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Flashes From Readers.......................... 111

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A New Novelette

By Edward S. Williams
Author of "Second Guess," etc.

time he was on his own as a private investigator—no longer a member of the Force.

Oh well, he thought, something'll turn up. He punched the light-button and went into the hall toward the stairs.

He heard the kid's voice as he started down from his third-floor quarters—and that was something else about Nick Raine. Before, when he'd been a hard-working cop, Nick had lived with the Stevens family. And now, even though he might have moved into a more modern apartment, he held onto the top floor of the old brownstone house.

That's why Nick had no compunctions about stopping on the stairs to eavesdrop. He'd known Betty Stevens ever since she was a leggy child in short dresses. And even now that the kid had grown into a real beauty at eighteen, Nick still thought of her as a child...

"Oh, Mother," Betty protested, "you're so old-fashioned! I tell you I can't always get home by eleven. And what difference does it make? Tonight's Friday and I don't have school tomorrow. I can sleep late."

"But, Betty..." Mrs. Stevens sounded tired, Nick thought.

"And besides, we're going to—" She stopped—stopped almost with a gasp. There was silence until her mother asked gently: "Going where, Betty?"

"Oh—just over to Madeleine's. The whole gang. And it spoils all my fun to always be the first to leave! But—" Nick heard her flying feet in the hall below him— "But I'll be home as early as I can, Mother. Promise! 'By."

NICK RAINE decided he might as well go for a walk. He sighed and yawned, tossing the book he'd been trying to read on to the table beside his chair. For a minute he sat motionless, thrusting long legs out before him. His rugged face, with its keen eyes, big nose and wide mouth, was set in an expression of whimsical boredom. Things were dull. No doubt somewhere there was excitement, but so far as he was concerned, the business of one private detective was slow...

Raine heaved himself abruptly to his feet and moved into his bedroom. The trouble really was, he decided as he got into a freshly pressed suit, that he was a good cop spoiled by not having to work for a living. When an uncle had died and mentioned him in his will to the extent of hundred grand, Nick Raine had invested it, and had started on a world hunt for adventure. But a growing nostalgia for home had brought him back to the thing he'd always liked best. Except that this
PROTECTION

... and within the smoke were dreams such as a murderer might have dreamt upon a stormy night—James Aspinwall, 1609-1642

"Betty! Betty—wait . . . Betty . . ."
The door slammed and Nick jogged on down the stairs with a jingle of change in his pants pocket and a grin for the frail, still pretty woman in the lower hall.
"Hi, Toots," he called cheerfully, "sounds something like mutiny in the ranks."

Helen Stevens half smiled, but the underlying anxiety in her face remained when she said, "Nick, it worries me! I want Betty to have a good time, but . . ." "Forget it!" he advised. "Betty's a good kid—she'll be all right. How 'bout a movie tonight for the old folks—you and me?"

"No. Thanks, Nick. Some other time. Tonight I . . ." she stopped and the worry in her clear gray eyes crystalized into something approaching terror. She faltered on, "Nick, I've simply got to tell someone, and you're almost like a member of the family. I'm more than worried about Betty . . . She—it isn't liquor—I'm sure of that. But twice, now, I've noticed it—when she comes in late. She acts strangely. As though she were under the influence of some— Oh, Nick, it couldn't be a drug, could it?"

"Drug!" he said. "Now you're imagining things! Betty wouldn't . . ." but he stopped suddenly, his mouth hardening. "How did she act—highly excited? Keyed up and jittery? Couldn't seem to relax and go to sleep?"

"Yes," she answered, "that's it exactly."
"Notice any particular odor on her clothes, or breath?"

"I—I thought I did, Nick, but then I thought it might be my imagination.

"Come on out, sister," the voice said
It was on her dress. I—I sent it to the cleaner."

"Who’s this Madeleine?" Nick demanded.

"Madeleine Jonas," Mrs. Stevens answered, and then added quickly, "but Nick, you won’t—I mean, I’ve always trusted Betty. I hate the idea of spying on her."

"It won’t be spying," he said grimly. "But kids can do some crazy things! And one as pretty and straight as Betty deserves all the protection we can give her. Where does the Jonas girl live?"

She told him. Anxiously she asked, "Nick, do you think . . . ."

"I think," he smiled again, "that we’re both getting excited over a remote possibility—but it can’t hurt to find out. And I won’t do a thing until I’ve told you what I find—if any. How’s that?"

"I don’t know what we’d do without you, Nick!"

"Aha!" he called back from the door, "Nick, the indispensable!" and he banged the door after him.

AN HOUR later, Nick Raine still walked aimlessly.

Betty wasn’t at the home of Madeleine Jonas. Neither was Madeleine Jonas; a supercilious butler had assured him of that. Not satisfied, Nick had all but forced himself in, to be reassured by Mrs. Jonas. She not only had no idea where her daughter was but was even more vague as to the identity of Betty Stevens.

The hum of a fast-driven car, coming behind him, the sweep of its headlights and the sudden shriek of skidding tires, cut into his thinking. Nick strode on with a muttered, "Damned idiot!" until car doors slammed shut, and a voice rumbled.

"Nick! What the devil’re you doing out here?"

He stopped and turned abruptly. Nick knew the growling bass voice of Tim Wallace—Sergeant Wallace, now, of the City Detective Bureau. Tim and he had been rookie cops together.

"Might ask you the same thing, Tim."

"Y’mean you don’t know anything at all about this?" He thumbed toward the apartment house on their right, before which the police sedan was parked.

Nick’s face sobered again. "No," he said. "What is it?"

"Dunno yet," Wallace answered shortly, "but come on in if y’want. Some hysterical dame phoned that there’s a guy with his head busted open in there."

"Dead?" Nick queried.

"That’s what we’re gonna find out . . . Okay, boys, let’s go."

Silently—hardly knowing why he bothered to go at all—Nick followed them into the building. There was an elevator, and a wide-eyed colored boy to take three of them up while the fourth, a uniformed man, stayed in the lobby. Wallace grunted, "8-C. That’ll be the third floor, eh?"

"Yessuh."

The door of 8-C was closed. Nobody answered the knock. Tim Wallace’s lips compressed as he gripped the knob, but if he’d expected resistance, he met none. The door swung in under his sudden pressure and for an instant the three of them stood rigid, staring at the sprawled body in the middle of the living room floor.

It was a man, and he had died quickly. The whole left side of his head seemed crushed, from the temple up and back over the ear. He lay on his face—with a puddle of congealed blood soaking the carpet.

Nick Raine was the first to speak, and the strangeness in his voice jerked Wallace’s eyes upward. Nick said, "Who is he?" but he wasn’t looking at the body.

He hadn’t looked at it at all, beyond the first glance. His gaze was fixed upon a gayly-colored beaded purse that lay as though it had been dropped and kicked aside a dozen feet from the body.

Wallace drew a card from the wallet he’d taken from the dead man’s coat. "Norbert Andrews," he read, "Vorani Construction Company . . . Hey, what the hell’s wrong with you, Nick?"

Raine said, "Nothing." But he still felt as though he’d been hit under the
heart. The last time he'd seen that beaded bag it was in the lower hall of the Stevens' home—lying beside Betty Stevens' hat, and three school books.

UPSTAIRS a piano was going, played by an expert. The feather-light touch, the almost incredible speed of the runs and interpolations, was discernable even at that distance. And there was a soft shuffle, as of dancing feet. It went on and on, endlessly, until refrain was lost in rhythm and repetition, and Tim Wallace muttered, "Wouldn't you think the guy'd get tired?"

But nobody answered. Nobody did much of anything until the photographer finished and the print man was through with the compact from that beaded bag, and the stone jug on the floor.

Nick Raine looked at the contents of the bag, spread out on a table. Beside the compact, with its clear fingerprints, there was a filmy blue handkerchief, forty cents in change, a latch-key that he recognized as the mate to his own, and a cigarette. There was nothing, he decided, to lead immediately to Betty's identification, but the sick, empty feeling in the pit of his stomach persisted. It was the cigarette that did that.

The cigarette wasn't made with tobacco. It was a reefer—a marijuana cigarette. Tim Wallace had identified it immediately and the man from the medical examiner's office had nodded grim confirmation.

"Sure!" Wallace grunted. "She was high on muggles. That's what they call it, Nick, and it explains anything. They get a jag, a kick, from one o' these things that's like nothing else on earth! It's the same stuff that makes those Philippine Island Moros run amok—and you know how they act. Bullets won't stop 'em unless you blow their brains out."

Nick sat in a chair with a topcoat draped over the back of it. He shifted restlessly and a faint rattle of papers penetrated his consciousness. Curiously he turned to probe into the coat's pockets and found a flat, folded wad of paper covered with figures. At first he was puzzled; then he remembered that the dead man was connected with some construction company... Vorani, wasn't it? Anyway, the thing became clear. It was an itemized list of labor and material for some construction job. He glanced at the last page, at the total: some $300,000. It was signed Norbert Andrews. There was a smeared rubber stamp that said, approved.

Wallace rumbled, "What's that?"

"Dunno," Nick answered. "Found it in this coat. Want to look?"

"Yeah." Wallace took the bundle of pages. He glanced from them toward the ceiling. "Damn that piano! Barton! Get up there and tell 'em to quit it."

"Yes, sir." The patrolman left the room.

"Well," the fingerprint man said, looking up from his prints, "the prints on the jug check with those on the compact. I'm reasonably sure of it, but the enlargements will show for certain. Have 'em ready for you in a little while, Tim."

"You mean," Wallace stated flatly, "that the dame who owns this bag"—he picked up the beaded purse—"is the same one who conked Andrews?"

"I mean her prints're on this jug. Can't find any others except his."

Nick Raine turned from the window. "And you think a girl—a woman—dealt that blow?"

"Why not?" the doctor shrugged. "The skull's weak at that point anyway. And if she'd been smoking marijuana she could have done it. That stuff's dynamite, Raine! It doesn't give a wild, insane strength and speed that's incredible."

Wallace said, "Okay. Let's go..."

"Hey, Sarge!" Barton, the man Wallace had sent to stop the piano, forged back into the room. "I think we've got the answer! There's a gang o' kids upstairs—and the air's thick with it. With marijuana! They're all—"

"Damn!" Wallace said. "This must be my lucky night!..."

The smell of marijuana was almost thick enough to taste in that small room. The room corresponded to the one be-
low in which Norbert Andrews lay dead. A studio upright piano stood against the far wall and the man who was playing it swung around as they entered. His hands convulsed on the keyboard in a nerve-racking, jangling chord. The dancing couple stopped in the middle of the floor, in midstep. They stared, wide-eyed and uncomprehending as big Tim Wallace strode into the room. The girl on the small divan watched with inquisitive eyes. Another boy stood in the doorway leading into the adjoining room.

Nick Raine felt sick all over again. Kids! Not one of them—except the pianist—was over eighteen.

The man on the piano bench spoke abruptly. “Who the hell’re you? Who asked you here?”

Tim Wallace said, “Shut up! Listen, which—”

“I won’t listen!” the girl on the divan suddenly screamed. “I won’t listen to a thief! You’re a thief—you’ve got Betty Stevens’ bag. Where’s Betty Stevens?”

“Betty Stevens, eh . . .” Wallace muttered. He turned toward the door. “Nick! You heard her—Betty Stevens. Isn’t that the name of the kid where you— Where is he? Where’s Nick Raine?”

II

Nick Raine wasn’t one to blind himself to facts. Short of a miracle, he was ready to accept the fact that Betty Stevens had killed a man; that she’d been there, in that apartment, and that she’d been under the influence of marijuana.

Nick’s cab braked to a halt in front of the house. He had perhaps a five minute start. If Betty were here, he could at least get her to some obscure hotel for the night. He could hear her side of it and then he and her mother could decide what to do.

“Betty?” the sound of the door’s opening had brought Helen Stevens.

He closed the door. “Hasn’t Betty come in, Mrs. Stevens? Isn’t she in her room, or somewhere?”

“No . . .” her voice was tense. “No Nick, she isn’t here. What’s happened? Tell me!”

He couldn’t look at her; he didn’t know how to tell her. But it was better that he told her than to wait for Wallace to tell it.

“Mrs. Stevens, there’s been a murder. And Betty—well, they found that bead bag of hers in the room with the dead man. That doesn’t say she did it, but . . .”

“Murder!” she gasped. “Betty! Oh, no, Nick, not . . .” she swayed, gripping the bannister and Nick caught both her shoulders in his hands.

“You’ve got to know, and I’ve got to tell you,” he said. “They’ll be here soon—the police. Betty’s been smoking marijuana. That’s what you smelled on her dress. That’s why—”

She collapsed with a shuddering gasp, and Nick swept her limp body into his arms, carried her into the living room and left her on the divan. Then he hurried upstairs towards his own room.

Nick entered his room without bothering to turn on any light. He knew where his gun was, his flash, and the ring of master keys. Nick got the keys and the flash from a bureau drawer, then turned to the closet where his .38 hung on a hook in its shoulder harness. As he reached for it, he sensed the shadowy figure that came from the bathroom.

“Nick!” her voice was a sobbing whisper. “Oh, Nick, I’m scared! Please, will you help me, and—and not tell mother?”


“She didn’t hear me come in, Nick. The basement door was open. I came that way. I wanted to see you first, and besides, I’ve lost my latch-key. It was in my bag, and I— Oh, Nick, I’ve been such a fool!”

“Betty, have you been smoking reefers? Marijuana?”

“N—not tonight, Nick. I—”

“Did you kill a man named Andrews?”

“No! No, Nick! I swear . . .” and suddenly she gasped, lifted a hand to her mouth. “Nick! How did you know I was there?”

He ignored the question. He breathed,
"Well, thank heaven for that, anyway. Now we'll find out who did kill him, but first you've got to go—"

The dull, thudding sound at the front door told him it was too late for her to go anywhere. Wallace was here. Nick heard him in the lower hall—heard his rumbling voice in quick orders—and then heavy feet on the stairs. For a minute he stood motionless, his mind at a furious pace. There was no way out except . . . He pushed Betty rapidly towards his bathroom.

Nick met Wallace at the door of his flat. Tim's face went from red to white as Nick drewled, "It's no use, Tim. She isn't here. I've looked."

"Nick," Wallace said, "I know you're fond of this Stevens kid. And maybe I'd do the same in your place. But I'm a cop, Nick, an' you know what that means! Where is she? Where'd you send her?"

Nick nodded. "Sure, Tim. I know how you feel. But I didn't send her anywhere."

"You're lying, Nick! You've crossed me up, and you know it!"

"Tim, she didn't do it. Don't ask me how, because I don't know myself, but I'm going to prove it!"

"Yeah?" Wallace's tone was harsh. "You're goin' with me down to the Hall, Nick. You're goin' to tell me where y'sent that kid. See?"

"Would it help, Tim," Nick proposed, "for me to swear to you that I haven't sent the Stevens girl anywhere? That I only got here a minute or two ahead of you, and her mother just told me that Betty wasn't here?"

"You—you swear that, Nick?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

Wallace swung on his heel and strode out without a backward glance.

Minutes later, Nick raised his bathroom window. In the airshaft, water-pipes crossed the shaft at floor level, leading from an un-used kitchen to the bath. He helped Betty back in from her precarious perch on the pipes.

"It was the police, wasn't it? They—"
had intervened. The elevator boy must have been half asleep. He'd either mistaken her "D" for "C," or he'd stopped the lift by mistake at the third instead of the fourth floor. Not noticing, Betty had gone to the door of 8-C instead of 8-D, and getting no answer to her knock, had turned the knob to look in upon murder—to go in and finger the death weapon, that stone jug, in a sort of fascination of horror.

He braked his car at the curb, behind Tim Wallace's official sedan. There were three other police cars, now, including the ambulance that was backed up at the entrance. Tim was there, Nick knew, questioning everybody with the bull-dog tenacity that characterized his work—that left no loop-hole it was humanly possible to plug.

Nick went in and met Wallace in the lobby. Nick said, "Where's the boy, Tim, who was running the elevator when we first came in?"

Wallace eyed him. "Why, Nick?"

"I'd like to question him, if you don't mind."

"No," he said, "I don't mind. He's down in the basement, getting out of his uniform. We're taking him with us, Nick... Y'see, we got hold of a copy of the high-school paper, where the Stevens girl goes, and it had a picture of her in it. The—damn it, Nick, I'm sorry, but the boy's identified that picture. He says he took her up to C or D earlier tonight. He can't remember which, but I can't see how it matters. Either way, she was here."

Nick said, "Thanks, Tim. I think I'll talk to him anyway. Shall I go down?"

"He oughta be up by now... Barton!" Wallace called.

"Yeah, Sarge?"

"Go down an' tell that elevator boy I want him."

Barton took the stairs that circled the shaft. Nick said, "Find anything else, upstairs?"

"No," Wallace answered. Then he said, "Nick, I'm sorry as hell about this, but—"

"Hey, Sarge!" Barton yelled hoarsely up the shaft. "For cripes sake, Sarge, c'mere! This guy's dead—stabbed in the back! . . . ."

Wallace's eyes met Raine's across the huddled, still figure of the elevator boy.

There was little blood; hemorrhage was all internal. The murder weapon was a narrow-bladed chisel—apparently from the rack of tools on a workbench nearby. The room was small, merely a partitioned-off portion of the big basement where tools were kept.

A dozen steps away was the door that opened into a tunnel-like alley. That door now stood open.

Nick Raine's voice was a soft guttural. "Well—did she kill him too? Doesn't it look, Tim, as though the real killer came back to make sure this boy didn't remember taking somebody else up to 8-C? Don't you think—"

"I think," Wallace cut in savagely, "I'll be back in harness next week if this keeps up. But get this, Nick! I still want that girl, and by the heaven I'm going to have her! How'd her bag get in that room if she wasn't there? How'd her prints get on that jug if she didn't kill Andrews? Where is she now?"

"Who killed this boy?" Raine countered. "And why? The two're connected or I'm a—"

"Yeah!" Barton blazed suddenly. "May-be you are, at that! Where were you—before you came in last time?"

Tim Wallace looked startled. He peered at Nick under drawn brows, then snorted, "Hell, Barton, you're nuts!" And then he roared, "Get out in that alley, you dope! Find something—do something beside accusin' your betters o' murder! Move!"

Barton glowered, "Have it your way, then, but—"

"Shut up."

Barton moved toward the alley door, still rumbling in his throat and Wallace dropped on one knee over the colored boy's body. When Nick turned on his heel, the other looked up.

"Where y'goin'?"

He halted. "Am I under arrest, Tim?"

A hesitant second preceded the an-
swer, "No." And it told Nick what he wanted to know. Tim Wallace was still thinking of what Barton had said.

Nick said, "Then where I’m going is still my business, isn’t it?"

"Go ahead," Wallace snapped. Raine cursed silently as he strode out to where he’d left his car.

HE DROVE with hands knotted on the wheel, with two deep creases between his eyebrows. Somewhere in the back of his mind was a gnawing reminder of something he ought to think of. But it was only a reminder; he couldn’t think of it. His mind kept slipping off on a dozen other thoughts: the colored boy, Betty—would she have courage enough to stay up there in the dark, alone? Then suddenly he remembered.

Nick yanked at the wheel, hoping he’d make the turn he was almost past when he’d thought of it. The big roadster went up on its right-side wheels, but Nick’s foot on the accelerator went down, and the car lunged out of its skid, missed a cast-iron pole by the thickness of fenderpaint and went on. It was in yesterday morning’s paper, that thing he’d been trying to remember. Bids for new city streets to be opened tonight, the paper said...

Half a mile further on Nick braked to a halt in front of the Call building. Inside, Nick found the right room and got a copy of the Call—and it was there on the financial page. He read it again, and just as he’d remembered it, the last sentence said, "Bids are expected from several City contractors, among which are . . . ." Nick Raine dropped the paper back into the rack and turned toward the door. Vorani Construction Company was listed. And dead Norbert Andrews had worked for Vorani!

In still another room, he found a directory and the address. Vorani Construction Company had offices in the Mechanics Building, and Raine went hunting a phone next.

He found it, fed a nickel, and dialed. He addressed the man who answered simply at "Ned," and talked persuasively for three minutes. Then he left the building and got back into his car. Across the street and halfway down the block a green and white taxi was parked. Raine looked at it without turning his head that way, but he knew, after a dozen blocks, that it was on his tail. He swore again, mildly. Then he shrugged and parked in front of the Mechanics Building.

He got out and went into the dark archway that shielded the entrance doors. The night super of the building was waiting for him. He turned on a light, unlocked the door and stood barring it.

"You the man Mr. Dumont phoned about?"

"Yeah," Nick said. His eyes were on the building directory behind the man. "Raine’s the name. Here’s my card—driver’s license. Any other identification you want?"

He looked at them carefully and his glance cut back to Nick. "No. I guess you’re Raine. Mr. Dumont said to let you into his office."

"That’s right. Did Ned Dumont say I may be a few minutes? Half an hour, maybe."

"He didn’t say. It’s all right, though. I’ll take you up."

"Good," Raine said and they entered the lift.

Vorani Construction Company, the directory said, was on the fifty-second floor. Dandy, Nick thought. Ned Dumont’s law office was on the fifty-fourth. Now, if he could get rid of this superintendent, it oughtn’t to be much trouble.

The lift stopped at fifty-four. The super led him to a door marked Dumont & Blades—Attorneys At Law. He opened it, switched on light and said: "If you’re going t’be here a while, you can ring when you’re ready."

"Swell," Raine said. "I’ll ring."

He stood in the hall and watched the indicator on the elevator. When it had reached G and flicked out, Nick opened the fire door and went down the stairway two floors. Vorani had the works, he saw,
the whole floor. He found a door marked Norbert Andrews, and one of his passkeys opened that.

III

HE SAT at Norbert Andrews’ desk, his eyes narrowed in thought. There was a pencil lying on the fresh, green blotters. He picked up the pencil and sat tapping its point on the blotters.

Nick Raine considered results glumly. They were few. He knew little more than he had known before: that Norbert Andrews was an engineer who worked for the Vorani Construction Company, and had been figuring estimates. The Vorani company had bid on a City contract for new streets, and according to Andrews’ figures the bid ran to $300,000. Some contrat! Juicy. Worth killing a man for, maybe—Nick thought—if your mind ran to killing for profit. But why? What could have made murder—or had made it—necessary?

There was that sheaf of papers, the estimate sheets, that had been found in Andrews’ apartment, in his topcoat pocket. Or maybe it wasn’t Andrews’ topcoat. But anyway, if this contract had anything to do with the killing of Norbert Andrews, why had the papers been left there for anyone to find?

Nick’s fingers gripped the pencil so hard that it snapped with a dry, sharp sound. His eyes flickered to the broken pieces, to the circle of periods and commas he’d made it on the blotters—and suddenly Nick Raine straightened up.

There were other scribblings, besides his, on that blotters. There were small geometric figures—squares, diamonds, circles—such as men make with a pencil, idly, when their minds are elsewhere. There was one scrawled word, deeply indented—Carr—and opposite it was a figure—$30,000. Neatly the edge of the blotter, almost obliterated beneath his own penciled dots, were two other words—Rotten graft.

Nick Raine’s wide mouth tightened, pulled down at the corners. Graft, and Carr—if it were Mitchell Carr—were to-gether, except that no one had ever proved it. A city contract, graft and Mitchell Carr fit together very neatly, and murder might be no stranger to that combination.

Raine’s swift fingers reversed the blotter in the pad. He turned it over, tucked the corners into the leather holders of the pad and smoothed it down.

On the fifty-fourth floor he punched the elevator call-button . . .

Joseph Vorani, the city directory said, was President and Chairman of the Board of Vorani Construction Company.

Joseph Vorani, the desk clerk informed him at the apartment hotel where Vorani lived, was out of town. No, he said, he had no knowledge of Mr. Vorani’s plans—where he’d gone or when he’d be back.

Nick turned and strode back to his car. The green and white taxi wasn’t in sight when he got in, but before he’d gone a block he picked it up again in his rear-view mirror, nosing out of a side street.

Raine grinned sourly. He’d have to shake that tail soon, because what he had in mind now came under the head of breaking and entering, with a possible flavoring of assault and battery. He meant to get into Joseph Vorani’s suite.

The early tabloids were on the stands now, he noticed, as he passed a subway entrance. Nick drew over to the next one and parked beside it. There was nobody else near him except the newsie. He bought the Call and got back into his car. And the corners of his mouth tilted as he picked out the green and white cab at the curb across the street. He couldn’t see who was in the back of the taxi, but he saw the driver get out and cross the pavement to a drug-store—to telephone, maybe. He opened the paper.

It was there, and the facts were substantially correct. There was a picture of the gang of kids they’d rounded up in Anthony Diekmann’s apartment, and Nick forgot the green and white cab as he read of the murder of Norbert Andrews—of the disappearance of Betty Stevens—of the reefer in her beaded bag and her prints on a blood-stained jug. His eyes devoured
the column savagely and he turned the page to read on. But he didn’t finish it. His eyes caught a headline in the next column,

LOCAL COMPANY AWARDED
CITY CONTRACT
Vorani Construction Company Gets
$350,000 Street Job

Three hundred and fifty thousand!
Norbert Andrews’ estimate sheets said three hundred. Norbert Andrews’ desk blotter saidraft — Carr — $30,000. Nick crumpled the paper and tossed it out. He reached for his switch key; his foot touched the starter—and it was as though it had been the trigger of a gun!

Out of the tail of his eye, as he flung himself down on the seat, Raine saw the green and white taxi again. It was coming up behind him, gaining speed. They’d started to shoot before they got abreast, and he saw the orange-red flame from the Tommy gun as he got the car door open. He put his feet against the opposite door and pushed.

It sent him out into the street like a catapult. He was right beside the subway entrance, and he saw the newsie’s face before the kid dived flat on his belly and disappeared. Raine didn’t get up, or even stop moving. He caught himself on his hands as he shot out of his car door, and his hands were like legs, carrying his weight, running along the pavement.

He couldn’t see now. He only heard the stuttering anger of the gun. He heard the windshield smash. Then lead began smacking the pavement around him, whining as it lifted, and Nick Raine reached sanctuary. He let himself go head-first down the subway steps.

He kept right on going down. The roar below told him that a train was coming in. Raine made it and leaned against the brake-wheel, wiping sweat from his face.

It was so very dark in there, alone. She sat in a chair that she had pushed over against the wall, where she could watch the door that led in from the hall-

way, and the gloom-filled rectangle of the bedroom door.

She knew the house was watched: that’s why she had to sit in the dark. After Nick had gone, Betty stood at the front window, looking down upon his big, striding figure. It was then that she had become aware of the two vague forms in the shadow of a basement entrance across the street. One of them had left, following the direction Nick had taken. But the other stayed. She saw him every few minutes. Once he lit a cigarette and she saw the lower half of his face in the flare of the match, under a dark, snap-brim hat. Again, he came up out of his ambush and walked to the corner and back again. There was nobody else on the street.

It was awful, waiting like that! The deep silence began to yield up small sounds: faint creaks and whisperings. The darkness began to be peopled with moving shadows. Betty Stevens gripped the arms of her chair and bit her lips to keep from screaming. She saw him again. That dead man. The memory of him seemed to emerge from her mind and to take form and substance until he lay there in front of her, his head in a pool of blood, his eyes glazed—staring at her.

Her fingers interlocked in nervous tension, she got up and walked to the window.

A car had parked at the curb—it was Nick! He was coming back to get her, to stay with her, to tell her he’d found the real killer of that—of him! It was . . .

No. It wasn’t even Nick’s car. She knew that man wasn’t Nick as soon as he got out of the car and came toward their door. This man was narrow, slight of build, and Nick’s shoulders were huge. She didn’t know this man at all, and abruptly her eyes lifted to the watcher across the street. He hadn’t moved. She barely made out the motionless shadow in the cellar entrance. In the next moment their bell rang and Betty ran out into the hall.

She heard the nurse Nick had sent open the door. She heard a grating voice ask,
“This where Nickolas Raine lives? The
dick?”

The nurse confirmed it and the voice
went on, “He sent me to get something
from his rooms.”

The woman’s answer was lost to Betty
Stevens. Betty’s hands clenched. Nick had
sent for her! That something must be her!
He had good news and he’d sent . . . Like
an icy deluge, Nick’s words recurred to
her: “Stay here, Betty. You can’t leave
because Wallace’ll be having the house
watched. If anyone comes—even your
mother—get back into that airshaft until
they leave.” With a choked sob, she ran
back toward Nick’s bathroom.

She knew when the man entered because
she saw faint light through the frosted
glass of the bathroom window. It grew
stronger, and Betty held her breath as she
balanced precariously on the two water
pipes. Below her was a sheer drop into
total darkness, but she wasn’t thinking of
that. It was the light that held all her
fearful thought. It was a flashlight, she
knew suddenly, and if Nick had sent him,
that man wouldn’t be using a flash. And
then her right foot slipped off the pipe.

She fell with a stifled cry. Her shoulder
hit the shaft wall. Her arms clutched at
the pipes, caught them both and she hung,
terrified. The window was raised. For a
moment she saw nothing, then the flash-
light blinded her. And then a voice from
back of the light. “Come outa there,
sweetheart!”

Slowly, straining to accomplish it, Betty
got back onto the pipes. The light re-
treated, still blinding her, as she pulled
herself through the window. Her voice was
a quivering whisper when she spoke.
“Wh-who are you?”

He laughed. The circle of light slid
down to her feet and up again.

Betty pleaded, “Oh, please—did Nick
send you? Please tell me!”

“Yeah,” he said then, but his laugh
told her he’d lied. “Sure. Sure, sweet-
heart, Nick sent me. Who’re you?”

“I—I’m Nick’s girl . . .” she faltered
desperately, “I was—waiting for him.”

There was silence, and then the voice
laughed. “You were, eh? Well, imagine
that! So was I. I got a little present for
him—right in here . . .” The light left her
for an instant to illumine a hand and arm,
and a .45 automatic pistol. Then the
light vanished and Betty tried to run.

He caught her arm. He twisted it up
behind her and the crook of his other
elbow covered her mouth and nose.

“What’s your name?” the voice
demanded. The smothering elbow relaxed but
the grip on her arm didn’t.

“Betty Stevens . . .” she sobbed.

“Come on, sweetheart. Make a sound
an’ I’ll tear this arm off.”

They went down together—to the lower
hall—to the street—and she was hardly
aware of what was happening. She heard,
“Get in,” and knew he meant the car.

Then another voice said triumphantly,

“Okay, wise-guy. I’ll take the girl—and
you too! We thought Raine might try a
fast one, but—”

The watcher across the street! The
police! Betty Stevens half turned and
screamed. And her scream was lost in the
hammering roar of a gun. She saw the
man in the dark snap-brim hat lurch
backward, saw him grab with one hand
at his stomach, and with the other try to
get the gun out of his pocket.

He didn’t clear it, but his gun went off
once and she saw sparks shoot from his
coat pocket. Then she was in the car and
it was rocketing away from the curb.

NICK RAINÉ found the right key and
pushed open the door of the apart-
ment. He said, “Okay, Bud. Go in and
turn on the light.”

The elevator man looked at him, and
wet his lips. He looked into Joseph Voranis’
dark living room and back to the gun in
Nick’s hand. He went in, and light from
a center chandelier illumined the room.

Nick closed the door. “Sit down,” he
invited, and when the other obeyed Nick
said, “I’m going to search the place. If
you think you can make it to the door
ahead of a slug, try it any time.”
The elevator man’s tongue slid over his lips again. “No, sir,” he said, “I d-don’t think I can.”

“Good.” Nick smiled pleasantly. “We’ll get along.”

He started there in the living room. He worked fast, but with an expert certainty that never went back to anything he’d looked at before and passed up. He searched a secretary, its pigeon-holes crammed with old letters, rent receipts, cancelled checks and bank statements. There was a picture of a girl on the top of the radio cabinet. There was another picture of the same girl on the secretary. Across the bottom was written, Devotedly—Angela.

Nick grinned and went into the bedroom.

His mouth straightened as he looked at the bed. There was a blue vest lying on the counter-pane, and a pair of dark blue, silk sox lying on the floor beside it. The closet door stood open and Nick saw an array of suits, an overcoat, a raincoat. On the floor were shoes. But he couldn’t find any coat or pants to match the blue vest. He went to the chest of drawers and looked in each drawer rapidly. Shirts, underwear, accessories, filled them. On the top was another picture of Angela.

Nick called, “Hey, Bud—come here.”

“Yes, sir.”

He stood in the doorway and Nick pointed to the vest. “Did Vorani,” he asked, “have on a blue suit—like that vest—when he left?”

“No, sir. He had on a brown suit.”

“He had a bag?”

“Yes, sir. It was tan leather. It was small, like one of those overnight bags dames carry.”

“Who’s that?” Nick pointed to the picture on the chest.

“Miss Swift,” he said. “I heard Mr. Vorani call her that once, in the car. He was introducin’ her to another guy.”

“Where does she live?”

“I dunno.”


In the living room again, Nick thumbed through the phone book. He found Swift, Angela, and the address.

“Let’s go,” he said.

He locked the door behind them. In the lobby, he stuck a ten dollar bill, folded, into the elevator man’s pocket. “Buy yourself a drink,” he grinned, “and in about five minutes you can untie your pal.” He nodded toward the desk, where there wasn’t any clerk in sight. But the lift man understood. A little while before, with Nick’s gun as persuader, he himself had trussed up the clerk with his own belt and tie. He looked worried and his tongue wiped his lips again as he watched Raine out of sight...

It was almost two A.M. when he rang the bell in the lobby of the building where Angela Swift lived. He got no immediate answer. Nick rang bells impartially all over the house, and grinned when the door-latch buzzer began to respond. It kept on responding until he was halfway up to the third floor, and then doors started opening. He stopped in front of Apartment 37 just as the door opened a crack. He saw blue-black hair, done up in front on curlers, and dark, hard eyes, before the door started to close again and he hit it with his shoulder.

It knocked the girl half across the room, but she didn’t scream. She started to. Her mouth opened to scream, and then Nick was standing over her and the blue muzzle of his gun was cold against her throat. “We’ll talk,” Nick said, “not yell.”

“Who are you?” she asked. “What d’you mean, breaking in my—”

“You look like the devil in those curlers,” he grinned, “but I like the nègligée. I’d hate to spoil it, honey... Where’s Joe Vorani?”

“Go to hell,” Angela Swift said.

Nick went swiftly into the bathroom and came out with two large bath towels. He caught her arm, whirled her around and lashed her wrists together. He shoved her ahead of him back into the living room and dropped her on the davenport again. Then he tied her ankles and knees.
Nick went into the kitchen. Silently he opened the electric ice-box door. He was very careful about noise as he worried an ice-cube out of the rubber tray. It didn’t take long. Then he hunted around until he found a sharp steak knife. He walked back into the other room whetting the knife on his thumb.

"Turn over," Nick said. He held the ice-cube in his cupped left hand, against his leg so that the drip wouldn’t betray it.

The girl stared up at him, without moving. Nick shifted the knife to the hand that held the cube. His free hand rolled her over on her stomach, with her face against the cushions of the davenport. The knife made no sound as he dropped it upon the thick rug.

"Talk," Nick said, "when you’ve had enough. I’ll start with your initials on your right shoulder blade. That ought to be exotic—maybe you’ll start a fad. There’ve been sillier ones."

She began to tremble. Her breath came faster but she made no sound as Nick pulled the négligée back. He said, "Where’s Joe Vorani?"

There was no answer. He touched her shoulder briefly with the sharp corner of the ice-cube. His hand thrust her head into the cushions and her swift scream was lost. But that one short gasp was enough to tell him that she believed she was cut. He eased up on the pressure on her head.

"Hotel Antoine..." she sobbed hysterically. "Under the name—Louis Sand."

He turned her over. She saw the dripping cube in his hand and the change from terror to rage robbed her of breath and voice. Then it didn’t matter. Nick dug out another towel and gagged her. He pulled out the telephone cord before he left.

IV

The squad car roared to the curb as he emerged from the building. Nick Raine stood in the doorway and heard somebody’s muffled yell, "There he is! Watch!" Nick took two steps forward and then stopped, his fists clenched. The squad car disgorged men, and there wasn’t a smile in the six of them.

Nick looked at Tim Wallace. Nick said, "Who am I—Dillinger? Do you think you need six guns to run me in?"

Wallace choked, "Broadhurst was killed, Raine."

Nick’s eyes narrowed still further. He knew John Broadhurst as a good cop, a man with a long, spotless record. He said, "I’m sorry—but this is the first I’ve heard of it. How? D’you think I killed him? And if you want to be formal, put a Mister in front of that Raine... Tim, what the devil’s eating you?"

The hardness in his face didn’t relax when Wallace said, "You know what’s eatin’ me, Raine. The man you sent t’get the girl shot John Broadhurst to death. You’re just as guilty of murder as your man. Come on—or would you rather take it this way?"

The gun in his hand thrust forward, trembling in his tight grip.

"Where’s the girl?" Nick asked harshly. "You wouldn’t know, would you? Well—we’ll get her, too. You and she can fry together. Come on!"

Nick got in between Wallace and a uniformed man he didn’t know. Nobody talked, and that suited Raine. He wanted to think.

It was easy enough to figure Wallace’s coming straight to him. The clerk and the lift operator, back at that house where Vorani lived, would be only too anxious to spill what they knew. And Wallace was astute enough to guess that Nick had gone after Angela Swift. John Broadhurst must have been watching the Stevens house. But Broadhurst dead—shot by a man Nick was supposed to have sent for Betty—and Betty gone..."

It put him right back where he’d started, he thought grimly, only more so. He wouldn’t be able to talk himself out of this jam.

But why, he thought suddenly, wasn’t Betty herself in the hands of the police? If Mitchell Carr was out to cover murder for the sake of graft, what earthly good
could Betty do him, outside a cell. And if Carr wasn't behind it—if Nick's whole theory was a mistake—then who had Betty?

It was unanswerable. Nick Raine said, "Tim, I didn't have anything to do with Broadhurst's death. I didn't send anybody to my flat. I swear it! Who—"

"Shut up, Raine," Wallace said bitterly, "your word isn't worth much."

"All right," Nick was patient. "I know you think I lied. But do you remember what it was I swore to before? That I hadn't sent the kid anywhere. I hadn't. She was there when you were—in an airshaft outside my bathroom window."

"Yeah?"

"Okay, Tim, you win. Mind telling me how you're so sure I sent the man who did the killing?"

"I mind," Wallace grated, "living in the same world with you! Shut up!"

Nick breathed, "So that's the way it is! You're a sucker for any old frame, aren't you, Wallace?"

"At least I'm not a murderer!"

Nick lowered his voice, "Just a stooge for Mitchell Carr, eh?"

Wallace looked at him, just a little puzzled, Nick thought, as the car stopped.

It was to be the D.A.'s office, he saw, not Police Headquarters, and that thought put ideas in his head. That might make it easier, when it came to a showdown.

Bourne didn't smile when they led Nick into his office. Martin Bourne lifted his head and his eyes gleamed as he glanced from the man sitting on his right, an assistant D.A., to the girl who was taking dictation on his left. The D.A.'s gesture stopped her when she started to close her book and rise. She opened it again and sat with it on her crossed knee.

Bourne said, "Well, Raine..." in a tone that gave him an out if his case blew up on him. Bourne was like that, Nick thought contemptuously, a lawyer who wouldn't commit himself.

Nick said, "Well, hell! I hear I'm supposed to be guilty of Broadhurst's death. It wouldn't surprise me much to hear I killed that colored boy, too. What're you chumps planning to do about it, Bourne?"

"Take a milder tone, Raine," Bourne counseled. "Would it surprise you to know that we have the girl, Betty Stevens? We got an anonymous tip, half an hour ago."

Things whirled in his mind for an instant, and then everything straightened out. Everything stood as it had before—except that he had to get out of here. He had to locate Joseph Vorani, and a missing coat and pants to match a blue vest. He had to pin murder where it belonged, and fit graft into the scene where graft fitted in. He had to bring in the killer.

Raine laughed. "It wouldn't surprise me to hear you say you've got a purple cow up your sleeve. What you mugs say is beginning not to impress me, Bourne."

Bourne's eyes darkened. He pressed a button at the side of his desk, and in a moment a door opened on their left. Nick edged closer to the uniformed cop on his right and nobody saw him move because the opening door jerked all their eyes that way. Bourne said, "Send in the Stevens girl, Gilbert."

"Yes, sir."

They continued to watch the door. They watched Betty Stevens falter into the room. And Nick Raine inched closer to the man on his right, and suddenly his hand plunged beneath a blue coat to a hip-pocket holster. His hand emerged with the butt of a .38 police positive in it, and the muzzle of the gun was pressed against the small of its owner's back.

There wasn't any confusion. Nick dominated the roomful as though it was a rehearsed scene. He spoke in to the cop's ear.

"Brother, you think I'm a killer, too, don't you? Well, think it hard, because if you were to doubt it and make a break, your widow might be sorry..."

"Betty..."

"Nick," she sobbed, "I—I did just what you told me. But I slipped on the pipes. He heard me and—"

"What'd he look like, Betty? Where'd he take you?"
"He was young, Nick. He had on a brown cap and a brown overcoat. He didn't seem any older than I am, but he—Oh, Nick, he was horrible! He shot that man—Mr. Broadhurst—and then he took me to a hotel and locked me in a dirty room. And then the police came."

She stopped abruptly, without any downward inflection to her tone. Martin Bourne spoke furiously.

"Very pretty, Raine! Very clever, but you won't get away with it, you know."

"You hope to heaven I won't, don't you?" Nick flared, then, "Listen, Bourne! This girl didn't kill Norbert Andrews. I didn't kill John Broadhurst, or the black boy, or have them killed. But I know who did, and I'll have the proof..." He stopped and smiled at the stenographer,

"Are you getting this, sister?"

She looked up at him, wide-eyed. "Yes, sir," she said.

"When the time comes, Bourne," Nick said, "I'll bring it into court. You've stuck your neck out once too often. You guys wouldn't take my word for it—you had to make an arrest... Come on, Copper..."

They backed out of the door together.

NICK RAINE drove a rented car. He'd changed taxis twice in coming away from Bourne's office. He thought the cop he'd used as hostage might remember the license number, and the driver of that first cab, Nick figured, wouldn't memorize the number of the second. Nick backed the hired Buick out into the street, and spun her toward the lower end of town, and Seventeenth, but his eyes were grimly anxious as he drove. Time had passed. He hadn't tied up the girl with any idea of permanency. Just long enough to reach the hotel where she'd said Vorani was, and long enough to get back to her if she'd lied. But half an hour had been snatched from him. It was three A.M. If the Swift woman had won free, he'd have to do all over again.

He pushed the Buick pretty hard. He reached Seventeenth in a matter of minutes and swung left in the direction of the Hotel Antoine. He knew the place vaguely: a dive, a hole where no questions were asked—and none answered, if the management could help it. Nick parked in front of it.

He went into a dingy lobby. It was deserted but a cold-eyed clerk lifted his head from the magazine he was reading to watch Nick approach the desk.

Nick said, "Louis Sand in his room?"

"Who wants to know?" the clerk asked tonelessly.

"Who asked you?" Nick flashed.

The clerk's eyes centered on the third button of Nick's vest. His right hand—he had the fingertips of both resting on the edge of the desk—began to slide to the right, slowly. "You a friend o' his?"

"Keep your hands still," Nick told him. His own left hand shot across the desk and gripped the man's upper clothes. He pulled him up across the desk and slapped him hard on the cheek. "Is Sand in his room," he snapped, "or has he checked out?"

"He's there," the other admitted.

"What room?"

"Two-seventy-three."

"I'm going up," Nick said. "I wouldn't do anything about it, if I were you."

He turned toward the elevators. There were two, and one stood with its gate closed, dark. The other was up above, but the jerking brass needle on the dial over it said it was on its way down. Nick stood to one side of the shaft, waiting.

It arrived, the gate crashed open and a man walked out. And Nick Raine stood for a frozen second staring at the expensive clothes of the man from the lift, at his swarthy, darkly furtive face—at the tan leather, small bag he carried. In the same moment, Joseph Vorani's watchful eyes saw Nick. Whirling, he ran toward the door.

Nick caught him at the curb.

Vorani dropped the bag and tried to draw a gun, but Nick's fist caught his chin with a thud. Vorani's head snapped back and he went over backward into the street. His gun flew a dozen feet away and slithered toward an open drain.
Nick got the bag. The hotel clerk was watching them from the hotel entrance. Nick ignored him as he sprung the bag’s catch, and one look inside was enough. In it was a blue suit, minus the vest, and a pair of cordovan shoes. Nick closed it and whirled back to Vorani—and Joseph Vorani was gone...

The oldest gag in history—a trick faint, and a runout! And he’d fallen for it...

He saw the prow car a block away as his eyes swept the street for Vorani. Nick swore between his teeth, but he threw the bag into his waiting Buick and followed it in himself. The hot cylinders took the spark swiftly.

V

DAYLIGHT was beginning to dilute the darkness when Raine parked the Buick again. An electric milk truck, like a big white box on wheels with the driver standing in the sawed out middle of it, trundled silently by. Nick got out stiffly.

It was the premonition that he was right—that he knew where Joseph Vorani had fled—that held him for an instant before he plunged into whatever it was that was due to happen. It was the thought that here, in Mitchell Carr’s Non-Partisan Club, the solution was going to be found. But in the event anything happened to him, Betty would still be safe for he had checked the tan leather bag and mailed the check stub to Wallace.

Nick Raine’s smile tightened as he drew a deep breath and turned toward the darkened entrance of Number 23 Lombard Street. There was no sign: Mitchell Carr needed none. The Non-Partisan Club was known to everyone who knew anything about the city. Mitchell Carr sat in his dingy office at Number 23 Lombard Street and wielded the power of a dictator.

The door wasn’t locked. It never was. Nick went in and a colored porter with a mop and a pail was slopping dirty water around over the black-and-white flagged floor of the entrance hall. Three closed doors flanked each side of that lobby. At the far end of it a double stairway with a heavy stone balustrade led upward. The colored man stopped sloshing water and looked at Nick.

“Carr in?” Raine asked.

The man silently pointed up the stairs. Nick strode past him and up. He turned into the short corridor at the top of the stairs. On his right was an unmarked door. Raine opened it and went in.

“Hello, Carr,” Nick Raine said. He stood in the doorway, leaning against the closed door, with one hand still on the knob behind him.

Mitchell Carr looked up sharply. The diamond on his hand flashed cold fire as Carr closed his hand into a fist. The man who was sitting beside Carr’s desk got up slowly and backed away. Both his arms were straight down at his sides, with his palms against his thighs as though he were wiping moisture off his hands. His eyes started at Raine’s hat, skipped his face and went on down, and his thin mouth curled in a faint smile...

Raine watched that boy. He had on a brown tweed topcoat. A brown cap lay on the corner of Carr’s desk...

Then Mitchell Carr’s thick voice broke the tension. “Why hello, Nick. Come in and sit down. What can I do for you?”

Nick spoke softly. “First, Carr, you can tell this—friend of yours to take it easy. I’ll kill him if he doesn’t.”

Carr’s glance flicked speculatively to the boy, then back to Raine. Gold flashed from his mouth as his upper lip lifted. He said, “You take a lot for granted, Raine. What’s on your mind?”

“I’m going,” Nick said, “to take this guy down to Tim Wallace in a minute. I’m going to see if the bullet that killed John Broadhurst fits his gun.”

“You think it will?”

Nick nodded.

The boy’s twisted mouth opened a quarter of an inch. “Let me take him out, Chief.”

Carr said thickly, “You be quiet, Berk,” and then to Nick, “Raine, what’re you getting at?”
“Can’t guess, can you?” Nick grunted. “Well, I’ll tell you, Carr. Vorani killed Norbert Andrews. He killed him because Andrews found out about that little present of thirty grand that Vorani gave you to swing the street and sewer contract his way. The way I figure it, Andrews was a decent sort who couldn’t be bought. If he could, Vorani would’ve bought him in the beginning and Andrews would’ve known about it all along because Andrews was the estimate man. When he did find out about your graft he taxed Vorani with it and Vorani killed him.”

“Maybe you can prove all that?”

“No. But I can prove Vorani killed Andrews—and I’ve got the proof in a safe place.”

“How?”

“Did Vorani tell you about his suit, Carr? He didn’t get rid of it. I got it.”

THERE was heavy silence. Mitchell Carr’s mottled face remained inscrutable. The boy’s hands moved restlessly and he said, without taking his eyes off the laces of Nick Raine’s shoes: “This cop’s too bright, Chief. I don’t like him.”

Nick smiled. Carr said absently, “There was a colored boy killed too, wasn’t there, Raine? Maybe you’ve got it all figured out who killed him?”

“You did,” Raine clipped softly. “Oh, not in person, Carr. The punk, here, slipped that chisel into him, perhaps. That doesn’t matter. The point is, you ordered it. Vorani came running to you after he’d killed Andrews and told you the whole story, but before you’d done anything about it this other thing broke. You heard about the bead bag and the marijuana angle and the Stevens girl. And then the only fly in the ointment was that elevator boy, who might remember taking Vorani up to Andrews’ apartment. So you sent somebody to see that he didn’t, and maybe the Stevens kid would burn for both and maybe not—you didn’t care. Y’see, Carr, even though I can’t prove graft I’m going to take the three of you down to Tim Wallace and prove murder!”


“Raine,” Carr went on in his flat voice, “you’re hard. You’re a tough nut to crack, but I’ve had to deal with tough nuts a lot in my time and I wasn’t born yesterday. There’s a gun behind that picture over there . . .” He pointed to it.

“I don’t underestimate anybody, you see. I didn’t underestimate you. My bodyguard—young Berk, here—told me you were getting interested in the death of Norbert Andrews and the colored kid, and I was puzzled, I’ll admit. Then I got the Stevens angle straight, and—I’ll admit again—I was worried. The thing wasn’t air-tight, as you’ve so obligingly shown me. But we’ll improve it as we go along; we’ll tighten it up—won’t we, Berk?”

He smiled at the boy and the boy’s voice was softly harsh, “A-ah, can the talk, Chief! Let me—”

“Berk’s a little abrupt,” Carr explained, grinning, “but he’s a good boy in his way. Y’see, Raine, he missed getting you by so little, there at that subway entrance, that it made him feel badly. Berk doesn’t miss often, and now he can’t afford to miss again. Can you, Berkeley?”

Joseph Vorani came in. His dark face was pasty, his eyes fearful. The man behind him was tall, big shouldered, with a broken nose and one tin ear. Patchell, Nick remembered, Carr had called him. Then Carr spoke again. “Matter of fact, Raine, I was just about to send Berk out to take another look around for you—try to make you see things our way—when you came in. Now, of course, that’s unnecessary . . .”

He stopped as though expecting Nick to say something, but Nick didn’t speak. The silence gathered, like a storm brooding, broken only by Vorani’s raucous breathing, and a restless movement of Berkeley’s feet.
Carr said, "All right, Berk, you can take 'em out, now. He and Vorani ... Get this, Berk! If you slip up again, you're through!"

"I won't slip up," Berk said.

"He and Vorani cancel each other, see? And be sure the gun you leave on Vorani is the one that killed Raine, and not the one you shot Broadhurst with. Get it?"

"I get it."

"Carr!" Joseph Vorani's voice was a terrorized croak, "You—you're not going to let this maniac kill me!"

"You lost that suit, Vorani," Carr grated inexorably. "You let this two-bit dick get it away from you ... You fool, you'd burn for the Andrews murder now, if I let you live. And you'd sing your head off before you burned. I'm through covering for you, Vorani!

"Get 'em out o' here, Berk. Patchell, you go, too. Take 'em back to that cheap hotel and—"

"Carr," Vorani screamed, "you can't! You can't let him kill me! I'll do anything— I'll give—"

Nick Raine watched Joseph Vorani. He watched them all at once, and watched the framed picture on the wall over his head—the picture behind which was a gun and a man who'd been ordered to keep him covered. He knew he'd have to risk that gun, but if Vorani ...

Vorani did. He lurched toward Carr's desk and for a split second his body was between Nick and Berk. And in that instant Nick turned the knob of the door and flung himself backward out of the room. In the same swift movement he slammed the door. Lead ripped through it.

The man with the mop was still in the corridor. He stood rigid, paralyzed by the sound of gun-fire, but he galvanized into life when he saw Nick. Raine's gun was in his hand. The porter saw it and started running for the front doors. Nick shouted, "Cops! Bring 'em here quick!" He turned to face the corridor again.

Berk had a gun in each hand. He was running. He must have thought Nick had gone on downstairs, for he was running hard and couldn't stop. His right gun went off—almost in Raine's face—but Berk's foot had slipped on the worn carpet as he rounded the corner onto the balcony. He fired again as he fell. Nick's long gun-barrel missed Berk's head, but caught the bridge of his nose. He rolled halfway down the left staircase before he stopped and lay still. Raine went back to the corridor entrance.

A slug took out a chunk of wall beside his head. Nick cursed. They hadn't all followed him out. He'd counted on their doing it. He's hoped they'd do just what Berk had done, so he'd have a chance to get them one at a time. But they hadn't ... That was Patchell who had just fired. Patchell dodged back into Carr's office. Raine dodged back into the corridor.

It saved his life. Behind him a gun crashed twice and he heard the whine of the bullet. He knew then what'd happened. Somebody had gone down another way to cut off his escape. Nick heard pounding feet on the stairs.

He waited, flat against the wall and watched Carr's door and the corridor entrance simultaneously. The running feet came nearer. Nick's gun spoke. The man literally ran into the slug. Nick saw him stop and straighten up as though he'd run into a strong wind. Another shot came from Carr's door.

It felt as though a brick had hit his left side—a brick with a sharp corner that tore his flesh as it bounced off his ribs. His gun muzzle moved a foot to the left and bucked upward as he snapped a shot back. He knew he'd missed again. He saw Patchell's ugly face jerk back out of sight an instant before his gun went off. Nick's eyes cut back to the man on his right. He lay face down where he'd fallen. Holding his left elbow hard against the pain in his side, Nick walked toward the door of Carr's office.

Flame met him. The stabbing orange jets of fire from Patchell's gun seemed close enough to burn of themselves. Raine raised his gun again and this time he
didn’t miss. He saw Patchell slump inside
the door.

It seemed too quiet after that.

Mitchell Carr was gone, of course, and
Joseph Vorani was dead. But he’d ex-
pected that. Raine knelt beside him. Vorani
lay on his face, with a slug through the
back of his head. Then Nick got up and
stood listening to the distant crash and
thud of police axes at the front door.

T

he knocking at his door woke him.
Raine’s eyes opened and without
moving his head they flicked toward the
alarm clock on the table beside his bed.
The clock said four-thirty. He’d slept nine
hours.

Nick called, “Come on in, if you’ve got
a cigarette." And Martin Bourne came in.
There was somebody else with him, but
whoever it was stayed in Nick’s living
room. The D.A. was very affable as he
stopped beside Nick’s bed and held out his
hand, but Raine didn’t seem to see it.

“Where’s the cigarette?" he asked.
Bourne colored faintly. He got out a
gold case and snapped it open. A lighter
was in his other hand. He held it to the
cigarette Nick put into his mouth, and
their eyes met over the flame. Then Nick
grinned and offered his hand.

“Good!" Bourne looked relieved. “I
hoped you wouldn’t hold this against me,
Raine. Because it’s all washed up and
you were a hundred percent right. That’s
what I came to tell you.”

Nick hitched himself up in bed ginger-
ly. His gouged left side and broken rib
smarted with movement. “You got Carr,
eh?"

“Yes," Bourne said eagerly. "We locat-
ed him at the airport in spite of his dark
glasses. That big diamond of his gave him
away; he forgot to take it off. . . . That
gunman of his, Berkeley—we had
ourselves a time with him. But he finally
admitted that he came to your rooms last
night to wait for you, and kill you when
you came in. When he found the Stevens
girl here, he knew Carr wanted her badly.
So he took her with him and shot Broad-
hurst on the way out. He stabbed the
colored boy, too.”

Bourne paused and Nick asked, “Vo-
ran’s suit—did it pan out?"

“Oh, yes, beautifully! There were blood-
stains all down the front of the coat and
pants. Even on the shoes. The stains
checked with samples of Andrews’ blood.
. . . Too bad Vorani’s dead. I’d like to
prosecute him, for there’s no doubt he
killed Andrews. And now, Raine, all we
need is a clarifying statement from you to
complete our case against Carr and Berke-
ley.”

He stopped again expectantly and Raine
sat smoking, frowning slightly. Finally
Nick grunted, “All right, I’ll give you a
statement—for a price.”

“Name it," Bourne said.
“I’ll name it later.”

Bourne hesitated, then agreed. “Okay.”

“First,” Nick said, “there were those
estimate sheets that I found in Andrews’
coat pocket. Andrews, you know, had been
working on estimates for Vorani’s bid on
the city street and sewer contract.”

Bourne nodded.

“His estimate,” Raine continued, “came
to three hundred thousand for the job.
That might, I figured, mean something—
or it might not—but it was all I had to
work on. So I checked with a news item I
happened to’ve read, and found that
Vorani Construction Company was bid-
ing on the City contract. Then, on a
hunch, I went to Andrews’ office.”

Nick paused to drag on the cigarette,
then went on with his finding of the pen-
ciled words and figures on Andrews’ blot-
ter. He mentioned reading that other news
item, later, that told of Vorani Construc-
tion Company having been awarded a
$350,000 contract for new streets and
sewers. He told over the machinegunning
of his car.

“But,” he pointed out, “that bit of
gun-play told me a lot! Told me that
somebody was anxious that I didn’t go
any further on the angle I was working on.
So I went to see Vorani. I went on the
theory that if there was graft, it couldn’t
exist without the knowledge and con-

nivance of the head-man in the company.

"Well, Vorani was gone. I knew that,
but I went anyway, and found several
things of interest. One was—a vest, with-
out any coat and pants to match. After a
while a possible answer dawned on me.
When Andrews was killed, he was hit so
hard that blood spurted. I figured that if
Vorani had killed him he’d get blood spat-
tered on his suit. But since there was
none on the vest he’d only taken the coat
and pants away to dispose of them. And
I found three pictures of the same woman
in his rooms."

Bourne cut in to say gloomily, “Yeah.
We had to turn that Swift woman loose
this afternoon. Didn’t have much to hold
her on.”

Nick nodded, “It was luck, of course,
that she knew where Vorani’d hid out. And
luck that he hadn’t had the time— \( \text{not the nerve—} \) to get rid of that suit. But I was
due for a break, and I got it. After that,
the only thing to do was to force a show-
down with Carr—and hope he’d convict
himself. And he did, and the rest you
know.”

He took a last drag on the finished
butt, and stumped it in the tray on the


table. And suddenly Nick raised his voice.

“All right, Wallace! Quit hiding your
ugly head in there, and come on in.”

Bourne looked sharply at Nick’s face,
then smiled. Bourne said, “Tim feels bad-
ly, Raine. He was sure you were off him
for life.”

Tim Wallace stood in the doorway and
tried to meet Nick’s eyes—and failed until
Nick said: “You can square yourself,
Tim, and Bourne can pay me off—both at
once.”

“How?” Wallace asked.

“Then get this!” Raine was grimly
serious. “That beaded bag of Betty Stev-
ens—that marijuana cigarette—the whole
set-up as we found it—was a plant! Un-
derstand? It was a plant—a frame—so we
could work secretly on the Carr angle.
D’ysee? I started out to protect a kid
from a thing that might ruin her whole life
—and it still might ruin her life un-
less . . .”

“Raine,” Bourne said, “it’s a deal!
You can depend on us. Can’t he, Wal-
lace?”

Tim Wallace blurted, “You bet! And,
Nick . . .” he stopped and swallowed
twice, then finished, “Nick, you’re a great
guy!”

BETTY STEVENS’ mother said the
same thing in different words. Her
voice was husky when she said, “We can
never thank you enough, Nick. Never re-
pay you. Never—”

Raine grinned up at her, “Oh, yes,” he
said, “you can!”

“We—You mean?” she faltered.

“How?”

“You can bake another of those choc-
olate cakes—like the one you made last
week. With frosting on top half an inch
thick . . . Remember?”

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Happy Relief From Painful Backache
Caused by Tired Kidneys

Many of those gnawing, nagging, painful
backaches people blame on colds or strains
are often caused by tired kidneys — and
may be relieved when treated in the right
way.

The kidneys are Nature’s chief way of
taking excess acids and poisonous waste out
of the blood. Most people pass about 3 pints
a day or about 3 pounds of waste.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters
don’t work well, poisonous waste matter


stays in the blood. These poisons may start
nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg
pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up
nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes,
headaches and dizziness.

Don’t wait! Ask your druggist for Doan’s
Pills, used successfully by millions for over
40 years. They give happy relief and will
help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out
poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan’s
Pills.
CHICK Carlson was loafing around town looking for something to turn up and he dropped into the Wagon Wheel tavern on Market Street to take in a beer and a couple of so-called cowboy tunes from the orchestra on the elevated stand above the bar. The flat-faced taxi driver drifted in and sat on the other side of the small table and started grousing about his job.

It was as simple and casual as that.

The taxi hawk had a face that looked like it had been used for a doormat. The nose was wide and flat, and little white scar lines ran around the lips and through the eyebrows. But at that it was a good-natured face.

"You know, I've never driven a taxi," Chick Carlson said, and at the moment he felt cheated.

"No? Well, you ain't missed nothing."

"Maybe. Maybe I have," Chick Carlson said. In fact, the more he thought of it the more he was sure that life just wouldn't be worth living unless he drove a taxi tonight. He got out a ten dollar bill and then another, and said, "Look, I'd like to drive your taxi for a spell."

"Ye-ah? And why?" the hacker said. Carlson grinned. He had a nice grin. "Why did I smuggle a milk wagon horse into my apartment? Why did I pinch hit for a wrestler? Why did I bet that I could steal the bell off a fire engine? Why—"

"Oh, a playboy, is it?" the flat-faced man said.

Carlson put a five atop the two tens. "Okay," the driver said. "But get back before this joint closes, or I report the car swiped. See?"

Wearing the flat-faced man's cap, Chick Carlson drove the taxi around. It was an independent cab, and the name on the license certificate was J. A. Smith. A name common enough to remember. He got a small kick out of being polite, giving profuse thanks for a ten-cent tip. There was a pair of lovers to see the city lights from Telegraph Hill; a salesman to the Third and Townsend station; a fat lady giving her Pekinese the air. Then a couple of guys wanted to be taken to a hot spot, and Chick Carlson headed toward the Tongan Village, off El Camino Real south of the city.
THE two guys got out at the Tongan Village, and "Heads" Morgan came out of the casino and hailed the cab. Carlson knew Heads Morgan by sight—had seen him at Tanforan and Baden, at Dreamland and at the night spots. Everybody who went around got to know Heads Morgan. Morgan always dressed with an immaculate flashiness; he was tall and lean with a hard-shaved blue jaw and large clear eyes that would make flint seem soft. Nobody seemed to know what business he was in.

Heads Morgan crossed from the bamboo thicket that half hid the casino. He had a zipper-closed brief case under one arm; his coat was open and his twenty-dollar gold-piece luck charm swung loosely from the chain across his vest.

"The Drake, and hurry," he said, getting in. He didn't look at Carlson; nobody notices a cab driver.

Carlson forgot to get out and open the door when he reached the Drake. That small oversight had its place in the simple and casual chain of events. Heads Morgan opened the door and got out, gave the door an easy shove that merely clicked the primary latch. Then he unclasped his gold luck piece from the watch chain, and said, "Double or nothing for the ride."


The coin arched, hit with a small sharp slap in Heads Morgan's palm. Morgan extended his hand over the front door of the cab so Carlson could see.

"I win; heads."

And then things happened. Two men were suddenly there alongside Morgan, and one of them said throatily, "No; you lose, Heads."

Carlson couldn't see much except that they were both tall and that one was heavy and the other thin. They had hats pulled low and polo coat collars turned high.

The heavier one said, "We know all about them slick-faced aces, Heads," and he grabbed for the briefcase Morgan had under his left arm.

Heads Morgan snatched for the gun under his coat. He was fast. He got the gun into view, but he never thumbed off the safety. He stiffened, with his mouth coming open above the blue jaw and the air sucking in sharp and fast, as one of the men made a jabbing motion at his ribs.

Carlson didn't sit around watching any longer. He gunned the motor and let out the clutch. The taxi jumped like a man getting the hot-foot. The two men in polo coats were crowding Heads Morgan, and all three of them rolled in a tangle along the side of the taxi as it lurched away. They went down in a heap off the curb.

Heads Morgan never got up under his own power.

CHICK CARLSON still didn't hear the chuckle of Fate, when he found Heads Morgan's zipper brief case a quarter of an hour later. He already had the gold piece.

When Heads Morgan went for his gun, he'd dropped his luck piece. It fell to the rubber floor mat and rolled against the base of the gear shift. Carlson drove around town awhile, switching about in case somebody should be following. He got the gold piece and put it in his pocket. Then he drove to the Wagon Wheel, parked, got out and found the brief case dangling from the side of the cab—dangling empty, the zipper pulled open by the jolting weight of the leather case.

A car door has two latches. Heads Morgan had shut the door softly, clicking only the primary latch. When he and his killers rolled along the side of the lurching cab, they'd crammed that door tight shut—crammed it shut on the little leather tab of the zipper slide.

Heads Morgan obviously was killed for the contents of that zipper brief case. And those contents were now sifted into the wind and under the wheels of San Francisco... . .

Carlson went home, with the gold piece luck charm as a souvenir of a thrill. He read about Heads Morgan's death in the paper next morning. The killers had
jumped into a car and escaped. Police were working.

Chick Carlson laughed to himself, and had another piece of toast. If he wanted. If he wanted, he could find the killers of Heads Morgan. Sure as the sun comes up.

But he was through with this. There'd be another prank next week. And Chick Carlson liked his neck. He didn't want to stick it out on account of a guy like Heads Morgan. Let the cops do their own chores.

So Chick Carlson practised polo that afternoon, went to a party that night. The next morning he read the paper with his toast and coffee in his hotel apartment. He sipped coffee and munchied toast while hundreds fell in China and Spain, while a sensational murder trial was hashed, while a tornado took its toll.

Then a little bit of an item at the bottom of page one hit him between the eye and he spilled coffee over his pajamas.

The item said:

The bullet-ridden body of James Smith, 38, taxi driver, was found in Golden Gate Park by police early this morning.

Smith had asked for police protection after turning State's evidence in a narcotic case a month ago. He had feared underworld vengeance, and police are following that theory.

James Smith. A common enough name to remember.

Chick Carlson sat there and tried not to think. He didn't want to think. He wasn't used to facing things.

He sat there gawping at the paper. Of course the two men who had knifed Heads Morgan had traced the taxi by the number. Maybe they had laughed before killing Smith when he couldn't produce what had been in that zipper case—laughed because he told them, "But I loaned my taxi to a playboy that night! He paid me twenty-five bucks to borrow it!" That would be funny.

Carlson saw what it made him. It was like borrowing a bottle of ink and bringing it back full of nitro glycerine. He'd borrowed a cab and brought it back loaded with murder. He tried to shove the thought away. He didn't like to face things. Struggles with the soul were for books and movies and radio dramas. What the hell? Smith might have been bumped by somebody else, anyhow, according to the paper. Smith was a squealer, afraid of the palsy he'd betrayed when he copped a plea.

But, still. . . . Carlson kept seeing the battered, flat, good-natured face of the taxi hawk.

Carlson tried to drop back into the swing. He spent a week-end on Tommy Sundell's yacht and tried to get excited about practise for the coming polo match with Hollywood. But everything seemed stale and futile, as if it had been done over and over and always would be, and what did it matter. It was all right during the daytime. A man could go at something hard and maybe lift a few slugs of liquor. But the more slugs you lifted, the quicker you woke up at night. It was ridiculous. Chick Carlson laughed it off—during the daytime. But it was different at night. He kept thinking of that flat-faced taxi driver. "He'd be alive if I hadn't borrowed his cab. . . . What the hell? A two-bit squealer. . . . But what made him what he was? Where would I be if I was born poor and saw money all around—rich playboys who'd never worked a day in their lives. Where'd I be if I was born poor and quit school early, and grew up to realize I'd never get anywhere—or get anything unless I took it. . . . He was a life; his life was all he had. The world ended for him when he died. He lived all his life worrying about tomorrow's bread, and he died because I wanted a thrill. . . ."

It wasn't easy at night.

Carlson tried the easy way out. He took to going to the Tongan Village and listening around in the casino. He dropped a question here and there.

That got no place.

He decided he needed a trip. That was
it. A trip. A change. New faces, new scenes. In a rut here. He called the downstairs clerk from his hotel apartment.

“Get me a seat on tonight’s plane East.”

Then he started to pack. With his luggage strewn around, he stood flipping Heads Morgan’s luck piece. It was a twenty-dollar gold coin set in a gold rim with a round clasp at the top. Carlson kept flipping and catching it.

Finally he muttered aloud: “What the hell? I’ve been always wanting a thrill. I’ll tell this one to my grandkids. If I live to have any.”

He called the desk: “Make that a seat on tomorrow morning’s plane.” He hung up, smiling tightly. He could get the men who got Smith. Because they were the ones who had got Heads Morgan. He could get them because of Heads Morgan’s good luck charm. He just had to flash that charm.

Facing the thing suddenly had him feeling calm and serene. He could be detached even as he speculated whether, before the night was over, he would have avenged Smith, or joined him.

HE COULD feel the bulge of the automatic under his left arm when he walked into the casino of the Tongan Village that night. With each step the heavy gold luck charm swung out and back against his vest. He had a gold watch chain strung between two vest pockets and the luck piece was clasped over the chain to swing loosely of its own weight.

The roulette wheel was in the center of the room, dice at the right, bird cage beyond, blackjack in the corner. On the other side of the room were the card tables. The long bar was at the front. The place was comfortably filled, as usual. White shirt fronts and white shoulders. Glitter of gems. Rattle of the roulette ball, soft whirr of shuffled cards, staccato murmur of voices, click of chips, chatter of dice. Carlson nodded at the habities he knew, and could see their eyes catch on the luck piece and then come up to his face and shift away. A twenty-dollar gold piece is distinctive on a man’s middle.

An arm on his shoulder, smiling Eddie Quill asking, “How’s she going, Chick?” Eddie Quill ran the place.

“So-so, Eddie. How’s business?”

“That’s quite an ornament you got there, Chick. Come on in the office for a little drink.”

They went in the office and Eddie Quill poured two drinks, and asked: “What’s eating you about Heads Morgan, Chick? A while ago you was working the pump around about him, and now you’re wearing his bauble.”

“I understand he was here the night he was bumped.”

Eddie Quill could never forget his smile. “Look, Chick, you’re a nice kid with plenty of dough and I like your sort of patronage. But you want to stay where you’re at and let others stay where they’re at. So I’d take that thing off my watch chain and clam it, Chick.”

Carlson said, “A man’s got a right to wonder if he wants to.”

Eddie Quill’s eyes were calculating above the smile. “Sure, Chick; it’s a free country. I do some wondering myself. I used to wonder how a crooked rat like Heads Morgan got away with it so long. He was here that night, him and a couple other guys, and these guys had a brief case. So Heads calls for a deck of cards and I take them to him myself personally. So him and one of the other guys cuts cards, and they both get aces. So Heads cuts an ace the next time and the other guy gets a trey. So Heads takes the brief case and goes out. So pretty soon the other guys jumps up and lams out quick. Me, I’ve been keeping the old onion peeled, so I ease over and start fooling with that deck of cards they’ve been cutting. So I find I can cut an ace ten times out of ten. I’m not saying that Heads Morgan switched decks for a pack with the aces waxed. I was watching his hands all the time, because I know Heads. I’m not saying he switched for a slick-faced aces deck when he cut for the brief case. I’m not
saying that these other two guys found it out like I did, and went and finished off Heads. I'm not saying. Me, I'm just wondering, like maybe you are, Chick."

"And who were the other two men?"
Carlson asked.

"Never saw them before," grinned Eddie Quill. "Me, I never noticed 'em. Wouldn't know 'em if they walked in here right now and spit in my face. And I ain't curious, Chick. Me, I wouldn't want to know who them two guys was. See you around, Chick, boy."

"See you around, Eddie."

Carlson went out and played red and black alternately on the wheel for a hundred dollars. He continued wearing the luck piece. Eddie Quill watched from the bar with a chiseled smile.

CARLSON kept expecting a word in his ear. He knew that at least half the men who frequented a high-stake casino like the Tongan Village would be men whose money came the easy way. And such men have a way of spreading news quickly and quietly. He figured the word would get around about that luck charm, and then there would be a word in his ear. He could feel the outline of the holster under his left arm. The killers of Heads Morgan would come for that brief case. They wouldn't know about the contents sitting onto the night streets. They would come.

But when the lights began flashing on and off for the closing signal, they hadn't come; no word had been whispered. Chick Carlson got hat and topcoat out of check and went into the foggy outside air feeling a little weak from the tension. Weak—and relieved. He'd tried. He'd done what he thought would draw the killers. He'd done all he could, and no man could do more.

He knew his nights would be peaceful from now on. He'd done all he could; and that was enough.

He slid under the wheel of his roadster onto the leather seat damp with fog. The floodlights among the date palms were off by this time. Cars of a few stragglers like himself were whining starters, blinking fuzzy headlights into the gloom. And then two men stood up into view along side the car. In the fog Chick Carlson couldn't see much except that they both were tall, one heavy and one thin. They had hats pulled low over their eyes and polo coat collars turned high along their faces.

The heavier one said, "We'll thumb a ride."

Carlson knew his nights would be peaceful from now on, if he had any more nights.

"Don't take your hands off the wheel," the heavy man said. He got in close to Carlson and frisked him, took the automatic from the shoulder holster. Then the lean man got in. "Get going," said the heavy man.

Carlson took a skidding turn out the palm-lined drive and onto the asphalt highway.

"Just a playboy, huh?" the heavy man said. His breath was bad. "We beat the hell out of that taxi driver and he still claimed it was a playboy borrowed his cab that night . . . . Turn to the right here . . . . And you're just playboy enough to wear Heads Morgan's watch fob for a thrill. Damned lucky for that taxi driver that a waiter I knew in the Wagon Wheel saw him there all that night. Damned lucky for him."

"Why did you kill him, if the waiter said he'd been in the tavern all night?"

"We didn't kill him, playboy. And so you want a thrill. Are you getting a thrill, playboy?"

Of course, they wouldn't confess to murdering the taxi driver.

A fist swung around and smashed Carlson in the face.

"I asked a question, playboy. You get in the habit of answering."

Carlson's face felt like the lips were gone. "Yes, I'm having a thrill," he said to the question. He went south on El Camino Real, turned right at Burlingame, wound among the hills, taking this fork and that at the heavy man's direction. In
the fog nothing could be seen but the little space of asphalt unwinding in front of the headlights.

"Pull up this driveway.... Now around back of the house."

The heavy man unlocked the rear door of the pink stucco house, went in flashing a light along a hallway. Carlson followed into the front room, with the lean man close behind him. A table lamp went on in the center of the room. There was a big window at the front covered with a Venetian blind. A door was at the south and another, the one he had come through, at the west. The room was furnished like any lower middle-class place. Drop ceilings, jazz-plaster walls, fireplace and floor furnace; oak floor; Monterey-type furniture in antique white; framed print of the Lone Wolf above the fireplace.

"A simple place," the heavy man said, "and private. Not a neighbor for half a mile. And so you borrowed the taxi from Smith that night, playboy? Just for a prank, yes?"

"That's right." Carlson had learned his lesson about answering questions.

The two men took off hats and polo coats. Carlson kept his topcoat on. The thin man had a hawk nose and sad eyes. The heavy man was round and blonde of head with a thick red neck that showed white valleys when he moved his head. He asked, "Where's the stuff, playboy?"

"What stuff?" Carlson didn't know what else to say.

The heavy man brought a pocket knife into view. It had a white bone handle, a single thin blade about four inches long. He pressed the handle and the blade clicked open. He stepped close, pressing the knife against Carlson's topcoat over the abdomen. Carlson retreated backwards across the room and the big man followed with the knife giving a steady pressure. Carlson stopped with his shoulders against the wall. The knife was razor sharp. The point of it was through the topcoat, vest and linen, with the bare point prickling the skin. He sucked in his stomach and the knife followed.

"Thought I learned you to answer questions," the heavy man said. "Where is that stuff that was in Heads Morgan's bag? Speak up quick and say your piece."

The heavy man's breath was nauseating. The round blonde head was ramming close, and the point of the blade was cold against the skin. Chick Carlson knew fear and also something like desperation. He might have let the police in on the play before he walked into the Tongan Village casino wearing the luck charm. But no, he'd had to have the old playboy angle. Just another screwball prank like stealing the horse from the milk wagon. Just the playboy angle. A prank — the last.

"Ease on that knife or you'll never find out," Carlson said, sparring for thinking time.

"You can't put the heat on me, playboy," the heavy man jiggled the knife. "Out with it, playboy. I'm getting impatient."

There was no hope, and so Carlson tried for an offhand finish. He knew these men would murder to cover murder, regardless.

"I threw the stuff in the can and flushed it down the drain," he said. "And you can go to hell."

The heavy man moved quickly. Pressure of the knife released and then came ramming at Carlson's abdomen with all the brute power of the hulking shoulder. Half turning, Carlson's spine hit the jazz-plaster wall as he doubled over, his two hands clutching. The big man made just that terrific shove and then let go the knife and stood there while Carlson hunched forward with his hands clawing at his middle. Carlson's knees bent slowly, and then he went over and lay gasping.

"Think it over, playboy," said the heavy man, standing there. "You'll live a couple, three days; they always do with a slit belly. But unless you talk, you'll pray to die quick." He turned to the thin man. "Let's have a drink."
“Sure,” said the thin man. “A couple of drinks.”

Carlson lay there with his hands at his middle and the right side of his face against the cool smoothness of the oak floor. His eyes were wide and staring, and he watched them go into the hallway to the west, leaving the door open. They went into a room to the right of the hallway and left that door open.

Chick Carlson cautiously got to his feet, the bone handle of the knife in his right hand. He couldn’t help unbuttoning his topcoat and looking at the twenty-dollar luck charm hanging on the chain that stretched between two vest pockets. Gold is soft and tempered steel is hard. The point of the knife had gone through the topcoat and stuck into the luck charm and the charm had slid along the chain against the vest as Carlson made that instinctive half turn. The heavy man had felt the knife moving, with perhaps just about the right resistance. Looking at the sharp depression in the luck piece, Carlson wondered briefly what would have happened that night in front of the Drake if Heads Morgan hadn’t dropped his good-luck charm to go for his gun.

Carlson could have gone out the other door, but he didn’t think of that. He was utterly confident; any man would be, after getting a chunk of luck that size. He walked silently into the hallway and through the door to the right. Without anger or fear. He pitied the two men who whirled to face him. He made just two fast motions with the knife. The heavy man did get a gun out but he never got a chance to use it. It was Carlson’s gun and he put it in the shoulder holster and went out of there.

He thought he would be able to sleep from now on.

The next morning Carlson finished packing for his trip. He knew Eddie Quill and some others might do some guessing, but they’d say no more about this affair than they had about the Heads Morgan murder.

He had the desk clerk call a taxi. A bellhop came for the luggage. Outside, the bellhop put the bags in the taxi and Carlson got in.

Then he saw the driver’s face twisted around, looking at him. The face looked like it had been used for a doormat. The nose was wide and flat and little white scar lines ran around the lips and through the eyebrows. The face was bruised, also, and one eye was swollen.

“I knowed I’d run into you sometime, playboy,” the driver said.

Carlson felt the hair actually rise on his neck, and his collar began squeezing like an opening and closing hand.

“James Smith!”

The flat-faced driver got out very deliberately, opened the door and jerked Carlson outside by the wrist.

“J. A. Smith,” he said. “Jefferson Albert Smith. Just call me Al. And two mugs beat the hell out of me after that night when you borrowed my hack. I knowed I’d find you sometime, playboy.”

Carlson saw the fist coming. He didn’t try to dodge. James Smith . . . police theory of gang vengeance . . . Too much coincidence . . .

He woke up flat on his back. People were around in the sunny morning. A cop was holding Jefferson Albert Smith, and the flat-faced one was declaring: “Okay, then I go to jail, but it was worth it.”

Hands helped Chick Carlson up.

“Let that guy go!” Carlson told the cop. “Me, I just slipped and fell. . . . Hurry, Jefferson Albert Smith, or I’ll miss that plane.”

At the airport, Carlson slipped the driver a coin and made a dash for the plane. “Keep the change, and good luck to you!”

Jefferson Albert Smith looked at the coin in his hand. It was a twenty-dollar gold piece set in a gold ring, with a round clasp at the top.

Jefferson Albert Smith shook his battered, good-natured head slowly, grinning. “Nutty as an acre of pecans,” he said. “Just a playboy.”
Detour from Death

By Charles Alexander
Author of "Death Is a Hummingbird," etc.

The escaping killers had a choice of two roads—but both led to death.

LOPEY CASE studied the topless Model T touring standing beside the tiny filling station. It was a battered relic. One front fender cocked up, one cocked down and both rear fenders were missing entirely. The stuffing and springs stuck out of the seat covers. The Model T had lived all its life on the beach of the Pacific, and salt water had eaten red spots over it until it was all one spot of rust.

But to Lopey’s fourteen-year-old eyes it was a thing of beauty. The wooden wheel, paintless, had a piece broken out where the wood had been dovetailed together. Hands had worn that paint off. Hands of his big brother, sixteen-year-old Dale. Hands hurrying that car, cut-out open and roaring, over mountain roads, through tunnels of black forest. Racing wide-open on the packed sand of the beach. Jumping that car like a living steed through the quicksand of Carkle Creek.

At one P.M. Lopey was going to drive that car himself. As reward for tending filling station all morning, while Dale and his father, the deputy sheriff, were out with all the other males of Johnsonville, trolling salmon off the bar. They’d be in at noon.

Lopey pulled a glittering watch, with a picture of Popeye on its face, from the bib pocket of his blue overalls. The watch was running, but its hands said it was only a little after eleven. This was, Lopey frowned, the longest, slowest morning he’d ever seen in his life.

He looked up into the village but it was no good looking there. Nothing to see but the rising sandhills the town was built on, the timbered ridges of the Coast Range running down to meet them. On one knoll by itself, commanding everything else, perched the one-story bank with its pressed-brick front.

There was nothing doing in town. Nobody in town but women, girls and babies.

But he kept looking up into town, frowning. He could see nothing. Yet he heard plainly a couple of sharp cracks. As if someone were slamming a flat board against the side of a house to make a noise.

Then he spotted something new. A low, shiny black coupé stood in front of the bank. That car didn’t belong in Johnson-
ville. A car like that didn't stop at the filling station once a month. And when one did, Dale never let Lopey, with his grimy fingers, get within a mile of it. He watched the car intently.

Two men were coming from the bank, getting in. In a hurry. One carried something. The car ripped forward in a shower of street-sand.

In a moment it was skimming like a bird. Lopey saw it flash behind houses, out, whirl on corners. It was coming down, down the sand hills. Straight for the station. It grew before his eyes incredibly. Its head lamps, swollen in huge fenders, stared like a monster's eyes.

One moment it was doing sixty or more, the next it stood beside the gas pump, ticking so silently Lopey could scarcely hear it. The right door opened and a squat man shot out.

Eyes in his heavy white face drilled into the filling station. One hand was hidden under the left lapel of his light gray double-breasted coat.

He snapped out of the corner of his mouth: "Nobody home but a kid. He won't know what we want."

"Take him anyway." The man behind the wheel watched his rear-view mirror. "We've got no time to hunt up a guide. Kids know more than you think. Kids know plenty."

The squat man's eyes searched the filling station lot again, stopped at the Model T. "Ain't seen a jalopy in town but Noah's chariot there. Looks like it might run. I'm puttin' a couple of slugs in its tank. A little more noise can't hurt us none."

"Not after," the driver snarled, "the gunnin' you did at the bank... Stasek! Watch that punk!"

Lopey, mouth dry, eyes strained wide, was backing away. The squat man, Stasek, grabbed a handful of his overalls bib in his left fist. His other fist had his gun out—a gleaming automatic. It cracked twice, driving slugs into the side of the Model T below the front seat. One of the extracted shells flung by the automatic struck Lopey in the forehead as he kicked and slugged at Stasek. "You quit shootin' that car," Lopey yipped shrilly.

Stasek slammed the boy into the seat, jammed his heavy body beside him. He growled: "Shut up, punk," and answered the driver as the coupé streaked north out of town. "I had to do that gunnin' at the bank. The old coot pulled a horse-pistol. Listen, Meacham, go slow on me. You ain't so high with me right now. You claim to be the brain an' you got us into this. Go slow."

Hunched over the wheel, the driver bored straight ahead. But a dull red spot burned on each high cheekbone beside his narrow, hooked nose. "I'll get you out," he said.

Stasek grunted: "You better."

THERE was blood on Stasek's gray coat. The blood got on Lopey's arm below his rolled shirt-sleeve and he tried to squeeze away. There wasn't room.

Stasek was watching the beach unroll ahead but he seemed also to be watching everything. He laughed at the boy. "Old Grandpa at the bank folded right over his money-drawer, spurtin' ruby-juice. I had to drag him off of it... You, Meacham. This is the setup you got me into.

"We come up the coast just lookin' and restin'. You been this far before. You say we can knock over this hick bank for a little roll an' we don't even need to case the job. Only one lone phone wire comin' from the south and none goin' north to the next wide-spot—Waldport. We cut down a swath or two of wire on the south an' double back that way. Nobody knows we even been up here.

"So, what do we run into? About a hundred dummies in a road gang workin' right at the only spot we could reach that wire to cut it. You say that don't figure, we can get away north. You don't tell me there's a creek on this damn beach that only the natives know how to cross. You only tell me that when we lam. I want to know so what, Meacham."

The driver, dividing his stare between
the flat, hard-packed beach and the rear-view mirror spoke out of the side of his mouth. "I was gonna grab the bank guy. You had to gun him. So I grab the kid. Nobody else in sight." His lips formed soundless words. "You give the kid the works when we get across. We can hide him in the brush.

"I never been up to that creek but I heard about it. The natives drive across it all the time. We cross it and hit the highway to Waldport. We're out of the woods and safe an' struttin' in the Big Town in a couple hours. . . . Kid, you know this creek?"

"Carkle Creek," Lopey said. His left forearm was doubled against his chest and he could feel the Popeye watch in his bib. He wondered what time it was now.

Stasek tried to soften his rasping voice: "Hell of a name. Carkle. Speak up loud, son. Tell us about it."

"Car-kill," Lopey said. "It kills cars. It's quicksand. The quicksand changes every time the tide changes. Sometimes you can cross it up near the bluff, an' next time you have to go farther down. It sucks lots of cars right out to sea."

"Ain't that nice" Stasek forgot his coaxing tone. "Listen, punk, there's a way around that creek. There better be or how'd you like to get what Grandpa got in that bank? Open up, punk!"

Stasek's big fist clamped on the boy's arm and crunched. Lopey squealed: "There's a way, mister! A road goes up in the woods an' crosses on a bridge. It's right ahead. Leggo, mister!"

Stasek didn't let go but he stopped crunching, snapped at Meacham: "I want out of this damn sand-trap you got me into. What you see behind? Why were the hicks all gone from that town?"

"There's nothing behind. I told you before all the hicks go out fishing. I've seen 'em before an' they stay out all day."

Lopey could hear his watch ticking. It made more noise than the motor of the big car. The watch ticked: "Dad an' Dale are comin' in at noon, Dad an' Dale are comin' in at noon an' I mustn't tell!"

"Where is that road?" Stasek demanded. He lit a cigarette, hurled it out the window as Lopey pointed ahead and to the right.

"That ain't a road! You steer me straight or your mother won't be seein' you."

Meacham slowed the big coupé, slanted up the beach toward the narrow cut in the sand and rock of the yellow bluff. "That line across the beach is the creek. . . . Lay off the kid, Stasek. It's a road to him. You don't know these hicks."

Stasek lit another cigarette but his hard eyes watched everything.

T HE car purred up the cut, wound through a storm-stunted spruce jungle. Then the road, merely twin paths, ran on and disappeared in the gray dusk under the towering forest. After the sun-glare of the beach and sea it was silent, forbidding here. The car crept cautiously. Bushes raked its bottom. Stasek's feet were braced. He watched grimly.

Something flashed, disappeared behind a six-foot spruce trunk. Stasek's hand shot under his coat. "What was that? Hold it, Meach?"

"A deer," Lopey said.

Stasek settled back. "I want out of these backwoods. This road ain't even big enough to be a back-alley. It goes round and round till I don't know where I'm at. Where does it come out? How far is it? Punk, you better be sure it ain't a blind alley. I ain't likin' the looks of this."

"It—it comes out on the beach."

"Sure. That's where it started. It better come out on the beach north of that damn creek."

Meacham suddenly stopped. A small fir trunk, no larger than cabin timber, lay at an angle across the track. Stasek popped out muttering.

Meacham helped and they strained to lift, swing the long, slender pole. They lifted its lighter top, swung against its angle. Stasek bawled: "You come help! Lay hold here—you think we're clearin' road for you?"
Lopey had stayed in the car, wished he knew how to drive it. It wasn’t a T model, so he slid down in the seat, did the next best thing. He looked at his watch. Twelve already—a little after twelve.

He jumped when Stasek roared, rolled an expert boyish eye over the length of the log.

“You got to pull it back toward you, mister. The way it fell in. You put a chain on it an’ your front frame. The car’ll pull it right back.”

Meacham trotted to the rumble, took out a rope. He snickered, “I told you these hick kids know plenty.”

Stasek watched the car snake the log aside, then studied the road ahead, strode forward a few steps. “Here’s a cross-road! Another of these cow trails crossin’ this one. Which one do we take?”

Lopey stared at the squat man’s eyes. It didn’t seem safe to try to jump in the brush and run. He’d seen that man’s gun shoot. He said seriously: “Mister, you’re gonna kill me, ain’t you?”

“Hell—hell no. Not if you tell us straight.” Stasek looked away from Lopey’s blue eyes, glowered at Meacham.

“But after you get across Carkle Creek—an’ you’re safe—you’ll kill me. You wouldn’t trust me not to tell where you went.”

“Sure we would, sure we would, kid. You tell us the right road and we’ll know we can trust you. Hell, you’re partners with us, see? . . . What’s your name, kid?”

“Lopey.”

“Lopey? That’s a dizzy handle. Who give you that?” Stasek boiled with impatience. But he had to jolly the punk a minute. Had to get the dope out of him on these hick cow trails.

“My big brother,” said the boy. “Whenever he catches me monkeying with his things, like his car—he says I leave the country on a high lope.”

Stasek boomed harshly: “That’s good! That’s what we’re doin’, see? We’re in the same fix. We monkeyed with the guy’s bank and we’re leavin’ on a high lope. You know how that is. . . . So you show us the road that’ll put us north of that creek.”

Lopey nodded and he said in a low voice: “You take the road to the right, mister.”

The black coupé edged out of the forest like a beetle, shimmered as the sun again struck it. It wound through stunted spruce, slid down a sandy cut, rolled to a stop on a wide, hard beach.

Stasek jumped to the sand, turned holding the door. His right hand poised near his gray lapel. “All out, bud. Outside!”

“Wait a minute!” Meacham’s narrow eyes stared ahead. “Ain’t that the creek? We’re back right where we started!”

Stasek turned, stared north at the uneven line of Carkle Creek. His gun flashed out, he exploded furiously and flung Lopey out of the car with one big hand.

The boy slid and rolled a dozen feet. A shot cracked, missed.

Stasek cursed hoarsely. “You double-crossin’ little rat.”

Meacham yelled “Wait!” and waved his arm wildly. “You ain’t seen nothin’. Look behind! A bus comin’!”

Stasek glared south, shaded his eyes. It was far away, a black dot, but it was moving. Crawling. A black dot far distant, slowly growing larger against the tawny beach. It threw off a flash of light—sun on windshield.

Stasek wasn’t yelling now. He was cold, deadly. “You said the hicks didn’t come home till night. Were you crossing me too?”

“Don’t be a dope!” Meacham snarled. “We’ve got to lam and we got to take the kid. Listen to him a second.”

Shrill words were popping from Lopey. “I didn’t mean to, mister! I took the wrong turn in the woods. I—I was only there once an’ I was a little kid then. I—I got mixed up. I didn’t—”

“All right, kid. Quick! Get back in.” Meachem gripped his wheel. “How many times you been across that creek? How do we tell where to cross? . . . Hop, Stasek, I’m burnin’ rubber!”
Stasek, breathing with murderous tension, hurled himself in. Lopey piped earnestly, "I crossed it hun'erd times. It's always different. You can't tell till you see it."

The car was hurtling, the needle passing seventy. "We're gonna see it quick." Meacham leaned over his wheel, glanced at the mirror. "That's that Noah's chariot behind us! We can outrun that can standing still."

Stasek growled and looked back. He couldn't see much for billowing sand. "It ain't. I drilled its tank."

"That's my brother's car!" Lopey couldn't keep still. "My brother wouldn't stop for them holes. He'd plug 'em with gum or—corks and pump her full of gas an'—"

"Watch this creek now and tell us!" Meacham put the coupé into a skid turn, shot close to the bluff where Carkle Creek entered the beach.

The coupé swung its nose toward the sea, its right side to Carkle Creek. Lopey stood up till his head touched the roof, peered down past Stasek's broad face into the creek. Stasek rolled down the window, stared.

He grunted, "Hell! A foot deep and twenty feet wide. Solid bottom. There's tracks where other cars crossed. Head into it, Meach! When we're across I'll get rid of this . . . ."

"You can't cross, it's quicksand!" Lopey shrilled. "Those tracks was made yesterday. Go on down, I'll watch."

Meacham drove at a crawl, watched the black spot approaching from the rear. That old Ford couldn't be making twenty-five. Lopey watched the creek, mumbled, "No, no." And Meacham suddenly stopped. The froth of a big wave washed about his tires, surf thundered close.

The beach was wide, two hundred yards or more. Near the surf line Carkle Creek divided, subdivided, fanned out and raced down the wet sand. The comber retreated and Lopey pointed: "Can't cross anywhere on the creek today, mister. Cross out there. Drive out behind the next big breaker. The breakers pound the sand hard out there."

Stasek cursed. "That's what I been watching for! Cross out there in the middle of the ocean! Those swells are big as a house. Wouldn't it be nice to drive out and let one fall on us! You little rat, you give us the bum steer back in the woods. You're tryin' it again! . . . Meach, run back to the bluff where it's safe and jump this crate across. I'm gonna—"

He slapped Lopey, clamped him between his knees. His gun was at Lopey's head when Meacham, whirling the wheel, snapped: "Not in the car. You already got blood on your coat. Wait till we're across."


The coupé left the bank, seemed to leap for the center of the shallow stream. Spray hid everything, there was a thudding shock as they hit the far bank. Stasek grunted, "We're across your damn creek—just like that."

Stasek relaxed a second. There was a flash of blue denim before his eyes, a kick on the side of the face and Lopey had dived out the open window. Stasek tried to follow him with his gun hand, shifted the automatic to his left to get it out the window.

Suddenly the car rolled and its rear shifted, sank sharply. Meacham, head out his own window, chattered in terror: "Jeez, we only hit the bank with our nose. She's goin' down—this ain't bottom, it's quicksand—it's over the fenders, it's comin' in. . . ."

Like a trapped animal he pulled the latch, flung himself on the door. The car tipped toward that side and the bottom of the door met thick, resisting sand. Meacham fought it frenziedly. As it swung out he plunged his feet through to the running board.

But the little man didn't have the strength. Inexorably the door pressed him back. He jerked his feet and got one safely inside. The door caught and crushed the other above the ankle.
Meacham shrilled with terror. "It's got me! Help, Stasek! It's got my leg."

He threshed futilely. A thick hand shot under his coat and he twisted, his face a mask of pain. "What you doin'? Stasek!"

He stared unbelievingly into the stubby muzzle of his own automatic. Back of that Stasek's eyes were as deadly as the gun.

"You never figured, Meach, you was goin' all the way out with me, did you?"

Meacham seemed to shrivel, frozen, helpless. Stasek sneered behind the gun: "I'm taking my own rod out now. It's the rod put the plug in Grandpa at the bank. It's the rod that's gonna put the plug in you in a minute.

"I'm leavin' it with you. They fish you out of this crate—with my rod. The plug in Grandpa proves it was this rod drilled Grandpa. You're stuck in the door and they figure you drilled yourself to keep from swinging.

"I toss your rod in the creek. If they do get me I'm not even heeled. I was only your innocent driver on that bank job! I get off easy." Stasek's laugh grated. "I may need an out from this mess you got me in—an' this is it!"

"Stasek—the kid knows. You can't do it."

"Damn the kid! He's already drowned. If he ain't, he don't know a thing. My mouthpiece will make him a bigger liar than . . . ."

His own gun shot out suddenly, drove a bullet in the skinny man's narrow forehead.

Stasek rubbed off the gun on Meacham's trousers, dropped it on the seat. "Good a job as he could do himself," he grunted.

He took a briefcase from the ledge behind the seat. It held the loot from the bank. That was damn little—around twenty C's—Stasek hadn't had a chance to check it. Chicken feed and Meacham had guaranteed the little bank was fat. Meacham wouldn't do any more of this phony guaranteeing, not this side of hell.

The door wouldn't open beyond the safety latch. Water, brown sand gushed in. It was creeping up from the floor boards. Stasek squeezed his legs and rear out the window, felt for the runningboard.

He had to let his feet down to the knees in sand slush, to touch the board. The crate was three feet down in a creek only one foot deep. It rolled, settled deeper on his side with his weight.

Hanging to the door frame, he swept the beach. Nothing in sight. The approaching car had disappeared. Maybe it hadn't been the T model. Maybe a tourist . . .

Stasek dropped Meacham's gun in the quicksand, saw it sinking and sucking outward toward the sea. The coupé itself was far from the bluff where it had gone in. It was going out—sucked by the river of sand. The kid said cars were washed out to sea. Stasek didn't know much about tides, but he figured when the tide came in the car would be down where the combers would roll it, maybe an undertow drag it out to the bottom of the ocean.

Stasek climbed on the hood and it began to sink under him. To the north bank was a long jump. Crouched, he exploded every fibre of muscle in that jump.

His chest struck the bank, the creek dragged at his legs and body. He clutched wildly; the sand bank crumpled under his fingers. His legs tugged him down as if a thousand-pound weight hung on them.

Then his fingers caught on a long bone embedded in the bank. He stopped sinking; the bone held. Inch by inch he crawled to safety and stood up shakily, dripping sand slush.

Triumphantly he looked back—and what he saw started him cursing, hoarsely, bitterly. The T model stood on the south bank, close to his lost coupé. It must have rolled up quietly, so he hadn't heard it above the pound of the surf.

Stasek's hand flew under his coat—he'd tossed Meacham's gun in the quicksand. He stood helplessly, clutching the briefcase, panting. Three figures stood about the T and they looked curiously alike. A wiry man. A husky youth. And the little punk. A star glittered on the wiry man's black shirt.
They watched silently. Stasek suddenly raised the briefcase, sang out: “The crook’s just plugged himself in the car. Knew he’d be caught and hung for that killin’. Here’s the bank jack—I got it out...”

They didn’t answer, didn’t move. And Stasek suddenly knew the truth. They had stood there all the time. They had watched through the back window of the coupé. They had seen him drill Meacham. The damn hicks. They had him.

But they were across the creek. The quicksand was between them. The T couldn’t swim it any more than the coupé.

Two old rifles leaned against the radiator of the T. Stasek took a careful step backward, another. The watchers didn’t stir.

He tried again. Then he had it. They thought he had a rod and wouldn’t touch their rifles till he was out of pistol range. He turned and ran and when he had run a hundred steps started to zigzag. Their rifles would pop now but he had a chance.

Nothing happened. Over his shoulder Stasek saw the rifles still leaning against the radiator.

He slowed. What were the fools doing? The man had a rope, seemed to be looping it at the coupé. The boy was climbing the bluff with another rope. They were going to tie the coupé to a tree so the ocean wouldn’t get it. Gonna get Meach’s corpse out and hang him with it.

BACK at the model T, Deputy Sheriff Jim Case said to his youngest: “Son, why didn’t they drive out farther, where they could cross? They’d have got away if they’d done that.”

Lopey grinned at his father. “I steered ‘em on the wrong road up in the woods. So that man—that big one—thought I was lying when they got here. I told ‘em to go out in the surf an’ he thought I was lyin’ again. I—I thought if I told them to cross up here, he’d say I was lyin’ and he’d cross out there an’ get away.”

Jim Case watched his son soberly. “Let’s get goin’ now and pick him up. Take him to the jail at Waldport. We can get a tow-car to come back and get this car out. He can’t claim self-defense on this murder, and get out of hanging. We all saw it... Mighty good, lad, your figurin’ how to catch him.”

The ancient T took off with a bang. It circled as if studying the great combers. At the right time it darted out after a receding comber, out far into the uncovered surf beach and pounded across with time to spare.

Lopey sat straight at the wheel like a dervish high on a camel. Nearly a mile ahead he saw Stasek standing still. “He’s watchin’,” yipped Lopey. “Bet he wishes now he’d been smart enough to believe me the second time.”

They bore down on the squat man, sodden, plowing through soft sand. He tried to run from the T, fell and the T stopped.

Slowly Stasek struggled up, clawed at his empty shoulder holster, cursed the T and three hicks, rifles sticking up, in the front seat. He saw the wide, level eyes of a boy staring over the broken wheel. He ran again.

His feet were shovels dragging him down. He zigzagged crazily, fell again and again. Screaming gulls followed him. The T let him get away and when he fell it clattered after him till its hard little tires nudged him. And at length, all instincts gone, he hunched on hands and knees, gibbering, sobbering.

Jim Case flung a leg over the car door. “We’ll have to hootle him and haul him the rest of the way.” When he had Stasek trussed up with half-inch rope he hesitated. “Hate to put a murderer like him in the car. Sort of mess it up. Maybe he’d ride on the runningboard.”

Dale, out helping his father, shook his head. “Back fender’s gone so it ain’t very strong. When we jounce over that rock road at Waldport he might drag off and mash up his head or something.”

Jim Case studied the runningboard, then glanced up at his youngest perched behind the wheel. “It ain’t very strong,” he admitted. “But I ain’t very particular.”
The Case of the

By K. Krausse

Author of "The Case of the Vanishing Hayseed," etc.

The vision of feminine pulchritude I got as I waltzed into Pop Kennedy's ante-room left me staring. She was a knockout. A form-fitting sport suit of some yellow knitted material ballyhooed a figure that Venus could've envied. Curling blonde hair—dark enough to stamp it natural—framed an oval face so beautiful it was breath-taking.

The girl was sitting stiffly in a chair, hands folded in her lap. When I entered she raised her eyes. Either my frankly admiring gaze annoyed her, or what she saw didn't impress her much. Anyway, she dropped her glance quickly, resumed a pre-occupied contemplation of a worn spot on the rug. Her orbs were very blue, very lovely, and—did I imagine it, or were they very troubled?

The clatter of Martha Lambe's typewriter stopped. She was Pop Kennedy's secretary; forty, homely as sin, but a good egg. I sidled over to her desk.

"Nice, huh?" she whispered, slipping me a wink.

I rolled by eyes, put my hand under my vest over my heart, and made my fingers give an idea how it was thumping.

"Got me hanging on the ropes," I whispered back. "Who is she?"

Martha humped her shoulders. "She gave her name as Thalia Stone. Was closeted with the skipper about fifteen minutes, then came out and told me he'd asked her to wait. Right afterwards Kennedy ordered me to call you. My womanly intuition tells me your next assignment's going to involve her. You like?"

I grinned broadly. "And how! There're times when being an insurance company shamus has its compensations. You meet such nice people!"

With a last lingering look at the blonde pulse-warmer, I walked into Pop Kennedy's sanctum.

He cocked a querulous eye at me over an
Vanishing Venus

Death hath a thousand doors to let out life—Philip Massinger

acre of littered desk. “Took you long enough to get here,” he growled. “Matter? Stop on the way to pick daisies?”

Chunky, rough-hewn, with craggy jaws and craggier brows, he was shaped like a stone-cutter’s idea of a grizzly; and he had a Bruin’s surly disposition. He was Kingfish of the Gibraltar Insurance Company’s Claims Department. Grouse or not, he was a good man for the job. No phony claim ever got by him, as he could smell a gyp setup a mile off.

“Nope,” I said. “Stopped on the way to see a man about a dog.” Pop’s grumpiness scared the pants off most folks. But to me he was just another Babbit who took himself too seriously.

“Some cutie you got sitting in your anteroom,” I went on. “Did you want to see me about her? I’ve always been a pushover for blonde Venuses. I could go for—”

“Shut up!” he barked. “Sit down, and listen.”

“Yes, sir. I’m listening, sir,” I said, laying the meekness on thick.

He glared at me, began: “Once a Levantine came to an official of this company, and said, ‘Mister, I know I’m not entitled to a big loan on my insurance policy, but . . .’ Here the Levantine pulled out a gun and pressed it to his temple. ‘But, either you decide to lend me ten thousand dollars on my policy to save me from ruin, or your company will pay out fifty thousand in insurance to my creditors . . .’ Ever hear that story?”

I scratched my head. Pop Kennedy in the role of a story-spieler was a new one on me.

“Nope,” I said. “Never heard it. So what happened?”

“So the Levantine got the loan.”

“Just what’s the point?”

“This.” Kennedy leaned forward. “That girl you were raving about is one of our
assureds. She came to me and pulled that gag on me."

I stared. "You mean she threatened to kill herself unless she was granted a loan?"

"No. She gave the gag a new twist. She told me her life was in deadly danger; that, either I furnished her with protection, or the Gibraltar would find itself paying out twenty grand on the policy she holds with it."

I whistled softly. "I'll be damned!"

"You and me both," Kennedy growled. "Other than insisting her life was in danger, she refused to go into detail. She told me calling in the police was out of the question. That she hadn't enough money to hire a private detective. You wouldn't know, since you were too interested in her shape to notice her eyes. But she's a badly frightened girl. She might be imagining things. A real threat might be hanging over her. I can't take a chance that it's the former. Twenty grand is too much dough to hand out if it can be prevented. You're elected to act as that girl's bodyguard. And if you let anything happen to her, don't bother to hand in a resignation—you're fired in advance!"

"You're just a big-hearted fool, Pop," I murmured. "You're so concerned about that poor kid. Yah! Twenty grand worth."

"It's my job to save the Gibraltar money wherever possible. If you're concerned about her as a person, that's just dandy. Maybe you'll do a good job of protecting her. I'm going to turn her over to you now."

He reached over his desk, punched the switch of an interoffice phone. "Martha, ask Miss Stone to step in here."

Martha Lambe's voice crackled back. "But, Mr. Kennedy, Miss Stone left—"

"What?" Kennedy snapped. "She left? When?"

I tapped out my cigarette, and listened to Martha's reply.

"Right after Mr. Dragonette went into your office. A man entered the ante-room, spoke to her in an undertone. She got up and left without saying a word to me."

Kennedy grunted angrily. "She walked out on me! And I took her seriously! Bah! I should've known . . ." He was about to close the switch. I stopped him, leaned over the annunciator.

"Martha, listen. Was the man who came for Miss Stone a little guy with shifty eyes, a chalky complexion, and a cute waxed mustache?"

"Why, yes, Drag!" Martha replied.

"Did you notice how she acted when he accosted her?"

"I'd swear she recoiled in fear when she saw him. But I thought it was just my imagination. Should I have informed Mr. Kennedy when she left?"

"Never mind that now. Ring the building lobby. We're on the twelfth floor. There's a slim chance they haven't left the building yet. Ask Joe, the special cop down there, to hold her. Hurry!" She was already jiggling a phone hook.

Kennedy was regarding me intently. "How'd you know what the guy came for her looked like?"

"I saw him loitering in the hall when I came in. He looked like a slimy crookster. But how was I to know then he had any connection with Thalia Stone? It's a safe bet now she's up against a real, not a fancied danger. That mug must've tailed her here, got jittery when she was out of his sight too long, and came after her."

Martha's voice came over the open annunciator. "Drag," she said, "Joe says Miss Stone—I described her to him—left the building not two minutes ago."

"Okay, Martha. Thanks," I muttered, and snapped off the switch. Kennedy swore. "Cursing won't help," I told him grimly. "We've got to do something—fast. There may yet be time to help her. What dope've you got on her?"

He tossed me a card out of the company files, which I knew contained all the data about Thalia Stone I might need. Address, beneficiary under her policy, and so forth. I picked it up, stuck it in my pocket.

A n elevator dropped me to the lobby where I paused long enough to ask Joe, the special cop, two questions. Yeah, he had watched the girl in the yellow dress
proceed to the street. Hadn’t she been worth any man’s second glance? Boy, what a face! What a shape! He’d seen her get in a dark green sedan with her companion. No; he hadn’t paid any particular attention to the car’s license plate, except off-hand he seemed to recall its first three numbers were 249.

Not much lead there. All I could do was make tracks for the girl’s home and see if I could pick up her trail from that end.

On the street I scanned the horizon for a cab. But I didn’t hail one. Half a block away a crowd was milling about a car that had climbed the sidewalk and crashed into a store window. It was a dark green sedan. But it wasn’t that fact that set my pulses pounding. Thousands of dark green cars roamed the city. At that moment a traffic cop astride a horse jockeyed his hay-burner through the mob, bellowing for clearance. As the curiosity seekers fell back in panic, I caught a glimpse of the wreck’s license plate. The first three numbers were 2491.

I reached the cop’s side as he was examining a figure slumped over the car’s wheel. It was the guy who had escorted Thalia Stone from Pop Kennedy’s ante-room. The girl herself was nowhere in sight.

I happened to know the cop, said, “The guy dead, Grubermeyer?”

Grubermeyer peered at me. “Oh, it’s you, Drag. I’ll say he’s dead. Shot through the conk!”

“What?” I cried. “He was shot?”

I didn’t need Grubermeyer’s laconic, “You heard me,” to convince me. I saw now the black bullet hole in the dead man’s left temple. It was oozing blood that trickled drop by drop through the wheel into his lap.

The cop was raking the crowd with challenging eyes. “Who knows what about this?” he demanded.

A middle-aged man, with pale eyes popping behind thick spectacles, elbowed his way from the fringe of the mob.

“My name’s Corwin,” he stated hesitantly. “I am the proprietor of this store. I was behind a counter near the window when the car crashed.”

“Okay. Okay,” Grubermeyer snapped impatiently. “Get along with it. What do you know?”

Corwin bristled visibly, but went on, “There was a woman—a girl—sitting with the dead man. She jumped out of the car when it hit, and ran off. By the time I reached the street, she had disappeared.”

“Humph!” the cop muttered. “So a dame bumped the egg.” I was about to point out something to him, but changed my mind. “Know the girl?” Grubermeyer resumed.

“No.” Corwin shook his head. “Never saw her before.”

“What’d she look like?”

“She was maybe twenty-two. Dressed in a yellow knitted suit. And she was very beautiful.” The store-keeper’s eyes lit up a little. “I don’t think she had anything to do with this. She—”

I wanted to shake Corwin’s hand. I didn’t think so either.

“Never mind what you think,” Grubermeyer cut him short. “Homicide’ll do all the thinking around here.” He turned to me. “See that none of these gawks touch anything, will you, Drag? I gotta put in a call to H. Q.”

“Sure,” I said. “Who’s the cold meat, Grubie? Happen to know him?”

“Yeah,” the cop began and stopped, squinting at me suspiciously. “Say—what’s your interest in this business?”

“Nothing,” I assured him hastily. “Just curious. Who is he?”

“A heel by the name of Waxy Reppert. Was one of Rufe Ewell’s boys.”

I watched the entrance of Corwin’s store swallow Grubermeyer’s broad back, while I let a bewildering fact sink in. Then I scammed.

Rufe Ewell ran the Powder Keg, about one of the worst spots in town. On the surface a clip-joint—mismamed a cabaret—it smoke-screened various backroom activities. Gambling, dope, women—you named your poison, Rufe supplied it. And there was the little matter of blackmail he practised on the side. My wonder had always been how he got away with it.
If Thalia Stone was in Ewell’s toils—and the presence of one of his men indicated that—she had ample reason to fear for her life. And then some. Rufe was the kind of rat would hardly stop at murder if there was money at stake.

My mind racing, I hopped into a taxi. What was Ewell’s interest in Thalia Stone? Who had killed Waxy Reppert? And why? I was positive the girl hadn’t. Had the shot that felled Reppert been intended for her? That didn’t make much sense. Ewell would hardly attempt running out the girl while she was riding with his own henchman. That would mean someone besides Rufe was after the girl’s life. On the other hand, assuming Reppert’s death had been no accident, it suggested someone was concerned enough about her to commit murder to save her. If such a person existed surely she should have known about him. Why then had she come to Pop Kennedy pleading for protection?

I gave up speculating at cross purposes. Thalia Stone wasn’t out of the woods by a long shot. If anything, her rescue had complicated matters further. In a short time her description would be broadcast, and the police would be searching for her.

As my cab driver pushed off, he inquired where I wanted to go. I consulted the file card Pop Kennedy had given me, and read off an address on East Fifty-second. On the way there, I noted the other items on Thalia Stone’s card. She was younger than I thought—several months short of twenty-one. The beneficiary under her policy was a brother, Arnold Stone. And she had no other living relatives.

II

The address on East Fifty-second Street was a fifteen storied apartment house, with a glass, shell-shaped marquee, and a doorman dressed like a Chinese admiral. The lobby had swell tapestries on the walls, and Oriental rugs on the floor. Its swank stopped there. There was no desk, or call clerk in evidence. A solitary elevator had an operator.

“Do you know if Miss Stone is in?” I asked him.

“I took her up about ten minutes ago,” he told me. “Apartment 11B.”

Three doors gave on a small hall on the eleventh floor. As the elevator door closed behind me, a door marked “11B” opened and Thalia Stone came out.

She had changed her clothes. In place of the yellow knitted sports’ suit, she now wore a more reserved street outfit of a neutral color. The terror in her eyes was more marked than the last time I’d seen her. It bordered on panic. She carried a valise in her hand.

When she saw me her nostrils dilated slightly. Otherwise she gave no sign that she’d recognized me. As she tried to push past me to the elevator, I said:

“Just a moment, Miss Stone. I’d like a word with you.”

Pearly teeth caught at her nether lip. Her breath came faster.

“I—I—” she stammered. “Not now, please. Later. I—I’m in a terrible hurry.”

She lifted her hand to press the elevator button. I caught it.

“Wait,” I said. “Maybe I’d better introduce myself. I’m Darryl Dragonette, investigator for the Gibraltar. You saw me in Mr. Kennedy’s ante-room. Remember?”

“I—remember,” she whispered. “But, please, Mr. Dragonette, can’t you come back later? I’ve got to keep an important engagement.”

Again she tried to reach the elevator button. I held on to her hand. It was small and icy cold. Maybe that was why it sent a queer chill down my spine.

“I don’t get this, Miss Stone,” I said. “Not long ago you came to my boss, pleaded for protection. Your life was in danger, you claimed. I was assigned to take care of you. First you vanish from my boss’ office mysteriously. I hunt you up, ready, willing, and able to look after you. But you act like I’m the last person in the world you want to see. Let’s go into your apartment and talk this over.”

“There’s nothing to talk over,” she re-
pled in a tight, desperate voice. "I've changed my mind about—Please—if you don't let me go, I'll scream!"

I let her go. "All right. Go ahead. Scream. Ring down the house. But you're not leaving till the cops come. And when they do, I'm turning you over for the murder of that guy who took you out of the Gibraltar building."

She shrank back, her eyes round with horror. "You wouldn't do that to me!"

"Sure I would. For your own sake. My dough says you'd be safer in jail than roaming the streets. That's because I don't think for a minute you killed that punk. Now do we talk?"

Acting hard-boiled with the kid went against the grain. But what could I do? I liked her. I admit it. And she was in a jam. I wanted to help, and the only way I could be of any use was to learn a few things.

She didn't answer. With trembling fingers she unlocked her apartment door, preceded me through a small foyer into a living room. The rich furnishings brought a pucker to my brow. I recalled something. She lived in a high-rental apartment house; there was every evidence of means around her. Yet she had told Pop Kennedy she hadn't the money to hire private bodyguards.

Why?

She dropped her valise, sank into a brocaded easy chair, and regarded me mutely.

"Okay, Thalia Stone. Tell papa what it's all about. You gave the police a wide berth, came to my outfit begging for protection. I was elected. Before I could take you under my wing, you disappeared with a mug named Reppert, one of Rufe Ewells' sidekicks."

Her eyes widened at that.

"Yes," I grinned. "I picked up that bit of information. But to continue... While you were riding with Reppert he was killed. You lit out. I hunted you up, find you checking out. If that packed valise means anything. And you give me a song and dance about changing your mind about wanting protection. Well, if I'm any judge you need it now more than ever. Suppose you go on from there."

THERE was a moment's silence. "I wanted to get away," she said finally, "because—because I killed that man Reppert."

"Did you?"

"Don't you believe me?"

"No. If you did, it means you reached behind him from the driver's seat to the right of him where you were sitting and shot him in the left temple. Pretty awkward. And I noticed there were no powder burns on him which suggests he was shot from a distance of more than several inches. Say a passing car. You're covering somebody. Who?"

She cried, "No! No!" so wildly I knew I'd hit the truth. "I killed him! I killed him!"

"Okay," I said, "if you insist. Where's the gun?"

Her eyes flickered. "I threw it down a sewer."

"And I'll swallow that, too. Why'd you kill him?"

"Because—it was true I feared for my life! Ewell, through his men, has kept watch over me day and night for weeks. I dared not go to the police. I couldn't afford private detectives. This—her hand swept the room with its luxurious furnishings—'doesn't mean I have money. Look in my bag. I have exactly twenty dollars to my name. It occurred to me the Gibraltar would be glad to give me protection to safeguard its investment in me. Your Mr. Kennedy was kind enough to listen to me."

"I knew Reppert followed me to the Gibraltar Building," she went on. "While I was waiting for Mr. Kennedy to talk with you, Reppert came in, forced me to leave with him. In his car I became panic-stricken. I'd been warned not to try to communicate with anyone. I thought my reason for going to the Gibraltar would be established, and I'd be murdered. So to get away from Reppert, I shot him,
reaching around behind him. Just as you said. To make it appear he'd been shot from a passing car. He didn't see me take my gun from my bag. I had it wrapped in a handkerchief. Perhaps that's why you saw no powder marks on him."

"That's pretty quick thinking," I commented dryly. "Only it's doubtful that a flimsy woman's handkerchief would prevent powder burns. But let it ride. Why'd Ewell have his rats on your trail?"

Two bright spots appeared in her pale cheeks. She dropped her eyes, then raised them again.

"Rufe Ewell was paying for this apartment," she said. The I-don't-give-a-damn-what-you-think in her voice had a false ring. "I met someone I liked better, told Rufe we were through. He flew into a rage, telling me the day I left him I would die. Not that he cared about me particularly. It was just that I knew too much about him. Enough to send him to prison for a long time. I pretended to patch it up with him, but he didn't trust me, had me watched. I knew it was just a question of time before he'd get tired of keeping an eye on me, and order my death. I couldn't entangle the man I'd grown fond of in my affairs, endanger his life. I stopped seeing him. And I couldn't go to the police, because . . ."

She spread her hands wearily. "Well, I couldn't without inviting a jail sentence on my own account. You see—I've helped Rufe Ewell in some of his illegal deals."

I stared at her. This lovely creature a dirty crook's woman? A crook herself? If a mule had kicked me in the breadbasket I couldn't've felt sicker.

She got up, put her fingers on my arm lightly, and searched my face anxiously. "Can I go now?" she implored. "With Ewell's bloodhound out of the way, I can leave town, start life over in another city. Must you turn me over to the police? Must they know I killed Reppert?"

Her body was suddenly pressed hard against mine.

"Please let me go! You like me. I can see it in your eyes."

I pushed her away roughly, conscious of a burning tightness in my throat. "Sure, I like you," I rasped harshly. "Enough to clean up the mess you're in the right way. I don't know how much of your story is true; how much false. But I know one thing: you didn't kill Reppert! The guy you say you fell for killed him! You beautiful fool! Think taking the rap for him will help? If your yarn is basically true, your boy-friend could clean his skirts with a justifiable homicide plea. You'll have nothing to worry about concerning your connection with Ewell if you make a clean breast of everything. The cops would be tickled to let you go to nab Rufe. I'm calling the police right now!"

I stalked to a phone on a near-by table. The girl stood stiff and trembling, breathing hard, and followed me with her eyes. As I reached for the instrument, I heard her gasp:

"No, Pepper! Don't!"

I whirled around, instinct driving my fist for my gun. Fast as I moved, I wasn't fast enough. I caught a split-second glimpse of a tall young fellow with reddish blond hair and a thinnish, haggard face set in desperate lines. He had a clubbed Colt in his up-raised mitt.

"Call the police, will you!" he hissed. Then his gun slammed home.

I WOKE up on the floor. Just the act of opening my eyes affected me like a dizzy merry-go-round ride. Rolling over on my belly, I made jacks of my arms and legs and hoisted myself erect. My hand touched cold metal. My fingers gripped the butt of a gun.

By the weight of my shoulder holster, I knew it was empty. Although I didn't recall doing so, I must've jerked my gun out as I fell. Swaying weakly, I forced my lids open a little. No; the gun wasn't mine. I owned an automatic. This was a revolver. Apparently the ginzo who'd slugged me had swapped weapons with me. I wished the fog would lift from my brain so I could figure the why of that. What I needed was a drink to oil the
gears of my think-tank. Maybe I could rustle one up in the apartment.

But a voice, coming from straight in front of me, snapped my mind into focus quicker than a tumbler of Scotch could have. It was flat, unemotional. And it said:

"Drop that gun!"

I looked up. Standing in the doorway was a tall, heavy-set man. The artillery he had aimed at my chest seemed out of place, because he looked like a banker or a lawyer. Not a gunman. I might have plugged him easily enough. But I saw no reason for shooting first and arguing later. So I dropped the rod.

"Where the devil did you pop from?" I wanted to know. "And what's the idea of the artillery?"

He ignored my questions, said bluntly, "Why did you kill him?"

I stared. "Come again? Why'd I kill who?"

He waved his gun at something behind me. "Don't be funny!" he snapped. "You know damn well who I mean!"

I whirled around, and almost jumped out of my shoes.

No blue-print was necessary to tell me I was staring at a corpse. There was a bullet hole in his forehead, smack-center, so big, not even an elephant could have lived with it.

It was the young guy who had knocked me silly; the same guy whom Thalia Stone had called "Pepper." The girl wasn't in sight.

I was stunned for a moment. Then I got the picture in a rush. Somebody had walked in on Thalia and the red-headed fellow while I was unconscious, blasted him, and left me in as neat a frame as I'd hope to see in a month of Sundays.

"Very pretty!" I sneered. "Very pretty! But trying to make me the fall-guy for this bump-off won't stand up. Why, I never saw this dead fellow before today! I was here talking to Thalia Stone. He soft-shoed in and laid me out cold. When I came to, I didn't even know he was dead until you told me. The gun you saw in my hand isn't mine. It was left beside me. Like a sap I picked it up while goggly. If my fingerprints hadn't already been planted on it, I took care of that. Where do you fit in this?"

He darted forward, watching me warily, scooped up the gun I'd dropped, and sniffed at it. His expression told me nothing as he pocketed the rod.

"It's been fired," he informed me, adding coldly: "And if the bullet in that young man came out of it, you're as good as in the electric chair right now! There's nothing strange about my coming here. I'm a lawyer. Henry Hegeler, by name. I've been acting as trustee for Thalia Stone's father's estate since his death three years ago. I had an important matter to discuss with my ward. Incidentally, where is she?"

I was suddenly too excited to pay any attention to his question.

"You say there's an estate waiting for Thalia Stone?" I countered. "How big?"

"Almost two million dollars," Hegeler replied. "It's been netting her a thousand dollars a month income. But I don't see why I should be answering your questions. Where is she? Why did you kill her brother?"

III

THE revelation that Thalia Stone was a rich girl had lifted a great weight from my mind. I was positive she had lied to me about being Rufe Ewell's woman, about being a crook. Why I couldn't guess. Unless she had spun her wild yarn to cover her real reason for fearing Ewell. Now my thoughts tail-spinned.

I pointed an incredulous finger at the red-headed young fellow.

"Is that Arnold Stone?" I pumped out.

"Thalia's brother?"

Hegeler nodded frostily. "As though you didn't know. I'm still waiting to hear why you killed him before I call the police."

"I didn't know," I cried. "And how many times must I tell you I didn't kill him? Listen. My name's Dragonette. I'm
an investigator for the Gibraltar Insurance Company. Before you sic the police on me, call my office and verify that. Thalia came to us with a story about being in danger. Wanted us to protect her.”

Hegeler frowned darkly. “I don’t believe you. She never told me anything about being in danger. And if she were, why didn’t she go to the police?”

“She claimed she couldn’t. And if she failed to take you into her confidence, she must have had a reason for that, too. I spoke to her a little while ago. She wasn’t what you’d call frank. But I’m positive the man she’s afraid of is Rufe Ewell.”


“A human rat. He runs a night spot in town called the Powder Keg. It’s a gambling joint; a clearing house for dope, women and blackmail. From the setup, I’d say he got his hooks into young Stone somehow. It must’ve been something that couldn’t stand the light of day. Thalia went to bat for her brother, and Ewell cracked down on her. Possibly because she threatened him with the police. He’s been keeping tabs on her. One of his men whisked her out of the Gibraltar building almost from under my nose. But he didn’t get far. He was gunned down in the street. Undoubtedly by Arnold Stone.”

Hegeler looked shocked. I gave him no chance to speak, went on:

“That’s the way it has to be. Arnold knew his sister had stuck her neck out for him, did some tailing himself today when she left her apartment. He followed her to the Gibraltar, and when he saw her come out with Ewell’s punk a very frightened girl, he went haywire with anxiety and let the palooka have it. Thalia saw him, tried to assume responsibility for the shooting to cover him. Now she had more reason than ever to keep the truth buried, and told me a fantastic story to throw me off.

“I insisted calling the cops was the best bet. At this point Arnold walked in and clouted me. In the meantime, Ewell must’ve learned his man had been rubbed out, guessed by whom, and came here looking for Arnold, who put up a fight and wound up dead. Ewell then took advantage of the circumstances to frame me for the killing, and left taking Thalia with him. It beats me why he didn’t kill her here while he had the chance. Because if she witnessed the murder of her brother, he’ll have to silence her anyway.

“He must have some scheme up his sleeve to squeeze money out of Thalia. But that doesn’t minimize the danger the girl’s in. Hegeler, be sensible. Put down your gun, and let me get after Ewell. I may still be in time to rescue her.”

The lawyer considered thoughtfully, then lowered his gun.

“I’m convinced you are what you claim,” he said, “an insurance company investigator . . .”

“Don’t take my word for it,” I told him. “Here—look at this.”

He barely glanced at the credentials I stuck under his nose.

“Your story has enough elements of truth in it,” he resumed, “to prompt me to trust you. This past week Thalla begged me to advance her twenty-five thousand dollars out of the principal of her estate. I had to turn her down. First because she refused to tell me why she needed so much money. Second because I had no right to touch the estate until she was twenty-one, and I hadn’t that much ready cash of my own to lend her. It didn’t occur to me until today that she wanted the money for her brother. That’s what I came to see her about. Arnold was always getting into scrapes, running to her for money . . .”

I glanced at the dead red-head. “The kid looks older than Thalia. Must be every bit of twenty-four. Yet he had to go to his younger sister for money? Why? Didn’t he have any of his own?”

“Arnold was twenty-three,” Hegeler said. “And he had no interest in his father’s estate. That is, unless Thalia pre-deceased him. He was always profligate, worthless. His father can’t be blamed for disinheriting him. But Thalla was extremely fond of him, kept him well-sup-
plied with funds. In fact, I'm sure it was he who squandered most of her monthly income. You'd better get going. Meanwhile I'll summon the police and explain the situation here to them."

"I'm going to need a gun," I said. "How about it?"

He handed me his rod without a word, and I lit out of Thalia's apartment on the fly. Going down the elevator, I asked the operator:

"Do you know the last passenger you brought up to Miss Stone's apartment?"

"You mean Mr. Hegeler, the lawyer?" he said. "What about him?"

"Nothing. What I really wanted to know was if you brought Miss Stone and another man down before you took Hegeler up."

"No, sir." The elevator man shook his head, eying me curiously. "The last passenger I had to or from the eleventh floor before Mr. Hegeler was Miss Stone's brother."

"I suppose this apartment house has a service elevator in the rear?"

"Yeah. It's automatic."

I left him looking like he wanted to know what point, if any, my questions had, and beat it for the street.

TWENTY minutes later I shoved my way through the entrance of the Powder Keg. There was a bar off to one side going full blast. The cabaret proper lay to the rear. Evening had come around, and a swing band was tuning up, getting ready for the night's grind.

I took a look inside. The place was barren of customers; several waiters were fussing around.

A tuxedoed egg came up to me. "You're early, sir," he said. "But can I show you a table?"

"I'm looking for Rufe Ewell," I said.

"He around?"

He jerked a thumb at a door marked Private on the cabaret foyer's left. "Try his office," he said, and lost interest in me.


The office had two occupants. Neither of them was Rufe Ewell. They were no different from any other plug-uglies I'd ever seen, only tougher. One sat at a desk, his feet up, a black stogy in his mouth. One filled an armchair with about a ton of beef.

I said, "Where's Rufe?"

The black stogy shifted. "Expect him soon. What d'ya wanna see him about?" he said.

"I'll tell him," I said. "Mind if I wait?"

The black stogy shifted again. Shoe-button eyes studied me narrowly. "It's oke by me, bo. Okay by you, Jake?" This to the ton of beef.

"Sure. Sure," Jake showed wolfish teeth in a grin as he re-adjusted his hulk to get a better look at me. "Seems I seen you someplace before. Ain't you Dragonette, the insurance company shamus?"

"Yeah, that's right," I said.

"That's nice," Jake chuckled. "So reach flatfoot!" A young cannon appeared in his fat paw as if he'd speared it out of the air.

All this time I'd had my hand on the butt of my rod in my pocket. I hated to spoil a good suit. But what was a good suit compared to good health? I pulled the trigger.

Jake bulged up in his chair as if an electric current had passed through him. An expression of surprise briefly crossed his face. Then he slumped back, his head lolling on his chest.

For the fraction of a second, the owner of the stogy did absolutely nothing but stare. Then the cheroot dropped from his mouth and he let out a bellowed curse. His feet plopped to the floor and his fist came up over the edge of the desk. In it was a gun.

His unexpected action jammed my reflexes. I made the mistake of trying to drag out my gun. His first shot went wide. But his second caught me in the right forearm. My arm became suddenly as useless as last year's calendar, and the rod fell from nerveless fingers. I knew diving for it with my left hand would be an empty
gesture, as Jake's pal had a bead on my head, dead center. But I dove anyway.

Instead of finding myself with a one-way ticket to the cemetery, I heard a, "Freeze, damn you!"

It didn’t add up. But it struck me I could postpone my execution for the present if I behaved. So I froze.

Jake's pal circled the desk, kicked my gun into a far corner, hauled off and socked me in the teeth.

"Damn you!" he ground out. "You killed Jake!" The tough lug was almost crying. So help me. "Rufe'll have your hide for that."

I licked my lips. "He asked for it. I'm a nervous guy. When he flashed steel in my face I thought he wanted to play rough. Where's the girl?"

"What girl?" Jake's pal eyed me as if he'd like to cut out my heart and eat it raw.

"Thalia Stone. Jake knew me. Yet as far's I can recollect our paths never crossed. There's only one place he could've learned my identity. In Thalia Stone's apartment. I was out cold. He must've been there with Rufe and searched me, and read my papers. For all I know, maybe you were there, too. Anyway, you should know what Rufe did with the girl. He took her away with him."

Jake's pal growled, "I don't know what you're talkin' about." His expression told me nothing except that his dislike for me bordered on murderous hate. "Rufe, me, an' Jake ain't been outa this room all afternoon."

"Aw, be your age," I said. "What's the point in fixing an alibi? You've got me covered. I'm not kidding myself I'm going to get out of here alive. But I am curious to get the lowdown on the stunt Rufe's pulling with that girl. Why you leery about talking?"

The gorilla's eyes churned. For answer he smacked the flat of his gat across my cheek with such force it sent me reeling into a chair on the opposite side of the room.

He flopped into a chair facing me, laid his gun across his knee. "Look, monkey," he snarled. "You gunned me pal, see? I hate your nerve. I even hate the sound of your voice. Let me hear one more peep outa you an' I'll ventilate you, see?"

I saw he was aching for an excuse to shoot me, and wisely emulated a clam. That my arrival hadn't been entirely unexpected, that Rufe Ewell had left orders to have me taken alive was apparent. I settled back to await the coming of Rufe.

EWEll wasn't long in coming. A door opened at the rear of the office, giving me a momentary glimpse of an alley that backed the building, and he walked in. He wasn't alone. He had Thalia Stone gripped by the arm.

Sure, I was thankful to see her alive. But the stark terror in her face, the hopelessness in her eyes, did something to me. And that wasn't all I saw. There was a dark bruise on her jaw where a fist had hit her.

At the sight of me, Thalia looked surprised, then let out an agonized little cry. She flung herself forward, knelt at my feet.

"Oh, they've hurt you!" she whispered, touching my blood-smeared mouth.

I grinned at her. "It's nothing compared to what Ewell has coming to him," I said, and looked at him.

His gaze flicked from Jake's inert form to me. "You talk big, shamus, for a guy that's one jump from hell. Is that your work?"

His gunman snarled, "Yeah. He done Jake in, Rufe. He come in here lookin' for you like you said he might. When Jake yanked a rod on him, he let him have it. Orders or no orders, I had all I could do to keep from pluggin' the guy. Jake was me pal!"

"It's a good thing you laid off him, Pete," Ewell muttered quietly. "I need him. When I'm finished with him, he's all yours." He strode to his desk. "Keep him covered."

Thalia touched my hand. "They mean to kill you!"

"But they won't," I assured her in a
THE CASE OF THE VANISHING VENUS

IV

The girl didn't know her brother was dead! Then she hadn't been present when he was murdered. What did that add up to?

"Your brother won't get hurt, sister," Ewell said. "For that matter neither will you or the dick. Pete'll have to take a bit off his hide, of course, because he killed Jake. Outside of that there'll be no rough stuff to any of you. You'll be holed up until I've collected your two hundred grand and I've made tracks for Europe. Then you'll be freed. Now sign."

"Don't sign, Thalia!" I yelled. "The longer you hold out, the longer we breathe! He can't let us live and feel safe! He's already murdered your brother!"

Thalia went white, moaned hollowly, and slumped down in a dead faint.

"Conk that blabbering fool!" Ewell yelled.

Pete rammed his fist in my face. I rolled with the punch, cushioning some of its force, and reeled backwards. My imitation of a guy backpedalling to regain his balance must've been perfect for no slug whacked into my body as I crashed down in a heap in a corner of the office. In the same corner where Pete had kicked my gun.

I snatched it up and let fly at the gorilla before it even dawned on him that I'd pulled a fast one. My fingers were still numb and I had to pump three slugs before I got him.

Ewell was making for the alley exit, tugging at his hip, when I swung towards him. He slapped a shot at me just as he ducked out and I fired. My bullet hit the closing door. It was of steel, for the lead pellet dropped to the floor, flattened. His bullet had better luck.

I was suddenly too sick to move for a while. Finally I managed to drag myself to the office entrance. As I opened the door, I thought abstractly what a fine job of soundproofing the place was. It had been used as a shooting gallery, and not a soul had stuck in an inquisitive head.
I must've presented a pretty sight. People in the Powder Keg lobby stared at me wide-eyed.

"Will somebody call a cop?" I blurted, and laid myself down to sleep.

TROMMER, a precinct captain, stood by while a police surgeon patched my punctured shoulder.

"Don't worry, Dragonette. Ewell won't get far."

He had heard my story. Now he turned to Thalia, who had sobbed herself dry and was letting me hold her hand.

"You did a very unwise thing, Miss Stone—not to come to the police with your troubles in the first place. What were you afraid of?"

She breathed deeply. "With Arnold dead, it doesn't matter if you know. He had lost a large sum of money—twenty-five thousand dollars—to Ewell, gambling. I'd always supplied him with funds. But he confessed to me later he didn't come to me then because he felt ashamed. Ewell kept badgering him for payment; finally threatened him openly. And one night he suggested Arnold could square himself by holding up the Standard Drug Company's warehouse, which had just received a large shipment of narcotics. Ewell wanted that shipment."

"I grinned crookedly at Trommer. "You wouldn't know, Cap, I suppose, that besides running a gambling joint Ewell peddled snow, would you?"

He rubbed his nose, looked sheepish.

"It's been suspected. But the Department could never prove it. Go on, Miss Stone."

"Arnold raided that drug warehouse with one of Ewell's men. A man named Reppert."

Trommer grunted. "No wonder you hated to come to the police with your troubles, Miss. Your brother would've gone up for a long stretch, if not life."

He waggled grizzled brows at me. "A watchman was killed in that robbery, and fifty grand worth of morphine stolen."

"Pepper—Arnold didn't kill that man! Reppert did!"

"I wouldn't doubt that, Miss," Trommer muttered in gentle gruffness. "But—Well, go on."

"Ewell didn't wipe off Arnold's debt. Instead, he threatened to turn Arnold in for the murder of that watchman if his IOU's weren't paid. When Arnold frantically insisted he couldn't, Ewell hinted he could do the trick, and at the same time do himself some good, by killing me! You see, Captain, my father left me a fortune in trust which would have passed to my brother upon my death.

"Of course, Arnold rejected the horrible suggestion. He was weak, self-indulgent; but not—not that bad. Ewell told him he'd collect the money if he had to have me killed himself. Arnold went wild with rage. He warned Ewell that if he so much as harmed a hair of my head, he'd kill him. It was then he came to me, and confessed the whole sordid story. I wanted to help him, tried to get the money to pay Ewell off from Mr. Hegeler, the trustee of father's estate. He couldn't let me have it for two months, when I became of age. I learned men were following me constantly. Arnold pointed one out to me once, Reppert. I was afraid Ewell was waiting for a chance to carry out his threat and have me killed. So in desperation I went to the Gibraltar Insurance Company, hoping I could promote a bodyguard. I thought if I could stay alive for two more months, I could then pay Ewell off, and be secure. The rest Mr. Dragonette has told you."

The police surgeon finished his work as Thalia ended her story, and I butted in.

"There's one thing I want to know, honey—" That slipped out. But outside of flushing a bit she didn't seem to mind it. "What happened after Arnold cragged me? I know he mistook me for one of Ewell's mob, thought I was about to call the police and give him up for the warehouse job."

She shook her head. "No. He thought you were about to turn him in for killing Reppert. He admitted to me he did that. He had been worried about me, had kept
his eye on me. When he saw me in Reppert’s car, he feared the worse, and shot him from a car.

“After Arnold struck you down, I calmed him down, and explained matters to him. We decided the wisest thing we could do was leave town together immediately. I went to the bathroom to wash up. As I stepped out of the room, something struck me on the head, and I knew no more until I came to in Ewell’s car. He drove me to his office, where I found you.”

Trommer got up, said, “Well, that’s that. We’ll let you know as soon’s we pick up Ewell.” He looked at me. “I suppose Homicide is in possession of Miss Stone’s apartment. I’ll run up and give whoever’s in charge the low-down. Maybe you better take her to a hotel for the night, Drag.”

“I slipped on my coat. “Not yet I don’t. How convincingly do you think you can say ‘Yeah!’ Cap?”

He stared at me. “You slug-nutty?”

“Maybe,” I said. “Let’s you and me and Miss Stone hop in a squad car and take a little ride.”

He rubbed his nose, regarded me a minute, then said, “Okay.”

THERE was a Lieutenant of Detectives named Barr and a dick called Guggenheimer in Thalia Stone’s apartment. Both attached to the Homicide Bureau. Henry Hegeler, the lawyer, was also there. The place smelled of flashlight powder. Arnold Stone’s body had been removed. For which I was thankful.

Henry Hegeler widened his eyes, and said, “Why...”

I said, “Thought I’d find you here, Hegeler. You’re ausgespielt. Ewell talked. That right, Captain Trommer?”

Trommer didn’t bat an eye. He said, “Yeah!”

Suddenly Hegeler didn’t look bankerish, or lawyerish any more. He looked old and tired.

“I realized that the moment you and Thalia walked in here,” he intoned, and stood up. But he didn’t stop there. A hand flashed up. A dull boom, and he slumped down.

It happened so quickly, so unexpectedly, no one moved for a good ten seconds. Then Thalia screamed hysterically and buried her face in my shoulder.

Barr was the first one to snap out of his trance. He yelled, “Hey! What the hell is this?”

“It’s like this, Barr,” I said. “In a couple of months Miss Stone here comes into a whale of an estate left her by her father. When it’s audited it’ll be found minus a hefty chunk snagged by Henry Hegeler here who was acting as trustee. He had to get rid of Miss Stone and her brother to duck the final accounting. But he didn’t want them killed just like that. He was afraid of a possible kickback to him. So he hired Ewell to hook Arnold, who had no contingent share in the estate, into a big gambling loss; and later frame him for a crime. The hope was that the kid would turn out rotten enough to kill his sister. Hegeler would have seen to it that he rode for it of course.

“When the kid rejected the idea, Hegeler had no alternative but to have Miss Stone killed in such a way that it would appear her brother had done it. The opportunity never came because Arnold broke down and told Miss Stone the jam he was in and her danger. She pulled me into the case and things began to happen fast. Arnold killed one of Ewell’s punks, Reppert, who’d picked up the girl. Hegeler learned about that through Ewell and hurried to this apartment where I was grilling Miss Stone. Meanwhile Arnold conked me by mistake, and Hegeler arrived in time to overhear the brother and sister discuss the matter. He realized my presence in the case would crack it wide open. So he rubbed out Arnold, after knocking out Miss Stone. Then he smuggled her into his car, and Pummed me— I’d regained consciousness—to find out how much I knew.

“He learned I knew all about the Ewell angle, and he let me run off to look up
Ewell, whom I suspected of having Miss Stone. Then he phoned Ewell, told him to come get the girl, ordering him to take both of us for a ride.

"He didn't finish us off himself because he wanted to fix himself an alibi. I bet he insisted on staying here when you showed, on the pretense he was anxious about Miss Stone. Right?"

The lieutenant nodded. "Before that he gave us a sweet song and dance about walking in here and being conked by a mug answering your description."

I said:

"Sure. He'd doped out a nifty. My prints were on the gun that killed Arnold. I was to have killed the kid because he objected to my making nasty advances to his sister. Then I would be found with her body in a by-road—a murderer and a suicide."

Thalia shuddered, and asked, "If Ewell was in Hegeler's pay, why did he want me to sign that paper in his office, Darryl?"

That she used my Christian name made my pulse pound faster.

"Ewell was no dope," I grinned at her. "He wanted to make sure he collected more than he was promised. Hegeler wouldn't dare deny the validity of the order on your estate."

Trommer rubbed his nose and said. "What I don't get is how you knew Hegeler was in it."

"I'm a good two-and-two putter-together," I laughed. "The tip-off was while I was in Ewell's office. If he had been on the up-and-up, he would've mentioned the fact that I'd gone there to Barr, and a squad would've come running. When I let the cat out of the bag that I was expecting help, and Ewell didn't turn a hair, I tumbled to the whole setup."

Trommer chuckled. "What's funny is Hegeler falling for that whiskery gag that his accomplice had talked. And him a lawyer."

"What's not so funny is that he escapes the chair," I said. "Tough. That's one execution I'd enjoyed seeing."

I reached for the phone. "Now, if you folks'll excuse me, I'll call my boss and tell him his twenty grand worth of assured is safe. Or he might not sleep tonight."

Thalia touched my arm. Her eyes were just a little bit starry. Her wan cheeks had a suspicious little flush in them.

"Darryl," she said, "will you also tell him you're resigning?"

"Me resign?" I wanted to know. "What the heck for?"

"Because—well..." She dropped her eyes. "I—I think your job is much too dangerous, and..."

She stopped, and blushed some more. I wasn't any too quick on the up-take, but when I got her drift, I felt myself suddenly riding the clouds.

What did I do? I called Pup Kennedy and told him his firing me in advance stood as of even date. I was going to like taking orders from my new boss.

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Cipher Solvers' Club for March 1938
(Continued from June 25 issue)


(Continued on page 61)
PROWL Car Officer Danny McClellan, as tough and competent looking as a rock crusher, swung No. 3 around the block and past Dalton's Department Store, which housed broadcasting station KWFL, with the easy familiarity of long practice.

As he did so, he burst into song.

"'Oh, a policeman's lot is not a happy one,'" he warbled cheerfully. "'When there's constabulary duty to be done—'"

"Jeepers!" Horse-Face Henderson, his side kick and fifteen years his senior, said sourly. He cast a morose gaze aloft at the lighted windows on top of the store where they both knew, Janet Moore was alone in the broadcasting station, announcing the Night Hawk program.

"Women!" Horse-Face spat scornfully. "Painted pussycats! They get their hands on a man who's got the makings of a swell cop and he turns soft as putty. Singing lessons! Why—"

"Now listen," Danny said defensively. "Janet's a swell girl. Just because she thinks I have a good voice—"

"It's all right to sing in your bath," Horse-Face said raspingly. "But to take lessons! You're th' disgrace of th' force.

Next thing we know you'll be changin' your name to Danislus McClellaniski, wearin' your hair long, an' garglin' mi-mi-mi-mi at th' breakfast table. While th' rest of us hide our faces in shame that we ever knew you."

"Nope. I like being a cop too much," Danny told him cheerfully. "It's just that Janet heard me when I sang over the radio for the Police Night broadcast and told me I had pretty near perfect pitch. So I took a few lessons from her—"

"Perfect pitch," Horse-Face sneered. "So you're a baseball player too? Everything but—cop."

He jabbed a hand toward their radio, twisted the dials.

"Headquarters ain't broadcast anything for twenty minutes. Wonder if th' set's—no, here's something."

"KWFL," a girl's voice said musically
from the loudspeaker. "And now a recording from the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *Pirates of Pencance*, dedicated with special attention to Danny McClellan. Let's hear from you again very soon, Danny."

Violently Horse-Face turned the dials back to their short-wave setting again, cutting off the music in the middle of a bar. "A policeman's life ain't a happy one!" he sniffed. "Now she's serenading you with th' damn song for everybody in ten states to hear. Well, maybe that's right. Maybe it ain't a happy life. Not when a guy has a canary-throated love-sick pitcher in th' car with him, and three killers loose somewhere in th' city he may run into any minute."

Danny flushed.

"It was just a gag," he explained patiently. "That's the first song she tried to teach me, so—well, it must be just a gag. And perfect pitch is a musical term, Horse-Face. It means ability to recognize any note you hear, see. To tell what it is and reproduce it. Like this."

Swiftly Danny sang a few notes.

"See?" he asked. "To make it simple, that first note was a, the second—"

But a glance told him his partner was not listening. Horse-Face was a crotchety bachelor and always had been. Danny sighed. Horse-Face disliked women. Ever since Danny had met Janet he'd been kidding the whole thing, making fun of Danny, trying to break it up. He'd thought Janet was trying to lure Danny away from the Force. It was all nonsense. In the first place, Danny had no intention of quitting the force. In the second, he and Janet were just good friends. Nothing more. So—

Danny shrugged, and kept No. 3 rolling evenly down Boland Avenue, his eyes peeled for trouble. No, for Trouble, spelled with a capital T. Trouble that, in his present mood, he hoped in his heart to run into. Trouble named Gaff Garrison, and two other killers, at large some place in the city with the blood of three men on their hands and a reward of two thousand dollars on the heads of each of them. A reward offered by an indignant Citizens' Association, suspicious of inside help for their escape, and open to anybody nabbing them.

They had broken out of State's Prison that afternoon, out of the massive citadel of stone and concrete, squatting on top of the hill on the edge of town, and known with a bitter curse by crooks everywhere as The Mountain.

Where the guns had come from Nobody knew, but suddenly they had blossomed in the hands of Gaff Garrison and half a dozen other of the prison's long-termers. Desperate men, sweeping a swath of death before them, they had seized the occasion of a baseball game in the recreation yard to blast their way through the main gates to freedom.

And once outside, Gaff Garrison and the two who had gotten free with him had vanished. Gone to earth somewhere in the basements and alleys of Dellsville, like rats waiting for the night to emerge.

And they were still hidden somewhere in town. The car that had been mysteriously waiting for them had been found parked beneath the old bridge across the river. Gaff and the killers with him had slid into the noisome alleys along the river and vanished, probably into some secret basement hideout previously prepared.

But they were still in town. And they couldn't stay hidden forever. Not in the face of a house to house search. And they couldn't get out of town when they emerged. Both of the bridges across the river were guarded by troopers. So were the two main roads leading out of town north and east, and the second-class dirt roads that went south.

Every exit was stoppered by state troopers and local police. Which meant that sometime soon Gaff and his killer companions would have to come boiling out of their hiding place to face copper's guns. And when they came, men would die.

It would be soon, too. They couldn't wait too long. Not with every stoolie in town after those rewards.
"Wonder what Gaff figures on doing?" Danny McClellan said aloud.

Horse-Face made an unconscious move toward the riot gun in its rack beside him.

"He'll come blasting when he comes," he said unpleasantly. "And you'll stop him dead in his tracks with a high C, I suppose. Or shoot him with a couple of do-re-mi's."

Danny held his temper in, but his jaw set grimly.

"It's not likely we'll meet up with him in any event," he said quietly. "Whatever he does, he won't try to escape past The Mountain, which he'd have to do if he came this way."

"And aren't you glad!" Horse-Face rasped.

Danny spun No. 3 around a corner on two wheels—but kept his temper.

The studios of KWFL were situated on top of Dalton's Department Store, a six-story building and the largest in Dellsville—except for the grim bulk of The Mountain, which loomed up a couple of miles away like a medieval castle guarding the town.

Janet was a singer, but she was also program manager, assistant announcer, and half the other officials of the little station. Among her duties, once a week she took the early-morning Night Hawk trick, playing records from midnight until two-forty-five A.M.

This being Friday—rather, Saturday morning now—it was her night for the shift, and she was all alone in the tiny studio. The clock said 2:20. Glancing through the windows of the broadcasting room, Janet could see scarcely a lighted window or the headlights of a moving car in the whole town.

Every half-hour or so, a pair of twin lights moving in a steady round came past, and she felt a sudden little pang of pleasure at knowing Danny McClellan and No. 3 were on the job. Once or twice a month, maybe, Danny would break regulations by stopping No. 3 and picking her up when she closed the station at 2:45, then taking her to her boarding house.

More often he couldn't. But just knowing he was there took away some of the loneliness that seemed to creep into the big building after midnight, and she was left all alone except for Al, the assistant technical engineer, down in the basement. Not that she was ever frightened, but—

Janet mechanically lifted the record on the turntable and put it aside. Choosing another from half a dozen she had laid out handy on the table, she leaned close to the mike.

"That's enough of the Dipsy Doodle, folks. Something legal next—Sweet Sue. Dedicated to Lawyer Henry Robinson, at the request of friends."

She slid the disc onto the whirling turntable and let the tone arm gently down. No, of course she never got frightened. What had she to be frightened of? Though the grim bulk of The Mountain was plain from her window, perched on top of the hill beyond the old abandoned flying field, its very solidity was reassuring.

But today that solidity had failed. Some of the men behind those gray walls had gotten free. And Janet shivered a little—not for herself, for they must be well away from here by now, but for Danny. Some day Danny would be there when a gang of those desperate men were escaping. He'd be there in the midst of gunfire and death.

She laughed a little shakily.

"What am I worrying about him for?" she demanded of herself. "Why, we're just friends. Even if he should be in danger, that's his job, and—"

But she did worry, and she knew it. Danny and she—and then the voice, like the whisper of an evil wind, spoke directly behind her.

"Just sit still, sister. Be quiet and don't move if you want to keep on living!"

Janet sat suddenly frozen, with the hand which she had stretched out for the next record poised in midair. She knew who it was, who it must be, even without turning. Gaff Garrison and his killers!

"Now turn around slow, sister," the
voice hissed, "and if you know what's good for you, don't try to say anything into the microphone."

Janet turned, her frantic mind racing far faster than her body was moving.

Should she scream for help? Should she send a cry echoing over a dozen states through the little black disc of the mike in front of her? But what good would that do? No one could reach the station within minutes. If she cried out, they would just kill her and flee. But if she waited, found out what they wanted, somehow there might be a chance.

She turned and faced them. The thin, twisted figure of Gaff Garrison, ex-jockey, beady eyes deadly in his pallid face, stood only inches away. Behind him were the other two—Spit Ryan and Nellie Nelson. She remembered their photos in the evening paper. Nellie Nelson, slim, effeminate, with feline cruelty marking his face, glared at her with an ugly light in his green eyes. Spit Ryan hulked beside him like an ill-tempered gorilla.

They had somehow rid themselves of their prison garb of gray marked with blue arrows. They wore mechanics overalls and workshirts, with greasy felt hats pulled low over their eyes. And each of them held an automatic that glinted blue and ugly under the studio lights.

"Yes?" Janet said, keeping her voice even with an effort. "Who are you and what do you want?"

Gaff Garrison grinned twistedly, waved his free hand backwards at his companions without ever taking his eyes from her face.

"Put away the artillery boys," he whispered. "I'll handle this. And you," he addressed Janet, "shut off that mike. Go ahead, throw the switch—and don't yell for help. Your technician downstairs is all nicely trussed up, and the machinery will run itself for a while."

Janet had to hold her hand steady with all the self-control she possessed as she reached out and threw the switch that controlled her announcement mike. A glance at the spinning disc on the turntable told her the record had about a minute more to run before another announcement would be due.

"Now"—Gaff Garrison seemed to relax a little—"we can get down to business. We're here, sister, to ask for a little request program."

"Re-request program?" Janet faltered. "I don't understand."

"You don't need to," Gaff Garrison snarled. "Do as I say and don't ask any questions."

Janet cast a swift glance at the turntable. The record was almost finished. If she let it run on, scratching the way records do when they're through playing, perhaps someone would suspect something wrong.

The pale-faced killer seemed to read her thoughts.

"Change the record!" he snapped. "Do just what you usually do."

Janet reached for the pile of records on the table beside her, then hesitated for a fraction of a second before reaching beyond them. The momentary pause seemed to go unnoted by the three men, and she swiftly picked up a record that had been put aside for return to the shelves. Swiftly she lifted the old number off the turntable, dropped the new one in place, and switched on her mike.

"Station KWFL," she said evenly, hoping against hope that Danny McClellan would be listening, as he occasionally did for a moment at a time, and hearing, would somehow understand the far-fetched but desperate plea she was sending him. "And now a recording from the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta Pirates of Pensance, dedicated with special attention to Danny McClellan. Let's hear from you again very soon, Danny."

The record was going out on the air and she switched off her mike again. It was the first song she had taught Danny how to really sing. Oh, if only he could read the hidden meaning, the ironically real significance of those verses: "A policeman's lot is not a happy one when there's
constabulary duty to be done, to be done—"

If only by some miracle he would understand that she needed him!

NOW let’s get down to business,” Garrison growled. “We want you to play some records for us, sister.”

“But su-suppose I haven’t got them?” Janet stammered.

Garrison’s hand leaped out like a striking snake. The flat of his palm took Janet a blow in the face that made her eyes water. She choked down a startled cry of pain and anger, and glared at the convict through the tears.

“Brave, aren’t you?” she asked scornfully.

“Shut up,” Garrison snarled. “You’ve got them, all right. Every broadcasting station has them.”

“Listen, Gaff,” Nellie Nelson interposed nervously. “Me and Spit, we don’t figure the play at all. What the hell are we doin’ here, taking chances, when we ought to be trying to get out of this lousy town. This hick city is full of stoolies and rats, and the local mobs hate our guts for getting the law all stirred up. Every minute we hang around makes our chances less.”

“Yeah,” Spit Ryan chimed in heavily. “Why ain’t we lammin is what I wanna know?”

Gaff Garrison whirled on them and his teeth showed between his pale thin lips.

“Listen, muggs,” he rasped. “I’ve run the show so far, ain’t I? Who was it got the guns inside the Big House? Who was it had a pal leave a car ready right outside, every day for six weeks, waitin’? Who was it had a hideout all fixed in the old warehouse, where we could lay low just in case of what really did happen—in case they closed the roads before we could get away? Who was it had a short-wave radio in the hideout so we could keep tabs on what the cops were doin’ to find us? Me!”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Spit Ryan agreed uncomfortably. “But still I don’t see—"

“An’ you never will!” Gaff Garrison blazed. “Well, get this. We’re trapped in town, ain’t we? Every road closed. And the cops are makin’ a house to house search down in the neighborhood where the hide-out is, ain’t they? They might be breakin’ in there this very minute. And we gotta get outa town now, tonight, don’t we!”

“Yeah,” Ryan mumbled. “But—

“But nothing. I thought of all this in advance, like I thought of everything else. I figured to get away clean the first shot. But we didn’t, and I was prepared for that. Carlos Gomez is waitin’ for me in Morristown, twenty miles away across the river. He’s hidin’ out on a old farm. And he has his orders. If I didn’t get away clean, didn’t meet him there by night on whatever day I made the break, he was to listen to this station until it went off the air. There ain’t no phone on the old farm, and if we had one put in, it would looked suspicious, see? So he’s waitin’ now for me to send him a message—by radio!”

“Gee.” Ryan scratched his head. “That’s smart, Gaff.”

“Smart, hell!” Nellie Nelson snapped. “Send a message over the radio and a thousand muggs will hear it and phone it to the cops. They’ll be down on our necks before we ever get outa the building.”

“Oh no they won’t,” Garrison said, a thin smile twisting his bloodless lips. “Hidden in a old barn on the farm, Carlos has a fast car and a cabin plane big enough for six. If I could, I was to reach him there, and we’d take off for the Mexican border. If I couldn’t reach him, I was to hide, and he’d come pick me up. Either in the car or the plane. All I had to do was to send him a message over the radio naming which, the time, and the place.

“The roads are closed. We couldn’t get out that way. So he’ll have to come for us in the plane. And I’m going to tell him that, as well as when and how, by playing certain records, see?”

Nellie Nelson’s face cleared.

“It’s an idea—if it works,” he said cautiously.

“It’ll work,” Garrison said. “I spent a year working it out, and getting the plans
to Carlos through released prisoners. I took care of everything, see, everything.”

He wheeled on Janet now.

“It’s two-thirty. I know you close the station at quarter to three. So hurry up. You’re gonna play three certain records, see? The Prisoner’s Song, Three o’Clock in the Morning, and She’ll Be Coming Round the Mountain. And you’re gonna say first, the next three pieces are dedicated to Carlos Gomez. You get me?”

Janet nodded wordlessly.

WITHOUT speaking Janet got the three records from the studio library and placed them at her elbow. Inside she felt queer and tight, as Garrison’s plan became plain to her. The message contained in the three records would be so plain to one expecting it, so harmless to one who did not. The Prisoner’s Song—“if I had the wings of an angel”—could have only one meaning. And Three o’Clock in the Morning was certainly clear enough. While She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain—Janet cast a swift glance through the windows. Grim in the distance loomed the prison. The Mountain!

Her eyes flicked to the vacant space lying between her and the prison—the abandoned flying field. A plane heading for it from Morristown would have to pass the gray building on the hill. That too would be plain to the distant listener.

Then a landing without motor or lights—she supposed an experienced pilot could manage it, for the lights of bordering streets would outline the landing field well enough—and a quick takeoff, and the plane would be gone before anyone was well aware it had landed.

“Get those records started!”

Janet glanced quickly at the station clock. Two thirty. Fifteen minutes to closing. Fifteen minutes to try to think; to try to figure some way to call help. Then—would they kill her?

Automatically she picked up the chimes board that sounded the station breaks, struck it with the padded hammer—ding-dong-ding.

“Station KWFL,” she said, switching on her mike. “The time is twenty seconds past two-thirty A.M. Next we bring you a special series of request numbers dedicated to Mr. Carlos Gomez.”

Then she put The Prisoner’s Song on the turntable and watched it whirl around under the needle, every revolution bringing closer the fateful minute when the station would be off the air, and the desperate men behind her would decide her fate.

Gaff Garrison pulled up a chair. Ryan and Nelson sat at ease on the edge of a table. Janet’s head seemed to be spinning with that fast-turning black disc. She was having difficulty in catching her breath. There was no way to cry for help. No way at all! Oh, if only Danny McClellan could somehow guess!

But he couldn’t do that, she realized hopelessly. He usually tried to listen to the last minute or two of her broadcast, to hear her sign-off and say good night. It was, he had told her, as if she was saying good night just to him alone, and she had blushed. She was saying it to him—but he shouldn’t have guessed. There was no help in that, though. You couldn’t call for help by saying good night.

She sat quite still, and they sat still, while the three records played themselves through.

“Carlos will be getting the plane out now, warming her up,” Garrison muttered. “Two forty. It’ll only take him ten minutes to make it. We’ll reach there just about the same time he does.”

“We better get going,” Nellie Nelson said fretfully. “No use taking chances.”

“Not until after the station signs off,” Gaff growled. “Everything is going to be kosher about that. We don’t want no snoopers guessing anything is wrong. We’ll let her finish out the program.”

“Then”—the slender killer said.

Lights flickered in Garrison’s small, pale eyes. He looked at Janet, then slowly he grinned.

“We’re going a long ways,” he said. “It’s a cabin plane. We’ll take her with us.”

“But that’s kidnapping!” Nelson said.
Gaff’s face darkened.

“Who’s to know we’ve got her?” he demanded. “Nobody’ll know where she’s gone. Besides, we’re headin’ for Mexico and a long hideout, ain’t we? We’ll be lonely. Ain’t it better than bumping her?”

There was no more argument. Nellie Nelson shoved the safety catch of his automatic on and off, nervously. Spit Ryan waited stolidly. Gaff sat still, his eyes fixed on the girl. And she too sat still, breathing a little silent prayer.

“Oh, Danny! Please guess!”

But if Danny McClellan had any sixth sense, it wasn’t in operation now. He and No. 3 were at the far end of the beat, over by Horton Avenue, drawn up for a moment beside a pole bearing a police call phone.

“All cars, attention,” the monotonous voice of Sergeant Garvey, down at Headquarters, came through No. 3’s receiver. “A fire has broken out in Dugan’s Alley, a block from the Tenth Street bridge. It may have been started by Garrison, Ryan, and Nelson to divert attention from an escape attempt. Call in to Headquarters for orders at once. We suspect they have access to a short-wave radio and are listening in. That is all.”

Horse-Face crawled out of the car to call in from the phone. Danny, looking a bit guilty, switched the receiver quickly over to long wave and brought in KWFL just in time to hear Janet’s melodious voice saying:

“And that brings to a close our regular Night Hawk’s program. Station KWFL signing off at two-forty-five a.m. Your announcer is Janet Moore.” And then the sound of chimes *dong, dang, ding, ding.*

“Good night, everybody.”

“La, la, la, la!” Danny sang gaily, echoing the chimes.

“Hey, what the hell?” Horse-Face Henderson burst out, startled, as he climbed back into the coupe.

“Just following the chimes,” Danny mumbled, abashedly. “It’s a trick Janet taught me. Funny, she changed ‘em to—night. Generally they do different. Like this—”

“Dong, dang, ding, ding,” the chimes repeated softly and almost insistently from the radio.

“See, Horse-Face, Janet struck—Gee! A—”

“What?” Horse-Face asked grudgingly. “Listen, Headquarters wants us to close in on Dalton’s Alley at once. There’s a fire raising merry hell in a warehouse, and a guy was seen crawling out a window. It was probably—”

“Gaff!” Danny McClellan cried suddenly. A startled look shot across his face, a look almost of fright. “Gaff Garrison! He’s—”

His next words were lost in a confusion of sounds coming from down near the river—the banshee wall of fire engines, the rising and falling siren-sob of speeding police cars, and then a volley of shots cracking ugly and sharp through the night.

“Damn right it’s Gaff!” Horse-Face Henderson roared. “Get rolling! Get roll- ing! Hey! What’re you doing? Why, you yellow-livered punk—”

Janet saw the car behind them first—saw the weaving and bobbing headlights as soon as they appeared in the rear vision mirror, because her eyes had been glued to it while in her heart she prayed.

But Gaff Garrison, at the wheel of the stolen sedan, saw them too, and a stream of oaths slipped between his tight lips.

“It’s a cop car,” he snarled. “I can tell by the way it’s coming!”

The car leaped ahead as his foot pushed the throttle to the floor. His little eyes swept an instant’s glance at Janet, her mouth taped, her hands bound, beside him.

“If I thought you—” the killer began.

“There’s th’ plane,” Nellie Nelson said softly, his face smooth and taut, little lights dancing in his eyes. “Coming down, Gaff. Never mind the cops. We’ll tend to them.”

Janet felt the sedan lurch and groan as Garrison twisted it off the road, sent it racing across the stubbly surface of the old
airport. And behind her glass cracked; then she heard a gun bellow and the interior of the car flickered with the pulsing yellow flame from an automatic.

She heard the shrill whine of a bullet scream past the sedan. Then there were no more shots. The car was bouncing so she could not see into the rear vision mirror, or turn around. Had the pursuing car gone off the road? Was Danny—

Her heart seemed to be in her throat, choking her, and the tape across her lips was suffocating. Unable to hold on, she pitched from side to side, banging cruelly against the door as the sedan lurched over grass hummocks.

But in the rear seat Nellie Nelson and Spit Ryan were still firing. So the police car must be coming on. The explosions of the automatics hurt her eardrums, and the acrid smell of burned powder half strangled her.

Still no answering fire from behind. Was it on account of her?

Momentarily upright, she saw the swooping shadow of the plane drifting downward from the starlit sky ahead of them, saw it touch earth, bounce, roll, and turn toward them. A motor sprang into thunderous explosion.

The car came to a screaming stop. Janet pitched forward, her head smacking the windshield. Beside her Gaff Garrison slammed the door open, leaped out, paused. Dimly she saw the gun in his hand swing toward her. Then instead of firing, he turned and raced for the plane, already moving slowly toward them under the impetus of its motor.

Nellie Nelson and Spit Ryan were running behind him. Struggling upright, she saw them turn, fling a swift volley of shots past the stopped car, then scramble wildly for the wing of the moving plane and into the open cabin door behind Gaff Garrison.

The plane’s motor roared with unleashed fury. Janet turned dizzily and saw a single headlight leaping and bouncing crazily toward them from far down the field. The shaft of light swung from side to side as the little police car took the bumps in the long unused field. And now little yellow blossoms of fire were blooming behind the single light.

Janet struggled frantically to work her hands free, to get loose from the tape across her lips.

“Oh, he can’t stop them!” she cried silently. “The plane’s in the air. Oh, Danny, Danny!”

The cabin plane, just a racing black shadow, was off the ground now. It was slanting upward toward the stars, a hundred yards beyond her, and the dancing spotlight was hurtling toward it. The pilot switched on his landing lights for better visibility, or perhaps to blind the oncoming car, and Janet could see the whole thing now outlined against the glare of the powerful beams.

A figure was half out of the little police car, firing deliberately. The plane, a black silhouette, was sweeping across the very nose of the coupé, rising, steadily rising.

It was away, free, beyond reach now.

No! The driver of the police car, seeing that he could not head the plane, had swung sharply. Then brakes screamed, glass shattered, metal crashed.

The tail surface of the plane had caught the windshield of the car, smashed through it and torn off as it met the steel frame, the car body. The car went whirling over and over. The figure on the runningboard shot off into darkness as if from a springboard.

The plane nosed down abruptly, dug itself into the ground. There was an instant in which metal screamed shrilly as the propeller flailed the earth, then hungry tongues of flame licked upward.

“Danny!” Janet tried to scream, and could not because of the tape. “Danny!”

Then someone was running toward her, was ripping the tape from her mouth with an awkward, one-armed effort, was holding her tight...

“FLOWERS!” Horse-Face Henderson snarled. “Candy! Nuthin’ too good for our hero, huh?”

He glared at Danny McClellan. Danny
struggled up in the hospital bed with his one good arm and grinned back, winked with the one eye visible under a swathing of bandages.

"You poor goof," he said good-naturedly, "so you feel off the runningboard into long grass and didn't get a scratch, while I rate three weeks in bed at full pay."

"You're a fool for luck," Horse-Face said. "To come out of a crash like that with only a broke arm and a black eye... But, uh, Danny, about last night. I wanna apologize for some of the things I said."

Danny waved away the apology.

"Forget it," he said. "You thought I was dutching it, naturally, when I turned away against orders. Tell me, what was happening in Dugan's Alley last night?"

"Just a sneak-thief," Horse-Face told him. "Set fire to the place when he short-circuited a burglar alarm. But—uh—Danny I wanted to ask you somethin'. The commissioner was questionin' me, an'- well, last night after I seen I couldn't get Gaff or them other guys outa the plane, I came over to the car and you were saying that you 'almost missed it.'"

He scratched an ear embarrassedly.

"Uh—I been tryin' to figure ever since what it was you almost missed, an' how you knew anyway that Gaff—"

Danny's grin broadened.

"Janet's message," he said. "That she sent because she knew I always tried to listen in to hear her say good night. Those chime notes.

"You see, she taught me to recognize notes, first thing. And I started to explain to you how she'd changed the regular station announcement chimes, that she'd struck the notes g-a-f-f."

"You weren't listening, thought I'd said something else. But she struck those four notes twice—and the second time I got what she meant. Then we hightailed it for the broadcasting studio, and got there just in time to see them pulling away."

Horse-Face rubbed his nose.

"Who'd a thought," he muttered, "a dame could think that fast with a bunch of killers at her back. I guess she'll make a pretty good wife for a cop, all right, Danny."

He hurried on before Danny could speak.

"What I came in to tell you, the Citizens' Protective Committee is gonna cut the reward for those three monkeys three ways—me, you, and her. So if it was thinkin' of just having a cop's salary was holdin' you back—uh, well I guess I better go now. She's waitin' to see you, Danny, an' I guess you'd rather be private."

Hastily Horse-Face Henderson fled to hide his confusion. Behind him he heard Danny humming something gaily to himself. "'Oh, a policeman's lot is not a happy one—''

Horse-Face Henderson slapped his cap onto his head, staring a surprised looking internre right in the eye.

"The hell it ain't!" Horse-Face said.

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Cipher Solvers' Club for March 1938

(Continued from page 52)

Charles E. Reynolds, Baltimore, Md. †Mrs. B. C. Squires, Thomaston, Conn.

Seven—Mrs. F. W. Heck, El Cajon, Calif.

Kenneth H. Riggs, Wollaston, Mass. †Will Will, White Plains, N. Y.

Six—L. H. Aber, Outremont, Quebec, Canada.

†Arbny, Bronx, N. Y. See-Ess-Bee, Hawesville, Ky. †George W. Bowesman, New York, N. Y.


Myrtle E. Cote, East Bridgewater, Mass. †Dogg-

maamgog, Massillon, Ohio. †Jay Essee, Ft.

Benning, Ga. Lester L. Eyrich, Dundee, N. Y.


Five—Allen, Buffalo, N. Y. Geo. Bailey,

(Continued on page 97)
MOAT FARM MYSTERY

When Samuel H. Dougal, his wife and a servant moved into the reputedly haunted Moat House near Claverley, England, in 1889, they were naturally the center of the town's curiosity. Mr. Dougal was a soldierly man of 40; his wife, a frail woman who kept much to herself. Six months later, gossip began to take note of Mrs. Dougal's absence from Moat House.

Questioned, Dougal explained quite frankly that his wife had deserted him and had gone to live on the continent. Meanwhile, a Miss Dougal, supposedly his sister, had come to live with him. The neighborhood was electrified when Dougal sued this woman—really his wife—for a divorce. Quiet investigation by the police disclosed the missing "Mrs. Dougal" was actually Camille Holland, a wealthy spinster. Gossip compelled a search of the house, which convinced police Miss Holland's infatuation for the man had worn off and she had left him as he claimed.

Camille Holland Missing!

Years passed but the gossip was kept alive by Dougal's scandalous conduct. Inspector Scott was called in when a nephew of Miss Hollands asserted her endorsement on cheques being presented regularly at her bank were forgeries.

When the inspector sought to question Dougal, he found he had decamped; but by clever work, caught up with him as he was closing out an account he kept in a nearby bank under an assumed name.

Coming Next Week—
The grounds of the large house were dug up for a body but nothing was found until a laborer, exploring an old ditch which had been planted over with shrubs by Dougal in 1889, unearthed a woman's shoe and the remains of a human foot. The rest of the body was found nearby, the head pierced by a bullet which was still inside the skull.

A dressmaker and a Claverling tradesman identified the clothing and shoes as Miss Holland's. The bullet was shown by experts to correspond exactly with bullets found in Dougal's desk.

Tried for murder, Dougal was quickly convicted. On the gallows he remorsefully admitted his guilt to the chaplain.

The Case of the Yowling Bobcats
Murder Goes Sour

"Windy" McClain sold lemons, but he was also selling murder on the side

I sold the lot to the fat man with the gun

By David Waters

FIVE-THIRTY in the morning was too early for aspirins and too early for a fight. Which means I didn’t expect what happened a couple of minutes later. There were only two people in the restaurant—a bulky red-faced guy and myself. I noticed him because once I caught him eyeing me intently. After that he kept watching the door. I didn’t like his looks and felt he needed watching more than me.

A cup of coffee was on the way up to my lips when the door opened quickly and two guerillas walked straight across the sawdust covered floor and stopped in front of me.

I started to set the cup on the table and noticed that the red-faced guy at the other table was watching as though he expected something to happen. He was too interested and it gave him away. The guerillas looked at me and then at each other. They were tougher than the skin on a pair of month-old oranges. In my business you get to know a tough guy by the hang of his arms, curved and bent at the elbows when he walks. One of them, the taller and heavier, with a flat nose and beady eyes under bushy brows, said: "This is the bloke."

The shorter guy nodded. He had an undershot jaw and a gold tooth that gleamed in the light as he agreed with his buddy. As I started to open my mouth to ask what this was all about, the big guy reached out a hand like a leg of lamb and lifted me up by the coat front. At the same time the shorter guy’s gold tooth flashed in a snarl as he swung.

I ducked sideways and his fist glanced off my cheek, short but stinging. The big guerilla hung tight to my coat front and wound up. It was a telegraph punch that a kid could dodge but there I was, hang-
ing in midair on the leg of lamb. My hands grabbed sawdust as I landed backwards on the floor. The punch almost knocked me cold.

Fights don’t scare me, but this was a massacre until the red-faced gent at the table stepped in. He leaped across the room and whirled the big guerilla round by the shoulder. Two socks. One, two . . . under the heart and an uppercut to the chin; yet quick as the red-faced guy worked, I could see him pull those punches. But it gave me time to clear my head and meet the rush of the guerilla with the gold tooth.

I swung my legs under me and dove. The sawdust spurted and gold tooth folded. He got up again but this time I was ready. He was a sucker for a left hook and I let him have it as he charged. He sagged. I looked at the big guy and he was on the floor trying to look colder than my coffee.

The red-faced gent smoothed his coat. He wasn’t even out of breath, which looked phoney too. He should at least have jarred himself socking that big mug.

"Let’s get out of here before they wake up," he said.

We WALKED out together. I noticed a long scar clear across his forehead at the hair line. My cheek began to bulge and my chin ached. I tested my jaw, clamping my teeth and rubbing.

We walked under the Sixth Avenue El and I measured the gent beside me. Relaxed, he had a droopy, slow look, but already I knew different. His face was full of little, hardly visible pock marks. I thought again that even if he did jump into the fight, I didn’t like this droopy, red-faced gent. His eyes were small, sunken and quick; his lips thin and blue. When a guy moves fast and looks slow, he’s slick. And slick guys are slick for reasons.

"Thanks," I told him.

He nodded without looking at me. We passed Canal Street and dawn over the river showed the scar clearly. He didn’t say anything. I had an idea he was waiting for me to talk. Cagey, he was. So I was cagey too. But the sweat felt cold on my forehead as I began to realize what could have happened in the restaurant if those two had been successful.

"I don’t know why those guys went to work on me," I said. His answer nearly bowled me over.

"You’re Windy McClain, aren’t you?" he asked. That’s my name, but who told him? My hat was on too, but I wouldn’t have been surprised if he told me that my hair was curly with a silver streak down the center, which is also the case. I faced him and stopped in the middle of Hudson Street.

"Yeh," I said. "How do you know?"

"You’re a fruit auctioneer," he said tonelessly. "I’m a fruit buyer. My place is in Jersey. I got credit with your company yesterday."

He dug a typewritten tissue out of his inside pocket. For the first time, I noticed the bulge of a gun under his shoulder as he showed me the paper. Sure enough, signed by the credit manager—"Circle Fruit Company is now on credit accommodation list . . ."

By now we were at the dock. I picked up the lemon catalogue that listed the fruit, and walked to the fruit samples lined in front of crates piled five tiers high as far along the dock as you could see. The droopy gent picked up a catalogue too. White coated men bustled past the opened samples and marked their catalogues.

The droopy gent tagged after me as I walked to the lemon display, but I couldn’t be bothered with him. A fight would never interfere with my work; I’d struggled for my job and was going to keep it. I lifted a lemon from an opened crate and tested the weight and examined the color. Beside me, the guy did the same, but somehow, by the way he did it, I knew that fruit inspection was new to him.

But this guy was smart; smart and handy with his dukes. The bulge under
his shoulder had been well concealed, but one look was enough. It convinced me that the guy was a phoney, that the fight was faked, but the reason for it was beyond me.

I tried to slip away from him. I sidled around back of the crates. I had a reason for going anyway. A wise lemon man never depends on the sample. He opens crates behind the pile. But Droopy came right after me.

AS I ENTERED the aisle behind the fruit piles, I noticed one box in particular. The pack was lopsided. Lemons don't come packed lopsided and any fruit man with half an eye could see something was wrong. The box was lumpy too. It looked queer all the way. So I headed over toward it.

Right behind me I could hear Droopy breathing heavily. He watched me closely now. I slipped a small axe from my pocket and the cold steel felt reassuring. It wasn't really an axe, but a T-shaped iron for opening boxes. I thought how handy it could be as a weapon. I swung down on the box because I knew for sure something was wrong, and I wanted to know what.

As I stuck the steel opener under the crate lid, Droopy moved up to my side suddenly. His face with its pock marks was close to mine. He deliberately put his hand on the lid.

"I wouldn't open that box if I were you," he said.

"Why not?" I asked, working with the axe to hoist the lid.

"Because I say so!" he said quietly.

His hand was still on the lid. With a quick wrench, I yanked at the wood and threw his hand aside. The lid came off and plonked to the stone floor. The short hairs on my neck stood on end. My flesh crawled when I saw what was in the box.

Crammed into the crate, with knees bent double and dead eyes staring up at me, was the body of a thin, gray-haired old man. The skull had been crashed in and matted hair covered his blood-clotted forehead. My eyes bulged and I felt a queer feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I knew the old man. Known him for years. Man name Scanlon and a swell old gent too. We used to have coffee together when I had night sales in Jersey. He had three sons he was always talking about.

Scanlon worked in the Jersey yards, routing the cars. For twenty years he had handled the loading of freight cars that threaded the river every night on lighter boats that come to New York. His job had been lemons exclusively.

I turned and looked straight into the business end of a black automatic that Droopy was holding.

"Now you know too much," he said, cool as a grapefruit. "Drop the axe and turn around."

For a second I almost lost what little sense I had and got ready to spring. But he poked the gun a little closer and I realized he had me cold. I turned. Behind me I heard him pick up the axe and hammer the top on the crate again. Instead of aspirins, I told myself, I should be addicted to automatics. I still had the sick feeling. The white-coated men were moving on the dock. I could see and hear them between the tiers of crates but they couldn't see me.

"Start moving to the stairs," he said. "We have talking to do."

I wondered whether it would do any good to jump him. But the auction sale started at eight-thirty and I had to sell lemons in rooms above the pier and a dead auctioneer can't sell many lemons. That gun was too close. As I walked, a lot of things went through my head.

It's queer what a man thinks about when he's in a spot. It was lemons I thought about and yesterday's auction sale. Lemons brought high prices yesterday. Lemons were scarce. And when anything is scarce it's worth money, that's natural; but lemon shortage makes the golden fruit just that: gold, and plenty of gold too. They sell quickly for a fruit man and with unbelievable profit. And poor old Scanlon dealt with lemons exclusively.
THE stairs, that led to the auction rooms above the dock, wound up under iron eaves only a few feet away. We came to the middle of the dock and the stairs. I could feel the menacing presence of Droopy behind me and I knew he had his gat concealed but ready. Some buyers and a fruit owner were gabbling near the stairs.

"Don't try anything fancy," His voice came low but packed with warning. "Act natural."

One of the buyers spotted me and headed us off. He grinned and his white market-coat flapped as he grabbed my arm. His beard was red and full, moving when he talked.

"Hello, Windy. Not many lemons. Kinda light, no?"

Lemons were light all right, but he didn't mean light in color. I stopped, sliding a glance behind me. Droopy stopped and pretended to look at a box, but his eyes warned me and the gat was ranged under the pocket of his coat. Yesterday we had ten carloads of lemons, last week eighteen a day; today only five carloads. Lemons were light.

"Maybe it's the freeze in California, Abe," I answered the red-bearded buyer. Droopy's eyes signaled I'd better get gone.

"See you later," I said to Abe as I started rigidly up the stairs.

I reached the first landing and turned left out of sight of the white-coated men on the dock. The landing gave me an idea. To the left again on the top landing was the way to the dressing rooms. To the right another stair led down to the street. Maybe Droopy knew this and maybe he didn't. It was worth a try anyway.

I slowed down just a little as we came to the top landing. I could feel Droopy right behind me on the steps.

In one motion I took the last step and whirled, striking out with my right fist and catching his gun arm with my left. But he was prepared. He shifted his weight and my fist went harmlessly past his ear. At the same time he knocked my grip off his gun arm.

A second later I was faced against the wall with a couple of hands like steel bands holding my wrists together.

"Any more of that, and you're going to eat lead," Droopy gritted in a low voice. "I can make an easy getaway down that right corridor to the street, but you won't live to tell it."

He was certainly well posted. He knew the layout as well as I did and I wondered where he got his information. It was evident that he didn't work alone, but I could see that he did all the brain work for his gang. He hadn't omitted the smallest detail. We passed the silent, empty auction rooms with their seats grading down to a rostrum. Finally I stopped at a locked door.

"Open it," he said, and I drew out my keys slowly, and wished for my axe when we got inside with the door closed behind us. In the room were two chairs, a wooden bench and four iron lockers, a window facing the door and another door leading to the lavatory on the right.

I looked at the window, but he heard the wheels in my head.

"That window is too far," he said, "I'd plug you as you jumped."

"What's this all about?" I asked him.

"Sit down," he said, "and listen."

I LISTENED and what he told me was very interesting. The little pock marks around his eyes creased into shrewd wrinkles as he talked.

"You're going to sell lemons in an hour. I'm going to be in the room, right in the first row. This gat will be very handy. I'm going to buy 7,000 boxes of lemons from you," he paused a second and the automatic stiffened in his hand.

"But it's going to be at my price. If you're smart and want to keep that nice-looking face of yours on straight, you sell 'em to me."

There were a lot of answers I could have made to that remark but I said nothing. I'm not bad at quick figuring—7,000 boxes of lemons, handled right, can equal $50,000 profit in a lemon shortage. His plan was daring and clever. But he
couldn't shoot me in the auction room. Too many people would be watching me there.

"One wrong move and you're dead," he continued, just like he heard what I was thinking. "I've got my men spotted through the room and a fast car waiting outside. Don't think you can get away with any smart stuff."

He watched me get into my corduroys and gray flannel shirt. I tested my big auctioneer's pencil, got a glass of water and aspirin. Then Droopy nodded an order for me to get into the salesroom. He followed me and I knew his hand never left that automatic. He sat, as he said he would, smack in the front pew. I was pretty jittery.

The owner of the lemons stepped on the stand; but here's the payoff. The owner of these particular lemons was a girl. Nora Burns. It's unusual for a girl to attend these auctions, but Old Man Burns died a while back and she's carrying on the business. In fact, I'd made a point to watch her sales especially to see that she got a square deal.

She looked at me and her little, upturned nose wrinkled as she smiled. Nora had the biggest blue eyes of any girl I knew; the wide, trusting kind of eyes that made me feel refreshed as though I'd just stepped out of the shower. Her hair was jet black and had tiny curls at the ends. She's swell. How could a guy deliberately doublecross a girl like that? She glanced at a dinky wrist watch, smiled again and said: "Okay, Windy. Shoot."

The word brought my eyes to Droopy. He sat relaxed and nonchalant, but he didn't fool me now. That guy wasn't droopy. He watched the girl too, and the bottom of my throat felt like it was going to fall out. Droopy never missed a thing. He took in the setup and I knew he guessed how I felt about Nora.

I started to sell and the room filled with white-coated men, streaming in from downstairs. I saw some unfamiliar faces and figured they were Droopy's side-kicks. They were nicely planted in the crowd and they sure were plug-uglies. In five minutes the room was packed. The buyers were interested in the lemon market because of the shortage. So was I, but for different reasons. I had another plan now. I spoke into the mike:

"All right, gentlema-a-a-an. On page one. At ten-at-ten-at-ten- and seven dolla-ten." Besides me, Nora swung her pencil and Droopy leaned forward. Like an experienced buyer he offered me in a hand signal the bid for five dollars and a half. Right behind him Abe, the red-bearded buyer, bid six dollars. Nora nudged me as I shouted:

"At fittee, at fitte-five, five dolla fitte-five," pretending not to see the six-dollar bid. She saw it, but I let it go: "Circle Fruit, five and a half."

"I'll take the carload," Droopy said and 500 of his 7,000 lemons were sold. At his price!

BUT I was in trouble. Beside me the girl got all excited about the six-dollar bid and the whole room jumped up at once, waving bids. A lot of things were running through my head. The stuff was cheap at ten dollars even, but what could I do about it? An automatic stopped me, but I promised myself to get this hijacker later.

A tall, thin man whose hat swept over one eye came into the room. My heart took a jump. Ed James, the Department of Agriculture man. I knew him; it's part of my business to know people like that. But he didn't know me to speak to. If I got him in time enough, he might stop this hijack.

I stared at him hard. His face was tanned and sharp eyes glanced down a straight nose over a firm, jutting chin. I kept staring, but he didn't give me a tumble. He sat and watched the sale. And then Droopy, watching me, deliberately twisted his thick neck around to see who I was staring at. So I couldn't try that any more.

I crossed out the lot number just sold
and as I did so, I scribbled a word. "Get." Nora kept writing, but didn't look at my catalogue. And I couldn't blame her; I had practically robbed her for Droopy.

The next carload also went to Droopy for five dollars and seventy-five cents and this time the buyers raised a terrible squawk. I crossed out the next page and scribbled "Police." Still Nora didn't give me a tumble. My hair stood on end almost, trying to get her to notice. I sold a few more carloads.

Droopy, by now, had bought his 7,000 boxes of lemons and it burned me up the price he paid, way under the market. He sat tight and I realized he was going to wait till the sale ended, and nail me so I couldn't get to a phone and give him away.

If Nora had only seen my scribbling, everything would have been jake. But she was sore and I didn't blame her. Droopy sat waiting for the sale to end, the Department of Agriculture man, Ed James, only a few seats behind him.

I began to sweat but not from hard work. There were about six pages and each had scribbled across it—"Get police." Except the last one. I had a chance here, with all the noise in the room, and I added quickly "Circle Fruit" to what I'd written.

The sale ended and a buzz went over the room. Nora grabbed my arm and I knew what she was going to say. Something like, "How come you missed those bids?" But I saw Droopy get up and come to the stand. Cool and brazen he said:

"Can I see you a minute?" And the pocket of his coat bulged significantly.

Nora released my arm and I handed her the catalogue with a prayer that she'd look at the scribbling. She took it absently and started out of the room with Droopy and me.

As we walked up the aisle, I nearly went nuts. Nora trotted alongside me with the catalogue. I saw Droopy look her over again. He didn't say a word, but I knew what he thought. Nora would be very handy to his scheme. But I took a long chance. Ed James stepped into the aisle as we passed. I didn't stop, but I took the catalogue from Nora and handed it to Ed James.

"Here's your catalogue!" I said, and Ed James answered with a blank stare. Naturally! The catalogue didn't belong to him. He let it hang in his hand, but Droopy hardly noticed because his wheels were working about the girl. We were both covered by the gun under his coat as we left the room. I looked at Nora and she must have sensed or seen something in my face. But she kept in step with us as Droopy took me downstairs to the dock. I saw ten black trucks. They were all nearly loaded and two were going off the dock, packed with hijacked lemons.

"You're sticking with me," Droopy said, including Nora in his glance. "We're leaving with the last truck so you don't get a chance to call the police."

He motioned to a big black Mack that was three-quarters loaded. Seven otheracks passed. Nora had begun to realize what had happened, and she turned pale and started to tremble.

DROOPY ordered us into the cabin of the last truck as the driver tied a canvas over the load. Nora sat beside the driver and I sat between Nora and Droopy. The driver was a dark, bushy-eyed, bearded fellow, built like an ox. We left the dock after the load was counted and okayed at the gate.

The truck heaved off Canal Street and Headed through the Holland Tunnel. I figured we were going to the Newark market, but I was wrong. We passed Newark and Elizabeth and hit less populated country. After about an hour and a half, we pulled into a side road. We followed it for about a mile and then turned right. The road was little more than a trail, but we came out by a clearing where an old farmhouse squatted under three big elms. The driver hopped out and went through a side door of the house.

"All right, brother," said Droopy, "you and the girl get into the house."
The place looked like it had been deserted for years, but the side door led through a black hall, up three creaky steps and into the neatest, warmest living room I ever did see.

I'm here to tell you, the place was amazing. It had been transformed from an old room into a colonial antique atmosphere. There were the old rafters, varnished and shiny, two swell sofas, a fireplace with a picture of a full-sailed boat and a big table, set for eating. Three men were sprawled, smoking, in the low chairs and on the sofa. A bottle of liquor, half finished, stood on the mantel over the fireplace. The men got up and walked over slowly as if they hadn't a worry in the world.

"That's the last load," a guy in shirt sleeves nearest the door said. He was almost handsome except his face was heavy, as though it were too big for his body. His hair stood up like he was wearing a hairbrush for a wig. As the other two walked toward us, I recognized the guerillas from the restaurant. The gold tooth flashed as the little guy said:

"Fancy meetin' you here." He rubbed his jaw and gave Nora one of those insulting appraisals that makes a red blooded man's fists itch. Nora cowered close to me and hung to my arm for dear life. She was trembling and her eyes were like open baskets. Nora, I learned, shrivels almost into a ball when she gets scared. Small as she was, she got smaller. I didn't feel so big either.

Droopy was the general of the bunch all right. When he looked around they all watched him, waiting for orders. Droopy nodded to Hairbrush, indicating Nora and me; then Hairbrush moved up like a watch dog. Droopy went out the way we had come in.

The big guerilla grabbed Hairbrush by the shoulder.

"I oughta handle wise guy here. Me an' him's acquainted. . . ."

"Lay off." Hairbrush swung his heavy face to the big guerilla, throwing off the huge hand. He looked vicious.

Gold Tooth’s lips spread across his teeth, his eyes lidde, “I wanna take a bite outta wise guy too. I'd just as leave bite you.”

But Droopy was in the doorway. He growled through his blue lips: “Keep your traps closed. This guy—" he came all the way into the room—“knows too much already. We might have to put the silencer on him. But not yet.”

The big guerilla grinned over clenched teeth. It was a nasty grin and I knew nothing would please him better than killing me. I saw Nora wince and tremble, but nobody said anything. I was in a swell spot. Nice pleasant bunch of cutthroats eyeing me, and poor Nora scared skinny.

She tried to stick close to me, but suddenly Hairbrush yanked her away. She backed into a corner, her hand over her mouth. Gold Tooth said, “Let's bump him off now!”

But Droopy grabbed his hand as a long stiletto came gleaming from his belt.

"Take it easy. I need him for a while yet.”

Droopy reached out an arm and bent my wrist behind me and up between my shoulders, “Get some rope,” he said.

While Gold Tooth reluctantly stowed the dagger and the heavy guerilla sat down, Droopy roped me tight to a chair. What I sat on felt like it had needles on it.

It was an awful feeling to have someone like Droopy hold your life in his hands; and to know that a swell girl like Nora had to watch with probably no chance for protection if anything happened.

Droopy was a quick tough customer but he couldn't hold this pack off long. Not much chance to get myself and Nora out of this jigsaw puzzle. The inside of my stomach sank into my shoes. If only I'd had a chance, but I was tied solid and I'd die tied, it looked like.

Droopy poked his scarred face close to mine.
"You're gonna help us get rid of these lemons," he said quietly.

My lips were dry and I steadied myself. Somehow my voice didn't crack, "How?"
"You're going to telephone a customer in Newark market and tell him you have 7,000 cases of lemons to sell. Get his price." Droopy said with the trace of a smile. The guerillas grinned all at once. The plan was perfect. Gold Tooth let out a nickering laugh, "Or you'll get what he gave Scanlon!"

"Keep your yap closed!" Droopy said, turning on Gold Tooth.

"Who am I going to telephone?" I asked, stalling, but Droopy knew I was stalling. With a nod at Nora he said:

"All your life you've auctioned lemons and you ask who. Cut the stalling if you and the girl want to wake up tomorrow."

But I figured I'd keep stalling a moment anyhow, so I said calmly: "You can all go plumb to hell!"

The effect was electrical. Everyone jumped up, but Droopy held them off with outspread arms. He said:

"These tough wise guys always talk under pressure."

His face got stony and the droopy look was gone entirely. "Give me your stiletto!" he ordered Gold Tooth. And Gold Tooth grinned wickedly, whipped out the blade and tested the edge before handing it over.

The thin steel shone in the light and Gold Tooth, the brush-haired guy and the big guerilla pressed around Droopy. The little pok marks absorbed the light and made his face seem to sink. The scar tightened on his forehead. He lighted a candle that Gold Tooth handed him from the mantel over the fireplace. Then Nora let out a scream. Droopy turned slowly toward her. Sweat was breaking from my forehead and I could feel the goose pimples on legs and arms. The sweat began to drip off my forehead. Droopy started to heat the stiletto point in the candle flame.

"A jab or two in the girl's cheek just to make you telephone that customer."

I'll never know why, but something told me to keep stalling, and I said the first thing that came into my head. Nora jumped up, but Droopy slammed her back with the flat of his hand, hardly looking at her.

"I gotta have an aspirin," I said.

The blade wavered and Gold Tooth's mouth dropped open. I guess he figured me for a cool one, but I wasn't as cool as I appeared.

It's a lucky thing I asked for the aspirin. They all seemed taken back. The few moments' hesitation was the thing that saved our lives.

Suddenly there was a whirring sound outside and the sweet screech of skidding tires on dirt road. I threw myself back in the chair and kicked with my feet as I smashed my head on the floor. The ropes dug into my arms and legs and something warm and burning cut at a hundred places.

In a split second the room was full of action. Guns leapt from pockets and shoulder holsters. Droopy jumped to the table and drew out the meanest looking Luger I ever laid eyes on. He was cool as a December persimmon. His voice came sharp and low.

"Kill the lights!" And in a second the place was pitch black and there wasn't a sound.

But Droopy couldn't watch everything. In the scramble, under the sudden darkness, Nora skidded across the room. They'd forgotten to gag me and I let go a yell that any auctioneer would be proud of. It echoed and re-echoed through the old house. Somebody crawled toward me. Nora was crouched behind me and working at the knots. Whoever was crawling wanted to get to her, but I kicked again. The ropes were just loose enough to give me room to catch a mushy face that snarled a muffled curse.

By this time I heard steps pounding in the hall as the side door opened. In the room where I was, dim figures crouched low and I made out the form of Droopy, edging toward me. I shouted:
"Keep clear of the door! They're all in here!"

Four shots blazed from the room toward the entrance, cutting the dim light in red spurts. I heard the sweetest music I ever heard—three sets of answering roars belled from the entrance and I saw Gold Tooth aim his gun from behind a table. An overturned chair was right near my foot and I kicked.

The effort nearly cut off my wrists but the tumbling chair served two purposes. It hit Droopy's shoulder as it passed and crashed into Gold Tooth's face. Then Droopy sprang. I saw what looked like continuous cross fire and Hairbrush, shooting as he pressed against the mantel, sagged slowly to the floor.

Another quick succession of shots and Droopy sucked in his breath as he landed on top of me. His knotty shoulder muscles sank into my cheek, but I knew he was hit. I wriggled, to protect Nora who kept working at the ropes when she could. The ropes were nearly cutting me in two.

Droopy raised his gun. Three forms rushed the entrance. A tall, lanky one, a fat and a smaller one. But Droopy's gun crashed into my jaw and the lights came up in my head and went out.

COLD water brought me to. But the scene was different. Even though the room was the same, it was completely wrecked. My head nearly killed me and I swore I had no arms or legs. Standing over me was the looming stringy form of Ed James, the Department of Agriculture man, and Nora.

I groaned weakly and Nora gave up, she fell over in a dead faint. A big cop in uniform lifted her to a sofa.

Ed James bent over me. His words were clipped and quick, but showed concern.

"Hurt, Windy?"

"Not much. Look after Nora. Where did you come from?" I asked like I was seeing an angel.

His lips made a slow grin as he pulled out a wallet with a badge inside.

"From the Federal Department of Justice, Windy. Not the Department of Agriculture."

"Thanks, Ed. But one point isn't clear. Why did Droopy murder Scanlon?"

"He held the reports of the lemon shortage due to a freeze in California."

"But the trade knew about the freeze," I said.

"Sure," Ed said, "but they expected some lemons, otherwise they would never have let you get away with selling them at the price you did. There will be none at all for two months according to this report. And today, since the report is out, lemons are selling for three times their value."

I looked around the room and dawn broke in my head. My catalogue was sticking out of Ed James' pocket. Behind him another cop, bigger than the first, the fat figure I had seen in the doorway, was eyeing the room.

Hairbrush lay in his own blood under the mantel. Gold Tooth had a blood stain the size of a cluster of Malaga grapes on his chest and the gold tooth gleamed in a death grin. The big guerilla was groaning in a corner, with his hands pressed into his belly. And Droopy was sitting, propped in a chair. His eyes were beginning to dilate and I knew he was going fast. I turned away as the lights in Droopy's eyes went dim. He pitched forward.

"Let's get Nora out of here," I said. She'd seen enough, I figured.

The cop collected the guns and went to the phone. The G-man said, "You handle things, McGuire. I'm going back to New York."

The cop saluted. I managed, with a little help, to stumble to the car behind the cop who was carrying poor little Nora. She opened her eyes as they set her beside me in the back of a high powered sedan. She leaned on me a moment, then reached into her jumper pocket. For what she dragged out, and that alone, I could have kissed her. It was a box of aspirins.
Bulldog Drummond on Dartmoor

A black cavern swallows his wife—and Drummond finds the secret of the vanishing rapier

"Hullo?" Alg Longworth's voice inquired cheerfully from the skylight. "Anybody down there?"

By Gerard Fairlie

NATASHA MALAKOFF is an amazing young woman who possesses incredible strength in her hands. With Merridew, the tenant of a lonely castle, she is fighting for hidden loot.

Drummond, his wife Phyllis, Alg Longworth and Peter Darrell are drawn into the affair when they investigate the murder of a youth named Ted Barton.

In the castle Phyllis is kidnapped. Drummond goes into a turret searching for her, leaving Alg Longworth covering Miss Malakoff with a gun. But Alg is unaware of the woman's strength, and she outwits him and escapes. He is unable to find means of entry to the turret.

Peter Darrell has gone to telephone for the police.

CHAPTER XIV
Deadlock

HUGH DRUMMOND made his way very carefully down the steps which were leading him he knew not where. It was a circular staircase of stone, so that the light shining through
the open secret door behind him aided him only for a short way, but Drummond was using to the full his amazing ability for moving silently in the dark, and his progress was both rapid and soundless. He had descended quite a long way—he judged he must be below the level of the ground floor—when suddenly he found himself facing a door. Drummond did not hesitate; he opened it carefully and stepped through.

He found himself standing on a small ledge so constructed that a normal man could only just stand without bumping his head on the ceiling of what obviously was the cellar. A pale light was shining into this cellar from a skylight on his left, and for a moment or two Drummond stood quite still trying to accustom his eyes to the new illumination. Gradually he began to realize that there were steps leading down from the ledge on which he was standing to the floor of the cellar. In a flash now he took in the details. The place was large, but in very bad repair, and gave the appearance of being damp and seldom used. On one side as he looked down he noticed a deep arched recess. On the other was another door, no doubt the normal exit leading to the upper part of the house. Immediately below him Drummond could just make out that the floor was piled with old pieces of broken furniture, packing cases, and other rubbish. The ceiling itself was arched, and farther back he noticed that there was another recess where the ceiling was low and sloping.

The faint rays of the moon filtering through the skylight provided the only glimmering of light to help him, but this faint beam concentrated on a patch of floor and a small portion of the opposite wall.

Drummond, standing silently and listening intently, could hear no sound. But just as he turned in order to descend the steps to the cellar floor below, he heard a faint moan from the shadows. It was followed almost at once by a piercing shriek of agony. Drummond gritted his teeth. It was all he could do to prevent himself from answering, but in the next moment he was glad that he had resisted the temptation, for he suddenly caught sight of a figure stepping away from the shadows into the patch of moonlight. It was Merridew. The man pulled an electric torch from his pocket and directed its rays into the patch of shadow from which he had just emerged. Drummond saw the limp figure of Phyllis, huddled in a chair to which she was tied by a length of rope.

Drummond could stand it no longer. With a shout of encouragement to Phyllis, he turned again toward the stairs. As he did so the door behind him opened again suddenly. The figure of a slender girl was clearly visible, but only for one instant. For Merridew, who had flashed his torch upward at the first sound, extinguished it quickly, and all was in darkness again.

Quite unaware that anyone was standing just behind him, Hugh Drummond took a quick pace to his left, fearful that Merridew might have marked his position and fire from the darkness, but as he did so there came a faint moan from the shadows. Phyllis.

"Hugh," she called weakly.

No further sound came to his ears, except the slight noise of a scuffle. Drummond realized that Merridew must have gone back to Phyllis, and at that very moment be stifling any possibility of another cry. He turned quickly toward the steps, but as he did so he felt himself suddenly pushed violently from behind. It was so unexpected that it caught him off his balance. For a second he hovered at the very brink of the ledge, trying his utmost to regain his balance, and he might have succeeded but for a second push, which sent him flying off the ledge and crashing to the floor beneath.

Complete silence reigned again in the cellar, but then slowly Drummond crawled out from the pile of rubbish into which he had fallen, and staggered a few steps forward.
“Phyllis,” he called weakly, “Phyllis, where are you?”

But he got no answer. Drummond swayed; then with a great effort he dragged himself rather uncertainly toward the arches. The silent figure of Merridew crossed quickly and stealthily to the pile of rubbish which Drummond had just left. Drummond turned and began to retrace his steps. He held one hand to his head, and his knees seemed to be giving under his weight.

“Hugh, take care!”

The warning cry from Phyllis came to him out of the darkness. Drummond did not hesitate—he staggered toward the shadows.

“Are you all right, darling?”

It sounded more like a croak than a human voice. Silently Merridew stepped out from his hiding place, the leg of an old chair in his hand, and crept up behind Drummond.

“Oh, Hugh!” Phyllis’ voice reflected the agony of her mind. “Hugh—behind you!”

But her warning was too late. Merridew raised his arm, and brought his weapon crashing onto Drummond’s head.

Drummond swayed drunkenly.

“Phyllis—don’t—don’t—”

It was only a whisper, but they both heard him. Then, before her eyes, Drummond collapsed abruptly and fell senseless to the floor.

For a moment Merridew said nothing. He stood gloatingly over his victim, an evil smile on his face.

“That’s just a little bit on account,” he muttered savagely.

As he spoke there was a slight sound behind him. He swung around, to see that Natasha Malakoff had descended from the ledge. She brushed unceremoniously past Merridew, and knelt over Drummond. She felt for his heart. A sudden panic seized Merridew.

“He’s not dead?”

The girl answered him briefly. “No, but he will not trouble us for some time.”

She rose and turned to Phyllis. But Merridew took an eager pace toward her.

“Have you got it?”

“No.” The girl spoke quickly and impatiently. She was watching Phyllis Drummond closely, and gave the impression that explanations to Merridew were a necessary waste of time. “He brought in that fellow with an eyeglass.”

“Where is he?”

“Upstairs,” she smiled reminiscently. “I don’t think he knows whether he is alive or dead.”

Merridew looked at Phyllis.

“Then there’s only her left?”

Phyllis heard that cool but sinister voice address her, that voice which she was beginning to hate with all her might.

“Well, Mrs. Drummond—you see the position. Your husband is of no use to us now, and I am afraid you will have to take his place.”

Phyllis looked up at her bravely.

“I don’t know what you want me to do,” she said as firmly as she could, “but if my husband wouldn’t do it, then I certainly won’t.”

“That’s what he meant when he said ‘don’t’ to her,” Merridew interrupted viciously. “Just before he faded out.”

“How very foolish of you, Mrs. Drummond. Look at your husband lying there on the floor.” For a moment Phyllis’ tormentor allowed the light from her torch to flash on the prostrate Drummond’s face. “Look how still he is. And his head is bleeding.”

“Hugh!”

The exclamation escaped Phyllis involuntarily, but Natasha Malakoff was quick to take advantage of it.

“It’s no good calling him,” she said quietly. “No doubt you would like to take his head on your knee, and bathe the wound—very tenderly, very gently.”

For the life of her Phyllis could not restrain a sob.

She hated giving way to weakness at that moment, for she knew very well that the only chance for Hugh Drummond lay in her ability to keep her wits about
her. He must have had some very good reason for so emphatically giving her instructions, even as consciousness left him, not to do—what? That was the trouble; she had no idea what it was that Hugh was so anxious she should deny her tormentors. Still, it was very clear that the slender girl with the blazing eyes who was staring at her so fixedly would soon demand from her the service which Hugh had so definitely told her not to give, and Phyllis offered up a silent prayer that she would be granted the courage and the wit not to let him down.

That calm, cruel voice again interrupted her thoughts.

“What would you do if I let you go now?”

There was a hard expression on the face of the girl who was standing in front of her, an expression which made Phyllis wonder how she could ever have thought her beautiful. But suddenly she was listening again, for the girl had not waited for an answer. “Go and help him, eh? A minute or two may make all the difference, Mrs. Drummond—whether he lives or whether he dies. If you hesitate—”

“You’re just obstinate, are you?” broke in Merridew threateningly. “Well, I’ll show you what happens to obstinate people!”

But the girl turned on her confederate angrily.

“Leave this to me, Merridew!”

“But she’s wasted enough time already.”

“She will waste no more.” There was a gloating, almost sensual note in her voice, as she turned back to Phyllis. “Will you, Mrs. Drummond? You see—if you wait much longer, my friend Merridew may lose his temper. That, I am afraid, would be fatal to your husband.”

Merridew laughed.

“It would,” he confirmed ominously.

“Surely you are not so heartless as to make him suffer more than is necessary?” continued that cruel voice. “Surely you will help us—won’t you?”

But Phyllis was prepared for that question.

“No, I won’t,” she said, between clenched teeth.

“I am afraid, Mrs. Drummond, that you will find that there are other people as well as yourself who have wills of their own—and ways of making you do things, even if you do not want to. Mrs. Drummond, you have very pretty hands and fingers. Once in Russia it was necessary for me to question a lady whose hands were almost as lovely as yours. She also was obstinate. And by the time that I had persuaded her, her hands—which had been so beautiful—were not beautiful any longer. She could not use them any more. They were—well, I will not tell you what they were like.”

With a quick movement the girl turned toward her satellite.

“Merridew, untie Mrs. Drummond’s right hand.”

She turned away for a moment. Merridew, a bestial grin on his face, took a quick step to Phyllis and loosened the rope which held her right hand. He muttered to her in a low voice:

“You little fool, you’d better do as she tells you—or you’ll be sorry, and no mistake.”

He turned away, and stood behind her chair, as Natasha Malakoff gently took Phyllis’ hand, and knelt beside her.

“My fingers are not beautiful as yours,” she said softly, “but they are very, very strong. Perhaps you can remember when I brought you down here?”

Phyllis closed her eyes. The calm ruthlessness of the girl so close to her was horrible.

“You see, my dear,” the voice went on inexorably, “in beautiful hands like yours there are delicate bones and muscles—bones that can be made to snap, and muscles that tear easily.” Phyllis felt the girl begin to stroke her hand, very slowly and very gently. She wanted to snatch her hand away, but she felt powerless. She began to feel faint and sick with anxiety, not so much about the torture which she knew must come, but more lest she should be unequal to the test.
“Mrs. Drummond, I am just stroking your hand now—very gently. For a moment you will feel nothing—and then—”

Suddenly through Phyllis’ clenched teeth, there was a wrenched a startled cry. The power of movement came back to her, and she tried to snatch her hand away. But the grip which now held it like a vise never relaxed. She heard a mirthless laugh.

“Oh, but that is nothing! Let me go on stroking your beautiful hand—and if in a moment the pain is too much, you have only to tell me that you will do as I ask, and I will stop at once. I shall do—so—and so—and so—and then perhaps this bone which I am touching now—”

“Hallo?” Algy Longworth’s voice inquired cheerfully from the skylight. “Anybody down there?”

The girl remained utterly motionless, kneeling by Phyllis, who was too much taken by surprise to seize the unexpected chance. She only had a moment in which to do it, for Merridew leaped forward and covered her mouth with his hand, so that she could make no sound. From the skylight, Longworth could not see into the cellar, but in an agony of mingled hope and despair Phyllis watched his shadow reflected from the skylight on to the floor. Then the Russian girl darted to the skylight wall, so that there could be no possibility of Longworth catching even a glimpse of her dress. Phyllis’ heart sank within her. All three in the cellar remained absolutely silent, tensely waiting.

“I say, Hugh!” came Longworth’s voice again. He paused, evidently listening. “Dash it!” he sounded perplexed. “Where the devil have you got to?”

His voice fell in volume as he moved away, and his shadow disappeared from the patch of light on the cellar floor. Natasha Malakoff waited just long enough for him to be well away before she turned to Merridew.

“All right—leave her,” she said.

As soon as Merridew removed his hand, Phyllis called out desperately, although she felt in her heart of hearts that it was hopeless.

“Algy!”

But there came no answer. Algy Longworth had gone too far to hear. And Merridew quickly riveted her attention. He pulled out his automatic and stepped close to her.

“I’ll settle this!” he snarled. “One more sound from you, and your husband goes.”

“Are you going to help us?”

It was that cool and cruel voice again. Angrily Phyllis looked round at the girl. “No, I’m not,” she said defiantly.

“Right,” grunted Merridew quickly. “Then I’ll give you until I count five. After that your precious husband’s for it, see?”

He moved away from Phyllis, and knelt by Drummond, placing the muzzle of his gun against Hugh Drummond’s temple. Natasha Malakoff moved quietly from the wall to the back of the chair on which Phyllis was sitting.


“Merridew has many faults, Mrs. Drummond,” she spoke softly, very close to Phyllis’ ear, “but he usually means what he says.”

“Three. Four.”

“You wouldn’t!” cried Phyllis. “Oh, you couldn’t!”

Merridew looked up at her.

“Then will you help us?”

Phyllis stared at him with horrified eyes. She tried to read in his expression whether or not he were bluffing. He was scowling at her, and with a tightening of the muscles of her throat, Phyllis realized that she could not doubt the answer. The man Merridew was more than certain to blow Hugh Drummond’s brains out in front of her eyes as she sat there, helpless to defend him—was in fact almost anxious to do so, almost looking for an excuse.

“Will you help us, Mrs. Drummond?”

It was the Russian girl who had spoken, a sharp note in her voice. Phyllis could not make herself believe that the agony
which she was enduring was real, and no nightmare from which she would shortly wake sweating with fear, but with a great weight lifted from her mind.

"Very well, then," Miss Malakoff hissed. "Finish it, Merridew."

The man turned back to the prostrate form of Drummond.

"You're doing this!" he whispered. "You! You're pulling the trigger and kill- ing your husband."

"Yes!" Phyllis heard her voice ring through the cell, as if someone else were screaming. "Yes, I'll do anything you want!"

MERRIDEW rose slowly from the cellar floor, a gleam of triumph in his eyes. Natasha Malakoff moved quickly and exultantly around the chair, and knelt by Phyllis, already fingering the knots in the rope which held her captive, about to release her.

And from somewhere beyond the arches, the voice of Poltwhistle asked plaintively: "Rita! Rita! Where are you?"

The effect on Merridew and the girl was instantaneous: he seized the gag, hanging loosely around Phyllis' neck, with which not so long before he had kept her silent during the fateful five minutes when Drummond and the Strangler had been face to face upstairs. One quick movement and it was in place again. The girl had in the meantime started to tie up once more the hand which Merridew had so recently released at her bidding.

"Get Drummond out of sight."

The words were scarcely formulated, but Merridew understood the order. Seizing Drummond by the feet, he pulled him quickly out of sight under one of the arches. Then, returning, he helped the girl to push Phyllis, now securely bound again to her chair, into the shadows. Merridew threw an old sheet which was in the rubbish, loosely over her. He crouched by the side of the girl.

"He may not come in—but if he finds anything, shoot!"

Merridew nodded grimly.

But Poltwhistle had every intention of coming in. Time was getting on, and if Rita remained lost much longer, his supper—a most important matter—was in jeopardy. Completely unconscious of the consternation which his advent had caused, and innocently unaware of the two pairs of eyes which watched his every move so anxiously, he shuffled forward from the arches into the patch of moonlight.

From somewhere outside came softly the cry of an owl. But Poltwhistle paid no attention to this phenomenon. He started hopefully to make clucking noises, which he interrupted only to call once again:

"Rita, you perisher, where are you?"

He listened carefully. No sound came to his ears. "Bother the old girl—where can she have got to?"

Poltwhistle took a torch from his pocket, and began to inspect more closely the piles of rubbish which littered the floor. He advanced slowly toward the archway into which Drummond's body had been dragged, and in the shadows Merridew raised his gun; but he felt a touch on his arm, and he knew that this was a command to hold his fire until the last possible moment. No doubt the girl beside him would tell him when to shoot, but he kept Poltwhistle covered all the time, ready to fire at once should the eccentric old walter become suspicious.

A sudden slight noise from the pile of wood in one corner attracted the attention of Poltwhistle. He hurried over to it.

"In the woodpile again, are you?" he asked curiously. "What did I tell you about that before?" He made a dive into the corner, and suddenly reappeared triumphantly holding an egg. "Blimey! She's been and done it! Good girl!" A sudden expression of keen disappointment came over his face. "Coo! It's that china one again."

In disgust he threw away the offending imitation, which bounced off the floor right back into the rubbish.

This time, from much nearer, the sound of the hoot of an owl came again. A
shadow appeared on the patch of moonlight on the floor, and Poltwhistle looked up in surprise.

"I say, Hugh," said Longworth from the skylight, "is that you down there?"
"No, it ain't," came the prompt reply.
"It's Poltwhistle."

"Oh," said Longworth, leaning forward through the skylight. "Well, jolly old Poltwhie, has Captain Drummond fallen in the beer?"

But Poltwhistle was in no mood for pleasantry. The question of finding his supper was becoming urgent.

"He ain't down here. I'm looking for Rita." He turned away and began to cluck again: "Rita! Rita!"

"Poltwhie!" said Longworth seriously, "that woman with a name like a sneeze has jolly nearly broken my wrist!"

"Lummy!" said Piltwhistle. "Was you getting fresh with her?"

But his interest was short-lived. He was principally concerned with his mislaid supper.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo!" he called plaintively. "Cock-a-doodle-doo!"

There was a sudden fluttering from among the rubbish.

"That's done it," yelled Piltwhistle in triumph. "Never could resist the boys, she can't!"

He leaped into the rubbish and abruptly reappeared with what looked like a struggling mass of feathers in his arms.

"I've got her, sir," he cried out.

"Who, Natasha?"

"No—Rita. Naughty girl, aren't yer? Leading me this dance!" But suddenly Piltwhistle realized that he was losing control of his capture. "Lummy, look out, Mr. Longworth. Look out!"

Before he could stop her, Rita the hen, with a violent fluttering of wings, escaped from his arms and with an undreamed-of optimism flew straight at the skylight.

"Stop her, Mr. Longworth!" Piltwhistle screamed. "Have you got her?"

Came the awed voice of Longworth: "I've caught an eagle!"

"It's Rita, sir," said Piltwhistle, and continued imploringly. "Hold her, sir! Hold her! She's bound to lay an egg now."

"What do I do if she does?" Longworth sounded interested.

"Keep it, sir! It's all I've got for me supper."

"Look out!" shouted Longworth suddenly. "Heads!"

An egg fell from the skylight, and burst at the startled Piltwhistle's feet. He stared at the remains for a moment without speaking. Then his voice rose pathetically: "Is that her egg?"

"Well, it isn't mine," replied Longworth promptly.

"Oh, Mr. Longworth! Couldn't you have done something about it?"

"Damn it all," complained Longworth, "she never said—I mean, she didn't ring a bell or anything."

A sudden wild fluttering from the skylight made Piltwhistle look up sharply.

"Look out!" shouted Longworth. "Oh, I say, I do believe she's going to—"

But Piltwhistle could stand the strain no more.

"Hold her, sir!" he screamed. "Hold her! I'm coming!"

He dashed out of the cellar by the way in which he had come. The shadow of Longworth disappeared from the patch of moonlight. He too had made off quickly, perhaps after the rebellious Rita.

FOR a moment nothing happened in the cellar below. Then the figure of the sinister girl appeared from the darkness. She was closely followed by Merridew.

"Quick!" she hissed. "They may come back."

Merridew roughly pulled the chair to which Phyllis was tied out of the shadows. The girl came up to her, and none too gently removed the gag from her mouth.

"That's your last chance gone, Mrs. Drummond," she said menacingly.

Very faintly—from a good distance away—came the hoot of an owl.
“Algy!” cried Phyllis weakly. “Algy!”
Her cry was quickly stifled by Merridew. Natasha Malakoff laughed.
“I am afraid, Mrs. Drummond, that you must now make up your mind to do as you are told.”
“What are you worrying about anyway?” demanded Merridew of Phyllis. “You won’t get hurt! You know how it works.”

Natasha glanced quickly at Merridew. “She knows?” she asked.
“Of course she does.”
The girl looked down at Phyllis interrogatively.
“I don’t,” said Phyllis. “I don’t even know what you mean.”
Merridew gave a short laugh.
“I suppose you weren’t even introduced to Mr. Brown!” he said, heavily sarcastic. Then his tone changed as he continued quickly. “I heard him going for you from outside that window. He was going to kill you because you’d been watching him—and lucky it was for you that your husband was about!”

But the girl, her expression a mask although her eyes were shining with anger, interrupted him firmly.
“What is this about Brown?”
“He was trying to doublecross us. He was at the safe but I settled him.”
“Settled him? What do you mean?”
Merridew shifted uncomfortably. He knew he was on thin ice.
“I did him in. I had to, it was him or me.”
“You killed him? What did you do with the body?”
“Hid it up there.”
“You’re sure he’s dead?”
“Of course I am.” Merridew took courage from the absence of vituperation which he had expected. “What are you worrying about?”
“Because you’re a bungler,” she said impatiently, “and if you didn’t kill him, he’s probably got the stuff by now.” She paused. “Oh, come on! Let’s get her up to the turret room. Open that door and see if all’s clear.”

As Merridew moved away on his errand, the girl knelt again by Phyllis and started to release her bonds. Suddenly she noticed that Merridew was making for the secret doorway.
“Not that door, you fool!” she called after him. “I’ve locked it. The other one.”
Merridew, grumbling under his breath, turned to the main door of the cellar. He disappeared for a moment behind the arches, and as the girl released the rope from the feet of Phyllis, and started to free her arms, she spoke to her quietly, but very firmly.
“Don’t forget one thing, Mrs. Drummond. Your husband’s life depends entirely on your—whether you do exactly what I want.”

Merridew made a sudden reappearance from behind the arches.
“He must have bolted the door on the other side,” he said urgently.
“Clumsy fool!” She spoke under her breath; then she rose and quickly ran toward him. Merridew followed her beyond the arches. They both disappeared into the darkness. Phyllis, one arm still bound firmly to the chair, started feverishly to loosen it.

A FIGURE—that of a large man—appeared from the shadows, and moving as silently as a cat, approached Phyllis. Just as she threw off the last rope, she saw him.

“Hugh!”
Phyllis could not restrain the joyful little cry, but Drummond quickly silenced her with a finger to his lips. He took her hand, and rapidly but still just as silently led the way to the stairs leading up to the secret door.
Phyllis whispered, “That door’s locked. She said so.”

Drummond grinned at her in the darkness.
“May be able to force it,” he whispered back. “Anyway, it’s the only chance.”

Holding her breath in excitement, Phyllis climbed the steps after him,
to the ledge by the door; but at that moment Fortune ceased to smile upon them. Phyllis stumbled in the darkness. Her foot made a noise against the step. In a flash, Merridew was back in the cellar, his automatic ready in his hand. For a moment he saw nothing, for Drummond had pushed Phyllis back against the wall, and was standing in front of her, as still as a statue. Merridew began to creep stealthily along the wall. The sinister figure of the Russian girl appeared through the arches, and stood watching silently. Drummond and Merridew saw each other in the same moment. Merridew was taking no chances this time—he raised his gun and fired. For a moment Drummond stood stock-still; then he swayed and crashed onto the ledge. He lay motionless.

On the report of the shot, the girl below assumed the initiative again. She ran across the cellar, followed quickly by Merridew. As they reached the foot of the steps, Phyllis fell on her knees beside Drummond.

"Hugh! Hugh!" her voice rose almost to a scream. "Answer me."

Natasha Malakoff roughly pulled her away from the prostrate form of her husband, and pushed her toward Merridew. Between them they bundled the struggling Phyllis down the steps and across the floor of the cellar toward the arches.

"Let me go!" screamed Phyllis.

But she could do nothing in the powerful hands of Merridew.

"Hold her," said Miss Malakoff grimly, "until I get this door open. It's only jammed."

She disappeared through the arches. Phyllis suddenly realized that everything was going black in front of her eyes. She swayed as she stood trying ineffectually to prevent the room whirling around her.

"The little fool's going to faint!" exclaimed Merridew anxiously.

Phyllis collapsed in his arms as Miss Malakoff reappeared by the arches.

"Carry her up," she said shortly. "We'll soon bring her around."

Merridew lifted Phyllis in his arms, and followed her out of the cellar.

CHAPTER XV

The Trap

FOR a few moments after Merridew, Phyllis in his arms, had passed through the arches into the darkness beyond, there was complete silence in the cellar. Then a rat poked its sharp nose out of a corner, and looked around inquiringly. Satisfied that its usual haunt—normally so delightfully free of those noisy and unpleasant creatures, human beings—was once more waiting to be claimed by itself and its fellows, it became a little bolder, and scurried toward the patch of moonlight which was shining on the floor through the skylight. But it had only covered half the distance when it paused. For a second it remained perfectly still. Then, turning abruptly, it scuttled back at full speed to the safety of the rubbish in the corner.

For a few more moments it would have been impossible for any human to have realized what had so rudely interfered with that rodent's peace of mind. But then—very slowly and silently—the figure of Drummond began to rise from the ledge on which he had fallen. There was an alert look in his eyes which would certainly have given cause for anxiety either to Merridew or to the girl Malakoff, had they been there to see it. In fact there was nothing about him which in any way confirmed their belief that he had so recently been the recipient of a bullet from a gun.

Drummond, having risen to his feet, stood quite still listening. Then a faint smile appeared about his lips, and as he turned toward the door he uttered a few words—obviously addressed to himself—in a very low voice:

"Sergeant, take Merridew's name for missing a sitter. Ten days confined to cellars and then I think—yes, I really do think a short sharp walk on a cold and frosty morning." He grinned to himself.
in the darkness, as he began to test the strength of the door in front of him. "Well, here goes. I hope the beastly thing’s not made of oak!"

Drummond drew back from the door and suddenly hurled his great weight, shoulder first, against it. The lock gave abruptly, with a sound of splintering wood, and Drummond very nearly fell forward on his face with the impetus of his leap. He steadied himself quickly, however, and once again remained quite silent, very still and listening intently. The lock giving way had been unpleasantly noisy. But no sound came to his ears. It seemed comforting clear that the wrenching of the lock from the woodwork surrounding it had not been overheard. Drummond began carefully to ascend the stairs which he had not so long before descended so rapidly.

As he mounted the spiral staircase, the darkness began to give way to a faint light which increased as he ascended, and in a moment or two he found himself near the secret door covered by the bookcase, which as he knew led into the turret room.

Drummond had not up to that moment formulated any definite plan—he was merely trusting to luck. All that he could rely on for certain was that Merridew and the girl would certainly bring Phyllis to that turret room as quickly as was possible, for it was a spring in the turret itself—now that they supposed him out of action—they would obviously require her to find. His mouth set in a grim line. He had plenty of displeasing recollections of Merridew within the last hour or so which gave him a very personal desire to get his own back on that ominous individual—not to mention the particularly unpleasant beauty who called herself Natasha Malakoff—but he swore to himself under his breath that if they touched one hair of Phyllis’ head, then he would personally see to it that the punishment fitted the crime. Drummond approached the secret door, and gliding forward without a sound, he pushed it gently and reached a position which just enabled him to see into the room.

At first nothing unusual caught his eye, the room seemed to be empty, and precisely as he had left it—but then an astonishing sight attracted his attention. A hand came slowly into view from behind the sofa, and clutched onto it for support. Drummond waited breathlessly, watching. A man drew himself up slowly until he was standing rather unsteadily behind the sofa.

With a shock Drummond recognized the man whom he had found molesting Phyllis, and whom he had dealt with so summarily in that very room less than an hour before—the same man who had disappeared in such a mysterious manner, so soon afterward. His brain was working quickly. He had heard Merridew—downstairs when supposed to be unconscious, he had lain in that pile of rubbish—claim to his accomplice that he had killed a man named Brown whom he had found in the very act of doublecrossing them. But here was Brown—for the man behind the sofa could be no other—apparently not very much the worse for the "killing," alone in the all-important room which he had originally entered with this intention to doublecross his pals. Drummond realized with a thrill that Brown might be going to prove himself extremely useful, but of course it all depended on what action he took now that his head was clearing. Drummond asked himself a vital question—what was Brown about to do?

Ever since the hectic days of the war—when he had learned the trick on dark nights out in No Man’s Land by bitter experience—Hugh Drummond had always followed one definite plan when faced with a similar problem: the necessity to profit by a correct appreciation of the situation. Plainly the best way to deal with opponents was to anticipate what their next move would be, and act upon this guess, but the only way to do this was to put oneself in the position of the
other fellow, and decide what one would do oneself in the circumstances. This plan—perhaps because of his ability to think from the point of view of others—had never failed Drummond, and he made use of it now. What would he do if he were in Brown’s position at that moment?

Brown found himself alone in a room which contained a hidden prize which he was more than anxious to get hold of. Brown had the choice of two courses of action, or so Drummond figured it out. He might make use of the heaven-sent opportunity to get away with a whole skin; or—if he had more determination—he might make use of the opportunity to try to find the prize and get away with it before he was disturbed.

From what Drummond already knew of the gang, they all appeared perfectly ready to stop at nothing in order to gain their own ends. He believed it was more than likely that Brown would choose the second alternative, in which case Brown was probably already on his way to the turret. Drummond decided to risk another peep. He very cautiously poked his head around the door enough to be able to see inside the room. There was now no sign of Brown, but a slight noise from the turret attracted Drummond’s attention. With a smile he realized that he had been right in his conjecture. It was the second alternative which Brown had chosen, and the reason why he could not see Brown was clear. That screen which Drummond had used to prevent the possibility of being seen at work by anyone entering the door, was no doubt now being used by Brown for the very same purpose.

Drummond glided forward again so that he was now clear of the door, and could see into the turret. He was relieved to discover that his second conjecture was also correct, for the screen was halfway across the opening. Moving utterly silently, Drummond approached the screen and edged his way along it until he reached the end, and the sight which met his eyes held him spellbound for a moment.

Brown was counting the bricks from one end of the turret toward the center. He said nothing aloud, but he was clearly doing so, for his finger passed quickly from one brick to another. Finally he found the one he wanted. It was near the center of the semi-circle which formed the turret.

Brown suddenly gave the impression of fear. He stepped back a foot or two from the turret, remaining just near enough to be able to press on the brick with his outstretched hand. He crouched down as well, and appeared to be apprehensively glancing toward his left. Then suddenly he pressed on the wall, and immediately the reason for his great caution was clear.

Drummond had difficulty in restraining a whistle of surprise. For as Brown pressed on the wall, a long stiletto-like knife flashed out from the side of the turret. For a moment it remained shimmering in the light, then very slowly it began to withdraw into the wall again. Drummond watched it, fascinated—the knife disappeared entirely, and when it had gone there was no sign whatsoever of that place in the wall from which it must have projected itself.

Here obviously was the explanation of that first murder in that room. He had just witnessed the means whereby the man who had been found dead in that turret had been stabbed. Some poor devil—the man whose murder had remained unexplained for over two years—had gleaned a little information, but not enough. He had discovered how to work the spring, but not knowing of the deadly danger so fixed that it must strike down anyone actuating the spring and not prepared against the inevitable consequence, he had paid the full penalty for his incomplete knowledge. No wonder the police had been baffled. No wonder they had never been able to discover the weapon used, or the identity of the murderer!

And then another thought came to Drummond. Young Barton had told him in that interrupted interview at his farm
that he was aware of a secret hiding place in the house, built apparently by Cavaliers in the old days of their persecution. Had he perchance a full knowledge of the turret? Had he been aware of the trap as well, and been discovered about to stumble not on the hidden hoard—long since removed—of the Cavaliers, but on that other hoard of stolen property which the disloyal gang of the mysterious Strangler had concealed in the turret?

The more he thought of it, the more certain did Drummond become that he had stumbled on the truth, for this theory explained fully the murder of Barton.

He had managed somehow to escape from the man who had abducted him from the farm, but he had been found in the act of working the spring, and he had fled to the top of the hall stairs and unexpectedly seen Drummond. He had been about to tell the whole truth when he had been shot to keep his mouth shut. Could all that be true?

But he had no time for further conjecture, for now that the danger of the dagger was out of the way, Brown was working as fast as he could. He had moved right up to the wall again, and he seemed to be trying to find some second spring in the brick just above that on which he had previously pressed. Suddenly he found it, and slowly part of the turret began to swing outward. Here evidently was a secret safe, and this was the door.

Drummond decided to wait no longer. He slipped very quietly around the end of the screen and stood for a second within a yard or two of the completely unsuspecting Brown.

Brown may have realized that something like the kick of a mule hit him on the jaw. But even that is doubtful, for he went down as if poleaxed.

Hugh Drummond gently rubbed the knuckles of his right hand, thoughtfully looking down at his victim.

"You're having an unlucky evening, Mr. Brown!"

The words were whispered to himself, but that was the only moment of pause that Drummond allowed himself. Picking up the figure of Brown as easily as if the grown man was but a child, he took a clean handkerchief, which he rather surprisingly found in the man's pocket, and quickly gagged him with it. He then stood up and looked around him questioningly. His quick eyes found that for which he was seeking very close at hand. Silken cords held the curtains in position, but these were now hanging loosely from a hook on the wall. Drummond quickly removed them, and made use of them to bind Brown's feet together. Then, turning him over, he tied his hands behind him. As he pulled the arms together Drummond hesitated for a second. Something had caught his eye which seemed to give him much satisfaction, but the pause was only momentary, and the next moment Brown was lying securely trussed up and completely out of sight behind the sofa, which was back in position against the wall, with Drummond standing away and looking at it, a grin of satisfaction on his face.

He turned to the turret. The secret door of the safe remained open.

There was only a small chamois leather bag reposing in the center of the safe. Quickly Drummond removed it, and examined its contents. He could not restrain a startled exclamation. For from the bag there had fallen into the palm of his hand a magnificent rose-pink diamond. Drummond slipped the priceless gem into his pocket. No wonder men had lost their lives over this treasure, no wonder those who had double-crossed the mysterious Strangler had gone to such lengths to retain their ill-gotten booty.

He went to the fireplace, and taking from the scuttle a piece of coal of approximately the same size as the gem now in his pocket, he put this in the little bag and replaced it in the safe. He then closed the safe cautiously, and stood back for a moment admiring the fact that no one could possibly tell that there existed an opening in the turret at that place in the wall—the Cavaliers had certainly done
their job superlatively well. But Drummond knew that he had very little time to spare, so he turned and walked quickly toward the door.

Just as he reached it, an unexpected sound came from the other side. Drummond stood stock-still listening. Then he suddenly pulled open the door, standing back behind it as he did so.

"Rita!" said the vague voice of Poltwhistle as he entered. "Rita! Oh, dear, where've you got to now?"

POLTWHISTLE moved into the room. Drummond, a mischievous glint in his eye, closed the door very quietly and stood by it waiting. Poltwhistle suddenly turned and started.

"Oh, it's you, sir, is it?"

He stood looking at Drummond for a moment or two. Drummond was intrigued by the look of concentration on Poltwhistle's face. Poltwhistle came right up to him, and stood staring into his face at very close range.

"What's the matter?" asked Drummond.

"You know, sir—" Poltwhistle was plainly at a loss. "You keep on worrying me, you do."

"I'm sorry," laughed Drummond. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

"Oh, it isn't that," Poltwhistle was still staring at him. "But I've seen you somewhere before, haven't I?"

For a second Drummond hesitated. Then he laughed.

"Yes, George."

"George!" Poltwhistle seemed to jump at the name. "That's it! I've got you at last!" A different tone came into his voice, almost a sentimental tone. "Oh, it's a long time since you called me that, sir."

"Nineteen-sixteen," said Drummond shortly.

"Yes. April, wasn't it?"

"It was muddy anyway."

"Ruddy muddy!" agreed Poltwhistle.

"In a shell 'ole, too. Coo, not half frightened, I wasn't!"

"George," said Drummond seriously, taking hold of his arm, "I think I'm rather frightened now. Like to help me?"

"Not half I wouldn't!" answered Poltwhistle eagerly.

"Right. First of all, have you seen Mrs. Drummond?"

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir. She's down in the hall."

"Is she all right?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes." Poltwhistle did not seem quite sure. "She's quiet like."

"What's she doing?" asked Drummond quickly.

"Fainting."

"What?"

Drummond started for the door, but Poltwhistle was equally quick to stop him.

"You needn't go down, sir. Mr. Merri-dew and the foreign lady are looking after her—proper like, too! Giving her whiskey, they are."

"You're sure?"

"Positive sure! They want to bring her up here. I heard them say so."

"Yes," said Drummond thoughtfully, "I know they do."

He glanced at the turret for a moment, then turned back to Poltwhistle.

"Now look here, George. Go and find Mr. Longworth. You know him, don't you?"

"Yes, sir. Of course I do," replied Poltwhistle. "He's the gent with the glass eye who tried to catch my Rita."

"Right. Find him and tell him to go outside that window—and wait for me to call him. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then," said Drummond quickly, with a glance toward the door, "get a saw from somewhere—and the moment the hall is clear, meet me at the foot of the stairs."

"Very good, sir. I'll be there!" Poltwhistle hurried to the door and opened it carefully. He looked out.

He exclaimed, startled, "They're coming!"

"Good," whispered Drummond. "Now, not a word to anyone, mind."
DRUMMOND moved quickly over to the secret door in the bookcase, and slipped through it out of sight. Poltwhistle did not see him go.

"Mum's the word, sir," he said in an undertone without looking around, "but do be quick, sir. They're here almost now, sir, oh do 'ide!" He cast a quick glance behind him and suddenly realized that the room was empty. "Oh, you have!"

Poltwhistle stood back from the door as Natasha Malakoff entered.

"What are you doing here?" she asked abruptly.

"Nothing," replied Poltwhistle promptly.

As he spoke, Phyllis, partially recovered from her faint but still supported by Merridew, was roughly hurried by him into the room, and no more gently pushed into a chair by the table.

"Oh!" said Poltwhistle, startled.

"Get out!"

The voice of the girl was sharp, almost fierce.

"Yes, miss," replied Poltwhistle, eagerly turning toward the door, but just as he was about to pass through it he turned back to Merridew. "I say—you haven't got a saw you could lend me, have you?"

"Get out!" thundered Merridew.

Poltwhistle disappeared through the door and banged it behind him. The girl walked straight over to the window and looked out, while Merridew pulled at Phyllis' arm so that she was forced upright in her chair. Then Natasha Malakoff turned back to Phyllis and as she spoke in that heartless, even tone which in itself was frightening, she produced an automatic and pointed it straight at Phyllis.

"Now, Mrs. Drummond, you've got to work fast. Get up."

Slowly Phyllis rose. She leaned against the table for a second, and then with a visible effort pulled herself together. She began to move unsteadily toward the turret. Natasha Malakoff followed her quietly, the pistol always in position. Merridew, his face gleaming with excitement, moved up after them.

"Hurry!" said Merridew roughly. "Get a move on, or I'll break your neck."

Phyllis turned and looked at him. There was a wealth of scorn in her expression, but she knew there was nothing to be done. Actually she was beyond caring now. Her beloved Hugh was lying downstairs in that cellar—lifeless. All that she asked was that this man and woman should get what they wanted, and then destroy her as well—life without Hugh would be insupportable. Within the semi-circle which formed the turret, Phyllis paused.

"What do you want me to do?" Her voice was dull, lifeless.

"We want you to find a spring which is hidden in that wall, Mrs. Drummond," Natasha Malakoff said quietly, firmly. "Find it."

She was very menacing as she stood there with the gun, waiting. Phyllis turned hopelessly toward the wall again. She stood within a foot of it, and inquiringly put out her hand. Her fingers began to skim along the stonework. Natasha Malakoff and Merridew watched her with shining eyes. It did not matter to them if the sinister trap—whatever it was—worked and killed the girl—in fact it might be more convenient from their point of view if Phyllis were killed, since it would save them the trouble later of disposing of her themselves. Running through their minds was a vague feeling of curiosity with regard to this trap, of which Brown was so proud. It was going to be interesting to see just how it worked, and to know at last just how that man, who had stumbled on half the secret, had lost his life. Once Phyllis had been sacrificed, they knew that they would be safe to investigate just as they chose.

Miss Natasha Malakoff moved a little nearer to Phyllis, her mouth slightly open, her breath coming just a trifle faster than usual in her horribly eager anticipation. There was something nauseating in her obvious and bestial sadism.

Phyllis began to move her fingers towards the center of the wall.
CHAPTER XVI
The Naked Blade

THE rat, thoroughly enjoying the freedom of the cellar, stiffened suddenly in fright. Then, with a little shriek of terror, it turned and bolted into a corner, very much annoyed. No human being had the right to move so swiftly or so silently in the dark.

Hugh Drummond had entered the cellar by the door which led onto the ledge, and had negotiated the steps to the cellar floor before the rodent had realized that he was even in the vicinity. Drummond crossed the patch of moonlight and disappeared through the arches into the shadows beyond.

Here he had to slacken his pace, for he found himself in a part of the house in which he had never been before. A few strides brought him to a massive door. This was slightly ajar, and in the faint light filtering through from somewhere beyond, Drummond made out that he was at the foot of a short staircase. This he ascended, and in a moment found himself in the main hall of Moreland Hall.

This was deserted—a fact which Hugh Drummond had taken care to establish before entering. A quick glance around satisfied him that he was unlikely to be disturbed for a few minutes. Drummond moved quickly to the stairs, and after a pause for a few seconds to bring back to his memory the precise position which young Barton had occupied at the moment when he had been shot, he began a quick search.

The object of his interest, apparently, was the bannister which flanked the stairway. This he proceeded to examine very carefully, particularly at a point just beyond and below the place where the unfortunate Barton had been standing at the moment when his life had been so mercilessly snatched from him. But if he expected to find any scar in the woodwork, he was doomed to disappointment. The bullet which had killed Barton had apparently remained lodged in the body of that unlucky youth, and Drummond made quite sure of this by extending his search beyond the bannister, moving on the line which the bullet must have taken, which he could establish very easily by comparing the relative positions of Barton and the mysterious murderer at the moment of the shot. The man who had fired the pistol which had killed Barton could only have been in one position on the landing above, for had he been farther forward he must have been observed, and had he been farther back he could not have seen to aim.

A grim smile came over the normally good-natured face of Hugh Drummond. His deductions, at least up to this point, were finding confirmation.

Then, abruptly, he transferred his search to another part of the room. He had noticed, when first he had entered that hall earlier in the evening, a very massive oak beam over the fireplace. This was not on the ceiling—it bulged out from the wall in a somewhat erratic and lackadaisical manner, rather as if it had got mixed up in the wall of the room during the building of the old house, and the workmen had been too lazy to remove it at the time.

But it had one major characteristic—it was extremely hard, and extremely thick: the perfect recipient for a bullet fired at short range from a pistol which was being used only as a decoy.

As Hugh Drummond stood by the fireplace, his eyes were only a foot below the beam. As he glanced quickly along it, he felt instinctively that he must be right. The mysterious shot could only have been fired in the hall. A man firing it would clearly not risk a sudden and unwelcome interest in the house from the outside world by letting off a pistol into the night. A bullet careering through space is apt to attract attention, particularly when Dartmoor must be alive with police and warders searching for the escaped convict. No, if a shot were necessary—and what better means could be devised on the spur of the moment to
get him out of the room upstairs, just at a time when in the light of his subsequent discoveries he now knew that his search was getting dangerously hot—then the bullet almost certainly must have been aimed for this convenient beam.

It was just at this stage of his deductions that he saw the hole in the beam.

A thrill of pleasurable excitement ran through him, and a smile of relief came over his face. There were many holes in that beam, entrances and exits to the homes of numberless little creatures which had lived and died with the stout wood as their world, but this was entirely different. It was larger, much larger, and clearly it was absolutely new.

With a sigh of satisfaction, Drummond moved to the foot of the stairs and stood for a moment listening intently. No sound came to his ears from the room upstairs—no doubt the door was shut. But Drummond decided that he could not much longer risk his Phyllis to the tender mercies of that inhuman girl and her satellite Merridew. He pondered on the relative merits of ascending the stairs and observing all that was going on within the room from the main door; or of gaining access to the windows of the room upstairs by means of the wall covered with ivy which led to the veranda. Of the two, the second seemed better. He left the hall quickly by the front door.

Poltwhistle, entering from the kitchen regions, missed him by a few seconds. There was more than a suspicion of stealth about his entrance. Both hands were behind his back, concealing some object with great care. Plainly he was more than relieved to find himself alone. He withdrew his hands from behind him. The object about which he had been so secretive was a narrow saw. This he carried over to the fireplace, and concealed in the pile of wood which was lying by the hearth. Then, taking a cigarette from a green packet, he lit it with relish and sat down on the settee near the fire. Poltwhistle was indulging in an expression which clearly indicated that he was very pleased with himself. He seemed to be suggesting that at any rate no fault could be found in the way in which he had fulfilled his part of the bargain. It was up to Drummond to do as well.

That bulky individual had at that moment reached the veranda. Soundlessly he approached the open window, thanking Providence that when disposing of the man Brown he had omitted to pull the curtains. As he reached it, he realized with relief that he could see into every corner of the room, and right into the turret as well. Drummond had his automatic held ready in his hand. He was taking no chances.

The sight that met his startled eyes made him draw a quick involuntary breath. Watched tensely by Natasha Malakoff and Merridew, Phyllis was standing close to the turret wall, both hands outstretched, fingers almost touching the very spot which Hugh Drummond knew would actuate that rapier-like knife. And she was about to place herself in just that position which would mean that the blade would strike her lovely head.

Hugh Drummond acted instinctively and instantaneously, but so quickly does the brain work in moments of great stress that he was able to remember for years afterward a few salient features of that horrifying scene. Even as he subconsciously raised his pistol, he noticed the loathsome expression of sadistic anticipation on the face of the girl Natasha Malakoff, and the eager excitement reflected in the face of Merridew. He noticed also the complete absence of color in the face of Phyllis. For a moment the thought flashed through his mind that she knew of the danger which she was running, but he dismissed it as impossible in the next instant. No, there was another explanation for that pallor, and it was with a warming of his heart that Drummond realized the true reason. Phyllis thought him dead, and plainly cared not one jot what happened to her.

He was not in practice, the target was
no larger than a shilling, and the range was twenty feet.

The sharp crack of a shot rent the tense silence of the room. As Phyllis cowered back, the thin stiletto-like blade flashed savagely out from the wall, and then, shimmering in the light, withdrew again slowly, almost as if consciously disappointed at being balked of its prey. The point had stopped scarcely an inch from Phyllis.

The safe door began slowly to open in the wall. Evidently the shot fired by Drummond had in some way actuated the second spring as well.

But Hugh Drummond did not wait to see what result would attend this discovery. He had a very shrewd idea that the veranda would cease to be a healthy spot in which to find himself in probably something under ten seconds. He waited only long enough to satisfy himself that the long shot had come off. Then he turned, and, still as silently as ever, he disappeared down the wall. A branch of ivy springing back into place was the only tangible evidence of his going.

At the sound of the shot, Merridew had recoiled toward the fireplace, an expression of blank amazement on his face. But Natasha Malakoff was quick to recover her wits. She swung toward the window. The curtain was swaying very gently.

“Drummond!”

The single word was spoken very softly, almost in an awed tone of voice. But Merridew heard the hated name.

“It can’t be! I shot him.”

“He may have been foxing. Merridew, look at that curtain.”

The gently swaying curtain caught his attention at once. Very stealthily he approached it, his pistol held ready for instant use. As soon as he was near enough, he made a sudden leap for it, and pulled it aside.

Only the open window met his anxious eyes. Merridew looked out. Natasha Malakoff glanced behind her at the wall of the turret. To her astonishment she caught sight of the open safe.

“There’s no one there,” said Merridew. “Nobody.”

“No, whoever it was has gone for help.”

Merridew, astonished to see that the girl was no longer interested in the window, suddenly caught a glimpse of the turret wall beyond her. A look of greed came into his eyes. Just for a few seconds he forgot all about his almost superstitious fear of Drummond, if indeed it had been that staggering individual who had risen from the dead to save his wife Phyllis from the vicious sword which had so unexpectedly sprung from the wall. He could only think of the treasure which had taken such a prominent place in his thoughts throughout the last three years, that treasure which at last appeared to be within his grasp.

Natasha Malakoff was already at the wall, was about to put her hand into the safe.

Merridew sprang forward. But the very next instant he pulled himself up with a jerk, to find himself staring into the muzzle of an automatic. Natasha Malakoff had whipped around as he moved, and was now staring at him, a scornful expression disfiguring her lovely face, her gun pointed unswervingly at his heart.

“No, Merridew.”

Uncomfortably his eyes dropped from hers. Natasha Malakoff turned, took the little chamois leather bag from the safe, and moved quickly up to the table. Merridew, unable to restrain himself, crept to her side and looked over her shoulder as she laid down her pistol, and opened the small leather bag. Very carefully, almost reverently, she pulled out its contents between slender finger and thumb.

And at that precise moment, in the hall downstairs, Hugh Drummond, aided by Poltwhistle and a saw, was extracting his prize from the beam by the fireplace.
"MR. MEDDICK! Did I ever tell you about the traveling salesman and the farmer’s daughter?" There was a sly smile on Martin Gladburn’s mouth as he put the question. He stood quietly beside Abner Meddick’s desk, his hands in his pockets, his head tipped a little to one side. Gladburn read the movie magazines regularly and always referred to Clark Gable, Robert Montgomery, Frederick March et al, as “those ham actors! Huh!"

He had a loud voice. The office was suddenly so still that the ticking of the little white clock on Abner Meddick’s desk was plainly audible.

Abner turned slowly in his chair, adjusted his glasses and peered through the thick lenses at his questioner. Abner Meddick was not young any more. His frail little body moved slowly, and he swallowed the dryness in his throat before saying: "Eh?"

Every eye in the office was on him. Discreet smiles were in evidence. Business could wait. This was “time out” for the daily laugh.

Gladburn swayed back and forth on his feet and said gently: "This traveling salesman stopped at a farmhouse one night, way out in the country, and asked for a place to sleep. ‘Why sure,’ the farmer said, ‘but we’re a little crowded right now and you’ll have to bunk in my daughter’s room, mister.’ Well, that was all right with the salesman. The farmer’s daughter was young and good-looking. So the salesman went upstairs and turned in, and pretty soon—"

Abner Meddick put a trembling hand on
Gladburn's arm and said quickly: "Now wait, Mr. Gladburn. Please!" He was blushing furiously. "You know I don't enjoy such stories," he mumbled. "I've told you at least a score of times—"

A stenographer giggled. In a moment the office was full of laughter. Abner Meddick's face burned a bright scarlet.

Gladburn, the sales manager, gently stroked the bald spot on Abner's head and said sadly: "Now, now, Mr. Meddick. You have an evil mind." That was good for another laugh, and Gladburn struck an attitude for the benefit of his audience. "I am afraid, Mr. Meddick," he declared sternly, "you should go to the theater less often, and renew your acquaintance with the church."

It was old stuff, but still good. Good because Abner Meddick never lost his temper and never failed to become exquisitely confused. Abner Meddick's blush was as much a part of Hall & Co., Inc. as the forty-year-old desk at which he sat.

Abner Meddick was fifty-one years old and had slaved under the vicious thumb of Benson Hall for more than twenty years. In twenty years he had been absent from the office only twice, late only once. He lived in a rooming house somewhere, spent his evenings at the public library, spoke only when spoken to, and never, absolutely never, permitted his voice to rise above a rather timid whisper.

He looked around him now, confused and frightened, as the echoes of the laughter died away. His face was still red when he turned his attention back to the pile of papers on his desk. Gladburn grinned and walked away.

It was about an hour later, while reaching into his desk for a clean paper handkerchief, that Abner discovered the package. The package lay under a calendar in the bottom drawer. He took it out, peered at it through his thick glasses.

It was tied with red ribbon, and across the top was written: *Happy Birthday to Abner Meddick, from us all.*

"Dear me," Abner said, looking at the calendar, "it is my birthday, isn't it?"

Gladburn had been watching him. Gladburn's voice, which in Gladburn's opinion was far better than that of Mr. Lawrence Tibbett or that of Mr. Nelson Eddy, boomed out the opening bars of *Happy Birthday to You* and the rest of the hired help joined in.

Abner beamed at them. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you very much. So thoughtful."

He unwrapped the package carefully and found it filled with soft, crinkly tissue-paper. Layer after layer of tissue paper he unwound. Then his face crimsoned; he closed his eyes and said almost inaudibly: "Oh!"

They crowded around him. A girl said: "Oh, Mr. Meddick, we're sorry. We let Mr. Gladburn buy the present, and we didn't know. Really we didn't." She was sincere. She glared at Gladburn and said sharply: "You shouldn't have done it. After all, there's such a thing as carrying a joke too far!"

The gift was attractive enough, but it definitely was not the sort of thing to give to Abner Meddick. It was a small white statuette of a nude woman, very saucy and most immodest. Abner picked it up in his hands that visibly trembled, and held it out to Gladburn.

"You—you take it," he said. "I'm grateful, but I—I really don't know what to do with it." With so many girls standing around, he was frightfully embarrassed.

All at once the statuette slipped from his hand and crashed to the floor.

"Oh!" Abner said.

Down on his knees, he fumbled at the fragments. Across the room a door opened—the door of Benson Hall's private sanctum. Benson Hall strode over the threshold and bellowed: "Mr. Meddick!"

Abner looked up, trembling. He was suddenly quite alone there by his desk. Waving a crumpled fistful of papers, Hall bore down on him.

Benson Hall stood six feet two and had a voice which even when whispering would have smothered the loudest tones of which Abner Meddick had ever been guilty. He
had a thick, square face, enormous shoulders, and a temper. His employees feared him, hated him; he had a wife at home who lived in constant terror of him.

Benson Hall had become a success the hard way, by grinding lesser men into oblivion.

He strode forward, a giant among trembling Lilliputians. Abner Meddick, on his knees, looked up with wide, staring eyes and was either too frightened or too wise to stand erect.

“What are you doing?” Hall snapped at him.

“I—I was cleaning up—”

“Get up! Get up, you blundering incompetent, and look at the mess you’ve made of these papers!”

Abner put a hand on the desk and slowly pulled himself up. He reached for the papers, but Hall slapped his hand away and flung the papers down on the desk and said again, savagely: “Look at them! What the devil’s come over you lately?”

Abner adjusted his spectacles and peered at the papers. “I—I’m sorry, Mr. Hall. I’ve not been myself this past week. I—I think—”

“Come into my office.”

“Yes, Mr. Hall.”

Abner walked very slowly across the room. He always walked slowly. Grimly smiling, Hall held the office door open for him, then entered behind him and slammed it shut. A little while later it opened again, and Abner emerged.

He looked tired and very old. Staring at the floor, he scuffed along to his desk, sat down, and began pulling out drawers. His fellow employees watched him and exchanged questioning glances. The room was quiet.

Abner took out his briefcase and began stuffing things into it. His package of paper handkerchiefs, his fountain pen, a little envelope containing Christmas cards left over from last December. Odds and ends which had been in his desk for years. Finally he pushed the last drawer shut and stood up.

No one spoke to him as he walked out. Every eye was on him as he took his coat, his hat, and paced along to the door.

The door closed behind him.

THE dollar alarm-clock on the bureau in Abner Meddick’s room read eleven o’clock when Mrs. Natick, proprietress of the rooming house, went to answer the doorbell that night. Mrs. Natick was a short, stout woman with gray hair and watery blue eyes, and when she opened the front door her eyes abruptly widened.

A policeman stood there, flanked by two men in civilian clothes. The policeman said politely: “Is Mr. Meddick at home, ma’am?”


“We’d like to have a talk with him, if you don’t mind.”

Mrs. Natick let them in. She wanted to ask a lot of questions, but was afraid to. The policeman looked uncomfortably stern.

“How long has Mr. Meddick lived here, ma’am?” he asked.

“Why—I don’t know. Oven ten years, at least.”

“You should know him pretty well, then.”

“Why, yes, of course.”

“What kind of man is he, ma’am?”

“Why—he’s very nice,” Mrs. Natick said, greatly bewildered. “He’s quiet, and he always pays his rent on time, and—well, what do you mean? I’m not sure I understand.”

“You ever know him to flare up and get mad about anything?”

“Good heavens, no! Not Mr. Meddick! Why, he hardly ever speaks above a whisper!”

The policeman glanced at his companions and said: “Checks with what that guy Gladburn told us. I got a feeling there’s more to this than we think.”

“You never can tell about these quiet guys,” said one of the men in civilian clothes. “Tell me, ma’am—what time did Mr. Meddick get home this evening?”
"What time? Why, I don’t know. It must have been more than an hour ago, because he came to me about an hour ago and asked me if I had any aspirin. He had a headache, poor man."

"Yeah. I don’t doubt it. Well, we’ll go have a talk with him."

Mrs. Natick led the way upstairs and along the hall up there to Abner Meddick’s room. She knocked, and Abner Meddick opened the door. Bewildered, Abner peered through his spectacles at the policeman and the two men in civilian clothes.

"You’re Abner Meddick?" the policeman demanded.

"Yes," Abner admitted.

"We want to have a talk with you. This here is Lieutenant Mitchell, of the Police Department. This is Detective Inspector O’Leary."

"H-how do you do?" Abner said.

The three men entered, and Detective Inspector O’Leary closed the door. Mitchell scowled at Abner Meddick and said: "Sit down, Mr. Meddick."

Abner sat. His face was a little pale and his hands were shaking, and he looked altogether helpless and harmless as he lowered himself into a rocking-chair beside the bed. He wore a faded blue dressing-gown over plain white pajamas, and his feet were tucked into worn leather slippers.

"W-what is it, gentlemen?" he stammered. "What is wrong?"

O’Leary did the questioning. Standing with his hands in his pockets, his thin, pointed face thrust forward on a neck that was all Adam’s-apple, he hooked a scowl on his mouth and said sternly: "You lost your job today, eh?" The policeman sat on the edge of the bed and gazed indifferently at the floor, and Lieutenant Mitchell leaned against the bureau, his thumbs tucked in his vest.

"Y-yes," Abner admitted.

"Had quite a scene with the boss, didn’t you? I mean, he bawled you out in front of the whole office."

"Yes."

"Where did you go when you left the office, Mr. Meddick?"

Abner Meddick didn’t answer that one. Anxiously he said: "Please—why must I answer these questions? What have I done?"


"A couple of hours ago, Mr. Meddick?" O’Leary said bluntly, "Benson Hall was found dead."

Abner’s frail little body stiffened convulsively. His face paled; his eyes grew until they looked like a whitish stain spreading over his spectacles. "Dead?" he whispered.

"Murdered. Mrs. Hall came home and found him sprawled out in the front hall, with three bullets in him."

"Oh-h-h!" Abner gasped, shuddering. "Oh, how awful!"

"So now you know why we’re here," O’Leary declared. "Things don’t look so good for you. Far as we can find out, you’re the only person who could have had a motive."

"But I didn’t! I didn’t do it!" Abner’s voice was actually shrill. "I— He subsided more abruptly than was natural. A strange, fixed expression of wonder worked its way over his face. Staring at O’Leary, he started to say something, then changed his mind and was silent.

‘Where did you go when you left the office?’ O’Leary asked.

‘I—I’m not sure. I was frightfully upset, and I just walked about, feeling ill.’

‘For your own sake, Mr. Meddick, you’d better remember where you went. We’re not accusing you of anything, yet. We’re only saying that you had a motive, see? Now if you didn’t go near Benson Hall’s house, and can prove you didn’t, you’ll have an airtight alibi. Otherwise—’ He shrugged his shoulders.

‘I don’t know where I went,’ Abner mumbled. ‘Really I don’t.’

‘You can’t think of a single thing you did? A single person you met and spoke to?’

‘N-no. Honestly I can’t.’

‘That isn’t going to help you any.’

‘But I—I just can’t remember.’
“Maybe he really can’t,” Mitchell said. “After all, he’s an old guy and losing his job like that must have dazed him. You worked for Hall a long time, didn’t you, Mr. Meddick?”

“Over twenty years,” Abner said shakily.

“Yeah? Well, we’ll take you down to headquarters and maybe after a while you’ll be able to think of where you went after you left the office.”

IT WAS the first time in his life that Abner Meddick had ever been inside a police station. He had always thought of a police station as being just a desk with a man in uniform behind it. This one frightened him with its long corridors, its multitude of doors.

He was let into a large, well-furnished room and told to sit down. He looked up, expecting to find a blinding white light above him—a light which would shine into his eyes and sear his brain and drive him almost insane while he tried to answer a lot of confusing questions. He had seen such things in the movies and read about them in books. But there was no light. He was visibly surprised.

Three or four men took turns talking to him, and they all asked the same questions. How long had he worked for Benson Hall? How often had Hall insulted him? Where did he go after leaving the office?

“You’re kind of glad, aren’t you, Mr. Meddick, that Hall is dead? You never liked him?”

“Nobody ever liked him,” Abner said truthfully.

“What?”

“Well, nobody ever did, that’s all. He was too hateful.”

“We understand, Mr. Meddick, that this Hall was pretty cruel to his wife. Made life hell for her, beat her up, all that sort of thing. Would you know anything about that?”

“I—only what I have heard.”

“Ever meet Mrs. Hall?”

“Only when she came to the office.”

“And you can’t remember where you went after Hall fired you? Think hard, Mr. Meddick.”

“I can’t remember.”

They treated him courteously enough, but there was something queer in their attitude toward him. Something very strange. It was as though they feared to anger him. Three or four times they left him alone in the room and went out and talked about him in whispers, and scowled, and shook their heads.

“You never can tell about a mild little guy like that,” Mitchell opined. “They go along for years, taking all kinds of abuse, and then all at once something goes blooey. I’ve seen it happen before. Why, I uncovered a case once where . . .”

They put Abner Meddick in a cell. It wouldn’t be for long, they told him apologetically. In fact, it was just a matter of routine, and they were sorry it was necessary. Was he hungry? Would he like anything special to eat?

No, Abner was not hungry.

THE following day he was visited in his cell by a man with a long and difficult name and an imposing kite-tail of titles. A psychiatrist. One of the most important psychiatrists in the city. The man sat and talked at great length about Abner’s work, and about his past life. He asked questions about Abner’s childhood. He asked a lot of questions that seemed to have no bearing on the case whatever.

“Now, Mr. Meddick, you usually go straight home after leaving the office, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Abner.

“But after being fired, you didn’t go straight home, did you?”

“I don’t know where I went. I’ve already told you that.”

“But, Mr. Meddick, isn’t it rather unusual for you to suffer such a complete lapse of memory?”

It was, Abner admitted. He couldn’t understand it.

The man with the hard-to-pronounce name conferred at long length with Lieutenant Mitchell and with Inspector
O'Leary. “Meddick,” he declared, “is hiding something. He does know where he went and what he did after being fired, but he won’t talk. I'm sure of it. I suggest that you check my opinions by having him examined again by . . .”

Abner Meddick was examined again, this time by a man who had gray hair, sharp eyes, a bristling beard and a bagful of tricks.

“I am going to recite a list of words to you, Mr. Meddick, and I want you to answer each word with a word of your own—a word which my word suggests to you. Is that confusing? Let me explain, then. If I say ‘shoe’ you might say ‘foot’ if that is what the word ‘shoe’ suggests to you. You see?”

“Yes.”

“No hesitation now, Mr. Meddick. Ready?”

“Yes.”

“Cat!”

“Dog,” said Abner.

“Hat!”

“Head.”

“House!”

“Street.”

“Job!”

“Er—”

“No hesitation, Mr. Meddick! Be fair, now! Job!”

“Work,” said Abner quietly.

“Boss!”

“Cow,” said Abner, smiling.

The examiner scowled, hesitated, then drew a deep breath and continued. He knew a lot of words. He went through walk, talk, wife, etc., etc., and suddenly:

“Gun!”

“Bed,” said Abner, and was suddenly pale, trembling.

“Thank you, Mr. Meddick.”

They found the gun hidden in Abner Meddick’s mattress and they brought it to headquarters and examined it. It was a .38 automatic of a popular make, fully loaded. It had been cleaned since last used, and there was no way of telling, offhand, how recently it had been fired.

Inspector O'Leary went into a huddle over it with Lieutenant Mitchell. “This,” O'Leary opined sadly, “doesn’t simplify things any; it only complicates them. Hall wasn’t murdered with a thirty-eight.”

They asked Abner Meddick all kinds of questions about the gun. They asked him where he had bought it and he told them—in a pawnshop, a month ago. They asked him why he had bought it and he said he didn’t know.

“You don’t know?”

“No. I—I just saw it in the pawnshop window and bought it.”

“Have you ever owned a gun before?”

“No.”

“Know how to use it, do you?”

“Why, yes. I suppose so,” Abner said, flustered. “You aim it and pull the trigger.”

“Who loaded this gun, Mr. Meddick?”

“I did. I have a book of instructions.”

“And yet you’ve never used the gun? Never fired it?”

“I—I don’t remember.”

They did their best to make Abner Meddick remember. They confronted him with doctors, psychiatrists, insanity experts, anyone who could possibly see through him. They asked him if he would submit to a test with truth serum, and he refused.

“They say that stuff makes you terribly sick afterward,” he protested. “I don’t want to be sick.”

They worked on him morning, noon, and night, and even when they left him alone he was watched. His every move was noted. They were convinced, finally, that he was insane.

“It’s like I said before,” Mitchell declared. “You never can tell about them quiet guys. They go along for years without acting up, and all of a sudden—blooey! He did it all right. We’ve checked every other possible lead and got exactly nowhere. This guy did it, but how can we prove it unless we make him talk or get hold of the real gun?”

There was no answer, so Mitchell supplied one himself. “Suppose we confront him with Mrs. Hall,” he suggested. “Maybe that will get results!”
Benson Hall’s widow was a frail, white-haired little woman about Abner Meddick’s age, and when they asked her if she would talk to Abner and try to work on his sympathies, she said yes. She said: “I don’t believe he did it.”

“I’m afraid you’re wrong, Mrs. Hall,” Mitchell said.

“May I talk to him alone, please?”

“That’s what we want you to do.”

Abner Meddick was surprised when the woman was brought to him. He stared at her and seemed to be dazed. Mitchell said: “Mrs. Hall wants to talk to you, Abner.”

Later, Mrs. Hall said to Mitchell: “No, Lieutenant, he didn’t do it. He couldn’t have. I’m sure of it.”

“Then you don’t think he’s insane?”

“No.”

“But the doctors say—”

“The doctors are wrong,” Mrs. Hall said firmly.

That night they found the gun.

It was queer about the gun. A boy named Charlie Agnew, who delivered papers in the neighborhood, found the gun in back of Benson Hall’s garage. He picked it up by the barrel and carried it to the house and showed it to Mrs. Hall. Mrs. Hall immediately called the police.

It was queer because Lieutenant Mitchell and three other men had previously been over every inch of ground around the house and had discovered nothing. “I’ll eat my belt,” Mitchell declared, “if that gun was lying there behind the garage when we first searched the place!”

They asked Charlie Agnew if anyone had told him where to find the gun, and he said no. He said he was taking a short cut home, as he often did, and there was the gun lying behind the garage.

“What time was this?”

“About nine o’clock, sir.”

“Dark wasn’t it?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Then how’d you see the gun lying there?”

“Why, I—I stepped on it.”

“You stepped on it and then you bent down and picked it up, eh?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Did anyone tell you to pick it up by the barrel?”

“I—no, no one told me. But I’ve read in books that you shouldn’t pick a gun up by the handle, because there might be fingerprints on it.”

Mitchell examined the gun and there were fingerprints on it. He checked the fingerprints with the files, and after half an hour of painstaking work discovered that the prints on the gun were those of a man named Whitey Nagle, who had a long police record.

Whitey Nagle had been arrested four times for breaking and entering, once for simple assault, once for armed assault, and once for peddling narcotics. On the bottom of his card was penciled a notation, 141 Macklin St.

Mitchell and Inspector O’Leary went to 141 Macklin Street at eleven o’clock that night and brought Whitey Nagle back with them.

He was a thin, sallow-faced man in his early thirties. His clothes were in bad shape and his nerves were worse. He had a violent case of the jitters. Mitchell took one look at him, under a bright light, and said to O’Leary: “This guy’s been hitting the dope and is going crazy for want of some. He’ll talk all right, if we show him the gun and promise him a shot in the arm.”

Whitey Nagle was tougher than that, though. He muttered denials for three hours, with sweat pouring out of him. He snarled at Mitchell and cursed O’Leary and raised quite a fuss. When he broke, he broke all at once and became a shivering, sniveling craven.

“All right,” he wailed, “I done it! I admit I done it! I went there to loot the joint, and I hung around until Mrs. Hall went out, and then I broke in. I was just leaving by the front door when Hall come in, and I got rattled. I put a gun on him. I told him he wouldn’t get hurt if he didn’t cause no trouble. Then he made a jump for me and I let him have it—three times. And I lammed.”
"And that," said Mitchell wearily, "is that."

They telephoned Mrs. Hall, and she said quietly, without emotion: "I'm glad it's over." Then she said anxiously: "Mr. Meddick is cleared of all suspicion, then?"

"Of course."

"I'm coming down," Mrs. Hall said. "The poor man must be terribly upset. I want to tell him how sorry I am for all the trouble we have caused him."

She was waiting for Abner Meddick when he was released. She took his hand and said softly, "Abner! Oh, my dear!" and Abner smiled at her. He was very tired, but he could still smile. He sat and talked to her, right there in headquarters for a while, and called her Mary—not Mrs. Hall. And Lieutenant Mitchell was puzzled, watching them.

Mitchell said to O'Leary: "There's something fishy here. You know what I think? I think she thought he did it, and he thought she did it, and they were trying to cover each other. Maybe I'm wrong, but you look at it this way: She came home that night and found Hall dead, and there was a gun lying there on the floor. Whitey says he dropped the gun right after he killed Hall. So Mrs. Hall thought Meddick did it, and she hid the gun on us. It wasn't until after she had a talk with Abner that she realized he didn't do it."

"Wait a minute," O'Leary said.

He walked over to where Abner and Mrs. Hall were sitting. "Mr. Meddick," he said, "I guess we owe you an apology for thinking you might have been a murderer. I hope there's no hard feelings?"

Abner Meddick looked at him and smiled. It was a peculiar smile.

"No hard feelings at all," he said. "As a matter of fact, you were almost right. I did go to the house that night. If Mr. Hall had been there—alive—I would have killed him. But he was dead. You see," Abner declared quietly, "I'd been planning it for weeks."

Cipher Solvers' Club for March 1938
(Continued from page 61)

Four—Doyle, Lakewood, Ohio. D. H. Holcomb, Fort Myers, Fla.
Three—Dopy, South Portland, Me. Oneal Irvin, Meridian, Miss. Novie, Springfield, Ohio.
Two—V. A. Gillet, Harrisburg, Pa.
One—Jack Densham, San Francisco, Calif.

Hundredweight, Los Angeles, Calif. Louis E. Krieg, Allentown, Pa. Hallie Mackintosh, Cleveland, Ohio.
Unsigned—Four answers, San Diego, Calif.
Cops Are People

By Lawrence Treat
Author of "Take the Heir," etc.

You can put a detective back on the harness beat but you can't keep him from solving murder cases

There was a reason why he always changed his uniform at the precinct house and walked home in street clothes.

Shane Sullivan—Sully, they always called him—was a grade B detective, and young for the honor. He was trim of build and had a slow steady strength, a strength that rippled through him pleasantly and made him laugh under his breath at odd times.

Looking at him and seeing the laughter lurking in his brown eyes, you sensed the youth in him, the lightness with which he took life, the knack of always finding the humor in things.

There was little humor to be found, however, in Ben Hammer, executive in the big department store of Graydon & Co., and Sully would have been a lot better off not thinking of him. Or at least, not doing anything about it.

For, though the car was illegally parked, Sully was a plain clothes detective and not supposed to waste his time on minor traffic violations. He insisted on writing out the summons chiefly because it amused him to see Hammer get a dose of his own medicine. Might teach him something, too.

Hammer crackled with annoyance. "Better use that energy of yours stopping crimes," he snapped. "John Daly, the political boss, is one of my pals."

Sully smilingly handed him the ticket. Hammer stuffed it in his pocket. "Twenty-four hours from now," he blazed, "this'll be in the trash basket and you'll be back in uniform."

Shane Sullivan’s eyes danced as he said, "Big shot, aren't you? You're the kind of guy that has to learn."
But he was wrong; it was he who learned. Next day Captain Beasley dropped a friendly hand on his shoulder and said, "Sully, I'm afraid you pulled a boner yesterday. For your own good you ought to be careful whom you nab." Then he showed Sully the order reducing him in rank.

Sully didn't say anything for a moment, and Beasley went on. "Hammer has some pretty powerful connections, and he's gotten away with this sort of thing before. There was the case of Joe Flannagan—"

Sully grimaced. "I can take it, Captain. I came up fast and I came down fast. Maybe I can manage to come up again. And I'm still in this precinct, anyhow."

Beasley stared hard. "What'll Tim say?" he demanded. And Shane tightened his lips and answered, "No reason I can think of why Tim should ever find out." And that was why Sully always changed his uniform at the precinct house and walked home in street clothes, as a grade B detective would.

Tim McCarthy had been a father to him ever since one bleak day twenty years back. A hop-head, asked by a cop to show his driving license, had yanked an automatic out of his hip pocket and started blazing away.

The cop was Mike Sullivan, Sully's father, and he'd never had a chance to fire back. The first slug had ripped through the big cavity of his chest and torn out a lung, the second had smashed through the delicate tissue of his heart, and where the next three had gone didn't make any difference.

Then the bewildered, drug-maddened gunman had had a short flash of sanity, realized he was in for it and turned the last bullet on himself. That didn't bring young Sullivan's father back to life, nor return him the mother he'd lost a year before in the flu epidemic.

Not that, at the ripe age of three, Shane was worried about his future or his past. He was vaguely aware that something had occurred, but his dim uneasiness was smothered in Nora McCarthy's welter of sympathy and warmth and eau de Cologne.

Nora had no children of her own, but fate had given her one and she intended to keep him. She impressed on Tim McCarthy that he was now a father and the responsible head of a family and that he had no business risking his life as a cop. What had happened to his pal Sullivan yesterday might happen to him tomorrow. He owed it to her and himself and the youngster to seek a safer and more lucrative position.

IN TWENTY years Tim McCarthy had his ups and had his downs, but they ended with nothing more glorious than a job as night watchman in the big Graydon department store.

"If I'd had inny sense in me thick head," he used to say, "sure I'd have stayed on the force where I can beat up whomiver I want, with a good conscience. Like this Hammer man."

But if Tim had regrets for his own life, they were amply compensated for by Sully. From the day Sully first heard the story of his father's death, he had one purpose and one ambition. To be a cop.

Tim nodded his head when the lad stated his aim. "Sure it's a wise man ye are. Only—" and he took the pipe out of his mouth and pointed it in the general direction of Nora's kitchen—"don't ye be tellin' it to her."

Tim's heart would have been broken if he'd learned Sully was a patrolman again, and doubly broken that he himself was the cause. Not a direct or a willing cause, to be sure, but he would have connected it at once with the time Sully had surprised him figuring up his bank account.

"What's the trouble, Tim?" Sully had asked. "Not going miser on us, are you?"

And Tim, who could never keep his feelings to himself, had exploded, "It's this oily-tongued, smooth-dressing Orangeman of a Hammer. He that's one of the bosses down at the store. Sayin' I've seen the best of me days and askin' what use of a watchman I am with so many years on me back."
"You're not fired?" Sully had gasped.

"Not yet, but they've taken a few dollars out of my pay and they're puttin' in a new burglar-trap of a machine, and this Hammer man has words on his tongue about keepin' me on as a kind of charity, to tend the machine. Sure, I almost knocked the little head from his shoulders, and only with the greatest of will did I hold meself back. And Sully me lad, I'm placed where I'm takin' insults from him every day. It's that, or the end of me job."

And so Sully had bided his time and then pounced on Hammer, with the results explained above. For a week now Shane Sullivan had washed up in the dingy lavatory of the 4th Precinct before stepping out on Reade Street and turning right, to chew the rag a few minutes with Tim McCarthy, according to nightly custom.

Tim had ten minutes between his rounds of clock-punching, and Sully always timed himself to reach the side door during those moments of leisure.

Tim was waiting inside the glass door as Sully strode up. Tim opened it immediately. "We'll be takin' our comfort," he remarked, and started down the deserted aisles and past the long merchandise counters.

He liked to sit back in an easychair in the women's lounge on the mezzanine. It was a harmless infraction of rules, but he made Sully feel like a conspirator as he led the way up and picked out his favorite chair.

He leaned back and sighed before he spoke. "Sure, they've got it in," he said, his big soft face staring at the lingerie counter and his dry pipe slipping into his mouth. "The burglar machine. A couple of miles of wire and a lot of wheels and bells. An' if a burglar man came along, those batteries'd ring bloody murder at Headquarters and fire a load of buckshot in the seat of your pants, and call out bad names in the bargain, I've niver a doubt. If it does what they're a-sayin' it will."

Sully leaned back on a stool, balanced it on two legs and then balanced it on one. He looked sharp, keen, with his level brown eyes that were still looking for something they couldn't laugh at. "Careful you don't set the alarm off yourself, Tim."

Tim nodded sagely. "And maybe just that isn't worryin' me! The Hammer man—for he's made up to me, Sully, and a-showin' he knows at last the which of us is the better man. And him with his pretension of workin' late ivery night, and Mrs. Graydon with him."

"The owner's wife?"

Tim nodded. "Herself, and pretty as a tree with the leaves on all its branches. And her alone with the Hammer man night after night. It's me private opinion the two of 'em is wishin' Misther Graydon as dead as a horse-car. Sully, ye was too young to remember thin horse-cars, wasn't ye?"

"A little young. What about Ben Hammer?"

Tim took a match from his pocket and stared at it. It was hard to hurry him. He would twiddle the match a few minutes, repack his pipe, stare at the match and twiddle it some more. In five minutes or so, he'd get to the business of lighting up.

"Sure, on me last round Misther Hammer calls out to me from Mrs. Graydon's office. 'Tim,' he says, 'Tim, now would ye be ather gittin' us a cup of coffee, maybe, and bringin' it along on yere next round?'

So I says to him, I says, 'It's not me that can watch the store if I leave it to get ye the coffee. But young Sully might be turnin' up tonight, and if ye want, he'll maybe go round the corner for a pot-ful.' 'Okay, thin,' he says, and Mrs. Graydon pokes her head out the door and says 'Tim, here's a quarther for yer trouble.' So I says 'Thanks to ye'—for she's a fine looking woman, Sully, and I stand there talkin' to her for a while, and she tellin' me of the fondness she has for little ones."

The match went back to the pocket and Tim's gnarled hands packed down the half burnt tobacco in the pipe. "And thin the Hammer man says he can't work with all the talkin', and I wint on down the corridor and tinded to me business."
"What were they talking about, Tim?"
"A little o' this, and a little o' that. Sure, I didn't listen."
"You say they're here every night?"
"I wouldn't exactly say that, me boy. But it's gettin' late, it is, and if ye want to fetch that coffee . . ." Tim took out the match again and studied it.
"Anything else you'd like, Tim?"
"Well, since ye ask it, I mind I might be runnin' a wee bit short o' tobacco, and since ye're goin' out anyhow ye might get me a tin of it to pass the long night hours with. For it's lonesome it grows. Whin I start me next round, ye could maybe go for it."

Tim scratched the match and watched the flame waver and bend in the flow of a draught. "Begorrah, Sully, there's divils in this place, for by the sign of me match, that side door's open again."

"How about the new burglar alarm?"
Tim smiled slowly. "I switched it off for fear I'd set the thing goin' meself, all except a red light that burns somewhere to show when the door's open, and ye can't turn that off for love nor money. But I don't know where it is."

"Better find out."
"And what for? Sure, a McCarthy's worth his weight, an' there's not above fifty pounds of the new-fangled machines here. I'll be right back, me boy."

Sully didn't offer to go in Tim's place. Probably the door wasn't open at all, but the old man was always inventing errands to make himself feel important.

Sully's stool went spinning to the floor and his long, hard-muscled legs carried him to the rail of the mezzanine balcony. He didn't take time for the stairs. He went sailing over the rail to drop on the top of a merchandize cabinet eight feet below. He slipped, sent a neckwear display crashing, and vaulted at a counter. Then he was racing down an aisle, gun in hand, yelling "Tim—Tim! You all right?"

A growl, a shot, a thump, and the sound of a door slamming. They dissociated themselves slowly, as sound. All Sully knew was that he'd heard the shot and it had come from the rear.

He sprinted to the back of the store, past the haberdashery department and the jewelry department and towards the light that was burning near the side door.

"Tim!" he shouted again, and then he stopped short.

Tim was sprawled on the floor, face down and very still. Sully whirled, saw nobody. It was considerably less than a half minute since he'd been on the mezzanine. He reached the door in two strides, wrenched it open and saw no one fleeing down the street. He fired a pair of signal shots for the cop on the beat. Then he wheeled and went back to Tim.

He dropped on his knees and tugged at the watchman's shoulder. Sully saw the dark pool of blood while he stared at the big kindly face. The eyes had a fixed, brittle sheen. The mouth was open, and a thin trickle of red stained the massive curve of chin.

"Tim!" he half sobbed.

He leaned down, held his ear to the wide chest. He wasn't sure. He pulled out his thick nickel watch and held it to Tim's mouth and nose. In the dim light, Sully still wasn't sure whether the glass was moist from the breath of a living man or dry from contact with a corpse. He peeled off his coat for a pillow, turned Tim's inert body over and propped it against the end of a counter.

Breathing as if he'd just run a mile, the young cop stood up. From somewhere in the store he heard sound. Maybe footsteps,
maybe not. It seemed to come from up-
stairs. He frowned, tensed. Every nerve
of him strained to rush in the direction of
the noises and battle it out. with the man
who had shot old Tim.

But Sully kept his head. Maybe it was
Hammer he'd heard. Maybe Hammer had
pulled a boner and done this. If so, he was
in the building, with a gun. Sully wasn't
giving him the chance to walk out with it.
As long as Sully stayed here, at least he
could cover all the street exits.

He gulped, dropped to his knees again
and put one arm around the solid hulk of
the watchman. "Tim!" he whispered.
"Whoever did this—I'll get him!"

He was still crouching there when he
heard the whirr of the elevator. He with-
drew his arm carefully and slipped around
the corner of the counter. The elevator
stopped. He raised his head cautiously. A
voice called out, "Tim, what's the trouble?
Tim—where are you?"

SULLY stepped forward. He saw Ben
Hammer, a tall, dark, well-dressed
man with a dark suit and a wine-colored
tie. His hair was smooth, thin, his heavy
jaw was pointed. The woman behind him
was a white blob of face between black
hair and the red of her dress. Sully
snapped: "Hammer!"

The executive didn't recognize him at
first. "Who are you—what happened? I
heard shots and—" Then Sully's face regis-
tered. "So, it's patrolman Shane Sullivan,
is it! Got your uniform off already?"

"Where've you been?"

"Upstairs in Mrs. Graydon's office. We
were working on some accounts. Mrs.
Graydon handles her husband's interests."

Olive Graydon murmured, "Yes, of
course." Her face was pale and taut and
her eyes looked shiny. Sully raised his gun.
"I'm going to search you, Hammer.
And if you're responsible for Tim . . ."

Hammer spoke in a cold rage. "You're
back in uniform now, Sullivan. In a week
you won't even have a badge!"

Sully hardly heard him. He gave Ham-
mer a vicious poke with the muzzle of his
gun and ran one hand along the pockets
and both sides, from the armpits down.
Hammer didn't have a weapon.

Then the side door opened and Patrol-
man Thompson bowled in.

Sully had his report at his fingertips by
the time Inspector Richards arrived in a
squad car. In the department, they called
Richards "The Machine." He was scrupu-
losely honest. He had the brains of an
Einstein, the endurance of a marathon
runner and the emotions of an oyster.

When Sully summed up his data, he
betrayed none of his feelings. Just a grim-
ness, a cold, almost empty grimness, and
a barely perceptible dryness to his voice.
"Tim, the night watchman, noticed a draft
when he lit a match near the front of the
store. He came back here. This door's sup-
posed to be locked, but I found it un-
locked.

"I was on the mezzanine, and Mrs.
Graydon and Mr. Hammer were upstairs,
according to Tim. He'd spoken to them
on his last round. Tim went to the side
door. I heard his voice, then a thump.
Somebody fired, and the door slammed. I
rushed down and looked outside. I didn't
see anybody.

"About four minutes after I'd found
Tim lying here, Mr. Hammer and Mrs.
Graydon came down in the elevator. Tim
was still alive when the ambulance ar-
vived. The surgeon said he had a chance."

Richards didn't answer. His sharp fal-
con expression swept Sully, appraised him.
Then the inspector turned and barked his
orders. "Hook up that spotlight and let's
have a look at the place."

Sully didn't get much sleep that night.
He stayed at the store while Richards con-
ducted his investigation. The inspector
made no comments on the evidence he
piled up. Tim had been shot at ten twenty-
seven P.M. His time clocks showed he had
made his rounds faithfully. Olive Gray-
don's office, directly underneath Hammer's,
held ample proof of the presence of the
pair.

At Sully's suggestion, Richards went
through Hammer's office as well. There was
no indication that it had been used that evening.

IT WAS after three when Sully and Richards left the store. Sully went straight to the hospital where he had a feverish glimpse of Nora McCarthy, and then he hurried to Headquarters in response to a telephone message from Richards. The inspector greeted him with a bombshell.

"Graydon's dead. Shot. I just heard when I came back from the store."

Sully didn't digest it. Why should the inspector call him? He was just a harness bull. A shooting was a job for experts, for the homicide squad.

The inspector said, "It happened between ten and eleven P.M. Beasley said you got a dirty break on account of Hammer. Beasley's willing to transfer you here on a plainclothes assignment."

Sully jerked up. "You know what Tim means to me. I'd spend the rest of my life—"

"Forget it. The point is we may be able to get Hammer for this. Hammer's crooked, he has political connections and heavy influence. I need someone who's willing to work his teeth off on the chance he can get Hammer."

"Hammer broke me from a grade B detective. That's nothing. But if Hammer shot Tim..."

Richards interrupted curtly. "I don't want sentiment and I don't want speeches. I said Graydon was shot. His interest in the store didn't amount to much lately. He was unwell and his wife represented him. His chief assets were a half million dollars worth of business insurance."

"A pretty wife and a boy friend. Looks simple, doesn't it? But Graydon was killed at the very time when Hammer can prove he was in the store. Do you get the force of that alibi?"

Sully got it. Mrs. Graydon would testify that Hammer was in her office all evening. Tim would back her up. What's more, Tim could prove the exact moment by that time clock of his. Hammer was in the store asking Tim for coffee at the very moment that Graydon had been killed.

Sully said, "That alibi looks airtight and smells fishy, but there's one thing I'm sure of. Whoever shot Tim didn't get out of the store. I was at the door within twenty seconds of the time I heard the shot, and there was no one on the street. It's all messed up."

"Sullivan, I want to hook up Hammer to this. Maybe he hired somebody to do the dirty work. I don't know, but I want you to find out. That's all."

Sully went about his work in a slow, repressed manner, as if he were nursing a fire inside him which was in danger of flaming out. His eyes were hard, sober; for they had at last found something that they couldn't laugh at, and he was no longer the buoyant kid he'd been a week ago. If Hammer had shot Tim, the gun was still in the store. But you can't search a nine-story building with a few million dollars worth of merchandise and hope to locate one little revolver. On the other hand, if the revolver were there Hammer was worried to death that somebody'd stumble across it by accident, and sooner or later Hammer'd try to get rid of it. So Sully asked Richards for a man to tail Hammer every time he left the building with a package. Richards granted the request, and Sully moved into the store.

He set up a cot in an unused office on Hammer's floor, and whenever Hammer left his desk at night, Sully, in stocking feet, followed down the deserted aisles and kept his quarry in sight.

Hammer worked regularly until long after midnight. After he'd left for the night, Sully broke into the office and studied the papers on which the executive had been working. They didn't show much. Columns of figures, additions and subtractions. Sully copied them religiously, even though he didn't understand them.

He averaged three hours sleep per night and he lived his case. Except, of course, the few minutes a day that he saw Nora.

Tim was getting better, slowly, and he had dictated a statement that cleared
Hammer. Hammer had spoken to him and asked for coffee; there wasn’t the slightest doubt of it. As for the shooting in the store, Tim had heard a noise, had turned quickly and seen the blaze of fire. But he hadn’t seen his assailant.

Tim was going to live, but he’d spend the rest of his life in a wheel chair. He didn’t know it yet. Sully did.

He gritted his teeth and called Richards. “Sullivan reporting on the Hammer business... Yes?... Hammer’s office is directly over Mrs. Graydon’s, and there’s an old steam pipe that connects the two of them. It’s scratched on the inside and the dust is rubbed, as if something had been raised and lowered through it recently.”

“So?”

“So all I can do is guess.”

“I want facts.”

“You’ll get them.” Sully put down the phone.

For five days and nights Sully checked on Hammer and learned nothing. On the sixth night, for the first time since her husband’s death, Olive Graydon stayed at the store too. Sully crouched behind a fire door a few feet from Hammer’s office where the two of them were apparently working. Sully heard them talking, but their voices were low, indistinct, and even when Sully put his ear to the keyhole there was nothing he could understand.

He waited, stiff and glum, until he heard the approach of Hammer’s quick tread. “Sullivan?” he called.

Sully didn’t kid himself that Hammer was unaware of being watched. You can’t tail a man in a deserted store for the better part of a week without his knowing it. So Sullivan stepped out of his shadows and grinned. It wasn’t the pleasant amiable grin, but it passed for it in the semi-darkness. “Well?” he said.

“Come on in a minute. I want to talk to you. And you may as well put your damn shoes on. I don’t like that cat-like tread.”

“There are a lot of things about you that I don’t like, but we’ll skip it.” Sully strode in and said “Good evening” to Olive Graydon. She smiled at him a little nervously. She was always nervous.

Hammer said, “Have a chair,” and Sully sat down. His hand slid almost unconsciously to the hard bulky outline of his gun. Then he pulled his fingers away. It wasn’t that kind of a party.

Hammer passed him a box of cigars. Sully waved them away. “You broke me a week ago,” he clipped. “Now you’re handling out cigars. What do you want?”

Hammer looked hurt.

“You’ve had it in for me, Sullivan, because of some fool prejudice that McCarthy developed. I’m sorry he felt that way, and I’m sorry he was hurt. As you know, I have some influence in the police department.”

“I’ll get along without it.”

Hammer’s voice was dry. “As you wish, Sullivan, but you might think it over. I don’t expect you to become my most intimate friend, of course, but we gain nothing by hard feelings.”

“So?”

“Well—” Hammer gulped, “frankly I don’t like this business of your watching me every night. Everything’s above board and I thought I might as well put my cards on the table. I’d rather have you sitting across the room, like now, than hiding around a corner. What do you expect to find, anyhow?”

“You’d be surprised,” smiled Sully.

“What do we do now—hold hands?”

Hammer’s thin smile was the same as he had had the first time Sully ever saw him. “I just thought we might be a bit more friendly about things. Have a cup of coffee? We’ve got some left in the thermos, haven’t we, Olive?”

Her hand trembled as she poured some into a metal cup. Sully took it, raised it to his lips, spluttered and bellowed “Ouch!” The cup spilled out of his hand and splashed on the floor. Sully rubbed the tips of his fingers. “That was hot!” he exclaimed. “Sorry.”

Olive Graydon tittered. Hammer
laughed. “That’s okay. We’ve got some more. You can let it cool.”

Sully sat down again. He was tingling all over, as if something were going to happen. But nothing was. He’d burned his fingers on a hot cup and everybody was a little embarrassed. He watched Olive Graydon shake the thermos to dissolve the sugar, then pour a second cup which she placed on a small table near him.

“Don’t mind if we finish our work, do you, Sullivan?”

Sully grunted, “Of course not,” and stared at the portable bar. It looked new and expensive. He leaned back and made himself comfortable.

Hammer lifted some papers, jotted down figures, gave them to Mrs. Graydon. Sully felt as if he were watching a sewing circle. He took up the coffee, sipped it. Then, with the cup still in his hand, he walked over to the bar and opened it.

“Pretty swell, this,” he remarked, leaning over to examine it. “I guess you use it for business entertaining.” He began to hum.

Hammer snapped, “Stop that infernal tune!”

Sully obeyed, gulped down his coffee and returned to his chair. He handed Mrs. Graydon the empty cup, said, “Thanks.”

Hammer’s voice was a monotone listing figures. Sully yawned. Presently his eyes began to droop.

Hammer called “Sullivan!” sharply.

Sully’s head jerked up and he said, “What?”

“You looked as if you were going to sleep. You don’t want to do that, do you?”

Sully yawned a “No” and leaned back again. The next time Hammer called him, he didn’t answer. Hammer went over to him and shook his shoulders. The policeman was dead to the world. Hammer pulled back an eye-lid, slapped him, and straightened up. “All right now. Come on, Olive. We better work fast.”

Sully was snoring as the two of them walked out of the office. At the rear of the store, a 20-watt bulb burnt dimly, casting long shadows across cartons of lingerie, canned goods, glassware and a pile of packing excelsior. Tim’s successor wasn’t due here for another fifteen minutes. Hammer’s flashlight slid along the excelsior, stopped near the far edge of it. “Here,” he murmured.

He bent down, hurriedly, and buried his hand up to the arm. His breath came out in short little grunts of glee.

“Olive, I got ‘em.” He was holding a small package.

“It was clever of you, Ben. But hurry. I’m nervous.”

“Don’t worry, honey. The cop’s dead to the world, and I’m not even going to carry this out myself. Just leave it in the packing room. It will go out tomorrow morning. The shipping slip is all made out. By tomorrow noon a friend will destroy the stuff and we won’t have any more worries. Not even Tim McCarthy on our minds.”

“You’re sure, aren’t you, darling? Because—”

She stopped speaking, turned and let out a scream. Somebody rose like a jack-in-the-box from behind the counter, dived past her and leaped at Hammer. The package was knocked out of his hands. It bounced on the counter and dropped to the floor, out of sight.

Sully snapped “Hold it!” and leveled his gun. Hammer gasped, stopped short.

Sully wheeled at the tap of heels. Olive Graydon’s white scared face looked like that of a woman bereft of all reason. Deliberately she flung herself at Sully’s gun.

He didn’t shoot. He couldn’t, in cold blood, at a woman. Instead, his left hand jabbed out. She screamed again and jerked away from him.

Hammer took advantage of the distraction; he charged like a tiger, savagely, on springy muscles. Sully, fingers tight on the trigger and ready to press, tried to swing his revolver, but it was clamped as if in a vise. He realized Olive Graydon was still holding it, with a maddened clinging strength. Sully felt almost weak as he hit her again. Hammer was pounding him and kicking him. Sully felt the gun lift out of
his hands as Olive Graydon took the force of his blow and dropped away from him.

He whirled, smashed at Hammer's head with hard bruising blows that almost broke his knuckles and jarred his arm up to the shoulder.

Sully lowered his head suddenly, butted forward and pounded with his fists. Hammer went down, and Sully, with his weight off balance, went charging head first into the counter.

He hit it with sickening force. The 20-watt bulb seemed to flare into a Klieg light and fireworks spluttered from all sides. His arms worked instinctively on the job they'd had before that head blow. Piston-like, his legs pounded. He kept pushing forward like a halfback trying to gain an extra foot. He was out for seconds, fighting without being aware of it.

Then the bulb came into focus. He saw it gleaming luridly on the steel barrel of his service revolver, lying there on the floor. He reached for it, closed his fingers on the barrel. Hammer, underneath him, was groaning and squirming and grunting like an animal. Sully lifted the gun and whipped it down. It made a dull shivering thud as it hit the side of Hammer's skull. Hammer stopped struggling and lay quietly.

Sully picked himself up and staggered to the support of the counter. A few feet off, Olive Graydon was moaning and trying to sit up. Sully's eyes began laughing but his mouth was hard and tight. He stood there with his revolver leveled and saw the drops of blood ooze from a gash on his wrist. Awkwardly he stemmed the flow with his handkerchief.

AN HOUR later, with a surgeon's bandage in place of the handkerchief, he was explaining to Inspector Richards.

"The night of the murder and shooting, Graydon drove down to the store to call for his wife, by appointment.

"Hammer wasn't in Mrs. Graydon's office at all, when he spoke to Tim. Hammer was upstairs in his office, talking through a loud speaker wired through the old steam pipe. Hammer called to Tim, but Mrs. Graydon didn't let Tim in the office, of course. She kept him talking at the entrance for about ten minutes, and during those ten minutes Hammer went outside to keep the appointment with Graydon. To keep it, and kill him.

"When Hammer went back into the store, after the murder, he used the loud speaker again, to complain that he couldn't work while Tim was there. When the voice came down the pipe, it was the signal to Mrs. Graydon that her husband was dead and that Tim could go."

"So Tim would swear Hammer had been in Mrs. Graydon's office all the time," observed Richards. "Very neat. And while we were conducting the investigation in the store, Graydon's body was outside in the car. Hammer drove it home, brought the body into the Graydon house and then Mrs. Graydon reported the murder. But why did Hammer have to shoot old Tim McCarthy?"

"Because the car was originally parked in too noticeable a place and Hammer had to go out and move it. He left the store door open, but he couldn't let Tim know he'd been out. He had to shoot before Tim recognized him, although he didn't want to kill Tim, of course. But what clinches the whole thing is the gun and the loudspeaker."

"How'd you get them?"

Sully laughed grimly.

"Hammer and Mrs. Graydon gave me some doped coffee. I was suspicious when Hammer offered it, because he wasn't friendly that way. I smelled the stuff right off and spilled the cup, but they gave me another. I poured that one into the bar. They didn't hear it splash because I was humming."

Richards surveyed young Sully closely.

"I wonder whether I could get you transferred to the homicide squad. I could use you."

Shane Sullivan grinned, and his eyes danced as if he again regarded the world as a pretty good place. But all he said was, "Tim would like that, too."
They're Swindling You!

Finishing Unfinished Business

By

Frank Wrentmore

This is the one-hundred-and-forty-fourth 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.

THE fraud which brought more inquiries to this department than any other swindle has been scotched at last, and I was in at the death. The Associated Adjusters of Milwaukee has been declared a fraud by the U. S. Post Office Department and an order has been issued denying them further use of the mails.

I don't know how many letters I have written in reply to inquiries from DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY readers advising them to save their money, but I do know that in the issue of October 8th I described the scheme as minutely as possible and closed with a warning to "stay away from it."

This article must have hurt because the magazine was hardly on the newstands before the publishers received via air mail, special delivery, a lengthy typewritten argument headed, "An Appeal to the American Sense of Fair Play" in which Mr. Momsen, the principal of the company, tried to make it appear that he had been the victim of a raw deal and that he was engaged in a perfectly legitimate business enterprise. But the magazine's position was justified, because on December 17th, only two months later, Mr. Momsen was cited to appear before the Solicitor General of the Post Office Department on January 4th, and subsequent dates, and show cause why a fraud order should not be issued against the Associated Adjusters.

I stopped in at the hearing on January 6th, and it was quite evident from the mass of complaints produced by the postal inspectors that there was a colossal fraud and that the U. S. Post Office Department would stop it just as the Canadian postal authorities had. The order was issued by the Postmaster General on April 13, 1938 but whether or not Mr. Momsen will be criminally prosecuted is a matter for the United States Attorney in Milwaukee to decide. This is the third fraud order to be issued against Momsen within three years. That's a rather high average.

DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY of November 25th carried the story of a group of Mexican and American gyps in Mexico who had devised a very clever little scheme to mulct several thousand Americans via a mining stock swindle. These Mexican philanthropists were virtually giving away thousands of shares of stock of the National Gold-Silver Co., S. A., at fifty cents a
share to the gringos, while it appeared that Mexican brokers were offered 87½c a share for the same stock! In the fraud order which the Postmaster General has now issued he says:

"The evidence shows that the National Gold-Silver Co., S. A., leases in the district are not regarded as valuable by mining experts having an intimate geological knowledge of that area, that one of the largest mining companies in Mexico recently investigated the properties with a view to their purchase, that the findings made by representatives of that concern were not only unfavorable but showed that the properties were not workable on a profitable basis, and that operations on mines in the district are not now in progress due to labor difficulties. . . ."

IN THE issue of December 23rd I related the story of Ernest High and Edward Cornez, who rooked Buffalo business men with their phony "State Police Publicity Bureau." When the Buffalo police got busy and Cornez and High took it on the lam I said that in all probability they would move to some other city and continue their thievery. I couldn't anticipate, however, that the boys would install themselves in the Hotel Ansonia in New York, set up a "boiler room" and begin to "take" New York City business men on behalf of the "New Jersey State Police Publicity Bureau," but that's exactly what they did.

Some New York firms whose trucks traverse the New Jersey highways made liberal contributions to the fund collected by these gyps. Other canny individuals investigated and as a result of their inquisitiveness the New York City police raided the boiler room and arrested the whole crowd.

At the trial in Special Sessions it became quite evident that at least one New Jersey police force—or some of its members—was "in" on the deal because a patrolman attached to the West New York (N. J.) police testified that the "courtesy cards" handed out by the crew did "obtain favors" for the motorists who held them. One of the Justices inquired sarcastically if the "favors" handed out by the police included the keys to the jail.

Cornez, High, and others of the gang were convicted and sentenced to the Riker's Island pen. But their troubles are not over yet because I am informed that a detainer will be lodged at the penitentiary by the Buffalo authorities which may result in another jolt for them.

WHAT SWINDLES ARE GOING ON IN YOUR TOWN?

EVERY DAY some new scheme for mulcting the public is devised. Often these schemes are worked in one town until the "heat" goes on, and the swindlers simply move on to another town and start in again. Detective Fiction Weekly would like to do its part as a nationally circulated magazine to stop the "come-on" boys.

To the first person who clips and sends in authentic stories from local newspapers which are later used as the bases for "They're Swindling You" articles, Frank Wrentmore will send an autographed copy of "The Run For Your Money," a $2.50 book about racketeers. The name of the person receiving the book will be published with the article as a guarantee of fairness.

Mr. Wrentmore will be the only judge of the available material. If personal experiences are sent, they must be well authenticated. This is not a contest but merely an attempt to disseminate the latest information about racketeers. Proceedings of Government bodies will not be considered.

Enlist in the War Against Rackets by Telling Others
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 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.

SEVERAL corrections, as appended to the monthly installments of our Cipher Solvers' Club, require upward revision in the 1937 solving scores of a number of our cryptofans, and we take pleasure in making the necessary changes in the subjoined paragraph. The figures given represent yearly or *Inner Circle Club score is also included.

†HR and †ICC corrections for 1937: *A. W. Smith, Oklahoma City, Okla., 312 answers instead of 307, and a grand total of 1,650 instead of 1,645. †Saco, La Mesa, Cal., 288 answers instead of 282. †Chi Valor, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, 251 answers instead of 250. †Gregory, Taos, N. Mex., 238 answers instead of 233. †Ernest H. Carling, New York, N. Y., 178 answers instead of 173. †Argon, Portsmouth, Va., 129 answers instead of 123. Our apologies, cryptofans!

No. X-50. 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
(a) W T E L N V O R S H  (b) W T E L O V N R S H
SEVEN 82524 82526
THREE 19722 19722
TWO 106 104
T W E L V E 102352 102352

†Lxaxar's two-answer puzzle in letter addition, No. X-53 of June 25, is reprinted herewith together with the double key and both solutions. Observe the interchange of the digits 4 and 6, represented in (a) by symbols N and O, and in (b) by O and N, respectively. Duly considering "carried" units, an analysis of S plus T equals SW would yield T=1 and W=zero, providing entry to this ingenious construction.

Clues to current crypts: Emil Lowe's division uses a four-word key, numbered 01 23 456 789.
S=S—U and I—I=Y will give you symbols U and Y. In Cosmopolite's crypt, find the words for OSD, OSDRL, ROH, HORBB, and ZBB by comparison. Having guessed these, substitute known letters in BEHOLD, OLKGSRDH, and *LDGEYBRX, and fill in the rest.

In Doyle's contribution, note SUG, HOSU, HG, and SK; ENN and HONN; and thus to SHOVING and HUGV. Solve R. Gray's cipher through the affixes KY-, -OKBY, and -KYU, noting KYKOKTM. And then reconstruct the alphabet, arranging the letters from a to z, and placing the symbols beneath the letters. You will find a hidden five-word message, composed of the eighteen symbols.

†Keystonian presents seven pairs of palindromic words, each group spelling a word both forward and backward. The pattern and context will help with the second word. Spot your own clues in †Rengaw's inner circle cipher! The asterisks in Nos. 164, 167, and 168 indicate capitalization. The answers to this week's puzzles will appear in next week's magazine.

No. 163—Cryptic Division. By Emil Lowe.

P E N ) T I N T S ( I H Y N I E

Y S T
K P H

P H Y S
P T E S

P N U

109
No. 164—On Halyard and Staff. By Cosmopolite.

"YDSKPV OSDB TBKLRKHEPHTRP KU OSD *LDGEYBRX
HORBB UEBB SRTS ZVFZPXD, ROH ZLNH ZPV OLKGSRDH
HOLDZNRPT RP ZBB OSDRL, KLRTRPZB BEHOLD!"—
*ADYHODL.

No. 165—Always on Guard. By Doyle.

SHOVING, SHOVING, SAERROD NOXUS! ENN SUG BEZ EVB
ENN SUG VOXUS, SGNNOVX LGKLNNG HOSU ZKFA XNKH,
HUGV SK YSKL EVB HUGV SK XK! OR HG HESDU ZKF
DEAGRFNNZ, KPGA FY VK YKB HONN TG!

No. 166—Symbolic Sentence. By R. Gray.

IBYOLAEMOKYU IWTRCKYU IMNH NEBY KYKOKTM
IBYOWKHNOKBY ITNRLS IBYROWNIOBW, IWLTOKYU
OCHR IWGEO, IBYRKNLWTHMIL IBYRLOWYOKBY.

No. 167—Forward and Back. By †Keystonian.

KHKOSRKDQTN FRBRFEOUNR AHFSE: AHNP—PNHA;
EDFHGE—EHGFD; *RNUV—VUNR; SRBON—NOBRS; LR—
RL; XVFS—SFVX; VFR—RFV; RD TRDRFV.

No. 168—Pacif Proposition. By †Rengaw.

*HOME *CROWDS! TAKN-TDNV *TVUFATS XOFT,
*XNWWYUF DRWVNNKNT, *ADUMAUF GRYGT, *BSAFNTN
CAWWBNWUBPNWT. CUZRW *CWNFBS VUTDWE, *TLATT
BSNNTN, *NFXMATS DNU, *FRWLNXAUFTUWKAFN.

LAST WEEK’S ANSWERS

157—Key:

158—The Natchez had a word for “blood,”
pronounced “itch.” They had an itch for blood,
too, massacring three hundred French settlers.

159—Hurray for the perfect-score cryptofans!
Many of us would like to know how you get
them all! Here’s wishing you continued good
luck in the cipher solvers’ club!

160—Where will Hitler go now? Into Czec-
slovakia? The Ukraine? The oil fields of Rou-
mania? Hungary? The deep Balkans? The
Polish corridor? Danzig? Memel?

161—Impeccable isolation, avers ancient adage,
proves more beneficial than profligate gregarious-
ness with vicious playfellows.

162—Naive young radio singer ambles mikes-
ward. Fright almost numbs vocal cords. Result,
barely audible squeak. Music drowses strange
sound. Quick switch.

All correct solutions of the current puzzles
will be duly listed in our Cipher Solvers’ Club
for July. Address: M. E. Ohaver, Detective
Fiction Weekly, 280 Broadway, New York,
N. Y.
SOME months ago, a gentleman named Aram Donikian sent us a detective magazine published in—of all things—Armenian. We thought that a fair oddity, and mentioned it in these pages in passing.

It turns out now that that was a grave error. Another reader,

LUDOVICK CZARCIENSKI

has evidently been brooding about the whole business. Mr. C. undoubtedly has our best interests at heart, but we'll have to admit that his proposals have unnerved us no end.

Dear Editor:

I am a little surprised at the jesting manner in which you mention your gift from Mr. Aram Donikian. And it is obvious, also, that you do not understand that gentleman's motives. Have you any idea how many Armenians there are in these United States? No? Well, there are some 60,000 of them, and wouldn't it help your circulation to print a story exclusively for them, in Armenian?

Nor is that the end of the idea. The citizens of these United States come from the far corners of the earth. A great many of them still cherish their native tongue. It would be truly patriotic of you to feature a story in a native language every week.

Naturally, some of the linguistic minorities are too small to be of interest to a great publication like yours. I have taken the liberty, therefore, of listing the larger linguistic groups in this country, to the best of my ability, so that you can begin gathering your materials without delay.

Irish, 750,000; Scandinavian, 1,225,000; German, 1,600,000; Polish 1,300,000; Czech, 500,000; Hungarian, 275,000; Dutch, 400,000; Russian, 1,150,000; Italian, 1,800,000; Yugo-Slav, 450,000; Lithuanian, 425,000; Finnish, 325,000; Roumanian, 300,000; Greek, 300,000; Spanish, 100,000; Portuguese, 165,000.

Of course, this is just scratching the surface. Other slightly smaller minorities, such as the Latvian, Bulgarian, Turkish, Syrian, etc., etc., will be valuable adjuncts.

While some readers will have to skip the Foreign Story every week, they won't mind (Oh, won't they?—Ed.) and the certain rise in your circulation should be eminently gratifying.

May I remind you that the ARGOSY once published a story in Esperanto?
I shall look forward to your putting these suggestions into practice immediately.
Detroit, Michigan.

After Mr. Czarcinski's letter (ultimatum?) it's a relief to turn to this letter from

MARK HORLICK

who, like Oliver Twist, clamors for more.

Dear Editor:

Seeing you appreciate news flashes from readers concerning DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY, I herewith give you my approval by congratulating you on the fine articles by my favorite detective authors
that are going through your said DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY.

But that is not all that prompted me to write you. It's getting four novelettes in one week's issue by Cornell Woolrich, B. B. Fowler, Herbert Koehl and Richard Hobart with the serial by Dale Clark. Also T. T. Flynn, Lawrence Treat, W. E. Brandon. Keep up your four novelettes a week besides four- or five-part serial; or else a long complete novel and three long novellas, four short stories with the three features even if you have to make DFW bigger. And give us a couple or more pages of FLASHERS FROM READERS and before you realize it, I'll be a dyed-in-the-wool subscriber. Looking forward to the future issues of DFW.

Youngstown, Ohio.

Even though he lambasts us, we'll have to admit that

WALTER T. BROWN

is something of a clairvoyant. The Saint will be with us soon!

DEAR SIR:

I have just finished reading Mystery in Room 913 by Cornell Woolrich and want to say it is one of the best yarns I have ever read in DFW. If I wanted to go in for small-time grumbling about technical details—as some of your readers do—I could say that the use of the pole and reel in the ending is a wee bit "fishy." But what do I care about such unimportant details when there's a cracking good story hitched to the front of it! If you would only print one story in each issue as good as this one I would be satisfied. (Yeah, I got some complaints too.) Anthony Armstrong and Julius Long, in the same issue, rate a "fair" grading, while the Judson Philips' serial gets a triple A on the report card. But scallions to Charles Alexander and Arden Fangborn. And while I'm giving out scallions, mark down a couple tons for William Edward Hayes who scuttled (sic) the lead yarn in the May 28th issue. I think it was called Murder Wears A Rose. But that was one case where a rose by any other name would have smelled just as bad. And with the same breath (pardon the onions please) I want to mention Edward S. Williams and William E. Barrett. It's sabotage! Whenever I see their names on the cover, I just skip back through the pages to FLASHERS FROM READERS, read them, spend the next three days trying to work the CIPHER SOLVERS' puzzles and then call it a day.

You might appease my righteous wrath by printing some more stories by Judson Philips, Cornell Woolrich and more stories like Fink by Frederick Painton. How about DFW getting some of the Saint stories by Leslie Charteris? This is my first letter so I suppose it won't get printed but you can't shoot a guy for trying.

Hoboken, N. J.

NEXT WEEK

The League of Worried Men
A New Novelette
by Paul Ernst

Johnny Get Your Gun
A New Novelette
by Steve Fisher

Never Borrow, Never Die
A New Novelette
by Cyril Plunkett

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Sun Km Tire Tubeless, Tires and Tubes
Sun Km Tire Tubeless, Tires and Tubes
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HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES
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TRACTOR BALLOON TIRES
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