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JULY

# MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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**BROTHER, CAN YOU  
SPARE A GRAVE ?**  
*DYNAMIC MURDER NOVEL*  
by DAY KEENE

**THE LITTLE GREEN  
DOOR OF DOOM**  
by FRED'K C. DAVIS



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NEXT ISSUE OUT JULY 5th

Volume 30

July, 1944

Number 3

**GHOULISH CRIME NOVEL**

**BROTHER, CAN YOU SPARE A GRAVE?.....Day Keene 8**

After courting death in the battle-torn Pacific, Tom Doyle thought it would be easy to locate the little old lady's lost grave. He didn't know he would be stirring up a secret so sinister that the very dead in their coffins would rise up against him!

**THREE STRANGE AND GRIPPING NOVELETTES**

**THE LITTLE GREEN DOOR OF DOOM.....Frederick C. Davis 26**

Can a dying person switch souls and remain on earth as a living, breathing—but entirely different—personality? This story of bizarre mystery is calculated to make you tinglingly unsure of the answer!

**IN BED WE DIE.....Curtiss T. Gardner 44**

Did creaking, howling Devils inhabit the windmills at Stevenson's woods? Val Vickers, Specialist in the Impossible, had an answer—but to prove it he had to risk his own life in the strange bed where, horribly, three others had slept and died!

**YOU'LL NEVER KNOW WHO KILLED YOU.....Francis K. Allan 62**

Each time the hooded killer struck, the murder guilt piled higher against innocent Steve Wall . . . until, appallingly, he found himself actually being forced to aid in his own—and his trusting wife's—destruction!

**TWO MENACE-DIPPING SHORT STORIES**

**HIS BEARD WAS LONG AND VERY BLACK.....Stewart Toland 38**

A beard is a strange thing. It completely moulds and masks a face—in life as in death!

**CLAWS FOR THE TIGER GIRL.....Duane Yarnell 55**

The Great Kerrigan, stage magician, had no trouble slipping out of a pair of trick handcuffs. But how could he get out of his own coffin?

—AND—

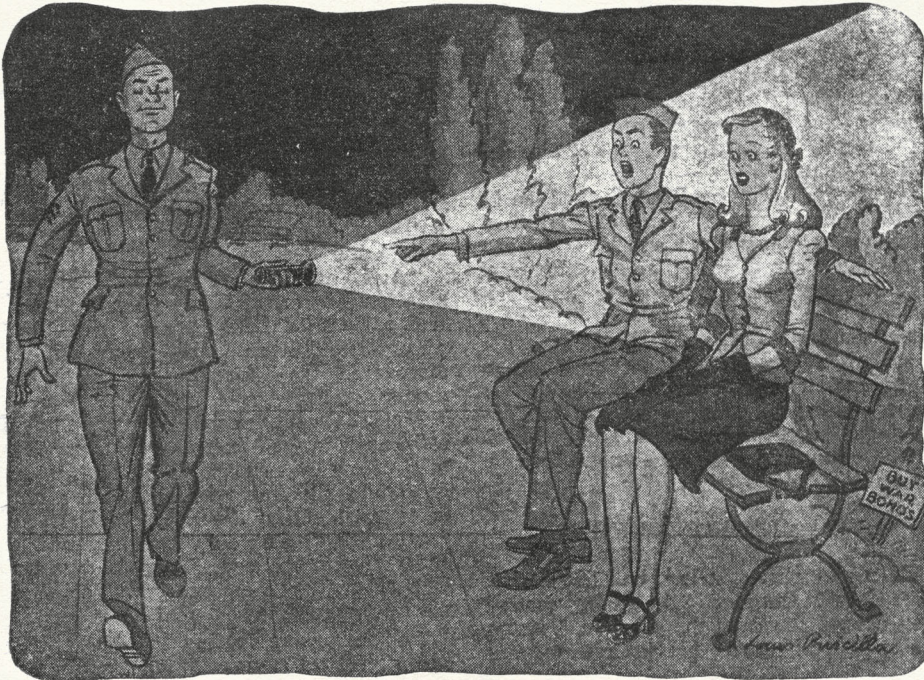
**MYSTERY'S DARK PORTALS.....The Editor 6**

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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# Mystery's Dark Portals

THE highway wound through miasmatic thickets of mangrove swamp, sparse stands of moss-craped cypress, and across barren wastes of sand and white coquina. In places—if McGinty's arms had been longer—he could have reached out the window of the car and touched the Gulf of Mexico with one hand and the Atlantic with the other.

When the droning car reached Seventh Key, McGinty saw the wall. It was ten feet high, with barbed wire and broken glass embedded in cement and glittering along the top. The forboding iron gates were closed. The sign said: Seventh Key Lodge . . . Uninvited guests stay out!

McGinty had been peculiarly invited, so he went in. The baronial mansion, built of cochina block, loomed huge and black against the brilliant shoreline. The architectural monstrosity had been impervious to rot, hurricanes, and time.

It was not impervious to murder!

It took McGinty less than seven hours to discover that. There were seven million dollars at stake, and here on this fantastic island McGinty found seven people, *each hoping to inherit the entire seven million*—seven people, seven million dollars, and:

## SEVEN KEYS TO MURDER

A Chicago mobster, dying, had left all the money. Outside the door to the gaunt "castle" was an absurd statue to the gunman, bearing its baffling inscription: "Blessed are the pure in heart".

McGinty lifted the brass knocker. . . .

Inside the house he was greeted by a gorgeous girl who flashed across the room and snuggled into his arms, kissed him and called him darling. She was no one McGinty had ever seen before. After two years on a Pacific Island with nothing more exciting to hold than a pin-up girl, McGinty was properly impressed with his reception.

Confidentially, the girl told him, "They're all trying to murder me, and they've only got two more days to do it in—"

"Two days?" McGinty asked politely.

"Yes, because then I inherit the seven million dollars—"

"Unless they murder you?" McGinty guessed. "In which case I suppose they divide the money among themselves?"

"Yes. We've been living here just two days short of a year—all seven of us. Old Martin put it in his will like that. He hated all of us, but he hated me the most. That's why he gave me the inside track to the money."

"Hoping somebody would murder you to take it away from you?"

"Yes . . . and that's why I've sent for you—to protect me."

It sounded like a hop-head's dream to McGinty, and he was about to tell her so. Then his thoughts were drowned in a burst of gunfire from the drive.

McGinty strode to the door and tore it open. The echo of the shots had died away. There was nothing but the night, and somewhere a girl who was sobbing. . . .

There was also somebody who was forever past sobbing. But it wasn't the girl, Angela, who now lay dead. It was one of the murderous six. So now there were only five left to inherit the money—always assuming that within the next two days Angela herself should die.

"And I will!" she moaned. "You won't be able to save me, McGinty. You'll never even find out who did it. Because they'll be cunning. They'll have to be—because if they're discovered they forfeit their right to the money. . . ."

McGinty went grimly sleuthing. The screwball guests in the house of doom weren't much help. They each looked as though they might cheerfully kill their own mother for a ration token. All except the little Southern sweetheart with the coppery hair and the green and sadly smiling eyes. And she was the one who shaped up the most guilty of all when the next man died!

And so it went during those two mad days and nights of terror in the hell-house on Seventh Key, with the guests draining their wine in silver tankards to the macabre toast: "Here's to the dead already dead . . . and here's to the next one who dies."

Because the guest list did dwindle tragically in spite of all that McGinty could do, until for a while it looked as though Angela would outlast them all. And then, unbelievably, Angela herself—

Mystery-master Day Keene tells the rest of it in a smashing feature-length novel in the next sensational issue of DIME MYSTERY.

\* \* \*

Outside, the sun lay warm on the new green of the chestnut trees lining that street in the Faubourg St. Germain in Paris. Inside the mouldering house a murky gloom prevailed, and heat that was stifling. At one end of the room a coffin rested upon a pair of low pedestals. The coffin was blackened with age; soil and bits of fungus still clung to its sides . . . and through the lid was driven a long, rusty

(Continued on page 80)



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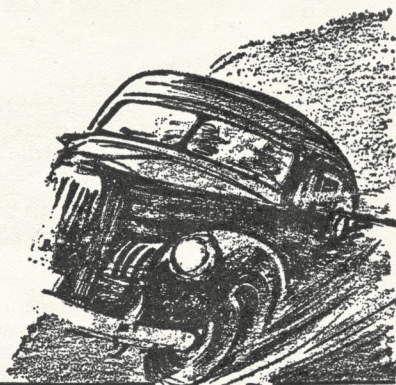
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By DAY KEENE

*When tough Tom Doyle contracted to help nice old Mrs. Clancy find her lost grave, he was signing up for a death-race against the police department, the D. A.'s office, a crooked detective agency, and every blood-hungry mobster in town—not to mention the dead that rest uneasily in their coffins!*



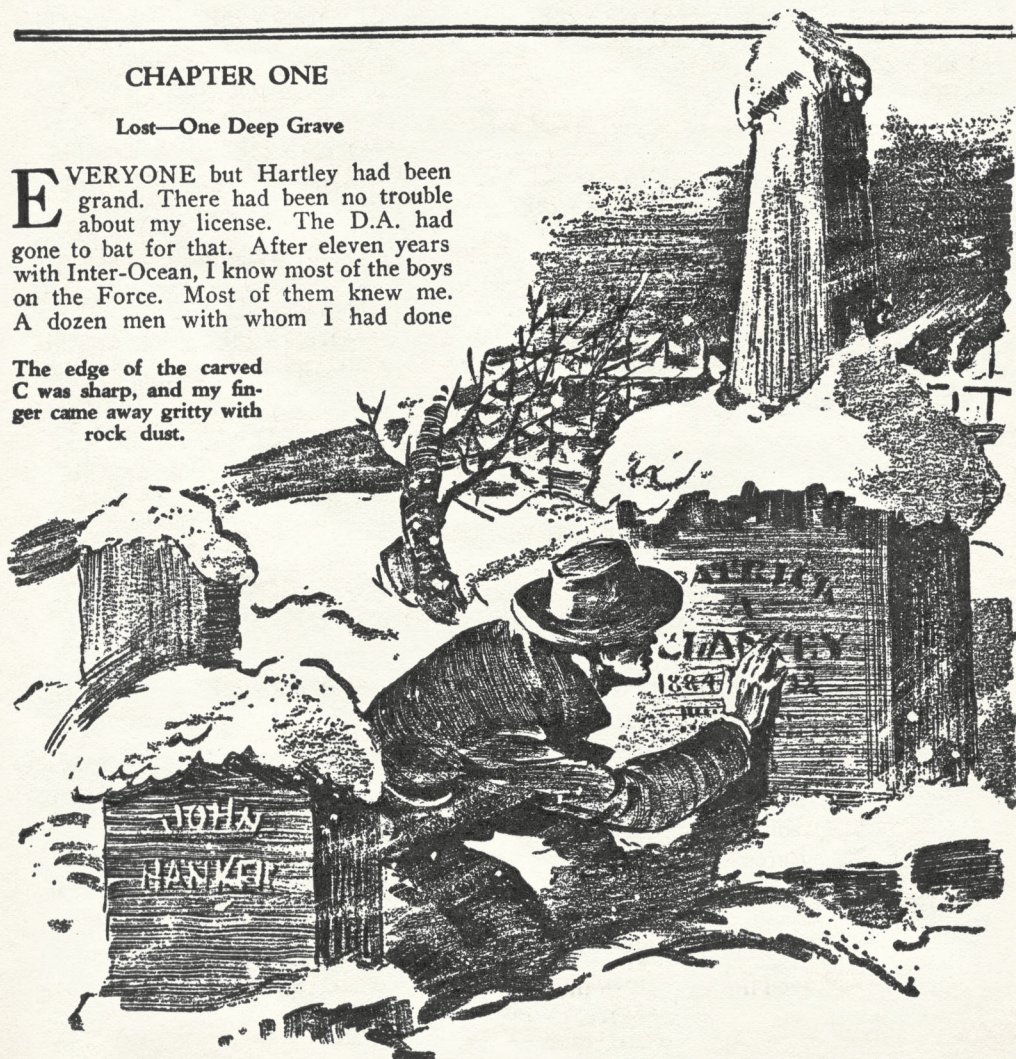
## Brother, Can You

### CHAPTER ONE

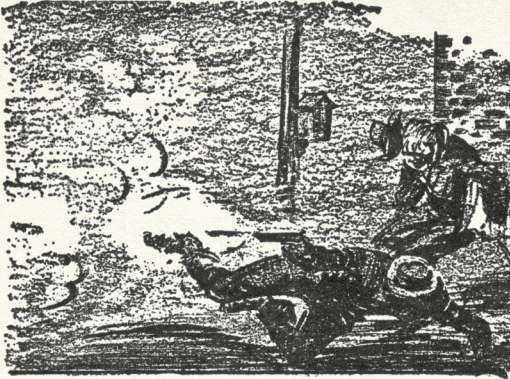
#### Lost—One Deep Grave

EVERYONE but Hartley had been grand. There had been no trouble about my license. The D.A. had gone to bat for that. After eleven years with Inter-Ocean, I know most of the boys on the Force. Most of them knew me. A dozen men with whom I had done

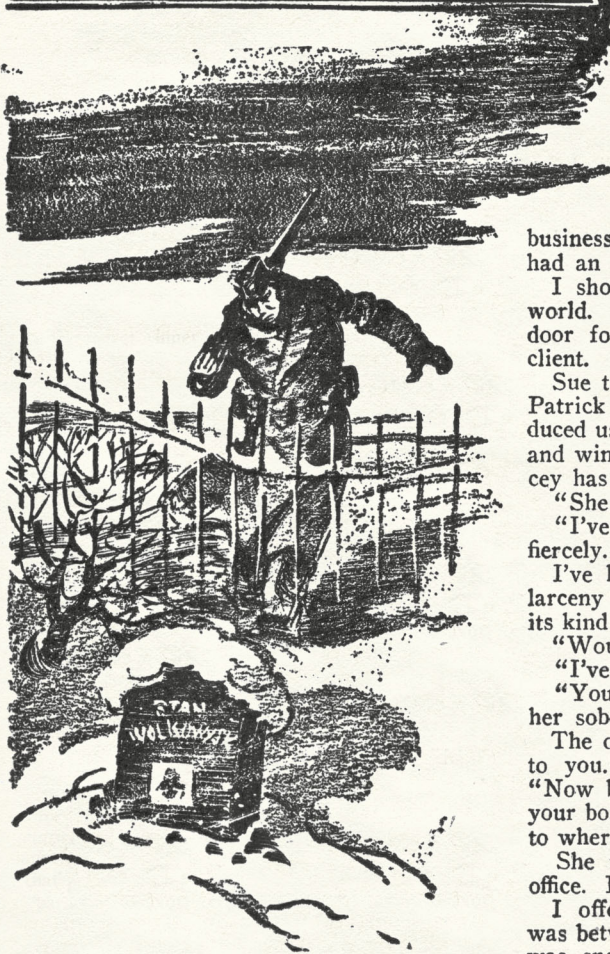
The edge of the carved C was sharp, and my finger came away gritty with rock dust.







## Spare a Grave?



business had promised me their crime. I had an office, a secretary, and a rep.

I should have been sitting on top of the world. I wasn't. My name had been on the door for two weeks and this was my first client.

Sue towed her into the inner office. "Mrs. Patrick Clancey . . . Tom Doyle," she introduced us. She flipped open her shorthand pad and winked at me. "It seems that Mrs. Clancey has lost her grave."

"She what?"

"I've lost my grave," the old lady told me fiercely.

I've handled a lot of cases, mostly grand larceny and murder, but this was the first of its kind that I had encountered.

"Would you please repeat that?" I said.

"I've lost my grave," she told me.

"You have advertised for it?" Sue asked her soberly, her pencil poised over her pad.

The old lady turned on her hotly. "Shame to you." She raised a plump white hand. "Now begone an' lave me alone to talk wid your boss or I'll be taking the flat of me hand to where your snuggies fit the tightest."

She meant it. Sue blushed and left the office. I was disappointed.

I offered a chair to Mrs. Clancey. She was between sixty-five and seventy. Her hair was snow white and neatly coiffured. Her clothes, if not expensive, were tasteful and in keeping with her age. Her face was unlined.

Her cheeks had had polished red apple gleam that some few old people's cheeks have. Her eyes were blue and unfaded. A thick old fashioned gold wedding ring gleamed dully on the plump hand that she had raised.

"Okay," I said. "Let's have the story."

It wasn't what I thought at all. In 1913 she and her husband had purchased an eight-grave lot in Maplewood Cemetery. Her husband and six of their children had been buried in it. She had believed the lot to have been paid for in full. The last five years she had spent in Florida. On her return she had visited the cemetery to find the eighth grave occupied—by a stranger.

**I** COPIED the name on the pad that she had copied from the headstone on the intruder's grave. It was Stan Wolkowysk. The girl in the office of the cemetery would give her no satisfaction except to tell her that the lot never having been fully paid for, the eighth grave had been sold to make up the balance due on the contract.

It didn't sound legal to me. I said so. "And what you want me to do," I suggested, "is to—"

"Get that man out of my grave," she broke in hotly. "I've a right to sleep me last sleep with Pat. And Mr. Wolkowysk is going to get out of me bed if I have to dig him up myself."

I told her that I didn't think that would be necessary. "Of course," I put on the bite, "there'll be—"

"Expenses," she said shrewdly. She took a roll of bills from her purse. There may have been some twenties. Most of them were fifties and one hundreds. She counted out ten fifties on my desk. "And the back of my hand to that poor stick of a Mr. Hartley who wouldn't even listen to—"

"Then you went to Inter-Ocean first?" I asked her.

"That I did," she answered. "And Mr. Hartley wouldn't even listen to me story. He treated me like I was mad and suggested that I see you. He said that you were the best detective and trouble shooter in the city."

I grinned. Inter-Ocean took no charity cases. They passed them on to some poor devil like myself who was scratching for a living. Only this time, Hartley had swindled himself by not hearing the old lady out.

She eyed the money, her thumb poised over the roll. "Five hundred will be enough?"

I told her that it would be sufficient, at least for the time being, wrote her name, hotel, and room number on my pad and bowed her out of the door of the inner office.

"Don't worry about a thing," I assured her. "I'll have your grave back in two days."

She took my hand and pressed it. There

was a suspicion of tears in her eyes. "'Tis comforting to know," she said simply.

Sue heard the door close and came in. "Well, did you find her grave?" she asked dryly.

I tossed her the bills and told her to deposit them to my account as I lifted my skimmer from the peg.

"Mi Gawd!" she gasped as she thumbed them.

"More," I grinned, shrugging into my coat, "I've learned how to handle you. All that I have to do is—"

She pulled her skirt tight. "You just dare try to!" she dared me.

\* \* \*

Maple wood is on the outskirts of the city but inside the corporate limits. I stopped the car in front of the wrought-iron gates and looked it over.

The Army had taken over the acreage just across the railroad tracks that border the cemetery on the west and turned it into a motor park.

Huge searchlights had been rigged on poles. There was a noisy coming and going of trucks. Alert sentries, their collars turned up against the cold, paced the boundary line.

I drove in through the gate and a bell began to toll. I hoped that it wasn't symbolic. I parked in front of the office and told the girl at the desk who I was and what I wanted.

She admitted, "We've been afraid that there would be trouble ever since Mrs. Clancey was here. You wait. I'll call Mr. Cook, the manager of the Association."

I knew his type as soon as I saw him. He was a smooth worker who would stay inside the law but who could talk a widow into signing up for an eight grave lot as the best possible investment for the deceased's insurance money before she could say "perpetual care."

I gave him my business card.

"It's a mess," he admitted frankly. "But I'll be damned if it's our fault. In the first place we were informed that Mrs. Patrick Clancey had died two years ago in Lakeland, Florida. In the second place, the Association didn't sell the grave. It was sold by a smart young punk here in the office who knew that we had written it off the books and saw a chance to make himself a quick fifty."

I asked to see the punk.

"Hell. We fired him two months ago for dipping into the petty cash. But we didn't know about this lot deal until Mrs. Clancey came out here yesterday and raised hell."

"And Wolkowysk was buried when?"

The girl looked up the records. "In June of this year," she said. "That's," she counted on her fingers, "four, five months ago."

"So?" I demanded of Cook.

He shrugged. "So we'll do what's right. We'll move him. I'll even donate a grave. But you'll have to get an exhumation order from the D.A.s office and also written permission from Wolkowysk's mother. I called her last night and told her what had happened."

"And?"

"She cursed me in Polish for twenty solid minutes. All that she said in English was 'No'!"

I asked for her address and the girl wrote it down on a card. "She bought the lot from this punk?"

Cook shook his head. "I can't tell you that. We have no record of the transaction. I didn't even know that the lot had been sold until yesterday."

I tossed the card back to the girl. "Give me the punk's name, too," I told her. "Also his last known address."

She looked at Cook. He nodded and she wrote—

*Clarence Freeman  
4821 W. Division St.*

"You'll try," Cook added as I put the card in my wallet, "to handle this with as little unfavorable publicity as possible, won't you, Doyle?"

I told him that I would. As an afterthought I asked for the location of the Clancey lot.

**I**T WAS almost on the west border of the cemetery. The sentry patrolling the motor park gave me a dirty look as I brushed the snow from an expensive hunk of carved granite to read the names.

The space under 'Mother' was bare. 'Father' was filled with—

**PATRICK A. CLANCEY**  
1884—1932

Under it were the names, Terrence, Aloysius, John, Mary, Sarah, and Baby Maureen.

To one side of the larger monument was a small, cheap headstone with the name Stan Wolkowysk chipped in it and under a glass inset a picture of a husky looking lad who wasn't Irish.

The sentry had stopped to stare at me. "Don't let 'em creep up on you, soldier," I kidded.

He forgot General Order No. 7 long enough to thumb his nose. "Nuts to you, wise guy."

By the time I got back to the car it was beginning to grow dark. I went to see Mrs. Wolkowysk first. I didn't expect to have trouble. I had it.

She lived in an old frame two story house on Clybourne Avenue that did a Gilda Gray

every time a street car passed. A long flight of stairs led up from the street. Mrs. Wolkowysk opened the door a crack but didn't invite me in. She was a big, raw-boned woman with work reddened hands and tired eyes. The law had called on her before. She had me spotted for a copper before I could open my mouth.

"What John do now?" she demanded.

"I wouldn't know that," I told her. "It's Stan that I want to talk about."

She brushed back a lock of dank hair. "No," she said flatly. "I tell the man no last night. It not good to move when you die. Stan stay where he is."

I tried to get into the hall. It was no dice. She kept me standing in the cold while she talked through the crack of the door. I talked for fifteen minutes. I pointed out Mrs. Clancey's feelings and appealed to her as one mother to another. I promised her fifty bucks cash and a new stone for Stan with two angels and a harp.

When I mentioned the angels she weakened. Then she said, "No," and slammed the door in my face. I still was banging on it when a lad of about nineteen drove up in a big new car and came up the stairs. He was squat, and blond, and bad—a dead ringer for the lad on the stone.

"What gives, chum?" he demanded.

I asked, "You're Stan's brother? You're John Wolkowysk?"

He said, "So what!"

"So listen."

I sold him the bill of goods.

"Sure. For fifty bucks I'll square it with ma," he said when I had finished. "What difference does it make where a guy is planted? Look. You come back tomorrow, Mister, about this same time."

I gave him a ten spot to bind the deal, and nodded at his car. "A pretty neat job."

"Yeah," He evaded my eyes. "It belongs to the guy I drive for." He wanted suddenly to be rid of me. "Look. You come back tomorrow, Mister."

I filed the numbers on the car's plates away from force of habit. Wolkowysk stood watching me from the porch.

"By the way," I called. "Who bought that grave for your brother?"

The young Pole shook his head. "I said I'd see that he was moved. Wise up. Play smart, Mister. Just let it go at that."

He went into the house and slammed the door. I pointed my own car west. There was something in this mess that smelled. I was beginning to have a hunch it was the dead man.

I hadn't gone twenty blocks from the house when a big car came up from behind and curbed me. It was either pull over and stop or take a chance on blowing two tires. I

swung to the curb in front of the high board fence of a lumber yard and sat with my hand on my gun.

A lad got out of the other car, leaving one lad at the wheel, and one in the back seat. It was too dark to see any of their faces clearly.

"If it's dough, I'm flat," I told the big lug who stuck his head in the window.

He looked at the gun in my hand and hesitated. "Okay. Let's just talk business," he said. "Who's hired you to dig up Stan?"

I was beginning to get sore. "No one. I guess I'm just a ghoul at heart," I told him. "Now pull your head back through that window or I'll plug you right smack through the teeth as sure as my name is Tom Doyle!"

He scowled and looked around at the car behind him for instructions.

"Doyle. Tom Doyle!" a familiar voice from the car said sharply. "Why the hell didn't somebody say it was Doyle? Come on, you fool! Get out of there or he'll do just what he says he will!"

Wolf-tooth backed out unwillingly. "Okay. So long for now, chum," he said in parting. "But forget all about moving Stan Wolkowsky. Or we'll be seeing you—later."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Red-point Sacrifice

**T**HE big car backed a few feet to clear my fender, then roared on down the street. I lighted a cigarette and sat trying to place the voice. When I had it, I moved on. If the man who had been in the car was the man whom I believed him to be, I had muscled in on something big. Dennis Corbin didn't play for peanuts.

More, there was no need for immediate worry. If I was to be mowed down, Corbin wouldn't be sitting in a car five feet away. He'd be playing pinochle with six judges or kissing the prize baby at some church social.

I stopped at the drug store on the next street car intersection and made a phone call.

"No," a polite voice informed me. "Mr. Corbin is not in. Whom shall I inform him phoned?"

I said that it didn't matter, hung up, dropped another nickel, dialed the Detective Bureau and asked for Lieutenant Nobby's attention.

"This is Doyle, Harry," I told him. "Look. What have you on the books against one Stan Wolkowsky, four or five months deceased?"

He said that there wasn't a thing. Wolkowsky had never even been booked. . . .

The number on West Division proved to be a rooming house in a not bad section of town. I leaned on the bell and waited. If there was a key to the picture, this punk Clarence

Freeman should have it. I rang once more.

An old man opened the door and cupped one hand to his ear.

I said loudly, "I want to see Clarence Freeman."

"Oh. You want to see Clarence," he said. He held the door open. "Come in. He must be in some kind of trouble. One plainclothes man just went up stairs. What are you, another copper?"

He cupped his hand to his ear again. I nodded and let it go that.

I walked up stairs wondering who the other dick was and if he was a district hack or one of the boys from down town. As I made the bend on the second floor a pert little blonde struck her head out a door and smiled.

"Were you looking for someone, dearie?"

"Yeah. I'm looking for Clarence," I told her.

She said, "Swish!" and slammed the door.

I started up the next flight.

The door at the head of the stairs was closed. I rapped on it.

"Yair?" a man's voice demanded.

"Tom Doyle of the Doyle Agency," I called. "And whenever you're through with the lad, I wouldst have words with Clarence."

"The door's open. Come in," he invited.

I opened the door and stepped in. A slim, black-haired youth in trousers and undershirt was lying on the bed. He didn't move as I entered.

"What gives—" I began, then ducked as the lights of the room blacked out and a sap swished down where my head had been.

I came up with my gun in my hand. But the man in back of the door had moved. As I blasted into the wall, he swung the sap from behind me and the gun jumped out of my hand. I dove for it, got it, and rolled, emptying the rest of the clip.

All of them didn't miss. I heard him suck in his breath with pain. There was a moment of absolute silence while I fumbled for a fresh clip. I had it in my fingers when he realized that my gun was empty and jumped me.

Down on the floor below, I could hear the little blonde screaming but no one attempted to interfere. First he rode me across the floor, then I rode him, beating at his head with my gun butt.

He was big and a clever fighter. Also a dirty one. He twisted and squirmed and arched, the sap in his hand never still. I got to my feet and he tripped me. Before I could get up again, the sap connected.

Everything was suddenly fine. Fists ceased to batter at me. The shadows of the room turned to sunbeams and I was dancing in a green meadow. It didn't last long enough. I was as suddenly tired of dancing. A cold wind began to blow. Then the room turned black

again. The last thing that I remembered was a glass crash and a distant shrill tooting of whistles.

When I came to, the room was filled with uniforms.

Jim McCarny of the Division Street Station prowler car helped me to my feet. "You hurt internally or something?" he demanded.

I asked him how the hell he expected me to know. Outside of being sick to my stomach, the lump in my jaw where the sap had connected, and a splitting headache, I felt fine.

I walked over to the bed. The slim, black-haired youth in trousers and undershirt was still lying as I had seen him. He had good reason not to move. Where his right eye had been, there was only a bloody hole.

Sergeant Cooper, in charge of the prowler car, came in from the hall. He looked at me suspiciously. "Where do you fit in, Doyle?"

"I'm just the guy who got popped," I told him. I added what the deaf old bird down stairs had told me about a plainclothes man.

McCarny shook his head and pointed to a broken window leading out onto a fire-escape. "That's the way that he went out. But the old Gee described him when we rush in, and there ain't no such guy on the Force."

**T**HE rest of it was routine. While the Tech Squad and a bored young deputy coroner went to work, Cooper loaded everyone in the house into the wagon he had sent for and gave them a ride to the station. None of them complained. It was that kind of a place.

I sat in Captain Feeny's office and worked on a pint of rye until I began to feel human. Both Cooper and Feeny had accepted my explanation of why I had gone to see Clarence. It was the truth.

"All that I wanted from him," I told them, "was the name of the dame or the lad to whom he had sold the lot."

"It's an angle," Cooper admitted. "We'll work it. But this lad Wolkowysk stumps me. So he's dead and buried, so what's all the fuss?"

I told him if we knew that, we might know why Clarence Freeman had been murdered.

I wanted to know more about Clarence so I walked out to the squad room. The tenants of 4821 W. Division sat like so many warts on a hog. There was little that they could or would tell me. The blonde with the propositioning eyes said she thought that Clarence had been a numbers collector since he had lost his cemetery job, but professed to know little about him.

I called my office from the desk sergeant's phone.

Sue informed me, "Mr. Hartley of Inter-Ocean has been burning up the phone."

"Yair?" I asked.

"Yair," she said too sweetly. "And he said for me to tell you to phone him as soon as I could contact you. He says that it's to your advantage."

I doubted that but told her I'd buzz Inter-Ocean.

"Where are you now?" she asked coldly. "Drunk in some bar somewhere?"

"I'm in jail right now," I told her.

She gasped and broke the connection at her end before I remembered that I had promised to take her to the best night club in town the day that we had our first client.

Hartley was waiting for my call. He sounded nervous.

"Look, Tom," he blurted without any preface. "When can I see you?"

I told him not for a hell of a long time, providing I saw him first. He told me not to be that way.

"So I was wrong. I should have held your job," he admitted. "But I'm willing to make it up. It's this way," he tried to sell me his bill of shoddy. "There's a case just come into the office that no one but you can handle. And it's up twenty a week if you'll come back."

I told him where he could put the twenty. "But it's a lulu of a case," he persisted. "What's more, there's a bonus arrangement."

I told him to put the bonus with the twenty. "Thirty a week more," he offered. "And Inter-Ocean will pay all expenses including transportation."

"Transportation to where?" I demanded.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," he explained. "This is a S.A. job that just came in. And you are the only operator I know who speaks passable Spanish whom I can trust."

"Whereabouts in S.A.?" I asked him.

"In Rio," he told me.

I winked at the desk sergeant, told Hartley to add Rio to the bonus and the twenty if he still had room, and started to hang up.

"Damn you, Doyle," he bellowed. "Don't you dare to hang up on me. If you do, you'll never work another day in this man's town. I'll have your license revoked. I'll—"

I hung up and asked the sergeant for a light.

Captain Feeny came out of his office. "That was Bruce Hartley that you were just talking to?" he asked me.

I said, "It was."

Feeny studied the tip of his cigar. "Now that you've got the stink of Inter-Ocean off you, Tom," he said, "if I were you, I'd stay away from Bruce Hartley. He cuts his corners too close and, well, things have happened since you've been away."

He wouldn't say more than that. It was sufficient. It was money in the bank.

I went back to the bull-pen where the ques-

tioning was still going on. The little blonde, staring a clinic in the face, had changed her tune and began to sing.

A squat, blond, Polish looking lad had been one of Freeman's most frequent visitors. A right fella, she said. Several times after calling Clarence, he had stopped to talk to her.

I described John Wolkowysk.

"That's the man," she admitted.

Sergeant Cooper massaged his seven o'clock shadow with one palm. "We'll get some pix and have her look at them," he told me. "But that sounds like Johnny Martin who drives for Dennis Corbin."

It was all shaping to one end. I gave him the license number of Wolkowysk's car, adding, "While you're checking up on that, I think I'll drop down and see Corbin."

I told them about being curbed right after I had talked to John Wolkowysk and thinking that I had recognized Corbin's voice. "More," I tried to clinch it in my own mind, "the big yellow-toothed lad who threw his weight around answers the old man's description of the phony copper with whom I played paddy-cake in Freeman's room."

McCarny said, "You're nuts. Dennis Corbin is a big shot. He runs all of the gambling and half of the crime in the city. Why should he give a damn about this Stan Wolkowysk being dug up?"

"That's what I want to find out," I told him.

**T**HE temperature had dropped ten degrees with the sun. By the time I had driven two blocks I was cold. I realized that I hadn't had any supper and pulled up in front of a diner and ordered a T bone steak.

"You'll tak' hamburg an' like it," the Greek told me. He started to slap the chopped meat on the griddle, stopped at the high whine of a racing car and peered out of the frosted window. "Look out!" he bellowed. "Is coming!"

There was a scream of hard-braked tires and a Tommy-gun raked the building, cutting the coffee urn in two and sending a stream of boiling liquid cascading all over the Greek.

I got up from the floor and kicked the door open as the car roared on. There was only a tail light to shoot at. I didn't even come close.

Inside the ruined diner, the Greek stopped swearing to splutter, "Someone, she don't like you!"

The Greek was still bellowing about who was going to pay for the damage and where the hell did I think he was going to buy a new coffee urn when I got back into my car.

I wanted to see Corbin—bad. If I was going to be offered as a red-point sacrifice, I at least wanted to know the score.

Two hard-faced flunkies holding down the pavement in front of his Randolph Street place closed in before I was well parked at the curb. Both of them had their hands in their pockets.

"Corbin ain't here," one of them told me.

I brushed them aside and went in to look for myself. The joint was empty.

Moe Harp, the house manager, said, "If you want to see him real bad, you can find him over at Findy's having supper with State Representative Green."

I had expected that one. "And he's been there for hours and hours and hours."

"Yair," Moe said flatly.

I left my car parked where it would block the entrance to the joint and walked a block down the street to the restaurant.

The place was crowded with the town's hoods, lugs, pollys, as well as some paying customers. Myrtle, a red head with a classy chassis, and more dough than I'll ever have, put my skimmer on the rack and helped me out of my overcoat.

"Long time no see, Doyle," she cracked. "How was dying for your country?"

"I'd rather buy bonds," I told her.

I took a peep in the mirror to straighten my tie. The lad who stared back wasn't human. The lump on my jaw had turned mauve. I had a purple bruise under one eye. The other was almost swollen shut. My hair is prematurely gray and in spots my skull hadn't been quite thick enough to keep the blood from oozing through.

Myrtle told me frankly, "You look like hell."

"You should know how I feel," I told her.

The more I thought about the set-up, the madder I got. Corbin was sitting in a booth with Green. Neither of them looked up. I squeezed in and sat down beside Green without waiting to be invited.

"I'll take the same," I told the waiter, pointing at the steak on Corbin's platter. Medium rare. And put it on Mr. Corbin's check."

Corbin stopped a forkful enroute to his mouth and turned his fish eyes on me. "What's the idea?" he growled.

I said, "I think that's only fair. If your boys ruin my hamburger, I don't see why you shouldn't buy me a steak."

The fork continued to his mouth, "I don't know what you are talking about."

I appealed to Green. "Don't you think so, Senator? If someone blew a hamburger off your plate with a Tommy-gun, wouldn't you feel entitled—"

Green mumbled an excuse, crowded by me, and left.

I sat looking at Corbin. A big, good looking, black Irishman, he was the exception to

the rule that most crooks are dumb. He had brains and he knew how to use them. He had been fifth in his class at Yale and headed for big business before some quirk in his mental make-up had side-tracked him into crime.

"Okay. Let's have it," I demanded. "I'm tired of being shot at and I want the answer to some questions.

He grinned. "And why should I answer your questions?"

Both of my hands were under the table. "Because I've got a gun in your belly," I told him. "And unless I find out what I want to know, I'm going to splatter your guts all over the back of this booth.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Twenty Bucks Buys Murder

**T**HE grin faded from his face. He continued to eat but his hands were shaking slightly. He'd seen me kill men before.

"Sure. Some of your boys will get me," I continued. "But I have nothing to lose. They're out to get me now. And spreading me on a slab won't do you a bit of good if you're lying right beside me."

The waiter brought my shrimp cocktail. I

ate it with my left hand, and watched Corbin.

"So," Corbin conceded the presence of the gun, "what is it that you want to know?"

"Why I've suddenly turned into a clay pigeon," I barked. "I know that John Wolkowysk, alias Johnny Martin, is one of your drivers. And I had just been talking to Johnny about digging up his brother Stan a few minutes before all this hell broke loose. So give. What is it that you want? Do you want this Stan Wolkowysk to stay planted in a grave he doesn't belong in?"

He shook his head. "I never even heard of this lad Wolkowysk." He braced both palms on the table. "And if that's a cause for murder, go ahead and shoot."

I gave him credit for guts and tried another tack. "And I don't suppose you ever heard of a lad named Freeman?"

He thought a moment, asked, "Would Clarence be his first name?"

I said that it would be.

"Then I know him," he admitted. "He collects a numbers route for me out on Division Street."

"Did collect," I corrected. "He's dead. What's more, I figure he was killed to keep him from naming the party to whom he sold the grave in which Stan Wolkowysk is planted."



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"Is that so?" Corbin asked, interested.

He was growing more certain of himself. He knew that I could take him. But the place was filled with his boys, and he knew that unless Mrs. Doyle had raised a feeble minded son name Tom, I wasn't over-eager to commit suicide.

"Well, well. Poor Clarence," he continued. "He wasn't a bad sort of a lad even if he did shade off toward lavender."

"Why did you have him killed?"

Corbin turned ugly. His face was mottled with anger. "He must have made a mistake," he said coldly. "Just the kind of a mistake that you're making if you're figuring for a shake-down. I never paid a dime to any private shamus in my life." He pushed his plate to one side and called my bluff. "Now either pull the trigger of that pop-gun or get out!"

I stood up and dropped my gun in my side pocket. I had pushed him as far as I could. The talk of a shake-down was a stall. Both of us knew that. My number had been posted. Either I got him, or he got me. And I still didn't know the score.

"Okay, Killer Kane," I needed. "If that's the way it's got to be, okay."

He pounded on the table with one fist. "You're damn right that's the way it has to be. I've taken all I intend to take off you or any other private shamus like—"

"Bruce Hartley?" I filled in the pause.

He realized that he had said too much. "G'wan. Scram. Beat it. Get out of here," he wound up our love fest in a lower tone.

I walked back to the cloak room with my hand in my pocket, complaining loudly to Findy, "What sort of a place are you running? That man threatened my life."

He ducked back in through the kitchen door like a frightened rabbit.

I figured it for insurance. At least forty people had heard me. Half that number had heard what Corbin had said. And if my corpse was found in a dark alley, it might tend to put him on a spot.

Myrtle handed me my skimmer. "Enjoy your meal?" she asked brightly.

"I loved it," I assured her.

Her eyes fluttered, frightened, to the booth where Corbin sat glowering at us. "Don't be a mule, Tom," she warned me, not moving her lips. "You don't know what you've gotten into. Step out of it while you can."

I TOSSED a half buck tip in the basket, threw my coat over my left arm, and stalked out thinking that things had come to a pretty pass when a cloak room dame knew more about the town's set-up than I did. Something had happened while I was away.

My hand still on the gun in my pocket, I cut across town toward the News-Tribune to talk

to Tad Hill. I wanted to know the answer to a lot of things, and if there were answers, he'd know them.

"Poiper? Poiper, Mister?"

I pushed the lad aside and walked. He clung to my elbow, whispering, "Je'es. Don't you know me, Doyle? Be a good guy and give me a break? I can sell you what you want to know for fifty bucks."

I stopped in the mouth of the alley and looked at the lad again. It was small wonder I hadn't known him. In the eighteen months I'd been away, his daily 'bang' had got him. His name was Billy Matson. He had been a wheel man for Corbin. When I had seen him last, he had been fat and sleek and prosperous. Dope had taken him for a ride. His hair was a dank dirty gray. His cheeks had sunken in. His eyes were swimming with junk. The suit that he wore was in rags.

"I need a bang," he whimpered.

"I wouldn't have known you, Billy," I admitted. "You can sell me what for fifty bucks?"

He looked around him nervously with a typical hop-head twitch and beckoned me onto the alley.

I shook my head. "Nix. We'll talk right here. What is it that you can tell me?"

"Who the dead lad is," he whispered.

I made him come all the way. "What dead lad?" I demanded.

He wet his lips and whimpered, "Stan Wolkowysk. But they'll kill me if they find out that I've told."

"Okay. Who was he?" I asked.

He bargained, "It should be worth fifty bucks."

I gave him twenty. I kissed even that goodbye. All the good tips that I've got from junkies, I could put in a sand gnat's eye. Most of them dream up their info.

"He's Jo Jo McGurn," he told me.

I waited for a bell to ring. It didn't. I'd never heard the name before. "And who the hell's he?" I demanded.

The dope screwed up his face in a knot. "Who's Jo Jo McGurn? Why he's the guy who—"

My back was half turned to the curb. Matson saw the car first—and screamed.

I dove for the alley pavement. My insurance hadn't been enough. Corbin wanted me out of the way so bad that he didn't give a damn who knew that he had ordered me rubbed out.

It sounded like Guadalcanal the day we rushed the beach. Lead plastered the alley and the dark brick wall. But Billy Matson took some of the lead. He was riddled and dead by the time the car roared on.

I rolled to the mouth of the alley and emptied a clip at the gas tank. I didn't miss



this time. The right front tire blew out like a field-piece. The car swerved, knocked over a fire-plug, vaulted the curb, and dove into a store front. As it hit, the gas tank exploded.

Before I could thumb in another clip, three men fought clear of the flames and raced east on Huron Street.

I ran shouting toward the car, bellowing for some one to stop them.

An old Gee took me by the shoulder and shook me.

"We must keep calm. By all means we must keep calm," he tremoloed. "We've been warned that we might be bombed."

I shook loose and stared at the flaming wreckage. The outline of the car looked familiar. Then I took a look at the plates and groaned. It was my own boat that I had left parked in front of Corbin's.

"Damn it to hell!" I swore.

The old Gee shook me again and repeated his admonition to keep calm as he stared worriedly at the sky, waiting for the next bomb to fall.

"I can't keep calm," I told him. "I'm just burning with excitement!"

I debated waiting for the cops, decided not to. I could beat my gums with them later. Right now, I wanted facts and the News-Tribune building was only a block away.

I faded into the crowd.

Tad Hill was sitting on the City Desk when I stormed in. He was trying to talk into three phones at once.

I hung up the receivers. "I'm the guy you want to see," I told him. "That's my car burning out there and I'm the mark at which all that lead was popping." I bargained, "I'm trading an exclusive for info."

"Anything we know," Tad promised.

**I** GAVE him the whole thing from the start including Mrs. Clancey, my calling on Mrs. Wolkowyzk, and the yellow-toothed killer with whom I had swapped lead in the dead pansy's room.

Hoke jotted down notes as I talked. He might have been tabulating the events at Mrs. McCloskey's strawberry festival. When I had finished, he looked up speculatively. "We can tie in the Hartley-Corbin angle. Begin to beat the drum for an exhumation order. In the interest of the public weal, the News-Tribune demands that District Attorney Beemer, etc., et al, blah."

"Now you tell me," I told Tad, "what this Hartley-Corbin angle is, and who is Jo Jo McGurn and why he is so important."

The story he told wasn't pretty. I had been in the Solomons when it happened.

At two o'clock in the afternoon on June 15th a gang of alleged out-of-town hoodlums, led by Jo Jo McGurn, a recently mushroomed

big-shot, had taken the First National Bank, with whom Inter-Ocean had a yearly contract to furnish bank guards and protection, for a half million dollars in bills of both small and large denominations. Two guards, a teller, and a deaf old lady who hadn't heard the command to raise her hands had been killed.

The police, the F.B.I., and Inter-Ocean, had trailed the gang to a split-up point in the suburbs, but from there on it had been cold turkey. Jo Jo McGurn had never been seen again. Not one dime of the money had ever been recovered.

"I think I get the McGurn angle," I said. "He stopped lead during the stick-up and died. The gang bought a cheap lot from Freeman and planted him under his real name in the hope that the heat would die down. But where does the Hartley-Corbin angle figure?"

Tad shook his head. "You've been away too long, Tom. Bruce Hartley has been pushed for cash on a little matter of back income tax that he forgot to pay. And there are those who say that Inter-Ocean furnished the guards and Dennis Corbin furnished the gang with a two-way split in prospect. And there's only one thing wrong with your Jo Jo angle. Not one guard fired one damn shot!"

A lot of things were suddenly clear.

*Bruce Hartley hadn't dared to keep my old job open. He had known I would find out too much.*

John Wolkowysk, alias Johnny Martin, was one of Corbin's drivers. Stan Wolkowysk, alias Jo Jo McGurn, had been Johnny's brother. He had been planted and forgotten. If Tad Hill's summation was correct, and Hartley and Corbin were involved, then they had been sitting tight waiting for the heat to cool. Then along had come Mrs. Clancey demanding her own grave and over had gone their apple cart.

Once Jo Jo McGurn had been dug up and identified, Corbin was on a spot. Freeman had been killed to shut his mouth. I was the next on the list. And then—

"What reward has the bank posted?"

He told me, "The usual five percent of all money recovered, plus two grand apiece for each convicted member of the mob."

That would run into money. We had a drink together and I walked back to my car. There were two uniformed boys watching the wreckage but the Headquarter's Squad had gone. I called Lieutenant Nobby from the drug store on the corner.

"I was just about to send out a *wanted*," he told me. "What the hell have you gotten into?"

I told him everything that I'd told Tad and promised that I'd be in his office inside of an hour. He told me he'd get in touch with the D.A.

"There's only one way to check your story," he said flatly, "and that is to dig up the stiff. Either he's Jo Jo or he's not."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Double Snatch

THE Avonshire wasn't the sort of a place at which Mrs. Clancey should have stopped. Just over the river on the near south side it's patronized mainly by show-people, night-club entertainers, and out and out fly-by-nights. There is a small bar off the lobby and as I came in through the front door, Bruce Hartley staggered from the bar door.

He didn't seem pleased to see me.

He swore at me under his breath, then not so softly: "My pal," he lushed. "Why, you lousy no good two-bit window-peeker. You had to be a hero and go off to war, leaving me with a headache, and now you're howling to high heaven because I didn't hold your job." He got a better grip on the door jamb. "I'm gonna make it so hot for you that there isn't a respect—respec—" He backed off and took another run at it, "isn't a respectable agency from coash to coash that will give you a job."

"That's just fine with me," I told him. "Or maybe you hadn't heard. I've opened an agency of my own. And from now on, to you, the name is *Mr. Doyle*."

He stood swaying, staring at me drunkenly. He was as big a man as Dennis Corbin, and as smart, except when he was in his cups. I knew. I'd worked for him eleven years. After his fashion, he had been honest.

"Go on," he dared me. "Shay whash on your mind."

I did, leaving out the bank affair. I'd been saving the other for years.

Hartley seemed to enjoy it. "Now I'll tell you what I think of you." He leaned forward and whispered in my ear, "Your father was unmarried and your mother was a tart."

Those weren't the exact words but they'll do. As he spoke, his right hand streaked for his right hip pocket. I might have fallen for the gag if I hadn't know that he was left handed, and his left hand was in his coat pocket.

Instead of going for my gun I kept both of my hands in plain sight and smiled, "Well, if that's the way that you feel about it—"

He said, "I do." The sweat stood out on his forehead in beads. He wasn't as drunk as he pretended. The thing that was ailing him was that he knew that I knew. He also knew that the only way that he could stop me was to kill me. He called me a coward and repeated the words that he had whispered out loud.

I said, "You're drunk," and attempted to push past him.

He drew his left hand from his pocket to stop me. It was all that I had been waiting for. I clipped him. He crash-landed against the opposite wall so hard that he ground looped.

The desk clerk squeaked, "You've killed him!"

"I hope so," I admitted, and went on upstairs to Mrs. Clancey's room.

Her face looked strained and flabby instead of plump. Her breath was strong with the smell of gin.

"I could use a drink, too," I suggested.

She poured a water tumbler half full of gin. "I'm afraid that I've made a mistake," she told me flatly.

I asked, "In hiring me?"

"N-no." She brushed a lock of hair out of her eye. "Not that a'tall, me boy." She took a deep breath, continued, "But maybe it would be best to leave the dead sleep where they are. I could get me another grave near by."

"Hartley's been up here to see you," I accused.

"There was a man here," she admitted.

"And he's tried to frighten you into calling off this thing."

She dabbed at her eyes with an ~~apple white~~ handkerchief. "I don't want to die," she sniveled. "I'm just a well meaning old lady who wanted her own grave."

"And you're going to get it," I assured her. "Scaring you off won't do Hartley a bit of good. Lieutenant Nobby of Homicide is pounding on the D.A.'s desk right now and demanding an exhumation order."

It was hard to tell how she took that. She said, "But I'm afraid. I'm so all alone."

I offered her a police guard. She refused it.

"But maybe," she suggested, "if I had some other woman to stay with me. Perhaps even that chit of a child in your office—"

I gave the girl at the switchboard Sue's number. Sue wasn't overpleased to hear from me, but she answered so quickly that she must have been sitting at the phone waiting for it to ring.

I told her that I was sorry as hell about our date but things had been happening too fast for me to even phone her and asked her to come to Room 810 of the Avonshire Hotel as fast as she could make it.

She said, "Hmm!"

I told her that it wasn't that kind of a party, that all I wanted her to do was to hold old Mrs. Clancey's hand. She wasn't pleased by the prospect but she said that she would come. I killed the rest of the gin while I was waiting and went down to the bar for another bottle. Old Mrs. Clancey changed

her dress and repaired her hair and make-up. Both of them needed it badly. The old lady looked as if the mice had been nibbling at her.

I stayed on until Sue knocked on the door.

She started to give me hell, got a good look at my face and began to cry. "Oh, Tom. Somebody's hurt you!"

"They tried to," I admitted.

**T**HE tips of her fingers explored my bruises.

I kissed her fingers and took her in my arms. Her lips were half an inch from mine when the old lady coughed.

Mrs. Clancey . . . Sue Vincent," I introduced them. "I believe that you've met before."

They stared at each other in the way women do, then Mrs. Clancey pulled Sue to her impulsively and kissed her on the cheek. "I'm so glad that you could come, my dear."

Sue wasn't so enthusiastic. Something about the old lady seemed to puzzle her.

I made certain that the clip of my gun was filled and gave it to her. "What I want you to do is to lock and bolt the door after me when I leave. Don't open it for anyone. And I mean *anyone*. If anyone tries to break in, empty the gun through the door, pick up the phone and scream for the police. You understand?"

Still looking at Mrs. Clancey, Sue said that she did.

"I should be back inside of two hours," I told them. "Meanwhile you two can chin."

Sue sat down in an easy chair, the gun resting in her lap. "This is a hell of a night club," she confessed.

As I closed the door, she was still staring at Mrs. Clancey.

It was snowing when I hit the street. I went directly from the hotel to the office, picked up my spare gun, and continued on to Homicide. Lieutenant Nobby was waiting for me with a still-wet News-Tribune Extra spread out on his desk.

"Cast-iron Doyle," he grunted. "How much of this is true?"

I skimmed over the front page. Hoke Meyers hadn't missed a bet. There were even some things I hadn't known. One of them was the fact that F.B.I. had grilled both

Corbin and Hartley re: the First National job.

I tapped the item, asked, "The Department feels how about this?"

"We'd like to nail them both," Nobby admitted. "And if that stiff out at Maplewood should turn out to be Jo Jo McGurn and we can tie him into Dennis Corbin through this lad Johnny Martin, we'll have a damn sight more to work on than we've ever had before."

Two G's walked into the office without knocking. I knew Tommy Convers well.

He introduced his partner as Mark Gold and we sat beating our gums about old times as Nobby got on the wire with the D.A. to ask about the exhumation order.

"It's waiting," he told us when he hung up. "The D.A. got Judge Arnson to sign it." He yelled into the squad room for two of his own boys, added, "Beemer said that he'd meet us out at the Division Street Station and we can all go on together from there."

We started out of the office and the phone rang.

Lieutenant Nobby handed it to me. "It's your boy friend on the News-Tribune. He says that he's been trying to locate you all over town."

Tad sound excited. He was. "Look. What kind of bull are you handing out, Doyle?" he demanded. "I've had fifteen phone calls since our extra hit the street with that damn sob story about poor Mrs. Patrick A. Clancey wanting her own grave."

I still didn't understand and said so.

"Why you idiot," he yelled, "Mrs. Patrick A. Clancey is dead! She died two years ago in Lakeland, Florida and I've had fifteen phone calls to prove it."

I hung up and stared at the phone. I was remembering something that Cook had told me out at the cemetery—

*"We were informed that Mrs. Patrick Clancey had died two years ago down in Lakeland, Florida."*

I didn't have all the picture but I had enough.

"Bad news?" Convers asked.

"They've got Sue," I told him quietly. "They're going to use her as a club to try and make us lay off."

Lieutenant Nobby exploded: "But that

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---

doesn't make sense. This old Mrs. Clancey is the dame who stirred up all this mess. If she hadn't come to you wanting her grave, we wouldn't ever have thought of looking for McGurn in a grave in Maplewood."

There was only one way to check. We made the Avonshire Hotel in four and a half minutes flat with the siren wailing wide open and to hell with the red lights.

The same clerk was on the desk.

"Yes," he admitted. "Mrs. Clancey phoned for a taxi-cab and left here almost ten minutes ago."

I pounded on the desk. "Alone?"

He seemed surprised. "Why no," he told us. "She was accompanied by the young lady who called on her just before you left."

Room 810 was a mess. The chair in which Sue had been sitting had been overturned on the floor. There was a bullet hole in the ceiling. Both of the floor lamps had been smashed. A small portable radio was spilling its entrails in the bathtub.

**T**HE rooms on either side of 810 were vacant. A drunk in the room across the hall thought he had heard a shot but hadn't investigated or informed the desk. He had heard a radio blaring. He hadn't complained about that either. In the first place he liked music, he informed us. In the second place, the Avonshire was a very good place for a man to mind his own business.

Nobby sent for a finger-print man while I talked to the elevator boy. He had noticed that Sue seemed frightened. Mrs. Clancey had kept both of her hands in her muff. There had been a man with them.

I asked him to describe the man. He had been a big man about six-feet four. The only thing else that the boy had noticed was that the big man had yellow teeth, he looked like he'd been in a fight, and he walked with a noticeable limp.

I thought that one over. That could put an entirely different complexion on the whole affair.

When I got back upstairs, Nobby reminded me that Beemer was waiting out at the Division Street Station and was probably raising hell.

I said to hell with the D.A.

Convers talked me out of that. "If the stiff is McGurn," he pointed out, "we'll have a pry bar to use on Corbin. And if Corbin is the lad who's snatched the girl—"

The room phone cut him short. It was the girl at the switchboard down stairs. "There's a gentleman on the line," she said, "who wants to speak to a Mr. Doyle."

Lieutenant Nobby told her to trace the call on another line and handed the phone to me.

"This is Tom Doyle," I admitted.

The voice was muffled. It sounded far away, as if the lad was talking into a wine glass or through a wadded-up handkerchief.

"Get this," he said, "and get it straight. You leave Stan Wolkowsky stay buried or the old lady and the dame go out the hard way."

I stalled to give the girl time to trace the call. I told him that the D.A. was already on his way to Maplewood with an exhumation order.

"Then stall him," my caller ordered.

"And if I can't—"

"That's Sue's tough luck," he told me and hung up.

"The call came from a dial phone," the switchboard girl informed me. "I can give you the exchange but I have no way of finding out the phone number or the street address."

I told her to skip it and hung up.

None of us talked much on our way to the Division Street Station, but Captain Feeney tried to sympathize with me by pointing out that we had no way of knowing that whoever had snatched Sue would release her unharmed if we refrained from opening the grave.

There were twelve cars in our cavalcade, half of them newspaper men. It was snowing harder now. Someone had gotten Cook, the Graveyard Association man, on the phone. He was waiting at the gates and led the way to the grave in his own car.

We parked. The snow had covered up the tracks that I had made that afternoon. We all had flashlights but we didn't need them. The searchlights on the posts in the motor park made that section of the cemetery plenty light.

The sentry saw us coming, stopped, and brought his rifle to a port. Before he could challenge, I called, "It's all right, soldier. We're stopping this side of the line."

Cook walked over to the tracks and talked to him.

The lad debated a moment as though he was thinking of yelling for the Corporal of the guard, then put his rifle back on his shoulder and resumed his tour.

"He's seen me before," Cook told us. He flashed his light on the hunk of granite, read, "Patrick A. Clancey," then turned his torch on the smaller head stone. "This is it, right here."

The pic-boys began snapping pictures. The muscle boys shoveled eight inches of hard packed snow from the grave, then got busy with their picks. The ground was frozen solid and all of us had spelled them by the time that they reached the soft stuff.

I kept thinking of Sue and how much she meant to me and how I wished that I had told her, instead of treating her like a kid because

my hair was gray and I was a few years older than she was.

A circle of pic-men snapped Beemer pointing to Wolkowysk's picture under the glass slide on the stone.

"Is it or isn't it?" Convers asked him.

The D.A. shrugged. "Off the record, I'll be damned if I can tell. All Slavs have a certain resemblance."

One of the shovels struck concrete and after the rubble had been cleared out, Cook's professional grave diggers took over. They ran a frame-like affair out over the hole, attached slings to the top of the concrete box, hoisted it out and then made the slings fast to the coffin.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Coffin Dust

**T**HE pic-boys snapped more pictures of Beemer grinning like a ghoul. The coffin itself was a modest cheap metal affair. It had been sealed with some sort of cement and Cook worked on the unhinged side of the cover with a dull chisel and a maul.

I kept thinking of Sue. Something wet kept getting in my eyes. Maybe it was the snow.

Beemer posed for more pictures. If the hunch I was riding was correct, I had nailed down his job for life. The body of Jo Jo McGurn and the loot from the First National job would earn him a lot of votes.

Cook tossed the maul and the chisel on a tarp. "That should do it," he said. He caught at the edge of the coffin lid and raised it while a dozen flash lights stabbed at the quilted satin.

Tommy Convers was the first to speak. He said, "Well, I'll be damned."

Whoever the lad in the coffin was, he wasn't Jo Jo McGurn. He had been dead too long, about ten years I should judge.

The D.A. glowered at me. "And the money?" he asked sarcastically.

Convers and I felt the satin. We even lifted the skeleton out and laid it on the tarp while we cut through the quilting with our knives. The dead Gee who wasn't McGurn, was all that there had been in it.

One of the leg men from an anti-administration paper quipped: "Oh dear. And I had my heart so set on being re-elected."

There was a general laugh.

The D.A. ignored it. "Okay. Put him back, seal up the coffin, and replant him," he ordered coldly.

The newspaper boys began to straggle off, wise cracking with each other. Beemer turned on me with a few choice remarks concerning private agency men who were willing to make damn fools of their friends for a little cheap

publicity, and stalked off stiff-legged through the snow.

Cook seemed anxious for us to leave. "A sweet mess that you've got me into," he sneered. "Why didn't you make certain of your facts before you started all this?"

Lieutenant Nobby blew on his hands to warm them. "Well, let's get started," he suggested. "I'll put out a pick-up on both Sue and Mrs. Clancey. We know that they have been snatched. We know that you were shot at. We know that Freeman is dead. But I'll be damned if I can figure what the hell this is all about. Why should Dennis Corbin give a hoot if we dug up this mummified Gee?"

I stood watching Cook's back as he plied a shovel. Then I took off one glove and ran a finger around the C of Clancey carved on the stone. It had taken a long time for the lightning to strike. But I had it. The edge of the carved C was sharp and my finger came away gritty with dust.

"I don't think that he did," I told Nobby. "Okay. It looks like we've made a mistake. Let's go."

It was two o'clock in the morning when the light in the house that I was watching blinked out and a man opened the window noisily as if preparing to jump into bed.

I started the motor of the drive-it-yourself car I had rented, but left my lights turned off. I'd know how right or wrong I was inside of the next five minutes.

I had been right. The rear door of the house opened. A man stepped out on the porch, looked around him cautiously, then leaning against the wind made his way to the garage on the rear of the lot.

He drove from the garage without turning on his lights. I followed a block behind him. It was a quiet residential section. So far as I could tell there were only three cars on the street. My car, the car I was tailing, and the car that was tailing me. Three blocks from the house the car ahead snapped on its lights. I dropped back another block, still driving blind.

At River Road, the car ahead turned west. There was other traffic here. I let two cars get in between us, then I turned on my lights.

We drove for ten or fifteen minutes, bunched up the way cars will. Then the lead car turned off of River Road onto a side lane.

By the time I made the turn, the car was gone. I crept up the lane without lights for a quarter of a mile, then drove off to one side and parked in a clump of evergreen. From where I was parked I could see the lighted windows of a pseudo English manor set well back from the road.

I left the car and waded toward it through the snow. The shades of the house were drawn but I could hear voices.

I tried the basement windows, found one that was open and slipped through. I knew this house as well as I knew my own. I had been in it a hundred times.

When my hands were warm, I used my flash to locate the stairs, kicked off my shoes, and crept up stairs silently.

The voices were much plainer here. Dennis Corbin made a crack about the D.A. being up a well known creek and Bruce Hartley laughed heartily.

**I** TURNED the knob of the door and tried it. It was unlocked. I opened it carefully and closed it as carefully behind me. Then I reached for my gun, froze as a gun barrel dug into my spine and the big yellow-toothed lad who had curbed me said:

"That will do just fine, Doyle. What took you so long?"

Feet clattered on the basement stairs and Johnny Martin banged open the door. "He took so long sneaking in," he complained, "I almost froze."

Corbin called from the other room: "He wasn't followed?"

"Naw," Martin called. "I tailed him all the way from the house. This prowling is strictly on his own."

Corbin gave Wolf-tooth a name. "Bring him in when you're sure that he's clean, Scaffidi."

The big lad slipped my gun from my holster, frisked me for a hide-out, then pushed me on ahead of him into the living room.

Bruce Hartley was sitting on a sofa with the grave yard man, Cook. Both of them had drinks in their hands.

Hartley grinned, "I hear that you and the D.A. were disappointed tonight, Tom." He spat into the open fireplace, the smile fading from his lips. "And to think I gave you credit for so much brains that I was willing to risk a murder rap to put you out of the way."

Corbin, looking very well pleased with himself, was sitting in back of an open desk, fingering several thick packets of bills. "Still want me to pay for your steak?" he asked me.

I told him, "I'd rather know how you knew that I had got wise to Cook."

The dapper little cemetery man had become a big-shot hotshot over night. I almost felt sorry for him when I thought of the let-down to which he was building.

"Why you damn fool," he sneered at me. "Don't you think I saw you run your finger over that stone? Don't you think that I knew you were parked outside my house since shortly before midnight?"

I lighted a cigarette. "So, it seems I made a mistake," I admitted. I looked at Hartley. "It's your house. Why not offer me a drink?"

He made no effort to pour me one. He did admit, "You have guts. I always admired that in you, Tom. It's a shame you have to die."

Cook was keeping too fast company for him. He giggled, "Leaving the affair of Jo Jo McGun and the stick-up of the First National Bank an unsolved mystery."

I asked him, "What makes you think that they're going to let you live?"

Scaffidi looked at Martin and raised his eyebrows.

Cook crowed: "You're crazy." He pointed to the bills on the desk. "I'm here to collect right now."

"Sure. In lead," I told him. "You sap. The only reason that you're alive now is because they needed you to decoy duck me in here."

Cook appealed to Hartley. "That's not so, is it, Bruce?"

Hartley patted him on the shoulder, smiling thinly. "Of course it isn't, Cooky."

Cook beamed, satisfied. Hartley took a gun from his pocket and amused himself by thumbing the safety on and off. Almost as an afterthought, and without seeming premeditation, he shoved the gun in his hand into Cook's face and fired.

Martin and Scaffidi laughed.

Cook clawed at his shattered face, mewed piteously a moment, then fell face forward into the fire. Martin dragged him back and beat out the wisps of flames.

"Don't drag him too far," Hartley warned. "Let him bleed it out on the fire brick."

Corbin divided the bills on the desk into two piles and put one of the piles in his pocket. "That being that, I'll be going." He added, "You're certain that you don't want my boys to take care of Doyle and the dames?"

Hartley said, "It won't be necessary. What I do with the women is my affair. I suggested that we snatch them. But if there are any lingering doubts in your mind that I'm double crossing you, I'll take care of Doyle right now."

He leveled his gun on me and the knuckle of his trigger finger whitened as he took up the slack.

**I** TOLD him. "Go ahead and shoot. But you're committing suicide. You see I wrote Corbin a nice long letter to be delivered in case of my death, telling him just how you tried to double cross him."

Hartley licked his lips. "You're nuts."

Corbin pushed in between us. "What the hell is he talking about?"

"A double-cross that didn't work," I told him. "Get Sue and Mrs. Clancey down here and I'll tell you all about it."

"I'll take care of Mrs. Clancey," Hartley sneered.

"You mean you'll split with *him*," I said. Corbin said, "Him?" He dipped his hand into his pocket. It came out with a gun. "Get those dames down here," he ordered Martin.

Hartley opened his mouth to say something, changed his mind and closed it. "It beats me," he said finally, and sat back on the sofa.

Sue had been crying. Her eyes were puffed and red-rimmed. When she saw me she tried to talk and almost choked. Both of her hands were tied behind her and a wide strip of adhesive tape slapped across her mouth.

"You don't need to tell me," I told her. "The F.B.I. checked the prints in the room and dear old Mrs. Clancey turns out to be none other than Moonface Charlie, one of Pink Kid Waller's old partners."

The phoney Mrs. Clancey shook a fat fist at me. "Don't you call me a confidence man, young man." She glowered at Corbin and Hartley. "And you let me out of here. I have nothing to do with your gangs. All that I wanted was me own grave."

Corbin ordered Scaffidi, "See if it's wearing a wig."

Scaffidi reached out a hand. Moonface Charlie slapped it away with one hand and drew a gun with the other. The move put Corbin and his boys between two fires.

Hartley jeered from the sofa, "So you're wise. So what? I win out after all. Now I collect all of the money."

Moonface tore off his wig and tossed it in a chair. His head was as bald as an egg and sweating. "I'm glad to get rid of that," he admitted.

Corbin's face had turned an apoplectic purple. "What the hell is this?" he demanded.

"Just what you thought it was this afternoon," I told him. "But first, let's get this straight. The loot from the bank job and Jo Jo McGurn are buried in the same coffin?"

"They are," he admitted.

"Under the name of Stan Wolkowsyk."

"Correct."

"And you and Hartley were partners in the stick-up. He furnished the guards. You furnished the gang."

"That's right."

"Rave on," Hartley grinned from the sofa. "I'm having a swell time."

I ignored him to ask Johnny Martin, "Who killed your brother?"

"No one," he admitted, glowering. "He died of a bust appendix right after the bank job. I didn't want him dropped by the road for Maw's sake, so Mr. Corbin and Mr. Hartley figured out how I should buy a lot and plant him under his own name."

"Incidentally stashing the loot at the same time. As I see it," I told them, "it was a temporary stash. You figured that you could dig it up any time that you pleased. But you couldn't. The Army moved in just across the tracks and established a motor pool. There was always a sentry on tour. You couldn't dig up the money some dark night because what with the motor pool lights there weren't any dark nights any more. You were hooked 'till the war was over. And that was okay with Corbin. But it wasn't okay with you, Bruce. You needed your cut. You needed it bad. That's why you tried a double cross."

Corbin flashed a quick look at Hartley.

Hartley warned him, "You're a dead duck if you go for your gun!"

"He's a dead duck if he doesn't," I pointed out. "You can't afford not to kill us all. And in my book, you've over-played your hand. You're going to have one hell of a sweet time disposing of six corpses."

Hartley scowled. "I'll manage. A man can do a lot of things for half a million dollars."

"Nix." I shook my head. "He can't beat



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a murder rap. And he can't run far enough to get away from a lad like Corbin."

I paused for breath and Corbin said, "Go on."

"He damn near made it," I told him. "He played it smart in sending Charlie to me. He knew that I work fast. He also knew that I'd bust my neck to earn my fee if I thought that I was putting one over on Inter-Ocean. He knew that I hated his guts so bad that I'd never even stop to question whether Mrs. Clancey was the McCoy after I knew that he'd turned her down."

Corbin repeated, "Go on."

"And then you popped the devil. I stopped to talk to Mrs. Wolkowysk and happened to bump into Johnny. He phoned you and wised you to what was going on. Only you had no way of knowing whether it was a scheme of Hartley's, or whether the supposed Mrs. Clancey was free lancing. That's why you had Freeman knocked off. That's why you tried to rub me out. You knew that as soon as Jo Jo was dug up both of your geese were cooked. But Hartley, when he saw things had gone wrong, tried to save his face with you by disclaiming all knowledge of Mrs. Clancey. More, he suggested that you snatch Sue and the old lady, saying that he'd dispose of them."

Corbin nodded, his eyes on Hartley.

"ONLY Mrs. Clancey's body never would have been found. Charlie was eager to be kidnapped. He was getting desperate. He wanted to rip off the skirts and the wig and disappear. Sue was just additional protection. So was that phoney phone call. Both of you knew all hell couldn't block an exhumation order once it had been issued. Right?" I snapped at Hartley.

The whites of his eyes had turned red as he whipped himself up to the kill. "Yes. That's right," he admitted.

I looked down at the man on the floor. He'd bled all over his clothes. He wasn't dapper any more. "Meanwhile, Cook had put two and two together and he came to you with a proposition that you jumped at. For so much money he could make Stan Wolkowysk's body disappear and make suckers out of me and the District Attorney."

Hartley got up from the couch. I could tell by his eyes he was ready. His lips were twitching. "So what?" he demanded. "Let's get this over with." He leveled his gun on me.

"Just one last question," I stopped him. "Did the storm blow out your lights tonight? Did you have to send for an electrician before they'd come on again?"

He stared at me stupidly through his blood fog. "They did and I did. So what?"

"So before you sit right down in the chair," I told him, "if I were you, I'd reach up in

those drapes behind me and rip out that dictograph."

He looked at me a moment, then pulled the drapes back with his left hand. It was there where I'd told Convers to put it five minutes after we had left Maplewood.

"Leading to where?" he demanded.

"One outside wire and one to the basement," I told him. "Hell. You admitted I was smart. You should have known better than to think that I'd walk into this wolves' nest alone."

"But you weren't followed," Johnny Martin swore.

"Of course I wasn't," I told him. "No one tailed me but you. They didn't need to. There were two F.B.I. men and all of the Homicide Squad stashed in the basement and around the grounds half an hour before I got here." I lifted my voice. "It's okay, Johnny. Come in. We have all we need for a conviction."

Convers, with Gold right behind him, opened the basement door and said, "Surprise."

"The hell you say," Hartley bellowed. He whipped a fast shot at me and dove for cover.

I felt the slug nick my ear as I yelled for Sue to hit the floor. Her mouth was taped but her ears were okay. She dropped like a bottle of Christmas Night and spread almost as flat on the floor. Moonface Charlie tried to grab her for a shield and she spiked him in the shin with a heel.

He sat down on the floor and bellowed, "I surrender," to everyone that looked at him with homicidal intent.

Both Scaffidi and Martin raised their hands.

Corbin was damned if he would. He poured a third of a clip at Nobby coming in through the window from the porch, a third of a clip at Convers and Gold, and all that was left at me.

One of them nicked me slightly, then I got him by the ankles and heaved. He went over backwards and lit on his head on the fire brick with the squash of a rotten melon.

That left only Hartley crouched back of a sofa. He'd sprayed the whole room with lead but hadn't even won a cigar. I walked over and knocked the gun out of his hand, pulled him to his feet and knocked him down again.

Sue was making mewing noises. That was all that stopped me. I picked her up and eased the tape off her mouth.

"They didn't hurt you, honey?" I demanded.

She still couldn't talk but she shook her head.

Certain the shooting was over, Beemer came in from the stash to which one of the wires had led, and into which Nobby had practically shanghai'd him.

"I had you all wrong, Doyle," he admitted.

"But tell me this. Why didn't we find that



money when we dug up Stan Wolkowysk?"

"Because we didn't dig him up," I told him. "We dug up a perfect stranger. That was where Cook came in. He led us to the wrong grave."

The D.A. protested: "You're crazy. One of those monuments read Patrick A. Clancey. The other read Stan Wolkowysk. I checked them both myself."

"Sure you did," I agreed. "Cook couldn't dig up the body and make an exchange. So he pulled a much simpler trick. Both of those monuments are standard pieces. All Cook had to do was to have the proper names cut on two blanks with an electric drill and set them up over a grave in approximately the same spot as the real one. The snow covered all trace of the work. And while the sentry across the way might have gotten suspicious if he had seen them digging in an old grave, he didn't think a damn thing of seeing two new monuments set up. Guys die every day in the year."

Beemer demanded: "You figured this out, how?"

"I rubbed my finger over the C in Clancey," I told him. "And the cutting was so fresh that the edge was razor sharp and there was even some granite dust in the letter."

Convers looked at Hartley. "Coffin dust,"

he corrected. "Just plain old coffin dust."

I realized that I was holding Sue and kissed her.

Did she kiss me back? She did not. She retouched her lips and smiled at Convers. "Is he like this all the time?" she asked him. "When he dates up a girl for a party, does he always bring a gang of corpses and feminine impersonators?"

"Almost always," he assured her soberly.

"But he makes good money at his trade?"

Convers computed five percent of two hundred and fifty grand and whistled.

"That's enough, mister," Sue stopped him. She pulled my head down to hers and kissed me. "I guess I'll have to marry the big lug after all."

I stiffened slightly. "Because of the money?"

She nodded, but her eyes were shining. "Of course. Can you think of any other reason why I would want to marry you?"

Then she was crying and laughing in my arms, touching the spots where I was bleeding with her fingers and trying to tell me how she felt and how she'd worried.

Hell. She didn't need to tell me. That kiss had been the tip-off. I wasn't an old man after all. I was just a young buck back from the wars. And this was it.

THE END

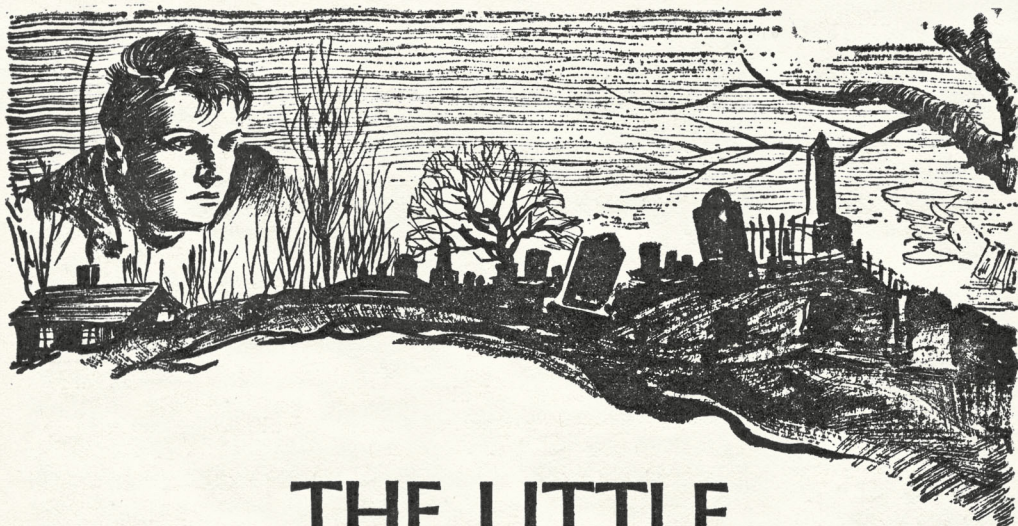


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*We have probed life and we have tried to probe death. But what do we know of that mysterious instant between life and death—that must be neither life nor death? Dr. Crane claimed to know, because he held his dead wife in his arms and then felt her once more return to life—as an entirely strange woman!*

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Living Dead

**I**—DR. JOHN CRANE, solemnly swear that the following is a truthful record of the singular circumstances which culminated in the murder of which I have been unjustly convicted.

This is a simple, accurate statement of the fact that the murder was committed not by me, but by a being who remains—who will remain forever—far beyond the reach of the court which has wrongly condemned me to death.

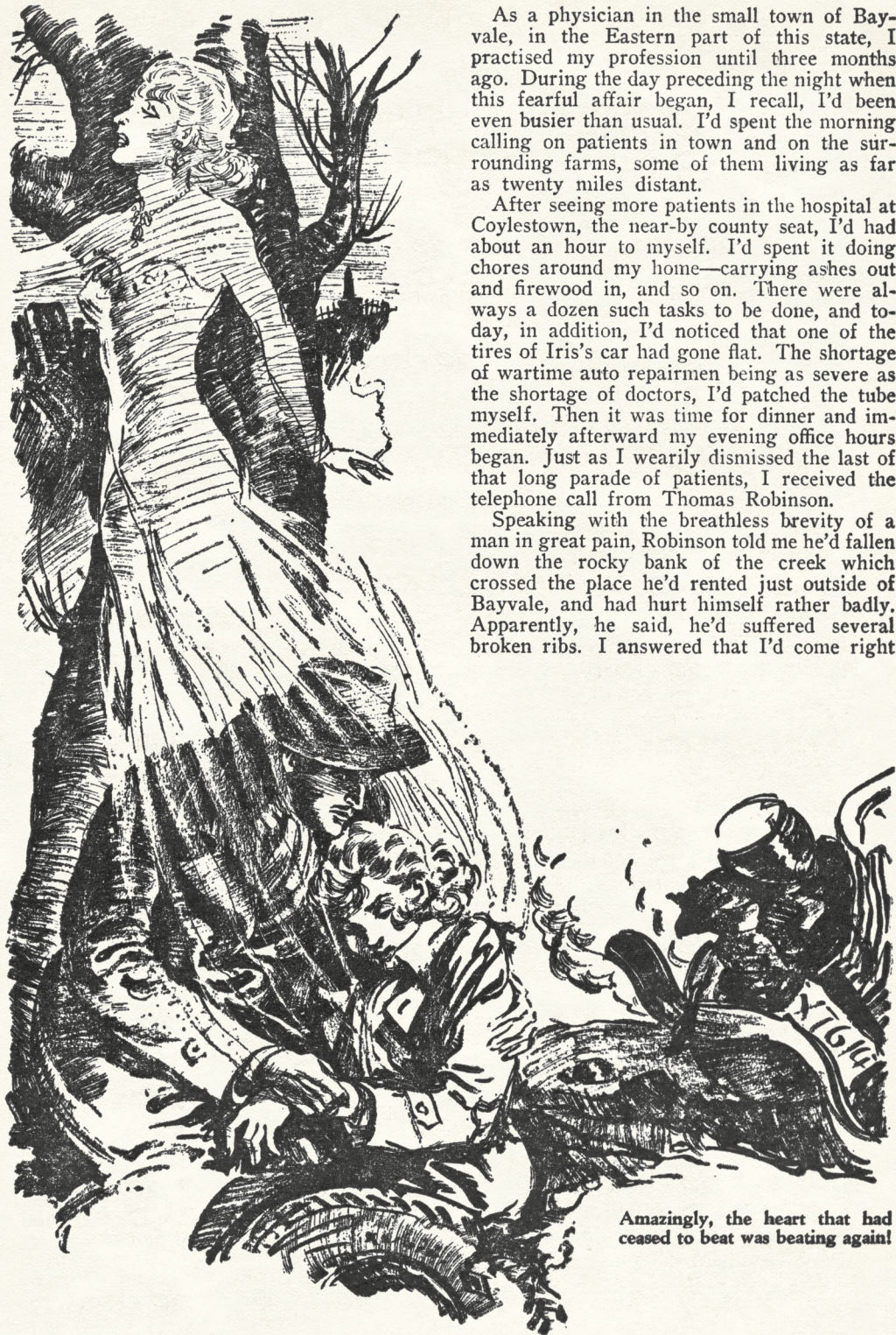
Warden Burrows has kindly granted my request for paper and pencil. Tonight I'm the only prisoner confined in the death-house. I've an opportunity to write uninterruptedly until the arrival of my visitors.

They will come shortly before eleven o'clock.

When they reach my door—and they'll be prompt—I'll have to stop writing; I'll know then that my last hope of a reprieve is gone. My final word will then have been written, to be read only after I've been conducted down the stone-and-steel corridor and through the green door of doom. . . .

Meanwhile, I want to tell my story simply and calmly from the bewildering beginning through to the appalling end, adding amazing fact to amazing fact, trusting that at last it will be read open-mindedly—though much too late!

I can't expect that when you come to the final line you'll feel that this is how it *must* have happened. I merely ask that you leave enough room in your mind so that you may equitably say to yourself, "Yes, that's the way it *could* have happened"—for, strange and unearthly as they may seem, these, then, are the facts:



As a physician in the small town of Bayvale, in the Eastern part of this state, I practised my profession until three months ago. During the day preceding the night when this fearful affair began, I recall, I'd been even busier than usual. I'd spent the morning calling on patients in town and on the surrounding farms, some of them living as far as twenty miles distant.

After seeing more patients in the hospital at Coylestown, the near-by county seat, I'd had about an hour to myself. I'd spent it doing chores around my home—carrying ashes out and firewood in, and so on. There were always a dozen such tasks to be done, and today, in addition, I'd noticed that one of the tires of Iris's car had gone flat. The shortage of wartime auto repairmen being as severe as the shortage of doctors, I'd patched the tube myself. Then it was time for dinner and immediately afterward my evening office hours began. Just as I wearily dismissed the last of that long parade of patients, I received the telephone call from Thomas Robinson.

Speaking with the breathless brevity of a man in great pain, Robinson told me he'd fallen down the rocky bank of the creek which crossed the place he'd rented just outside of Bayvale, and had hurt himself rather badly. Apparently, he said, he'd suffered several broken ribs. I answered that I'd come right

Amazingly, the heart that had ceased to beat was beating again!

over and instructed him to lie down and keep himself quiet meanwhile.

It was a nasty March night. Thin, misty rain drifted down, freezing into shells of ice on everything it touched—the branches of every tree, the telephone wires and the roads.

**ALTHOUGH** Robinson's place wasn't far by air-line—it could be reached by a few minutes' walk through the cemetery and woods separating it from my home—the highway wound and curved through the hills for a distance of four miles. It was a dangerous road even in fair weather, and since the driving was particularly hazardous tonight I had to take it slowly.

At Robinson's isolated house, I found he had multiple lacerations and contusions in addition to the fractures. It seemed wise not to risk moving him to the Coylestown hospital tonight. Once the fractures were joined and his chest tightly bound he'd be comfortable enough and able to take care of himself at home. However, he was certainly due to suffer a very painful half hour without anesthesia. Therefore I at once phoned my wife.

Before marrying me six years ago Iris had been the anesthetist at the Metropolitan hospital where I'd served my internship and in cases like this one she was of indispensable help.

"I'm at Tom Robinson's," I began. "He's—"

She broke in quickly, "Tom's? What's happened to him, Jack? What can I do?"

"Bring ether and a cone," I instructed her, "and extra bandages. And look, honey—don't try to chalk up any speed records. There's ice on the road."

"I'll be very careful—I'll get there all right," Iris said in a rush of breath. "Here I come!"

I did what little I could for Tom Robinson while waiting for Iris. He was my own age, darkly handsome, sun-browned and spare. I knew him rather well, but not intimately. No one did. He lived here entirely alone, which was the subject of much curious talk in town, and since coming to Bayvale and renting this place several months ago he had made no effort to cultivate friends, though he seemed likable enough, and exceptionally attractive to women. Tonight he was deeply disturbed—not merely by his physical pain, I sensed, but by something even more distressing.

He asked me abruptly, "What time is it?"

"Ten forty-five. Iris should be here any second now."

He lay back, eyes closed, but almost at once he lifted his head tensely to stare at me with a kind of suppressed horror, and he asked quickly again, "What time is it now?"

"Just a minute later than it was a minute

ago." Smiling to humor him, I noticed the motionless pendulum of the fine old grandfather's clock in the corner. "Does that clock need doctoring too?"

"I stopped it," he said tersely. "I couldn't quit looking at it—couldn't stand it." Oddly, he asked again, at once, "What time is it now?"

"See here!" I said. "What's worrying you? Is something important due to happen tonight?"

"It's nothing," he sighed, eyes again closed tightly. "Nothing."

"Something's worrying *me*, anyway," I said. "Iris should be here by now."

Taking up the telephone, I called my home. There was no answer for, of course, Iris had left. Looking out the window, I could find no faint shine of an approaching car. The misty rain had thickened; everything outside was growing a heavier crust of ice. The passing minutes became as anxious for me as they were—for a reason entirely obscure—to Robinson. At last, full of agitation when five more empty minutes had gone, I quickly put on my coat.

"Lie right where you are, Tom," I ordered my patient. "I'll be back."

Then once more, as I jerked open the door, he blurted, "Jack! What time is it now?"

I flung over my shoulder impatiently, "It's five minutes of eleven," and as I hurried on I heard his lips press on a moan.

Midway between Robinson's home and our own, at the sharpest and most dangerous curve in the road, I saw a single headlamp shooting its beam into the murky sky at a crazy angle.

I skidded my car to a reckless stop and scrambled out, calling Iris's name. There was no answer except the whisper of the rain and the creaking of ice-laden branches. The black pavement was so slippery I had to slide my feet across it, inch by inch, to the bank. Faint tire-marks indicated a car had plunged over there. Fifteen feet below it had rammed itself into wreckage against a clump of trees. I crawled down the bank as rapidly as I dared, driving my heels hard to crack the crust of ice on the sod, calling again and again.

"Iris! . . . Iris! . . ."

She'd always driven too fast. She was like that in everything she did—impulsive, eager, zestful. Tonight she'd taken one chance too many. She'd misjudged her speed. The treachery of the ice and the sharpness of the curve—Hurry to help me—

"Iris!"

**I** FOUND her huddled limply at the base of the trees. There was very little blood, but she was completely inert. Bending over her, bracing myself, I pressed my fingers to her pulse and tried to realize she had no heartbeat,

no heartbeat at all. I stared at her, appalled.

*My wife was dead.*

But then, while my cold fingers clung to her wrist, I felt a faint throb of life! Staring incredulously into Iris's lax white face, I felt another pulsation, stronger than the first—then still another! The heart that had ceased to beat was beating again!

With a growing force that amazed me, the impulses of her flowing blood quickened until they were almost normal!

I was too joyfully dazed to wonder what sort of miracle had happened. Quickly making sure it would do no harm to move her, I gathered her into my arms and struggled up the bank, knowing only, in a stunned and unquestioning way, that my wife had been dead but was dead no longer! But my happiness, almost delirious then, was doomed to be short-lived. Within two hours even stranger things, unaccountable at first, began to happen, to pile up. . . .

It was almost one o'clock in the morning when I hurried into the Coylestown hospital to see Iris.

It seemed an eternity since I'd driven her directly into Bayvale, to the home of our friend, Dr. Martin Miller. Taking charge of her, he'd rushed her down to Coylestown, still unconscious. I hadn't followed at once, because my anxiety was a hazard to Iris—I might interfere too much with Mart's handling of her. Besides, I must not shirk my patient, Tom Robinson. Mart having assured me that Iris would probably be all right, and that he'd phone me as soon as possible, I'd returned to Robinson's home.

Robinson seemed no longer mentally dis-

tressed. Instead, his mood had become one of morose resignation. He hadn't asked me again that queerly repeated question as to what time it was. Necessarily lacking anesthesia after all, he'd submitted without complaint. It had taken quite a long time to bind his chest properly. I'd just finished when the telephone rang.

Mart Miller had reported to me, "The x-rays don't show a thing, Jack. Except for a few bruises and minor cuts Iris isn't hurt. It was mostly shock and she's coming out of it nicely now."

"Thank God for that!"

He would wait for me, there, he'd said. Robinson had asked many worried questions about Iris, and this report had relieved him. Instructing him to remain quiet, and telling him he'd be going to the hospital himself in the morning for a thorough check-up, I'd hurried down to Coylestown as fast as the icy road would permit.

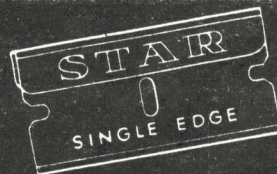
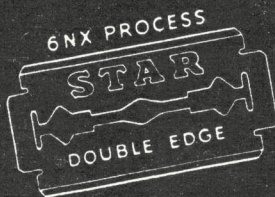
As I strode down the corridor, Nurse Browne sent me a reassuring smile, then turned to say through the door of Iris's room, "Your husband is here, Mrs. Crane."

I heard Iris's faint voice answer, "My husband!"—and her tone was exactly what she would have used if she had meant to add, "But what do you mean? I have no husband!"

Eager as I was to see her, I gave no thought then to the strange inflection of her voice. I hurried in with scarcely a glance at Mart Miller, who was seated in a corner, watching her with an intent frown. Iris lay in the bed, seeming remarkably unshaken now; but I was shocked to find that she had no welcome for me. She gazed at me as if at a stranger. Bend-

**YOU'RE NEITHER  
TOO YOUNG  
NOR TOO OLD!**

**I GET THAT  
"JUST RIGHT" LOOK  
FROM SMOOTH  
STAR BLADES!**



ing to kiss her, I felt her resisting me. To my astonishment, she pushed herself up on her elbows, indignantly.

"There—there's some mistake here," she said.

It was Iris's voice again, and yet it was not. Her words, startling in themselves, were spoken in a manner not at all like her. I couldn't understand it, for her throat wasn't injured and her lips weren't swollen—yet she spoke with a queer sort of accent.

She gazed past me, and a sharp, startled look sprang into her eyes—a look of utter bafflement mingled with wariness. I saw that she was peering at her reflection in the mirror.

She blurted, with that same faint accent, "Who is that!"

Concealing the consternation I felt, I said quietly, "Iris, you remember how—"

Suddenly she fell back to the pillow, overwhelmed with speechless confusion, her eyes tightly closed. Mart tapped my shoulder and I stepped back. I watched anxiously as he gave her sedation by injection.

"She'll be all right, Jack." He smiled at me. "Her confusion is perfectly natural, considering the shock she had."

I wasn't reassured and after he'd gone I sat beside the bed, watching Iris. Her pulse was still strong, her color good. The sedative, however, seemed to have little effect on her. Although she slept, she was restive. She clenched her hands into small white fists and squirmed. Then she spoke those names—the strange names.

"Timothy!" she murmured, again with that peculiar accent. "Timothy!"

I racked my memory, but I could recall no Timothy whom Iris had ever mentioned before. And the tenderness of her voice startled me—the softness of it, as if she were a woman speaking to the man she deeply loved.

Next she spoke another name, and this time her voice was totally changed. It became sharply impatient. "Alma!" I couldn't remember that either Iris or I knew anyone named Alma, but she repeated it with bitter contempt: "That precious Alma!"

Something had happened to Iris—something deep inside her—and this was only the beginning.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Dead Can Kill!

**S**HE was well enough to be taken home two days later—well enough physically, that is—although she had not recovered otherwise—she wasn't the Iris I'd always known.

My wife had been an eager-minded young woman, almost childlike in her playfulness. She wasn't at all like that now. Her friendli-

ness, so spontaneous before, seemed forced now, and I felt that she was constantly feeling me out without appearing to do so.

You know how it is when you encounter by chance someone whom you can't quite remember. You realize you've met him before, but you can't recall where, or when, or what his name is. You talk with him, avoiding the embarrassment of your forgetfulness, pretending to remember him clearly. During the course of the conversation you look for little hints—something that will place him in your mind. He might mention a name or an incident which suddenly brings it all back. Unless this happens, you part from him still wondering, "Now who the devil was he, anyway?" It was actually like that with Iris now—in everything I said she was secretly seeking a mental association, trying to clarify me in her mind, to adjust herself to some forgotten relationship. And she hadn't succeeded! This, I knew, is how Iris now felt toward me—this young woman who had been married to me for six years!

As we were leaving the hospital we met Tom Robinson in the foyer. A thorough examination having revealed no deeper injuries, he was being discharged at the same time. He was profusely solicitous about Iris. Her reaction bewildered me. Outwardly she was casual, but my hand on her arm felt it trembling. An almost fierce glow filled her eyes. Although she attempted to conceal it, his galvanic effect upon her continued as I helped her into the car.

She asked me then, "That man—what is he to us?"

"A patient of mine, darling, and a friend of ours. Of course you remember—"

"Yes, I know, but—" I sensed doubt in her voice. "Will he be staying long near here?"

"I believe he intends to live at Plum Hill Farm indefinitely."

She was thoughtfully silent until she said cryptically, while we were driving homeward, "Jack, I think you know I'm still not entirely myself, but I am quite content now—quite content."

Then she laughed. It was a sound such as I had never before heard rise from Iris's throat—a burst of shrill, selfish, gloating, triumphant laughter! . . .

When I could stand it no longer—these baffling changes in Iris—I went to Mart Miller's office.

"There's something devilish wrong!" I said earnestly. "A hundred little things show it. Iris rarely used perfume before, but now she douses herself—reeks with it. In all the years I've known her, the only cosmetic she ever used was a lipstick, but now her dresser's crowded with stuff—rouge, eye-shadow, face

creams. . . a whole drug store full of stuff.

"She used to keep the house spick and span, but now it gets more untidy by the hour. She used to bounce out of bed bright and early but now she sleeps late every day. She used to love to cook, but now she hates it and her meals are a mess, and I have to get half of them myself. Instead of spoiling me with a thousand little attentions, as she used to love to do, she expects me to wait on her hand and foot. And the wine. Iris never had any taste for it, but now the pantry's full of bottles—she has wine with every meal, and brandy afterward. All these unnatural things—"

"Jack," Mart said thoughtfully, "you know that an operation, or a long sickness, or severe fever or shock, will sometimes cause an alteration in psyche or personality. This sort of thing is very difficult to account for. Perhaps it stirs up dormant endocrine glands, or affects their interadjustment. We know that the seeming imminence of death can powerfully change one's perspective—and Iris, you realize, had a very narrow escape."

"This is something much stranger than that, Mart," I insisted. "Explain this if you can. Today she brought home a book. It's a paper-backed novel—written in French. But Iris can't read French! Yet that cheap French novel of hers has been devoured from start to finish. It's impossible, Mart! Yet—"

"I'd like to see the book," Mart said quietly. "In any case there's no cause for alarm."

"Her nerves—she's all nerves now. And her mind seems to be always strangely preoccupied—secretly busy, as if she's constantly scheming and planning. Sometimes I see such a fierce, bitter look in her eyes—"

"LOOK here!" Mart interrupted. "I'll speak frankly. You're concerned with things that don't exist—or if they do exist, you're exaggerating their importance and misreading their meaning. You know, you've never fully recovered from that old siege of cerebral fever, and there's no question that you've been working much too hard. Really, Jack, you should worry less about Iris's condition and more about your own. Get yourself some rest, old man, and free your mind—"

I broke in sharply. "I came to you for help—to tell you that something frightful has happened to Iris, and you answer that I'm probably not quite right in my head. Thanks for nothing, Mart. And goodbye."

Offended by his lack of understanding, still full of baffled concern for Iris, I hurried home. There were lights behind the drawn blinds of the living room. I went in quietly, so as not to startle Iris. Seated at the desk, she heard my step and instantly she moved with feline quickness. She'd been writing a note, and swiftly it was whisked away—hidden.

To whom had she written so covertly, and why? Puzzled, I looked for the note after she'd gone to bed. I couldn't find it. I did find an impression on the blotter—a fresh blotter, clean except for one short scrawl, the signature.

Gazing at the reflection of the signature in the mirror I saw, with a stunned chill, that the bold scrawl didn't in any way resemble Iris's neat handwriting, and that it wasn't her own name she had signed, but another. It was a name completely strange to me—*Thyra*.

Thyra! It echoed in my mind. Very faintly I felt I'd seen or heard this name somewhere, so remotely that I couldn't trace it.

I spent a sleepless, bewildered night. I must not question Iris about it, I decided. If there was something really horribly wrong with her, to grill her would only aggravate her condition. The name was a riddle I must solve as best I could, alone. Thyra . . . Thyra . . .

All the next day that meaningless name kept repeating itself in my ears. Late in the evening I sat gazing from my office window, my thoughts still groping through nothingness. The moon was full in the cold spring sky. The familiar scene outside was a clear-cut etching in black and silver—the yard behind the house, the cemetery beyond. Many bad jokes had been cracked as to how convenient the cemetery must be for me. In summer, fortunately, it was screened from view by shrubbery, and in winter I preferred to keep the curtains drawn across this particular window simply because it wasn't pleasant for an ailing patient to see the gravediggers at work nearby. Privately I felt no qualms about it; it was a peaceful view. Tonight the cemetery lay serene in the cold, moonlit darkness as my mind continued to search for the elusive meaning of the name of Thyra.

Then I strained forward, gripping the arms of my chair. There was a flicker of movement among the headstones. Something or someone—a spectral shape—was hurrying along a path, deeper into the night. In a moment, while I still stared, it was gone.

Quickly I went upstairs. Very quietly I opened the door of Iris's room. This was another change that had disturbed me since the accident—Iris's insistence upon having a separate room.

Gazing at her bed now, I was not startled. I think I had expected to find it empty.

Outside the air was crisp. The moonlight guided me along the path through the cemetery. It led me into the woods beyond, then across a field. Against the sky ahead stood Tom Robinson's place. No light shone from it. More slowly and quietly now I continued.

There was a dark figure standing at the door—Iris—barefooted, wearing only a sheer

nightgown. She opened the door, moved silently inside.

Advancing, I came to a window, also open. Robinson, I knew, used a bedroom on the ground floor—the room just inside the window. I stood beside it, listening. A sound reached me—a sleepy mutter in Robinson's voice.

"Who—who is it? Who's there?"

A murmur answered: "Do you not *feel* who it is? Have you so soon forgotten Thyra?"

A moment of silence followed, electrically tense. Then Robinson shoked out, "Thyra! No, no. . . it's impossible. It can't be Thyra!"

The murmur said: "I have come back."

Suddenly Robinson's voice rose to a crazy pitch. "Go away! Go away!"

Then again I heard that shrill burst of laughter—mocking, bitter, vindictive laughter!

In the darkness Robinson roared out an unintelligible sound of panic. A movement at the door caught me by surprise. The figure reappeared in the moonlight—Iris, running. She passed me swiftly, an echo of her evil laughter still lingering on her lips. She sprang past the house and was quickly gone through the hedge. Inside the bedroom there was a frantic thumping and threshing, and a light flashed on.

Through the window I saw Tom Robinson standing hunch-shouldered beside his bed, white-faced, a man stricken with terror.

I strode into the house, and as I entered his bedroom he stiffened.

"I don't understand this," I said. "I can't explain it except by saying that the accident must have affected Iris's mind."

"Iris?" he said thickly.

"She was here. I know—"

"You're mistaken!" he cut in. "Iris here? Why should she come? What're you talking about?"

"I don't really know what I'm talking about," I admitted. "It's beginning to drive me mad. If you know what it means, for God's sake tell me! Who is Thyra?"

He swallowed, his eyes a glare. "Thyra?"

"You must know the name," I insisted. "It meant something to you. You shouted at her to go away."

Robinson sank back on the couch. "I must have been dreaming—saying things in my sleep."

He brought a bottle from a cupboard and poured himself a stiff drink. Then he stared at me, his jaw clenched. Was he as deeply at a loss as I was, or was he determined to evade my questions? In either case he was a man on whom a strange sort of horror had taken hold. I saw clearly that it would be futile to press him now. He was pouring another pow-

erful jolt of whiskey when I turned and left.

Midway across the cemetery I paused, just in time to see a light blink out behind the windows of Iris's room. Iris had returned to her bed. But no—no, I told myself, it was not Iris who was up there. God only knew what she had become, this woman who lived in my home and *looked* like the girl I'd married—but it couldn't be Iris—couldn't really be my wife.

**T**HYRA. . . . Thyra. . . . The mystery of that unusual name had become an obsession. The next afternoon, I sat alone in my closed office, full of a sense of frustration and dread. I sat staring out the window, scarcely seeing the two men digging a new grave in the cemetery beyond. Twilight was settling when suddenly a faint light glimmered in my memory.

I sprang up. On the knob of my office entrance, I hung a card reading, *Doctor is Out*. I drove rapidly into Coylestown through a light rain—the weather had turned warm—and in the *Herald* building I pored over their files.

And I found it!

In the *Herald's* issues of four months ago there was a series of brief items at which I'd scarcely glanced at the time. In the New York papers of those same dates the startling story was complete. I reread again and again, chilled by one astounding point of significance after another.

It concerned a woman named Thyra Armond—a divorcée who, at the outbreak of the war, had fled to this country from France.

Also it involved a broker named Timothy Robbins and his wife Alma. Timothy and Alma—the names Iris had muttered in her tortured sleep!

Although I can now set down these facts with calm understanding, they struck me then with such a terrific impact that I could scarcely grasp them—but there they were in black and white, true in every detail, throwing a ghastly light upon the mystery that possessed my mind.

This woman, Thyra Armond, had been the mistress of Timothy Robbins, and it was brought out that she had grown jealously eager to become his wife. He had promised Thyra that they would be married as soon as he'd divorced Alma Robbins, yet he couldn't bring himself to the point of discarding his devoted wife. Thyra would not be denied; evilly possessive of her lover, she saw his wife as an obstacle she must destroy.

Thyra had the means close at hand—strong poison. It had been prescribed as a medicine for her—fluid extract of veratrum, a derivative of hellebore, a powerful cardiac depressant. Thyra's physician had warned her never



to take more than the maximum dose, three drops. Well knowing its deadly potentialities, Thyra had carried the bottle in her purse that afternoon when she'd gone to the Robbins home as a friend, for tea with her lover's wife.

All this was proved at the trial by unquestionable evidence. Most damning of all was the fact that Alma Robbins, taken suddenly and violently ill while Thyra was still present in the house, had died within an hour of Thyra's departure.

Thyra Armond's conviction was a certainty. The jury had seen no reason to recommend clemency for this woman. The court had sentenced her to death. In due time the penalty had been executed upon her—only a week ago.

A week ago!

Thyra Armond had died in the electric chair in Sing Sing Prison on the very night, and at the very hour—the traditional hour of eleven o'clock—even at the very minute when, several hundred miles away, Iris's car had gone careening and crashing off that treacherous, icy road! . . .

It was late when I strode into my office. If any patients had waited for me to return, they'd given up and gone. The whole house was full of the silence of emptiness—a silence that persisted as I ran up the stairs to the living quarters on the second floor.

"Iris!"

Even as I called out the name I felt it was abominably wrong—that I shouldn't call her Iris any longer, but Thyra. Whichever she was, and whatever she was, no answer came. She had gone.

Gone! Gone where?

A cold fear sent me rushing back down the stairs and into the little room where the shelves were loaded with supplies of drugs. In accordance with the practice of all country doctors, I wrote prescriptions less often than I dispensed the required medicines. With fumbling fingers I searched for it—the small bottle which I knew should be there, which I knew somehow was actually there no longer. The small bottle labelled *Veratrum, Fluidextractum*—it too was gone!

I ran out into the rain. The sod was soggy under my feet, the path through the graveyard a lane of mud, as I flung myself along, and through the woods beyond. There were lights

in Thomas Robinson's house. I was breathless when I reached the door—and there I stopped, staring into the living room at the figure of Robinson slumped in a chair beside the waning embers in the fireplace.

Even before my fingers touched his drooping wrist I knew his heart was stilled.

An empty highball glass lay on the rug beside him. A second glass sat on the coffee table, still half full. I saw a glitter behind the chair and my hand closed tightly on the small bottle. It was almost empty now—I realized that Thomas Robinson had unwittingly been made to swallow such a powerful dose of veratrum that his heart had been lulled to a standstill within seconds.

She was standing there behind the open door, gazing at me with a fierce, triumphant shine in her eyes—this woman who appeared to be Iris.

"You killed him!" I said. "This is how you planned it! Your affair with him ended so wretchedly and you'd grown to hate him so terribly that you had to strike back at him in revenge. Nothing in Heaven or Hell could keep you from returning to destroy him!"

I moved toward her, my hands outstretched to implore her repentance. She shifted to the open doorway, defiant, fearless of me, diabolically glad of the frightful thing she'd done, and even as I stared at her she seemed to fade into the night that was black and limitless behind her.

"Come back!" I cried.

Suddenly she was no longer there.

"Come back, come back!"

I flung the little bottle aside and sprang out the door. There was no hint of her in the damp darkness. I ran across the field and into the woods. In the midst of the cemetery I stumbled to a dazed, breathless stop.

"Iris! Thyra! Come back!"

Nothing answered but the whispering rain. She was nowhere. . . .

## CHAPTER THREE

### Could It Have Happened?

I WAITED the whole night and she didn't come. Somehow I got through the next day. I was alone in the house that night when



**Bonds AND Taxes  
Will Beat the Axis!**

**Your Dollars Fight Too!**



District Attorney Frank Forbes called on me, accompanied by two state troopers.

Forbes asked, "Dr. Crane, you know that Thomas Robinson is dead?"

"Thomas Robinson wasn't his real name," I said. "He was Timothy Robbins. He came here to get away from the scandal of that murder trial in New York State. But he couldn't really get away from it—not in his own mind. A week ago tonight he kept asking me, 'What time is it, what time is it?' It was nearing eleven o'clock, the hour set for the execution of the woman who'd murdered his wife, you see—the woman he'd once thought he loved—His name—"

Forbes interrupted gently. "His name doesn't matter. You know he's been murdered?"

"I—I don't have to answer your questions."

"No, you don't have to; but I've a search warrant here." Forbes showed it to me. "Please sit quietly while these officers go through this house."

The two smartly uniformed young men went quietly up the stairs, and Forbes inquired, "Where is your wife?"

"My wife is dead."

Forbes' voice was very quiet. "When did she die, Dr. Crane?"

"A week ago," I said, "on the night of the ice storm, when her car crashed off the road."

Still more quietly, Forbes said, "She was seen here as late as yesterday."

"The woman who was seen was not my wife," I explained. "It's not my wife you're asking about. It was a—a different being. She merely looked like Iris. She was another woman who somehow moved and breathed in the fleshy shell that had been my wife's lovely body."

"I see, I see," Forbes said softly, but I knew he didn't see at all. "And where is she now, Dr. Crane?"

"She's gone. I don't know where. Only God—or Satan himself—knows that. No one will ever see her again. She's gone forever."

Studying me for a moment, he produced a small slip of paper, muddied and spotted with dampness.

"This is one of your prescription blanks, Dr. Crane. It was found on the cemetery path, probably blown by the wind, and the rain has made it rather hard to read—but is this your handwriting? It says, 'June tenth, 3:45 to 5:15 p. m.' You made that note? What does it mean?"

"I don't remember."

"No doubt you have a can of non-inflammable cleaning fluid in the house, Dr. Crane?"

He watched me closely.

"Cleaning fluid! I suppose so, but what connection would it have with all this?"

He didn't answer. The two troopers came

back down the stairs carrying one of my suits and a pair of my shoes. Forbes examined them. From his pocket he produced a box which contained the small bottle of veratrum—black-smudged now with developed fingerprints. They peered at me, these three men.

"Thomas Robinson, or Timothy Robbins, died at ten o'clock last night, Dr. Crane," Forbes said. "Where were you then? How do you account for the mud on your shoes and clothing? Does this bottle belong with your medical supplies? Have you nothing to say, Dr. Crane?"

Hopelessly I answered, "Nothing that you will understand."

"Then," Forbes said, rising, "I must place you under arrest for the first-degree murder of the man known as Thomas Robinson."

I felt fortunate to have obtained the legal services of Spencer Brandon. He was a highly successful trial lawyer. Still, I sensed that he regretted having taken my case. For all his brilliance he was a mundane-minded, cynical, hard-skulled man.

He sat in my cell, hand at his chin, his rugged face impassive, interrupting me with interminable questions while I attempted to make my story clear to him, and when I finished he regarded me in wry silence.

"Dr. Crane," he said at last, "I advise you to allow me to plead insanity."

"Insanity!" I blurted. "I'm not insane! I haven't imagined all this. It all happened, exactly as I've told you. I didn't kill Robbins. And it wasn't Iris who killed him. It was—"

"Dr. Crane," he interrupted again, "the prosecution's evidence is very strong. We won't stand a chance with a fantastic defense of this sort."

**"FANTASTIC!"** I flung back at him. "Listen to me. Is there such a thing as a life after death? Most of us believe so. We never think of that conception as fantastic. Yet the belief in the transmigration of souls is as well-founded and as ancient. It was part of the religion of the Egyptians, part of the teaching of Pythagoras and Buddha. Plato believed that birth is the transmigration of a soul from one body to another. Even today this same belief exists around the whole world. You see, I happen to have studied this subject. Modern theosophy has taken metempsychosis—this same idea of the transmigration of souls—as a cardinal tenet; it's considered by highly intelligent men to be the master-key to modern problems, among them the problem of heredity. Why—there are so many great truths veiled from us, you can't categorically deny this; that the black soul of Thyra Armond took possession of my wife's body at the instant Iris died and used it as a weapon of vengeance—"

Brandon rose with a sigh. At the door of my cell he paused to look back. "Dr. Crane," he asked again—it seemed this was the hundredth time I'd heard the question—"where is your wife?"

"My wife is dead," I answered wearily. "She died in the auto accident on the night of the ice storm. . . ."

Some of the first witnesses produced by the prosecution were close neighbors of mine—people I'd considered my friends. Something had turned them against me. There in that crowded, tense courtroom they avoided my eyes while making absurd answers to the district attorney's soft-spoken questions.

Gripping the arms of my chair I tried my utmost to keep from crying out, "Lies! Lies!" to such testimony as:

"I saw her with Timothy Robbins one day. . . . The first time was just a week or so after he moved here. . . . I even began to look for her, because the minute the doctor left to call on his patients, she'd sneak out the back door and across the cemetery. . . . Talk was going around—seemed like everybody knew it—so much talk I thought sure the doctor must have heard. . . ."

False, all of this!

There were only two witnesses for the defense. The first was Dr. Martin Miller. He spoke guardedly, as if trying to be eminently fair, but I realized that he, too, felt an aversion to me.

In substance he said, "Yes, Iris Crane seemed slightly changed following the accident, but only in minor, unimportant ways." I was the other witness.

This was the moment for which the crowded, expectant courtroom had been waiting. I told my story calmly despite skeptical titters from the spectators and dubious frowns from the jury. All the while I was bracing myself for the ordeal to come—cross-examination by the gentle-voiced but relentless district attorney.

"Dr. Crane, you've heard the testimony of your neighbors. They've made statements clearly indicating an illicit relationship flourishing between your wife and Timothy Robbins. Were you also aware of this?"

"How could I be aware of it? It didn't exist. It's not true."

"It was your motive for killing Timothy Robbins, wasn't it, Dr. Crane?"

"I didn't kill Robbins. You've heard me testify that Robbins was murdered by Thyra Armond."

"But Thyra Armond was put to death in the electric chair in Sing Sing prison a full week prior to the murder of Robbins, Dr. Crane."

"I've already explained all this!" I insisted. "The murder wasn't done by Thyra Armond's

corporeal self. The crime was committed by her inner being—her spirit, her soul—using my wife's physical body as her tool."

"And you really believe this, Dr. Crane?"

"Believe it? I can't help believing it! I saw it happen!"

"You actually believe your wife died in the automobile accident and that a moment later a sort of evil spirit took possession of her body—the spirit of a condemned murderess who had at that same moment died in a prison several hundred miles away? That's what you tell this court?"

"That's the truth!"

"Then let us try to understand it a little better, Dr. Crane. I show you here a newspaper account concerning Thyra Armond. It states she was under a doctor's care for a heart ailment. Now, did your wife, following the accident, exhibit a need for treatment of this same ailment?"

"OF course not!" I protested. "You wouldn't ask that question if you really grasped what I've been saying. I keep telling you, it was Iris's body—Iris's body just as it had always been, healthy and sound—yet it was not Iris herself. Her soul was gone. The evil soul of the Armond woman had taken its place. Do you understand now?"

"I believe I do, Dr. Crane," the district attorney said. "But tell me this, then. What became of this being—this creature composed of your wife's body and another woman's soul?"

"Her devilish work was done," I said. "She disappeared. I saw her dissolve into the night."

"But you say, Dr. Crane—in fact, you insist—it *was* your wife's body. No matter whose soul occupied it, it was still a solid, real thing of flesh and blood and bone. I ask you again, then, Dr. Crane, what became of your wife's body?"

Hopeless, all of it! No one could or would understand. This was supposed to be a court of justice, yet every eye was blind to the truth. The judge, the jurymen—blind, all of them!

There's no need here to recount my attorney's restless closing discourse to the jury, or the district attorney's gentle but scathing expressions of doubt and contempt. The outcome of my trial is already too well known, even though it is nowhere recognized as a gross miscarriage of justice:

"We, the jury find the defendant guilty of murder in the first degree, as charged."

Judge Dawson said, "Even though counsel has not requested it, the court directs that this defendant be subjected to a thorough examination by the State Psychiatric Commission. When the Commission's report has been sub-

mitted, the court will thereupon pass sentence."

I remember well the wording of that weighty but tragically mistaken document: "We find that at the time of committing the murder the defendant was sane. His present condition is one marked by high excitability of the imagination, which is no doubt the result of two causes—first the severe attack of cerebral fever suffered by him several years ago; and second, the emotional repercussions of the situation which provoked him to kill. It should be clearly understood that this condition, *pseudologia phantastica*, did not impell him to murder. Rather, his fantasies as presented to the court are an attempt to account for and escape punishment for his crime. In short, the commission finds that the slight mental derangement from which the defendant now suffers is a condition developed subsequent to and as a result of the murder, and therefore it is not to be considered a mitigating circumstance."

Judge Dawson declared, "It is the mandatory duty of this court to sentence the defendant to be put to death in the electric chair at Rockton State Prison during the week of September twelfth next."

This is the week of September twelfth.

This is the last day of that week. Today is September eighteenth.

Even after I was brought here to this cell in the death-house, with the whole world still scornfully doubting me, they kept drumming that eternal question at me:

"Where is your wife? Where is your wife? Where is your wife?"

"My wife is dead," I told them repeatedly. "She died when her car smashed up on the night of the ice-storm. She was driving too fast. Her car skidded off that sharp, slippery curve. It was a frightful crash. It killed her. I felt her heart stop beating. I was with her when she died. It was eleven o'clock on the night of the ice storm. . . ."

\* \* \*

I can write no longer. They're coming now—my visitors, as promptly as I'd expected. Their footfalls ring in the corridor as they approach my cell—Warden Burrows and the chaplain.

And so I've told my story for the final time. In a moment they'll lead me down the steel-and-stone corridor to that little green door of doom by which the execution chamber is entered. When the moment comes I will know that there is still nothing in all the world for me except doubt—doubt and death.

They are here now, and the lock is opened. I must stop. . . .

*Statement by William Burrows,  
Warden of the State Prison at Rockton:*

The foregoing manuscript was found in Cell

A of the Execution Block of this prison where it had been left by Convict No. 734-65, Dr. John Crane.

Having read and reread it with a sinking heart, I was left with exactly the impression Dr. Crane had hoped to create: "Yes, it *could* have happened this way."

It was not a pleasant sensation.

As you may well imagine, the office of warden of a large state prison is one to try the toughest of men—and I'm not particularly tough. In fact, I've often spent restless nights wondering how many *innocent* men this prison confines. Realizing, as everyone does, that our system of administering justice is not perfect, and therefore not infallible, I'm often deeply distressed when I must witness, as the law requires, the execution of a sentence of death.

**A**T such times my mind is numbed with questions. "For God's sake, is there no doubt at all that this man deserves this awful punishment? Is there some slight possibility that he's actually guiltless? Am I helping a misguided system of law to kill an innocent fellow human?"

Since I had just seen Dr. Crane die in the electric chair, my reading of his written statement struck me a shaking blow. Anxious to make sure, even though a terrible act of injustice had been committed upon Crane, I took it personally to the District Attorney.

"Amazing," he said, "the way Crane interweaved truth and falsehood."

"He was a man facing certain death," I pointed out, "and he swears that every word is true."

"He does. But all the same, this is a remarkable ingenious misconstruction of the facts. He's cleverly glossed over some and twisted others. I'm quite sure of it—quite certain of what actually happened. For example, that French novel. I traced it. Iris Crane didn't buy it. John Crane did."

"What?"

"You see, Burrows, we didn't present all our evidence at the trial. It would have been irrelevant for the simple legal reason that Crane wasn't charged with having murdered his wife."

"His wife?"

"His first attempt failed," the district attorney said. "Notice this line where Crane writes that he found a flat tire on his wife's car and patched the tube himself. He omits to say that he secretly put a pint or so of cleaning fluid inside that tube."

"Cleaning fluid!"

"Carbon tetrachloride. It's a rubber solvent. That car sat there for several hours, the pool of tetrachloride inside the tube causing the rubber to swell and soften and become greatly

weakened. It was sure to blow out the next time Iris Crane used it. The ice-storm suited perfectly Crane's purposes—it would account for the inevitable accident doubly. Crane didn't really need to call his wife over to Robbins' place then. It's obvious that Robbins required no anesthetic, and several doctors have reassured me as to that. Actually Crane was deliberately calling his wife to what he hoped would be her death."

Startled, I asked, "But why did he try to kill her then? He says he knew nothing about any affair going on between his wife and Robbins—"

"There was, and he knew it. How could he help hearing rumors of it in a town as small as Bayvale? How could he help noticing little hints of it around his home? Even in this manuscript there are indications that he was well aware of it—for example, Iris's anxiety when Crane told her Robbins was hurt, and her haste to go to him; and again her emotional reaction when encountering him in the hospital. Crane was half mad with indignation and jealousy because it was only too plain to him. We have proof of that too."

"What possible proof?"

"We've found her body."

"Her body!"

"Only today, after searching for two months, and then at a spot where we should have looked at once. Notice this page where Crane writes of the beginning of that last night. He says, 'I stared out the window, scarcely seeing the two men digging a new grave in the cemetery.' He saw them clearly enough and planned to make quick use of it. That's where he hid her—under the bottom of that grave in which someone else's casket was to be placed the next day. That's what really accounted for the mud on his shoes and his suit."

"Good Lord! Did he poison her too?"

Forbes shook his head. "First he went to Robbins' place while Robbins was there alone.

In some way—perhaps through a newspaper picture—he'd learned who Robbins actually was, and now he knew too that his wife had become Robbins' new mistress. His fever-warped mind had already concocted the fantastic story he meant to tell when he'd accomplished his purpose. Robbins, however, thought Crane was ignorant of the affair. He downed that highball without suspecting that Crane had laced it with the same poison Thyra Armond had used to kill Robbins' wife. Then, once Robbins was dead, Crane waited for Iris to come—and she did come to her own death.

"HERE, Burrows, is another shrewdly twisted line he wrote: 'I moved toward her, my hands out-stretched—' He really did—with his hands stretching out to her throat. He choked her to death. He believed she would never be found—actually believed his story would be credited, including the angle that this unearthly being has disappeared into the space between the worlds. Otherwise he wouldn't have thrown that pad of prescription blanks into the muddy hollow he dug for her dead body in the bottom of the open grave.

"Prescription blanks?"

"One of them blew away, and was found. In the grave we found dozens of others. On each of them a date and time was noted down, indicating a rendezvous between Crane's wife and Robbins. He'd been watching them for weeks. His patients have told me how he neglected them more and more, and this was because he'd hidden himself in the woods near his home in order to spy. Why he made these notes I'm not quite sure. Perhaps he meant to confront Robbins and Iris with documentary proof."

I stared at the amazing document. "Then it couldn't have happened the way Crane says?"

"I won't say it couldn't," Forbes smiled. "I do say it didn't."

THE END

SEEING-BELIEVING

THIRST-RELIEVING

What happens when you look at the circles  
and move your head from side to side?

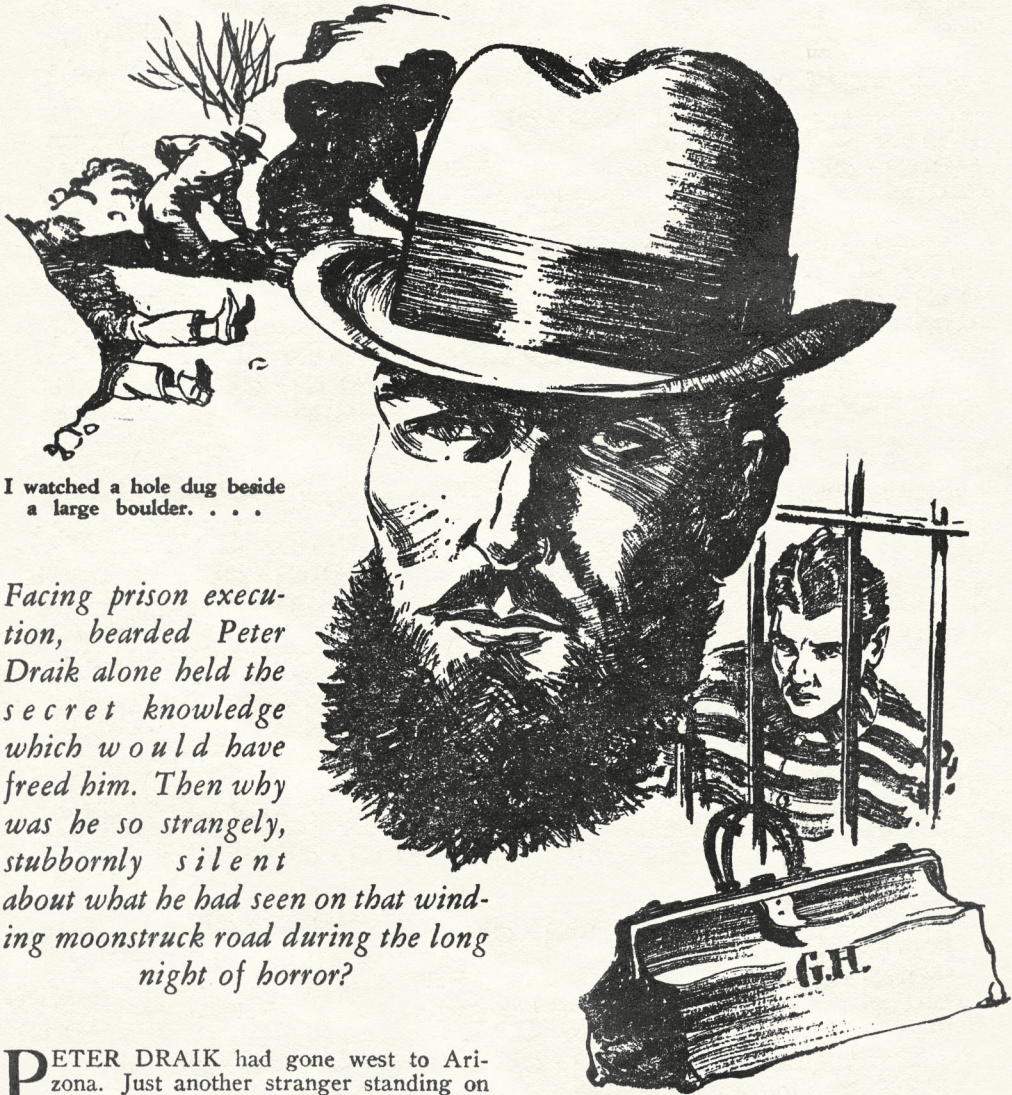


ANSWER. The circles spin like a wheel.



# His Beard Was Long and Very Black

By STEWART TOLAND



I watched a hole dug beside  
a large boulder. . . .

*Facing prison execution, bearded Peter Draik alone held the secret knowledge which would have freed him. Then why was he so strangely, stubbornly silent about what he had seen on that winding moonstruck road during the long night of horror?*

PETER DRAIK had gone west to Arizona. Just another stranger standing on the Pullman step, gaze intent, even anxious in the blazing sunshine, then swinging gently down into people's lives. Not many came to Canotee; it had been six years since any bought land. But Peter took the old Wilsey place. Paid cash. That in itself caused talk.

He hired Mrs. Evett as housekeeper—old

Mrs. Evett who had minded everybody's business for sixty years. Afterwards it was a local wonder it had taken her so long to get onto Peter Draik. Almost a whole year.

But that was because always he'd kept that particular closet locked.

The Wilsey place had been on the slow

road to ruin, the house sagging in a kind of terrible defeat. Rattlesnakes had made paths in the dust and sand upon the floor; no door would close over warping boards. No man in his right sense would have bought the place. Save it was out of town. Alone. Acres and acres, thick with cacti and quartz rocks and scuttling desert creatures. And a drainage ditch sparkling in the sun. Water.

**T**HAT was what Peter Draik bought. Water and an Arizona sun. What he did first was to plant sweet peas, row upon row. The seeds vined green, and while he waited for the miracle of their blooming he patched up the old house. He worked until it stood straight and proud again. As proud as Peter Draik.

The town thought him strange, peculiar, even distinguished. His back was so straight, in spite of the slight limp that kept him out of the war. His eyes were clear and gentle, with just a touch of sadness, as though they wanted to smile—and couldn't.

Mrs. Evett was remembering that smile as she traded her last bit of gossip over her ration points at the butcher's on that day almost a year after taking service with Mr. Draik. The day that was to be a milestone in her life, in all the lives in Canotee.

Mrs. Evett swished her skirts and her tongue and when she got back to the old Wisley place that was now the new Draik place, she found the closet door unlocked. And there wasn't a thing inside. For all the mystery about that door there wasn't a thing inside. But wait— On the shelf, way in the dark of the corner so she could only see it by standing on tiptoe, was a small black bag. She snatched at it. This was Peter Draik's secret.

That he had one she held no doubt. A body couldn't cook three meals a day for a man for almost a year without learning more than that he liked his meat well done and plenty of pepper in the sauce.

There were initials on the bag. G.H. And she knew what it was even before she opened it. A doctor's bag.

There were instruments inside and mustiness and a newspaper crisp and noisy to her touch. It was from far away, a little town in New York State she'd never heard of. There was a man's picture on top. Middling aged he was and handsome, laughing so his eyes were almost tight shut. He had a long black beard. Under the picture were words:

Dr. George Heathton, wealthy physician feared murdered. His bloodstained car has been found. Nothing else. Statewide search for the pauper he befriended who has disappeared. A mental patient named P—

There it was torn, just the letter P, and

George Heathton. G.H. Mrs. Evett looked quickly at the initials on the bag, then back at the date on the paper. Five days before Peter Draik had hired her. Peter Draik whose name began with the letter P. Five days, and it took around four to get from New York to Arizona. . . .

Peter Draik saw her coming, stiff and quick, justice with the blindfold gone. And in her anger she was blind to her own danger. She held the bag accusingly, and the paper, and looked to the gun he'd always worn. For potting rattlesnakes he'd said. Indeed!

"You killed him! You killed the man that owned this bag. That's why you're here. You're not an honest farmer nor yet no lunger. You're hiding because you killed him!"

The man just shrugged and smiled, "Yes, I killed him." He went on working with his sweet peas.

He was still there when she got back with the cops. He stood and watched them come through his new green fields and he was glad. It was time. Time and enough. Eight months was too long for a man to lie dead. Murdered.

The police licked their jowls like hungry wolves and Peter Draik didn't keep anything from them. Why bother? The bag did belong to Dr. Heathton. The New York cops had his car, and the bloodstains, and the thin air he'd vanished into, and not in all the months since had they found anything more. Until this bag.

Fingerprints flashed across the continent and Draik's matched some of those found so long ago in the bloody car. He admitted they were his. That much he'd give them. But no more. And he smiled at the handcuffs, at the man getting on the train with him.

"No murder without a corpse. Find the body." That was what he said when he left Canotee.

He said it to all who would listen. Even to Francis Heathton, the murdered man's stepbrother. They met in the jail, thick with tobacco and reporters and the lust for drama in men's eyes.

**I**T WAS Mr. Heathton who did the talking. Hesitant, a bit sadly, he nodded to indicate Peter Draik. "Yes, this is Peter. He was homeless, no-good, when he came to our house six years after the first world war. He had a story to tell. Not many knew, but 'brother' George and I were adopted, unrelated except by the love of the man we learned to call father. It was a very real love, and it was of father that Peter Draik told.

"He had tried to rescue our father from death. The battle of Belleau Woods. He told the story well. We saw and felt every minute of that horror in which men died and some lived. He had father's silver identification tag,

with Y.M.C.A. on one side and his number on the other. It had not been hard to get, lying loose in the mud of France, for father's arm had been blown to blood and pulp. The tag was washed clean now. It was something to stare at and feel and to hang thoughtfully from a watch chain.

"After that we kept the stranger, this Peter Draik, year after year in memory of that last day he had shared with Father. A man's last day on earth. It was something to be treasured.

"Then we found he lied.

"That was when my brother George told Peter Draik to go. Told him in threat and wrath. That was the night George's car was found all red and soaked with blood."

Francis Heathton stopped his talking. There was nothing more to say. Silence lay like a thick, black hand over all the staring people in that room. And it was laughing that broke it! Peter Draik's laughing, deep and hearty and strangely contented.

Weeks passed and a million questions and still Peter Draik sat unperturbed in the midst of all the hate.

"No murder without a body."

He always smiled when he said it and the police had come near to breaking his bones, yet they hadn't broken his spirit. There had been no trial, there was no body. He was booked on suspicion merely.

Finally they let him go. It was a beautiful day—a nameless space of time, filled with wide blue sky, and a sun, a living wonder, so warm, so close. That was what Peter thought, standing on the steps of the jail. Almost he had forgotten. The cell window had held such a narrow view, and this was all the world.

By and by he began to walk, slowly at first, pausing by each store window, seeing each thing as though it were new. All of the necessities man had educated himself into needing! In jail one learned a different sort of need. A shirt, a pair of pants, a razor, and a smile now and then.

It was while he was looking at a pink flowered dress that Francis Heathton walked by.

Mr. Heathton stopped short. Stunned. The glistening whiteness that crept up from his neck into the roots of his hair, made him rather terrible to look at. Strange.

He turned and ran, as if already the devil's pitch fork burned deep between his shoulder blades. That was how he came to the jail to tell the story he had so long withheld.

"You had no right to let Peter go! Murder has been done. I can prove it!"

He sobbed the first words and then calmness came, there in the safety of the jail, in the circle of these blue-coated men he had known most all his life.

"I know where the body is." Words trem-

bled, to match the shaking lips. "I saw the murder. I didn't tell before because I wasn't sure who the murderer was. Not at the time. He was just a dim shape that made up a horrible nightmare.

"It was a hot night and I had accompanied my brother on a late call. I'll never forgive myself. I went to sleep, waiting in the back seat. When I awoke, the car had been moved into the country. I looked out and there was my brother lying on the ground, eyes wide and sightless and dead. There was no doubt of it. And the man above him threw a knife away and stooped low and grabbed George's beard—the beard was long and very black—and he pulled him by it, pulled him all down the winding, moonstruck road.

"I followed in the distance, witless with terror. I watched a hole dug beside a large boulder and when the hole was done the killer took a pen knife, slashing at the beard . . . and I turned tail and ran. I'm not proud of that, but my bones had turned to jelly. They had done more than that. They laid in bed for days afterwards beset with fever and delirium."

Francis Heathton twisted and broke the pencil in his hand. Then once again he looked to the listening men.

"Long ago I thought the murderer might be Peter Draik. But I couldn't be sure. And then when he practically confessed, still I wouldn't tell, wouldn't sign a man's death warrant. I thought that, then. For days I've fought with myself, hoping Peter would break. But he hasn't. Now I'm telling, for Peter Draik is free. He will tire of looking in windows, he will remember what I have said of him. He will come to kill me."

Francis Heathton shrugged, licked his lips twice.

"I will show you where the boulder is."

SO Peter Draik was sent to the Death House to wait for a certain 15th and midnight. To wonder how many volts there would be. Did a man feel their burning or die first?

The world forgot. Even the jury that convicted him. All save Peter Draik, worrying about his sweet peas in the garden in Conotee. An old man had come to care for them. A man so old and hungry he didn't mind working for a murderer.

Then the week before the 15th Peter Draik asked the young jailor who brought him his food if he might see the judge who had sentenced him. The judge was kind and fair. He came.

And when he got to the cell door he stood transfixed.

The man inside smiled, and stroked the beard he'd been so many weeks growing. It was short still but very black.

"Come, judge, don't tell me you've for-



gotten. You've known me since I was little enough to crawl under your fence and steal apples."

"George Heathton! The likeness is amazing!"

"It should be. I am Dr. George Heathton. Though none of you recognized me without my beard. A beard is a strange thing, it so completely molds and masks a face. But then that's why I grew it in the beginning. I looked so ridiculously young when I got out of college, I thought no one would hire me to cure their aches and pains. Remember? Or is it too many years ago. . ."

The judge was skeptical. "If you are George Heathton why have you masqueraded as Peter Draik? Why did you sit so passively all through your trial? Why wouldn't your own brother know you?"

"But he does. He's known all along who he was sending to the chair." A laugh, grim and sardonic came out of the beard. "I was curious, wondering how far he would go. Now I know. I have only seven days and seven nights to live."

The judge shook the bars in his very vehemence. "You are mad! This can't be so. If it were it would mean Francis Heathton is a fiend!"

"And clever. Don't forget that. Francis is clever."

"Why should he send you to the chair, and if you are George, where is Peter Draik?"

"Dead. Buried under the name of Dr. George. My name. His was the body found beside the boulder. He was the reason I went away to Arizona, the reason I waited eight months and more to find where he lay.

"Come, judge, sit on the cot beside me and let me tell you a bit of the story that hasn't yet been told. You never knew Peter Draik. None of the townspeople did. He was an invalid all the years he lived with us, and never left the comfort of our grounds. If you had known him I wouldn't need to tell you that Peter Draik didn't lie about father. I was never disappointed in Peter. But I was in Francis.

"Francis hated Peter Draik. With each year the hate grew greater. It was because of the affection between Peter and myself, and the money I lavished on Peter. Francis even started counting the mouthfulls Peter ate at the table, to resenting every dime. There was no need, there was money enough for all three, money I earned—for Francis dabbled at painting and made nothing.

"And then one night poor, invalid Peter disappeared. Just like that. Without a trace except for blood all over my car, all over a pair of white ducks stuffed in the laundry. The clothes of Francis.

"There was a terrible argument between us, and the end was nothing. Nothing but blood on Dr. George Heathton's car, and no doctor. Just a vast silence with Francis taking all the estate and living contentedly and the neighbors forgetting to whisper . . . until 'Peter Draik' came from Arizona." The blue eyes smiled.

"This last part everyone knows. But there is something that hasn't been told. The little bit before that last, before my car was found, after my argument with Francis.

"I still held the bloodstained trousers, and Francis only laughed. What did they prove?"

### WHEN HELL RIDES TO PARADISE

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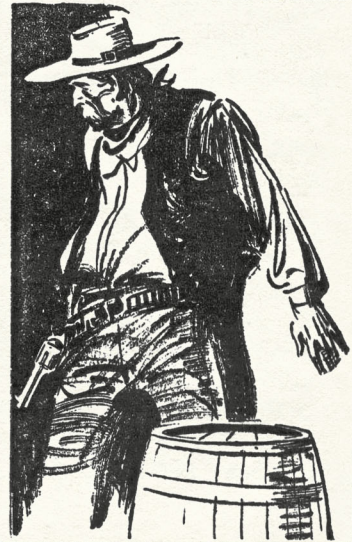
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You can't spell murder without a body. He swore an oath and raced wildly into the night and I laid the trousers down and picked up the phone. I'd been very fond of Peter. Maybe I could find a way to spell murder without a body.

"But as I stood there I saw my brother stalking through the trees. That was why he had gone out, to be in the shadows while I was in the light. But there was a moon, and I saw the gun in his hand, and a terrible hate in his face. I laid the receiver back; it would do no good to call the police, we both were bloodstained now, people would say we two had killed together.

"They aren't saying that now, they are saying only one man killed Dr. George. And they are right. But you can't electrocute a man for killing himself. That's what I did, what Dr. George did, I laid the telephone receiver down, picked up my bag and disappeared in the night. I shaved my beard and called myself Peter Draik and for eight months I waited in Canotee for my nosey housekeeper to find the bag with its so carefully careless and incriminating paper. She was the type to read evil in anything; that's why I hired her.

"I was sent home a hunted criminal, and the opportunity was too great for Francis' hating will. That was what I hoped, that in his hate, in his joy at hurting me, he would lead me to the body. It was the only way I'd ever find Peter. Peter Draik's body."

The man with the prison pallor lying thick upon his hands smiled. "I've been waiting ever since the trial, growing this beard, that someone might know me for myself and call me George."

The judge sent for Francis Heathton.

**F**RANCIS HEATHTON laughed in their faces. And then he showed them what fools they were, how clever Peter Draik. For it was Peter Draik. He swore it on the bible.

"Yet I can't much blame the man for making this last desperate gamble." Francis Heathton shrugged. "George and Peter were of a near age, both had blue eyes and black hair, they were of the same build, their fingerprints were jointly all over the car. Peter knew this, and played upon it. They lived so long together, they knew each other's thoughts and habits."

And then for the first time the man in the prison suit lost his composure. He beat upon the table and screamed.

"I am Dr. George! Bring me my bag, and a wound. I will dress it, I will operate. I will prove that I am Dr. George!"

And Francis Heathton laughed, with strange amusement. "You forget, Peter, that

we know you are a doctor, too. There are the war records . . . you were in the medical corps. Remember?"

"But the beard! The body found had no beard, no more than normally grows after a man dies. That proves it was Peter Draik."

"It proves that Peter was clever when he cut George's beard off before burying him. I saw you do it, Peter, and you did it just for this. To wriggle out of your own crime."

The listeners, the silent pawns in this game of death, went away, marveling at this brazenness, and another came to shave the beard off the prisoner's face.

A whole morning he sat in his death cell rubbing the smooth shaven skin, then in the afternoon he wrote the governor a letter, quite as calm and strange as Peter himself.

*Your Honor:*

*You probably have read the papers and know my story well. This is to add just a little.*

*If in your clemency you will go to the records in the soldier's hospital of Montreal, Canada, you will find that Peter Draik laid there for five years after the first world war. There was shrapnel in his lung. They said he would carry it to his grave and bring him an early one. This is why I have been so patient. Perhaps foolish. Men look very much alike behind beards, I'll grant Francis Heathton that, or with the mold in their bones . . . but if you will again exhume the body found beside the boulder you will find the shrapnel.*

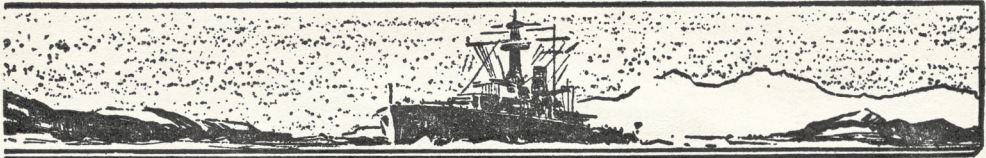
*Francis didn't know about that. He was never interested in Peter's health. If he heard of it he didn't remember or he would never have disclosed the body with which to railroad me to the chair.*

*Peter Draik and I had been so similar, I couldn't even claim a specialized knowledge. We were both doctors. Francis could find no loophole, so he sent me down the long road to death. And I took the trip willingly, all this weary way, that Peter Draik's murder might be avenged and he be buried for the last time with all a soldier's honor. Poor Peter, who was so fond of sweet peas.*

*Sincerely,*

*George Heathton.*

There were more letters. Questions—pounding and ceaseless, to break the courage of a Samson. Then they let the man they had known as Peter Draik go back to Arizona where he picked up the threads of his life and his medicine kit and let his beard grow full again. The beard that was long and very black and by which he hadn't been pulled down the winding moonstruck road, except in the fiendish cleverness of his step-brother's mind, Francis Heathton, who died by the will of the State of New York, November 21, 1943 at midnight.



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# IN BED WE DIE

By CURTISS T. GARDNER

## CHAPTER ONE

### Sounds in the Night

**I**T was dark as a witch's cave at midnight, Val Vickers was thinking, as the small launch swung in to a short wooden pier. No moon; no stars; huge black pines towering up obscurely into the night.

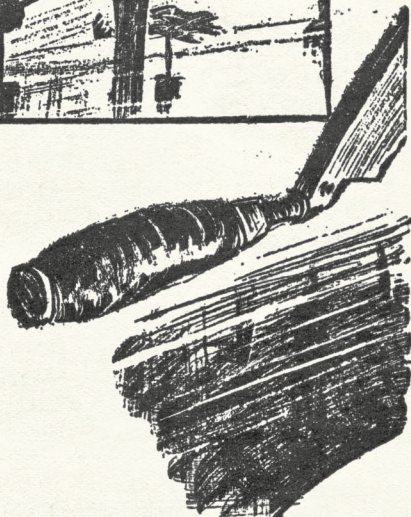
Beyond the bobbing lantern at the pier, loomed dimly the massive features of Garnet Blackburn, multi-millionaire banker, who had been first to recognize and employ Vickers' unique talent for solving inexplicable problems. Vickers could sense an unusual strain in the banker's rigid expectancy now.

"Thank Heavens you're here," Blackburn said. "We had another storm early this evening. All the electricity is off again. Just like the night Anders died."

Wind moaned thinly through the invisible tops of the pines as Vickers followed Blackburn up a flight of wooden stairs. The ground above was soft and springy with damp pine needles and fallen cones. Some hundred feet beyond the top of the bank was the house.

Four men and a girl were waiting inside the large living room. Red reflections from a log fire in a cavernous stone hearth played on tense faces. Over the fireplace a stuffed moose head stared with glassy, sightless eyes. An old-fashioned kerosene lamp stood on a table at the side of the room.

Blackburn murmured rapid introductions. There was John Stevenson, owner of the place, and Orville Stevenson, his son. The other two men, Wallace Mettee and Porter Townsend, wealthy New York mining men,



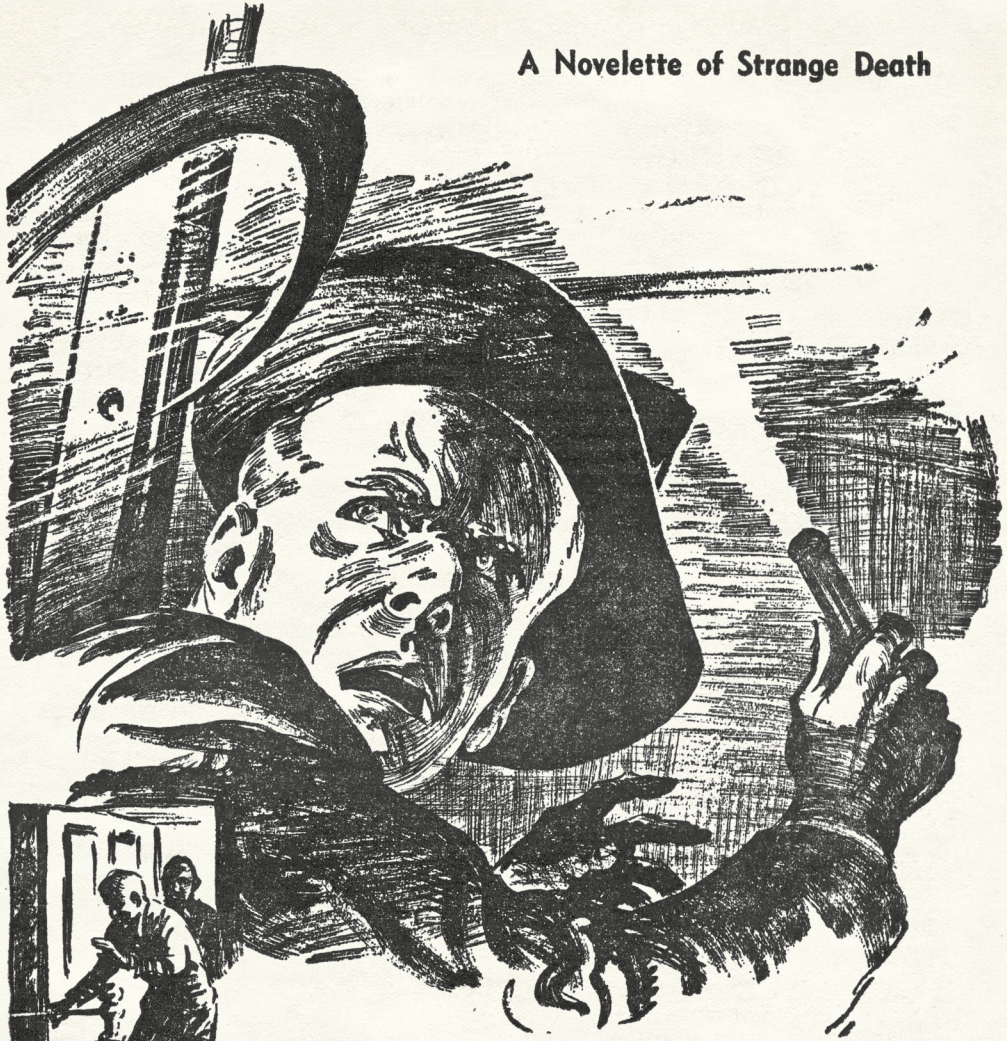
were, like Blackburn, house guests of Stevenson. As was the girl, Naila Grey.

"We're glad and relieved to have you with us, Mr. Vickers," John Stevenson said.

"Suppose you tell me exactly what happened," Vickers suggested. "About all Mr. Blackburn had time to say over the telephone was that you've had incredible occurrences resulting in death."

**A** DEEP groove of worry bisected John Stevenson's bushy white eyebrows. "I came up for several months this summer," he told

## A Novelette of Strange Death



The sickle swished at him murderously through the night.

Vickers. "And invited a number of old friends for short visits to the lake. Among them, several weeks ago, I had Sam Parker, one of my old associates in the mining business. One night we found Sam dead in his bed, right in this house."

Stevenson's voice grew slower and more unsteady. "The coroner came from Visalia to look at the body and he said it looked like death by electrocution. There were two burns on Sam's body, one on his leg and another on the top of his head. But it didn't seem possible Sam could have died from other than natural

*Outside the wilderness camp the Devil's windmills creaked. Inside, the fire roared in the cavernous stone earth, and Val Vickers, "Specialist in the Impossible," was invited to sleep in the same bed in which three men—horribly, inexplicably — had slept, never again to awaken!*

causes. Until we found Franklin Anders, another of my friends from the old days, dead in exactly the same way two days ago. Franklin had an electrical burn on one leg and another on his arm."

Val Vickers gave Blackburn a reproachful look. "So you called me on a thing like that! Why any electrician from Visalia could probably diagnose this case. Matter of defective insulation in a bed lamp, or—"

"My son, Orville, is an electrical engineer," Stevenson interrupted quietly. "He is sure there were no loose wires in that bedroom." He paused and his voice sank almost to a whisper. "There's another thing, Mr. Vickers. So far up in the woods, our hydro-electric is erratic. Thunder storms frequently leave us with no current at all for hours at a time—particularly at a stormy season of the year like this. *The power was dead for twenty-four hours on and after the night Anders died. And then we remembered that the same thing had happened the night we found Sam Parker dead. Yet, the police are certain both men were electrocuted.* They're completely baffled. So Mr. Blackburn thought about calling you. And that sums it up."

"It's utterly fantastic!" The girl spoke for the first time. "It's impossible!"

Val Vickers had already noted Naila Grey's dark beauty. Spanish ancestry, he decided. Or maybe Mexican. Her skin was dusky ivory, her hair jet, her eyes bright and black and fringed with long natural lashes. The pert, little-girl sort of loveliness which blooms early in tropical climates.

Vickers smiled suddenly. "Why, yes," he agreed. "It does sound fantastic, doesn't it? I believe this is the kind of case I'm going to like."

Vickers' oddly mismated eyes swept the room, encompassing everyone with their piercing glance. There was something reminiscent of a hawk about Valentine Vickers' features. His unusually high forehead jutted forward to a distinct ledge, then dropped at an angle exactly paralleling the angle made by his bony hook of a nose. Like some swooping bird of prey.

An encyclopaedic fund of information, ranging through the alphabet from Admiralty Law to Zymology was the foundation for Vickers' unique profession. Putting to practical use the extraordinary number of learned degrees which he had received from world famous institutions of higher learning, Valentine Vickers had become known as the *Specialist in the Impossible*.

Porter Townsend stood up suddenly. "It's too late for you to do anything tonight, particularly with no light available," he said, nervously consulting his watch. He was so short that the neatly folded handkerchief in

Garnet Blackburn's pocket showed above Townsend's smooth pink skull. "Let's go to bed. You can start your investigation tomorrow, Vickers."

Garnet Blackburn nodded his massive head in agreement. "I'm ready to turn in."

John Stevenson went out of the living room. Vickers could hear him calling from somewhere in the rear of the house. "Harry Woodcock! Oh, Harry!"

In a few moments Stevenson came back followed by the weather-beaten backwoodsman who had held the lantern at the pier.

"I'm afraid the accommodations we'll have to give you tonight are rather crude," he apologized to Vickers. "But Mr. Mettee is returning to the city tomorrow."

WITH his ragged fringe of sandy hair and large crooked nose, Wallace Mettee was not a handsome man. A lump on the side of his cheek and a scrubby, close-clipped moustache, gave him an appearance strangely like that of a human turkey-buzzard.

"I've had my caretaker, Woodcock, put a cot on the side porch for you tonight," Stevenson continued. "He'll show you the way."

The lean, whip-tough Woodcock picked up his lantern just outside the door. The weak rays shone on a side porch fenced with fine copper mesh.

"Put out a chair for you to hang your duds on," Woodcock observed. "An' a couple o' foldin' screens so's you can git yourself dressed in the mornin' in private."

When Woodcock had gone, Vickers undressed and slid between clean, crisp sheets. His mind restlessly reviewed the people he had just met and the circumstances which had brought him here.

Orville Stevenson had not uttered a single word, Vickers recalled. The man had sat silently, peering with pale, weak eyes through thick convex spectacles. Through some trick of the lenses, when he bent his head, they reflected double, giving the impression that Orville Stevenson had two pairs of eyes. With his cadaverous cheeks and long nose, the man was not prepossessing. Furthermore, he had appeared to resent Vickers' presence at the lodge.

A new sound broke into Vickers' consciousness. It came at first like a faint moan from somewhere in the darkness not far from the porch. Vickers held his breath to listen. Wind was rising again over the lake. It wailed more shrilly in the pines.

The sound came again. A deep groaning, but followed almost immediately by a metallic creak. It came again, and yet again, rhythmically lulling Vickers against his will into slumber.

It wasn't thunder rolling across the lake

which roused him. In the depth of his subconscious mind Vickers was aware of the thunder before he found himself fully alert again, staring wide awake into blackness. Rain was beginning to drum against the porch roof. The clean aromatic smell of the pine trees was stronger.

The groaning creak which had puzzled him before was still coming at regular intervals from somewhere in the night. Then Vickers heard the new and different sound. A dry crunching, almost at the side of his cot.

He sat up quietly, reaching for the pencil flashlight in his suit pocket. Then he leaped from bed.

Beyond a screen door were three or four wooden steps to the ground. The flashlight was just in time to reveal the clumsy, lumbering waddle of a big porcupine making frantic escape into the underbrush near the house. Fresh splinters in the planking of the steps showed where Vickers had interrupted the animal's nocturnal labor.

A blinding flash of lightning flared just before Vickers got back to the folding screens around his bed. Like the instantaneous exposure of a sensitized photographic plate, it revealed a vista of lake and trees beyond the house. More interesting to Vickers, it caught and registered the image of a woman.

It was Naila Grey. Clad in a filmy white negligee, she was in the act of moving on tiptoe across the front of the porch. She held an unlighted candle, in an old-fashioned saucer-like holder. Just that one flashing glimpse before blackness settled again.

Vickers got back into bed. What, he wondered, was the girl doing wandering around outside the house at this hour of night?

The monotonous groaning sound came louder from the darkness. Intermittent thunder rolled away into the distance.

Suddenly, inside the house, a woman screamed. Vickers sprang upright, the short hairs at the base of his scalp atingle. There was just the one shrill, terrified cry. Then silence.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Sickie

**H**ASTILY Vickers whipped on trousers and shirt. By the time he had crowded his feet into shoes and reached the living room door, the whole house was aroused. A match flared as Vickers went inside. John Stevenson, looking like an old Roman senator in his antique night shirt, was lighting the kerosene lamp.

Flickering light reflected into a hallway running from the living room to the rear of the house. Vickers plunged along this passage.

The light was a wavering candle flame. It came from the first bedroom down the hall. Inside the room were Naila Grey and Orville Stevenson.

The girl was white-faced, shuddering. She was still garbed in the filmy white negligee Vickers had seen on the porch. Orville, fully dressed, had an arm around Naila's slim shoulders, trying to comfort her.

One swift glance was enough to show Vickers the reason for the girl's outcry. On the bed lay Wallace Mettee. All the bedclothes had been pulled off except for the bottom sheet, and were on top of Mettee's clothes on a chair. The man lay limply, eyes wide open and staring.

In his pajamas, the lumpy cheek and crooked nose gave Mettee more than ever the ugly appearance of a turkey buzzard. But a buzzard which never again would soar the skies in search of carrion. Mettee was carrion now himself.

Behind Vickers, John Stevenson and Porter Townsend crowded into the small bedroom. Garnet Blackburn arrived a moment later in a heavy blue satin dressing robe.

A door at the back of the house banged and Woodcock appeared half-dressed behind the others. Woodcock's eyes were gummy with sleep.

Naila Grey was still shaking as if she had a chill. "I found him here . . . just like Mr. Anders."

John Stevenson was entirely oblivious of his grotesque appearance in the nightshirt. "My God!" he burst out. "Has he been electrocuted too?"

He stepped forward as if to move the dead man on the bed.

"Don't touch the body," Vickers warned quickly. "That's a police prerogative." He pointed to a spot of scorched flesh half as large as his palm on the dead man's ankle. There was a similar burn on Mettee's wrist. "Your friend has died as a result of electrical burns, I'm sure."

Vickers turned to Naila Grey with a stern expression on his hawklike features. His hyperopthalmis eyes—one grey-green, the other blue with yellow specks—held her like a butterfly impaled upon a thorn. "How," he asked, "does it happen you were in this man's room with a lighted candle at this hour of night?"

Naila's face was absolutely bloodless. "The thunder woke me," she said weakly. "I was frightened. I felt I needed fresh air. When I came back in the house, I got into the wrong room by mistake."

"Where is your room?"

Orville Stevenson answered. The engineer's thin features seemed more cadaverous than ever. "Miss Grey's room is just two doors down the hall from here." He bent his head,

two pairs of pale eyes stared from behind the convex lenses at Vickers angrily. "I don't like your attitude, Mr. Vickers, toward my guest. The insinuation is ridiculous!"

"There's never anything ridiculous about sudden death, Stevenson." Vickers' square face was perfectly devoid of emotion. "Incidentally, how does it happen that you, yourself, are fully dressed?"

Fine moisture sprang out suddenly on Orville Stevenson's forehead.

"I didn't feel like going to bed," he said defiantly. "I know of no rule that a man can't stay up as late as he chooses in his own home."

The pink-skulled Townsend was almost hysterical. "This is dreadful! First poor Sam Parker and then—" He swung to face John Stevenson, towering head and shoulders above him. "John, forgive me, but I simply can't stand it. I'm leaving first thing in the morning."

Vickers spoke sharply. "Pull yourself together, Townsend. You nor anyone else will be able to leave until the law enforcement authorities have given permission. *This is murder!*"

Val Vickers was looking rapidly around the room. It was small, wall and ceiling paneled like the living room in white pine except where the brickwork at the back of the big fireplace formed a portion of one wall. The furnishings were simple.

The old-fashioned brass bed seemed unusually short. Vickers stooped to look beneath it. Then he stepped closer, examining the bed frame itself with minute attention. He noted a series of scratches in the brass at the horizontal cross piece at the head, exactly similar scratches on the cross piece at the foot. Vickers rubbed his thumbs against the grooves, reflectively.

He was perspiring as he turned again to the others silently watching. "I hadn't realized how hot it was," he remarked.

"On account of the fireplace," John Stevenson said. He laid his hand against the brickwork. "Still warm. We shouldn't have had an open fire tonight. I don't know why Woodcock lighted it."

"I thought you wanted it," the caretaker rejoined from the doorway.

Vickers spoke over his shoulder to Garnet Blackburn. "First thing is to notify the proper authorities. I suppose that means at Visalia?"

John Stevenson said, "That's right. Woodcock, you go put in a call for Bert Holden. This is getting unbearable . . . all my old friends—" His voice broke suddenly. He seemed all at once like a much older man. "I just can't forgive myself."

"There's no reason to blame yourself," Vickers said calmly. "Unless, of course, you know how these electrocutions have been

accomplished. In that case, of course—"

Orville Stevenson became belligerent again. "I'm not sure Mettee hasn't died from natural causes."

VICKERS fixed Orville with a freezing glance. "I'm assuming we're not entirely a bunch of children, Stevenson. The chance would be only one in trillions that three fatalities could occur under exactly the same circumstances as these within a few days time."

He turned away abruptly. "I advise you all to go back to bed. Try to get some sleep. Tomorrow's likely to be a trying day—"

"If we live until tomorrow!"

Vickers didn't take his own advice. Instead, he let himself quietly out of the screen door, started with his flashlight in the same direction the porcupine had gone. The wind had dropped to a faint sigh; the storm was over. The groaning sound was still coming from somewhere out in the night. It sounded less frequently, but Val Vickers had a sudden hankering to know exactly what it meant.

It didn't take long to find out. Beyond a cluster of pines near the side of the house the thin ray of the pencil flash picked up a spiderweb of light structural steel. It arose, like an Eiffel Tower in miniature, a lacework of angle irons and braces, some twenty feet square at the bottom, narrowing gradually as it went higher.

In the center of the structural fame a long metal plunger, black with grease, was working vertically up and down. The grease didn't seem to do much good because each downbeat of the mechanism caused the creaking groan which had worried Vickers.

Another anguished protest of tortured metal came from somewhere above. He pointed the light up but it failed to reach the top of the tower. Vickers didn't care because he already knew the answer. This was an old-fashioned windmill, used evidently to pump water for the storage tank of John Stevenson's house.

Val Vickers stood a moment watching the plunger move as wind stirred the big vanes above. He started to turn, heard the sudden swishing sound behind him and ducked.

Something hissed through the air just above his head and struck one of the struts of the windmill tower with a metallic crash. Vickers scrambled upright again, darting his flashlight toward the house. The beam sprayed whitely against trunks of the pines, then diffused in the impenetrable black curtain between the trees and the house.

He jerked the light around again to the windmill. On the ground just behind where he had been standing lay the handle of a sickle, but with only some four inches of jagged blade. The rest of the knife's edge, honed to a razor sharpness, glinted in shattered pieces



from the dark, thick carpet of pine needles.

Vickers switched off the flashlight. He made his way back to the house in the dark. But when he reached the screen door to his open-air bedroom, he did not go in. Instead, he kept on around to the back of the house, feeling his way, fingers against the wall.

At the corner of the property he paused to listen. Voices, very faint, hummed from the blackness in the rear. Val Vickers moved forward against, testing each step in advance. The voices grew louder.

Three white shapes, like slender towering ghosts, rose suddenly before Vickers. He switched on the flash again. The ribbon-like ghosts were three big silver birches. Beneath them stood Orville Stevenson and Naila Grey.

The girl gave a little squeal of fright.

"Don't be alarmed," Val said quietly. "It's only Vickers." To Stevenson he added, "Missed me!"

Stevenson retorted, "I thought you were supposed to be getting your sleep."

\* \* \*

Shortly after daybreak the law arrived by motor boat from Visalia. It consisted of the sheriff, Bert Holden; the coroner, Dr. Dixon; and two husky deputies.

In addition to his official status, Holden owned the sawmill in Visalia. A hulking giant with sun-bronzed skin and a lithe, loose-limbed way of walking, he looked more like a lumberjack than a policeman. His denim shirt was open at the throat; muscles corded his brawny bare arms.

Dr. Dixon on the other hand was a much older man. Small, frail as a column of smoke, his snowy white hair was carefully parted in the middle, and the white stubble on his cheeks had been allowed to grow to a tiny, almost imperceptible point at his chin.

Both men went into the house. Val Vickers talked with them briefly, giving his version of the night's happenings, but omitting any reference to the murderous attack made upon him with the sickle. After Dr. Dixon began his routine examination, Vickers wandered out on the porch.

John Stevenson had chosen a lovely spot for his summer home. In the light of day all the spookiness of the night had vanished. Through the trees at the edge of the bank, the lake

sparkled azure blue, with wooded hills across a mile wide bay rising into a rocky bluff.

THE big windmill was still creaking gently in the mild morning breeze. And now Vickers saw that the whole place was literally filled with windmills. Not, like the steel-framed pump, performing strictly utilitarian purposes, but odd, cunningly contrived playthings built evidently by hand with loving care. They were all shapes and sizes.

On one of the cedar posts supporting the porch roof an old witch astride a broomstick whirled gnarled arms into the wind. In the front yard four tiny, fully rigged sailboats revolved gracefully in a three foot circle. Near them a locomotive with wind vanes on its boiler, moved wheels and driving rods realistically with each puff of wind.

There were Dutch windmills, airplanes, and little men hitched to their vanes in such a way to create a perfect illusion that their muscular power was causing the apparatus to turn. Probably the oddest item in the whole collection was another human figure, almost life-sized, operated by vanes like an airplane propeller.

Vickers was studying this latter figure when Harry Woodcock came around the corner of the house.

"Clever!" Vickers remarked.

"John Stevenson's hobby," Woodcock said. "He's always makin' the things."

Val Vickers turned away from the windmill. "Mr. Stevenson has a great many house guests, hasn't he? Is the house usually so completely filled?"

The caretaker brought out a black cutty pipe and tamped tobacco into it with the ball of a calloused thumb. "Always people around here this time o' year. I like it better myself when I'm here alone. But there ain't usually this many. This here bunch is somethin' special. Orville's party. He's been tryin' to git money out of 'em." Woodcock gave a grunt supposed to be a laugh. "He ain't had no luck yet from what I hear."

"Money?" Vickers was instantly attentive. His queerly mismatched eyes were studying Woodcock. Like many men whose lives are spent in the woods, Woodstock might have been anywhere from forty to seventy. Hard

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work and healthy living made it impossible to judge the man's age.

"Orville's been tryin' to git them fellers interested in his invention," Woodcock said serenely. "He's got a new way of gittin' silver out o' ore. Thinks he's goin' to make back all the money his old man lost in the depression."

Vickers was casual. "What is the process, do you know?"

Woodcock hitched his suspenders, removed the pipe from his mouth and spat deliberately. "Don't know the details; they're supposed to be secret. 'Cept that it'll do everything by electricity. Orville says it'll supercede the old mercury amalgamation process altogether."

"And you say he hasn't been able to interest anyone in financing the development of his process?"

"That's right. The scheme works, all right. But these fellers like Townsend and the rest are cagey. They claim it'll cost too much to put it over. Ain't none of them the kind what'll put out a dollar unless they see the chance of gittin' back ten."

They were interrupted by Sheriff Holden and the coroner who emerged into the front yard, followed by the two husky deputies carrying a long wicker basket with the remains of Wallace Mettee.

"This is getting to be a habit," Holden remarked dourly. "Makes me neglect the saw-mill."

Dr. Dixon spoke to Woodcock. "Maybe you're plainly lucky, Harry. If you'd made a lot of dough in the silver strike, like these fellows did, maybe we'd be bringing you out of here in this thing, too." He jerked his thumb toward the basket. Then, to Vickers he added, "Looks like you were right. This man died by electrocution. But I can't figure how that could be with all the juice off last night."

"That," Vickers observed, "is the impossible feature of the situation. If true, in fact, it verges upon the miraculous."

He turned to Holden. "Do you mind giving me a lift back to Visalia with you, Sheriff? I think I'd like to start my investigation back in town."

Holden shrugged. "Sure. Plenty of room in the boat."

To Woodcock, Vickers said, "Tell Mr. Blackburn I'll be back before night."

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Devil in the Windmill

**H**E DID return in the early evening, completely satisfied with the results of his day. Even in the boat on the way to Visalia he had pieced together some interesting information from the conversation of old Dr. Dixon, who had lived in these parts for forty years.

Parker, Anders, Mettee and Townsend, he learned, had all been associated, years ago, in the development of the Silver Fox mine, a rich bonanza which had bought prosperity to Visalia and millions to the mine owners before the lode was finally exhausted. John Stevenson had never been one of the owners, but his fee for work as a consulting mining expert had been sufficient to make him a moderately wealthy man. Although Stevenson had lost much of his money, he was still more than rich judged by local standards.

One of the first things Vickers had done upon arrival in Visalia was to check with the local office of the Hydro-electric Commission to verify that all current had been off the preceding night. This was officially confirmed. The trouble, caused by a transformer near Jumping Caribou Lake which had been struck and burned out by a lightning bolt, had only been repaired shortly before Vickers' arrival in Visalia with the sheriff's party on the day before.

Much of the rest of the day was spent by Vickers in the combination post-office, city hall and court house. He spent hours poring over old land records, while a reasonable explanation for what had happened at John Stevenson's house formed gradually in his mind.

Later in the evening, Val Vickers drew Porter Townsend aside. He spoke earnestly to the stocky, bald-headed man. As a result, Townsend had little to say the rest of the evening, keeping huddled out of the way in a corner of the room, nervous eyes roving frequently to his watch.

When bedtime approached, John Stevenson was apologetic and uncertain. "I'll have to put you in the room where Mettee died," he told Vickers, "or leave you out on the porch like last night."

Val Vickers shot a quick glance at Porter Townsend. The man's smooth high forehead was beaded with fine perspiration, the pinkness of his skin seemed to have assumed a slightly bluish hue.

"There's not the faintest danger for anyone in that room tonight," Vickers said quickly. "Tonight is vastly different from last night."

It was. Instead of gloomy darkness, stars twinkled high in a clear sky. Under the faint radiance of a scimitar-edged moon the waters of the lake sparkled through the trees with a silver ripple.

Vickers lay down on the bed in the inside room without removing his clothes. After everything was still, he arose and went silently down the hall to the door of Townsend's room.

"All clear," he told the barrel-chested little man. "My advice would be for you to go to sleep and forget everything."

Townsend's head looked as if it had been

carved from pink rock candy. He was sweating like a startled horse. "Sleep! I may be going to my death. I was a fool to agree—"

"You're the safest man in this house," Vickers said. "I'd stake my reputation on it. For one reason, if no other, because you're shorter than average."

"I shan't sleep a wink," Townsend complained. "I'll sit up in the chair."

Vickers agreed. "Just so you stay in the room and keep quiet."

He waited while Townsend crept down the hall and into the room that he, Vickers, had just left. Then Vickers slipped off coat and shoes only, got under the sheet in Townsend's bed. He made no attempt to sleep.

An hour passed, and Vickers was becoming impatient when he heard a faint rustle in the hall outside the room where he lay. An air current, stirring suddenly through the open window, was all that gave evidence that the door had been eased silently open. Then something white loomed near the bed.

Abruptly there was a blinding flash, like lightning. Vickers came suddenly upright in bed, his fingers finding the light switch and flipping it up. The room sprang into brilliance. The white object near the bed was Naila Grey, clad in her filmy white negligee. Near the door, camera in one hand, an exploded magnesium bulb in the other, was Orville Stevenson.

The expressions on the faces of the pair were comical, but Vickers did not laugh. "Surprise!" he said grimly. "Nothing is working the way you planned, is it?"

Two pairs of pale eyes behind heavy lenses blinked at Vickers. "We thought—we expected—" Orville stammered.

"Save your breath," Vickers advised. "I understand perfectly. You wanted a picture of Townsend in a compromising situation. The kind of picture a man's wife would never understand. You knew Townsend would invest in your new silver extraction process against his better judgment, rather than have a picture like that disrupt his home. In a word, Stevenson, *blackmail!*"

"No!" Orville protested. "Not blackmail. Anyone investing now in my process will make a mint." He assumed a suddenly hopeful expression. "You would, yourself, Vickers."

Val Vickers smiled coldly. "Guess again. I have no wife and anyhow I haven't that kind of money. You're wasting your time on me. Although I'll give you credit for a remarkable degree of persistence. You knew I was suspicious when I found you fully dressed in Mettee's room last night. And Miss Grey's story about mistaking the room in the dark was fishy. You called on Mettee last night just the way you called here tonight."

The girl's black eyes were snapping with

defiance. "You can't prove a thing. It's our word against yours—two against one."

Vickers gave her an icy stare. "That's right. I can't prove anything—*yet*. Now get out of here, both of you!"

HE LAY quietly for a long time after they had gone. Not until his watch told him it was two in the morning, did he slip out of bed for the second time, put on his shoes, and go out of the house. The crescent moon had set, but the stars were still bright overhead.

Vickers had his flashlight in his hand as he got down on hands and knees beside the house. But he didn't switch on the pencil ray until he had crawled under the porch and proceeded a dozen feet straight ahead in the constricted space between floor and ground.

He found the wires he had expected halfway along the side of the house near the second row of foundation posts. They were thick, heavily insulated wires and they emerged from the ground to disappear through the floor boards of the building above.

Vickers turned his light off and crawled back to where he had started.

He did not need light to locate the trowel he had picked up early in the evening and concealed near the porch. Neither did he use the light as he dug carefully in the spot he had previously noted and determined to investigate. Only when he struck something which resisted the trowel did he flash the light for a mere fraction of a second.

The one glimpse was enough. Val Vickers nodded with silent satisfaction. He knew now where the wires came from, as well as where they emerged inside John Stevenson's house.

His next visit was to a storage closet near the kitchen at the rear of the lodge. A trapdoor to the air space between roof and ceiling opened from here. Using a small stepladder already conveniently set beneath the trap, Vickers went up. His flashlight fingered rafters and struts in the darkness overhead as he levered himself through the opening.

Swinging himself to a sitting position on the ceiling joists at the side of the trap, Vickers had just started to sweep his light around, when he heard a faint stealthy sound at his back. He lunged sideways instinctively, trying at the same instant to bring the flashlight over in the direction from which the sound had come. There was only time for a fleeting glimpse of a dim human figure casting an enormous black shadow against the roof beams. Then something hard caught Vickers a glancing blow on the side of the head.

Vickers lost his balance, tumbled over backward between two joists. The flashlight dropped, and went out. Utter blackness descended. Vickers could hear his assailant scrambling frantically through the trap. There

was a crash from the storage space below and a muttered curse.

Vickers' groping fingers located the fallen flashlight. He scooped it up, snapping on the beam. The probing rays shot downward through the yawning trap. But the storage closet was empty. Whoever had attacked Vickers had vanished.

Rubbing long spatulate fingers ruefully against the swelling lump on the side of his head, Vickers hesitated momentarily. Then he shrugged, turned again to examination of the air space. He remained up there under the rafters for fifteen minutes.

Before he left the storage room, Vickers picked a fragment of broken glass from the floor. A segment from someone's spectacles. The lens was thick and had been ground in a convex curve. . . .

The next day dawned clear and beautiful, and the countless windmills around John Stevenson's house stood motionless.

But by midmorning a rising wind set all the windmills to whirling and the pines sighed louder under a fresh breeze from directly down the lake channel.

Vickers sought out John Stevenson. "I find I shall need bait to trap a killer," he said. "Could you send someone to Visalia to get it for me?"

Stevenson seemed confused. "What is it? I'll go myself."

"That's not necessary. Anyone can get it. Why not just send Woodcock?"

"Well, if you think he'd handle it properly."

When the caretaker appeared, Vickers took a slip of paper from his pocket. "Here's what I want," he said. "A complete transcript of the land records relating to the plat described as NE  $\frac{3}{4}$ , Section 7, Township 34 East, Range 18 South. I've written it down for you."

Woodcock took the paper, looking at it woodenly. He shifted his gaze to John Stevenson. Stevenson nodded.

After Woodcock had gone, in the small motorboat, Vickers motioned Garnet Blackburn aside. "You can help too, if you will," he said in a low tone.

Blackburn inspected the tips of plump, well-manicured fingers critically. "Certainly, Vickers. What do you want?"

"You're still John Stevenson's guest," Vickers reminded the banker. "Ask him to take you for a trip around the lake. The weather's not too bad for that. I need it arranged somehow so only Orville Stevenson and I will be left here together."

Vickers walked over and took Orville firmly by the arm, urging the man outside onto the porch. As they left the room Blackburn was saying, "I wonder if we couldn't all take a little spin around the lake this morning,

John? It's calm as a mill pond, Beautiful."

**B**Y THE time Stevenson and his guests came back, there were ominous black clouds over the rocky bluff across the bay. Vickers was lolling comfortably in a hammock underneath the pines, as if he had not moved since the others left. Orville Stevenson was nowhere in evidence and did not appear until near dinner time.

Woodcock came back from Visalia and reported apologetically:

"Couldn't git what you wanted today. Folks in the record office was too busy to finish all the typin'. I'll go back tomorrow an' most likely they'll be ready then."

Vickers stretched languidly. "All right. I can't do a thing until I get those records, but I don't mind taking life easy for another day."

That evening was a dreary affair. Everyone was nervous and apprehensive. The moan of wind outside the house, the sound of waves breaking against the shore, the drum of rain slashing against the roof, all provided a turbulent background which did nothing to ease the tension which grew almost electric as the evening progressed.

John Stevenson, engaged in a chess game with Garnet Blackburn, finally exploded as Woodcock appeared with another armload of fuel for the crackling fireplace.

"I can't understand why you would light a fire on a warm evening like this," he complained. "Can't you use a little more judgment, Harry? I told you that the other night." He swung around to Vickers, "And when may we expect some progress on your investigation?" he asked irritably. "Or should we expect anything at all?"

Vickers got up and stretched himself, yawning. "Very soon," he said, carelessly. "I'm only waiting for those papers from Visalia. Woodcock tells me they'll be ready tomorrow."

His eyes were half closed as if with sleepiness. "Think I'll turn in early," he added. "Tomorrow's likely to be a strenuous day."

Stevenson grunted. Vickers went into the small bedroom where Mettee and the other two men had died. The heat from the brickwork of the fireplace made the room stifflingly hot. Vickers removed the bed coverings, put them into an empty bureau drawer. He took off his coat, loosened his shoes, but left them on. Then, instead of going to bed, he relaxed in the comfortable chair.

Through the thin partitions he could hear people stirring in the living room. Someone came along the hall, went into a room farther toward the back of the house. Tonight, Vickers felt sure, would see the finish of this strange case. He knew something he had not divulged to the others. That tonight the lurking killer would be frantically impelled to

strike again. And that the intended victim, this time, was certain to be one Valentine Vickers, *Specialist in the Impossible*.

He had two, maybe three or more hours, he decided, before the attempt upon his life would be made. So, because he possessed the rare and fortunate facility of being able to sleep when he wished and for only as long a period as he planned, Val Vickers closed his eyes and sank into a deep and restful slumber.

His mind, like an accurate alarm clock, woke him a couple of hours later. It was very dark; inside, the house itself was silent as a sepulchre. But rain was beating a devil's tattoo against the window pane and Vickers could hear the wind wailing in a high octave through the pines outside.

He lay quietly, waiting.

Time ticked past. In the darkness it seemed endless.

Then there was a sound. Very faint, the scrape of a board in the ceiling overhead. A brief interval of silence and the sound was repeated. Ears straining, Vickers heard a slight metallic clink in the room right beside him, and a rustle from the curtained alcove.

Abruptly the stillness of the night was shattered by a shrill, high-pitched scream, broken off almost before it started. The scream came from above the bedroom ceiling.

Vickers was out of his chair in a single leap. He clicked the light switch and the room was flooded with brilliance. From behind the curtain of the clothes closet alcove, Sheriff Bert Holden emerged, blinking in the sudden glare.

"Look!" Vickers shouted. He pointed up-

ward, and started moving toward the door.

One of the white pine boards which panelled the ceiling, had been removed at the head of the bed. Through the three-inch slot thus formed, a thick wire with a curved bit of metal forming a hook at the end, had been lowered. The hook made contact with the brass cross-piece of the bed. A similar device was lodged against the metal foot of the bed, having been lowered from another board removed in the ceiling at that point.

Slipperd feet were scurrying through the hall. The door burst open. John Stevenson, his house guests crowding behind him, was peering into Vickers' room with worried eyes.

"THE results for which you were so impatient," Vickers told Stevenson calmly. "The murderer is up in your attic air space, caught as safely as a rat in a wire cage." He spoke over John Stevenson's shoulder to Orville. "You'd better go up with the sheriff right away and pull him out before the current kills him."

"I don't understand," John Stevenson muttered as Orville and the sheriff disappeared toward the storage closet and the trap door.

"Orville and I rigged a trap this morning while you were away," Vickers informed his host. "We fixed a metal plate so the killer would have to stand on it. And we changed the electrical circuit so the switch handle actually formed another electrode. The killer, working as he had to in the dark, couldn't notice the changes. When he tried to electrocute me, as I knew he would, he actually shorted the current through his own body. But



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there isn't enough juice to kill him. Just enough to hold him frozen across the contact points. We made sure of that."

Porter Townsend was wiping perspiration again from his moist pink forehead. "And to think I slept in that bed last night! You shouldn't have let me, Vickers. I might have been killed!"

Vickers' hyperopthalmic eyes were dancing like those of a mischievous boy. "There wasn't the slightest danger last night, Townsend. I promised you that. You see, the current used for these killings didn't come from the power line. You know that already. It was actually generated by the windmill—the one with the man's figure and the airplane propeller. Under that windmill is a concealed dynamo. It only produces enough current to kill a man when there's a strong wind blowing. There was no wind last night. And besides, I told you, you're too short. Your hands and feet would not touch the head and foot of the bed to make the proper contact."

He pointed to the bed. "You see it's been carefully arranged to be too short for the average person. On a hot night, when the coverings have been thrown aside, anyone in the bed would be almost certain to touch the metal at the head and foot. The killer connected the bed frame with his electrical circuit by means of the hooks, pulled the switch concealed in the attic upstairs, and BING!"

John Stevenson looked dazed. "But who could have rigged up such a devilish device? I still don't—"

"Exactly the question I asked myself," Vickers said promptly. "And only one candidate qualified. Who would have had opportunity to conceal a dynamo under the windmill figure? Who could have buried wires from the dynamo to the house and connected the switch under the roof? Who was around here at times of the year when no one would observe what he was doing?"

"Not Harry Woodcock!"

"Woodcock, of course," Vickers agreed. "Wasn't it Woodcock, too, who built a fire each stormy night so the bedroom near the fireplace would be hot enough to make his intended victim throw off the protecting bed-clothes. I imagine we'll find that Woodcock maneuvered very cleverly to see that each victim occupied that special room."

"Woodcock!" John Stevenson still looked thunderstruck. "But why would Woodcock want to kill my friends?"

"Vengeance. You never really knew about it, did you?" Val Vickers seemed satisfied, as if one last remaining angle of the case had suddenly cleared in his own mind. "Because you didn't know, was the only reason you weren't killed yourself. But Townsend knows.

He could tell you how he and Parker and Anders and Mettee acquired the land where the Silver Fox lode was developed. How they managed to cheat the former owner, Harry Woodcock, out of his holdings. Woodcock never forgot or forgave and he vowed to get even some day. When you invited those men here to visit, you gave him his chance. I got my first inkling of Woodcock's interest in the Silver Fox from a chance remark yesterday by Dr. Dixon. That's why I went to Visalia. To check the land records myself. And that's why I sent Woodcock to bring back a transcript of his own former property. He didn't even try to get it, of course. He was thoroughly alarmed and knew he'd have to get me or be exposed. He'd already tried last night by throwing a sickle at me and that was before I'd even come close to the truth. I knew he'd take my bait and he did, hook, line and sinker."

Even Garnet Blackburn could not keep his curiosity from giving his question a hurried eagerness. "How in Heaven's name did you suspect the concealed wires, Vickers? I don't see—"

Val Vickers laughed. "As a specialist in illusions, I knew that every fantastic effect must have a logical cause. It's impossible to electrocute a man without electric current. Q.E.D.: there must be a hidden source of power." Both his eyes were suddenly the same color—the chill, cold grey of ice. "Woodcock had to operate his murder device on windy nights. It was his hard luck that the storms knocked out the Hydro-electric plant the same nights he killed a victim. That created the illusion which interested me. Without the illusion, the deaths might have been written off as accident and coincidence."

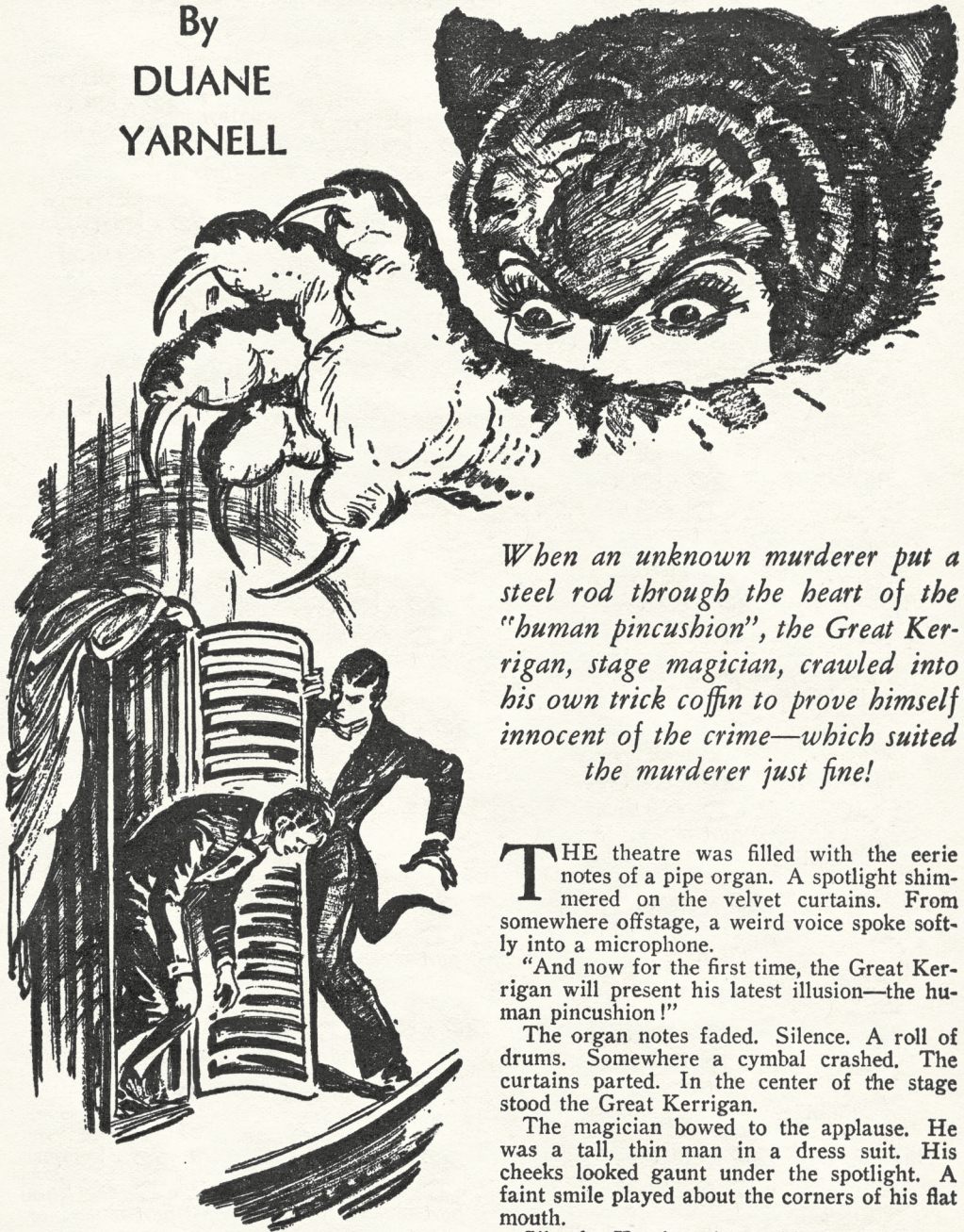
**L**ATER, when Bert Holden and his sullen prisoner had departed for the jail at Visalia, Vickers took Orville Stevenson aside again.

"I didn't think it necessary to tell them that you found the wires, too," he said. "Or that I was careless enough to let you hit me over the head when I came up under the roof to see where the wires went. And, of course, I shall keep my promise never to mention your little experiment in blackmail." A faint smile hovered around his lips and he seemed suddenly much less like a hawk about to pounce. "I hope you and Naila will be happy. As a wedding present, I shall try to influence Blackburn to put up money to finance your new process. It's a wonder you hadn't tried your blackmail game on him already."

Val Vickers grinned widely. "One piece of advice: next time you try something that can't stand the light, don't try to keep a *Specialist in the Impossible* in the dark."

# Claws For The Tiger Girl

By  
DUANE  
YARNELL



*When an unknown murderer put a steel rod through the heart of the "human pincushion", the Great Kerrigan, stage magician, crawled into his own trick coffin to prove himself innocent of the crime—which suited the murderer just fine!*

THE theatre was filled with the eerie notes of a pipe organ. A spotlight shimmered on the velvet curtains. From somewhere offstage, a weird voice spoke softly into a microphone.

"And now for the first time, the Great Kerrigan will present his latest illusion—the human pincushion!"

The organ notes faded. Silence. A roll of drums. Somewhere a cymbal crashed. The curtains parted. In the center of the stage stood the Great Kerrigan.

The magician bowed to the applause. He was a tall, thin man in a dress suit. His cheeks looked gaunt under the spotlight. A faint smile played about the corners of his flat mouth.

Silently, Kerrigan began his act. He made a motion with his left hand. Sam West, his strikingly handsome young assistant, walked onto the stage. West was carrying easily a

The lifeless body of young Sam West plunged face forward into the orchestra pit.

huge roll of burlap and a narrow, slatted box about the size of a coffin.

He upended the box on the stage, and stepped inside. With the lid closed, the lock snapped shut, Sam West's big body was still visible through the slotted openings. Then the great Kerrigan, with a flourish, wrapped the burlap around the box.

He made still another motion with his hands. A girl came from the wings. A slim, beautiful girl in spangled tights. Laura Evans, Kerrigan's other assistant. She carried a tray of long, steel rods that had been made to look like oversized pins. Each pin was three feet long, half an inch around and drawn to a sharp, tapering point.

Kerrigan took two pins, hit them together. They made a tinkling sound. The audience tittered nervously. Slowly, Kerrigan held one of the pins against the very center of the box. The pipe organ trilled a shuddery scale. Kerrigan's white hand flashed downward like an adder striking. He drove the pin through the burlap, through the box. A woman's scream rang through the theatre.

Swiftly, then, Kerrigan thrust the pins home. He drove pin after pin into the box. There seemed to be no rhyme, no reason, no pattern. Faster and faster he worked until he was in a veritable frenzy. When the final pin had been driven home, it was inconceivable that any man in that box could be alive. Kerrigan, faintly perspiring, bowed slightly from the hips, looked questioningly at the audience.

From somewhere in the balcony, a nervous voice yelled, "That's one way of getting rid of him, Kerrigan!"

Kerrigan's smile froze. He drew the human pincushion away from the silken backdrop, pulled it down to the footlights. Swiftly, he removed the pins from the burlap wrapping.

With the pins out, he started to unwrap the folds of burlap. But the burlap wouldn't come off. Puzzled, Kerrigan spun the box on its axis. A gleaming steel pin was sticking into the back of the box. Kerrigan pulled the pin. It came loose with an effort.

Kerrigan unwrapped the box in half a dozen seconds. He unlocked the door. In the wings, a stage hand finally came awake. He jerked the curtain rope. But even as the curtains closed, the slumped, lifeless body of young Sam West plunged face forward into the orchestra pit. The front of his boiled shirt was stained red where the pin had pushed through his body.

**A** BARREL-SHAPED man made his way through the crowd backstage. He was flanked by half a dozen plainclothes men. His name was John Rogan. He was Chief of Police.

Rogan's corpulent face was flushed, his

eyes grim. As Kerrigan watched him approach, he cursed the fates that had goaded him into making a monkey out of Rogan for publicity.

The city, at Rogan's instigation, had just built a new jail. Escape proof, Rogan had proclaimed proudly. For publicity purposes, Kerrigan had offered to escape from the jail. With the aid of a concealed gimmick, he had accomplished the feat in less than ten minutes. The papers had had a field day with the baffled Rogan. And Rogan hadn't forgotten.

Rogan saw Kerrigan standing beside the body. Rogan said, "You're a slick customer, Kerrigan, but how're you gonna get out of this one?"

"Out of which one?" Kerrigan asked softly.

"The stiff!" Rogan said wryly. "The corpse. The body. Murder's nasty, Kerrigan."

Kerrigan said, "You sound like the movies."

Rogan's expression didn't change. He pointed toward the body. Then to a frightened Laura Evans, Kerrigan's assistant.

"You had a reason. You were in love with the babe, here. You were gonna marry her. But Sam West was younger. So the babe breaks off her engagement with you to marry him. I read all about it in the papers."

"I wouldn't have killed him," Kerrigan said sardonically, "if I'd known you could read."

Rogan sputtered. "Okay, be a smart guy. But murder ain't funny. You figured if you'd pull it in front of an audience, you could get away with it by callin' it an accident." Rogan turned to Laura Evans. "How about it, babe? Did you jilt him, like the papers said?"

Laura didn't meet Kerrigan's gaze. Her shoulders were shaking and the sound of soft sobs came from her bloodless lips. "Yes . . . I was going to marry Sam," the girl murmured.

Rogan's eyes were triumphant as he stared at Kerrigan.

"Get outa that one," he challenged.

Kerrigan sighed wearily. The stage was just as it had been when the curtains had been drawn. The final two acts had been cancelled. The audience had been told to go home.

Kerrigan pointed to the silken backdrop. "I don't know who killed West or why. But I know it was done by someone who parted the curtains and pushed a steel pin into Sam's back. This morning, I missed three of those pins—but I thought I'd mislaid them. Apparently, they were stolen by the murderer."

Rogan didn't believe it. His eyes were hostile. "Just how was this pincushion trick of your supposed to work?"

Kerrigan said, "I can't tell you. If I did, every magician in the country would steal the trick. It's a professional secret."

Rogan grunted, and turned to study the faces of those gathered around him. There were five women, all members of the traveling



stage show. There were four men, stage hands.

"Any of you have any reason to kill the guy?" Rogan asked.

"I'll bet they tell you," Kerrigan said bitterly.

Kerrigan studied the faces of the five women. The two Anson girls had a tumbling act and they had been due on the stage at the conclusion of Kerrigan's pincushion illusion.

"Where were you when it happened?" Kerrigan asked them.

June Anson's faded blonde face was drained of color. "Betty and I were getting our tables ready for the next act. We were in the wings all the time."

The Chief looked at Carole Bestor, a woman juggler.

"Okay, sweetheart. Maybe you got an alibi too."

Carole Bestor was a small brunette and her eyes were red from weeping. She stammered, "Why—I—"

"She was with me, Chief." The voice came from the wings. The speaker was a tall, willowy girl with dusky eyes and jet black hair. She danced under the stage name of Raven. Raven said, "We were smoking in my dressing room when it happened."

Rogan said, "That takes care of the women. Laura, here, couldn't have done it. She was on the stage all the time."

A man in plain clothes said, "I've checked the four stage hands. They all had jobs to do and were doing 'em at the time of the killing. They're clean."

Rogan had a pair of handcuffs in his right pocket. He started to reach for them. "You men stay here and check the alibis again. In the meantime, I'm takin' the murderer to the station."

Kerrigan started to make a break for it. He bumped into Rogan. But three cops piled him to the floor. When he got up, he extended his wrists. He did it peaceably.

The crowd had started to melt away. Kerrigan preceded Rogan down a narrow, dark alleyway. He smelled perfume, recognized it. He saw her then, standing back of a cement pillar. It was Raven, the dancer. She had an empty beer bottle lifted above her head. Kerrigan was half a dozen steps in front of

Rogan. As he passed Raven, she whispered, "When I hit him . . . run!"

But Kerrigan shook his head. "Not now," he muttered. With his eyes, he flashed his appreciation of Raven's attempt to help him escape.

They walked into the alley where Rogan's car was parked. They climbed in. At the end of the alley, they turned into a wide street. After they had driven three blocks, Kerrigan turned to the Chief.

"One thing about being a magician, Rogan. It takes more than handcuffs to hold you."

Rogan looked straight ahead, chuckled. "Don't give me that stuff. Them handcuffs are fool proof."

Kerrigan said, "The hell of it is, I'm not a fool. Look."

Rogan looked. His eyes bugged. Kerrigan's wrists were free. Rogan hit the brake with his right foot. Kerrigan clipped the Chief under the chin with a straight, hard fist. He put the cuffs into his pocket and stepped out and lost himself in the crowd.

**R**AVEN'S eyes were large and dusky and startled. Her hands flew to her white throat. She stared fascinatedly at the man who had just entered her dressing room.

"Kerrigan . . . you were in handcuffs! How—"

Kerrigan said, "When I tried to escape back stage it was a phony act. I bumped Rogan and switched a pair of my trick cuffs for the ones in his pocket. I felt more at home when he put *my* cuffs on me. That's why I didn't let you try to help me escape. I didn't want you to get involved. But thanks, baby, anyway."

"What are you going to do now, Kerrigan?"

"Find the murderer," Kerrigan said. He looked speculative as he eyed Raven. "You tried to help me once. Maybe you can help me again. Do you know why any of those women would have wanted to kill Sam West?"

Raven said slowly, "Every woman in the act was upset. Sam West had three of them thinking that each was the one he loved. I know that he borrowed money and didn't pay it back."

"Who were the women, baby?"

"Carole Bestor was one. And from the way



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the Anson sisters acted, I think he must have been borrowing from them, too. Then there was Laura. Maybe she found out about him—"

Kerrigan frowned. "Laura couldn't have done it. The Ansons might have. But Carole Bestor was in your room when it happened. So that lets her out."

Raven watched a thin coil of smoke drift ceilingward. "Yes. That eliminates Carole."

"And leaves only the Anson sisters. The tumblers."

"There might have been others," Raven said.

Kerrigan studied Raven's dark, exotic face. "Why are you helping me, baby?"

A faint smile hovered on the girl's lips. "Don't you know, Kerrigan?" she asked softly.

Kerrigan walked over to her. He looked deeply into her eyes. What he saw unnerved him. He had looked into Laura's eyes before but he had never felt like this. His arms slipped around her. He kissed her full upon the mouth, released her.

"Baby," he said, "why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Slim white hands gripped Kerrigan's. They were hard hands. Strong hands. Raven said, "You'll be sentenced to death in this town, Kerrigan. Rogan's out to get you. I've got a home up in the Catskills. And enough money to live on. We'd hit it off, you and I. We can get married and stay there until they forget about you."

It sounded interesting. But Kerrigan said, "Maybe later, baby. But not now. I've got to clear up this other first."

Kerrigan eased the door open. The cop was gone. Directly across the hall was Sam West's dressing room. Kerrigan entered it. The light was on and Sam's trunk was closed. That pleased Kerrigan. Rogan had been so sure of Kerrigan's guilt that he hadn't bothered to investigate Sam West's background.

Kerrigan found what he wanted. A pack of scented letters. He broke the string around them, pulled up a chair. This was going to be interesting. He started to leaf through the envelopes—

The lights went out. Kerrigan half turned. That was all that saved him. Otherwise, the blow would have landed squarely on top of his head instead of glancing. Knocked from his chair, he felt a hand brush over him, snatch the letters. He tried to move but he was paralyzed. He felt the blackness rolling down over him. He fought it . . . fought . . . it . . .

Kerrigan was out only a moment. He got up, found the lights. His head was a mess, with his right ear torn, and blood everywhere.

But the letters were gone.

Kerrigan stepped into the hallway again.

Raven's door was closed. Through the panel, a cop was saying, "I know you didn't do it, sister, but I gotta go through the motions of checkin' your alibi. Why don't we do it at the Canabarra Club after I get off at midnight?"

A sharp slap of a hand against flesh came through the panel. Kerrigan grinned as he walked quickly down the hallway. He turned a corner. The door of the Anson sisters' dressing room was half open. The Ansons were fighting.

"He couldn't have loved you, June. He loved me! Why, I loaned him half the money I earned—"

"So did I! And he told me I was the only one. Why, that cheap chiseler—he got what was coming to him!"

"Stop talking about him! I loved him so. I won't stand for it—"

"Quit blubbing. You're lucky he was killed." The door opened the rest of the way. June Anson came out. Kerrigan had to move fast to make it into his own dressing room. He heard June Anson leave by the back exit. An instant later, footsteps came across the hall and Kerrigan's door opened. Betty Anson was holding one of the gleaming steel pins that had been stolen from Kerrigan.

When she saw him, the pin clattered to the floor. Kerrigan said, "Okay, Betty, maybe you can tell me what you did with the third one. You killed West with one. Here's the second—"

The girl's drab face was flushed crimson. "I—I found it hidden in my dressing room. I didn't want to get caught with it. I—I was only bringing it back."

Kerrigan said, "I'll remember it when I talk to Rogan."

Betty Anson's eyes narrowed. "I thought you were *with* Rogan." She withdrew hastily. Kerrigan knew that she was going to find a telephone.

He beat her to it. He went back to his own room, called Rogan on the phone. He said, "Rogan, I don't want to be on the prowl forever. I'll make a deal with you. Give me twenty-four hours of unmolested freedom. If I don't turn up your murderer by then, I'll come in voluntarily."

Rogan said, "Next time I see you, I'll plug you."

Kerrigan said, "Answer my question. Will you talk business with me?"

Rogan said, "You know who done it—besides you?"

Kerrigan said, "It could have been any one of several women. If you bring your boys into it, the gals will clam up and I'll be the goat again. There's only one way to break this case and that's by a confession. I think I can get it."

"You're stalling," Rogan said.

Kerrigan said, "Give me twenty-four hours. Or start looking for me now. I'm hanging up, Rogan."

Rogan was desperate. "I—I'll lay off. But it's highly irregular. I—"

"And tell the papers I've been cleared," Kerrigan said. "Tell 'em it wasn't my fingerprints on the murder weapon. Tell 'em I'm nice to my Sunday school teacher. Tell 'em anything, you kluck!"

Kerrigan hung up. Rogan hated his insides, but Rogan would keep his word. Tomorrow, Kerrigan could call Rogan and have a long talk with him. In the meantime, he needed to do some thinking.

**T**HE theatre was packed. The curtains were drawn. Backstage, Kerrigan listened to the eerie roll of organ music. He stood in the wings. In a moment, he would go on for his human pincushion act. But tonight Kerrigan was going to be the victim. The press had announced that Kerrigan had been cleared of the killing, that the police expected an arrest at any moment. Tonight, theatre seats had been at a premium.

Kerrigan studied the faces of the women in the wings. The Anson sisters were visibly upset as they prepared their tables for the tumbling act that was to follow. They had been fighting between themselves all day. Carole Bestor was red eyed and no amount of makeup would hide it. Raven, too, seemed to have the jitters.

The organ music grew shrill. Kerrigan looked at the women, said to them, "If the murderer hadn't made one mistake, I'd have been in jail by now. But the crime wasn't perfect. I know who did it and after this act, I'm going to prove it."

Kerrigan was lying and he knew it. So, it seemed, did the women who listened to him. They were not impressed. Kerrigan went out and the curtains parted. A new assistant brought the coffin shaped box and the burlap onto the stage. Kerrigan stepped into the box. It was very close to the silken backdrop.

The door was closed and the burlap wrapped around the box. Kerrigan tapped softly on the floor of the box. Slowly, the floor lowered under him as he was eased through a trap door.

That wasn't the trick. Doing it this way was hard on Kerrigan's ego. It was a breach

of his professional ethics. But this time it was justified. Looking up through the box, Kerrigan could see the steel pins being run through the burlap and the slats.

Kerrigan was below the stage. He walked noiselessly up a flight of stairs, into the wings. There were two backdrops, the one back of the burlap box and another five feet back of that. It was dark between the two drops. Kerrigan crept silently along the rear backdrop, stopped when he had reached the center of the stage.

He heard the footsteps. A vague form was outlined in the darkness. The form came to a halt. A hand, barely visible, drew back. It was holding a long, steel pin. This, then, was the third one that had been stolen. The hand moved swiftly and the pin was driven through the curtain, into the burlap covered box out front.

Kerrigan leaped forward. His left hand went around the woman's waist. His other hand went over her mouth. The woman bit him and he swore. She kicked him and he bent her back across his body and carried her into his dressing room.

He snapped the door shut behind him, turned the key. Then turned on the light. Carole Bestor, the woman juggler, looked as if she'd been drawn through the eye in a needle. Kerrigan shoved her roughly into a chair.

He said, "I've got to get back and finish my act. I hope you don't mind." He bent down, tied a rope around her feet. "When I come back, you can tell me why you were silly enough to try to murder me the same way you murdered Sam West!"

"I—I didn't kill Sam. I loved him!"

"You and half a million others," Kerrigan said.

"You've gone crazy," Carole Bestor cried. "You killed Sam! You killed him just as I was going to kill you. With a stab in the back."

Kerrigan put a gag in her mouth, tied her hands. There was no terror in her eyes. He said, "I'll be back soon. And when I come, I'll have Rogan with me."

Kerrigan went downstairs. He was just in time. The steel pins were being withdrawn from the cage. He stood on the automatic lift and was carried up into the box. The bottom snapped shut. The box was unwrapped and Kerrigan stepped out and took his bow.

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He felt like a fish in a large glass bowl.

The curtains closed. The Anson sisters shoved their tables onto the stage as Kerrigan walked past. He sighed and walked heavily down the hallway toward his dressing room. He opened the door.

Carole Bestor was sitting in the chair, just as Kerrigan had left her. Her hands were untied. Her hands were resting on the head of one of those gleaming, iron pins. Her pretty white hands, all covered with blood.

The pin had been driven into her heart.

Kerrigan could imagine facing Rogan now. Kerrigan would say, "Yonder sits the babe who killed Sam West."

Rogan would say. "Swell. Now who killed her?"

Kerrigan would say, "Suicide!"

And Rogan would reply, "You're gonna fry on the hot seat, my slick and slimy friend."

**K**ERRIGAN left things as they were. He walked down the hall to Raven's dressing room. She was painting a pair of sheer stockings on a lovely white leg when he entered.

Kerrigan said, "Carole's dead."

Raven's eyes were startled. "Who killed her?"

Kerrigan said, "It's suicide. She couldn't stand it without the boy friend."

Raven smiled softly. "Then that lets you out, Kerrigan. They can never try to blame it onto you."

Kerrigan sat down beside a telephone. "Peace, it's wonderful." He sighed. "Baby . . . is that offer still open? That place up in the Catskills?"

Raven came gliding across the room. She was wearing a soft, silken robe and she held her arms out to him. He got up and stepped into the pleasant circle of them.

"I'm ready when you are," Raven said.

Kerrigan did not pull away. He reached down, picked up the phone with his left hand and dialed a number. He saw the question in Raven's eyes. He said, "Send a bottle of whatever you've got over to the Rialto. Dressing room number seven. Hurry it. There's a little celebration."

Raven's eyes smiled at him and she snuggled against his shoulder. She said, "Kerrigan, I'll always love you."

Kerrigan's voice was dreamy. "And I'll always love you, baby." He pressed his nose into the hollow of her shoulder. "Why'd you kill Sam, baby? And Carole Bestor—"

She stiffened. "Kerrigan—you're joking!"

Kerrigan said, "I'm not joking. You killed Sam West because he jilted you. And last night, you damn near killed me to keep me

from finding your letters among the others."

She did not try to get away from him. Instead, she pressed even closer. Her voice was very husky. "All right, I did kill Sam! He was too weak to live!" Her eyes had a blazing intensity as she looked up at him. Her arms pressed tighter around his shoulders. "You're my kind of man, Kerrigan. I know it, now. You're hard. You're strong. We can still have a great life together. Carole Bestor was a worse chiseler than Sam West. I killed her, too. I was going to make it look more like a suicide—until I heard you coming. We've still got time to make it look that way, Kerrigan. We can both go free. We'd have a wonderful life together."

Kerrigan hesitated. Raven saw that hesitation. She pressed still closer to him. "Kiss me, Kerrigan!"

He leaned forward to kiss her. He felt the pressure of the knife blade against his back. It sent a little tingle down his spine. He whirled and grabbed Raven's wrist. She bit him. But he got the knife that she had been carrying in the sleeve of her robe. He threw her across the room and onto a divan. She tried to leap up but he pushed her in the stomach with his knee.

He said, "You wonder why the knife didn't go through my back? I'll tell you, baby. With so many guys being stuck in the ribs, I figured I'd better protect myself. I'm wearing an 'iron' vest under my coat."

Raven's eyes were the eyes of a wounded tigress. Kerrigan looked sad. "You thought if you told me you loved me, I'd never suspect that you had loved Sam West enough to kill him when he jilted you." Kerrigan shrugged. "It was fun, though, while it lasted."

The door opened. Rogan came in. Rogan looked very upset. "I gotta give you credit," he said. "You delivered the goods."

Raven stared at Rogan. She looked accusingly at Kerrigan. "When you called for the liquor, you were really calling Rogan. And you left the receiver unhooked so that he could hear!"

Kerrigan said, "I had to do it, baby."

Rogan said, "Sweetheart, we got you cold." He turned to Kerrigan. "With all the dames having the same motive, how'd you decide it was this one?"

Kerrigan said, "I eliminated the Ansons early. It takes both of them every second they have to get their tables ready to follow my pincushion act. The night of the murder, they were ready to go on when the curtains were drawn. They didn't have time to do the job."

"How did you eliminate Carole Bestor?" Rogan asked.

"I THOUGHT she was guilty," Kerrigan admitted. "Until I returned to my dressing room and found her dead. I knew it couldn't be suicide. You see, three pins were stolen from me. One was found in Sam West's back. You have it as evidence. Another was hidden in the room of the Anson sisters and the third in Carole's dressing room—probably to provide additional suspects in case you couldn't make your charge stick against me. Betty Anson found the pin in her room and returned it. Carole Bestor found the one in her room and in a fit of rage, tried to kill me with it, just as she thought I'd killed Sam West."

Kerrigan turned and looked at Raven. "You'd have gotten away with it, except for one thing. There was only one pin available and it was sticking through the curtain into the back of the box, where Carole had driven it. You were the only suspect free to have taken it."

"But why'd she kill Carole?" Rogan demanded.

Kerrigan said, "Last night, Carole didn't have an alibi. So Raven said they were in her dressing room smoking. That gave Carole an out. It also gave Raven an alibi. But when I caught Carole trying to kill me to-

night, she was half hysterical. Raven knew that if I turned Carole over to the cops, they'd break down her alibi. And then Raven would have had to explain where she was during Sam West's murder."


Rogan said, "It checks." He looked at Raven. "Come on, sweetheart."

Raven stood up. Her chin was up and her eyes were staring at Kerrigan. Pityingly, Kerrigan thought. As Raven left, she brushed close to Kerrigan. "If I'd used a knife on Carole, instead of that steel pin, it could have gone as a suicide. You know, Kerrigan, I'm sorry I didn't. We'd have had fun in the Catskills!"

He watched her leave. The fragrance of her perfume lingered in the room. Kerrigan sat down and poured a drink. He tried to relax, but couldn't. He kept remembering the tigerish fierceness of Raven's kiss. What was the matter with him? The girl had tried to kill him!

He tried to think of Laura. He knew he could have her again. Laura with the gentle kisses.

The thought left him cold. His mind flashed back to Raven. He leaned forward, buried his head in his hands and stared miserably at the floor.



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Fantastic Crime Novelette

By FRANCIS K. ALLAN

*Doomed to a living death, Steve Wall heard the hooded killer say: "You may pass me on the street, you may even drink with me, never recognizing that I am the man who will give you orders—for the rest of your very uncertain life, Mr. Wall!"*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Black is the Hood of Murder

IT WAS just after five in the afternoon when Steve Wall left the elevator at the sixth floor of the Fitzhugh Building and moved down the corridor. He stopped at a door and surveyed the neat letters: Wall and Gregg, Attorneys-at-Law. He entered.

His partner, Martin Gregg, was putting on his hat. Helen, the secretary, was closing her typewriter. Steve dropped his brief-case.

"Your mail," Helen said, handing him a pack of letters.

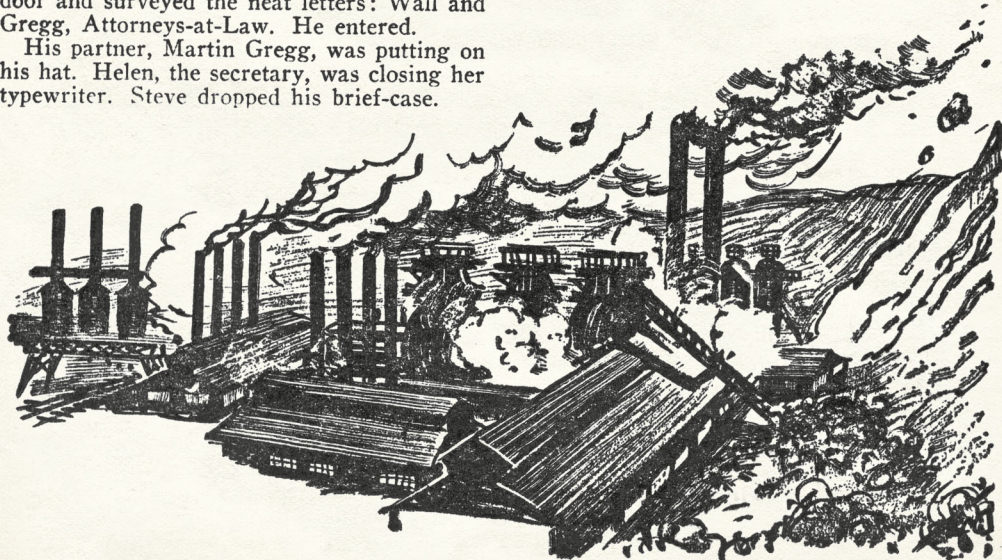
He riffled them and stopped at a brown envelope without a return address or name. He slit the flap and opened the one sheet.

Mr. Stephen Wall,

As a dear friend . . . as a curious dear friend, may I ask: Why has your wife not been informed of the whereabouts of her father? Can it be that you have some motive for this secrecy? And may I ask: Why has she not been told of the two hundred thousand dollars that he left with you? Have you some motive?

May I apologize for not signing my name? Very soon we shall meet, you and I. We will talk. . . .

"What's the matter—somebody die, Steve?" Martin's voice wondered from the distance.





With a sickening swiftness, Steve felt his legs drop into emptiness over the cliff.

Steve waked and folded the letter away. "It's just . . . nothing. Let's . . . have a drink."

**I**N A booth at the corner bar, Steve's fingers kept returning to his pocket. He could scarcely believe his memory.

"What's the matter with you?" Martin asked. "I've been telling you for ten minutes about the Village Dramatic Club, and you haven't heard a word! Do you, or don't you, want to see your partner in an amateur theatrical?"

Steve slowly moved his head. "The hell of it was, not a soul was supposed to know."

"Know what? What are you talking about? That Brooklyn witness?"

"Huh? . . . Oh, no. I meant my father-in-law, Max Count."

"What brought him up? I haven't heard of him in six months. Didn't he disappear after some gossip about a killing?"

"He—I'll pass this next drink, Martin. I feel terrible." Steve rose, nodded absently, and walked out.

It was after six when he entered his apartment in New York's West End. He heard Ann's swift steps hurry toward him.

"HELLO, mister!" she greeted. She stood on tip-toe and offered her lips. He did not move. He looked at her, yet his eyes seemed far away. Slowly she frowned. "Huh? You don't love me any more?"

He waked and kissed her, rumpling the short waves of her golden hair. "Sure I do. What's cooking?"

"Oh, beans and—" She stopped. "Steve, the strangest letter came to me this morning. I don't understand what—"

He took the brown envelope from her hand and pulled out the single sheet. Before he read a word, he knew. . . .

**Mrs. Stephen Wall,**

As an old friend . . . as a curious old friend who merely wishes to help, may I ask a question: Where has your father been for the past six months? Why has he been away? Are you certain your husband does not know where he is? Perhaps you will ask your husband one question: Where is a certain large sum of cash of which you have not been told?

Someday we shall have a long talk. . . .

"What does it mean?" Ann asked. "It's not even signed and—"

"I—" He stopped. He did not remember lying to Ann before; this was going to be hard. "I don't know, honey. Forget this thing."

"But where is father? Nobody knows! He didn't even tell me good-bye when he left! And those letters of his from Mexico—they have no return address! They never tell me anything about him!"

"Ann," he said slowly, "your father is a smart man. Whatever he's doing is best. You've got to believe that. Just . . . believe it."

"But why can't he write and tell me?"

"I don't know. I— Oh, let's eat," he said almost angrily.

Ann was frowning uneasily as she went away. Steve moved to the window and stood there, looking down. His fingers opened and closed against his palms. "Who in hell could have found out everything? . . ."

It was after midnight when the ring of the telephone woke him. He pulled the sheet higher and hoped. It didn't stop. He felt his way across the darkness to the hall. "Hello?" he grunted.

"Stephen Wall?" asked a man's voice. "This is Dr. Werner Grantham."

"Oh, Grantham. What do you—"

"Listen: I'm at Max Count's Lost Lodge.

He called me an hour ago. When I got here he . . . Steve, I think he's dying!" the doctor threw out harshly.

"Dying!" Steve closed the door to the bed room. "What's the matter? When did he come back from—"

"I know nothing about that. He has a high fever. Sometimes he is delirious. When consciousness returns, he asks for you. He knows he's dying! This fever has been with him a long time, I think—"

"All right! I'll be out!" He hung up.

"Steve! What is it, Steve?" Ann called sleepily.

He turned on the light and opened the door. "It's just . . . an old client. He wants me to draw a will tonight."

"But I thought I heard you say doctor."

"The doctor called me. I've got to go." He began to pull on his clothes. He paused before the mirror. His eyes looked back at him, black and troubled. His lean face was lined and uneasy, his short black hair rumpled. He shook himself. "Back in an hour."

The clock in the filling-station at upstate Vardenville showed one-ten as Steve drove through the little hamlet. A mile beyond the last house, he turned into a narrow rocky road that soon became a trail. In the shifting arcs of the headlamps, whitish and angular trees crept out of the night. A rain had begun, and the drops slanted listlessly through the lights. The motor labored up the tortuous trail. He shifted into second and the car crept on. As he reached the crest of the hill, the lights spilled down to reveal the the shore of a small lake.

A long rambling building of stone and logs appeared. One dim light shone through an upper window. He turned off the motor and lights and hurried toward the porch. The door of Lost Lodge swung inward, and the odor of stale dust came to his nostrils. The light shone down the rude log stairs. He hurried upward.

"Dr. Grantham," he called as he opened the door to Max Count's bed room. "Where are—" He stopped, looking down, stunned, at Max Count.

The huge body was relaxed upon the bed; the flesh was white; the fingers were limp and open upon the sheet. Only in the man's face were there traces of his strength and power. The eyes were deep-set beneath craggy brows. Heavy lines webbed the cheeks, and his head was utterly bald.

All that Steve saw. Yet he seemed to stare in a trance—at the round dark hole in the center of the forehead. It hadn't bled much—only two drops of blood that now were dry. Like two small tears they lay, dark on his temple.

Steve reached down; the body was still



warm. He straightened; his hard black eyes roamed the room. He found the brown envelope propped on the dresser: To Stephen Wall. . . . He opened it slowly.

**Mr. Stephen Wall,**

As an old friend who is sincerely interested in your safety, may I offer the following facts before the police arrive; and they are on their way, I should tell you.

First, I am afraid that Max Count was murdered with your thirty-two revolver; and you know that the gun is registered with the police.

Second, I am afraid that the murderer is in possession of a receipt, signed by you, proving that Max Count gave you two hundred thousand dollars, six months ago. It is remotely possible that the police will think you killed him to keep the money.

Third, the killer has evidence to prove that you called Max Count back from Mexico. Also it can be proved that you were here at the time of the murder. And last, if you will look at Count's legs, you will see they are chained to the bed. That chain is locked; you cannot remove it now. But the key to that lock is among certain of your possessions, and will be found by the police.

Unless, Stephen Wall, you return at once to your apartment and await a message from the murderer, I sincerely advise you to do so, for your safety, as well as the safety of your wife.

It will do you no good to search for Dr. Werner Grantham. He is no longer able to prove that he called you. Within twenty-four hours, the good doctor will be dead. Do not join him. . . .

A friend.

"Friend!" Steve exploded furiously.

He stared at Count's thick ankles; there was a chain, locking them to the heavy bed. There was a massive lock with an intricate keyhole. "Who in hell—"

He stopped. Through the window he saw the flash of a distant light. Again he saw it—headlamps weaving their way through the woods, slowly approaching the Lodge! The police!

**O**NE uncertain moment he waited, trying to think. Then he snapped out the light, crumpled the note into his pocket, and hurried from the room. Down the stairs he

plunged, across the porch, to his waiting car.

"Good evening, Mr. Wall," spoke a soft whisper. Steve twisted. Into the car slipped a shadowy figure. The blunt point of a gun settled against Steve's ribs. "We shall wait very quietly," the figure whispered musically. "Everything is progressing perfectly." He laughed—an acid and humorless sound.

"Who are you! What in hell's the idea! What—"

"Do not be impatient. We have a long time to talk, later. You will know me very well. For the rest of your life you are going to know me, Mr. Wall. But you will never know who I am. . . . Perhaps you will pass me on the street. Perhaps I will be the man next door, but I will be unknown. My face is no face you have ever known before, yet I know you well." And the laugh came again.

"You . . . you're insane!" Steve whispered thickly. He stared, trying to penetrate the darkness of the man's face. The features refused to take form. There was nothing but a black mass. Then the lights of the police car swung over the trees to the left; they were extinguished and doors slammed. Flash-lights played and steps crossed the porch of the Lodge. A heavy knock sounded.

"Me—I think it's a dead-alley chase," a voice growled.

"But why the hell would that doctor have called us?"

Steve did not move. The gun dug deeper into his ribs. The Lodge door opened and the steps began to echo through the silent building.

"Now," whispered the dark figure. "Start the motor. Cut down that trail and drive!"

"But, you . . . you fool! They'll see us and—"

"I said drive!" The voice was edged with throbbing fury.

Numbly Steve turned the key. The motor roared. He released the clutch and the car leaped forward. From the Lodge came a shout and the thunder of running feet. The dark figure reached down and snapped on the lights. The brilliant beams caught the porch and flooded over two uniformed figures in the doorway.

"Stop! Stop that car!" one man shouted.

Frantically Steve twisted the wheel. He saw the second man drawing a gun. Then a ham-

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mering blast roared against his ears. The windshield shattered, spraying glass around. He waited for the pain. None came. And then he saw. . . .

The man with the gun staggered backward. His mouth sagged open. His fingers parted and the gun fell. His knees buckled and he fell forward on his face. He did not move.

"You killed that man!" Steve choked.

"Drive! Fast! I can kill two, you know!" the figure snapped.

The coupe rocked into the narrow trail. Fenders scraped trees. Rocks sang beneath tires. The headlamps sprayed their weaving beams through the night. Steve remembered to breathe. He listened for a sound behind him, for the car to follow. Nothing. . . .

"Stop here," the figure ordered after another minute.

Steve obeyed. The door opened. The gun left his ribs and the man stepped out. "This . . . is it," Steve whispered silently. "This is the way people die—" Then it came; not a shot, but a whisper:

"I believe that you have read the letter. Furthermore, when this car is found, that other policeman will identify it. You will have two murders to explain. So . . ."

"So?" Steve asked tightly.

"I KNOW that you have two hundred thousand dollars of Max Count's money. Get it. Have it ready at ten o'clock in the morning. You will hear from me. When our bargain is made, we shall discuss our plans for the future."

"What future?" Steve asked bitterly. "You'll get the money and throw me to the cops."

"Oh, no. Hardly." The man laughed. "I have plans for you. You are going to live a long time. A long time, Mr. Wall."

"And if I don't get the money?"

"You love your wife, I presume."

"Oh," Steve said very softly.

"I thought so. I will see you at ten." The man stepped back. In that moment, in the reflection of the lights, Steve saw. . . .

There was no face! There was only a long black hood of cloth, flowing down over the shoulders!

"You'd better be going. I hear a car at the Lodge," the man said.

Steve choked a curse. The car leaped forward. Down the trail it sped, into the highway toward New York.

It was two-thirty when Steve turned into a dark narrow street in the upper West End. He stopped before a dark squat building in the middle of the block, unlocked the big steel doors. In the yellow glow of a match, two dismantled trucks took shape.

He drove his car into the building. As he

climbed out, something rolled from the seat and dropped to the concrete floor. He struck another match. There lay a small black tube, like a fountain pen. He lifted it and unscrewed the cap. Into his palm slipped a thermometer.

The match went out, and he stood there in the darkness. He remembered the words of the policeman at the Lodge: "Why the hell would the doctor have called us. . . ." And Steve remembered the midnight call from Dr. Werner Grantham.

He returned to the steel door, lowered it and turned the lock. "Now, if nobody remembers I'm the lawyer for the bankrupt Hoolihan warehouse," he murmured.

Two blocks away he entered the telephone booth of a smoke-filled bar and dialed. His breath tightened as he heard Ann's sleepy, "Hello?"

"Ann—it's Steve. Ann, listen. I can't explain now. Dress. Get out of that apartment. Walk to the subway and go to Greenwich Village. Change trains a couple of times. Don't get followed. Be damned sure that—"

"But Steve! What is the—"

"Go to the Albatross Hotel on 14th Street. Get a room. Sign in as Ann Smith. Stay in that room until you hear from me. Is that perfectly clear?"

"But I— No! I don't understand! You sound—"

"Something's happened. I'll tell you later. Do what I say—the Albatross at once." He hung up, mopped the sweat from his brow, and left the bar. He caught a cab and gave the address of Dr. Werner Grantham's apartment.

"How the hell he ever found out," Steve wondered rawly. "How he ever got Max back from Monterrey! That damned man's insane! He's been setting this up for God knows how long! That key! My gun! Future plans!"

At 72nd Street, just below Broadway, he left the cab. He turned into a drab brown-stone house. The lobby was dark.

Swiftly he climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. Silently he moved to Grantham's door. He heard no sound. He tried the knob. It turned freely. The front room was dark. A margin of light shone beneath the closed door of the study. Still there was no sound.

Steve tried to recall the room in which he stood. On the radio in the corner, he remembered. . . . He moved toward that corner and his fingers closed on a heavy bronze vase. He tip-toed toward the door. He gathered his muscles, gripped the vase, and opened the door.

The room was empty! In silent mockery the lamp shed its golden light across the desk and rug. Steve turned and looked behind him. Uneasily he entered the study. A sensation, uncertain yet deep and persistent, crept into his mind. A sensation of being watched with

unseen eyes, of moving within a planned and waiting trap.

The silence grew to thunder in his tense ears. Relentlessly the lamp burned on. A salty bead of perspiration burned in Steve's eye. Abruptly he bent over. From the waste-basket he lifted a huge scrap of black cloth. From the center had been cut a pattern.

"Black! And that hood was black!" he whispered.

"Yes. Yes, Stephen Wall. That hood was black," spoke a voice.

Steve turned. In the doorway stood the figure—large-bodied, stoop-shouldered, and gaunt. The gun sprayed bright reflections in Steve's eyes. The door closed. "You are early," the voice spoke softly. "Our appointment was for ten."

"Dr. Grantham! I knew damned well!"

"Your intuition is good—too good."

"What're you going to do? Take off that hood and—"

"No, thank you," came the dry answer. "You will never see my face. Not as *mine*. A thousand times you may see it, but never as mine."

"What are you talking about?"

"Think: how long since you last saw me? A month? Many changes have been made since then." He touched the features beneath the black cloth. "Only two people in this world ever knew what my new face resembled. And one of them, a facial-surgeon, met a sad death a week ago. Now only I know what Werner Grantham looks like."

"You killed the man who changed your face!" Steve's cheeks narrowed. "Murder comes cheap to you these days."

"Not cheap. It is well worth the effort."

"You mean the two hundred grand? How did you find out?"

## CHAPTER TWO

### Money or Your Wife

THE man laughed gently. "It was six months ago. One morning Max Count asked me to prepare an unusually large quantity of his heart-medicine; enough to last him for over a year. I had heard of some trouble at his Madison Club—the shooting of Phillip Avelli, to be precise. It occurred to me that Count was leaving town because of that trouble. And then I thought: Would it not be of value to know where he was going?"

"Just a natural gift for blackmail," Steve supplied.

"I take care of myself. . . . It was a simple matter for me, his doctor, to administer a sleeping-powder under the guise of heart-medicine. While he slept, I searched his papers. I learned the address to which he was going

in Monterrey, Mexico. Much more interesting, I found the receipt that you signed the day before; a receipt for two hundred thousand dollars in cash. I have it now. And so, six months ago, I began to make my perfect plan."

"You think it's perfect?" Steve wondered ironically.

"Quite perfect. And I have evidence that can burn you for double-murder. Unless you follow my orders."

"I see." Steve's hard eyes watched the gun relentlessly. "And if I pay you the two hundred grand? How do I know I won't go the way of Max?"

"Because you are more valuable to me alive. I know, of course, that you are the executor of Max Count's estate. He was rich—"

"But you know damned well what that money is for!" Steve exploded. "It goes to set up that paralysis fund. I can't touch a dime of it! You know that! You were named with me and Dr. Feller and Dr. Smallens to form the fund. They'd yell if I tried to—"

"We shall dispose of them before they talk."

"You'd kill them!" Steve stared.

"Yes, I will kill them." He gestured. "Listen: At ten this morning I will meet you. Then and there you will give me the two hundred thousand dollars. At ten-thirty tonight, we will meet again. At that time I will furnish a murderer for your crimes. I will furnish evidence to convict this murderer. But I will keep the evidence against you. In the years to come, after Smallens and Feller are dead, you will loot Max Count's estate. We will divide that money. I will direct you; I will watch you constantly. Never shall I be far away; perhaps I'll be the man next door; the man with whom you have a drink. You will never know the face I wear."

"You fool, you can't get away with—"

"Look out that window—down to the street. What do you see?"

Mechanically Steve obeyed. There at the curb was a car. "That—My car!" he gasped.

"Yes. I brought it here. I was in the rear trunk all the time. I have your second-keys. The car will be found in the morning at my door. It is known that I reported you. Perhaps you will have *three* murders charged against you, Stephen Wall."

Dazedly Steve turned to face the black hood.

"Now, I'll trouble you for the set of car keys which you have in your pocket, Steven Wall."

The gun threatened. Helplessly, Steve turned over the keys.

"I said the plan was perfect," the voice reminded. "The car is merely a detail. And I will know where your wife is within an hour. Do not force me to injure her."

"But I— For God's sake, Grantham, what— Who can you get to be the killer? The whole thing is fantastic! You can't—"

"It is very simple. I shall be the murderer."

"You what?" Steve exclaimed blankly.

"Precisely. At ten-thirty tonight, I will be dead." He laughed—a raw sound, yet lingering in the after silence. "Now, we have talked enough. I will call for the money at ten."

"Damn you, I won't do it! You'll lie and trick me! It'll mean murder on top of murder if I bargain with you! I won't—"

"Then I shall see your wife within an hour." He bowed himself out the door.

Steve followed quickly. Outside he saw no sign of Grantham. The man was unreal—diabolical and unreal. In the subway Steve peered fearfully at his fellow riders. Almost anyone of them could have been the masked murderer.

At 14th Street Steve left the Subway. The words came back to him: "I will know where your wife is within an hour. . . ." He walked to 12th Street. Half-way down the block he drew back into a dark doorway. He looked back; along the street not a soul was moving. He went on. At the corner of Fifth Avenue, he repeated the process; still no one was following. He circled back to the Albatross; once he passed the lobby without entering. Still he was alone. Quickly he crossed the drab lobby.

Ann Smith was in room 38, the thin hunched clerk said.

**H**E CLIMBED the stairs, hurried down the narrow corridor, and knocked. "Ann. . . . It's me, Ann," he called softly. Her steps hurried to answer. The door opened.

"Oh, Steve, I. . . . Steve! What's the matter?" she interrupted herself starkly. "Your face! You look so—"

He closed the door behind him and breathed deeply, with a sense of almost frantic relief. "Sit down, honey. I've got to tell you something. Something hard."

The bleak stillness of his face hushed her. Slowly she sank down, her eyes watching him.

"Honey. It's your dad. He was murdered tonight."

Her hand started toward her throat. Her eyes grew wide. "No. No!" she choked.

"I'm sorry," he said slowly. "There's plenty more. You better let me finish. I'll start at the beginning and give it quick. Six months ago a gambler named Phillip Avelli was killed in your dad's Madison Club. There was plenty that looked funny; Avelli owed your dad heavy money; people knew your dad was sore. It was dog-luck that your dad and I found the body first. It was a frame on your dad; a heavy initialed letter-opener was missing from

his desk. We had a hunch that the blade inside Avelli was the blade of that opener. We hustled the body out quick. We left it in an alley blocks from the club. The cops never tied the murder to your dad or the Madison Club."

"But what—I don't understand why he left—"

"He started getting black-mail letters demanding two hundred thousand dollars. If he paid, he'd get the handle of the letter-opener back, complete with incriminating initials and prints. If he didn't, the police would get the handle, plus a nice little explanation.

"You know your dad. He got stubborn. He'd be damned if he'd pay. He was ready to fight back when the black-mailer turned the fire on you. Pay up, he said, or something would happen to you. I talked Max into going to Mexico and staying quiet while I tried to trace the killer. I told him he'd never buy off; he'd pay installments until he was broke, and never get the blade back. I told him I'd watch you; for four months after he left I kept a private-dick behind you—that fat little man you used to wonder about."

"He—was trailing me!" Ann echoed blankly.

Steve nodded. "Your dad agreed, with one condition. He made me take the two hundred grand in cash. I was to hold it. If anything happened to you, if they got too close to you, I was to pay off. So that's where I got two hundred grand of your dad's money. That's why he left town. And he didn't want you to know the story."

"But what does this—tonight—" she stammered.

"Tonight it all turned clear and simple," Steve said bluntly. "The blackmailer, probably also the killer of Avelli, is your dad's heart-specialist. Dr. Werner Grantham killed your father."

"No! No, Steve! I know Dr. Grant—"

"Knowing him doesn't change it," Steve interrupted drily. "What happened on that murder six months ago has all the earmarks of what's happened this time. Last time your father was framed for a black-mail pay-off; this time it's me. Last time you were the pawn, and you're the pawn again. I'll tell you and let you draw your own conclusions." He took a deep breath and started with the midnight call from Grantham. When he was through, he waited. He watched her eyes, dark with the incredulity of horror.

"Steve, he's mad! No normal man could plan—"

"Certainly he's crazy—but crazy-smart, see? I'm nailed for murder. If I pay once, I'll pay forever. When there's nothing left to pay with, he slaps on the murder proof. I don't know what he looks like—understand

that? You can't hunt a face you've never seen." He pushed his fingers nervously through his black hair. "And he was so certain . . . so certain he'd be able to find you—"

"Steve, listen: The money—it doesn't mean as much as life—you see that, don't you? Let's pay it. Then if he won't let you alone, we can run—get out! He can't find us if we—"

"I shall always find you, my child," a musical voice said. Steve and Ann turned. In the doorway stood the figure, gaunt and black-hooded. Slowly the door closed. The gun seemed a living part of his body, poised and waiting. "You can never get away, my child."

"How—how did you—" Steve choked.

"Didn't I say that my plan was perfect?"

Steve swallowed drily. His palms itched. His fingers opened and closed in futile anger. "What are you going to do?" he whispered.

The man's gun settled on Ann. But he talked to Steve.

He said coldly, "it is nearly six o'clock. You will leave this hotel at once. Ten minutes from now I will telephone the Nightowl Cafe. You will be there to take the call; I must know you are that far away. After that, you will get the money. You will meet me at ten o'clock in Max Count's old house on Riverside Drive. I will hold your wife until our plans are complete. Remember: she will be with me constantly; I will have my gun. I do not advise you to bring the police. She would be the first to die. . . ."

"You—you know you're going to kill her! You—"

"Only if you fail or try to trick me. Now, get out."

Steve looked at Ann. Her eyes tried to speak. Her lips formed a silent whisper: "Please. . . . I'll be all right. Go on, Steve. . . ."

He choked. Furiously he wrenched open the door. Down the stairs he plunged. He passed a smouldering cigarette-stub. He kicked it in futile rage, knowing it must be Grantham's. Then he cursed.

"Like a child! All I can do is kick . . . run . . . leave her!"

**T**HERE was only the waiter and cook in the small Nightowl Cafe when he entered and ordered a cup of coffee. He looked at the clock; it was time for the call. He lit a cigarette and waited. He felt his muscles grow stiff. Half an hour passed. Suddenly he could wait no longer. He entered the telephone booth and dialed the Albatross.

"Call room 38," he ordered the clerk. He heard the buzzing.

"I'm sorry, sir. That room doesn't answer."

"Go look in that room!" Steve rasped. He waited the long tense minutes until the clerk returned.

"I'm sorry, sir. There's no one in that room now."

Numbly, he replaced the receiver. He left the cafe. In the greyness of dawn he caught a cab and gave the number of his partner, Martin Gregg.

An ill-tempered, pajama-clad Martin Gregg answered his knock.

"It's an hour before I get up!"

"Give me your office keys, Martin. Mine were stolen last night."

"What do you mean, stolen? What's the hurry? You look—"

"Forget my looks and get dressed," Steve snapped. "You're coming with me. I'll tell you why." He talked fast while Martin dressed. His law partner stopped to stare at him.

Martin kept frowning. "I never heard Count was tied up with murder," he said suspiciously. "You never told me anything about any two hundred grand. It sounds just a little phony."

"Nobody got told—not even my wife. Max wanted it that way."

The elevators were not running when they climbed the stairs of the Fitzhugh Building. Steve went directly to his office. Slowly he pulled the heavy filing cabinet from its place in the corner. He reached behind and came up with a small flat key.

"That fits safety-deposit box 99 at the Eastern Trust," he explained. "It opens at nine. I want you to get over there Martin, and get the contents of that box. By nine o'clock I'm not going to want to meet any cops. You can do my signature. Get the money in that box and bring it to your apartment. I'll be waiting."

"And just where are you going?" Martin wondered.

"To stall a couple of murders. . . . Max Count had a pet-scheme. When he was a kid he had infantile-paralysis. He wanted his estate used to set up a trust fund for paralysis patients who—"

"I know all that. Where does it come in here?"

"Grantham's got plans to kill Smallens and Feller, and raid the estate. I'm going to Smallens and Feller and tell the story. Maybe they'll believe me, maybe not."

Martin stared at him. "You sound—I never heard such a fantastic tale, but— Damned if I don't almost believe you."

Steve laughed bitterly. "Thanks. You get that money."

Steve leaned forward as the cab neared Dr. Smallens' address. Suddenly his eyes narrowed. At the entrance was parked a squad-car. A cop was leaning against the doorway.

"Drive another block," Steve ordered. At the next corner he entered a cigar-store. He

dialled Smallens' number. A man answered.

"Dr. Smallens, please," Steve asked.

"Who is calling?" the voice asked bluntly.

"Is Smallens there? Is he all right?"

"This is Inspector Carwile. Who is calling?"

Slowly Steve replaced the receiver. "Something's happened . . . already happened to Smallens!" He fed another coin into the slot and dialled Feller's number. A woman's voice answered.

"May I speak to Dr. Feller?"

"I—I'm sorry. This is Mrs. Feller. I don't know just where the Doctor is this morning," she said uncertainly.

"When did you last see him? Who was he with?"

"I believe he received a call last night about eight o'clock. I think it was from someone named Grantham. I don't—"

Steve didn't wait for the rest. Wearily he left the cigar-store and moved toward the waiting cab. He wasn't thinking. He scarcely heard the shout:

"Wall! Stop there, Wall! Don't move!"

With a shock he waked. He turned. Not a dozen feet from him, a cop was approaching. The man was raising a gun.

One instant Steve stood frozen. Then he leaped! He tore at the cab door. The gun roared behind him. The slug smacked the fender! The cop shouted furiously! Steve stumbled into the cab and slammed the door behind him.

"Drive! Get out of here or—or I'll kill you!"

The white-faced cabby pawed at the gear. The motor coughed and roared. The cop hit the running board. His arm came in, levelling the gun. Steve ducked and grasped the thick wrist. Again the gun roared, shattering the rear window. Desperately Steve sank his teeth into the wrist. The cop screamed. The gun clattered to the floor. The cop reeled backward from the speeding car. Steve held the arm.

"Slow it, driver," he panted. When the speed slackened, he released the wrist. The cop stumbled down in the curb, sprawled, and came up fighting for his whistle. Its shrill blast tore down the street. A siren gurgled and wailed.

"Times Square! Lose that squad car!" Steve rasped. He pocketed the cop's gun. The siren was wailing in an endless blast now.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### At Last—The Perfect Crime

**A**T TIMES SQUARE he caught the first shuttle to Grand Central Station. He got another cab. A block from Martin Gregg's

apartment he left the cab and walked. He entered the side-door of the building and used the emergency stairs. It was eight o'clock when he sagged down in a chair at the apartment and mopped his damp face. He snapped on the radio.

It came; first the war-reports from Russia, from the Far-East. News from Washington and London. There was a pause, then the announcer spoke crisply. "We bring you a special bulletin from Police Headquarters. . . . Shortly after midnight this morning, Maxamillian Count, wealthy speculator and club-owner, was shot to death at his upstate cottage three miles beyond Vardenville, at isolated Lake Boone. Police of Vardenville had received a tip from Dr. Werner Grantham, long-time physician to Count. They drove to the cottage. As they approached, a car was heard leaving the densely wooded section near the building. In attempting to halt the car, Deputy Chester was shot to death. The killer escaped in the car. An hour ago this same car, positively identified, was found abandoned at the apartment building of Werner Grantham. Known to be the death vehicle, this car has been identified as that of Stephen Wall, attorney and son-in-law of Count. Thus far Metropolitan police have been unable to locate Wall. Both Wall and his wife have vanished. Certain letters, the exact contents of which are not yet disclosed, were discovered in Wall's rooms. Attempts, as yet unsuccessful, have also been made to locate Dr. Werner Grantham. Since Wall's car was found at Grantham's address, some fear is expressed for the doctor's safety, in as much as—"

Abruptly the voice stopped—then continued. "Ladies and gentlemen, a late report on Stephen Wall has just been handed me. Thirty minutes ago a policeman, summoned to investigate the mysterious disappearance of a Dr. Joseph Smallens, saw Wall emerging from a cigar-store near Smallen's house. Wall disregarded a command to halt, and leaped into a waiting cab, escaping in the vicinity of Times Square. Further complications have come to light: The missing Dr. Smallens is reported to have left his home last evening around eight o'clock in answer to a telephone summons from Dr. Werner Grantham. Neither Grantham nor Smallens now can be located. In addition, Police have just received a missing-persons report upon a Dr. Paul Feller. Dr. Feller was last seen when he left his house at eight o'clock last evening. Feller, like Smallens, was answering a summons, reputedly from Werner Grantham. At the present time neither police nor families of the missing men can offer any connection between the calls. However, the families do state that Stephen Wall was known to the three missing doctors. Police now fear that these

later disappearances may have some place in Wall's pattern of violence. At the request of police, we broadcast a description of Stephen Wall. Anyone seen resembling—"

Numbly Steve twisted the dial. The voice vanished. He closed his eyes and tried to think. In the silence the ticking of the clock wore against his tortured nerves. Blindly he plunged up and hurled the clock to the floor. He stared at the shattered pieces. He closed his eyes and sank down.

"I— I'm going mad! I can't think. I can't—"

"Shut up, you fool!" a voice said. Into the room came Martin Gregg. He locked the door behind him. "You'll have the neighbors calling the cops," he warned.

"You got the money?" Steve questioned his partner anxiously.

"Yeah. Here." Martin pulled three thick packs of bills from his pockets. "It was touchy. I heard two radio reports on you. Every cop in town is looking. You—you're sure you're not—"

"I'm not sure of anything." Steve took the money.

"What's the next act in this little comedy?"

"I meet Grantham in Count's old house on Riverside Drive and pay him. Maybe Ann gets loose; maybe not. After that I . . . I don't know." He took the gun from his pocket and turned it slowly in his hand. "At least I'll have this much of a chance."

"Before you take any more walks, you better change clothes. The cops know what you're wearing. You— Take this old suit of mine. And I've got some brown glasses." He opened the closet and took out the clothes. He watched Steve undress. "Go take a look in the mirror. Try one of these old hats. Pull it low. Maybe if you do that and wear— Oh, hell," he exploded wearily.

"What's the matter with you?"

"What's that Riverside address? Is there a back door?"

"Yeah, but I don't see what difference that—"

"I'm just a natural fall-guy," Martin snapped bluntly. "But I've got a gun, too. What time is the pay-off?"

"You mean—you're taking a chance on me and—"

"I said I was a fool. What's the address and time?"

"At ten." Steve gave the address. "But I'm not asking—"

"OKAY, listen," Martin interrupted. "You go on. You'll go in at ten. Just a little after that, I'll tackle the back way. You stall along with Grantham while I prowls the house and find you. We'll have two guns on him, or at least mine. Now, go on." He gestured.

"Don't start the old thanks. I'd rather save you than pay the whole office-rent myself."

Steve smiled appreciatively. "Just be careful, Martin. Don't let Grantham know."

At five minutes of ten Steve touched the massive grill-door of the old mansion. It was a fat squat house, ill-kept and dirty. Five years before, Count had closed it and put it up for sale.

A voice called from within: "Come in, Steve Wall. Slowly. Close the door behind you."

The door whined inward, revealing a high empty hall and massive stairs. "You have the money?" spoke the voice. Steve's eyes adjusted. He saw the hood, the eyes shining from the slits.

"It's in my pocket," he said wearily. "Where is my wife?"

"Throw the money at my feet."

Steve obeyed. The man pocketed the bills. "I am glad you are reasonable. And your wife will be returned. But first we must discuss my death. Tonight at ten-thirty I shall die, you remember."

"The last of the perfect plan," Steve recalled acidly.

"Why shouldn't I want to be dead? How often do the police search for dead men? . . . Not often. So tonight I'll place evidence in your hands, proving me the killer. Then I shall commit suicide. You were about to reveal me. Suicide was my last resort—"

"Where is this fake 'you' coming from?"

"This body of 'mine' will be mangled beyond recognition. It will be quite simple—my tweed suit, my watch, my identification papers, my ring—those things will identify me. And as for the body—New York is full of potential bodies, you know." He laughed. It was a soft sound, yet edged with a cutting intensity. He leaned forward and spoke with quick whispers:

"Remember the nights you've spent at Lost Lodge? Remember that sound that seems to be thunder? It comes from the North each night at exactly ten-thirty. I know what that is." He gestured violently. "It's scrap-iron. A train-car of scrap-iron thundering down the waste-slide at the Hummerton Furnace a mile away. The car moves along an embankment until it reaches the slide at the end. Then the tons of scrap are dumped! That is the thunder—the tons of twisted torn steel, hurtling down the slide into the larger pile. That avalanche of steel will slice a man to ribbons! I know! Three nights ago I stood on the cliff high above the slide. I waited until that exact moment, then I hurled my dog over . . . down . . . into that avalanche of steel! Nothing but tiny scraps of flesh and hair remained. You see—"

"You mean— You'll throw a man—"

"Why not? Night after night I have gone to that cliff. The nightwatchman has seen me; he knows my tweed suit, my watch. We have talked. In my words, I laid the plan. I said to him: That twisted steel would cut a man to pieces, wouldn't it?" I said: 'You know, if I was a criminal and the police were about to catch me, I believe I would rather die down there—' You understand now, Stephen Wall?"

"That man already thinks I am partially crazy. He will tell his story to the police. The body will be there, mangled beyond recognition. You will have proof against me. And remember: when I called Feller and Smallens from their homes last night, I used my name." He stopped and there was a long dread moment of silence. "So there is my perfect plan. Tonight I shall be dead. No longer will the police search for me. No one will know the face I wear in the future. In the years to come, I shall direct you in the looting of Count's estate. So long as you obey, the evidence against you will be safe."

"You . . . You're insane!" Steve breathed thinly. "Nobody could dream up a death like—"

"No. Not crazy. Merely very wise," the whisper corrected. "Now it is fifteen after ten. By nine tonight I shall complete the last details."

"You mean you'll kill Smallens and Feller?"

"In my laboratory downtown. It will prove that Smallens and Feller and I were engaged in research. Max Count was financing that research. We discovered a serum for paralysis. And I, rather than share the profit and honor with the others, sought to eliminate them by murder. You will reveal me. I have prepared a great deal of data regarding the research. It will all be quite convincing."

"And then we'll have our last meeting?" Steve wondered slowly. He tried to listen for some sound of Martin Gregg. He heard nothing.

**"YES.** Here is the schedule. Tonight I shall dispose of Smallens and Feller. At ten minutes after ten tonight, I shall meet you at the boat-house a mile from Max Count's Lost Lodge. There I will give you the evidence to prove me the killer. I shall go from there to the Hummerton Furnace in my car. It will take twelve minutes—I've timed it. You will walk to the Hummerton Furnace—that will take twenty-five minutes; I have timed that, too. By the time you arrive, this 'T' will have committed suicide. The night watchman will probably have called the police. You will present proof, and say that you had been following me. You had tracked me to that cliff. You will have a gun. . . . Thus I

jumped rather than let you take me or shoot me."

Steve felt the sweat turn salty on his lips. His ears ached for the sound that would be Martin Gregg. "And what about my wife? You've got the money. Our deal was for you—"

"Oh, yes. And so I will keep my promise. Your wife is in the basement room downstairs. We shall go down now and release her—" Abruptly he stopped and his body stiffened. His head tilted. "I heard a noise, Stephen Wall," he whispered softly. His eyes glinted through the slits of the hood. "You didn't disobey me, did you?" he breathed.

Steve did not move. Only the fingers of his right hand tightened, then the hand started toward his pocket. He tried to keep his voice cool, tried to cover the slow movement: "No. I didn't tell anybody! I didn't hear any—"

"You did!" The figure half-turned. "A step! Steps coming from the back! You told where I—"

Steve's fingers pawed at the gun. It came up. The figure turned back quickly. Steve side-stepped fast and leveled the gun. The hooded figure closed in. Steve aimed squarely at the other's gun and squeezed. One sharp empty click was all that broke the tense silence.

In a sweat of panic, he squeezed again. Again came the empty click. In closed the hooded man.

"I told you!" the voice snarled. "Never try to trick me! My plan is perfect!" His gaunt long arm swept up.

Steve threw himself to the side. Twice more the futile click of the gun sounded. Then the long arm came crashing down upon him. Desperately he hurled himself into the man. Too late—

The gun-butt smashed against his forehead! A shower of dazzling blindness burst into his skull. He felt his fingers tremble and loosen on the gaunt figure. An abrupt darkness closed in. . . .

He waked to the smell of dust in his nostrils. He tried to move, and a sharp ache pierced his head. Dazedly he pushed himself up. He was in that same shadowy hall. Alone now. A small sheet of white paper lay beside him, weighted down with the gun. He read the scrawled words

*I warned you. Now I must hold your wife until after tonight. One more disobedience will kill her; I promise you, Stephen Wall, and as for your friend . . . you may find him in the basement. . . . The time is ten at the boat-house tonight.*

"But— That gun—" Steve choked. He lifted it. "No slugs! But that cop was shooting! He had slugs in—" He wiped his blood-



stained face with his sleeve and staggered up. He stared dazedly at the dim empty rooms. He remembered the face of Grantham—the old face, the face lost to plastic surgery. He could see again in memory the reddish cheeks and small grey eyes; the bony forehead and the thick glasses, deepening the eye-sockets.

"But I'll never know the next time," he whispered. "I'll never know which man I meet is the man who murdered— It is a perfect plan!" he whispered bitterly.

He stopped. For one endless moment his body was frozen. Then it trembled violently. An expression of horror, mixed with incredulity and dawning certainty, cloaked his stark features.

He stumbled to the back stairs that led to the basement. He descended into the dark and struck a match. He found Martin, crumpled on his side. A red livid welt crossed his temple. His breath was coming in jerking spasms. Consciousness was returning. The man's eyes opened. He stared wildly at the match-flame. He started to scream.

"It's only me—Steve. I got it too," came the dreary explanation. "How bad are you?"

"I don't know." Martin choked. He pulled himself into a sitting position. "I was—was trying not to make any noise. But the steps are old— When I opened the door, somebody was waiting for me. I got slugged before I could—"

"I know. Listen, Martin—I've been thinking. I want you to get out. Leave me alone. We can't whip this damned madman. I can't fight anymore. He's still holding Ann. If I try to trick him again—"

"You're going to play ball with him?"

"I've got to. I haven't any choice. I—you get out of it Martin. Keep out of it. Maybe someday I'll find a way. Tonight I've got to obey any damned thing he says. You'll only get in the trap with me if you try to help."

"Will I hear from you? You'll contact me if anything—"

"If I can. Later. Tomorrow maybe. Today I'm doing what he says."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Scrap Iron for Hell's Furnace

**T**HE dusty silence hung heavily in the empty huge rooms. The sun, sinking now into sunset, drove an oppressive heat through the shuttered windows. Steve paced relentlessly, slowly—as he had paced for the long hours of the day. Sweat, salty and grimy, streaked his haggard face. His cigarettes had run out hours before.

On he walked, in a tired relentless fury—trying to think.

"Ann—she's my wife. She means everything to me. But Smallens and Feller— They have families, too. Their lives are important, too. I—I haven't got the right to let them die. I can't sacrifice them for myself and Ann. I— Oh, God! I've got to take a chance! I've got to risk her life! It's got to be now!"

He moved to the window. The street was dark outside, now. He moved to the door. One long final moment he waited. He closed his eyes and whispered, silently and wordlessly to himself. He opened the door.

Two blocks away on Broadway, he entered a crowded bar. He pulled down his hat to cover the blood-stain. He entered the telephone booth and dialed Police Headquarters.

"Let me speak to Inspector Carwile," he said. There was a long wait, then the inspector's dry voice answered: "Yes?"

"Are you the man the radio's talking about?" Steve said thickly. "The man what's looking for that Wall guy?"

"I— Yes, I am. Why? Have you any information?"

"I don't want to get myself in no trouble—"

"If you have information, it won't cause you any trouble."

"If I tell you where I am, you'll just talk to me and leave me alone and don't bring no cops, huh?"

"Yes," came the blunt agreement. "Where are you?"

Steve gave the name and address of the bar. "I think maybe I seen him going in a hotel, but I don't want to get in no trouble. If you bring a lot of cops, you won't find me, see?"

"I heard you the first time. What is your name? How will—"

"You just come on. If you are alone, I'll spot you." Steve hung up. Quickly he left the bar, crossed the street, and drew back in the darkness of a vacant store-entrance.

He saw the police-coupe pull to the curb and park. He saw the heavy man leave the car and enter the bar. No other car was following; no one was with the inspector. Quickly Steve crossed the street, slipped into the coupe, and crouched down out of sight. His fingers gripped the empty gun. Long minutes passed. At last he heard the heavy steps returning. The opposite door opened. Inspector Carwile climbed in, closed the door, cursed wearily, and pushed on the starter. Steve moved slightly. The gun buried its muzzle in the inspector's ribs.

"Drive. Slowly. Don't touch that radio. Turn toward Riverside."

"Who in— Wall!" the man exploded harshly. "You can't—"

"Drive toward Riverside, damn you!" Steve whispered.

At last the man shifted the gears. The car moved. Slowly Steve raised himself into the

seat. "Pull against the curb, there," he ordered when they reached the dark drive. Carwile obeyed silently. The motor died. Deliberately the inspector faced Steve.

"Now what?" His voice was cold, waiting.

"You're going to listen. Maybe you're not going to believe me, but you're going to listen. I . . . did . . . not . . . kill . . . Count! I haven't killed anybody; but Smallens and Feller are due to be murdered tonight—within the next hour. Listen. And get this straight: On Muncie Street, at 245 East, there's an old loft building turned into a half apartment house. On the fourth floor Dr. Werner Grantham has a research laboratory. Dead or alive, Feller and Smallens are in that laboratory. Grantham intends to kill them tonight, soon. Also, Grantham is holding my wife somewhere. If I wreck his plans on Smallens and Feller, he kills my wife. So—" Steve spoke more slowly. "When you leave me here in a few minutes, call the first-aid squad to that laboratory

"Meeting Grantham. But here's the rest: If you find Smallens and Feller alive, you'll know I'm not lying to you. If I was the killer, I wouldn't have tipped you off. So if you find them, do me one more favor. Call the Hummerton Furnace and Smelting Company. Get somebody in authority. Tell who you are. And then—tell them to delay the switching of that car of scrap-metal that gets dumped in the yard at ten-thirty. Tell—"

"Who gives a damn about any scrap—"

"I do! And so will you! Have them hold that car just fifteen minutes. Make it fifteen minutes late—understand. Not thirteen or fourteen, but fifteen minutes."

"I'm damned if I—"

"Okay. You know all I can tell you. You'll know the rest by eleven o'clock tonight." Steve reached into the man's coat and took out his gun. "I'm sorry. Later you'll believe me, I hope. Be waiting at your office for a call at eleven. And Carwile—for God's sake,



The hooded death threatened them both.



and get Smallens and Feller. If they're alive, explain fast that my wife is a captive. Then—and get this—put them on stretchers. Carry them into the lobby downstairs. Make them play dead. Make the frame-up look good! Get a pulmotor and an ambulance. Spread the word that gas was smelled; a complaint was turned in. The police came, found the gas coming from the laboratory, and broke in. There Smallens and Feller were discovered—dead! Do you understand now? Grantham will be coming to that address to kill them. He'll see the frame-up! You'll have to make it look good; make it look damned like they are actually dead! Maybe he'll swallow it; he can't investigate too closely, or he'll show himself. If he'll take the story that they're dead, maybe he'll feel safe in carrying out the rest of his plan. He must do that. He must meet me later."

"And where are you going to be?" came the blunt question.

make the gas-death story at Muncie Street look good. Grantham's got to think they're dead. Now—I'm getting out. Drive straight ahead. Get to Muncie Street fast."

He stepped out, slammed the door, and nodded. Carwile stared at the gun, then savagely shifted gears. The car roared away. Steve turned and plunged into the darkness of Riverside Park.

**F**IVE minutes after ten. . . . On the timbers beneath the boathouse, the waves of the lake lap-lapped in the silvery moonlight. The trees stood still and dark. A frog croaked in the distance. Steve breathed thinly. He stiffened.

"Stephen Wall?" a voice asked from the darkness.

Steve turned. "Here. I'm waiting."

"Do not move." Then a flashlight blazed upon him. Beyond the light, the gaunt hooded figure moved to stand before him. "Here is

## You'll Never Know Who Killed You

the evidence that will show why I killed Count. A timely accident made it unnecessary for me to kill Feller and Smallens, but the evidence will show why I was holding them captive. It tells of the research and discovery that I wished to keep for my own profit. With these facts, the rest of your story will stand. You will tell of my telephone call that brought you to Lost Lodge last night; tell the police I intended to frame you for the killing. You may tell them how I held your wife; she will agree with your story. And when the police search my apartment, they will find my diary in my desk. It will carry a day-by-day plan of my crime-schedule. It will begin with that day long ago when I first began to scheme. It will clear you completely. By the time you arrive at the Hummerton Furnace, 'I' will be dead. You may call the police. I will leave a gun for you; it will be on the edge of the cliff, just above the scrap-slide. You will say you had me cornered. Do you understand, now?"

"I understand everything, Grantham," Steve said quietly. "And my wife?"

"She will be waiting for you at your apartment when you get back to New York. And now—my last warning again— So long as you obey my orders in the future, you will never have to worry about the murder of Count. But remember, each day I shall watch you; my face shall be unknown. But you will obey me, unseen. You will loot Count's fortune and pass it on to me. Neither you or your wife will attempt to flee; else the proof of your murders will immediately go to the police. Remember. Now I must go. Back away from me, Wall. Back slowly. One minute from now, start for the Hummerton Furnace. Good-luck." Then he laughed. "It has been pleasant, our little friendship."

Steve did not speak. Steadily, slowly he backed away. When he was fifty feet from the light, it went out abruptly. Long moments later he heard the sound of a car disappearing, its tires whispering on the road. Steve plunged through the trees and underbrush. Branches raked his face and tore at his flesh. He ducked his head and plunged out, not following the road, but running cross-country in the direction of the Hummerton Furnace. He plunged on and on. At last he saw the faint reddish cloud in the night sky—the furnace!

He moved more slowly toward the edge of the cliff. He looked down. Fifty feet below, in the table-like bottom of the huge excavation, sprawled the Hummerton mills. Dimmed-out lights cast a bluish haze against the night. There stretched the rails of the switch-track over which the scrap-metal would move. Steve



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# DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

moved on. His fingers were tight on his gun now. The safety was off. He retreated slightly from the brink of the cliff to shield his profile from the lights beneath. He tried to penetrate the night where the cliff hung above the slide. He risked a match to read his watch; it was ten-forty.

"Carwile did! He held the train! Grantham will be—" He hushed. Beyond, now no more than fifty feet ahead, waited two dark figures. Both stood on the brink of the cliff, directly above that slide. In the thin bluish light from below, Steve could see the brown tweed suit of Grantham; the thick glasses reflecting the light; he could see the sweat that stained the heavy face; he could see the lips working wordlessly. He moved in.

Behind him he heard the first panting chugg of the switch-engine. He looked back. Out of the darkness loomed the freight-car, loaded with twisted dark steel. Slowly it approached down the track, the engine panting behind it. It scarcely crept.

Steve moved on. Now the two figures were only ten feet before him. He could hear the words from Grantham's lips:

"You— Oh, God! You maniac! Don't kill— please don't push me—" he was sobbing thickly.

"He won't push you!" Steve announced. He came in with a rush. "Don't move!" he shouted. "If you move, I'll kill you!"

The figure beside Werner Grantham turned sharply. His body froze in an animal-like crouch. The head beneath the black hood seemed to tremble. The gun shone in the bluish light from the furnace. "And I—I can kill you, too!" came the thick whisper.

"But it won't do you any good now. The perfect plan fell apart. I know you are. I know your face like I know my own! You'll never live to raid the estate!"

"How do you know—" the words were blotted out by the shrill scream of the switch-engine on the track below. The belching smoke traced its movement as it approached the end of the track.

"Just a couple of little mistakes," Steve snapped.

"But I've still got your wife! You can—"

"But Grantham knows where she is!"

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Continued

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## You'll Never Know Who Killed You

You're holding her in the same place you've been holding him! Isn't he, Grantham? Where—"

"Don't answer!" the voice raged. "I'll kill you both!"

"You won't kill anybody. Ask Inspector Carwile."

"What do you mean?"

"That switch-engine is a little late, isn't it? Carwile delayed it. It's all a plan to trap you. Isn't it, Carwile?" he called loudly.

"Who— Where is—" The figure twisted instinctively, automatically. It was the instant. . . .

STEVE ducked his head and leaped headlong, swinging downward with his gun as plunged through the night. With a spine-shattering jolt, his head drove deep into the man's stomach. A violent breath exploded past the man's hood. In the split-instant later, Steve's gun smashed into the head. A broken sob trailed from the hidden lips. Then a paralyzing smash caught his own face, blinding him with a flash of pain. He held on doggedly and twisted. They crashed to the ground together. In a chaotic moment of vision, Steve saw the edge of the cliff roll nearer. Far below he saw the rails gleaming like black diamonds in the blue light. The smoke from the engine poured up. Frantically he kicked, trying to break his roll toward the precipice. His fingers fought to control the arm with the smashing gun.

"I'll take—take you with—with me if—" the hooded figure panted wildly.

The whistle screamed below. Suddenly, with a sickening swiftness, Steve felt his legs lose their grip and drop into emptiness over the cliff. He felt his body sliding. Wildly he clawed at the figure above him. He screamed once in thick horror. He knew he was going over! He saw the slide directly beneath him. He saw, in slow-motion nightmare, the dump car lifting. Then the twisted scrap steel began to hurtle down. Its thunder roared upward. It became a tearing grinding avalanche toward which Steve was hopelessly sliding. . . . He knew he was taking the killer with him. But he knew he was leaving life behind!

Abruptly hard fingers gripped his shoulder and twisted him violently. Pain shot through his ribs and neck.

"Hold to me!" a voice shouted thickly. The voice of Werner Grantham!

Steve tried to clutch. He released the hooded man's waist. He felt himself being dragged away from the cliff. Abruptly another scream split the chaos. Beside him the hooded body was sliding over, the fingers gnawing wildly at the earth.

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78

## DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Steve grabbed with one hand. He got the hood. It wasn't enough. Beneath the cloth the man's hair slid away. His scream was a long and wordless sob now. Abruptly the hood slipped off. In that instant Steve looked into the face.

The features of his law partner, Martin Gregg, were grotesque and primitive in their horror. The throat was convulsed and corded the eyes wild and glazed. And then the face faded fast. Down—down through the bluish light hurtled the body. The limbs fought a the empty air. Then it ended. . . .

Into the roaring churn of steel the body fell. Once it seemed to rise, to leap—as if by superhuman effort, Martin Gregg was dragging himself from the death-slide. Then the human form was swallowed in the avalanche. Down it hurtled, beneath, over, between the tons of metal. Suddenly the last of the scrap left the slide. A silence, hushed and raw, filled the void where the thunder had been. And still Steve stared fixedly down. He could see nothing now. And then he could see a little

There was a scrap of black. Perhaps an arm. He didn't know or care. With a sick choking breath he turned away, crawling or hands and knees from the brink of the cliff

"She—she's all right, Grantham? You do know where she is?" he panted.

"She's all right. She is locked where he had me . . . in that boat-house. She's there now."

\* \* \*

"Let me get this straight if I can," Inspector Carwile said incredulously. "Martin Gregg has held you captive at that boat-house for a month?" he asked Werner Grantham.

"A month—while I listened to him plan," the doctor said slowly. "He would torture me that way; when he'd come out to bring me food, he'd explain what he intended to do. He even explained how he intended to kill me."

The doctor gestured and leaned forward "Six months ago he pulled the murder of Avelli, intending to blackmail Count. Wher Count vanished instead of paying, Gregg felt certain that Steve had advised him. Gregg told me how he broke into Steve's files, night after night, until he finally found the copy of Steve's receipt to Count for the two hundred thousand dollars. Likewise he found the copy of Count's will that outlined the set-up of the paralysis fund and named Smallens and Feller and me as trustees with Steve. He made his plan: he would telegraph Count to return to New York immediately, that his daughter was ill—he would sign Steve's name. When Count arrived, Gregg had all his other details waiting. He had stolen Steve's gun. He had held me at the boat-house. He planned to use me

## You'll Never Know Who Killed You

as the final killer-corpse. Night before last he forced me to call Steve from the Lodge. There Gregg had Count locked to the bed. When the call was made, he took me back to the boat-house, returned to the Lodge to kill Count and wait for Steve. The rest you know."

"I see." Carwile frowned curiously. "And he intended to throw you into that metal-dump. Naturally your body would be identified as you. Steve would be completely bewildered then. Likewise, the murder evidence would be held by Martin. Steve would have to go through life, raiding the Count estate, paying to the unknown killer who was actually his partner—the man who would always be able to check on his actions."

"HE SAID it was a perfect plan," Steve supplied ironically. "And it came damned near it. If he hadn't smoked cigarettes— If I hadn't remembered that Grantham smokes cigars— And most important, if I hadn't remembered, there in that house on Riverside, that Martin Gregg was the only man who had seen my gun; the only man who could have unloaded it. You see, I realized that the hooded man must have known the gun was unloaded, or he wouldn't have risked slugging me—he'd have shot me. But Martin saw the gun when I was at his apartment. He had a chance to empty the clip while I was changing to the clothes he gave me. The more I thought, the more I was sure it had to be Martin. Only my partner could have known enough about me. Only Martin could have raided my files and learned what he had to know. It must have taken weeks to search everything."

"But he didn't find the key to that safety-deposit box," Carwile mused. "And when you actually gave it to him, he had to play it honest and bring you the money."

"Or the long term raid on Count's estate would have blown up," Steve finished.

Carwile nodded, then frowned. "Why didn't you ever recognize Martin's voice?" he wondered.

"Because it was a perfect mimic of Grantham's," Steve said wearily. "Martin was good at that. He belonged to an amateur theatrical club in Greenwich Village; he worked his way through college as a radio-actor."

Carwile nodded.

Steve didn't see him. He was sleeping soundly in his chair.

Ann smiled softly. "You know, inspector, that is a very satisfied smirk my husband has on his face right now."

THE END

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(Continued from page 6)

iron stake whose point projected several inches below the underside.

"Mael, Urael, Valnum, and Apologia Sedes! By the night-side kings and infernal powers—" The hollow voice of Count Roland droned on with the black arts Ritual of Quickening.

The coffin trembled slightly. The stake gave a quarter turn as though something within was struggling against it.

"Patience brother," the aged Count murmured. "Vengeance shall be yours—"

### THE VENGEANCE OF THE STAKED DEAD

And then the Germans came—the Gestapo—clicking their heels in uneasy mockery before this man with the cairngorm eyes, whose face wrinkles might have been measured not in years but in centuries, and who had taken

the Nameless Oath on the Altar of Lead and signed a covenant in his own blood with the shadowy, scaled horror that hovered back of the altar.

The Nazis came on a mission from the Fuhrer's own personal astrologer. They came bearing a gift—the genuine Seal of Solomon. At least, they said it was genuine, vouched for by no less a personage than Morganstiern, the foremost thaumaturgist of the Reich.

"But Morganstiern," the aged Count Roland reminded his visitors dryly, "was unable to use the Seal to his advantage. You will recall you had to scrape him off the walls and ceiling—"

"You know about that?" the Gestapo man bit out.

Count Roland hugged himself in his faded saffron robe and shook with silent mirth. "Morganstiern," he said, "made the mistake no Nazi sorcerer can afford to make. By mispronouncing two words in the conjuration



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## MYSTERY'S DARK PORTALS

of a minor demon, he summoned up no demon, but a Hebrew archangel with full powers for fifteen seconds—”

The Nazi's snort was expressive. "Ridiculous. There are no archangels."

"So? Did anyone hear an explosion?"

No one had. And no one saw when the changes took place here in the mouldering mansion in the Faubourg St. Germain. And yet—

"I could have sworn the wallpaper was blue when we came up!" Adelbert muttered to his stiff-necked companion.

"Ja," I also thought so, but now it is red! And the staircase, did it not turn at right angles before? Now it is straight. And there was no chandelier before! I feel so—so funny, Adelbert."

But that was nothing to how they felt when they saw Cornelius with the skin of dead wax white, and with the lips as full as a woman's and blood red. The Count took the Colonel's own dagger and thrust it deep into the chest of Cornelius. The dagger pulled clear of the age-yellowed silk shirt. It was dry and bloodless. Cornelius only smiled, his bright little eyes on the fat neck of the Nazi colonel.

"Wonderbar!" the colonel gasped, and it was almost the last word he ever spoke.

R. Sprague Hall tells this blood-quickenning story of the Nazis' strange mission to the aged French Count Roland . . . and of the shuddering curse of the Von Haengels.

\* \* \*

Harry Young, married to the Senator's lovely daughter, spent his honeymoon alone in the black pit under a prison yard. They kept him there a month; he didn't know why. They tried to kill him, but he wouldn't die. Not actually, though in a sense he did. . . .

"You're free, Colgan," they told him, sardonically.

"My name's not Colgan," he insisted. "It's Harry Young."

But everyone else—even June, his bride—thought he was Colgan. And Colgan, it developed, was a man facing an appalling fate!

In a long novelette Bruno Fischer tells the fantastic story of

### THE MAN WHO WAS SOMEBODY ELSE

These are only a few samples of the stories and novelettes packed in the next bizarre issue of DIME MYSTERY. On the stands July 5.

THE EDITOR



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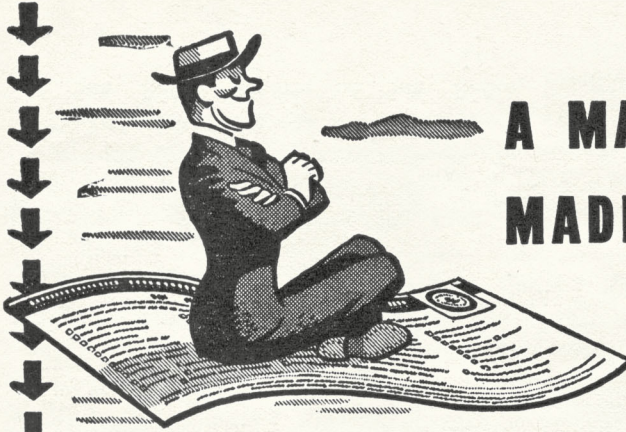
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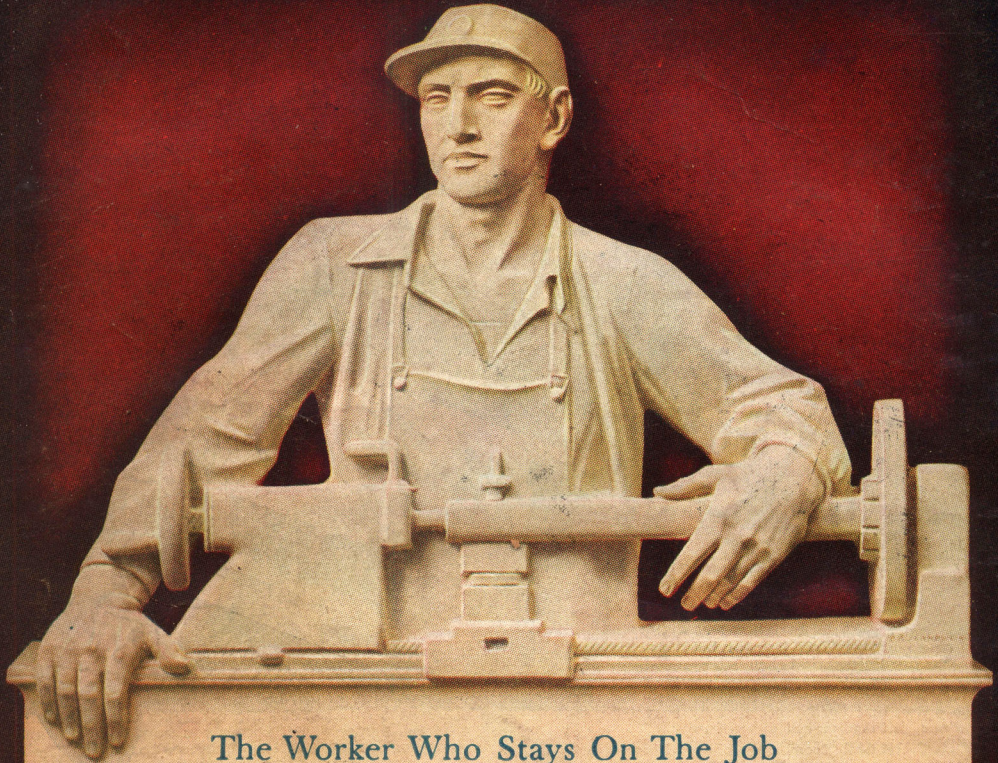
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