his pocket. Nothing would stop him now. He was going to commit murder.

"Publicity," he whispered, and his smile was grim.

Yet he took a moment even in this state to think of Margot. Her screen test was today, and of course she would be a sensation. She would wow them from coast to coast. Right now she would be watching the film on a projection room screen while, he, Tom Thompson, was on his way to murder. What a laugh.

II

MARGOT had thought of creeping out of the projection room and running away so that she would not have to face them, but she had been too

cold and weak to move from the chair, and she sat there in the bleak silence. When the screen was white and empty, just before they turned on the lights, she realized she had seen a dream run out.

She was finished. Or rather there was to be no beginning. She would be a file number in a room where ambition lay dead in dust, and across the round can that tombed her film would be the letters *N. G.*

It left her cold because there never had been any doubt that she would make good . . . that she would be a sensation, a refreshment, a new and vital screen personality. Everyone had believed that, or told her they did, and they had convinced her. The contract would be signed ten minutes after the test film was through. But there would be no contract now.

"You did very well for a beginner," said someone, and hearing this, she rose, and then they were all around her. Her friends. The crowd Dan Martin and Tom Thompson had gotten her into, and in which she had been like a warm flame. She was a girl everybody liked. She had no enemies. Men worshipped her, and women respected her. Her laughter was like the morning song of birds, and her beauty was in face, and lines, and the way she wore clothing. Her hair smothered her shoulders in gold, and her eyes were the blue of tropic coral. But none of that had come out in the films, except in two scenes with a star male lead and they had been all too short.

"He may sign you yet," she heard someone else say, but even as the words fluttered against her ear drums she saw Harold Ransom, the producer, striding from the room, his face pale, and the cigar in his mouth out.

She tried to look toward the light

side now, but there was no light side, because she had gambled everything in the world, and she had lost. Nothing but New York again, and a starched white uniform, and patients moaning in a dingy Brooklyn hospital.

She had known Dan Martin in childhood. She had seen him to the train when he had left for Hollywood, already an assistant newsreel cameraman and she grew from a little girl to a woman, lashed on by one ambition—to crash Hollywood gates. She knew you had to spend months going to the right places, and meeting the right people, and wearing the right clothes, and then maybe you got a trial. She had known that all this would cost money, and she saved like a miser. She scarcely knew a dress other than her uniform. And then, when the time came, and she had a lump of money, she wrote Dan Martin and asked if he would mind taking her around.

He did not answer her letter, and thinking he might be away on location, she left anyway. It was difficult to find Dan when she arrived, but she found him, and once he saw her, and appraised her, they made dates. They went to the Grove, and the Troc, and the Derby. Henri's on Hollywood Boulevard, and the Brass Rail, and Musso-Franks for steaks. He told her what clothes to buy and sometimes got her wardrobe from the studio.

She was started.

But Dan Martin made it plain that he didn't do favors because he was a Boy Scout, and gradually, as he became worse, to the point of being obnoxious, she put off seeing him only infrequently. She transferred her interest to Tom Thompson, and though she wasn't in love with him, it was the next thing to it. Dan Martin was furious. He was like Shylock cheated out

of his pound of flesh. He was insanelly jealous.

BUT it didn't matter now. She was outside, the projection room was behind her, and the sun was shining in her face. She stood, very still, feeling as though she was holding her broken heart in both of her hands.

She walked along, numb, with neither thought nor emotion left, staring bleakly ahead.

She could not somehow make herself leave the studio. She kept walking, around, and around, past empty sound stages, through an acre of "No Man's Land," through a Shanghai set that was gray with cobwebs.

And then suddenly she knew the truth. Why she had failed, why the scenes she had done with a star were good and the others were bad. "A star goes first to her cameraman—they're the boys to whom you must cater. Their genius can make you beautiful or dull." It was clear what Dan Martin had done.

He had wrecked her, though he didn't dare shade the lense in those two scenes with the star because the star was, after all, a proven picture personality. Everyone knew how he photographed. They didn't know about Margot, and Dan Martin had seen to the rest.

She turned and started toward Harold Ransom's office, her high heels clicking. She knocked, and then she forced her way in. He sat behind the desk, half smiling, intolerant. She made her speech, not letting him break in when he wanted. Then she stopped and waited.

"My dear," he said, "so many of you feel the same way. There are so many alibis when a girl fails to make the grade. Mr. Martin is . . ."

She went to others; she was half hysterical; she went from office to office, crushed and yet with hatred and fire in her.

"Really, my dear, we are very sorry, but . . ."

Then she was in the street, outside the gates, knowing that her whole life was swept away.

Walking, with darkness closing around her, she concentrated on Dan Martin. She kept thinking of him, his narrow face, his patronage, his clumsy love making.

It no longer mattered what happened to her. She was through, forever through because of him. All those years of slaving in Brooklyn to save her money, starving herself; all the years that might have been the future, these were washed away. He had wrecked everything for her, and also, for Tom Thompson; for she had planned that Tom would earn his bread by building her up. Dan Martin had finished that. He was cold and ruthless. He would treat another girl in the same manner someday. It was all a sordid business with him, a pleasure, an evil. But Margot had courage; she was not afraid of him. She had courage and anger had robbed her of conscience.

She must get a gun somewhere, and then she must go to see him.

III

AMONG his other failings, Daniel Jasper Martin was a coward. Murder to him, therefore, was cold reality, not an emotion born of hysteria; not a fragile weakness springing from sudden and insane hatred. Murder was necessary, though in the beginning it had been only one of the many doors to escape. So now, because he was a coward, it was a thing that must happen.

His chances of succeeding were extremely good for he went about the preparations coldly and deliberately, giving each future move a great deal of intelligent thought. There lay before him on the table a revolver he had just oiled and loaded and a silencer which, after some difficulty, he had managed to attach. The plan was already formulated and he had but to go through one rehearsal and he would be ready.

Dan Martin was a thin, dapper man. Because he was always well-dressed he gave the impression of being faintly handsome, but this was actually only the cut of his clothes with padded shoulders and pleated trousers. One of Hollywood's top cameramen, he made lots of money; but he had been raised in Brooklyn where his mother and father had died in the poverty of a tenement and no matter how much money he had, the lust to obtain more was irresistible. Money gave him a gloating sense of pride. He calculated at one point that he had enough to purchase the whole block of buildings in the Brooklyn district where he had been born. When he discovered he could never become a millionaire grinding a camera, he began to gamble. He was careful at first to use carefully worked out systems and he reaped a small fortune weekly from the wheels of chance.

But, inevitably, he began to lose. For two months he went nightly to his favorite club—the Tip Top, and each night he laid down a thousand dollars and came home empty-handed. One night, his accounts having dwindled to almost nothing, he cleaned them out and laid everything he had on the line. When he lost he made out an IOU. He went into the hole one hundred thousand dollars.

The Tip Top Club was very tolerant

for three long weeks. Even then they were, Dan Martin knew, most generous, for they had never in their existence laughed off a thing like a hundred thousand dollar debt. There were vague, dire rumors of what they did do, but as it turned out, he never heard them.

They came to him with a very simple plan of blackmail. The only hitch was that if anything went wrong he would be the fall guy and the Tip Top would in no way be linked in it. The scheme, they said, was worth two hundred thousand. A hundred grand would be his debt to them, the other hundred would be theirs. Dan Martin stood to gain nothing but his freedom from debt, and if it all came out well he would at least be alive. That was, of course, his foremost consideration.

The plan had to do with a scandal involving producer Harold Ransom. This was the history; Harold Ransom, executive producer at Colossal, got mixed up with a rising young star. Harold Ransom did the right thing. He took her to Mexico—secretly—and married her. They hushed the matter beautifully. Carol Brown had her baby in Mexico and returned to Hollywood to continue her rise which took her to near-stardom and good second-lead parts. Harold Ransom naturally gave her an allowance. She was a good girl, didn't want anything that didn't belong to her, and was glad enough to forget it. Her parents were raising the child.

This was all legal. Where the complication came in was when Harold Ransom fell in love with his present wife, a star, and insensibly, as a man will when he's in love, married her amid fanfare and trumpets in what was one of the biggest Beverly Hills turn outs. He got a quiet Mexican divorce from Carol Brown *afterward*.

How the members owning the Tip Top Club discovered all this Dan Martin never knew, except that they made such things their business. Their contention was that for the period of two months Harold Ransom had been a bigamist. Further, where a Mexican marriage is legal, a Mexican divorce isn't, so that technically he was *still* a bigamist. But even more; no one, particularly Mrs. Ransom, knew about Carol Brown's association with the producer, and no one was aware of the existence of the child. This, the Tip Top argued, constituted a scandal that might not stir the average man but would make a mogul like Ransom shake in his boots.

Dan Martin, inexperienced in such matters, saw it that way. He did not recognize that the experienced Tip Top men looked upon it as a weak skeleton in a poorly-guarded closet, and for that reason alone had turned the thing over to him.

SO Daniel Jasper Martin plunged in head first. It was all over so quickly he could scarcely believe it. Harold Ransom trapped him in his office with a hidden dictaphone, the oldest gag in the world. The record would convict him of blackmail for Ransom was in a position where he was not afraid of blackmail. Why, women stars had gone to glory in scandal. More important, Ransom was tired of his wife who was too much in love with him, and would welcome a break. He was going to reveal the whole story to the world.

"But what about Carol Brown?" Dan Martin had demanded desperately, "it'll ruin her, and you know it. It's the kind of thing that *will* ruin her!"

Harold Ransom lifted his gray eyebrows, ran a hand through his thick hair, and shrugged. Carol Brown was

with another studio. It would be her loss, not his. He was not a sentimental man, he said. Then he lifted his automatic from his drawer and put it on the desk.

"Get out, Martin," he said, "and if I were you I'd get as far from California as I could. I'm going to discuss this with my lawyers and the studio publicity department tomorrow, and then I'm going to break it wide open. And I know the cops are going to be after you from then on. You get about ten years for blackmail in this state, so if I were you . . ."

So that was it. What he would have to do was shut up Harold Ransom tonight—shut him up once and for all. If he didn't, and if Ransom had him arrested for blackmail, the Tip Top Club, afraid that the trial might implicate them, would kill him.

No matter how you looked at it murder was the answer, and he was sufficiently egotistical to believe that he could commit a murder the police would never be able to solve.

He knew where Harold Ransom was going to dine tonight, and he knew how he was going to accomplish his feat. Like all big things it was incredibly easy.

He stacked four large books, one against the other, along the wall now, on a table. He picked up the gun with the silencer and walked away, with his back to the books, his eyes looking into a mirror. He now slipped on a light coat, inspected the slight hole he had made in it under the arm pit, and then he straightened up and walked toward the mirror. As he walked he reached inside his coat—as though for his cigarettes—and looking straight into the mirror, he punched the nose of the gun through the hold under the arm of his coat. As he did this, he bent his left

shoulder so there would be slack. Then he fired.

The bullet tore into the book. He was a crack shot. Now, carrying on the rehearsal, he quickly dropped the gun into a lining of the coat, slipped off the coat in almost the same motion, and stepped into another room. In the café where Harold Ransom ate this would be the kitchen, and he would drop the coat into one of the large garbage cans that always stood near the door. Over this he would drop a newspaper. Later the can would be filled to the top with garbage and the coat would be dumped into a truck, probably buried in the debris, and taken somewhere. Even if it were afterward discovered there was nothing to identify him with either the gun or the coat.

He looked around, then glanced at his wrist watch. He knew that he must hurry. He picked up the three books that had represented Harold Ransom and put them in the chute to the incinerator which, at this time of night, was blazing. There wasn't going to be anything around to tie him to the case; there wouldn't be a single fake move. He would even leave word with the switchboard operator that he was going to the Rendezvous for supper because he usually left word where he could be located.

He put the light coat back on, and left the apartment. Going down in the elevator, his face very white, he shifted the direction of his thoughts for just an instant, remembering how clever he had been at the camera this afternoon during the test shots.

It gave him pleasure to think of Margot now, as an upstart from Brooklyn, who had tried to high hat him. She had been so sure of herself, he wondered how it would feel to her to be a failure?

The stunt he had pulled on Margot

was something that ordinarily would have given him gloating amusement for days, an inane, morbid sense of revenge; but now, tonight, it stayed only a fleeting moment in his mind for he was on his way to commit his first murder.

IV

THE girl at the switchboard said: "Mr. Dan Martin has gone to the Rendezvous Restaurant for supper. He just left this minute." Margot whispered "Thanks" and hung up. She knew, somehow, that she must get to the café before Dan Martin, and the only way was by cab. There was one parked at the curb, she got inside. "Rendezvous Restaurant," she said. . . .

The Rendezvous was one of the newer popular places. It hadn't made the fan magazines yet but it would. Everything in Hollywood did eventually. It was crowded tonight.

Margot had walked in half the length of the mirrored bar when she saw Dan Martin. He was staring at a table. Following his glance she saw the booth was occupied by Harold Ransom, his wife and his personal secretary, a dark, somber young man. Suddenly Martin turned, hunching his shoulders a little so that his coat was more slack. He moved toward the jeweled bar, looking into the mirror.

But at this moment, from the crowd waiting for tables, Tom Thompson emerged. Margot looked at him and she was sick. He was drunk. He was terribly drunk. He grasped Dan Martin by the shoulder and spun him about. His aggressive move attracted attention and people turned.

"Here you are, Martin," said Thompson. He slurred his words, rocking back on the heels of his shoes. "Here you are, you dirty rat."

"You'd better get out of here," said Martin.

Tom Thompson laughed. "Look who's talking. The chinless wonder. The dirtiest camera grinder in town!"

He swayed back, groped into his pocket, and brought out a gun.

Margot leaped toward it and two other men made this same move, but Thompson backed, his eyes half lidded, and said: "Stay away from me. I'm settling a few grievances. You, Harold Ransom, and you Martin—both of you two dirty heels!"

Before anyone had the courage to stop him there were two loud reports. The gun in Tom Thompson's hand was smoking. He relaxed his wrist. The gun dropped. Half a dozen men leaped on him.

Margot turned her stare from him to Harold Ransom and Dan Martin. For a moment nothing happened, and then Ransom slumped over the table. At the same time Dan Martin began clawing at a red hole in his chest. He sank to his knees, and then silently crumpled on the floor.

The place was a bedlam. Women screamed. Men scrambled about. People rushed for the doors. Tables were overturned. But the riot quieted as quickly as it had begun. Heavy silence hung over the room. Margot did not move. She was paralyzed.

She was conscious of an awakening from the numbness that had been in her, of voices: "Harold Ransom's dead!" Somehow through all this she kept hearing the radio, Guy Lombardo and his orchestra playing *I want to be in Winchell's Column*. Another voice: "Dan Martin's dead too . . . Call the police . . . Hold Thompson. Don't let him loose." Then: "Thompson's passed out. He's colder than a plank and as stiff." She kept standing. "Will some-

body hurry up and get the police?" And Lola Ransom screaming: "*Get me out of here, get me out of here!*" Another voice saying: "Don't touch the bodies. Don't touch anything." All of these things she heard, in a rising crescendo, voices coming faster, blending, roaring, beating against her ear drums, and at the same time Guy Lombardo's orchestra playing a love song *I want to be in Winchell's Column*.

Margot's mind was spinning, spinning, and fading into a well of darkness. She fainted.

SHE opened her eyes and looked around. She was in a room that was all green; green walls, green floor, green ceiling; and she was lying on something hard. In a moment she saw the matron standing by the window in which there were bars. Margot lifted the cloth from her head, but when she tried to sit up she found that she could not.

The matron turned, said: "Oh, you're awake."

Quietly, she left the room. Margot propped herself to her elbows and looked around, but there was nothing to see. Presently, a young man came into the room. With all her energy now she pushed herself up and put her feet on the floor. The young man stood at the door. He looked hard, with brittle blue eyes, and a hard jaw. He wore a felt hat, which was pushed back on his head. His manner was arrogant, and yet there was something about him that immediately attracted Margot. It was a quick emotion which made her both ashamed and curious. The young man stood at the door, put the sole of his foot back up against it, and calmly lit a cigarette.

"This is our green room," he said softly.

"I would never have guessed," she said.

He shook out the match and dropped it.

"Are you feeling better?"

"Yes," she said.

The cigarette dangled in his mouth. "This afternoon, Miss Troy, you made all kinds of a scene in Mr. Harold Ransom's office about a test film that you were not satisfied with. You made similar scenes in other offices. You spoke rather freely about Daniel Martin."

She rose, but feeling a dizzy sensation in her head, sat back down.

"I don't know where you learned this, and I don't know why—"

He held up his hand, moved away from the door and opened it. He jerked his head. Harold Ransom's secretary came in. The large, dark complexioned youth already had hollow rings of worry under his eyes, and his face was ashen.

"Is this the girl you described, Shaye?"

Shaye nodded, then: "I'm awfully sorry, Margot. Really I am. What happened is—" he seemed to choke. "You *didn't* do it, did you? I've tried to tell them you didn't, but you've been out for hours, and they've been around to the studio talking to all kinds of people. You must have been under a tremendous emotional pitch to faint for such a long period of time but—"

Margot said: "You mean they actually think I killed Mr. Martin and Mr. Ransom?"

Shaye ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know what they really think. Obviously enough Tom Thompson did the shooting, and he was drunk. They can't get around that. At best it's second degree. But they're trying to cook up some kind of theory that someone

prompted him, that he had a confederate."

She laughed. "That's nonsense."

"I know it is," said Shaye, "but—"

"All right," the hard-faced young man interrupted, "you've said your piece, Shaye." He opened the door. Shaye looked at him for a moment, and then moved out, calling back: "If I can help you in anyway, Margot . . ."

He was a nice enough kid, she thought. She had met him at some of the Hollywood parties and it was he who helped convince his boss that she should have a tryout. But he was gone now and the young detective was standing with the sole of his shoe braced back against the door, the cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

"You and Tom Thompson," he said, "were both sort of sour on life, weren't you?"

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

He ignored her, said: "What'd you want to make him do it for?"

"Let me out of here."

He smiled thinly.

"I don't know who you think you are," she said. "Standing there with your hat on and that cigarette sticking in your mouth. Who are you— Philo Vance? What am I supposed to do—break down and confess something I had nothing to do with? I tell you I want to get out of here!"

For a moment he said nothing and she felt the blood rushing to her face. He took the cigarette out of his mouth, dropped it, and rubbed his toe over it. He looked at her, then, and his eyes seemed to soften. "You're beautiful, sister, but you can't get away with it. Not in this man's town." He paused. "We're holding you on suspicion of murder." She did not answer and he kept looking at her, and then as though

he saw how *really* beautiful she was he seemed to become embarrassed and she knew she had broken down his front and was seeing the man that was behind it. The way he looked at her now made her skin tingle, and then he dropped his eyes, half turning.

"I guess we might as well proceed," he said softly, "I'm taking you in to see Tom Thompson."

V

THEY had done everything but drown Tom Thompson to sober him up, and everything but kill him to loosen his tongue. When Margot came in he was slumped in a chair with a three-hundred-watt police lamp burning down on his face, and detectives standing all around him. Cigarette butts littered the floor. Thompson's face was a bloated pulp, both of his eyes were swollen and black. They slapped him to bring him around so he could see her and then he could not penetrate the glaring light so at last they had to turn it off. She stood back in horror, and then moved toward him.

"They're a rotten bunch, these cops," said Tom Thompson, "I signed a dozen confessions, and still they won't leave me alone, Margot. They want you in on it. A rising young star like you in on a thing like that. These punks just haven't good sense."

"Of course they haven't," Margot replied.

He waved his hand out aimlessly. "I'm in a lousy mess, kid. But listen. Don't you waste any sympathy on me. Because I don't care. I really don't care a bit. I wanted to go out writing one last big publicity story in blood and that's what I'm doing."

"Only most of the publicity on this has been squashed," snapped one of the detectives.

"Shut up!" Tom Thompson snapped in return. "I've heard enough out of you and all the rest like you, so shut up for a minute while a lady is in the room. You can do that, can't you? You poor little saps, wanting a big murder instead of just something pulled out of a hat by a drunk. That must be disappointing to you coppers. The biggest thing in the way of murder in Hollywood and a lousy drunk had to do it so all you can do is crate him away to a jail and the Hays office even squashes your glory on that."

Margot kept staring at him. Tom Thompson was not quite sober yet, and he went on raving. As the police let him talk, hoping in his delirium he would unwittingly involve her, she began reconstructing the whole murder scene in her mind, this time carefully remembering *everything* that had taken place, *all* that she had seen.

"Don't let them bluff you, honey," he went on, "the poor fools haven't got anything but a lot of theories. For clues all they have is the broken top of a fountain pen some poor guy dropped in his excitement. And listen—they found a gun with a silencer on Dan Martin's body. It was in his coat, and there was a hole under the arm as though he was going to shoot it from there. They've been chasing around trying to find out how come, but they can't find out anything . . . and they claim I was so close to Harold Ransom—Old Skinflint Ransom—that there were powder burns on his suit. Was I *that* close, honey?"

He suddenly dropped his head in his arms and sobbed.

"I'm the one, Margot. *I'm* the killer. I'm not fit to live. I don't want to live. I hope they hang me for it. I hope they hang me for it. I hope they'll hang me so high that it'll jerk out every muscle in my body."

The young detective tapped her on the shoulder and motioned with his head that she should go out. She hesitated for a moment but at last she went. The detective came with her, leading her back to the green room.

"Listen," he said, "I don't mean to be unfriendly."

"I can see that," she said.

"I mean it."

"Yes."

HE said nothing more until they were in the green room. She went and stood at the window. He took off his hat this time, sitting down on the cot. "I suppose you don't mean to be unfriendly to Tom Thompson, either," she said.

"He's a killer. You're not—I hope."

She still did not face him. "You thought I was a moment ago."

"It was a wild hunch—a suspicion," he said. "We have to check every angle an' bear down on every angle. It's part of our job. We can't help it if we hurt people's feelings."

"You mean I can go then?" said Margot.

"Not yet. I'll have to wait for the word. I just wanted to tell you how I felt. I want you to know that Joe Ryan is your friend."

"Your name is Joe Ryan?"

"Yes," he said.

"And you're a—a big stalwart detective, a gallant who keeps our laws?"

"Rib if you want. I'm trying to be decent. But I can play the other way, too."

"Please play the other way then!" she said. "I think your whole system is rotten. I think like Tom Thompson does. I don't want your friendship. You're only making a fool out of yourself."

"The system may be rotten, sister,"

he said, and he was hard again, "but two men who were living and breathing are laying on a slab in the morgue, and there's no way you can get around that."

She turned suddenly. "Was what Tom said true? About the clues of the fountain pen top . . . and the rest? About Dan Martin having a gun on him?"

She thanked her lucky stars while she asked this that she hadn't had a gun, that she hadn't gone that far in her hysterical desire for murder.

"Yes, all Thompson said was true," Joe Ryan replied.

Margot looked at him steadily. "Then I'm going to tell you something. *Tom Thompson did not kill Ransom and Martin!*"

He looked incredulous.

"He was too drunk to shoot straight. Don't you see? He—"

Joe Ryan suddenly began to laugh. He held his side, laughing. Margot opened and closed her mouth, and then, rage pumping up into her cheeks, she whipped her hand across his cheek. It was a stinging slap. He looked up, his hand on his cheek; and then he rose. He looked down at her, his lips thin and hard against his teeth.

"You poor, dumb little fool," he said. Then he turned and walked out. The door slammed.

VI

IN that moment, out of the hysteria of the night through which she had gone, a new girl was born. All her life she had done nothing but dream of the movies and now she didn't even think of them. She was in the center of a murder case with the police and everyone believing Tom Thompson was guilty and she was going to prove that he wasn't.

She had no experience in this line and the thought occurred to her that this idea of solving a case might be confidence on top of ego. But Joe Ryan's mocking laughter had fostered it and at least she could try.

The green door opened and she looked up expectantly. But it was only a desk sergeant.

"Sorry to have detained you," he said.

So she was free. She got up and walked down the long hall.

As she arrived on the street a clock was chiming midnight. It was misty and starless and bleak; she walked along listening to her footsteps echo hollowly on the pavement. And then, at last, because she didn't have five dollars cab fare, she took a street car and transferred on Seventh, and got another car that would take her to Hollywood. . . .

She awakened at ten o'clock with California sunshine streaming in the window, and birds singing, and traffic humming on Sunset Boulevard, just a block from her apartment. She was angry that she had not waked earlier and when she got up she was in a bad mood. She put on a robe and made coffee. She was sitting in the breakfast nook drinking this when the doorbell rang.

It was Joe Ryan with his hat in his hand. His face had a little more color; it was browner than she had at first imagined.

"May I come in?" he said.

"Am I under arrest again?"

"No. I just want to talk to you."

"Come right in," she said, but her voice was mockery. "You'll find clues all over the place."

He didn't answer but accepted the invitation. She returned to the kitchen and sat down. He followed. He watched her a moment, as though he

were amused. He was leaning back against the gas stove.

"You're beautiful," he said.

She glared at him.

He swallowed, and went on: "The reason I came was to apologize for laughing like that last night."

She said coldly: "You don't have to apologize."

"But I do. I don't know why. I thought I must be going nuts when I started checking up on your story about Thompson not being guilty. But I found out something that'll interest you."

"Yes?"

"You were wrong," he went on.

"That's supposed to interest me?"

"Well, I just wanted you to know that I was sorry enough to check up for you. I went over to the Rendezvous. If Thompson's shots had missed, it's certain they would have hit *somewhere*. In the floor, or wall, a table or something. That was your theory, wasn't it? That he fired his gun, but that somebody else's shots did the killing?"

Quietly, the spirit gone from her, she said. "Yes."

"Furthermore," he went on, "I asked ballistics men about the slugs from Thompson's gun. They hadn't examined the bore because that takes time and money, but it isn't necessary. The shells were the same caliber. It boils down to this: Thompson fired a .38 at both Ransom and Martin. They died with .38 caliber bullets in them. There is no trace of any other bullet marks in the room.

"You didn't have to go to all that trouble for me," she said.

"I wanted to be fair." He looked at his fingernails.

"At that I wouldn't have done it for anyone else. Oh, yes, here's one other small detail. One bullet had been fired

from Dan Martin's gun. But we found the ashes of a book in his incinerator and the bullet was in those. His gun had a silencer on it so we figured he must have been practising in his apartment. Although if he'd had the idea he was going to get away with anything those ashes would have tripped him up. There isn't much we miss in this day and age."

"How wonderful," she said.

"Look, baby," he said, "I'm just trying to be nice. If you don't like it, say so."

Her face came up. "I'll say this: I'll still say that Tom Thompson's shots *didn't* kill those two men."

His expression went limp with disgust. "Listen, how can anyone so beautiful be so dumb? Didn't I check up for you? Wasn't I willing to give you a break the first time you said it?"

"You didn't have to bother."

"But I like you. I think you're swell."

He slid across the table from her and sat down. His face was flushed now. He was looking at her as he had once last night. "Yeah," he said, "I really do."

She laughed. "That's very flattering, Mr. Ryan, but I have to get dressed now, and . . ."

"How about supper?"

"I'm sorry."

He stared at her for a moment. "I see." His voice lost something. "Maybe some other evening then." He stood for a moment longer, suddenly awkward and out of place, and then he left.

She felt her heart fluttering, and hated herself in that moment for being a woman.

MARGOT went to the Rendezvous for lunch.

It was around one o'clock and the

place was jammed with a mob that was morbidly curious. But business was going on as usual and no one got in unless they were going to eat. She sat at a corner table.

She noticed a few picture people, among them Bob Shaye. He was with an older man, and a pale dark-haired young woman dressed in black. Margot stared in amazement. Surely that wasn't Lola Ransom! But there was no mistaking the beautiful, aristocratic features, the large, softly dark eyes of Harold Ransom's widow. A salad and a goblet of wine stood in front of her, but she had scarcely touched either one; she was listening with quiet dignity to the conversation of her companions, but her lovely face was set and strained. She looked as if she'd break into tears at any moment.

The identity of the older man puzzled Margot at first, then she recognized him as Robert Bronson, an ex-cowboy actor, once idol of a million kids. Hollywood gossip said he was in love with Lola—had been for years. Margot studied him more intently because she had a faint recollection of having seen him in the crowd here last night, and because she suddenly remembered something else: that in his heyday he had been known as "Two-Gun" Bronson.

"Two-Gun" was a big man, Broad-chested. His face was creased with lines that seemed actually noble; he had a full, generous mouth, and sad gray eyes. He looked just a little tired, yet whenever he turned to speak to Lola Ransom, his expression lighted.

She thought him an interesting contrast to Bob Shaye with his slick hair, and his boyish, though somehow weak, face. Bob Shaye had a personality that sparkled like champagne, but it was so rich and vital that it struck you as

false. It was the kind of personality studios bought at a dime a dozen, and yet he was likable.

At last the trio left, and Margot sat looking at the room, trying to concentrate on it. It seemed to her that there was something she had forgotten, and yet . . .

She rose to pay her check, putting her gloves for a moment on the window sill. When she picked up the gloves something stuck to her finger. She turned to the window and saw it was lined with fresh putty.

"Did somebody break a window?"

The waiter said: "There was some excitement her last night. It happened then. We had it replaced very early this morning."

She had not remembered a window breaking, but then she had been looking only at the two men, and everyone had been shouting, and she had fainted.

She gave the waiter a tip and left. Her blood was tingling. This was her first actual lead!

VII

ALTHOUGH she was in a hurry she didn't go very far, just to the narrow alleyway that separated the Rendezvous from the building next door, which was a haberdashery. The ground was littered with broken bottles and cigarette stubs and other trash; but she didn't pay attention. She was counting the windows in the Rendezvous. She calculated until she was sure that she was at the one where the new glass had been put in.

It was not a window that you were supposed to look out; it was intended for ventilation and decoration. The curtains consisted of long brown cords that were like tassels. You could brush back the tassels, if you were in the Rendezvous, and see the brick of the

building next door. But unless you were exceptionally curious it wouldn't occur to you to do this. There was no screen either on the inside or outside.

She looked upward, on a level with the window, and then a little higher. Turning, she examined the haberdasher's building. There was a white spot on the wall where the brick had been chipped. Her eyes followed downward from this, and then she stopped.

Margot brushed back a little pile of fallen brick debris, and suddenly, her fingers trembling, picked up two twisted bullet slugs.

She could scarcely breathe!

What had happened was obvious enough. Tom Thompson's shots had crashed through the window and hit this building. Someone else—an assassin with a silencer on his weapon—had fired the shots that had been the actual ones to take the lives of Harold Ransom and Dan Martin. Joe Ryan had come to the Rendezvous to search for the bullet holes *inside*; he had apparently known nothing of the broken window and it had not occurred to him to look outside as well as in.

Margot rose, cupping the slugs in her palm. She was thinking of Tom Thompson, sweating, and raving; she was hearing Joe Ryan's laughter. Solving a crime was then, after all, a matter of common sense.

But when she lifted her eyes her heart thumped wildly. "Two-Gun" Bronson was standing at the mouth of the alley, looking at her. She could not guess how long he had been standing in that position staring nor how much he had seen. She looked into his gray eyes and could not read the emotion that was in them. He was an actor and whatever his face might register would be a lie, either intended or subconscious. Except for the coloring. His

skin seemed to be grayish, like his hair. His eyes burned. She was filled with horror and wanted to shrink back from those eyes; and yet she felt a magnetic hypnotism in them that drew her forward.

In that moment the spell was broken, and he was smiling. "I'm sorry if I seem curious, my dear. It did look a bit queer to see one as beautiful as you in such an odd place."

She was disappointed in his cultured voice. She had expected the fictional cowboy drawl. But she suddenly realized he wasn't a cowboy actor any more; he was merely a polite and oldish man with a noble face.

"Yes—I—I suppose I did look funny," she said.

She was opening her purse and now she slipped in the slugs.

He still smiled. "You couldn't be a woman detective working on the Ransom-Martin case?"

"Well, I was looking around." She smiled nervously.

He studied her for a moment, not moving from the position in the mouth of the alleyway. "Haven't I seen you somewhere?"

"Possibly last night," she said, "I was the girl who fainted."

He snapped his fingers. "Yes. I remember now. Bob Shaye was talking about you just today. He said the police had brought you in for questioning."

His eyes grew bright again.

"You know, I'm quite interested in the case myself."

"Are you?"

"Yes—quite. It's my theory that there is something more behind it than appears at present."

"That's what I thought too," she said timidly.

He looked at his wrist watch. "My dear, I am Robert Bronson. I used to

be on the screen. I—I was wondering if perhaps we couldn't sit down over cocktails and discuss this thing. I mean, I hope you won't think I'm too brash . . ."

"Not at all," she said, "but—"

"Then you will come, won't you?" There was something in his voice that chilled and yet commanded her. She wanted to turn and run away. But she could not. She only nodded.

"Yes, I'll come."

THEY went to Marti's. It was deserted and they sat in a leather plush booth drinking Bacardis. "Two-Gun" Bronson was nervous and smoked almost incessantly. He seemed to be a combination of a glorious past and a rather shaky present. He kept saying: "And that reminds me of a situation in one of my pictures. Let's see, what was the title? . . ."

She was getting nowhere, and she was weary of listening. More than that she was becoming increasingly alarmed for fear that he was keeping her here trying to decide what she knew.

It was almost four o'clock when she had her chance to get out.

A beautiful girl came into Marti's. Margot recognized her at once as Carol Brown. She was small and wore a simple white dress that showed off her lovely figure.

She glanced around, then came toward the booth. "Two-Gun" Bronson rose.

"Ah, Carol," he said. He introduced Margot.

Carol Brown said: "Have you seen Bob? He was supposed to meet me here."

"I haven't seen him since lunch," said Bronson. "Why not join us?"

"Why I—I—"

"It's all right," said Margot, and she

got to her feet with her bag in her hand. "I have an appointment and I must rush away." She made her departure speeches and departed.

When she was on the street she looked into her purse to see if the bullet slugs were still there.

Then, exhausted, she took a cab to her apartment.

Unlocking the door, she pushed it open. She was just taking off her hat when she glanced toward the kitchen and saw him.

"Tom!"

Tom Thompson was ashen. His eyes stared from their sockets in almost vacant stupidity. His clothes were shapeless and hung on his long, thin frame. His hair was a tangled mess. His lips were cut and swollen and his eyes were puffed, black and blue. There was sweat on his cheeks.

"I had to come, Margot," he whispered.

"But how did you get here?"

"I escaped," he said softly.

She just stared at him, and he said: "Oh, don't. Don't do that." He flopped down on the divan. "Maybe I shouldn't have done it. Maybe I should have stayed there to take it. But they kept insisting that there were other angles. They kept at me. *At me! At me!* I thought I would go crazy, and maybe I have. Maybe coming here is crazy. I don't know what I'm doing any more. But I had to run to somebody. It's just your bad luck that I'm in love with you, that's all."

He rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand. "Have you got a drink, kid? I've got to have a drink."

She went into the kitchen and got down a bottle of whiskey. She poured a good stiff drink and brought it to him. He took it down, and motioned for the bottle. He poured in the rest

and took this down also. Then he fumbled with a cigarette.

"How did you do it?" she said.

"That's it. *I* didn't do it. You don't think I had that much sense, do you? But they were giving me a recess. No sleep, understand. I haven't slept for a hundred years. They threw me in with a couple of birds that were also in on murder and were pretty desperate. They had a simple escape plot—help from the outside. The old gag—cutting the bars away. Well, since I was there it didn't seem any more than right that they invite me along. That's hot, isn't it? Me and the rest of the murderers take it on the lam. I can't get used to this idea of being a murderer. But I guess that's the way they all feel, isn't it? Some guy kills somebody and he can't believe he did it. He gets down on his knees and prays and thinks God says: 'Okay pal, skip it. We'll take you in heaven anyhow.'"

"Tom. Tommy! You *didn't* kill Martin and Harold Ransom."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean somebody else did."

"Not you, kid?"

"Of course not, Tom. Be coherent. Try to understand what I'm saying. Your shots missed. They missed, understand? And attempted murder is only a misdemeanor."

SHE was looking past him, at a curtain that moved from the small closet into which her bed folded.

"Tom!"

"Yes?"

"You didn't bring those other two murderers here with you?"

"Heavens no!"

"Then you didn't escape, Tom."

"What do you mean—I didn't escape?"

"It was a trap. Don't you see. They

still won't believe that you and I didn't commit those crimes together."

"Who? Who, kid?"

"The cops. Those weren't killers who helped you escape. They were stool-pigeons. They let you escape so they could follow you. They're in this apartment now!"

He leaped to his feet like a madman. "Where?" He was looking both ways, at the door, at the window. "*Where are the cops?*" His voice shook with a sob that revealed almost insane fear.

The two detectives came out from the closet. One was tall and blond, held his gun close to his hip. The other was Joe Ryan; his face was hard and white and he held his gun loosely.

"You're rotten!" she said, "as if you haven't done enough to him!"

Tom Thompson saw them then and everything sane seemed to go out of him. He reeled back on his heels. "Here you are," he said, "two of you. Two big men with big guns in their hands. Do you think you're going to take me?" His voice cracked with laughter. "Well, you aren't," he went on, "because I'm not afraid. Not a damn bit afraid of you. Shoot me down, if you want. Go ahead and shoot me down. It's not death I'm afraid of. Shoot if you've got the nerve."

The blond said: "Look out, Thompson!"

But Tom, laughing again, hurled himself forward. He brought his head up under the blond man's jaw, slammed his elbow into the stomach; and at the same time both of his hands were on the gun; fingers insane with strength were prying the weapon out of the other's hand. The detective backed, started to charge. Tom brought the butt of the gun down squarely across the man's forehead. The detective's knees buckled, and he pitched forward.

Ryan fired at Thompson, but missed, and now Tommy Thompson was moving backward. His gun spat flame. It jerked three times in his hand. But he was so nervous, moving so quickly, that only one of the bullets hit. This one slipped across Joe Ryan's temple tearing with it a ribbon of blood. Ryan brushed blood from his face and tried to bring up his gun. Thompson fired again, catching Joe Ryan in the arm. The impact of the shot swung Ryan around; he hit the wall and slid off his feet, his head banging on the floor. He lay there, very still. The blond detective had not moved.

Tom Thompson stood there, reeling over the two fallen men, and then all at once he dropped his gun. He wiped sweat from his face and looked at Margot.

"Have you another drink?"

"No."

"Oh, Tom, you were a fool to do this. Didn't I tell you you didn't kill Martin and Ransom?"

"They didn't believe it. And I'll never be clear now. I've done at least one of them in. I guess I got the killer's lust last night."

Margot knelt by Joe Ryan. Tears were in her eyes. "But I tell you, Tom, you didn't commit murder. You *must* let them take you."

"Oh, don't be a fool, kid. They're never going to take me. Not ever!"

"But—"

"All right," he said, "if you want to believe that, I'll tell you something. Before Martin came in last night I was near Ransom's table and I heard his wife steaming about something. I was drunk up to my gills, but I *do* remember it was about a dictaphone record."

"A dictaphone record?"

"That's right, kid. The cops did so many things to refresh my memory.

They tried so many so-called psychological tricks to make me remember *everything*, that that fragment of conversation came back to me. I was damned if I was going to tell them."

"Tom," Margot pleaded, "you can't go, *you can't!*"

His smile was grim and white; he opened the door. Looking back over his shoulder, he said: "A simple little pass key got me in here. So it's a lousy lock. For your own protection you ought to get it changed." His voice softened to a whisper. "For protection against killers." He laughed softly, and then he closed the door behind him and was gone.

VIII

THE big blond detective who had been slugged on the forehead was the first one to regain consciousness, and he got up and washed. He had stopped bleeding so he was all right except that he swore violently and mumbled that he had a headache. He helped Margot get Joe Ryan on the bed, then left, saying: "I've got to make a report and send out the alarm on that Thompson punk. He's made us look like monkeys all the way through on this case."

"Wait a minute," said Margot.

He lingered at the door. "Yeah?"

"There's something I have to know," although she was breathless she spoke slowly now. "Whose idea was it to let him go and to follow him back here?"

"Listen—" the detective shrugged. "Listen, lady, a lot of people get the wrong idea of the cops. We go by orders. Maybe we mess a guy up but just think what *he's* done with somebody's life. Confessions aren't nearly so important as you think. If we don't have an air tight case when we go to court it's just too bad. They've been

plenty of killers acquitted and don't fool yourself a minute about that. So we *have* to be tough."

"That isn't what I asked you."

The detective dipped his head, said: "Well, it was the chief's idea, and Joey damn near got suspended arguing against it." He grinned. "The guy's no piker, honey. He's got it bad for you."

"Thanks," she murmured, and she began to breathe again.

The detective left, and Margot sat on the bed washing out Joe Ryan's wounded arm and head. Neither wound was deep or serious.

She watched him curiously. Nothing in the world had seemed to matter suddenly. The murders, the flight of Tommy Thompson, her own misfortune; nothing mattered but this detective lying here on the bed, and so she knew that she loved him. It was queer, she thought, that love should come like this, in spite of circumstances.

Remembering the fight a few moments ago she saw, clearly, what he had done. While Tom was grappling with the other, Joe could have shot him dead, but he did not. And later, when they were facing each other, Joe did not shoot to kill. Though it went against all of his police experience, he believed that Tom was guiltless.

She bandaged his wounds, then straightened her hair and put on a touch of lipstick. She turned on the radio, twisting the dial to the six o'clock supper music, and then she sat down on the bed again and just looked at Joe Ryan.

His eyes fluttered and opened. A trace of a smile touched his lips.

"Well, here we are again," he said.

"Yes, darling," she said, "here we are again."

He stared at her in incredulous unbelief. "Did you—did you call me . . ."

"Yes," she said.

He closed his eyes for a minute and she was afraid that he was going to open them and find them wet. She leaned down, gently put her arms about his head and neck and brushed her lips over his.

"I didn't know it could happen like that," he said. "But I knew last night that I had gone crazy."

Then: "I'm sorry about Tom Thompson. It *was* a rotten trick."

She said: "That's all right too. Only you must rest now."

"Nonsense," he said, "I can get up."

"No. You must go to sleep for a while. Please, Joe."

"What about my report?"

"The other fellow is making it. You will stay for a while, won't you?"

He smiled. "If you want me to."

"Yes. Please. Because I have to go out, and then I'm coming back. I want you to be here when I return."

"Where are you going?" he asked quickly.

"Just—somewhere. I can't tell you now."

"You're not going to be foolish, Margot. You're not going to—"

"Of course not. Trust me."

He leaned back. "I do—completely."

"All right then. Wait. Rest."

She knew that where she had to go she must go alone. To take a detective with her might spoil everything and the case depended on her next move. This she knew, and because she had always had courage, she was not afraid. She was this far into the affair and she would see it through. She put on her gloves, and smiled over at Joe Ryan. If anything went wrong she might never see him, or anyone, again. She was at the door now.

"Goodby, darling," she said.

She knew, from reading novels and

newspapers, that motive lay at the bottom of every murder and Tom Thompson had given her, she thought, the clue that would point to the motive for these.

SHE went directly to the studio. She had yesterday's pass, and flashing it briefly she walked through the gates like one who belonged. Inside the vast studio she felt a queer painful tugging, and then nostalgic sweep of emotion as she passed the various sets, as she remembered the studio commissary where she had eaten, and the sound stage on which she had made her test film. It was almost seven o'clock and there were not many people around, but those whom she did see she artfully avoided. There was one night set where several principals and twenty extras were working. She made a wide sweep around this.

She walked down the long corridor at the end of which was Harold Ransom's office. The girls employed here were day secretaries so that place was now deserted. When she reached the door she looked up and down the hall and then tried the knob. The door was locked.

Remembering the layout of the office, Margot returned outside, her heart beating a little faster. She left the sidewalk and made her way through the flowers, and at last the crawling vines on the side of the building. The windows were unlighted so that she was shrouded in darkness. She pressed her face against the pane of a French door; then, sure it was the right door she stopped and picked up a rock. Quickly, realizing that hesitation devours courage, she hit the stone against the glass and stepped back as it tinkled at her feet.

She then reached in and turned the

knob. The door swung open. She entered, closing it behind her. The hole she had made in the glass was the size of a basketball, broken jaggedly.

She knew that she could not risk lights and that she must work in haste. She passed her hand over the mahogany desk. It was dusty. The office must have been deserted all day. In this there was hope. Desperately, with no more than a visitor's knowledge of the room, she set about to find a dictaphone record of whose existence she was not even sure.

Her search ended, then began again, at the waste basket. A lighted match from a folder revealed a pile of broken dictaphone records. Someone had come in and cleaned out the dictaphone file and broken them all. Her pause was momentary and now her pulse beat was in her throat. This was both victory and defeat. The fact that the records were broken indicated their importance. But a broken dictaphone record was worse than useless for these had been smashed into fine bits almost like black sand.

It was while she stood here in silence that the thought came to her if the record was important Harold Ransom might have put it in a safer place than the dictaphone file.

She started a more thorough search now, tearing up the carpet, padding over the entire office with her hands: walls, carpet, desk drawers.

The cylinder was in the last place she looked; hanging in the chandelier of the now dark overhead light. The base of the chandelier had a shiny metal finish and the record could not have been visible when the light was on.

She had stood on the desk to get it and now she jumped to the floor.

Her first impulse was to flee with it, but she listened and still heard no sounds. The silence comforted her and

made her bold, and her woman's curiosity was burning to hear a few words of the record. Quickly, she set it up on the machine, put the earphones on her head. She kept watching the door, prepared to run out through the French windows at the first sound.

The record ground smoothly, and then, distinctly, she heard Dan Martin's voice. "*You'll be surprised when you find out what I'm here for, Harold.*" She listened, amazed, while he unfolded a blackmail plot that involved Carol Brown. "Why I saw her just this afternoon!" Margot thought. The record went on, the voice very clear. "*So it's either pay, or else, Harold, I guess you know what I mean . . .*" The sound chilled her for Dan Martin was in his coffin now and it was like listening to the dead talk. Then Harold Ransom spoke. He revealed that the speech had been recorded and had begun to threaten Dan Martin with exposure when the record went off. It had come to its end. Margot quickly detached it and rose.

Engaged in this she did not hear a sound until the office door closed.

THE lights went on then, and Carol Brown, her auburn hair like a flame against the sudden illumination, stood with her back against the door and a gun in her hand.

"I'll take that record," she said.

Margot caught her breath. "What record?"

"That cylinder in your hand," said Carol Brown. "Let's not be stupid about this."

"Oh this," Margot replied, and put the record on the desk. "If that's all you want."

Carol Brown's eyes blazed. "What else is there?"

Margot shrugged. "Nothing, I guess."

That seemed quite enough for the murder of two men."

Carol Brown stared for a moment, then said: "That had nothing to do with any murders. Only I have an idea it's something personal connected with my life and I mean to have it. I usually carry a gun for protection. My studio advises it. You are an intruder—a burglar one might say, so—but—" She kept looking at Margot, and then she dropped the gun back into her purse. "What does the record say?"

"It concerns you," said Margot evenly.

"My marriage—my son?"

"Yes."

Carol picked it up. "I'd be finished if publicity like that broke. You know that, don't you? Not that I'm ashamed of my child. I love him. But I don't believe in a person sacrificing their own life for one too young to understand or appreciate. I don't want to be finished in pictures!" Her voice had become almost desperate.

"I guess no one would," said Margot.

Carol, across the desk, smiled faintly. Then, she dropped the record and ground her heel over it.

Margot watched lifelessly. "There goes a motive for murder," she said.

Carol Brown looked up. "I wish you'd explain yourself. Statements like that. And what you are doing here."

"That doesn't matter to you," Margot replied, "but perhaps we could turn the question around. You don't belong on this lot, and no one could have opened this office door without a key."

Carol Brown smiled tolerantly. She sat down in a leather chair, leaned back and lit a cigarette. "I have an appointment here," she said, "and I was given a key. You see, it's really very uncomplicated and I hate to disappoint you . . ."

"You don't," said Margot, and she too sat down. She picked up the telephone.

Carol rose. "Who are you calling?"

"A friend in my apartment."

Their eyes met. Carol Brown said: "Go ahead, dearie, but you're getting yourself in deeper and deeper."

Margot said: "Maybe," and put through the call. She told Joe Ryan where she was and to come down if he could.

SHE hung up, saying: "He's my bail bond, Miss Brown. He always gets me out of embarrassing difficulties."

Carol Brown said icily:

"How convenient."

"Yes—isn't it?" Margot's eyes narrowed. "Now for some more information. There is only one person who would have the authority to make an appointment here with you. It is, of course, Mr. Ransom's secretary—Bob Shaye."

Carol Brown nodded.

"He probably wanted to show you some broken dictaphone records and to assure you that you were safe and your career unimpaired."

"He probably did."

"But of course he would have been lying," Margot went on softly. "Because here are the facts, pure and simple. Bob Shaye is desperately in love with you."

Carol Brown was leaning forward.

"Yes, what of it?"

"When he discovered that Ransom was going to expose you in a public scandal, he was shocked. He could not see you ruined. In love with you, perhaps, he magnified your situation. He saw you as a helpless creature defiled by a fat and spidery producer. He realized that to keep Mr. Ransom quiet, he must kill him."

Carol Brown was on her feet again. "My dear, you are mad!"

"Not at all," said Margot, "it's really all very uncomplicated, to borrow your phrase. At first I thought the killer might have been Bronson, who did it to gain Lola Ransom. But Lola loved her husband desperately—a love that was not shared by him—and Bronson knew the hopelessness of his passion. So he was out. It was Bob Shaye who acted for you."

"What do you mean? Tom Thompson did the killings last night."

"No, he didn't. Bob did," said Margot. "When he saw what Tom Thompson was going to do he realized it was a blessing laid in his lap. But Tom missed. He was wildly drunk and missed both of his shots by wide margins. Bob Shaye, thinking quickly, desperate that his chance had come and was going by, quickly drew the gun from his shoulder holster. In the excitement, with everyone watching Tom, he shot Ransom who was at his side, and then he shot Dan Martin."

"Wherever did you get such a notion?" Carol Brown was shaking.

"From quite a number of sources," said Margot, "I—"

Her tongue suddenly froze for Bob Shaye stood in the open doorway. He came in and quietly closed the door behind him. He crossed the office and looked at the broken French window, and then he looked at Margot; from her he turned to Carol Brown.

"Good evening, dear," he said quietly.

"This woman—is—" Carol began slowly.

"Quite insane," said Bob Shaye. Then he whirled about. "You lying little tramp. Where does such an idea originate? I stood outside and heard you. I listened as long as I could. Will

you explain yourself and explain fast?" His boyish face was white, his eyes dilated.

Margot was staring at an ink spot on his vest, for he stood with his coat brushed a little back.

She said: "Mr. Shaye, I've done all the explaining I'm going to do. But I will tell you how I discovered your guilt when the police didn't. In the first place, Tom's shots sounded, but it was not until a *full half minute later* that Mr. Ransom and Mr. Martin fell dead. A dozen people will testify to this!"

"You're such a fool," cried Shaye. "No one has a sense of time in such a moment."

Margot nodded.

"No one but you had, Mr. Shaye. You timed your shots beautifully with that silenced gun but two important things will convict you of murder; the police weren't there to see, but everyone who was in the place will testify that Tom was at least eight feet from Mr. Ransom when he fired. He was, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"But there were *powder burns* on Ransom's suit, which isn't surprising, since you were not more than *two feet* from him!"

Bob Shaye was shaking with rage. "That won't prove a thing and you know it!"

"I think it will," Margot went on inexorably, "because there are a couple of other points. When you drew the gun your fountain pen, in your vest, was in the way. The top of the pen was torn off and afterward it was ground under somebody's feet on the floor. But it left a spot on your vest! You might at least have changed your clothes or were you too excited celebrating your triumphant double murder, to think of such a thing?"

Speechless, Shaye stared at the ink spot.

"More than that," Margot went on, "Bob Shaye, the police ballistic experts can prove that the bullets fired from Tom Thompson's gun were found *outside* the Rendezvous. They had—"

Bob Shaye picked up a paper weight, lifted his arm to hurl it. A revolver shot burst out. Shaye spun around, and saw Joe Ryan standing at the door; Joe Ryan with his felt hat pushed back on his head, and his face hard.

"It was too good a show to interrupt before the finale, Margot," he said softly, "but I heard it all, and there's two cops out here that heard it too." He looked down at Shaye who had crumpled unconscious, to the floor, gazed up at Carol Brown who was in the leather chair with her head in her arms. He turned back to Margot.

"Come on, honey. Let's get out of here."

NO PUBLICITY broke, and Carol Brown, grateful, secured Margot a test at her own studio. It came out as she had dreamed the first one would. Two weeks later, Tom Thompson staggered into a police station in a town down near the border a broken, unshaven wreck, and said hoarsely: "I give myself up."

They didn't know what to do, so they called Margot. She came down at once.

Joe Ryan came with her.

"I'll take him," she said.

The room was musty, and California sunshine was filtering in through the windows and on the bare wood floor. There were cops around, and a radio playing. Tom Thompson stood with his pallid, unshaven face blank. He stood like a dummy ready to be lead somewhere, anywhere. Joe Ryan stood there

too, his felt hat back on his head, an unlit cigarette hanging in his mouth. Margot went to him, and Tom Thompson half turned, the stare in his eyes vacant, yet watching.

"It'll have to be goodbye for awhile," Margot said. "I've got to get him on his feet again. It may be months, Joe, but—well, I owe it to him. When he gets going—"

"Listen," a hoarse voice cracked out suddenly, "listen, if I'm not wanted for murder or anything, I'm not hanging around this decrepit, moth eaten place. Me, I'm getting out in the sunshine. And I'm going alone. You don't think I want a woman hounding my tracks wherever I go, do you?" Tom Thompson paused, rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand, went on: "No sir. The world's greatest publicity writer can navigate on his own. He's going back to Hollywood. Me, I'm going back. I'm going to walk down Hollywood Boulevard again."

He sucked in breath. "When a man's going back to his own country, where there is fruit on the trees, and grass in your front yard, and streets lined with gold, there isn't anybody that'd try to stop him, is there?"

He reeled out of the place.

Margot held Joe Ryan's arm and watched Tom Thompson as he went. She was remembering the Rendezvous and her own madness. She remembered Tom saying: "Look who's here. The chinless wonder. The dirtiest camera grinder in town." She remembered Guy Lombardo's orchestra playing, *I want to be in Winchell's Column*, and guns going off, women screaming, Lola Ransom saying: "*Get me out of here. Get me out!*"

And then she thought, of all things, something she said now aloud. She said: "He's swell."

ILLUSTRATED CRIMES

BY STOOKIE ALLEN

The UNDERCOVER AGENT



IN 1935, A SHIPMENT OF HEROIN ARRIVED IN HONDURAS, UNDER GOVERNMENT SEAL, FROM FRANCE. IT WAS ENOUGH TO LAST THE REPUBLIC A HUNDRED YEARS. A FEW MONTHS LATER THE CHIEF OF THE NEW ORLEANS NARCOTIC BUREAU WIRED WASHINGTON THAT DOPE PEDDLERS IN HIS DISTRICT WERE SELLING UNUSUAL AMOUNTS OF HIGH-GRADE HEROIN.



Tony
Jurich



PRESENTLY THERE APPEARED IN THE NEW ORLEANS UNDERWORLD ONE JOE BIANCO, A YOUNG ITALIAN WHO LET IT BE KNOWN IN THE RIGHT QUARTERS THAT HE WAS A DOPE DISTRIBUTOR FROM NEW YORK. BIANCO SOON CONTACTED EARL STRANGE, A LOCAL DOPE PEDDLER, AND DROPPED HINTS THAT HE WOULD LIKE TO DEAL DIRECT WITH SOME "BIG SHOT" WHO COULD SELL HIM IN QUANTITIES, AND AT A RIGHT PRICE, THE GRADE OF HEROIN STRANGE WAS HANDLING.

STRANGE PASSED BIANCO ON TO TONY JURICH, A BEADY-EYED JUGO-SLAV. JURICH FELT HIM OUT AND, CONVINCED OF HIS RELIABILITY, INTRODUCED HIM TO BALDO PAUSINO.

"YOU SEEM ALL RIGHT TO ME," PAUSINO SAID, "AND IF YOU HAVE THE DOUGH I'LL DELIVER ANYTHING FROM \$2 TO \$200,000 WORTH."

"I CAN RAISE THE SUGAR, BUT WHERE CAN YOU GET THAT MUCH DOPE?" BIANCO ASKED.

"FROM HONDURAS," EXPLAINED PAUSINO.

"A DOE DOWN THERE IS TAPPING IT FROM A BIG GOVERNMENT STORE."



Pausino

Coming Week After Next—



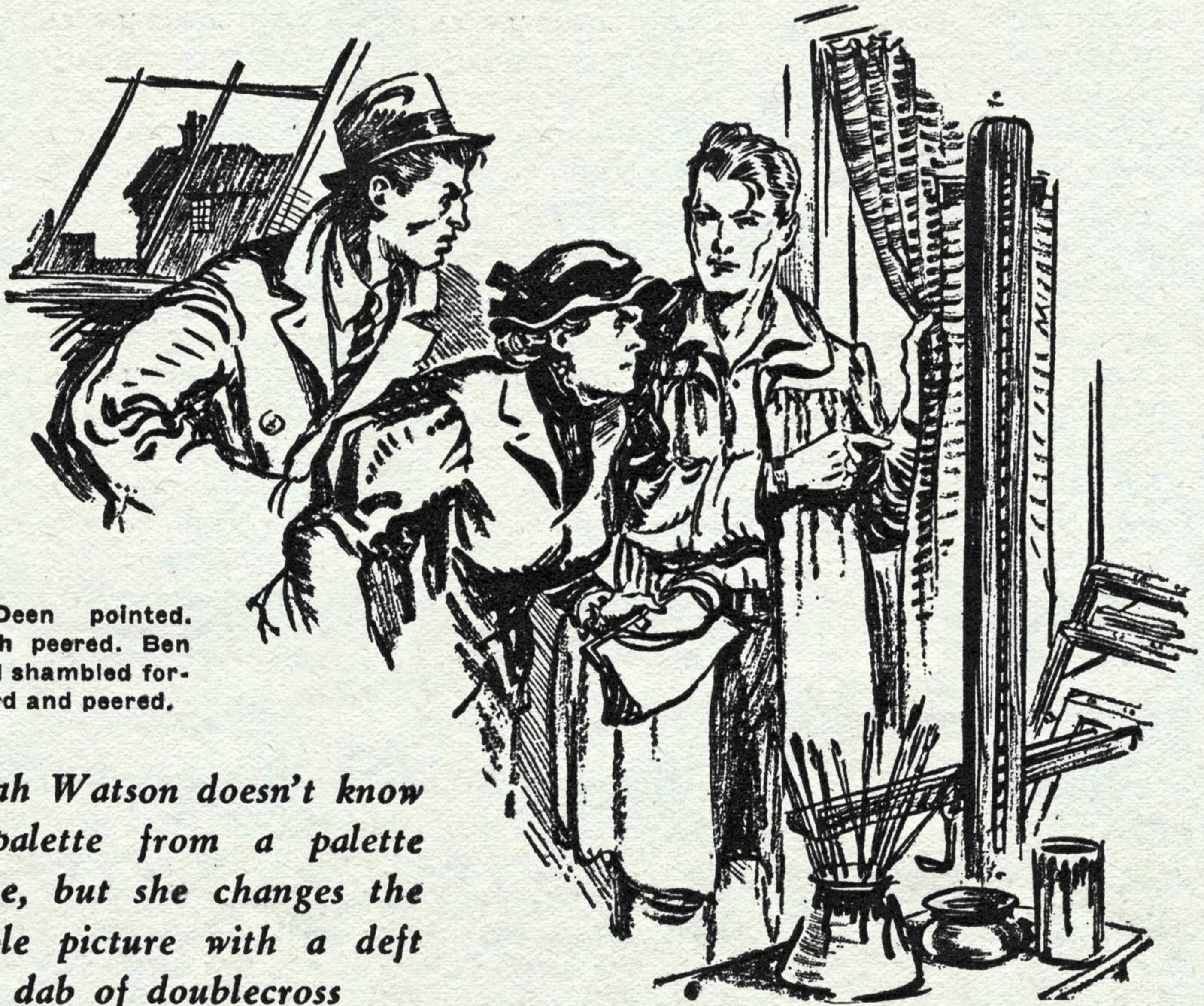
BIANCO DEMANDED TO BE SHOWN—AND WITH SUCH A BIG DEAL IN PROSPECT, PAUSINO TOOK HIM TO A SHRIMP CAMP ON AN ISLAND THIRTY MILES OFF THE COAST, AND SHOWED HIM HOW THE SHIPMENTS WERE RECEIVED.

BIANCO GOT A LOOK AT THE DRUG CACHE ON THE ISLAND AND ARRANGED A DEAL. THIS WAS STILL PENDING WHEN A SERIES OF SURPRISE RAIDS LANDED MOST OF PAUSINO'S MOB IN THE FEDERAL NET AND SIMULTANEOUSLY A COAST GUARD CUTTER SWOOPED DOWN ON THE SHRIMP CAMP. IT HAD BEEN HASTILY ABANDONED BUT THE CUTTER SOON OVERTOOK A MOTORBOAT IN WHICH PAUSINO AND TWO OF HIS GANG WERE ATTEMPTING FLIGHT.

THE SMUGGLER'S LEADER, TAKEN AT PISTOL POINT, CURSED HIMSELF FOR A FOOL WHEN HE FACED HIS CAPTOR—JOE BIANCO—REALIZING HE HAD FALLEN FOR A DEAL AS PHONEY AS THE MONICKER USED BY THE FEDERAL AGENT WHO HAD TRAPPED HIM.

PAUSINO AND HIS MEN PAID FOR THE MISTAKE WITH LONG TERMS IN THE FEDERAL PEN AND THE HONDURAN REVOLUTION WHICH THE DOPE WAS SUPPOSED TO FINANCE FAILED TO COME OFF.

Hot Bonds



VanDeen pointed.
Sarah peered. Ben
Todd shambled for-
ward and peered.

*Sarah Watson doesn't know
a palette from a palette
knife, but she changes the
whole picture with a deft
dab of doublecross*

A Little Artistic Work

By D. B. McCandless

Author of "Hooked," etc.

A MAN and a woman walked down a crooked alley and paused before a brick building which had once been some rich man's stable and was now a studio, consciously quaint in its decoration, its front wall glassy with the large north-light windows necessary to artists.

The woman leaned close to one of these large windows on the street level, and, with her fists on her broad hips, peered within. She was a stalwart, militant and excessively competent female, clad in rusty black. The jut of her jaw, the spring of her large beak and the bristling of her grizzled brows were

ominous, and so was her expression, as she stared through the lighted window at the paintings visible from the street.

The young man, a red-headed individual, shuffled his long legs to join her at the window. He was the gangling type of youth that seems always to lean, even when there is no visible support. He leaned now against the wall of the building and peered through the window, and the expression on his freckled face was one of blank bewilderment.

The studio into which the two stared was empty of humans. It is true that some of the strange and startling oil

paintings which covered the walls might have been intended to portray men and women in the raw and then again, they might not.

The man and woman outside the window peered in at these modern examples of art for several long, silent minutes. Then the woman nodded her head briskly and her antique black headgear quivered as she spoke.

"Ben Todd," she said, "those things in there are Art. Young man, what do you know about Art?"

"Not a thing, Sarah Watson. I don't need to know a thing and I don't want to know a . . ."

"Nonsense, young squirt. A detective should know something about everything. We're going inside here, Bennie, and see some more paintings like that, close to . . ."

"Take your hands off me, Sarah Watson. I may be your wage slave in office hours, but I'll be damned if I'll . . . Listen, you old harridan, I'm not going . . ."

"You're going up those steps, Ben Todd, and knock on that front door. It may be near midnight, but there's no office hours in our line of work! We've got an appointment with an artist in one of these studios—one of the upstairs ones, I think . . ."

"Listen! For grief's sake, old girl, listen. Have a heart. If you've got an appointment, lemme wait outside. If I have to go inside and look at more pictures of arms and legs and eyes writhing together, all purple and green and yellow and red, I'm going to be sick."

"Bennie, you have no soul. You have no vision, no feeling for the abstract, no sensitivity to color, no . . . Never mind. Let it go. We've got an appointment in there, Bennie, with Mr. Richard VanDeen, only son of the famous Thomas P. VanDeen."

"Thomas P. VanDeen, the railroad millionaire?"

"The same. Of course, the job won't pay much. Young VanDeen ain't getting much cash from his pa these days, since he went in for modern art. Still, with a man like Thomas P. VanDeen in the background on a case, it might be profitable at that. Bennie, you knock on that door."

Ben Todd worked the antique knocker. Presently, a white-coated Negro opened the door. Sarah sailed into the hall and made for the steps. On the landing above, she halted, with Ben Todd beside her. Three doors opened on the little hall. One of them stood ajar and the smell of incense, hot-house flowers and expensive cigarettes floated out.

Sarah made for the open door and stepped into a room blue with smoke and filled with people, some lying, some lolling, some squatting, but all on the floor.

Sarah cleared her throat purposefully and stepped into a clear space.

"Where," she demanded, "is Mr. Richard VanDeen?"

NO ONE answered. An emaciated gentleman with long hair ceased wilting over a piano in one corner long enough to stare at her. The rest of the party went on lolling and talking. Sarah cleared her throat again. Behind her, Ben Todd grinned.

Curtains at the side of the room stirred. A large and exceedingly rugged young man in a paint-stained smock walked into the room. There was something about this huge young man which reminded Ben Todd of a football hero dressed for a masquerade.

"You!" barked Sarah. "You Mr. Richard VanDeen?"

The large young man brushed a lock

of brown hair from his brow, and nodded. Sarah lifted her skirts, stepped over a corpulent female who should have known better than to recline in public, and threaded her way to Richard VanDeen.

"Mr. VanDeen," said Sarah. "I'm Sarah Watson. You phoned me . . ."

Richard VanDeen held aside the curtains through which he had entered the room. Sarah passed through, followed by Ben Todd.

Ben Todd gave a cringingly expectant glance at the walls of the studio in which they now stood, saw that the walls were quite bare and sat down with a sigh of relief. Sarah remained standing, facing Richard VanDeen.

"Now, Mr. VanDeen," said Sarah, "let's get down to brass tacks. You're having a party, so we won't waste time."

"Party?" said young VanDeen, absent-mindedly. "Oh, yes. You mean the mob in there. No party. They come every night, smoke my tobacco, drink my liquor . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Um," said Sarah. "Well, now. This painting of yours you want me to find. How big was it, what kind of a frame did it have on it, what was it supposed to represent?"

"What was it supposed to represent?" inquired Richard VanDeen. "It was signed with my name, of course, in large letters, yellow letters. As to what it looked like, frankly, Mrs. Watson, I can't say."

"Drat it!" barked Sarah, taking a step toward him and putting her fists on her hips. "Drat it, young man, you can say something. You can say how big the damn thing was, can't you?"

"Big," murmured Richard VanDeen. "Very big. Seventy-two inches by a hundred and eight. Plenty of paint. No frame. Frames cost too much. Sched-

uled to be hung in the Modern Arts Prize Exhibit tomorrow morning before eight. Must have it back for tomorrow morning before eight, because it's sure to win the prize, you see."

"I see," rasped Sarah, peering intently at her client's bland face, "that you're not half as asinine as you'd like me to believe. Young man, do you suspect anybody of stealing that painting, anybody in particular, I mean?"

Richard VanDeen did not answer. He strode to the curtains which covered the door to the next room, twitched them aside and pointed. Sarah peered. Ben Todd shambled forward and peered. VanDeen whispered: "That one. The skinny fellow with the black hair that needs clippers."

"Looks silly enough for anything," muttered Sarah. "Anybody else?"

"That one," whispered Richard VanDeen, pointing. "That large, juicy gentleman with the pink and white complexion and the curly blonde hair."

Sarah grunted. She stepped back from the curtain.

"Give me their names," she said. "Give me their addresses. Give me the reasons why you suspect 'em."

"I suspect 'em," said Richard VanDeen slowly, "well, to tell you the truth, Mrs. Watson, I don't really suspect them much. There's another man in there . . ."

"Let's finish those two fellers first," interrupted Sarah. "Hurry, now. It's after midnight and we ain't got much time. If you want your painting back before eight tomorrow and I want your five hundred for getting it back . . ."

"THE skinny one with the long dark hair is Alberto Tarrant," said VanDeen, hastily. "Tarrant lives in this building, one flight above me, in the rear. Tarrant might be interested

in keeping my painting from being exhibited tomorrow, because he has a canvas which might take the prize if mine wasn't there. Tarrant's painting is a rank copy of my painting. It's even exactly the same size. The other man, the overgrown cherub with the blonde curls, is August Banner. Banner lives in this building, too, one flight above me, in the front. Banner might be interested in removing my painting for the same reason that Tarrant might be interested. But . . ."

"Um," said Sarah, meditatively, pulling aside the curtains and peeking into the room beyond. "Tarrant and Banner and somebody else beside, eh? The somebody else couldn't by any chance be that gentleman with the sly eyes and the stomach and the trick glasses, that dark gentleman sitting over there with his back against the piano leg?"

"It could!" replied Richard Van Deen, taking Sarah by the arm and conducting her to a chair. "It could be and it is. Woman, you're a marvel. You know, when I picked your name out of the telephone books, I thought you'd be a marvel. Watson, you know—assistant to Sherlock Holmes . . ."

"Mrs. Watson," said Sarah, grimly, "and I'm assistant to nobody."

Richard VanDeen grinned. He opened a cupboard and produced a bottle and three glasses.

"Mrs. Watson," he said, "you have unerring judgment. The man you have picked is my prime suspect."

"Who is he?" demanded Sarah.

"One Henry Morgenfeldt, an art dealer. He's backing Alberto Tarrant, the young man who needs a barber. I don't trust Morgenfeldt."

"Neither do I," said Sarah, crisply. "I've seen him somewhere. It seems to me he has a reputation that smells bad somehow. Maybe he's a fence."

"Fence?" inquired VanDeen vaguely. "I don't know . . . But it's quite possible that Morgenfeldt may have stolen my painting, or had it stolen, in order to make sure that Tarrant wins the prize tomorrow. Morgenfeldt has sunk considerable cash in Tarrant's future and if Tarrant cops the prize—"

"I see," said Sarah, absorbing three fingers of whiskey in one gulp. "No chaser, thanks. It spoils the taste. Now, about this painting of yours, Richard, when did it disappear?"

"Tonight. About two hours ago. I came in here from the other room and found the easel," VanDeen pointed to a large, skeleton-like frame, "empty."

"Was this feller Morgenfeldt in the other room then, Dickie?"

"He was not."

"How about Tarrant? How about Banner?"

"I don't know. I didn't suspect either of them at the time and didn't look for them. I only thought of Morgenfeldt. This studio, by the way, opens into the public hall. The door to the hall was unlocked. Anyone could . . ."

"Young man," interrupted Sarah, hoarsely, "it seems to me you've been real careless with your art, leaving it unguarded in an unlocked room."

"My art!" murmured VanDeen. "I can still see it. Six square feet of color, magnificent, voluptuous, rampart color."

Sarah reached for the bottle and poured herself a drink.

"I'm very anxious," said Richard VanDeen, "to win the prize at the exhibition. The prize would justify my art in my father's eyes, you see. You've heard of my father, of course, Mrs. Watson? My father, Thomas P. VanDeen."

"Somewhere," rasped Sarah. "Go on."

"My father," said Richard VanDeen, "is the type who recognizes only achievement. He has fought against my present mode of life. He says it's a disgrace. He has fought against my art. He said that's a disgrace, too. He has fought against my showing my finished work at the exhibition tomorrow, with the VanDeen named signed upon it. He says that would be the last and final disgrace, the public disgrace . . ."

"I'd like to meet your pa, Dickie," said Sarah. "Well, now, my assistant and I will get to work. We'll go up first and take a look at the quarters of the young artists, Tarrant and Banner. Not that I suspect 'em, of course, any more than you do, but if I see their paintings, I can get an idea what yours looks like, since you don't know yourself. By the way, there's the little matter of a retainer . . ."

Richard VanDeen fished in the pocket of his smock, and brought to the surface four paint brushes, a pen knife, a tin of tobacco and some soiled bills. Sarah reached for the bills. She counted with a grim smile.

"Fifty," she said, "on account. Four hundred and fifty to be paid me, Mr. VanDeen, when I deliver your painting."

"If you deliver my painting," said Richard VanDeen, "before eight o'clock tomorrow morning. Remember that."

AN HOUR went by. The front door of the studio building burst open and Sarah Watson sailed down the steps with Ben Todd in tow. Sarah made for her ramshackle, square-topped car, waiting at the end of the alley. Ben Todd loped beside her, talking furiously as he loped.

"Listen! Listen you old she-mule! We've spent an hour's good time rummaging around in studios and we ain't

found a thing on Tarrant and we ain't found a thing on Banner. What we should have done was to get after the real suspect, this Morgenfeldt, this art dealer with the smelly reputation. We should have been at his apartment long ago. We should have been at his art shop."

"Maybe we'll get there yet," snapped Sarah, wrenching open the door of her car and plunging under the wheel. "When we have time, of course. Right now, we're going up to see Dickie Van Deen's pa, Thomas P. VanDeen, the multimillionaire."

The car swerved away from the curb with Ben Todd bouncing on the seat beside Sarah while he endeavored to close the door. They went two blocks before Ben Todd spoke. Then he said, simply and sadly:

"I see."

"See? What do you see? Drat it, young feller, speak out."

"I see," said Ben Todd, acidly, "the doublecross. The good old doublecross that you never fail to make, you old crook."

Sarah turned a corner with the ancient motor roaring and put her commonsense shoe more firmly on the gas.

"I see," said Ben Todd, "that Richard VanDeen has only five hundred smackers, if he has that. I see that Thomas P. VanDeen has, maybe, fifty million. You've made a sort of half-hearted attempt to find Richard's painting and failed. Time is getting short. It's a question whether you could find Richard's painting before eight tomorrow, even if you tried and you might lose Richard's measly five hundred fee. But there's still Papa VanDeen. There's still papa, who has fifty millions, papa who doesn't want his son's Art exhibited in public; papa, who might be persuaded to part with substantial

spondulix if convinced that you were in a position to keep said son's Art from being shown."

"Bennie," interrupted Sarah, brusquely, "sometimes you're real bright. I've been thinking about those paintings we saw in Tarrant's studio and Banner's. If those paintings look like Dickie Van Deen's painting, Bennie, I wouldn't blame Papa Van Deen. I wouldn't blame Papa VanDeen for anything . . ."

The old wreck on four wheels turned into a quiet street of stately homes, bucked at the curb and stopped. Sarah said: "Ben Todd, you got a gun?"

"What the hell would I need a gun for in Thomas P. VanDeen's swell dump?"

"You never know," retorted Sarah. "Get out of this car now, whippersnapper, and march."

A LARGE butler looked down his bulbous nose at Sarah Watson and Ben Todd. He began to close the heavy front door upon them but never finished because Sarah had already inserted the square toe of her shoe. Words passed, mostly from Sarah to the butler. The butler disappeared. Presently, he reappeared, followed by a gentleman who looked very much as young Richard VanDeen would look fifty years hence.

Sarah cast a withering look upon the butler, stalked past him and into the room Mr. Thomas P. VanDeen silently indicated at the side of the wide hall.

"Mr. VanDeen," said Sarah, halting in the middle of a priceless oriental rug while Ben Todd adjusted himself to lean languidly against an inlaid cabinet filled with *objets d'art*. "Mr. VanDeen, I am Sarah Watson—private detective—hired by your son, Richard, to recover a piece of his personal property."

"Humph," said Thomas VanDeen,

regarding Sarah bleakly, "and what property could my son possibly own that would be worth recovering?"

"That," snapped Sarah, "is beside the point. The property in question is evidently worth five hundred dollars to your son. I am here to consult you in regard to the return of that property."

"Humph," said Thomas VanDeen again, "I have nothing to say. When my butler told me you were here in regard to a painting, madam, I consented to see you, because I thought you had come in connection with my Rembrandt . . ."

"Rembrandt?" ejaculated Sarah.

"Rembrandt," repeated Mr. Van Deen. "Since you know nothing of my Rembrandt, I shall have to ask you to excuse me . . ."

"Rembrandt," murmured Sarah, her glinting eyes on Thomas VanDeen's face. "Rembrandts are worth considerable money. Can it possibly be, Mr. VanDeen, that you, too, have lost a painting, a painting by Rembrandt?"

Thomas VanDeen said nothing for a long moment, during which he rocked back and forth on his heels, regarding Sarah's craggy countenance with deep attention. Then he nodded.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, yes. This woman might help me. She seems to have some degree of intelligence."

He turned on his heel and led the way across the room to a door at the side. He opened the door, pressed a light button, and revealed a long picture gallery, its walls crowded with paintings in elaborate gilt frames.

There was silence. The three stood staring into the gallery. Sarah cleared her throat. She said:

"Yes. You ought to have these walls done over, Mr. VanDeen. Anybody can see the paint is faded where the Rembrandt hung. Just about the size of

your son's picture, Mr. VanDeen. Not quite as big, but . . ."

"Don't compare my son's daubings with a Rembrandt, madam," cried Mr. VanDeen, clenching his fists and shaking them at the empty space where the Rembrandt had hung. "That painting was magnificent. One of the most noble of the Rembrandts. A picture of an old woman, madam, seated, a bowl of apples in her lap. That picture is worth a fortune, madam. I'd give anything to get that picture back."

"Anything?" demanded Sarah Watson. "How much?"

"I'd give five thousand dollars," said Thomas VanDeen, hoarsely.

"Um," said Sarah. "I have no doubt you'd give more, Mr. VanDeen, but there ain't time to horse trade now. We'll take the job for five thousand. When did the Rembrandt disappear? How did the thief get in? How did he get out? Do you suspect anyone in the house, or anyone out of the house. If so, why?"

Thomas VanDeen stared down at Sarah, and opened his mouth to speak. Sarah said: "And why, I should like to know, have you not called the cops?"

Thomas VanDeen shut his mouth again. He took Sarah by the elbow and ushered her back into the next room, through the next room and into the wide hall. He put his free hand on a wall button and a bell was heard ringing below.

"Mrs. Watson," he said, "I want my Rembrandt, and my offer of five thousand dollars for it still stands. But I am not hiring you to find it and I am not answering your questions. Good night."

The butler appeared. Thomas VanDeen made a gesture toward Sarah and a gesture toward the front door. The butler advanced purposefully. Thomas VanDeen bowed stiffly and began to

mount the stairs to the floor above. The butler put his hand on the front door.

Sarah stood where Thomas VanDeen had left her. Her grizzled brows were gathered and the eyes under them were on the lower portion of Mr. Thomas VanDeen's legs, all that was now visible of Thomas VanDeen.

The latch on the front door clicked open. The butler made a polite gesture to Sarah to pass through and out. Sarah took a small step forward. Her fist shot out and connected with the butler's bulbous nose.

Ben Todd said, "Gor!" softly and sprang for the toppling butler. Sarah drew back her elbow and struck once more, this time on the point of the butler's chin. The butler went down very quietly in Ben Todd's arms.

Sarah glanced at the stairs. They were quite empty. There was no sound from above. She looked at Ben Todd, stooping over the recumbent butler.

"Let him lay," she said in a hoarse whisper. "I don't like him, and we've got work to do in this house."

BEN TODD and Sarah Watson stood in the long picture gallery, in darkness, except for the twin circles of their flashlights.

"Sarah," whispered Ben Todd, "that butler—hadn't I better tie him up, stick him in a closet or something?"

"Nonsense," retorted Sarah, briskly. "He won't bother us. When I knock 'em out, Bennie, they stay knocked. Besides, this won't take us long—at least, I hope it won't take us long."

"What won't take us long? For grief's sake, Sarah, tell me what it's all about? Do you think you're going to find some clue to that Rembrandt here, old girl?"

"I'm not the sort of detective who goes pussyfooting around for clues,"

replied Sarah, contemptuously. "I'm looking for something concrete now, very concrete, a piece of canvas with paint on it. A piece of canvas seventy-two inches by one hundred and eight inches. And it ought to be comparatively easy to find."

"The Rembrandt?"

"The VanDeen. The Richard Van Deen."

"Jeepers!"

Sarah moved toward a door in the side of the gallery. Her flash moved up and down. She muttered, thoughtfully: "Um. Maybe this is it. Stands to reason the person who stole Dickie VanDeen's painting delivered it here in this gallery. Otherwise, the Rembrandt wouldn't be gone. Now, if only this door leads to a closet and if only this door ain't locked . . ."

"Sarah! Have you gone bats?"

"No. Not yet. But I will, if you don't stop whispering silly questions, young man. Papa VanDeen hired somebody to steal Richard VanDeen's painting. That's self-evident, and that's why Papa VanDeen couldn't call the cops when his hired thief decided to steal a second painting, an immensely valuable Rembrandt this time."

"Oh!" said Ben Todd. "Oh!"

Sarah wrenched at the knob of the door in the side wall. It turned and the door came open. Sarah said:

"Of course, we've still got the Rembrandt to find and the Rembrandt is worth five thousand dollars to us. In the meantime, we might as well take a look around for Dickie's Art. Five hundred dollars can't be ignored."

Sarah's flash probed the dark interior of the closet behind the door. She reached in a hand, brought it out clutching a roll of canvas, turned with a triumphant glint in her eye. A voice sounded somewhere near:

"Police! Police! Come at once! Mr. Thomas P. VanDeen's house! Police!"

Sarah smiled grimly. Slowly she unrolled the canvas.

"Sarah," pleaded Ben Todd, "we've got to get out. For grief's sake, let's beat it. Listen, that butler's in the next room at the phone. It's the only way out of here. I'll take care of the butler, you beat it for the front door."

Sarah went on unrolling the canvas. She spread it out in her extended arms. She said: "Just hold your flash on this . . . this thing, Bennie. I want to make sure what I think is true."

Ben Todd's flash illumined the mass of crusted color upon the unrolled canvas. He gazed upon the swirling lines and blobs of raw paint, and moaned.

"Robbers! Thieves!" howled the butler's voice. "Police . . ."

Sarah briskly rolled the painting up again. She said: "Well, the signature's plain, anyway. Richard VanDeen, in yellow letters."

"I've been struck!" wailed the butler in the next room. "Struck by some kind of infernal machine . . ."

"Sarah!" cried Ben Todd. "For grief's sake, let that damn painting go. Drop it. We've got to get out. The cops . . ."

Sarah tucked the rolled canvas under her arm. She said:

"Maybe we'd better get started at that. The cops won't be here for several minutes, of course, but Thomas P. Van Deen must be on his way down to investigate by now."

Sarah charged out of the picture gallery. Ben Todd charged beside her, gun in hand. The butler, crouching over the telephone in one corner, slid down from his seat to the floor as Sarah advanced, and he rolled in the opposite direction with astounding agility as Sarah came on.

Sarah swept by. She strode into the hall, cast her glittering eyes at the stairway and saw a pair of bare shanks rapidly descending toward the hall.

"Good night, Mr. VanDeen," she called hoarsely, and flung open the front door.

A shot pinged against the heavy woodwork of that door as Ben Todd slammed it shut behind them. Sarah's voluminous black skirts bellied out behind her as she flew down the steps and lighted in her car. The old car coughed raucously and slanted down the street as Ben Todd jumped on the running-board. The front door of the Thomas VanDeen mansion flew open again, revealing Thomas VanDeen himself in an old-fashioned night-shirt. Sarah said:

"Don't worry about Papa VanDeen. He won't shoot again. He's just an old thief, and he knows it," and Sarah sent the car lurching around the corner and down a side street.

IT WAS after three o'clock when Sarah again barged into the party still in progress at Richard VanDeen's rooms. The guests were still reposing on the floor. Richard VanDeen was not in evidence.

Sarah surveyed the assemblage with cold eyes. She made for the curtained door to the studio and passed through, with Ben Todd behind her. Richard VanDeen looked up from the sad contemplation of an empty glass. His mouth slacked as Sarah took the rolled canvas from under her arm and let it unroll before his eyes.

"Four hundred and fifty dollars," said Sarah. "Cash."

Richard VanDeen took the painting in his hands and stared at it. A convulsive movement that might have been a shudder of either repulsion or joy passed over his rugged body.

"I always," said Sarah, "take cash."

Richard VanDeen thrust his hand in his smock pocket and brought it out again. He said: "Mrs. Watson, I haven't got four hundred and fifty. I haven't got a cent."

"Fiddlesticks! If you haven't got it, you'll get it. You'll get it before eight o'clock this morning, young man, or I'll take that painting back to—that is, I'll take it to your father. Your pa, I feel certain, would gladly pay four hundred and fifty dollars in order to make sure that that . . . that thing you've painted didn't appear in public with the VanDeen name signed in the corner."

"Mrs. Watson," said Richard VanDeen, earnestly, "my father would undoubtedly pay a good deal more than four hundred and fifty . . ."

"You don't say? How much more do you think he would pay, Dickie, my boy?"

"Much more. Much more. The fact is, he offered me a thousand dollars to refrain from exhibiting my art. But I don't want money. I want the privilege of pursuing my chosen work."

Sarah moved over to the curtains, parted them, peered into the next room a moment, and turned.

"Work!" she sniffed. "Do you call covering up a square of canvas with paint *work*?"

Richard VanDeen grinned. He said: "My chosen work is architecture. Father wanted me to enter the railroad business with him. I don't like railroads, so . . ."

"Then," said Sarah, "then all this, the bohemian atmosphere and the painting is just . . ."

"Just camouflage," said VanDeen. "I thought if I did something that father absolutely couldn't stomach, he might be willing to let me stop doing it and do architecture. Yes, Mrs. Wat-

son, you guessed it. The painting is camouflage."

"I thought it looked like something on the side of a battleship," said Sarah grimly. "Well, well! I've got another job to do here tonight, a job that will pay five thousand dollars, by the way. Tell me now, Dickie, how long ago did that fat young painter, August Banner, leave the party in the next room?"

"He gone?" exclaimed Richard VanDeen.

"He has. What's more, a minute ago, I saw that art dealer, Morgenfeldt, sneaking out."

"Let him sneak," said Richard VanDeen. "What do we care? You've found my painting. I'm not interested in where you found it. I have no wish to prosecute the thief."

"Neither have I," remarked Sarah. "My no! But as I mentioned, I've another little job to do here tonight."

Sarah's voice broke off abruptly. She strode to the door which led from the studio to the public hall. She opened the door and thrust herself halfway out. For a long moment, nothing of her was visible but her rather generous rear. Then she extended a hand behind her, beckoned to the two startled young men in the studio, and vanished completely into the hall.

SARAH WATSON, Ben Todd and Richard Van Deen went swiftly up the steep flight of steps which led to the studios above Richard VanDeen's. Sarah was in the lead and she made no effort to hide the thumping of her heavy shoes. The sound of dull thuds and muffled bumpings from somewhere above took care of that.

On the landing, Sarah paused. Ben Todd, gasping, gripped her arm. "Somebody," he whispered, "being killed."

Sarah wrenched free, strode to one of the three doors opening on the landing, turned the knob and stalked through. Ben Todd followed, his hand in his gun pocket. Richard VanDeen brought up in the rear.

The fat young man who lay trussed on the divan under a north light window made a strangled sound of appeal as the three entered. The dark haired man who had been engaged in picking up and throwing down large canvasses from a pile in one corner of the studio wheeled and dropped the painting he had just picked up.

"Mr. Morgenfeldt," demanded Sarah, "what's this?"

The art dealer's sly, dark eyes swerved to August Banner on the divan and back to Sarah's craggy face.

"Nothing," said Morgenfeldt, "nothing at all. This misguided young man, Banner, has something which belongs to me. I came to get it. That's all."

"Did you get it?"

"I did not."

Sarah advanced to the plump artist on the divan and yanked the paint rag which gagged his mouth.

"Well, young feller," she said, "speak up. Have you got something here that belongs to Mr. Morgenfeldt?"

The fat young man lifted both bound, shaking hands and looked balefully at Morgenfeldt. He said:

"He's after the painting I'm going to exhibit tomorrow, that's what. He knows blame well it will cop the prize. He wants Tarrant to get the prize. He's invested a lot in Tarrant and it means money to him for Tarrant to win."

"My," said Sarah. "Bennie, we seem to be in a den of thieves tonight. Well, Mr. Morgenfeldt, what are you waiting for? If you haven't found it, you might as well go, you know. Nobody's keeping you. Scat!"

Morgenfeldt slid past Sarah. His narrow shoulders seemed to cringe and he broke into a run after he was safely beyond her. The door banged behind him and there was the sound of his feet going swiftly down the stairs.

Sarah undid the bonds on August Banner's fat wrists and ankles. He sat up. Richard VanDeen held a flask solicitously to Banner's rosebud lips.

"Sarah," said Ben Todd, "you damn old fool! You should have held that guy Morgenfeldt. If he came here to snitch Banner's painting, he's the guy who snitched Richard VanDeen's. If he's the guy who snitched Richard VanDeen's then he's the guy who snitched the . . ."

"Young squirt," interrupted Sarah, hoarsely, "you talk too much," and absently, she patted Banner's curls.

"Talk too much!" muttered Ben Todd. "Listen to me, woman, I'm talking about a picture that's worth five thousand dollars to us."

"Bennie," said Sarah, "if Mr. Morgenfeldt has that painting, he didn't have it here. A man can't hide a painting that size on his person, you know. By the way, Mr. Banner, what's that painting hanging up there on the wall?"

"That's it," replied Banner. "That's my painting for the exhibit tomorrow."

"Um," said Sarah, staring up. "It's got a nice frame. Gold, ain't it? Yes, yes, Richard, I thought you said Mr. Banner's painting was just as big as yours?"

"That's right," said Banner, eagerly, getting to his feet and waddling a bit as he approached his painting and looked up at it admiringly. "Mine was just the same size as VanDeen's, but I cut it down a bit. The reduction in size strengthens the central theme of the work, you see, and centers the eye, as it were, on the motivation."

"Quite so," interrupted Sarah, briskly. "Now, Mr. Banner, we'll leave you to your well-earned rest. I suppose you'll be taking your painting to the Modern Art Galleries first thing in the morning, young man?"

"About seven o'clock," replied Banner. "I won't feel safe until it's there."

"I won't either," said Sarah. "Lock your door. There seem to be thieves about."

Sarah stooped, pounced upon something glittering which lay on the floor beside the divan, and straightened again with a grunt, a pair of platinum rimmed *pince nez* in her hand.

"No wonder," she said, "that Mr. Morgenfeldt couldn't see Mr. Banner's painting, hanging right there on the wall, ready for him to take. Mr. Morgenfeldt had lost his trick spectacles, you see. Good-night, Mr. Banner. Come, Bennie. Come, Richard. I've still got work to do."

"I'LL say you've got work to do," muttered Ben Todd, striding up and down Richard VanDeen's studio and glaring at Sarah, who was calmly tilting Richard VanDeen's whiskey bottle over her glass. "Good grief, Sarah, I don't get you. You, who are always ready to slide down a greased pole for a nickel, sitting here doing nothing while this guy Morgenfeldt . . . Listen, old girl. We know Morgenfeldt was after Banner's painting. If Morgenfeldt was going to steal Banner's painting, then it stands to reason Morgenfeldt is the guy who stole Dick's painting, and if Morgenfeldt stole Dick's painting then Morgenfeldt stole the Rembrandt . . ."

"Bennie," said Sarah, calmly, emptying her drink with one gulp, "Bennie, you're repetitious. Bennie, just pick up that telephone and call Papa VanDeen."

I'll watch to see that Richard doesn't come in from the other room while you're talking. Tell Papa VanDeen you're sorry to get him out of bed at four in the morning but he might as well stay up the rest of the night, anyway, because he's going to meet us at the Modern Art Galleries at seven o'clock. Seven o'clock, sharp, make it, Bennie, and tell him to bring along five thousand cash and a couple of thousand extra, for emergencies."

Ben Todd dialed a number viciously. He said:

"Emergencies! I know damn well what emergencies. You're planning some doublecross on old man VanDeen. You're . . . Listen to me, you old war horse! We've got to get busy. We've got to go after Morgenfeldt. We've got to search Morgenfeldt's living quarters and Morgenfeldt's art shop for that Rembrandt. By jeepers! I just thought . . . we've got to search Tarrant's studio again. Tarrant and Morgenfeldt are in together on this modern art exhibit and they may be in together on this Rembrandt picture business. We've got to get busy."

"Get busy, then!" barked Sarah. "Get busy and search, then, after you've made that phone call, if it will make you feel any better. But be damn sure, young man, that you're back in this studio at ten minutes to seven, if you don't want to be fired."

A quarter to seven found Richard VanDeen stretched, fully clothed, on his couch, snoring valiantly. It found Sarah Watson, erect as always, on a three-legged stool by the huge window, her keen eyes searching the street below.

At eleven minutes to seven, Sarah Watson stood up from the stool, yanked down the old-fashioned corset under her black skirt, tucked a strag-

gling end of gray hair into the hard bun at the back of her head and quietly opened the door to the hall.

Ben Todd came in. He looked at Sarah and looked away. Sarah said: "Well, young man?"

"Sarah, I've had a helluva time. Morgenfeldt's a killer. He fired two shots after me as I was crawling out his back window."

"People usually do fire shots at thieves caught in the act," said Sarah, crisply. "I see you haven't got the Rembrandt, young man."

"Sarah, it ain't in Morgenfeldt's apartment. I'm sure of that. And it ain't in Tarrant's studio upstairs either. It might be in Morgenfeldt's art shop but I couldn't break in there. There was a cop . . ."

"I'm not interested in cops. Go over and wake Richard up and splash some cold water on his face. I've got to watch this door to the hall."

"What in hell for? Do you expect Morgenfeldt to come back, bringing the Rembrandt? Do you expect—?"

"I expect you to do as you're told, young man, and do it quick."

Ben Todd did as he was told. Richard Van Deen got to his feet, sat down again on the bed and rubbed his sleep-bleared eyes. Ben Todd leaned negligently against the bare easel, his eyes grim on Sarah, who stood at the door to the hall. Suddenly, but very gently, Sarah shut that door.

"All right, boys," she said. "Get your coats and caps. We're going now."

"Wait," protested Richard Van Deen, shrugging himself into a coat and combing his hair with his fingers. "Wait! I've got to get my painting. What are we going to the Modern Art Galleries for except to take my painting? Where is my painting?"

"Dickie," said Sarah, soothingly, "we can't wait."

"Of course, you can wait. What do you think I paid you five hundred dollars for? I paid five hundred dollars to get my painting so I could hang it in the exhibit. That's what I paid five hundred dollars for."

"You haven't paid five hundred dollars—yet," said Sarah, grimly, "and when you do pay five hundred, you'll pay it for receiving your painting back intact before eight o'clock this morning, as per agreement with me. Your painting is in the umbrella jar over there, if you insist on having it. I put it away there—for safe keeping. Get it quick, if you don't want to be left."

AT ONE minute to seven, an elegant limousine drew up before the doors of the Modern Art Galleries. Mr. Thomas P. VanDeen descended and marched up the marble steps. The doors opened, a female arm in a rusty black sleeve came out of the opening and a hand gripped Mr. VanDeen and drew him within.

The doors shut. Thomas VanDeen found himself in a dim, marble-walled lobby, surrounded by white, inanimate figures in various stages of nudity. The fingers of the woman who gripped his arm were unpleasantly hard.

"Quiet!" warned Sarah Watson, relaxing her hold. "Somebody upstairs. Somebody else due to arrive any minute. Here, get behind this statue, quick, and don't make a sound."

"Madam," protested Thomas P. VanDeen, "I came here to get my Rembrandt, as per your telephone message. I did not come here to lurk behind statues."

"You came here to do as I say," said Sarah, grimly, "if you want your Rembrandt. Duck behind there. Duck

quick! Somebody's coming up the front steps."

Thomas P. VanDeen ducked. He crouched behind the enormous stone figure of some aboriginal female. A side glance showed him two other figures of men hidden behind two other pieces of statuary. One of the figures was tall and lank and leaned negligently. The other was large but unidentifiable, being hidden by a black shadow.

There came the sound of a door opening and of footsteps across the tiled floor. The footsteps slowed and began to go up the curving, marble stairway to the show rooms above. Then silence. Then the swish of skirts and Sarah Watson was once again at Thomas VanDeen's side, beckoning.

Two men emerged from behind statues and joined Thomas VanDeen and Sarah. Thomas VanDeen saw that one of these men was his son and he cursed softly.

"What?" he demanded in a loud whisper. "What is this ingrate son of mine doing here? What, for that matter, is all this idiotic hiding and whispering about? What . . .?"

"Your son," replied Sarah, calmly, "is merely here to hang his painting for the exhibition. You know the painting I mean, Mr. VanDeen. Your son expects to win the prize with his painting, you know, and I can't say I blame him. Now, Mr. VanDeen, the feller we've been waiting for, a Mr. Morgenfeldt, has just arrived and gone upstairs. We will go upstairs, too. Lift your feet, Mr. VanDeen, please, and when we get up, you and your son stay back, out of sight. There may be trouble. It wouldn't do for a man like Thomas P. VanDeen to be mixed up with thieves.

They went up. Sarah and Ben Todd

moved silently toward the door to the gallery in which the exhibition was to take place. VanDeen Senior and VanDeen Junior remained behind in the shadows of the hall, glaring at each other.

Sarah put her hand on the door to the gallery. She said: "No shooting, Bennie," and went in.

Henry Morgenfeldt stood with his back half turned to the door. There was a gun in his hand. The fat young painter, August Banner, stood facing the door, his hands over his head.

Sarah cleared her throat. Morgenfeldt wheeled, bringing up his gun. Ben Todd made a flying leap which carried him as far as Morgenfeldt's small, trim feet. Ben Todd clasped the ankles above the feet and Morgenfeldt went down. Morgenfeldt's gun went off.

Ben Todd crawled up on Morgenfeldt's curving stomach and wrenched at the gun with one hand while he used the other to pound Morgenfeldt's anatomy.

"Sarah!" yelled Ben Todd. "You all right? By hell, if this skunk Morgenfeldt shot you I'll pound him to pulp!"

Sarah did not answer. She was down on the floor. At the moment Ben Todd glimpsed her, she was motionless, her large, black swathed body spread.

Ben Todd gave a groan, finished wrenching the gun from Morgenfeldt's fingers and aimed the gun at Morgenfeldt's pop eyes.

Sarah began to roll. She rolled over on her back and somebody rolled with her, somebody with pale blonde curls and a lot of avoirdupois.

"Ben Todd," said Sarah Watson, in a hoarse, muffled voice, "leave poor Mr. Morgenfeldt alone and come help me with Banner. You *would* pick the wrong man to wallop, young squirt!"

TWO minutes later, Sarah Watson was on her feet, straightening her hat and tucking her black shirtwaist into her black skirt.

Ben Todd stood looming threateningly over the cringing figures of Morgenfeldt and Banner, backed up against the gallery's wall. One of Morgenfeldt's sly dark eyes bore faint shadowings of an impending blackness. August Banner's pink and white complexion was largely congested to deep red and purple. At the door to the hall, the VanDeens stood looking singularly alike with their eyes protruding and their mouths wide. They hadn't moved during the fracas.

"Now," said Ben Todd, breathing a little hard. "Now, Sarah Watson, we'll get things straight and find things out. We'll find out why Morgenfeldt was threatening Banner with a gun. We'll find out why Banner attacked you after we'd saved him from Morgenfeldt's gun. We'll find out where Morgenfeldt has got Mr. Thomas VanDeen's Rembrandt."

"Bennie," barked Sarah, "you always put the most important thing last. Mr. Thomas VanDeen, did you bring the cash in your pocket?"

"I did."

"Mr. VanDeen, do you wish to prefer charges against August Banner, the thief who stole your Rembrandt last night?"

"I—"

"You do not," said Sarah, striding forward, laying a firm hand on the elder VanDeen's sleeve and drawing him aside. "Naturally, you do not," she said in a hoarse whisper. "Of course, Mr. VanDeen, I understand just why you hired August Banner to steal your son's painting, but the cops . . . Well, the cops, as you know, know nothing about art."

Sarah dropped the elder VanDeen's arm and motioned to the gaping Ben Todd.

"Bennie," she said, "just escort Mr. Morgenfeldt and Mr. Banner down the stairs and out the front door. We don't need 'em any more."

Ben Todd went. After he had banged the front door of the Modern Art Galleries on a slinking Mr. Morgenfeldt and a staggering Mr. Banner he legged it up the marble stairs and into the gallery. Sarah Watson was in the act of taking down from the wall a large, gold-framed picture which Ben Todd recognized as August Banner's work.

The picture was heavy and Sarah staggered as she lifted it down but she waved aside help, and clutched the huge thing to her hard bosom. Then she got down on the floor with a thump and adjusted the painting across her lap.

Wordlessly, she plucked a wire hairpin from the knob at the back of her head and began to pry tacks from the back of the picture's frame.

Richard VanDeen bent over, a pen-knife in his hand. He, too, began to pry tacks. The thin board on the back of the painting came loose. Sarah cast it aside. She stood up. She said: "Mr. Thomas VanDeen, the five thousand, please," and thrust the gold framed painting into Mr. VanDeen's arms.

"But—" stuttered Mr. VanDeen, "but this is ridiculous. I certainly have no intention of paying five thousand dollars for this horrible mess of paint which you say is Banner's painting. It's almost as terrible as my son's picture."

"It is," said Sarah, "damn terrible. But if you'll just lift Banner's canvas carefully away from the frame, Mr. VanDeen, you'll find your Rembrandt

hidden underneath. The frame, Mr. VanDeen, was what gave me the lead in the first place—such a big gold frame, just like the frames you have on the rest of your pictures at home. The frame, and the fact that August Banner had cut down his own painting to fit the frame. I couldn't see any reason why a modern painter should cut away an inch of his canvas, unless there was something he wanted to hide. Mr. Morgenfeldt gave me a clue, too. Mr. Morgenfeldt seemed to think there was something worth stealing in Banner's studio, and I felt damn sure it wasn't Banner's painting. I suppose Banner had approached Morgenfeldt about fencing the Rembrandt and spilled something to Morgenfeldt about the unusual circumstances under which the Rembrandt had been acquired. But there, maybe you'd rather not discuss those circumstances, Mr. VanDeen?"

THOMAS VANDEEN did not answer. He seemed hardly to have heard. He was engaged in disengaging August Banner's painting from the big gold frame, revealing the dark, mellow colors of another painting beneath.

"My," said Sarah, peering over his shoulder. "My, that Rembrandt is a nice painting, Mr. VanDeen. Not as bright as your son's picture, of course, but real nice. Now, if you'll just get that five thousand out of your pants, Mr. VanDeen."

Slowly, like a man in a dream, Thomas VanDeen drew a thick roll of bills from his pocket and held them out toward Sarah. Sarah's eyes glinted as she counted. Thomas VanDeen went on staring at the Rembrandt which now lay fully revealed.

Sarah thrust the wad of bills into the maw of her black handbag. She laid her fingers on the elder VanDeen's

arm and pulled him well away from Richard VanDeen and Ben Todd.

"Mr. VanDeen," she said, in a hoarse whisper, "did you bring that extra cash for emergencies, by any chance?"

Thomas VanDeen gave a vague nod and looked back at his picture. Sarah said: "Good. I understand, Mr. VanDeen, that it would be worth at least a thousand to you if your son's art work did not appear in public, now or at any other time?"

Thomas VanDeen nodded again, then took his eyes from the Rembrandt to shoot Sarah a sharp glance.

"Of course," said Sarah, smiling complacently, "you will agree, under those circumstances, to let Richard do architecting instead of art?"

Thomas VanDeen glanced down at the discarded painting by August Banner which lay spread on the floor. He glanced up at his son and the large roll of canvas under his son's arm.

"Madam," he said, quietly, "I'll agree to anything, anything at all."

"Hand me the thousand," whispered Sarah crisply, and extended her square palm.

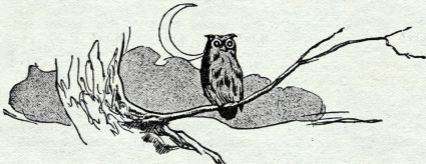
Sarah left Thomas VanDeen and strode to Richard.

"Richard," she said, benignly, "I've fixed everything up. If you'll agree not to exhibit your painting now, or any other painting at any other time, your pa will let you do architecting instead of art."

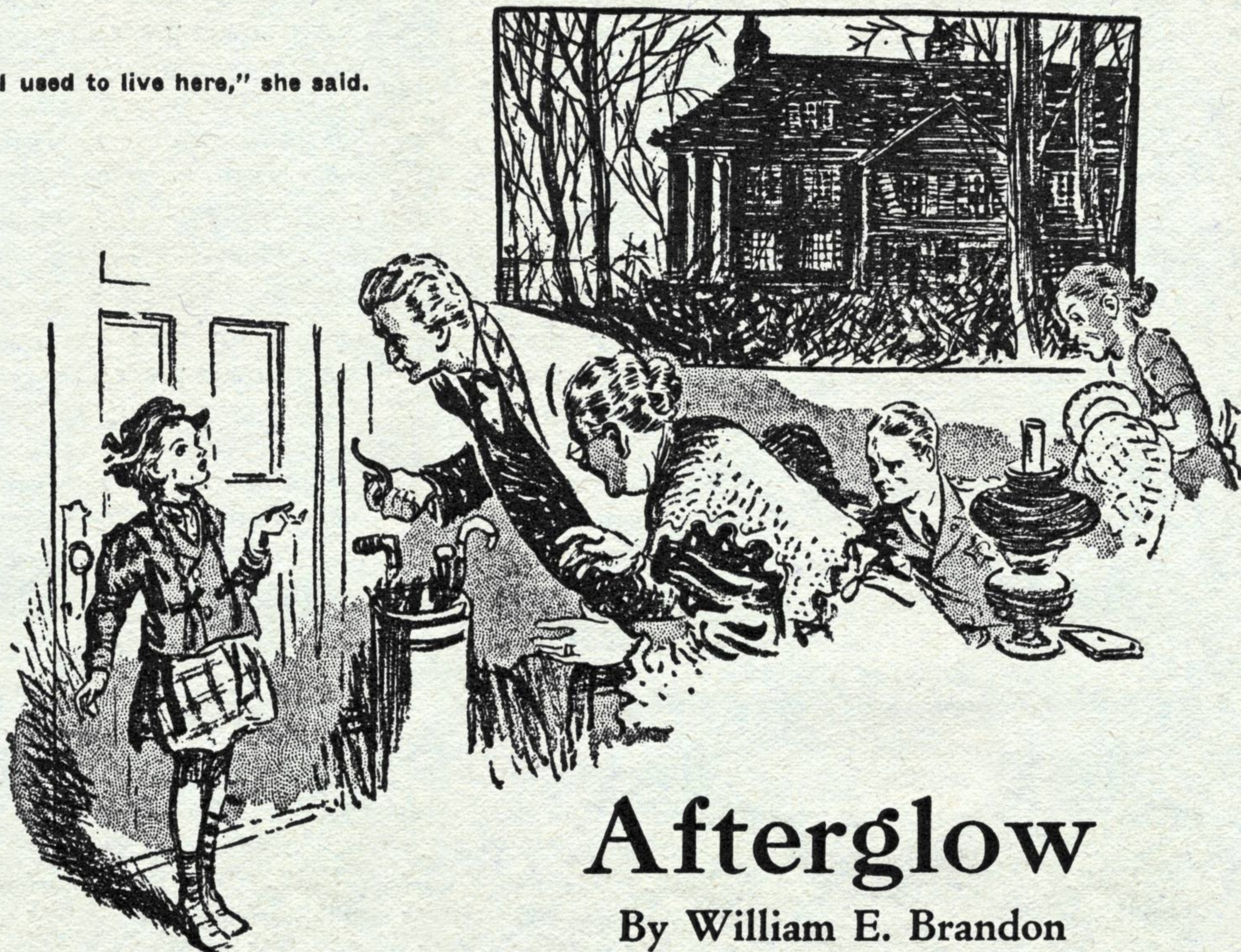
Richard VanDeen grinned. Then suddenly his grin stiffened and his eyes fastened on the bill which Sarah Watson was cramming into her open bag.

"A thousand!" he cried. "You got father to pay you a thousand for persuading me to give up my art! Why, you old doublecrossing harridan, I told you myself that father was willing to pay *me* that much for chucking the painting . . ."

"Maybe," said Sarah, complacently, snapping her bag. "But don't forget, Dickie, that if he had paid you the thousand, instead of me, you would still have had to agree to be a railroad-ing man. By the way, young man, your pa is in a very good humor just now, because he's got his Rembrandt back. You might just step over there and ask him for that four hundred and fifty dollars you owe me, right now. . . ."



"I used to live here," she said.



Afterglow

By William E. Brandon

Author of "Reward," etc.

*Out of the great Nowhere came the
reincarnation of little Mary Correll
—but Trooper McMaim didn't be-
lieve in life after death*

THE lawns were tangled, kneehigh stretches of wiry grass and weeds; the gardens were grown into brush and a few spreading hardies; the house stood like a grim, black spectre, windows mostly blank and shuttered; tarnished, ugly, like a skull that once had been the head of a queen.

It had been a showplace, a magnificent estate, with rolling green lawns kept smoothly cropped, trees and shrubs put in the right places to make the right picture, a sunken garden which had required the services of a head gardener and two assistants. And over all, the centerpiece: the house. It had been alive with hurrying steps, surrounded by motor-cars, noisy with parties, kept like a palace by a corps of servants.

Now it lived in silence and faint sounds; the rustling of a squirrel among the soggy, matted leaves; the beat of a pigeon's wings; the shuddering squeak as one of the four unshuttered windows in the house was opened or closed. The roof of the garage had fallen in on one side; scraps of the roofing hung loose and flapped dismally on windy nights.

It was a place of death, rotting in its own unkempt decay. A place at home with clouds and grayness, storms, the sight of bare tree branches etched against a white, pale moon.

On the public road paralleling the

crumbling wall of the estate, a car came to a stop. A woman was driving. A man and a small girl sat in the back seat.

The man opened the door. "Get out here," he said. "I'll boost you over the wall."

The girl—she was about eleven—followed him out of the car. She was poorly dressed, but clean. Her hair was black, hung in two braids. She was blue eyed, fine featured; within ten years she would be beautiful. She didn't speak.

The man stopped at the wall, turned to her. "Now you remember what we've taught you. We'll know whether you act right or not, and if you don't I'll whip you in two. Understand?"

The woman said, from the car: "Whip her, hell. I'll break her neck if she jams it. After two years of working . . ."

The man growled at her. "Shut up." He spoke again to the girl. "If they send you away or take you away, you get to a telephone and call, and do it damn quick. If they let you stay here, you know where to be next week. On Tuesday night at eight. Got it all?"

She looked up at him. "Yes, sir." Her voice was low.

"All right. And remember: we'll know everything you say. And make it snappy. It's getting dark already." He made a step out of his hands, lifted her up. As she balanced at the top of the wall, he said: "You got your directions right?"

She was looking across the wall, to the other side; she didn't face him again. "Yes, sir."

"Then get going. What the hell you waiting on?"

She scrambled to a more secure position, hesitated, and dropped over the wall and out of sight.

For a moment the man stood still, brushing off his topcoat, then he climbed back in the car, beside the woman. "Okay," he said, "there she goes. Win or lose, we've made our play."

"What are you talking about, lose?" The woman laughed. "It can't lose."

"I got my fingers crossed."

"You can twiddle 'em, sweetheart." She wheeled the car out into the road. "No rules in this game, and we play for keeps."

IN the big house, sitting in one of the three rooms that were kept livable, was Trooper McMMain, of the State Police. It was a usual visit for him; he stopped in often, partly because of the constant fear that someone would try to rob the middle-aged couple and put a particularly dirty crime under his nose. But he also took a real interest in them, enjoyed his visits, always did what he could to take them out of the shells in which they had locked themselves. He was almost the only visitor the Corrells ever saw. They kept an aged housekeeper, and no other servants. They were lonely; they were possibly turning a little crazy after so many years of it, but they were holed up to die, like wounded animals.

McMMain felt sorry for them, but—it was their fault for letting anything whip them that bad. And at that, maybe they were as well off as they had been, before, in one way of looking at it.

Harry Correll, sixty-four, gray-haired, well built, with only that constant expression in his eyes to set him apart from other men, leaned back in his chair and lit one of Trooper McMMain's cigarettes.

"Staying wet late this year," he said. McMMain nodded. "Snow before an-

other week. November means business, in this part of the state."

Martha Correll looked up from her sewing, quickly, as though surprised by something said, and bent her head again. She seemed older than she was. Fifteen years ago she had been in her thirties, and looked even younger. Slim, flippant and debonair. A good hostess and a better talker; modern. . . . Now she was stout, her brown hair graying, her face relaxed in lines which told more of resigned placidity than age. She wore glasses while she sewed and knitted. She seldom talked, and rarely looked directly at another person. She seemed to be only waiting, marking time, consumed with her own thoughts.

But now she said: "November . . ." Her voice died away. For an instant her needle was still, although she did not raise her head again.

Her husband ground out his cigarette, carefully, reserving the stub. He smoked only a pipe, and an occasional cigarette was worth saving.

McMain cleared his throat. "Did you hear about Harvard beating Yale last week? In the last two minutes . . ."

A gleam flashed on and off in Harry Correll's eyes. "Guess I haven't paid much attention lately," he said.

"Well, you see, Yale beat 'em last year because they had an end . . ." McMain launched into a story of the game. Outside, the drizzle of rain built up to a light, steady downpour, filled the old house with soft, whispering sounds.

Martha Correll's quiet voice suddenly broke in on Trooper McMain's football news:

"Harry, listen. . . . At the door . . ."

McMain stopped talking, his round Scotch face alert. The rain was drumming on the east windows, there was a faint rattle of pots and pans from the

kitchen where Annie was at work, but they heard it plainly when it came again: a light, hesitant knocking.

Correll started for the foyer which led to the massive front doors. McMain stood up, his thoughts leaping to the holdup he had so long expected. "Maybe I better do the answering."

Correll shook his head. "I'll see." He walked on out, switching on the foyer light as he went. They heard the door open, the louder rattle of the rain, indistinct voices. McMain was moving toward the door, listening, his right hand at his belt.

The large door thudded shut; Correll's voice, as he returned through the foyer and reentered the room, was touched with something strange. "It's a little girl, Martha."

The woman stood up, dropped her sewing on a table. "On this rainy night? Out here?" She took a step toward the girl, standing just inside the door, her clothes dripping water, and stopped as though jerked. "Harry," she said. Her voice was a whisper.

Correll spoke loudly, stretching out the words. "Call Annie and have her bring some dry blankets." He touched the girl's shoulder. "Come over here by the fire and take off that coat. What are you doing out here in this sort of weather? Are you lost?"

She raised her large, dark eyes, looked up at him. "No, sir." Martha Correll appeared again from the kitchen, came to the doorway in time to hear the girl say: "I used to live here."

McMain saw the woman sway in the doorway, reach out and clutch the trim for support. Her comfortable, middle-aged face was drawn, her eyes wide behind her glasses.

Annie edged around her, blankets draped over her withered arms. She dropped the blankets, choked out in a

thin, half strangled voice: "Lord Merciful! It's—"

Correll barked at her: "Be quiet, Annie. Get her dried out, and then we'll talk to her." He put a blanket around the girl, touched her again gently. "Go with Annie now, and she'll get you into some warm clothes."

The little girl obediently followed the old housekeeper out of the room. Correll stood by the fireplace, looking after her; he looked, for an instant, like a very old man, feeble, emaciated, confused.

THE little girl sat in a big Jacobean chair, her dark hair combed out and spread over her shoulders. Her face was white, a pale background for her eyes.

"I don't know why," she said. "I just came." And she repeated: "I used to live here."

"When?" asked Correll. His tones were hoarse, uneven.

"I don't know." She looked from Correll to his wife and back again. There was no fright in her eyes. "I'll go, if you want me to."

Martha Correll leaned forward with a rush of words but her husband silenced her. "You can stay here until we find out who you are." He lit his pipe with trembling fingers. "Don't you remember where you came from? Or your name?"

She nodded. "I won't tell you where I came from. It was bad, and I didn't like it. It was a long ways off. My name is Mary."

"Mary!" Martha Correll's voice broke in a sob.

"What was your last name?"

"I don't know. They wouldn't tell me."

"Then the people you stayed with weren't your parents?"

"No, sir."

"But had you always lived with them?"

"No, sir. I lived here first. And there was another place that I can't hardly remember. And then I went to live with—them."

"Where did you come from today? Were you walking? Did you know where you were going?"

"Yes, sir. I was coming here. I've been walking for a long time. I was in a big city last night and I walked out from there today. It was Philadelphia. Why are you so curious?"

Correll swallowed. "Well, Mary, you see . . . We had—we had a little girl once, and she looked like you. Not quite, but . . ."

"Ain't the same mouth and chin," whispered Annie from the doorway, "but it's her hair and eyes and way of talking."

"Where is she now?" asked Mary.

Correll gestured aimlessly with his hand. "She died, Mary. A long time ago. We've thought of her so much that when you—came—it almost seemed as though—as though . . ."

And then, as simply as though she were telling of a day at school, the little girl said: "I know. I remember. That's why I wanted to come back." Her eyes widened a little, but were still clear and without fear. She said, to Correll: "You're papa." She looked at his wife. "And you are my mamya. But you are both a lot different."

Martha Correll said, in a voice that had lost its shakiness and become steady: "You heard her, Harry. You remember, Mary called me 'mamya'? It . . ."

Correll was looking helplessly around the room. The trooper was seated by the window, out of the way, bent forward, listening.

Correll said to him: "Am I going like you said I would, Mac?"

McMain stood up and came nearer them. "You're all right, Harry. I hear her too." He said to the little girl: "Mary, how much do you remember? Tell us everything you can, will you?"

He smiled down at her, and she rested her head against the back of the heavy chair and began.

"I don't remember you. Papa's chauffeur wore a suit—I mean a uniform—something like yours, but he didn't wear a gun. And he wasn't as good looking as you are. He had a little mustache, and his skin was real dark, almost like a colored man's, and mamya was always scolding him for driving the car with just one hand on the steering wheel. He bought me some candy once, when we were waiting for papa to get through at his office, and it made me so sick I had to stay in bed for two days. So I missed Gertrude—Gertrude—Gertrude Johnson, that was her name—I missed her birthday party.

"I used to live in the little room right up those stairs and then one door to the front. It had pictures all over the walls, of animals and wagons, and all like a circus parade. And oh, we used to have such good times when mamya—"

Correll shouted: "Stop it, for heaven's sake!" He jumped up. "I can't stand it, Mac. What is it?"

McMain was silent a moment. And then: "When were you born, Mary?"

"They never told me just right out. But I always got birthday presents on November sixteenth. They just gave me something and said that was for my birthday. I'm eleven."

"November sixteenth, eleven years ago," McMain said slowly. "That was the day wasn't it, Harry?"

Correll dropped back into his chair, without answering. His wife, sitting very still, her hands folded in her lap, said: "Yes. That was the day Mary died."

"Then there's a theory," said McMain, "that a lot of people believe. You've both heard it."

Martha Correll nodded. "Reincarnation, isn't it?"

"They believe that when a person dies the soul is immediately transferred to someone else, who is born at the same instant. Or even to a cat or a dog or some other animal, born at the same time that death occurs. And sometimes, they say, something awakens that soul to memories of its former life, and . . ."

"Good heavens," said Correll, "do you think that's possible?" He raised his haggard face. "Isn't it damn nonsense, Mac?"

"I don't know," said McMain. "I'll try and get her checked up on. We'll be able to locate her beginnings someplace. After that, maybe we'll know more." He glanced at the girl, asked her: "How did you get over the wall, Mary?"

He caught the brief, telltale expression in her eyes. The expression of a child thinking up a lie. . . . "I climbed over. There were a lot of vines growing on it."

McMain nodded. "Well," he said, "I'll get in my report and see what we can find out. I suppose, if you wanted to, Harry, you could have out a bunch of big doctors and mental specialists and so on . . ."

"No, no. We'll trust ourselves in this. We'll have to."

"Right," said McMain, he lowered his voice, "let her talk as much as she wants to, and remember it if she gets anything wrong."

"What would be her reason for lying to us? Where would she have gotten the stuff she knows?"

McMain grinned at him. "Walk mighty slow, Harry. Keep hold of yourself. The fifteen or twenty million dollars you're still worth is a lot of reason for a lot of things. Maybe I'm just a cop." He turned for the door. "I'll stop every day and let you know if I find out anything.

SHOCK wore off gradually. The next day found the couple curiously weak, physically, but ready to talk to the little girl. And there was the glimmering of something inside them—something that had been buried for eleven years. The thing that had sunk to the bottoms of their souls like a rock on that day their daughter died.

Harry Correll had been forty-three and his wife almost thirty when their daughter had been born. They had set her up like a small goddess and worshipped her. She had lived to be ten years old, and had died, suddenly, of pneumonia.

They hadn't been able to take her death calmly. They hadn't gotten over it, and after a few months had given up trying. Harry Correll had retired from his business. He and his wife had lived, since, in this country place, letting it fall to pieces around them, shutting out everything except harsh bitterness at the memory of undeserved tragedy.

But now, as he took the little girl, the seemingly supernatural reincarnation of his daughter, walking through the grounds, heard her tell of places and incidents in the past, heard her describe the grounds as they had once looked, he heard himself saying:

"Wait a while, Mary. We'll do them all again. You and I and your—

Martha." He had almost said, "Your mother."

Mary took his hand. "I hope it will make you happy."

Correll shook himself. A disturbing, almost frightening feeling had swept over him at her touch. Something powerful; something he could not understand. Imagination . . . he was building this thing up too high. He was a man sixty-four years old, and at that age a man had common sense and—but he looked down at the little girl, tightened his grip on her hand and said: "Let's go back to your mother."

McMain stopped several times, reported no results from the search for information regarding the girl. The only thing a man could believe, he said, was that she had sprung out of the ground that night, and closed the earth behind her.

But Trooper McMain had too much police work behind him. Police work teaches a man that there is a practical reason for every unusual thing, and that this practical reason is either madness, hate or money. The little girl, Mary, seemed sane, and certainly there was no hate in her, and little possibility of that motivation behind her. But there was money . . .

It was strange, that she should come to the Corrells, armed with her knowledge of what had passed, leaving no trace behind. And reincarnation was a religion to a great many people. . . . But so was money.

The one thing, the one fault in any solution he could figure, was the girl herself. He liked her. She was honest, straightforward, frank with all she said. . . . With the one exception of what he knew had been her lie about climbing the wall.

She was old enough to understand what she would be doing to the Corrells

if she was mixed in a deliberate plot. Trooper McMMain held a cynical attitude about people in general, but he was sold on Mary. The kid wouldn't be capable of the compounded lies and artfulness, the cruel, planned deception necessary for an acted lie.

And since any logical answer rested on the assumption that she was, McMMain was stymied. He did what every thoughtful detective does when he finds himself looking at the eight ball; he kept on looking.

HE stopped at the Corrells' on Sunday evening, noticed the changes in the house as he approached it. For two days a crew of men had been going over the place. They were going to fix it up, open several more rooms.

He found the three of them in the large front room, sitting in a close circle, talking. Harry Correll jumped up to meet him, took him aside to talk. His eyes were bright, glittering; he was flushed, enthusiastic.

"We've done it, Mac. We know, now, that she's Mary come back to us. . . . Lord, it's unbelievable!" He ran a hand through his gray hair. "But we know, and so we've done it. We had our lawyers out yesterday, and got the papers ready."

"Papers?"

"We're trying to adopt her. We can, of course, unless someone appears on the scene who claim to be her real parents, or who hold some prior authority of some sort. But we don't anticipate that, Mac. There aren't any such people. She's ours."

"I hope so, Harry." McMMain paused. "How about your will?"

"Both Marth and I changed our wills. It'll go to her. We wanted to do something—right away—that gave us some sort of legal claim on her, even

if it was slight. We know, but the world—wouldn't believe it."

"Besides which," McMMain said quietly, "if you and your wife would happen to die suddenly, little Mary would be worth quite a fortune. After which, if her real parents would show up, or someone else that had adopted her first, they'd step in and—"

"I know that; I know that. Working out that way, I suppose the people she's been staying with, whoever they are, might have a chance to take part of it from her. But that would be hard for them to do, Mac. And anyway, what the hell, Martha and I would have to die first. . . . Lord, man, I won't die for ninety years yet, the way I feel tonight! I'm just beginning to see what that little girl's bringing us. I don't care what happens after we're gone, as long as we're here I want to give everything to her. Listen: We're taking her in town next week. She's going to pick out—"

McMMain cut in: "Harry, you realize how long you've known her?"

"Five days, by counting. But more than twenty years by my figures, Mac; and by Martha's."

McMMain looked bleak.

"Then you haven't got any doubts left about reincarnation?"

Correll frowned slightly. "If I have, Mac, I'm not thinking about 'em. I don't think I have; she remembers too much about—about the other time. It's—It's a fascinating adventure, for us, to hear her tell. . . . But aside from that, barring any part of that or any chance of it, we would still want her. She came to us, Mac, and now we want her to stay."

McMMain stuck out his hand. "Then best wishes, Harry," He suddenly grinned. "Damn it, for all my knowing it can't be true, I know it can't be the

other way around either. She's too fine a kid."

Correll laughed. His fading blue eyes were misty. "For a cop, you've got a lot of sense. Watch us start to live now, Mac. I'll have some noise around this old barn again. I'll make the place like a Sultan's garden. We're going to make up for eleven years of decay. I'll give that girl everything she could want. Don't you see? We've got her back!"

McMain turned away. "I hope so," he said shortly. He left the house, but he didn't leave the grounds. He called in to his station, got them to allow a man to help him. Trooper McMain began guard duty around the Correll estate.

The assisting trooper was there all day Monday, and throughout Monday night McMain prowled around the place, outside the wall and inside, watching the house, the roads, the gates.

He was back on Tuesday night, an hour or so before dark, and took up the job again. He was allowing himself a week of this. If the impossible was happening; if someone outside was pulling the strings which worked that little girl, they would have to have some way of meeting. . . .

He circled the place once, rested a while, started around again.

HE caught the sound of the motor at a few minutes before eight. The road outside the estate was little traveled; he listened to the car, heard the motor suddenly cut off. He began to run through the grass and brush, swearing under his breath because he was so far away from the road.

He cut across the estate, heading toward the spot which he had marked in his mind. It was a dark night; he

stumbled over a vine root, picked himself up and stumbled on.

He pulled himself up on the wall, slid over to the roadside quietly, stood there, for an instant.

The car was sitting beside the road, a black blot in the night, less than a hundred yards distant. McMain started for it, moving softly.

He heard a man's voice, but was too far away to catch the words. And then—although he'd been certain she was at the car, the shock of proof stopped him like a blow to the middle—he heard the little girl answering, her tones hushed and fearful.

A door of the car slammed, and the motor whipped to life.

McMain broke into a run; the car was swinging slowly out into the road. It was starting away with its lights out; creeping away like some escaping thug with his cap pulled over his eyes. . . .

He dove for it as it passed, caught the door handle, jerked himself up to the running board. His uniform was outlined against the sky; they would know him for a cop.

The car leaped forward like a living thing; he heard someone inside shout hoarsely and the window was rolled up. McMain swung his gun barrel to break it.

The mad careening of the car saved his life. It slashed into a rut, pitched from left to right, straightened out, and McMain was almost thrown clear.

He heard the shot, saw the flash of flame, heard the crackling shatter of the glass. The slug drove into his left shoulder, jerked his hand off the door handle. He fell from the runningboard, rolled into the ditch beside the road.

The roar of the car drew away, grew faint. McMain struggled to his knees, waited while his head cleared, got to

his feet. His left arm and shoulder were numb and blood was soaking through to his coat. He headed for the Corrells' house. He wouldn't break it to them yet, but would see the girl, talk to her. Tomorrow . . .

"Some Lover's Lane bandits," he explained, as old Annie bandaged the wound. "They got away, and yours was the nearest place to come for help."

Correll whistled. "A narrow shave. They must have been desperate."

McMain said: "I think they were."

Annie completed her first aid; Correll said: "Come in the front room and I'll pour some brandy. We'll get you into town right away where you can get complete fixing." He laughed suddenly as he entered the front room. "The excitement's got Mary awake."

"Gone to bed already?" asked McMain.

"Yes. Too much town and shopping today. She went to bed almost in the middle of her dinner."

Martha Correll and the little girl were sitting side by side on a sofa in the great front room. It would be easy to believe, now, that the little girl wasn't well. Her eyes were troubled; her skin pale; she seemed nervous. McMain grinned and spoke to her.

He sat down carefully, took a glass of brandy from Correll. After a moment he said to him: "Harry, I've been thinking . . . Mary's told a lot of things, but are you sure she's ever told you anything that only she would know? That is, something that someone else couldn't have tutored her in?"

Correll made an impatient gesture. "Dozens of times. Damn it, Mac, we're willing to believe it. We do believe it." They were keeping their voices low.

"You're not afraid she couldn't do it, are you Harry?"

"Afraid—I'm not afraid of anything! I tell you, we're happier than . . . I told you, she already has told things no one else could know."

"What was one of them?"

"Oh . . . There were several. . . ." Correll twirled his brandy glass between his fingers, set it down. "I can't remember any at the moment."

Mac changed position, to ease his shoulder. "Do you mind if I ask her?"

"Mind? Of course not. But I don't like troubling her—she's not feeling well tonight."

His wife caught the words, asked: "Troubling her about what, Harry?" Martha Correll had lost ten years during the past week. There was life in her eyes.

"Nothing," said McMain quickly. "I was just interested—wondering if Mary had ever told you anything that absolutely no one could have told her. One incident, for the sake of—"

She laughed. "Oh, I'm sure she had, she's told us so much. Can you think of one in particular, Mary?"

For once the little girl's eyes kept to the floor. McMain, noticing her small, thin hands, saw that they were tightly locked in her lap, the knuckles showing white. "No, mamya," she said finally, "I guess I can't."

"Let's see . . ." Martha Correll shut her eyes a moment, opened them; they were suddenly sober, tragic with memory. "Can you remember, dear, the day you—the day you—" She cleared her throat. "The last day you were here with us. I was alone in the room with you. It was—it was so near the end. I've never told anyone, and I know no one else heard. I could scarcely catch your words myself . . ."

Without warning, Mary was speaking. She was sitting straight up, her eyes fastened on the rug at her feet.

She was very still, spoke softly, slowly:

"I couldn't hardly get my breath. You said—you said—'If you go away, remember that papa and I will come to join you, sometime.' And then you cried. And while you were crying, I said, 'I am going away, and maybe for a long time. But if you will wait here for me, I will come back.'

"But you went on crying, so after a while I said it to you again and made you stop crying to watch me cross my heart when I promised I would come back. I had read in a book about pirates signing an oath with blood, so I tried to scratch my arm to make it bleed, so you would know I meant my promise, but I couldn't scratch hard enough.

"And then one of my feet got out from under the cover, and I said, 'My toe is cold, mamya.' And you were crying again, and—and . . ." With a quick, wild fling of her head she looked up at Trooper McMMain, started to her feet and fell back. She was shaking. She caught hold of Martha Correll's dress. "I want to stay with you. I'm so afraid . . ."

Martha Correl put an arm around her, drew her close. Her eyes were filled with tears. "Mary," she said softly.

McMMain took a deep breath. "That," he said, "was the way it was?"

She nodded. "Every word. Only her—her foot wasn't out from under the cover. Those were the last words she said."

Correll said: "You see now why we believe, Mac?"

McMMain stood up. He heard the car turning in the drive that was to take him to the hospital. He shook Correll's hand silently and left the room.

Someone, he knew, had lost their senses, and he wasn't sure that it wasn't Trooper McMMain.

HE was in the hospital, getting a professional dressing, when part of it hit him like a cannonball.

Whoever had been contacting the little girl that night would have learned then about the will. After McMMain's jump at them they would fear their play dug out. Tomorrow, the will could be changed again.

They had shot at him; they wouldn't stop with killing. If the Corrells should die in the night, the will would probably stand. It would be their last card.

Within ten minutes he had called his station and the sheriff's office and was in the car, his foot to the floorboard, holding the wheels to the road with his one good hand. The little girl's story had hypnotized him, mesmerized him, put his brains to sleep.

He jammed on the brake, skidded to a stop at the Corrells' main gate, stamped on the accelerator again. The main gate was open.

There was a light in one room of the house, but a thick silence over the place when he cut his motor.

He leapt from the car, ran for the porch.

A figure reared up by the steps, grabbed his good arm, whirled him to the ground. A gun prodded into his ribs.

He heard a woman's voice. "Look, he's tied up. Maybe that's the guy that jumped us."

The man holding him down answered savagely: "He won't jump again." He raised his arm.

"Wait!" The woman stepped up to them. "We'll take him to the door and hold him in front of us. No chance of a slip that way. The door'll be wide before they catch on."

McMMain struggled for breath. He said: "You'll do a lot of killing cheap. You can't get anything out of it."

The woman laughed at him. "Listen to that, Jack. No, not over five or ten million, copper."

"You're crazy," McMMain was playing for time. "As soon as you show yourselves you'll spoil the whole deal."

"We don't have to show ourselves. We'll do our collecting right through little Mary. If she balks, well, we can come in then with a few papers we've got around."

"Which won't be worth a nickel if they know you've used force or threats—or murder."

"Which they won't know. . . . Get him on his feet, Jack. He may have some buddies on the way. Let's get this hayride going."

The man got McMMain to his feet, held his arm twisted behind him, led him up to the thick front doors. The woman stood against the wall, next to the doors, the man behind McMMain. He reached around him and knocked on the door.

They waited. Steps sounded on the other side of the doors, they heard the click of a latch.

Correll barked, from behind them: "Put up your hands."

The woman whirled and fired, but the roar of Correll's old revolver beat the crack of her automatic, blended with her scream.

McMMain jerked with his arm, lashed it down with all his strength, caught a slippery hold on Jack's gun, lost it, bent his elbow and rammed it into the other's belly. The man doubled up, McMMain stepped back and kicked him in the chin.

He went over backwards and down the steps, lit at Correll's feet.

Correll stepped up on the porch. His shoulders were sagging; the gun hung from his hand.

"That's that, Mac."

Headlights were swinging down the drive. McMMain said: "Go on in. I'll be in as soon as they cart these away."

Correll paused at the door. "She—can you . . ."

McMMain said: "I'll keep her out for a while, anyhow." He called to the sheriff. "Two of 'em. They're the same ones I jumped in the road tonight. Tried to rob the old couple here; what I've been expecting for ten years."

"Dirty business." The sheriff bent over the woman. "That slug cut her up. . . . Well, if they live they'll live in prison."

"I'll go in and talk to the Corrells."

The sheriff peered up at him. "All right. We'll get back and see what a doctor can make out of this junk. Slick work, Mac."

"Yeah." McMMain went inside.

MARY raised her wide, dark eyes, looked McMMain in the face. "All of a sudden I was afraid, and I couldn't lie to them any more. So I told them about Jack and Eva and what they had said tonight, so papa went outside and stayed in the yard with his gun, and told mamya to go and pretend to answer the door if anyone knocked, but not to open it. Now I'm glad I did, because—"

"How long had you lived with them?" asked McMMain.

"I was there for two years. They took me out of an orphan asylum. Nobody knew who I was, but they took me as soon as they saw me."

"Because you looked like Mary," said McMMain suddenly, without thinking. He didn't look at Correll.

"That was my real name," the girl said in her small voice. "That was always my name. So all the time they kept me Eva was teaching me all about

papa and mamya and the house and the garden and the trees . . ."

"This Eva," McMMain broke in again. "You remember her? Was she a maid, or a governess?"

Martha Correll said, in a dead, toneless voice: "There was an upstairs maid with us for years called Eva. It may have been she."

McMMain glanced again at Mary, and the girl went on: "And then they brought me here and I did what they had told me to. I was afraid of them."

McMMain wiped sweat from his forehead. His shoulder was throbbing. "Then what made you tell on them tonight?"

She kept her luminous eyes on him. "I just had to, all of a sudden. After . . ."

She paused.

McMMain could feel rather than hear as Harry Correll and his wife leaned forward in their chairs. From the corner of his vision he caught a picture of

Correll's right hand, gripping the arm of his chair, the fingers working.

"After mamya asked me to tell about—that last day—tonight." Her voice dropped. "Eva hadn't told me about that."

McMMain heard Martha Correll suddenly let out her breath; a quick rush of whispered words were carried with it: "I knew she couldn't have. No one could have."

The girl went on: "So after I told it, everything seemed different, you see. I had to tell papa on Jack and Eva, because then he was really—"

McMMain didn't let her say it; he could feel his nerves drawing up in knots. "But if they hadn't told you, Mary, how did you know it?"

Martha Correll got up, but Mary didn't see her; her large eyes were fastened on something else, farther away. She said: "I just knew, all of a sudden. It—seemed like I remembered it."

Fallible Fingerprints

ONE of the more popular dodges of the fictional malefactor since the advent of fingerprinting was the one of the executed murderer's thumb carefully preserved and used to leave a print on a burgled safe to the complete bafflement of the local gendarmerie. A good trick if you could get the murderer's thumb.

A far neater device was employed by a prisoner on trial at Croydon, England, recently. The Crown's case rested on the prisoner's fingerprint found on a stolen article. The prisoner, while admitting it was his print all right, contended that it might have been put there by someone else. And this is how he proved it: Placing a plastic pad against a police officer's thumb, he then pressed it on a mirror, leaving an excellent print of the astonished officer. He claimed further to have lifted the print of an entirely unsuspecting person from a glove and transferred it to another surface, thus disproving the entire theory of fingerprinting.

The Crown characterized the demonstration as utterly fantastic but the jury agreed with the prisoner's contention that his print *might* have found its way upon the loot without his having touched it, and acquitted him.

—Perry Paul

Coffins for Three



"The name of the guilty man is flying toward this room at this very minute."

CONCLUSION

By Frederick C. Davis

Author of "Front Page Dynamite," etc.

CHAPTER XVIII

A Truce

Sometimes a man who can pull a bluff can also pull a murderer out of a pigeon cote

NAKED, Hatch crawled out of the bedclothes, ventured into a sitting position and smiled with unexpected relief.

"I'll be damned if I don't feel pretty good," he said.

Sanders was lying on the opposite side of the bed, fully clothed, with his right wrist hanging from the handcuff linked to the chair placed beside him. He attempted vainly to turn over and mumbled a complaint.

This story began in Detective Fiction Weekly for February 19

"I say, can't you take these bloody manacles off me, Hatch? You jolly well know I shan't run away."

"I told you last night Danny took the key with him," Hatch said. "I'd like to know what the hell's happened to him." He looked at his watch. "Past noon. What time did Kerrigan leave?"

"You kept telling him how much you admire your father," Sanders said, "so it was about four o'clock, when you finished the second bottle of Scotch."

Hatch went into the bath and took a cold shower. He toweled himself vigorously, then shaved, using Sanders' razor, and dressed. Sitting at the telephone, he found the number of Kerrigan's agency in the directory, and called it.

"Hello," Kerrigan's voice rumbled. "Good morning, Kerrigan," Hatch said.

"What's good about it?" Kerrigan retorted.

"I'm coming over."

"It'll be just dandy if the police spot you here," Kerrigan said. "It'll be so beneficial to my reputation."

"You'll be seeing me in half an hour," Hatch said.

Kerrigan muttered something and hung up.

When he finished dressing, Hatch transferred a "Do Not Disturb" card to the outside knob.

"If Danny shows up, Sanders, tell him to try his damndest to get in touch with me," he said. "So long."

Sanders was putting the chair to bed with himself. He sighed, "So long."

Leaving the hotel, Hatch bought a paper. He entered the first restaurant he saw. While he ate breakfast, he read with sober care the front-page news about the murders.

The police were still working on the theory that Rhoda Quinn's body had been dumped from an automobile. Lloyd Daly and John Pirano were still being held. Norman Sanders was still being sought. A search was still being made for Professor Cyrus Hatch.

A meeting of the faculty of Knickerbocker College, to consider the status of Professor Hatch in the case, would be held that afternoon.

Nowhere in the columns was there a hint to explain the absence of Danny Delevan.

Hatch left the restaurant and walked across town to Kerrigan's office.

The office was old-fashioned, orderly and clean. The windows bore golden legends: *Kerrigan Detective Bureau, Confidential Service, Licensed & Bonded Operatives, Investigations Conducted Ethically, No Case Too Small—None Too Large.* Kerrigan looked at Hatch darkly across his neat desk.

"The more I think about that letter you wrote, the more I'm damned sure this whole thing is going to explode in our faces," Kerrigan said.

"We'll have to go through with it," Hatch said. "The letter's probably in the Commissioner's hands by now."

"It is, definitely," Kerrigan informed him. "I talked with Lois Westcott on the phone a few minutes ago. A couple of detectives came for the letter, and then the Commissioner phoned her. All she could tell him was that the pigeon flew in with it."

"Didn't the Commissioner talk with Howard Westcott?"

"The Commissioner didn't talk with Howard Westcott," Kerrigan said, "because Howard Westcott hasn't come back home yet."

In alarm, Hatch asked, "He hasn't what?"

"I said he hasn't come back home yet," Kerrigan repeated vehemently, "and I'd damned well like to know why. I'll tell you how this thing is going to end up, Hatch. The cops are going to pin these murders onto Westcott, onto my client."

"They'll certainly try to, if they ever find out that Rhoda Quinn's body was hung out the penthouse window so it wouldn't be discovered right away," Hatch agreed, "—so the murderer would have time to make himself scarce."

Kerrigan smacked his flat palm against the desk. "The only way to save Westcott is to hurry up and pin these murders on the guilty man—and even that may not save him."

HATCH glanced at the newspapers on the desk. "The Commissioner must have shown the letter to the suspects by now, but nobody's confessed yet," he observed.

"Nobody ever will," Kerrigan said. "Whoever's guilty would be a damned fool to let that letter scare him into a confession."

"Still," Hatch said, "he has plenty of reason for being scared as hell."

"Even if fifty pigeons were going to come flying in with an accusation all tied up in pretty pink ribbon, he'd still have nothing to lose and everything to gain by keeping his mouth shut," Kerrigan said.

"But he's under terrific tension, waiting for the next message," Hatch said. "The tension will grow greater and greater. He'll suffer more and more. It'll become almost unendurable. Finally—"

"Finally he'll still keep his mouth shut," Kerrigan said.

"I'm hoping his nerve will crack," Hatch said. "It may not crack until the

very last minute, until the bird actually flies in with the message, but men have been broken by less than that, Kerrigan."

"Some men never break," Kerrigan returned. "Anyway, whose name are we going to put into that message?"

"I still haven't the faintest idea," Hatch said. "I feel that I ought to know, but I don't. I hope I'll be able to find out something during the day. I'm counting on you to help me out with the rest of it, Kerrigan."

"There's nothing else I can do now," Kerrigan said. "So long as the whole works are going to be blown up anyway, we might as well blow 'em up your own special way."

"Stay here at your desk, so I can reach you in a hurry if I turn something up," Hatch said.

"What if you *don't* turn up anything?" Kerrigan asked.

"Then you're going to release the bird anyway," Hatch said. "Wait as long as possible, but not too long, or the damned bird will roost somewhere and won't show up until tomorrow morning. Give it a chance to get to the Westcott loft before dusk."

"Where will *you* be while everybody's waiting for the pigeon?"

"If I'm lucky, I'll be in Westcott's loft," Hatch said, "along with the suspects, the Commissioner and a squad of detectives."

"The Commissioner will find out the whole Alexander household is acquainted with you," Kerrigan said. "What then?"

"We can't let him find out, or he'd sure as hell suspect I'm staging the whole thing," Hatch said. "Call up Lois Westcott. Tell her she doesn't know me. Tell her Terry never heard of me. Howard Westcott isn't aware I exist. Suzette never saw me before.

Rupert Alexander—what the hell can we do with that glass-eating hellion? We can't get him out of the picture. If we ask him to put on an act for us, he'll demand to know why. We'll have to take a chance on him and hope for the best."

"The best is none too good," Kerrigan said.

Hatch rose. "If this plan works, Kerrigan, we'll celebrate with a binge that'll make binge history. If it doesn't work . . ."

Kerrigan moaned.

At the door, Hatch looked back. "Have you any idea where Danny is?" he asked anxiously.

Kerrigan shook his head. "I'm not even sure where *I* am," he said.

PURPOSEFULLY, Hatch went out. He stepped into a telephone booth in the foyer and spun the dial.

"Police Headquarters," came the response.

"Connect me with the Commissioner's office. . . . This is Cyrus Hatch calling."

In a moment, Mark Hatch growled over the line, "Damnation, Cyrus, how long are you going to keep jumping in and out of this telephone?"

"That's up to you, Mark," Cyrus Hatch answered. "I'll surrender right now, if you'll agree to certain conditions."

"I'll agree to throw you into the cooler and keep you there, Cyrus," the Commissioner said.

"Hold on a minute, Mark," Cyrus Hatch said. "My position at the beginning of this case was justified, and you know it. But I'm not working in opposition to you any longer. I want to help you."

"Help me?" Mark Hatch retorted. "Help me? Cyrus, there are eighteen

thousand trained men on this police force."

"How many of them know who killed Seligman and Flack and Rhoda Quinn?" Cyrus Hatch inquired.

"What's that? Damnation, Cyrus, do you mean to tell me you know—"

"I admit I don't, Mark," Cyrus Hatch interrupted, "but I'm getting pretty damned warm."

Mark Hatch was quiet a moment. "That's more than I can say," he admitted.

"I'll make a bargain with you. I understand the police sometimes bargain with criminals," Cyrus Hatch said with an ironic smile. "If you'll grant me a reasonable degree of freedom for a short time, I'll undertake to produce a murderer for you. If I fail to do it, before nightfall, I'll admit I'm licked, and you can go ahead and give me the works without any further resistance on my part."

"Do you mean that, Cyrus?" Mark Hatch demanded.

"I mean it," Cyrus Hatch said.

"Damnation!" the Commissioner exclaimed. "What are your conditions?"

"Phone your detectives and tell them they're to allow me to go wherever I please, in their company and under their observation. All I want is a chance to get my hands on certain information."

"You'll be technically under arrest," the Commissioner reminded Cyrus.

"Fair enough," he said. "Spread the word pronto, will you, Mark?"

"I will," Mark Hatch said.

"As a token of my appreciation, I'll turn a fugitive over to you," Cyrus Hatch promised. "You still want Norman Sanders, don't you?"

"Damnation!" the Commissioner exploded.

"I'll bring him along," Cyrus Hatch said. "Mark, have you arrested Danny? Are you holding him somewhere?"

"No, we haven't got Danny," the Commissioner growled, "but we certainly want Sanders."

"I'll be seeing you, Mark," Cyrus Hatch said.

"I hope so," said Mark Hatch.

WORRIED but smiling, Cyrus Hatch walked across town. He passed the Commonwealth, stepped into a hardware store on Third Avenue, bought a small saw, then returned to the hotel. When he entered Room 1521, he found Sanders sitting on the bed and making a ghastly grimace while vainly trying to squeeze his hand through the handcuff.

"Hello, Sanders," Hatch said. "No word from Danny?"

Sanders relaxed hopelessly. "Not a word, Hatch," he said.

Hatch unwrapped the saw. Sanders eagerly watched its teeth bite through the arm of the chair. Hatch pried the cut apart and detached the cuff.

"I say, that's a relief!" Sanders said. "Now can't you unfasten the rest of the bloody thing?"

"Not without the key Danny has." Hatch threw the saw on the bed. "We're on our way to Headquarters."

"Headquarters!" Sanders echoed in a horrified tone.

"You can't stay in hiding like this," Hatch said, "and I didn't promise I wouldn't turn you in. Anyway, we're both in the same boat."

"But they'll investigate me!"

"Not if you use your head. Did you connect with a lawyer?"

"Yes. I know a chap—"

"Phone him again and tell him you're giving yourself up upon his

advice. He'll be on hand to protect your interests. If you stick to the story I outlined for you, you'll be reasonably safe. Try to give the impression that you're honest, well-meaning, somewhat timid and not too bright."

Hatch waited impatiently while Sanders used the telephone, then steered Sanders from the room. Sanders concealed the dangling cuff by putting his hand in his coat pocket. Leaving the hotel, Hatch signaled a taxi.

"Look here, Hatch," Sanders said nervously as the cab rolled. "There are still holes in the story I must tell. For instance, about my going to your place yesterday noon, when I found Flack there."

"Why did you go?" Hatch asked.

"I'd read about you in the papers," Sanders said. "I wanted to convince you I'd nothing to do with killing Seligman. It seemed the wisest thing to do."

"Good. Tell the police that," Hatch said. "Why did you quarrel with Flack?"

"He was jarred almost out of his wits," Sanders said. "He shouted things about his high-class law office and his fine reputation. The bloody maniac seemed to think all this trouble was my fault. I wouldn't listen to that, you know. He threatened to have me arrested. I told him he could jolly well go to blazes, and left."

"You left because Flack scared you by accusing you of malefactions you knew nothing about," Hatch said. "That was while my secretary was still out, wasn't it?"

"That's right," Sanders said. "I was shaky, so I stopped in a bar and had a half-and-half, and something to eat. Then I went back, hoping you'd come in, in the meantime, but a crowd was

on the sidewalk and the police were overrunning the place."

"You saw me come out of the house next door, and followed me directly to Zarata's. Directly—remember that. Tell the rest as it actually happened. Another thing—you've never heard of a man named Kerrigan."

"That's right," Sanders said.

The cab stopped in front of Hatch's apartment. He took from his pocket the second letter he had written the previous night and, as he opened the door, he stooped, pretending to pick the letter off the floor.

McCullough came from an easy chair in the living room.

"Hello, McCullough," Hatch said. "Did you miss me?"

"Commissioner phoned about you a few minutes ago," McCullough said. "He says to let you go wherever you want to, but I've got orders to stick closer than a corn plaster."

Hatch nodded. "This is Norman Sanders, McCullough. You may have the credit of placing him under arrest."

"You're under arrest," McCullough said with a startled jerk. He turned to the telephone.

"We haven't time," Hatch said, halting him. "The Commissioner is expecting Sanders to come in with me." He flipped the envelope. "Just found this under the door. Excuse me a moment."

"Sure."

He opened the envelope and read the letter slowly. With an alert nod he glanced at his watch and returned the letter to his pocket.

"Let's go, McCullough," he said. "Come along, Sanders."

The two men followed Hatch out. His roadster was still sitting at the curb. For fifteen minutes he drove without speaking.

McCULLOUGH and Sanders followed Hatch into Flower Hospital. At the information desk he inquired for Miss Jane Porter. He found Jane in a sunny room, sitting up in bed, her forehead bound, a newspaper folded on her knees and a pencil in her hand.

"What's an eight-letter word meaning the culmination of love?" she was asking.

A bored man was slouched in a chair tilted back against the wall. He said, "Divorce."

"Hello, professor," Jane said cheerfully.

The man got up and reached for Hatch's arm.

"Cut it out, Harris," McCullough rebuked him. "What do you think I'm doing here, trying to sell him an insurance policy? You stick with the girl."

Detective Harris returned to his chair.

"The word is marriage," Jane said, plying her pencil upon the crossword puzzle.

Hatch took the newspaper from her, examined the list of definitions and said, "No such word is called for. How are you feeling, Jane?"

"Pampered," Jane said. "But I'm having lots of fun. For some reason they put me in the maternity department. Every woman patient on this floor has a brand-new baby, and I've held 'em all and I've decided I've got to have one of my own. Did you bring my paj—"

"I did not," Hatch said quickly. "Jane, have they questioned you?"

"Harris tried it, but I refused to answer on the grounds that it might incriminate me," Jane said.

Relief shone in Hatch's eyes. "You were scarcely conscious when I talked

to you last, Jane. Tell me again exactly what happened."

"First—"

"It began when Flack came in," Hatch said.

Jane looked into his eyes, kept a poker face and thought a moment. "Why shouldn't I?" she said. "I don't like her anyway."

"It began when Flack came in," Hatch said again, firmly. "The most important point is your return from the drug store."

"I'm glad you feel as you do about that," Jane said with a smile. "But I'm afraid I can't tell you any more than I already have, professor. I started into the living room, and somebody hit me a terrific wallop, *zowie*, and I went down, *wham*. That's all."

"Jane, you must have gotten a glimpse of that man," Hatch said.

"But I really didn't. All I remember is seeing a lot of fireworks. I've seen better ones at Jones Beach and they didn't hurt so much, either. Have you ever been to Jones Beach, professor? I like to cook on the grills in the evening when—"

"Stick to the subject, Jane," Hatch said.

"I'm trying to," Jane said, "but you keep getting off onto the murder."

"I was counting on you to remember something important," Hatch said.

"But the next thing I knew, you were looking down at me, and you looked so tragic I wanted to laugh, and I wondered if you'd come into the office unexpectedly and caught me asleep on the couch wearing my—"

"Is that absolutely all you remember, Jane?" Hatch asked severely.

"Yes, professor," Jane said.

His eyes pinched, Hatch rose. "I'll be back later," he said. "I want you to stay here until you're good as new."

"I'll take care of that," Jane promised. "Next time you come, will you remember to bring my—"

"Goodby, Jane," Hatch broke in desperately.

"By, professor," Jane said.

Sanders and McCullough trailed Hatch from Jane's room. They returned to the roadster.

"Next stop," Hatch said grimly, "Police Headquarters."

CHAPTER XIX

A Trap Is Prepared

GOING into the waiting-room, Hatch asked the Commissioner's secretary, "Is the Commissioner expecting me?"

"You'd better go right in," Mallet said.

Hatch found three men in the inner office. The Commissioner was sitting at his desk with his legs stretched out, angrily wriggling the toes of his shoes. Deputy Commissioner Sprague was watching him enigmatically but shrewdly. The third man in the office was dapper, excited and challenging in his attitude. He was Harrison Knapp, the district attorney.

"We had a case," he was saying with a rasp when Cyrus Hatch entered. "We had a damned good one. It was perfect. What've we got now? No case at all. Two suspects we can't pin anything on, Commissioner, that's all we've got."

"Here's Suspect Number Three," Cyrus Hatch said.

Sanders hesitated, deathly pale, on the sill, but McCullough pushed him into the office.

"Mr. Sanders, shake hands with District Attorney Knapp and Commissioner Hatch," Cyrus Hatch said. "I'm afraid you won't be able to pin

anything on Sanders either, Knapp."

Sanders extended his hand. Under Knapp's scowl and the Commissioner's stare, it drooped of its own weight.

"Sprague, take charge of Sanders," Mark Hatch directed. "Get his story."

Sprague closed one hand on Sanders' arm. "Your lawyer's waiting for you downstairs," the Deputy Commissioner said. "You can see him later."

Sprague led Sanders out. Knapp paced to the windows, paced back and paused to peer at Cyrus Hatch. McCullough stood watchfully at Cyrus Hatch's side. The Commissioner wriggled his toes and sadly contemplated Cyrus Hatch. Cyrus folded into a chair.

"Hello, Mark," he said.

"Hello, Cyrus," the Commissioner said. "How did you find Sanders?"

"It was the other way around," Cyrus Hatch answered. "He looked me up because he wanted to convince me of his innocence."

"Did he convince you?"

"He seems to have a good alibi," Cyrus Hatch said. "Apparently all three suspects have good alibis. There must be something wrong somewhere."

Knapp rapped his knuckles on the Commissioner's desk. "I want you to answer that question," he demanded. "Did Sanders convince you he's innocent?"

"Before I answer it," Cyrus Hatch said, "I'd like to ask you another. Do you believe all three murders were committed by the same person?"

"Yes," Knapp said.

"Why?" Cyrus Hatch asked.

"Seligman was a blackmailer," Knapp said. "He must've been killed by one of his victims."

"Rhoda Quinn?" Cyrus Hatch asked with a smile.

"Don't rub it in, Cyrus," the Com-

missioner said. "We found the woman's gun in the street near her body. Her fingerprints are all over it. It hasn't been fired. It's a blue automatic, twenty-five caliber. You were right, but don't rub it in."

"Rhoda Quinn didn't do it," Knapp said. "Some other victim of Seligman's did it. Flack must've known who killed Seligman, and he was going to spill the works, so the murderer had to get rid of him. Rhoda Quinn was right there on the spot when Seligman got it. She certainly would've talked to save herself from being toasted, so the murderer had to silence her. Hatch, are you convinced Sanders is innocent?"

"Yes," Cyrus Hatch said. "How about Pirano and Daly? Do their alibis stand up?"

"If I had a case against either of 'em," Knapp retorted, "I'd be getting an indictment from the Grand Jury right now."

"You mean Pirano was actually asleep at about the time Rhoda Quinn was killed?"

The Commissioner said, "Pirano checked in at the Montblanc early this afternoon. Nobody saw him leave the hotel until this evening. A chambermaid looked into his room twice, about the time Rhoda Quinn was getting killed, and she swears he was sound asleep both times."

"He could've bribed the maid to say that," Knapp said. "His alibi might be faked. But I'm damned if I think it is."

"What about Daly?" Cyrus Hatch asked.

"Daly says he met Rhoda Quinn late this afternoon at a theatrical supply place over on the west side," the Commissioner said. "He says she left him there. Then he took a taxi, he says,

and went to the Trafalgar Hotel, and when he arrived at the Trafalgar, he was arrested. Daly was in custody when Rhoda Quinn's body was found."

"I can verify Daly's statement," Cyrus Hatch said.

"Damnation, Cyrus!" the Commissioner protested.

"I spotted Daly this afternoon," Cyrus Hatch explained. "I saw him come out of Zarata's and get into a taxi. I heard him tell the driver to go to the Trafalgar Hotel. Danny was with me, and he'll say the same thing."

Knapp said, "It's got to be Sanders, then."

"Cyrus, where is Danny?" the Commissioner asked.

"Damned if I know," Cyrus Hatch said. "I'm worried about him."

"He'll turn up," the Commissioner said.

KNAPP leaned over Cyrus Hatch, threatening him with a forefinger. "Don't evade the question. What convinces you that Sanders is innocent?"

"When the news came over the radio that Rhoda Quinn's body had been found," Cyrus Hatch answered, "I'd already been with Sanders at least an hour."

Knapp dramatically swung his finger at the Commissioner. "That's the last straw," he said. "We can't pin this thing on Daly, and we can't pin it on Pirano. Sanders was our only hope. Now your son alibis Sanders."

"Cool off, Knapp," Commissioner Hatch said. "Cyrus can't help it if Sanders is innocent."

"The way he's throwing monkey wrenches into the works, I'll never get a case," Knapp complained.

The door opened and Deputy Commissioner Sprague came in.

"Sanders is telling a straight story," Sprague said.

"There you are, Knapp," said Cyrus Hatch. "None of those three men could have done it."

"You're telling me? I'm the district attorney, and I'm running for re-election, and I want a sensational case with plenty of big headlines and a big conviction," Knapp declared, "and I still say every one of those three men is in the clear."

"Yet one of them must have done it," Cyrus Hatch said.

Knapp sat, hopelessly resigned, overwhelmed with exasperation. "None of 'em could've done it, but one of 'em did!"

"What else is possible?" Cyrus Hatch asked.

"I give up, professor," Knapp said. "You figure it out."

"I'm as stumped as you are, Knapp," Cyrus Hatch said. "The only thing left to do is fall back on Timothy Quinn."

His father swiveled to him suddenly. "What do you know about Timothy Quinn, Cyrus?"

Cyrus Hatch removed from his inner pocket the letter he had written to himself, and passed it to the Commissioner. Knapp read it over Mark Hatch's shoulder.

"It says practically the same thing as the other, except it also says Timothy Quinn thinks your son should be in on it," Knapp said.

"You have shown a remarkably clear insight into the situation from the beginning," Mark Hatch read aloud, "and I feel strongly that without your continued participation the entire case may fail."

"That's very kind of Mr. Quinn," Cyrus Hatch said, keeping a straight face.

"This may be the work of another

crank," the Commissioner said, "like those brass letters that somebody knocked off the Seligman tomb."

"Quinn knows what he's talking about, and you know he does, Commissioner," Knapp said. "Otherwise you wouldn't have Houser and Vogt in the Westcott place right now, waiting for a stork or something to fly in."

Mark Hatch took from a drawer of his desk the first letter, which Cyrus Hatch had dispatched by pigeon.

"Sprague," he said, "show this to Sanders."

Sprague turned to the door with the letter. "It won't mean a thing to him, Commissioner," he said. "The professor just alibied him, and the professor's been dead right all along."

"Sprague," Mark Hatch growled, "you just heard Cyrus say that one of those three men has got to be guilty. Show that letter to Sanders."

Sprague went out.

"Daly and Pirano have both seen it, of course," Cyrus Hatch said.

"Certainly," Knapp said.

"With no effect," Cyrus Hatch surmised.

"None whatever."

"Then we'd better take all three men over to the Westcott place and keep them in the loft, waiting for that bird," Cyrus Hatch suggested. "Give them to understand that the pigeon is going to fly in at any minute, and that once the message is received, it'll be curtains for the guilty man. Drive that home. Watch all three, and if one of them begins to show signs of cracking, go to work on him."

"And what if nobody shows any signs of cracking?" Knapp asked hopelessly.

"Then," Cyrus Hatch said, "the message brought in by the bird will break the case."

"A swell case it'll turn out to be," Knapp said, "with the principal witness a bigamist who's in hiding and afraid to show his face."

"Mark," Cyrus Hatch said, "you don't mind if I join the party, do you?"

Without looking up, the Commissioner said, "I think you'd better be there, Cyrus. We'll go over right away."

"There's not a great deal of time left," Cyrus Hatch said. "I understand carrier pigeons don't fly after dark unless they're specially trained." He rose. "I want to stop off at the college first. I won't be long. Let's go, McCullough."

McCullough bumped into Hatch as Hatch paused at the door.

"There's one other slant on these letters, Knapp," Mark Hatch was saying quietly. "Timothy Quinn may be the guilty man. The idea behind the letters may be to shift the blame onto somebody else. Quinn could be taking this way of drawing a red herring across his trail and keeping himself covered."

"Anything's possible," Knapp said. Cyrus Hatch listened.

"If that damned pigeon doesn't bring in a message," the Commissioner said, "and if Timothy Quinn doesn't make good by naming the man who's actually guilty, then I'm going after Timothy Quinn with everything I've got. I'll tear this town apart piece by piece until I get my hands on him."

His jaw clenched, Cyrus Hatch went out, trailed by McCullough.

CHAPTER XX

The Trap Is Sprung

McCULLOUGH dogged Cyrus Hatch into the Knickerbocker College tower.

"Just a minute," Hatch said.

He stepped into a telephone booth, shut the door tightly and braced his foot against it. McCullough considered a protest, but abandoned the idea. Hatch dialed the number of Kerrigan's office.

"Kerrigan Detective Bureau," came Kerrigan's voice.

"Hatch," Hatch said.

"Have you got it?" Kerrigan asked quickly.

"Have I got what?"

"The name, the name to put in the message, the name of the murderer."

"I'm afraid not," Hatch admitted.

Kerrigan moaned over the wire. "What about all those suspects?"

"Every one of them has an alibi," Hatch said.

"Hatch, we've got to make good. If we don't, there'll be hell to pay."

Hatch lowered his voice to a whisper that McCullough could not hear. "Damned right there will," he agreed. "But I still don't know who the murderer is. I have a feeling that I should know, but I'm damned if I do. I'm still hoping the pigeon will break his nerve."

"I offer a hundred to one his nerve won't break," Kerrigan retorted. "I'll bet my last cent he'll watch that pigeon fly in and laugh in its face."

"We've got to think of a message to send, Kerrigan," Hatch said.

"Oh hell!" Kerrigan said. "What the hell can we write? We can't take a shot in the dark. We can't pick out somebody at random and accuse 'em of murder. The worst thing we could do would be to try to pin this thing on somebody who's innocent."

"We've got to think of a message," Hatch said again. "Something that will break down the guilty man's defenses and force him to confess."

"Listen, Hatch," Kerrigan said. "The guilty man is now sitting pretty. He has an alibi. He's literally getting away with murder. And all you expect us to do is compose a few words that will turn him into a gibbering, nervous wreck."

"You don't realize what's going on inside that man's skin," Hatch insisted. "He's going to pieces at this very minute. When he sees that bird fly in, and when he sees the Commissioner taking that message off the bird's leg—"

"I'm the guy who's going to pieces, and it's not over any pigeon," Kerrigan broke in. "This cockeyed psychological trap of yours won't catch any murderer, but it's sure driving me screwy."

"Listen, Kerrigan—"

"What're you going to do when the bird hops in and the Commissioner looks at a piece of paper that doesn't mean anything, and the murderer sits there chuckling to himself?"

Hatch grunted.

"In that case, it'll be up to me to think of a brilliant idea in a hell of a hurry," Hatch said soberly. "Listen, Kerrigan—"

"Suppose the idea *does* work," Kerrigan said. "Suppose the murderer is a big enough dope to break down and confess. He'll pull everybody else down with him. He'll wreck the whole works."

"Not if I handle it properly," Hatch said. "Listen, Kerrigan. The Commissioner will be marching his three suspects over to the Westcott place right away. You'd better get busy with the pigeon. Remember, wait as long as possible, but not too long."

"I've a good notion to wring that bird's neck and eat the damned thing on toast," Kerrigan said, and hung up.

THE lines around Hatch's eyes were deep and dark when he left the booth. McCullough followed him into the elevator, then followed him out on the thirty-fourth floor. Hatch led him to a door which bore the legend, *Professor Gillies, Chairman, Department of Sociology*, and stepped in.

Professor Gillies' mousey secretary was brushing tobacco crumbs from his untidy desk. She looked disapprovingly at Hatch through her horn-rim glasses.

"Where is Professor Gillies, Miss James?" Hatch asked.

"Professor Gillies is attending a faculty meeting," Miss James said righteously.

"The faculty meeting?" Hatch asked.

Miss James sniffed an affirmative.

McCullough hurried after Hatch up four flights of stairs. They pushed through swinging doors into a small auditorium. The seats were occupied by Hatch's colleagues. Among the faculty were two men and a woman with busy pencils—reporters.

A cadaverous man, whose hair looked like an awning rolled up off his shining forehead, was sitting at a table on the stage, running a talonlike finger up and down the ridge of his beak nose. He was Hamilton Grampey, president of Knickerbocker College.

Professor Gillies, seeming uncomfortable without his pipe and looking shabby in his expensive tweeds, was gravely addressing the assembly from the rostrum.

"I'm sure we have considered the matter thoroughly and fairly," he was concluding. "Much as I regret—" He glanced uneasily at Hatch as Hatch came down the aisle, trailed by McCullough. "I will cast my vote in favor of severing Professor Hatch from—"

He stroked his beard, striving to ignore Hatch's direct eyes. "We have no choice but to—"

Hatch mounted to the stage. McCullough, put at a loss by this move, allowed him to face the audience unaccompanied by the law. Hatch paused beside Professor Gillies at the rostrum.

"President Grampey, Professor Gillies, and my colleagues of the faculty," Hatch began. "There is no tribunal in the civilized world that doesn't allow an accused man to speak in his own defense, but since you've seen fit to withhold that privilege from me, you can hardly blame me for making the most of this opportunity."

Grampey drummed his fingers and frowned. Gillies retreated. Hatch looked hard into the faces of the faculty.

"I don't intend to attempt to justify myself, gentlemen," Hatch said. "An endeavor to safeguard an innocent woman from a charge of murder needs no justification. My efforts on her behalf were made the subject of a great deal of sensational newspaper publicity, which has ruffled your academic serenity, but I can't apologize for that, because I had no control over it. I merely wish to say that even though the case is not closed, I have already been proved right in my stand. And, gentlemen, I would rather be right than assistant professor."

Grampey looked haughty and Gillies indignant. The faculty murmured both disapproval and approbation.

"Gentlemen," Hatch inquired, "have you a higher regard for your pedagogical complacency than for a human life? Can you allow yourselves to believe in practice the liberalism of attitude which you profess? Can you—you men who are entrusted with the enlightenment of youth, you men who should

be holding high the torch of truth—can you, with a clear conscience, condemn me for—” He paused.

“The hell with fine phrases,” he said. “I’m not done with this murder case, not by a damned sight. You can’t vote me out of it. I’m going to see it through. If you must kick me out for it, then kick me out and crawl back into your mummy cases and be damned. Good day, gentlemen.”

From the faculty rose a roar of boos and cheers. Hatch, his lips drawn thin, grasped Professor Gillies’ arm.

“What’s more, you’re going to see this through with me, whether you like it or not.”

The faculty kept howling, ignoring Grampey’s rapping gavel. Hatch tugged Gillies off the platform and maneuvered him from the auditorium.

McCullough hastened along while Hatch hustled Gillies down the four flights of stairs. Gillies was breathless when Hatch thrust him into his office.

“Get into your hat and coat,” Hatch commanded. “We haven’t any time to waste.”

Miss James stared, horrified.

Gillies puffed. “See here, see here. This is an outrage. I’ll not submit—”

Hatch plucked Gillies’ hat from the desk, slapped it upon Gillies’ head, caught up Gillies’ coat, and swung him from the office.

Hatch jockeyed Gillies out of the building while McCullough trailed along. With Hatch at the wheel of the roadster, and McCullough planted on his other side, Gillies sat clamped to the seat.

“This is an outrage!” he said.

HATCH jumped red lights, went around corners with his horn blaring at scattering pedestrians, cut in and out of sluggish traffic, and ignored

the shrilling of traffic patrolmen’s whistles. When he swung to the curb, McCullough let go of his hat.

“There’s only one traffic law you didn’t break on the way up here,” McCullough said, “and that’s parking overtime.”

“This is an outrage,” Professor Gillies said.

Another car was just arriving at the apartment building. It was the Police Commissioner’s official automobile.

Hatch hustled Gillies from the roadster. Followed by McCullough, he maneuvered Gillies into the lobby of the building.

Ambrose was officiating at the door. Hatch drew him aside and spoke quietly.

“A number of men are about to come in, Ambrose,” he said. “Look at them carefully. After they’ve gone into the elevator—not before—I want you to point out the one who used the house phone to talk with the Alexander apartment yesterday evening. Do you think you can do that?”

“Of course, sir,” Ambrose said.

Hatch turned to the elevator. Herbert was waiting in the cab.

“In a moment you’ll take a car full of men up to the penthouse, Herbert,” Hatch said, lowering his tone so that McCullough could not hear. “One of them is the man I asked you about yesterday. After you come down—but not before, understand—I want you to identify him to me. Can you do it?”

“Certainly, sir,” Herbert said.

Hatch went back to the entrance as it opened. Commissioner Hatch led the way in. District Attorney Knapp followed him. Lloyd Daly, John Pirano and Norman Sanders entered in file. Deputy Commissioner Sprague and a detective brought up the rear.

“Gentlemen,” Cyrus Hatch said.

"this is Professor Gillies of Knickerbocker College. He asked permission to be present, so I brought him along. Since you're in a hurry, I suggest you complete the introductions on the way up. I'll be with you in a moment."

Dubiously, Mark Hatch entered the elevator. When the car was filled by the officers and the suspects and Professor Gillies, Herbert closed the panel. Hatch detached himself from McCullough and stepped to Ambrose's side.

"Now," he said quietly, "which one of them is the man you saw here yesterday?"

"The one with the wing collar," Ambrose said at once.

"You're sure of that?"

"Of course, sir."

Hatch squared his shoulders. He waited at the elevator. When the cab opened, Ambrose was at his side.

"Now, Herbert," Hatch said, "which was the man?"

"The one with the red face," Herbert said.

"You're positive?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's fine. That's perfect," Hatch said sourly. "The man you picked out, Ambrose, is the district attorney. The man you selected, Herbert, is the Police Commissioner. You two are beyond all doubt the most horrible examples of defective observation and retention I've ever encountered. Let's say no more about it."

Ambrose and Herbert looked injured.

Hatch took McCullough's arm and entered the elevator. Reaching the penthouse vestibule, he rang the bell. Suzette opened the door.

"My name is Hatch, and this is Detective McCullough," Hatch said. "We're joining the party."

"Come in, please," Suzette said.

Hatch found the living room crowded.

Sprague and the detective were guarding the three prisoners. John Pirano was moistly nervous; his face, spotted with bits of plaster, was pallid and drawn. Norman Sanders, annoyed by the handcuff still affixed to his wrist, was trying to find the best pocket to put it in. Lloyd Daly looked haggard.

Lois Westcott and Terry Alexander were standing side by side. They glanced at Cyrus Hatch apprehensively, then glanced away.

Rupert Alexander was facing Mark Hatch.

"Most certainly it's an inconvenience," Rupert Alexander was saying. "It's a damned nuisance. Hrrrf. But as a public-spirited citizen, I cannot protest. I'll aid you in every possible way. My home is at your disposal."

"I appreciate your co-operation," the Commissioner said.

"Very good of you, Mr. Alexander," Knapp agreed. "Now, just where is the pigeon supposed to arrive?"

Rupert Alexander frowned at everyone in the room, except Cyrus Hatch. At Cyrus Hatch he glared suspiciously. "That young man—"

Lois Westcott interrupted him by going quickly to the Commissioner.

"I'm sorry my husband is out of town on business," she said, "but I'm expecting him back at any moment."

"You mean he doesn't know anything about this?" Commissioner Hatch asked.

"Nothing—nothing whatever," Lois Westcott said. "I—I'll take you up to the loft."

The Commissioner said, "Thank you. Mr. Alexander, I suggest that you remain down here, with the ladies."

RUPERT ALEXANDER was still scowling at Cyrus Hatch. As Lois Westcott led the Commissioner into the hall, and as the others followed, Cyrus Hatch went to him.

"Again there seems to be no opportunity to discuss your collection of glass," Cyrus Hatch said.

Rupert Alexander said, "I was under the impression that you knew my daughters. Why didn't they speak to you just now?" He turned to Terry. "Terry, why didn't you speak to this young man? Young man, why didn't you speak to Terry? What the devil does this mean? Hrrrf. Well?"

Terry Alexander said quickly, "After all, Father, I'd met Mr. Hatch only—"

"I called at first, you see, about the stolen pigeons," Hatch interrupted with a smile. "After all, in a situation like this, it's a bit difficult to observe the social niceties, and I'm sure—"

"Are you a detective?" Rupert Alexander demanded.

"A criminologist," Hatch said. "My father, the Commissioner, often gives me an opportunity to do a bit of field work. When the theft of the pigeons was reported, I asked his permission to look into the matter. Of course, we hadn't any idea then that it was connected with any other crime."

"I talked with Mr. Hatch," Terry said, "because Howard was busy and asked me to."

"Hrrrf. A criminologist," Rupert Alexander said severely, "should know a great deal more about glass than you do, young man."

"I'll be glad to learn more about it later," Cyrus Hatch said. "I—I hope we won't be in the way here long. You're being very generous, Mr. Alexander."

"Hrrrf."

Cyrus Hatch hurried to the stairs. McCullough, who had been waiting for him, followed him into the loft. It was crowded.

Pirano, Daly and Sanders were standing in a corner. Sprague and Professor Gillies were at Mark Hatch's side. Knapp was prowling about. Houser and Vogt, having been stationed in the loft earlier in the day, were reporting to the Commissioner.

"No pigeon has flown in here yet," Houser said.

"Not a sign of one," Vogt seconded. Lois Westcott indicated one of the cages. Its door was open. It contained a bird that was fidgeting on its nest.

"The pigeon you're waiting for will fly in the window, of course, Mr. Commissioner," Lois Westcott said. "It will light on this runway. You may pick it up immediately and detach the message. If—if my husband returns before the pigeon arrives, of course, I—I'll explain everything to him, and send him right up."

"Thanks," the Commissioner said. "Could anything happen to that bird on the way? Something to stop it from getting here?"

"A hawk might—might capture it," Lois Westcott said.

Knapp said impatiently, "No use worrying about that, then. There aren't any hawks in New York City, are there?"

"A pair of peregrine falcons live on a tower of the Manhattan Bridge," Lois Westcott said. "There are others on the Riverside Church, and on the Paramount Theatre Building."

"Falcons in Times Square," Knapp said. "I'll be damned."

Cyrus Hatch asked, "But the other pigeons all arrived safely, didn't they?"

"Yes," Lois Westcott said.

"Then there's every reason to be-

lieve this one will arrive safely also?"

"Yes," Lois Westcott said.

"I feel sure it will," Cyrus Hatch said. "And damned soon."

Pirano and Daly glanced warily at each other, then both of them peered at Sanders, then all three looked uneasily out the window.

The sun was hovering low over the towers on the opposite side of Central Park.

"If you'd like me to stay . . ." Lois Westcott suggested.

"It's pretty crowded in here," Cyrus Hatch answered. "Better wait downstairs, Mrs. Westcott."

Lois Westcott, without glancing at Cyrus Hatch, went down the stairs.

MARK HATCH looked skeptically at the caged birds. Knapp nervously moved about. Professor Gillies still looked outraged. Sprague stood aside expectantly. The detectives took positions near the door at the head of the stairs. Cyrus Hatch eyed the three suspects.

Sanders thrust the handcuff deep into his pocket and shifted from foot to foot. Pirano pressed a handkerchief over his damp face. Daly endeavored to bite one end of his mustache. They glanced at Cyrus Hatch, then stared out the window.

Knapp sat down and drummed his fingers on the table. Sprague took the other chair. Professor Gillies stroked his beard. Mark Hatch looked into the western sky, then at his ancient watch.

"It's only a matter of minutes," Cyrus Hatch said.

Knapp drummed his fingers. Commissioner Hatch opened the windows half an inch wider. Cyrus Hatch's sharp eyes did not leave the three suspects.

Sanders was trying to tuck the hand-

cuff up his sleeve. Pirano licked his lips. Daly looked at his nails.

Except for the piping of the birds and the soft fluttering of wings, the loft was silent a moment.

"When we leave this room," Cyrus Hatch said, "one of you three men will be on his way to the electric chair."

The three men looked at Cyrus Hatch.

The Commissioner said, "They know that damned well. They've all read Timothy Quinn's letter. They know it's the straight goods."

"Damned right it is," Knapp agreed emphatically. "Nobody but an eyewitness to Seligman's murder could have written that letter."

"The name of the guilty man," Cyrus Hatch said, "is flying toward this room at this very minute."

Sanders swallowed. Pirano dabbed at his face. Daly's lips worked as he looked out the window.

The sun was blazing down upon the towers across the park.

Again, except for the noises of the birds in the cages, the loft was silent.

"One of you men is three times a murderer," Cyrus Hatch said grimly. "And you haven't a chance of beating this rap."

Sanders put the handcuff back into his pocket. Pirano stared into the golden glare of the sun. Daly interlocked his fingers and cracked his knuckles.

Again, except for the sounds of the birds, the loft was quiet.

"Sanders," Cyrus Hatch said, "it looks bad for you."

Sanders stared at him and swallowed.

"You were on the spot when Seligman was killed," Cyrus Hatch said. "You'd just left my apartment when

we discovered Flack murdered. As for Rhoda Quinn—"

"You know I didn't kill her, Hatch! You jolly well know that!"

Cyrus Hatch wagged his head. "I wonder," he said, "if you were actually in that hotel room while I was gone. For instance, you might have found a chance to sock Danny and knock him out. You could have left the hotel, killed Rhoda Quinn, and returned before I got back. Danny was probably so ashamed of being knocked out, he didn't mention it to me."

"I swear to—"

"Never mind, Sanders," Cyrus Hatch said. "There's no use arguing about it. In a few minutes, the pigeon will fly in with Timothy Quinn's message, and then it'll be all over."

Sanders stared out the window.

"Daly, you're a magician," Cyrus Hatch said. "Your mind is trained to work fast, and you know all sorts of tricks—even ways of making a fake alibi seem solid."

Daly bit at his mustache.

"You were also on the spot when Seligman was killed, Daly," Cyrus Hatch said. He turned to the Commissioner. "And the second murder was committed after he'd been released, wasn't it, Mark?"

"It was," the Commissioner said.

"Where was Daly at the time?"

"Missing," the Commissioner said.

Daly clenched his hands behind his back. "I was waiting to meet Rhoda," he said. "Waiting at Zarata's. I was there for hours before she came in. I can prove it."

"Then you left Zarata's after Rhoda did," Cyrus Hatch said. "And while Rhoda was getting killed, you were riding across town in a taxi, from Zarata's to the Trafalgar Hotel, is that it?"

Daly looked sick. "That's it," he said.

"All right, Daly," Cyrus Hatch said. "No use wasting our breath over it. The pigeon will be flying in here at any minute now."

Daly looked into the brilliant sky and closed his hands hard.

ONCE more, except for the bird-noises, the loft was hushed.

"Pirano," Cyrus Hatch said, "it won't be long now."

Pirano squinted at him.

"You were in your office the other night when Rhoda Quinn came in looking for Seligman. You were in the office later, when Rhoda Quinn came back. But that doesn't mean you were in your office all the while between those two visits."

Pirano said, squinting, "I was there."

"But you can't prove it," Cyrus Hatch said. "You say you went directly from your office to the Montblanc Hotel yesterday, but you can't prove that, either. You followed Flack to my apartment. You knew he was going there, didn't you?"

"I went straight to the hotel," Pirano said, squinting.

"And last night," Cyrus Hatch added, "you didn't surrender to the police, with your alibi about being asleep, until after Rhoda Quinn was dead."

"I tell you I was at the hotel—"

"Save your breath, Pirano," Cyrus Hatch interrupted. "Just keep watching that window. In a few minutes you'll see a pigeon fly in with a bit of paper tied to its leg. And that will be that."

Again the loft was quiet.

Mark Hatch sat on the sill of the broad window, wriggling the toes of

his shoes. Knapp's fingers drummed. Sprague's eyes were shrewd and wary. Professor Gillies thoughtfully stroked his beard. The detectives at the head of the stairs were standing in expectant attitudes.

The three suspects fidgeted.

Cyrus Hatch's confident smile was forced. The lines around his mouth were drawn deep. His gray eyes searched the sky, hopelessly yet eagerly. Birds were flying over the park, but none of them was a pigeon winging toward the loft.

The sun was low behind the distant towers.

As footfalls sounded on the stairs, the detectives at the door stepped aside.

Howard Westcott came in.

He paused, looking from face to face. He seemed laden with fatigue, but his shoulders were firmly squared. His air of quiet defiance made him seem strong. He scarcely glanced at Cyrus Hatch.

"I'm Howard Westcott," he announced. "Who—"

Mark Hatch extended his hand. "I'm the Commissioner."

Westcott gripped the Commissioner's hand. "I got back just a few minutes ago," he said. "I would have been here sooner, except that I was delayed because—because an important decision had to be made. My wife has just told me about the pigeon you're expecting."

"Too bad to involve you in a matter like this," Commissioner Hatch said, "but apparently Timothy Quinn saw a good reason for it."

"Yes; yes," Westcott said. "My wife explained the whole thing."

Cyrus Hatch was watching Pirano and Daly. Pirano was squinting curiously at Westcott. In Daly's eyes there was a strange shine of compassion.

"Mr. Westcott," the Commissioner inquired, "how long has it been since you had any contact with Timothy Quinn?"

Westcott glanced around again. Again his eyes passed over Cyrus Hatch's without a flash of recognition.

"Years, Mr. Commissioner," he answered. "Five years, or six."

"How well do you remember him?" Mark Hatch asked.

"Scarcely at all," Westcott said.

"Can you describe him?"

Westcott hesitated. "You see, I met Timothy Quinn only once, when I bought a few birds from him. He seemed quite—quite average. I'm afraid I can't be of any real help on that point."

"You don't know where he lived, then?"

"I—I don't know," Westcott said.

"Where he is now?"

Westcott stiffened slightly. "No," he said. "I can't say where he is now."

CYRUS HATCH said, "The way he's making use of your pigeons is as much of a surprise to you as it is to us, Mr. Westcott?"

"Yes," Westcott said. "Exactly."

"Personally, Mark," Cyrus Hatch said, turning to his father, "whoever and wherever Timothy Quinn may be, I'd be damned sorry to see him discovered and unmasked."

Westcott's eyes flashed gratitude. "Judging from what my wife has told me," he said, "he seems to be conscientiously aiding justice as best he can in a difficult situation."

"Certainly," Cyrus Hatch said. "He might have kept himself completely out of the case, and stayed perfectly safe, but instead he's helping us to crack it."

Knapp said, "Poppycock. He should

come forward. If I need him as a witness, I'm going to find him and put him on the stand regardless. Then I'll have to prosecute him."

Cyrus Hatch felt Westcott wince.

"That's the law, of course, Knapp," Cyrus Hatch said, "but I feel that Quinn deserves to be let alone."

"Unless," the Commissioner said, "he happens to be the guilty man."

Westcott's hold on himself grew firmer. "Do you believe he may be—guilty of the murders?"

Mark Hatch frowned at the three suspects fidgeting in the corner.

"If this message we're waiting for doesn't name one of those three men," he said, "then I'll be sure Quinn himself is guilty. And if Timothy Quinn is the guilty man, I'll turn this town upside down until I find him and nail him for it."

"Mark," Cyrus Hatch said, "the bird will settle that. I think you'll find that your murderer is one of the men in this room now."

Westcott straightened. "I'm afraid if the pigeon doesn't arrive in a few minutes," he said in a controlled tone, "it will be too late, at least for today. The sun is about to set."

Cyrus Hatch looked across the park. The spires were dark against the rain-bow hues of the western sky.

"There's a bird," he said. "It's a pigeon—circling. It's coming this way."

Every eye turned out the window. At the same time Knapp and Sprague and the detectives pressed close to the sill. Westcott thrust himself among them.

"Yes, it's the pigeon," he said. "I'm sure of it. I can tell from the way it's flying. You must clear the way. Please stand back."

The bird winged closer.

Mark Hatch turned, pushing at Knapp and Sprague. "Damnation, get out of the way," he ordered. "Give the damned bird a chance."

"Don't try to stop it until it reaches the runway," Westcott said. "Perhaps you'd better let me handle it."

He was standing beside Cyrus Hatch, breathing rapidly and deeply. The gray bird was skimming toward the window.

"Don't scare it," Mark Hatch said. "Don't move."

"Don't move, anybody," Knapp said.

"Don't move," Sprague echoed.

Cyrus Hatch's eyes turned to the three men standing in the corner. Sanders was motionless, staring out at the bird. Daly's face was waxen and his eyes were wide. Pirano's skin was beaded with sweat. Cyrus Hatch watched them.

Gray wings stirred the air at the window. The pigeon hopped onto the sill.

It cooed, cocked its bald eyes at the men in the loft, and strutted across the sill.

Sprague reached for it.

The pigeon bounced up and whirled out the window.

"Damnation!" Mark Hatch muttered.

The bird swerved back, shot over Mark Hatch's head and alighted on the runway of its cage.

"Don't move," the Commissioner growled.

Knapp held Sprague's arm. "Don't move," he warned.

Howard Westcott, with a gentle motion, closed his hand over the bird. At once Cyrus Hatch stepped to his side. Mark Hatch came close to his son, Westcott turned to the table in the corner.

Cyrus Hatch glanced sharply at the

three suspects. Sanders was still rigid and staring. A trickle of sweat was running down Pirano's forehead. Daly had one hand lifted, as if to snatch at the bird.

Westcott took up a pair of scissors. He snipped the thread that bound the paper rolled around the pigeon's leg.

Commissioner Hatch took it.

CYRUS HATCH looked over his father's shoulder. The Commissioner unfolded the paper. Sprague and Knapp were crowding to see. Cyrus Hatch gripped his father's arm and drew him back to the window.

"No matter what it reads, Mark," he whispered, so no one else could distinguish his words, "don't say anything for a minute."

Mark Hatch began reading the message. Cyrus Hatch turned his father's hand so that no one else could see the writing.

The note was typewritten. It read:

To Commissioner Hatch—

I did not actually recognize the murderer. In my first letter I pretended that I knew him in the hope that it would aid you to force a confession. If my bluff has not worked, there is nothing more I can do. I think this case now rests upon Cyrus Hatch.
Timothy Quinn.

Cyrus Hatch closed his hand over the message.

Mark Hatch looked hard at him.

"What's it say?" Knapp demanded.

"Good heavens, what's it say?"

Cyrus Hatch warningly squeezed his father's arm. He gazed at the three suspects. Sanders and Daly and Pirano were staring at him whitely.

"There you are, Mark," Cyrus Hatch said quietly. "That settles the case."

He watched Sanders and Daly and Pirano. They stared at him.

"We know the guilty man now," Cyrus Hatch said.

Sanders and Daly and Pirano stared.

Commissioner Hatch made a growling noise deep in his throat. Sprague, Knapp and Gillies were looking at Cyrus Hatch. Westcott was holding the pigeon. The detectives were glancing uncertainly from face to face. Cyrus Hatch searched the faces of the three suspects.

Pirano and Sanders and Daly stared.

The bright glints in Cyrus Hatch's eyes signified swift thought. "It's clear as day," he said, "when you stop to think of it. Didn't Daly tell you, Mark that several nights before the Seligman murder, a burglar broke into Rhoda Quinn's apartment?"

"Yes."

"That was true. Daly said also that the burglar stole Rhoda Quinn's gun. That was a lie. The gun remained where it was usually kept. Only one person besides Rhoda Quinn had access to it that night—Daly."

Daly was blinking at Cyrus Hatch and biting his mustache.

"When you released Daly yesterday, Mark," Cyrus Hatch said, "he came to my place, found Flack there and murdered Flack. As for last night, I think he used me to manufacture an alibi for himself."

Daly was not breathing.

"When he came out of Zarata's, he saw me watching him," Cyrus Hatch went on. "He thought fast. He spoke to the taxi-driver in a voice loud enough for me to hear. After the cab was under way, he simply gave the driver a different address. He's the only one of the three suspects who could possibly have known where—"

Suddenly Daly sprang at the detectives near the door. His shoulders struck them with a force that jolted

them aside. At the top of the stairs he stumbled. He rolled down the flight and sprawled in the hall.

The frightened pigeons squeaked. Mark Hatch shouted. The detectives regained their balance and turned to run after Daly. Cyrus Hatch was already springing across the room. He was the first to reach the head of the stairs.

Daly jumped up and ran along the hall. Hatch bounded after him. The detectives threw themselves after Cyrus Hatch, drawing their guns.

AT THE end of the hall, Cyrus Hatch found the entrance open. Daly was in the vestibule, pounding on the elevator panel with both fists. He whirled back, jolting past Hatch. Hatch grabbed for him and caught his coat. Daly struck viciously at McCullough. McCullough lurched back against Hatch, and Hatch lost his grip.

Daly rushed across the living room. Rupert Alexander had risen from his chair. Terry and Lois Westcott were on their feet, their widened eyes following Daly. Daly paused, looking for another door.

The detectives were crowding out of the hall. Mark Hatch shouted, "Don't shoot!" Cyrus Hatch was almost at Daly's heels.

Daly dove at the nearest window. The impact of his head and shoulders shattered the panes. He crashed halfway through. As Cyrus Hatch gripped both his ankles, he fell heavily. The jagged fragments in the window-frame cracked under his body. He squirmed as Cyrus Hatch dragged him back.

Far below the black gaping window, pieces of glass were tinkling into a cement court.

Daly made wild motions with his

arms. The rug beneath him was smeared and wet. Cyrus Hatch twisted him over. Daly's collar was crimson. Blood was spurting from the side of his neck. He struggled, attempting to rise, but Cyrus Hatch pushed him flat.

"Lie still!"

Men crowded around as he pulled Daly's tie loose and ripped Daly's collar open. He pinched the flesh above the gash in Daly's neck. The flow of blood lessened, but it continued to run from the compressed vein.

"Jugular. Call an ambulance," Cyrus Hatch said without looking up. "Somebody get me something to stop the bleeding."

Blood was running around Daly's neck and trickling into thick carpet that blotted it up quickly. Mark Hatch dropped to his knees beside Daly, and Knapp stooped over him. Houser and Vogt stared down with their guns still drawn. Daly lay breathing hard, his eyes closed, his face lined with pain, striving to bite his mustache.

Hatch heard Terry's voice at the telephone. "An ambulance—quickly!"

RUPERT ALEXANDER stooped at Cyrus Hatch's side. He had a pair of long-nosed pinchers. With the narrow steel jaws Cyrus Hatch pressed the vein shut. Daly squirmed, then lay still.

"That's right," Cyrus Hatch said. "Take it easy. You'll be all right."

Daly whispered, "What's the use? What's the difference?"

He stared up. Howard Westcott was looking down at him. He licked the blood from his lips.

"If she'd only given it up," Daly whispered. "If she'd only let it go—about Quinn."

Knapp had a notebook on his knee and a pencil in his hand.

"If I only hadn't—dropped her gun," Daly whispered.

Cyrus Hatch was watching the severed end of the vein.

"I wanted to stop her," Daly said. "She was going to—to give it to Seligman. She was looking for her gun—so I took it—to keep her from getting hold of it."

The room was hushed except for Daly's ragged breathing, and the quick respiration of the men surrounding him.

"You're the man who fired at Seligman through the hedge," Cyrus Hatch said gently.

"I knew—knew she was going to kill Seligman," Daly said. "I wanted to keep her from it. I thought—I'd rather go to the chair myself—than see her get it. I shot Seligman to—to save her from doing it. I would've done anything for her—anything—then."

"You didn't mean to drop her gun," Cyrus Hatch said. "You lost it accidentally. You didn't have time to get it back."

"If I only—hadn't dropped it," Daly said, staring up at Howard Westcott. "If I only hadn't—dropped the gun."

"Easy," Cyrus Hatch said. "Lie easy."

"Flack saw—saw me with the gun," Daly said. "When I was at his office, trying to find out where Rhoda was going—he saw the gun—sticking out of my pocket. He knew I'd do anything for Rhoda—even kill."

"Did you come to my apartment to see me, after you shook the detectives, because you knew I was trying to help her?" Cyrus Hatch asked.

"That's why I went there," Daly said. "Flack—Flack told me he'd come there to tell—tell you about the gun."

Daly was still staring up at the pale face of Howard Westcott.

Mark Hatch said, "Daly, did Rhoda know you'd killed Flack?"

"She knew—about Seligman and Flack both," Daly said. "But that wasn't why I—killed her."

"You didn't kill her to protect yourself," Cyrus Hatch said. "You wouldn't have done that."

"Everything I did," Daly said, "I did for Rhoda's sake—trying to keep her with me. I—I didn't want to lose her. But she told me—told me she was through with me. She was going to—to turn me in—to save herself. I tried to stop her—but nothing could stop her—except—"

Daly's eyes were fixed on the face of Howard Westcott.

Mark Hatch said quietly, "Where did it happen, Daly?"

"Nothing could—could stop her—except killing her," Daly said. "We were both—wild. I didn't mean to kill her—didn't know I'd done it—until it was too late. It would—it would've been better for everybody—if she'd never been born."

His tortured eyes held to Howard Westcott's.

Again Mark Hatch asked, "Where did it happen, Daly?"

"I caught up—caught up with her—just as she was coming into this building," Daly whispered.

Cyrus Hatch felt the tension of despair in Howard Westcott.

"Why was she coming here, Daly?" Mark Hatch asked.

"She'd found out—" Daly took a deep, quavering breath. "She'd found out—Westcott bought some pigeons from her husband—years ago—and she thought Westcott could tell her where—Timothy Quinn was."

Westcott straightened and turned his haggard eyes upon his wife.

"I—I didn't let her come in," Daly

said. "It happened—down in the street. It was dark—raining—nobody saw us. She broke away from me—when I was choking her—and ran out into the street. Then I hit her with her gun—with the gun she had—the automatic—she was pointing it at me—and I choked her again until she was dead and then I ran away."

"Was anyone else in this with you, Daly?" Commissioner Hatch asked.

"Did it—alone," Daly whispered.

Knapp placed his pencil in Daly's bloody hand. He held the notebook in front of Daly's eyes.

"I've taken down everything you've said," Knapp told him. "Will you sign that?"

Daly scrawled his name.

The doorbell tinkled.

Cyrus Hatch held the severed vein until an interne clamped it. He straightened, wagging his head. Daly was lying limp, eyes closed now, face gray with suffering.

Howard and Lois Westcott were standing side by side. His hand was closed tightly on hers.

Mark Hatch muttered, "Damnation!" and stared at his son.

McCullough and the other detective were holding the arms of Sanders and Pirano.

"Take 'em both back down to Headquarters," Deputy Commissioner Sprague said. "They're all right. We won't hold 'em long."

McCullough and the detective led Sanders and Pirano out. Sanders' eyes shone with gratitude as he looked at Cyrus Hatch.

CYRUS HATCH gazed at his bloody fingers. Terry Alexander plucked at his sleeve. He followed her from the room and into a bath.

He ran water into the bowl.

"I want to thank you, Cy," she said quietly as he rubbed his hands together in the pink water.

"Don't thank me," he said. "Thank Daly."

"But without—without everything you've done. . . ."

"Don't thank me," Hatch said again sharply. "Daly is a murderer but I'm damned if there isn't something decent in him. I feel like a heel."

He dried his hands and went back to the living room. The ambulance men were carrying Daly on a litter into the elevator. Houser and Vogt crowded into the cab.

"We've made a mess of this place," the Commissioner was saying to Rupert Alexander.

"Frightful mess," Rupert Alexander agreed. "Horrible, but it couldn't be helped. I'm sure you did the best you could. Hrrrf. A very capable young man you have for a son, Commissioner. I'd like to know that young man better."

Mark Hatch stared at his son and said, "Damnation!"

Rupert Alexander glared about, scowled at the blood stain on the rug, then stalked down the hall and into his study.

Commissioner Hatch offered his hand to Howard Westcott. "Glad it's over," he said. "Thanks for your co-operation. I'll try my best to keep your names out of the papers."

Howard and Lois Westcott murmured their thanks.

"I'm going down to Headquarters now, Cyrus," Mark Hatch said.

"I'll be along later, Mark," Cyrus Hatch answered.

The Commissioner looked at his toes, then suddenly grinned and thrust out his hand. "Good job, Cyrus," he said.

"Thanks, Mark."

"If that college of yours goes and kicks you out, why, maybe I can fix something up for you."

Cyrus Hatch looked around and found Professor Gillies standing in a corner, thoughtfully stroking his beard.

"Thanks, Mark," Cyrus Hatch said, smiling.

"Goodby, Cyrus," the Commissioner said.

"You'll be working late tonight, Mark. How about staying over at my apartment?"

The Commissioner wagged his head. "I never feel right unless I go home to the old place in Brooklyn," he said. "Goodby, Mark," Cyrus Hatch said.

The Commissioner went out with Knapp. Westcott came to Cyrus Hatch with his hand extended. His grip was strong and grateful.

"Goodby," he said.

Lois Westcott's hand squeezed Hatch's.

Hatch looked at Terry. "See you later?" he suggested.

Terry nodded.

Hatch took Professor Gillies' arm.

As the elevator carried them downward, he placed in Gillies' hand the note which the pigeon had brought.

"This doesn't even mention Daly," Gillies said in surprise.

"No," Hatch said. "But it touched off a spark in my mind."

Gillies cleared his throat and said, "This affair has taken a remarkable turn, Hatch."

"Don't you think it would be a mistake, professor," Cyrus Hatch said, "to discharge a member of the faculty on the grounds that he makes successful practical use of the subject he teaches?"

Gillies stroked his beard. "I think perhaps the matter can be adjusted," he said.

"I hope so," Hatch said.

"I think you may rest assured it will be," Gillies said.

Outside the entrance, Hatch paused to say, "I'm going on from here."

"I'll see you in your office in the morning," Gillies said. "You must tell me more of the inside of this case, Hatch. I'm sure you'll be able to write an interesting paper on it."

HATCH was smiling when he folded under the wheel of his roadster. He drove north and parked near Flower Hospital.

"I'm calling on Miss Porter," he said to the woman at the information desk.

"Miss Porter was discharged a few minutes ago," he was told.

"Discharged?" Hatch echoed. "Where did she go? She didn't leave any message?"

"Are you Mr. Hatch?"

"I am."

"She left a note for you."

Hatch took the envelope, opened it and read Jane's neat script.

"I've decided to recuperate on East Thirty-Ninth Street," he read half aloud. "Good heavens!"

"Beg pardon?" the woman said.

"Beg pardon?" Hatch said.

"I said, beg pardon?"

"I said good heavens!" Hatch said.

He hurried back to his roadster. Shifting to Park Avenue, he drove downtown swiftly. When he stepped into his apartment the telephone was ringing.

He caught it up. "Hello?" he said.

"Break it gently, Hatch," Kerrigan's voice came.

"I'll gently break your neck when I find the chance," Hatch said. "That damned note you wrote threw the whole case squarely up to me."

"It was the best I could do, Hatch," Kerrigan said.

"It had the effect of a cold shower," Hatch said. "It washed the cobwebs out of my mind. Suddenly I realized what I should have seen before—that Daly was the only one of the three suspects who could possibly have known where Rhoda Quinn was going to be last night at the time she was killed."

"Daly?" Kerrigan said. "Damn me! Did he—"

"He lied in order to keep Westcott out of it—said he'd killed her in the street. He knows that he can't help himself by exposing Westcott, and he appreciates what Westcott must have gone through with Rhoda. He'll stick to his story. Westcott's safe. We're going to have us a binge, Kerrigan."

"Damn me!" Kerrigan exclaimed. "It's on me."

"Can't talk now," Hatch said. "See you later."

He abandoned the telephone and went into the bedroom. Jane Porter was sitting up in Hatch's bed, reading a magazine.

"Good heavens!" Hatch exclaimed. "You shouldn't have come here. You can't stay. I've just saved myself from being kicked off the faculty by the skin of my teeth, but if Gillies hears of this—"

"I stopped on the way to buy a new pair of pajamas," Jane said. "Like 'em?"

The door-buzzer buzzed.

Hatch turned around to see Danny Delevan coming in.

"How do, chief," Delevan said, grinning.

Hatch sat down. "Good heavens!" he said again. "Where the hell've you been, Danny?"

"I took me a trip out to the Middle West, chief," Delevan said. "I flew both ways. Nice country out there."

"You what?"

"I just come from the Westcott place," Delevan said. "I had something which I had to give it to that sweet dame's husband."

"What the hell are you talking about, Danny?" Hatch demanded.

Delevan sat on the bed. "How do, Jane. You look nice. Them there are very swell pajamas."

"Danny!" Hatch insisted.

"Sure, chief," Delevan said. "I bought me an airplane ticket and flew out to Chicago. Did Sanders squawk about the money I took it from him?"

"Stick to the point, Danny!"

"I hadda have his money on accounta I didn't have enough on me," Delevan said. "Then I took me a bus which it went to a place called Fairgrove, Indiana. Chief, that there is some dump. So I sorta got myself acquainted with the guy out there in Fairgrove he's the city clerk or something, and I bought him plenty butter-milk, and I slipped him alla cash I had. So then I went to the Westcott place and give it to that sweet dame's husband. I feel better than I would feel if I woulda knocked out that Jonegan stumble-bum."

"You gave Westcott what?" Hatch demanded.

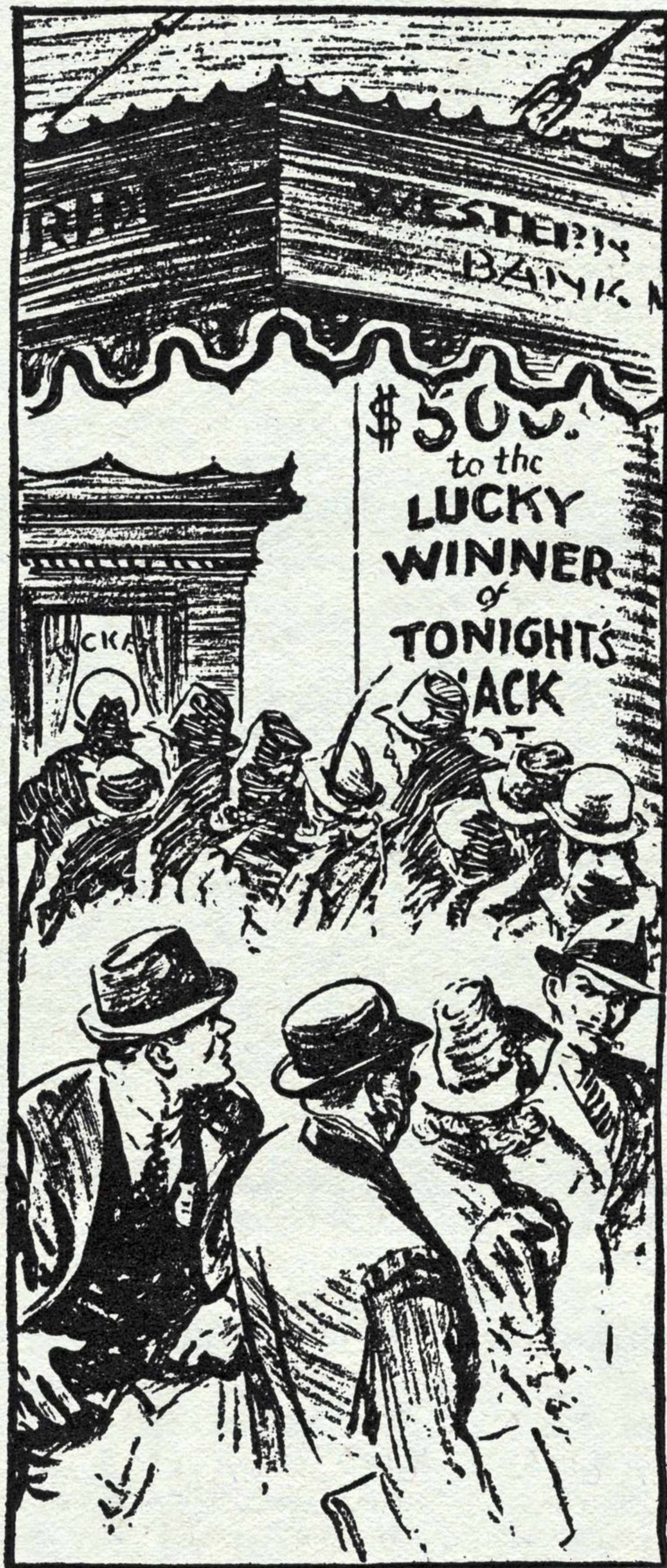
"It was the original of that there photostat we got it off from Kerrigan," Delevan said. "It was the original marriage certificate, chief."

"Good heavens!"

"I figured it would be better if that there certificate it wasn't on record any more, so I gave it to that sweet dame's husband," Delevan said with a grin of complete satisfaction, "and I just told him I done it for the wife and kiddy."

The Old Percentage

By M. E. Counselman



O'Reilly jerked his chin up, flushing, to see Percentage Kyson grinning back at him from the line ahead

“THE way I figure it”—Percentage Kyson gestured horizontally, flicking ash from his cigarette—“is like this, O'Reilly. A guy who's out of line with the law has got two strikes on him already. It's the honest john who gets all the breaks.

“An honest john,” he expanded, “can make maybe a coupla-three mistakes and still come out on top. He don't lose his job and his friends and everything else. Or if he does, he can go to another town and start over.

“With a crook it's different.” Kyson raised close-set eyes innocently at the word, fingering his gnat-wing mustache. “A crook's got to be perfect, and no guy is perfect. I don't figure,” he admitted modestly, “that I'm quite that. One little mistake for a crook—and he's out for the count. See? Like the feller says, crime don't pay off. It's just a matter of the old percentage.”

Detective-Sergeant Mike O'Reilly had been listening to this oration with compressed lips, punctuating each sentence with a nod full of sarcastic sweetness. But now, lantern-jaw thrust out, he loomed over Kyson like a thundercloud.

“In that case,” he growled, “why did you crack the Surety Loan safe last Friday and pump four slugs into the night watchman? Answer me that!”

Percentage Kyson, dapper in a

Kyson was a gambler who never missed a trick—until Detective-Sergeant O'Reilly dealt one off the bottom of the deck

checked suit, and over-large zircon solitaire on his right forefinger, closed his eyes in a pained expression. He sat back in the poolroom chair tipped against the wall, then looked up at his plainclothes heckler with an air of patient martyrdom.

"O'Reilly — *Detective - Sergeant* O'Reilly—I just got through telling you I *didn't* crack that safe—and explaining just *why* I didn't. Haven't you got a home?" he sighed. "Go 'way, will you? You got nothing on me, and you never will have. Stop calling your shots until you can drop 'em in the corner pocket!"

There was a snicker from a nearby table. O'Reilly whirled, red-faced and scowling, but there was nobody to swing at except a scared kid, a fat guy, and a smart aleck innocently chalking his cue. The dick glowered at them briefly, then whirled on Kyson again. His square Irish face was beaded with perspiration, but his eyes were granite-hard as he wagged a forefinger under the ex-con's nose.

"You did that job," O'Reilly stated flatly. "It's got your monogram all over it, Kyson—but I can't prove it. Percentage!" he snorted bitterly. "You've been playin' hell with the law of averages for so long it's not funny any more. I never saw a rat with luck like yours. Aw, what the hell!"

He turned wearily and plodded out the billiard parlor, keenly aware of Kyson's derisive grin. And he winced at the thought of returning to headquarters and the Old Man's whip-lash brand of sarcasm. Confound the old polar bear! He expected his men to be clairvoyant. Could any dick—even a smart dick like Bowen or young Pitcher—crack a case that didn't have even so much as one good lead?

"And I'm not a smart dick,"

O'Reilly thought morosely. "No, I'm just a dumb cop who ought to be back in harness, pounding a beat or directing traffic. I don't belong on the Trouble Squad. I just haven't got what it takes in the top story."

Feeling stymied at every turn, he wheeled into a corner drug store and sat down heavily on a stool at the counter.

"Anything—I dunno. Coca Cola," he mumbled, running a big hand over his eyes. It was a hand intended for knotting into a fist and smashing things, the city dick thought glumly, not for putting a blasted jigsaw puzzle together, piece by tiny piece. . . .

THE jigsaw puzzle of who had cracked that safe in the loan office, shot the night watchman, and vanished as neatly as a passing shadow. That was what the Old Man expected a guy to find out in a few hours . . . and here is was Friday again. A week had passed, and the papers were howling for a shakeup.

"And next Friday," O'Reilly muttered half aloud, "I'll be kicked out on my . . . I'll be kicked out."

"Sir?" The soda clerk turned, grinning at him. "Did you want something else?"

"No," snapped O'Reilly. "Nothing you could make outta chocolate syrup."

The clerk laughed good-naturedly. "Sounds like you've got a hangover, Sarge. Or maybe you're broke, like I am. Going to Bank Night tonight? The pot's \$500."

O'Reilly gazed moodily at the long ticket-line forming in front of the theater across the street.

"Yeah?" he grunted. "And eleven thousand people registered. What kind of percentage is that? Anybody's a sucker to expect—"

He broke off abruptly, staring at that snake-dance of theater-goers trailing out of the marquee. Three places from the end stood someone he knew—someone whose presence in a such a spot at such a time surprised and annoyed him. It was Percentage Kyson, unconcernedly tossing a coin in the air as the line inched forward.

"And he'll prob'ly win the money, too!" O'Reilly muttered savagely. "That's how it goes. Me that deserves a little luck, and him that don't deserve anything but a poke in the jaw!"

Gulping his drink, he ambled out of the store and across the street, drawn by sheer mob-fever over a chance at something for nothing. It was fifteen to eight, and the drawing was supposed to be at 8:00 sharp. Why not steal two hours off duty, O'Reilly argued with himself sheepishly, as his eye strayed to a poster lettered large: \$500 TO THE LUCKY WINNER OF TONIGHT'S JACK POT! To hell with that robbery for a little while, anyhow. Precious lot of thanks a cop got for driving himself like a mule.

"I could sure use that little piece of change," the plainclothes dick excused himself, joining the snake-dance. "Especially if I get canned next week, because Jennie and me haven't got anything saved up. And jobs are scarcer than hen's teeth in this man's town. If I got that money . . . Oh, I won't get it, of course! Eleven thousand other suckers. But . . . suppose they called my name and I wasn't there. It's a racket, that's what it is. A confounded comeon to make people . . ."

"Talking to yourself, Sergeant? Tch-tch!" a mocking voice spoke near him. "Tell me, don't you bore yourself sometimes? You bore *me* now and then."

O'Reilly jerked his chin up, flushing,

to see Percentage Kyson grinning back at him from the line ahead.

"What are you doing here?" the city dick growled. "Bank Night! I thought you only played a sure thing, Kyson."

The ex-con flipped his cigarette toward the gutter in a bright arc. "Oh," he drawled, "you never can tell, O'Reilly. I might win the jackpot tonight. One never knows, does one? You can't win all the time; but then you can't lose all the time, either. The old percentage. Besides, somebody's bound to get the dough out of the three draws tonight. Everybody'll be here with the pot five C's."

Mike O'Reilly grunted dourly and made no reply. He was thinking of that safe robbery and a white-haired old watchman lying in a pool of his own blood. If only there had been fingerprints. If only he could locate the murder gun. If only the criminal would try to pass just one of those stolen bills. But whoever had done the job was a cagey weasel, and no mistake. He was stacking the cards his way, not taking any chances on a slipup.

And that certainly sounded like Percentage Kyson. Only once had the old percentage caught up with that worthy—and then it was because a dame had informed on him. Kyson was a smart baby, and had come out of the pen a lot smarter, and not a bit chastened. He wasn't going back there. He wouldn't fool with anything that didn't look sure-fire.

O'REILLY frowned suddenly, moving forward with the line. If that were so, then why was Percentage fooling around with a movie Bank Night? It was a rotten show—always was on Fridays, because people came anyway in hopes of winning the jackpot. No, Kyson wouldn't be going to this movie,

this syrupy thing about two little orphans and a grouchy stepmother. The ex-con, he knew, wasn't much of a movie fan at any time.

And, by past experience, Kyson was certainly not attending this show tonight, in all this crowd, with the SRO sign already up, on the improbable chance of winning an eleven-thousand-to-one drawing.

"Hmm," O'Reilly muttered. "I wonder what's the gag?"

His eyes narrowed, watching that dapper figure purchase an "inside" ticket. He saw Kyson loiter at the box office, making the pretty ticket-seller laugh and blush. Saw him give the manager a glad hand. Saw him even pause to chat briefly with the usher. Percentage Kyson was not normally so affable.

"There's something a little on the sea-food side about all this," he decided. "That termite is up to no good."

He hesitated briefly, casting a longing glance at the poster promising \$500—a quarter against half a grand. It was irresistible. But rules for Bank Night were irksome in O'Reilly's home town.

Any other night a cop could get in on his badge, but not for Bank Night. On Friday he was just another citizen. He could buy an "inside" ticket, enter now to attend the drawing, and stand in the aisle on aching arches to see tonight's show. Or he could purchase an "outside" pass, making him eligible for tonight's drawing but forcing him to see a much worse movie on the morrow. In the latter case, however, he must be near enough to hear his number called and claim the money within three minutes after the announcement.

O'Reilly scowled at the ads. A lousy Western! Besides, he and Jennie had planned a little Saturday trip to visit

her relatives across the county line. He couldn't attend that movie tomorrow—but if he entered the packed theater tonight and failed to keep a sharp lookout for Kyson, the little rat might pull something. And when it came out that Detective-Sergeant O'Reilly had been calmly attending a show while it happened—

The dick grunted. Confound the luck! He just *had* to take a chance on the drawing, though—even if it meant throwing away a good two-bit ticket. Jennie would cuss him out for that. The Old Man would ride him for not checking in on time, he would miss two hours of silver-screen salve for his troubles . . . and, naturally, wouldn't win the money anyhow. But he had to get in on that drawing, and he had to watch out for Kyson. A hell of a note!

Shrugging, he stepped out of the ticket-line and edged around into an alley between the theater and the hardware store next door, musing bitterly on the sowhatness of life in general.

"Hey, Jerry!" he hissed to a young friend who had just reached the box-office window. "Buy me an 'outside' pass, will you?"

He flipped a quarter to the boy, and in a moment was pocketing the signed ticket for tonight's lottery and tomorrow's show. Sheepishly he glanced about him for a chance observer. If the Old Man heard of his loafing around the theater marquee like this, with a hot case burning a hole in the Commissioner's disposition, it would be just too bad. The Old Man was down on Bank Nights, anyhow.

But his aversion was not shared by many. Already the theater was packed to the doors with "inside" customers, and the street in front of the marquee was milling with "outside" customers who had bought a Saturday pass like

O'Reilly's. It was raining a little now; but the rule was "you must be present to win," and no one moved out of ear-shot of the public address system. That \$500 loomed large and enticing to everyone in the crowd.

"A confounded lottery, that's all it is!" O'Reilly grumbled, edging deeper into the shadows of his alley stake-out. "Bank Night! Knots up traffic, takes everybody away from their homes, draws all the cops into one spot . . ."

A NEW thought struck him full in the face. That robbery and killing last Friday night—just at Bank Night hour. And another on Friday at the same hour, a few weeks before—still unsolved. Each time the criminal had picked Bank Night, obviously for all those reasons O'Reilly had just ticked off. No cops on regular duty. Nobody home. And the traffic congested to insure an easy getaway.

"Hunh!" the city dick grunted. "Wonder why I never thought of that before? Chances are, our friend'll try another Friday job pretty soon. Maybe tonight!"

He stiffened at the thought, eagerness for action surging over him. But he relaxed again, disgruntled. If the safe-cracker was Percentage Kyson—and he knew damn well it was nobody else—that little trouble-maker was safe in the movie for two hours at least. There was no good reason why Kyson should come out, no reason for watching that theater door. But . . .

O'Reilly propped his big frame against the wall, staring moodily across the sea of heads and listening to the murmur of many voices. Once he tensed, peering intently, for he thought he saw a dapper overcoated figure pushing its way hurriedly out through a side exit. The face was shadowed by

a cap pulled far down; but it looked vaguely like . . .

The plainclothes man shrugged, annoyed with himself. It couldn't have been Percentage Kyson, of course. Kyson was wearing a pearl gray hat with that loud checked suit, and he had carried no overcoat. Besides, why should anyone pay his good two bits for a Bank Night "inside" ticket, enter the crowded theater, and come right out again—not seeing either show and also forfeiting his chance at the \$500 drawing, as "outside" passes were required for those not actually in the theater itself.

O'Reilly shrugged again irritably. That unsolved murder and robbery was driving him nuts. He was beginning to worry about the screwiest sort of things, and see people who were not there. What he needed was a rest, after the hot summer's grind. Well, next week there was every indication he would get it. A nice long one, without pay.

The theater's loud-speaker was blaring now, announcing the shows for next week, then calling for judges from the audience to come up and make sure the drawing was fair and square. O'Reilly listened sourly, wishing they would get it over with. It was 8:20 already. The manager had simply kept stalling around so that every possible customer could buy a ticket.

But presently the wheels of weekly routine were turning smoothly at last. Inside on the theater stage, according to the loud-speaker, the manager was blindfolding a little boy who would draw the winning ticket from a large wire churn.

Silence for a moment—with everyone in the crowd hoping hard. But O'Reilly, lurking moodily in his alley, was not even hoping. He leaned against

the brick wall, gloomily fancying himself as the heroic victim of a gangster's bullet. No, five gangsters. That would make the Old Man sing his praises, leaning over his fine still body stretched out in its coffin.

But—Kyson. The thought nagged at him. Percentage Kyson—the sand in his spinach. Could it possibly have been that little weasel he had seen, capped and overcoated, sneaking out of the crowded theater? Why should he do that? Why, for that matter, had he attended the show, anyhow? If Kyson was up to something . . .

Conscience pricked O'Reilly. A good cop, like Bowen or Pitcher, wouldn't be hanging around a movie Bank Night. A *good* cop would have gumshoed after that suspicious-looking figure. Why had he stayed outside in the first place? Waiting for Kyson to pull something phoney, of course. Yet, when it seemed that he had, what had the brave sergeant done? Talked himself out of doing anything about it, on the silly hope of winning five hundred dollars.

O'Reilly snorted. Then he scowled, running a jaundiced eye over the throng in the street.

"Well, hell's bells!" he muttered. "If every mother's son of 'em can leave their jobs to go to Bank Night, why shouldn't I? Besides, it won't take long, and Kyson probably never left the theater at all. If they *should* happen to draw my name—"

HE stood irresolute for a moment, wiggling a loose tooth unhappily. No chance to catch that overcoated figure now and ascertain its identity. No faintest chance of finding out if Kyson was one of the hundreds of people in that packed theater . . . unless . . .

O'Reilly stiffened, eyes narrowing. An idea had occurred to him. A screwy idea. If his hunch was wrong, the Old Man would kick him off the force so fast he could hear the wind whistle. It was a gamble of winner take-all, and once again the old percentage was on Kyson's side.

"But what the hell?" O'Reilly growled bitterly. "Next week, if I haven't cracked that case, I'll have to turn in my badge anyway. Might as well get shot for a sheep as a goat."

He paused only long enough to hear the loud-speaker announce the first drawn number and name. He shrugged. Nope, it was not his. And the owner appeared to be absent. That meant they would draw again.

Turning his back on the shifting crowd, O'Reilly hurried down the shadowed alley to a door marked "Stage Entrance." It was ajar, and through it he could see the movie manager returning the drawn ticket to the wire churn and repeating his regrets that the lucky person was unluckily elsewhere tonight.

O'Reilly sidled into the wings nervously. This was a nutty thing he was planning. Maybe the manager wouldn't do it. Maybe he shouldn't try it, just on a wild hunch . . .

The square jaw set. Resolutely he beckoned to an usher standing near the three judges and the blindfolded boy. Startled at sight of a plainclothes cop in the wings, the manager motioned his employee to see what he wanted—and O'Reilly took the plunge.

"Listen," he said rapidly. "Pass the word around to the manager and judges—official business." Impressively he flashed his badge "I want the next number you call to be the one belonging to a James J. Kyson, Greeley Hotel. Look it up in the register and

call it. I'll—I'll take full responsibility, tell the boss. Official business," he repeated solemnly, and saw that the usher was properly awed.

The manager nodded slightly as the message was relayed. And, gulping, O'Reilly edged out into the alley again, with a growing coldness in the region of his big Number 12's.

"If Kyson's in that theater," he muttered half aloud, "I'm sunk! Why did I try a screwy bet like that? I could lam back in there quick, and tell 'em it was just a gag."

His reverie snapped off short. Too late now! The loud-speaker was already squawking, and with every squawk O'Reilly's heart quickened a beat. Kyson's number was called, then his name. But there was no answer.

"Mr. James J. Kyson . . . Mr. Kyson? If you are held back by the crowd, sing out please! Mr. James J. Kyson. . . . All right, folks, our three-minute wait is . . . up! Mr. Kyson is not present. Sammy boy, draw another number."

But O'Reilly was deaf to the rest. Blood pounded in his ears as he plunged forward, plowing his way through the crowd. Oblivious of the fact, he dropped his movie-pass and also a silver-pencil, so hasty was his progress toward the drug store across the street.

Inside it he grabbed the phone and called police headquarters.

"Joe? Mike O'Reilly," he rapped out. "Listen, has a robbery been reported in the last half hour?"

"Nope. Nothin' stirrin', sweetheart. I . . . Wait a minute." The voice of the desk sergeant was discontinued momentarily. But an instant later it fairly crackled over the wire, "Yes! Call just came in, from a burglar alarm in the Chandler Building. Safe

cracked in the office of Simon & Brent. Got some negotiable bonds and a neat piece of cash, from the looks of it, I've just sent a squad car out. Why, Mike? Any leads?"

But O'Reilly had already cradled the receiver and was striding across the street, smiling grimly.

BANK NIGHT had broken up and the crowd was drifting homeward. Horns tooted. Voices called gaily to other voices. Police whistles trilled sharply, directing traffic. But O'Reilly hardly saw all this.

He was waiting for a dapper figure in a checked suit and pearl gray hat. And presently he saw it—sauntering idly out of the theater marquee with the crowd, patting a yawn and lighting a fresh cigarette.

As O'Reilly strode to meet him, Percentage Kyson cocked an eyebrow. "Ah, Sergeant! Didn't like the picture, eh? Left early—couldn't stand the sad tale of the two little orphans. But really, it turned out okay in the end," the mocking voice soothed. "You'd have loved it. It was just your speed, nothin' to strain a brain-cell over—if any."

Detective-Sergeant O'Reilly said nothing. He merely smiled broadly—and snapped a pair of handcuffs on his favorite quarry.

Kyson's weasel face went a shade paler. "Hey!" he stammered. "What's the big idea, you screwy flatfoot? You got nothin' on—"

O'Reilly, still without speaking, went through the other man's pockets with a deft speed that defied resistance and brought out a large wad of currency and a packet of bonds labeled with the trade name of Simon & Brent.

"Mm-hmm," O'Reilly beamed at them fondly. "I didn't think you'd

have had time to plant these anywhere. But I was going to book you on suspicion anyhow, and hunt till I dug them up. Finding 'em on you saves me a lot of trouble, though—me and the D.A. both!"

Percentage Kyson, his narrow face putty-colored now, sagged away from his captor. "It's a p-plant!" he gargled. "I—I never took those. You can't prove it, O'Reilly! You can't make it stick!"

The dick grinned pleasantly. "Kyson," he drawled, "don't be a sap. You're sunk, and a full confession is about all the chance you've got for a light sentence. Even then it won't be too light to hold you down for a nice long time. I can't prove you pulled those other two jobs—but one twenty-year stretch is about all that one guy can handle, anyhow."

Kyson glared at him. "Say, listen!" he lashed out. "You can't frame me, you dumb cluck! I know my constitutional rights, and I demand—"

"Relax," O'Reilly drawled mildly. "Still a little punch-drunk, are you? I see nobody's told you yet that your name was called as the winner tonight, and you weren't there—"

"What!" Kyson sagged lower. His pearl gray hat fell off and rolled away unnoticed. "Why, I been in that theater all evening. You saw me go in. Ten other people saw me. I—I just didn't hear."

O'Reilly chuckled.

"You just didn't hear your name being called," he said sweetly, "for the very good reason that at 8:25 you were busy robbing the Simon & Brent office safe half a block away.

"That overcoat and cap you wore were planted inside the theater somewhere, all ready for your lightning change before you slipped out. Your whole idea in going to the show to-

night was just to alibi yourself, in case anything slipped. The ticket seller saw you go in, and the manager, and the usher. Sure, sure . . . but nearly eleven thousand people will testify that you weren't within earshot around 8:30. Too bad, Kyson, but the old percentage has gone back on you at last!"

Turning a beaming countenance toward headquarters, O'Reilly shoved his prisoner ahead of him, whistling a little tune.

But at the curb someone drifting by plucked at his arm. It was a man he had once given a ticket for double parking, and the fellow was grinning now with malicious delight.

"OFFICER O'REILLY!" was the acid greeting. "Don't tell me you've actually arrested a *real* law breaker. Protecting the public night and day, eh? Well, well! Too bad you weren't at Bank Night tonight. They drew your number right after that James Bryson or Tyson. Just think . . . five hundred dollars!"

O'Reilly's square jaw dropped in consternation. "Wh-what! Why . . . Why, I was . . . I just didn't happen to hear . . .!"

He clawed for his ticket, found it gone and stifled a groan. Five hundred bucks, gone with the wind! And simply because he had been attending to his duty like a good cop, like Bowen or Pitcher. If he had stayed on at the show and had himself a little relaxation, or even loitered outside in the alley a few moments longer, instead of playing cop-and-robber so conscientiously. And for what? To take one Public Rat out of circulation, and save himself from getting kicked off the force—until the next shakeup!

With a masterly effort he straightened his face, aware that Percentage

Kyson, handcuffed to his left wrist, was jeering at him mockingly.

"Cheer up, Sargekins!" the prisoner jibed. "Virtue is its own reward, haven't you heard? Maybe the Com-mish'll pat you on the head. Maybe the *Evening Dispatch* will give you a little writeup on Page 10 for ridding this fair city of—"

"Hey! Sergeant O'Reilly!" a boy's voice hailed him from the theater lobby.

O'Reilly turned, and raised a hand in half-hearted salute to the boy Jerry who had bought his ticket for him. Seeing who stood beside the lad, he sighed wistfully. It was the movie manager.

Jerry panted up, grinning. "Sarge, I been tellin' 'im you were outside with a pass when they drew your number. Why'n't you answer? Oh—" He broke off, awed and delighted at sight of the sneering figure handcuffed to the dick's arm. "I see why you didn't answer. Is he a burglar, Sarge?"

O'Reilly nodded and gave him a wry grin. "Yeah, kid, he sure is. But I . . . I guess I've lost that 'outside' pass you bought for me. I was so busy it must have dropped out o' my pocket."

His voice trailed off unhappily. But the movie manager had edged forward now, peering into his face.

"Oh," he murmured, "you're the officer who came backstage asking us to call that Kyson fellow's number. I didn't understand, but we're always glad to cooperate with the police."

Percentage whirled about, glaring at O'Reilly, who grinned with momentary enjoyment. "You!" Kyson hissed. "I knew it was crowding the old percentage too far for those hicks to call my name tonight. One in eleven thousand. I knew it couldn't happen."

The movie manager glanced at him, uncomprehending. Then he smiled at O'Reilly, and shrugged.

"Well, officer," he announced, raising his voice dramatically to accommodate a small crowd that had gathered. "Young Jerry here says you had an 'outside' pass; and if you corroborate that, it's good enough for me." He winked at the boy. "If we can't trust a police detective, why, who can we trust, eh, son? You fellows on the city force deserve a lot more than you get, anyhow."

With a flourish and a slight bow, he thrust into O'Reilly's free hand a check for \$500, signed, with a blank space ready for the payee's name.

O'Reilly blinked dazedly, and a slow grin turned up the corners of his drooping mouth. Beside him, staring at the check, he heard Kyson curse softly under his breath. With stammered thanks, he pocketed the jackpot and turned again toward headquarters, shoving his prisoner before him.

"The old percentage," he chuckled. "You can have it, Kyson. I always say, you get just what you work for in this world. That's the way I figure it. Yes, indeedy!"





They're Swindling You!

Fiction and Facts

By

Frank Wrentmore

This is the one-hundred-and-twenty-ninth of a series of articles exposing business rackets that cost you billions of dollars every year! Mr. Wrentmore is an authority on swindles and frauds, well known to legal, financial and commercial associations.—The Editor.

"I 'VE been down to Trenton,' says Andy, pulling a document out of his pocket. 'I think I've got this matter fixed up all right, Jeff. Look at that.'

"I open the paper and see that it is a corporation charter issued by the State of New Jersey to the Peters & Tucker Consolidated and Amalgamated Aerial Franchise Development Company, Limited.

"'It's to buy up rights of way for airship lines,' explained Andy. 'The legislature wasn't in session, but I found a man in a post card stand in the lobby that kept a stock of charters on hand. There are 100,000 shares,' says Andy, 'expected to reach a par value of \$1. I had one blank certificate of stock printed.'"

This quotation is from the O. Henry story, *Innocents on Broadway*, which appears in his book, *The Gentle Grafters*.

LAST September, W. H. Cross and Ernest George, two international swindlers, paid a flying visit to Rochester, New York. One of their first shopping calls, after settling them-

selves comfortably in one of Rochester's good hotels, was at a leading stationery store where they endeavored to purchase some blank stock certificates and, upon being informed that the store could not supply them out of stock, they tried to obtain a few sample forms. The store manager refused their request and promptly reported the incident to the Rochester Better Business Bureau.

Cross, who sometimes signs his name as Major Wallace H. Cross, and who bears a striking resemblance to George Bernard Shaw, is described as "distinguished in appearance and scholarly in speech." Undismayed by the first turn-down, he continued his shopping and was finally successful in getting hold of a few sample blank stock-certificate forms. One of them—no longer a sample—is before me now. In its present form it purports to be a 100 share interest in the "Superstition Consolidated Mining Company, Capital Stock \$2,000,000, Incorporated under Laws of Arizona."

Careful examination under a magnifying glass—and it requires a magnifying glass, so fine is the work—shows that all the above wording, which appears to be printed, is actually hand-lettered by an expert engrosser. Other certificates, similar to the one I have, were sold to a few gullible Rochester citizens who bought them

without making any investigation as to their authenticity, or taking any other precautions to protect themselves.

The Attorney General's office was advised of the promotional activities of the two men and, in the absence of any swindling charges, they were arrested as vagrants. That's not so serious but, nevertheless, bail was set at \$1,000 each and the Attorney General's men pursued their investigation. When the luggage of the two men was searched, the police found several 1,000 share certificates still unsold and a copy of O. Henry's *The Gentle Grafter* with the story *Innocents on Broadway* marked for reference!

But the ending is different. In the O. Henry story the fictional characters get away with their loot and are not apprehended. In the real life drama in Rochester, "Major" Cross provided the \$1,000 bail and skipped. He is now a fugitive from justice. His partner, George, unable to dig up a grand, was held and convicted. He was later turned over to the New York City authorities, who have more serious charges to prefer against him.

I HAVE often wondered if these articles, intended only to warn you about the methods used by swindlers, have inspired any readers to try out some of the schemes I have described. It would be a very dangerous pastime. Even professional crooks, after years of perfecting themselves in the technique of some pet racket, are frequently caught and prosecuted. The amateur, who knows practically nothing of the wiles of crookdom and the methods used by the more experienced

swindlers to escape detection, is, naturally, under a far greater handicap and is much more likely to be picked up on his first attempt.

Another thing. Police methods today differ greatly from those in vogue twenty years ago. Radio cars and the teletype cut down his chances of escape, even though he may leave the premises. Police laboratories have new machines and special equipment unknown to the cops of only a generation ago. These aids are invaluable in convicting the crook, once he has been identified.

But possibly the greatest factor in making easy money harder and harder for the crook to get is the rather widespread campaign of education which is familiarizing the public at large with the trickster's schemes. Just as you are reading this so are thousands of others reading similar articles in other magazines and books. Some of those people are intended victims. Many a gyp owes his capture to the fact that the man he looked upon so contemptuously as a sucker had recognized his racket before he had gone half way and had yelled "Police!" instead of parting with his money.

Ten years ago Cross and George would have hit Rochester with thousands of fake stock certificates in their trunks, opened up their boiler room, pounded their "tap list" to a frazzle and cleaned up a young fortune. Today, before they have peddled half a dozen pieces of their phony paper and despite their "distinguished appearance and scholarly speech" the dicks pick them up as a couple of vags and throw them in jail.



Solving Cipher Secrets

A cipher is secret writing. The way to solve ciphers is to experiment with substitute letters until real words begin to appear. In solving, notice the frequency of certain letters. For instance, the letters e, t, a, o, n, i, are the most used in our language. So if the puzzle maker has



M. E. OHAVER
"Sunyam"

used X to represent e, X will probably appear very frequently. Combinations of letters will also give you clues. Thus, the affixes -ing, -ion, -ally are frequent. Read the helpful hints at the beginning of this department each week. The first cryptogram each week is the easiest.

NEXT week the scroll of last year's puzzle solvers will start to unroll! Department totals for the year will first be published. Next will come our °Inner Circle Club standing at the end of the year. And finally, a complete list of †Honor Roll members for 1937! All this will take several issues. Hence, to occupy your spare time in the interim, we offer the subjoined twenty-solution cryptic division by °Lethargic. With this master stroke, °Lethargic is celebrating his recent entry into the °ICC! And we are sure you will find it a solitaire problem of exceptional interest!

No. X-50. Vigesimal Division. By °Lethargic.

(a) A B C D) E F G H (I
 E F G J
 —————
 H
(b) A B C D) E F G H (I
 E F G J
 —————
 ?

The puzzle is in two parts. To the first part, (a), there are 12 different answers; and to the second part, (b), where the interrogation (?) may signify any symbol not greater than H, there are 8 more answers, or 20 altogether! Cryptofans submitting the 12 answers to part (a) will be credited a full solution in their solving records. And solvers sending in these 12 answers together with additional answers to part (b) will receive special mention in this column. Each answer employs all ten digits. No key-words are used. °Lethargic avers that not more than ten solvers will get all 20 solutions! Take up this challenge, fans! We are giving you four full weeks in which to make good!

This week's cryptic spread opens with a

division puzzle by †Rengaw. The key is numbered 01234 56789. You can start here by eliminating for zero. Esther's contribution provides the connective word RDU (in 3-word phrases), and the phrase ROO HYV, for identification. Having guessed these words, continue with VRKH, BV, and BVKH. In Zip's message, observe that the four symbols of TLRH are transposed in the ending -RTHLA. If you can guess these, you will have all but two letters in STARTLYR.

Icy provides the suffixes -FGH, -FGHZ, and -ZFNG for entry, noting FG. Follow up these with KFCFZFNG, then RGKFGHZ, ZRACR, and Group 2. J. Richards, whose No. 77 provides -D and -KD as an approach to YUDDKG-RZ, has read this magazine since 1924, but never tried the ciphers till last year! Now he's a confirmed cryptofan! Par on †W. J. G.'s Inner Circle cipher, built on a difficult suffix (used 19 times), has been set at 125 solutions! Send in your answers! By the way, †Joubert's "Brickkiln Timekeepers," No. 312 of Dec. 25 last, with par at 100, netted just 194 solutions! See next week's issue for the answers to this week's Nos. 73-78.

No. 73—Cryptic Division. By †Rengaw.

O H E) A E H E P (E R H
 Y R T
 —————
 H T E
 C E W
 —————
 O A O P
 O R A R
 —————
 O R A

No. 74—Electrical Age. By Esther.

VRKH RDU BVKH, TZHA RDU XRPL, NORZD RDU
LEFDHRZD, YEB TOEKV BV RPV HEURA, OZDGVU SA ROO
HYV LEUVPD LZPRTOVK EX TELLFDZTRHZED.

No. 75—Hawaiian Terminology. By Zip.

STARTLYR OGEK RBVNA: "VGXHNXHN," UNOGRTENOB
AKHHRX; "G-G," UHPDX GLS AYHUTGYNHPA. RXN
ZHUKNU SNEHOVA TLRH ZGLRGARTY ZHUKGRTHLA.

No. 76—Literally Speaking. By Icy.

ABDEFGH KFOMFNGPAFRZ ZRACR OADSMNTPGZ TPFMB-
TVXXD, BRXS YFMB ARTAPOMNAD RGKFGHZ. PXZN,
PGPHAPE UXNOLZ SANCN VZRTVX FG KRMRAEFGFGH
OADSMFO KFCZFZNG LRD-YNAKZ.

No. 77—Reward Refused. By J. Richards.

VPP, FHESDZ ZVENT DXUNFTKD DUNFTKH. EXTUYYZ
VOXKG OUMKD LEGAVED. YUDDKG-RZ YEGDEKD,
FUYNKGD EXQUAXHZ OGNFT, GKBKFNK GKCEANUH.

No. 78—Unanimous Verdict. By †W. J. G.

AXBPNF FRHANF YUXTG SDKNF AXTNF AXEANF.
VHGDPNF SHGNF XAKHG EDBNF RUKNF SZPLNF.
VBZFLNF RDNF, BUVLNF SZBPNF, OXANGNF BPUNF GXE,
VURHSNF DTPNF PADKNF.

LAST WEEK'S ANSWERS

67—Key: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
A Y O U N G B I R D

68—Rope skipping, immemorial pastime of the spring, is popular now in playgrounds and on sidewalks. And nippy March winds mean kites to dozens of youngsters everywhere.

69—In an eerie creek within forest depths murmurs deep water, full of fantastic fish, variegated as double rainbows at eventide.

70—Perhaps nothing hurts more, momentarily, than ankle struck against chair

rocker when you enter dark room. Moral: Keep lights lit!

71—Violent storms, fierce gales, huge, mountainous seas occasioning many wrecks, characterize vernal equinox. Autumnal period often proves equally disastrous.

72—Kilkenny cats voice weird music while zealous audience fling bricks. Jacobinic orator, contacting xenial, mature turnip, ends talk quite abruptly. "Erin go bragh!"

All correct solutions of the current puzzles will be duly listed in our *Cipher Solvers' Club* for March.

Flashes from Readers

THIS, like last week and next, has been seven days filled with crime. An astounding array of murder, arson, kidnaping and mayhem in general has crossed our desk.

We are pleased to report, however, that we have had some really romantic excitement. Yesterday noon, the editor of *DOUBLE DETECTIVE* rose and announced solemnly that he was getting married—immediately.

He was so serious about it, in fact, that we offended him mortally by not believing him.

But it was true.

So will you please excuse us now while we hurl some rice at the bride and some old shoes at the bridegroom?

Perhaps if we sit back quietly and let the old-timers, like

IRVING S. SHERMAN

have their say about the magazine, an interesting dispute will start?

DEAR SIR:

In your issue bearing the *League of Disaster* conclusion, I noted a complaint from another "Since Flynn's" reader. I am such a reader myself, hence this letter. It is with sincere regret, and a feeling of marked sympathy, that I discover one single reader, and that a "since Flynn's" reader, too, who can find any possible complaint in the sheer, exhilarating brilliance of a Judson P. Philips or a Richard Sale. What, I wonder, has kept Carter H. Holland a reader these 12-14 years? To me, *Daffy Dill*, *Dinah Mason*, *Saville*, *Hallam*, *Jericho* and *Wu* are more real and alive than Hollywood's or Broadway's best. By the way, when does *Daffy* marry the gorgeous movie-reviewer? Maybe Mr. Sale can give me a knock-down to the beauteous gal?
Brooklyn, N. Y.

Mr. Sale states firmly that he is introducing *Dinah Mason* to no one. It seems that there's no handling *Daffy* when *Dinah* goes about with some other lad.

When the sky is overcast and the printer rambunctious and everything seems to go wrong, we wonder if

ALVIN JOSEPHS

may not be right?

DEAR EDITOR:

You're publishing the best detective magazine on the market. My feeling is that you shouldn't publish those complaints on the *FLASHES* page. Not even this one.
Newark, N. J.

Sorry, Mr. Josephs, but we couldn't restrain ourselves.

NEXT WEEK:—

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