

JANUARY



# 10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE



TWO FASCINATING  
NOVELETTES OF  
COMPELLING MYSTERY  
**DEATH HITCH-  
HIKES SOUTH!**  
by RUSSELL GRAY

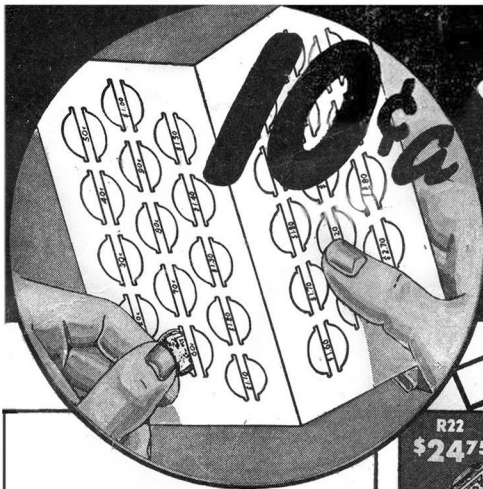
**BEWARE THE  
BLACK QUEEN**  
by WILLIAM R. COX

**ALL AT ONCE—NO WEDNESDAY!**  
by DANE GREGORY

MANNEQUINS

**STERLING  
ROGERS  
ALLAN**





# 10¢ a Day buys a Watch

## on Our SAVINGS BOOK PLAN

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**ELGIN**

**GRUEN**

**KENT**

**BENRUS**

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*Jim Feeney*



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JIM FEENEY

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ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_

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**R22 - Ladies' BULOVA; 17 J. 10K yellow gold plate. \$24.75**  
**M17 - Man's BULOVA; 15 J. 10K yellow rolled gold plate case; bracelet. \$24.75**  
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**L140**  
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**S141 - Man's ELGIN—sturdy 10K yellow gold filled case; 17 jewels. \$37.50**  
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Nearly every neighborhood offers opportunities for a part time Radio Technician to make good money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get Radio parts and instructions for building test equipment, for conducting experiments that give you valuable, practical experience. You also get a modern Professional Radio Servicing Instrument. My fifty-fifty method—half Radio parts, half Lesson Texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

### FIND OUT HOW I TRAIN YOU AT HOME

**MAIL THE COUPON.** I'll send you a Sample Lesson and my 64-page book FREE. Learn about my Course; the types of jobs in different branches of Radio. Read letters from more than 100 men. I have trained so you can see what they are doing, earning. **MAIL THE COUPON** in an envelope or paste it on a penny postal.

J. E. Smith, President, Dept. INS9,  
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

**This FREE BOOK has Helped Hundreds of Men to Make More Money**

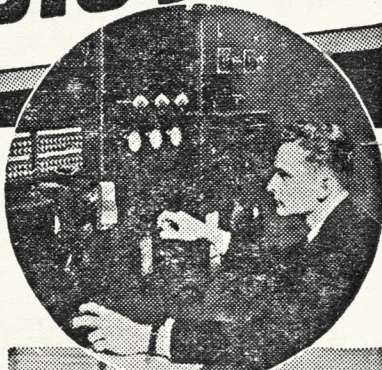
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NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE, Washington, D. C.

Mail me FREE, without obligation, your Sample Lesson and 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio." (No Salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

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**BROADCASTING STATIONS** (top illustration) employ Radio Technicians as operators, installation, maintenance men and in other fascinating, steady, well-paying technical jobs. **FIXING RADIO SETS** (Lower illustration) pays many Radio Technicians \$30, \$40, \$50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make \$5 to \$10 a week extra in spare time.

**Mail Coupon Now!**





THE MAGAZINE OF WEIRD MYSTERY!

10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE  
NEXT ISSUE ON SALE JAN. 9th

Volume 26

January, 1942

Number 4

AN OUTSTANDING NOVEL OF BIZARRE MYSTERY

BULL-MARKET FOR THE DYING.....Stewart Sterling 11  
Ken Kallon, mild-mannered bank representative, had nothing but an impersonal interest in the headless corpse—until that raving mad woman claimed Ken was her husband and dragged him helplessly into the outlandish murder mess that threatened to turn Wall Street into an avenue in Hell!

THREE FASCINATING NOVELETTES OF CHILLING INTRIGUE

BEWARE THE BLACK QUEEN.....William R. Cox 38  
There on Jeffrey Falcon's boat, Tom Kincaid, honest gambler, and his little partner, Matt Durkin, accepted the grim hand dealt by their nemesis, George Grey, the kill-crazed ex-banker. But how were they to know that Death had changed the rules of poker—and that a queen now ruled the deck?

MURDER TOWN.....Wayne Rogers 56  
Against the Organizer, the town of Taylor was utterly helpless, its frightened citizens prey to all the ghastly crimes this murder master cared to perpetrate. But Sheriff Tom Trowbridge was not yet ready to admit defeat, for he was sure that he could trap this vicious killer—with the help of a man who'd been dead and buried for a quarter of a century.

DEATH HITCH-HIKES SOUTH.....Russell Gray 82  
He didn't know who she was, but she had saved his life. So Bruce Keeler decided to help her—and was promptly embarked upon the weirdest murder puzzle of all time, where police and thugs alike stood ready to shoot him down on sight!

TWO SPINE-TINGLING SHORT STORIES

AM I THE CORPSE'S KEEPER?.....Francis K. Allan 33  
Steve Brannon was only too keenly aware that he could never live in peace unless he found the strange, beautiful girl who'd given him a smile—and a freshly-murdered corpse whose accusing finger pointed right in Steve's direction!

ALL AT ONCE—NO WEDNESDAY!.....Dane Gregory 70  
Dave Merrick knew that the girl had been strangled with the cord that was missing from his bathrobe. But he didn't know if he had killed her, because—in some unearthly way—one day of his life had never been lived by him!

— AND —

THE DEAD MAN'S FRIENDS PLAY ROUGH!.....The Editor 6  
Stepping into a dead man's shoes means stepping into the dead man's trouble!

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!



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# "I WAS BOUND AND GAGGED AND LEFT TO DIE!"

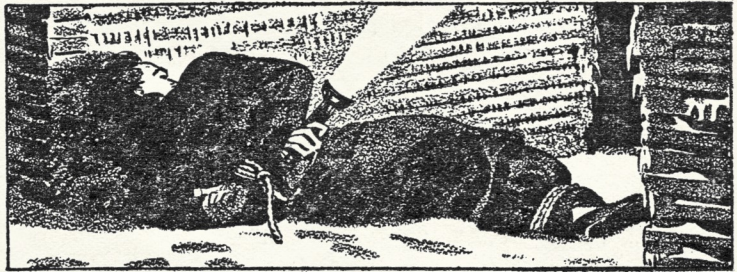


A true experience of JOSEPH J. KARES, Charlestown, Boston, Mass.



"THUGS HELD ME UP one bitterly cold night as I left our docked lumber ship," writes Radio Operator Kares. "After taking what cash I had, they left me bound and gagged in an inky dark alley between great piles of stacked lumber.

"FURIOUS STRUGGLING only tightened my bonds. My arms and legs grew numb with cold. My plight was desperate! Then, remembering my flashlight, I managed to reach it . . . started flashing SOS against the top of the lumber.



"FOR MORE THAN AN HOUR I kept signaling. Half dead with cold . . . about to give up hope . . . I was at last rescued by two officers from my ship. If it hadn't been for those dependable 'Eveready' fresh DATED batteries I would have been a goner.

(Signed) *Joseph J. Kares*

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



**FRESH BATTERIES LAST LONGER... Look for the DATE-LINE**

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# The Dead Man's Friends Play Rough!

**T**RUTH, they say, is stranger than fiction, and in most cases that's probably true. It's difficult nowadays to find a magazine which can introduce anything really startling or strange in the way of stories; stereotyped plots with the usual, expected complications can be found everywhere.

This magazine, on the other hand, was long ago dedicated to the presentation of stories which cannot be found elsewhere; and it is our humble belief that we have maintained that pledge.

Occasionally one of these off-trail stories strikes us as truly distinctive. Such a story came in today. Arriving too late to reach the press for this issue, it was, nonetheless, in time for us to give it a brief preview on these pages. In the following, we've tried to catch the spirit and flavor of the unusual story:

\* \* \*

It began with an empty stomach. Bill Dale had had nothing to eat for twenty-four hours or so, and when he hit the town of New Liverpool, Ohio, without a cent, he was determined to get a meal—at any price! He chose a tough, waterfront bar and grill, and after consuming a substantial meal, attempted to talk his way out of paying, by offering to work the bill out.

That was a big laugh to the owner, who called in his biggest bartender. The two of them then prepared to "bounce" Bill—and he could see that they were going to make quite a job of it. Being a professional boxer by trade, Bill could take care of himself—as the men found out. But then one of them began to holler, "Holdup!" And Bill had to scam, not stopping even to pick up the cop he knocked over when running out. Friendless, broke, Bill's only thought was to get clear. He ran until he came to a park, then he ducked in there to catch his wind.

But let's let Donald G. Cormack, the author, tell it—in Bill's own language:

"I figured I had maybe an hour before the police started combing the park. First they'd close off the section where the thing happened and work their way down to the park, trapping me there. That was logical, because the park faced on a river, and the only way out was back the way I'd come. Once they got me, I was good for a three-to-five-year trip to the pen.

"Keeping away from the footpaths I worked my way down to the river bank. I was too scared to do much logical thinking, but I suppose I hoped to find a bridge across to the other side, or a convenient rowboat moored handily at the shore. There wasn't any, of course, and I knew already the river's swift current was far stronger than my mediocre swimming ability. But it was when I got to the shore that I noticed this guy drive up and park his car.

"My thoughts were only vague at first. I remember thinking that with a car I'd stand some chance of getting out of the trap. And this was a good-looking car—it must have cost at least three grand.

"The guy got out and walked over to the river, looking around carefully to see if anyone was watching him. He put something on the ground by the railing, and a second afterward he had climbed up on the balustrade. Then I knew. He was going to commit suicide!

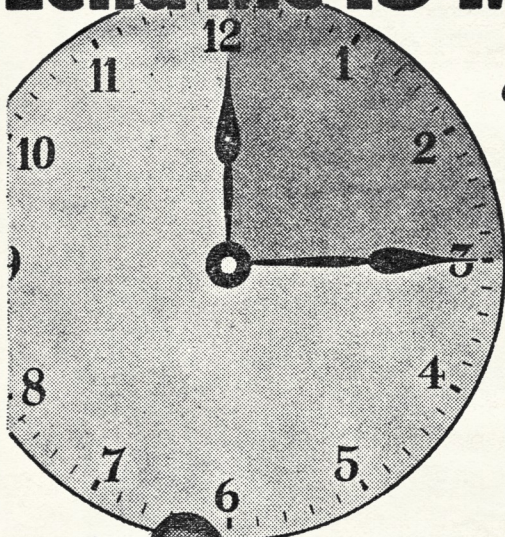
"I let out a yell involuntarily and raced toward him. But he didn't hurry; he'd planned this thing too carefully. He looked at me as he shrugged out of his suit coat and topcoat together, his face expressing relief, and he threw the garments into my arms. Then his body arched outward, and disappeared from sight into the night's blackness. A few

*(Continued on page 8)*



# Lend Me 15 Minutes A Day

## ..and I'll prove I can make you a NEW MAN



*Charles Atlas*  
**America's Greatest "Builder of Men"**  
 Among all the physical instructors and "conditioners of men" ONLY ONE NAME STANDS OUT. That name is Charles Atlas!

In every part of the country Charles Atlas is recognized as America's Greatest Builder of Men. Almost two million men have written to him. Thousands upon thousands have put their physical development into his capable hands!

And now that the call is for men capable of helping America meet and conquer any national emergency, many thousands of others (even those already in their country's Army and Navy) are calling upon Charles Atlas to build the kind of men America vitally needs.

Actual photo of the man who holds the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

I'M "trading-in" old bodies for new! I'm taking men who know that the condition of their arms, shoulders, chests and legs—their strength, "wind," and endurance—is not 100%. And I'm making NEW MEN of them.

I don't care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

bodies of other men in only 15 minutes a day? The answer is "Dynamic Tension," the amazing method I discovered and which changed me from a 97-pound weakling into the champion you see here!

### Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

Are you ALL MAN—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute, with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? Or do you need the help I can give you—the help that has already worked such wonders for other fellows, everywhere?

In just 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home, I'm ready to prove that "Dynamic Tension" can lay a new outfit of solid muscle over every inch of your body. Let me put new, smashing power into your arms and shoulders—give you an armor-shield of stomach muscle that laughs at punches—strengthen your legs into real columns of surging stamina. If lack of exercise or wrong living has weakened you inside, I'll get after that condition, too, and show you how it feels to LIVE!

### I Was a 97-lb. Weakling

All the world knows I was ONCE a skinny, scrawny 97-pound weakling. And NOW it knows that I won the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Against all comers! How did I do it? How do I work miracles in the

## FREE This Famous Book That Tells You How to Get a Body That Men Respect and Women Admire

Almost two million men have sent for and read my book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." It tells you exactly what "Dynamic Tension" can do. And it's packed with pictures that SHOW you what it does. Results it has produced for other men. RESULTS I want to prove it can get for YOU! If you are satisfied to take a back seat and be pushed around by other fellows week-in, week-out, you don't want this book. But if you want to learn how you can actually become a NEW MAN, right in the privacy of your own home and in only 15 minutes a day, then man!—get this coupon into the mail to me as fast as your legs can get to the letterbox! CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83M, 115 East 23rd St., New York City.

**Here's PROOF Right Here!**  
 "Results come so fast by your method that it seems just as if some magician put on the pounds of solid muscle just where you want them!"  
 —W.L., Missouri  
 "Feel like a million dollars and have a 44" normal chest—A 2" GAIN IN 4 DAYS!"  
 —L.A.S., Illinois  
 "My doctor thinks your course is fine. In 15 days have put two inches on my chest, and 1/2 inch on my neck."  
 —B.L., Oregon  
 "My muscles are bulging out and I feel like a new man. My chest measures 38 in., an increase of 5 in., and my neck increased 2 in."  
 —G.M., Ohio  
 "Your book opened my eyes . . . 14" gain on my biceps and 1" more on my chest in two weeks!"  
 —J.F., Penna.

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 115 East 23rd St., New York City

I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big, muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name .....  
 (Please Print or Write Plainly)

Address .....

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





(Continued from page 6)

seconds later I heard him splash into oblivion.

"It was the sound of a prowler-car siren moaning briefly that brought me out of the temporary trance. The lights of the car were weaving slowly through the park, a spotlight cutting into the bushes on each side of the drive. The search for me was on."

And that, Mr. Cormack relates, was the reason why Bill Dale decided to don the man's coat. He took with him, also, the man's driver's license, glasses—and the sporty car. And he also decided that he'd sleep at the stranger's hotel that night—because the thought of a good bed appealed to him. The police? No, they didn't bother him behind the wheel of the car. But things were not so rosy as they seemed, and to quote Bill Dale "who was now Mr. Gerald Grenoble, of Washington, D. C.," he had completely forgotten:

"... that when you adopt a complete stranger's life as your own, you also adopt his past and his immediate future, with its dangers and worries and desperate troubles. And I forgot, too, that rich young men don't do the Dutch without a very compelling reason to make them leave comfort and luxury behind. . . .

"THE sound of soft chimes woke me in my hotel room, early the next morning, and at first I figured it was the cops coming in. But no one had entered—it was just the bell that said someone was outside, wanting to come in.

"I was nervous as a cat when I opened the door, and then I was downright pleasantly surprised.

"It's only me," a girl's voice said—and a cute voice, just as cute as she was. Without a word of lie, she was the sweetest little armful I'd ever set eyes on, and right away I was jealous of Grenoble.

"She'd introduced herself as Peggy, through the door, and when she came in and saw me, her small hand went to her mouth in sudden fright.

"Where's—where's Rowdy? I mean, where's Gerald? This is his room, isn't it? They told me at the desk—"

"Gerald's gone," I told her, noticing her deep disappointment. 'I stayed over in his apartment for last night, after he left. He's—' I just couldn't tell her the truth—he's been called away suddenly. He didn't tell me where he was going.'

"Oh, damn! she broke out, tears coming to her eyes. Her lips trembled. 'They'll kill him now! Rocco will get to him first and it'll be too late. Oh, God, why did he have to—' but her momentary near-hysteria faded. 'If you see him again, tell him Little Porky died. Maybe he doesn't know. Tell him Little Porky died without regaining consciousness. So Rocco doesn't really know; he's only guessing! I don't—don't know whether that's good—or if it's bad. And give him this, too.'"

"And then she was gone, after giving Bill a newspaper clipping that read:

"We wouldn't want to be the young son-of-a-tycoon who left New Orleans so hurriedly the other day. Pappy won't disinherit his erring boy now, but he may mourn his decease. Right or wrong, the victim has been condemned by an underworld kangaroo court, even without evidence. Little Porky died yesterday—and we are afraid we'll soon have to report the same sad state for the Daring Young Man on the Flying Eight Ball."

\* \* \*

And that, we think, is a fair—or un-fair—enough portion of Mr. Cormack's story to prove our original point that this is a thoroughly unusual tale. But enough has been said. This story will appear, complete, in the March issue of *Dime Mystery Magazine*, on sale the 9th of January. . . .

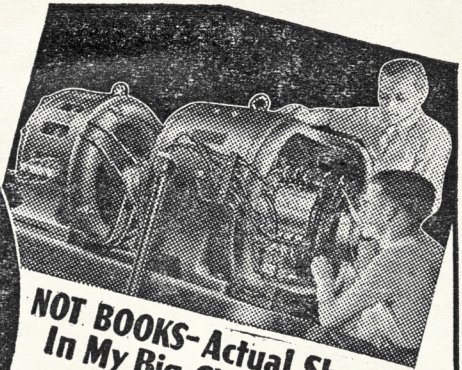
THE EDITOR.



# TRAIN FOR ELECTRICITY

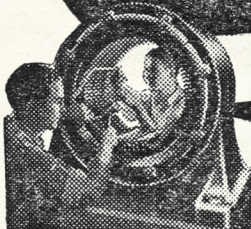
*I'll Finance Your Training*

*H. C. Lewis*



**NOT BOOKS-Actual Shop Work  
In My Big Chicago Shops**

**"LEARN BY DOING" IN 90 DAYS**



**PREPARE FOR JOBS LIKE THESE**

- Armature Winder
  - Sub-Station Operator
  - Auto & Aviation Ignition
  - Maintenance Electrician
  - Service Station Owner
  - Air Conditioning
  - Radio Servicing
  - and many others
- Our Employment Bureau for graduates gives FREE lifetime employment service.

Have you ever dreamed of holding down a steady, good pay job? Have you ever dreamed of doing the work you really like in a job that holds promise of a real future in the years ahead?

Well, we all know that you can't get the good things in life by just dreaming about them. Hundreds of fellows are today holding down mighty fine jobs with prospects of a bright future. They are filling these jobs because they had the foresight to

equip themselves with the right kind of training. Most of these men were only average fellows a short time ago, but the proper training helped to lift them out of the low pay ranks of unskilled workers. The same opportunity is now offered to you.

The great fascinating field of ELECTRICITY offers a real future to many men and young men who are willing to prepare for a place in this giant industry.

Here at my school in Chicago, the world's Electrical Center, you can get 12 weeks Shop Training in ELECTRICITY and an extra 4 weeks Course in Radio that can prepare you for a good pay job in these fields.

You will be trained on actual equipment and machinery and because of our method of training, you don't need previous experience or a lot of education. Many of my successful graduates never even completed Grammar School.

Here in my school you work on generators, motors, dynamos, you do house wiring, wind armatures and do actual work in many other branches of Electricity and right now I'm including valuable instruction in Diesel, Electric Refrigeration and Air Conditioning at no extra cost. Our practical shop methods make it easier to learn—First the instructors tell you how a thing should be done—then they show you how it should be done—then you do the actual work yourself.



*H. C. Lewis*

I think the "pay after graduation" plan... offers the fellow who wants to get ahead in life a wonderful opportunity... I am now employed by the Power Co. I have been employed by this Company ever since graduating from COYNE... I make almost double what I did at my previous work... COYNE School helped me in landing the job I now have.—James Dible.

**AN EXTRA 4 WEEKS COURSE IN RADIO INCLUDED**

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You can get this training first—then pay for it later in easy monthly payments, starting 60 days after your 90 days training period is over—then you have 12 months to complete your payments.

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If you need part time work to help out with expenses while training in my shops, my employment department will give you their assistance to help you get it. Then after graduation this department will give you valuable lifetime employment service.

Send the coupon today for all details. When I get it I'll send you my big free book containing dozens of pictures of students at work in my shops. I'll also tell you about my "Pay After Graduation" Plan, extra 4 weeks Radio Course and how many earn while learning and how we help

**MAIL COUPON TODAY FOR BIG FREE BOOK**



H. C. LEWIS, President.  
COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL,  
500 S. Paulina St., Dept. 91-76, Chicago, Ill.

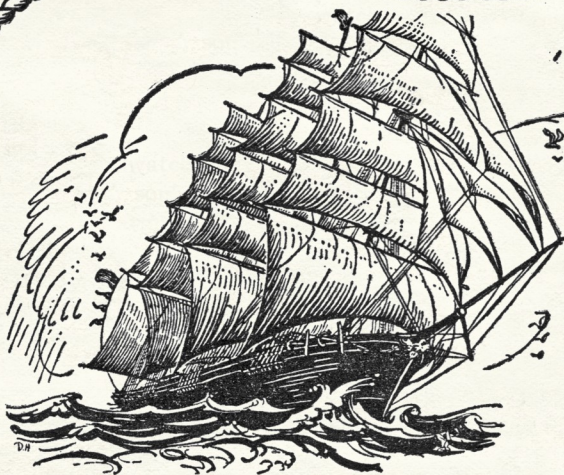
Dear Sir: Please send me free your big catalog and full particulars of your present offer, also your "Pay-Tuition-After-Graduation" Plan and also your extra 4 weeks Radio Course, you are including at no extra cost.

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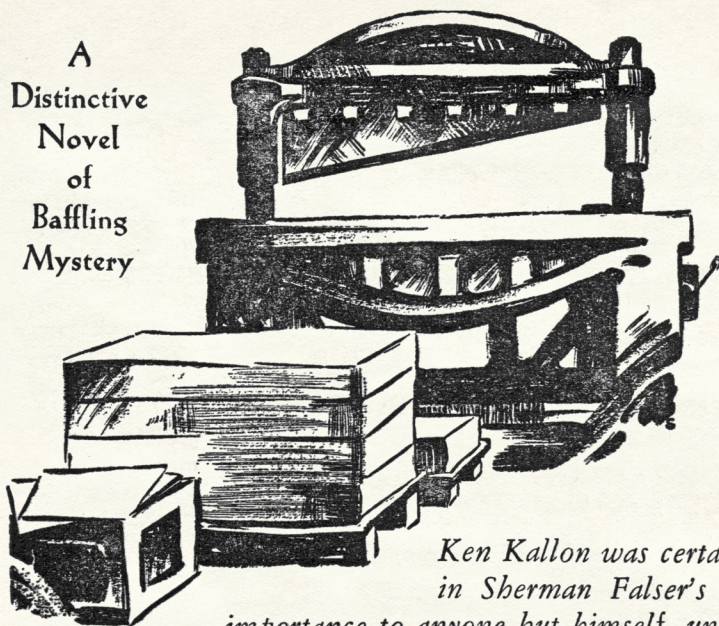
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Novel  
of  
Baffling  
Mystery



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By  
STEWART  
STERLING  
•

*Ken Kallon was certain that his interest in Sherman Falser's death was of no importance to anyone but himself, until he uncovered a brutal murder whose motive threatened the financial structure of the entire country. And quite without warning, Ken found himself the object of a stark-mad woman's affection—and a killer's ghastly vengeance!*

## Bull=Market for the Dying

**K**EN KALLON tooled his coupé deftly between an ambulance and a police car, while staring curiously at the milling crowd on the sidewalk. He stuck his head out of the car window.

"What's the trouble here?" he called to a bystander.

The man regarded Kallon suspiciously. "Killing of some kind. Ask one of the cops."

"I will." Kallon climbed briskly out of the coupé, tapped the nearest bluecoat on the shoulder.

"Pardon me, officer. Is anything wrong at the paper company?"

"Who wants to know?"

Kallon indicated the brief-case in his

left hand. "I'm from the Mammoth Trust Company."

"The place is closed. What'll you want here?"

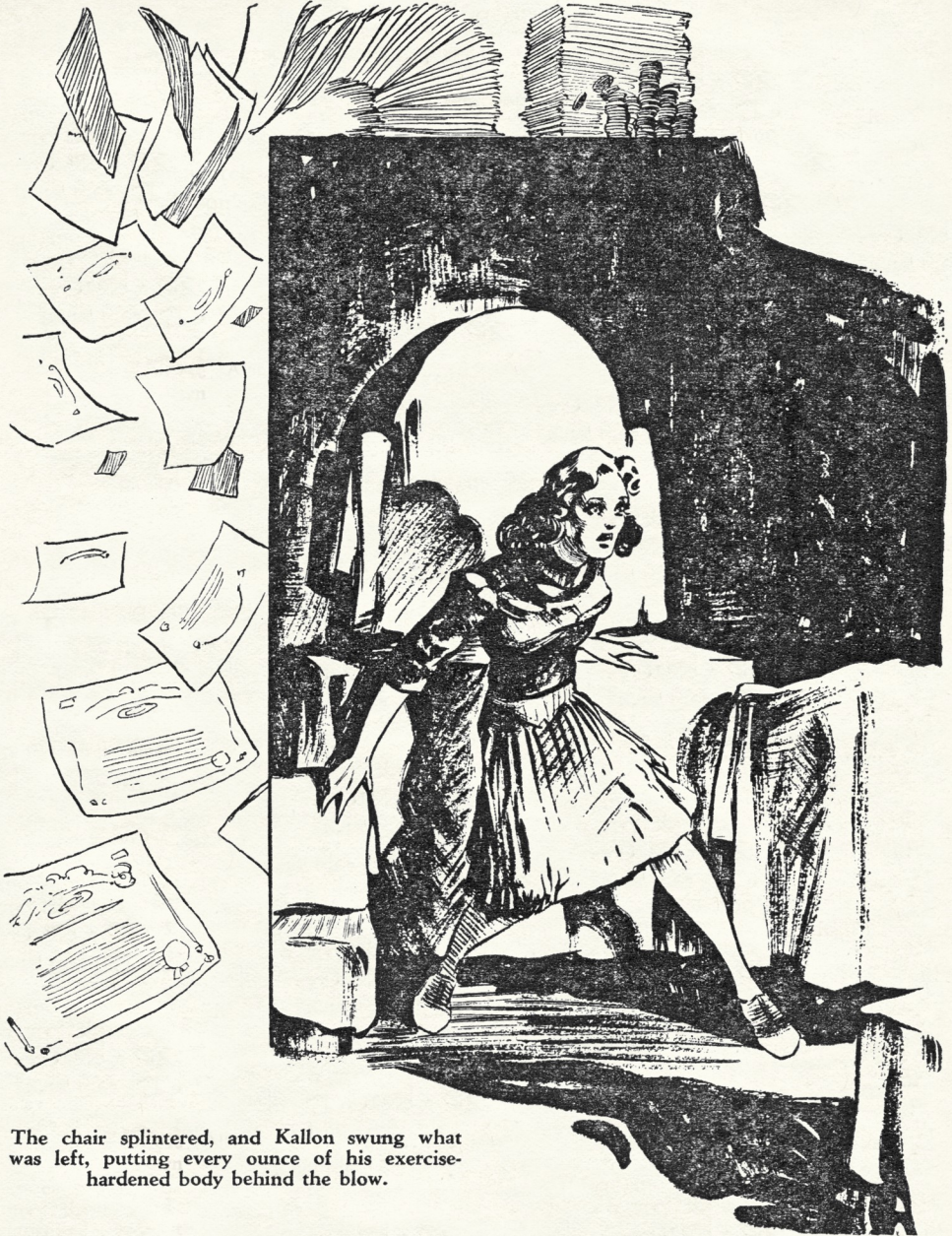
"A word with one of the Patentex employees. Sherman Falser."

The cop's fists went to his hips as he inspected the short, chunky figure in the mouse-colored overcoat and droopy-brimmed felt hat. Perhaps he sensed the earnestness in those serious gray eyes behind the steel-rimmed spectacles. "You a friend of Falser's?"

"No. Matter of business. What's wrong? Something happened to him?"

The cop rubbed his chin moodily. "Guess you better step inside a minute." He shouldered his way through the curi-





The chair splintered, and Kallon swung what was left, putting every ounce of his exercise-hardened body behind the blow.

ous throng, past another patrolman who stood guard at a door which bore a red-lettered warning:

**KEEP OUT**  
**Positively No Admittance At Any Time**  
**Patentex Paper Corporation**

"Hey, Lieutenant!" the policeman called.

A bulky-shouldered man in a pepper-and-salt business suit broke off his conversation with a police photographer. "Yeah?"



"Guy here from a bank. Wants to see Falser."

The lieutenant sauntered over. "I don't think you want to see him, mister. What you say your name was?"

"Kallon. I work for Mammoth Trust. And I do want to see Falser."

The plainclothes officer rocked quietly back and forth on his heels. "You got a good strong stomach, Mister Kallon?"

The bank man's temper began to rise; it always did when people adopted this superior, semi-paternal attitude toward him. Just because he looked like a college freshman was no reason he had to



be treated like one by everybody he met.

"Strong as the next's man," he snapped. "Why?"

Two white-uniformed internes trudged past with a heavily weighted stretcher.



The bank man couldn't see what was on the canvas carrier, but he did see the trail of red. . . .

"That," the plainclothesman murmured, "was Falser."

Kallon fought back an uncontrollable sensation of nausea. Could that still figure, now going out the door to the ambulance, really be the husky, red-haired man who had received a hundred dollar loan only a few days ago!

"An accident?" Kallon asked.

"Suicide."

"Impossible!"

"Incredible," the lieutenant said pointedly. "I been on the force twenty years, and I never seen anything like it. He guillotined himself."

"What!" Kallon didn't take it all in, at once. He was thinking of the reason Falser had given for wanting the hundred dollars—

"Stuck his neck under the blade of one them giant paper cutters, then tramped on the treadle. Blade weighed close to two hundred pounds; edge's sharp's a razor."

Kallon's necktie seemed, suddenly, much too tight. "That's horrible. Because I suppose I'm sort of responsible."

"You're—" The lieutenant took his hands out of his hip pockets, moved casually to Kallon's side. "What'd you have to do with it?"

"I—that is, Mammoth Trust—made Falser a loan."

The police officer propelled him gently through a gate in a railed enclosure, past typewriter desks and filing cabinets. "This is one time you'll really have to chase the guy clear to hell to collect, then. I hear he didn't carry insurance."

Kallon shook his arm free from the other's grasp irritably. "You don't have to treat me as if I'm trying to get away from you. Of course, Falser didn't have any insurance. He wouldn't have borrowed from my bank if he'd had a policy.

He wanted that money to bury himself."

"You're kidding!" The lieutenant's eyes went wide.

"I am not! Falser swore he needed money urgently, to pay for a funeral. Naturally, it never occurred to me he meant his own. Probably, if I hadn't let him have it, he'd be alive this minute."

Behind them a deep voice rumbled, "What's this about Falser borrowing money?"

**K**ALLON turned. He saw a stout, red-faced man with a straggly gray moustache and bulging blue eyes. The man growled: "Who the devil are you?"

The lieutenant answered. "His name's Kallon, Mister Nystrom. Claims he's from the Mammoth Trust."

The stout man nodded recollectively. "Say, Sherm got a loan from your bank recently?"

Kallon nodded stiffly. "Only one hundred dollars. It won't exactly break us."

Nystrom squinted, puzzled. "But it doesn't make sense. His borrowing—after what he stole from us."

The plainclothesman started. "That's right. It would be like a guy running wild in the mint, and coming out with a pocketful of pennies!"

Kallon fidgeted with his spectacles. "If you gentlemen would kindly tell me what you're talking about. . . ?"

The manager of the paper company nodded wearily. "Come on in my office, Mister Kallon. Won't be any harm for you to know what's happened, since you're a bank man."

The lieutenant said: "I want to see you before you go, mister."

Ken followed Nystrom past a ground-glass partition, into a big, comfortable office, which was neatly furnished.

There was a woman in the swivel chair behind the desk. She was close to forty; thin and bony, her face seemed merely



a setting for great, prune-dark eyes. Her dress was severe, her shoes flat-heeled; she wore no jewelry, but her black hair was waved in a fashionable coiffure.

The manager addressed her as if she were a machine. "Miss Yates, this is Mister Kallon, from the Mammoth Trust. My secretary, Mister Kallon. This gentleman says Sherman borrowed a hundred dollars a day or so ago. I can't figure it out."

She turned her eyes on Kallon. "He might have intended to use the money to get out of town, Mister Nystrom. Until he could dispose of . . . it."

Kallon's ire rose; no one had paid the least attention to his suggestion that Falser might still be alive if the Mammoth hadn't extended the loan. That was all Kallon was interested in, at the moment. He didn't like his job, anyway; least of all, the necessity of chasing down delinquent debtors who were always in a jam for funds. And now, in addition to Kallon's natural dislike of his occupation, he felt a personal responsibility to the dead man and his family. Yet Nystrom and his secretary were callously concerned with nothing but their own business losses. . . .

"I'm not interested in Falser's difficulties here at your company, Mister Nystrom—"

"Ha!" The manager interrupted. "I'll say you are. Every bank man in the country's interested. You see Falser performed some sleight-of-hand with a case of *planchette*."

Mary Yates added sharply, "And it was worth anything you care to name, up to a hundred million dollars!"

A spark of anger kindled inside Ken Kallon. Who did these people think they were ribbing! A hundred million! If the case had been filled with diamonds, it wouldn't be worth that much.

"On the other hand," Nystrom continued, "the stuff might not be worth a

cent. It all depends on how it's used."

He seemed to assume Kallon was baffled. "You don't know what I mean? I'll show you!"

He led the way around the partition, through a gloomy corridor, into a large oblong room that occupied the rear of the building. Mary Yates followed, a dozen feet behind them.

They were in the cutting room. There were long rows of wooden cases with cabalistic figures stencilled on the sides; huge piles of yard-wide paper with a shiny finish that gleamed like enamel; stacks of tinted cardboard; steel baskets full of cuttings. To one side stood a file of small machines; down at the end was a huge, black metal monster with a six-foot glittering blade suspended in guides over a polished metal table. Around the base of the machine, the floor was dark from scrubbing. On the floor beside it, the end of a manila-wrapped package was flecked with tiny scarlet specks. Nystrom didn't look at the cutter. He stopped beside a pile of narrow boxes, encased in sheet lead. The metal on the side of the top box had been cut open with a saw, exposing a hinged steel cover with a lock.

"THERE'S only one mill in the world which makes *planchette*. We're their metropolitan representatives. They ship the stuff in tamper-proof cases." The manager busied himself with a key. "Every sheet's counted at the mill as carefully as if it was made of platinum. Here at this end we check the cases in, but don't open them. They're never opened until they get to a customer, ordinarily."

He unlocked the case, reached in, pulled out a long sheet of light green paper, the surface of which was peppered with tiny dots of dull red, blue and yellow. "Recognize it?"

"Sure." Kallon didn't have to feel the



sheet. He knew what it was, now; that secretary hadn't been exaggerating when she'd mentioned a hundred million. This was bank-note paper, the kind on which banks printed their own money; the sort of stuff always used to engrave stock certificates. Not quite the same as the colored-thread paper used for government money, but close to it, and just about as valuable. A single sheet of *planchette* printed the right way could represent a thousand shares of stock worth five hundred bucks a share.

Nystrom put it back in the case; his hands trembled as he locked it up. "Sherm Falser was in charge of these boxes. He received them from the express company and shipped them out, in armored trucks, to the three or four companies who are permitted to buy them from us." He sat down weakly on a pile of coated stock, rubbing his eyes as if they hurt.

His secretary went on calmly: "Last week, Mister Nystrom got an order for a case from Exchange Bank Note, one of the biggest in the business. Falser was supposed to have filled the order. Yesterday I had a phone call from Mister Gallatin, president of Exchange, telling me the case was full of ordinary bond letter-paper. Apparently the lead seal was intact, but when they opened it, five hundred sheets of *Planchette* had disappeared—and no one could explain how or where."

The manager tweaked his moustache absently. "I put it up to Falser. He insisted it must be a mistake at the factory. This morning I talked to the mill. They made a careful investigation and called me back about half-past twelve. Three men at the mill had checked the *planchette* into the box; they saw it sealed." He looked off toward the big cutter. "I told Sherm what they said and went back into my office. Ten minutes later . . ." He didn't finish.

Mary Yates said, "Mister Nystrom

had already called the police. Falser must have seen he couldn't get away. . . ."

Kallon shifted uneasily. This put a different light on the Mammoth Trust's concern with this business. If the loan Kallon had okayed *should* prove to be connected with this theft of banknote paper, it would be disastrous! "Anyone who had that paper could run off counterfeit bank notes or stocks and bonds?"

"If they could get an engraver who could copy plates, and a printer who knew something about inks," Nystrom replied. "That's why we don't dare let the story get to the papers. It'd scare security buyers silly; might even start a panic on the Street."

The man from the bank walked over to the cutting machine. Offhand, he couldn't imagine any more unpleasant way for a man to kill himself than to stick his neck under that blade.

"Are the police certain it was suicide?" he asked.

Nystrom rubbed his eyelids as if he was sleepy. "It had to be. There was no one else in the plant, except me."

The secretary spoke in a hushed monotone. "When I came back from lunch, Mister Nystrom sent me out here. I saw—Falser's body was on the cutting table; his foot was still on the treadle switch." She began to sob quietly. "It was the most frightful thing—"

Nystrom licked his lips. "Couple of the boys who work here remembered hearing Sherman say, two or three times in the last few days, he wished he was dead. He—he got his wish."

Kallon scowled. "Why would a man go to all the trouble of working an ingenious trick like refilling that box with plain paper, and getting away with the *planchette*—if he intended to kill himself afterward?"

The manager of the paper company muttered, "Because he knew the game was up."



"Yes?" The bank man took off his spectacles and wiped them. "I should say the game had only begun—as long as he knew where the paper was, and you didn't!"

## CHAPTER TWO

"Hello, Honey!"

MARY YATES leaned weakly against the wall. "It's just barely possible Falser's death was an accident. If he'd been trying to adjust that cutter. . . ." She didn't look at either of them.

down his spine. There was something more than suicide here. Falser wouldn't have borrowed money to pay for his own funeral—knowing the authorities couldn't find out where to send his body! No matter what arrangements had been made, the dead man would still wind up in Potter's Field, unless the police knew where to send his corpse. Of course, Mrs. Falser might have been warned to expect the tragedy—been instructed to go to the police and claim the body. But somehow, that was a bit too wacky for Ken Kallon to accept.

The manager held out a limp palm. "You see why we can't afford to have

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Nystrom tugged at his moustache. "It doesn't make a great deal of difference, far as I'm concerned. Sherm's dead. I'm in a jam. We've got to find that paper before somebody starts flooding the country with phoney securities, or Patentex is finished, for good and all."

Maybe it didn't make any difference to these people whether Falser had committed suicide or not, Kallon thought. But it must have meant plenty to the dead man's wife.

"Have the police searched Falser's home for the paper?" he asked.

"They don't know exactly where his home is."

Nystrom moved toward the office. "He lived up on Vermilion Avenue until day before yesterday. Then he moved; so far the detectives haven't been able to trace him. You people weren't notified he meant to move?"

"No." Kallon felt a cold chill run

this get out to the general public, Kallon. No objection to your advising your own officers, naturally, but you can understand the damage it might do if it went further than that." He moved, dejectedly, into his private office.

Kallon turned to Mary Yates. "Mind if I call my office?"

She wiped her eyes, sniffed. "Certainly not. Can I get a line for you?"

"Don't bother. I know how to plug in." He went to the private board. There wasn't any reason for him to call, but it occurred to him that it might be worth while to inspect the record of outgoing calls, on that sheet clipped to the monitor board.

The secretary stood aside while Kallon got through to his assistant. Ken idly glanced at the call sheet. "Remember that Falser notice that was returned by the post office?" the bank man said into the transmitter. "MOVED; LEFT NO



FORWARDING ADDRESS. Well, Falser's moved, all right. No, I don't know where he's gone. He's dead. Suicide, they say. Looks to me like it might have been murder. I'll be back in an hour or so."

His eye traveled down the right-hand column, spotted the initials S. F. three times on the list of the previous day's calls. The number S. F. had called was the same one each time. *University 9-8621.*

When Kallon hung up, Mary Yates was watching him covertly. "You have no right to say a thing like that—"

"Why haven't I?"

"It amounts to an accusation of Mister Nystrom?"

"No, indeed." Kallon's lips compressed in a straight line. "All it amounts to is my private opinion."

Her chin lifted indignantly. "Then you should tell the police why you think so."

She raised her voice, "Lieutenant?"

THE plainclothesman walked over to the partition rail. She inclined her head toward Ken. "This gentleman believes Sherman Falser was murdered!"

The lieutenant's eyebrows rose. "May I ask why, mister?"

Kallon shrugged. "No reason. There doesn't have to be a reason, does there? I just happen to think that a good-looking guy like Falser wouldn't commit suicide in a way that would mess his body up like that and probably give his wife nervous prostration."

"Ah!" The officer leaned over until his face was close to Ken's. "One them amateur sleuths, huh? A criminologist, no less!"

Kallon kept a tight check on his feelings. "I don't pretend to be a detective; I wouldn't know a fingerprint from a *habeas corpus*. And I don't want to. I'm just an ordinary citizen who has a

right to his own personal opinion."

Mary Yates cried: "But if you have any evidence, it's your duty as a citizen to turn it over to the police."

"That's right," the lieutenant agreed. "You better come right down to headquarters." He opened the latch-gate in the railed partition, made a grab for Kallon's arm.

The bank man struck the plainclothesman's hand down, roughly. "I haven't any evidence. I haven't said I had any. If you take me to the police station, that's all you'll get out of me. Except that you'll have the Mammoth Trust on your neck for interfering with one of their employees."

The lieutenant flushed angrily. "I ain't so sure you work for them, anyhow."

Kallon held his brief-case on the top of the railing, opened it. He pulled out his identification card, with the photograph on it. The plainclothesman read it grudgingly:

"Kenneth Kallon, 5 ft. 6 inches, 150 pounds; sandy hair, gray eyes; steel-rimmed glasses. Yeah, I guess that's okay." He tossed the card, contemptuously, back on the brief-case. "Only thing it don't say there is, 'shoots off his mouth too much. One of these days, he'll get his puss in a sling for talkin' out of turn.'"

The bank man's face was white with rage. The lieutenant threw the latch-gate open. "Okay, G-man, run along and brag about how you showed up the dumb cops."

Kallon walked stiffly out to the street, slid into the coupé. At the first drug-store he stopped, found a phone booth, spun the dial to the University number.

A thick guttural answered. "Semish deligadezzen—"

Kallon said, "Who? Who is this?"

"Semish deligadezzen. Whad you vant?"

A delicatessen? That was some help.



Ken tried again. "This the store at the corner of Broadway and a Hundred and Sixty-eighth?"

"No. It is nod. Ve are on Hundred and Eighty-sevend between Amsterdam and Saind Nicolas. Whad we do for you?"

"Never mind," Kallon answered. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

It took him twenty to get uptown, on the express highway. Every minute of the twenty increased his grim resolve to find out what really had happened to Sherman Falser. He had to know how much of the responsibility for the man's death was the Mammoth Trust's and Ken Kallon's.

**K**EN parked on Saint Nicholas, around the corner out of sight. He found that Semish deligadezen was:

**PETER SAMISH**  
Fine Delicatessen  
Imported Groceries      Cold Meats  
Sandwiches

It was a trim-looking store on the ground floor of a five-story apartment. He went inside.

A white-aproned man came toward him, smiling agreeably. "Whad'll it be today, sir?"

Ken took out his wallet. "I was going to work this morning, and I bumped into a fellow, outside your store. He dropped this. I turned around to give it to him, but he was gone. I thought maybe you'd know him."

"Whad's he look like?"

Kallon described Sherman Falser as well as he could. "He must live around here somewhere."

The delicatessen man considered.

"Maybe it'll be Mister Fuller who just moved up in 4B. I ain't saying for sure."

"You're probably right." Kallon

started out. "His wife'll be up there, anyway, I suppose."

"How could I know? She might be. He calls her up here, sometime."

There was an elevator, but Kallon used the stairs. He listened at the door of 4B a minute, but heard nothing. He rang the bell.

A gruff voice inquired: "Who do you want?"

Kallon called: "I was sent by the bank."

The door was opened, cautiously. A bald-headed man in denim shirt and faded blue overalls peered at him suspiciously. A corn-cob pipe was removed from between toothless gums.

"What you selling, bud?"

The bank-man frowned. "Nothing. I just want to see Mrs. Falser."

"You got the wrong address."

"Isn't this the Falsers' apartment?" Ken asked insistently.

"Nope. It's mine. I'm Joe Fuller. You musta made a mistake."

The door began to close, but Kallon knew the man was putting something over on him, and sneering as he did it! On the apartment wall, just inside the door, was a lithographed calendar which advertised a butcher on Vermilion Avenue. The Falsers had lived on Vermilion until day before yesterday!

Kallon stuck his foot over the sill. "What's the idea of kidding me, mister? This is the Falser flat, and I want to talk to Mrs. Falser."

The bald-headed man let the door swing open. He gazed at Kallon calmly while tamping the bowl of his pipe with his left thumb. "You're wrong, bud." His right hand reached into an overall pocket, as if for a match. When he brought the hand up, he held an automatic, its muzzle pointed at Kallon's stomach.

"Maybe you better come inside, dick," the man said.



**K**EN moved, but resentment oiled his tongue. "You've got me all wrong. I'm no detective. I'm not even a reporter."

"That's what they all say, bud." The door closed behind him.

"I don't blame you for protecting Mrs. Falser from annoyance; I can understand she must have had a bad time. But I'm not trying to run her ragged. I just want to tell her she needn't worry about that note at the bank, until she gets . . . on her feet again."

The man who called himself Fuller backed a couple of yards away. "Where'd you get the notion they was anyone here named . . . whatever you called it, gumshoe?"

Kallon's jaw muscles knotted; his eyes blazed. "You're not the man who rented this place; why do you pretend you are?" He braced himself. If the bald-headed man would only come a step closer, maybe Ken could duck the first shot, and grab that evil-looking gun. He wasn't as big as the man with the pistol, by fifty pounds, but Kallon kept himself in trim. Exercises, every morning, in front of the open window; long week-end walks—they might prove helpful, now.

The baldheaded man eyed him suspiciously. "You say I ain't Joe Fuller; and you ain't a shamus. Maybe you're right on both counts, wise guy. But you ain't going to be nothing but a sackful of cold meat in one more minute." His small eyes glittered; the muzzle of the gun angled up—

Kallon flung his body to one side, showing himself out from the wall. The gun coughed. Ken lunged, gripped the man's gun-wrist and twisted. A fist caught him in the mouth; he drove a short blow to the pit of Joe's stomach, then smashed him on the jaw. Joe let go of the gun, jabbed a vicious thumb at Kallon's right eye.

The bank man saw it just in time.

He let his head roll back, and his spectacles clattered on the floor.

Kallon swung his left, and it landed flush on the man's Adam's apple. Joe made a croaking noise; put both hands to his neck. He stumbled back against the opposite wall, sank to his knees, fighting for wind.

Kallon picked up his glasses and got hold of the gun. A tall, bulky-shouldered figure stepped swiftly from the living-room. A milk bottle crashed on Ken's skull. The heavy glass shattered with the force of the blow.

Kallon couldn't see clearly, but he could sense a huge, dark bulk over him. He felt the paralyzing impact of a boot, stamped down ferociously on his left hand. He lifted the muzzle of the automatic; jerked the trigger. The gun said "*Cah!*" but it was scarcely audible over the terrific roaring in Ken's ears. Weight piled on him, crushingly. He wrenched violently to one side; felt the rake of vest buttons across his face as the man fell over onto the floor.

Kallon lay still for a moment, getting his breath, hoping the crescendo of sound in his ears would diminish. He struggled up to his hands and knees, then he used the wall as a guide to stand. He stumbled along it until he came to a bathroom. He ran a basin full of cold water, sloshed it over his head. He used a towel from the rack; went back to the hall.

There, two men sprawled grotesquely, and for a moment, Ken thought they were both dead. Finally Joe stirred, groaning.

Joe opened his eyes, apparently too dazed to focus them. The bank man knelt among the jagged slivers of bottle glass; slipped his hand inside the shirt of the one who had clubbed him. There was no heart beat.

Ken stared at the pistol in his hand. He'd shot this man—killed him! Sure, the thug had tried to kill him; still, the bank man had always hated gun-fighters.



He didn't want to feel that he had to have a weapon to stand up to any man.

He rubbed his aching forehead while staring at the thing the dead slugger had wrapped around the neck of the milk bottle to keep his hand from being cut. It was still there, looped around the splintered fragment clenched in the death grip—a woman's silk stocking.

In the struggle, Ken had forgotten Mrs. Falser. She might still be here, somewhere. If she was—

A faint tapping reached his ears. Irregular, but clearly a signal. Tap, tap, tap! Tap, tap, tap!

He went through the rooms. The furnishings weren't much, but the place was as neat as a pin. There were no rugs anywhere. Maybe she hadn't had time to put them down, after moving.

He opened the closets, but found nothing. He drew a blank on the broom closet in the kitchen, too. The tapping kept up, a little less audibly, now. Maybe it


was someone who had heard the fracas in the hall—that .22 didn't make much racket and this was the noisy hour between five and six, when the kids are home and supper is being rushed—still, the sound of that battle might have attracted attention.

He paused beside the refrigerator in the kitchen. The tapping seemed louder here. He opened the icebox. Bowls and pans covered with oiled silk; jars of preserves and a dish of butter—nothing else. Then he saw the rug-beater. It stood beside the window. Sure; she'd want to make certain they were clean, before she put them down.

He slid the window up. The rugs were there, outside, in a bundle on the fire-escape. And there were heels sticking out of the end of the bundle. Heels that tapped insistently against the metal rungs. . . .

He pulled the rugs off her. She was nearly smothered, with a stocking gag

**You rate high, mister, in her book  
If you've a smooth and well-groomed look!  
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in her mouth and clothesline bonds on wrists and ankles.

He hauled her inside; tore the gag away. She was small, dark and pretty. Her eyes seemed curiously dull.

"You're Mrs. Falser?"

She smiled strangely, holding out her arms. "Sherm, honey," she cooed. "I knew you'd come for me."

### CHAPTER THREE

#### "It'll Only Take Three Minutes"

SHE flung her arms about him, murmuring, "You won't let them hurt me, will you, Sherm?"

Cold sweat trickled down Ken Kallon's spine as he disengaged her arms. "I'm not Sherman," he said gruffly, knowing, before the words were out of his mouth, it was no use. She acted as if she hadn't heard him.

"Hold me, Sherm . . . so they won't ever get me again."

Hair bristled on the back of Kallon's neck. This was a fine mess! If he'd just taken Joe Fuller's word and gone away, quietly, he'd have been on his way to see the fight at the Arena, now, instead of being tangled up here with a dead man, a lad who had done his best to blow a hole in Kallon's stomach, and a crazy woman.

Mrs. Falser was busy at the stove. "You must want your coffee, honey. You'll be all tired out after a hard day like that."

A hard day! Kallon groaned. He wasn't at ease dealing with women, anyway, let alone one whose mind had begun to crack around the edges. Maybe the shock of finding out her husband had been decapitated had been the breaking point. It didn't make much difference—she was as cuckoo as a Swiss clock and Ken couldn't help her one bit. He had those two boys out in the hall to think of.

He put his hands on her shoulders. "Now, listen, lady—"

She gazed up at him, misty-eyed. "Why're you acting so strange, Sherm? Aren't you glad to have me home again?"

"Sure." Kallon rubbed sweat off his forehead. "But I've got to be trotting along."

"Oh, Sherman! You said you were going to stay home tonight."

"Yeah, that's right." How could a man keep from going nuts in a spot like this! "That's right, honey, but—I had to change my plans. I'll be back in a little while."

"Aren't you even going to wait for your coffee?"

"Uh—no," he gritted. "You—you keep it hot for me." He got back to the hall just in time. Joe was staggering to his feet.

"You rat!" the bald man snarled. "You killed Chuck!"

"That's right." Ken's jaw jutted pugnaciously. "Same way I'll drop you, if you don't behave. Turn around! Face the wall!"

Joe uttered a string of oaths. Kallon clipped him over the ear with the barrel of the automatic. "Tone it down, gutter-mouth. There's a lady present."

He went through Joe's pockets. There was a box of .22 cartridges, a corked vial of colorless fluid that smelled like chloroform, two metal drums of surgeon's tape, a dirty handkerchief and sixty-five dollars and eleven cents. He didn't have any papers on him, or any other weapon.

Kallon prodded his prisoner with the muzzle of the gun. "Okey, Joseph. There isn't any telephone here in the apartment, so I can't call the cops. So you and I have to go find one. On your way."

The woman came out of the kitchen, ran after them. She grabbed Kallon's sleeve. "You won't let anything happen, Sherm? You'll come right back, won't you?"



"Yeah, sure." He reached around Joe, got the door open. "You just stay here. Wait for me." He shoved Joe ahead of him, pushed the woman back inside the apartment, and slammed the door.

Maybe it was a lousy trick to leave her in there with a corpse like that, but there wasn't any other way out. He'd have the police there in five minutes. He jabbed the elevator button.

"Don't shift your hands, Joe, even if you get tired. You'll have plenty of time to rest, later."

The car came up. When the door opened. Kallon pushed his prisoner in, without paying too much attention to the gawking operator. The man at the lever was thin and bony; his gaunt face might have been carved out of cheese.

Kallon snapped: "Down!"

"Yes sir? Been some difficulty?"

"Strictly an understatement." Kallon kept his eyes on Joe. "I'm going over to Broadway for a cop—you keep an eye on 4B. Make sure no one goes in or out, huh?"

"Well, I dunno . . . if—"

"Don't 'if' me or 'but' me," Kallon barked. "Do as I tell you. Maybe you'll get a medal."

The door to the ground floor opened. Ken pushed his captive out, followed him quickly. But Kallon hadn't moved entirely out of the elevator before a terrific blow caught him on the back of the head. It sent him reeling to his knees, arms outstretched to keep from falling flat. The man who had operated the elevator pounced on him, cat-like; slugging him with a short length of taped pipe he had produced from his hip pocket.



**K**ALLON wasn't out—he could hear their voices faintly, as if at the other end of a long tunnel. They removed his topcoat, taped his

wrists with the adhesive he'd taken from Joe.

"Nice timing, Smudge," Joe exulted. He knelt over Kallon's body, yanked off his spectacles, threw them on the floor of the car. He slapped a strip of tape over Ken's eyes. "I thought you wasn't going to make it."

"How many times I told you I can't leave that job before five." Smudge was caustic. "But I been here, about a quarter of an hour. I was right outside the door when the shooting started, but there wasn't any sense in buzzing the bell. If you were okay, you didn't need me. If you weren't, I couldn't have gotten in, anyway. So I went down in the basement. I tied up the elevator operator and acted as his sub. Figured it might come in handy."

"That was playing it smart, Smudge. This little jerk got my gun away from me—he killed Chuck. I'm going to go to work on him for that."

"You'll cut your own throat, then. What's the matter with you Joe?" Smudge rapped. "The rest of the blues might drop in here any minute now, to check up on Falser."

"It'll only take three minutes, Smudge. Lemme—"

Smudge snarled, "No! Hear me? We're getting out before we have to shoot our way out. This guy goes with us."

Joe subsided. "Okay, okay. But we better snag that fluff upstairs, too. Shorty, here, untied her; she'll be screeching blue murder if we don't shut her up."

"Why didn't you tell me that at first!" Smudge hoisted Kallon to his feet. They pulled his topcoat over his shoulders again, buttoned it up without putting his arms through the sleeves. No one could tell his hands were bound, now. "All right, half portion. We're scrambling. One squeak out of you and you'll hear the echo in hell!"



The door to the lobby was opened. They hurried across the entrance hall, down the steps. Their car was at the door; they slid Kallon into the rear seat.

As they threw him back against the cushions, Smudge grunted: "Hustle that woman down here, Joe. I'll take care of the dick."

"Sure, pal, sure. Only this lug isn't any dick."

"What was he doing up there in Falser's place then?"

"Said he came from some bank, Smudge. About some loan his outfit had made to Falser."

Smudge climbed into the driver's seat. "A bank man, did you say?" He chuckled. "Now, that's almost too good to be true. We've been looking for a fall guy, Joe. Here we've got one made to order."

Joe guffawed. "I catch. We set him up so he goes out—same way Falser did!"



**K**ALLON tried to get the picture clear in his head, but the seething rage inside him made it difficult to think. It was plain enough these two who'd captured him were involved in Falser's death; they'd trailed the cutter home from work, probably the previous night. Either the dead man had been in with them on a deal to steal the *planchette* paper and had double-crossed them, or else they'd made it look as if Falser was the thief, and then arranged his death so it would appear to be suicide. On the other hand, maybe the paper company employee hadn't been involved at all, but had suspected the thief. If he'd told his wife about it, that might explain Joe's anxiety to put her out of the way.

The widow obviously didn't offer any resistance to Joe when he led her to the

car. Kallon could hear her saying:

"You're not going to hurt me again, are you? You'll take me to Sherman, won't you?"

Joe chortled. "You're going to meet Sherm, all right."

Kallon strained desperately against his bonds. Going to meet her husband! In the cemetery, that's what Joe meant. But there was something else on Kallon's mind: *Where had he heard Joe's voice before?* It sounded like someone he knew!

The woman and Joe got in on either side of Kallon. The motor roared; the car rolled away.

The bank man strained to distinguish sounds which might indicate their course, but all he could figure out was that they were driving under an elevated, then over a bridge. Mrs. Falser didn't help much, with her babbling.

"Sherm, darling, they aren't going to kidnap me again, are they? You won't let them do that, will you?"

Apparently the woman was too much off-center to understand that Kallon was a prisoner, too.

"It's all right, honey," he muttered.

Kidnap her *again!* That cleared up a thing or two. This gang must have snatched Falser's wife; forced the head cutter to steal that case of *planchette*. When they'd released her, Falser must have figured the only chance he had to prevent a repetition of the kidnapping would be to move where they couldn't locate his home. It began to make a little sense, now. That might be why the cutter had borrowed the hundred dollars—perhaps he had rented a truck he could drive himself, so no one could trace him through a moving company. But these two must have kept hounding him, probably to have him spirit away another case of the bank-note paper out of the Patentex plant.

"Sherm, honey, you said you wouldn't let them take me away again."



At Kallon's left, Joe chuckled. "She's looney. She thinks the half-pint's her hubby." He said delightedly, "That gives me an idea, pal."

Smudge chortled, "I'm way ahead of you. It would be better than having her croak, wouldn't it?"

Ken's blood seethed. What the devil were they talking about? Some scheme to tie him up to this crazy woman, involve him in this butcher business of theirs? He couldn't dope it out. The woman's arms around his neck, her lips against his cheek didn't help matters.

"Sherm, darling, you're so cold to me. . . ."

Cold! Kallon's rage was at fever-pitch. He wrestled fiercely against the restraining tape, but Joe cracked his kneecap with the butt of the pistol.

"Quiet, Rollo. Else I'll let you feel a slug."

Kallon forced himself to sit rigidly. Again that haunting recollection of Joe's voice. He remembered it, and yet he didn't. If he could only place it. . . .

The car stopped. Smudge came around to the rear.

"You take her, Joe; I'll handle this dope." Kallon was seized by the shoulder, yanked out of the car; rushed into a house that smelled queer and musty. A heavy door creaked shut behind them.

A gun muzzle rammed into Ken's back. "Up those stairs, runt."

**K**ALLON went up thickly carpeted steps. He was shoved over a threshold, fell headlong with a jarring shock that made his ears ring. But he had no trouble making out what Smudge was saying.

"Rush that stuff out of here. Leave some of those sheets of specimen bonds lying around. Spill a little water on 'em so they'll look like they been spoiled. Tear up a couple of those old-issue certificates—throw 'em up on the shelf in

the closet. When the John Laws find his body, they'll think it was this bank-boy who was making queeries. They'll figure he decided the jig was up and pushed the button on himself. With that nutsy dame blubbering around here the way she is, it'll be a cinch for them to dope out this lad was playing around with her. And that her hubby did the Dutch when he found out."

Joe sniggered. "By the time they're tamping dirt on him, we'll be out on the coast shoving another little stack of certificates across the counter, huh?"

There was the sound of a blow. Joe grunted with pain; Smudge's voice was steely.

"Keep that ugly mouth closed!"

"What difference's it make? The runt won't be able to repeat anything, and the dame—"

"Suppose she snaps out of it, all of a sudden!"

Joe whined, "Maybe we oughta knock her off, too."

"Yeah? Maybe you oughta stick to con work and let me do the brain stuff. If the dame is still alive, maybe *she* could have killed this cluck they're going to find dead. Now, get going! Hustle the stuff out of those closets. We don't want anything left so they can tail us."

Doors banged; heavy feet pounded up and down the stairs.

The woman was pushed, babbling, into the room with Kallon. She knelt beside him, mumbled affectionate incoherencies into the helpless bank man's ears. He struggled awkwardly to his knees, lumbered to his feet, moved uncertainly around the room, bumping into the sharp edges of the furniture.

He wondered how long his two captors had been getting away with forging phoney securities; and the thought of crackling sheets of paper printed in light green and gold suddenly rang a bell in the back of Kallon's brain. *He knew who*



*Joe was, now!* Despite that disguise of overalls and corncob pipe, the identity of the voice came back to him. Joe was J. C. Vanning, a recent customer of the Mammoth Trust Company! This thug had been posing as a western promoter—an individual who strolled casually into the Mammoth Trust with a portfolio of gilt-edged securities, negotiated a sizeable cash loan and afterwards took one of the vice-presidents to lunch.

There was scant resemblance between the dapper, gray-haired man with the toothy smile Ken had admired in the bank, and this baldheaded, hollow-gummed individual who had so nearly murdered Kallon at the Falser's apartment. Still, the absence of a toupe, the removal of false-teeth and a judicious change of clothing could accomplish such a transformation, even to the man's voice.

Kallon was positive he was right. J. C. Vanning's rock-ribbed shares in industrial companies, railroads and oil corporations—certificates on which huge sums had been borrowed from Mammoth—were all fakes. From that case of *planchette*, stolen only forty-eight hours ago, more counterfeit securities could be produced.

Kallon followed the wall around, with his shoulder, trying to get a rough idea of the room into which he and the woman had been thrown. He bumped against a bed, a bureau, a chest of drawers. He had reached the window when Vanning came back into the room.

"No dice, shorty," the man laughed harshly. "If you tried to dive out that window, you'd only knock your brains out. I'll show you an easier way."

Kallon kicked savagely in Vanning's direction. He felt his shoe sink into flesh. Vanning howled, clubbing with his gun. Ken gasped with the pain that lanced through every nerve in his body. He was hurled backward, on the bed.

From below, Smudge called, "See you later, Joe. Don't forget what I told you. Don't mark him up. It's got to look like he did it himself."

"Okay, Smudge."

A weight descended crushingly on Kallon's legs. A knee drove deep into his stomach.

Faintly, he could hear Mrs. Falser moaning, "Don't hurt my Sherman!"

Ken's overcoat was ripped open; cold metal was shoved against his palm—the butt of a gun! His index finger was forced through a trigger-guard.

He was going to be made to shoot himself!



THE barrel of the gun was twisted up steadily, toward Kallon's temple. He rolled away from it, had the wind knocked out of him with a vicious knee. His muscles were nearly paralyzed. He fought bitterly for breath, but managed to put enough strength into the tug of his wrists to keep the gun from being pointed at his head. He tried to roll over on his stomach, but couldn't escape that dead weight on his lower limbs.

Joe Vanning kept muttering, "What's the use of battling, punk? You're going to get it. Why not take it the easy way?"

Ken's teeth bit through his lip in the fierce intensity of his fury. But Joe's remark gave him an idea! He uttered a fearful groan, letting his arms go limp for the fraction of a second. The force Vanning was putting into his wrist-hold on the gun twisted it clear around, past Ken's head, until the barrel pointed down into the bed. Then the bank man jerked, spasmodically, gripping the gun-butt with every ounce of strength his fingers possessed. Joe didn't let go, but the barrel slipped partway through his grasp. His fist slid out over the end of the muzzle.



In that instant, Kallon fired. He pulled the trigger again and again. Only the first shot clipped Joe's hand, but it ought to slow him up a little.

Mrs. Falser whimpered, somewhere across the room. Ken swung his bound wrists up and out, up and down like a hammer. The steel barrel connected with bone; the weight on Kallon's legs lightened.

He wrenched himself away, landed, half-dazed, on the floor. He struggled to get his hands underneath him, floundered against a chair. Then Vanning was on him.

Kallon wallowed to his knees, got the fingers of his left hand around the leg of the chair. Now he had a weapon he could handle without being afraid of killing the woman, yet he was scarcely conscious of what he was doing.

He swung the chair up and around in a whistling arc. It connected. Vanning screamed. The chair splintered, and Kallon swung what was left, putting every ounce of his exercise-hardened body behind the blow. This time, the smashed chair was torn from his grasp, and pin-wheels exploded before his sightless eyes.

Kallon made one last effort. He launched himself forward from his knees, caught hold of Vanning's legs, and brought him to the floor.

A thin, hot wire touched the side of Ken's neck—a knife! He knew that the next time that blade struck, Vanning wouldn't need to bother with the chair anymore.

The bank-man tried the longshore trick—he butted with all the bull-like strength of his torso. The top of his head caught Vanning under the chin. There was a sharp click of teeth; the thud of a body falling.

Dazed, Kallon groped blindly on the floor. He touched the haft of the knife; the blade was buried deep under Vanning's left armpit.

His fingers fumbled with Joe's throat, but found no pulse. The man was dead.

Mrs. Falser whispered, "You've got to let them have the paper, Sherm. If you don't, they'll kill me. It'll be all right with Nystrom—you can fix it with him, afterward. Only let them have the paper, now. I don't want to die, Sherm."

Kallon weaved blindly to his feet, leaned against the wall. The floor pitched beneath him, like a ship's deck at sea. The front of his shirt was wet. He must be losing blood pretty fast. He'd have to do something pretty quick or there'd be two dead men lying here on the floor.

Then he realized he still held the knife. He put the blade to the corner of his right eye, and succeeded in working the tape loose. He gritted his teeth, caught hold of the adhesive, and wrenched.

Tears streamed over his face, but he could see, after a fashion. He could make out the long, expensively-furnished bedroom, the crumpled figure of Joe Vanning; the woman crouched beside the bed, her head buried in her arms.

She was murmuring, "Let them have it, Sherm. Nystrom would want you to. Please let them have the case of paper."

Kallon stumbled, weak-kneed, out to the hall, then down the wide staircase to the diningroom. There was a carafe of brandy on the sideboard. He let blazing fluid trickle down his throat; he splashed searing liquor in the wound on his neck. Then he wedged the knife, blade up, in a silver drawer and sawed at the tape which bound his wrists.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Too Many Women

**I**T TOOK him ten minutes to get his wrists free. His first intention was to call the police, but the more he considered it, the less he liked it. He could explain Vanning's body, all right,



but it would take a lot of talking to straighten out hard-boiled homicide plainclothesmen when it came to explaining Mrs. Falser. She'd probably grab him around the neck; mumble sweet nothings at him just when he was telling them how he'd never seen her, up to an hour or so ago. Eventually, they'd find out she was crazy as a bat, but by that time, they'd have taken Ken into custody. He wouldn't care for that; the Mammouth Trust would care even less.

What the bank officials might think concerned him little; he half hoped they'd fire him, after this mixup, anyway. Then he could get into some work he could really put his heart into. But there was still an account to be settled with Smudge. *Planchette* or no *planchette*, Ken wasn't going to let any waxy-faced rat put him in a spot like this, without paying for it. He'd had more than his bellyful of doing a detective's work on a loan-clerk's pay, but he'd have one more crack at rounding up Smudge.

It was plain enough that the dead Vanning and his partner hadn't rented this house—it was too expensively furnished. The front door had been boarded up; shades were drawn; the furniture covered with shroud-like coverings. The place was somebody's town house, closed for the summer.

Smudge and Joe must have broken in to use it as a headquarters. Yet, there couldn't have been much equipment here. There hadn't been time to remove presses, engraving cameras, all the heavy paraphernalia counterfeiters required.

Kallon wandered aimlessly through the magnificent livingroom, into a library walled with books. He took out a volume. On the flyleaf was written:

*Louis T. Gallatin,  
New York, 1924*

Gallatin! The Exchange Banknote President! How did he fit into this crazy jig-saw puzzle?

Kallon decided to let the police figure that out—after he put in his anonymous phone call to notify them the Falser woman was here.

Upstairs, in the bathroom, Ken found more recent signs of occupancy. On the windowsill, he discovered half a dozen thin strips of metal and a slender file wrapped in a still-moist cloth. On a radiator lay a folded length of newspaper, with a long, narrow, damp mark on it. The paper bore yesterday's date. From the old-fashioned rag rug, in front of the washbowl, he picked up a half-dozen microscopic slivers of paper.

He examined his face in the medicine cabinet mirror. The lids of both eyes had lost some skin; his nose was swollen; there were blue lumps and scratches on both sides of his jaw. The slash on his neck had stopped bleeding, but one side of his shirt-front seemed to be soaked with port wine.

He scowled fiercely at his reflection, then peered more closely at the mirror. On its surface was a curiously blurred surface about ten inches square. He nodded grimly, to himself. This settled it—

There was a crash from the bedroom! He ran. Mrs. Falser, her hair disheveled, her clothing disarranged, struggled to climb through the cracked glass of the bureau mirror.

He grabbed her around the waist, while she shrieked with joy:

"Sherman . . . Sherm, honey! I thought you'd gone. I thought you'd left me. I don't want to live if you leave me." She clung to him so tightly he couldn't break away without using force.

"Now, now, honey, steady down . . . I'm all right . . . don't get excited now. . . ."

What could he do with this case of screaming meemies? He'd intended to call the cops, leave her here and clear out before the police came. But he didn't dare do that now. She might kill her-



self, diving out a back window or slashing herself on that busted mirror! He'd have to tie her up.

It was the toughest job he'd ever faced in his life. Not that she fought him, while he used a bunch of Gallatin's neckties from the bureau drawer. All she did was cling to him and murmur, "They won't hurt me now, will they, Sherm? You won't let them hurt me any more."

He lifted her into a chair; fastened her ankles to the chair-legs. "Nobody's going to hurt you . . . honey. You'll be all right. Just sit right there."

He hurried downstairs to the phone. As he reached for the receiver, the bell jangled sharply. Force of habit made him lift the instrument to his ear. "H'lo?"

"Hey, Joe!" It was Smudge's voice.

Kallon imitated the dead man's voice as well as he could. "Yuh, Smudge?"

"You fix that boy scout?"

"Sure," Ken growled.

"What's the matter! Your voice sounds screwy!"

"Teeth," the bank man mumbled. "He hit me—"

"Prob'ly serves you right. Anyway, you better beat it right up here to the plant; there's going to be trouble."

"That right?" Plant? Where was Smudge talking from! And what about!

"Yeah. Gallatin just called Patentex, asked Nystrom to get up here in a hurry. You better bring the car around. Park up by the corner. Keep an eye open. If I need the bus, I'll be in a rush."

"Okay, Smudge." Kallon hung up.

Fix the boy scout, would they! And there was going to be trouble, eh. . . .

Kallon decided grimly that he'd do his best to make *that* prophecy come true!

HE DIDN'T bother to call the police, but he did use the phone book. He found the Exchange Bank Note Company in the Bronx directory, on Mitchell Boulevard. Then he sprinted up the stairs.

The woman whimpered unintelligibly. What a help she'd have been, if her gray matter hadn't been scrambled!

Kallon knelt beside Vanning's corpse. The false teeth, which the pseudo-promoter must have slipped in when he got in the car, back there on a Hundred and Eighty-seventh Street, were out of place, now. Ken searched the dead man's pockets, found an auto key attached to a miniature license tag. Now, if he could locate the car!

There was the faint sound of sobbing from upstairs when he let himself out the back door, into the alley beside the big, white-stone house. It was dusk now; nobody noticed him as he moved along the street. There were three cars, parked by the curb. One was a sleek limousine, with a chauffeur dozing behind the wheel. Another was an old heap that must have been handed down from generation to generation. The third was a new, light sedan. He went toward it. The key worked in the door.

He drove toward the bridge across the Harlem, wondering what sort of trouble Smudge had been so concerned about? Why was Nystrom being called to Gallatin's place of business? Was Ken's guess about the individual behind this whole mad whirl of murder, the right one? He got the car up to fifty, zoomed around trolleys and busses like a fire engine with the right of way. . . .

The long, low plant of the Exchange Bank Note Corporation was lighted like

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a Christmas tree; they were on a night shift, that was obvious. Kallon parked the car near the corner, but locked the doors, and put the key in his pocket.

A watchman stopped him at the entrance.

Ken said, "Mister Nystrom, of Patent Paper, inside yet?"

The watchman regarded him ominously. "Whether he is or whether he ain't, *you ain't goin' in.*"

Kallon's jaw muscles twitched. "I've got to see him."

"Friend, I got orders to let nobody—"

"I can identify myself. Kallon, Mammoth Trust."

In the corridor, beyond the guard, Ken saw a shirt-sleeved man dangling a large sheet of stiff paper. "There's a man who can identify me!" Kallon pointed.

The watchman turned for the fraction of a second, to see who the bank man was indicating. Ken stooped and ran past the guardian of the door.

"Here, you, come back here!"

Kallon didn't stop; he sprinted up to the man in the eyeshade; seized his shirt-sleeve.

"Didn't count on seeing me again, did you, Smudge?"

The waxy-faced man wrenched free and raced down the corridor. Kallon expected, momentarily, to feel the shock of a bullet from the watchman's pistol as he took up the pursuit.

Smudge tore around the corner of the corridor, yanked open a paneled oaken door, and lunged through it. Ken dived after him.

The shirt-sleeved man had sprawled half across a huge director's table, where three people sat open-mouthed with astonishment. A tall, distinguished man with curly white hair and a pointed Van Dyke, was in the high-backed chairman's chair. On one side of him sat Nystrom; on the other, Mary Yates.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the one Kal-

lon didn't know. "What's going on? Dario, what's this all about?"

Smudge tried to appear frightened, but there was only fury in the eyes that glared at Ken. "A holdup, I guess, Mister Gallatin. This man got past the watchman and came after me."

"That's true, Mister Gallatin," the guard roared. "I'll take him out and turn him over to the police."

Nystrom stood up. "Wait a moment. I know this man."

Gallatin exclaimed, "What!"

Mary Yates cried, "He's Kallon, from the Mammoth Trust."

The man Gallatin had called Dario sidled toward the door. Kallon said sharply: "If you ever want to see that case of *planchette*, don't let that man get away."

The watchman stared from Dario to Gallatin and back again, and his gun wagged at the shirt-sleeved man. "Take it easy. Stay put a minute."

Gallatin barked: "You must be insane, young man. Charley Dario's been our press-room foreman for five years."

"He's had plenty of time to run off phoney stocks and bonds, then. On your own presses—your own inks and paper."

Dario laughed harshly. "I don't know who this little squirt is, Mister Gallatin, but I'm not going to stand here and let him make an accusation like that. I'll break him in two."

Nystrom interrupted, "Let's hear what the fellow has to say about our *planchette*, Dario."

Kallon rested both hands flat on the directors' table. "I say the paper is right here, under your noses!"



GALLATIN'S face got very red. "You mean to tell me that case we got was intact?"

"No," Kallon said calmly. "I guess



Falser switched the *planchette*, down at Patentex, all right. I suppose he substituted bond paper in place of your bank-note stock. But you'll probably find a case of bond paper was shipped up here, about that same time."

Mary Yates nodded. "That's right, Mister Gallatin."

"Chances are, nobody's bothered to check on the bond paper," Kallon went on. "Wouldn't be worth it. But the *planchette* was in that case, wasn't it, Dario?"

Smudge — Dario cursed bitterly. "What is this, a plot for a movie?"

"Might be," Ken admitted. "But the idea was worth more to you and the crowd you worked with than the biggest picture ever made. You had the *planchette* right here in the plant where you could use the company's own inks and the genuine plates for engraving stocks and bonds!"

Nystrom shook his head in disbelief. "Then if it's still here—"

"Sure, it's still here," Ken explained. "Remember you told me that, at the factory, they check over every sheet, as if it was gold-leaf? Well, you do the same here, don't you, Mister Gallatin?"

The white-haired president nodded in amazement.

"That's what I thought. Only you wouldn't have any record of the *planchette* that came in the bond paper case. Smudge, there, would take care of that. So he could hand out a few sheets extra on every job he passed out to the printers. And the extra sheets—the ones you didn't have any record of—those went out of your plant, probably next to Dario's undershirt. He could stop off in the wash-room and slide a few hundred thousand dollars worth of securities out of sight in no time.

"And all the time, the number of your finished sheets would check with the *planchette* you had a record of."

Ken wiped his forehead. "Dario, here,

had a side-kick, Joe Vanning. They, and the head of the outfit who worked with them, had their headquarters in your house, down on East Eighty-ninth, Mister Gallatin."

The head of the bank-note concern paled. "Why would they choose *my* home?"

Kallon shrugged. "Maybe because Dario knew your family was away and that you were living at a hotel. Possibly they figured that if there should be any investigation, no one would suspect anything wrong if a few stray sheets of securities were found around your house."

Gallatin sank back, dazed.

Kallon proceeded. "Dario produced the securities, but Vanning was the one who pretended to be a financial big shot. He went around to banks, presented the phoney stocks, and got big cash loans on them. He stuck Mammoth for one."

Mary Yates exclaimed, "But certificates like that wouldn't be counterfeits; not if they were printed on the real paper, from the original plates—"

"Except for the serial numbers," Kallon pointed out. "I imagine Dario could have found a way to get around them. Is that right, Smudge?"

Dario muttered, "Wait'll you try to prove it!"

"There'll be enough of your fingerprints down at Mister Gallatin's to send you to the chair a dozen times. And they'll find the *planchette* here, now that they know where to look. You and Vanning had a perfect setup, if you could get your hands on paper that was the real McCoy."

Kallon turned to Nystrom and his secretary. "You don't need to talk; we'll get all we want from your pals."

Mary Yates exclaimed, "Mister Nystrom wouldn't ever have done a thing like that!"

Nystrom's eyes bugged out. "They got



that paper from Falser, you said."

"Sure," Kallon agreed. "They kidnapped your head cutter's wife and held her until they made Falser switch the stock in those cases. But somebody had to tip them off to the fact that Falser was in love with his wife and would probably do anything to get her free from kidnapers. That same somebody filed a key so Falser could unlock the *planchette* box after the lead cover had been cut open, too. I'm not positive Falser knew who it was, but I think he did. I know!"

FOR the space of a breath, the room was deathly silent. Then Nystrom muttered, "You'll have trouble getting a conviction."

"I would," Kallon said, "if I were trying to convict you. But I've plenty of proof against your secretary!"

Mary Yates gasped, "Do you realize what you're saying?"

Kallon drawled, "I'm saying that you siced Dario and Vanning onto Falser; kidnapped his wife; scared Falser so he agreed to do what Dario told him to, about the *planchette*. I'm saying you were afraid Falser would suspect you and warn Mister Nystrom, so when you found out your manager had called in the police, you went into the cutting room, stunned Falser, shoved his head under the cutting blade and put his foot on the treadle. Then you screamed and pretended it was suicide."

Smudge snarled, "You're framing it up. I never knew this dame in my life."

"You're a liar," Kallon insisted mildly. "Miss Yates was with you in Mister Gallatin's house. How often she was with you, I don't know, but I can guess. She must have gone there direct from Patentex a good many times, because there were little slivers of paper from the

cutting room—stuff that stuck to her skirt—on the rug in the bathroom."

Mary Yates' face went chalk-white. "You can't trap me that way."

"You trapped yourself. When you used that newspaper on top of the radiator in Mister Gallatin's house to dry those stockings you washed out. You had to stand so close to the machine, to push Falser's head down under the blade after he was stunned, blood got on your shoes and stockings. You were afraid to throw them away, so you washed the hosiery when you got to Gallatin's for the rendezvous with your partners. You scrubbed the shoes with one of your handkerchiefs, then dried it by pasting it on the medicine chest mirror in the bathroom."

She appealed to Nystrom. "Can't you do something, Mister Nystrom!"

The manager turned his back. Gallatin shook himself like a man emerging from a cold water dive. "There doesn't seem to be much to do, Miss Yates. Except to turn you and Dario over—"

The foreman stooped suddenly, ducked under the grasp of the watchman, and dived for a window.

There was a roar from the guard's gun, a burst of splintering glass, and a thickening thud from the alley below. Mary Yates rushed to the window.

The watchman pulled her back. "He was dead before he left the sill," he said simply.

Then Kallon had to fight off the girl, who came at him like a demon. Gallatin and the guard pulled her away.

"Keep her away from me," Kallon said laboriously. "I've been fighting off women all evening." He walked unsteadily to the door. "If there's a reward for the return of that *planchette*, you better give it to Falser's widow. She's going to need it."



STEVE BANNON noticed her first because there was gold in her hair and her eyes were the proper shade of green to complement it to finest advantage. He was tired of reading about Restwood vs. Carpenter; he was tired of the gloomy darkness outside the train windows. When the girl with the golden hair got on, she afforded Steve something more to look at than the fat, sleeping man across the aisle and the thin, bored man up ahead.

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## AM I THE CORPSE'S KEEPER?

By  
FRANCIS K. ALLAN

*Steve Brannon thought that the blonde girl on the train with him was exactly the kind of person he'd always wanted to meet—until she presented him with a corpse and framed him for an outlandish murder!*

---

The girl had no luggage. She walked slowly down the aisle to a seat just opposite the fat man. At first Steve couldn't see her face fully, then she turned around, glancing in the fat man's direction. He was asleep, but she kept staring at him in a hard, strange way, as though her eyes were locked in some hypnotic embrace.

Self-consciously she woke; her glance



Steve swept down with his hands, forcing the heavy window closed.



darted to Steve, then to the thin, dark fellow far down the coach.

The thin man rose and sifted out the crease in his pants. He moved down the aisle until he reached the girl's seat.

"Do you have a match?" Steve heard him ask, and thought it odd that the fellow chose to ask the girl. The girl was pretty, of course, but . . .

"I think so," she answered. There was a strange, hesitant thickness to her voice. She searched in her purse. The man bent down, and his eyes locked, questioningly, with the girl's. She nodded yes.

The lean man straightened and moved on toward the smoking compartment. Steve had a fleeting premonition that the man had wanted no match, that the man knew the girl.

The fat man slept on, snoring faintly, his pudgy hands closed comfortably across his stomach.

The rails clicked on; the whistle moaned ahead. Lights of a distant farmhouse wandered through the blackness, then were lost as the train sped on. The girl rose and came down the aisle, past Steve, headed for the smoker.

As she passed, he noted her more carefully. Her brown eyes were hollowed and dark, her lips were set. They seemed too tense somehow—as though they feared to tremble or to speak.

She's afraid! The thought slipped into Steve's head as the girl's footsteps faded. He started to turn, to look after her; and had to resist an impulse to follow her.

"I'm a fool," he muttered to himself. "I'll be glad when I get off."

At last the lean man returned, leaving the girl alone in the smoker. Steve decided he needed a cigarette.

**S**HE looked up when he entered, then back again to the window; he saw her swallow heavily. Then she turned to face him, and she spoke, with that huskiness still in her voice.

"Do—do you have a knife—a pocket knife I can borrow, please?"

"Huh? Oh. . . . knife." He came alert; his hand searched through his pockets and brought out an initialed knife. He pressed the release, and the blade sprang out.

As she took it, he noticed that she wore gloves. Funny—smoking and wearing gloves. . . .

"I'll bring it right back," she promised quickly. Her eyes slipped down quickly to the fresh cigarette in his fingers. It seemed as if she were estimating the length of it.

She smiled wanly at him and hurried out.

Steve stared at the door which closed behind her. Why did she want a knife? he wondered. And then the other thought returned: That girl's afraid of something. But this time, Steve couldn't shrug it away.

It was no more than a half minute until she returned. For one suspended moment she stood before him, her cheeks pale save for two vivid red spots burning through the ivory of her skin. Her throat moved once as she brought the words from inside.

"I—I'm awfully sorry, but I—when I passed between the coaches, I dropped the knife. It—it fell, under the train. . . ."

Steve wasn't a lawyer for nothing—he knew that she was lying, and poorly. But a lie always had a reason. He nodded slightly. "Don't worry about it. It wasn't much good anyway."

The girl went back to the coach, and he remained to finish his cigarette. At last he rose and returned to his seat. The fat man was still asleep. At the far end of the car, the thin man was peering intently out the window. The girl had changed her seat until now she waited by the exit. She sat very still, her fingers locked together; her face averted.

Steve frowned. Too many little things



kept picking at his mind; loose strands in a strange mosaic. For as he'd passed between the cars, he'd noticed one thing; there was no crack through which a knife could drop!

Where was the knife then? And why had the girl lied?

He studied her taut face a while, then his eyes wandered aimlessly to the old man across the aisle. The man's mouth was still open.

The eyes were open, too—staring straight ahead. No more snores issued from the man's throat. The fat hands that had been locked comfortably across his stomach were half-lifted, frozen in an unfinished grasp.

The utter stillness of the man sent a tremor down Steve's spine. He could detect no sign of breathing, no movement at all.

The clanking of the brake-blocks reminded Steve that the train was slowing. A few dim lights wandered by: they were entering another small town. Not much of a place, he decided, turning from the window.

And then, quite abruptly, he realized that the thin, dark man was gone. Steve

glanced around—and the girl was gone too! Only himself and the fat man remained in the car.

The fat man still did not move nor breathe. Then Steve noticed the other's white shirt—and the slow-spreading blot of darkness that was growing there, Blood?

Without thinking of what he did, Steve pulled himself forward, and leaned across the aisle.

"I beg your pardon," he said testingly. There was no answer. His hand reached out, touching the other's shoulder. Gently he shook the still figure.

The man's coat shifted open. There, embedded in his chest, was Steve's knife. The handle was turned down so the coat had folded across it. The man was dead!

SOUNDS drained away. Steve could only stare at his knife; at his initials engraved there on the handle. And he remembered the girl's words:

"Do you have a knife I can borrow?"

"No—no—she didn't," he whispered

The advertisement is enclosed in a decorative, wavy border. It features three panels at the top illustrating the shaving process:
 

- ZIP!**: A man is shaving his cheek with a safety razor.
- PIP!**: A woman is shaving the man's neck.
- LIP!**: The man is shaving his upper lip.

 Below these panels is a product shot of a Probak Junior Blades pack. The pack is labeled "20 PROBAC JUNIOR BLADES" and "MADE IN U.S.A.". A circular badge on the left of the pack says "20 FOR 25¢" and "4 FOR 10¢". At the bottom of the pack, it says "RECEPTACLE FOR USED BLADES INSIDE!". To the right of the product shot, the text reads:
 

**Shaving's A Breeze With  
PROBAC Jr. Blades . . .  
Twenty For Only A Quarter!**



blankly. Yet behind the protest was the memory of her eyes, terrified and shifting.

The train jerked, moving slowly forward. The lights of the sleepy town began to pull away. The door at the far end of the coach opened and the conductor stood there, fumbling with his tickets.

Fear, crystal sharp, woke in Steve's heart. In the split moment he recalled his fingers, opening and handing the girl the knife; he remembered her hands—gloved. He thought of the prints and the initials on this death weapon.

And he was alone in the car!

The conductor was still studying his tickets, and the train was gathering speed, moving rapidly away from the town that held, somewhere, a girl who had murdered the fat man, and who left Steve to wait with the corpse.

As quietly as his frantic muscles would permit Steve rose and moved toward the opposite door and out between the coaches. His hands worked furiously with the closed door. It creaked open. He gauged the speed and leaned out, feeling the rush of cold wind go past him. Then he leaped.

With a jarring smash, he plunged down an embankment and rolled to the bottom. The sounds of the train faded; the lights disappeared in the darkness. For a moment he felt a vast sense of relief, of escape—until he remembered that his brief-case was still on the train. That and the knife were enough to hang him!

"I've got to find her. I've got to find that girl," he whispered desperately. "They'll have me nailed for murder before the train hits the next town."

He pulled himself up, feeling the bite of his bruised muscles. Laboriously he worked his way from the ditch, left the track and cut across the plowed fields toward the lights of the little town.

At the bottom of the one main block he stopped. A light burned in a filling station; another lit the boarded sign of The

Palace Hotel. Further on, a neon beer sign glowed in a drug-store window. There was no movement on the dark street.

A square of yellow light appeared in one hotel window. He heard the rasp of the frame as the window was opened. There, framed in the light, was the girl with the golden hair. She loosened the screen, leaned out. Steve heard her whistle softly.

There was an answering whistle, and from the dark shadows of the street, the figure of the lean, dark man appeared. He crossed to the side of the hotel and blended once more with the darkness.

Steve began to move. Flattening himself against the walls of the buildings, he crept toward the hotel. He stopped. A shadow was moving up the fire escape of the building; moving toward that window from which the girl had signaled. Silently, Steve drew nearer. He saw the shadow stop just beyond the square of yellow light.

"Turn out the light!" The thin man whispered sharply to the girl.

The hotel room went dark. Accustomed now to the darkness, Steve saw the shadow duck into the opening. He heard the shade roll down. Then the light came on again inside, making only a border now around the edge.

He worked his way into the darkness, and found the base of the fire escape. Quietly he leaped, grasping the lowest rung. He pulled himself up and went to the second floor, toward the crack of light in the window. There he waited, tense and unbreathing, his ears straining for sounds.

"I—I don't believe you anymore," he heard the girl's husky voice saying. "You didn't say what you were going to do. You just said get a knife. You only said you were going—"

"Sure, that was what I said." A flat whisper answered her.



There was a silence, broken only by the measured click of the girl's heels. Steve edged nearer to the crack and peered into the narrow slit. Once the girl passed, just before him.

"I don't believe you!" she burst out again, her voice rising sharply.

"Shut up," the lean man grated. Steve heard heavier steps—the man moving toward the girl.

"You want to wake up the whole hotel?" the thin man asked. "You'll be smart to keep quiet yourself, now. When they get that dumb bird on the train, he's going to remember what you looked like."

"I don't care!" she sobbed suddenly. "I—I want to see what was in Morgan's pocket! You said you'd get it. You said—"

"And I got it," the man answered quietly. He waited a moment. "And now you want to see?" he said; ironically, Steve thought.

"Yes!"

"Okay. Take a look." There was the rustle of paper being unfolded, then another silence.

"Do you get it?" the man asked softly.

"But this—this says—Oh!" The girl's breath drained away.

"You get it," the man supplied sarcastically. "The fat boy you put the finger on had the dope to get your old man sprung!"

**T**HE girl said, "You killed him so he wouldn't— You lied to me about—" Again she sobbed. "I'm going in and tell them! I don't care what they do to me about getting the knife. I'm going to show them this paper!"

"You're not going anywhere!"

"I will! I—"

There was a clatter of heels, then a shuffle of heavier weight. Steve heard the girl choking; she wasn't moving anymore.

"Shut up and keep still," the man or-

dered tensely. "You're clear on the train job if you'll keep your mouth shut. If anything goes wrong, the boys will give us an alibi."

He laughed harshly, sneeringly. "You see," he said, "if your father got out, I might have to explain what I've been doing with the dough he left with me. I think it's best for him to do his stretch. I wouldn't like it if you were to try to gum things up for me. See." He waited a pointed moment before he added, "Maybe my boys would forget about a nice abili for where you were tonight if you don't play ball."

"I don't care! I don't care—"

"If they stuck you for murdering Morgan, you might care a little maybe. And they just might do that." The quiet flow of words paused, then moved smoothly along.

"If you'll look in your purse, you won't find your handkerchief, because it's back in the women's rest room on that train. It's got a little of Morgan's blood on it, where maybe you stabbed him and wiped your hands. There's a couple of your hairpins in Morgan's lap, where maybe you bent over and dropped them when you slipped in the knife. When they find those things, and when that bird keeps telling his story about the blonde who borrowed his knife, they'll start wondering.

"Figure it out—your old man's in and you're out. Start squawking, and you're both in. Keep still, and the guy on the train takes the rap."

"I don't care," the girl repeated slowly. "I'm going to tell. I'll make somebody believe me. If Morgan knew my father wasn't guilty, then somebody else knows too. Maybe—" Her voice rose suddenly. "Maybe Morgan made some other copies of the confession. You don't have those! We'll find them! I'll find this—this man who says he killed Rinski. If he confessed once, he'll con-

*(Continued on page 112)*





# BEWARE



*Gambler Tom Kincaid and Matt Durkin, his little, dapper partner, went aboard the Eyrie to get the goods on their nemesis, the crime-crazed ex-banker, George Grey. They found instead a poker game played in blood, a gangster bullet-trap and a woman not too proud to kill.*



# THE BLACK QUEEN

A Tom Kincaid and Matt Durkin Novelette

By WILLIAM R. COX



She was running on flat-heeled shoes, her head down, and she charged full-tilt into Tom Kincaid.

## CHAPTER ONE

Siege!

“THE man we want to see is old,” said Tom Kincaid. “He’s eccentric. He lives on this houseboat, the *Eyrie*, and people think he’s touched in the head.” He paused a moment. “Ever hear of Jeffrey Falcon?”

The big convertible sedan rolled along at seventy. Tom Kincaid’s big hands nursed the wheel, negotiating the pleasant, winding road down the Delaware River, through the riotous autumn foliage.

Matt Durkin said, “Jeffrey Falcon! You mean the old gambler?”

The big man nodded. He had a weathered, wide-cheekboned countenance and steady blue eyes. His sloping shoulders and sinewy hands bespoke great strength.



"He calls himself plain Jeffrey," he said. "They say he just fishes and reads and lets time run on."

Matt Durkin was small and dapper, with a ferret's sharp eyes and a perky, aquiline nose. His gestures were quick, almost nervous; his speech was impetuous.

"Falcon was one of the great ones—used to sit in with Bet-A-Million Gates. I heard he was in the game when Joe Leiter made that \$30,000 bluff."

Tom nodded. "In 1900, at the Waldorf-Astoria. Gates had three fours; Leiter stood pat with a pair of sevens, an ace, a trey and a king. Gates did not help his hand, and Leiter's bluffing bet of \$30,000 was good. Jeffrey Falcon played with men like that in his salad days."

Matt shook his head. "Leiter must have built that bluff for weeks. You can't just do that to a man like Gates—"

"Joe Leiter was the best poker player of his day. Jeffrey Falcon was in his class, though. . . ."

They had come to a T road, which led to the water. Matt glanced at the marked map and said, "If Frisco Jed knew his stuff, this could be it."

Tom slowed, made the sharp, downhill turn on squealing tires.

Ahead lay the blue, clear-running Delaware, its bank lined with bright, autumn color.

Tom warned, "Take it easy with old Falcon. He may not be glad to see us."

The houseboat was larger than Tom had expected. Its paint was new, and the metalwork was shiny. It lay in a cove, safe against the swift current, a high, comfortable-seeming craft with a broad beam and a spacious deck.

Matt said, "Look! Another car!"

"And a boat," Tom pointed out. "Anchored on the river side."

"I thought this guy didn't like visitors," said Matt drily.

The silence was shattered by a sudden scream. Tom said, "There's a woman—and trouble!"

"I'm not surprised. Women and trouble are like ham and eggs."

A gun was already in Matt's hand. He carried a light .22, very unlike the balanced target revolver which Tom Kincaid produced, with its pearl handle and special sight.

The woman screamed again. A high-pitched voice quavered, "I'll shoot ye if ye make another move!"

From the bow, a man loomed, taking aim with a long-barreled revolver. Tom called, "Drop it!"

The man intended to fire. Tom could see it in the tight features, the threatening flash of eye; so he did not hold his own shot any longer. He fired from the waist, aiming for the man's right shoulder. He didn't miss.

There was a gang plank, whose end rested ashore. Tom and Matt went leaping aboard.

A hard voice said, "Something's wrong, Baker. Get going!"

"Jake's down! The cops!" was the hoarse reply.

The hard voice cursed with a mincing, polished accent.

Matt Durkin gasped, "That's George Grey! Let me get a crack at him!"

From the deck of the houseboat arose a sort of bungalow, with the dwelling rooms arranged in a square. Matt went forward, swiftly, his little gun poised, his thin face fierce with hatred.

Tom hotfooted aft. Between them, they should be able to trap the man with the hard voice. They had travelled many weary miles to find Jeffrey Falcon in order to learn things about that man. Now George Grey was at hand, ready to commit any crime to prevent them from gaining knowledge of his past.

The woman seemed to come from no-



where. She was running on flat-heeled shoes, very quickly, her head down, and she charged full-tilt into Tom Kincaid. He tried throwing his two hundred pounds sideways, but the both of them went sprawling helplessly on the slickly-polished deck.

Matt's .22 sounded. Then other shots; and Matt's voice: "I can't get a good crack! They're getting away! Where are you, Tom? Tom!"

Matt came racing over the boards. George Grey could get away ten times—Matt Durkin's first thoughts were always for his big friend.

On the river, the motorboat roared into action.

Matt stopped dead at the sight of his partner and the woman sitting on the deck. A shot from the receding speedboat came very close to Matt's head. He squatted quickly.

"What's the idea of making love while George Grey lams out of reach?" he demanded gruffly.

Tom said, "I'm sorry, but it was a head-long affair."

The woman turned from one to the other, staring openly at them. She said slowly, "Uncle Jeff! Is he all right?"

She was very beautiful, with titian red hair, worn to her shoulders. She was about thirty—a grown, gorgeous woman, with brown eyes and creamy skin.

Matt said, "If that's Uncle Jeff, he sure looks all right."

A skinny, elongated old man with a small goatee was up forward. In his hands he held a long rifle. While they watched, he steadied the gun on the rail and pulled the trigger. He shaded his eyes with long, slender fingers, peering. He turned and said, "Dang it! I missed the dog! I'm getting old."

Matt murmured: "Just a simple old soul, tired of the world, wanting only peace."

"IF THE MAN I shot hadn't been able to get away with Grey," said Tom regretfully, "I think I could prove that Grey is planning a criminal raid somewhere, and soon. We've been on his trail for a year, but so far we haven't been able to get anything—"

"He's as slippery as an eel," Matt injected bitterly.

They were gathered in the comfortable living quarters, a large room forward on the houseboat. Old Jeffrey Falcon shook his head. He had a face like a hatchet, and his eyes were amazingly young and bright.

He said, "Rose came to visit me and George Grey must have learned of it somehow."

The woman's name was Mrs. Rose Cairns, Tom had learned from her uncle. He could not see her face plainly, but it seemed as if she listened for something, as if she were waiting.

Matt said, "Frisco Jed did you a favor once, twenty years ago. Now Jed's working for us. He's an oldtimer and he's honest. Tom and I ran a hundred honest gambling houses before George Grey dreamed about a criminal empire with himself as dictator. Now we've got three. Jed runs one of them, out on the Coast. He said you knew something about Grey's past which would bring the police down on him."

Tom explained, "You see, Mr. Falcon, as professional gamblers, Matt and I have no standing with the police. George Grey, posing as a respectable ex-banker, has no past. No direct evidence against him has been obtainable. He's very clever at hiring stooges."

"You heard him call the name Baker," said Matt. "That's Tiny Baker—a hood from St. Paul. He runs a Monkey Gang. Grey has put up some dough and is leading this mob to big stuff. Cocaine and heroin are coming in over each border; banks are held up. They even pick up



sabotage jobs on the side, this Monkey Gang. It all swells Grey's millions!"

Jeffrey Falcon shook his head. His glance went to the passive, silent woman, then strayed to Tom Kincaid. He said in his thin voice, "I know you're a square gambler. There was a time I'd enjoy having a whack at you— But never mind that. I can't help you. I'm an old man—"

Matt broke in, "You were mighty quick with that rifle. You're not so ancient!"

"I can't do it," Falcon said. "What I know about Grey involves . . . others."

Tom stood up abruptly. His voice was harsh.

"This man Grey is mad. He intends to lead an army of criminals, to take over the country. He boasts that he will know how to welcome Hitler, once his criminal supremacy is assured. I can't afford to trifle with Grey."

He planted himself directly in front of Jeffrey Falcon. "You say you want peace. I promise you shall have nothing but death. George Grey was here today. He threatened you. He would have killed you if we hadn't arrived. Don't you know he will be back?"

"I have my rifle," the old man said.

The woman stirred for the first time. She leaned forward and spoke, keeping her voice low. "Mr. Kincaid is right. George will be back."

There was deep knowledge in her voice, and something else which Tom could not quite grasp. It was almost as if she were proud.

He stared at her, but turned quickly to take advantage of her help. "He'll be back—with more of the Monkey Gang. Jeffrey, if you don't help us, I can't help you. I swear, I'll leave you to Grey's mercy!"

Jeffrey Falcon blinked. Far up the river a motor sounded, growing louder, coming closer.

Matt whispered, "Grey and his mob!"

Falcon's eyes again went to the woman, who spread her hands in acquiescence. The old man gulped. He said quietly, "I guess I need you. I guess maybe I ought to tell what I know. George Grey is a monster—"

Tom snapped, "It'll be dark in half an hour. Get your rifle and watch the shore. Matt, you cover the boat as it comes up. I'll be wherever Grey appears."

He paused, looking at Rose Cairns. "You'd better remain below, out of range of gunfire. There'll be a lot of shooting because Grey can't spare much time. He's very clever—"

The titian head went back. She looked him full in the face and said, "You can't tell me anything about George Grey. He's been in love with me for ten years!"

Up on the deck, Tom drew his pearl-handled revolver and watched the river. The boat sheered off, well out of range.

A voice called, "Ahoy the Eyrie!"

"Watch the shore," Tom cautioned. "Can you up take that gangplank?"

A winch started almost at once. A shot sounded, and lead whistled past Tom's head, but the gangplank came up. Old Jeffrey Falcon had electric power on his craft.

Their position was strong enough, Tom reflected; only a lucky shot could harm them. Boarding the high-sided houseboat would require brave men, the sort of men who could stand up under steady fire. The Monkey Gang would not provide boarders—underworld guns are not noted for courage.

Tom yelled, "Stand off there with that boat!"

Through a megaphone a hollow voice called, "So it's you, Kincaid! I wanted to be sure. I'm glad you're all there together! It will be a nice catch for me!"

Tom said, "Mr. Falcon! May I borrow your rifle?"



The old man said, "The light's getting bad. Grey won't try us yet. But he's got men ashore."

"He hasn't too much time," Tom repeated. He lay the rifle's sights on the motor boat, which was drifting downstream. It was a long shot. Tom sighted on a vague figure, hoping it was Grey. He pulled the trigger.

There was a faint splash. A curse floated back on the chilly evening air.

Grey's voice came again, "I'll have you all! I'll have Rose, this time! You can't stop me, Kincaid!"

Tom handed the rifle back to the old man. "Missed him again! They'll be around all night. Don't show a light of any kind. Have you food enough?"

"Canned goods, biscuit," nodded Jeffrey Falcon. "I suppose you heard what George said about Rose?"

"Yes. . . . Is that a man moving ashore?"

He fired his revolver, and heard something breaking through the brush in hasty retreat. Matt said, "This .22 is too light. I need a heavier weapon for this work."

"I have guns, and ammunition," said Jeffrey Falcon. "I used to hunt a lot. We can hold them off, Kincaid."

Tom said soberly, "You'd better tell me about Grey, in case something happens. The F. B. I. would take care of him if they could get something on him. So far he's preyed on gamblers, like myself, and has had others front his violent crimes. But one piece of evidence would bring the law right down around his ears."

"I can start now and talk all night about that crook!" Jeffrey Falcon grated.

They sat in the dark, with the cicadas calling in the trees and the gangsters ashore moving restlessly in the thickets. Once in awhile a stray shot ricocheted on the water; then the motorboat sounded in the distance, but it did not come close.

Tom said, "I think they'll attempt to board us about dawn. Until then, we'll take turns watching."

## CHAPTER TWO

### George Grey's Past

**B**UT no one slept while the old man talked, and after a moment Rose Cairns, dressed in a pair of dark slacks and a short leather jacket, came and sat beside them. The dry voice of Jeffrey Falcon went on and on:

"My business was in New York, but our folk always lived over in Jersey. I saw George Grey grow up.

"He was a strange boy. He went to work in the bank, and he did all the things a young fella does when he wants to get ahead. But George never seemed to be a part of the things he did. He was like a man playing a part.

"Bill Cairns and the widow, Mrs. Greet, about owned the bank. Bill was not as old as George, but the two of them courted Rose here. Rose is my younger brother's child. She's twenty years younger than George Grey.

"Bill got to be president of the bank, and George was next in line. George was a good banker.

"But Rose married Bill Cairns. George sent them a fine present and married Mrs. Greet the same month. That was a smart move, and although Bill was still president, George had a lot more to say about the bank business. That was about ten years ago.

"Rose and Bill lived out in Crawford, a suburb of Elizabeth. The Greys lived there, too. Mrs. Greet, that was, died within a year.

"They said it was stomach trouble with complications. George had his own doctor, an old man. He's dead, too. In view of what happened, I'd say it was arsenic that did for the old gal. She was not



beautiful, and she was six years George's senior.

"Then George took to calling on Rose when Bill was busy down at the bank, and Rose hesitated to say anything to Bill, until George got pretty fresh.

"One night Bill pretended to be busy and came quietly back to the house. I had the houseboat in the neighborhood, and by accident I walked in on it. Sure enough, George was in the solarium with Rose. I was just walking into the house when I heard the shot.

"Yes, George shot him—with Bill's own gun, which he had swiped for that very purpose. George was a smart one.

"He had us right where he wanted us. He was a respected member of the community. On account of my gambling reputation, people in that small, suburban community looked askance at me. George swore that he would go on the stand and testify that he was Rose's lover, that Bill had discovered them together, and that George had taken the gun away from Bill and fired in self-defense.

"It don't sound sensible, does it? But that wasn't all. George claimed that those nights Bill had been busy at the bank, he had been falsifying the books! George was ready to pop that one at the trial, too. It would have ruined the bank, Bill's estate, and Rose's life. George offered to cover at the bank, fixing the books, putting up his own money to replace what Bill had stolen.

"I'm no great believer in cops—I've always been a sort of individualist. I advised Rose to do as Grey said. I put up some money of my own to help cover up.

"It wasn't until years later that I found out it was George Grey who'd been stealing, that Bill was catching on to it, and that Grey had planned the whole thing just as it came out. Yes, he's a clever fella, Kincaid.

"Finally Grey came here after Rose.

He wants her to marry him, otherwise he'll kill us both. He's undoubtedly insane—but in such a coldblooded way it gives you the creeps.

"He's smart, and I guess he's as ruthless as they come. I mind he used to teach a Sunday school class, back home. . . . How do men like that manage to hold themselves in for years, then break out?"



LATER, when Matt was ready to relieve Tom, they paused to compare notes.

"Keep your eyes on Rose Cairns," Tom instructed. "And on Jeffrey Falcon, too, for that matter."

Matt said, "I was thinking that myself. There's something screwy about his story."

"Too many happenstances." Tom nodded. "It's now one o'clock. I figure Grey will try us between three and dawn."

"I'll keep watch until three. Then I'll wake you."

Tom went below, to an airy, almost luxurious bedroom. Jeffrey Falcon, he thought, had certainly quit Wall Street and the gaming tables while he was on top. The arsenal contained good shotguns, rifles, revolvers and automatics. It almost seemed that Jeffrey Falcon had been preparing for this siege.

Yet the old man claimed to live alone. There was no sign of a servant. Tom wondered if the girl stayed on the boat with her uncle. He remembered the car parked on the shore when he had arrived, and decided not. Grey and his first contingent had come by water, so the car must belong to Rose.

The cars—his and the woman's—would be rendered useless by now; one of the first things Grey would do would be to cut off their retreat. They had to fight



Grey off until someone came along and heard the shots, or until Grey got tired. Unless Grey could be killed. . . .

Comforted by that thought, Tom slept.

At three he woke, without being called. Something was wrong—he sensed it the moment his eyes opened. It was pitch dark, and even the birds were silent. Tom got out of bed, noiseless as a cat.

He held the revolver ready in his hand. The companionway was clear, and stars shone in a deep blue-black sky above. Tom went up the stairs three at a time.

He was about to call when he saw the figure slipping forward. He waited a moment to make sure it was not Matt. Then he went ahead, bent almost double to keep his figure from the skyline.

Aft, there was a hatch, over which the pilot house towered. The light flashed with incredible swiftness, sending a pencilled beam up the river. Tom stayed out of sight against a bulkhead, watching. Again the electric torch snapped on and off.

From far ashore came an answering beam. It broke once, long; then again, short. Tom stepped forward and said sharply, "Tell him to come ahead. Tell him no one suspects."

There was a slight gasp. Tom said, "Don't try anything funny. Use Morse."

"He—Morse won't do any good," Rose Cairns whispered.

Tom said, "Flash it your way, then. But if you trick me—I swear I'll kill you both!"

She said, "I—I won't betray him."

"You're in love with Grey!"

She did not answer. Tom said, "Signal him!"

She flashed the torch again. Matt came running, but Tom said, "Go back and watch the shore. I'll handle this."

Matt peered. "I knew she was a phoney. Look out for the old guy and his fancy guns. He coulda had Grey when he

took that shot. I coulda hit him myself, and I don't know much about a rifle."

"Watch the shore, Matt. Look out for Tiny Baker's men. I'll take care of this."

He could not translate the rapid flashes of the girl's light, and knew it was some secret code. He waited grimly until she was done and the sound of the motor upstream was gone.

She faced him defiantly. "I've always loved him. I don't care what he does, do you hear?"

"Then you were an accessory to your husband's murder?" Tom asked coldly.

"No!" she cried. "I was—George killed him in cold blood. I—George is a fiend. I'm not defending him. I—I don't want to love him, but I can't help it, I tell you. When I see him—like today—it does something to me!"

Tom said flatly, "That would interest a psychiatrist. To me it merely means that you'd sell us out. Is your uncle in on this, too?"

She said, "Uncle Jeff is old and tired. He can't fight George Grey and his millions. I want this thing settled. I've fought against marrying George for ten years. Now I'm ready to quit. If I marry him, he'll leave Uncle Jeff alone."

"Not while Uncle Jeff has a dime," said Tom bitterly. "You don't know your great George Grey. He'll kill the old man and get his money. What sort of hold can the man have over you, to fool you so?"

SHE buried her face in her slender hands. "I—don't know. I'm ashamed of it. He looks at me—"

"That's nonsense," Tom said briskly. "Did you tell him to come aboard?"

"I—I was going to—he was going to let the boat drift alongside. I was to jump overboard so he could pick me up."

"You'd better go below."

"I told him not to come," she said



faintly. "I told him you were watching."

"Go below!"

Tom watched her descend the companionway. Matt came and said, "Now ain't that a thing?"

"Screwy people," nodded Tom. "She thought she could sell out, and have her cake, too."

Matt said, "I can watch alone while you talk to Falcon."

"Walk up and down. Grey might drift down a way, just on the chance. I don't think we'll be bothered from shore, but—"

Matt said, "I found a sawed-off shotgun. Everything's under control."

Down below, Rose Cairns sat rigidly in a chair, staring at the wall. A tiny light shed a soft radiance in the room. Tom went to the door of Jeffrey Falcon's room and called softly. The woman started to speak, as though to protest. Then she shrugged and was still.

The old man came out, half asleep. Tom said, "I just wanted to tell you. Your niece is ready to marry Grey."

Jeffrey Falcon was awake, all at once. For the first time Tom noticed the solid, stubborn jaw beneath the tuft of beard.

Falcon asked harshly, "What's this, Rose?"

"I'm tired," said the woman flatly. "He won't bother us if I go with him."

"You can't do that, you know." Falcon came forward, standing over her, shaking a long, lean finger. "You always were a fool. You played with fire and nearly got burned, and I saved you because you are my brother's daughter. I believe you're as mad as Grey."

"This is no place for me," Tom said suddenly. "If you'll pardon me, I'll leave."

Falcon whirled. "You can't do that! They'll get you!"

"I'll take my chances."

"You can't leave us! We'll be at Grey's mercy!"

Tom shrugged. "She says she's going

to marry him, and everything will be just lovely."

Falcon threw out his long arms. "I've fought this for years! Every time he gets close enough to look at her, she's willing to give in. If I kill Grey she'd never forgive me. I could have shot him."

Tom said, "Yes. We know you had him cold this afternoon. But you can't expect to stay here and take our chances with him. Mrs. Cairns is for letting him aboard. I'm not getting that close to Grey unless I have the drop."

"Let him aboard! Rose! How could you!"

"It's a mistake I made," the woman replied listlessly. "I won't try it again. Kill and be killed, all of you. Get out your guns and shoot. But please—let me go to my room. I've seen enough shooting."

She rose and walked slowly from the living quarters.

Tom put out his hand and stopped Falcon, who attempted to follow.

"There's no point in arguing with her," he said. "She signals him with a flashlight, but I don't think she'll ask him over while we're awake."

Jeffrey Falcon said, "I've fought this thing for ten years. I've failed."

"I tried to get her to bring him aboard," Tom said. "He's a madman, Mr. Falcon. I'd kill him like a dog with rabies—"

From above came Matt's clear voice: "Tom! There's a boat coming slowly downstream. They're flying a white flag!"

Jeffrey Falcon stared, his face deathly pale. "That's Grey! He came after all."

"Under a flag of truce," muttered Tom. "His word is no better than Hitler's."

For a moment he stared down at the old man. Then he said, "I don't know why I should trust you. I know that story you told me was full of holes. I could duck over the side right now, under cover of the confusion. I could fight my way through those hoodlums and get free."

Jeffrey Falcon did not speak. His eyes



rested on Tom, bright and questioning.

Tom said, "Yet I have hopes that you may produce some evidence—something which will hang a rap on Grey. So I'm seeing this through. Will you cover us when Grey comes aboard?"

"Yes. I'll be with you," Falcon said. His voice was stronger, and his eyes did not waver.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Death Deal

THE boat drifted closer in the half-light of a pink dawn. George Grey stood erect in the stern, a middle-aged man with eagle's profile and piercing, strange eyes. There was only one other man in the boat, and Tom Kincaid could see no sign of armament.

bargain involved, Grey. How do we know you won't molest Jeffrey Falcon? What guarantee do we have that you and your mob will leave?"

Grey smiled coldly. "I have a score of men. You are at a disadvantage. Why should I bargain? When Rose leaves with me, I'm finished with Jeffrey Falcon. But you and Durkin are my enemies. You must be—eliminated!"

"In other words, you expect us to leave in order that Falcon should be safe? If we stay, you intend attacking the houseboat?"

The ex-banker shrugged. "Jeffrey did not ask you here. I'm sure he'll be glad to see you go. I have plans with which you might interfere, Kincaid."

Tom called, "Mr. Falcon! What about it?"

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**William R. Cox, author of this vivid mystery novelette, is a regular contributor to our companion magazine, *Detective Tales*. The current issue carries THE DISAPPEARING CORPSE, one of Cox's most breathless crime classics to date!**

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Grey called: "I'm relying on your honor, gentlemen. May I come aboard?"

Matt snorted, "Look who's talking about honor!"

"Watch the shore Matt," Tom cautioned. He raised his voice, "Come ahead, Grey. You're taking the chance this time."

The ex-banker swung vigorously up the heavy anchor chain of the houseboat. Rose Cairns stood in the door leading to the companionway, watching him intently.

George Grey bowed to her. "I'm risking my life, my ambitions for you, my dear. I hope I read your signal correctly."

She nodded, pale as the receding moon above. Kincaid said sharply, "There's a

The old man had a rifle in his veined hands. He leaned against the rail, his sharp old eyes fixed on Grey. For a long moment there was silence.

Finally Jeffrey Falcon spoke. "It looks like a Mexican standoff. We can prevent Rose from going with you. You can give us a fight, George. You might win—maybe we can kill enough of you to hold you off. Either way, nothing will be settled while we're all alive."

Grey said, "Exactly. I'm offering you peace. Kincaid and Durkin can take their chances ashore."

"Peace," nodded Jeffrey Falcon. "I've been seeking it, up and down the rivers. It's not so easily come by. In your heart, George, you're a gambler. Why don't we



settle this thing over a card table?"

The ex-banker's brilliant eyes sparkled. "In just what way?"

"Freeze-out," snapped Jeffrey Falcon. "You got a card-player in your outfit, I'll venture. You and him, against Kincaid and me. Free-out poker, and the last man, or pair of men, win and make their own terms."

Grey turned his gaze upon Tom Kincaid. "The man down in my boat is Tiny Baker. Are you willing to play against him?"

Tom hesitated. It was his nature to take risks over a gaming table; everything within him said yes to this proposition of settling the matter with a poker deck. Yet he said, "It's fantastic."

"We'll put up twenty thousand dollars for our side," said Grey contemptuously. "That will give you a chance to make some money."

Tom looked at Rose Cairns, who had not stirred from the doorway. He asked, "Does this sound reasonable to you, Mrs. Cairns?"

Her reply was almost indifferent. "This is not a reasonable business. It doesn't matter to me."

Tom said abruptly, "Bring Baker aboard."

Grey's smile was not pleasant. When the ex-banker had gone to call his ally, Tom said in a low voice, "Mr. Falcon, you know this Baker is a crook? You know Grey will cheat if he can get away with it?"

The old man shrugged. "Are you afraid of them?"

Tom shook his head. "We'll play right here on deck. Matt will watch the shore. The light will be good in a minute or two. I have ten thousand dollars in cash on me, and Matt has the same amount if you're short—"

"I can rake up the cash," Jeffrey Falcon smiled.

On the other side of the boat, Matt

said, "I want to get in on this too, Tom."

Tom said no. "You watch out for the Monkey Gang—it's like Grey to double-cross us. He has twenty men who'd shoot you for a nickel."

"You can't play on the deck," protested Matt. "They'll plug you with a rifle."

"There's a protected spot forward, between the living quarters and the pilot house," Tom pointed. "I'll set the table there."

"The woman," Matt said fretfully. "She's on Grey's side. She might flash signs."

"I'll see that she doesn't stand behind the old man or me."

"I don't like it," Matt grumbled. "Grey was too sure of himself when he came aboard. Old Falcon—"

Tom said, "I'll protect our dough. You watch for an assault."

"It's a crooked set-up. It's not sensible," Matt insisted. "If you win, Grey still has his twenty hoods."

"But I'll have ten thousand dollars—and we'll be no worse off." Tom smiled. "If we win, we dictate terms. We'll hold Grey as hostage for safe passage down to Philly."

Matt shook his head. "I still don't like it," he muttered.

When Tom returned, Tiny Baker had been added to the group; the card table was on deck. Baker was a giant—shaggy, hard-faced. He had been a gambler before he had turned to the rackets in the middle west and Tom knew he had never dealt an honest hand.

Grey said briskly, "The light is excellent now. How about playing right here?"

Tom pointed to the sheltered spot. He said, "Put the table there. And, Grey, if you try anything, I'll shoot you where you sit."

Baker leered, patting the bulge beneath his jacket. "There'll be plenty shootin' if you start anything, Kincaid."



Tom said, "As for you, I've got sharp eyes, Baker. One phoney move with those cards and you'll have to reach for that gun. Is that plain to everyone?"

Jeffrey Falcon leaned his rifle against the pilot house, within easy reach. He said, "Kincaid's telling you. We deal lefthanded—and slow. Straight stuff's the game. Rose, you go and stay with Durkin."

"She stays here!" said Grey.

"She goes," said Tom.

No one spoke. Baker's hand strayed to his lapel. Grey stared at Tom, his chin thrust out. Tom made a gesture which was apparently aimless. As if by magic the pearl-handled gun appeared in his big fist.

Rose Cairns said, lifelessly, "I'll go."

Baker's hand dropped from his lapel. The big gangster seemed unafraid, as confident as Grey. They seated themselves at the square table, Grey and Baker at opposite sides, Falcon and Tom facing each other in the remaining seats.

Jeffrey Falcon dispensed the stacks of chips with a practised hand. He seemed to grow younger as he opened a fresh deck of cards.

He chortled, "Ten thousand apiece and the devil take the hindmost! First ace deals!"



**T**OM KINCAID faced his dwindling pile of red, white and blue discs, his mind working furiously, his eyes on the cards Tiny Baker held. The deals, he was positive, all had been off the top of the deck.

Old Jeffrey Falcon's intentness was almost breathless; his lean body was crouched upon the straight bridge chair.

The sun had climbed high. George Grey and Baker were winning heavily. The two were "brother-in-lawing," of course, but that was legitimate, in this

game. Both pairs of men were open partners. Raising the other's good hands despite poor cards in his own was part of the strategy. Yet there was a "feel" to the game which Tom did not like.

Over the years, Tom Kincaid had played millions of stud hands. His quick knowledge of percentage and the odds against pairing or better in a four-handed game was superior to any of the others. And there were too many good hands—flushes especially—falling to Baker and Grey.

Neither of them had attempted to use the mechanic's grip, even if they had been able, dealing left-handed. The cards had been furnished, uncut, by Jeffrey Falcon. "Readers" seemed out of the question.

Tiny Baker flipped over the first exposed card to old Falcon—an ace. Grey drew a ten. Tom received a queen. Baker's own draw was a nine of hearts.

Falcon bet the ace for a hundred. Grey stayed. Tom shoved out a red chip without looking at his hole card, watching with increased interest, now.

Baker played along. The cards went around, and Tom did not even glance at them. He was looking for a "shiner" concealed in Baker's chips, or in a ring on Baker's finger. He could see no sign of the little mirror which would let Baker know each card as it slid off the deck.

Falcon drew a trey, Grey an eight, Tom a jack. Baker got the deuce of hearts. Tom drew a deep breath and waited for the next round. He thought he had it now. He could not be sure, but it was the only solution.

It was his own fault. He should, he admitted to himself, have insisted that Matt play. Matt had the sharpest eyes in the world. Tom was the superior player, but Matt had a greater knowledge of the tricks.

He peeked at the corner of his hole card. It was a jack, which gave him a pair. Jeffrey bet five hundred on his top



ace. Grey said shortly, "I'll tilt, gents."

Old Jeffrey's chin juttled. Tom said slowly, "I'll fold these."

Baker put out the chips with his left hand. Grey poked at his chips with his fingertips, making room. Baker said, "I'll call that."

Falcon said eagerly, "I'll raise another five."

"I'll tap!" Grey snapped.

So there it was. Old Jeffrey Falcon was in the cut. Tom was out of the hand; Falcon was between two fires and his pile was tapped. To stay in for Grey's raise Falcon had to put up his remaining chips. If he lost, he was out of the game and Tom was alone—with about two thousand dollars against a combined stack of thirty-eight thousand!

Baker sneered, "I'll stay."

"No further betting," said Grey coldly. "Deal them around, Tiny."

Jeffrey Falcon shoved his remaining stack in with a hand which did not tremble. His lined old face was like rock; his eyes never left the cards which Baker was dealing.

The fourth pasteboard fell around the table. Falcon drew a nine. Grey's card was a six. Tony Baker drew the five of hearts.

The old man showed an ace-high against 6-8-10 for Grey and three hearts in front of Baker.

Grey said, "Deal them, Tiny!"

Baker seemed to gloat, reaching for the final round of cards. Jeffrey Falcon did not flinch in the face of the possible flush. It had worked very nice, Tom thought, with Grey doing the raising on his small, useless hand, and Baker lying back in wait.

Tom's voice cut into the silence of the others' concentration. "Just a moment!"

Baker's face turned to stone. Grey said, "Don't butt into this, Kincaid!"

Tom said evenly, "I believe Falcon has the privilege of a cut at this point."

"Where do you get that stuff?" Baker snarled.

Grey's face was emotionless. "This is not a gambling house, and Falcon is playing the hand, Kincaid. It's none of your business."

"Falcon wants a cut," said Tom, placing his two big hands carefully on the edge of the table. "Don't you, sir?"

Jeffrey Falcon hesitated. His eyes shifted to the deck Baker held. "Yes."

"You'll do no such thing!" Baker roared. "Here's your draw—"

Tom's hand shot out, clamped down. Baker tried to struggle, but Tom held him fast, pinning him against the light table, holding steady with his own weight. The deck dropped among the chips, face down.

"Cut it!" Tom said.

Grey's hard mouth set in a straight line. Falcon promptly cut deep into the deck, rearranging it.

Tom said, "Place it flat on the table. Now, Baker, pick off the top card, gently. If you draw a heart now, it'll really be luck!"

Baker did not move for a long moment. Tom's right hand hovered now, ready for that lightning draw of his revolver.

Grey's voice was flat, untroubled. "Deal them, Tiny."

A nine paired Falcon's preceding card; a six gave Grey a pair. Baker's hand hesitated. Then it turned over his own draw.

It was the eight of clubs!

Tom said, "Nice cutting, Mr. Falcon. Collect the chips. Your nines are high on the board—and I'll bet another thousand you've got aces backed up."

Jeffrey Falcon turned over his hole card. It was an ace. "There were too many flushes coming out," Tom said. "I couldn't believe it. The trick was too simple and ancient for me to remember it—the old haymarket shuffle with some cute variations. One man fiddles the discards with his fingertips, the other picks them up right and deals you a pair or two



and himself a flush—because flushes are easiest to select quickly.”

Jeffrey Falcon grunted. “The old hay-market, eh? Older than Canfield!”

Grey sat immobile, his face hard as rock. Baker stared, enraged, but did not speak nor move.

“I warned you what would happen if you failed to play honestly,” Tom said coldly. “Matt! Come here a moment!”

There was no answer.

“Matt!”

Grey smiled blandly. “Call him again, Kincaid. He can’t hear you. You insisted upon Rose leaving us. You were so clever, Kincaid. Look behind you. . . . Don’t draw that gun!”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “Gambler, Make Your Play!”

**T**HERE was a whistling zing, a bullet flicked paint from the pilot house, the wind of it brushing Tom’s cheek.

Grey said, “That’s a sharpshooter with a rifle, Kincaid, Just keep your hands still. . . . Baker, get his gun.”

Tom did not attempt to make a play. Jeffrey Falcon still sat at the table, the chips from the last pot before him.

“Rose is quite a girl, you know,” Grey went on. “She’s been in on this all along. You never had a chance, Jeffrey. She was going to sell you out from the start. That little act she put on when your friends arrived was meant to deceive them, to build it up until I had you all in one bag.

“I knew Kincaid was coming. My men are everywhere. They have special orders about Kincaid and Durkin. I always know just where I can put my hands on the pair of them. . . . Oh, you’re surprised, Jeffrey? You never believed Rose was implicated in the death of Bill Cairns?”

Falcon’s voice trembled. “No! I—I can’t believe it.”

Grey shrugged his thick shoulders. “Enough of this farce. Baker, get your men aboard. Hook onto this old tub with our boat. We’ll take it to midstream and set it afire. Tie up Falcon and Kincaid, and Durkin—if Rose didn’t kill him when she hit him. Put them below; they can burn with the boat. Make sure you get all the cash from them and the old man’s safe below. Rose will show you.”

Baker lumbered over to Tom. “Smart guy, huh? Calling for a cut! Here’s your cut!”

He slapped, using his full-arm. His palm caught Kincaid on the side of the face, knocking him to the deck. George Grey laughed again.

Matt Durkin was gone, too, Tom reflected bitterly. The woman had slipped up on him somehow, laid him out. That was the bitterest thing of all—neither of them left to battle George Grey. The police did not know the truth about Grey; they didn’t know where to look for him nor what to expect of him. The country was facing war, the F.B.I. was busy with sabotage. All of the anti-American organizations would welcome an offer to ally themselves with George Grey’s organized underworld.

Two of Tiny Baker’s low-browed Monkey gangsters seized Tom, lifted him. They swung him back, forward; let him go. Tom hit the middle of the steps and rolled awkwardly to the bottom of the companionway, into the corridor which led to the hold. His ribs ached, and he thought some of them must be cracked.

Nevertheless, he held himself still and broke the force of Jeffrey Falcon’s fall. The old man grunted as he landed on Tom’s body. The door slammed, then opened again, and a small form flew down to join the two below.

Tom said, “It’s Matt! He must be alive!”

Jeffrey Falcon bent to look at the still face of the little gambler. “Hit over the



head. That Rose! I didn't think she'd catch him off guard."

Tom said, "You knew all along she was in it with Grey and his gang?"

"Who can say what we know?" Falcon asked gloomily. "I suspected."

"I suspected at the start, when she came careening around the deck and ran into me," said Tom. "I might have had Grey right then. I could have avoided her—but she made sure she tripped me! She lied to me later, very convincingly, too. Yet, I didn't trust her. I should never have allowed this to happen. It's all my fault."

"My fault, too," Jeffrey Falcon said gently. "I've lived with this knowledge of Grey's villainy for years. When he retired from the bank, I should have checked on him, should have never tried to protect Rose. The girl's my only living relative. I was wrong—but perhaps I can make it up."

He struggled about like a lean old fish out of water. Above, they could hear footsteps, the clanking of chains, the sound of a powerful motor. Tom knew better than to fight his bonds—gangdom ties tightly with its cruel wire.

He said, "You'll only cut your wrists, Falcon."

"Houdini was my friend," Jeffrey Falcon said. "A fine card manipulator, but better at getting out of things. They thought I was too old to bother about. I played frightened while they were tying me."

He bent double and tugged at the wires on his ankles. He stood erect, free of his bonds.

"I think, Kincaid, that we might yet gain a point or two—even though we die!"

**T**HERE was a light in the corner. Jeffrey Falcon pulled the cord, and the hold was illuminated.

The old man said, "There are considerable explosives in that other room. I

have only to press a switch—there are three above and one in this room."

Tom stared where the old man pointed; he saw an innocent-looking press button on the wall. Jeffrey Falcon went on, "I could blow us all out of the world."

"It would be worth it to get Grey," Tom muttered. "If you can get Matt off, and get off yourself, I'll blow it and be glad to do it."

The old man nodded gravely. "No doubt. If all you say is true, Grey should be removed at any cost. But there are other things."

He opened a chest, reached down and produced a sub-machine gun, black and glittering, its drum loaded and ready. He bent again and brought out a flat automatic for Tom.

"You see, Kincaid, I have always expected to fight someone. Firearms are a fad with me, and with reason, too!"

He smiled tranquilly, said, "Now, if we can revive your small friend. . . . Here's some smelling salts."

Tom knelt, holding the bottle. He put it in his pocket while he unwrapped the wire from Matt's wrists. There was a tricky twist around Matt's ankles which took more time.

Tom raised the head of his friend and applied the salts. Matt's eyelids fluttered.

"He's all right, Falcon!" Tom said.

There was no answer. Tom rubbed Matt's wrists. "The three of us can give them hell! The surprise alone will be half the battle."

Matt opened his eyes wide. "Where were you when the cyclone struck?" he demanded affably.

"Being trimmed by the haymarket shuffle," Tom said bitterly. "I bungled it, Matt. If it wasn't for Mr. Falcon, here, we'd be sunk deeper than Davy Jones."

Matt sat up, holding his head. "What Mr. Falcon? I don't see the old coot. That woman—she conked me, I think. With an axe!"



Tom wheeled about. There was no sign of Jeffrey Falcon. "The machine gun! He took it along!"

"Machine gun?" Matt blinked, shook his head. "What goes on, anyway?"

Tom told him swiftly, picking up the automatic, making sure of the clip. A large revolver lay beside the chest from which Falcon had produced the weapons. Tom handed it to Matt and ended, "The old man's got some idea of his own. It's dangerous—something we wouldn't have allowed him to try. Let's go topside, Matt."

Matt staggered a bit, but he managed to stand erect. He balanced the revolver in his palm. "It's a heavy gun, all right. If I can only get a shot at Grey—"

The chatter of machine gun fire broke out with startling suddenness.

Tom leaped for the companionway. The door was unlocked. Tom burst out upon the deck into bright morning sunlight. Men were running in confusion, this way and that. He saw Tiny Baker whirl and raise a shotgun to his shoulder.

Tom brought his automatic up. He was unfamiliar with the flat weapon, but the range was short. He fired, low. Tiny Baker dropped the shotgun and sprawled ungracefully across it.

A hood shouted, "They're all over the boat!"

Tom cut loose at the voice. He was not satisfied with his small supply of ammunition. He ducked and went forward, casting one quick glance to see if Matt was all right.

Matt was fine. He was aiming the big gun at a man who stood in the prow of the boat. The gun spat fire; the thug jerked and fell over the side into the river. Matt ran aft.

Tom kept looking for Jeffrey Falcon and George Grey. The machine gun stuttered again, and he spotted the old man up in the pilot house. He wondered how

the old man had managed to knock off the lookout which must have been placed there.

MATT'S gun sounded again. Tom found three men in a knot, trying to bring weapons to bear upon the pilot house. Tom knocked them off like shooting fish in a barrel.

The automatic was empty now, and Tom made a dive for the men scattered about the deck. He seized a revolver, got one hand on a sawed-off shotgun, too. There were a couple of other members of the Monkey Gang forward. Tom turned his guns on them, and they jumped over the side into the water, without firing a shot.

There was no sign of Rose nor Grey. Tom plunged for the afterdeck, thinking Matt may have been overpowered. He almost ran into the little fellow on the starboard side of the living quarters.

"They're inside," Matt called excitedly. "I've been all the way around. They're in there!"

Tom ran forward. He was just in time to see the power boat drift away with the current. A man with a rifle aimed at him. Tom fired the revolver and ducked. The motor roared in the boat and spray spewed from the bow as it raced away.

All the Monkey gang left aboard the *Eyrie* were dead, or inside the living quarters.

Tom ran back and tugged at the door leading inside. A shot ploughed through the wood, drove him back.

Grey's voice said, "Rose has her finger on the switch! If you don't stand back, she'll blow us all to hell!"

"Let her blow!" Tom yelled.

"Don't be a fool," Grey called. "Get off the boat. It's a standoff! If you come in here, she'll touch it off. Get off the ship and we'll work our own way out."

The houseboat was caught in the current, rushing downriver. Tom remem-



bered old Jeffrey Falcon and ran swiftly to the pilot house.

Matt said, "I'll watch the door! You see what Falcon thinks!"

There was an iron ladder. Tom went up, wincing at the pain in his cracked ribs. He opened the door of the pilot house. Jeffrey Falcon lay on the floor.

The old man was still breathing. He looked up at Tom and smiled. "A stray rifle bullet," he whispered weakly.

Tom said, "Grey's threatening to blow up the ship. Rose knew the switches."

The old man shook his head. "Rose only thinks she knows. The one she things is the switch merely lights a back room. Go and get him, Kincaid. I'm—glad—"

The old man smiled; his head dropped peacefully into the crook of Kincaid's arm. Tom paused an instant, involuntarily, saluting the dead gambler. Then he went down the ladder.

Matt said, "There's no sound from inside."

"I'm hitting that door, Matt. Cover me. I think this is the end of Grey."

He hopped on one foot, shoved the other one straight out, his heel crashing the lock. The door splintered open.

Tom ducked, slid on his stomach, his borrowed revolver outthrust. He came over the threshold of the livingroom, ready to shoot.

The room was empty. Matt plunged in behind, covering him. Together they raced through the rooms. All of them were empty.

"Back to the deck!" Tom shouted. "He's fooled us again!"

There was a splash. Tom ran to the side of the boat, ready to fire at a bobbing head. But there was no sign of anyone in the water.

Matt came around the other way. He said, "They went out through a stateroom window and over the side, while we were

breaking down the door. It was simple as a-b-c."

Tom raced back to the pilot house. He seized the wheel, wrenching it over. The houseboat swung about clumsily and headed for shore.

Tom said gloomily, "Drop the anchor. It's no use. Grey discovered that the switch was phoney and went overboard with the woman."

"It could have been worse, Tom," Matt said. "We got Baker. That'll fix the Monkey Gang."

"It could have been better," said Tom. "Old Falcon is dead, and the woman won't testify—ever. Grey is still in the clear—and we didn't even win the twenty thousand dollars!"

"No," Matt said, "we didn't. But I looked in Baker's pocket. I found that much. Do you think we're entitled to it?"

"Entitled to it? We've got to have money to fight Grey, don't we?"

"Maybe he drowned," said Matt hopefully. "The current was pretty swift."

"You can't drown him," Tom said scornfully. "He was born to hang—or stop lead!"



**U**P RIVER, a thick-bodied man hauled himself to the shore. The woman was hard to handle, but he got her up the bank.

There was a car waiting. Always there was a car posted within call; George Grey never overlooked a bet. If he did not win, his money was always coppered.

It was not until the car was several miles on the road that he really believed it. Then he slowly covered the woman's face with a coat, and sat hunched in a corner of the seat while the thug at the wheel drove on.

He had another score to settle with Tom Kincaid now.





## HINTS ON HOMICIDE

Good news for crime-fiction fans—Cellini Smith is back! L. A.'s nonesuch private op returns to trade careless lead in *Bail Bait*—ROBERT REEVES' new novelette that's got everything—mystery, murder, thrills—and the inimitable, wise-cracking and very tough Cellini. Here's a sample:

... When Jimmy Legg jimmed his way into the Lansing Investment Company office and souped open the safe, practically everyone in town caught him in the act—including the janitor and a steno who identified him in the lineup. To boot, he'd left his prints all over the place. It was open-and-shut and the D.A. asked for an early trial. But—"Release the accused!" snapped Judge Reynolds, the judge who couldn't be "reached." "Insufficient evidence for trial." So that was that. Only it wasn't. The first thing Legg did with his unexpected freedom was call Cellini Smith. "The judge had me with my pants down but he let me go. Something stinks and I got to know why he didn't hold me, Cellini," was the little cracksman's plea. It was the first time Cellini had ever been paid to find out why Justice was blind—but anything for a fee was his motto—so why not this? You'll get a kick out of the answer.

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# BLACK MASK



*For twenty-five years this murderer went unapprehended, safe in the belief that he had committed the perfect crime. But finally history repeated itself, and a man who had been dead for a quarter of a century proved to be all that was necessary to balance the grim scales of justice.*

# MURDER TOWN

## CHAPTER ONE

### Lesson in Crime

“**H**UGHES for President! Hughes! Hughes! Hughes!” The roar of the crowd was still far-off; the procession was several blocks down the street. But the sidewalks were lined with waiting people; the enthusiasm and the cheering ran ahead of the marchers like wind-blown fire across a prairie.

Winslow City was all for Hughes, and if noise would do it, they would elect him then and there. The shouting grew louder, but in the dark hallway of the Preston Building it was quiet. The noise from outside stopped at the solid, oak-paneled door.

The young man followed his companion to the foot of the stairs, where he stopped. “I don’t know, Nick—maybe we better not,” he husked.

His voice was a muted whisper behind the handkerchief that covered the lower half of his face. His hand trembled as he

grasped a revolver that seemed, to him, as big as a cannon. He was twenty-two, and he was scared. All the bravado and grim determination suddenly were gone out of him.

“What’s the matter? Yellow?” the other demanded contemptuously. “You gonna let Nichols rob you and get away with it? He swindled you, didn’t he? He’s gonna force you to sell out for next to nothing, ain’t he?”

“Yes, but—coming in here to hold him up—” The uncertain whisper floundered. “Suppose he puts up a fight?”

“You leave that to me.” The older man’s face was similarly masked, but somehow the handkerchief did little to lessen the dominance of Nick Rucker’s heavy, square-hewn features. “All you gotta do is hang onto that gun I gave you. Just keep it pointed at the old devil, and I’ll do the rest. You just do like I tell you, and I’ll take care of everything.”

As he spoke he took hold of the youth’s elbow, urged him up the stairs to the second floor, where a dim light showed through the ground-glass door of an office. The door was lettered:

Lyman Nichols,  
Attorney at Law

Rucker silently led the way to the door, grasped the knob and gave it a gentle, experimental turn. He grunted with satisfaction and pushed the door open. Behind a huge, roll-top desk sat Nichols, a

A Powerful Novelette of Rare Mystery

By WAYNE ROGERS





My revolver barrel slapped flat against the side of his head, but before his limp body hit the floor, men came leaping at me from the doorway.



big gray-haired man with a gaunt face.

The bedlam down the street had covered the sound of the opening door, and Nichols was not aware of his callers until they were in the office. The youth stood near the door, barring any hope of escape; Rucker walked up to the desk, his black-muzzled .44 pointed commandingly.

"The safe—get it open!" Rucker clipped. He nodded to a screen beside the desk.

Nichols began to sputter, but presently he pushed the screen aside and bent over the dials of a six-foot iron safe. With the gun nudging his back, he worked the combination, pulled the doors open, and sank back into his chair when Rucker waved him aside. He watched the masked man rifle pigeonholes, pull open drawers, watched him uncover a hoard of stacked banknotes.

The youth watched, too, and when he saw the bills his eyes widened. When Rucker began stuffing them into his pockets he caught his breath. The blaring of a band below drowned out his protest. Sudden panic seized him as his words went unheeded.

"No—not the money!" He shouted to be heard above the din. "We're not thieves. We—"

Rucker's hate-filled eyes stopped him; the man snarled an oath. Whirling from his half-crouch at the safe, he snatched up his gun and sprang.

That was all the youth knew: Death was leaping at him.

"No!" he yelled frantically—and the gun in his tense fingers blazed.

One instant Rucker was there, leaping at him with savage malevolence. Then, as the gun discharged, the masked face was gone. Rucker had dived out of the way, and the bullet had found a mark in Lyman Nichols' body!

The attorney gasped, then wilted and crumpled over his desk. That much the youth saw before he, too, went down;

before Rucker's arms closed around his knees and slammed him to the floor. The gun was knocked from his hand, and Rucker was past him, out into the corridor. His footsteps clattered down the stairs and were lost in the booming chant of "Hughes! Hughes! Hughes for President!"

Like one in a trance, the youth picked himself up. His face was now as white as the handkerchief that had slipped to his throat. For a moment he stared foolishly at Nichols' slumped body.

Then he remembered why he had come.

Mechanically, he went to the open safe and sorted through its distorted contents. He searched until he found a brief document that bore his own signature. He folded it and started to put it in his pocket—

Downstairs the door had opened! Footsteps sounded on the stairs, along the hall! Desperately the youth glanced about for an avenue of escape. . . .

This was in New York State, in November of 1916.

**T**WENTY-FIVE years later that pistol shot echoed in Ohio. It was in November, 1941, that I started to drive to Taylor City to perform the most distasteful task I had faced in the ten years I'd been sheriff. In my pocket was a warrant for the arrest of John Stacey, and I could still hear the voice of the Governor, over the telephone:

"I know your reputation for giving a man a break, and I suspect you're not going to approve of this arrest, Trowbridge," he'd told me. "But we have no choice. This man is a convicted murderer, an escaped prisoner, no matter what he has made of himself since coming to Ohio.

"Yes, I know that the fifteen thousand dollars he stole has all been returned anonymously, but that doesn't change murder. The New York authorities are



hounding me. I'll have to sign extradition papers if he resists."

So that was that. John Stacey was to be arrested and shipped back to New York, to serve a life term for the murder of Lyman Nichols. John Stacey—who had been Hugh Bossert back in Winslow City twenty-five years ago. . . .

The whole story was there in the deposition that came with the arrest-order from New York.

Bossert had been caught red-handed in Lyman Nichols' office. The hair-triggered gun that had killed him was in Bossert's hand, and in Bossert's pocket was the option he had taken from Nichols' safe—the motive for the murder.

Old Nichols was a nasty devil, all right, a shylock if ever there was one. On the pretense of organizing them into a co-operative, he had secured what they thought was power-of-attorney from all the little, hard-working farmers in a down-at-the-heels valley on the edge of Winslow City. Too late, they realized they had signed options on their farms—so that Nichols could buy them out at a fraction of their value and make a fortune reselling to the state for an irrigation project.

Young Bossert admitted that he went to Nichols' office that night, to demand the return of his option and to take it by force if necessary. But he denied having killed the attorney. He claimed that Nichols was dead when he got to the office; claimed that he merely took his own option out of the open safe and was about to leave when the police walked in and grabbed him. His fingerprints on the revolver he explained by saying he had instinctively grabbed up the weapon when he heard approaching footsteps. He knew nothing, he said, about the money that was missing from the safe.

That was his story.

However, the jury did not elect to believe him. But they sympathized with

him—they found him guilty of murder in the second degree.

Bossert was sentenced to life imprisonment, but as he was being led from the courtroom he swung a hook to the sheriff's jaw and reached an open window before anyone could stop him. He made his getaway, and that was the last the world knew about Hugh Bossert—until somebody put the finger on him and reported that he and John Stacey, of Taylor, Ohio, were one and the same.

In the twenty-five intervening years Bossert had built up a new personality. He had married and was the father of a grown daughter. He had gone into business and was now the owner of a factory that produced farm machinery—Taylor's largest enterprise.

I had watched him develop from an unknown to the town's leading citizen. And now I had to haul him back to rot for the rest of his life in a New York penitentiary.

The whole affair left a bad taste in my mouth. I'd have ducked the nasty chore if I could, would have passed the buck to Cliff Meade, my chief deputy in Taylor City; but. . . .

I groaned when I thought of Cliff. He had just announced his engagement to John Stacey's daughter!

So I couldn't ask him to unmask his prospective father-in-law and cart him off to jail. That would be too much, and Cliff had had plenty of trouble on his hands lately. The national defense program had made a big town out of little Taylor overnight. The farm machinery factory had been remodeled and enlarged to three or four times its normal capacity; the town had mushroomed like a frontier camp, jumped from a population of five thousand to twenty. I had given Cliff two assistant deputies, Paul Kenney and Jim Lee, to help him bolster the inadequate police force, and they were working day and night to keep the lid from blowing off.



No, arresting John Stacey was up to me.



**M**Y CAR needed gas, so I turned into the first station I met; had the assistant check my water and air. But that was all the stalling I could do. Reluctantly I stepped on the starter, but before I had gone a quarter mile I remembered something I ought to have attended to before leaving my office; something I'd better see about immediately.

I swung around and went back to the gas station to phone. They had a connection in the garage behind the roadside set-up, but when I reached it the phone was busy. The assistant, who had served me, was talking. Slipping in a personal call during working hours, from his confusion and the guilty way he ended the conversation as soon as he saw me.

That station was about a mile from the outskirts of the town. Just before turning into Taylor, the road made a sharp swing and then climbed a steep-grade hill. It was a nasty spot, one that generally necessitated shifting gears before the summit was reached.

I put the car in second before I was halfway to the top. As I made the shift my eyes flicked back to the road, just in time to glimpse a black car coming over the crest and starting down. Something about that car gripped my attention. It was going fast—too fast; and it was taking too much of the road. If the driver had stayed over on his own side I would have paid him no particular attention. But that hedging toward the middle alarmed me.

The car was almost on top of me before I realized its driver's intention. Twenty feet away, he suddenly swung straight at me, murderously; with split-second timing that would have crashed

him squarely into the side of my coupé if I had not got that flash of warning. Instinctively I swung the wheel to meet him head-on. And in the same motion I opened the door and flung myself out.

I hit the road with a thud that knocked the breath out of me. The world seemed to disintegrate in a thunderous crash. A deafening hollow boom—and then the grating whine of rending metal as the interlocked cars skidded crazily across the road.

I got to my feet, swayed uncertainly before I could make my legs carry me forward. Another car had stopped before I reached the wreckage; others were coming. Soon half a dozen men were gathered around the telescoped machines, staring at the strange figure pinned behind the snapped-off wheel of the black car.

The man was dead, impaled by the steering shaft. His costume was amazing. He was outfitted like a racing driver—coveralls, heavy gloves, a padded helmet and goggles. No, not exactly a racing driver's outfit—but a crash-driver at a country fair!

The fellow had crashed into me deliberately! This would-be murderer on wheels was a deadly reception committee to welcome me to Taylor!

I was asking myself why when I removed his leather helmet I had never seen the thick-lipped, flat-nosed face before.

But one of the bystanders knew him. "That's Bobo Mearson. He used to be a racing driver before he lost his license."

Bobo Mearson. . . . Who had sent him to meet me? Someone who must have known I was coming to arrest John Stacey? Over-night, it seemed, Stacey's private affairs, hidden for all these years, had become almost public property. Over-night he had acquired a Nemesis and a guardian, ready to do murder in order to protect him!



## CHAPTER TWO

## Death Listens in

INSTEAD of going straight to John Stacey's home, I went to my deputy's office in the City Hall, when a motorist drove me into town. I wanted to see Cliff Meade before arresting his father-in-law-to-be. But Meade was not around. The only one on hand was young Paul Kenney, one of the newly-assigned assistants.

Kenney looked up, surprised, when I entered. He was a strapping young fellow, whom I had always known to be gay and carefree; but now he looked worried. His face was troubled, almost haggard-eyed. The smile he gave me was filled with relief. He led me inside to Meade's private office, before he offered to talk.

"Bobo Mearson? Sure, I know him," he nodded grimly, when he heard what had happened. "A crooked driver. He was barred at Indianapolis, and outlawed at every other decent track. He's been here in Taylor for the past two or three weeks—imported by the big-shot who's taking this town over. I heard he was private chauffeur for the Organizer—"

"Who's he?" I asked.

"I can't tell you that, Tom." Kenney shook his head. "Nobody seems to know. He calls himself the Organizer, and he's organizing plenty. In less than a month he's taken over most of the rackets in this town, and started a flock of new ones."

"Isn't Meade doing anything about this?" I demanded angrily.

"Cliff? He's been busy—what with his wedding coming along," Kenney answered. "But I've been working on an idea of my own. I'm glad you came today, Tom. This is Saturday afternoon—it's payday at the factory. If what I suspect is true, we're sitting on a heap of dynamite right now—and the fuse is lit! Tonight—"

The clatter of breaking glass and a dull thud cut him short. Something had been hurled through the window at the far end of the office. Round and glistening, it rolled across the floor.

From where I sat beside Meade's desk, I caught only a glimpse of it, but that was enough. I yelled a warning and flung myself backward into the shelter of the desk.

Paul Kenney half-rose from his seat—and the office was filled with a blinding flare of light, with a terrific, stunning crash. Concussion hurled me to the floor; debris rained down as the walls and the ceiling, the furniture and everything within reach of the blast seemed to disintegrate.

After that deafening detonation came an awful stillness, the hushed quiet of death, broken only by the soft dribble of falling plaster. For a moment it seemed that I must be dead; I couldn't move a muscle. I could only lie there, while my ears rang and my head throbbed.

It must have been the sound of voices out in the hallway that brought me back to full consciousness. I staggered to my feet and managed to drag myself to where Kenney lay face down. I bent over him, turned him on his back. He was dead, all right—with a bullet hole drilled squarely through his temple!

The explosion hadn't killed him; he'd been shot, murdered—and the killer had had plenty of time to make his getaway. When I glanced around the wrecked room, I saw that the blast had not been sufficiently strong to kill us, unless accidentally. It had brought down the plaster from the walls and ceiling, had shattered the window, but it had not blown out the walls.

No, the blast had not been intended to kill us. It was meant merely to create an opportunity for the killer to put that bullet into Kenney. The resultant confusion gave the murderer a beautiful chance to escape.



**I**N A few minutes, the office was filled with wide-eyed men who stared at me as if I had returned from the dead. City officials, City Hall hangers-on, policemen, and then Cliff Meade arrived. He looked down at the body of his assistant, his jaws clenched. As quickly as possible he cleared the office and turned to face me.

"Murdered," he clipped, his dark eyes smoldering, his hands working into fists, "Murdered right here in the office! The explosion was only a cover-up—"

"This makes two attempts to remove me within half an hour," I said.

"Two attempts?" Meade's eyes opened even wider when I told him about Bobo Mearson, and about the reason for my coming to Taylor. He groaned, leaned back against the battered desk, and silently studied the wreckage on the floor.

"You think Stacey engineered this?" He found words at last. "You think he knows you're coming for him?"

"Somebody knows," I pointed out. "Somebody who seems more anxious to put me in a hospital than to kill me. That killer could have got me as easily as Kenney. And a tommy-gunner in Mearson's car could have cut me in two as I crept up the hill. For some reason they want to keep me alive but out of the way."

"I—I'd rather not be there when you go for Stacey," Meade said uncomfortably. "If you can handle it alone."

"That's what I intend," I assured him. "I'm going there now. Give me half an hour. If you haven't heard from me by then, you better come over."



**I** DIDN'T expect any trouble with John Stacey, and he made none. He answered the door himself, led me into his library.

"I've come for you, Bossert," I told him quietly. "The New York authorities

have located you. You'll have to go back. You can fight extradition, but it won't do you any good."

His face went white, but I spotted a momentary look of relief in his eyes, as if he was glad the twenty-five years of hiding and waiting were over.

"I won't give you any trouble, sheriff," he said simply. "But I'd like to leave quietly, without my daughter learning—"

Stacey's eyes widened. But it was too late. Before I could grab for my gun, an automatic was jabbed into the small of my back.

"Stand very still, Mr. Sheriff," a soft feminine voice ordered. "You aren't taking my dad anywhere. He isn't a murderer, and you're not dragging him off—"

"Evelyn!" Stacey protested. "You'll only get in trouble. This won't do any good."

"Please, dad! We're going to do things my way now," the girl said. "I'll hold him while you take the car. Hurry!"

I had moved just a trifle; enough so that I could see her face in a mirror on the side wall. It was a pretty face, even now when it was tense and white-lipped. I saw her glance switch from me to her father, pleading with him—and I took a chance on catching her off-guard. I threw myself forward, away from the gun.

Evelyn Stacey didn't fire. Before I could turn and make a grab for her, she swung the gun and brought it down over my head.

Blossoms of flame burst in front of my eyes, and my skull seemed to split wide open. I heard the girl's gasp—horrified, contrite. Then I hit the floor, and her voice seemed to come from a great distance.

"Get a rope and help me tie him up!" She was almost sobbing. "Stuff something in his mouth to gag him. We've got to get him out of here!"

My ankles and wrists were lashed—



and I had just sufficient strength to flex my muscles, against the time when I could try to free myself. A cloth was forced into my mouth, tied behind my neck; I was lifted and carried outside to a car, tossed on the floor covered with a robe.

By now my senses had almost fully returned. I was lying in the rear of a sedan, which was moving. There was no use trying to free myself; they had taken up my gun and I would be helpless if I tried to make a break.

All I could do was lie there and hope.

This made the third attack so far—three chances to kill me that had been passed up, even though two other men had died because of them. I know now that John Stacey must have been expecting me; that his daughter was aware of his real identity and of his impending arrest.

*"We're going to do things my way now,"* she'd said. That sounded bad, yet I could not believe that John Stacey was a cold-blooded murderer. I didn't think that he had ordered Kenney's death . . . unless *he* was the Organizer—and one of the petty racketeers he had displaced had learned his secret and squealed. . . .

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Red-Hot Lead

**T**HE car stopped and the girl got out. When she returned, it started up again, rolling a short distance into what my nose told me was a garage. It was quiet there, so quiet that I could hear voices—Evelyn Stacey's and a man's.

"Please, Will, don't ask for explanations now," she begged. "Just do this for me. Keep him here for a few hours."

"For two weeks I can't get as much as a word from you—can't even see you—and then you come asking me to help you with kidnaping." His voice was harsh,

bitter. "Seems to me your fiance—"

"Please, Will." Her voice was so low that I could hardly hear her. "Please—Oh!"

Her gasp was smothered by a kiss, then another and another, until she begged him to stop.

"All right," I heard him agree. "Wait until Val is busy outside. There's a car now."

The door of the sedan was opened and a man peered down at me. I was dragged out, lifted over his shoulder and carried a few yards to a large closet. He dumped me on the floor, bent over me to see that my bonds were secure, then closed the door.

I could make out nothing more of what was said, but I was no longer trying to listen. I was busy with the rope around my wrists. I had caught a glimpse of that garage as I was lifted from the car, and if what I suspected was true, I had to get out of that closet in a hurry—if I was to get out at all.

Fortunately, Stacey and his daughter hadn't had much experience binding a man. When I relaxed my muscles, there was sufficient play in the rope for me to work my hands back and forth. Gradually I eased one farther and farther out from under the coils. With a final tug that almost tore the skin away, I yanked loose.

A few minutes more and my ankles were untied and the gag was out of my mouth, not a moment too soon. The closet had a double doorknob, and it wasn't locked. I opened it cautiously—stepped out into the same garage where I had stopped for gas; where I had come back to the telephone!

It was dimly lighted, deserted at the moment, but I was hardly out of the closet when I heard a familiar voice out front. I looked around and chose one of a line of parked cars—one near the telephone—and ran to it. I scrambled inside, flattened out on the floor just as Cliff Meade



entered the garage. With him were the owner and the assistant who had served me.

"Don't give me any of that, Harding," Meade growled. "The sheriff's been snatched, and I've been tipped off that you're holding him here. That's all the search warrant I need."

He had his gun drawn; it was trained on Harding's middle. At his order, Val, the assistant, turned on the lights.

"That closet—" Meade pointed to the place where I had been lodged. "Open it up!"

The assistant obeyed, and I saw Harding's barely suppressed amazement when the closet was empty. Meade ordered several other closets opened, went out in back with the garagemen. Five minutes later he returned, puzzled, plainly unconvinced. With a warning to Harding that the place would be watched, he left.

As soon as he was gone, Harding came back and conducted his own search. Mystified, he turned away from the empty closet from which I had fortunately removed the ropes and gag. I breathed more freely and settled down to wait.

Again the half-darkened garage was silent. For ten minutes there was no interruption, and then the assistant returned. He hurried straight to the phone and called a number. His voice was barely audible, but I got the number and etched it deep in my memory.

"Dawson calling," he husked into the hand-cupped mouthpiece. "Meade was here a little while ago, looking for the sheriff. He says Trowbridge was snatched. He thought we had him here. No—nobody's been here but the Stacey girl. She drove in about half an hour ago and talked to Harding. No—no—"

**D**AWSON half-turned from the phone, looking about fearfully. I clouted him over the head with a wrench I'd gotten from the tool-kit in the

back of the car, and he dropped without a sound. I grabbed the receiver before it banged against the wall, clamped it to my ear.

". . . and he may be around there somewhere now, you fool!" a voice rasped over the wire. "Look for him!"

The connection clicked off before I could say a word. I rang for central. The chief operator got busy on the number I gave her. A few minutes later I had the address—a cigar store on the corner of Market and Erie.

Harding came back into the garage, and I had him up against a wall before he knew what was happening. He didn't try to resist; just clamped his jaws together and refused to answer a question. I wasn't in the mood for talking, anyway. I slipped my handcuffs on him, and tied up Dawson with the ropes I had shucked. I piled them both in the back of a sedan, locked up the garage, and started out for the corner of Market and Erie.

I had to pass John Stacey's home on the way. Cliff Meade's car was at the curb. I stopped to pick him up, and Meade came out to meet me before I reached the front steps. He gaped at me, wide-eyed.

"Tom! Where the—" He sputtered, "Someone phoned and said you'd been kidnaped and were being held in Will Harding's garage. That was to get me off on a wild-goose chase. But there's nobody here. Stacey's gone, and Evelyn too. What did you do with them?"

I set him straight on that. When he learned what the Staceys had done to *me*, he seemed incredulous; he didn't seem to believe, me, until he saw the trussed-up captives in the back of the car.

"I don't get it, Tom," he said slowly. "But if you didn't arrest Stacey, then the Organizer has him—and Evelyn." The sound of his voice was as hopeless as a death sentence.

He stepped in beside me, rode tight-lipped, mask-faced.



I knew now why Bobo Mearson had come to meet me; knew how word of my arrival in Taylor had been flashed ahead of me. But Stacey had known that I was coming too. He was not surprised when I walked in on him, and yet it seemed fairly certain that Harding had not phoned word of my arrival.

And why hadn't I been killed in the first place? Why were such pains being taken to keep me alive, when a bullet would have eliminated me so easily?

This mysterious Organizer was playing with me. I could read the signs of his handiwork, could feel him very close to me—

"Better stop at the office and let me get you a gun." Cliff Meade broke the silence. "I only have this one."

That took only a few minutes. With the revolver Meade gave me thrust in my holster, I headed for Market and Erie.

Blocks from the corner, I knew that we were running into trouble; fire sirens warned me. One street away, we could see the flames leaping high. I parked the car and locked it, led the way through the watching crowd; but I knew what we would find before we reached the fire lines. The three-story building that housed the cigar store was blazing furiously.

"Looks like the Organizer has moved—and doesn't care to be followed," I said, as one of the floors crashed in a shower of sparks.

"That's the end of your lead," Meade said gloomily.

"Maybe. We still have Val Dawson," I reminded.

Meade didn't answer. He followed me silently to the car, but a few yards from the machine he suddenly broke into a run. Then he cursed bitterly.

The sedan stood where we had left it, but one of the windows was smashed and the doors were unlocked. Will Harding was gone, but Val Dawson still lay bound on the floor—with the top of his head bludgeoned in!

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Beyond the Blaze

**F**OUR hours later, nothing remained of the cigar store building but a heap of smoldering, water-drenched embers.

From where I watched, in a doorway across the way from the burned structure, I caught a wink of light at the Market Street end of the block; one and then two more in quick succession. That was from Jim Lee, Meade's assistant deputy, reporting all clear on the street he was watching. In a few moments a similar signal blinked at the far end of the Erie Street block, Meade's station.

Nothing stirring there yet, but I sat tight, gambling desperately that the telephone call trail did not end in the blaze that had wiped it out.

Hell had broken loose in the city; crime had moved in and taken arrogant charge, and the overgrown town was helpless.

While the cigar store blaze was raging, half a dozen hold-up men had walked in on one of the city's illicit gambling establishments; and before they walked out with their haul, three men lay dead on the floor. Half an hour later, a fight broke out in the town's largest tavern. Before the frantic police had restored order there, a dance-hall murder and a reckless street-gun-battle had sent them rushing to answer new alarms.

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"They're running wild!" Washburn, the stampeded head of the local police, wailed. "Cars full of gangsters are roaming the town! We haven't a chance against them. You've got to call on the governor for help, sheriff."

But before the governor could send help it would be too late. The Organizer was taking over the city, wiping out all opposition.

After tonight it would be a next to impossible to dislodge him.

With Meade and Lee, I patrolled the town for hours, but each time we were too late; we arrived after the raiders had gone. They struck and vanished—and the Organizer could laugh at our bungling efforts. He left not a hint of a trail, except that telephone call from Will Harding's garage.

It would have been simple to close the cigar store and leave after that phone call, but whoever had been at the other end of the line did not dare allow the premises to be searched. Why? Because the store was only an entrance, a threshold to somewhere else; a threshold effectively blocked by the blaze, unpassable for at least twenty-four hours.

But the trail from that threshold still led on—to where? To somewhere within that block? Two sides of the square were lined with stores, a third was occupied by stores and small loft buildings. The fourth consisted mostly of garages.

Somewhere in that set-up, I was convinced, was the Organizer's nest, and we had only to spot its other exit. I was hoping that he would reveal it. Cliff Meade and Jim Lee had their orders, and I sat tight, waiting. . . .

The break came sooner than I expected. We hadn't been at our posts half an hour when Cliff Meade's light blinked three times in quick succession. I waited only long enough to flash a single beam in Lee's direction. Then I ran to meet Meade.

"You're right, Tom," he greeted. "The rats' nest is in this block. Harding just passed me and turned in at that second garage. It looks like it's closed, but the door opened to let him in."

From across the street we studied the garage. It was a grimy, one-story building, with two gas pumps at the curb. The big door was closed, but a dim night-light shone through the greasy office window. Apparently the place was shut for the night, but when we tried a small door cut in the larger one the latch lifted.

Inside, it was deathly silent.

"There it is! There's the car he drove in!" Meade whispered hoarsely and pointed to a black coupé.

Gun in hand, Meade crouched beside the machine. There was only the one doorway to the garage, we discovered. No other way out—until we located a flight of steps leading to the basement. It was dark and still down there, but when we stood on the cement-paved floor and cupped lighted matches in our hands, the faint sound of distant voices reached us.

Suddenly Meade clutched my arm.

"That's Evelyn's voice!" he whispered. "The devils have her down here somewhere!"

Frantically, he began searching among the piled up crates and empty oil barrels. Hidden in the center of what seemed a solid square of those metal barrels, he unearthed another stairway. It took us down to a narrow, cement-walled passageway ten feet below, where the voices were louder, coming from the farther end. Only men's voices now.

We felt our way along the dark tunnel. One hand on the wall, the other tightly gripping my revolver, I edged forward, nerves tensed for the break I knew would come at any moment.

When we were nearly to the end of the passageway, light burst upon us!

That abrupt illumination almost caught me unaware. Meade whirled toward me—



and my revolver barrel slapped flat against the side of his head. He staggered back, slumped; but before his limp body hit the floor men came leaping at me from the doorway at the tunnel's end.

I pressed the trigger again and again, but nothing happened. Dull clicks, and nothing more. . . .

The gun Meade had given me was loaded with duds, not blanks! He knew I might detect a suspicious lightness in the weapon unless the bullets were genuine, so he had removed the powder and refilled the cases with sand!

Guns whipped down on my skull; arms closed around me, pinning me helplessly as I dived headlong into a void of all-engulfing blackness. . . .



**H**ALF a dozen pairs of eyes were fixed on me when I came to. Cliff Meade; John Stacey and his daughter; Will Harding—they were all staring at me as I sputtered and gasped.

The rat-faced little thug who had doused me grinned appreciatively. But only one face in that strange place gripped my attention.

The heavy, square-jawed face of the man who sat behind the desk. He, too, grinned appreciatively.

I was slumped in a plain, straight-backed wooden chair. I wasn't bound. That was not necessary. I felt weak as a kitten, and two guns covered me carefully—Meade's and the thug's. And there was another, efficient-looking automatic lying on the desk.

The damp-smelling room was somewhere underground; probably at the end of the passageway, I told myself. Three doors opened onto it from as many directions. Meade—with an angry-looking welt on the side of his head—stood near one of those doors, in a position from which he could cover all of us.

The Staceys and Will Harding were helpless. Lined up side by side on a wooden bench against the wall facing me, their ankles and wrists were tied. Tragic, stricken-faced figures, they could only sit there and watch me with hopeless eyes.

But that fellow behind the desk—*So he* was the criminal Organizer. . . .

As I stared at that cruel, ruthless face I straightened out the last perplexing kinks in the strange web of crime that had enmeshed the city. What had seemed inexplicable became simple, rational—like John Stacey's putting the finger on himself, and bringing pressure to bear to have himself arrested and returned to a New York penitentiary!

Yes, Stacey did that, all right. I suspected as much when I listened to Evelyn talking to Will Harding. Now I knew I was right.

"Glad you came out of it, sheriff." The man who called himself the Organizer widened his grin. "We been waiting for you. You're gonna go places, and you oughta know where. You've been working too hard, sheriff. You need a vacation. We're gonna send you on a nice little hunting trip, you and Stacey. Just the two of you—a sort of honeymoon. That's a good one!" He chortled. "The girl gets married, and her old man goes on a honeymoon!"

I nodded grimly. "I suppose there'll be no returning for either of us."

"I wouldn't say that, sheriff." The Organizer shook his head. "Maybe not for you there won't be any return; but whether Stacey comes back depends on our girl friend here. If she's a nice, sensible wife nothing's gonna happen to him. If she isn't—"

"Don't believe a word he says, Evelyn," John Stacey warned.

I said quickly, "Meade only wants you in order to grab the factory when you inherit it. That's why your father reported himself to the New York authorities—to



get you out of the hands of these rats!"

"Daddy! You didn't!" The girl's eyes were wide, horrified.

"It was all I could do," Stacey admitted.

"He was helpless," I reminded. "You knew that when you agreed to marry Meade. This Organizer fellow knew about your father's trouble back in New York, and saw in that a fine opportunity to grab the town's main industry by marrying you off to his pal Meade—while he built up an underworld kingdom of his own! That's why I wasn't killed half a dozen times tonight. My death would mean a new sheriff—and a new deputy. Their scheme requires that Meade stay on here as deputy—unless he can become sheriff."

Every moment counted now, every moment I could keep them like this.

"That's the way you have it figured now, isn't it, Cliff?" I hazarded. "We're not coming back from that hunting trip—neither Stacey or I—but you'll bring in our murderer. You'll bring him in dead, probably. That's where Harding comes in—the bloody murderer who killed Stacey because he could not prevent her marriage to you. After that fine piece of police work, chances are ten to one the governor will appoint you to succeed me. Between you and the Organizer, you'll own the town body and soul."

I could tell by the gleam in his eyes, by the defiant set of his jaw, that I hit the target with that one.

"But it won't work, Cliff," I told him matter-of-factly. "You can't work a scheme like that with this fellow you call the Organizer. He'll cut your throat. He's had partners before. There was one twenty-five years ago, back in Winslow City, Your Organizer made a stooge of him, tricked him into helping pull off a robbery and committing murder, and then ran out on him with the loot. He left him to face the chair."

I watched the desk and the man behind

it. The Organizer's hand was very close to the automatic.

"That's a lie, Trowbridge," he rasped. "You can't prove a word of it. You can't—"

"Trowbridge now; Tom Trowbridge," I said slowly. "But back in Winslow City, when you were plain Nick Rucker, you knew a Tom Walters, remember? Tom Trowbridge Walters."

I saw his eyes narrow almost imperceptibly, saw his knuckles whiten, his body tense. And I leaped.

Not at Rucker, though. I jumped straight at Cliff Meade's leveled gun. Death was very close at that moment, but as the weapon roared, I dived. The bullet missed me by a hair's breadth—and buried itself in Nick Rucker's broad forehead!

That much I glimpsed as my arms closed around Meade's knees. Even before he hit the floor, I grabbed frantically for his gun; snatched it from his strangely yielding fingers. Strange—until I saw his writhing face, and the crimson stain spreading over his chest where Nick Rucker's bullet had found a mark.

I had little time for Meade just then. The slick-haired thug had dropped behind the Organizer's desk and was taking deliberate aim at me.

There was no cover in that bare little room. The three bound prisoners sat as stiff as wax figures, pressed tight against the wall. Rucker slumped over his desk. Meade sprawled dead on the floor.

I caught a glimpse of his staring eyes, his slack jaw—just as a bullet caught me in the shoulder and almost pinned me to the floor. Then I heard the pound of footsteps beyond the door at my back.

The door opened. I knew then that everything was going to be all right; I saw it in the panic-stricken faces of the thugs even before I heard Jim Lee's yell and the bark of his gun. He *had* seen my signal—he had got help from the police and had trailed me. . . .



**W**E'RE going on that honeymoon, John Stacey and I. But we're going along with the bride and groom. Stacey and the Hardings insist on having it that way. They're going back to New York State with me, to see the governor and help me set the record straight after twenty-five years.

This wallet I'm taking with me has the whole story in it, documentary proof as far as I can provide it. Those money-order receipts? Fifteen thousand dollars worth!

Sure, they are for the instalments of the loot that was mysteriously returned to Lyman Nichols' heirs over the years. That was the least I could do, to make restitution—for I was a party to that safe-robbery, just as much as if I had taken the money myself. I was only Rucker's stooge, but I helped him get away with it.

John Stacey—or Hugh Bossert, as he was in those days—he told the truth, even though the jury wouldn't believe him. I ran out of Nichols' office when I heard footsteps in the hall and left by the window. Those footsteps were Bossert's. He

walked in on the murder scene, and when the police came they caught him red-handed, or so it looked, anyway.

Believe me, I sweated blood during the days of his trial. I couldn't go to his rescue without heading straight for the electric chair myself, and I guess I hadn't had the guts for that. I was in the courtroom that day when he made his break, and I followed him—the only one who saw how he got away. I trailed him out here to Ohio, settled down in the same county so that I could keep an eye on him—to make sure that the law didn't catch up with him. To make doubly sure that I would not be taken unaware, I set out and became the law myself.

The Organizer nearly put a crimp in my plan. He would have wrecked it completely if—seeing him sitting there at his desk like Nichols, with Meade at the door—I hadn't remembered that trick he taught me back in Winslow City. That was a mighty expensive lesson for me; but there's one thing we ordinary fellows have to be thankful for. Crooks—even the big-shots—seldom learn.

THE END

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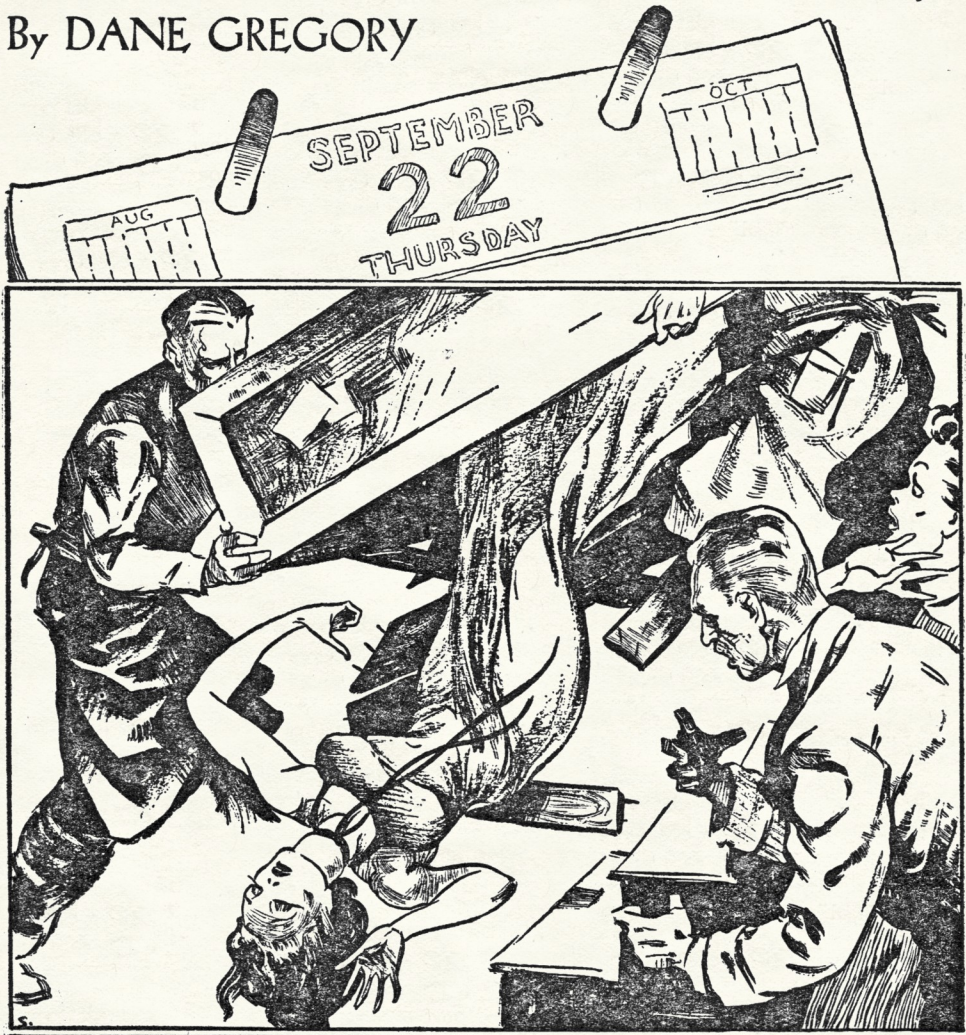
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# All at Once—No Wednesday!

By DANE GREGORY



The ancient bottom boards of the crate suddenly cracked under the weight they bore, and everybody looked at the thing on the floor.

*The girl was dead, all right—strangled with my bathrobe cord. But had I killed her? After all—one day of my life was never lived by me!*

**L**ITTLE things. That was the way it started out—with a couple or three unimportant little things that gradually fitted themselves together. Afterward, I could almost believe that destiny felt a mild sort of pity for me and was



trying to break the bad news gently.

First of all, McAllister called up from the Third National to report that I had overdrawn my account the day before. I hadn't, of course—I'd spent the whole day crouching over an easel.

I told him so, in my sulkiest early-morning voice.

McAllister demanded, "Are you sure?"

"Now look," I said. "You're a personal friend of mine and all that—but Judy isn't home from her mother's yet and I haven't even had my morning coffee. The way I feel right now, it'd be pretty easy for me to—"

"But, Dave, this check!"

"Maybe it's one I pre-dated or something. I'll be in later and settle up with all the big and little vice-presidents! Quit worrying about it, will you?"

I hung up, threw on my bathrobe, and spent the next couple of seconds trying to knot the tasseled cord around my waist. But it wasn't there to knot, and at that hour of the day a petty annoyance can grow into a world crisis within a matter of minutes. I was still turning over pillows and looking under furniture when the telephone rang again.

This time it was Philip J. Fenwick calling from the chromium-plated editorial offices of *NOW*.

I said, "Well?"

He said, "Well, where is it? You promised me faithfully, Dave, that that cover job would be in my hands not later than one o'clock."

"And I've still got until one o'clock. There are only two or three touches to add, and it's only ten-thirty by *my* watch. Look—have I ever missed a deadline?"

Silence. Then Fenwick said gently: "You're feeling all right, aren't you, Dave? You haven't been drinking—"

"What is this, any—"

"—because you know that cover was due at one o'clock *yesterday* afternoon. Not today. Yesterday."

I SAT down and began to laugh. All of a sudden I was feeling much better, and if you know a Philip J. Fenwick maybe you can understand the reason why.

Fenwick was a perfectionist in all things—a copper-plate etching of a man whose socks always matched his neckties and whose crisp blond hair would have remained neatly combed in a Texas twister. He had failed as an artist because of that very passion for detail; his stuff was filled with precise trivialities until it had all the verve and spontaneity of a blueprint. As an art editor, the only forgivable thing about him was that he bought my work pretty regularly. At that, though, he never bought it without first instructing me to deepen a shadow or to tip-tilt a nose or to tone down the gleam in a pair of eyes.

He said coldly, "I don't quite see the joke, Dave."

"I'm happy to find out you're capable of making a mistake, that's all. Look, Phil, if that cover was due yesterday, why didn't you say something about it when you and Gay Gibson dropped in last night?"

Silence again. Then: "This isn't really very funny, Dave. Gay Gibson and I weren't there last night. We dropped in on you *night before last*, and I haven't seen you or Gay since!"

Yes, it had stopped being funny. I said solemnly, "You need either a vacation or a change of brands, Phil. Why don't you take a look at your calendar?"

"I have," Fenwick said coolly. "Have you?"

"Why—"

"I don't know what's wrong with you, Dave, but I do know that I need that cover. In view of your—uh—temporary incompetence, I'll give you a few more hours. But I'm coming after it at one o'clock, and it better be ready for me." He hung up.



I thought, "Poor old Phil," and went downstairs with the cordless bathrobe flapping around my ankles.

The kitchen oppressed me even more than the thought of Fenwick. There was a squalid little pagoda of unwashed dishes in the sink, though I could have sworn I'd cleaned them up the day before. A discarded ham sandwich smirked raffishly at me from the top of the icebox—and when had I made a ham sandwich, anyhow? The percolator was full of coffee grounds that couldn't have been there because I'd scoured it out last night. Little things like that.

I wished Judy were here.

My beard resisted as never before, and the fresh coffee had boiled over by the time I'd finished shaving. There remained only a gummy residue formidable enough to make a Turk wince. I took one sip, and then went out to get the bottle of cream from the front porch.

But there were two bottles of cream on the front porch!

There were two bottles of milk; there were two morning newspapers, both of them neatly folded.

I opened the top one and stared at the dateline. It read: Thursday, September 22—and that was when I stopped wasting pity on Philip J. Fenwick. I began to feel a little sorry for myself.



**I** WASN'T really scared yet, you understand. Even then, I wasn't scared. I simply had the kind of light, bubbly sensation that comes to you when you contemplate something too unbelievable to be anything but funny. Rip Van Winkle must have had it when he found out he'd overslept twenty years. I'd only overslept one day, but that gave me a rough idea.

Or had I overslept?

I gathered up the bottles and went back to the kitchen. I thought, *All at once—no*

*Wednesday*, and tried to feel light-hearted and whimsical about it, and then quit trying because I couldn't laugh off the sudden cold sweat in the hollows of my hands. The leering ham sandwich, the unwashed dishes, the other small, smug evidences that I'd been up and about the day before. The cigarettes, for instance.

Tuesday night I'd been out of cigarettes—I'd had to mooch a couple of bedtime smokes from Phil Fenwick. I remembered it distinctly. But now there was half a pack of cigarettes on the table and a little tier of stubs in the ashtray. Two of them were even tipped with magenta lipstick.

That was all right, maybe. Gay Gibson used magenta lipstick, and Gay was the model who posed for most of my work. She probably had dropped around for her money and had stayed long enough to have a couple of companionable smokes with me. Judy didn't mind things like that. We'd agreed from the beginning not to make a problem novel out of our marriage.

Yet, I couldn't remember Gay or the cigarettes or anything else. Wednesday was simply an air-pocket in my brain. I had lost a whole day as a clock sometimes loses ten minutes, and I had lost it for the same reason.

Because I'd stopped ticking right. Because there was something radically wrong with my works.

*Aphasia*. The word came to my lips and clung there like a burr. I dug my knuckles into my eyelids and pressed deeper and deeper as if I could squeeze out memory by hand.

I started, "Let's see now—where was I?" and laughed a thin dry laugh as joyless as the snick of a guillotine blade. I wouldn't try that again. I didn't like the sound of it.

I poured out the coffee and went upstairs to dress. All the time I was trying to think, *So what?* but that wasn't what I kept thinking. I wanted to know



just what I had done with Wednesday.

*I thought, I'm a good enough guy when I'm myself—sure. I don't beat Judy, and I'm kind to animals, and I contribute to the community chest. But what kind of guy am I when I'm some other guy? How do I act when my governor is haywire and I can just let myself go?*

I called up McAllister. I said, "Look, Mac—uh—maybe I did cash a check yesterday."

"I'll say you did! A seven-hundred-buck one, and that puts you an even hundred in the red. Not slipping, are you?"

The receiver twisted in my fingers. "Huh? Oh, no. Nothing like that. . . . Uh—why? Signature looks all right, doesn't it?"

"Sure. I wouldn't have worried about it, but—well, it was cashed at Jerry's bar. That sort of bothered me." Jovially, he went on, "Better cover it as soon as possible, Dave—and better get back on the wagon before Judy comes home."

"Sure," I said. "Ha, ha, ha!"

There was the laugh again, and it didn't sound any better this time.



**J**ERRY said sure, I'd cashed a check there the day before. "Couldn't have covered it if I hadn't just cleaned up on a three-horse parley. . . . Hey, that was all right, wasn't it? When the girl came in with it, I called you up and you said—"

"The g—girl?"

You ought to know! Gay Gibson. It was made out to bearer, and when I checked with you over the phone—"

"All right! What did I say?"

Jerry's voice became slow and thoughtful. "Well, now that I think of it, you said a sort of funny thing. You said, 'Go ahead and cash it for her, Jerry. When she comes back here after her hat, maybe I can talk her out of fifteen cents

for cigarette money.' Hey! Don't you remember what you—"

I said, "Oh, sure. Sure."

Jerry said, "Look, Dave, if that girl is blackmailing you, I know a lawyer who—"

I said inanely, "Oh, it c-couldn't be anything like that, could it?" and let the transmitter jiggle back into its socket.

I was beginning to have a faint idea of what kind of guy I was when I was the other guy. I had owed Gay Gibson fifty dollars for modeling fees, and apparently I had paid her seven hundred. Judy was broad-minded, but even Judy would want to know why.

But I wasn't so sure that I did.

I shoved my hand into my coat-pockets, and began to walk back and forth across the carpet. Then I said, "Whoa!" and my hands came out full of wadded paper that fluttered in a lazy little green blizzard to the floor. I sat down on my heels and gathered it up again.

Seven hundred dollars! Evidently I'd talked Gay out of more than fifteen cents for cigarette money.

I began to sweat again. Gay Gibson was one of the loveliest things alive, but under her smooth enamel was rock, nothing else. It would have taken extraordinary powers of persuasion to loosen her grip on seven hundred dollars—and ordinarily I'm not an eloquent man.

I went to the telephone again. I was beginning to hate that telephone as I never before had hated an inanimate object, but I spun the dial to Gay Gibson's number.

I said, "Hello! Hello—Gay?"

It wasn't. It took me a full minute to recognize it as the voice of her sister June.

She said, "No, Gay isn't here. Who's this?"

Ask me why I lied and I couldn't tell you. Why does any man do senseless things when he feels himself sinking



deeper and deeper into trouble? I said, "It's Arthur Scott," making up the name. "I met Gay at a party last week, and we were supposed to have a date this afternoon."

"Oh. Oh, I see." All at once words were pouring out of the telephone as if something had broken inside it. "She isn't here. She—she went out yesterday afternoon and she hasn't been back since. She was going to collect some money from an artist she poses for. I'm scared—I'm scared to death! I don't know what's happened to her. It's not like her to— to stay away so—"

I mumbled, "Oh, I guess she'll be home all right."

"I was just going to call the police." She laughed a delirious little laugh. "Will you g-g-get off the wire so I can call the police, Mr. Scott?"

I dropped the transmitter.

Police. . . .



JUDY proudly called the room my *atelier*, but it was just a renovated store room with a good north light. I did all my pastels there, and most of them brought pretty good prices—but I still didn't think it was an *atelier*.

I stopped for a minute outside the door, then kicked it open. I went in to look for Gay Gibson.

Her hat was on the floor, a dinky green turban with a big black footprint on it. My footprint, of course—size eight and a half. There wasn't any sign of Gay, though.

I turned around and went over to the easel. I looked at my study of Gay Gibson—the pastel cover-job that Fenwick had been chewing his nails about—and my breath came up into my throat and lodged there in a little cold ball. It had been fair work the last time I'd seen it, but it wasn't even fair surrealism now.

Somebody armed with a good sharp blade had slashed it to doll-ribbons. And Gay wouldn't have done that; Kipling to the contrary, there isn't a woman in the world who will deliberately ruin a picture of herself. No one would have done it but a lunatic—or maybe somebody who had developed a sudden black rage against the model.

I took out my pocket pen-knife and opened the blade, and—wouldn't you just know it?—it was filled with pastel dust. I put it back in my pocket and began to prowl from room to room, looking for Gay.

When I got back to the livingroom, Judy suddenly walked through the front door. She shook the red curls out of her eyes and thumped her suitcase down on the floor.

"Well," she said. "A fine husband you turned out to be! I waited two hours at the depot."

I said stupidly, "Hello, Judy. Did—did you have a nice visit?"

"Why didn't you come to meet me? You knew I was due on the—"

"I wasn't expecting you, Judy. I mean—well, I was expecting you tomorrow, of course, but I keep forgetting that this is tomorrow on account of yesterday was Wednesday. I mean—"

She took a couple of steps toward me, her eyes growing big and soft. "Dave!" she whispered. "Why, you're *green!*"

"I'm what?"

"Green. Like a Martian. Why, Dave, I—I believe you're sick."

I had to tell her about it. I don't know why; I guess it was just that I'd never held out on her and couldn't seem to acquire a new habit on the spur of the moment. "Judy," I said. "You remember a fiction character named Jurgen, who suddenly got all his lost Wednesdays back as a sort of cosmic birthday gift? Well—uh—what I'm trying to say is that I'd settle for just one."



Judy got pretty white around the lips as I poured out the whole story, but her soft eyes didn't move from mine. She took one of my hands, squeezed it between her palms, and said, "But—but that's not so terrible, Dave. It—well, it happens to people you know—when they're overworked or run-down or something. Lots of people." She added enthusiastically, "Thousands, maybe!"

"Don't try to make me feel good about it. It's still terrible."

Judy said, "Dave! You—you're telling me everything, aren't you? I—I mean—there isn't anything terrible that you *remember*?"

"No. There's just a black hole in my brain where Wednesday ought to be." I lifted my hands and began to cuff the sides of my head. "How do I know what I'm like when I'm not like me? Why, I might have done anything. I might have—"

"No, Dave. You wouldn't have done anything really bad."

"What makes you think I wouldn't?"

Judy said weakly, "Oh, just because," and then the back doorbell buzzed like a coiled rattler.



THERE were two of them. They measured about six feet apiece, and they both wore striped jumpers and tough brown faces. One of them said, "You're David B. Merrick? We're from the transfer company."

I said blankly, "Are you?"

"We've come for the crate."

"The crate?" said Judy.

"This here crate on the porch, I guess. Mr. Everly—that's our boss—he says we're to come here and pick up a crate for Mrs. Merrick and take it down to the freight office. Says Mr. Merrick wants it shipped not later than noon."

Judy looked at me. Then we both went

outside and looked at the crate on the back porch.

It was an old one I'd moved out of the store room when I moved my easel in, but several new things had been done to it. There were strips of board nailed across the top and a shipping tag nailed to one of the boards. I bent and stared at it as a man might stare at his own face in a casket. There in my familiar, spidery printing were the words:

*Otto J. Glaspin, Great Falls,  
Mont.—Store Until Called For.*



Judy kept looking at me, and now there was sudden fear in her eyes.

"Dave, are you—are you sure you want to ship this?"

I must have been sure Wednesday, but I wasn't now.

I thought, *Good God, couldn't I have found a stronger crate—and couldn't I have thought of a name that didn't sound so phony?*

"No," I said, "No, I guess I don't want to send it, after all. Otto—uh—well, Otto will understand. Sorry to have bothered you gentlemen for nothing."

They stared at me. "Well," said the broader one. "Well, you see, it's this way. We take our orders from Mr.



Everly, and Mr. Everly says for us to take the crate. So we gotta take it."

Judy twisted her hands hysterically. "But you can't just come into our home and take a—a crate we don't want to send! This isn't Nazi Germany!"

"It is if Mr. Everly says so. Way I see it, you ought to call up Mr. Everly again and tell him you've changed your mind. You'll have to hurry it, though, because we're taking the crate."

And they were, too. They got at either end and began to lift. I shut my eyes and opened them again because I couldn't keep them shut. The whole thing was like a sequence in a horror movie—a fascinating sequence that I'd seen before but just had to see again.

The nails let out a rusty whine. The ancient bottom boards of the crate suddenly cracked under the weight they bore, and everybody looked at the thing on the floor. Judy uttered a short, whispering scream.

The men didn't say anything. They just kept looking down at Gay Gibson.

She was no longer beautiful. She lay in a silken sprawl near my feet, one hand clenched into a pale tight fist. Her face was queerly dark under the amber cloud of her hair. Drawn tightly around her throat was the missing cord of my bathrobe. It had been carefully knotted at the nape of her neck, so that its ends dangled down like a Windsor tie.

Obviously she had been dead for a good many hours.

"Murder," said the broad man, in a thick, furry voice.

"Murder?" the other whispered.

They put down the crate. The broad man peered thoughtfully into my face, then his enormous brown wrists jumped out of his cuffs. He came at me fast. I saw instantly that he was planning to knock me around, not because he had known Gay Gibson but just because it seemed the thing to do.

And I couldn't move.

Judy screamed, "No!" and pitched her slim body hard at mine. We went through the open door together.

The bolt gnashed into its socket. We heard the broad man hit the panel and rock back on his heels and then hit it again, bawling blue murder.

Judy said, "Run!"

I said, "No."

"Run—run—*run!* Dave, you've got to!"

"I'll take my medicine. I'm a killer, Judy—and a rotten one, too—a terrible one. I should've known that crate wouldn't stand the gaff. I—"

"Dave—please! I just *know* you didn't do it!"

They were both hitting the door now. I mumbled, "I did it, all right. You see why, don't you? She was blackmailing me about—well, something or other—and when she came back after her hat I must've blown my lid. . . . I took the money away from her and then I—"

"Dave!" said Judy. "L-look!"

All the time she'd been tugging me along toward the front door, but I didn't realize it until she stopped there with her small nose pressed to the pane and her fingers tight on my arm. I looked out.

A mysterious black sedan had just braked to a halt in the sanded driveway. Two hard-jawed men stepped out of it and came swinging along toward us; and that was when I remembered that June Gibson had been about to call headquarters.

It was probably the first time in history, I thought, that the cops had trapped a murderer before they knew there was a murder. . . .

JUDY said, "Policemen!"

I said, "Yes."

Judy said, "Oh, Dave, Dave—you've got to run! They'll beat you with



rubber hoses like they do in books! You'll confess to murder because you think you did it, but you didn't—you *didn't*! It's nothing but a vicious frame-up of some kind!"

I said harshly, "That's what all us murderers say."

A fist went *rickety-rac-rac* on the panel, and back in the nether part of the house I could hear door-hinges getting ready to give. I pushed my fingers through my hair, and they came away as damp as if I'd just emerged from a shower. At best, it would only be a matter of heart-beats until the men in back and the men in front were comparing notes.

So I agreed to run.

It's this way: A man may have the courage to slap down a bigger man, or to put on khaki in times of need, or to sail through any of the other crises that are the standard gauges of valor. But when the cops come for him, the litmus

test shows yellow. Whether he approves the status quo or not, he pays the instinctive tribute of fear to the social order those cops personify. He wants to run, and finally he does.

I said, "Judy, Judy!" and she said, "We'll g-get in touch with each other later," and I went upstairs just as doors began to bang open below me.

I slammed another door and went through the master bedroom, bowling over a bedside table and the ashtray on it. The window rose as grudgingly as Jeeter Lester. Below me a whitewashed trellis clambered up the side of the house, and I clambered down it into banked rose-bushes that caught and held me for one priceless second. All the inanimate objects in the world seemed to have joined the force.

Judy's scream came out to me and then was lost in the flat, bitter *whack* of gunfire. Notes had been compared al-

## "I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did — Actually and Literally)

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal, sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do — well — there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering — and now? — well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County, I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do, if there is poverty, unrest,

unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well — this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be — all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 1069, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1940, Frank B. Robinson.



ready, and one of the cops was shooting at me from the open window. He was resting his elbow on the sill, shooting with all the deadly deliberation of a man who knows he has more time than his target.

The first two bullets threw hot gravel against my legs. I thought crazily: *Shooting at me. At me! Why, they can't do this, can they? I'm not a conscious criminal—I'm a law-abiding citizen just like anybody else.*

The cop kept shooting, though. His third bullet licked at the side of my head, and I got to the alley no more than a dime's breadth in front of the fourth one.

Our car was laid up for repairs, of course—when bad luck starts coming your way, it comes in bunches, like visiting relatives or a sequence of flat tires. There was nothing to do but run.

The alley let me out on Sutter Street just as cop cars began to scream along the avenue, half a block to my right. Newspaper editors write shrill editorials about the inefficiency of the police, but they probably wouldn't feel that way if they'd ever been hunted. I didn't. I thought the police were right in there pitching ball.

Another radio car roared down Sutter Street, its siren opened to the sky. I sauntered innocently into the corner drug-store and sandwiched my face in a magazine. The car went by. "May I help you, please?" a salesgirl asked politely.

I said, "No, I guess not," and put down the magazine, and got out of there fast. It seemed I had been absorbed in something named *Kiddy Komix*.



UNCLE Dave Merrick had left me three thousand dollars for being his namesake, and Judy and I had invested it in a four-room unfurnished

house that nobody would live in very long because the man next door held jam-sessions. It turned out to be a good investment, after all. I spent the day there, huddled close to the crack of a window blind, with the street constantly under my eye.

Nothing happened; and I knew that by picking the last place where I should have gone, I'd picked the last place where the cops would look for me. The afternoon died in a dusky blanket and still nothing had happened. That night I went out.

I clung to the side-streets and cut across town to Russian Hill, setting my teeth against the bitter wind that leaned out of the bay. I had no coat; I'd taken it off when I started to sweat and had forgotten it when I started to run. I had no money; all my money was in the coat. I had nothing but an empty belly and a destination.

Philip J. Fenwick opened the door of his six-room apartment and looked at me with as much concern as his well-bred face would permit.

"Dave! For heaven's sake, get in here quick! The neighbors . . ."

I got in quick.

Fenwick shut the door behind me and said bitterly, "Judy gave me the whole story when I went after that cover job. My Lord, man, I can forgive murder or any other eccentricity—but did you *have* to spoil that cover?" He slid lean fingers through his hair, and the hair fell neatly back in place. "Now I'll have to depend on Jay Crossen, and you know what kind of stuff I'll get. Libido—pink libido as indigestible as marshmallow frappé."

I sat down and lit one of Fenwick's cigarettes. He watched me very thoughtfully.

"Dave, what is this memory-lapse yarn? Just something to tell a jury, or is it the truth?"



"A kid in kindergarten could figure out a better yarn for a jury," I said morosely.

He looked as convinced as possible. "I see. Well, I'll do what I can for you—not as an art editor but as a friend. Frankly, Dave, you've become a serious liability to *NOW*."

"I'm broke—flat. Could you—"

"Yes," sighed Fenwick, "I can. I'll have to cash a check at the corner cigar-store, though."

He went out.

I smothered the cigarette and began to stalk restlessly about the room. It crowded in on me. There was a place for everything, and everything was in place, from the shelf of correct books at one end to the neatly-covered dictagraph set into which Fenwick enunciated his correct articles on contemporary art. I went over to the prim little fireplace and looked at the picture above it.

It was one of Fenwick's early paintings, a geometric rural scene as full of detail as the room. I was still looking at it when Fenwick came back.

He said, "Like it, Dave?"

I said, "If your calipers are handy, it seems to me the wart on the farmer's jaw could stand a few little touches."

Fenwick was hurt. "That's a crass comment, Dave—crass and very unkind. Especially since—"

I turned around and looked him in the eye. "It's like a set of specifications, Fenwick. There's just too much perfection, too much detail. It's like the sort of murder you'd plan—if you were going to commit a murder!"



**F**ENWICK leaned back against the door, and pocketed his hands in Saville Row tailoring that would never have that lived-in look my own suits seem to get. His long upper lip

flattened ever so slightly across his teeth. He said, "And what exactly does that mean?"

I took a couple of deliberate steps in his direction. "You'd do the thing up brown, wouldn't you? And if you were going to frame it on somebody else, you'd even want him to think he did the job himself. There'd maybe be such items as a forged check that not even a handwriting expert could tell for a forgery—not the way you work. And a cut-and-dried motive. And a telephone call to a transfer company, so that the body would be discovered under the most dramatic circumstances. And—"

"Dave!" Fenwick said reproachfully, frowning.

I said, "Detail! Too much of it, Fenwick, too much. You forgot one thing, though, and that was the ashtray in my upstairs bedroom. I kicked it over when I was running, and it came to me later that there should have been a couple of stubs in it. I bummed two bedtime smokes from you Tuesday night. . . . You'd be surprised how many little things people can think of when the cops are after them."

Fenwick was sneering delicately, but his face had lost none of its neatness. "For your information, Dave, the cops will be here soon. I called headquarters when I went to the cigar-store."

"I expected that."

"But you didn't expect this, did you?" he asked.

He opened a rosewood box and took out a neat, dark Mauser and centered it on my heart. The safety went *snick*. I said no, I hadn't quite expected that.

Fenwick started a careful, balancing walk toward me. "Your theory is grotesque. There isn't a chance in a million that anybody would accept it. But why should I take that one chance? A man has a perfect right to kill an escaped murderer, hasn't he?"



He smiled. I braced myself and said hastily: "What was in those cigarettes, anyhow? I thought they tasted pretty rotten, but I'd expect you to smoke rotten cigarettes if they came in the right kind of package."

Fenwick said, "Muriane."

"What?"

"It's a weed that puts the novice smoker under for hours at a time. There was also a touch of thallium sulphate in your nightcap. I had made preliminary tests on myself, of course."

"Of course. And I spent the whole day in bed?"

"Yes."

"While you sat in my house and used my telephone and—Lord! The things men won't do to be subtle!"

Far down the street, a police siren drew its thin cry across the night. Both of us heard it. Fenwick said, "Even this," and carefully steadied the gun-barrel on his left wrist.

"There's plenty of time to tell me the rest!" I cried. "How did you get Gay to cash that forged check?"

"I told her it was one you'd given me in payment of a debt. She was always after me for money. I—she was with me one night when my car accidentally hit a woman, and she could have . . . messed up my life. I knew she was going to your place yesterday afternoon, and I waited there for her."

The siren rose in a ghoulisish crescendo, and I watched Fenwick's finger gradually whiten on the trigger.

He said, "I'm not sorry—not for either of you. I've had to buy your stuff because my publishers said so, but all the time I've loathed it and you. You're a sloppy craftsman, Dave—a putrid artist. In the name of the old Dutch masters, I'm going to—"

"Not with that gun," I gloated. "I took all the bullets out while you were calling the cops!"

Fenwick jerked—involuntary muscular reflex—and shot a large hole in the carpet. He said, "Damn you! I'll—" and then Judy came through the door. She hit him over the head with the heavy silver-mesh bag I'd given her last Christmas. A fine investment, that bag. . . .

FENWICK got down on his hands and knees and began to hunt all around for the fallen Mauser. I kicked it across the room. He came to his feet quickly.

Judy coaxed, "Hit him, Dave!"

I hit him once with either hand. Fenwick went backward through the open door; we heard the soft *thud-thud* of his heels along the hallway. The first tidal wave of cops bore him into the room again.

There were four of them, and they all had guns. The guns were pointed at me.

Fenwick leveled a dramatic forefinger. "There he is! He was trying to get away, and the woman was helping him! Get him, the—the fiend!" It was pretty bad acting; even Fenwick winced a little.

The cops crowded in, more of them appearing from the corridor.

I said, "Now wait a minute! Listen, will you?"

They listened for a few minutes.

One of the cops laughed boisterously. Judy made fists of her small hands and cried: "It's true! Every word of it's true, and I can give you absolute proof!"

She said proudly, "I figured it out all by myself a little while ago, and that was why I came over here to tell Phil the game was up. It was that—that bathrobe cord around the girl's neck. Don't you see? The knot was *too* neat. I got to thinking: Who wears the sloppiest neckties in the world? Why, Dave. And who wears the neatest ones? Why, Phil. It was that easy."

All the cops were laughing now.

Somebody slapped his thigh resound-



ingly. "It's one for the book. Lady, Hauptmann also claimed he couldn't have made that ladder."

I settled back on my heels and smiled broadly. "All right. So you want better proof than that, do you? Well, how about a verbal confession from the killer himself?"

Everybody looked in my direction.

Taking it big, I said: "Why do you suppose I came here in the first place? See that dictaphone set in the corner? I turned it on while Fenwick was out, and we had a little chat that ought to be rather interesting. Just wait a minute—"

I started toward the dictaphone; and then I turned suddenly and pointed at Fenwick's Mauser. "Watch him!" I bawled. "Watch him! He's going after that gun!"

It was my first experiment in applied psychology, but it seemed to work out pretty well. A hypnotic glaze filled Fenwick's eye. He stared wildly at the gun for a long, electric second, then he crouched and caught up the weapon.

"Get back!" he snarled. "Get away from that door, everybody! I'll kill the

first man who tries to keep me from—"

One of the cops shot him in the head.

I held Judy against my shirt front so she wouldn't have to see. She cried softly there, and the cops maintained a sheepish silence.

"Well," somebody said at last. "I guess that cooks *his* goose, huh? Let's listen to this here dictaphone and see what he's got to say."

It was weird and terrible, hearing Fenwick's calm voice discuss contemporary art while his body grew cold on the carpet: ". . . but though many so-called modern artists achieve a certain eloquence through the deliberate *omission* of detail, Rembrandt's adage remains as true today as it ever was. Trifles make perfection, and perfection is no trifle—"

The dictaphone choked off into silence.

I said, "Well, I *should* have turned it on, of course, but—oh, hell, I'm not a thinker like Fenwick. I just have to get along the best way I can."

"You do all right," growled one of the cops, not quite sure he was pleased.

I patted Judy's quaking shoulder.

"We get along," said Judy.

### "MURDER MEETS THE 8:15"



**D**EATH was a passenger and stark terror the freight of the crack midnight flyer that raced through the black. And manacled side by side on that hell-bound express, the two travelers sat in silence—a cold-eyed man who owed his life to the swiftness of his guns—and his companion—Murder! Don't miss this smashing crime novel by O. B. Myers.

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# Death



Releasing the wrist, Bruce whipped his arm around Charlie's throat.

## CHAPTER ONE

"Have a Corpse on Me"

**T**HE girl was the first person who had ever been afraid of him. That was how it started.

Bruce Keeler had been alone at the bar of the roadhouse until the New York

to Miami bus had pulled in at the way station a short distance down the road. Within a couple of minutes the short bar was jammed with bus passengers. The girl was the last to enter.

Her tweed swagger coat was open in front, revealing a stunning figure in a tight blue gown. Her face, Bruce Keeler thought, was that of a Grecian Venus,



# Hitch = Hikes South

*She was very beautiful, and she was very frightened. How was Bruce Keeler to know that his helping her would lead to an appalling sequence of nightmare events, and that he and this lovely girl would be hunted constantly in a grim game of hide-and-die?*



A Superb,  
Thrill-Crammed Mystery  
Novelette . . . By RUSSELL GRAY



severely classical, with dark hair combed back from an ivory forehead. But she used too much make-up.

"A small beer," she said to the bartender in a husky, tired voice.

A moon-faced man frowned drunkenly up at Bruce Keeler. "Say, you're not on the bus with us!" He made it sound like an accusation.

"I'm driving my own car," Bruce told him.

"To Miami?"

"I'm not sure," Bruce said.

The girl turned her head sharply toward Bruce, leaning over the bar so that she could see past the three or four men between her and him. Their eyes met, and in hers he saw terror. There was no doubt of it; she was mortally afraid of him.

She turned her head away and reached for her beer glass. She lifted it to her very red lips and spilled a little of the beer, and then gave up. She dropped a coin on the bar and started for the door.

Bruce Keeler had an idea that she was running away from him, and there was utterly no sense to it. In the mirror behind the bar he caught a glimpse of himself. It was still the same ordinary face—the chin was strong, the eyes a clear blue. There was nothing wrong about him, nor menacing either. He was just one of a vast crowd of nobodies.

The moon-faced man was leaving the bar also, hurriedly, without quite finishing his drink. He no longer seemed so drunk.

Bruce Keeler paid for his drinks and became the third person in the procession. He was not a man of action, but he was gripped by curiosity as to why a strange, attractive girl should flee from him and why a moon-faced man, who was not as drunk as he pretended, should follow her.

Outside, he saw that the girl had almost reached the bus which was parked in front of the way station. The moon-

faced man was fifty feet behind her. Instead of entering the bus or the squat, plaster building which housed the waiting rooms, the girl turned down the side of the building. At once shade trees hid her. The moon-faced man lurched after her.

Nobody was in sight when Bruce reached the rear of the building. Through the open back door he could see the waiting room and the bus parked beyond the front door. Had the girl returned to it, going completely around the house?

Then he heard the thin squeak. It was a human voice of pain or terror or both, but very low. The muted cry was not repeated.

Three buses were parked on the flat clearing behind the building; there was nowhere else from which the voice could have come.

Bruce hurried on, between two of the buses. The girl and the moon-faced man stood up near the front of one of them. A knife gleamed in the man's hand, and he was holding the point of it against the girl's throat.

"I'm not a guy to horse around, sister," the moon-faced man was saying.

"Let's talk," the girl whispered, her face blanching with unconcealed terror. "I'll—"

"Nuts, sister!"

"You'll kill me anyway!"

"That's the chance you're taking," the moon-faced man said.

He pressed the knife a fraction of an inch. The girl tried to get away from him, but his left arm held her firmly.

Bruce Keeler at last managed to force words past his throat, and what he said sounded downright silly. "Here, you can't do that!" he exclaimed.

The moon-faced man twisted his head.

"So you got a pal!" he snarled at the struggling girl.

"No!" she whimpered. "I never saw him before. I—"

Bruce's eyes were rooted on the knife-



point at the girl's throat. He found himself stepping forward to knock the knife away.

The moon-faced man thrust the girl away to one side as he leaped at Bruce. Instinctively, Bruce flung himself backward. His feet tangled in a root or a spare part for the buses; he fell backward. As he clawed air, he glimpsed the man coming forward, the knife raised. Then the back of Bruce's head smacked the bumper of the bus and a gray curtain threatened to come down over his eyes.

As he rolled down to the ground, he heard, distantly the roar of a powerful bus motor springing into life. And overlapping the roar, there was a smaller sound, like a popping cork.

It seemed only a moment later that Bruce found himself staring at a vagrant pink cloud riding alone in a clear North Carolina sky. The grayness was receding. With an effort he sat up. Fire pierced his brain, coming, it seemed, from the back of his skull. Strangely, there was no pain in the rest of his body.

Then he saw the moon-faced man. He was lying face down, and one of his outflung arms almost touched Bruce's ankle. He lay very still. The girl was nowhere in sight.

Turning on his knees, Bruce bent over the man. Where sparse hair ceased at the back of the neck, there was a small blue hole. The man must have died the moment the girl's bullet had hit him.



SOMEWHERE on the road a man called cheerily, and the voice brought Bruce back to reality. The bus motor must have drowned out the shot, otherwise people would have been here already. He and the murdered man might be found at any moment. What could he tell the police? Would they believe that he hadn't murdered this fellow?

Would they believe that a girl had fired the shot—even if he could bring himself to accuse her after she had saved his life?

Panic-stricken, he started to run. Before he had cleared the buses, he checked himself and walked with attempted casualness to the road. The New York to Miami bus was gone, probably with the girl on it.

His coupé was parked at the side of the roadhouse. As he approached it, he saw that somebody was inside. With a mad fluttering of his heart he knew who it was; yet until he got close enough to look right at her, he wasn't sure.

Her coat was gone and her slinky blue gown had been changed for a simple white dress. Her face was clean of any make-up, her nails were back to normal, and her hair was now piled in a bun on top of her head. She could have passed for a fresh, unsophisticated country girl, still very beautiful, but in a different way.

"Hello," she said. She smiled warmly. "I missed my bus and I heard you say in the roadhouse that you were going to Miami. I noticed the New York plates on your car. I'm from the big town myself."

He gaped at her, wondering if what had happened behind the buses had been merely a bad dream. It didn't seem possible that after having killed a man this girl could have bothered to change her clothing and waited around for him. And why pretend that nothing had happened?

"I come from Buffalo," he corrected her, chiefly because he felt he had to say something.

He walked around to the other door, and slid behind the wheel. A small Gladstone bag rested at her feet. It couldn't have held her tweed coat; she must have discarded the coat entirely.

"Do you want to catch the bus?" he asked.

"Thanks."

He thought he understood now. The police could not prove that she had shot



the moon-faced man. That was why she didn't admit it even to him. She had covered the small knife-pricks on her throat with powder.

He gunned the motor. The dead man behind the ancient buses formed a barrier of silence between them as mile after mile of road disappeared beneath the humming tires.

Presently the yellow bulk of the bus came into view up ahead. The coupé cut down the distance between.

Her hand dropped over his. "I hate buses. Would you like company?"

This was all wrong. If she did not return to the bus and pretended that she had missed it while changing into more comfortable clothes, the police would check the missing passengers and go after her.

"I'm not sure I'm going your way," he said. He couldn't quite tell her that he didn't want to make himself an accessory to murder. After all, she had saved his life.

"Let me ride with you as far as you're going toward Key West."

He didn't look at her, but he was acutely conscious of her closeness. As he swung the car around the tail of the bus, she dropped down in the seat, crouching so low that her head was beneath the level of the window. When they had left the bus behind, she sat up again.

"That doesn't seem so smart," he said. "You shot him in self-defense. I'm your witness."

She turned in her seat, studying him quite openly. "Let's have it, mister. Who are you?"

"Me?" His mouth twisted in a sad imitation of a smile. "I'm a man like millions of others. I'm not a bad guy and not an exciting guy. Nothing's ever happened to me—before this. For fifteen years I've been a buyer in a Buffalo department store. Several days ago I walked out of my job and got into my car. I

hadn't any idea where I was going. I didn't care. I'd suddenly realized that life was rushing by without touching me."

"Looking for adventure, eh?" She sounded skeptical.

"Not exactly. It's hard to explain. I wanted something different. I was tired of being one hundred and seventy pounds of nobody named Bruce Keeler."

"That's not such a good story," she said.

"You don't believe me?"

She shrugged. "What's the difference? I should be satisfied that you're on my side."

"Your side?"

"Just a manner of speaking. I'm a poor working girl bound for Miami to look for a job. On the way a man tried to attack me and you came to my rescue."

"You said Key West before."

"Did I? I meant Miami."

He stopped the car and reached for her handbag resting on her lap. She snatched at it, but he got it first and held it out of reach. She sat back, watching him out of clouded eyes as he opened the bag and lifted out a .32 automatic. He returned the gun, handed the bag to her, and started up the car.

"I just wanted to make sure," he said. "Somebody else might have shot him, you know. Poor working girls generally don't go around armed." He stared at the road ahead. "Thanks for saving my life."

"Thanks for saving mine," she said.

After that they skimmed along in silence between the cotton fields.

On the outskirts of a sleepy little town, Bruce stopped at a service station for gas. He was outside the car, paying the station attendant, when a little man came out of the rest room. The man stopped dead and stared, and Bruce had a fleeting impression of fish-cold eyes in a pinched, swart face. Then Bruce heard a motor cough into sudden life.



He whirled to see that the girl had shifted behind the wheel of his coupé; the car was leaping forward.

"Hey!" he shouted, jumping. He made the running board and clung. The girl jammed the gears into second.

Behind him there was an explosion; a hot breath fanned his cheek. Turning his head, Bruce saw the little man running toward the road with a raised pistol. The attendant crouched behind a pump.

Again the gun belched. Bruce heard the spang of lead against a mudguard. Then the car was on the highway, moving wildly at sixty an hour.

Bruce hung on, every nerve in his body trembling. Presently the girl slowed down. He opened the door and got in beside her. She was hunched over the wheel, her lovely face grimly set. He wiped sweat from his brow.

"Listen!" she said. "I had no idea Charlie would be so close. As soon as I shake him, I'll get out of your hair."

"Who's Charlie?"

"A killer."

"And he wants to kill you?"

"Worse than that," she said huskily.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Net Tightens

**A**T a crossroad, a police sedan and a motorcycle blocked their way. A cop beckoned to them to stop.

*Here it comes*, Bruce thought hollowly. The girl's face mirrored no emotion whatsoever.

The cop came over to the coupé, his hand resting on his holstered gun. He peered at the girl and then asked Bruce, "You know this woman?"

The girl cut in quickly, "What a silly question! I'm his wife." She rested her hand, intimately on Bruce's shoulder. Her manner was shy, almost embarrassed. "We're on our honeymoon. We're driving

to Miami from Buffalo. That's where we live—Buffalo, New York."

The cop kept looking at her. "Let's see your license," he said to Bruce.

The cop checked the description of Bruce on the driver's license and then asked him to sign his name so that he could compare the signatures. Finally the cop said, "Sorry to have bothered you, Mrs. Keeler, but this car has a New York tag, and you look like this woman."

"What woman?" the girl asked.

At that moment there were no other cars at the crossroad. The cop rested an arm on the window. "One of these here Broadway showgirls. Name of Esther Payne. Seems she was hanging around with Sid Edge, a New York rat. She emptied part of a gun into him and the rest of the clip into his bodyguard, Weeping Willie Howe. Their bodies were found in Sid Edge's apartment maybe a day later. When the New York cops checked, they found this Esther Payne had been seen leaving Edge's apartment. They traced her to a bus bound for Miami."

Bruce's knuckles whitened on the wheel. He kept his mouth shut.

"What has that to do with us?" the girl protested.

"A little while ago they stopped the bus she'd been on, but she'd got off half an hour before. She'd shot another man at the station where she'd left the bus. Leastways they figure she shot him. She's a cold-blooded killer, that gal."

The girl smiled coyly. "Do you think I look like this cold-blooded showgirl—"

"You're pretty enough," the cop responded gallantly. "For a showgirl, I mean. The description says she had black hair and black eyes like you. But she was dressed different, and anyways I can see in a minute you and your husband are okay."

For a while they drove in silence. Then Esther Payne said, "You were swell,



Bruce, but from now on it's my grief."

"Did you kill them?"

"I killed a man who deserved to be killed," she said without emotion. "You can let me out right here."

"And what will you do?"

"I'll think about that later. The cops are bad enough, but with Charlie on my trail too, I'd only be leading you straight to your grave."

He concentrated on the narrow, two-lane road. "Why did the sight of me in the bar terrify you?"

"You were the only man who hadn't been on the bus. I thought you might be a detective or one of Charlie's gunsels whom I didn't know. It turned out that the harmless-looking fat-faced man was the one I should have watched. He must have hopped the bus with me and waited for his chance to get me alone."

"Why do you want to go to Key West?"

"If I ever reach it, I'll charter a boat to Cuba. . . . Here's where I get off."

He continued driving. "I told you I've never done anything before. Maybe I'm a fool, but I'd like to see Key West and have your company on the way."

Esther Payne stared at him for long moments, then set fire to her cigarette. On their right the sun was sinking.

It was night when they crossed over into South Carolina. They had been working their way to the central part of the state, keeping off the regular through highways to Florida.

"I guess we fooled the cops for a while," Esther observed. "But Charlie's a leech. He knows what I look like and the car I'm in."

"Don't you think I'm entitled to hear the whole story now?"

She shook her head. "The less you know, the less chance of your being hurt. I've got you in too deeply already."

Later they stopped off at a juke joint for sandwiches and coffee. They should

have been hungry, but neither of them could eat. Esther kept glancing at the door and drumming her fingers.

*I'm scared sick,* Bruce thought. *I've never had reason before to be really afraid. I wonder if I'll pass out if someone points a gun at me again.*

They left the half-eaten sandwiches on their plates. When they were in the car and driving again, Esther asked: "Have you a radio?"

"Sure."

He clicked the switch and got music, but as soon as he removed his hand, Esther started to fiddle with the knob. She got a radio commentator and listened for a few moments and then kept turning the dial. After a while she found a news report:

Esther Payne, the beautiful New York showgirl who, police believe, murdered Sid Edge, the gambler, and his bodyguard, Weeping Willie Howe, is known to be somewhere in the eastern part of the Carolinas. After escaping from a New York to Miami bus, only twenty minutes before the police stopped and searched it, she evidently transferred to a blue coupé bearing a New York license tag. She is being driven by a man not yet identified by the police. A North Carolina trooper, who had been flashed only a brief description of Esther Payne, actually stopped the car. The girl had changed her clothes and make-up, and thus managed to satisfy the trooper that she and the man with her were on their honeymoon.

Later, when the trooper returned to headquarters, he recognized Esther Payne from a photograph on a police flier, which had just been received. The man with her is named Kelly or Kahler, or some similar sounding name. The police are convinced that he must be an accomplice to the murder as—

**E**STHER reached forward and snapped off the radio. She said: "You've two choices. Either hand me over to the cops, or drop me off here."



Bruce's jaw jutted. "No," he muttered. "I won't."

"Why stick your neck out? I don't mean a thing to you. You're just a sweet, harmless guy getting yourself into a terrific mess."

"I'm in it already," he said, "and I'm staying in it."

She drew deeply on a cigarette, then flicked it out through the window. "With a car as hot as this, it's a wonder we haven't been picked up already."

He thought that over, slowly, like a man not used to action or quick decisions. Then he said, "We fooled them once by pretending to be a respectably married couple. Let's try it again."

The headlights had picked up a roadside sign advertising tourist cabins, a mile ahead. He sped up and then pulled into the cabin court.

Within a couple of minutes, Bruce had paid over two dollars and he and Esther were alone in a cabin. Esther stood at a window, staring out at the half dozen other cars which parked in front of the cabins.

"What now?" she said. "The cops can't miss your car."

"I'll ditch it near here, then I'll come back. We'll get a good night's sleep. By tomorrow we'll have had time to dope out a reasonably safe way to go on from here."

She turned and glanced at the big double bed.

Bruce flushed. "I'll manage to sleep in that chair. I—I think you can trust me."

She smiled wryly. "Even if I couldn't, I can take care of myself." Then her eyes brightened and she touched him lightly. "I've never met a guy like you, Bruce. The people I know would have a name for you—sucker. But I think you're tops."

Again the blood rushed to his face; his skin tingled where her hand had

rested on his. He said quickly, "I'll be back soon," and went out.

He took his car a quarter of a mile down the road, drove it in among a heavy clump of bushes and turned off the lights. He knew that he couldn't afford to lose an almost-new car, but ever since he had met Esther Payne, he had ceased thinking and acting like the conservative, rational being he had been all his life.

It wasn't only because she was a beautiful woman. She had become a symbol of all the wild dreams of a reckless rapture, which in the past had had no relation to reality. Now these things that he was doing were real, yet somehow they were still like a dream.

He walked back to the cabin. His hand was on the doorknob and he was about to turn it when he heard voices inside. He stood rigid, his palm suddenly sweaty. Then he stepped off the single concrete step and moved silently to the nearest window.

Esther, still fully dressed, was standing with her back against the wall, facing two men. One was Charlie, the little fish-eyed man who had pulled the gun in the service station. He hardly reached to Esther's shoulder, but his face was pure murder.

The other man was gigantic in contrast to Charlie. He had wide sloping shoulders and a flat, brutal face. Yet for all his size, Bruce had an impression that he was infinitely less dangerous than the little man.

Charlie was doing most of the talking, and Bruce strained to hear what he was saying.

All the uneventful years behind him urged him to flee, but at the same time he knew that he could not. On rubbery legs, he went to the door.

As he mounted the single step, a voice said quietly behind him: "That's right, pal, make it easy for me. Keep right on going."



Bruce twisted his head. Full-fleshed lips in a smooth boyish face grinned at him; something hard prodded his back. He knew it was a gun, and he was surprised that his legs did not fold under him.

*Now they'll kill us both,* he thought dully.

Aloud he said, "What do you want me to do?"

"Just keep going. We're having a little party inside."

**B**RUCE reached for the doorknob, but he had to turn it several times before his moist palm got a grip. The gun was urgent in his back. Then the door was open. Bruce stepped through. Behind him he heard the door close.

Esther opened her mouth, about to say something, but evidently changed her mind.

Bruce saw that both his valise and her Gladstone bag were on the floor, their contents strewn about. He wondered what the men were looking for.

He was aware of Charlie's fish-like eyes appraising him. Charlie turned to Esther. "Who's this mugg? The coppers say you're passing him off as your husband."

Esther shrugged. "Just a sucker I flagged on the road. I gave him ideas so he'd play along. He doesn't mean a thing—"

"Yeah?" Charlie grunted. "Well, it's too bad for him. He's seen too much."

"Wait!" Esther protested. "I tell you he's only—"

"You tell me what I want to know," Charlie broke in sharply. "I'm not going to bother taking this cabin apart, and I'm not going to horse around. Where is it?"

"I told you I don't know!"

"Sid Edge never let it off his finger. After you plugged Weeping Willie, you removed it. You got it on you now. You going to come across?"

Her dark eyes flitted desperately about the room. There was the big man with his back against the door and the smooth-faced kid holding a gun, and Charlie, little and utterly ruthless, looking coldly up at her.

"Have it your own way, baby," Charlie said coldly. "Looks like we have to begin by searching you."

He stepped toward her. Esther's face started to break, and she tried to burrow back into the wall. Charlie smiled and put out his hands.

"Don't touch her!" Bruce heard himself say, more surprised at his words than the others.

Charlie glanced at him with contempt, and took the final step toward Esther. His fingers hooked.

Bruce Keeler's thought processes ceased. It was as if he were seeing somebody else hurl himself at Charlie and drive a crushing right into the side of the little man's face. Charlie slammed against the dresser.

Esther cried out, and then, overlapping her voice, Charlie's command came thickly: "Don't shoot him yet, Jimmy! Take him, Geep!"

Bruce spun. The kid called Jimmy had the muzzle of his gun leveled at Bruce, but he was watching the big man, Geep, who was rushing Bruce.

Instead of retreating, Bruce astonished Geep and himself by leaping in to meet him. The man's arms started to close, and Bruce brought his fist up from his knees. He felt the stabbing pain of cracked knuckles as his fist slammed against Geep's jaw; and he felt also a hot, flowing sensation of pure joy as Geep's head snapped back and his legs folded.

Fifteen seconds ago Bruce had never hit a man. He had never had occasion to know that his fist could pack so much power.

Esther's voice was now a warning

*(Continued on page 92)*





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*(Continued from page 90)*

scream. Bruce caught a glimpse of Esther as she wrestled with Jimmy for his gun.

He came up behind Jimmy and clamped both fists over the kid's gun wrist. He twisted. Jimmy cursed stridently as his fingers relaxed on the gun. Bruce took the automatic from the kid's hand.

"Watch Geep!" Esther's voice exploded.

The three of them, Bruce and Jimmy and Esther, were a swaying mass in the middle of the room. Geep had his gun out and was trying to get a clear shot at Bruce. Charlie, badly hurt by Bruce's punch, was leaning against the dresser, supporting himself groggily with one hand, while the other was fumbling weakly at his shoulder clip.

Bruce remembered the automatic in his hand. Years ago he had shot at targets on several occasions, but these were human beings. For a breathless moment he hesitated, then the kid, to whom Esther was clinging frantically, shoved himself toward the bed. Geep's gun came up.

Bruce shot, gripping the butt furiously in an attempt to control the kick. The flimsy walls of the cabin seemed to shake. The automatic jumped again in his hand, and a third time, too. Geep's gun remained silent. Bruce wondered about that, seeing Geep's bulk so huge and so close before him.

Then Geep wasn't in front of him any more—Geep was lying on the floor. Charlie was shouting: "For God's sake, don't shoot!"

The room and the people in it straightened out. Charlie, still dazed by the punch, had managed to slip his gun out, but it was dipped low, and he was staring at Bruce with awe and fear. Near the bed the kid had his hands lifted in the air.

Esther moved across Bruce's line of vision, walking stiff-legged. She took Charlie's gun from his unresisting hand,

swept her open handbag from the dresser and then backed to Bruce's side.

"Let's go," she whispered.

He nodded. Side by side they went backward through the door. Somebody shouted in one of the cabins, which accentuated the strange quiet that hung over the auto-camp court. There was nobody in sight. As Bruce looked about, the remaining lights in the cabins went out.

Men and women were huddled in them, afraid of him. Even two desperate killers inside one of the cabins were afraid of him. It was curious and startling and somehow satisfying. Within the eternal minute that had passed between the time he had leaped at Charlie and now, he had become another person.

And then, remembering that he and Esther Payne were alone and hunted by police and gangdom alike, he grabbed her arm. Together they ran between two cabins and plunged into the woods.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Killers' Choice

THERE was no moon. Hand in hand, they groped between tree trunks in that utter darkness. Bruce heard Esther's labored breathing.

They found themselves at the edge of a field, where starlight touched on countless swaying blobs of cotton. On their left the moving headlights of a car told them that the highway was not far off.

"What do we do now?" Esther panted. "The cops will be all around us in no time. And Charlie and Jimmy are not finished with us by any means. Now that you killed Geep—"

"I saw him move on the floor."

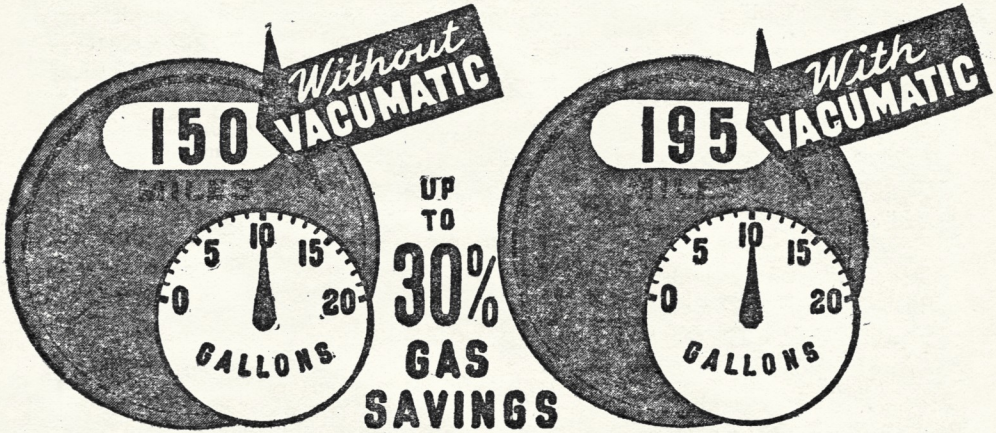
Esther said, "Geep won't last long. Now, on top of everything else, I've made a murderer out of you."

*(Continued on page 94)*



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## DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 92)

"I killed a man!" Bruce knew that he should feel horror, but he didn't. "It was self-defense," he murmured.

"You won't have a chance to convince anybody. Right now we're a pair of mad dogs to be shot down at sight. That's the order that will be going out to every cop—"

"So we have to keep moving."

He had her by the arm again and led her along the side of the cotton field toward the highway. They turned right, keeping off the road, beyond the rays of occasional headlights. His car was an obscure shape behind the bushes where he had left it.

"That's crazy," Esther protested. "You know the car's hot."

"With luck it will get us a little farther from here."

He put his hand in his trouser pocket for the car key. His fingers felt something that didn't belong there. It might have been a marble, except that it had rough edges.

He unlocked the door, and they both got into the coupé. Then he took the object out of his pocket and struck a match. The mellow glow caught the facets of the biggest and most beautiful diamond he had ever seen.

The match died. In the darkness, he could sense that Esther Payne was waiting for him to speak first.

"So that's what Charlie was after!" he said at length. "He spoke of you taking it from Sid Edge's finger, after he was dead. I suppose you threw the setting away?"

"Yes." She was only a weary voice beside him. "When I saw Charlie at the gas station, I dropped the diamond into your pocket. I hoped he wouldn't suspect you had it, and I trusted you to return it to me later."

(Continued on page 96)



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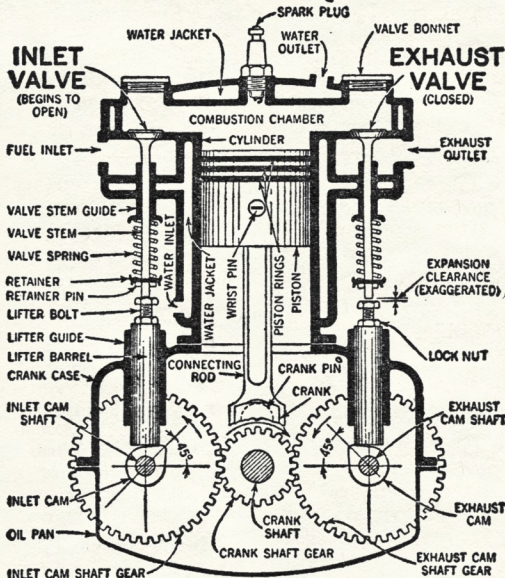
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### ANSWERS YOUR QUESTIONS



SPECIMEN ILLUSTRATION—INSIDE VIEW OF MOTOR



(Continued from page 94)

He put the diamond back in his pocket. "Murder and robbery," he said softly. "I had to kill this man Geep because he wanted the diamond, and now we're close to death ourselves."

Her voice ripped savagely through the night. "Now will you believe that I'm poison to you? Get rid of me. It's the only way you can save yourself."

"You've said that before," he told her. "It's beginning to bore me."

He kicked the starter. Leaving every light off, he backed the car to the road. Headlights were approaching. He waited until they were past, then swung into the highway and put the lights on. He headed the coupé south.

"Sucker," Esther said.

"I'm not," Bruce replied soberly. "I thought I was at first, but now I know I'm not. Because I want to do this."

"I suppose you're enjoying yourself?" she mocked.

"No, but I've never felt this way before."

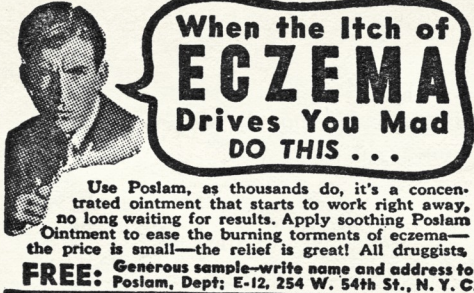
He heard her shift in her seat, and her closeness was more eloquent than words. And then, in the mirror, he saw headlights coming up behind.

He was gripped by choking tension until the car swept past. At any moment the police, or a little man and a smooth-faced kid more deadly than the police, might be on them. And this coupé would be a dead give-away.

Soon Bruce found what he was looking for—not a real tourist court, but three or four ramshackled tourist cabins behind an unpainted shack. He drove past it and found a thick stretch of pine forest. He ran his car as far into it as he could, and then, by the light of the flashlight he had taken from the car, he and Esther walked back.

A fat crone, with dirty gray wisps of

(Continued on page 98)



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## DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 96)

hair dangling over her aged face, was alone in the shack. Bruce told her that he and his wife would like a cabin for the night.

"I didn't hear your car," she said.

"It broke down a mile up the road."

"No baggage either, eh?"

"No," Bruce said.

The old woman leered at Esther. "I'm all rented, but maybe one of the cabins is empty already. Thought I heard a car leave. For all night it will be five bucks. You wait here."

When they were alone, Esther smiled thinly. "You learn the ropes quickly, don't you? You didn't intend her to believe I'm your wife. That's the way she does business. If the police come asking questions, she can't tell them about us, because she wants to protect herself."

Bruce nodded. "It's our safest bet—to hole up until pursuit moves past us."

The old woman was gone a long time. Bruce stood looking out of a side window. There were lights in only one of the cabins. A form moved in front of the window—the old woman, probably. Somewhere nearby, feet scraped over the hard ground, but when he listened intently the only sound was that of a car whizzing by on the highway.

Presently the old woman returned, the leer still in her bright eyes.

She slapped a key on the counter. "Cabin two is empty. Pay now."

**A**LL the cabins were dark when he and Esther stepped out of the shack. Why had the woman put the light out, knowing that it would be occupied almost immediately? Esther's hand, cold and quivering, slipped into his. That gesture was, somehow, the final link uniting them, and Bruce felt himself closer to this girl than he had ever been to

(Continued on page 100)



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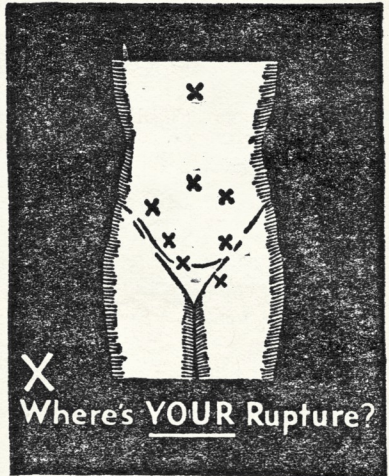
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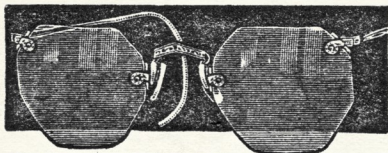
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## DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 98)

anybody. This girl of whom he knew nothing except that she was a thief and a murderer.

His flashlight picked out the crude number painted on the cabin door. The door was locked, and that was even queerer than the old woman's having put out the light. He turned the key and stepped over the threshold, spraying his flashlight. A cord dangled from the ceiling. He pulled on the light.

Esther was standing with her back against the closed door, staring at the bed. She moved first; took two jerky steps to the side of the bed and pulled off the bedspread. The dead eyes of Geep stared up at her. . . .

She uttered a ragged sigh and her legs started to fold. Bruce caught her, held her tight against him, fighting the horror that was a live thing within him.

"We're through!" Esther moaned. "They're here, somewhere, watching us."

Over his shoulder he looked at the two windows. They showed dark and empty. Beyond them was silence, but death was close by.

"It's a coincidence," Bruce said. "Geep was wounded and they got him this far and he died in the bed."

"Would the woman have sent us in here with a corpse?"

"The fact remains that she did."

Esther clung to him, her back to the bed. "She was gone a long time while we waited in the shack," she said. "Charlie had a chance to bribe her and dump Geep here. We hadn't been out of their sight at all, not since the time they picked up our car before we reached the first cabin. Charlie and Geep went into our cabin where I was alone, while Jimmy followed you to where you hid your car. After you shot Geep, we took a long time getting back to your car. They had a chance to wait for us in their own car."



## DEATH HITCH-HIKES SOUTH

"But why this?" Bruce muttered.

For the first time he gave the man he had killed more than a horrified glance. He saw the irregular patches of blood on the shirt, and he saw the roll of white paper clenched in one hand.

Bruce had never before touched a dead man, and when he felt the cold flesh of the clenched hand, his own hand turned into ice. The note said:

*We have the cabin covered with tommy-guns. All we want is Sid's ring.*

*Esther, you walk out alone, with the ring in your hand. Keep walking straight to the road till one of us takes the ring from you. The guy stays inside.*

*When we have the ring, we'll fade out and let you two alone. We aren't interested in anything but the ring.*

*You have five minutes to make up your mind after we see the light go on. In five minutes we'll start shooting, and the slugs will go through those walls like butter. If you put the light out or come out together or try any funny business, we'll start shooting sooner.*

Bruce said: "Why don't they simply hold us up and take the diamond?"

"Maybe Charlie figures you're a fighting fool and won't be taken alive."

Bruce laughed through his nostrils.

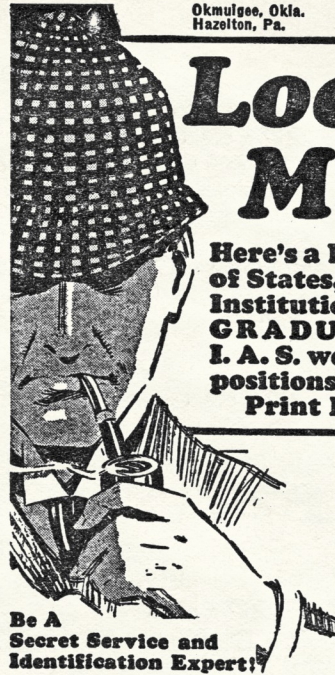
"From what he knows about you, you're quite a man," Esther said. "Anyway, there's good chance we've got the diamond hidden away, and Charlie is going in for some heavy brainwork. Geep must have died on the way. They had to dump the body somewhere. Finding the corpse here on the bed would scare us, soften us up, make us think what's-the-use. There's no mistake we're trapped. We can't afford any shooting because that would bring the cops. If I come out with the diamond, fine. If you've got it and stay behind while I bargain, they've got us separated and hold all the cards. He can make it pretty bad for me until

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## DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

you hand the diamond over. If we stay in here, it's curtains for both of us."

Bruce wet his parched lips. "The five minutes must be up."

"Yes." She held out her hand. "Give me the diamond."

"Why would they kill us if they don't get the diamond?"

"They have to," she said. "If we delay too long, my death will become more important than the diamond. You can slip through a back window while I go out the front door."

"And let you take it alone?"

"Why did you have to horn in on this mess?" Her voice shook with fury, but her eyes were soft, misty. "It was only me they were after." She swung away from him, toward the door. "I'm going out there, with or without the diamond."

"Then I'm going too," he said quietly.

They heard cars outside, the whine of wheels suddenly braked. They rushed to the front window. A sedan was parked near the gas pump, its headlights on two motorcycles. A uniformed policeman dismounted from each motorcycle, and out of the car came plainclothes police.

"Maybe they found our car. . . . or maybe the old woman tipped them off," Bruce muttered.

Esther laughed crazily. "This makes it perfect. What can we tell them when they find us in here with a murdered man—and the gun that killed him in your pocket? Take your choice: An air-tight murder rap or Charlie's bullets!"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Two Against the World

**B**RUCE KEELER strode to the rear window. The cabin ceiling light flowed out dimly, to show the straight dark trunks of pine trees. He unhooked the screen and swung it out.



## DEATH HITCH-HIKES SOUTH

Esther whispered, "We'll never get through. Charlie and Jimmy will be hanging around."

"They won't dare make a move with the police so close. Anyway, we're not quitting now, are we?"

She forced a wan smile to her lips. "No, Bruce. Here goes."

He helped her through the window. For an instant she was a dark outline, then she merged into the shadows.

Voices sounded between the shack and the cabin, coming closer. Bruce dropped to the ground. Behind him there was a stifled gasp. He spun toward the darkness, peering. The trees were silent.

As he raced to the edge of the woods, he brought Jimmy's automatic out of his pocket. It felt heavy and strange in his hand.

"Esther," he whispered.

His only answer was the soft tread of feet in the cabin. He called her name again, low—and in the cabin a man cried out. Instantly there was a jumble of excited voices.

Esther would have waited for him, Bruce reasoned—which meant that only one thing could have happened. With the arrival of the police, Charlie and Jimmy had cut around to the rear of the cabin. Esther had tried to scream, before her voice had been cut off by a hand over her mouth.

In the cabin a voice rasped: "They're kill-crazy, especially the girl! Biddle, phone for all the men you can get."

Bruce moved deeper into the woods. It was like walking into a black tunnel in which obstacles had been put in his way to stop him. He groped on, still whispering Esther's name. Maybe the gunmen were crouching nearby, waiting to get a shot at him or to use a knife silently. He gripped his own gun tighter. What good was a gun to a blind man?

A needle of light pricked the darkness.

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**DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE**

He shrank away from it, slammed against an unseen tree. The light swung toward him and seemed to impale him against the tree trunk.

"Stay where you are!" a voice ordered.

Bruce twisted around the trunk. The night was shattered in a burst of sound and pain. Something smashed against his shoulder, sending him staggering into a crazy spin. The voice yelled again, and there was another shot; but he kept going, stumbling in the blackness. The light did not follow. He glimpsed it arc off to his left, and he realized that he was not running in a straight line.

Bushes sprang up to tear at his clothes and face. Like a terror-stricken animal he plunged on, his teeth digging into his lips to keep back the pain. The bushes thickened, stopping him. He tried to find a weak spot in the wall but couldn't, and his legs folded.

Voices neared him. He dropped flat on his face, hardly breathing. Through the lattice-work of bushes he saw lights.

"I'm pretty sure I hit him, bad," a man said.

"Was the girl with him?"

"I didn't see her."

"All right, spread out. Watch yourself. Those two are killers!"

The lights trickled away. It had sounded as if there had been only three men—all that the shots had brought. The woods were big and reinforcements would not come for some time yet.

Bruce clawed his way to his feet, and stumbled out of the bushes. He was among the tree-obstacles again, feebly feeling his way with his one hand. The ground under his feet became swampy.

Then he heard her. He was sure it was Esther; and with sudden perception, he knew that they did not keep her voice wholly muted because it would draw him to them. The diamond was worth the risk of the police hearing it first.



## DEATH HITCH-HIKES SOUTH

AS he moved toward the sound, he forgot the pain in his shoulder. Nearby a twig snapped. Bruce stopped dead, groping with his hand. He touched a tree and barely had time to get behind it when the blackness was pierced by an approaching flashlight.

A uniformed policeman, gun in one hand and flashlight in the other, was coming forward cautiously. He, too, must have heard Esther.

Bruce stepped around the trunk and came up behind the cop. His gun slammed down on the dimly distinguished hat. The cop sank without a sound.

Bruce dropped to his knees and, his back to the unconscious cop, hooked his good arm between the cop's legs and reached across his chest for one of the cop's dangling hands. Then, with the cop's weight on his back, he managed to rise and stagger several rods.

He heard Esther's voice again and another voice whisper to her. She was very near.

He slid the inert body off his back. The cop was breathing with heavy regularity. Esther's cry did not come again for a long time. Bruce forced himself to sit in the slime, resting, listening to the cop breathing.

Presently he fought to his feet. Muck buried his ankles. Thick, stunted swamp growth blocked him. He whispered, "Esther!" and stumbled along.

Light splashed over him. Jimmy's voice chuckled: "You're covered, pal. Drop the gat." The automatic slipped from his hand and splashed out of sight. "Now start walking where this light points."

Bruce lurched, turning with the path of the beam. The growth parted somewhere, and in a little clear spot he saw Esther and Charlie seated on the ground.

It was a tiny island surrounded by slime. A feeble flashlight on a tree stump

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revealed Esther. Mud streaked her face. "Good!" Charlie said. "I figured before more coppers came he'd hear her voice." He held his gun loosely fixed on Bruce's midriff.

Bruce glanced around. Only a few feet distant, the weak light was effectively blocked out by swamp growth. They had chosen this spot wisely.

He started moving again, and he pitched forward. The murky water felt cool on his face. He didn't think he could take any more punishment.

Jimmy's hands fumbled in his clothing, going over every inch of him. "Those shots we heard—the cops clipped him in the shoulder."

Esther whimpered and started to her feet. Charlie pulled her back roughly. "How bad is it?" Charlie asked.

"He'll last long enough for us." Jimmy's hands continued the search. After a while he looked up. "It's not on him."

"It has to be. He was lamming; he'd have to have it on him!"

Bruce pushed his head out of the mud. "You two guys are not so smart. Soon the police will have this place surrounded for miles."

CHARLIE smiled cruelly. "So what? They won't find this God-forsaken spot till we're through with you two. Anyway, we can hear them coming. After, all we have to do is ditch our rods in the mud and make out we're a couple of tramps. Now, are you coming across with the ring?"

Bruce said through the pain that wracked him. "I'll make a deal."

"Why not?" The little man's dead eyes glinted. "Tell us where it is and we let you go."

"No!" Esther spoke at last. "They'll murder us anyway."

"That's what you said before," Bruce said. "Why? Because if you live you'll



## DEATH HITCH-HIKES SOUTH

tell the police who really murdered Sid Edge and Weeping Willie Howe?"

Jimmy tittered like a schoolboy. "That's a laugh. She bumped Weeping Willie, all right."

"But not Sid Edge?" Bruce said.

"No!" Esther's voice rushed from her. "Weeping Willie killed him. Sid Edge was nothing to me. It was my sister. But he wouldn't marry her and after a while he left her. She suffered a nervous breakdown, went half-mad. Sid gave me a little money for the sanatorium and expensive treatment, but it wasn't nearly enough. Then—"

"Can it!" Charlie cut in. "We got no time to listen to stories."

"How can I make a deal if I don't know all the facts?" Bruce asked insistently.

Jimmy brought his foot back savagely, his boyish face twisted in rage. The kick might have bashed Bruce's skull in, but Charlie barked, "Save it! We'll give him another minute, then we'll get tough."

Esther rushed on: "I was in Sid's apartment, asking for more money for my sister, when the bell rang. Sid went to answer it. I thought I heard a shot, but the radio was on loud—I wasn't sure. I went out to the foyer and saw Sid on the floor. The door was open, and I saw Weeping Willie Howe. He was Sid's bodyguard, but there were rumors of a break between Sid and Charlie—"

"The rat was welching on plenty he owed me," Charlie put in. "So I bought off Weeping Willie to give Sid the works and bring me the ring."

"Weeping Willie must have heard me coming, but he couldn't leave without the ring," Esther said. "And watching him, I realized that he couldn't let me live. He had shot Sid with his own gun and had left it on the floor to make it look like suicide. He pulled a knife and came at me. I grabbed the gun and shot him."

"I see," Bruce said. "Both men shot



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with the same gun and you in the apartment. The police would learn what Sid Edge had done to your sister and believe that was your motive."

"Yes. That's what I was thinking when I took the ring. If the police thought me a murderer, what difference if they also thought me a thief? Sid Edge kept most of his fortune in that diamond. In a way, it belonged to my sister. She needed it to be cured and get back on her feet."

Bruce said: "It's plain now. Charlie had somebody outside the house, that moon-faced man who followed you to the bus and got on with you—"

"Skipper Upton," Charlie growled. "He wired us she was on that bus and he was waiting for a chance to get at her. Jimmy and Geep and I took my car."

"To take the ring from Esther and murder her," Bruce said, "you had to kill to keep her from involving you in the murder. That's what gave me the idea that maybe she was innocent."

Charlie stood up, small and stoop-shouldered and dead. "Now you got your story. Hand over the ring before we start working on both of you."

Nearby something splashed. Jimmy tensed, peering around.

Charlie said with a nervous laugh, "Getting jitters, Jimmy? That was only a rabbit or something. You watch the girl. I'll make this lug talk."

Bruce rolled over on his left side, moaning, "I'll tell you! I'll give you—" Hacking coughs choked off the rest.

Charlie got down beside him, his gun gripped tightly, his eyes wary. "Talk, pal. It'll make it a lot easier for the girl."

Bruce's lips moved, murmuring, and the little man bent low to catch the words. Bruce's good arm flapped in the mud—and his hand closed over Charlie's gun-wrist.

Screams mingled with the sharp, thrusting pain in Bruce's body. Charlie's face was inches above his, the lips curled



## DEATH HITCH-HIKES SOUTH

back over his teeth. Releasing the wrist, Bruce whipped his arm around Charlie's throat.

It was no use, of course. Jimmy was armed. The shot sounded as if the entire world were falling to piece. Bruce felt nothing because there was no room in him for additional pain. Yet his arm was still choking Charlie, and the clawing of the little man's arms and the thrashing of his legs was becoming feeble.



IT was later, when the uniformed cop was prying Bruce's arm loose, that Bruce saw the still figure of Jimmy on the ground. He realized then that the shot had not come from the kid's gun. He let his arm relax, and the cop pulled Charlie away.

"He's dead too," the cop announced with satisfaction. "Looks like you broke his neck."

Bruce said, a little shakily. "You heard it? You heard that she's not a murderer?"

The cop nodded and stepped aside to let Esther drop down next to Bruce. She was sobbing as she put her face close to Bruce's. "He's wounded!" she cried. "Do something!"

"It's not a bad wound," Bruce said. "But it's still bleeding."

The cop was staring down at the two with a puzzled expression. "I don't get it. Somebody knocked me out and carried me near here. That's how I heard everything. Funny!"

"I was afraid you wouldn't recover in time," Bruce muttered, "though you were coming out of it when I left you."

"You carried me with that hole in your shoulder!" the cop gasped.

"I had to. You wouldn't have listened to me. You would have shot me down on sight. It was a long chance, but it was the only way to clear us both."

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He put his fingers to the wound. His teeth ground, and he couldn't prevent a cry of pain. His hand came away and in his open palm lay the diamond.

Esther and the cop stared unbelievably.

"I stuck the diamond in there," Bruce explained. "I couldn't let them find it on me, because then they would have killed us immediately. I had to spar to get a confession out of them so that you could overhear it. I couldn't discard the diamond—if something went wrong and you didn't come in time I'd have to hand it over to them so Esther could have a quick death instead of a slow one."

Esther looked at him. "You did that?" she whispered. "You, the soft guy, to whom nothing had ever happened. You did that for me?"

Bruce said simply, "It was the only way."

She wept softly. "It's no good. I'm still a thief."

"Thief?" The cop rubbed his chin. "Don't forget I heard the whole thing. God knows you two went through enough. My shots will bring the rest of the boys here any minute. When they come, they'll find the diamond in the pocket of one of those two rats. That's all anybody ever has to know about it."

In a few minutes, a lot of strange men were standing about. Bruce was lying on the dry spot in the clearing, with his head on Esther's lap. His wound had been bandaged.

"Don't try to move," Esther said softly. "It'll be a couple of weeks before you're strong enough to go on to Key West."

"Key West?" he said.

"Wasn't that where we were bound for?"

All at once he felt fine. "So it was," he said.

THE END



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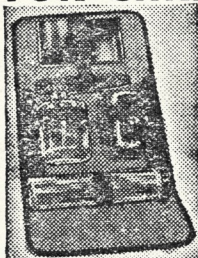
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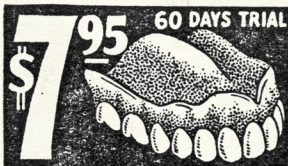
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(Continued from page 37)

fess again, and then my father will—”

“He won't confess again,” the man said flatly. “He got hit by a car today.”

“He got hit by . . .” The girl's words faded thinly. “You—you killed him?” she supplied emptily. “You killed him! You killed Morgan, too, and all the time you kept saying you were trying to help dad, to get him out. You lied to me! You'll let him rot in prison so you can keep his money.”

“And what are you going to do?”

“I'm going to tell!” the girl cried. “I don't care what you do, I'm going to tell! You can't hold me! I'll scream. I'll—”

“You're asking for it now, kid,” the man said. “I didn't send you through the lobby for nothing, while I climbed up outside. You're all alone here, see? And if you committed 'suicide,' the cops would think for sure that you killed Morgan and were afraid to take the rap.”

Steve's fingers touched the window; he jerked frantically. The sash grated loudly, and he knew the man inside had heard.

He'll have a gun! The electric realization cracked across his brain. His eyes fled along the dark fire escape from which there was, now, no escape.

Ominously the silence within the room lingered. Then, one slow step sounded; another. The lean man was coming toward the window.

The shade moved back, and the thin face peered out into the night. Breathlessly, Steve flattened himself against the dark wall, praying for the light within to blind the man for the moment.

“I pulled this window down,” the man said coldly. “It ain't down anymore.” The shade moved back another fraction, letting a slice of the light play perilously close to Steve's feet. One more fraction, he thought, and I'll be dead game.

(Continued on page 114)



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# DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 112)

"You stick where you are and keep still," the man whispered to the girl. "Don't try anything."

There was a tiny click—the release of the safety on a gun. Then one hand came out the window, and Steve saw the gun. The shade was sent up higher, the light spread, painting Steve in its harsh, yellow glare. Then the lean, dark face was staring out.

It took the man an instant to accustom his eyes to the darkness, then he fired. The slug smashed into Steve's shoulder.

Steve swept down with his hands, forcing the heavy window closed, crashing it across the other's wrists.

A scream of pain followed the fading explosion. The gun rattled as it fell through the fire escape.

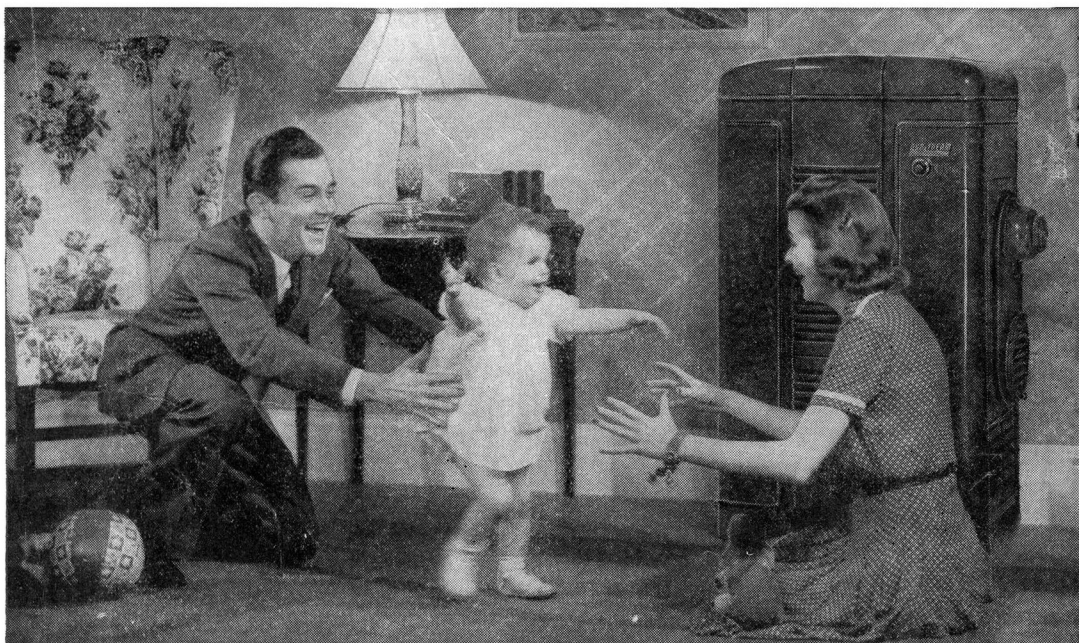
Steve knew that he had been shot, and he wondered if he'd die quickly, or maybe linger a while. He hung on to the window grimly, keeping the snarling killer a prisoner.

The blonde girl was standing a few feet behind Steve's captive, and she kept looking from the man to Steve as the sound of people moving in the hotel corridor became more pronounced.

And Steve kept staring at her, conscious that it pleased him to have her watching him so. He even managed to forget the pain in his shoulder, or perhaps it was merely that he considered it unimportant now. Nothing was going to happen to him; he was sure of that. This mad nightmare was over; in a few minutes he'd be explaining to the cops, and the girl would be safe; her father would be released. . . .

He smiled, realizing even as he did so that it was hardly the time or the place. But the girl returned the smile, and Steve knew that this adventure was not entirely finished. The most pleasant part had just begun.





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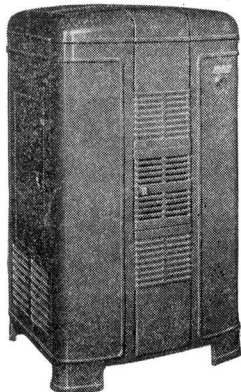
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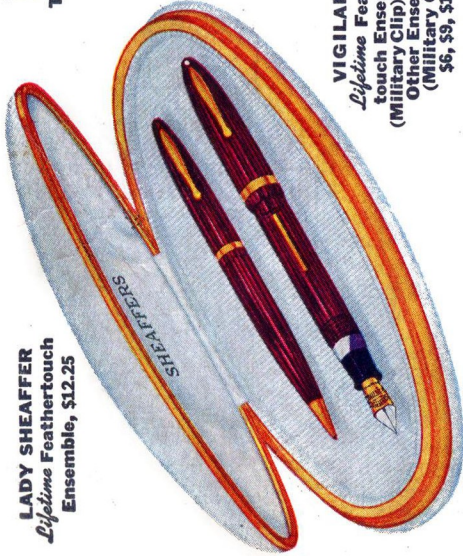
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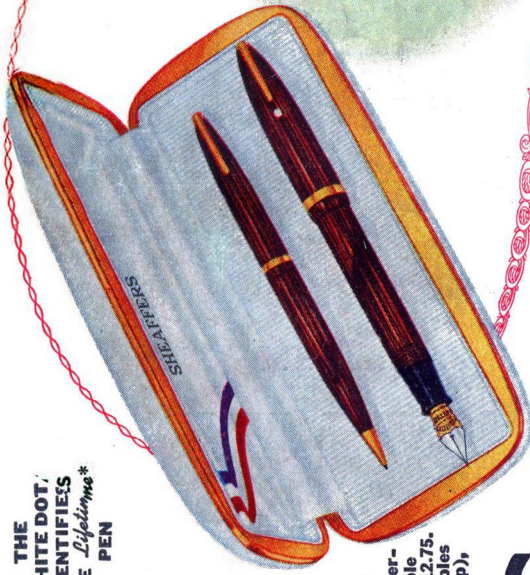
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