

DETECTIVE

Story Annual

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YOU'LL NEVER SEE ME AGAIN By Cornell Woolrich

"I'm going home to mother—" She stormed out of the house and disappeared. Where did she go? What did she meet? Dire forces were abroad, crime and deception rampant. How was she involved? Was she ever seen again? Here's an exciting mystery novel that strikes home!



THE ROLLING HEADS By Mark Harper

Deserted and forgotten in the heart of a teeming city, they had watched through the long night, waiting for the other's return. A head each day had been the threat, one payment had been made, and two were overdue. They dared not go out in the daylight, and dreaded another night.



HANG ME TODAY! By Emile C. Tepperman

"By God, I'll do anything—anything—to save my brother from the gallows! He shall not die tomorrow. I'll sacrifice the life of anyone if necessary—even my own! And if I must, I'll even sacrifice your life, Laura Payne, but I'll free my brother!" Did he make good his threats?

STORIES SELECTED BY

Frank Gruber

A WINNER IN THE MARY ROBERTS RINEHART


MYSTERY NOVEL CONTEST

Author of the best-sellers, "The French Key," "The Laughing Fox," etc.

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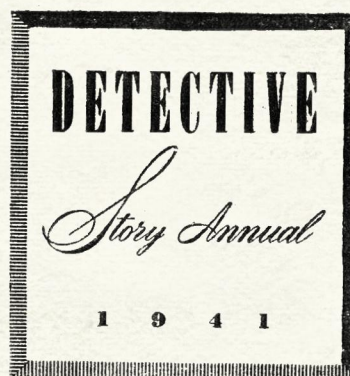


F OREWORD:

Why do we permit our sleep to be disturbed, our brain tortured, our ingenuity baffled? Because we Americans are avid detective fans! And that's why Street & Smith has compiled this Annual of detective stories—the best stories by the best-known names in current mystery fiction.

Frank Gruber, winner in the Mary Roberts Rinehart mystery novel contest, selected the stories. You know him as author of the current best sellers "The Laughing Fox" and "The Talking Clock." He wrote "The Murder Book" for us. Cleve Adams, author of "Sabotage" and "And Sudden Death" (which the *Saturday Review of Literature* called "one of the best of the month . . . exhilarating") is represented with "Triple Threat." Cornell Woolrich, whose "The Bride Wore Black" has been selected by Simon & Schuster as their December Mystery of the Month, gives you "You'll Never See Me Again." And Steve Fisher, movie-script writer and author of "I Wake Up Screaming", leader of Dodd Mead's spring list, is the author of "I'll Never Let You Go."

These are detective yarns at their best—the top efforts of top writers. They're your favorites—and we know you will enjoy this grand collection of yarns.



STREET & SMITH'S

DETECTIVE *Story Annual*

CONTENTS 1941

YOU'LL NEVER SEE ME AGAIN Cornell Woolrich . . . 3

"I'm going home to mother—" She stormed out of the house and disappeared. Where did she go? What did she meet? Dire forces were abroad; crime and deception rampant. How was she involved? Was she ever seen again? Here's an exciting mystery novel that strikes home!

THE ROLLING HEADS Mark Harper . . . 35

Deserted and forgotten in the heart of a teeming city, they had watched through the long night, waiting for the other's return. A head each day had been the threat; one payment had been made, and two were overdue. They dared not go out in the daylight, and dreaded another night.

HANG ME TODAY! Emile C. Tepperman . . . 54

"By God, I'll do anything—anything—to save my brother from the gallows! He shall not die tomorrow. I'll sacrifice the life of anyone if necessary—even my own! If I must, I'll even sacrifice *your* life, Laura Payne, but I'll free my brother!" Did he make good his threats?

THE MURDER BOOK Frank Gruber . . . 84

Unnoticed, the man in the camel's-hair topcoat came out of a shooting gallery at 11:15. The clock ticked on. At 12:15 he emerged from a secondhand bookstore. The clock ticked on. At 12:45—violent death and a paper pamphlet clutched in a cold, stiff hand!

I'LL NEVER LET YOU GO Steve Fisher . . . 114

Ensnared in the web of crime, the hand of the law weighed heavy upon her. She was hounded by a parole officer who would never let her go. Why?

THE LEE SIDE OF MURDER B. B. Fowler . . . 128

In the cold chill of an October morning, Myra Ganong's body is found in the river, a bullet through her heart. Sealed forever in her pretty head is the testimony by which the D. A. hoped to smash a corrupt political machine. With the city in the midst of a bitter political campaign, how would this affect the coming election?

TRIPLE THREAT Cleve Adams . . . 140

A lovely, innocent girl is marked for death by a frightened killer. Three identical victims confuse the killer and police. Here's a yarn you will enjoy solving.

MARKSMAN William Campbell Gault 155

Outlined in the glare of the lights over the speakers' stand was the Reform League Committee. In a window across the street, an unwilling killer sighted a powerful gun. Why was he compelled to pull the trigger?

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YOU'LL NEVER SEE ME AGAIN

by CORNELL WOOLRICH



IT was the biscuits started it. How he wished, afterward, that she'd never made those biscuits! But she made them, and she was proud of them. Her first try. Typical bride-and-groom stuff. The gag everyone's heard for years, so old it has whiskers down to here. So old it isn't funny any more. No, it isn't funny; listen while it's told.

He wasn't in the mood for playing house. He'd been working hard all day over his drafting board. Even if they'd been good, he probably would have grunted, "Not bad," and let it go at that. But they weren't good, they were atrocious. They were as hard as gravel, they tasted like lye, she'd put in too much of something and left out too much of something else, and life was too short to fool around with them.

"Well, I don't hear you saying anything about them," she pouted.

All he said was: "Take my advice, Smiles, and get 'em at the corner bakery after this."

"That isn't very appreciative," she said. "If you think it was much fun bending over that hot oven—"

"If you think it's much fun eating them—I've got a blueprint to do tomorrow; I can't take punishment like this!"

One word led to another. By the time the meal was over, her fluffy golden head was down inside her folded arms on the table and she was making broken-hearted little noises.

Crying is an irritant to a tired man. He kept saying things he didn't want to. "I could have had a meal in any restaurant without this. I'm tired. I came home to get a little rest, not the death scene from 'Camille' across the table from me."

She raised her head at that. She meant business now. "If I'm annoying you, that's easily taken care of! You want it quiet; we'll see that you get it quiet. No trouble at all about that."

She stormed into the bedroom and he could hear drawers slamming in and out. So she was going to walk out on him, was she? For a minute he was going to jump up and go in there after her and put his arms around her and say: "I'm sorry, Smiles; I didn't mean what I said." And that probably would have ended the incident then and there.

But he checked himself. He remembered a well-meaning piece of advice a bachelor friend of his had given him before his marriage. And bachelors always seem to know so much about marriage rules! "If she should ever threaten to walk out on you, and they all do at one time or another," this sage had counseled him, "there's only one way for you to handle that. Act as though you don't care; let her go. She'll come back fast enough, don't worry. Otherwise, if you beg her not to, she'll have the upper hand over you from then on."

He scratched himself behind the left ear. "I wonder if he was right about that?" he muttered. "Well, the only way to find out is to try it."

So he left the table, went into the living room, snapped on a reading lamp, sprawled back in a chair and opened his evening paper, perfectly unconcerned to all appearances. The only way you could tell he wasn't, was by the little glances he kept stealing over the top of the paper every once in a while to see if she was really going to carry out her threat.

She acted as if she were. She may have been waiting for him to come running in there after her and beg for forgiveness, and when he didn't, forced herself to go through with it. Stubborn pride on both their parts. And they were both so young, and this was so new to them. Six weeks the day after tomorrow.

She came bustling in, set down a little patent-leather valise in the middle of the room, and put on her gloves. Still waiting for him to make the first overtures for reconciliation.

But he kept making the breach worse every time he opened his mouth, all because of what some fool had told him. "Sure you've got everything?" he said quietly.

She was so pretty even when she was angry. "I'm glad you're showing your true colors; I'd rather find out now than later."

Someone should have pushed their two heads together, probably. But there wasn't anyone around but just the two of them. "You're making a mountain out of a molehill. Well, pick a nice comfortable hotel while you're at it."

"I don't have to go to a hotel. I'm not a waif. I've got a perfectly good mother who'll receive me with open arms."

"Quite a trip in the middle of the night, isn't

it?" And to make matters worse, he opened his wallet as if to give her the money for her fare.

That put the finishing touch to her exasperation. "I'll get up there without any help from you, Mr. Ed Bliss! And I don't want any of the things you ever gave me, either! Take your old silver-fox piece!" *Fluff*. "And take your old diamond ring!" *Plink*. "And take your old pin money!" *Scuff-scuff-slap*. "And you can take back that insurance policy you took out on me, too! Simon Legree! Ivan the Terrible!"

He turned the paper back to where the boxscores were. He only hoped that bachelor was right. "See you day after tomorrow, or whenever you get tired of playing hide-and-seek," he said calmly.

"You'll never see me again as long as you live!" It rang in his ears for days afterward.

She picked up the valise, the front door went *boom!* and he was single again.

The thing to do now was to pretend he didn't care, and then she'd never try anything like this again. Otherwise his life would be made miserable. Every time they had the least little argument, she'd threaten to go back to her mother.

That first night he did all the things he'd always wanted to do, but they didn't stack up to so much after all. Took off his socks and walked around in his bare feet, let the ashes lie wherever they happened to drop off, drank six bottles of cold beer through their mouths and let them lie all over the room, and went to bed without bothering to shave.

He woke up about four in the morning, and it felt strange knowing she wasn't in the house with him, and he hoped she was all right wherever she was, and he finally forced himself to go back to sleep again. In the morning there wasn't anyone to wake him up. Her not being around didn't seem so strange then simply because he didn't have time to notice; he was exactly an hour and twenty-two minutes late for work and ran out with one arm through the sleeve of his coat and one arm on the outside of it.

But when he came back that night, it did seem strange, not finding anyone there waiting for him, the house dark and empty, and beer bottles rolling all around the living-room floor. Last night's meal, their last one together, was still strewn around on the table after twenty-four hours. He poked his finger at one of the biscuits, thought remorsefully: "I should have kept quiet. I could have pretended they were good, even if they weren't." But it was too late for that now, the damage had been done.

He had to eat out at a counter by himself, and it was very depressing. He picked up the phone twice that evening, at 10:30 and again at 11:22, on the point of phoning up to her mother's place and making up with her, or at least finding out how she was. But each time he sort of slapped his own hand, metaphorically speaking, in rebuke and hung

up without putting the call through. "I'll hold out until tomorrow," he said to himself. "If I give in now, I'm at her mercy."

The second night was rocky. The bed was no good; they needed to be made up about once every twenty-four hours, he now found out for the first time. A cop poked him in the shoulder with his club at about three in the morning and growled: "What's your trouble, bud?"

"Nothing that's got anything to do with what's in your rule book," Bliss growled back at him. He picked himself up from the curb and went back inside his house again.

He would have phoned her as soon as he woke up in the morning, but he was late again—only twelve minutes behind, this time, though—and he couldn't do it from the office without his fellow draftsmen getting wise she had left him.

He finally did it when he came back that evening, the second time, after eating. This was exactly 8:17 p. m. Thursday, two nights after she'd gone.

He said: "I want to talk to Mrs. Belle Alden, in Denby, this State. I don't know her number. Find it for me and give it to me."

He'd never met Smiles' mother incidentally.

While he was waiting for the operator to ring back, he was still figuring how to get out of it; find out how she was without seeming to capitulate. Young pride! "Maybe I can talk the mother into not letting on I called to ask about her, so she won't know I'm weakening. Let it seem like she's the first one to thaw out."

The phone rang and he picked it up fast, pride or no pride.

A woman's voice got on, and he said: "Hello, is this Mrs. Alden?"

The voice said it was.

"This is Ed, Smiles' husband."

"Oh, how is she?" she said animatedly, before he got any further.

He sat down at the phone. It took him a minute to get his breath back again. "Isn't she there?" he said finally.

The voice was mildly surprised. "Here? Why, no. Isn't she *there*?"

For a minute his stomach had felt all hollow. Now he was all right again. He was beginning to get it. Or thought he was. He winked at himself, with the wall in front of him for a reflector. So the mother was going to bat for her. They'd cooked up this little fib between them, to punish him. They were going to throw a little fright into him. He'd thought he was teaching her a lesson, and now she was going to turn the tables on him and teach him one. He was supposed to go rushing up there tearing at his hair and foaming at the mouth. "Where's Smiles? She's gone! I can't find her!" Then she'd step out from behind the door, crack her whip over his head, and threaten: "Are you going to behave? Are you ever going to do that

again?" And from then on, she'd lead him around with a ring in his nose.

"You can't fool me, Mrs. Alden," he said self-assuredly. "I know she's there. I know she told you to say that."

Her voice wasn't panicky, it was still calm and self-possessed, but there was no mistaking the earnest ring to it. Either she was an awfully good actress, or this wasn't any act. "Now listen, Ed. You ought to know I wouldn't joke about a thing like that. As a matter of fact, I wrote her a long letter only yesterday afternoon. It ought to be in your mailbox by now. If she's not there with you, I'd make it my business to find out where she is, if I were you. And I wouldn't put off about it, either!"

He still kept wondering: "Is she ribbing me, or isn't she?" He drawled undecidedly: "Well, it's damned peculiar."

"I certainly agree with you," she said briskly.

He just chewed the inner tube of his cheek.

"Well, will you let me know as soon as you find out where she is?" she concluded. "I don't want to worry, and naturally I won't be able to help doing so until I hear from you that she's all right."

He hung up, and first he was surer than ever that it wasn't true she wasn't there. For one thing, the mother hadn't seemed *worried* enough to make it convincing. He thought: "I'll be damned if I call back again, so you and she can have the laugh on me. She's up there with you right now."

But then he went outside and opened the mailbox, and there was a letter for Smiles with her mother's name on the back of the envelope, and postmarked 6:30 the evening before.

He opened it and read it through. It was bona fide, all right; leisurely, chatty, nothing fake about it. One of those letters that are written over a period of days, a little at a time. There was no mistaking it; up to the time it had been mailed, she hadn't seen her daughter for months. And Smiles had left him the night before; if she'd gone up there at all, she would have been there long before then.

He didn't feel so chipper any more, after that. She wouldn't have stayed away this long if she'd been here in town, where she could walk or take a cab back to the house. There was nothing to be that sore about. And she'd intended going up there. The reason he felt sure of that was this. With her, it wasn't a light decision, lightly taken and lightly discarded. She hadn't been living home with her mother when he married her. She'd been on her own down here for several years before then. They corresponded regularly, they were on good terms, but the mother's remarriage had made a difference. In other words, it wasn't a case of flying straight back to the nest the first time she'd lost a few feathers. It was not only a fairly lengthy trip up there, but they had not seen each other for several years. So if she'd said she was going up

there, it was no fleeting impulse, but a rational, clear-cut decision, and she was the kind of girl who would carry it out once she had arrived at it.

II.

He put his hat on, straightened his tie, left the house and went downtown. There was only one way she could get anywhere near Denby, and that was by bus. It wasn't serviced by train. There'd been a spur out to it from the main River Valley line, but it hadn't paid for its keep and had been discontinued fifteen years ago.

Of the two main bus systems, one ran an express line that didn't stop anywhere near there; you had to go all the way to the Canadian border and then double back nearly half of the way by local, to get within hailing distance. The smaller line ran several a day, in each direction, up through there to the nearest large city beyond; they stopped there by request. It was obvious which of the two systems she'd taken.

That should have simplified matters greatly for him; he found out it didn't. He went down to the terminal and approached the ticket seller.

"Were you on duty here Tuesday night?"

"Yeah, from six on. That's my shift every night."

"I'm trying to locate someone. Look. I know you're selling tickets all night long, but maybe you can remember her." He swallowed a lump in his throat. "She's young, only twenty, with blond hair. So pretty you'd look at her twice, if you ever saw her the first time; I know you would. Her eyes are sort of crinkly and smiling. Even when her mouth isn't smiling, her eyes are. She . . . she bought a ticket to Denby."

The man turned around and took a pack of tickets out of a pigeonhole and blew a layer of dust off them. "I haven't sold a ticket to Denby in over a month." They had a rubber band around them. All but the top one. That blew off with his breath.

That seemed to do something to his powers of memory. He ducked down out of sight, came up with it from the floor. "Wait a minute," he said, prodding his thumbnail between two of his teeth. "I don't remember anything much about any eyes or smile, but there was a young woman came up and priced the fare to Denby. I guess it was night before last, at that. Seeing this one ticket pulled loose out of the batch reminded me of it. I told her how much it was, and I snagged out a ticket—this loose one here. But then she couldn't make it; I dunno, she didn't have enough money on her or something. She looked at her wrist watch, and asked me how late the pawnshops stay open. I told her they were all closed by then. Then she shoveled all the money she could round up across the counter at me and asked me how far that would take her. So I counted and told her, and she told

me to give her a ticket to that far."

Bliss was hanging onto his words, hands gripping the counter until his knuckles showed white. "Yes, but where to? Where was it to?"

The ticket seller's eyelids drooped deprecatingly. "That's the trouble," he said, easing the back of his collar. "I can't remember that part of it. I can't even remember how much the amount came to, now, any more. If I could, I could get the destination by elimination.

"If I only knew how much she had in her handbag when she left the house," Bliss thought desolately, "we could work it out together, him and me." He prodded: "Three dollars? Four? Five?"

The ticket vender shook his head baffledly. "No use, it won't come back. I'm juggling so many figures all night long, every night in the week—"

Bliss slumped lower before the sill. "But don't you keep a record of what places you sell tickets to?"

"No, just the total take for the night, without breaking it down."

He was as bad off as before. "Then you can't tell me for sure whether she did get on the bus that night or not?"

Meanwhile an impatient line had formed behind Bliss, and the ticket seller was getting fidgety.

"No. The driver might remember her. Look at it this way: she only stood in front of me for a minute or two at the most. If she got on the bus at all, she sat in back of him for anywhere from an hour to four hours. Remember, I'm not even guaranteeing that the party I just told you about is the same one you mean. It's just a vague incident to me."

"Would the same one that made Tuesday night's run be back by now?"

"Sure, he's going out tonight again." The ticket man looked at a chart on the wall. "Go over there and ask for No. 27. Next!"

No. 27 put down his coffee mug, swiveled around on the counter stool and looked at his questioner.

"Yare, I made Tuesday night's upstate run."

"Did you take a pretty blond girl, dressed in a gray jacket and skirt, as far as Denby?"

No. 27 stopped looking at him. His face stayed on in the same direction, but he was looking at other things. "Nawr, I didn't."

"Well, was she on the bus at all?"

No. 27's eyes remained at a tangent from the man he was answering. "Nawr, she wasn't."

"What're you acting so evasive about? You don't seem to want to—I can tell you're hiding something, just by looking at you."

"I said, 'Nawr, I didn't.'"

"Listen. I'm her husband. I've got to know. Here, take this, only tell me, will you? I've got to know. It's an awful feeling!"

The driver took a hitch in his belt. "I get good wages. A ten-dollar bill wouldn't make me say

I saw someone when I didn't. No, nor a twenty, nor a century either. That's an old one. It would only make me lose my rating with the company." He swung around on his stool, took up his coffee mug again. "I only sawr the road," he said truculently. "I ain't supposed to see who's riding in back of me."

"But you can't help seeing who gets off each time you stop."

This time No. 27 wouldn't answer at all. The interview was over, as far as he was concerned. He flung down a nickel, defiantly jerked down the visor of his cap, and swaggered off.

Bliss slouched forlornly out of the terminal, worse off than before. The issue was all blurred



now. The ticket seller vaguely thought some girl or other had haphazardly bought a ticket for as much money as she had on her person that night, but without guaranteeing that she fitted his description of Smiles at all. The driver, on the other hand, definitely denied anyone like her had ridden with him, as far as Denby or anywhere else. What was he to think? Had she left, or hadn't she left?

Whether she had or not, it was obvious that she had never arrived. He had the testimony of her own mother, and that letter from her from upstate, to vouch for that. And who was better to be believed than her own mother?

Had she stayed here in the city then? But she hadn't done that, either. He knew Smiles so well. Even if she had gone to the length of staying overnight at a hotel that first night, Tuesday, she would have been back home with him by Wednesday morning at the very latest. Her peevishness would have

evaporated long before then. Another thing, she wouldn't have had enough money to stay for any longer than just one night at even a moderately priced hotel. She'd flung down the greater part of her household expense money on the floor that night before walking out.

"All I can do," he thought apprehensively, "is make a round of the hotels and find out if anyone like her was at any of them Tuesday night, even if she's not there now."

He didn't check every last hotel in town, but he checked all the ones she would have gone to, if she'd gone to one at all. She wouldn't have been sappy enough to go to some run-down lodging-house near the freight yards or longshoremen's hostelry down by the piers. So that narrowed the field somewhat.

He checked on her triply: by name, first, on the hotel registers for Tuesday night; then by her description, given to the desk clerks; and lastly by any and all entries in the registers, no matter what name was given. He knew her handwriting, even if she'd registered under an assumed name.

He drew a complete blank. No one who looked like her had come to any of the hotels, Tuesday night, or at any time since. No one giving her name. No one giving another name, who wrote like her. What was left? Where else could she have gone? Friends? She didn't have any. Not close ones, not friends she knew well enough to walk in on unannounced and stay overnight with. She just had a few acquaintances, from the place she'd worked at before their marriage, and she was hardly on more than nodding terms with them.

Where was she? She wasn't in the city. She wasn't in the country, up at Denby. She seemed to have vanished completely from the face of the earth.

It was past two in the morning by the time he'd finished checking the hotels. It was too late to get a bus any more that night, or he would have gone up to Denby then and there himself. He turned up his coat collar against the night mist and started disconsolately homeward. On the way he tried to buck himself up by saying: "Nothing's happened to her. She's just hiding out somewhere, trying to throw a scare into me. She'll show up, she's bound to." It wouldn't work, much. It was two whole days and three nights now. Marriage is learning to know another person, learning to know by heart what he or she'd do in such-and-such a situation. They'd only been married six weeks, but, after all, they'd been going together nearly a year before that; he knew her pretty well by now.

She wasn't vindictive. She didn't nurse grievances, even imaginary ones. There were only two possible things she would have done. She would have either gotten on that bus red-hot, been cooled off long before she got off it again, but stayed up

there a couple of days as long as she was once there. Or if she hadn't taken the bus, she would have been back by twelve at the latest right that same night, with an injured air and a remark like: "You ought to be ashamed of yourself letting your wife walk the street like a vagrant!" or something to that effect. She hadn't, so she must have gone up there. Then he thought of the letter from her mother, and he felt good and scared.

The phone was ringing when he got back. He could hear it even before he got the front door open. He nearly broke the door down in his hurry to get in and at it. For a minute he thought—

But it was only Mrs. Alden. She said: "I've been trying to get you ever since ten o'clock. I didn't hear from you, and I've been getting more and more worried." His heart went down under his shoelaces. "Did you locate her? Is it all right? Is she there with you?"

"I can't find her," he said, so low he had to say it over again so she could catch it.

She'd been talking fast until now. Now she didn't say anything at all for a couple of minutes; there was just an empty hum on the wire. Something came between them. They'd never seen each other face to face, but he could sense a change in her voice, a different sound to it the next time he heard it. It was as though she were drawing away from him. Not moving from where she stood, of course, but rather withdrawing her confidence. The beginnings of suspicion were lurking in it somewhere or other.

"Don't you think it's high time you got in touch with the police?" he heard her say. And then, so low that he could hardly get it: "If you don't, I will." *Click*, and she was gone.

He didn't take it the way he, perhaps, should have.

As he hung up, he thought: "Yes, she's right, I'll have to. Nothing else left to be done now. It's two full days now; no use kidding myself any more."

He put on his hat and coat again, left the house once more. It was about three in the morning by this time. He hated to go to them. It seemed like writing finis to it. It seemed to make it so final, tragic, in a way. As though, once he notified them, all hope of her returning to him unharmed, of her own accord, was over. As though it stopped being just a little private, domestic matter any more and became a police matter, out of his own hands. Ridiculous, he knew, but that was the way he felt about it. But it had to be done. Just sitting worrying about her wasn't going to bring her back.

He went in between two green door lamps and spoke to a desk sergeant. "I want to report my wife missing." They sent a man out, a detective, to talk to him. Then he had to go down with him to the city morgue, to see if she was among the unidentified dead there, and that was the worst ex-

perience he'd had yet. It wasn't the sight of the still faces one by one; it was the dread, each time, that the next one would be hers. Half under his breath, each time he shook his head and looked at someone who had once been loved, he added: "No, thank God." She wasn't there.

Although he hadn't found her, all he could give when he left that place of the dead was a sigh of unutterable relief. She wasn't among the *found* dead, that was all this respite marked. But he knew, although he tried to shut the grisly thought out, that there are many dead who are *not* found. Sometimes not right away, sometimes never.

They took him around to the hospitals then, to certain wards, and though this wasn't quite so bad as the other place, it wasn't much better either. He looked for her among amnesia victims, would-be suicides who had not yet recovered consciousness, persons with all the skin burned off their faces, mercifully swathed in gauze bandaging and tea leaves. They even made him look in the alcoholic wards, though he protested strenuously that *she* wouldn't be there, and in the psychopathic wards, among people who had gone temporarily insane on the streets.

The sigh of relief he gave when this tour was over was only less heartfelt than after leaving the morgue. She wasn't dead. She wasn't maimed or injured or out of her mind in any way. And still she wasn't to be found.

Then they turned it over to Missing Persons, had her description broadcast, and told him there wasn't anything he could do for the present but go home.

He didn't even try to sleep when he got back the second time. Just sat there waiting—for the call that didn't come, and that he somehow knew wouldn't come, not if he waited for a week or a month.

It was starting to get light by that time. The third day since she'd been swallowed up bodily was dawning. She wasn't in the city, alive or dead, he was convinced. Why sit there waiting for them to locate her when he was sure she wasn't here? He'd done all he could at this end. He hadn't done anything yet at the other end. The thing was too serious now; it wasn't enough just to take the word of a *voice* over a telephone wire that she wasn't up there. Not even if the voice was that of her own mother, who was to be trusted if anyone was, who thought as much of her as he did. He decided he'd go up there himself. Anything was better than just sitting here waiting helplessly.

He couldn't take the early-morning bus, the way he wanted to. Those building plans he was finishing up had to be turned in today; there was an important contractor waiting for them, and he was loyal to the firm he worked for. He stood there poring over the blueprints, more dead than alive between worry and lack of sleep, and when they

were finally finished, turned in and O. K.'d, he went straight from the office to the terminal and took the bus that should get in there about dark.

III.

Denby wasn't even an incorporated village, he found when the bus finally got there, an hour late. It was just a place where a turnpike crossed another road, with houses spaced at lengthy intervals along the four arms of the intersection. Some of them a quarter of a mile apart, few of them in full view of one another due to intervening trees, bends in the roads, rises and dips of the ground. A filling station was the nearest thing to the crossroads, in one direction. Up in the other was a store, with living quarters over it. It was the most dispersed community he had ever seen.

He chose the store at random, stopped in there, and asked:

"Which way to the Alden house?"

The storekeeper seemed to be one of those people who wear glasses for the express purpose of staring over instead of through them. Or maybe they'd slipped down on the bridge of his nose. "Take that other fork, to your right," he instructed. "Just keep going till you think there ain't going to be no more houses, and you're sure I steered you wrong. Keep on going anyway. When you least expect it, one last house'll show up, round the turn. That's them. Can't miss it. You'll know it by the low brick barrier wall runs along in front of it. He put that up lately, just to keep in practice, I reckon."

Bliss wondered what he meant by that, if anything, but didn't bother asking. The storekeeper was evidently one of these loquacious souls who would have rambled on forever given the slightest encouragement, and Bliss was tired and anxious to reach his destination. He thanked him and left.

The walk out was no picayune city block or two; it was a good stiff hike. The road stretched before him like a white tape under the velvety night sky, dark-blue rather than black, and stars twinkled down through the openings between the roadside-tree branches. He could hear countryside night noises around him, crickets or something, and once a dog barked way off in the distance, it sounded like miles away. It was lonely, but not particularly frightening; nature rarely is, it is man that is menacing.

Just the same, if she had come up here—and of course she hadn't—it wouldn't have been particularly prudent for a young girl alone like her to walk this distance at that hour of the night. She probably would have phoned out to them to come in and meet her at the crossroads, from either the store or that filling station. And yet if both had been closed up by then—her bus wouldn't have passed through here until one or two in the morn-

ing—she would have had to walk it alone. But she hadn't come up in the first place, so why conjure up additional dangers?

Thinking which, he came around the slow turn in the road and a low, elbow-height boundary wall sprang up beside him and ran down the road past a pleasant, white-painted two-story house, with dark gables, presumably green. They seemed to keep it in good condition. As for the wall itself, he got what the storekeeper's remark had intended to convey when he saw it. It looked very much as though Alden had put it up simply to kill time, give himself something to do, add a fancy touch to his property. For it seemed to serve no useful purpose. It was not nearly high enough to shut off the view, so it had not been built for privacy. It only ran along the front of the parcel, did not extend around the sides or to the back, so it was not even effective as a barrier against poultry or cattle, or useful as a boundary mark. It seemed to be purely decorative. As such, it was a neat, workmanlike job; you could tell Alden had been a mason before his marriage. It was brick, smoothly, painstakingly plastered over, and at one or two places Smiles' mother was evidently already trying to train rambler roses over the top of it, with somewhat meager results so far.

There was no gate in it, just a gap, with an ornamental willow wicket arched high over it. He turned in through there. They were up yet, though perhaps already on the point of retiring. One of the upper-floor windows held a light, but with a blind discreetly drawn down over it.

He rang the bell, then stepped back from the door and looked up, expecting to be interrogated first from the window, particularly at this hour. Nothing of the kind happened; they evidently possessed the trustfulness that goes with a clear conscience. He could hear steps start down the inside stairs. A woman's steps, at that, and a voice that carried out to where he was with surprising clarity said: "Must be somebody lost their way, I guess."

A hospitable little lantern up over the door went on from the inside, and a moment later he was looking at a pleasant-faced, middle-aged woman with soft gray eyes. Her face was long and thin, but without the hatchet-sharp features that are so often an accompaniment of that contour of face. Her hair was a graying blond, but soft and wavy, not scraggly. Knowing who she was, he almost thought he could detect a little bit of Smiles in her face: the shape of the brows and the curve of the mouth, but that might have been just auto-suggestion.

"Hm-m-m?" she said serenely.

"I'm Ed, Mrs. Alden."

She blinked twice, as though she didn't get it for a minute. Or maybe wasn't expecting it.

"Smiles' husband," he said, a trifle irritably.

You're supposed to know your own in-laws. It wasn't their fault, of course, that they didn't. It wasn't his, either. He and Smiles had been meaning to come up here on a visit as soon as they could, but they'd been so busy getting their own home together, and six weeks is such a short time. Her mother had been getting over a prolonged illness at the time of their wedding, hadn't been strong enough for the trip down and back. And then he had swept Smiles off her feet so that she'd simply sent them a telegram announcing she was getting married, instead of going through any lengthy engagement.

Both her hands came out toward his now, after that momentary blankness. "Oh, come in, Ed," she said heartily. "I've been looking forward to meeting you, but I *wish* it had been under other circumstances." She glanced past his shoulder. "She's not with you, I see. No word yet, Ed?" she went on worriedly.

He looked down and shook his head glumly.

She held her hand to her mouth in involuntary dismay, then quickly regained her self-control, as though not wishing to add to his distress. "Don't know what to think," she murmured half audibly. "It's not like her to do a thing like that. Have



He was looking at a pleasant-faced, middle-aged woman with soft gray eyes, "I'm Ed, Mrs. Alden," he said.

you been to the police yet, Ed?"

"I reported it to them before daylight this morning. Had to go around to the different hospitals and places." He blew out his breath at the recollection. "Huff, it was ghastly."

"Don't let's give up yet, Ed. You know the old saying, 'No news is good news.'" Then, as though noticing that they were both still standing in the open doorway: "Don't let me keep you standing out here. Joe's upstairs; I'll call him down."

As he followed her inside, his whole first impression of Smiles' mother was that she was as nice, wholesome, inartificial a woman as you could find anywhere. And first impressions are always half the battle.

She led him along a neat, hardwood-floored hall, varnished to the brightness of a mirror. An equally spotless white staircase rose at the back of it to the floor above.

"Let me take your hat," she said thoughtfully, and hung it on a peg. "You look peaked, Ed; I can tell you're taking it hard. That trip up is strenuous, too. It's awful; you know you read about things like this in the papers nearly every day, but it's only when it hits home you realize—"

Talking disconnectedly like that, she had reached the entrance to the living room. She thrust her hand around to the inside of the door frame and snapped on the lights. He was standing directly in the center of the opening as she did so. There was something a little unexpected about the way they went on, but he couldn't figure what it was; it must have been just a subconscious impression on his part. Maybe they were a little brighter than he'd expected, and after coming in out of the dark— The room looked as though it had been painted fairly recently, and he supposed that was what it was, the walls and woodwork gave it back with unexpected dazzle. It was too small a detail even to waste time on. Or is any detail ever too small?

She had left him for a moment to go as far as the foot of the stairs. "Joe, Smiles' husband is here," he heard her call up them.

A deep rumbling voice came down in answer: "She with him?"

She tactfully didn't answer that, no doubt to spare Bliss' feelings; she seemed to be such a considerate woman. "Come down, dear," was all she said.

He was a thick, heavy-set man, with a bull neck and a little circular fringe of russet-blond hair around his head, the crown of it bald. He was going to be the blunt, aggressive type, Bliss could see. With eyes too small to match it. Eyes that said: "Try and get past us."

"So you're Bliss." He reached out and shook hands with him. It was a hard shake, but not particularly friendly. His hands were calloused to the lumpiness of alligator hide. "Well, you're taking it pretty calmly, it seems to me."

Bliss looked at him. "How do you figure that?"

"Joe!" the mother had remonstrated, but so low neither of them paid any attention.

"Coming up here like this. Don't you think it's your business to stick close down there, where you could do some good?"

Mrs. Alden laid a comforting hand on Bliss' arm. "Don't, Joe. You can tell how the boy feels by looking at him. I'm Smiles' mother and I know how it is; if she said she was coming up here, why, naturally—"

"I know you're Teresa's mother," he said emphatically, as if to shut her up.

A moment of awkward silence hung suspended in the air above their three heads. Bliss had a funny "lost" feeling for a minute, as though something had eluded him just then, something had been a little askew. It was like when there's a word you are trying desperately to remember; it's on the tip of your tongue, but you can't bring it out. It was such a small thing, though—

"I'll get you something to eat, Ed," she said, and as she turned to go out of the room, Bliss couldn't help overhearing her say to her husband in a stage whisper: "Talk to him. Find out what really happened."

Alden had about as much finesse as a trained elephant doing the gavotte among ninepins. He cleared his throat judiciously. "D'ja do something you shouldn't, that how it come about?" he blurted out.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we have no way of knowing what kind of a disposition you've got. Have you got a pretty bad temper, are you a little too quick with the flat of your hand?"

Bliss looked at him incredulously. Then he got it. "That's hardly a charge I expected to have to defend myself on. But if it's required of me— I happen to worship the ground my wife walks on, Mr. Alden. I'd sooner have my right arm wither away than—"

"No offense," said Alden lamely. "It's been known to happen before, that's all."

"Not in my house," Bliss told him, and gave him a steely look.

Smiles' mother came in again at this point, with something on a tray. Bliss didn't even bother looking up to see what it was. He waved it aside, sat there with his arms dangling out over his knees, his head bent way over, looking straight down through them.

The room was a vague irritant. He kept getting it all the time, at least every time he raised his head and looked around, but he couldn't figure what was doing it. There was only one thing he was sure of, it wasn't the people in it. So that left it up to the room. Smiles' mother was the soothing, soft-moving type that it was pleasant to have around you. And even the husband, in spite of his brusque-

ness, was the stolid emotionless sort that didn't get on your nerves.

What was it, then? Was the room furnished in bad taste? It wasn't; it was comfortable and homey-looking. And even if it hadn't been, that wouldn't have done it. He was no interior decorator, allergic to anything like that. Was it the glare from the recent paint job? No, not that, either; now that he looked, there wasn't any glare. It wasn't even glossy paint, it was the dull kind without high lights. That had just been an optical illusion when the lights first went on.

He shook his head a little to get rid of it, and thought: "What's annoying me in here?" And couldn't tell.

He was holding a lighted cigarette between his dangling fingers, without bothering to smoke it, and the ash was slowly accumulating.

"Pass him an ash tray, Joe," she said in a watery voice. She was starting to cry, without any fuss, unnoticeably, but she still had time to think of their guest's comfort. Some women are like that.

He looked and a whole cylinder of ash had fallen to the rug. It looked like a good rug, too. "I'm sorry," he said, and rubbed it out with his shoe.

Even the rug bothered him in some way.

Pattern too loud? No, it was quiet, dark-colored, and in good taste. His eyes traveled over it and he couldn't find a thing the matter with it. But it kept troubling him just the same.

Something went *clang*. It wasn't in the same room with them, some other part of the house, faint and muffled, like a defective pipe joint settling or swelling. Bliss looked around blankly, unable to tell just where it had come from. It hadn't really been loud enough to be disconcerting.

She said: "Joe, when are you going to have the plumber in to fix that water pipe? It's sprung out of line again. You'll wait until we have a good-sized leak on our hands."

"Yeah, that's right," he said. It sounded more like an original discovery than a recollection of something overlooked. Bliss couldn't have told why, it just did. More of his occultism, he supposed.

"I'll have to get a fresh handkerchief," she said apologetically, got up and passed between them, the one she had been using until now rolled into a tight little ball at her upper lip.

"Take it easy," Alden said consolingly.

His eyes went to Bliss, then back to her again, as if to say: "Do you see that she's crying, as well as I do?" So Bliss glanced at her profile as she went by, and she was. She ought to have been, she was the girl's mother.

When she came in again with the fresh handkerchief she'd gone to get, he got to his feet.

"This isn't bringing her back. I'd better get down to the city again. They might have word for me by now."

Alden said: "Can I talk to you alone a minute, Bliss, before you go?"

The three of them had moved out into the hall. Mrs. Alden went up the stairs slowly. The higher up she got, the louder her sobs became. Finally a long wail burst out, and the closing of a door cut it in half. A minute later bedsprings protested, as if someone had dropped on them full length.

"D'you hear that?" Alden said to him. Another of those never-ending nuances hit Bliss; he'd said it as if he were proud of it.

Bliss was standing in the doorway, looking back into the room. He felt as if he were glad to get out of it. And he still couldn't understand why, any more than any of the rest of it.

"What was it you wanted to say to me on the side?"

Blunt as ever, Alden asked: "Have you told us everything, or have you left out part of it?"

"Don't get you."

"Just what went on between you and Teresa anyway?"

"One of those tiffs."

Alden's small eyes got even smaller, they almost creased out in his face. "It must have been *some* tiff, for her to walk out on you with her grip in her hand. She wasn't the kind—"

"How did you know she took her grip with her? I didn't tell you that."

"You didn't have to. She was coming up here, wasn't she? They always take their grips when they walk out on you."

There wasn't pause enough between their two sentences to stick a bent comma. One just seemed to flow out of the other, only with a change of speakers. Alden's voice had gone up a little with the strain of the added pace he'd put into it, that was all. He'd spoken it a little faster than his usual cadence. Small things. Damn those small things to hell, torturing him like gnats, like gnats that you can't put your finger on!

Right under Bliss' eyes, a bead of sweat was forming between two of the reddish tufts of hair at the edge of Alden hair line. He could see it oozing out of the pore. What was that from? Just from discussing what time his bus would get him back to the city, as they were doing now? No, it must have been from saying that sentence too fast a while ago—the one about the grip. The effects were only coming out now.

"Well," Bliss said, "I'd better get a move on, to catch the bus back."

Her door, upstairs, had opened again. It might have been just coincidental, but it was timed almost as though she'd been listening.

"Joe," she called down the stair well. "Don't let Ed start back down again right tonight. Two trips in one day is too much; he'll be a wreck. Why not have him stay over with us tonight, and take the early morning one instead?"

Bliss was standing right down there next to him. She could have spoken to him directly just as easily. Why did she have to relay it through her husband?

"Yeah," Alden said up to her, "that's just what I was thinking myself." But it was as though he'd said: "I get you."

Bliss had a funny feeling they'd been saying something to one another right in front of his face without his knowing what it was.

"No," he said dolefully, "I'm worried about her. The sooner I get down there and get to the bottom of it—"

He went on out the door, and Alden came after him.

"I'll walk **you** down to the bus stop," he offered.

"Not necessary," Bliss told him curtly. After all, twice now this **other** man had tried to suggest he'd abused or maltreated his wife; he couldn't help resenting it. "I can find my way back without any trouble. You're probably tired and want to turn in."

"Just as you say," Alden acquiesced.

IV.

They didn't shake hands at parting. Bliss couldn't help noticing that the other man didn't even reach out and offer to. For his part, that suited him just as well.

After he'd already taken a few steps down the road, Alden called out after him: "Let us know the minute you get good news; I don't want my wife to worry any more than she has to. She's taking it hard."

Bliss noticed he didn't include himself in that. He didn't hold that against him, though; after all, there was no blood relationship there.

Alden turned as if to go back inside the house again, but when Bliss happened to glance back several minutes later, just before taking the turn in the road that cut the house off from sight, he could still detect a narrow up-and-down band of light escaping from the doorway, with a break in it at one point as though a protruding profile were obscuring it.

"Wants to make sure I'm really on my way to take that bus," he said to himself knowingly. But suspicion is a two-edged sword that turns against the wielder as readily as the one it is wielded against. He only detected the edge that was turned toward him, and even that but vaguely.

He reached the crossroads and took up his position. He still had about five minutes to wait, but he'd hardly arrived when two yellow peas of light, swelling until they became great hazy balloons, came down the turnpike toward him. He thought it was the bus at first, ahead of its own schedule, but it turned out to be a coupé with a Quebec license. It slowed long enough for the occupant to lean out and ask:

"Am I on the right road for the city?"

"Yeah, keep going straight, you can't miss," Bliss said dully. Then suddenly, on an impulse he was unable to account for afterward, he raised his voice and called after him: "Hey! I don't suppose you'd care to give me a lift in with you?"

"Why not?" the Canuck said amiably, and slowed long enough for Bliss to catch up to him.

Bliss opened the door and sidled in. He still didn't know what had made him change his mind like this, unless perhaps it was the vague thought that he might make better time in with a private car like this than he would have with the bus.

The driver said something about being glad to have someone to talk to on the way down, and Bliss explained briefly that he'd been waiting for the bus, but beyond those few introductory remarks, they did not talk much. Bliss wanted to think. He wanted to analyze his impressions of the visit he had just concluded.

It was pretty hopeless to do much involved thinking with a stranger at his elbow, liable to interrupt his train of thought every once in a while with some unimportant remarks that had to be answered for courtesy's sake, so the most he could do was marshal his impressions, sort of document them for future reference, when he was actually alone:

1. The lights seemed to go on in an unexpected way, when she first pressed the switch.
2. The room bothered him. It and nearly everything in it except the people themselves. It hadn't been the kind of room you feel at ease in. It hadn't been *restful*.
3. There had been some sort of faulty vocal co-ordination when she said, "I'm Smiles' mother," and he said, "I know you're Teresa's mother."
4. There had also been nuances in the following places: When Alden's eyes sought his, as if to assure himself that he, Bliss, saw that she was crying almost unnoticeably there in the room with them. When she ran whimpering up the stairs and threw herself on the bed, and he said, "Hear that?" And lastly when she called down and addressed her overnight invitation to Alden, instead of Bliss himself, as though there were some intangible kernel in it to be extracted first before he passed on the dry husk of the words themselves to Bliss.

At this point, before he got any further, there was a thud, a long-drawn-out reptilian hiss, and a tire went out. They staggered to a stop at the side of the road and exchanged quizzical looks.

"Looks like I've brought you tough luck," Bliss remarked ruefully.

"No," his host assured him, "that thing's been on its ninth life for weeks; I'm only surprised it lasted this long. I had it patched before I left Three Rivers this morning, thought maybe I could make the city on it, but it looks like no soap. Well, I have a spare, and now I *am* glad I hitched you on; four hands are better than two."

The stretch of roadway where it had happened was a particularly bad one, Bliss couldn't help noticing as he slung off his coat and jumped down to

lend a hand; it was crying for attention, needled with small jagged rock fragments, either improperly crushed in the first place or else loosened from their bed by some recent rain. He supposed it hadn't been blocked off because there was no other branch road in the immediate vicinity that could take its place as a detour.

They'd hardly gotten the jack out when the bus overtook and passed them, wiping out his gain of time at a stroke. And then, a considerable time later, after they'd already finished the job and wiped their hands clean, some other anonymous car went steaming by, this time at a rate of speed that made the bus seem to have been standing still in its tracks. The Canadian was the only one in sight by the stalled car as its cometlike headlights flicked by. Bliss happened to be farther in off the road just then. He turned his head and looked after it, however, at the tornadolike rush of air that followed in its wake, and got a glimpse of it just before it hurtled from sight.

"That fellow's asking for a flat," the Canadian said, "passing over a stretch of fill like this at such a clip."

"He didn't have a spare on him, either," Bliss commented. "I got a look at his rear and side just now."

"Looked like he was trying to beat that bus in." Just an idle phrase, for purposes of comparison. It took on new meaning later, though, when Bliss remembered it.

They climbed in and started off again. The rest of the ride passed uneventfully. Bliss spelled his companion at the wheel, the last hour in, and let him take a little doze. He'd been on the road steadily since early that morning, he'd told Bliss. The Canadian evidently figured by that time he could trust his passenger, wasn't in any danger of waking up in a ditch with his car gone and his pockets empty. He happened to be right, but all he had to rely on was just feeling, sixth sense. Bliss himself was a firm believer in that very sort of thing; the whole effect that room back there at Denby had on him was the result of that entirely.

Bliss woke him up and gave the car back to him when they reached the city limits. The Canadian was heading for a certain hotel all the way downtown, so Bliss wouldn't let him deviate from his course to take him over to his place; he got out instead at the nearest parallel point to it they touched, thanked him, and started over on foot.

He had a good stiff walk ahead of him, but he didn't mind that, he'd been sitting cramped up for so long. He still wanted to think things over as badly as ever, too, and he'd found out by experience that solitary walking helped him to think better.

It didn't in this case, though. He was either too tired from the events of the past few days, or else the materials he had were too formless, indefinite, to get a good grip on. He kept asking himself:

"What was wrong up there? Why am I dissatisfied?" And he couldn't answer for the life of him. "Was anything wrong," he was finally reduced to wondering, "or was it wholly imaginary on my part?" It was like a wrestling bout with shadows.

The night around him was dark-blue velvet, and as he drew near his own isolated semisuburban neighborhood, the silence was at least equal to that up at Denby. The only difference was there were paved sidewalks to traverse and the houses were more numerous. There wasn't a soul stirring, not even a milkman. He trudged onward under a leafy tunnel of sidewalk trees that all but made him invisible.

Leaving the coupé where he had, and coming over in a straight line this way, brought him up to his house from behind, on the street in back of it instead of the one running directly before it, which was an approach he never took at other times, such as when coming home from downtown. Behind it there were nothing but vacant plots, so it was a short cut to cross diagonally behind the house next door and go through from the back instead of going all the way around the corner on the outside. He did that now, without thinking of anything except to save a few extra steps.

As he came out from behind the house next door, treading soundless on the well-kept back-yard grass, he saw a momentary flash through one of his own windows that could only have been a pocket torch. He stopped dead in his tracks. "Burglars," was the first thought that came to him. The lights were in perfect working order, he knew; anyone that had



any business being in there—and no one had at this hour—would have turned them on.

He advanced a wary step or two. The flash came again, but from another window this time, nearer the front. They were evidently on their way out, using it only intermittently to help find their way. He'd be able to head them off at the front door, as they stole forth.

There was a partition hedge between the two

houses, running from front to back. He scurried along that, on his neighbor's side of it, keeping head and shoulders down, until he was on a line with his own front door. He crouched there, peering through.

They had left a lookout standing just outside his door. He could see the motionless figure. And then, as his fingers were about to part the hedge, to aid him in crashing through, the still form shifted a little, and the uncertain light struck a glint from a little wedge on its chest. At the same instant Bliss caught the outline of a visor above the profile. A cop!

One hand behind him, Bliss ebbd back again on his heels, thrown completely off balance by the unexpected revelation.

V.

His own front door opened just then and two men came out, one behind the other. Without visors and without metallic gleams on their chests. But the cop turned and flipped up his nightstick toward them in semisalute; so, whatever they were, they weren't burglars, although one was unmistakably carrying something out of the house with him. It was on the side away from Bliss, but he could tell by the stiff way he held his arm, as though it were weighted down with something.

They carefully closed the front door behind them, even tried it a second time to make sure it was securely fastened. A snatch of guarded conversation drifted toward him as they made their way down the short front walk to the sidewalk. The uniformed man took no part in it, only the two who had been inside.

"He's hot, all right," Bliss heard one say.

"Sure, he's hot, and he already knows it. You notice he wasn't on that bus when it got in. I'll beat it down and get the teletype busy. You put a case on this place. Still, he might try to sneak back in again later."

Bliss had been crouched there on his heels, hair line just even with the serried top of the hedge. He went forward and down now on the flats of his hands, as stunned as though he'd gotten a rabbit punch at the back of the neck.

"What was that?"

"Cat, I guess, rampaging around in the hedge. There it is; see it?"

At that moment a small form which Bliss himself hadn't noticed until now, scampered furtively out farther down the hedge and disappeared around the corner of the house, effectively covering the rustling noise he had just inadvertently made.

Motionless there, almost dazed, he kept shaking his head slightly, as though to clear it. They were after *him*, they thought he'd— Not only that, but they'd been tipped off what bus he was supposed to show up on. That could mean only one person, Joe Alden.

He wasn't surprised. He could even understand his doing a thing like that; it must seem suspicious to them up there the way she'd disappeared, and Bliss' own complete lack of any plausible explanation for it. He'd probably have felt the same way about it himself, if he'd been in their place. But he did resent the sneaky way Alden had gone about it, waiting until he was gone and then denouncing him the minute his back was turned. Why hadn't he tried to have him held by the locals while he was right up there with them? He supposed, now, that was the esoteric meaning in her invitation to him to stay over; so Alden could go out and bring in the cops while he was asleep under their roof. It hadn't worked because he'd insisted on leaving.

Meanwhile, he continued watching these men before him who had now, through no fault of his own, become his deadly enemies. They separated. One of them, with the uniformed cop trailing along with him, started down the street away from the house. The other drifted diagonally across to the opposite side. The gloom of an overshadowing tree over there swallowed him, and he failed to show up again on the other side of it, where there was a little more light.

There was hardly any noise about the whole thing, hardly so much as a footfall. They were like shadows moving in a dream world. A car engine began droning stealthily, slurred away, from a short distance farther down the street, marking the point of departure of two out of the three. A drop of sweat, as cold as mercury, toiled sluggishly down the nape of Bliss' neck, blotted itself into his collar.

He stayed there where he was, on all fours behind the hedge, a few minutes longer. The only thing to do was go out and try to clear himself. The one thing *not* to do was turn around and slink off— though the way lay open behind him. But at the same time he had a chill premonition that it wasn't going to be so easy to clear himself; that once they got their hands on him—

"But I've got to," he kept telling himself over and over. "They've got to help me, not go after me. They can't say I . . . did anything like that to Smiles! Maybe I can hit one of them that's fair minded, who will listen to me."

Meanwhile he had remained in the crouched position of a track runner waiting for the signal to start. He picked himself up slowly and straightened to his full height behind the hedge. That took courage, alone, without moving a step farther. "Well, here goes," he muttered, tightened his belt, and stuck a cigarette in his mouth. It was a crawly sort of feeling. He knew, nine chances to one, his freedom of movement was over the minute he stepped out from behind this hedge and went over toward that inky tree shadow across the street that was just a little too lumpy in the middle. He didn't give a rap about freedom of movement in itself, but his whole purpose, his one aim from now on, was

to look for and find Smiles. He was afraid losing it would hamper him in that. She was his wife, he wanted to look for her himself, he didn't want other guys to do it for him, no matter whether they were professionals or not.

He lighted the cigarette when halfway across the street, but the tree shadow didn't move. The detective evidently didn't know him by sight yet, was on the lookout for someone coming from the other direction on his way to the house.

Bliss stopped right in front of him and said: "Are you looking for me? I'm Ed Bliss and I live over there."

The shadow up and down the tree trunk detached itself, became a man. "How'd you know anyone was looking for you?" It was a challenge, as though that were already an admission of guilt in itself.

Bliss said: "Come inside with me, will you? I want to talk to you."

They crossed over once more. Bliss unlocked the door for him, with his own key this time, and put on the lights. They went into the living room. It was already getting dusty from not being cleaned in several days.

He looked Bliss over good. Bliss looked him over just as good. He wanted a man in this, not a detective.

The detective spoke first, repeated what he'd asked him outside on the street. "How'd you know we'd be looking for you when that bus got in?"

"I didn't. I just happened to take a lift down instead."

"What's become of your wife, Bliss?"

"I don't know."

"We think you do."

"I wish you were right. But not in the way you mean."

"Never mind what you wish. You know another good word for that? Remorse."

The blood in Bliss' face thinned a little. "Before you put me in the soup, just let me talk here quietly with you a few minutes. That's all I ask."

"When she walked out of here Tuesday night, what was she wearing?"

Bliss hesitated a minute. Not because he didn't know—he'd already described her outfit to them when he reported her missing—but because he could sense a deeper import lurking behind the question.

The detective took the hesitancy for an attempt at evasion, went on: "Now every man knows his wife's clothes by heart. You paid for every last one of them, you know just what she owned. Just tell me what she had on."

There was danger in it somewhere. "She had on a gray suit—jacket and skirt, you know. Then a pink silk shirtwaist. She threw her fur piece back at me, so that's about all she went out in. A hat, of course. One of those crazy hats."

"Baggage?"

"A patent-leather valise with tan binding. Oh, about the size of a typewriter case."

"Sure of that?"

"Sure of that."

The detective gave a kind of soundless whistle through his teeth. "Whe-ew!" he said, and he looked at Bliss almost as if he felt sorry for him. "You've sure made it tough for yourself this time!"

"In what way?"

"I didn't have to ask you that, because we know just as well as you what she had on."

"How?"

"Because we found every last one of those articles you just mentioned in the furnace downstairs in this very house, less than twenty minutes ago. My partner's gone down to headquarters with them. And a guy don't do that to his wife's clothes unless he's done something to his wife, too. What've you done with her, Bliss?"

VI.

The other man wasn't even in the room with him any more, so far as Bliss was concerned. A curtain of foggy horror had dropped down all around him. "My God!" he whispered hoarsely. "Something's happened to her, somebody's done something to her!" And he jumped up and ran out of the room so unexpectedly, so swiftly, that if his purpose had been to escape, he almost could have eluded the other man. But he didn't try to bolt out of the house; instead he made for the cellar door and ran down the basement steps. The detective had shot to his feet after him, was at his heels by the time he got down to the bottom. Bliss turned on the light and looked at the furnace grate, yawning emptily open—as though that could tell him anything more.

He turned despairingly to the detective. "Was there any blood on them?"

"Should there have been?"

"Don't! Have a heart," Bliss begged in a choked voice, and shaded his eyes. "Who put them in there? Why'd they bring them back here? How'd they get in while I was out?"

"Quit that," the headquarters man said dryly. "Suppose we get started. Our guys'll be looking all over for you, and it'll save them a lot of trouble."

Every few steps on the way back up those basement stairs, Bliss would stop, as though he'd run down and needed winding up again. The detective would prod him forward, not roughly, just as a sort of reminder to keep going.

"Why'd they put them in *there*?" he asked. "Things that go in there are meant for fuel. That's what you came back for, to finish burning them, isn't it? Too late in the year to make a fire in the daytime without attracting attention."

"Listen. We were only married six weeks."

"What's that supposed to prove? Do you think there haven't been guys that got rid of their wives

six days after they were married, or even six hours?"

"But those are fiends, those are monsters. I couldn't be one of them!"

And the pitiless answer was: "How do we know that? We can't tell, from the outside, what you're like on the inside. We're not X-ray machines."

They were up on the main floor again by now.

"Was she insured?" the detective questioned.

"Yes."

"You tell everything, don't you?"

"Because there's nothing to hide. I didn't insure her, I insured us both. I took out twin policies, one on each of us. We were each other's beneficiaries. She wanted it that way."

"But you're here and she's not," the detective pointed out remorselessly.

They passed the dining-room entrance. Maybe it was the dishes still left on the table from that night that got to him. She came before him again, with her smiling crinkly eyes. He could see her carrying in a plate covered with a napkin. "Sit down there, mister, and don't look. I've got a surprise for you."

That finished him. That was a blow below the belt. He said: "You gotta let me alone a minute." And he slumped against the wall with his arm up over his face.

When he finally got over it, and it took some getting over, a sort of change had come over the detective. He said tonelessly: "Sit down a minute. Get your breath back and pull yourself together." He didn't sound like he meant that particularly, it was just an excuse.

He lighted a cigarette and then he threw the pack over at Bliss. Bliss let it slide off his thigh without bothering with it.

The detective said: "I've been a dick going on eight years now, and I never saw a guy who could fake a spell like you just had, and make it so convincing." He paused, then went on: "The reason I'm saying this is, once you go in you stay in, after what we found here in the house tonight. And, then, you did come up to me outside of your own accord, but of course that could have been just self-preservation. So I'm listening, for just as long as it takes me to finish this cigarette. By the time I'm through, if you haven't been able to tell me anything that changes the looks of things around, away we go." And he took a puff and waited.

"There's nothing I can tell you that I haven't already told you. She walked out of here Tuesday night at supper time. She said she was going to her mother's. She never got there. I haven't seen her since. Now you fellows find the things I saw her leave in, stuffed into the furnace in the basement." He pinched the bridge of his nose and kept it pinched.

The detective took another slow pull at his cigarette. "You've been around to the morgue and the

hospitals. So she hasn't had any accident. Her things are back here again. So it isn't just a straight disappearance, or amnesia, or anything like that. That means that whatever was done to her or with her, was done against her will. Since we've eliminated accident, suicide, voluntary and involuntary disappearance, that spells murder."

"Don't!" Bliss said.

"It's got to be done." The detective took another puff. "Let's get down to motive. Now, you already have one, and a damned fine one, I'm warning you. You'll have to dig up one on the part of somebody else that'll be stronger than yours, if you expect to cancel it out."

"Who could want to hurt her? She was so lovely, she was so beautiful—"

"Sometimes it's dangerous for a girl to be too lovely, too beautiful. It drives a man out of his mind, the man that can't have her. Were there any?"

"You're talking about Smiles now," Bliss growled dangerously, tightening his fist.

"I'm talking about a case. A case of suspected murder. And to us cases aren't beautiful, aren't ugly, they're just punishable." He puffed again. "Did she turn anyone down to marry you?"

Bliss shook his head. "She once told me I was the first fellow she ever went with."

The detective took another puff at his cigarette. He looked at it, shifted his fingers back a little, then looked at Bliss. "I seldom smoke that far down," he warned him. "I'm giving you a break. There's one more drag left in it. Anyone else stand to gain anything, financially, by her death, outside of yourself?"

"No one I know of."

The detective took the last puff, dropped the butt, ground it out. "Well, let's go," he said, licking his fingers. "I couldn't have held onto that any more without sticking a pin into it." He fumbled under his coat, took out a pair of handcuffs. "Incidentally, what was her real name? I have to know when I bring you in."

"Teresa."

"Smiles was just your pet name for her, eh?" The detective seemed to be just talking aimlessly, to try to take the sting out of the pinch, keep Bliss' mind off the handcuffs.

"Yeah," Bliss said, holding out his wrist without being told to. "I was the first one called her that. She never liked to be called Teresa. Her mother was the one always stuck to that."

He jerked his wrist back in again.

"C'mon, don't get hard to handle," the detective growled, reaching out after it.

"Wait a minute," Bliss said excitedly, and stuck his hand behind his back. "Some things have been bothering me. You brought one of them back just then. I nearly had it. Let me look, before I lose it again. Let me look at that letter a minute that her



"Unless I miss my guess, these two letters weren't written by the same person."

mother sent her yesterday. It's here in my pocket."

He stripped it out of the envelope. "Smiles, dear," it began.

He opened his mouth and looked at the other man. "That's funny. Her mother never called her anything but Teresa. I know I'm right about that. How could she? It was *my* nickname. And I'd never seen her until last night and . . . and Smiles hadn't been home since we were married."

The detective, meanwhile, kept trying to snag his other hand—he was holding the letter in his left—and bring it around in front of him.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Bliss pleaded. "I've got one of those things now. There was like a hitch in the flow of conversation, an air pocket. She said, 'I'm Smiles' mother,' and he said, 'You're *Teresa's* mother,' like he was reminding her what she always called Smiles. Why should he have to

remind her of what she always called Smiles herself?"

"And that's supposed to clear you of suspicion, because her mother picks up your nickname for your wife, after she's been talking to you on the phone two or three days in a row? Anyone would be liable to do that. She did it to sort of accommodate you. Didn't you ever hear of people doing that before? That's how nicknames spread."

"But she caught it *ahead of time*, before she heard me call it to her. This letter heading shows that. She didn't know Smiles had disappeared yet, when she sent this letter. Therefore she hadn't spoken to me yet."

"Well, then, she got it from the husband, or from your wife's own letters home."

"But she never used it before: she disliked it until now. She wrote Smiles and told her openly it sounded too much like the nickname of a chorus girl. I can prove it to you. I can show you. Wait a minute, whatever your name is. Won't you let me see if I can find some other letter from her, just to convince myself?"

"My name is Stillman, and it's too small a matter to make any difference one way or the other. Now, come on, Bliss; I've tried to be fair with you until now—"

"Nothing is too small a matter to be important. You're a detective, do I have to tell you that? It's the little things in life that count, never the big ones. The little ones go to make up the big ones. Why should she suddenly call her by a nickname she never used before and disapproved of? Wait, let me show you. There must be one of her old letters upstairs yet, left around in one of the bureau drawers. Just let me go up and hunt for it. It'll just take a minute."

Stillman went up with him, but Bliss could tell he was slowly souring on him. He hadn't changed over completely yet, but he was well under way. "I've taken all the stalling I'm going to from you," he muttered tight-lipped. "If I've got to crack down on you to get you out of here with me, I'll show you that I can do that, too."

Bliss was pawing through his wife's bureau drawers meanwhile, head tensely lowered, knowing he had to beat his captor's change of mood to the punch, that in another thirty seconds at the most the slow-to-anger detective was going to yank him flat on the floor by the slack of the collar and drag him bodily out of the room after him.

He found one at last, almost when he'd given up hope. The same medium-blue ink, the same note paper. They hadn't corresponded with any great frequency, but they had corresponded regularly, about once every month or so.

"Here," he said relievedly, "here, see?" And he spread it out flat on the dresser top. Then he spread the one from his pocket alongside it, to compare. "See? 'Dearest Teresa.' What did I tell—"

He never finished it. They both saw it at once. It would have been hard to miss, the way he'd put both missives edge to edge. Bliss looked at the detective, then back to the dresser again.

Stillman was the first to put it into words. An expression of sudden concentration had come over his face. He elbowed Bliss a little aside, to get a better look. "See if you can dig up some more samples of her writing," he said slowly. "I'm not an expert, but, unless I miss my guess, these two letters weren't written by the same person."

VII.

Bliss didn't need to be told twice. He was frantically going through everything of Smiles' he could lay his hands on, all her keepsakes, mementoes, accumulated belongings, scattering them around. He stopped as suddenly as he'd begun, and Stillman saw him standing there staring fixedly at something in one of the trinket boxes he had been plumbing through.

"What's the matter? Did you find some more?"

Bliss acted scared. His face was pale. "No, not writing," he said in a bated voice. "Something even— Look."

The detective's chin thrust over his shoulder. It might have been observable that the subject of their leaving for headquarters had been allowed to lapse temporarily, but neither of them had time to notice that just then. "Who are they?" Stillman said.

"That's evidently a snapshot of her and her mother, taken at a beach when she was a schoolgirl! I've never seen it before, but—"

"How do you know it's her mother? It could be some other woman, a friend of the family's."

Bliss had turned it over right while he was speaking. On the back, in schoolgirlish handwriting, was the notation: "Mamma and I, at Sea Crest, 1931."

Bliss reversed it again, right side forward.

"Well, what're you acting so scared about?" Stillman demanded impatiently. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Because this woman on the snapshot isn't the same woman I spoke to as her mother up at Denby tonight!"

"Now, wait a minute; hold your horses. You admit yourself you had never set eyes on her before until tonight; eight years is eight years. She's in a bathing suit in this snapshot. She may have dyed or bleached her hair since, or it may have turned gray on her."

"That has nothing to do with it! I'm not looking at her hair or her clothes. The whole shape of her face is different. The bone structure is different. The features are different. This woman has a broad, round face. The one in Denby has a long, oval one. I tell you, it's not the same woman at all!"

"Gimme that, and gimme those." Stillman pocketed letters and snapshot. "Come on downstairs."

I think I'll smoke another cigarette." His way of saying: "You've got yourself a reprieve."

When they were below again, he sat down, with a misleading air of leisure. "Gimme your wife's family background, as much of it as you can, as much of it as she told you."

"Smiles was down here on her own when I met her. Her own father died when she was a kid and left them comfortably well off, with their own house up in—"

"Denby?"

"No, it was some other place; I can't think of it offhand. While she was still a youngster, her mother gave Smiles her whole time and attention. But when Smiles had finished her schooling, about two years ago, the mother was still an attractive woman, young for her years, lively, good-hearted. It was only natural that she should marry again. Smiles didn't resent that, she'd expected her to. When the mother fell for this mason, Joe Alden, whom she first met when they were having some repairs made to the house, Smiles tried to like him. He'd been a good man in his line, too, but she couldn't help noticing that after he married her mother, he stopped dead, never did a stroke of work from then on; pretended he couldn't find any—when she knew for a fact that there was work to be had. That was the first thing she didn't like. Maybe he sensed she was onto him, but anyway they didn't rub well together. For her mother's sake, to avoid trouble, she decided to clear out, so her mother wouldn't have to choose between them. She was so diplomatic about it, though, that her mother never guessed what the real reason was.

"She came on down here, and not long ago Alden and her mother sold their old house and moved to a new one in Denby. Smiles said she supposed he did it to get away from the gossiping neighbors as much as anything else; they were probably beginning to criticize him for not at least making a stab at getting a job after he was once married."

"Did they come down when you married Smiles?"

"No. Smiles didn't notify them ahead; just sent a wire of announcement the day we were married. Her mother had been in poor health, and she was afraid the trip down would be more than she could stand. Well, there's the situation, there's the background."

"Nothing much there to dig into, at first sight."

"There never is, anywhere—at first sight," Bliss let him know. "Listen, Stillman. I'm going back up there again. Whatever's wrong is up at that end, not at this."

"I was detailed here to bring you in for questioning, you know." But he didn't move.

"Suppose I hadn't gone up to you outside in the street just now. Suppose I hadn't shown up around here for, say, another eight or ten hours. Can't you give me those extra hours? Come up there with me, never leave me out of your sight, put the bracelet

on me, do anything you want, but at least let me go up there once more and confront those people. If you lock me up down at this end, then I've lost her sure as anything. I'll never find out what became of her—and you won't either. Something bothered me up there. A whole lot of things bothered me up there, but I've only cleared up one of them so far. Let me take a crack at the rest."

"You don't want much," Stillman said grudgingly. "D'ya know what can happen to me for stepping out of line like that? D'ya know I can be broken for anything like that?"

"You mean you're ready to ignore the discrepancy in handwriting in those two letters, and my assurance that there's someone up there that doesn't match the woman on that snapshot?"

"No, naturally not; I'm going to let my lieutenant know about both those things."

"And by that time it'll be too late. It's already three days since she's been gone."

"Tell you what," Stillman said. "I'll make a deal with you. We'll start out for headquarters now, and on the way we'll stop in at the bus terminal. If I can find any evidence, the slightest shred, that she started for Denby that night, I'll go up there with you. If not, we go over to headquarters."

All Bliss said was: "I know you'll find out she did leave."

Stillman took him without handcuffing him, merely remarking: "If you try anything, you'll be the loser, not me."

The ticket seller again went as far as he had with Bliss the time before, but still couldn't go any further than that. "Yeah, she bought a ticket for as far as the money she had on her would take her, but I can't remember where it was to."

"Which don't prove she ever hit Denby," Stillman grunted.

"Tackle the bus driver," Bliss pleaded. "No. 27. I know he was holding out on me; I could tell by the way he acted. She rode with him, all right, but for some reason he was cagy about saying so."

But they were out of luck. No. 27 was up at the other end, due to bring the cityward bus in the following afternoon.

Stillman was already trying to steer his charge out of the place and on his way over to headquarters, but Bliss wouldn't give up. "There must be someone around here that saw her get on that night. One of the attendants, one of the concessionaires that are around here every night. Maybe she checked her bag, maybe she drank a cup of coffee at the counter.

She hadn't checked her bag; the checkroom attendant couldn't remember anyone like her. She hadn't stopped at the lunch counter, either; neither could the counterman recall her. Nor the Negro that shined shoes. They even interrogated the matron of the rest room, when she happened to appear outside the door briefly to stretch her legs.

No, she hadn't noticed anyone like that, either.

"All right, come on," Stillman said, hooking his arm around Bliss'.

"One more spin. How about him, over there, behind the magazine stand?"

Stillman only gave in because it happened to be near the exit; they had to pass it on their way out.

And it broke! The fog lifted, if only momentarily, for the first time since the previous Tuesday night. "Sure I do," the vender said readily. "How could I help remembering? She came up to me in such a funny way. She said: 'I have exactly one dime left, which I overlooked when I was buying my ticket because it slipped to the bottom of my handbag. Let me have a magazine.' Naturally, I asked her which one she wanted. 'I don't care,' she said, 'so long as it lasts until I get off the bus. I want to be sure my mind is taken up.' Well, I've been doing business here for years, and it's gotten so I can clock the various stops. I mean, if they're riding a long distance, I give them a good thick magazine; if they're riding a short distance, I give them a skinny one. I gave her one for a medium distance—Denby; that was where she told me she was going."

All Stillman said was: "Come on over to the window while I get our tickets."

Bliss didn't say "Thanks." He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. The grateful look he gave the detective spoke for itself.

"Two to Denby, round," Stillman told the ticket seller. It was too late for the morning bus; the next one left in the early afternoon.

As they turned from the ticket window, Bliss wondered aloud:

"Still and all, why was that driver so reluctant to admit she rode on the bus with him that night? And the ticket man claims she didn't buy a ticket to Denby, but to some point short of there."

"It's easy to see what it adds up to," Stillman told him. "She had a ticket for only part of the distance. She coaxed the driver into letting her ride the rest of the way to Denby. Probably explained her plight to him, and he felt sorry for her. That explains his reluctance to let you think she was on the bus at all. He must have thought you were a company spotter, and naturally what he did would be against the regulations."

Tucking away the tickets in his inside coat pocket, the detective stood there a moment or two undecidedly. Then he said: "We may as well go back to your house. I might be able to turn up something else while we're waiting, and you can catch a nap. And, too, I'm going to call in, see if I can still make this detour up there and back legitimate while I'm about it."

When they got back to his house Bliss, exhausted, fell asleep in the bedroom. He remained oblivious to everything until the detective woke him up a half hour before bus time.

"Any luck?" Bliss asked him, shrugging into his coat.

"Nope, nothing more," Stillman said. Then he announced: "I've given my word to my lieutenant I'll show up at headquarters, and have you with me, no later than nine tomorrow morning. He doesn't know you're with me right now; I let him think I got a tip where I could lay my hands on you. Leaving now, we will get up there around sunset, and we'll have to take the night bus back. That gives us only a few hours up there to see if we can find any trace of her. A tight squeeze, if you ask me."

VIII.

They boarded the bus together and sat down in one of the back seats. They didn't talk much during the long, monotonous ride up. Once, about an hour after they'd started, Bliss said suddenly, half under his breath:

"I can't get them."

"What do you mean?"

"Those things that bothered me. I can't figure them out. I thought maybe I could straighten them out ahead of time, know what to look for when we get there."

"Better take another snooze while you've got the chance," Stillman said.

Bliss thought he wouldn't be able to again, but, little by little, sheer physical exhaustion, combined with the lulling motion of the swaying bus, overcame him and he dropped off.

It seemed like only five minutes later that Stillman shook him by the shoulder, rousing him. The sun was low in the west; he'd slept through nearly the entire trip. "Snap out of it, Bliss; we get off in another couple of minutes, right on time."

"I dreamed about her," Bliss said dully. "I dreamed she was in some kind of danger, needed me bad. She kept calling to me: 'Ed! Hurry up. Ed!'"

Stillman dropped his eyes. "I heard you say her name twice in your sleep: 'Smiles, Smiles,'" he remarked quietly. "Damned if you act like any guilty man I ever had in my custody before. Even in your sleep you sound like you were innocent."

"Denby!" the driver called out warningly.

As the bus pulled away and left them behind at the crossroads, Stillman said: "Now that we're up here, let's have an understanding with each other. I don't want to haul you around on the end of a handcuff with me, but my job is at stake; I've got to be sure that you're still with me when I start back."

"Would my word of honor that I won't try to give you the slip while we're up here be worth anything to you?"

Stillman looked him square in the eye. "Is it worth anything to you?"

"It's about all I've got. I know I've never broken it."

Stillman nodded slowly. "I think maybe it'll be worth taking a chance on. All right, let me have it."

They shook hands solemnly.

Dusk was rapidly falling by now; the sun was already gone from sight and its afterglow fading out.

"Come on, let's get out to their place," Bliss said impatiently. "It's a considerable walk."

"Let's do a little inquiring around first. Remember, we have no evidence so far that she actually got off the bus here at all, let alone reached their house. Just her buying that magazine and saying she was coming here is no proof in itself. Now, let's see, she gets off in the middle of the night at this sleeping hamlet. Would she know the way out to their house, or would she have to ask someone?"

"She'd have to ask. Remember, I told you they



moved here *after* Smiles had already left home. This would have been her first trip up here."

"Well, that ought to cinch it for us, if she couldn't get out there without asking directions. Let's try our luck at that filling station first; it would probably have been the only thing open any more at the hour she came."

The single attendant on duty came out, said: "Yes, gents?"

"Look," Stillman began. "The traffic to and from here isn't exactly heavy, so this shouldn't be too hard. Think back to Tuesday night, the last bus north. Did you see anyone get off it?"

"I don't have to see 'em get off, I got a sure-fire way of telling whether anyone gets off or not."

"What's that?"

"Anyone that does get off, at least anyone that's a stranger here, never fails to stop by me and ask their way. That's as far as the last bus is concerned. The store is closed before then. And no one asked their way of me Tuesday night, so I figure no strangers got off."

"This don't look so good," murmured Stillman in an aside to Bliss. Then he asked the attendant: "Did you hear it go by at all? You must have, it's so quiet here."

"Yeah, sure, I did. It was right on time, too."

"Then you could tell if it stopped to let anyone down or went straight through without stopping, could you?"

"Yeah, usually I can," was the disappointing answer. "But just that night, at that particular time, I was doing some repair work on a guy's car, trying to hammer out a bent fender for him, and my own noise drowned it out. As long as no one stopped by, though, I'm pretty sure it never stopped."

"Damn it," Stillman growled, as they turned away, "she couldn't have been more unseen if she was a ghost!"

After they were out of earshot of the filling-station attendant, Bliss said: "If Alden, for instance, had known she was coming and waited to meet her at the bus, that would do away with her having to ask anyone for directions. She may have telephoned ahead, or sent a wire up."

"If she didn't even have enough money to buy a ticket all the way, she certainly wouldn't have been able to make a toll call. Anyway, if we accept that theory, that means we're implicating them directly in her disappearance, and we have no evidence so far to support that. Remember, she may have met with foul play right here in Denby, along the road to their house, without ever having reached it."

It was fully dark by the time they rounded the bend in the road and came in sight of that last house of all, with the low brick wall in front of it. This time not a patch of light showed from any of the windows, upstairs or down, and yet it was earlier in the evening than when Bliss himself had arrived.

"Hello?" the detective said, giving his companion an inquiring glance. "Looks like nobody home."

They turned in under the willow arch, rang the bell, and waited. Stillman pommeled the door and they waited some more. This was just perfunctory, however; it had been obvious to the two of them from the moment they first looked at the place that no one was in.

"Well, come on. What're we waiting for?" Bliss

demanded impatiently. "I can get in one of the windows without any trouble."

Stillman laid a restraining hand on his arm. "No, you don't; that's breaking and entering. And I'm out of jurisdiction up here to begin with. We'll have to go back and dig up the local law; maybe I can talk him into putting the seal of official approval on it. Let's see if we can tell anything from the outside, first. I may be able to shine my torch in through one of the windows."

He clicked it on, made a white puddle against the front of the house, walked slowly in the wake of that as it moved along until it leaped in through one of the black window embrasures. They both edged up until their noses were nearly pressed flat against the glass, trying to peer through. It wouldn't work. The blinds were not down, but the closely webbed net curtains that hung down inside of the panes effectively parried its rays. They coursed slowly along the side of the house, trying it at window after window, each time with the same results.

Stillman turned away finally, but left his torch on. He splashed it up and down the short length of private dirt lane that ran beside the house, from the corrugated tin shack at the back that served Alden as a garage to the public highway in front. He motioned Bliss back as the latter started to step out onto it. "Stay off a minute. I want to see if I can find out something from these tire prints their car left. See 'em?"

It would have been hard not to. The road past the house was macadamized, but there was a border of soft, powdery dust along the side of it, as with most rural roads. "I want to see if I can make out which way they turned," Stillman explained, strewing his beam of light along them and following off-side. "If they went in to the city, to offer their co-operation to us down there, that would take them off to the right; no other way they could turn from here. If they turned to the left, up that way, it was definitely a lam, and it changes the look of things all around."

The beam of his light, coursing along the prints like quicksilver in a channel, started to curve around *toward the right* as it followed them up out of sight on the hard-surfaced road.

There was his answer.

He turned aimlessly back along them, light still on. He stopped parallel to the corner of the house, strengthened the beam's focus by bringing the torch down closer to the ground. "Here's something else," Bliss heard him say. "Funny how you can notice every little thing in this fine floury dust. His front left tire had a patch on it, and a bad one, too. See it? You can tell just what they did. Alden evidently ran the car out of the shed alone, ahead of his wife. She got in here at the side of the house, to save time, instead of going out the front way; they were going down the road the other way,

anyway. His wheel came to rest with the patch squarely under it. That's why it shows so plain in this one place. Then he took his brake off and the car coasted back a little with the tilt of the ground. When he came forward again, the position of his wheel diverged a little, missed erasing its own former print. Bet they have trouble with that before the night's over."

He spoke as though it were just a trivial detail. But is anything, Bliss was to ask himself later, a trivial detail?

"Come on," Stillman concluded, pocketing his light, "let's go get the law and see what it looks like on the inside."

IX.

The constable's name was Cochrane, and they finally located him at his own home. "Evening," Stilman introduced himself, "I'm Stillman of the city police. I was wondering if there's some way we could get a look inside that Alden house. Their . . . er . . . stepdaughter has disappeared down in the city; she was supposed to have started for here, and this is just a routine check. Nothing against them. They seem to be out, and we have to make the next bus back."

Cochrane plucked at his throat judiciously. "Well, now, I guess I can accommodate you, as long as it's done in my presence. I'm the law around here, and if they've got nothing to hide, there's no reason why they should object. I'll drive ye back in my car. This feller here your subordinate, I s'pose?"

Stillman said, "Um," noncommittally, favored Bliss with a nudge. The constable would have probably balked at letting a man already wanted by the police into these people's house, they both knew, even if he was accompanied by a bona-fide detective.

He stopped off at his office first to get a master key, came back with the remark: "This ought to do the trick." They were back at the Alden place once more inside of ten minutes, all told, from the time they had first left it.

Cochrane favored them with a sly grimace as they got out and went up to the house. "I'm sort of glad you fellers asked me to do this, at that. Fact is, we've all been curious about them folks ourselves hereabouts for a long time past. Kind of unsociable; keep to themselves a lot. This is as good a time as any to see if they got any skeletons in the closet."

Bliss shuddered involuntarily at the expression.

The constable's master key opened the door without any great difficulty, and the three of them went in—the constable first, the husband of the missing woman in the middle, and the city detective last.

Cochrane snapped on the hall light. "Keeps a nice neat house, she does," he commented. "My Malvina'll be interested in hearing that." Neigh-

borly inquisitiveness seemed to play as great a part with him in this inspection as his own law-enforcement duties. But then Stillman had not yet revealed the real purpose that had brought them here, out of fairness to the Aldens, until evidence was found against them, if for no other reason. Rural gossip, once it gets started, is very hard to stop.

They looked in every room in the place from top to bottom, and in every closet of every room, and not one of the "skeletons" the constable had spoken of turned up, either allegorical or literal. There wasn't anything out of the way, and nothing to show that anything had ever been out of the way, in this house.

In the basement, when they reached it, were a couple of sagging, half-empty bags of cement in one corner, and pinkish traces of brick dust and brick grit on the floor, but that was easily accounted for. "Left over from when he was putting up that wall along the roadside a while back, I guess," murmured Cochrane. "Didn't need as much cement as he thought he would, most likely."

They turned and went upstairs again. The only other discovery of any sort they made was not of a guilty nature, but simply an indication of how long ago the occupants had left. Stillman happened to knuckle a coffeepot standing on the kitchen range, and it was still faintly warm from the residue of liquid left in it, as were the iron range top it rested on, and the banked ashes beneath. A dish towel hanging nearby was still damp.

"They must have only just left before we got here," he said to Bliss. "Missed them just by minutes."

"Funny; why did they wait until after dark to start on a long trip like that? Why didn't they leave sooner?"

"That don't convict them of anything, just the same," Stillman maintained obdurately. "We haven't turned up a shred of evidence that your wife ever saw the inside of this house. Don't try to get around that."

The local officer, meanwhile, had gone outside to put some water in his car. "Close the door good after you as you come out," he called out to them.

They were already at the door, but Bliss unaccountably turned and went back inside again. When Stillman followed him a moment later, he was sitting there in the living room raking his fingers perplexedly through his hair.

"Come on," the detective said, as considerately as he could, "let's get going. He's waiting for us."

Bliss looked up at him helplessly. "Don't you get it? Don't this room bother you?"

Stillman looked around vaguely. "No. In what way? What's wrong with it? To me it seems clean, well kept and comfortable. All you could ask for."

"There's something about it annoys me. I feel ill at ease in it. It's not *restful*, for some reason. And I have a peculiar feeling that if I could figure out

why it isn't restful, it would help to partly clear up this mystery about Smiles."

Stillman sliced the edge of his hand at him scornfully. "Now you're beginning to talk plain crazy, Bliss. You say this room isn't restful. I can see why that is. You think it's the room. The room has nothing to do with it. It's you. You're all tense, jittery, about your wife. Your nerves are on edge, frayed to the breaking point. That's why the room don't seem restful to you. Naturally, it don't. No room would."

Bliss kept shaking his head baffledly. "No. No. That may sound plausible, but I know that isn't it. It's not *me*, it's the room itself. I'll admit I'm all keyed up, but I noticed it already the other night when I wasn't half as keyed up. Another thing, I don't get it in any of the other rooms in this house, only get it in here."

"I don't like the way you're talking; I think you're starting to crack up under the strain," Stillman let him know, but he hung around in the doorway for a few minutes, watching him curiously, while Bliss sat there motionless, clasped hands on the back of his neck.

"Did you get it yet?"

Bliss raised his head, shook it mutely, chewing the corner of his mouth. "It's one of those things; when you try too hard for it, it escapes you altogether. It's only when you're sort of not thinking about it, that you notice it. The harder I try to pin it down, the more elusive it becomes."

"Sure," said Stillman with a look of sympathetic concern, "and if you sit around in here brooding about it much more, I'll be taking you back with me in a strait jacket. Come on, we've only got ten more minutes to make that bus."

Bliss got reluctantly to his feet. "There it goes," he said. "I'll never get it now."

"Ah, you talk like these guys that keep trying to communicate with spirits through a ouija board," Stillman let him know, locking up the front door after them. "The whole thing was a wild-geese chase."

"No, it wasn't."

"Well, what'd we get out of it?"

"Nothing. But that doesn't mean it isn't around here waiting to be seen. It's just that we've missed seeing it, whatever it is."

"There's not a sign of her around that house. Not a sign of her ever having been there. Not a sign of violence."

"And I know that, by going away from here, we're turning our backs on whatever there is to be learned about what became of her. We'll never find out at the other end, in the city. I nearly had it, too, when I was sitting in there. Just as I was about to get it, it would slip away from me again. Talk about torture!"

Stillman lost his temper. "Will you lay off that room! If there was anything the matter with it, I'd

notice it as well as you. My eyes are just as good, my brains are just as good. What's the difference between you and me?" The question was only rhetorical.

"You're a detective and I'm an architect," Bliss said inattentively, answering it as asked.

"Are you fellows going to stand there arguing all night?" the constable called from the other side of the wall.

They went out and got into the car, started off. Bliss felt like groaning: "Good-by, Smiles." Just as they reached the turn of the road that would have swept the house out of sight once they rounded it, Stillman happened to glance back for no particular reason, at almost the very last possible moment that it could still be seen in a straight line behind them.

"Hold it," he ejaculated, thumbing a slim bar of light narrowed by perspective. "We left the lights on in that last room we were in."

The constable braked promptly. "Have to go back and turn them off, or they'll—"

"We haven't time now, we'll miss the bus," Stillman cut in. "It's due in six more minutes. Drive us down to the crossroads first, and then you come back afterward and put them out yourself."

"No!" Bliss cried out wildly, jumping to his feet. "This has a meaning to it! I'm not passing this up! I want another look at those lights; they're asking me to, they're begging me to!" Before either one of them could stop him, he had jumped down from the side of the car without bothering to unlatch the door. He started to run back up the road, deaf to Stillman's shouts and imprecations.

"Come back here, you welsher! You gave me your word of honor!"

A moment later the detective's feet hit the ground and he started after his prisoner. But Bliss had already turned in through the opening in the wall, was flinging himself bodily against the door, without waiting for any master key this time. The infuriated detective caught him by the shoulder, swung him violently around, when he had reached him.

"Take your hands off me!" Bliss said hoarsely. "I'm going to get in there!"

Stillman swung at him and missed. Instead of returning the blow, Bliss threw his whole weight against the door for the last time. There was a rending and splintering of wood, and it shot inward, leaving the whole lock intact against the frame. Bliss went flailing downward on his face into the hallway. He scrambled erect, reached the inner doorway, put his hand inside and put the lights out without looking into the room.

"It's when they go on that counts," he panted.

The only reason Stillman wasn't grappling with him was that he couldn't locate him for a minute in the dark. The switch clicked a second time. Light flashed from the dazzlingly calcimined ceil-

ing. Bliss was standing directly in the middle of the opening as it did so, just as he had been that first night.

Stillman was down the hall a few steps, couldn't see his face for a minute. "Well?" he asked.

Bliss turned to him without saying anything. The look on his face answered for him. He'd gotten what he wanted.

"Why, they're not in the center of the ceiling! They're offside. That's what made them seem glaring, unexpected. They took my eyes by surprise. I've got professionally trained eyes, remember. They didn't go on where I expected them to, but a little farther over. And now that I have that much, I have it all." He gripped Stillman excitedly by the biceps. "Now I see what's wrong with the room. Now I see why I found it so unrestful. It's out of true."

"What?"

"Out of proportion. Look. Look at that window. It's not in the center of that wall. And d'you see how cleverly they've tried to cover the discrepancy? A thin, skinny, up-and-down picture on the short side; a big, wide, fat one on the longer side. That creates an optical illusion, makes both sides seem even. Now come over here and look this way." He pulled the detective in after him, turned him around by the shoulder. "Sure, same thing with the door frame; that's not dead center, either. But the door opens inward into the room, swings to that short side and partly screens it, throws a shadow over it, so that takes care of that. What else? What else?"

He kept pivoting feverishly, sweeping his glance around on all sides. "Oh, sure, the rug. I was sitting here and I dropped some ashes and looked down at the floor. See what bothered me about that? Again there's an unbalance. See the margin of polished woodwork running around on three sides of it? And on the fourth side it runs right smack up against the baseboard of the wall. Your eye wants proportion, symmetry; it's got to have it in all things. If it doesn't get it, it's uncomfortable. It wants that dark strip of woodwork on all four sides, or else the rug should touch all four baseboards, like a carpet—"

He was talking slower and slower, like a record that's running down. Some sort of tension was mounting in him, gripping him, Stillman could tell by looking at him. He panted the last few words out, as if it took all his strength to produce them, and then his voice died away altogether, without a period.

"What're you getting so white around the gills for?" the detective demanded. "Suppose the room is lopsided, what then? Your face is turning all green—"

Bliss had to grab him by the shoulder for a minute for support. His voice was all furry with dawning horror. "Because . . . because . . . don't you see what it means? Don't you see *why* it's that

way? One of these walls in a dummy wall, built out in front of the real one." His eyes were dilated with unbelieving horror. He clawed insensately at his own hair. "It all hangs together so damnably! He was a mason before he married her mother, I told you that. The storekeeper down at the cross-roads said that Alden built a low brick wall in front of the house, 'just to keep in practice,' he guessed. No reason for it. It wasn't high enough for privacy, it didn't even run around all four sides of the plot.

"He didn't build it just to keep in practice! He did it to get the bricks in here from the contractor. More than he needed. He put it up just to have an excuse to order them. Who's going to count—Don't stand there! Get an ax, a crowbar; help me break this thing down! Don't you see what this dummy wall is for? Don't you see what we'll find—"

The detective had been slower in grasping it, but he finally got it, too. His own face went gray. "Which one of the four is it?"

"It must be on this side, the side that's the shortest distance from the window, door, and light fixture." Bliss rushed up to it, began to pound it with his clenched fists, up and down, sounding it out. Sweat flew literally off his face like raindrops in a stiff wind.

The detective bolted out of the room, sent an excited yell at the open front door:

Cochrane! Come in here, give us a hand, bring tools!"

X.

Between the two of them they dug up a hatchet, a crowbar, cold chisel, and bungstarter. "That wall," the detective explained tersely for the constable's benefit, without going into details. Cochrane didn't argue; one look at both their faces must have told him that some unspeakable horror was on the way to revelation.

Bliss was leaning sideways against it by now, perfectly still, head lowered almost as though he were trying to hear something through it. He wasn't. His head was lowered with the affliction of discovery. "I've found it," he said stifledly. "I've found—the place. Listen." He pounded once or twice. There was the flat impact of solidity. He moved farther over, pounded again. This time there was the deeper resonance of a partly, or only imperfectly, filled orifice. "Half bricks, with a hollow behind them. Elsewhere, whole bricks, mortar behind them."

Stillman stripped his coat off, spit on his hands. "Better get out of the room—in case you're right," he suggested, flying at it with the hatchet, to knock off the plaster. "Wait outside the door; we'll call you—"

"No! I've got to know, I've got to see. Three of us are quicker than two." And he began chipping off the plaster coating with the cutting edge of the

chisel. Cochrane cracked it for them with the bungstarter. A cloud of dust hovered about them while they hacked away. Finally, they had laid bare an upright, *coffin-shaped* segment of pinkish-white brickwork in the plaster finish of the wall.

They started driving the chisel in between the interstices of the brick ends, Stillman steadying it, Cochrane driving it home with the bungstarter. They changed to the crowbar, started to work that as a lever, when they'd pierced a big enough space.

"Look out. One of them's working out."

A fragment of brick ricocheted halfway across the room, dropped with a thud. A second one followed. A third. Bliss started to claw at the opening with his bare nails, to enlarge it faster.

"You're only impeding us, we can get at it faster this way," Stillman said, pushing him aside. A gray fill of imperfectly dried clayey mortar was being laid bare. It was only a shell; flakes of it, like dried mud, had begun dropping off and out, some of their own weight, others with the impact of their blows, long before they had opened more than a "window" in the brickwork façade.

"Get back," Stillman ordered roughly. His purpose was to protect Bliss from the full impact of discovery that was about to ensue.

Bliss obeyed him at last, staggered over to the other end of the room, stood there with his back to them as if he were looking out of the window. Only the window was farther over. A spasmodic shiver went down his back every so often. He could hear the pops and thuds as brick fragments continued to drop out of the wall under the others' efforts, then a sudden engulfing silence.

He turned his head just in time to see them lowering something from the niche in the wall. An upright something. A rigid, mummified, columnar something that resembled nothing so much as a log covered with mortar. The scant remainder of bricks that still held it fast below, down toward the floor, shattered, spilled down in a little feshet, as they wrenched it free. A haze of kindly concealing dust veiled them from him. For a minute or two they were just white shadows working over something, and then they had this thing lying on the floor. A truncated thing without any human attributes whatever, like the mold around a cast metal statue—but with a core that was something else again.

"Get out of here, Bliss," Stillman growled. "This is no place for you!"

Wild horses couldn't have dragged Bliss away. He was numbed beyond feeling now, anyway. The whole scene had been one that could never again be forgotten by a man who had once lived through it.

"Not with that!" he protested, as he saw the crouching Stillman flick open the large blade of a penknife he carried with him.

"It's the only thing I *can* use! Go out and get

us some water, see if we can soften this stuff up a little, dissolve it."

When Bliss came back with a pail of it, Stillman was working away cautiously at one end of the mound, shaving a little with the knife blade, probing and testing with his fingers. He desisted suddenly, flashed the constable a mutely eloquent look, shifted up to the opposite end. Bliss, staring with glazed eyes, saw a stubby bluish-black wedge peering through where he had been working—the tip of woman's shoe.

"Upside down at that," grunted Cochrane, trying not to let Bliss overhear him. The latter's teeth were chattering with nervous shock.

"I told you to get out of here!" Stillman flared for the third and last time. "Your face is driving me crazy!" With as little effect as before.

Fine wires seemed to hold some of it together, even after he had pared it with the knife blade. He wet the palms of his hands in the pail of water, kneaded and crumbled it between them in those places. What had seemed like stiff wires was strands of human hair.

"That's enough," he said finally in a sick voice. "There's someone there; that's all I wanted to be sure of. I don't know how to go about the rest of it, much; an expert'll have to attend to that."

"Them devils," growled Cochrane deep in his throat.

Bliss suddenly toppled down between them, so abruptly they both thought he had fainted for a minute. "Stillman!" he said in a low throbbing voice. He was almost leaning across the thing. "These wisps of hair— Look! They show through dark, bluish-black! *She was blond!* Like an angel. It's somebody else!"

Stillman nodded, held his forehead dazedly. "Sure, it must be. I don't have to go by that; d'you know

what should have told me from the beginning? Your wife's only been missing since Tuesday night, three days ago. The condition of the mortar shows plainly that this job's been up for weeks past. Why, the paint on the outside of the wall would have hardly been dry yet, let alone the fill in back of it. Apart from that, it would have been humanly impossible to put up such a job single-handed in three days. We both lost our heads; it shows you it doesn't pay to get excited.

"It's the mother, that's who it is. There's your answer for the discrepancy in the handwriting on the two notes, the snapshot, and that business about the nickname that puzzled you. Come on, stand up and lean on me, we're going to find out where he keeps his liquor. You need a drink if a man ever did!"

They found some in a cupboard out in the kitchen, sat down for a minute. Bliss looked as if he'd been pulled through a knothole. The constable had gone out on wobbly legs to get a breath of fresh air.

Bliss put the bottle down and started to look alive again.

"I think I'll have a gulp myself," Stillman said. "I'm not a drinking man, but that was one of the nastiest jobs in there just now I've ever been called on to participate in."

The constable rejoined them, his face still slightly greenish. He had a drink, too.

"How many of them were there when they first moved in here?" Stillman asked him.

"Only two. Only him and his wife, from first to last."

"Then you never saw her; they hid her from sight, that's all."

"They've been kind of standoffish, no one's ever been inside the place until tonight."

"It's her, all right, the real mother," Bliss said,



Bliss turned in time to see them lowering something from the niche in the wall.

as soon as he'd gotten his mental equilibrium back. "I don't have to see the face, I know I'm right. No, no more. I'm O. K. now, and I want to be able to think clearly. Don't you touch any more of it, either, Still. That's who it must be. Don't you see how the whole thing hangs together? Smiles *did* show up here Tuesday night, or rather in the early hours of Wednesday morning; I'm surer than ever of it now. You asked me, back at my house, for a motive that would overshadow that possible insurance one of mine. Well, here it is; this is it. She was the last one they expected to see, so soon after her own marriage to me. She walked in here and found an impostor in the place of her own mother, a stranger impersonating her. They had to shut her up quick, keep her from raising an alarm. There's your motive as far as Smiles is concerned."

"And it's a wow," concurred Stillman heartily. "The thing is, what've they done with her, where is she? We're no better off than before. She's not around here; we've cased the place from cellar to attic. Unless there's another of those trick walls that we've missed spotting."

"You're forgetting that what you said about the first one still goes. There hasn't been time enough to rig up anything that elaborate."

"I shouldn't have taken that drink," confessed Stillman, squeezing his eyes together.

"I'm convinced she was here, though, as late as Thursday night, and still alive in the place. Another of those tantalizing things just came back to me. There was a knock on one of the water pipes somewhere; I couldn't tell if it was upstairs or down. I bet she was tied up some place, the whole time I was sitting here."

"Did you hear one or more than one?"

"Just one. The woman got right up and went out, I noticed, giving an excuse about getting a fresh handkerchief. They probably had her doped, or under some sedative."

"That's then, but now?"

"There's a lot of earth around outside, acres of it, miles of it," Cochrane put in morbidly.

"No, now wait a minute," Stillman said. "Let's get this straight. If their object was just to make her disappear, clean vanish, as in the mother's case, that would be one thing. Then I'm afraid we might find her lying somewhere around in that earth you speak of. But you're forgetting that her clothes turned up in your furnace at home, Bliss—showing they didn't want her to disappear, they wanted to pin her death definitely on you."

"Why?"



The thing resembled nothing so much as a log covered with mortar.

"Self-preservation, pure and simple. With a straight disappearance, the investigation would have never been closed. In the end it might have been directed up this way, resulted in unearthing the first murder, just as we did tonight. Pinning it on you would have not only obviated that risk, but eliminated you as well—cleaned the slate for them. A second murder to safeguard the first, a legal execution to clinch the second. But—to pin it successfully on you, that body has to show up down around where you are, and not up here at all. The clothes were a forerunner of it."

"But would they risk taking her back to my place, knowing it was likely to be watched by you fellows, once they had denounced me to you themselves. That would be like sticking their own heads in a noose. They might know it would be kept under surveillance."

"No, it wouldn't have been. You see, your accidental switch to that hitchhike from the bus resulted in two things going wrong. We not only went out to your house to look for you when you didn't show up at the terminal, but, by going out there, we found the clothes in the furnace sooner than they wanted us to. I don't believe they were meant to be found until—the body was also in position."

"Then why make two trips, instead of just one? Why not take poor Smiles at the same time they took her clothes?"

"He had to make a fast trip in, the first time, to beat that bus. They may have felt it was too risky to take her along then. He also had to familiarize himself with your premises, find some way of getting in, find out if the whole thing was feasible or not before going ahead with it. They felt their call to us—it wasn't an accusation at all, by the way, but simply a request that we investigate—would get you out of the way, clear the coast for them. They expected you to be held and questioned for twenty-four, forty-eight hours, straight. They thought they'd given themselves a wide enough margin of safety. But your failure to take the bus telescoped it."

Bliss rose abruptly. "Do you think she's . . . yet?" He couldn't bring himself to mention the word.

"It stands to reason that they'd be foolish to do it until the last possible moment. That would increase the risk of transporting her a hundredfold. And they'd be crazy to do it anywhere else but on the exact spot where they intend her to be found eventually. Otherwise it would be too easy for us to reconstruct the fact that she was killed somewhere else and taken there afterward."

"Then the chances are she was still alive when they left here with her! There may still be time even now; she may still be alive! What are we sitting here like this for?"

They both bolted out together, but Bliss made for

the front door, Stillman headed for the phone at the upper end of the hall.

"What're you doing that for?"

"Phone in an alarm to city headquarters. How else can we hope to save her? Have them throw a cordon around your house—"

Bliss pulled the instrument out of his hands. "Don't! You'll only be killing her quicker that way! If we frighten them off, we'll never save her. They'll lose their heads, kill her anywhere and drop her off just to get rid of her. This way, at least we know it'll be in or somewhere around my house."

"But, man, do you realize the head start they've had?"

"We only missed them by five or ten minutes. Remember that coffeepot on the stove?"

"Even so, even with a State police escort, I doubt if we can get in under a couple of hours."

"And I say that we've got to take the chance! You noticed their tire treads before. He has a wallowing bad patch, and he's never going to make that bad stretch on the road with it. I saw his car last night when it raced past, and he had no spares up. There's no gas station for miles around there. All that will cut down their head start."

"You're willing to gamble your wife's life against a flat tire?"

"There isn't anything else I *can* do. I'm convinced if you send an alarm ahead and have a drag-net thrown around my house, they'll scent it and simply shy away from there and go off some place else with her and where we *won't* be able to get to her in time, because we won't know where it is. Come on, we could be miles away already, for the time we've wasted talking."

"All right," snapped the detective, "we'll play it your way! Is this machine of yours any good?" he asked Cochrane, hopping in.

"Fastest thing in these parts," said the constable grimly, slithering under the wheel.

"Well, you know what you've got to do with it: cut down their head start to nothing flat; less than nothing, you've got to get us there five minutes to the good."

"Just get down low in your seats and hang onto your back teeth," promised Cochrane. "What we just turned up in there happened in my jurisdiction, don't forget—and the law of the land gives this road to us tonight!"

XI.

It was an incredible ride; incredible for the fact that they stayed right side up on the surface of the road at all. The speedometer needle clung to stratospheric heights throughout. The scenery was just a blurred hiss on both sides of them. The wind pressure stung the pupils of their eyes to the point where they could barely hold them open. The constable, luckily, used glasses for reading and had happened to have them about him when they started.

He put them on simply in order to make sure of staying on the road at all.

They had to take the bad stretch at a slower speed in sheer self-defense, in order not to have the same thing happen to them that they were counting on having happened to the Alden car. An intact tire could possibly get over it unharmed, but one that was already defective was almost sure to go out.

"Wouldn't you think he'd have remembered about this from passing over it last night, and taken precautions?" Stillman yelled above the wind at Bliss.

"He took a chance on it just like we're doing now. Slow up a minute at the first gas station after here, see if he got away with it or not." He knew that if he had, that meant they might just as well turn back then and there; Smiles was as good as dead already.

It didn't appear for another twenty minutes, even at the clip they had resumed once the bad stretch was past. With a flat, or until a tow car was sent out after anyone, it would have taken an hour or more to make it.

"Had a flat to fix, coming from our way, tonight?" Stillman yelled out at the attendant.

"And how!" the man yelled back, jogging over to them. "That was no flat! He wobbled up here with ribbons around his wheel. Rim all flattened, too, from riding so long on it."

"He?" echoed Stillman. "Wasn't there two women, or anyway one, with him?"

"No, just a fellow alone."

"She probably waited for him up the road out of sight with Smiles," Bliss suggested in an undertone, "to avoid being seen; then he picked them up again when the job was finished. Or if Smiles was able to walk, maybe they detoured around it on foot and rejoined the car farther down."

"Heavy-set man with a bull neck, and little eyes, and scraggly red hair?" the constable asked the station operator.

"Yeah."

"That's him. How long ago did he pull out of here?"

"Not more than an hour ago, I'd say."

"See? We've already cut their head start plenty," Bliss rejoiced.

"There's still too damn much of it to suit me," was the detective's answer.

"One of you take the wheel for the next lap," Cochrane said. "The strain is telling on me. Better put these on for goggles." He handed Stillman his reading glasses.

The filling station and its circular glow of light whisked out behind them and they were on the tear once more. They picked up a State police motorcycle escort automatically within the next twenty minutes, by their mere speed in itself; simply tapered off long enough to show their badges and make their shouts of explanation heard. This was all to the good, it cleared their way through such

towns and restricted-speed belts as lay in their path. Just to give an idea of their pace, there were times, on the straightaway, when their escort had difficulty in keeping up with them. And even so, they weren't making good enough time to satisfy Bliss. He alternated between fits of optimism, when he sat crouched forward on the edge of the seat, fists clenched, gritting: "We'll swing it; we'll get there in time; I know it!" and fits of despair, when he slumped back on his shoulder blades and groaned: "We'll never make it! I'm a fool, I should have let you phone in ahead like you wanted to! Can't you make this thing *move* at all?"



"Look at that speedometer," the man at the wheel suggested curtly. "There's nowhere else for the needles to go but off the dial altogether! Take it easy, Bliss. They can't possibly tear along at this clip; we're official, remember. Another thing, once they get there, they'll do a lot of cagy reconnoitering first. That'll eat more more of their head start. And, finally, even after they get at it, they'll take it slow, make all their preparations first, to make it look right. Don't forget, they think they've got all night; they don't know we're on their tail."

"And it's still going to be an awful close shave," insisted Bliss through tightly clenched teeth.

Their State police escort signed off at the city limits with a wave of the arm, a hairpin turn, and left them on their own. They had to taper down necessarily now, even though traffic was light at this night hour. Bliss showed Stillman the short cut over that would bring them up to his house from the rear. A block and a half away Stillman

choked off their engine, coasted to a stealthy stop under the overshadowing trees, and the long grueling race against time was over—without their knowing as yet whether it had been successful or not.

"Now follow me," Bliss murmured, hopping down. "I hope we didn't bring the car in too close; sounds carry so at an hour like this."

"They won't be expecting us." One of Stillman's legs gave under him from his long motionless stint at the wheel; he had to hobble along slapping at it until he could get the circulation back into it. Cochrane brought up at the rear, with a quiet determination that showed how much the hideous revelation they had made up at Denby had stirred him.

When they cleared the back of the house next door to Bliss' and could look through the canal of separation to the street out in front, Bliss touched his companions on the arm, pointed meaningly. The blurred outline of a car was visible, parked there under the same leafy trees where Stillman himself had hidden when he was waiting for Bliss. They couldn't make out its interior.

"Someone in it," Cochrane breathed. "I think it's a woman, too. I can see the white curve of a bare arm on the wheel."

"You take that car, we'll take the house; he must be in there with her long ago at this stage of the game," Stillman muttered. "Can you come up on it quietly enough so she won't have time to sound the horn or signal him in any way?"

"I'll see to it I do!" was the purposeful answer. Cochrane turned back like a wraith, left the two of them alone.

They couldn't go near the front of the house because of the lookout, and there was no time to wait for Cochrane to incapacitate her. "Flatten out and do like I do," Bliss whispered. "She's probably watching the street out there more than this lot behind the house." He crouched, with his chin nearly down to his knees, darted across the intervening space to the concealment provided by the back of his own house. So far there had been not a sign, not so much as the wink of a torch, to show that anyone was inside it.

"We can get in through the kitchen window," Bliss instructed, when Stillman had made the switch over after him. "The latch never worked right. Give me a folder of matches, and make a footrest with your hands."

When he was up with one foot on the outside of the sill, his companion supporting the other, Bliss tore off and discarded the sandpaper and matches adhering to it, used the cardboard remainder as a sort of impromptu jimmy, slipping it down into the seam between the two window halves, and pushing the fastening back out of the way with it. A moment later he had the lower pane up out of the way and was inside the room, stretching down his hands to Stillman to help him up after him.

They both stood perfectly still there for a minute in the gloom, listening for all they were worth. Not a sound reached them, not a chink of light showed. Bliss felt a cold knife of doubt stab at his heart.

"Is he in here at all?" he breathed. "That may be somebody else's car out there across the way."

At that instant there was the blurred but unmistakable sound that loose, falling earth makes, dropping back into a hollow or cavity. You hear it on the streets when a drainage ditch is being re-filled. You hear it in a cemetery when a grave is being covered up. In the silence of this house, in the dead of night, it had a knell-like sound of finality.

Burial.

Bliss gave a strangled gasp of horror, lurched



forward in the darkness.

"He's already . . . through!"

The sound had seemed to come from somewhere underneath them. Bliss made for the basement door. That was the only place where there would be any earth inside the house, anyway. Stillman's heavy footfalls pounded after him, all thought of concealment past.

Bliss clawed open the door that gave down to the cellar, flung it back. For a split second, and no more, dull-yellow light gleamed up from below. Then it snuffed out, too quickly to show them anything. There was pitch blackness below them, as above, and an ominous silence.

Something clicked just over Bliss' shoulder, and

the pale moon of Stillman's torch glowed out from the cellar floor below them, started traveling around, looking for something to center on. Instantly a vicious tongue of flame spurted toward the parent orb, the reflector, and something flew past Bliss, went *spat* against the wall, as a thunderous boom sounded below.

Bliss could sense, rather than tell, that Stillman was raising his gun behind him. He clawed out, caught the cuff of the detective's sleeve, brought it down. "Don't! She may be down there somewhere in the line of fire!"

Something shot out over his shoulder. Not a gun or slug, but the torch itself. Stillman was trying to turn it into a sort of ready-made star shell, by throwing it down there still lighted. The light pool on the floor streaked off like a comet, flicked across the ceiling, dropped down on the other side, and steadied itself against the far wall—with a pair of trousers legs caught squarely in the light, from the knees down. They buckled to jump aside out of the revealing beam, but not quickly enough. Stillman sighted his gun at a kneecap and fired. The legs jolted, wobbled, folded up forward toward the light, bringing a torso and head down into view on the floor. When the fall ended, the beam of the torch was weirdly centered on the exact crown of a bald head surrounded by a circular fringe of reddish hair. It rolled from side to side like a giant ostrich egg, screaming agonizedly into the cellar floor.

"I'll take him," Stillman grunted. "You put on that light!"

Bliss groped for the dangling light cord that had proved such a hindrance to them just now by being down in the center of the basement instead of up by the doorway where they could get at it. He snagged it, found the finger switch, turned it. Horror flooded the place at his touch, in piebald tones of deep black shadow and pale yellow. The shovel Alden had just started to wield when he heard them coming lay half across a mound of freshly disinterred earth. Near it were the flat flagstones that had topped it, flooring the cellar, and the pickax that had loosened them. He must have brought the tools with him in the car, for they weren't Bliss'.

And on the other side of that mound—the short but deep hole the earth had come out of. Alden must have been working away down here for some time, to get so much done single-handed. And yet, though they had arrived before he'd finished, they

were still too late—for in the hole, filling it to within an inch or two of the top, and fitting the sides even more closely, rested a deep old-fashioned trunk, of a shape that isn't sold any more, that had probably belonged to Smiles' mother, and come down in the trunk compartment of the car. And foursquare as it was, it looked ominously small for anyone to fit into—whole.

Bliss pointed down at it, moaned sickly. "She ... she—"



He wanted to fold up and let himself topple inertly across the mound of earth before it. Stillman's sharp, whiplike command kept him upright.

"Hang on! Coming!"

He had clipped the back of Alden's skull with his gun butt, to put him out of commission while their backs were turned. He leaped up on the mound of earth, and across the hole to the opposite side, then dropped down by the trunk, tugging at it.

"There's no blood around; he may have put her in alive. Hurry up, help me to get the lid up. Don't waste time trying to lift the whole thing out; just the lid. Get some air into it—"

It shot up between the two of them, and within lay a huddled bulk of sacking, pitifully doubled around on itself. *It was still moving feebly.* Fluttering spasmodically, rather than struggling any more.

The blade of the penknife Stillman had already used once before tonight flew out, slashed furiously at the coarse stuff. A contorted face was revealed through the rents, but not recognizable as Smiles' any more—a face black with suffocation, in which

the last spark of life had been about to go out. And still might, if they didn't coax it back in a hurry.

They got her up out of it between them and straightened her out flat on the floor. Stillman sawed away at the short length of rope cruelly twisted around her neck, the cause of suffocation, severed it after seconds that seemed like centuries, unwound it, flung it off. Bliss meanwhile, was stripping off the tattered remnants of the sacking. She was in a white silk underslip.

Stillman straightened up, jumped for the stairs. "Breathe into her mouth like they do with choking kids. I'll send out a call for a pulmotor."

But the battle was already won by the time he came trooping down again; they could both tell that, laymen though they were. The congested darkness was leaving her face little by little, her chest was rising and falling of its own accord, she was coughing distressedly and making little whimpering sounds of returning consciousness. They carried her up to the floor above when the emergency apparatus arrived, nevertheless, just to make doubly sure. It was while they were both up there, absorbed in watching the pulmotor being used on her, that a single shot boomed out in the basement under them, with ominous finality.

Stillman clapped a hand to his hip. "Forgot to take that gun he had away from him! Well, there goes one of Cochrane's prisoners!"

They ran for the basement stairs, stopped half way down them, one behind the other, looking at Alden's still form lying there below. It was still face-down, in the same position as before. One arm, curved under his own body at chest level, and a lazy tendril of smoke curling up around his ribs, told the difference.

"What a detective I am!" Stillman said disgustingly.

"It's better this way," Bliss answered, tight-lipped. "I think I would have killed him with my own bare hands, before they got him out of here, after what he tried to do to her tonight!"

By the time they returned upstairs again, Cochrane had come in with the woman. They were both being iodined and bandaged by an intern.

"What happened?" Stillman asked dryly. "Looks like she gave you more trouble than he gave us."

"Did you ever try to hang onto the outside of a wild car while the driver tried to shake you off? I'd gotten up to within one tree length of her, when the shots down in the basement tipped her off Alden was in for it. I just had time to make a flying tackle for the baggage rack before she was off a mile a minute. I had to work my way forward along the running board, with her swerving and flinging around corners on two wheels. She finally piled up against a refuse-collection truck; dunno how it was we both weren't killed."

"Well, she's all yours, Cochrane," Stillman said. "But first I'm going to have to ask you to let me take her over to headquarters with me. You, too, Bliss." He looked at his watch. "I promised my lieutenant I'd be in with you by nine the latest, and I'm a stickler for keeping a promise. We'll be a little early, but unforeseen circumstances came up."

At headquarters, in the presence of Bliss, Stillman, Cochrane, the lieutenant of detectives, and the necessary police stenographer, Alden's accomplice was prevailed on to talk.

"My name is Irma Gilman," she began, "and I'm thirty-nine years old. I used to be a trained nurse on the staff of one of the large metropolitan hospitals. Two of my patients lost their lives through carelessness on my part, and I was discharged.

"I met Joe Alden six months ago. His wife was in ill health, so I moved in with them to look after her. Her first husband had left her well off, with slues of negotiable bonds. Alden had already helped himself to a few of them before I showed up, but now that I was there, he wanted to get rid of her altogether, so that we could get our hands on the rest. I told him he'd never get away with anything there, where everybody knew her; he'd have to take her somewhere else first. He went looking for a house, and when he'd found one that suited him, the place in Denby, he took me out to inspect it, without her, and palmed me off on the agent as his wife.

"We made all the arrangements, and when the day came to move, he went ahead with the moving van. I followed in the car with her after dark. That timed it so that we reached there late at night; there wasn't a soul around any more to see her go in. And from then on, as far as anyone in Denby knew, there were only two of us living in the house, not three. It was fairly out of the way, and we managed to cold-shoulder any visits from the neighbors; or, if we had to interview anyone, put her under a sedative for the time being and kept them downstairs. We didn't keep her locked up, but we put her in a bedroom at the back, where she couldn't be seen from the road, and put up a fine-meshed screen on the window. She was bed-ridden a good part of the time, anyway, and that made it easier to keep her presence concealed.

"He started to make his preparations from the moment we moved in. He began building this low wall out in front, as an excuse to order the bricks and other materials that he needed for the real work later on. He ordered more from the contractor than he needed, of course.

"Finally it happened. She felt a little better one day, came downstairs, and started checking over her list of bonds. He'd persuaded her when they were first married not to intrust them to a bank; she had them in an ordinary strong box. She found

out some of them were already missing. He went in there to her, and I listened outside the door. She didn't say very much, just: 'I thought I had more of these thousand-dollar bonds.' But that was enough to show us that she'd caught on. Then she got up very quietly and went out of the room without another word.

"Before we knew it, she was at the telephone in the hall—trying to get help, I suppose. She didn't have a chance to utter a word, he was too quick for her. He jumped out after her and pulled it away from her. He was between her and the front door, and she turned and went back upstairs, still without a sound, not even a scream. Maybe she still did not realize she was in bodily danger, thought she could get her things on and get out of the house. She was only in the wrapper and nightdress she wore in bed.

"He said to me: 'Go outside and wait in front. Make sure there's no one anywhere in sight, up and down the road or in the fields.' I went out there, looked, raised my arm and dropped it, as a signal to him to go ahead. He went up the stairs after her.

"You couldn't hear a thing from inside. Not even a scream, or a chair falling over. He must have done it very quietly. In a while he came down to the door again. He was breathing a little fast and his face was a little pale, that was all. He said: 'It's all over. I smothered her with one of the bed pillows. She didn't have much strength.' Then he went in again and carried her body down to the basement. We kept her down there while he went to work on this other wall; as soon as it was up high enough, he put her behind it and finished it. He repainted the whole room so that one side wouldn't look too new.

"Then, without a word of warning, the girl showed up the other night. Luckily, just that night Joe had stayed down at the hotel late having a few beers. He recognized her as she got off the bus and brought her out with him in the car. That did away with her having to ask her way of anyone. We stalled her for a few minutes by pretending her mother was fast asleep, until I had time to put

a sedative in some tea I gave her to drink. After that it was easy to handle her; we put her down in the basement and kept her doped down there.

"Joe remembered, from one of her letters, that she'd said her husband had insured her, so that gave us our angle. The next day I faked a long letter to her and mailed it to the city, as if she'd never shown up here at all. Then when Bliss came up looking for her, I tried to dope him, too, to give us a chance to transport her back to his house during his absence, finish her off down there, and pin it on him. He spoiled that by passing the food up and walking out on us. The only thing left for us to do after that was for Joe to beat the bus in, plant her clothes ahead of time, and put a bee in the police's bonnet. That was just to get Bliss out of the way, so the coast would be left clear to get her in down there.

"We called his house from just inside the city limits when we got down here with her tonight. No one answered, so it seemed to have worked. But we'd lost a lot of time on account of that blowout. I waited outside in the car, with her covered up on the floor, drugged. When Joe had the hole dug, he came out and took her in with him.

"We thought all the risk we had to run was down at this end. We were sure we were perfectly safe up at the other end; Joe had done such a bang-up job on that wall. I still can't understand how you caught onto it so quick."

"I'm an architect, that's why," Bliss said grimly. "There was something about that room that bothered me. It wasn't on the square."

Smiles was lying in bed when Bliss went back to his own house, and she was pretty again. When she opened her eyes and looked up at him, they were all crinkly and smiling just as they used to be.

"Honey," she said, "it's so good to have you near me. I've learned my lesson. I'll never walk out on you again."

"That's right, you stick with Ed," he said soothingly, "and nothing like that'll ever happen to you again."

THE END.

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THE ROLLING HEADS

by MARK HARPER

IT was without a doubt the most sensational crime that San Francisco had ever experienced. It wasn't such a different crime; similar holdups had been staged in other parts of the country from time to time. But this one was smoother than most of them. And it left practically no trail whatever.

The newspapers explained it:

\$500,000 ARMORED TRUCK STICK-UP

Three Guards Shot Down Without
Warning

Story of Eyewitness

San Francisco, . . . At 2:45 this afternoon the pay roll of the Atlas P. & M. Co., on Harrison, together with nearly a half million of bank money, was taken from an armored truck. The three guards were killed instantly and the murderers escaped with their loot without leaving a trace of a clue that has yet been uncovered. . . .

John Iverson, assistant bookkeeper, tells the following story: "I glanced at the clock and saw that it was a quarter to three when the truck was due, and looked out the office window just as it came into the square from a side street. I must have noticed, without thinking about it, that two street cleaners were not far to the right, picking up pieces of paper and refuse and putting them in the can on wheels which they were pushing before them. I remember, too, the well-dressed man, swinging a cane, who was slowly approaching the office from the left.

"I turned and called to our guard, James Stephens, who had gone to the rear of the office for some purpose. When I looked back, the truck had stopped and two of the guards had stepped out, hands on their pistol butts, facing the truck and with their backs to the street cleaners.

"Then the third guard came out with our pay roll. As he turned toward the office, the well-dressed man raised his cane and pointed it at him. There was a slight noise and I saw a little wisp of smoke at the end of the cane. The guard fell and he was dead when we reached him later.

"At the same time I heard two 'plops' and saw the two other guards pitch forward and the cleaners running toward the truck with long-barreled pistols in their hands. Everything happened all at once and within seconds of time. I knew that I yelled and that Stephens was running to the door; but by the time he reached it the three robbers jumped from the truck with packages of bills in their hands and were piling into a black sedan that had come from somewhere and drawn up alongside.

"Stephens got the door open and fired one shot; then

the sedan jumped ahead and a submachine gun started shooting from up the street a little ways. I glanced that way and saw a bearded man shooting from behind his fruit-peddler's cart. He was firing at the truck driver; then I heard the glass in our windows crash as he turned the gun our way. Stephens staggered back in, wounded, and I ducked back. It got quiet almost immediately. When I looked out again there was no one in sight except the three dead guards lying on the ground—

"No, I didn't see their faces. I'm sure not one looked our way while I was looking, and now I come to think of it I believe they kept their heads turned away. Of course I could have seen the two cleaners plainly before it all happened, but I didn't think of it then. . . ."

. . . Charles J. (Flick) Anderson, famous Federal investigator, is on the job, but refuses to make any comment. Every local, county and State law-enforcement agency, is working feverishly. . . .

. . . The license-plate numbers are not known, but a State-wide watch, especially to the south, is being held for a black sedan carrying four to five passengers including the driver. . . .

The slender man, wiry and nervous, with eyes as sharp as a ferret's, parked a sedan close to the incoming-baggage room of the Penn Station. He got out, took time to light a cigarette, and over his cupped hands sized up the persons at the counter. There weren't many. The last important express was long since in; another wasn't due until morning, and the line of taxis had dwindled to a lone bus back beyond the turn-in, its driver dozing low in his seat.

The short, slender man watched a stout lad receive his suitcase and start toward the street. A grayish-haired woman was telling the tired attendant the shape of her grip while two dark-skinned men who looked like porters were looking on stolidly from close by. The slender man, beyond noting their appearance, did not waste a glance on them. He saw the woman get her grip and, throwing away his fag, he stepped forward and slapped a check stub on the counter.

"Trunk, buddy," he said, and with an elaborate show of indifference turned his head.

The steady black eyes of the dark man at his right met his stare expressionately. He was tall and powerfully built. His skin was very dark, but he



didn't look like a Negro. He didn't seem at all interested in the slender man, although there was a bold pride in the way he looked eye for eye; then he glanced away after the baggage smasher and suddenly leaned forward intently.

The short, slender man, looking annoyed, scowled around in the other direction and found the dark man there similarly absorbed, and he saw now that the two were as alike as brothers. A grating sound drew his eyes front. The trunk was being dragged along the concrete toward him, and he stiffened, forgetting the strange dark men. The baggage smasher swung it up, slammed it on the counter and slipped off the stub.

The slender man reached for the strap handle; then two dusky hands, from either side of him, fastened on the trunk, and he felt it being wrestled against his grip. A spasm of rage that was like the anger of fear twisted his face into a snarl. He shifted his grip to his left hand, let his right steal close to the lapel of his coat.

"Break away, dinges," he said in a savage growl, "or I'll blow your guts out!" In that moment he was near panicky, but some remnant of sense held his hand poised. Only as a very last resort could he afford a shooting here, and he knew it; but he was on the very point of it as powerful arms twisted his grasp.

"What's a trouble?" a voice spoke gruffly from just behind him, and a big copper shoved in close. "Whose trunk's this?"

"My," one of the dark-skinned men said in a low, fierce guttural.

"That guy's," the baggage man said, with a nod at the runty man. "He gimme th' check."

Beads stood out on the small man's face. His eyes got a little crazed.

"My car's right here," he whined. "I don't want no help, and I don't see why I gotta pay a quarter when I can handle it myself."

"Beat it!" the copper told the dark men, and pushed against them.

The unexpected attack broke their hold and the small, slender man yanked the trunk free, and with the swing his pull gave it carried it across the walk and worked it hastily into the rear of the sedan. Sweat bathed his face; his hands were trembling; he was trembling all over. He got the car started and, leaning over the gear shift, risked a sidelong glance. The scuffling he had heard behind him had stopped, and the big cop was watching him with a curious expression, almost as if he was about to raise a hand to stop him. He didn't wait to see what the dark men were doing or where they were; he looked away from the flatfoot quickly; the car jerked. He turned into the exit runway, shot up the ramp and made the street.

He drove with his head bent forward, his eyes roving from straight ahead to right and left.

He looked like a ferret, and he drove like a bat out of hell. With a reassuring glance into his rear-view mirror, he cut into Twelfth, slid the length of the smooth block, passing an old and deserted-looking brick-and-brownstone that was set between an empty lot and church property, then swung up the avenue and turned into Thirteenth.

He cut off his lights and swung the nose of the sedan up to a small garage just beyond the railing and in the rear of the old mansion. The panic was still on him, for he yanked a pistol from its holster, peered down the block and cursed impatiently, although the door was opened on silent hinges almost at the moment he had stopped. He drove in, with the pistol still in his hand, then waited, tense, his eyes glued to the rear, until the door was softly closed and bolted. When he stepped out, his teeth were chattering.

"What's a matter, punk?" a voice growled at him from the darkness.

"Damned near lost it, Slip," the slender man muttered.

"You—what?" A hand reached out, caught his arm and gripped it until he winced.

"Aw, lay off, Slip. I got it here, ain't I?"

"Lissen!" It was a low, menacing growl. "Use your nut if you want to keep it. Two-three guys got bumped gettin' this. It won't make any difference if some more 're knocked off. What happened?"

"Le's get this baby in an' I'll tell you. You couldn'ta done any better."

"Come on an' we'll see about it."

A trap was opened in the rear of the garage and they took the trunk down into a narrow passage. As they groped their way along, with a hand on a damp wall, city noises came to them in a dull rumble where seepage through the years had made some opening in the old tunnel. Twenty steps took them to the first tread leading upward, and another trap let them into the basement of the brick-and-brownstone house. A cigarette glow flickered in the darkness; the butt was dropped to the floor and a foot pressed it out. Then a soft voice spoke.

"You got her, Slip?"

"Yeah, we got her, Nickolai. Don't know how long we'll keep her. Come up an' hear th' grief."

The first floor, dust-laden and bare, was as dark as the basement, but the small, slender man, who was leading, found the stairs readily. It was a ghostly place of high ceilings and wide, empty rooms behind the boarded-up windows. Their steps, carefully placed, echoed softly. There was no other sound. In the big, old dining room on the second floor, candlelight showed a table, chairs and improvised beds, partly in that room and some seen through open doorways. At one side was a dumb-waiter shaft, and to that they carried the trunk and set it in a place that had apparently been prepared

for it with great care. When a shelf had been fastened over the top, it would take a very cunning search even to suspect its hiding place.

The three men returned to the table. Slip lighted a cigarette and leaned on an elbow as he sat sideways. Nickolai, the Greek, took a chair across the table. He was very quiet, but his eyes were alert. The slender man told his story, punctuated by Slip's low cursing. When he had finished, Slip turned his head.

"How you figure it, Nick?"

The Greek was scowling darkly.

"Not so hot. Way Runt tells it, those black fellers were after that trunk. That's bad."

"They couldn't been porters, even though they tried to look like 'em, an' they couldn't been dicks," Slip said, "or they'd grabbed it and got th' flatfoot to help. What th' hell!" He yawned.

"I don't like it," Nickolai said. "Maybe they come after it, and then dicks come, too."

"Ain't nobody coulda followed me," Runt said. "I come too fast."

"You come straight down?" Nick asked.

"With *that* bundle? Sure. I made the turn below here and I coulda spotted any tail."

"Aw, what's a coupla smokes?" Slip growled.

"They wasn't dinges," Runt told him. "I don't know what they was. But I'm tellin' you if it hadn't been for th' cop, I'd had to blast 'em, or they'd had it."

"Hell! You musta been jittery, Runt. What'd they know 'bout it? Long's you got past the flatfoot, we ain't got to worry."

"I still don't like it," Nick said. "We ain't got nothing to fool about."

"Say," Runt broke in, "you think some guy coulda spotted you out there?"

"Not a chance; not a chance," Slip said, but he saw Nick looking across at him, and he flared in red anger. "What's bitin' you, greaseball? You know Furber wouldn't muffed it. Look what we done without a hitch."

"How'd you make it?" Runt asked. He pointed to the ten-day-old paper on the table, that carried the first news. "They ain't got a whisper more'n that since."

"Pete was handlin' the Tommy," Slip said, "and made Nick's heap just outside th' square. Mike put th' sedan 'longside it and me an' Furber made the shift with the stuff. Mike went shootin' down South, an' we rolled along California to South Bay an' hopped a boat, slick as grease. She was fixed up like a tub. We got into th' fog an' skinned her, put on th' speed and made Seattle."

"That's where you checked the trunk, huh?"

"Way station. Furber did it, then took a swing round Canada to beat it back here. An' I'm tellin' you there ain't a chance some guy gloomed th' stuff while Furber handled it." He yawned, got up, swung off his coat and, taking the holster from his shoul-

der, placed it on the table. He took out the pistol, a silenced automatic of the fixed-carriage type, looked at it and laid it beside the holster. "I been ridin' th' rattlers for a week. I'm hittin' the hay. How 'bout you, Nick?"

"Yeah, I guess so," the Greek said. "But I wish Furber'd show up, so's we can get our split and scam."

Slip Fadigan, as yet an unknown murderer, sought, without a name or identity, through forty-eight States, turned slowly from the doorway of an adjoining room where the end of a cot showed.

"Listen, you guys. We pulled the lick of a century. Who done it? Dal Furber. Who found this scatter with that tunnel getaway? Furber. There's th' chair, waitin' for th' lot of us. One hitch, an' we're all fryin', an' five hundred grand won't do you no good in hell. Only mistake Dal's made was to have this hophead go for th' trunk, so's th' rest of us won't show our mugs, but Furber's runnin' this, and what he says goes. He says wait till the gang gets here. Can't shove th' stuff for a while, anyway, he says. Aw, hell! Want to keep me talkin' all night, just because Runt ain't laid off his bindles an' thinks a coupla smokes who want to make a quarter 're onto th' stuff? Forget it!"

Slip turned; the cot creaked. Nickolai, the Greek, went softly into another room. He always moved like that, without sound. Runt slumped into the chair Slip Fadigan had left, humped over, his ferret-like eyes darting from place to place without movement of his head. Over on one wall the wainscoting ran to the ceiling and behind it was the dumbwaiter shaft and the great fortune in loot. Runt wasn't sleepy. During the days and weeks of waiting here, he'd slept much, used his bindles from time to time when he couldn't stand the lonesomeness and the silence. He'd put them aside when the big news broke, but he wished he had one, just one, now.

II.

Snores broke from the rooms behind him, the raucous breathing of hunted men who had crept into their lair to rest. It was all right for Slip Fadigan to bluster. He had killed, and he knew that once faced with his crime it would be bullets, and the end. He was steeled for that one moment and nothing else mattered. Now he felt safe. Runt didn't. He had seen the dark-skinned men and the look in their eyes. Slip hadn't. Runt squirmed in his chair, but didn't raise his head.

Those men hadn't wanted a quarter. They had wanted that trunk. How they had known about it, Runt couldn't guess, but he knew that they knew. He had seen it in their eyes, fierce, wild and absolutely fearless. He had never seen such eyes, or such men. Runt shivered. The old house creaked from time to time, but it wasn't those ghostly

sounds that sent a chill up the hophead's spine. He'd heard them through the lonely days and nights, with the rumbling of the city all about him and himself alone in its midst. No; it was his picture of those dark-skinned men as they had looked at him. If it hadn't been for the copper they would have killed him on the spot for that trunk. Runt was sure of it. He caught himself up with the thought, straightening a little.

The movement sent his thoughts into another channel. Perhaps he was jittery, as Slip had said, cursing him for it. Slip said they were safe here, and he ought to know. Runt began to think about the loot, how much was his share. Furber, the leader, would get a share and a half; the others, a full share each; Runt, a half. He tried to figure that, but, in spite of himself, those two dark men kept sliding back into his mind, intruding before his vision of big piles of crisp bills.

He lifted his head and his ferret's eyes swept around; he let his ears listen to the faint outside sounds, the snoring in the adjoining, smaller rooms. That reassured him, and he cursed his trembling. This scatter was a prize. The hide-away for the loot, the slickest trick anyone could have thought up. The trunk was in the dumb-waiter. What if the shaft looked boarded up. They could still work the lift, let it down to the basement on the silent pulley Runt had spent such care in oiling. With the tunnel right there, all they had to do was to slide out of this big room, through that arched doorway—

Runt was facing that dark opening, shaded from the feeble candlelight that was now sputtering low. He could make out the arch of the frame, the deeper

shade of the space back of it, a solid shadow—Runt's eyes narrowed. They came wide in sudden fright. His blood froze in his veins. His first thought was that his imagination was picturing something there. Then it moved; he saw it move, grow slightly more distinct, come closer to the room. And he knew!

He would have screamed, but his tongue clove in his suddenly dry mouth. His paralyzed muscles clamped him in the chair. A dim figure came into definite form, advanced to the threshold, took a step inside. A tall man, his face as dark as the shadows about him, stood there. Candlelight gleamed in his black eyes, fixed on the crouched figure by the table. It was one of the men who had grappled with him for the precious trunk. Runt was sure of it.

The man took another silent step forward; his eyes swept the room swiftly, came back to the cowering figure, menacing in their fixed stare.

"I—Matu." His voice was low, guttural. "You got um. I, Matu, want."

He started forward. Runt's hand made a convulsive, unconscious movement, the reaction of his jumping nerves, and his knuckles rapped sharply against the barrel of the pistol which the exhausted Slip had left lying there. It broke the hypnotism of those staring black eyes. Runt tore his look away, glanced down. His fingers clawed at the butt. He raised the weapon.

The dark man was three yards from him when the dull *plop* of the silenced gun came. The dark man jerked erect; his lips bared white teeth. He leaped ahead. Runt shot twice more, frenziedly.



Runt raised the weapon. The dark man was three yards from him when the dull plop of the silenced gun came.

The dark man crashed against the table, sending Runt backward, then thudded to the floor.

Cots creaked in the other rooms, with the thud of feet on the floor and a sharp oath. The two men came boiling in; Nick with his pistol ready; Slip barehanded. Runt was backed away from his chair and the table, the pistol half raised, shaking. Slip tore it from his fingers, gave him a backward shove.

"What th' hell?" he growled.

Runt pointed to the farther side of the table.

"I told you," he gulped.

Nick was around the table, gun poised. He bent down swiftly; then straightened.

"This guy's dead," he said softly, and looked around at the blank doorway.

"Yeah, by Gawd!" Slip rasped. "We gotta look over the place. Come on, punk," he snarled at Runt. "You show me. You stay here, Nick!"

Slip was shoeless. At his gesture, Runt's trembling fingers unfastened his own laces. In stocking feet, they crept to the lower floor, shuffled softly from empty room to bare corridor, went to the basement and, with pencil flash heavily shaded by a handkerchief, searched there. It was empty of other figures; the trap was in place as they had left it. They went upstairs, without a light, moved from room to room, feeling of windows. They went even to the attic, and found nothing at all.

Back in the old dining room, Slip sank into a chair and glared morosely at the other two.

"How in hell'd he get in here, what I want to know," he said accusingly to Runt.

"What'd you find?" Nick asked softly.

"Nothing. Way up, windows ain't got no fasteners, but door to th' roof was hasped. But there ain't no house next this, an' a guy can't fly."

"Tunnel?"

Slip shook his head. "Trap hadn't been touched that I could see. We'll look at th' other end when we take him out"—with a nod at the still figure. "We better put this dead smoke down there, then run him out somewhere an' dump him just 'fore daylight. Hell of a thing. Damn you, hophead!" he said in a low growl to Runt. "If you've ditched us, I'll slit your throat if it's th' last thing I do, so help me!"

"One of your men, Runt?" the Greek asked.

"Yeah," Runt gulped. "But I don't see—"

"You couldn't see, anyway," Slip rasped at him, "so shut up. Come on; you gotta help me get him out." He stood up, then waggled his pistol at Runt. "Say, ain't you got a gun of your own?"

"Sure, Slip, sure." He drew out the mate of the burly man's pistol.

"Lemme have it," and Runt made the exchange.

"Now," Slip said, with a little gleam of cunning in his small eyes, "it's your lead in th' guy, punk. An', by Gawd, there's another back in Frisco."

"Listen, Slip," Nickolai spoke, and when the burly

man turned to him: "This ain't a dick. We can handle it. Only, when daylight comes, we gotta find out how he made it, case th' other one wants to try."

"Huh? Aw right. Take his feet, hophead."

With some difficulty, they carried the heavy weight to the basement and into the tunnel. As they passed along, a distant taxi horn sounded faintly. Besides their soft footfalls, shuffling in darkness, there was no other sound. They laid their dead burden close to the farther steps. Slip told Runt to wait, while he went through the trap into the small garage and returned in a very few moments. He said nothing until they were back in the old dining room, then addressed himself to Nick.

"Tunnel's out. Everything there's sealed." His head jerked with a sudden thought. "Say, Nick, listen. Each one of us had a key to that garage lock. S'pose someone lifted Ed's?"

"What'd you mean?" Runt asked.

"Ed was croaked. Somebody plugged him from that office. We had to leave him with Mike in the sedan, bleedin' all over th' place. Mike probably dropped him somewhere between Frisco and Los. What I'm thinkin', did some guy find th' key on him 'fore the dicks got to him?"

"You can leave that to Mike," Nick said in his soft tone. "He oughter be in 'fore long. But listen, Slip; how'd they know it was the key to this garage, way 'cross country?"

"Huh. Guess that's so. Then I dunno." He looked at his watch. "Oughter go out with him in two-three hours, say round three. Give us time to get back. Better slip him into the water, say below th' Heights. What you think, Nick?"

"I think that would be a good place, if tide's running out. Mebbe they won't find him till Dal gets in."

Slip swung around in his chair.

"Any wet stuff in this joint, Runt? Dal don't want us drinkin', but I gotta have something to keep me awake. Say—what you figgerin'?"

"You said Ed was bumped?" Runt asked.

"And you're countin' up his share. You would. Listen, punk. Dal's got the only key to that trunk. Maybe, 'fore he gets round to openin' it, somebody'll be figgerin' your share."

They wrangled on, with long intervals of silence. At three o'clock, Slip got heavily to his feet, and Runt started up. The burly man turned to Nick.

"Anything go wrong, Nick, we won't make a trail back here. You can tell that to Dal."

They went out of the room, down the stairs. Two minutes later, Nickolai heard steps coming up the stairs, and there was something about them, their carelessness or haste, that made him shift his right hand to the opening of his coat and remain silently motionless.

Slip Fadigan barged into the room. His face was

dark and troubled. Runt was at his heels, pasty-looking.

"The body's gone!" Slip said.

III.

Charles J. (Flick) Anderson was on the big knock-over, as the papers had said, but he wasn't working in a way that any newspaperman could follow him. And his own office often had the same complaint, too. People said Flick got most of his men on hunches. That wasn't true. The hardest kind of work to turn up every possible information, then cold, calm judgment as to what the criminal would do in face of the facts, was the thing that put Flick ahead of the game.

Frisco gave up no clues. That was discouraging to the local Johnnies, but it gave Flick the story of an outside gang; therefore, that Frisco would be the last place to look for them. They'd found Ed Schlinger's body in a ravine off the highway, just short of Ventura, and they'd picked up a black sedan, partly gutted by fire, ten miles beyond. The sedan had been wiped clean, but Ed had left a record behind him that had nothing to do with the Frisco haul. The driver had had a night's start; so had whatever other men had been along. Most of the outfit thought that was a good bet and went south. Flick set half a dozen cities looking into Ed Schlinger's past and started off north.

People said it was his stubborn way, but Flick visited Portland, then nosed around Seattle, where he picked up something that might be interesting to look further into when he should get east. He went to Omaha and Lincoln, took a swing down to Leavenworth, and later made Chi, and there he heard of a pal Ed had had in recent years, Frank Lauter, sometimes known as Runt.

So far, Flick had run into no threats, had not been shot at. The trail wasn't that warm, or, as he reasoned, it was a close gang with no hangers-on. And no one was aware that he was at work, except various police departments who welcomed the pleasant-faced young fellow with the deceptively powerful build and the deceptive smile, and were doubly glad when that guy who never knew when to quit had moved on.

Flick had only a couple of things and the dawning of an idea; but, nevertheless, he was moving in. The trail led eastward—to New York.

With daylight, Nickolai and Slip Fadigan followed Runt from basement to garret, but the means by which Matu had gained entrance and the manner in which his body had been spirited away remained a complete mystery. It was true, they couldn't examine the place from the outside by day or to advantage at night. The whole matter was getting on the nerves of the three of them, but Nick called attention to this lack to combat the superstitious

fear Runt was making no effort to hide.

"Lookit," he said. "I've stuck in this hole day and night for two or three weeks an' I know every crack in the walls. I'm tellin' you no guy could walk in on us without bustin' in. Nobody could do it; that's all."

"Listen," Slip growled at him. "If you'd told us about it 'fore we got here, I'd believe it was one of your hophead dreams. But I saw the black feller, and so did Nick, and I helped carry him down in the tunnel. So what?"

"You're a pretty big, strong feller, Slip," Nickolai said softly. "You think only one man took him away?"

"Yeah; I see what you're gettin' at. Could be done, but I don't believe it." His scowling glance turned toward the dumb-waiter shaft. "Be a hell of a thing if there's a crew of 'em."

Runt shivered.

"We watch," Nickolai told them. "Night, too. Mike, he come bimeby. Maybe he'll tell us about Ed's key, and maybe it won't make us feel too good."

Night came, and a man stole into the hide-away, a short, thickset fellow, bronzed, hard and burry as a nut—Gip Flanders who had built the false sides on the speedboat and ferried the gang and the loot from South Bay to Puget Sound. He took the story of the dark men with a shrug.

An hour after Gip Flanders, another man slipped in, the driver of the black sedan, who had dumped Ed Schlinger's dead body and ditched the car farther on.

"Hi-yah, Mike," Slip greeted him sourly. The strain of that half-million cache was getting on his nerves. By virtue, or vice, of being one of the three who had done the killing and lifted the loot, Slip carried himself as second in command to the absent Dal Furber; and now his temper had become ragged; the tide in the bottle Runt had given him was almost at full ebb. "We got th' stuff here, Mike," Slip told him, "but listen to this," and he repeated the story, and asked the question they were all hanging on.

For answer, Mike Pollard reached into a pocket and laid two keys on the table.

"I ain't that dumb," Mike told them. "What's the matter with you guys, anyway? If it ain't the law, what do we care? An' if we can't keep it away from a bunch of smokes we oughter lose it."

"What I say," Slip agreed. He scowled around at Runt. "Look, punk. You skip out an' get us another pint. An' pick up a paper. We oughter see if anything's happening."

"What's the use of takin' chances?" Nickolai asked. "We better sit here tight and see what comes to us."

"What I think," Runt said. He had drawn a little apart from the men, especially the surly Fadigan.

"Who told you you could think?" Slip asked him

sarcastically. "Go on; beat it, Runt, like I said."

Runt's ferret eyes glared a frightened man's hatred at Slip; then he went out with a hangdog look.

"The damned hophead's lost his guts," Slip told them, as the sound of Runt's footsteps receded. "When you showed that extra key, Mike, his eyes liked to pop outta his head. He's got an idea those black fellers been workin' some kind of magic on us, or something. That's one mistake Dal made, pickin' him. He'll get us in trouble yet."

"Then you shouldn'ta sent him out," Nickolai, the Greek, said softly.

"An' I wish to hell he'd never come back!" Slip snarled back at him. "He gives me the jitters."

"Listen, Slip," Nick said again. "Th' thing ain't natural. This scatter's sealed. Only one way in, an' we got all the keys. An' yet that black guy was just standin' there, 'cording to Runt. Not a sound, not a whisper; Runt just looked up, and there he was. Explain that if you can. I can't."

"Aw, you're just another one," Slip growled.

They squabbled on. An hour passed, and Runt hadn't returned. Slip didn't like the way Nick, the Greek, glanced toward him every now and then, and told him as much. No one thought of sleep. It was a ring of hard faces around the table, heavily shadowed by the flickering candlelight. They avoided looking at each other as time wore on, glancing often at the boards concealing the dumb-waiter, but more frequently fixing their gaze on the big, blank doorway, waiting to spring into action, listening for some sound that would warn them.

And around midnight, it came; a dull, indistinguishable noise first, echoing through the empty floor below, then resolving into measured footfalls.

"There's the punk," Slip growled with evident relief. "I'll tell him where he gets off."

"That ain't Runt," Nickolai said.

"Huh?"

The steps were just outside the room now. Then a big, burly form appeared in the doorway and shouldered into the room. His face was split in a grin, showing yellow, broken teeth; his jowls were white and blue, as if he had recently lost a heavy beard.

Slip cursed luridly.

"What'sa matter?" the newcomer asked.

"Plenty," Slip told him. "Sit down, Pete."

The man who had taken a submachine gun from his peddler's cart in the Frisco square looked on the news as had Mike, but Mike was far from being as assured as he had been, and after two hours had passed and the men sought their cots or mattresses thrown on the floor, Pete was as worried as the rest, for there had been no sign of the absent Runt.

The morning was well advanced when the first of them stirred and began to growl for coffee. Runt had performed this service, and Slip Fadigan, from

his cot, cursed him for his absence and for whatever else he could think of. Finally, Nick, the Greek, went quietly into the pantry and brewed a mess. When he came back with a steaming pot, the rest were sitting sulkily at the table, bleary-eyed from lack of sleep, heads bent.

Nick shoved the pot over to Slip Fadigan, after filling his own cup, and turned to his accustomed chair. It was then that he noticed something that had not been there the night before, a large, round, well-secured package smack in the middle of the large table.

"What you got here, Slip?" he asked in his soft tone, but the others caught a peculiar note in the query.

Slip said: "Huh?" looked up, then his eyes narrowed sharply. "What th' hell!" He got up and pushed a finger against the package. "Kinder soft. Guess it ain't no pineapple. If it was," he added with a short laugh, "it'd blown th' town apart, that big. Say—how'd that get here?"

No one could answer that. Slip drew out a knife.

"Guess we gotta see what this is," he said, and slit the string carefully, holding the wrapping so that it would not spring apart. A very thin paper of peculiar strength was on the outside. Slip opened that, disclosing what seemed to be a gossamer oilcloth beneath. Whether his nerves were ragged or in his bullish way he wanted to have it done with, he yanked the wrapping away, then sprang back with an oath.

A human head slipped from his fingers and rolled to one side, the eyes open and staring and vacant, the throat a jagged red line.

"My Gawd!" he said hoarsely. "Runt Lauter!"

IV.

Mike Pollard, who had thrown Ed Schlinger's body into a ditch, turned from the table violently sick. The rest shoved back, getting to their feet, staring, fascinated by the gruesome sight. They could hear Mike Pollard retching, and Slip Fadigan threw an oath at him. Nickolai, the Greek, was the first to regain his wits.

"The coppers never done that," he said.

"No!" Slip rasped. "Those black devils. Runt was talkin' about black magic, an' he got it—plenty. Say—cover th' damn thing up, one of you fellers."

"You opened it," Pete spoke for the lot. "You do it."

"Wait," Nick said. "There's some writing there." He reached out a hand and pulled a slip of paper from partly beneath the head.

"You look at it," Fadigan growled, "an' I'll get this outta sight."

The oilcloth had slipped to the floor. Slip caught up the first paper he saw—it was the old newspaper that had carried the first news of the crime—and, failing to observe what it was, spread it over the

face, then reached the cloth from the floor and hastily made up the bundle with fingers that trembled a little when they fastened the knot.

"Put this in one of th' ash cans in th' basement, will you, Gip? I wanta see what Nick's got here." The bronzed man went out. Slip turned to Nick, who was frowning over the paper slip. "Can't you read it, feller?"

The Greek looked up at him slowly.

"Sure, I can read it. That's easy. What it's all about and what we're up against ain't so easy."

"What's it say?"

Nick held up the slip of paper. The words and the characters were in English print, but they had strange formation.

"Read it for us, Nick," Pete demanded.

"'You have,'" Nick read slowly, "'what belongs

"wasn't no smoke. Runt was right. I never saw any man just like him."

"But they're men, ain't they?" the burly Pete rasped.

"Yeah, they're men," Nickolai said softly. "But tell me how that Matu got in without our hearing him. Tell me how that head got here, sometime between two and daylight. I think th' feller that brought it coulda slit our throats easy."

"Shut your trap!" Slip almost yelled. "We gotta look out for that," he added in his growling tone. "They don't know where it's hid, see? They can't do anything until they do."

"You never liked Runt," Nickolai told him. "But you gotta hand him one, Slip."

"What'd you mean?" Fadigan asked roughly.

"They must've tried to get him to tell 'fore they—" He drew a finger across his throat suggestively.

"You mean they'll try it again, huh?" Mike Pollard asked. "I'll face any man, but I don't like it when it comes to these hoodoos. I think we oughter take th' stuff and scam for Philly, or maybe Chi."

"Nuts!" Slip cut in. "We're stickin' till Dal Furber shows. As for that"—he pointed to the slip of paper beside Nickolai—"we got grub enough. We'll stay right here, th' bunch of us. Some of us'll keep awake at night, say, two at a time, an' those black helions won't be slitting any more throats—not ours, anyway."

"Can't do it," Nickolai told him.

"Why not? If you don't know it yet, greaseball, I'm givin' th' orders

around here till Dal comes back."

"S'pose," Nick went on quietly, "the coppers trail us, or see some of these black fellers foolin' around an' get curious. Then they come in, an' we let 'em come. Tell 'em we're only jungled here. They don't find th' stuff, but they find Runt's head. What do we get then? We fry."

"Yeah, guess we gotta get rid of it," Slip said heavily. "But two better do it." He looked slowly around the table.

"Gip 'n' I better take care of it," Pete said. "We ain't been here as much as you guys."



It was a human head—its eyes open and staring!

not to you. Matu asked for it. You did not give. Matu's spirit now claims it. One head you pay each day you do not give."

Gip Flanders came back into the room as the others sat silent; then Mike Pollard joined them, glancing warily at the table before he sank into a chair. His entrance stirred Slip to speech.

"The nerves of those smokes!" he growled. "Think they can scare us into givin' up five hundred cold grand."

"That feller—Matu, they called him," Nick said,

"Aw right. If there was any ashes downstairs, I'd say take th' can where Gip put it. But you can slip it in a can with ashes somewheres uptown. They'll dump it an' never see it."

"Look," Nick said to Fadigan, "you may think you're th' boss, but you don't tell me where to get off. And you ain't Furber. If he was here, we wouldn't be sittin' round waitin' for our throats to be cut or to be fingered by the coppers. He'd plan something to get these black fellers, or we'd scam."

"You damn—" Slip began, but Nick stopped him.

"Now you wait a minute, big feller," and there was a curious impression of steel beneath the Greek's quiet tones, "an' don't think you gotta blow your head off. I'm waitin' maybe another day for Dal; then I'm takin' my cut and goin' somewhere else."

"This scatter's safer than any other place," Slip growled.

"Not with what's happenin', it ain't," Mike said.

"An' with you guys runnin' round th' country," Slip went on, "each with his load of swag, somebody's goin' to get pinched and that means the rest of us. You fellers get this: I'm not goin' to the chair for any one of you."

"If Runt held out," Nickolai told him, "I guess the rest of us can."

Mike Pollard's hand trembled a little as he reached for the coffee.

That night, Pete and Gip Flanders took the gruesome bundle to the car. Making sure that the block was for the moment deserted, they drove at a moderate pace to the West Side, then turned north. Up in the great apartment section of the upper Bronx they parked on a silent and dimly lighted side street. Pete got out and, telling Gip to wait, walked on to scout. He was back in a few moments.

"Made to order," he said. "Come on with it."

He led the way into a narrow alley between two towering blocks of brick, stopped where a row of large cans stood before a side basement door. Without a word, they dropped the package into a can from which Pete had dumped half the contents, upending another over it until it was overflowing, then scooped the spilled ashes as best they could back into the second can. Metal did not once strike metal; they made no sound, and returned to the car without seeing a single person. Pete let the car run down the grade before switching in the engine, crossed over to the far East Side and turned south, still driving at unhurried speed. It looked like a perfect job.

It had been late when they had started, and they came back to the Thirteenth Street garage in the deeper darkness that just precedes dawn. The section was deserted; not a single beat copper or even a wandering straggler had they seen. Pete was yawning in wearied relief as he turned off the dimmed light and waited for Gip to open the silent

door. He ran the car in, got out leisurely and heard Gip Flanders softly close and lock the door.

In that space, and with no shred of light filtering from the outside, he couldn't see his hand before his face, much less the car or a wall. He turned to shut the car door, using both hands to make it noiseless. Then his throat constricted with sharp pain. He felt his wind completely shut off even as he realized that a cord was cutting his flesh and suffocating him. His big shoulders heaved; his powerful arms threshed wildly, but more powerful hands clamped his wrists, held him as the cord drew tighter and tighter; his eyes seemed popping from their sockets and his tongue was a wooden clog in his mouth.

His hands were tied behind his back. A gag was stuffed into his open mouth and a cloth wound tightly around it. Then cords bound his legs at ankles and knees, and finally the pressure on his throat eased and his nostrils flared as he gasped for strangling breath. Pete had tried to make noise, to slam the door or shake the wall, anything on the chance of giving an alarm to his friends beyond the tunnel. But there had been no sound, except the soft shuffling of feet, the heavy breathing of men in violent action.

He had heard no sound of Gip, not above his own struggles, and now he was bent backward, his considerable weight lifted lightly and he was put into the tonneau, bumping against a man similarly bound—Gip Flanders. Gip's pocket was rifled of its key and the door again opened. From where Pete sat, propped against the back, he saw a tall figure faintly outlined in the glow outside. The man disappeared; there was a little wait, then the car was started and slid slowly out, turned and was off. A man stepped to the running board and sat beside the driver.

The rear was crowded. Pete was wedged between Gip and a hard-muscled man on his right. He couldn't move; he didn't try to move. He wasn't thinking of that. His mind was filled with a grim and terrible picture: the severed head of Runt Lauter as it had stood there on the breakfast table.

Hardened as he was, that was a little too much for Pete, gagged, bound and helpless. His eyes turned sidewise and, perhaps to divert his thoughts rather than from any hope, he tried to make out where they were going. He knew that their first turn had been north, and he thought of their recent trip in that direction and again of the dripping head. Sweat bathed him from head to foot. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, the car was turning to the left, then north once more.

The street lights seemed dimmed to Pete, then he realized that daylight was close at hand, and for some reason it stirred his spirit. He shoved himself up an inch or two, looked sidewise again, and made out a street number; then, in place of following a straight road, the car began to wind, and he knew they were in the park.

Trees swept past him and the light grew slowly. Then, just before they hit a cross street, a cloth was passed over Pete's eyes and made fast. But his mind was alert now, grasping for any straw, and, guessing at the exit, he counted the two turns that were made, judged the distance traveled; then the car slowed its speed, made a sharp turn and stopped.

His captors got out; he could hear the low murmur of their voices but could make out not a single word. Pete nudged Gip Flanders with his elbow and got an answering pressure; but there was no hope in that. The men got in again, the car moved less than the length of the block and stopped.

In silence, the two gangsters were taken out and carried into an entrance on the same level, then down a short flight. They were lowered to the floor; the cloths were taken from their eyes, only, and they heard a door closed and locked upon them.

V.

A big truck moved leisurely from house to house in the early morning. Men in ash-covered overalls rolled the cans sluggishly to the curb, where they were raised and dumped into the big container. A man clambered up the rear and directed the loading.

The men on the sidewalk tilted one of the cans, hurled it up. Ashes came out—and then a roughly spherical object rolled out and along the sidewalk!

One of the men unwrapped the covering—and then all of the men gasped! They were looking at a *human head!*

A man started running toward the corner. He reappeared in a remarkably short time with a policeman.

The copper took one look at the grisly object and hustled to the nearest call box, then returned and fought away the curious. Soon a radio car flashed up; the copper remained in the vicinity while Runt Lauter's head found its way to the police laboratory at headquarters.

Early as it was, Charles J. (Flick) Anderson, assigned to the Frisco branch and recently arrived from Chicago, was closeted with William Oberling, head of the detective squad, a hard-headed and hard-fisted man for forty-five. They were old buddies. Oberling's interoffice phone rang, and after answering it, he turned to Anderson.

"I'll answer that in a moment, Flick," he said in his clipped tone. "Got to look at something right now. Come on in, if you want to."

Flick did. He followed Oberling into the laboratory, saw the cause of the interruption and, while listening to the surgeon talk, let his gaze wander to the wrappings which had been shoved to one side. The black print of a headline caught his glance and he moved nearer. Crumpled, bloodstained and dirty, a newspaper lay before him. It was a morning extra, dated about two weeks earlier, and it told

the story of the big Frisco knock-over.

A light gleamed in Flick Anderson's gray eyes, the first in two fruitless weeks of tireless search, but his manner did not change. He waited until Oberling chanced to look around at him, then nodded. Oberling came over and gave Flick a keen look.

"Mean anything to you?" he asked, with a nod over his shoulder.

"I'll tell you, Bill, after you have that paper shaken down. Wish they'd save every part of a print they get."

From that moment on, headquarters hummed, and Flick Anderson was the spark plug of activity, although no one knew it outside Bill Oberling's office. Flick called men from the department, but it was local help he wanted, and the detective chief, while acting skeptical, was giving it to him. Runt's head was rigged on a dummy and men from the force were called in to have a look at it.

The surgeon had said that it wasn't a medical or even a student case; that, from a microscopic examination, while the work had been done by a very sharp instrument, he was inclined to believe that metal had not been used. Then, along in the afternoon, a stout patrolman remembered the face as it was rigged on the dummy, and also the face of the man he had seen getting the trunk at Penn Station. He told the story of the man who had taken a trunk from the station and his peculiar actions. The baggageman was visited, with the patrolman along, checked his stubs and produced one he thought was it, which showed a passenger checking from near Seattle. Between the two men, they finally thought of the trouble with the dark-skinned men, and again Flick Anderson's eyes fairly gleamed.

While daylight lasted and well into the evening, Oberling's best men were working at top speed; later, Flick set out himself, with the detective chief, to run down a trail that had been uncovered of men who were black but not Negroes. Bill Oberling grumbled; he thought it was the long way around, that they should be doing what they had sent other men to do: search for Slippery Jim Fadigan, sometimes known as Slip, whose prints, with those of Lauter, had been found on the paper.

"I s'pose it means fine-combing all Harlem for certain black men," Oberling said.

"We haven't time," Flick told him. "I could give you a story now, but you wouldn't believe it; and if you don't want your office decorated by more heads, come along with me. Harlem would probably do—the number of strange cults there would surprise you—but I know a family on the East Side that should give us a real short cut to what we're trying to do."

Nick, the Greek, Slip Fadigan and Mike Pollard had passed a day of hectic worry in the hide-away, deserted and forgotten in the heart of the teeming

city. They had watched, one at a time, through the balance of the night, their ears strained, waiting vainly for the others' return. They dared not go out in daylight; they dreaded what the darkness of another night might bring.

"A head each day" had been the threat, and as far as they knew, two days' dues was ready to be paid. As dusk gathered, they watched the shadows in blank doorways, with guns ready, listened to the ghostly creaking of aged timbers.

Balanced on the side of a very real fear was also a great temptation. The trunk with its half million was right under their hands. It was easy to argue that they should get away from there with the loot in the interest of all concerned. Mike Pollard fought for it openly; Nickolai repeated his promise to leave toward the end of that night. Slip Fadigan alone was stubborn in his determination to wait for Dal Furber.

But their anxiety was nothing in comparison with the tortured agony of the two men lying gagged and helplessly bound in the damp basement of a strange house somewhere north of the park. Once, during the interminable day, a tall, dark-skinned man came in, loosened their gags, one at a time, and gave them water to drink. That was all. But Pete, when his head was raised for the cup, looked desperately around, without hope but, nevertheless, seeking an outlet from their prison.

Two small, grimy windows let in faint light by which he made out the long but rather narrow cellar. A furnace and coalbin were at the end which he faced. Opposite, along the wall beyond him, were a broken table and chair, a trunk, part of a bed and mop or broom handles; but Pete knew that even if his own pet Tommy-gun were lying there it would have been of no more use to him than one of the broken handles.

Night came, and the cellar was a blank of absolute darkness. The sands of time ran on; minutes, hours passed. Then dim light appeared as a door was opened. The steps of several men came in, paused beside them. They were lifted to their feet, the cords at ankle and knee were severed, but for a few moments their cramped muscles could not hold them erect.

Hands grasped their arms, a man on either side of each captive, holding them up, and the clasps, while not heavy, were as powerful and unbreakable as vises. They were turned and half carried, half led toward the door. Gip, either because he was the nearer or by purpose, went with his captors ahead; Pete followed a few paces back. At the outer doorway they paused in darkness while a man, who was not holding them, went softly out; and in the brief opening of the door, Pete caught the flash of a small, blue sign across the street. Then cloths were bound securely over their eyes.

Pete heard the door opening; he was led through, down some steps and then hurried at a rapid pace

along the sidewalk. Abruptly he was turned at right angles, kept from stumbling over the curb and rushed straight across the narrow street, and once more he forced his mind to think of his progress and not what might lie ahead. He was helped over the farther curb, pushed straight on and knew they had entered an alley, by the footing and the smothered sound of their soft footsteps.

He started to count his steps, knowing its uselessness, for the alley should measure a block, but to keep his thoughts filled and not let them reach ahead; and he failed. He could not fool himself. He knew. Then suddenly he took the weight from his legs to let it sag to the ground, hoping to break the holds, wriggle free and run. He dropped no more than three inches, and if he hadn't before guessed the strength that held him, he knew it now. Fingers bit like pincers into his arm muscles, but they were numbed from the cord and he felt only the firmer grip.

Another sidewalk and street, another alley, and he was turned when it seemed to him they had passed only half its length. A second turn, and after that he lost all sense of direction, and could think only of Runt Lauter's head and his own, and knew that no price would be too great to pay if he could still keep it on his shoulders. Not for his share of the loot, not for the whole half million, would he part with it—if given the choice. But would he?

Pete's stumbling progress was abruptly checked. He was lifted the height of a threshold, and a cool, dank air struck his face where it was not covered at mouth and eyes. The door was closed gently behind, but soft as the sound was, it echoed faintly in what seemed a lofty space. His feet, set under him, pressed stone. Outside, when he had forced his lips open against the cloth, he had seen faint flickers of light. There was none here; and where their progress there had been hurried, now the step was slow and measured, as if in rhythm with some music he could not hear.

On they went at the maddening pace, with faint echoes, like flying bats, all around him. There were no threats; there was no bluster; they weren't needed.

Pressure on his arms turned him; the powerful grip eased him to stone steps, leading downward; broad steps, for he knew that both men were beside him; winding steps that brought him to another floor of stone. And against his eyeballs a faint light showed. A rustle of sound came to him, and above it the faint, rhythmic touching of a drumhead. They walked to that tempo, had been so walking from the moment they had entered whatever sort of building this was.

A half dozen steps forward, and he was halted and held motionless.

Then suddenly the band was whisked from his

eyes. A knife struck the cords from his aching arms, but now two hands grasped each in place of one. But Pete was not thinking of that extra freedom which was not freedom at all. His pupils, wide open from darkness, were taking in the scene before him, which his mind was grasping in all its horrible significance.

The place was long, the ceiling high, the stone walls dull and hazy under the bluish light whose source he did not see; nor did he look for it, neither at the walls nor the ceiling. At a little distance straight before him a score of tall, powerfully built

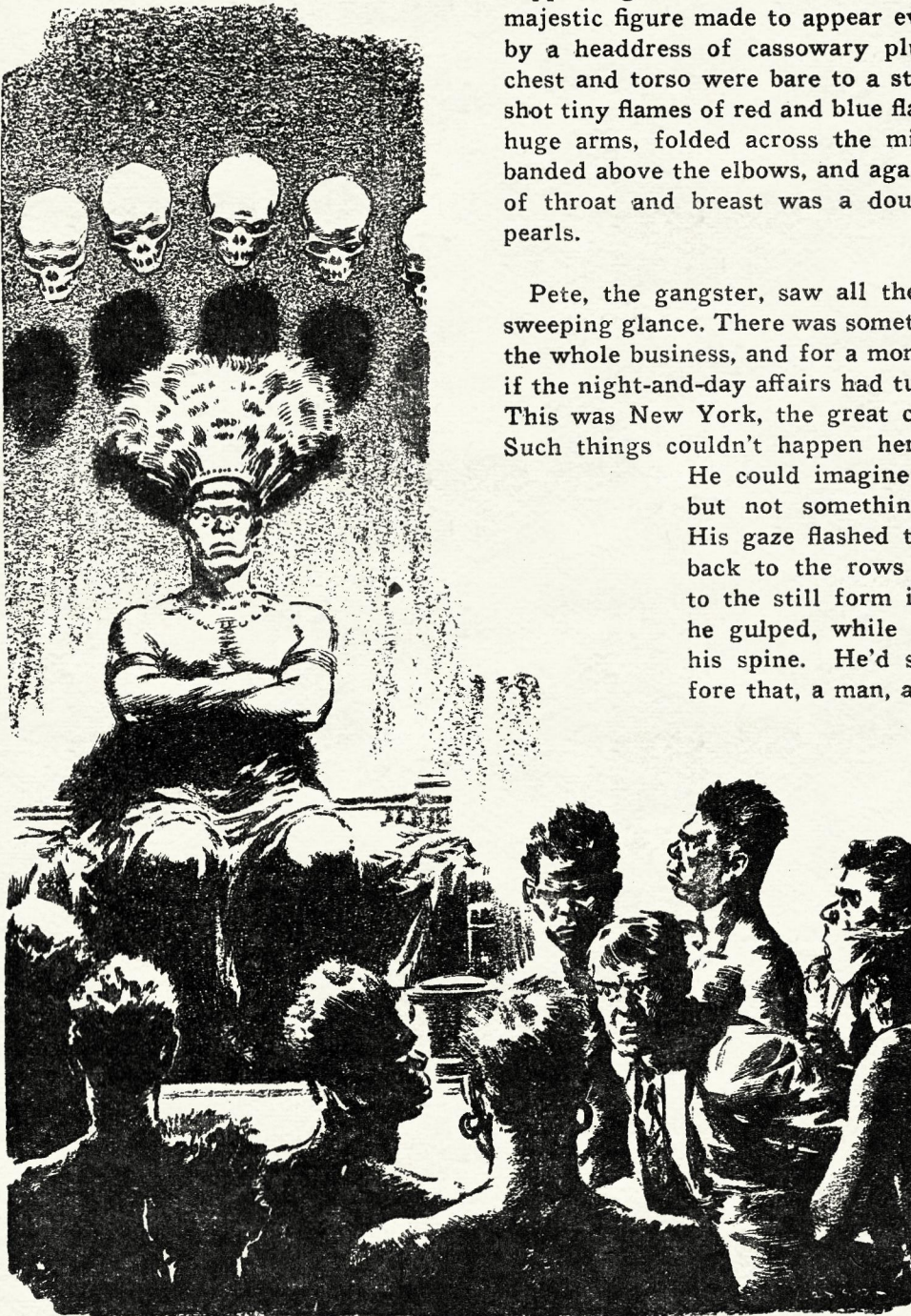
men were ranged in parallel rows fifteen feet apart. Naked to the waist, the bluish light on their dark skins showed the ridged muscles, now still as they stood rigidly motionless, heads turned in one direction, away from where Pete was standing, and his gaze was drawn that way with hypnotic force.

The space just beyond the farther end of the two lines, which was apparently the end of the underground room, was blocked by a purplish cloth, from floor to ceiling, and against this background was a hanging arch of human skulls, ghastly under the light.

Framed against this arch stood a low platform supporting a seat of some sort on which was a majestic figure made to appear even more gigantic by a headdress of cassowary plumes. The great chest and torso were bare to a studded girdle that shot tiny flames of red and blue flashing light. The huge arms, folded across the mighty chest, were banded above the elbows, and against the dark skin of throat and breast was a double row of large pearls.

Pete, the gangster, saw all these things in one sweeping glance. There was something wrong about the whole business, and for a moment he wondered if the night-and-day affairs had turned him screwy. This was New York, the great city of the world. Such things couldn't happen here, not in reality.

He could imagine it all as a show, but not something true and real. His gaze flashed to that grim arch, back to the rows of silent figures, to the still form in the center, and he gulped, while shivers ran down his spine. He'd seen a head. Before that, a man, a pal.



On the low platform was a majestic figure made to appear more gigantic by a headdress of cassowary plumes!

Then another thought flashed across his mind. All right; this was real, the goods. But what could these jungle pirates have to do with the Frisco loot? How could they have tumbled to it the moment the secret trunk had come? The police of the country weren't dumb, not in Pete's experience, but not one of them was wise to it. Only these black devils who had taken Runt's head to force the hand-over, who had promised a head a day—What was their angle?

Seconds, only, had passed since sight had been given him. There had not been the slightest pause in the progress of the two powerful figures, with their captive between them, along those parallel lines. With slow steps, measured to the soft tapping of the drum, they walked toward the motionless figure on the platform, half dragging, half leading Gip Flanders with them. His arms were freed of the ropes but not of the hands that clasped them. The cloth was still around his gag, but not over his eyes. He could see what all this was leading to, as could Pete, and suddenly sickness gripped at Pete's stomach.

The trio halted ten feet short of the platform. The big man there made his first motion, the slight raising of a hand, and Gip was whisked around, his eyes seeking out Pete in an agony of appeal.

Pete made convulsive movement of his arms, and the hands holding them stopped it. He twisted his head and saw behind him a third man with a short club and a strange thing at its head. He looked back, and suddenly he understood, even as a new figure slipped from between the line of still forms and danced toward Gip.

They weren't going to try to make Gip talk. His gag was still in place. They were going to persuade Pete himself of that wisdom. But even if he should—Then his thoughts stopped. He could do nothing but look and stare in stupefied horror at what was taking place before his eyes.

The two men who held Gip Flanders drew an arm's length to either side as the new figure came close. The man was naked from head to foot with the exception of a cloth and a girdle around his sinewy loins. His right hand held just such a club as Pete had seen brandished behind himself, and there was not the slightest pause.

The club was raised, descended in a light blow on Gip's temple. The hands that were holding him upright loosened their grip and he staggered until the naked man, dropping his club, caught him by the hair and held him erect. A dusky hand shot to the man's girdle and came away with a knife that took no glint from the light. There was a sweeping stroke, and blood spurted from Gip's throat from ear to ear. The hand shot to the girdle again, snatched a short cord. Pete saw it being inserted into the ghastly wound, then his swimming eyes closed.

VI.

He opened them to see the convulsive twitching of the muscles of the headless corpse before it slumped to the stone, to see the dripping head dangled by the hair high in the air. Pete clamped his lids tight again. Behind his gag, a hoarse sound came from his throat. He started to thresh wildly. The hands closed their grip. Something hard and sharp touched his head lightly from behind. He was forced to stand quiet. He opened mad, staring eyes.



He could no longer see the naked executioner or his grim trophy. Men from one line were moving a long oblong of stone from the floor before the platform. A horrible stench struck Pete's nostrils with sickening force. He saw the headless body lifted and dropped into the black hole. The flag was put back in place; the men resumed their places in line; but now they weren't looking away from Pete. All heads were turned in his direction. And another naked figure had stepped in between them, or it might have been the same, with the knife and cord at the girdle, the short, headed club in his hand.

Pete felt the strong hands urging him forward. He tried to hold back against them—

A strange, yet curiously familiar, sound struck his ears and penetrated his dazed intelligence; faint at first, hardly discernible, mocking the fantastic horror of the scene before him by its commonplaceness. Yet it served to make his captors halt, to turn all heads upward, listening. It was the faint, far-off cry of a siren; it grew a little more distinct and was joined by the sound of a whistle, the dim clangor of a bell.

The crowd stood motionless, listening, waiting.

The sounds grew louder swiftly, a medley of

clashing noises. There was a rumble in the street; the walls and the floor trembled slightly, the bell clanged furiously and muffled shouts could be heard. The rumbling became more pronounced, then stopped abruptly at its height; the bell kept on, slowed for a few beats, and ceased. The siren wailed shrilly not far away.

All eyes turned toward the man on the little platform. He had risen to his gigantic height, but his face was calm and expressionless. Pete felt the man's eyes on him with almost hypnotic intensity; then they shifted slightly and the man nodded and raised his arm in a sweeping gesture around the room. There was no word spoken, but Pete saw the men spring into activity, some running toward the purple cloth and its hideous arch at the rear; then he was turned about and pushed forward.

The bluish light was almost extinguished, even as a blinding cloth was again wound around Pete's eyes. As the fingers left his head, some thought or instinct made him duck forward quickly, and instead of falling squarely on his skull, a hard object struck it a glancing blow and thudded on his shoulder. Pete let himself go limp, a little dazed but gathering his wits desperately. The hands shifted their grips from his arms to his shoulders; he was carried up the stairs with dragging feet, and across the stone floor above in the same fashion.

There was a short halt, then he felt warmer air on his face and he was taken through a doorway to the outside. He let his feet work a little, to judge of the footing, but not too much; he wanted them to get the effect of his weight. There was plenty of noise not far from where they were moving along: cries, hoarse shouts of command, an engine working and the hiss of steam. The fire was right at hand.

Pete heard running steps; a form brushed past his back as he was turned abruptly to one side. Others were coming; he could hear their voices and hurrying footfalls. While the holds were still under his shoulders, a hand left each of his arms and was clasped over the cloths that bound eyes and mouth, presumably to hide their color. Pete had been gathering wits and strength for such a moment. He exploded all at once into terrific action. His arms tore backward, encircled hard torsos and with all his strength forced them together. For a fraction of a second, the grasps were loosened, and in that instant Pete twisted frenziedly, threw himself ahead—and was free.

Automatically, his legs started running. He tore the cloth from his eyes just in time to avert crashing into a wall, swerved away from it, bowled a man over in his stride and made the mouth of an alley and was in the midst of a milling throng. Careless of collisions, heedless of the curses and the blows hurled at him, he dived into the crowd, working toward its edge. Almost there, a glance over his

shoulder toward the alley mouth made him bend low and turn in the opposite direction.

He got to the somewhat clearer space of a sidewalk, scurrying along it in a crouch, dodged boldly around a big copper who was shoving people back and found himself facing another alley. It looked clear, and he never ran faster. He turned, and on the main stem jumped a taxi.

"South, brother!" he gasped. "Smoke your axles!"

"You musta started that fire," the driver said, as he turned down the flag.

"Listen, punk," Pete growled at him. "I'd give a grand to the guy who did, and no foolin'."

He walked the last two blocks, head twisting constantly on his shoulders, eyes everywhere, keeping to the shadows. His pistol had been taken from



him, but he had his key, and when he had opened the garage door a foot he cupped a match in his palms and took a look inside. By the same light he had seen a spanner on the cement floor, and he gripped that, lifted the trap and carried a lighted match to the bottom. The tunnel seemed clear, and it didn't take him long to cross it. Once in the basement, he shuffled softly to the stairs, made the first floor, and then panic he had long repressed seized him. He rushed up the last flight and burst through the big, arched doorway. Three leveled pistols greeted him from behind the table where Mike, Nickolai and Slip Fadigan crouched.

Pete blurted out his story.

"I want some o' that dough," he finished, "any part of it, an' I'm beatin' it. I'd give myself to the coppers on vagrancy, 'cept they'd slap the big rap on me, and I'd take that 'fore I'd stick around here another night. You know what they done to Runt. You oughter've seen 'em doin' it to Gip, with me comin' next, an' you wouldn't stand round here gawping."

Mike Pollard added his, and Nickolai, the Greek, reminded Slip that his time was up, also; and before them Fadigan gave way. The trunk was taken from its secret hiding place, brought into the big dining room and, at Nick's suggestion, taken into one of the smaller, adjacent chambers. They worked on

the lock until Pete could get his spanner under the hasp and break it open. The four gathered close as Slip Fadigan lifted back the lid. Then a voice spoke quietly from the open door:

"What's going on here?"

They wheeled as one, hands flying to shoulder holsters, only Pete finding his empty. As swiftly, they relaxed.

"Listen to this, Dal," Slip Fadigan said, "and you'll get it."

Dal Furber stepped farther in. He was not a large man, rather slender in his well-pressed clothes; but there was a tightness about him, in his whole appearance and carriage, his hard, level eyes and the set of his unsmiling mouth. He didn't even glance at the open trunk; he looked at the men, one after the other, searing them with the scorn of his stare.

"I ought to blast the four of you," he said in the same quiet tone, cold as ice and hard as chilled steel, "for trying this on me. Where's Runt Lauter and Gip Flanders?"

"Part o' Runt," Slip told him, "is in an ash dump. Maybe Gip— You tell him, Pete."

The burly Tommy-gun handler had by no means recovered his poise. His eyes were still wild-looking, and as he repeated the story, sweat stood out on his face. Furber listened, interrupting him frequently for greater detail, watching him closely.

"Have you taken out the money?" he asked coldly when Pete had finished his gruesome details.

"Just this second got it open," Slip assured him.

Dal Furber turned toward the trunk. His eye narrowed sharply as he bent close, then filled with rage. He pulled out the first of the closely wadded paper, dug out more and threw it carelessly aside. He bent lower, thrust his hand in deep, grasped something and yanked it out. He held it up where they all could see it—the small, crudely fabricated figure of a monkey. With his only gesture of anger, he slammed it back inside.

"You damned fools!" he shot at them. "You got the wrong trunk!"

A chorus of oaths and of dismay answered him.

"Not a brain among you!" he said with biting scorn.

"Listen," Nick, the Greek, said. "You were the only one who saw that trunk, Furber. How could we tell?"

Furber spun on his heel, strode to the big room and sat by the table. The rest followed him, Pete and Slip Fadigan sitting awkwardly. Nick alone looking as angry as Dal Furber. The chief turned to him, measured him a moment.

"You tell me the first of it again, Nick," he said. "Everything Lauter told you. Don't miss anything."

When he had ended, Furber sat in thought, his eyes swiveling once to the room behind him.

"It's plain," he said, as if speaking his thoughts aloud, "that they were after that thing in there. They recognized the trunk when Runt took it, must have been waiting there for one of their own." He raised his head quickly. "That, also, must have come from Seattle, or the way station, checked by mistake on the ticket I bought. It is possible," he said slowly, with his eyes on Nick, "that they got our trunk. If they did, the question is: how far did they dig into it, or did they open it at all?"

"Listen, chief!" Pete said excitedly. "I remember now. Down in that basement, where they kept us all day, was a pile of stuff, broken beds and things, an' I know damn well there was a trunk."

"Do you remember what it looked like?" Dal Furber asked very softly.

"Lemme think. I didn't get much of a look at it—the guy was holding me up so's I could get a drink—and I just got a quick glance. Say—did it have sort of a brass cap on th' corner?"

Furber nodded. His eyes were inscrutable, but a little glint had come into them that was not anger.

"Just like any ordinary trunk," he said.

"My Gawd, we oughter have a look at it!" Pete said. Then he looked away quickly from Furber's probing glance.

"Think you could find the place?" Furber asked him.

Pete opened and closed a big hand that lay on the table.

"I might. Yeah, sure. There was a little blue sign"—he shivered, thinking of another bluish light—"right across th' street. I saw part of it an' I'd know it again. But—if I'm goin' up there again, I'm takin' a Tommy-gun or I ain't goin'—not one damn lousy step!"

Pete wasn't looking at Furber as he said that. He was facing the blank, arched doorway with the shadows beyond it. Suddenly he gave a yell and came to his feet, the hair prickling the back of his neck.

Something was coming through that doorway, on the floor, rolling and bumping along, something the size of a large soccer football, or a pumpkin—or a human head. It reached the table, and stopped, wobbling on its uneven surface. Pete, leaning half over the table, let out a shriek and dived for the room behind him.

Then a streak like light slithered across the room, grazing Pete's disappearing shoulder and thudding into the door frame. The sound was echoed by the *plop* of Furber's silenced pistol. He turned, bent low, and closely followed by Slip Fadigan, moved back to join Pete, passing the blade that was quivering in the wood. Mike Pollard and Nick, the Greek, dropped down behind the table, found its defense of no use as a second knife came through low and slashed Pollard's shoulder. They, too, crept backward toward the door of the room adjoining, send-

ing shots in the dark opening at no targets that were visible.

A shower of knives followed; one, two, a half dozen, whizzing through the air, thudding into wood or wall while one crashed a window. Furber had pinched out the candle in his room, and from the darkness Pete was begging him for a gun, but Furber had only his own, and whether or not he was impressed by Pete's story, he was keeping it for himself. Pete felt around for something he could get his hands on.

The shots ceased momentarily; there was the sound of rushing movement and a number of dark forms slid into the big room, ducking, dodging, two circling the walls, the other coming forward. The three pistols were firing, but in the darkness it was impossible to line the sights and the targets were elusive, never still, one moment erect, the next instant low, close to the floor, knives gleaming in the fitful light of the candles burning on the table.

Dal Furber called out something, but either they did not understand his suggestion to talk or were too intent on their deadly purpose; a knife, cutting through the air and crashing the glass behind him, was the only answer. A head and shoulder appeared suddenly in the doorway, silhouetted against the feeble light behind. Furber shot; there was a grunt and they were quickly withdrawn.

An instant later, another showed on the opposite side, ducked back a split second before Furber shot, showed again. It was then that Pete, maddened and helpless before the fate he felt creeping upon him, cast aside all reason and went berserk. In his groping, his hand had finally fallen upon something that felt reasonably solid and heavy; an old, broken-off bedpost that had been discarded and forgotten.

He got a grip in both hands, shouldered past Furber and suddenly burst through the doorway, slashing at the first figure he saw. The man was half crouched, knife poised, apparently on the point of rushing inside. Pete's weapon missed the head but crashed down with all his strength on the dusky man's shoulder. He went over sideways with the blow, the knife tinkling on the floor, but the post broke with the force of it, leaving only a two-foot butt in Pete's hands. He jabbed that in the man's face, raised it for a finishing blow, but the man ducked, rolled over and over toward the big doorway.

Across the table, another dark-skinned man drew his arm back for the knife throw, taking time for careful aim. Pete was quicker. His missile struck that man in the chest and the knife went past Pete's shoulder. He caught up a chair, hurled that and grasped for another. Dal Furber and Fadigan had come out behind him; Mike Pollard was yelling something. Then a strange cry rang out from somewhere below, echoing weirdly through the empty

halls and the rooms, and as if they had melted into thin air the dark-skinned men had gone.

"What th' hell!" Pete growled.

Furber caught his arm.

"Listen!" he said sharply.

In the complete silence that was now in the old house, shouts could be plainly heard outside. The five men stared at each other. Out toward Twelfth Street a whistle shrilled; then was checked abruptly.

"We gotta scram!" Mike said hoarsely. Furber nodded.

"Coppers," Slip Fadigan echoed. "If they know 'bout the tunnel, they'll be holding a bag there."

"Our only chance," Dal Furber said coldly. "Don't shoot. Use your butts if you have to. I'm



just telling you that I'm not being taken alive." He was pinching out the candles as he talked, and they shuffled down the stairs in silence.

As Nick, in the lead, turned to the basement stairs, there came a heavy hammering at the front door; it was echoed at a side door that had been the servants' entrance. When Furber, in the rear, felt the first tread, the boarding over the big front entrance was crashed through, and as he closed the door softly behind him, he heard the splintering of glass and wood and knew that the door itself was giving.

They made the tunnel and ran its length, Nick with his pistol shoved before him. At the end, Dal Furber held them for a moment.

"We've got to make a play for that trunk Pete'll take us to, then scatter," he told them. "If any of you want to scram now, it's all right by me."

"What th' hell!" Pete said hoarsely. "We got

nothing but a headache so far." The other echoed it.

"All right," Furber said swiftly. "Pete, meet me at Frenchie's. You get the sedan, Mike, and pick us up there. Nick, you get up on Twenty-fifth, near Sixth. We'll get you in half an hour; Slip, you'd better trail Mike and come along with him. If there's any crowd out here, and no coppers, mix in with them before you shove along. I'll go first."

In the garage, they listened briefly, hearing sounds back toward the old house and voices outside. The door stood in darkness. It was opened gingerly and one after the other slid out. And on their way out, they unexpectedly solved the mystery of how the dark-skinned men had gotten into the house. For the seepage of years had worn a hole in the tunnel; previously, the dark-skinned men had blocked this up when they left. But in the haste of their last departure—when the police had broken up their visit—they had failed to block it up again.

VII.

In a radio coupé, Flick Anderson and Chief of Detectives Bill Oberling were speeding from the south-eastern tip of Manhattan to an address in Harlem when a short-wave call checked them. It was for Oberling personally, a request to get in immediate touch with headquarters. He pulled up at the first drugstore, was back in a couple of minutes.

"Calls have been pouring in, he explained, as he slipped in the clutch and they shot ahead, "about a ruckus in an old, deserted house above us here on Twelfth. The precinct squad is taking it in."

"What house?" Flick clipped.

"Stands back of church property, runs through the block. Hasn't been lived in for twenty-five years, I guess. Boarded up. Beat patrolman's supposed to check the doors daily."

"How big is the noise?"

"Could be a gang battle, according to the calls. Probably somebody caught a mouse and it squeaked. Want to take it in, or push along? You said you were in a hurry."

"Let's look," Flick told him. "Sounds right in line, and it could be."

It was in line with their course northward, but Oberling was inclined to think that Anderson didn't mean that. They turned off the avenue into Twelfth, drew up sharply in a crowd. A flashlight lit up a ragged opening in a square house that stood before them, where a door had once been. They shouldered through and went up the steps. Inside, a lieutenant of police was coming down the broad stairway. He recognized Oberling.

"It's up there," he said grimly, with a nod over his shoulder, "all there is to say, and you won't like that, captain."

There were several patrolmen in the big room; the most of them were facing the doorway. Steps

could be heard overhead. Flick Anderson looked down at the gory head which lay on the floor.

"Check!" he said softly.

"Your stuff?" Oberling caught him up quickly.

"Right in line," Flick told him.

Oberling turned.

"Keep your hands off everything, boys," he said sharply. "Call in the print men; tell them that I want everything, unless"—he turned back to Flick—"you want to stay here, and I'll show 'em myself."

"What do you think you'll get?" Flick asked him.

"The guys who did the killing, of course."

Flick shook his head.

"Not this one; they were the victims, of a mistake, I think. But they were the Frisco lads, and we want them, Bill."

"Damn you and your riddles, Flick," Oberling began. A policeman interrupted him.

"There's a funny thing in there, captain." He pointed toward an open door. "We ain't touched it; just looked."

Flick Anderson led the way in, leaned over the opened trunk.

"And double check!" he said, but he didn't say it softly. There was a glint in his eyes as he swung on Oberling. "Have this run down to your office, will you, Bill? And have enough men go with it." He closed the lid. He strode into the larger room. "Any arrests or bodies?" he asked the lieutenant who had just returned.

"Not a hair or a hide even of a rat—except that little souvenir there."

Flick turned to Oberling, who had been giving instructions.

"Come on," he said tersely. "No time to spare now."

The big sedan that Mike was driving swung out a north exit of the park. Pete was sitting beside him, eyes closed, trying desperately to recall impressions of his progress of twenty-four hours earlier. Of other impressions he needed no reminder, but his terror was more remote now and his thoughts were concerned with the recovery of loot and their get-away.

"Left, Mike," he said, and after a short interval: "Right, and keep her slow. 'At's about right. Wait, now, wait—how's this for right, sharp?" He opened his eyes, sat more erect and peered down the block, looking for a small blue sign on the upper side of the street.

"Wrong way," Mike told him and swung the big car back, ahead.

"Then try the next one. I couldn't be far out. This's the set of blocks, I know that."

They cruised through the next, silent block, but no blue sign was to be seen.

"Cut down to the one below," Pete told him, "and come back on the one below that. Hell!" he ex-

claimed in sudden excitement. "Don't you smell smoke?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

They swung into the second street south and parked. Pete, with Dal Furber, took the upper side of the street; the other three followed at a short distance on the other. Pete was possessed of a gun now and his hand was never far from the butt.

They seemed again to be doomed to disappointment; no light could be seen. Then Pete, peering into the windows they were passing, gave a low exclamation.

"There she is," he said low, triumphantly. "Only the light's turned off."

They crossed over. Dal Furber stepped to a door directly opposite. The four men were spread close behind him. A tall man, dark-faced, opened it at Furber's ring. He was fully dressed.

"What do you want?" he asked after an interval of studying them closely.

"I want my trunk," Furber told him bluntly. "And I think you want yours, if there is a small bronze monkey in it."

"Come in," the man said.

He led them a little way down the hall and stopped. A door beyond opened and two or three came into the hall and stood watching them. They were tall, dark of skin. A second door was opened behind them. More men came into the narrow hallway.

"Talk," the first man said to Furber.

"Two weeks or more ago," Furber said slowly, "there were two trunks checked from Seattle to New York. The man mixed the checks. I got one that isn't mine. It has a small bronze monkey in it."

"You give?" There was uncontrolled fierceness in the simple question.

"I will give," Furber said quickly, "for mine, if it hasn't been disturbed."

The man gave quick glances down the hall in either direction.

"Come," he said.

He opened a door, led the way down into a basement. The five followed him; more men followed them. Pete pushed ahead, stepped over close to the furnace and faced around. He counted. Ten big, dark-faced men were down there with them. He saw eyes fixed steadily upon him, and suddenly he had the feeling that he wasn't going out of there, either whole or alive. But Furber was speaking in his cold, quiet tone without a tremor.

"Where is it?"

Pete turned and pointed to the debris. But the man who had brought them here was already dragging a trunk into full sight. The lock was broken, but the trunk was closed. Furber went close, studying it keenly. Then he took a key from his pocket and inserted it in the lock. It turned. He raised the lid, peered down at folded clothing. The dark-

faced man was watching him, but Furber didn't appear to notice.

He took out several suits of clothes, with paper placed between them. His hand went farther, came out with a bound package of bills. The dark-skinned man touched his arm; then motioned for him to put the bills back. Furber straightened and turned to him without complying.

"Where is mine?" the man asked.

"I will tell you," Furber said coldly.

The man shook his head.

"We will keep," he said, "until you bring ours." A low, guttural murmur from the dark-skinned men backed up the statement.

"You will get yours," Furber told him and spoke more loudly. "But this and everything in it belongs to me and these men here."

"You get—" the dark-faced man began.

Then one of the grimy windows, loose fitting in its frame, crashed open. A small, round object came through, fell to the floor. There was a slight explosion and a hiss like escaping steam, and the room clouded quickly with vapor. There was a concerted rush for the door. It was closed and securely fastened.

The big room at headquarters was crowded, with ten dark-skinned men and five white, and all were manacled. On a flat desk stood numerous neat packages of bills; beside them, a crudely made, small bronze monkey.

Flick Anderson turned to Dal Furber, whose face was drawn into hard, sober lines.

"You and your men had that," he said, and pointed to the little idol, "and you threw it away for those"—indicating the pile of bills. "And you weren't so smart."

He took up the bronze figure, turned a foot which came off, then, thrusting in a finger, removed a small wad of paper. A torrent of scintillating gems poured out, it seemed never ending. Flick turned to the detectives who lined the wall back of the prisoners. "All right," he said. "Take 'em out and put them to bed."

When the room was cleared, Bill Oberling, who had been staring hard at Flick Anderson, could stand it no longer.

"Now, what the hell is it all about, Flick?" he asked querulously.

"That"—and Flick pointed at the idol—"is the sacred monkey of an old cult, known in a certain place overseas as Boh-mu. "And that"—he indicated a fearsome head that was resting, not too conspicuously, on a shelf—"was an old custom of those headhunters, presumed to have been discarded centuries ago. And this"—his fingers toyed with the glistening gems—"I expect was sent here to help spread the cult that, unknown to all of us, seems to have been very well established already. You know,

Bill, I believe there are many dark secrets in Harlem, and in the Harlems of our other cities, that have not come to light."

The chief of detectives shrugged. "Maybe! But how the hell did you know that family on the East Side knew about that hide-out up there?"

"I didn't actually know," Flick admitted. "But it was a fair-to-middling chance that they would. Part of my business is to know folks like that—folks who can give me tip-offs on many weird set-ups."

"You were lucky," Oberling said. "Covered with horseshoes, you were, all the way through."

"Guess you're right," Flick conceded. "When the big knock-over broke, most of the boys went south, in the trail of that black sedan. Being contrary, I went north. In a way station of Seattle I stumbled on two trunks having been checked through to New York on the same day. If there had been only one, or if both hadn't been sent by different parties,

I might have taken it more seriously. When we got that break here"—he nodded toward the shelf—"I began to see a little light, had one of those hunches they accuse me of," he added smilingly.

He was thoughtful for a few seconds. "Gangsters can't be very smart," he said. "Smart men work alone. Learning that the dead Schlinger had a pal—Runt Lauter—and that Runt had gone on to New York was pretty hot, too. And when Runt's head turned up—well, I had a hunch the end mightn't be so far away."

Oberling turned his eyes toward the pile of sparkling gems.

"Say, Flick, how d'you suppose those black fellers ever collected a fortune like that? They're worth more than the bank stuff."

"Considerably, I'd say. That story, Bill, goes back a long ways, to the days of the conquistadores and the galleons. I'll tell it to you sometime. But, now, suppose we call it a day."

THE END.

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HANG ME TODAY

by EMILE C. TEPPERMAN

GILLIAN GALE arrived in Summit City on a Sunday morning, via a box car. He bought the Sunday papers, as well as a guide map of the city, and went down to the South Side, where he took a room for fifty cents in a flea-infested flophouse.

He did not go out all day, not even to eat. He read the local papers carefully, and studied the map, noting the location of the county jail, the courthouse, the city hall, the morgue, and of the residences of all the higher officials of Summit City as disclosed by the telephone directory.

At nightfall he went out.

He made one telephone call from the pay station in the corner cigar store. A girl's voice answered.

"Miss Payne?" he asked.
"Miss Laura Payne?"

"Yes." There was a note of tense expectancy in her voice.

Gillian Gale kept his lips close to the mouthpiece. "This is the party you have been expecting."

"Oh . . . yes. I . . . was afraid you weren't coming any more. There's so little time left. He goes . . . to the gallows . . . Tuesday—"

"I know all that," he said harshly. "And be careful what you say over the phone. Have you made sure about your wire—sure it isn't tapped?"

"Quite sure! I did everything you ordered in your letter. I'm at your disposal for anything you want to do, now."

"All right. What I'm going to ask you to do tonight is very dangerous. It may get you in trouble."

"I don't care. I'll do it!"

"You may be killed."

"I still don't care."



"All right. Your car is ready?"

"Yes!"

"Then drive down to the corner of South Street and First Avenue. Park on First Avenue, just around the corner from Manfredo's Bar. You know where Manfredo's Bar is?"

"Yes."

"Park your car facing west. Keep the motor running. You can get there in fifteen minutes, can't you?"

"Yes."

"Remain there for a half-hour. If nothing happens, then go home, and come again tomorrow night at the same time."

"I'll surely be there," she said.

"All right then. Good-by."

He hung up and went out in the street, mingling inconspicuously with the down-at-heels denizens of the South Side.

Superficially, he looked no different from the average run of the South Side bums. His clothes were old and worn, he lacked a shave, and his hair was matted. But there was a subtle something in the way he carried himself—his effortless stride and the lithe way in which he swung from the hips when turning—which might have marked him to a keen ob-

server. Besides that there was a grimness to his eyes and a set to his lips which did not fit a South Side bum.

He walked slowly down South Street until he came to Manfredo's Bar. He went in, and his dark, intense eyes made a quick survey of the place. They rested only an instant upon two men who sat at a table, drinking whiskey. They were neatly dressed, but they were of a type—hard-eyed, dangerous. They were talking in low tones to each other.

Gillian Gale's eyes flickered past them, and he saw that they were scrutinizing him carefully. He stepped up to the bar. Three men were standing there, drinking beer. One of them was saying in a loud voice: "Well, Roger Gale takes the long walk Tuesday. He should have known better than to buck Alonzo Firmin."

The speaker stopped abruptly as his neighbor nudged him, jerking his head in Gale's direction. He dropped his voice and finished whatever he was saying in a whisper.

The bartender came over and wiped the counter in front of Gale. "What'll it be?" he asked gruffly. "Rye," said Gale, "with a beer chaser."

The bartender poured whiskey from a bottle labeled: "Manfredo's Private Stock."

But before pushing it over to Gale he said: "That's a quarter."

Gale fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a coin. He dropped it on the counter, and only then did the bartender give him the drink. Gale put it to his lips, tasted it. Then he said, "Hey, Mulligan!"

The bartender turned from the cash register, where he had been about to ring up the sale. He scowled. "My name ain't Mulligan. What you want?"

"Whiskey," said Gale. "I asked you for whiskey. Not for slops."

The three men at the bar stopped talking suddenly. The bartender grew red in the face.

"That's good enough for a bum like you!"

"It's not good enough," said Gale. "Try it yourself."

He lifted up the whiskey glass and sent the contents flipping into the bartender's face. The man sputtered and wiped the liquid off with the back of his sleeve.

"You lousy bum!" he snarled, reaching under the bar. His hand came out with a heavy bungstarter. "I'll show you what."

That was all he had a chance to say, because Gillian Gale had the bottle of "Manfredo's Private Stock" gripped in his hand by the neck. He reached over the counter and hit the bartender on the head with the bottle. He didn't bring it down with enough force to smash the bottle. But it was enough to knock the bartender out. The man's jaw slipped open, his eyes turned up, and he gently slid down to the floor behind the bar.

The three beer drinkers swung around toward Gale. One of them yelled, "Get this bum, guys—"

Gillian Gale smiled thinly. He swung the whiskey bottle in a backhanded blow that caught the fellow in the face, sending him back into the others.

Gale stood straight by the bar, the bottle in his left hand, grinning at them. The door at the rear came open, and the stout Manfredo, proprietor of the place, rushed into the room. His little eyes, peering from barricades of flesh, took in the situa-

tion at a glance.

"Police!" he yelled, and pulled a whistle from his pocket.

But one of the two hard-eyed men at the table said softly: "Never mind, Manfredo. We'll handle this punk for y'u!"

The man whom Gale had hit in the face was dabbing blood from his nose. "Take him, Waxey!" he growled to the man at the table. "Take the lousy bum apart!"

Waxey was smiling. "It's too bad, bum," he said to Gale. "Y'u just started somethin' in the wrong place." He gave a glance at his partner at the table. "O. K., Kip."

They both got up at the same time, moving smoothly and efficiently. Their hands slid up to their shoulders. And then they both froze in that position.

Their eyes grew wide and incredulous. Because somehow, almost magically, a gun appeared in Gillian Gale's hand. It was a heavy automatic, flat and black. The room became so silent that the snick of the safety catch sounded loud and clear.

"This," Gillian Gale said softly, "is a holdup."

"A holdup!" Manfredo's breath came in a wheeze. The police whistle rose to his lips.

Gale's gun veered toward him. "Go on, Manfredo," he urged. "Go on and blow it."

There was a strange glitter in his eyes, and Manfredo saw it. He threw the whistle away convulsively. "No, no—"

"That's good," said Gale. His eyes swept from the three men huddled at the bar, over to Kip and Waxey at the table. Their hands seemed to be permanently frozen in position close to their neckties.

"Relax, boys," he said to them. "Or would you like to pull those gats?"

Waxey was looking at him queerly. "No, pal. This is all your show."

Slowly he let his hand drop to his side. Kip did the same.

Gillian Gale put one leg up on the bar, and vaulted it. For an instant, his back was to Kip and Waxey.

He landed facing them all. Nobody had moved. He stepped over the lax bartender, and punched the "No Sale" key on the cash register. The drawer snapped open. Gale reached in and took the twenties first, then the tens, then the fives and the ones. He left the change. Before putting the money in his pocket, he counted it.

"Forty-six dollars!" he said disgustedly. "You'll have to do better than this, Manfredo."

He came around the bar and up behind the fat proprietor. He pushed the muzzle of the automatic in Manfredo's spine and thrust a hand in the proprietor's right-hand trousers pocket. Only coins jingled there. He tried the left-hand pocket and

found nothing but keys. All the time he kept looking at Kip and Waxey, waiting for them to make a move. But they stood very quiet. Waxey was smiling a little.

Gale reached around to Manfredo's breast pocket and found a wallet.

He flipped the wallet open and counted the money. There were a lot of hundreds, some fifties, and a thick batch of tens. The wallet bulged. It was fat, just like its owner.

"Eighteen hundred," said Gale. "That's nice!" He pocketed the wallet.

"Look, mister," said Manfredo. "Leave me the wallet. I got some private papers in there."

"I'll mail them back to you, sometime," Gale told him.

He stepped away from Manfredo and faced the others. "You guys next," he said to the three beer drinkers at the bar.

The one he had hit in the face was the first. His pockets yielded ninety dollars. The other two had fifteen and three, respectively. They were cowed, seeing that Kip and Waxey were taking it on the chin.

Gillian Gale shoved the loot in his pocket. Then he turned to Kip and Waxey.

"All right, boys. It's your turn."

Waxey's face lost its smile. "Don't be a hog, pal," he said. "Y'u got enough, there. Don't you realize when you're well off?"

Gale didn't say anything. He walked over to the table, with the gun low at his side.

"Turn around, both of you."

Waxey gave him a malignant look. "In case you're a stranger in town, you should know that I'm Waxey Klebber. This is my friend, Kip Manson. Ever heard of us?"

Gale's face was stiff and noncommittal. "Yes," he said. "I've heard of you."

"Then y'u know we ain't the kind to take this layin' down. We got a reputation—"

"Do you turn around?" Gale asked tonelessly. "Or do I plug you?"

Waxey looked into his eyes for a second, then shrugged. Slowly he turned around.

"Come on, Kip. Let's give him his way. We'll get our lick later."

Kip threw a murderous glance at Gale and turned. Gale prodded them, and they raised their hands.

He got eight hundred dollars from Waxey, and six hundred from Kip.

While he went through their pockets he stood in such a way that he could see the other four men, as well as the front entrance. He found the guns on Kip and Waxey, both in shoulder holsters. He took them, too.

"Thanks for the contributions, boys," he said. "I'll be back sometime. And remember to serve better whiskey, Manfredo."

He backed out to the door.

Waxey and Kip followed him with deadly looks. "Better not come back for fifty years, bo," said Waxey. "What you just done ain't healthy."

Gale said nothing. He stepped out into the night and pocketed the gun. He did not run away. Instead, he stood still, in the shadows just outside the barroom. In a moment he heard the feet of the men inside, making a concerted rush for the door. The door came open. Gale took out his automatic and fired once, into the air. The rush stopped. They all tumbled back inside.

Gale turned and walked swiftly away. He rounded the corner into First Avenue and saw a small black sedan. Behind him, a police whistle was shrilling. Manfredo was doing his stuff. Somewhere, a cop's heavy feet were pounding the pavement in staccato time as he ran to investigate the revolver shot.

Gale did not hurry. He reached the sedan, and the door was opened from within.

A slim girl was at the wheel. She had short, bobbed auburn hair. Her face was pert, small-featured, vibrant with life—and fear. Her eyes were wide and round. Her hand at her breast, she stared, fascinated, at Gale's unshaven face and matted hair.

He got in beside her and shut the door. A police squad car came tearing up First Avenue, and swung into South Street on screeching tires. But Gale paid it no attention. He did not bother to look at the girl. He began to pull the loot of his holdup out of his pockets.

The girl watched him tensely. "You . . . you can't be Gillian Gale!" she whispered.

He laughed. "I can, and I am." He was riffling through Manfredo's wallet, and he whistled when he pulled some folded papers out of a side pocket. One of the papers was a note for twenty thousand dollars, payable to Vincent Manfredo, on demand. It was signed: "Carter Orth."

He showed the girl the note. "Isn't Carter Orth a city commissioner?"

She nodded. "He was elected last fall. There are three commissioners. Orth has charge of the police department. John Bolton, the veteran chief of police, has very little to say since Orth was elected."

Gillian Gale nodded. "Well, this shows where part of Orth's campaign funds came from."

He folded the other papers and thrust them back in the wallet. Then he dumped all the money on the seat between them, as well as the two guns he had taken from Waxey and Kip. He put his own automatic down beside them.

"Take this stuff and hide it where you're absolutely sure it can't be found," he said. "Don't handle the guns by the butts. I want the fingerprints intact. Take the money and hire the best lawyer in the State. There's enough there to get the best. All I want is a stay of execution."

She was biting her lip as she put everything

away in the dashboard compartment and locked it. "You robbed Manfredo's Bar to get this?"

"What of it?"

"They might have killed you."

Gillian Gale's dark eyes were bright and hard. Police sirens were screaming in the nearby streets, and men were shouting and running. He seemed to hear none of all this, to be bothered by it not at all—though it was all part of the search for him.

"Roger Gale is my brother," he said slowly. "Tuesday morning he goes to the gallows for murder. I have one full day and two nights in which to spring the jaws of the trap he's in." Gillian Gale's voice became deeper, and it seemed to be imbued with an undertone of savagery that frightened her. "Laura Payne, there's no risk I wouldn't take—nothing I'd hesitate to do. If necessary, I'll take this city apart. If necessary, I'll sacrifice anyone's life—yours included!"

Laura Payne was trembling. But she met his eyes. "I'm not afraid, Gillian Gale. I . . . I love Roger. You can't frighten me. If it's my life you need to save him, take it!"

There was a spark of admiration in his glance. "Roger is very lucky," he said softly. His hand went out for a moment, and almost touched hers. But he swiftly withdrew it, and the mask of hardness once more covered him.

"Roger has been convicted of murdering your own father, Edmond Payne," he said harshly. "What makes you so sure he's innocent?"

"Because," she told him, her breath coming fast, "Roger was framed. He and dad were partners—Payne & Gale Construction Co. They bid eight million dollars for the Summit River Bridge job, and they were low. They were awarded the contract. But they had been warned not to bid for it by Alonzo Firmin. Firmin is the president of the city council. He's also in the construction business, and no one has ever dared to try to outbid him on a job. Firmin owns Summit City. He owns the Summit City *Sun*, the only newspaper, and he owns one of the two banks. He bore down on dad and Roger when they underbid him on the bridge job, and almost ruined them financially. Then, when he saw that they wouldn't withdraw the bid, he murdered dad and framed Roger for it."

"Didn't you tell me in your letter that the bullet in your father's body came from Roger's gun?"

"Yes! But I'm sure they managed it somehow. Roger had a drink in the City Club; then he went upstairs to one of the members' lounges to meet dad. The drink must have been drugged, because the next thing he remembers, he was in jail, charged with the murder. He hadn't even been carrying his gun, but the police claimed they found it on him. And now, since Roger's been in jail, the business has gone to pot. Roger has no money left. I didn't even have enough to send your fare."

Gale glanced out of the window and saw more squad cars pulling into the street. Any minute now, they would stop to investigate this coupé.

"Are all the cops crooked in this town?" he asked her.

"Not the rank and file. They're average, honest men. But Alonzo Firmin controls the department through Commissioner Orth, and Orth has brought in pretty bad men for the key jobs. They even have a special squad of thugs who aren't even appointed police, but who have the run of the town. They're often deputized when there's something vicious to do, and then they fade away to their hide-outs. This last week, Summit City has been full of them."

"All right," said Gillian Gale. "I've got the picture. All that there is to do is get Roger free."

"And," she added in a low voice, "find the man who murdered dad." Suddenly she smiled. "Roger has often talked about you. He said you were a hard man and that there was no mercy in you for anyone. He said he was the only one you cared for. He's often tried to get you to give up adventuring and fighting and come back to America."

She put a hand on his arm and looked up at him. "Somehow, I knew you'd come when you heard Roger was in trouble."

Gillian Gale nodded. "Roger is older than I am by ten years. He brought me up. And I've come back to pay my debt to him. Just remember, Laura Payne, that you can't trust me. I may throw you to the wolves to save Roger."

"Understood!" She smiled. "But what now? You've just done a thing that makes you a hunted man. The police are all over the neighborhood. There's a cordon around it by this time. How will we get out of the district?"

"We're not getting out," he told her. "*You are.*"

He opened the door, stepped out quickly, and started to walk away.

"Wait!" she called. "You . . . you'll be caught if—"

Momentarily, she glimpsed his face as he turned back to her. It was grim, with a dreadful sort of bleakness.

"I aim to be caught," he told her. "Now get going!"

She started to say something further, but she stopped, almost frightened by what she saw in his eyes. She gulped.

"All right. But please—I hope you know what you're doing. If anything happened to you, there'd be nothing between Roger and the gallows."

He laughed. Then suddenly he turned on his heel and went around the corner back to Manfredo's Bar.

II.

Gale almost bumped into a uniformed cop who was coming around the corner, fast, with Kip Man-

son. Kip was saying, "He went this way, Swenson—"

Kip broke off, and his eyes almost popped. Then his lips twisted into a wide, blissful smile. "And they say there ain't no Santa Claus!" He grabbed Gale by the arm. "This is him, Swenson!"

Swenson had his gun out. He looked incredulous. "Don't tell me— The guy wouldn't be such a sap as to come back."

"But I tell y'u it's him. Bring him back there. All the boys will identify him."

Swenson looked at Gale. "Come on, bo. You're under arrest."

"What for?" asked Gale.

"Quit stallin'!" Kip snarled. "I figured y'u for a wise guy. Now I see y'u're a sucker. Boy, wait'll we get workin' on y'u! This is for practice!"

He let fly with a short uppercut to Gale's chin. Gale's head moved back a fraction of an inch, and Kip's fist missed by a hair. Gale grinned and drove a hard one to Kip's stomach. The gunman doubled up in agony.

"Quit it!" growled Swenson.

Gale shrugged. "Well, should I let him smack me?"

Kip had straightened out. His face was twisted in a vicious mask. "Boy, am I gonna cut y'u to ribbons—"

"Nix!" said Swenson. "You lay off him. You can't smack him around while he's my prisoner." He pushed Kip out of the way and took Gale by the arm.

"Come on!"

There was a crowd in front of Manfredo's Bar. Two radio cars and a squad car were at the curb. A police captain was getting out of the squad car.

"I got a prisoner here, Captain Slocum," Swenson said doubtfully. "Kip Manson, here, says he's the guy that held them up. But it don't hardly seem possible."

"Nobody asked you for an opinion!" Captain Slocum barked. He swung to Kip, and jerked a thumb at Gale. "This the man?"

"Yeah," said Kip. "I'm sure!"

Waxey Klebber and the fat Manfredo came over from the doorway of the saloon.

"That's him!" yelled Manfredo. "That's the guy that got my wallet!"

Waxey Klebber's eyes were glittering. "Some guys are awful dumb!" he grinned. "First he goes an' sticks up a tough joint like Manfredo's. Then he marches right back an' asks for a pinch!"

Captain Slocum grunted. "Well, I guess that clinches it. This is the guy." He pushed Swenson out of the way, and grabbed Gale's coat in one big paw. He was a big man, with a close-shaven, steel-gray jaw and a thin line of a mouth. He held on to Gale's coat with his left hand, and bunched his right into a fist.

"So you're a stick-up artist, huh?" He swung

the fist straight at Gale's face.

Gale kicked him in the shin and let the whole weight of his body sag against the grip on his coat.

Slocum grunted with the pain of the kick in the shin. His fist went harmlessly over Gale's head, and he went forward with the impetus of the blow, almost losing his balance.

Kip Manson stepped swiftly in from behind and smashed Gale behind the ear. Then he and Waxey grabbed Gale by the arms and held him while Slocum recovered his balance.

Slocum's face was red with rage. "Hold the dirty so-and-so!" he grated.

Kip and Waxey held on tight to Gale's arms. Slocum swung again. This time, Gale couldn't dodge, and the captain couldn't miss. Slocum's fist smashed into Gale's face. Gale was able to twist his head sideways just a little, so that the blow struck him on the side instead of square. A gash appeared on his right cheek, and a thin trickle of blood seeped from it.

Gale's eyes burned. "I'll remember that, Slocum."

"You'll remember a lot more before we're through with you!" Slocum growled. He motioned to two plain-clothes men at the curb. "In the car with him."

The two detectives replaced Kip and Waxey at Gale's side, and started to lead him toward the car. They were not as rough as Slocum. In fact, one of them looked almost with pity at Gale.

As they were about to step into the squad car, Manfredo said, "Hey—wait!"

He took Captain Slocum by the arm and led him aside, whispered urgently into his ear. Slocum's eyebrows went up.

He called Kip and Waxey over, and spoke to them in a low voice. Waxey answered him in a whisper, but he spoke very earnestly.

"All right," said Slocum. "We can't book him yet." He raised his voice to the two detectives. "Take the prisoner inside. I want to question him."

Uniformed cops were dispersing the crowd as Gale was led inside. The three beer drinkers were at the bar, and the one whom Gale had hit in the face with the bottle uttered a yell and came at him.

Slocum only laughed and watched. But the two detectives who had Gale by the arms maneuvered so that the man couldn't get at their prisoner.

"Thanks," Gale murmured.

Neither of the plain-clothes men acknowledged his expression of gratitude. They both looked guiltily over at Slocum, who frowned at them, but said nothing. They followed Manfredo into the back room. Kip and Waxey came in, too.

Slocum took his revolver out and held it with his finger around the trigger. He looked at the plain-clothes men. "Wait outside!" he ordered.

The detectives saluted and went out, closing the door after them.

Slocum nodded. "O. K. Fan him!"

He lifted up the gun and covered Gale, while Kip and Waxey went through his pockets. They searched him thoroughly, but found only nine dollars in dirty singles and forty cents in change. There was nothing else on him.

The two gunmen looked blankly at Manfredo, who began to wipe sweat from his forehead. "My wallet!" he muttered. "I got to get my wallet back!"

"An' my gun!" said Waxey. "I need that gun, bad!"

Slocum hefted his revolver. "You sure this is the guy that held you up?"

"Positive!" exploded Manfredo. "And he was only free about five minutes. He couldn't have got rid of it all."

Slocum nodded. "I get it. Leave it to me." He came up close to Gale, and lifted the gun. "Where did you ditch the stuff?" he asked.

"What stuff?" Gale countered.

Slocum brought the gun down in a swift slash. The muzzle raked Gale's cheek in a painful furrow.

"I asked you where you ditched the stuff!" Slocum repeated.

Gale stood straight, meeting Slocum's eyes. "Go to hell," he said.

"A pleasure!" said Slocum, and he struck again with the gun muzzle.

It opened a wide gash in the side of Gale's face. Blood warmed his cheek and neck. He swung with his right, but Kip and Waxey jumped him, pinning his arms.

"You're gonna talk," Slocum told him. "You're gonna talk, boy, or you'll never leave this room alive!"

Gale's dark eyes burned at him with a fearful intensity.

"Go ahead," he said in a tight voice. "I can take everything you can dish out."

"By heavens," Slocum said thoughtfully, "I believe you can. You're no bum. I bet you're big time from the big town. You're no cheap crook. I bet you're wanted some place for plenty. What's your name?"

"Gill—John Gill."

"Gill, eh? Where from—New York?"

Gillian Gale shrugged. "From here and there."

Slocum grunted. "A big timer, all right. And he has a tight mouth."

He looked keenly at Gale. "What's your game? What's the idea of coming into Summit City and holding up the toughest joint in town? How come you pick Kip and Waxey and Manfredo?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Gale. "Do you want me to plead guilty to robbery? You didn't even find a gun on me."

"Sure not! You had an accomplice. You met him right near here and ditched the stuff with him. He's probably out of town by this time. But you've

been identified by six men. Their testimony will send you up for life. Be smart! You can get a break for yourself by turning back Manfredo's wallet and Waxey's gun. You can keep all the dough. We'll let you get out of town."

Gillian Gale raised his eyebrows. "Manfredo wants the wallet pretty bad. And Waxey wants his gun. I wonder why. Maybe Waxey killed someone with that gun and was sap enough to keep it with him. I've known killers to do that—especially in a town where they know they won't be picked up by the cops."

He felt Waxey stiffen alongside him. "Listen, cap," the dapper gunman begged of Slocum. "Go to work on this baby for real. He's a menace."

"All right," said Slocum. "We'll take him downtown, but we won't book him. When I get him alone in the fish bowl, I'll take him apart. He'll spill his guts."

Manfredo tugged doubtfully at his ear. "You sure that's the right thing to do? You can't afford to slip up. We got to get the wallet back."

"An' my gun!" Waxey snarled. "Don't forget my gun!"

"We'll get it all back!" Slocum said grimly. "He'll tell us just where to find it. We've broke tougher guys than him in the fish bowl!"

III.

The room was aswirl with cigarette smoke.

Gillian Gale was stripped to the waist. He was seated in a chair between the door and the window. His right wrist was manacled to the radiator, his left to the doorknob, and the distance between door and radiator was such that his arms were stretched almost taut.

There was no hot spotlight beating down on him, as one sees in the movies. There were no relays of detectives pounding questions at him. There were just Captain Slocum and Waxey and Kip. They all had their coats off, and they were sweating with the heat.

They had a fourteen-inch length of rubber hose, and they were taking turns at pounding Gale with it. They didn't touch his face. They kept pounding at the same spot under his heart, all the time. They asked no questions; they just kept hitting.

It was Waxey's turn, and Kip and Slocum were sitting and watching.

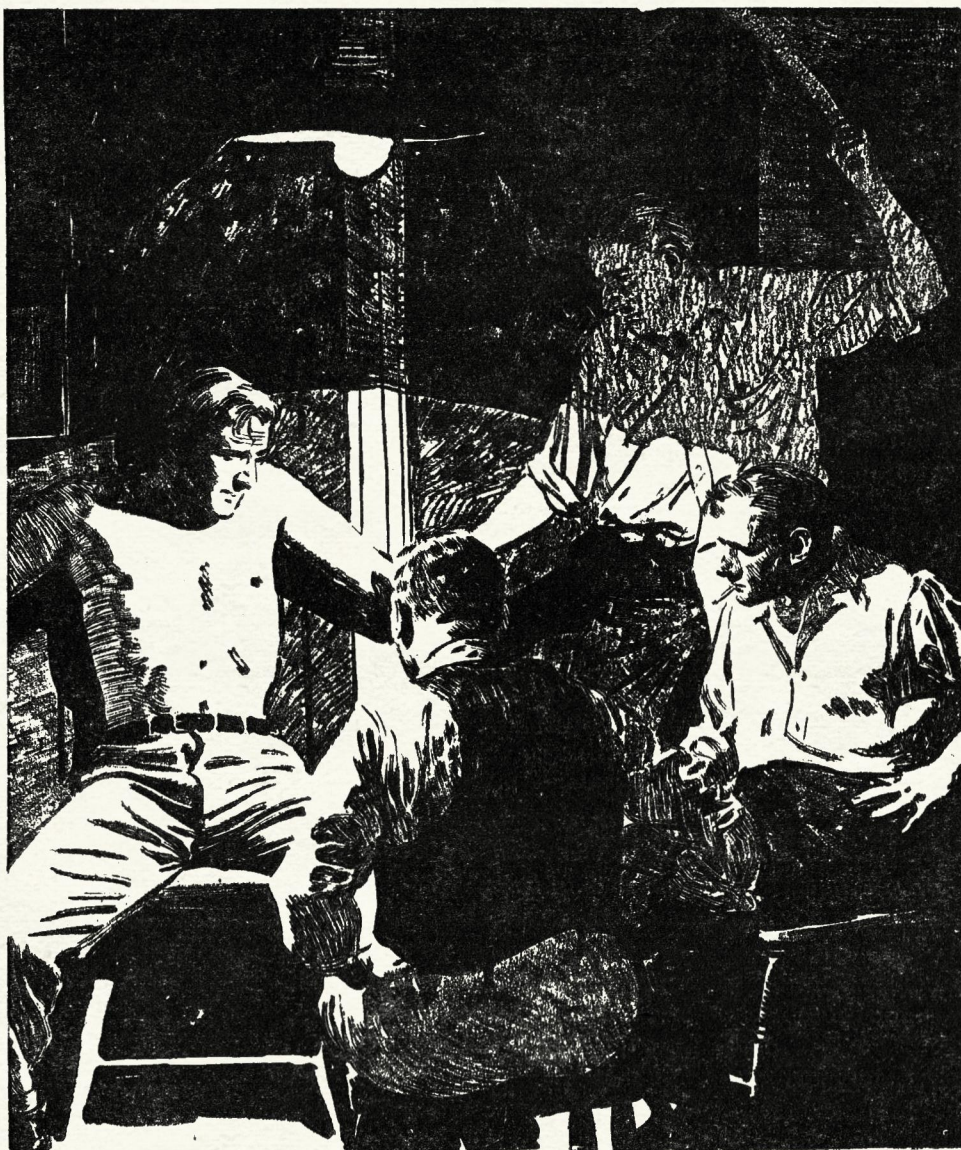
Thump! Thump! Thump!

"Damn you," said Waxey, "when are you gonna give in?"

Gillian Gale's face was white and set. Only his eyes burned.

"When"—*thump*—"are you gonna"—*thump*—"give in?"

Gillian Gale showed his teeth in a death's-head grin. There was a great red welt on his body, just



"Damn you!" said Waxey. "When"—thump—"are you gonna"—thump—"give in?"

under the heart. His breath was coming spasmodically.

He lifted himself off the chair by the handcuffs on his wrists and kicked feebly at Waxey's face. The kick was slow, and Waxey ducked it easily.

"Gawd!" he said. "The guy ain't human. Look—he's out on his feet, an' he's still fightin'!"

He threw the rubber hose away. "He ain't human, I tell y'u!"

Captain Slocum got up and slapped one fist into another. "I never saw anyone who could take it like that. All night—and he's still holding on!"

There was a faint trickle of dawn coming in through the crack between the shade and the wall. Slocum came over and took a handful of Gale's matted hair in his fist, and yanked his head up. Then he slapped him hard with his free hand, three times, quick.

Gale's eyes snapped open, and he grinned.

Slocum bent down so that his eyes were on a level with Gale's. "You're gonna talk, Gill. You hear me? You're gonna talk!"

Gale forced his eyes to stay open. He looked at Slocum for a second, and then he spat straight into the police captain's face.

Slocum jumped away and wiped his face with his hand. Then he came in and smashed a right and a left to Gale's unprotected face. They were hard blows, and Gale's head snapped back under them. Then he slumped over sideways and hung by the handcuffs.

"Damn him! Damn him! Damn him!" shouted Waxey. "He's got to give up my gun!"

There was a quick rap at the door. Someone said: "Let me in, Slocum. This is Commissioner Orth."

The police captain went and unlocked the door.

Orth was a tall man, with graying hair at the temples. His eyes were tired-looking, and his clothes were a little rumpled, as if he had slept in them all night.

He glanced nervously at the slumped figure of Gillian Gale, then at Captain Slocum.

"Well?" he demanded. "Did you break him down?"

"Hell, no. He's made of iron. We couldn't do a thing with him. By this time his pal could be out of the State with the guns and the wallet."

Orth bit his lip. "Perhaps we'd better try him another way. Take him out of here, book him, and put him in a cell. Get him a doctor and call me when he's conscious."

"I'm conscious now," said Gillian Gale suddenly. "You can talk to me right now, commissioner."

Orth seemed to freeze all over at the sound of Gale's voice. Slocum became red in the face, and Waxey cursed under his breath.

"Hell!" said Kip. "The guy's a devil. He absolutely ain't human!"

Gale was sitting erect once more, with a twisted smile and a hot gleam in his eyes. "Come on, boys," he said, looking at Slocum and Waxey and Kip. "Why don't you do your stuff? Don't tell me you're worn out!"

Commissioner Orth cleared his throat. "I'm sorry about all this, Gill. It would never have happened if I had known about it." He scowled at Slocum. "Release that man at once!"

Slocum said, "All right, commissioner," with mock humility, and took keys out of his pocket. He opened the handcuff link from the radiator, then went over and took the cuff off the doorknob. For the moment, Gale was left sitting there with links dangling from both his wrists.

He came up to his feet lithely and effortlessly, just as if he had not been taking a beating all night. His left fist flicked out and caught Slocum on the side of the jaw. It was a well-aimed blow, but there wasn't much power behind it. However, it took Slocum by surprise, and he raised an arm to ward it off.

Gale's lips were set in a tight grin. He brought his right arm around in a terrific swing, but he didn't try to hit with his fist. Instead, he swept his arm past Slocum's head, and the dangling link of the handcuff swiped across the captain's nose and cut it to the bone. Before Slocum could recover, Gale brought his arm up again, in a back-handed sweep, and once more the hanging link cut into Slocum's face, slicing the left cheek open.

But that was all the spark left in Gillian Gale. He just keeled over and lay down on the floor, dead to the world.

Slocum was pawing blindly at his wounded face and broken nose, and grunting with pain, and Waxey and Kip were trying to help him.

Commissioner Orth spared not a glance for them. He stood and looked down at Gillian Gale, and his eyes flickered with admiration.

"What a man!" he murmured.

Hours seemed to pass before Gale regained consciousness. He stirred but did not open his eyes. There was a deep, throbbing agony all through the left side of his body. And there was a dull, insistent pain under his heart.

He tried to turn over, and found his left wrist was handcuffed to something.

"Take it easy, Gill," said a voice.

He opened his eyes.

He was on a cot in a cell. His wrist was cuffed to the iron frame of the cot.

Commissioner Carter Orth was sitting on the stool alongside him.

"Take it easy, Gill," Orth repeated. "The doctor says you're all right. He says you have the constitution of an ox."

Gillian Gale veiled his eyes. "Hello, Orth," he said. He looked down at his cuffed wrist. "Why the bracelet? Are you afraid I'll walk off with the jail?"

Orth smiled uncomfortably. "They were afraid you might become violent while I was in here talking to you."

"Oh," said Gale. "So you're talking to me!"

Orth's thin face tightened. "Now don't take that tone, Gill. I'm here to help you. I'm sorry Captain Slocum gave you the works. He should have realized you weren't the kind of man to handle like that."

"O. K.," said Gillian Gale. "Your apology is accepted. When do I leave this stinking joint?"

Orth shook his head. "You have nothing to gain by being tough, Gill. I'm here to make a deal with you."

"Well?"

"I want Manfredo's wallet, with all the papers intact. I want Waxey Klebber's gun."

Gale bared his teeth in a death's-head grin. "What'll you pay?"

"Turn them over to me, Gill, and I'll arrange for you to get out of this with a whole skin."

"To hell with you!" said Gale.

"You don't understand," Orth told him. "You'll hang if you don't play ball with me."

"Hang?" Gale raised his eyebrows. "Since when do they hang you for robbery in this State?"

"It's not robbery, Gill," Commissioner Orth said slowly. "It's murder!"

Gale stiffened. "You're crazy!"

"Not crazy, Gil. The bartender that you conked is dead. And your prints are on the bottle."

"Nuts!" said Gale. "I hit him easy."

Orth smiled. "That's what you say." He held out a copy of the *Summit City Sun*. "Take a look."

The headline stared Gale in the face:

BARTENDER KILLED IN ROBBERY!

He read quickly down the column, and his lips tightened. "So somebody hit that bartender, again, and killed him. You made sure you'd have a good murder charge to hold me on. Who killed him—Slocum or Waxey—or you?"

"For all practical purposes," Orth said softly, "you killed him."

"All right," Gillian Gale rapped. "So you have me framed. You can hang me. But I have Manfredo's wallet, with papers which incriminate you and maybe plenty of others. Also, I have Waxey's gun, which may send him to the gallows. So it's stalemate."

"You still refuse to do business with me?"

"I'll do business—but not with you. Get the boss of this town. I'll talk to him."

"I'm the boss, Gill."

"You lie!"

Orth became red in the face and got up from the stool. "Damn you, you're in no position to talk to me like that. We can railroad you through the courts and have you hung in twenty-four hours."

Gale swung his feet over the side of the cot. "Get out," he said.

"You mean that, Gill? Do you realize you're digging your own grave?"

"Get out!"

Orth looked puzzled and angry. He put out a hand to rattle the bars to call the jailer. Suddenly he turned around. He weakened.

"Listen, Gill. If I get you an interview with the big boss, will you talk nice to him?"

Gillian Gale grinned. "I'll talk as nice to him as he talks to me."

"Well," Orth said doubtfully, "I'll see what I can do."

He shook the bars, and the jailer came and let him out. A guard came and stood with a hand on a revolver while the jailer took off the handcuff from Gale's wrist. Then they closed the door and left him.

IV.

Barely a half-hour elapsed before he heard footsteps once more along the cell tier. He got to his feet and stood waiting.

This time it was Captain Slocum who accompanied the jailer and the guard.

Gale's eyes glinted when he saw Slocum's face. The police captain's nose was bandaged across the bridge, and there was a long strip of court plaster diagonally across his left cheek from cheekbone to jawbone. He stood looking in at Gale in murderous silence while the cell door was opened.

"Come on, you!" he said. "There's a visitor to see you."

Gale came out of the cell, and the jailer slipped a pair of handcuffs on him. Slocum got on his right side, the guard on his left. The jailer led the way down the cell tier.

Gillian Gale saw that this tier consisted only of nine cells. There was a heavy steel door at the far end and a smaller one opposite. He raised his eyebrows.

"Pretty exclusive place you've got here," he said to Slocum. "I thought your jail was bigger."

"It's bigger, all right," Slocum said, fingering the bandage on his nose. "This tier is just for high-class guys like you. This is Murderer's Row. That little door at the other end is the one you go through on the way to the gallows. And believe me, guy, I'll be there watching when you drop through the trapdoor!"

"I see," said Gale. He glanced quickly at Slocum. "Was it you that conked the bartender the second time?"

Slocum only grunted. "The night before you hang," he whispered, "I'm coming in your cell for a couple of hours—and I'll bring Fanny along. Did you ever meet Fanny? Take a look at her." He brought his left hand partly out of his pocket, exposing part of a blackjack. "You won't feel very good when you walk up on the platform the next morning—after Fanny and I get through with you."

Gale said nothing. They were almost at the end of the tier, passing the last cell in the row.

Suddenly, Gillian Gale stopped short. His eyes, dark and burning, were fixed on the prisoner in that last cell.

The prisoner was a tall man, almost as tall as Gale. He was standing at the barred door, watching them pass. And a quick flicker of recognition stirred in his eyes. Then he swiftly veiled them.

Gillian Gale nodded almost imperceptibly and kept on walking. The two prisoners did not exchange a word. But Captain Slocum laughed loudly.

"That's Roger Gale," he told Gill. "Another guy that's slated to swing. Maybe we can hustle your case through, so you can hang with him tomorrow."

Gillian Gale raised his voice so that what he said carried back to his brother in the condemned cell. "A lot of things are going to happen between today and tomorrow, Slocum. *Maybe neither of us will swing!*"

They passed through the big door and out of Murderer's Row. Now they were in the prison proper. The jailer clanged the door shut after them and remained behind. Slocum and the guard pushed Gale along. This was the main floor of the prison. Above them there was a balcony running completely around the inside of the building, with cell tiers on all four sides.

They passed a door marked "Visitor's Room." But Slocum kept going.

"I thought you said I had a visitor," Gale said.

"This is a special visitor," Slocum snapped queerly.

"Firmin?" asked Gale.

Slocum scowled.

They turned out of the bleak main hall into a corridor and stopped before another door labeled "Office of the Warden."

Down at the end of the hall there was a guard with an automatic rifle, stationed near a side exit. Slocum pushed open the door of the warden's office and barked: "In there!"

He gave Gale a shove, sent him into the room and slammed the door shut without going in.

Gale recovered his balance and stood straight, looking unwinkingly at the huge, powerfully built man standing in front of the desk. This man was almost two inches taller than Gillian Gale, and his shoulders were wider. His jaw was hard and unyielding, and his eyes were cold, calculating, merciless. Every line of his face and figure bespoke the ruthlessness of one who has used power without restraint.

Gale met the man's appraising gaze. "You," he said, "are not the warden."

The other did not reply at once. He was studying Gillian Gale, evaluating him. He eyed Gale's unshaven face and matted hair, his rumpled and torn clothes. At last he said: "No! I'm not the warden. The warden was kind enough to lend me his office for our talk."

Gale nodded. "You're the boss of Summit City—Alonzo Firmin."

"That's right. And you are no cheap holdup artist. You look like a bum, but you aren't. You had a reason for sticking up Manfredo's place. It wasn't just to get money. Better give me the inside dope

You take a cut from all the gambling layouts, and from all the rackets. You grab all the fat contracts. Well, it got too hot for me in my own town; so I figured I'd come here and take over."

"You're crazy," Firmin said coldly. "Trying to muscle in here is like standing on a load of TNT and dropping lighted matches. You're licked already. We have you cold for murder."

Gale smiled tightly. "So why come and talk to me?" He came a step closer to Firmin. "Shall I tell you why? Because I have as much on you as you have on me. I've got Manfredo's wallet and Waxey's gun. Waxey killed someone with that gat. If I turn it up, Waxey goes to the gallows. And the contents of Manfredo's wallet will probably send Commissioner Orth to jail."

Alonzo Firmin smiled. "You may be right about that, Gale." He stopped and coolly lit a cigarette, then sent a perfect smoke ring up toward the ceiling. "But Waxey Klebber and Commissioner Orth are small fry. I can spare them. If your accomplice makes that stuff public, I'll throw Waxey and Orth to the wolves. You'll hang, and I'll still be running the town!"

Gale studied him a minute. "I still ask—so why come and talk to me?"

"I'll tell you why," Firmin went on, puffing thoughtfully at his cigarette and studying Gale through the smoke. "From what Orth and Slocum have told me about you, I decided I could use you. I need a man like



Gale swung his legs over the side of the cot and faced Orth. "Get out!" he yelled.

—and don't try to pull the wool over my eyes. I'm not Slocum, and I'm not Orth."

"All right," Gale said quietly. "I'll give you the low-down. I came here to take this town apart."

"Why?"

"Because it's a good town to take over. You've been running it high, wide, and handsome, Firmin.

you. Waxey and Kip and those others are small-time gunmen. Dangerous with a rod, yes; but they have no guts and no imagination. They crack too easy. Now you, on the other hand—if I made it worth your while—would be someone I could depend on."

Gale's impassive face showed nothing. He kept

his voice cold and hard. "How do you know you could depend on me?"

"Because, my dear fellow, there's a murder rap hanging over your head."

"You want me to give up Waxey's gun and Manfredo's wallet?"

"Yes!"

"And take a chance on your keeping your word?"

"Yes!"

Gale shook his head slowly. "No!"

Firmin's face darkened. "You're digging your own grave, Gill."

"That's what Orth told me. I hold a good hand, Firmin. And I'm playing it out my own way. Tomorrow, the party who has the wallet and the gun goes to Capital City and turns the stuff over to the opposition newspaper. They'll make plenty splash, and the governor will be forced to appoint a special prosecutor. That'll take it out of your local district attorney's hands. And it'll crack Summit City wide open."

"You're wrong, Gill. It won't crack anything. If that stuff is made public, Orth and Waxey will commit suicide. There won't be any investigation."

"I see," said Gale. "They'll commit suicide—just like that bartender."

Firmin shrugged. "In this town, my orders go—even when I say suicide. And you, Gill, won't live to see any of it. You'll go on trial today if necessary, and you'll hang tomorrow."

"To hell with you!" said Gale.

Firmin ground out his cigarette viciously in the ash tray on the desk. "You're a fool, Gill."

"Thanks for the compliment."

For a long minute the two men stood facing each other with locked gaze. Then Firmin pressed a button on the desk. Almost at once, the door opened, and Slocum entered.

"Take him away," Firmin said coldly, with an air like some all-powerful emperor of ancient Rome condemning a slave. "Arraign him at once. Tell District Attorney Welsh I want him tried for murder today. As soon as the State's case is in, Judge Brownlee is to adjourn court. During recess, the prisoner will try to escape. Unfortunately, he will be shot to death while making the attempt. Do I make myself clear, captain?"

"It will be a pleasure, Mr. Firmin!" said Captain Slocum.

V.

The courtroom was strangely empty.

In the ordinary course of events, the arraignment of a felon and murderer, who had staged such a spectacular robbery as that at Manfredo's Bar, would have attracted hundreds of morbidly curious citizens of Summit City—especially when the victims were such notorious characters as Kip Manson, Waxey Klebber and Vincent Manfredo.

But this morning there were no spectators in

Part 1 of the Summit County Criminal Court when Gillian Gale was brought in through the subway corridor connecting the county jail with the courthouse.

This was quickly explained when the judge, an ascetic-looking man with thin lips and a sharp nose, said, speaking to the stenographer: "For the benefit of the record, note that due to the dangerous character of this defendant, the presiding judge has deemed it wise to clear the court."

The judge nodded to the clerk who arose and intoned: "John Gill, you are charged with murder in the first degree, to wit: that you did feloniously strike upon the head and kill one Gustave Ash, a bartender. How do you plead—guilty or not guilty?"

Gale looked past the clerk, and his eyes locked with those of the judge. "Don't I get a lawyer?" he asked. "According to the Constitution, a man has a right to demand a lawyer."

The judge's narrow face did not show any emotion. He nodded. "You are entitled to the services of an attorney." He smiled crookedly. "I shall appoint a counselor—"

Just then the double doors at the rear were opened, and a little rat of a man was pushed into the room by one of the court attendants standing outside. The attendant whispered to Captain Slocum, who had gone to the door. Slocum glared at the little man, then said gruffly: "Naw! Get out!"

He took the little fellow by the arm and tried to push him back into the corridor. But the newcomer was not so easily handled. He had a brief case under his arm and his hat in his other hand; so he couldn't offer physical resistance to the huge Captain Slocum. But he had a good pair of lungs. His voice rose in a loud and imperative whine.

"I demand justice!" he screeched. "I am Eustace Kimber. I am an attorney admitted to practice in this State, and I know my rights. I represent John Gill, and I demand the right to appear at his arraignment and protect his interests!"

Gillian Gale had turned to watch the proceedings. His eyes narrowed and he studied Eustace Kimber. The man was a shyster if there ever was one.

Kimber's voice rose louder and louder, and the people in the corridor outside could hear it plainly. Slocum tried to shut him up, but couldn't.

At last Judge Brownlee called out: "All right, captain. Let the counselor come in. I want to ask him some questions."

Slocum took the diminutive Eustace Kimber by the arm and fairly dragged him down the aisle to the rail.

Kimber straightened his tie, and put the brief case down on the counsel table. He threw a triumphant look at Gillian Gale. "Don't worry, Mr.

Gill. Your interests will be well taken care of. I know the law!"

Judge Brownlee frowned down at the little lawyer. "I don't seem to know you, Mr. Kimber. Have you been practicing long in this city?"

"No, your honor. I come from Capital City. I was hired to come here and represent this defendant."

"Who hired you?" the judge demanded—almost too eagerly.

Eustace Kimber smirked. "That, your honor, is a professional secret. As you know, legal ethics forbid me to reveal that information."

Judge Brownlee hesitated. He glanced questioningly over to the assistant district attorney, who shrugged.

Kimber saw the shrug and winked broadly at Gale. Then the lawyer turned swiftly to the bench. "If your honor will permit, before entering a plea, I should like a few minutes with my client"—he raised a hand hastily as the judge started to refuse—"not in private. I'll talk to him right here. You may all watch."

Brownlee assented reluctantly. Kimber swiftly opened the brief case and motioned to Gillian Gale to step closer.

Gale's handcuffs had been removed, but he had a stalwart deputy sheriff on either side of him, and Slocum was immediately behind. The deputy on his right moved back from the table just a little, so that Gale could come alongside the little lawyer.

Kimber took out several papers, glanced at them and frowned. "No, this isn't it. Wait—" He opened the mouth of the brief case wider and held it in such a way that Gale could look into it.

Gale stiffened. He could not be mistaken. *There was a burnished gun-metal automatic in that brief case!*

Eustace Kimber let the flap of the brief case drop closed, and gave the whole thing a slight push toward Gale. He held up one of the papers. For a moment he turned so that he was looking full into Gale's eyes. There was a quick urgency in his glance, and his lips moved swiftly.

"It's your only chance!" he whispered. And then he had turned and was talking to the judge. So quickly had Kimber done it, that Gale wasn't sure whether he had whispered at all. But that gun was in the brief case all right.

There were two possibilities. Either Kimber had been sent here by Laura Payne to help him escape, or it was the payoff on the part of Alonzo Firmin to induce him to try to escape—and give Slocum justification for shooting him down. If Kimber was sent by Laura Payne, that gun would be fully loaded; if by Firmin, it would be empty, or loaded with blanks. Gale could only find out by trying.

Kimber was talking rapidly, and waving the paper at the judge. His voice was high-pitched and irri-

tating, and he was managing to attract the attention of Slocum and the deputies as well as the judge to himself.

Gillian Gale said, "Excuse me, counselor."

He pushed the little lawyer out of the way, and thrust his hand into the brief case. His fingers found the reassuring coldness of the automatic's butt. He brought it out, and jumped backward. He swung a backhanded blow with the muzzle of the weapon, and it connected with the jaw of Detective Captain Slocum, who was just behind him.

Slocum dropped as metal thudded against his chin.

Gale took a quick step to one side and brought himself around so that he faced the two deputy sheriffs as well as the judge, the stenographer and the clerk.

The two deputy sheriffs were caught flat-footed. They gaped at him, with their hands nowhere near their holstered guns. The judge leaned forward tensely, his ascetic face twisted into a grimace of dazed incomprehension. The clerk and the stenographer just sat still, as if the whole thing didn't concern them.

"All right," said Gillian Gale. "I'm going out. Whoever wants to stop me—or to yell for help—is welcome to try!"

Eustace Kimber started to wring his hands. He put on a good act.

"Oh, mercy me!" he wailed. "I never thought of the gun! I always carry it for protection, and now this desperado has it. Why did I ever accept his case!"

Gale backed toward the door at the rear of the courtroom, which connected with the subway corridor to the jail. Captain Slocum was lying with his head against the railing. He groaned and started to stumble to his feet, but he was groggy and didn't face in the right direction.

One of the two deputy sheriffs exclaimed: "We can't let this guy walk outta here. We'll be canned. One shot and they'll all come in from the hall—"

"Sure!" Gillian Gale said softly. "Just one shot. But someone dies with it. Who wants to die?"

Nobody in the room moved.

Judge Brownlee said slowly: "Gill, you can't get away with that. The chase will be on the minute you pass through that door. You'll be caught. The mob outside will lynch you."

"I'll worry about that, judge," Gale said. He reached behind him and opened the door. The deputy sheriffs were standing with their hands half lifted, leaning a little forward like two hounds straining at the leash.

"Don't come after me, you two," Gale warned them. "You're just nice boys trying to make an honest living. I'd hate to kill you."

Then he stepped quickly through, and pulled the door shut after him. He stepped to one side, and he was just in time because lead came crashing

through the panel to the accompaniment of thunderous reverberations of gunfire from the courtroom.

Men's voices were raised in wild shouts, and pulsed nearer.

Gillian Gale did not run yet. Instead, he reached over and pushed the door open again.

The two deputy sheriffs were so close that they almost ran into him through the suddenly opened door. They recoiled as if at the sight of a boa constrictor; and Gale fired once into the floor at their feet.

They leaped away from the door, leaving Gale a view of the courtroom, with Judge Brownlee scrambling off the bench, and Eustace Kimber watching everything with detached interest.

Gale got only that one fleeting glimpse; then he turned and ran. A shot zinged past his shoulders, and he thrust his hand behind him and fired without looking back. He reached the door at the far end, and it opened just before he put his hand on the knob. A startled prison guard faced him, with a sawed-off shotgun under his arm. The man had been coming to investigate the shooting and he recoiled before the sudden apparition of Gale's bearded and unkempt appearance—and before the menacing hole of the black gun in his hand.

Gale straight-armed the guard out of his way and leaped through the doorway. He was in the anteroom of the prison. There were two doors: one facing him, one at his right. The one facing him was the door he had come through this morning. The door on the right led out into the alley behind the jail. It was barred from the inside. Behind him, the deputy sheriffs were coming down the corridor, with a mob streaming after them, and all shouting at the top of their lungs. They hadn't fired any more after that first fusillade for fear of hitting the prison guard.

Gale slammed the corridor door in their faces and barred it. Then he threw the bar off the street door, opened it, and stepped out into the alley.

It was a wet, dank, drizzly day, and the rain was coming down steadily. He ran, crouching low, toward the street. Someone fired at him from a window in the courthouse, and the shot ricocheted off the concrete almost at his feet. Then he was out of the alley and in the street.

Courthouse Square was pretty well filled. Pedestrians were hurrying about their business in the rain, and traffic along the side streets was moving fast. A cop in a raincoat was running from the traffic intersection over toward the jail, tugging at his revolver, and hundreds of faces were visible at the windows of the buildings lining the square. They had all been attracted by the shooting. The siren on the roof of the prison began to scream in a long, seemingly unending wail. Gale

wondered if it would ever stop before he was recaptured.

And now the traffic cop was ten feet away from him. He had his gun all the way out and was bringing it up.

Gale could see his face, round and well fed, with a bulbous nose and widely distended eyes. The man was in his middle forties—no doubt a veteran of the Summit City force, on maximum pay. Perhaps he had grandchildren. Certainly he had a wife, a grown son or daughter. And Gale would have to shoot him, or be shot.

Gillian Gale did not raise his own gun. Instead, he went into a low, long dive that carried his shoulder smack up against the cop's shins.

The cop went over backward, his gun exploding into the air, and then it was flying from his hand as he clawed unsuccessfully for balance.

Feet were pounding in the alley now, and another throng was rushing out of the front entrance of the jail. They were all converging toward Gillian Gale.

With lithe agility he was on his feet again. He'd have to run, and be the target for a hundred hungry weapons. It was a desperate chance he had taken, and this was the end of it. This was a poor way to finish it all—lying riddled in the street, for Slocum and Firmin to laugh at. He'd never know, now, whether Eustace Kimber had come from Laura Payne or from Alonzo Firmin.

VI.

Suddenly that question was answered for him.

Above the shouts of the bloodthirsty mob and the shriek of the prison siren, he had not been able to hear the voice. But as he pivoted around to run, he saw a taxicab at the curb—and the wild, excited face of the cab driver, motioning to him frantically to get in. Even as he leaped to the running board, he had a vague idea that the face should be familiar, that he had seen it somewhere before. But he had no more time for that. He had no time to get inside. He clung to the running board, and even as he jumped, the cab got in motion. Gears clashed and the cab literally shot forward. Gale hung on hard, hearing in his ears the terrible, foiled yelling of the cheated mob. They had been after a man's blood, and he was being snatched from under their fangs.

Shots thundered in horrid rivalry to the screaming prison siren. Lead spattered and clanged against the side and back of the cab. But the driver was handling the wheel like one possessed. At the corner he slued the wheel around so violently that Gale was almost thrown off, but the cab kept right side up as it careened out of the square into East Main Street.

Gale didn't know just where the cab driver fitted into the set-up, but he was willing to accept

whatever help the gods offered. He held on with one hand as they raced down East Main Street, and he watched behind. A police car came around the corner after them, and Gale snapped two shots at its tires. There was a loud *bang*, almost drowned by the continuous wail of the prison siren, and the right front tire of the police car went flat. The driver fought the wheel hard and succeeded in bringing the coupé to a stop before it mounted the curb. A cop came charging out of it and raised his gun. But he didn't shoot. It was no use. The cab was already making a left turn at the next corner, into Center Street.

Gale clung to the speeding cab expecting the mad ride to end in disaster any second. It was impossible that they should traverse the heart of the city without coming to grief. Every traffic cop and every police radio car would be watching for them. Every avenue of escape would be blocked off. Yet, this thing seemed to have been well planned. There must be some sense to it.

He hung on, watching the street ahead for cops. Pedestrians scurried to the sidewalks as they skidded past at sixty miles an hour, and other cars pulled over to one side, for Gale's cabby was leaning on the horn, and its raucous blasts, punctuating the steady wail of the prison siren, cleared the way for them.

But before they had made a half dozen blocks along Center Street, their trail was picked up again. Another police car was after them, with uniformed men on the running boards, armed with rifles. The police car gained slowly, and the cops were only waiting for a clear chance to open up.

Gale's cabby seemed to sense the new pursuit, for he turned off at the next corner without warning. They tore the fender off a truck parked around the corner. Gale narrowly escaped being ripped off the running board, but he held on grimly. His eyes glinted with admiration for the driver. The fellow knew his business and was willing to take chances.

Before the pursuing police car rounded into the street after them, the driver turned left again at the next corner, then left once more. They were now heading back toward Center Street, and they could hear the siren of the pursuing police car diminishing in volume in the distance. The police had missed that last turn, and they were momentarily clear of pursuit.

Even at that, Gale couldn't understand how they'd managed to make good their escape.

Twice more they turned, then headed straight west for almost half a mile. Then, with an abrupt squealing of brakes, the cab dragged to a halt in front of an apartment house in a tenement block. People stared at the bearded and unkempt hobo who leaped off the running board, and at the slim, almost boyish cab driver who slipped out from behind the wheel and urgently motioned to the bum

to follow into the basement entrance of the apartment house.

Just as the two of them disappeared down the short flight of stone steps marked "Janitor's Entrance," a police car skidded into the block. They had been directed here by willing pedestrians along the route, and now a dozen fingers were pointing toward the cab and the spot where the two had gone.

The cops jumped from the squad car with riot guns ready, and swarmed down the basement stairs, only to find the door into the cellar locked against them.

They began to pound and hammer at it.

In the meantime, Gillian Gale was following his cab-driver guide along a narrow concrete corridor toward the rear of the house. He asked no questions. The fellow seemed to know just what he was doing. He seemed to be acting in accordance with a prearranged plan. And if he was willing to take the chance of being caught in the act of aiding and abetting a fugitive from justice, Gillian Gale certainly had no complaint to make.

They came out into the back yard of the tenement house. There was a row of these back yards here, and the driver hugged the building line with Gale behind him, slipping along the wall until they came to the rear entrance of the next house. They went into this, and the driver silently led the way up a flight of stairs.

Outside, they could hear the shouts of the police, and the wail of the prison siren, dominating everything. More squad cars were coming into the street. In a matter of minutes the whole block would be surrounded, and all escape would be cut off. Then it would merely be a matter of scouring the buildings in the row to find the fugitive.

But the driver did not seem to be alarmed. He stopped before a door in the front of the first floor and inserted a key. He turned it, pushed the door open and stepped in. Gale followed. The driver swiftly closed and locked the door, then turned to face Gillian Gale.

Gale's eyes narrowed as he looked into the driver's face. "I know you now!" he said. He reached out and took off the uniform cap, and a pile of auburn hair tumbled down.

Laura Payne faced him, breathing fast. Her small breasts were heaving, and her eyes were glowing with excitement and triumph. "How did I do, Gillian Gale?" she asked huskily.

"Not bad," he said. "The more I see of you, the more I realize how lucky Roger is. Did you hire that shyster to bring me the gun?"

"Yes! I paid him the three thousand dollars you gave me. It was worth it. When I read in the paper that you were being held for murder, I decided I'd have to get you out, or you and Roger would both hang."

"All right so far. But what about the cops? They'll be searching these flats pretty soon."

"I'll show you what about that," she told him.

She led him down the hall into a living room. "This is a three-room flat. It's completely furnished. I rented it this morning, and furnished it on the installment plan. You know—ten dollars down. There's the bathroom. Go in there and change. You'll find shaving material and a whole outfit of clothes."

Gale chuckled.

He went into the bathroom and stripped. He shaved first, and then got under a hot shower. The welt on his stomach where Slocum had beat him throbbed under the water, but he felt strength pouring into his veins.

He would have liked to stay in the shower for an hour, but he kept it down to five minutes. He dried himself swiftly and put on the clothes which he found in a neat pile on the hamper. Laura had provided everything, including a belt and a pair of garters. The socks were a little tight, and the shoes squeezed a bit, but on the whole she had guessed his size pretty accurately. The blue serge suit fitted nice and snug around his broad shoulders. The necktie was the only thing he didn't like. It had bright red-and-orange diagonal stripes.

When he was all dressed he took a look at himself in the shaving mirror, and was startled at his transformation from a seedy bum. He put the automatic in the inside breast pocket of the jacket and went out of the bathroom.

Laura Payne was already waiting for him. She no longer wore the cab driver's rig. Her hair was combed, and she had on a green print dress that accentuated her slimness and beauty.

For a second she stared at him and her eyes widened. "Oh, I almost didn't know you!"

She came up close to him and stared up into his face. "You're changed, Gillian Gale," she said. "No one would ever recognize you now. They'll never connect you with the seedy bum who's wanted for murder!"

His lips tightened. He went to the window and pulled aside the shade and looked down into the street. There were several squad cars down there, and the street was full of bluecoats. Policemen were going into every house along the block.

"They'll be here any minute," he said over his shoulder.

"And we'll be ready for them," she told him. She hurried into the bathroom and gathered up the old clothes he had discarded and took them into the next room. In a moment she was back.

"We're Mr. and Mrs. Smith," she explained hurriedly. "We've come here from Chicago, because you're looking for a job—"

She was interrupted by a heavy, authoritative knock at the door.

Her hand flew to her breast. "Here they are!" she whispered. Suddenly she was trembling. "Oh, Gillian, what if they should recognize you?"

"Open the door!" he told her harshly. "If they recognize me, it'll be too bad for someone!"

He dropped into an armchair, while Laura Payne straightened her shoulders and went into the foyer. He heard her say, "Yes, what is it?" in a frigid, tautly controlled voice. And then he heard a man say: "Sorry, miss, but we have to go through your flat. Police! We're looking for the escaped murderer—"

At the sound of that man's voice, Gillian Gale came out of the easy-chair in one swift motion. He took the automatic out of the breast pocket and put it in his side pocket. He stood stiffly watching the living-room doorway, with his hand on the gun.

He couldn't be mistaken. The man who was coming in behind Laura Payne was Captain Slocum.

There were two men with the police captain, but he called back to them: "Take the other flats, Rafferty and Colvin. Rafferty, you take all the B flats up to the top floor. Colvin, take the C flats. I'll take the A's."

The two detectives went out, closing the hall door after them, and Slocum came into the living room after Laura Payne.

In addition to the bandage across the bridge of his nose and the court plaster on his cheek, Slocum now had a great red welt on his forehead where Gale had struck him with the gun.

He had his gun in his hand, and as he came into the room he blinked his eyes against the light, for it had been dark in the windowless foyer. He did not glance at Laura, but his eyes focused on Gale. There was no recognition in them.

"You live here?" he barked.

Gale nodded, without speaking.

"I got to search this apartment. I have no search warrant, but we're asking everyone in these flats to co-operate with the police and waive their rights. If you refuse to let me search, I'll station a man outside your door till we get a judge to sign a warrant."

"Go ahead," said Gill. "Search all you want."

He watched Slocum like a hawk as he spoke. He saw the police captain stiffen at the sound of his voice and look at him queerly.

"Haven't I seen you some place before?"

Gale shrugged. "I've only been in this town a short while."

"How long?"

"A couple of days."

"When did you move in here?"

"Yesterday."

Slocum drew a deep breath. "That's funny. Because the man we're looking for has only been in town a couple of days."

He was holding the gun at his hip, and he half turned to Laura. "Are you two married—"

Slocum stopped speaking with a sudden, terrible abruptness. It had been dark in the foyer, and he

hadn't gotten a good look at her.

"By heavens," he said softly, "I know you. You're Laura Payne. I begin to see—"

"That's right, Slocum!"

Gillian Gale spanned the distance between himself and Slocum in a single leap, and pressed his bulging pocket against the captain's side. "You're beginning to see a lot. For instance, if you let out a single yap, it'll be drowned out by the blast of my gun in your ribs!"

"Ah, so!" said Slocum. "So you're Gill. Shaved and dressed up. I'd never have known you if it wasn't for the girl. And you're tied up with her. That means you're tied up with Roger Gale. You came here to get him out of his jam!"

"Right!" said Gale. Very gently and very carefully he took the gun out of Slocum's hand.

Laura Payne was staring at the two of them in frigid fascination.

Gale said softly, "Now raise your hands in the air, captain."

"You realize," Slocum said, "that I only have to raise my voice to bring the whole police department in here?"

"You're welcome to try, Slocum." Gale pocketed the captain's revolver and took his own out.

Slocum's eyes were fixed upon Gale in black and wordless hatred. But he didn't raise his voice.

Gale smiled tightly. "Up!"

Slowly, the police captain raised his hands.

Gale motioned with the gun. "Frisk him, Laura."

Laura Payne approached him gingerly. She went through his pockets, gaining confidence as she saw that he did not attempt resistance against the threatening muzzle of Gale's gun against his ribs.

She put the contents of his pockets on the table. They consisted of a police identification cardcase with a gold badge pinned into it, almost two hundred dollars in cash, a pair of regulation handcuffs, a blackjack, a key ring with eight keys on it, and a small black leather notebook full of names and telephone numbers.

Just as she got the last of these objects on the table, there was a quick rap at the outer door.

All three of them stiffened.

The voice of Detective Rafferty called out: "Captain Slocum! You still in there?"

Slocum's eyes glinted triumphantly. He opened his mouth to yell, and at the same time he twisted away from the gun in Gillian Gale's hand.

But Gale had read his intention. He was in motion at the same time as Slocum. His left fist, bunched into a hard sledge of bone and muscle, came around in a pile-driving blow that landed just behind the police captain's ear.

Slocum dropped like a poled ox.

Gale bent swiftly and caught him as he fell, so as to avoid the thump of his body against the floor. He eased the unconscious man down, just as Raf-

ferty, out in the hall, banged against the door with his fist.

"Hey, you, in there! Why don't you answer?"

Gillian Gale got to his feet and looked at Laura Payne. "Can you handle them?"

She nodded. "I think so."

Gale rolled the unconscious Slocum out of line with the front door, and Laura hurried out to the foyer.

"Coming," she called.

While she opened the door, Gale hurriedly dragged Slocum into the bedroom. He heard Laura talking to Rafferty.

"Why," she said, "that detective has gone. One of the men outside told him he was wanted at headquarters, and he left."

Gale took out his automatic and stood in the bedroom doorway. If Rafferty didn't believe her—

But she must have sounded convincing. Because Rafferty said in a loud and disgusted voice to his companion: "That's a hell of a note, Colvin. We'll have to finish up the house by ourselves. Thanks, miss. Sorry to have bothered you."

"Not at all," Laura answered.

Gillian Gale breathed a little sigh. His lips twitched in a faint smile as she came back from the door.

"Now we're going to get out of here," he told her.

He turned and looked down at the unconscious Slocum, with hard, smoldering eyes. He hefted the automatic.

"Get me a heavy towel from the bathroom," he ordered harshly.

"A . . . a towel? What for?"

He did not take his eyes from Slocum. "To wrap around my gun."

Laura Payne gasped. "You're . . . going to kill him?"

He nodded bleakly.

"No, no!" she exclaimed. "You can't. It would be murder!"

Gale laughed. It was an unpleasant laugh, deep and bitter.

"Murder? Yes, of course. They're going to murder my brother. Legally. But it'll be murder just the same. And if we leave Slocum alive, we're through. He's seen me now, shaven and cleaned up. He'll know me next time. And he knows what I'm here for."

Slowly he turned and looked at her. "Slocum has to die. This is war! It's Slocum or Roger. You were ready to give up your own life. Why do you get squeamish about his?"

Laura shuddered. Her eyes were fixed in horrid fascination upon him.

"You're a hard man, Gillian Gale," she breathed.

He moved impatiently toward the door. "If you won't get me a towel, I'll have to get it myself—"

"No!"

The single word exploded out of her. She blocked the way, her head up and her eyes flashing. "I won't let you do it, Gillian Gale. I won't let you murder a man in cold blood!" Suddenly she wilted, and stretched out an appealing hand. "Don't you see? Two wrongs don't make a right. You can't fight murder with murder. It's different to shoot a man who's fighting you. But when he's helpless—"

"Helpless?" he repeated harshly. "When Slocum comes to, he'll be savage and merciless. He'll be after me day and night—"

"Are you afraid?" she asked.

He looked down at the gun in his hand. "Afraid? Perhaps. Perhaps I'm afraid that he'll stop me from doing what I have to do. It'll be hard enough as it is, without having Slocum on my trail."

She shook her head. "You'll have to do it that way, Gillian Gale—or not at all. If you try to kill Slocum now, I'll scream. I'll attract the police. I'll end it for you right here."

His lips twisted scornfully. "What about all that high-sounding talk you made yesterday—that you were ready to give up your life—"

"My own life—yes!" she broke in quickly. "I'm still ready for that. But not for . . . murder."

Gale sighed. "All right. You win. But Heaven help you if Slocum gums up the works later!"

He went to the bed and yanked off the sheet, then tore it into strips. He used the strips to tie Slocum's hands behind his back and to gag him thoroughly. He tied his feet, and made a running line from ankles to wrists, with a slipknot that would tighten if he tried to struggle. Then he dragged the detective captain into the closet and covered him with his own and Laura's discarded clothes.

"Let's hope they don't find him for a while."

"And now?" she asked.

"Now," he told her, "we're going out of this building. Keep your chin up. They should let us pass; unless someone else recognizes us."

He went into the living room and swept up all the objects which she had taken from Slocum, and pocketed them.

"Come on," he said. "Here goes nothing!"

VII.

Downstairs, the street looked like the scene of a Fourth-of-July police parade. Uniformed men and plain-clothes detectives swarmed about. Radio cars, squad cars and riot cars were scattered from corner to corner. The special service squad was coming up with tear-gas bombs and submachine guns.

As Gale led Laura Payne down the steps of the stoop he saw a maroon sedan with the gold-shield insignia of the police commissioner, parked a few feet away. Orth was sitting in that car. His driver

was not there, probably having gone to join the search.

A uniformed lieutenant in charge of the special service squad came up alongside Orth's car and saluted. Gale heard what he said.

"We're all set, commissioner. As soon as they locate the place where he's holed up, we'll clear the building and go in with the tear gas."

Gale pressed Laura's arm, and they went steadily down the steps. They heard Orth's rasping voice: "It'll be best to club him into submission, Lieutenant Preston. If you capture him alive, I want him brought directly to my office. Give him no chance to talk to *anyone*. Understand?"

Lieutenant Preston saluted. "Don't worry, sir. I've given orders. That guy won't be in any shape to squawk after we handle him for a couple of minutes!"

Orth nodded and waved the officer away. "If you see Captain Slocum," he called after the lieutenant, "send him to me at once."

Laura Payne threw a quick, frightened glance up at Gale. "Orth knows me," she whispered. "If he sees me it'll be all over. He's no fool—"

"Come on!" Gale growled, and hurried her to the sidewalk. A patrolman was scowling and watching them come down. He put out a big paw to bar their path.

"Everybody who leaves these buildings has got to identify themselves," he growled.

"Certainly," said Gale. "I see my friend, Commissioner Orth, over there. He'll identify us."

Gale kept his grip on Laura's arm and brushed past the cop with an air of authority.

There was a puzzled frown on the cop's face, and he kept his hand on his holstered gun as he watched Gale and Laura go up to Orth's car. Orth turned, and saw them. "Miss Payne!" he said.

The cop heard that and turned back to his duties, satisfied that Gale had told the truth about knowing Carter Orth. If he had seen what happened immediately after, he would not have been as satisfied.

Gale pushed Laura ahead until they were both up close to the window of the car.

Orth said, "Miss Payne! What are you doing here? And who is this man?"

He raised his eyes to scan Gillian Gale, but did not recognize him. A look of suspicion entered his eyes. "By Jove, I bet you two had a hand in Gill's escape—"

His mouth remained open, and he did not finish what he had begun to say, for Gale lifted up the black felt hat which he had been carrying in his hand. He lifted the hat just high enough so that it cleared the window, and so that Orth could see what was underneath.

"Yes, commissioner," Gale said softly, without any effort to disguise his voice. "She helped me to escape."

Orth gasped. "You . . . you're Gill!"

"Quite so, commissioner. And this little object which you see under my hat is an automatic pistol. If you have any doubt about my willingness to shoot you in the mouth, just raise your voice."

"You . . . you wouldn't dare!" Orth blurted.

"Why not? I'm wanted for murder anyway. If they get me they'll hang me. It will be a pleasure to send you on ahead."

Orth looked into the cold hard eyes of Gillian Gale, and believed him. "What . . . what do you want? You can never get away. There are too many police—"

"I'll worry about that. Just move over and take the wheel. Laura, you climb in back. I'll sit right next to the commissioner."

As if he were in a daze, Orth obeyed. Laura got in the rear seat, and sat tense and tight. Gale opened the door and slid in easily. He kept the hat in his lap, with the gun under it.

"Now, commissioner, just drive away from here. If any of these policemen stop you for orders, say that you are in a hurry and that they are to remain right here until they receive other instructions. If you say one word beyond that, I'll shoot you on the spot."

Orth's face was greasy with sweat as he stepped on the starter and let in the clutch. The big maroon car began to roll slowly, then gathered speed as it moved down the block. Uniformed policemen cleared the way for them, and saluted as the car passed. At the corner, Gale said pleasantly, "Turn left, commissioner. You're doing fine so far."

Orth obeyed. "You can't escape from Summit City," he said. "Every road is blocked. They're stopping and searching every car that leaves. Someone will recognize Miss Payne. Or they'll see that gun under your hat—"

"We're not leaving Summit City," Gale told him grimly.

"Then . . . then where—"

"To police headquarters!" said Gale.

"Police headquarters!" Orth was so startled that he almost lost control of the wheel. "You're mad—"

"Perhaps. But what I have to do has to be done fast. Keep going!"

It took them less than ten minutes to reach headquarters. At Gale's direction, Orth swung the car into the alley between the headquarters building and city hall, where there was a head-on parking space. Orth tooled the car into one of the empty spots and shut off the motor.

"Where is Chief of Police Bolton's office?" Gale asked.

"On the ground floor—in the east wing."

"Thanks," said Gale. "Now get in the back."

Orth hesitated. "Look here, Gill. I tried to do business with you once before. Maybe—"

"Sure!" said Gale. "You sent Firmin to see me. And Firmin ordered me hung."

"You don't understand," Orth hurried on desperately. "Firmin doesn't give a damn for me. He's going to let me drown. He doesn't care if that wallet of Manfredo's is turned up or not. As soon as I get in a jam, I'm no longer useful to him. He'll have me knocked off and fix it so it'll look as if I committed suicide."

"I know all that," Gale said calmly.

"Then . . . then you won't give me a break?"

"A break?" Gillian Gale's voice was harsh. "What kind of break did you give me? I heard you order that lieutenant to pound me into unconsciousness when I was caught—so I wouldn't be able to talk."

"I had to do that. It was self-preservation. Give me a break now, and I'll help you—"

"No! Get in the back."

"What . . . what are you going to do to me?"

"I'm going to break you, Orth. I'm going to break every rat in this damned town. I ask for no quarter, and I give none. Now, do you get in the rear, or do I shoot you in the guts right away?"

"Wait!" said a firm, small voice in the rear.

Gale stiffened. He looked up in the rear vision mirror and saw that Laura Payne had taken out the revolver which she had gotten from Slocum, and which she had put in her handbag. She was pointing it at Gale's back.

Gale turned around and saw the resolution in her eyes. He smiled crookedly. "Double-crossing me, Laura?"

"N-no! Not double-crossing you, Gillian Gale. Just keeping you human. I never knew what they meant when they spoke of hard men. You're a hard man, Gillian Gale. Too hard! There's no mercy in your soul for anyone. Why can't you give Commissioner Orth a chance?"

"Because—as I told you once before—this is war. This man can't be trusted. He'll knife us in the back the first chance he gets."

Orth's eyes had grown wide with terror when Laura Payne addressed Gillian Gale by name. He shrank away from the gun in Gale's hand.

"You . . . you're Roger Gale's brother. The adventurer. The one who fought in Spain and in China!"

"Right!" Gale told him.

"You're here to save your brother!"

"Right again. I'm here to save him—if I have to exterminate every rat in Summit City to do it. Now you know too much. I'm sorry, Laura."

Deliberately disregarding her gun, he clubbed his own automatic and brought it down against the side of Orth's head, in a motion so swift that she could not even have attempted to stop it.

The commissioner slumped forward against the wheel.

"Oh, you brute!" Laura Payne exclaimed.

Gale grinned thinly. He glanced around to make sure that they were not observed. Then he got his knees on the seat, and hauled Orth's body over the top, into the rear. He pushed him over until he fell in a heap on the floor at Laura's feet.

"I ought to shoot you now," said Laura Payne. "I ought to shoot you because you are a savage, merciless animal, without a single instinct for good. I ought to shoot you because Roger is a good man and an honest one, and he wouldn't want to gain his freedom by such means as you use."

"Better shoot me now, then," said Gillian Gale. "Because you're going to see much worse before I'm through with Summit City."

He opened the door of the car and got out, then he opened the rear door. He bent in, not even looking at Laura's gun, and worked around till he got Orth's belt off the man. He used the belt to strap his wrists together behind his back. Then he found a handkerchief in the commissioner's pocket, and removed the shoe laces from his shoes. With the laces and the handkerchief he made a very effective gag.

When he was all through he examined the spot where he had struck Orth. There was an abrasion of the skin and a rapidly swelling lump.

Gale grunted. "You have nothing to kick about. I didn't kill him. He'll be all right in a few hours—and just as dangerous."

He suddenly looked up and met Laura Payne's eyes. "If you don't want to go on with this," he said, "now is the time to quit."

She sat on the edge of the seat, with her feet just barely touching the twisted body of Carter Orth. Under the thin silk dress, her breasts were rising and falling swiftly as she breathed in short gasps. She held the gun with the muzzle pointing upward, not at Gale.

"I want to go through with it, Gillian Gale. But I don't want to do it by cold-blooded murder or with useless cruelty. Promise that you'll try to use a bit of decency."

He stopped her with a harsh, bitter laugh. "I'll promise nothing—except to have Roger out of the shadow of the gallows before tomorrow morning. Take it or leave it!"

He jerked away impatiently.

"Wait!" she called out as he started to turn away. He stopped, and she faltered: "I'll stick. But I warn you—I won't have you killing men without mercy. I . . . I'll stop you somehow. Even if I have to kill you."

"Fair enough then. Here's what I want you to do. Leave Orth in here. He'll be safe for a while. Take a cab to your apartment. Pack a small bag, and take Manfredo's wallet and Waxey Klebber's gun. Go to the Summit City Hotel and register under the name of Laura Drake. Wait there for a call from me. Don't open the door for anyone but me."

"And you?" she asked. "What are you going to see Bolton for? Are you going to kill him, too?"

"No! You told me he was one of the few honest officials in the town. I'm going to make a deal with him."

Gale watched her get out and start toward the street. Then he took the keys out of the ignition, and locked all the doors of the police sedan, leaving one window open an inch or so, so that Orth wouldn't smother. That done, he put the automatic in the side pocket of his coat and headed into the east entrance of police headquarters.

VIII.

The ground floor of police headquarters was more or less quiet this afternoon. The call for reserves had taken all available men out on the chase for the escaped murderer.

Gale passed two or three police clerks, who did not spare him a second glance. There was a desk sergeant seated behind the desk near the entrance, and Gale went past him, making for a door at the rear marked:

CHIEF OF POLICE

Private

But the desk sergeant called out: "Hey! Where do you think you're going?"

Gillian Gale stopped short. He turned and came up to the desk and leaned over it.

"Talk up!" barked the sergeant. "What do you want?"

Gale's face was expressionless, but his eyes were hard as they met the other's.

"In the future, sergeant," he said harshly, "when you address me, say 'sir!'"

The desk sergeant's eyes popped with surprise. He started to get up.

"Sit down!" Gale barked.

So explosive was the force of his command, that the man literally was forced back into his chair by it.

Gale took out Slocum's cardcase, and flipped it open, showing the gold badge.

"I," he said, "am the new captain of detectives."

"B-but I never saw you before—sir," stammered the sergeant.

"You'll see more of me," Gale told him firmly. He flipped the cardcase closed, and left the sergeant gaping after him as he made for the office of the chief of police.

His footsteps sounded hollow on the stone floor. With each step he expected the sergeant to call out, to stop him again. But the man was impressed—impressed both by the gold badge and by the look he had seen in Gillian Gale's eyes.

Gale reached the door without hindrance. He rapped once, lightly, and without waiting for an invitation to enter, he opened the door and stepped

inside. Then he pushed the door shut behind him and stood with his back to it, facing the gray-haired man at the desk opposite.

Chief of Police John Bolton was almost fifty. He was square-jawed, frosty-eyed, with a squat and sturdy body, and big, powerful hands. He was the typical plodding police officer who has worked himself up from the ranks by stern doggedness and untiring honesty.

He frowned, looking at Gale, and said: "Well? Who are you?"

Gale did not answer at once. He was busy sizing up his man. At last, after a full thirty seconds, he made his decision. He came forward to the desk. He stood erectly, facing Bolton.

"I," he said, "am your new captain of detectives."

Bolton frowned. "What's this—a joke?"

"No joke. There's my badge."

Gale flipped the identification cardcase down on the glass top of the desk, open, with the shield showing. In the center of the shield was a large embossed figure, 1.

Bolton did not at once look down at the case. He kept his eyes on Gale. His hands were resting loosely on the desk top. Then he lowered his glance to the cardcase. He stiffened.

"Why," he explained. "That's shield number 1—Captain Slocum's shield!"

"Right," said Gale. "I took it away from him. Slocum is in temporary retirement. I'm going to take his place. You're going to appoint me captain of detectives."

"I'll be damned!" Bolton exploded. His right hand slid down to the open desk drawer where a service .38 was lying in plain view.

"Hold it!" said Gillian Gale. He brought the automatic out of his pocket, and pointed it at Bolton.

"To hell with you!" said Bolton and kept going for the service revolver.

Gale's eyes flickered with admiration. But he kept his face impassive. He snicked off the safety catch of the automatic.

"I don't want to shoot you, Bolton. Don't make me do it."

The police chief stopped with his hand in mid-air. He sat like a graven image, looking at Gale.

"What do you want?" he asked harshly.

"To talk. Close the drawer!"

Bolton's shoulders rose in a slight shrug. Slowly his hand came down, but it did not go into the drawer. Instead, he slid the drawer shut.

"Well?" he asked.

"All right," said Gale.

He pushed the safety catch up again. Then he laid the automatic down on the desk alongside of the identification cardcase, where it was within easy reach of Bolton.

"Leave it there," he said. "I'm gambling on you, Bolton—gambling on your being an honest man. If I'm wrong"—he shrugged—"I lose out all around."

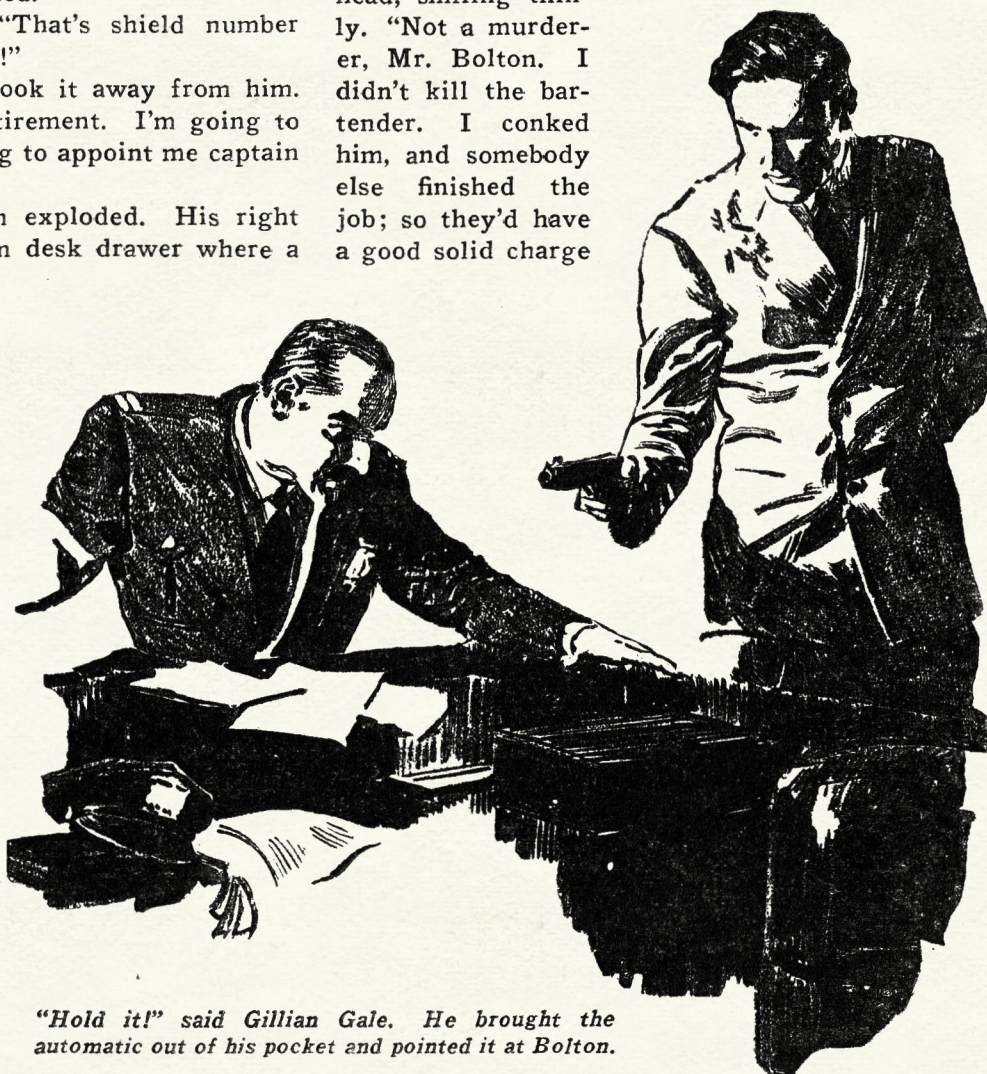
Chief Bolton's forehead creased in a puzzled frown. "I don't understand you. Why did you come in here like that? How did you get Slocum's shield? Who are you?"

"I," said Gale, "am the man the hue-and-cry is out for. I'm the man your whole police force is searching for right at this minute."

Bolton grew taut in his chair. "Gill!"

His glance dropped involuntarily to the automatic, but he did not reach for it. "You're Gill, the murderer. The man who held up Manfredo's, and killed the bartender!"

Gale shook his head, smiling thinly. "Not a murderer, Mr. Bolton. I didn't kill the bartender. I conked him, and somebody else finished the job; so they'd have a good solid charge



"Hold it!" said Gillian Gale. He brought the automatic out of his pocket and pointed it at Bolton.

to hold me on—something to bargain with. I've got a wallet and a gun they want back very badly."

"I see!" Chief Bolton whispered. "I begin to see a lot. That's why they didn't arraign you in night court last night!"

Gale nodded. "They worked on me all night. I didn't trade."

Bolton had forgotten all about the automatic by this time. There was a sudden eager glint in his eyes. "But I still don't understand. You're a criminal. You committed a robbery. Why do you think I will help you, Gill?"

"The name," Gale said slowly, "is Gillian Gale!"

Chief Bolton's hands contracted spasmodically on the desk top. "Gale! You're Roger Gale's brother. You're the brother he's often mentioned—the one who, when last heard of, was commanding a squadron in the Chinese Air Force!"

"The same," said Gale. "And I've come to Summit City to smash the jaws of the trap my brother's in—even if I have to pull the whole damned city down to do it!"

Chief Bolton pushed his chair back. Slowly, he got to his feet. He stretched out his hand and picked up the automatic pistol, Gale not making a single motion to stop him. Then, Bolton reversed the pistol and silently handed it across.

Gale suddenly smiled. He took the gun and slipped it into his pocket.

Bolton extended his hand across the desk, and Gale took it. Their eyes met.

"Do you know what I'm thinking, Gillian Gale?" said John Bolton. "I'm thinking that I'm sorry for Summit City!"

They were interrupted by the sharp ring of the telephone.

Bolton picked up the instrument, and Gale could hear the voice of the police headquarters switchboard operator: "Chief Bolton, it's Captain Slocum on the wire. He's trying to locate Commissioner Orth, but he can't find him; so he wishes to speak to you."

"Put him on," said Bolton. He glanced up at Gale, whose lips were thin and tight.

"Damn that girl!" said Gillian Gale.

In a moment, Captain Slocum came on the wire. Bolton held the receiver a little away from his ear, so that Gale could hear, too.

"Bolton!" Captain Slocum's voice came barking out of the phone. "Gill knocked me out and escaped. He was aided and abetted by that Payne girl. Put out an alarm for her. I'm going over to her apartment with a squad of men. When Commissioner Orth gets in, tell him I'll be back shortly!"

Slocum didn't wait for an acknowledgment, but hung up at once.

Gillian Gale said, "How does a police captain dare to talk to his chief like that?"

Bolton spread his hands helplessly. "I'm only a figurehead here. I've served as chief of police under five administrations—and under five different commissioners. But Alonzo Firmin runs the city to suit himself. He had Orth elected commissioner, and Orth has appointed all the key men under me. I can't even make an appointment of my own. The inspectors and captains are all Orth's men. I want to help you, Gale, but there's little that I can do."

"You can appoint me captain of detectives. Just till morning. Leave the rest to me."

"I can't even do that, Gale. Under a recent ruling of Orth's, no appointment may be made by me to a rank higher than first-grade patrolman, unless countersigned by the commissioner."

Gale leaned over the desk. "Suppose," he asked, "that Commissioner Orth were temporarily out of the picture? Suppose that he were disabled or out of town. Who would be in charge of the police department?"

Bolton's eyes narrowed. "I would. I could run the department to suit myself, until Alonzo Firmin appointed another commissioner."

Gale gave him a wide grin. "Consider yourself in charge, then. Orth is out of the picture."

Bolton's eyes snapped with eagerness. "You're sure?"

"Dead sure! Don't ask me why or how. Take my word for it."

Chief Bolton smiled. "Looks bad for Summit City," he said. He pressed a buzzer on his desk, and a secretary came in.

"Make out an official appointment order," he directed the secretary, "appointing Gillian Gale captain of detectives, to take effect as of noon today!"

While they waited for the typed document, Gale picked up the phone and called the Summit City Hotel.

"Has a Miss Laura Drake registered there?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," the clerk told him. "She's right here at the desk, checking in now."

"Put her on."

In a moment he was talking to Laura Payne. "Your friend, whose life you saved," he told her bitterly, "is out and on the warpath. He's at your apartment now. I hope you covered your trail thoroughly."

"I did," she said. "I'm sure I did."

"What room have you got?"

"Room 1116."

"All right. Go upstairs, and double-lock the door. Open for no one!"

"Will you come soon?"

"Not for a while. I have work to do. Sit tight."

He hung up, just as the secretary returned with the typed order, in quadruplicate.

"Here you are," Bolton said, signing one of the copies after the secretary had left. "Now you're a captain of detectives—but Heaven knows for how long. As soon as Firmin hears of this, he'll break me and have your appointment rescinded. Whatever it is you want to do you'll have to do it fast. And you better not lose out. If you lose, you die. Firmin will have no mercy—for you or for me."

Gale folded the appointment and put it in his pocket.

"Now," he said, "there's something else. My brother, Roger, was convicted of the murder of Edmond Payne. The bullet found in Payne's body checked with Roger's gun. Have you got that bullet?"

Bolton nodded. He went to the huge safe in the side wall of the room, and came back with an envelope. It was marked:

People vs. Gale—Exhibit A.

Underneath the caption was a signed statement which Gale read swiftly:

I, Conrad Marchesson, M. D., coroner of Summit County, do hereby certify that this envelope contains the bullet extracted by me from the body of Edmond Payne, deceased this 25th day of May.

Signed,
Conrad Marchesson.

"Who is this Marchesson?" Gale asked.

Bolton made a wry face. "Firmin got him elected county coroner. He's always been Firmin's man."

The new detective chief nodded.

"I see," said Gale. "And it's this slug which convicted my brother?"

"More than anything else. Ballistics found it was fired from your brother's gun. There's no doubt of that. I smelled a rat somewhere, when the case broke, and I stood by while the slug was being tested, from the minute Marchesson handed it over to us."

"Yet you don't believe Roger killed Edmond Payne?"

"Roger Gale never killed him," Bolton said vigorously. "He and Payne were too close. And if Laura Payne believes your brother innocent, then I certainly do." Roger was framed, all right."

Gale shot his next question:

"What about Waxey Klebber? Could he have done it?"

"Very likely!"

"All right," said Gillian Gale. "I'll be looking him up. In the meantime, I'll depend on you to cover me. See how long you can keep my appointment valid."

"Firmin will be burning up the wire in a few minutes," Bolton said. "But I'll do my best."

"Good enough!" Gale said grimly.

Bolton walked to the door with him. "Good luck, Gillian Gale!" he whispered.

IX.

Out on the main floor, a number of plain-clothes detectives, and several uniformed sergeants were clustered around the bulletin board, reading the newly posted order. They were whispering excitedly among themselves.

When Gale came out, a hush fell over them. They looked at him as if he were some strange specimen imported for the zoo.

A skinny little fellow, with sandy hair and a pug nose detached himself from the group and moved over to intercept Gale. He was carrying one of the new compact flashlight cameras with the flash bulb built into the box.

"Excuse me, Mr. Gale," he said. "I'm Freddie Mercer, police reporter on the Summit City *Sun*. I see you've just been appointed captain of detectives. How about an interview?"

"Sure!" said Gale. "What do you want to know?"

Freddie Mercer had a pad and pencil out and was scribbling, with the camera hanging by a strap over his shoulder. Everybody on the floor was silent as a tomb, listening with straining ears for every word they could catch.

"Your name is Gillian Gale," the sandy-haired reporter said. "Are you any relation of Roger Gale, who is now in the county prison awaiting execution?"

"His brother."

The escaping breath from a dozen throats was clearly audible. Only the sandy-haired Freddie Mercer seemed unperturbed. "Do you expect to remain permanently on the Summit City police force?"

"No!"

"Then you have a specific job to do?"

"Yes!"

"May I tell the readers of the *Sun* the nature of that job?"

"Sure! You may tell them"—Gale spoke deliberately in a loud and clear voice which reached to everyone on the floor—"you may tell them that I'm going to take their fair city and turn it inside out and shake it until one murderer falls out—the murderer who killed Edmond Payne. I'm going to put the finger on that murderer in order to clear my brother. And I'm going to do it if I have to exterminate every rat in this city."

"Oh, boy!" Freddie Mercer exclaimed ecstatically. "Will this wow them, or won't it?"

He tore a page from the pad and stuffed it in his pocket, then started scribbling on the next.

"One more question, Mr. Gale. Where are you going to start on this campaign of extermination?"

"Watch my smoke," said Gale, "and you'll find out!"

He started to push past the reporter, but Freddie Mercer got hold of his sleeve. "How about letting me tag along, Mr. Gale? How about giving me a scoop—"

"Who owns the Summit City Sun?" Gale asked.

There was a funny glint in Freddie Mercer's blue eyes. "Alonzo Firmin owns it."

Gale laughed harshly. "There's your answer. Do you think I want you on my tail—reporting every move I make to your boss?"

Gale started walking swiftly toward the exit, not even glancing at the men who watched him. But Freddie Mercer clung to his sleeve.

"I promise to keep everything confidential till you give the word, captain. I promise on my honor."

Gale laughed. "You don't look like a crook yourself. But you work for a crook."

"You can trust me, captain," Freddie Mercer gasped, almost running to keep up with Gale. "Look at this. It'll prove you can trust me!"

Gale glanced down at the slip of paper which Mercer tore from the pad and thrust at him. He read the single line scribbled on it, and stopped short. On the sheet Mercer had written:

Commissioner Orth must be awful cramped, down in that sedan!

Gale slowly crushed the paper in his hand. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw the dozen or so policemen and detectives watching him like hawks. He looked down at the impudently grinning Freddie Mercer.

"So you found Orth in the car! I suppose you phoned it in to your paper?"

"Nix!" grinned Mercer. "I left him just where he was, and I came right in here. I smelled hot stuff. Listen, Captain Gale—I've been waiting for a long time for something like this to break. I'd almost given up hope of ever busting up Firmin's combination in this town. I'm a reporter at heart, and I've got a yen to turn in some red-hot news. The Sun won't print it. But I can get a job on any other paper in the State if I have the inside track with you. I'll play ball—all the way!"

Gale studied him speculatively. "This is a dangerous game, Freddie. I stand every chance of losing. If we lose, Firmin will have your life."

"I'll take the chance!" Freddie Mercer said.

"O. K., then. Come along!"

He hurried out, with Mercer at his heels.

In the alley, he unlocked the car and motioned Mercer in. He threw a single hasty glance at Orth, and found that the commissioner was conscious again, but helpless with his wrists bound and his mouth gagged.

Freddie Mercer giggled ecstatically, and turned his camera down on the commissioner. He snapped

the lever, and the flash bulb exploded, giving him a perfect picture.

"Boy, oh boy! What a story this will make—with pix!"

"If you live to write it!" Gale told him grimly.

While Freddie busied himself with screwing in a new flash bulb, Gale tooled the car out of the parking space and headed east, across town. He had the map of Summit City clearly in his head, and he knew just where he wanted to go.

On the way across, he turned on the short-wave radio and caught the calls from headquarters. They both listened, and Freddie Mercer grinned as he heard the police announcer's rather bewildered voice:

"General order to all precincts: In the absence of Commissioner Orth, Chief Bolton has taken temporary charge of all police administrative duties. All officers are ordered to co-operate fully with Gillian Gale, newly appointed captain of detectives—"

Freddie Mercer turned around and looked over the seat, into the rear compartment, where Orth lay. "Hear that, commish? You got a new captain of detectives—like it or not!"

Orth didn't answer, because he couldn't.

Gale kept on driving steadily, till they reached the river.

At the edge of town, on the Summit River, he pulled up a block away from the low, bleak county morgue building, and parked.

"Do I go in with you?" Mercer asked.

"No! You stay right here. See if you can find a robe or blanket to cover Orth with. If anybody comes nosing around, drive away, and meet me in an hour at the Summit City Hotel. Keep the motor running. I may come out in a hurry."

"How long will you be in there?"

"What I have to do shouldn't take more than ten minutes. If I'm not out in that time, go away. Scram! Get out of town. It'll mean I've flopped."

He gave Mercer no further explanation, but left him in the car and walked swiftly to the morgue building. The morgue itself was downstairs in the vaulted basement, but Gale did not go there. Instead he consulted the directory and found that the county coroner's office was in Room 2.

A gray-haired attendant asked him whom he wanted to see.

"Is Coroner Marchesson in?"

"Yes! But you'll have to be announced—"

"It's all right," said Gale. "Official business." He flashed his badge and brushed past the attendant. Room 2 was on the left. He pushed the door open without knocking and went in.

Doctor Conrad Marchesson was talking on the telephone. He was a short, plump man of forty, with soft white hands. His forehead was high and round, and his hair was thin, barely covering a shining dome.

He looked up from the phone and frowned at Gale; then he said into the phone: "Hold on just a minute, Mr. Firmin—"

He covered the mouthpiece with a pudgy hand and rasped at Gale: "Don't you believe in knocking? What do you want?"

Gale had stiffened at the sound of Firmin's name. He bared his teeth, and took a quick step over to the desk. The automatic came out of his pocket and poked into Marchesson's chest.

"Yee-ee!" yelled the coroner and went over backward, dragging phone and all with him. He toppled over with his chair, and the phone flew from his hand.

Gale calmly went around the desk and picked up the instrument. He put the receiver to his ear and heard Alonzo Firmin's voice: "Marchesson! What's happened? Mar—"

Gale replaced the receiver on the hook and put the phone down. He turned around just in time to see Dr. Marchesson scrambling to his feet and clawing a revolver out of his back pocket.

Gale took the doctor's wrist in his hand, yanked it out with the gun and twisted. Marchesson yelled, again, and dropped the revolver.

"That's better," said Gale.

The coroner was gasping for breath and holding on to his sprained wrist.

"W-what's the meaning of this?"

Gale flashed his shield. "I'm arresting you, Dr. Conrad Marchesson, for perjury in connection with the trial of Roger Gale."

"Y-you're crazy. I've never seen you before. You're not a police officer!"

Gale took his official appointment out of his pocket and held it for the other to read.

Dr. Marchesson's plumpish face became even whiter than before.

"Roger Gale's brother! This is mad. Bolton had no right to appoint you—"

"There it is," said Gale. "Right or not right. And I'm arresting you."

Marchesson recovered a little of his poise. He shrugged, grinning nastily.

"All right. I don't know what's behind it all. But you won't get very far. Mr. Firmin heard something happening here. He'll send police. There'll probably be a radio car at the door as we go out."

"You don't understand, Marchesson," Gale told him softly, hefting the automatic. "We're not going out."

"Not going out? Then you—you're *not* arresting me?"

"Yes, I'm arresting you. But unfortunately, you are going to attempt to resist arrest." He nodded toward the gun on the floor. "It will be very unfortunate. I shall have to shoot you for resisting arrest. You will be dead."

Marchesson shrank back from the cold, merciless gleam in Gillian Gale's eyes.

"You're mad! You— It would be murder!"

"Call it anything you like, Marchesson. They're going to murder my brother tomorrow. They found a way to do it legally. I've found a way to murder legally, too. I'm an officer of the law. You see, Marchesson, everything will be quite in order."

"B-but why should you want to kill me? Why—"

"You know damned well why, doctor." He reached out and grabbed a handful of the coroner's coat in his left hand, then he thrust the automatic against his chest. "And now you are going to resist arrest. Here goes—"

"Wait! Wait!" the fat man screamed. He began to blubber. "D-don't kill me. I'll do anything—anything!"

Gale's eyes flickered. "All right. Tell me about the bullet."

"What bullet?"

Gale sighed. "You were just wasting my time. You only gave yourself a minute more of life." He pressed the muzzle harder against the man's chest.

"Yes, yes!" Marchesson screamed again. "I know! I'll talk! The bullet . . . I switched bullets." The words tumbled out on top of one another in his frantic eagerness to prevent Gale from pulling the trigger of the automatic. "I substituted a bullet from your brother's gun for the one I took from Payne's body?"

"Who really killed him?"

"I don't know. As God is my witness, I don't know. They never told me."

"Where's the bullet you took out of Payne?"

"I gave it to Firmin."

Gale's eyes were hard and bright. He removed the automatic from Marchesson's chest. He picked up the chair and righted it in front of the desk, then he thrust the coroner down into it and pointed to the pen.

"Write it out—fast!" he ordered.

Marchesson was shaking so that the lines he wrote were wavy and uncertain. But he wrote quickly.

When he was finished, he dropped the pen as if he had palsy and looked up at Gale with quivering lips.

"There, you devil. You have what you want. Now let me go."

Gale picked up the document. He read through it swiftly and nodded. He slipped it into his pocket.

Marchesson pushed up to his feet. "Now, you've got what you want. Go away!"

Gale grinned. "So you can recant it the first chance you get? Claim I forced you to sign it under threat of death? You know damned well that I couldn't use this in a court of law."

"Then why did you make me write it?"

"You'll find out, doctor—soon enough. Come along!"

He got a grip on Marchesson's coat collar and shoved him ahead of him, out of the room. In the corridor, the aged attendant stared at them with mouth agape, but he did not offer to interfere.

Dr. Marchesson regained a little of his courage, and shouted to the attendant: "Call Alonzo Firmin. Tell him Roger Gale's brother—a police captain—"

That was all he got a chance to say, because Gale shook him like a rat, so that the breath was pounded out of him. Gale literally dragged him out into the street, and several passing pedestrians stopped to watch.

Marchesson raised his voice and yelled: "Help! Murder!"

The passers-by might have interfered, but just then Freddie Mercer, who had seen Gale come out, tooled the police sedan up to the door, and the onlookers saw the police shield on the radiator.

"Aw," said someone in the crowd. "It's just a guy getting arrested!"

Gale pushed Marchesson in the back seat, over the wriggling figure of Commissioner Orth, and got in with him. "Get going!" he ordered.

Freddie Mercer giggled, and sent the car forward. It was getting dark, and he had to put on the headlights.

"Where to, captain?" he asked over his shoulder.

X.

"Back to police headquarters," Gale told him. "I want to leave these two babies with Chief Bolton—"

He was interrupted by the sudden code buzz of the short-wave radio. In a second, the police announcer's voice followed:

"Attention Car 14: Go to city morgue. Coroner Marchesson in trouble. Look out for Gillian Gale. He is dangerous, and armed. When last seen was wearing blue serge suit with red-and-orange striped tie. Shoot to kill! I will repeat—"

While the announcer was repeating the message, Freddie Mercer kept driving mechanically and cursing under his breath.

"Something must have gone wrong," he said over his shoulder to Gale. "If Chief Bolton is working with you, why would he be putting you on the spot?"

Gillian Gale frowned.

Almost at once, the police announcer began another message:

"Attention, all precincts and cars: Official orders. Council President Alonzo Firmin has removed Chief John Bolton from office on a charge of malfeasance; namely, of aiding and abetting a fugitive from justice, Gillian Gale, who has been identified as the hold-up man and killer now being hunted. Council President Alonzo Firmin has

named Captain Ernest Slocum acting chief of police. All previous orders of former Chief Bolton are to be disregarded. All cars are instructed to be on the lookout for Gillian Gale—"

"Oh, Lord!" gasped Freddie Mercer. "That's just like Firmin. He's got a chain-lightning mind—and he moves just as fast. What now, Mr. Gale?"

"Pull up to the curb!" Gale ordered harshly.

Freddie obeyed and brought the car to a stop under the lee of a darkened warehouse.

Marchesson said venomously: "Well, Mr. Gale, what are you going to do about that? Am I still under arrest? Where's your authority now?"

"Here's my authority!" said Gale, bringing his bunched fist up in a short but terrific jab to the point of Marchesson's jaw.

The coroner's head snapped back with the blow, and his teeth clicked together with a sound like the clack of castanets. Marchesson stiffened up for a second, and then doubled over in the seat, toppling sideways against Gale.

Gale lowered him to the floor and bent over him, working swiftly. As in the case of Orth, he removed the coroner's belt and shoelaces, with which he tied and gagged him. Then he went over Orth's bonds, once more, to make sure they were intact.

Freddie Mercer had turned around, and was watching him intently.

"I take it from what you're doing, Mr. Gale, that you don't concede that you're licked yet?"

"No!" Gale told him grimly. "But from here on the going will be very tough. You can clear out of this now if you want."

"Not a chance," said Freddie. "I wouldn't miss this for a case of Scotch. And besides, my goose is cooked, anyway. I can't back out. Orth and Marchesson know I've been working with you. Which makes my finish if you don't win out."

"I'll fix that for you," Gale said. "Drive back to the river. We'll send the car over the edge of the embankment, with Orth and Marchesson in it. Dead, they can't tell Firmin what you've been doing."

Freddie Mercer became a little pale. He gulped. "You . . . you mean to kill them in cold blood?"

"Why not? They'd cut your throat if you put a knife in their hands."

Orth was squirming around desperately, underneath the dead weight of Marchesson's unconscious body. His eyes were no longer venomous. They were frightened and pleading.

"Wait a minute," Gale said to Freddie. "I think Orth wants to say something."

He bent over and took the gag out of the commissioner's mouth.

"Good heavens!" Orth gasped as soon as he could get his mouth working. "You can't murder us like that, Gale. Haven't you got a spark of mercy in your heart?"

"Sure! The same kind of mercy you're handing my brother. If he hangs tomorrow, at least I'll have the satisfaction of knowing that you're at the bottom of the river."

"Just give me a chance. I'll help. I'll do anything I can to help your brother. I've got nothing to gain from Firmin any more. He's through with me. He'll sacrifice me, anyway, to whitewash his administration. I might as well throw in with you. Just give me a chance—"

"What kind of chance do you want? How can you help? Do you know who killed Payne?"

"Waxey Klebber did it. He was a fool and kept his gun. That's why he's so anxious to get it back."

"You're lying. That gun couldn't convict Waxey of the murder of Payne. Marchesson switched bullets."

He looked up and saw that Freddie Mercer was taking everything down in shorthand.

Suddenly his eyes switched from Freddie, to a police radio car which came cruising down the street from the opposite direction. It had just turned the far corner, and was coming toward them. He saw it slow up as its headlights flashed their sedan, illuminating the police shield on the radiator.

Freddie Mercer turned and saw it at the same time. "Nuts!" he said. "I guess this is the end—"

"No it isn't!" Gillian Gale barked. "Get going!"

Freddie shrugged. "Might as well be cooked for hash as for spinach!"

He threw the gear shift into first and sent the car lurching forward.

The police coupé was almost abreast of them, and the policeman next to the driver was opening his door to come out and investigate. The man was not prepared for the sudden forward lurch of the sedan. They sped past like a rocket, and gears clashed and grated as Freddie shifted from first to second, then to high. They were at the corner before the police coupé got itself turned around, and Freddie kept going like a bat out of hell, turning corner after corner on two wheels, until they had lost the radio car completely.

At last he slowed up and took a deep breath. They were in a dark and scrubby part of the city, near the gas works.

"What are we gonna do now?" Freddie demanded. "We can't keep dodging cops all night."

"Pull into the gas-company parking space over there," Gale directed.

Freddie did so. He switched off the ignition and turned off the lights. There were only four or five cars in the parking space, belonging to the night crew of the gas company.

Gale put the gag back on Orth, then motioned Freddie out of the car. He threw a robe over Orth and Marchesson, turned up the windows most of the way and locked the doors.

"We'll leave them here. There's little chance of their being found before morning."

"It's seven o'clock," Freddie said. "Your brother hangs at dawn. You have less than twelve hours to go—"

"Twelve hours is too much now," Gale told him. "Inside of an hour, we'll be sitting on top of this town—or six feet under it!"

At the next corner, they caught a trolley car, and rode it south to Center Street. Then they got off and walked two blocks to the Summit City Hotel, mingling with the home-going crowds.

Freddie Mercer was watching, lynx-eyed, and he spotted a heavy-faced, husky man standing at the corner.

"That's one of Slocum's special service men!" he said. "Slocum has a couple dozen of them. They're all mugs with criminal records, who get protection here in town. In return, they do Firmin's dirty work."

Gale's eyes narrowed. "If he's waiting here, it may mean they've traced Laura Payne to this hotel. Come on! Snap it up!"

They crossed the street to avoid the watching thug and entered the hotel through the side entrance.

They stopped for a moment while Freddie Mercer gave the lobby the once-over to make sure there were no more watchers in sight. Then they hurried across and entered the elevator.

They got off at the eleventh floor, and Gale rapped sharply at the door of Room 1116.

There was no answer. Freddie Mercer shifted nervously. "Do you think they could have got to her already?"

Gale rapped again. He put his mouth close to the door and called, "Open up, Laura. This is Gale."

Almost at once the door came open. Gale started to come in, with the diminutive Freddie Mercer close behind him.

And then Gillian Gale stopped short.

It was not Laura Payne in the doorway. It was Alonzo Firmin!

Firmin had a revolver in his hand, and it was pointing straight at Gale's stomach. His lips were twisted into a dangerous smile.

"How do you do, Mr. Gillian Gale," he said. "I knew you'd come here sooner or later! Won't you step in?"

Firmin hadn't seen Freddie Mercer, because Gale's bulk blocked off the little newspaperman. But Gale could see past Firmin, who stepped a little to one side so Gale could come in.

A little muscle in the side of Gale's cheek twitched at what he saw inside the room. Waxey Klebber was there, alongside the bed. Laura Payne was spread-eagled on the bed, and most of the clothes had been ripped off her. Waxey was doing something to one of her legs, with a pocket knife.

Firmin saw the look in Gale's eyes, and his voice

hardened. His finger tightened just the least bit on the trigger of his revolver.

"I said to come in, Gale. Or I'll shoot you now! You're a fugitive from justice, you know."

From behind Gale there was a sudden blinding flash.

Freddie Mercer had side-stepped out from behind Gale and had snapped a picture of Alonzo Firmin with the gun in his hand—and of that portion of the room behind, which was visible past him.

Freddie Mercer hugged the camera and started to run with it.

"You dirty rat!" Firmin yelled.

He stepped back and swung his gun after Mercer. And Gillian Gale, with a set smile on his face, smashed the edge of his hand down upon Firmin's wrist.

He came into the room with a rush, gripping Firmin by the throat.

Waxey Klebber was swinging around, having exchanged his knife for a gun, but Gale gave him no chance to shoot. He sent Firmin hurtling into Klebber, and the two of them catapulted against the bedstead, struggling to hold their balance.

Gale brought the automatic out of his pocket, and covered them.

"Drop the gun, Waxey," he said softly.

Waxey was a little behind Firmin. He had his gun halfway up, and he might have tried to shoot it out with Gale. But he saw the dark intensity of Gale's eyes, and slowly opened his fingers, letting the gun fall to the floor.

Almost at once, another flash bulb exploded in the doorway.

"Wow!" said Freddie Mercer. "This is gonna turn the city upside down. Mr. Firmin, I hereby resign from the Summit City *Sun*. With these pix and this story, I can get a job anywhere in the State!"

"Close the door," Gale said, matter-of-factly.

He kept Waxey and Firmin covered and looked over to the bed, where Laura Payne lay, spread-eagled, with her wrists and ankles tied to the four posts of the bed.

"What have they been doing to you, Laura?" he asked.

There were long, painful-looking gashes down the length of her left leg. He looked up from those gashes to Waxey Klebber, and Waxey started to back away from him.

Laura Payne smiled weakly. "They've been trying to make me tell where Waxey's gun is. They guessed that you gave it to me. I . . . I didn't tell."

Gale heard Freddie Mercer utter an exclamation behind him, and he turned. Freddie slammed the door shut quickly.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "Here comes Slocum! With a mob. They're not regular cops. It's those gorillas of his!"

"Not bad," Gale said, looking at Firmin. "You had this figured out nicely. We were supposed to walk right into this trap, and then Slocum was supposed to come up after us and bottle us up. Only it didn't work out just that way!"

Firmin smiled deprecatingly. "I should have shot you in the doorway. That was my mistake. Now I'll make a deal with you. You and Mercer and Laura Payne can go out of here free. In return I get Waxey's gun."

"Why do you want Waxey's gun so badly?"

Firmin shrugged. "What's the difference? Is it a deal?"

"What about my brother?"

"I can't do anything about him. He's been convicted."

Freddie Mercer had been busy untying Laura Payne. She wound a bed sheet about herself, to cover her torn dress; then she came and stood beside Gale.

"Where *did* you hide that gun, Laura?" he asked her.

"You'd never guess!" she said. She went to the window and started to pull in the aerial cord, which ran from the radio on the night table. She pulled in about two feet of it, and there, tied to the end of it, was her handbag.

Firmin said, "Well, I'll be damned!"

Laura Payne opened the bag and took out Manfredo's wallet and the two guns which Gale had taken from Waxey and Kip.

"This one is Waxey's," she said, handing him one with a rose-colored stock.

Gale kept Waxey and Firmin covered with the automatic, while he examined the revolver, holding it in his other hand. He spun the cylinder, and frowned. "It's fully loaded. Ready to use." He looked up, studying Klebber. "You wouldn't be such a fool, Waxey, as to carry around a gun with which you had killed someone, would you?"

Firmin looked tense at the question, and Waxey dropped his eyes. "Figure it out for yourself!" he snarled.

"No," said Gale. "You're going to tell me."

He handed his automatic to Freddie Mercer. "Keep Firmin covered," he ordered. He took a step forward and came up close to Waxey, holding the revolver less than ten inches from Waxey's face.

"A little of your own medicine, my friend. The same medicine you were dishing out to Laura Payne. Think you can take it as well as give it?"

Waxey was a little frightened. But he kept up his bravado. "I ain't talkin'!"

He tried to duck the swiping blow with the gun barrel, but Gale hit too swiftly. The muzzle raked his cheek open in a long gash. He yelled and jumped backward.

Gale came after him, raising the gun for another blow.

And just then he was interrupted by a terrific pounding at the door.

"Open up in there!" Captain Slocum bellowed from outside. "Open up, or we'll come in shooting!"

To the accompaniment of his bellowed order, Slocum and his men kept pounding at the door with their gun butts. Everybody in the room turned to face the door. And at the same instant, the side door from Room 1118 was thrust violently open. Two thugs raced in, guns blasting. The sole purpose of Slocum's shouts had been to divert attention from that side door.

The first shots of the two thugs were wild, because it took them a second to focus on their target and to make sure they wouldn't hit Alonzo Firmin. And that second was all that Gillian Gale needed. He leaped forward and straight-armed Laura Payne out of the line of fire, onto the bed.

Even as he did so, he had Waxey's gun out in front of him, belching lead. He kept squeezing the trigger again and again, until the gun was empty. Subconsciously, as he fired, he counted the shots. There were five of them, and then the hammer clicked on a defective cartridge.

But he needed no more shots. The two gunmen were flat on the floor, with slugs in their heads.

Gale jumped over their bodies and slammed the connecting door shut. The room was thick with the stench of cordite and with the reverberating echoes of the thunder of the guns.

Gale swung away from the door just as Waxey Klebber came charging across the room at him with a long knife poised low for an upward slash. Klebber's eyes were fanatical with rage and hate. He was crouching low, and rushing forward. The knife was already coming up for the slash when Freddie Mercer fired from where he stood near the corridor door, covering Firmin. The shot missed and plowed into the wall.

Gale saw the knife blade coming up at his stomach and he side-stepped with a beautiful twisting motion that carried him just past the blade. The knife licked up, missing him by a fraction of an inch. Gale took another step backward and brought his right foot up. The point of his shoe smashed against Waxey's chin, and there was the terrible sound of cracking bone.

Waxey's eyes glazed, and he fell forward on his face.

Gale yanked the bed over in front of the connecting door as a barricade and turned to see Firmin and Freddie Mercer struggling for the gun in Freddie's hand. Firmin must have jumped him when he fired at Waxey. Laura Payne was standing tensely over them with a clubbed gun in her hand, which she had picked up from one of the fallen thugs, and waiting for a chance to strike.

Gale crossed the room grimly and got hold of Firmin by the collar, then seized his right wrist

and twisted it behind him. He pulled up hard on the wrist, and Firmin gasped and stopped fighting.

Gale hauled him to his feet.

Freddie Mercer wiped sweat from his face with the back of his hand.

Then he said, "*Wow!*" and yanked his camera up and snapped a picture of the whole room.

From outside came the voice of Captain Slocum once more.

"Mr. Firmin! You still alive?"

"Yes!" Firmin shouted. "They've got me. Use tear gas!"

"You others in there!" Slocum bellowed from the hall. "I'll give you two minutes to come out with your hands in the air, and Mr. Firmin unharmed, or we'll give you a dose of tear gas!"

But Gale wasn't listening. He was inspecting Waxey's empty gun, with a puzzled frown.

"There were six cartridges in here," he said. "But only five fired. I wonder—"

He broke the gun and held the trigger back while he turned the cylinder up to the chamber containing the defective cartridge. It was jammed, and he used Waxey's knife to pry it out.

Firmin, watching, suddenly said desperately, "Look here, Gale, don't bother with that. The two minutes are almost up. I'll promise to free your brother, too—somehow—"

He stopped talking, and let his voice die down to nothing. His eyes were fixed in fascination upon the thing that Gillian Gale was taking out of the cartridge. There was no powder in it. It was merely an empty shell. And inside the shell was a bit of rolled paper.

Gale unrolled the paper and held it low, so that Laura could also read what was written on it:

If this is ever found, it'll mean that I'm dead or that Firmin has crossed me. This is a confession. I'm the guy that shot Edmond Payne. Firmin told me to do it. He got a cartridge from Roger Gale's gun, and made Marchesson switch them. I'm writing this confession because I figure Firmin may try to wipe me out sometime. I told Firmin about this confession, but I didn't tell him where it is; so he'll be interested in keeping me alive. Alonzo Firmin is as guilty as I am.

Joseph Waxey Klebber.

Gale's eyes were glittering as he raised his glance to Firmin's.

"So that's why Waxey was so anxious to get the gun back! And when he couldn't make me fork it up, he went to you and told all, so you'd help him recover it!"

Alonzo Firmin licked his lips. "We can still do business, Gale. I'll turn Waxey Klebber in as the murderer of Payne, and your brother will go free. And I'll pay you plenty of money. I could raise a million if I had to—"

Once more they heard Slocum. He was just the other side of the door.

"All right, Gale. The two minutes are up. It's your last chance—"

"Ah!" said Gillian Gale.

He snatched the automatic from Freddie Mercer and sent Alonzo Firmin staggering backward with a shove of his chest. Then he slipped open the catch which locked the door and put his hand on the knob.

"All right," Slocum was saying, still close to the door. "Here comes the tear gas—"

Gillian Gale yanked hard on the door and pulled it open.

Captain Slocum jumped erect on the other side. He had a tear-gas gun in one hand and a revolver in the other. Almost a dozen thugs were in the hall, some at the stairs, others at the elevators, to keep people off the floor.

Slocum was taken aback by the sudden opening of the door. He brought the revolver up, his finger tightening on the trigger.

And Gillian Gale, with his mouth set hard and straight, shot him between the eyes.

The gunmen in the corridor were stunned by the suddenness with which the thing had happened. For the moment they were left without a leader. There was no one to give them an order.

Gillian Gale offered them no chance to organize. He sprang back into the room, and almost before Slocum's body had hit the floor, he had Alonzo Firmin firmly grasped by the arm, with his automatic pressed against the political boss' ribs.

"Follow me out!" he said to Freddie Mercer and Laura Payne.

He pushed Firmin along out into the hall.

The thugs were crowding toward the doorway, with guns in their fists. But when they saw Gale appear once more, with Firmin in his grip, they slowed up. But they did not give ground.

"All right, you rats," Gale told them. "The show is over. Firmin is under arrest for murder. Summit City is going to be cleaned out. I advise you to be out of town before midnight."

"Don't listen to him!" Firmin shouted. He tried to squirm out of Gale's grip. He was desperate now seeing his whole empire of graft and power crumbling before his eyes—and himself facing prosecution for murder.

"Get him—"

Gillian Gale slid the automatic along Firmin's side, so that the barrel was against his ribs, and fired once.

The bullet burned Firmin's side, and the jar of the exploding gun against his ribs shook the breath out of him. The slug spanged into the metal elevator shaft and ricocheted down the hall. Firmin was not wounded, but the words were jarred out of him and his voice broke.

One of the thugs said, "Hell, let's take this guy—"

Gale shot the man in the leg, and the fellow yelped and crumpled to the floor. At the same in-

stant, Freddie Mercer touched off another of his flashlight bulbs, and took a picture of everybody in the corridor.

"I got all you mugs in the picture!" he shouted, above the echo of the gunshot. Then he pulled Laura Payne with him and ducked back into the room, shutting the door.

The thugs glanced at each other. They were disheartened and frightened. One of their number was wounded already. Gale would certainly get more of them if they tried to stop him. And besides, their pictures were in that camera. Even if they downed Gale, there might be the law to face. Slowly they began to fade away toward the stairs.

Firmin had regained his breath. "You fools!" he shouted. "Come back and fight. I'll make everything all right. I'll pay—"

Gale pressed the muzzle of the automatic against the side of his neck. "One more word does it for you now, Firmin!"

Firmin became silent.

And the next moment the hall was empty of gunmen. They were like the rats Gale had called them. The ship was sinking, and they were on their way.

Gale grunted. He led Firmin back to Room 1116.

"Open up, Freddie," he called.

Mercer pulled the door open, and Gale pushed Firmin in.

Laura Payne was waiting just inside the door, with anxious eyes, one hand at her throat.

"That was wonderful," she said. "I mean—how you faced those thugs!"

Gale waved her to the phone. "Get Chief Bolton on the wire. He's probably at home."

In a minute he had Bolton on the phone. "You can come out of retirement," he said. "The police department is yours. Better get up here quick—with as many honest men as you can muster. And send a couple of boys over to the gas-company parking lot. Take Orth and Marchesson into custody. With their testimony to tie up with what I've got here, it's in the bag. Firmin swings for murder instead of Roger!"

Alonzo Firmin was straightening his coat and tie once more.

"Well, Gale," he said, "you win. You've battered your way through. I never thought it could be done." He got up from his chair and moved to the window.

"Sit down!" Gale growled.

Firmin smiled. "I don't like hanging, Gale. Surely you won't deny me one last favor."

He took a quick step and threw one leg over the window sill.

Gale made no move to stop him.

Laura Payne gasped, "He's going to jump!"

Gale still made no move to interfere.

"Thank you," said Firmin. "You've licked me."

But I'm not the kind to quit without striking back. I'm going! But it's going to cost you everything you've fought for today."

"What do you mean?" asked Gale.

Firmin put the other leg over the sill. "I mean just this. If I stay here and wait to be arrested, Waxey's confession will surely hang me and exonerate your brother. But if I can give the impression that you killed me so that I wouldn't be able to defend myself, then Waxey's confession will be regarded with doubt. They'll think you framed it to free your brother, and then got me out of the way so as to make it easier."

"I see," said Gale. He didn't move. His face was set and hard.

Laura Payne stammered: "What does he mean, Gill? I don't understand."

"You'll understand in a moment my dear young lady," Firmin said with a smile. "Gale knows what I intend to do. And he can't stop me. I hear people coming now."

There was the sound of the elevator door opening and closing, and of excited voices in the corridor. People were coming up. Probably police, probably the hotel management. The voices drew nearer.

Alonzo Firmin drew in a deep breath. Then he raised his voice in a loud, strident scream that

carried into the corridor. "Help! Help! They're throwing me out the window. They framed me—"

Then he leaned far out and jumped.

At that very instant, there was another blinding flash from Freddie Mercer's camera. Freddie lowered the camera from his eye. His face was flushed and strained.

"I got it!" he gasped. "I got the picture of him jumping. It'll prove he wasn't thrown out!"

"Well," said Gale, "Firmin was a fighter, anyway. At least he'll never know his last try was a fumble!"

He went across to the bed where Laura Payne lay. She had fainted as Firmin jumped.

People were pounding at the door again, but Gale didn't open it.

"Let them pound," he told Freddie, "till Bolton gets here."

He got a towel, wet it, and applied it to Laura's forehead. She opened her eyes.

"It's all right, Laura," he said. "Firmin's trick didn't work. Your father's murderer has paid up. The other one"—he jerked his head at Waxey Klebber, who was still unconscious—"will hang. Roger goes free. You get your man. And Freddie gets his story."

"Wow!" said Freddie Mercer. "What a story—with pix!"

THE END.

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THE MURDER BOOK



by FRANK GRUBER

I.

THE man with the yellow camel's-hair topcoat came out of the shooting gallery. Sam Vedder took a notebook from his pocket and with the stub of a pencil wrote:

11:55; came out of shooting gallery.

He was a sporty-looking duck, about fifty years old, although he walked with the jauntiness of a man of thirty. He was red-faced and popeyed and had a waxed mustache. He carried a cane which he twirled as he made his way down Sixth Avenue.

Near Forty-third Street he turned into a second-hand bookstore. Sam Vedder followed and pawed over a stack of battered detective books. The fellow in the camel's-hair coat, meanwhile, leafed through some art magazines. Vedder, watching, noted that his quarry was apparently enjoying the pictures.

After about fifteen minutes of this, he left the

store without making a purchase. Sam Vedder wrote in the notebook:

12:15; left secondhand bookstore where he spent fifteen minutes looking at pictures of artists' models.

He put the notebook back into his pocket and left the bookstore—and there was Camel's Hair trying to flirt with a girl who looked decidedly out of place on Sixth Avenue. She wore a silver-fox jacket, with fur-trimmed hat to match. She had a figure of a manikin and the face of a Hollywood actress in the upper brackets. Blond, nicely coiffured hair peeped out from under the skimpy hat.

Apparently, she had just stepped out of a limousine at the curb. The subject of Sam Vedder's shadow was blocking her passage, while he smirked and said the things a man of his type says to a girl he's trying to pick up.

Sam Vedder mumbled under his breath. He had

his instructions, but he had taken a violent dislike to the man in the yellow camel's-hair coat. He yearned to step forward and pop him one.

The girl in the silver-fox jacket tried to step around her annoyer. He promptly stepped with her. Vedder muttered, "Job or no job!" and moved forward.

It was unnecessary. The girl's gloved hand suddenly flashed up and connected smartly with the pink cheek of the middle-aged flirt. Then, before he could recover, she stepped swiftly past him and walked, unconcerned, down Sixth Avenue.

Sam Vedder snickered. The man who had been slapped glared angrily after the retreating girl; then he shrugged and turned back toward Forty-second Street.

At a corner stand, he bought a glass of orangeade. Then he crossed the street and strolled west on Forty-second Street, ogling stenographers who were hurrying out of the buildings for their lunches.

He stopped for a few minutes at the Cameo Theater to look at the stills of the picture that was playing inside.

He resumed his stroll, walking more leisurely than ever. He looked into store windows, smirked at the girls and occasionally gave his waxed mustache a twist or two.

And then, suddenly—he was gone.

After two hours of dawdling, during which the man in the camel's-hair coat had acted very much like a WPA man on a vacation, he had suddenly made a quick movement—and vanished into thin air.

Sam Vedder gasped in astonishment. Then he darted forward and jerked open the door of a radio repair shop before which he had last seen Camel's Hair.

Two clerks behind counters were the only occupants of the store. Vedder slammed the door shut and whirled back to the sidewalk. Ah! the entrance to the office building.

He rushed into the lobby, in time to see the elevator doors closing upon a flash of yellow.

"Up! Going up!" he cried frantically.

The elevator doors closed. In despair, Vedder stared up at the floor indicator. If the car had a full load, it might make a dozen stops.

The indicator stopped at the third floor, proceeded to the fourth and stopped again. Vedder groaned. The next pause was at the seventh floor. It stopped again at the eighth, then skipped the ninth and lingered at the tenth. From there it zoomed up to the top floor.

Three—four—seven—eight—ten. Five floors and the man in the camel's-hair coat might have got off at any of them.

"Going up!" called the operator of the adjoining elevator.

Vedder shook his head. He watched the first elevator come leisurely down, stopping at numerous floors. Finally, it returned to the lobby and discharged a load of passengers—none, however, with a camel's-hair topcoat.

Vedder stepped into the car. "Look, buddy," he said to the operator. "I just saw my uncle step into your car on the last trip up. I've got to find him—in a hurry. What floor did he get out at? Sporty-looking bird, with a waxed mustache and a snazzy, yellow camel's-hair coat."

The operator screwed up his face and scowled. "He got out at the seventh floor. Or maybe it was the tenth. Uh-uh, the tenth."

Three or four passengers had entered the elevator. All got off separately at floors between the first and the tenth, and Sam Vedder fumed impatiently.

But at length the operator opened the door to the tenth floor. Sam Vedder leaped out, started toward a dead-end wall, whirled and rushed to an ell at the other end of the corridor. He whipped around the corner—and collided with someone coming toward him like a projectile.

The impact was so violent both men were hurled to the floor. Dazed and hurt, Vedder began an automatic apology, "Excuse—" That was as far as he got. A hand, gripping a rolled-up newspaper, flashed from the floor and struck Sam Vedder on the chin.

There was dynamite in that rolled-up newspaper! It exploded and red pain shot through Vedder's head, flashed down into his body. He reeled back, his head hitting the granite floor.

He lay there stunned, while red devils beat at his brains. Then he gasped, and as the air rushed into his lungs, power returned to his muscles. He flexed them in a tremendous effort and rolled over to his face. He lay there groaning from the agony that searched out the most remote parts of his body.

After a moment, he placed his hands flat upon the granite floor and lifted himself. When he got to his knees, he felt better. A shake of the head to clear the cobwebs and he was able to look around him.

The corridor, which stretched back for a hundred feet, was empty. No—it wasn't. Twenty feet away, there was a large yellow object.

Sam Vedder blinked at that object. Then, with a gasp and a rush, he was on his feet, running toward it.

It was the man in the yellow camel's-hair topcoat! He lay on his stomach, his waxed mustache bristling as always, his bulging eyes staring—sightlessly.

There was a pool of blood by his head. Sam Vedder, stooping, saw the matted hair, the ugly bruise—

He saw something else: a faded, aged pamphlet

that was clutched in the dead man's hand. He picked it up and looked blankly at it.

It was an old detective magazine; he judged that by the title: "Murders In The Rue Morgue." But it was of a type long extinct.

He started to put the thing into his pocket; then an office door, nearby, opened. A girl came out into the corridor, looked at Sam Vedder and the body at his feet. She screamed!

She screamed as though a combination werewolf, vampire and banshee suddenly had appeared out of nowhere and clawed at her throat. She kept on screaming and doors up and down the corridor jerked open. Men and women poured out and completely cut off any escape Sam Vedder might have made.

II.

About three hours later—at 3:45—Sam Vedder pushed open a ground-glass door on which there was the legend:

BLIGH DETECTIVE AGENCY

We Get Our Man

A little man, stretched out on a bench, raised his head a few inches and looked owlishly at Sam Vedder. He began to whistle, softly.

Standing, the little man might have reached to a height of five feet three. He weighed perhaps one hundred and twenty pounds and had sandy hair, baby-blue eyes and a wistful expression on his face. His name was Robert Catt and he was naturally called Bobcat.

Sam Vedder glared at Bobcat and said, through his teeth: "One crack and I'll break your neck!"

"Me, crack?" Bobcat asked innocently. "What for? When the walls are so thin I can hear the captain dig up your ancestors—"

Sam Vedder looked at the gorgeous blonde who was sitting behind a desk on which there were three telephones. No gleam came to his eye, which showed the state of his mind. For Emma Todd, despite her plebeian name, would bring gleams to eyes of Egyptian mummies.

Beside Emma's desk was a door on which was lettered:

CAPTAIN BLIGH

Vedder nodded to the door. "Is he inside?"

Emma stared at Vedder with an expression that bordered on awe. "He wants to see you."

Vedder winced. Then he took a deep breath and advanced toward the door in a "we who are about to die—" manner.

He opened the door, stepped through and closed it swiftly behind him.

Captain Billy Bligh took his feet from his desk, put them on the floor and got slowly to his feet.

He smiled pleasantly, a hulking, cherubic-faced man of forty-five.

"Sammy, my boy!" he said.

A shudder ran through Sam Vedder. He seemed to shrink three full inches.

And then Captain Billy let go. The pictures on the walls rattled, the walls, themselves, trembled and Sam Vedder quaked as he had not since the days when his father had taken him out to the woodshed.

Billy Bligh had the face of a cherub, the voice of a bucko mate and the disposition of a Bengal tiger with the toothache.

He was a master of invective; he knew more swear words than an infantry sergeant and, having a literary flair, himself had coined many new words. He used them all on Sam Vedder. And finally he wound up in a tone of voice that nearly curled the wallpaper.

"I won't fire you! I'll just dock you four fifths of your wages for the next month. That'll be enough punishment—"

"I quit!" Sam Vedder said hastily.

A brand-new gleam came into Captain Billy's eyes. "You'll quit? You try that and I'll beat out your brains. I'll blacklist you with every agency in town, and I'll frame you with the cops."

Vedder reeled toward the door, but Captain Bligh shouted him back: "Your report, you blundering idiot!"

Vedder took the notebook from his pocket and after moistening his lips, began:

"Subject left his apartment on Seventy-ninth Street, at ten twelve. He walked to Sixty-fourth Street and Fifth Avenue, during which time he tried to pick up two different women. He was rebuffed in each instance. At Sixty-fourth Street he got into a Fifth Avenue bus and rode to Fiftieth Street. He then walked west to Sixth Avenue. He stopped at a clip jewelry auction for a half-hour and made two unsuccessful bids on some cheap jewelry. He emerged at ten fifty and—"

Captain Bligh growled: "Get on with it; get on with it!"

"I am," retorted Vedder. "He worked his way down Sixth Avenue, tried to pick up a couple more janes and entered several shooting galleries where he played pin-ball games and shot at ducks and clay pipes. Near Forty-third Street he went into a secondhand bookstore and looked at pictures of women in art magazines—"

Captain Bligh began to show his teeth and Vedder skipped the rest, hurriedly. "He gave me the slip on Forty-second—"

"I don't doubt it," Bligh snarled. "You were probably as prominent as an elephant. Get on with it."

Vedder's ears became red. "He ducked into a building and beat me to an elevator that was just

going up. I deduced"—Bligh's lips curled scornfully and Vedder winced—"that he got off at the tenth floor. I rode up to the tenth floor, myself, started around a turn in the corridor and this murderer conked me with the lead pipe—" Vedder touched the lump on his chin.

"Lead pipe!" Captain Bligh sneered. "Probably his fist. I always thought you had a glass chin. So you got laid out cold, and when you woke up, Hotchkiss was lying next to you, dead—"

"I didn't pass out," Vedder gritted. "I was dazed for a minute, that's all. A lead pipe—"

"And then you waited for the cops to come and grab you," Captain Bligh went on, "thereby causing me great humiliation and inconvenience in bailing you out."

Vedder glowered. "You know I didn't like this shadowing business in the first place. That's Bobcat's business."

"Bobcat was busy!" snapped Bligh. "It was a simple enough job. All you had to do was follow an old goat who's about as subtle as a goldfish. And you couldn't even do that."

"In the second place," Vedder persisted, "you led me to believe that the guy's wife was merely trying to get evidence for a divorce—"

"I told you that?" Bligh demanded. "You're crazy. I never mentioned divorce at all. We were hired to shadow Hotchkiss and find out what he did. Nothing was said about a divorce—"

"Well, who hired the agency?"

"A man named Chisholm. He didn't say why he wanted Hotchkiss shadowed and naturally I didn't ask him. It was a lousy twenty-five-dollar job. I thought even *you* could do it."

"I don't like to shadow guys," Vedder said. "I'm too conspicuous."

"Because you look like Clark Gable, maybe?" Captain Bligh said biting.

Vedder again backed to the door. Bligh let him go, but as he went out, gave him a parting salvo: "And if you think you can wheedle me into remitting that fine, you're crazy!"

Vedder closed the door, took a handkerchief from his pocket and began mopping his face.

"If you make that man swear like that again, I'm going to quit my job," Emma Todd said.

From his bench cot, Bobcat called softly: "That goes for me, too. If a man can't get his sleep around here—"

The outer door opened and silver-fox pelts came into the office. They were in the form of a short jacket and they were worn by—the girl who had slapped Hotchkiss' face on Sixth Avenue.

Vedder stared at the girl. She looked him squarely in the eyes, but there was no sign of recognition. Apparently, he had been merely part of the background for the episode on Sixth Avenue.

The girl advanced toward Emma Todd's desk and

said in a rich, throaty voice: "I'd like to see Captain Bligh."

Emma's eyes were instantly cold and hostile. A good-looking working girl is always hostile toward an equally attractive nonworking girl, especially if the latter wears a silver-fox jacket that costs in the neighborhood of what the working girl earns in six months.

Emma said crisply: "Your name, please? I'll see if Captain Bligh can see you—"

The newcomer replied coolly: "I'd prefer not to give my name. Just tell Captain Bligh that I want to engage his services in an important matter."

Emma Todd got up from her chair and slipped quietly into Bligh's office. She remained inside about ten seconds, then came out and motioned to the other girl.

The girl and her fur jacket went into Bligh's office.

Bobcat whistled. "The 'Follies'! I'll bet—"

"A buck," challenged Vedder. "A society girl—the daughter of a millionaire."

"I'm in on it," said Emma Todd. "A dollar says she lives in a penthouse on the West Side—"

A buzzer whirled under Emma's desk and she picked up the interoffice phone. She said: "Very well, Mr. Bligh." She hung up and nodded to Sam Vedder. "You, Sherlock. He wants you."

Sam Vedder said: "Don't forget, that's a bet!" He opened the door of Captain Bligh's office and was almost bowled over by the fond smile the captain bestowed upon him.

"Miss Prescott," Bligh said oilily, "this is Mr. Vedder, my associate. Undoubtedly the finest private operator in the business. A human bloodhound, that's what he is. Once he gets on the trail of a man, nothing can stop him. Nothing!"

Miss Prescott surveyed Vedder impersonally. "He doesn't look like much," she observed candidly.

Captain Bligh took it up from there. "That, Miss Prescott, is the sign of a *real* detective. A man like Mr. Vedder can go anywhere. He can mingle with all types and never be conspicuous—a tremendous asset to a detective. I assure you, Mr. Vedder is—"

"All right," Miss Prescott said impatiently. "I don't want to buy him. I only want to hire him. What'll it cost me?"

Captain Bligh's eyes became fixed upon the silver-fox jacket. He said: "You understand, Miss Prescott, you're getting the very best there is. You could go to an ordinary agency and hire an ordinary man for almost nothing, but this agency—er—we specialize in the very best—"

"Fifty dollars?"

Captain Bligh looked reproachfully at Miss Prescott. "For an operator of Mr. Vedder's caliber? Ah, Miss—"

"A hundred dollars a day!" the girl snapped. "And not a nickel more."

Captain Bligh surrendered. He did it very gracefully, considering that his regular charge was only twenty-five dollars a day.

"Very well, Miss Prescott, for you—"

The girl turned on Sam Vedder. "Come along!"

Vedder looked inquiringly—and bewilderedly—at Captain Bligh. The captain smiled pleasantly. "All right, old man. This is Miss Susan Prescott. She will tell you what she wants. Just make your usual reports—"

"To me," Susan Prescott said bluntly. "That's what I'm hiring him for. You'll get your money, Captain Bligh. That's all that should concern you."

"Of course, Miss Prescott."

Susan Prescott walked out of the office. Vedder lingered only for a malicious glance at his employer, then followed Miss Prescott out.

III.

Without looking to see if Vedder even followed, Susan Prescott left the offices of the Bligh Detective Agency. In the elevator riding down to the street level she still did not look at Vedder. But as they were leaving the building she finally spoke to her newly hired employee:

"The car is at the curb; get in."

A chauffeur sat behind the wheel of the limousine, oblivious of the fact that the car was parked by a fire plug and that a cop was loitering only thirty feet away.

Vedder opened the rear door and Miss Prescott brushed past him into the limousine. Vedder followed and plumped himself down on the soft cushions.

Without instruction, the chauffeur started his motor. He backed up the limousine and banged the bumper of the car behind. Then he turned the wheel, missed the fender of the taxicab in front and zoomed out into traffic.

Miss Prescott then said, without looking at Vedder: "Captain Bligh tells me you can keep your mouth shut."

To prove it, Sam Vedder said nothing. Susan Prescott nodded approvingly. "My father's life has been threatened. That's why I'm hiring you. To guard him."

"For a hundred dollars a day?"

Miss Prescott frowned. "What's that? Are you trying to be impertinent?"

"Not at all, Miss Prescott. I'm trying to get an idea of the case, that's all. Who's threatening your father's life?"

"A man named Hotchkiss. Clyde Hotchkiss."

Vedder almost choked. "Did you say Clyde Hotchkiss?"

"I did," snapped Susan Prescott. "He's a sneak

thief. He's threatened to kill father and he's quite capable of carrying out his threat. Father doesn't think so, but I do. That's why I'm hiring you against father's wishes."

Vedder exhaled heavily. "Well, this is going to be an awful blow to Captain Billy. The hundred bucks a day, I mean. You see, Miss Prescott, Clyde Hotchkiss isn't going to kill your father. He can't, because he's already been killed, himself."

Susan Prescott looked sharply at Vedder. "What's that? Hotchkiss is dead?"

"It ought to be in the newspapers by now. Have the chauffeur stop at the next corner and get one."

"Never mind. I'll take your word for it. Who killed him?"

"The same guy who belted me on the chin with a lead pipe wrapped in a newspaper."

"What? You saw him killed?"

Vedder nodded. "A client hired the agency to shadow Hotchkiss. I got the assignment. I followed him all around town and then he tried to lose me. Before I caught up to him, someone had slipped it to him. I suppose I'm fired, now?"

"No!" cried Susan Prescott. "Father will need you more than ever, now. I was wrong about Hotchkiss. It wasn't he who threatened father's life. And the scoundrel has proved it wasn't an empty threat. He isn't bluffing. I know *that*, now."

Vedder sighed wearily. "If you'd tell me what this is all about, from the beginning, maybe I'd be able to do something for you."

Susan Prescott frowned at the back of her chauffeur's head. "I don't know. I only know that father received a threat this morning. Rather, it was I who took the message on the telephone. A man's voice said that if father didn't cease he'd be killed. That's all I know."

"Cease what?" Vedder demanded impatiently.

"He didn't say. But I know what he meant. It's the book. He knows that father has been negotiating for it, and he doesn't want him to have it. I thought it was Hotchkiss, but I see I've been mistaken. It must be Chisholm. Although—"

"Chisholm!" cried Vedder. "Why, that's the man who—"

Susan Prescott's head swiveled toward Vedder. Her clear blue eyes fixed themselves upon Vedder's face. "Chisholm is the man who hired you to shadow Hotchkiss?"

"I didn't say that," Vedder countered. "I guess I'd better report to Captain Bligh, before I go any further on this."

"No!" exclaimed Susan. "I'm paying you two hundred dollars a day—"

"One hundred—"

"Two hundred! And for that much money I've a right to your full and exclusive services, which includes not only your physical self but whatever

amount of brain you possess. Now that that's understood, we'll go on! Chisholm hired you to shadow Hotchkiss. What for? What did he want to know?"

Vedder shrugged. "He didn't say. He just asked for a complete report of everything Hotchkiss did today. I picked up Hotchkiss as he left his apartment at Seventy-ninth Street. He didn't do a thing that was interesting. Unless you call visiting shooting galleries and secondhand bookstores interesting."

"What bookstore?"

"A dump on Sixth Avenue near Forty-third Street."

"Eisenschein!" cried Susan Prescott. "That awful place Felix Eisenschein runs as a front. So Eisenschein and Hotchkiss were working together. Did you overhear any of their conversation?"

"No, because Hotchkiss didn't talk to anyone in the store. He just went in and looked at a lot of pictures of . . . er . . . artists' models, in some of those cheap art magazines. He didn't talk to anyone the entire time he was in the place."

Susan Prescott said: "Then he saw he was being shadowed. He spotted you. What did he do after he left Eisenschein's?"

Vedder had been expecting this. He said softly: "He tried to pick up a girl and got his face slapped. The girl wore a silver-fox jacket!"

He did not look sideward, but he knew that her eyes were on him. After a moment she said: "Go on, what did he do then?"

"He walked west on Forty-second Street."

Susan Prescott's tone became eager again. "Where did he go?"

"I'm getting to that. He ducked into an office building and he *did* give me the slip then, for a few minutes. When I found where he had gone to—"

"The tenth floor of that building?"

Vedder scowled. "How do you know?"

"Because that's where Eisenschein's office is located. The place on Sixth Avenue is just a blind. He keeps his son there. He has the real stuff at his place on Forty-second Street. Go ahead. You followed Hotchkiss to Eisenschein's office. What then?"

"That's all. I didn't follow Hotchkiss to any office. When I got up to the tenth floor, the fellow hit me with lead pipe. When I regained consciousness, Hotchkiss was on the floor. His head was bashed in!"

Susan Prescott cried out in horror. "He was killed in front of Eisenschein's office? In the corridor?"

"I didn't know anything about any Eisenschein. All I know is that I got off the elevator and some guy tangled with me. The next thing I knew, there

was Hotchkiss dead. Some dame—girl—came out of an office and hollered. Then cops came from all directions. They grabbed me and accused me of killing Hotchkiss. That's what Bligh was so sore about when you came in. He had to bail me out of jail and he didn't like it."

Susan Prescott's white teeth were gnawing at her lower lip. "And you didn't know anything about Eisenschein? You don't even know if Hotchkiss had been in his office?"

"No. I didn't know anything after I was hit."

"But you saw the man. What did he look like?"

"I don't know. I was turning around the corner of the hall and bumped into him. We both went down, and before I could get up, he slapped me with that lead pipe and beat it. I never did get a look at him."

Susan Prescott exclaimed: "But you *must* know! Was he fat and bald? That would be Eisenschein. Or was he black-haired with a large nose? That would be Felix's son—the one who keeps the bookstore."

Vedder shook his head. "I don't know if he was short or tall, fat or lean. All I know is that he had a lead pipe wrapped in a newspaper."

"How do you know that?" Susan Prescott asked bitingly.

Vedder touched the sore spot on his chin. "Because nothing less than that would have knocked me goofy. It was a lead pipe rolled up in a newspaper. I'm sure of that!"

Up to now, the chauffeur had been rolling the car smoothly along. Vedder had been so engrossed in his conversation with Susan Prescott that he had neglected to watch where they had been going. But now the car pulled up to the curb. The chauffeur got out and ran around to open the door.

Susan Prescott said: "We're here!"

She got out and Vedder followed her. On the sidewalk he regarded the four-story brownstone house. It was one of the last of the old mansions once rather common on the Avenue.

Susan Prescott ran up a short flight of stairs to the front door, and before she even reached it, the door was opened by a liveried butler. Vedder followed the girl into the house and through a richly furnished living room to a huge room lined to the ceiling with books.

A lean, gray-haired man, sitting in a leather chair, was examining a book with the aid of a reading glass.

Susan Prescott cried: "Father, this is Mr. Vedder, a detective! I've employed him. Something awful has happened."

Prescott closed his book with a slam and looked at his daughter. His face darkened with anger. "A detective! I told you I didn't want a—"

"But you haven't heard yet, father. Clyde Hotchkiss has been killed—murdered!"

"I know it," Prescott said crisply. "Heard it on the radio, a half-hour ago. I'm sorry, but I can't mourn for him. He was a thief and a scoundrel and probably richly deserved what he got."

"Perhaps, yes, father!" Susan said intensely. "It's not that. It's that threat! You seemed to think it was Hotchkiss, but his death proves that it wasn't. Therefore, it must be someone else! Perhaps someone you don't suspect in the least, a close friend—"

"Bosh! It was just some jealous crank. They're all a bunch of cats. But I never really heard of a collector being killed by another collector. No, Susan, I'm sorry, but you had no right to hire this . . . this detective!"

Vedder shrugged. "You're the boss, mister. It's O. K. by me. I get my salary whether—"

Susan Prescott shot Vedder an angry look. "I don't care for your attitude, Mr. Vedder. And, father, you must listen. Mr. Vedder, here, is the man who was employed by James Chisholm to spy upon Clyde Hotchkiss—"

Prescott exploded. "What sort of nonsense is this? You, sir, explain the meaning of all this rot."

Sam Vedder looked down at his hands. "I work for the Bligh Detective Agency. A man named Chisholm hired us to shadow this Hotchkiss. I drew the assignment and was carrying it out when Hotchkiss was killed. That's all there is to it. Unless your daughter wants to tell you more."

"I?" exclaimed Susan Prescott. "I don't know anything about it."

"No?" said Vedder carelessly. "I thought you might want to say something about what happened when Hotchkiss came out of that bookstore on Sixth—"

She sighed suddenly, in surrender. "Very well. I was afraid you remembered me. It so happens that I sometimes act as my father's assistant. That is, I take care of his books and things. I was going downtown to purchase—stationery. There's a rather large place on Forty-fourth Street where they sell such things and that's where I was going when a man accosted me."

"Hotchkiss," Vedder murmured.

"Hotchkiss!" Susan Prescott declared. "Very well, but I assure you that I had no idea in the world that that was Clyde Hotchkiss. You may ask my father."

Vedder looked at Susan's father for confirmation. The old man snapped: "What's this all about? Susan, did you meet that thief?"

"It seems that I did. He . . . well, he tried to pick me up. I didn't know who he was—"

"Hold it!" snapped Vedder. "You insist you didn't know Hotchkiss?"

"I never met him in my life. Of course, I'd heard about him—plenty—from father. Isn't that so?"

Prescott nodded. "I was fully acquainted with his character and naturally I would not suffer him to come into my house. I would no more think of having business dealings with him than I would—than I would think of flying to Mars in a rocket plane. And that's all there's to it. Now, Susan, if you will—"

Susan Prescott looked helplessly at her father. Then she sighed in surrender. "Very well. Mr. Vedder, since father insists, there's nothing I can do but let you go. I think it's no more than right, however, that you be paid a day's wages. If you will write out a check, father—"

"Send it to Captain Bligh," Vedder said bluntly. He frowned at Prescott, who had again opened his book and was focusing his reading glass on it. "Good afternoon, folks!" he said.

Without being summoned, the butler appeared from nowhere and escorted Vedder to the door.

IV.

Outside, he looked at his watch. It was after four o'clock. No need to go back to the office now. Captain Billy would undoubtedly accuse him of losing a lucrative client; and coming on top of Vedder's previous disgrace of the day, it was more than Vedder felt he could bear.

He walked west on Central Park South, mulling over the events of the day. For a moment or two, he toyed with the idea of running back to Forty-second Street and interviewing a man named Eisenschein. The whole affair was puzzling, and being possessed of a more-than-average bump of curiosity, Vedder could not help wondering what it was all about.

But he wasn't being paid to satisfy his curiosity. On the west side of Central Park he descended to the subway, bought a newspaper and after a while caught an uptown local.

The train came out of the subway to the elevated at 125th Street. Vedder got out of the local and, having finished his newspaper, tossed it into the trash can on the platform. The movement of throwing the paper brought his arm up to his right breast, and he felt the folded pamphlet he had been carrying since he had picked it up from the floor of the building on Forty-second Street.

He took it out of his pocket and saw that it was an old-fashioned story paper. According to the title on the wrapper, it contained two stories: "Murders In The Rue Morgue" and "The Man That Was Used Up."

His nose wrinkled in distaste. He liked detective stories, but this one was too out-of-date. The old-timers, Vedder knew from experience, were too slow for the present day. However, he had picked up the booklet under unusual circumstances, so he flicked the pages as he descended the long staircase to Broadway.

There was no writing anywhere in the booklet. As he stepped to the sidewalk, Vedder tossed the thing into a waste container. Then he walked blithely up the hill to his rooming house.

In the hallway he encountered Mrs. Polichek, his landlady. "Evenin', Mr. Vedder," she greeted him. "There were a couple of gentlemen here lookin' for you. You just missed 'em."

"Two men looking for me?" Vedder asked, in surprise. Very few people knew where he lived. "What'd they look like?"

Mrs. Polichek shrugged expressively. "Not so good. Kinda mean-lookin', if you know what I mean."

Vedder winced. Mean-looking. Only bill collectors were mean-looking and these two men might very well be bill collectors. Yes, they undoubtedly were, for in Vedder's room, right now, was a letter from the Ajax Accordion Co. He had received it a week ago. It stated in no uncertain terms that something drastic was going to happen to Mr. Sam Vedder unless he promptly remitted the last two installments due on his accordion, Model F-2, purchased by Mr. Vedder some months previous.

Vedder had done nothing about the letter. "Just a couple of insurance agents who've been bothering me," he told Mrs. Polichek. "The next time they come around, tell them I moved and didn't leave any address."

He climbed the stairs to the second floor and walked toward his room in front, overlooking Riverside Drive and the Hudson River.

He put his key into the lock and it didn't work, but the door was suddenly pulled open from the inside. A man who needed a shave in the worst way stuck a neat-looking .32 automatic in Vedder's face.

"Come in, pal, come in!" he invited.

Behind the unshaven man was another, a fellow who looked like a broken-down heavyweight wrestler. He caught hold of Vedder's arm and jerked him into the room.

The man with the gun slammed the door shut and remained there with his back against it. Vedder's eyes darted about the room. It looked as if a Caribbean hurricane had gone through it. The rug was pulled back, the cushions from the sofa were strewn about the floor, the drawer of the writing desk was dumped on the floor and papers and letters were strewn everywhere.

Vedder said grimly: "The accordion's in the bedroom. If you'd asked me for it, I'd have given it to you."

The man with the gun said, "Wise guy, huh?"

"Not very," Vedder retorted. "But I know a couple of bill collectors who've been too wise for their own good. They'll find out about it later."

The man who looked like a wrestler blinked his piggish eyes. "Bill collectors? Roscoe—he thinks we're bill collectors."

"He's kidding, Louie. He knows damn well what we're looking for. Don't you, Vedder?"

"I'm overdue two installments on an accordion," Vedder said. "You're here to collect them, or else—huh?"

Roscoe made an impatient gesture with his gun. "Frisk him, Louie. He might have it in his pocket."

Louie advanced clumsily toward Vedder. But there was nothing clumsy about him once he got his hands on Vedder. One thick arm whipped about Vedder's neck and held him in a viselike grip. He used his other hand to go through Vedder's pockets.

The net result of his search was a fistful of money. He released Vedder and began counting the money. "Four dollars and seventy-five cents, Roscoe?"

"Chicken feed!" Roscoe snorted. "So he hasn't got it on him. All right, punk, what'd you do with it?"

"If you tell me what you're looking for, I might be able to answer your question—"

"Cut it!" Roscoe interposed. "We're looking for the book and you know it. The one you swiped from Clyde Hotchkiss."

Vedder inhaled softly. "That! Why, there wasn't anything in it!"

"Who said there was? It's the book that we want."

Vedder shook his head. "I haven't got it. I . . . threw it away!"

At a distance of six feet, Vedder could see the trigger finger of Roscoe whiten. For one horrible moment he thought that Roscoe was going to shoot. But, then, the muzzle of the automatic was slowly lowered.

Roscoe said, through his teeth: "You're not that dumb. You were shadowing Hotchkiss; you knew—"

"I didn't know, I tell you!" Vedder cried. "I only work for Bligh's Agency. I get sixty dollars a week, and I do what I'm told. I thought Hotchkiss's wife wanted him shadowed, for divorce evidence, that's what—"

"You *thought* that!" Roscoe gritted. "But you know better now. Who told you?"

"No one. It's just that after he was killed and I had been slugged by the murderer, I knew then that it was more than just a divorce case—"

"The guy who hit you?" Roscoe snarled. "What'd he look like?"

"I don't know. I didn't get a look at him."

Roscoe made a signal to Louie. Louie grinned and suddenly cuffed Vedder on the side of the head. The blow was delivered in an almost playful manner, but Louie apparently did not realize his own weight and strength. The blow rocked Vedder and caused his ears to ring.

Roscoe said again: "What'd he look like?"



Louie stepped forward and cuffed Vedder on the side of the head. The blow rocked Vedder and caused his ears to ring.

"I don't know!" Vedder cried. "I didn't see him—"

Louie laid his open palm along the other side of Vedder's face. Vedder was slammed against a chest of drawers and an edge dug into his ribs and caused him to gasp.

"The next time he uses his fists," Roscoe snarled.

"All right," Vedder said. "He was about five feet ten inches tall, weighed one hundred and sixty pounds and was about thirty years old." The description would have fitted Vedder, himself, yet it seemed to make an impression on Roscoe.

"Did he have a long nose?" he asked eagerly.

Vedder nodded. "And black hair. Dark, any-

way." It was a blind stab, but it registered again.

Roscoe's eyes gleamed. "All right, I think I know who it was. It fits in— Now, about the book, where is it?"

Vedder's hands felt suddenly clammy. He'd been lying and had gotten away with it. But, now, he *could* tell the truth. And if he did—

He said: "It's in the office safe."

Roscoe swore dispassionately. "That's what I was afraid of. It looks like—"

With a lightning movement he lunged forward and swung the automatic at Vedder's head. The shamus, half expecting something of the sort, already had his arm up. He took the blow partially

on his wrist, although the weapon thumped his head. He cried out in pain and slumped to his knees. From there, he dropped to his face and lay still.

He was fully conscious, but knew that it was safer to pretend unconsciousness. It was.

"Come on, Louie," Roscoe said. "We got work to do."

Then both men left Vedder's apartment. Scarcely had the door closed than Vedder was on his feet. He threw the bolt in the door first; then he turned toward a closet.

"The next time I meet those two," he muttered aloud, "I start shooting."

He jerked open the closet door and, stooping, pressed on one of the floor boards. One end of it came up sufficiently for him to get a finger hold. He lifted up the board and, from a small compartment underneath, took a .32 automatic and a small roll of bills, kept there for emergencies.

Captain Bligh didn't like his operators to carry guns. His theory was that a gun in a detective's pocket robbed him of initiative. Captain Billy was strong for the brain stuff. But Vedder had a license to carry this gun, and he was going to carry it—as long as two strong-arm men named Roscoe and Louie were at large and liable to pay him another visit.

Slipping the gun into his coat pocket, he unlocked the door. He hurried down the stairs and peered cautiously out the front door, just to make sure the thugs had gone. He could not see them.

He opened the door and stepped out to the street. He headed directly for Broadway, down the hill. And then, for several minutes, the people of that vicinity enjoyed the spectacle of a rather neatly dressed, well-built man rummaging through the newspapers and trash.

He found it, already inches deep under accumulated papers. He took it out and dusted it with his coat sleeve. Then he stared at it, perplexed.

Finally he stuck the thing into his pocket and started to walk briskly up Broadway, to where, several blocks away, stood the numerous buildings that were Columbia University.

Before he reached the university buildings, however, he paused before a hole-in-the-wall shop, before which was a rack of weather-stained books.

He went down three stairs from the street level to the entrance of the shop and pushed open the door.

As a rule, there were three or four browsers in the place. But, for once, the store was empty, save for the proprietor, a young, sandy-haired man of about Vedder's own age. His face broke into a smile of welcome when he saw Vedder. "Sam, old man, where've you been keeping yourself?"

"In the kennels with the rest of the dogs, Johnny," Vedder replied. Vedder had known

Johnny Jackson for years. He stopped in at Jackson's little shop on an average of once or twice a month. Johnny kept him supplied with reading matter, for which he generally refused to take payment.

Vedder said to him, now: "Johnny, old boy, you're pretty well up on this secondhand book business, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Jackson admitted, "but there's no money in it. Not around this location, anyway. The college kids don't have enough money to spend. And the rental-library competition is tough."

Vedder took the folded pamphlet from his pocket. "Look," he said. "Is this thing worth anything?"

Jackson took one look at the booklet, then snatched it from Vedder's hands. He stared at it while an expression of stupefaction spread across his face. "No," he whispered. "It can't be— It can't be!"

"Can't be what?" Vedder asked sharply.

"Poe's 'Murders In The Rue Morgue.'"

"Why not? It says so right on the cover. What's wrong with the darned thing? There *is* something wrong, I know. Too much has happened today in connection with that thing, already."

Jackson stared at Vedder in awe. "Where did you get this?"

"I found it."

"No," said Jackson, shaking his head. "You couldn't just have found it. Such things don't happen—"

"All right," Vedder snapped. "A man was killed and I was slugged. The guy who did both jobs dropped this in his hurry to make a getaway."

The book dealer suddenly handed the booklet back to Vedder. "A man's been killed over this? Then I don't want anything to do with it!"

Vedder winced. "For the last time, Johnny, what's so remarkable about this darned thing?"

"Nothing," said John Jackson. "Nothing at all, except that it happens to be one of the rarest pieces of Americana in existence. As far as I know, there are only three like it in all the world—and this might be one of those three."

Vedder inhaled softly. "Rare, eh? Well, how much is it worth? Fifty bucks?"

Jackson groaned and clapped a hand to his forehead. "Fifty dollars! Lord, I'd give this entire shop for it—and you'd be gypped. I could go out and sell that thing inside of an hour for twenty-five thousand dollars. And if I had a week to write to certain collectors out of town, I could double that price."

"Fifty grand!" gasped Vedder. "You're crazy! No book's worth that much. Why . . . why, I could go to the highest-priced printer in town and get a hundred copies just like it for not more'n a couple of hundred dollars."

"Sure, you could. No doubt of it. But it wouldn't be the same. This is a first edition; it was

printed in 1843 and didn't have a wide circulation. Edgar Allan Poe was virtually unknown at the time. Later—after his death—his works came into demand; especially his first editions, since collectors collect mainly first editions."

"Some people are screwy," Vedder muttered. "But I'll take your word for it. I knew a guy once who collected stamps and set all kinds of fancy prices on them. Well, look, Johnny, I'd like to leave this thing here with you—"

Jackson drew back in horror. "Not here. I wouldn't be able to sleep. Why, I had a copy of the Cherokee Bible here once and I worried so much about it I sold it at a loss just to get rid of it. My stuff here is strictly secondhand—but it isn't rare. Take the thing with you, Sam!"

"But what'll I do with it?"

"Take it down to Felix Eisenschein on Forty-second Street. He's one of the biggest rare-book dealers in the business. He'll knock you down on the price—"

"Oh, but I can't sell it. It's not really mine. You see, a client of the agency's had it—or got mixed up with someone else who had it. Anyway, the client got himself killed and—"

"Killed?" cried Johnny Jackson. "Then get out of here with that thing. I should have known. Any rare-book collector would kill a man for that piece. Take it away, Sam—hurry!"

Somewhat reluctantly, Sam Vedder stowed the pamphlet away in his pocket. Then, frowning, he left the bookshop. Outside, he stood for a moment and looked down Broadway.

V.

Vedder strode to a drugstore. As he entered and moved toward the telephone booths, he looked at a wall clock and saw that it was near six o'clock.

In a booth, he dialed a number. After a moment Emma Todd's best telephonic voice said: "Bligh Detective Agency."

Vedder said: "This is you know who. Is the big, bad wolf still in the office?"

"You mean that noble gentleman who rents out gigolos to escort penthouse girls to their penthouses?"

Vedder chuckled. "That reminds me, you and Bobcat each owe me a dollar. She is society, and she lives with her papa in one of those museums on Fifth Avenue. The captain's gone?"

"If he isn't, he's hiding under his desk, because I don't see him. What do you want, Romeo? Hurry up, because I've got a date and—"

"And you'll wait right there at the office until I come down. Business, my pet! And if that human bloodhound isn't still sleeping on the bench, locate him and get him down there right away. Understand?"

Emma caught the urgency in Vedder's voice.

She said: "What's up?"

"Plenty! First of all, lock your door and don't open up for anyone except me. I'll be down in ten minutes."

He hung up the receiver and trotted out of the drugstore. Outside, he decided to squander some of his hard-earned money and hopped into a taxi.

In a little more than ten minutes he bounced out of the cab before the skyscraper on Madison Avenue which housed the offices of the Bligh Detective Agency.

Emma Todd had taken his warning to heart. The office door was locked and Vedder had to knock and announce his name before it was opened. Then Bobcat slipped a pair of brass knuckles from his fist to his pocket.

"What's up, Sam?" both Bobcat and Emma asked. Emma looked closely at him and said: "You look like you got slapped around. Did the gal in the fox skins cuff you?"

Vedder wrinkled his nose. "All she did was fire me!"

"The skipper will be pleased!" Emma Todd exclaimed. "He was already adding up his bank balance. How come, chum?"

"Her papa didn't want a detective. Here, let me explain." Rapidly he related the events of the day, beginning with the time he had picked up Clyde Hotchkiss for his shadow and ending with the assault on him by the thugs, Roscoe and Louie, in his own apartment. He finished the story by whipping out the ancient copy of the "Murders In The Rue Morgue." "And this hunk of paper, my friends, is what it's all about. It's worth twenty-five G's—maybe fifty!"

Bobcat snorted. "Somebody's kiddin' you, Sam. I've got a hundred better-looking magazines than that right at home that I'd sell for a nickel apiece."

"I don't doubt it," said Vedder. "I couldn't believe it, myself, at first. But a man's been killed because of this, and another's had his life threatened."

Emma Todd was frowning. "I'm not an authority on rare books, but I've heard about that 'Murders In The Rue Morgue.' There was a piece in the papers two or three years ago. Someone found a copy in a bunch of rubbish and sold it to a dealer, along with a stack of other old books, for a total price of seventy-five cents. The dealer sold the Poe book for a box-car-number sum. But you can't keep that book."

Vedder shrugged. "Well, who gets it? Hotchkiss is dead. He has no relatives or friends. The police learned that."

"You don't know for sure that it belonged to Hotchkiss," Emma said. "Didn't the Prescott woman—and her father, too—both say that Hotchkiss was a crook? Perhaps he stole this book and was taking it to this dealer, Eisenschein, to sell. Sell. Wouldn't that make Eisenschein a—a fence?"

"A fence for stolen books? I think you've got something there, Emma. Hop over to the phone and give his office a ring. You ought to find him in the classified directory under book dealers."

Emma went to the telephone and put in a call. After a minute she said: "No soap, Sam. He doesn't answer. I guess he keeps regular office hours."

Vedder scowled. "Then I'll amble over to the dump run by his son. And you, Bobcat—you cover this James Chisholm who hired the agency to shadow Hotchkiss. Find out from him exactly why he wanted Hotchkiss shadowed. He may not want to talk. Give it to him strong—Hotchkiss getting killed, maybe on account of being shadowed—"

Bobcat winked. "He'll talk. Don't worry about it."

Emma said: "But, Sam, you're not going over to Eisenschein's with that book on you."

Vedder screwed up his mouth. "I can't leave it here. When those pugs were giving me the once-over, I told them the book was in the office safe. Dollars to secondhand chewing gum, the office is burgled tonight."

Emma Todd stepped to her desk and brought out a large Manila mailing envelope. "Here, Sam," she said, "put it in this. We'll address it to the office, here, and mail it outside. It'll be safe in Uncle Sam's hands until nine thirty tomorrow morning."

Vedder winked at Emma. "Even if you haven't got silver-fox pelts, I like you better."

Emma made a moist, raucous noise with her tongue. She scribbled an address on the Manila envelope and sealed the pamphlet inside.

As the trio went out of the office, Emma said: "There had better be some money in this for the extra work, or we'll all catch the devil from the skipper tomorrow. You, especially, Sam."

They parted outside, Bobcat running to catch a Madison Avenue bus and Emma Todd heading for Grand Central and a subway train. Sam Vedder started west to Sixth Avenue.

The secondhand bookstore had its usual crowd of browsers and loafers. Sam sauntered in carelessly, pawed over a few books; then he moved toward a tall, black-haired young fellow who presided over a cash register by the door. The youth had an extremely long nose.

Vedder said to him: "You buy secondhand books and magazines here, don't you?"

Young Eisenschein shrugged. "Why not? How many you got?"

"Why, I haven't got so many. But some of them are pretty old. The books, I mean. I thought they might be worth a little more. They've been up in my grandmother's attic for a long time."

A small amount of interest came into Eisen-

schein's eyes. "Well," he said, "as a rule, the older a book is, the less it's worth. There are some dopes who go in for antiques, though, and it's possible that one or two of the books might be worth a little more—just as curiosities, you know. D'you happen to know any of the titles of the old books?"

Vedder's knowledge of old books was as scarce as his knowledge of trigonometry. He rubbed his chin and took a stab at the first title that came to his mind. "Well, one of 'em's called 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.' It was printed before the Civil War—"

"Uh-huh," said Eisenschein. "A million copies of that are still floating around. Not worth a nickel."

"Well," Vedder went on, "there are some others that I don't remember so well. One's by a guy named Poe or something. It's an old-fashioned detective story, 'Murders In The Morgue.' N-no, 'Rue Morgue,' I guess it is."

Eisenschein's eyes were suddenly fixed upon Vedder. He seemed to be holding his breath. "That's in a magazine, isn't it? *Graham's Magazine*, maybe?"

"The name Graham is familiar," Vedder said. "I guess his name is on the cover. But it ain't really a magazine. More like a regular book. Yeah, now I recall. It's only got two stories in it. 'Murders In The Rue Morgue' and 'The Man That Was Used Up.'"

Eisenschein's mouth trembled and he became pale. "No," he said, "there's no such book that I know of."

"But there is," Vedder insisted. "I've got it. Since you mention it, I recall it even clearer. Even the date on it—1843—"

"Then," said Eisenschein tensely, "it must be a reprint of some other book. You . . . you've got me curious about it, now. I'd like to see it."

"Why, sure," said Vedder. "I'll bring it in sometime."

"Sometime—" murmured Eisenschein. "Um-m-m—as a matter of fact, I've got a customer who goes in for freaks like that. If the book's like you say it is, I'm quite sure I could use it. I'd give you a buck or so for it."

Vedder pretended disappointment. "Is that all? Shucks, I'd kinda hoped for more, seeing's how old it is and all—"

Eisenschein shook his head and at the same time he looked at his watch. "It's my supper time. Say, which way do you live?"

"Oh, I live way uptown."

"Fine! I'm going that way, myself. What say I stop in at your place and look at this—these books of yours? Maybe there are a couple of other pieces I could use."

Vedder shook his head. "No, I don't want to bother you. Not tonight. I'll bring them in sometime—"

"It's no bother at all. You've worked up my curiosity. I'll tell you what—" Eisenschein punched the cash register. "I'll probably lose money on the deal, but here's five dollars for that booklet—sight unseen—provided that it's really called 'Murders In The Rue Morgue.' O. K.?"

Vedder looked longingly at the bill, but still shook his head. "Sorry, I just stopped in here for a minute. I've got a date tonight and—well, you know—"

A fine film of perspiration came out on young Eisenschein's forehead. "You've got five minutes, haven't you? Hold it for that long. I want to telephone my father. I think I heard him say something about another customer—more money—"

Eisenschein sprang for a private telephone booth in a corner. Vedder chuckled and pawed over some old copies of *Printer's Ink*.

Eisenschein came out of the telephone booth, breathing hoarsely. "Pop's coming over. He lives just up the street in a hotel—"

Vedder said: "Sorry, mister, but I'm late for my date. I'll stop in tomorrow—"

Eisenschein clawed frantically at Vedder's coat sleeve and followed him to the door. "Five minutes, mister—wait for pop. He'll be sore if I don't keep you here. Ten bucks—the devil—twenty-five dollars we'll give you for that book. We got a customer who—"

Vedder pulled away from Eisenschein. "My girl won't wait two minutes. I stood her up once and—"

He shoved open the door and young Eisenschein followed him out to the sidewalk. "Fifty dollars!" he screamed.

Vedder grimaced and headed briskly for Forty-second Street. As he turned the corner toward Broadway, he shot a look back and saw young Eisenschein standing in the middle of the sidewalk, huddled and dejected-looking.

"The dirty crook," Vedder muttered. "He'd give a guy a buck for a book worth fifty thousand dollars. I should have poked him in the face. Well—now what?"

The little episode just concluded had been worth no more than entertainment. The Eisenscheins were aware of the "Murders In The Rue Morgue," but so, probably was every book dealer in the country. Young Eisenschein hadn't reacted to the coincidence of two copies of "The Morgue" floating around in one day. Therefore, he had not known of any other.

That seemed to clear him of any complicity in the tragedy that had befallen Clyde Hotchkiss—unless he were as good an actor as Sam Vedder, himself, or his father did not confide completely in his son.

Vedder walked hurriedly to the Times Building on Seventh Avenue and Forty-second Street and

descended to the subway level. He went toward the battery of telephone booths.

He looked up a number in a directory, then, grinning crookedly, entered a booth. He dialed the number and after a moment said out of the corner of his mouth: "I want to talk to Mr. Prescott. Tell him it's about a book."

"Very well, sir," said an even, cultured voice. "I'll see if Mr. Prescott is at home."

There was a moment's silence at the other end; then the suave, butler's voice said: "I'm sorry, sir, but Mr. Prescott says he has too many books, now. What particular book did you have reference to?"

Vedder said, disguising his voice: "A book by Edgar Allan Poe. A detective story. Ask him if he'd be interested in that."

It was Prescott's voice that answered, excitedly: "What's that? What's that?"

Vedder grinned at the telephone. "I've come into possession of the famous 'Murders In The Rue Morgue.' Would you be interested in purchasing it?"

Prescott gasped. "Who is this talking?"

"Never mind. You wouldn't know, anyway. Come on, this is your last chance—do you want to buy it, or don't you?"

"But . . . but—" Prescott sputtered, then cried angrily: "I must know who you are. Because . . . well, because . . . damn it, yes, I do want the book. But I must be assured that you came by it honestly!"

Vedder laughed mockingly. "Do you want a pedigree with the book? You know damn well how I got this book, and if you don't—" Abruptly he hung up the receiver. Then he spent a full minute scowling at the mouthpiece.

Prescott, too, had not reacted properly. He should have been eager to obtain the book under any circumstances.

Vedder dropped another nickel into the telephone and dialed the number of Bobcat's rooming house on West Fifty-seventh Street. He talked to Bobcat's landlady, but was informed that he had not yet returned home.

He juggled another nickel in his hand and finally dropped it into the slot and dialed another number. Emma Todd's voice answered.

"Vedder, Emma. Have you—"

She cut him off excitedly: "Bobcat just telephoned. He thought you might get in touch with me. He's shadowing James Chisholm. Chisholm's in a print shop on Forty-eighth Street, near Sixth Avenue. Bobcat's watching the place."

"Fine!" cried Vedder. "I'll rush right over there. Stick by your phone. If I miss him, I'll call you again. And if he calls, find out where he is then. Tell him to keep calling whenever he gets a chance."

He slammed the receiver on the hook, rushed toward the subway and slammed through a turnstile.

He could get to Fiftieth Street by subway quicker than walking or riding in a taxi.

VI.

Fortunately, a local train was just pulling into the station. Vedder piled in and two minutes later was storming the stairs to Fiftieth Street.

As rapidly as he could, he walked to Forty-eighth, then headed east to Sixth Avenue.

He was still a hundred feet from the corner, when Bobcat slipped out from a doorway and caught hold of his arm. Vedder moved back into the shadows with him.

"Across the street," Bobcat said. "He's been in there twenty minutes, now!"

Vedder looked across the street. The print shop was on the street level in an ancient brownstone house, although the entrance was a couple of feet below the sidewalk.

A faded sign on the window read:

AMOS TEEPLES' PRINT SHOP

Vedder turned to his fellow worker. "Did you get a chance to talk to him?"

Bobcat chuckled. "I stormed into his joint and hollered at him: 'You murderer, you had Clyde Hotchkiss killed!' Very subtle, eh? Well, it worked; he threw me out, and thirty seconds later he was hustling out, himself. He flagged a cab and I got the next one. He's been in there ever since."

"O. K.!" said Vedder. "I'll mosey across and take a peek through the window. You stick here."

He walked across the street, lit a cigarette, then sauntered carelessly past the low window of the print shop. As he came opposite it, he stooped, pretending to tie a shoelace.

He forgot all about the shoelace. The print shop consisted of one room. An elderly man wearing an apron was standing before a case of type, working. There was no one else in the shop.

Vedder darted a look across the street to where Bobcat was loitering in the hallway. His vision was unobstructed. Vedder shook his head. In the time he had worked at the Bligh Agency he had never known of an instance in which the subject of a shadow had eluded Bobcat. They might elude Vedder, but never Bobcat. The little operator was a veritable bloodhound.

Yet Chisholm had entered this print shop—and was not in it, now.

Abruptly, Vedder straightened and went to the door of the shop. He pushed inside.

The old man came forward. "Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

"Mr Teeple's? I'd like some business cards," Vedder said.

"Fine," the printer said. "I make a specialty of them. Here's a sample of raised printing that you

can't tell from embossing—a special process of mine."

Vedder rubbed a finger over the card. "Not bad. How much would a hundred like that cost me?"

"A dollar and a half for a hundred, but if you can use five hundred the charge for the extras is only a dollar more. How about it?"

Vedder screwed up his mouth. He took a pencil from his pocket and wrote on a sheet of paper:

Sam J. Vedder

Rare Books

Monadnock Block, New York City

"How would this look?" he asked, turning the paper around so the printer could read it.

The old man's eyes remained fixed on the copy. At last he moistened his lips with his tongue. "You're in the rare-book business, eh?"

"Yes. Nice business, too." Vedder smacked his lips in satisfaction. "Had an awfully lucky break lately. I picked up a really rare item for a song."

"That so? What was it? I'm interested, because I—well, I collect a few first editions myself."

Vedder chuckled. "This was a copy of Poe's 'Murders In The Rue Morgue.'"

The printer said, "Oh!" But his eyes said a great deal more. Vedder reached out casually, then stabbed a blunt forefinger at the other's chest.

"Where's Chisholm?" he snarled.

Teeples blinked. "Chisholm? What . . . what are you talking about?"

"The man who came in here ahead of me. You know damn well who I mean. He hasn't come out of this dump."

The old man snorted. "That's what *you* think. He didn't stay more than a minute. Came in and said something about some thug following him. I let him out through the back door."

"Back door?" cried Vedder. "Where?"

The printer gestured to the rear. "Through the stock room. It leads out to Sixth Avenue."

The explanation was logical enough. The building faced south, but was near enough to Sixth Avenue so that one of the buildings on the latter street could touch the side of this one.

Vedder brushed around a stone table and headed for a door, on which there was a little sign, captioned: "Stock."

He jerked open the door, stepped forward and a harsh voice said: "Looking for someone?"

The questioner was Roscoe—the hood who had visited Vedder not so long before, at the detective's own apartment. Roscoe was sitting carelessly in an armchair, with his feet resting on an old table.

He had asked the question before recognizing Vedder; but the moment the words were out of his mouth, he gasped and swung his feet to the floor.

Vedder, this time, was not caught napping. Be-

fore Roscoe's feet were solidly under him, Vedder smashed him squarely in the face! Roscoe's chair went over backward, and he crashed to the floor. Vedder followed him. He caught hold of the thug's coat and part of his shirt, yanked him upward and hit him again in the face.

Roscoe, meanwhile, was yelling and swearing furiously and trying to get at the gun in his shoulder holster. He had it almost out before Vedder finally became aware of it. Sight of the weapon,

however, gave Vedder the last bit of anger he needed. He put everything he had into one punch that smacked against Roscoe's jaw like the kick of a Missouri mule!

The hood collapsed to the floor. His body shuddered and went limp. Vedder turned—just in time to see Amos Teeple coming through the door with a printer's mallet raised to strike at Vedder!

Vedder stepped aside nimbly and wrested the mallet from the old man's hand.



Before Roscoe's feet were squarely under him, Vedder smashed him in the face.

"Tsk! Tsk!" he chided. "You might damage someone with this gadget, pop."

"Who are you?" Amos Teeples demanded hoarsely. "And what's the idea of assaulting my assistant like that?"

"Oh? He's your assistant, is he? Well, pop, you'd better get a new one. This mug broke into my apartment this afternoon. He burgled it; then, when I came in, he stuck a gun in my belly. He had a little playmate named Louie with him. Louie slapped me around some. Come on, old-timer, spill it! What's this all about?"

"What?"

Vedder scowled. "Now, don't stall. I know you're mixed up in something; otherwise you wouldn't be having these crooks around your joint. Let's begin with James Chisholm—what's his racket?"

"I never even heard of anyone called Chisholm," the old man protested.

Vedder said wearily: "The bird who was in here ahead of me and went out the back way. Say—" His head swiveled about to look beyond the limp body of Roscoe.

There was a door beyond!

Vedder stepped across the unconscious form of Roscoe and tried the door. It gave under his pressure. Ahead was a short, narrow corridor, dimly lighted by a twenty-five-watt bulb overhead.

Vedder hesitated. He couldn't very well use force to make Amos Teeples talk and the old printer seemed to realize it. Therefore, he was wasting his time in the print shop, since the quarry had skipped.

He stepped into the corridor and trotted to a door at the far end.

He pulled it open and threw himself frantically to the floor as a rifle cracked almost in his face. But even as he hit the floor, he winced.

For the rifle had not been fired at him. It had been aimed at a clay pipe!

Vedder scrambled to his feet and shot a glance around a shooting gallery. Beyond was a battery of marble games, a fortune-telling machine and the usual paraphernalia found in a Sixth Avenue shooting gallery.

It was Sixth Avenue. The print shop on Forty-eighth Street was just around the corner.

This was the way James Chisholm had disappeared. He'd gone into the print shop on Forty-eighth Street and stepped out through the rear door. Then he walked calmly along a short corridor and entered the shooting gallery that had its front on Sixth Avenue.

Vedder frowned. Old Amos Teeples, the printer, *could* have been telling the truth. He might not have had a thing to do with James Chisholm, except that Roscoe, the gunman, had been lurking in his stock room and that there was a rear exit by way of the shooting gallery.

Vedder had not forgotten that Clyde Hotchkiss had made a tour of the Sixth Avenue shooting galleries before meeting his murderer. Vedder had followed him—and this was one of the places to which he had gone.

What did it all mean? Where had Hotchkiss obtained the rare book? Why had he gone from shooting gallery to shooting gallery, to a second-hand bookstore and finally to a rare-book dealer?

And who had killed him?

Vedder did not ask why. He knew. It was because of the rare book. That the murderer had not taken it with him was simple, too. Vedder, himself, had come along too quickly. A man who commits a murder in a more or less public place is pretty tense about it; he knows that he has only split seconds in which to perform his crime and make good his escape.

He shook his head and walked out of the shooting gallery. At the corner of Forty-eighth, he peered around the corner. Bobcat was still in his doorway, watching the print shop. He was so intent upon his task that he did not see Vedder approach until the latter said sarcastically:

"Looking for someone, mister?"

Bobcat was startled. "For Pete's sake—how'd you get out of there?"

"The same way Chisholm got out. You dope, he left a half-hour ago by a side door, through a shooting gallery on Sixth Avenue."

Bobcat was crestfallen. "That ain't happened to me in years, Sam. I didn't think there'd be a rear door there."

Vedder rubbed the knuckles of his right fist into the palm of his left hand. "In a little while a guy's going to pop out of here. You'll know him by his face; it looks like raw hamburger. Follow him, Bobcat."

Bobcat growled: "He won't get away. I'll move over to the corner, where I can watch the shooting gallery as well as this joint. Where'll I get in touch with you?"

"Report to Emma by phone when you run him to his hole. I'll keep in touch with her myself. I've got to see a man, now, about a book."

VII.

He returned to Sixth Avenue and began walking southward. As he walked, he made a mental list of the persons involved in the mystery of the rare book.

First, of course, there was Clyde Hotchkiss. Susan Prescott and her father called him a crook. James Chisholm had employed the Bligh Agency to shadow Hotchkiss for a day and get a detailed account of his movements.

Susan Prescott had encountered Hotchkiss on Sixth Avenue, slapped his face and then insisted later that she had not known it was Hotchkiss.

He read column after column in the papers, stunned, the words something blurring before his eyes.

The whole thing, from the beginning, had been like this:

Hollis Smith and Joe Ritz, two-time losers on robbery charges, had conceived the plan to kidnap the Lambert baby. So they would have a place to keep the child they rang in Mike Mead, Laura's brother, on the job. He was to get an even split for taking care of the baby during ransom negotiations. So—as Hollis had now testified—Mike Mead brought the baby to Laura and told her the story of a sick friend for whom they were to keep the child for a few days.

Meanwhile, Joe Ritz and Hollis Smith collected the ransom and, having no further use for Mike Mead, and not wishing to have him alive as a possible witness some day, and being unwilling to split any money with him, they killed Mike and threw him in the harbor. Hollis Smith then tipped a stool pigeon to inform a cop where the Lambert baby could be found, feeling that if the baby were taken back alive there would be less pressure on the search for the kidnapers. Particularly if they had Laura Mead—who had known nothing of the deal—to take part of the rap, and so partly appease the public.

Saxon was the cop the stoolie had tipped.

All of this simple plan came off perfectly, but a later complication arose when Laura was arrested. Simon Rand, who had been lawyer for Joe Ritz and Hollis Smith in the past, knew of their acquaintance with Mike Mead, and guessed the rest. He demanded fifteen thousand dollars of the ransom money as blackmail. This the two kidnapers promptly paid, knowing Rand's power. Simon Rand then pretended to defend Laura, and in reality helped the D. A. get a conviction by presenting her case as weakly as possible.

A detective, on the other hand, thinking Laura guilty, and wanting to make sure he got a conviction on so important a case, had asked Saxon to exaggerate two small items which helped in the evidence against Laura.

Laura served her sentence. Meanwhile Joe Ritz and Hollis Smith, afraid to spend the hot ransom money for a few months, were picked up on a robbery charge and sent back to prison. Joe Ritz died in prison, and part of his share and part of Smith's share of the money was discovered in Modesto. Hollis Smith was released from prison on his robbery term shortly before Laura Mead was released.

The remainder of Hollis Smith's ransom was gone. He was desperate for money. Simon Rand had blackmailed him, and was still holding onto the fifteen thousand dollars blackmail money. Smith decided to get it back. He went to Ivan's Nite Spot, where he had traced Laura, hung around long

enough to pick up her handkerchief and lipstick container, then went to visit Simon Rand.

When he saw that it was impossible to blackmail Rand, as he had anticipated it would be, he killed the lawyer, and left the clues which led to Laura. He then went through Rand's files, found the keys to a safe-deposit box in a bank in the outlying districts. The lawyer had the money hidden there under an assumed name so that, in the event it should be found, he could disclaim knowledge of it.

Hollis Smith took the key, went to the bank under the posed name invented by Rand, and got the money. The captain of detectives who'd had Smith down as a leading suspect nabbed the crook when he came out of the bank. With the hot money on him, and fingerprints left back in Rand's office, along with one or two other clumsy marks which Smith had neglected to clean up, it was easy to make him confess.

And, since a man can hang only once, Smith related the rest of the story, going back to 1931, and the Lambert kidnaping. It was one story really, for one crime went into another.

Laura Mead could not be found, but a citizens' committee was taking up a collection to compensate her for the injustice that had been done.

Saxon looked up.

It had taken him thirty minutes to read all of this for it was not in the coherent form of a story, but in newspaper style, featuring the most dramatic incidents first, and gradually boiling down to detail and fact. He had read slowly, deliberately, so that he could clear his mind.

This he read again: Laura Mead could not be found.

She was hiding, afraid that Saxon would arrest her for deadly assault. *Afraid.*

A day later he was up. He flew to San Francisco. He didn't bother to check in with the police yet.

He knew this—that she'd return to Frisco the same way she'd gotten out of it. He knew she'd come back because before she went to prison she had been raised here; it was the only city she knew, and anywhere else would be foreign to her. She had run from San Francisco to get away from him, but she'd come back. He knew that just as he knew everything else about her.

Just like he knew *where* in San Francisco she'd be most likely to be. It was his town, too, and he knew the streets people walked on when they were friendless and afraid. It took him some time, of course; it took him a day and a night. He went to Ivan's, and then he checked up on the chorus girls she'd known and liked. She'd slept at the flat of one of them, then left. He went back to the old neighborhood where she had lived when she was arrested. An old lady who'd known her in girlhood had kept her one night and fed her, and loaned her money. Saxon walked, kept walking; he went to



place, now. By the way, mind telling me how y'u got your book?"

"I don't mind," Vedder said. "I took it from a dead man's hand! The man's name was Clyde Hotchkiss."

Felix Eisenschein showed no unusual emotion. He nodded his head. "All right, then we stop fooling around? You're the dick who was followin' Hotchkiss when he got killed."

"Oh," said Vedder, somewhat deflated. "You knew that all along?"

"Of course. The minute my dumb kid said a guy was in trying to sell a copy of 'The Morgue,' I knew it must 'a' been y'u. That build-up didn't fool me none at all. That's why I brought y'u here."

Uneasily, Vedder's eyes darted about the apartment. Eisenschein chuckled. "Over there, by the big bookcase!"

Vedder had already looked at the big bookcase. But, now, he looked again and was startled to see that one section had moved partly outward. And

in the aperture were twin muzzles of a double-barreled shotgun!

He took a step back and the shotgun came out into the room. Behind it was Eisenschein's long-nosed son.

"Careful, Julius!" Felix Eisenschein cautioned.

Had it been a revolver, Vedder would, in that moment of desperation, have gone for his own gun and attempted to shoot it out.

But a shotgun—no! A shotgun is too sure, at close range. He looked at Eisenschein, Sr. The book dealer chuckled again, and, walking around behind Vedder, patted his pockets. He slipped the automatic from Vedder's coat pocket, then came around, again, to the front.

"Sit down," he ordered and pointed with Vedder's own gun to a deep armchair.

Vedder obeyed. Julius Eisenschein came openly into the room and sat down in an armchair across from Vedder. He turned it sideward, so the shotgun could rest on his knees and still remain pointed at Vedder.

Felix Eisenschein remained standing. "Now, mister," he said to Vedder, "let's talk this thing over. Where's the book?"

Vedder shook his head. "I haven't got it."

"But y'u did have it. Y'u couldn't have described it to Julius if y'u hadn't seen it. And when y'u looked at this one—I knew you'd seen another like it. Where is it, mister? Honest, we ain't foolin'!"

Vedder looked at the shotgun across the room. "If I'd thought that gun was empty, I wouldn't be sitting here."

Felix Eisenschein bobbed his head up and down. "That's what I thought. So, where's the book?"

"A couple of thugs came up to my apartment on Riverside Drive and took it away from me. Their names were Roscoe and Louie. Louie's a big bruiser and Roscoe's a little rat-faced fellow—like your son, here!"

Julius Eisenschein half rose from his chair. "Hey, you—"

His father waved him down. "Shut up, Julius. Y'u'll have y'ur chance later. Now, Mr. Vedder—"

"Oh, you know my name?"

"I can read. It was in the papers this afternoon. All right, shut up a minute, now. Those punks didn't get the book from you. Otherwise, you wouldn't have come snooping around our place. Y'ain't got it on you. So—where is it?"

"In the office safe—"

Felix Eisenschein's bushy eyebrows drew together. "What's the combination?"

Vedder laughed shortly. "I only *work* for the agency. Outside work. The boss never gave me the combination to his private safe."

Young Eisenschein spoke up. "There's a fella comes to the store once in a while; he's a burglar, pop!"

Felix chewed on his lower lip while he thought that over. Then, finally, he shook his head. "No, Julius. We ain't gone into the burgling business—yet!"

"How about murder?" Vedder snapped suddenly. "Hotchkiss was killed right outside your office, today."

The elder Eisenschein scowled. "Who you been talking to? At the time, you didn't know my office was around there."

"A man told me. A rich guy. His name's Prescott!"

The shot told. Eisenschein's mouth fell open and he sucked in air, noisily. "You . . . *know* Prescott?"

"Do I? He hired the agency today."

This salvo did even more damage than the first. Consternation spread across the rare-book dealer's face. "What . . . what for?" he cried.

Suddenly, Sam Vedder grinned. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Abruptly, he got to his feet. Julius Eisenschein sprang up simultaneously. "Sit down, you—"

Vedder chuckled at him. "I'm tired of sitting. And I'm tired of your pointing that gun at me." He took a step forward.

Julius Eisenschein cried out in terror: "Keep back! Keep back, or I'll—"

"No, you won't," said Vedder. He took another step forward. Felix Eisenschein leaped in front of him, brandishing Vedder's .32.

"Back up, or—"

Vedder reached out suddenly and plucked the gun from the book dealer's hand. He waved it at young Eisenschein. "Put down that gun before someone gets hurt around here!"

Julius Eisenschein backed away, but the muzzle of his shotgun wavered and finally pointed at the floor. Vedder took a deep breath.

"Your bluff didn't work. Both of you are too chicken-hearted."

Red-faced, Felix Eisenschein began to sputter. Vedder chuckled. "You're a lousy crook, Eisenschein. You'd rob your grandmother of her false teeth, but you're scared stiff of rough stuff. You might hire someone to do a job for you, but neither you nor your son has got the nerve to do it yourself."

Felix Eisenschein sighed in surrender. "All right, Vedder. You've got us. Julius and I were bluffing. We wanted that book, that's all."

"So you can sell it to Prescott? He's your sucker, eh? The one you've been building up?"

Eisenschein was perspiring heavily. "I been workin' months on him. There're only so many copies of 'The Morgue.' The others are in private collections. None of them would sell. And if Prescott knew that—"

"That a copy was floating around, he'd try to buy it for a lot less than you intended to hook him?

How much are you asking him, Felix?"

Felix Eisenschein scowled. "Three thousand dollars."

Vedder laughed boisterously. "Still clowning! Come clean. Fifty thousand?"

It was young Eisenschein who yelped: "I told you, pop! They're giving you the razzle-dazzle!"

"Shut up, Julius!" the elder Eisenschein snapped. His eyes glittered as they fixed themselves upon Vedder's own, trying to determine exactly how much the latter knew.

He said, finally: "All right. It isn't fifty thou-



sand, but it's a big price. I've put in a lot of time on it. Prescott thinks I'm dickering for a copy right now. That's why I can't afford to let another copy come into existence. If Prescott heard about it, he'd cut my own price down to nothing. He . . . he might even—"

"Buy the copy Hotchkiss had?"

Eisenschein nodded. "Look, Vedder, I'll come

clean. I'll give you five thousand for your book and you forget you ever saw it."

"No!"

Eisenschein swallowed desperately. "Ten thousand—"

Vedder still shook his head. "This may sound screwy to you, but—I couldn't sell the book for any price. It isn't mine, you see. It belonged to Hotchkiss."

"But he's dead!"

"He may have a family. That's none of my affair. Even if he hasn't, he's got an estate. Whoever gets it—even though it's the State—well, the book belongs to them."

Eisenschein looked panic-stricken. And bewildered. He couldn't understand an honest man. "But . . . but—" he floundered.

"That's the way it stands," Vedder said quietly.

A telephone on a desk nearby tinkled. Felix didn't even seem to hear it. But Julius went to answer it. He promptly clapped a hand over the mouthpiece and cried to his father: "It's him, pop! Mr. Prescott!"

Felix Eisenschein ran to the telephone. He scooped up the receiver. "Yes, Mr. Prescott!" he exclaimed. "Yes, Mr. Prescott. Er . . . what's that? Uh"—his eyes swiveled around to Sam Vedder and the latter saw that they were bulging in agony—"I don't understand, Mr. Prescott. That's impossible. I tell you, there's only this one other in existence. . . . Yes. . . . Someone's playing a trick on you. That's all I can say. . . . Yes. . . . All right, I'll see you tomorrow. Good-by, Mr. Prescott!"

He hung up the receiver and turned to face Vedder.

Vedder said: "That was Mr Prescott! Has someone else offered him a copy of 'Murders In The Rue Morgue'?"

"Hotchkiss! I'd have said it was Hotchkiss, only Mr. Prescott said the man didn't call until this evening—" Eisenschein looked suspiciously at Vedder "That could have been— Yes, it must have been you!"

"Me?" Vedder said innocently. "Why, don't you remember? Mr. Prescott employed our agency today."

Eisenschein bared his teeth in a snarl. "Are you working for Prescott now?"

Vedder shrugged. He put his .32 back into his pocket and started for the door. "I'll be going, boys!"

"Wait!" Eisenschein cried desperately. "You haven't answered my question. Are you working for Prescott now? If you're not, I want to hire you."

"Sorry," said Vedder. "I can't take no assignment right now. You'll have to see my boss in the morning!"

"I'll call his home. Where does he live?"

Vedder rubbed his chin with the back of his

hand. "Gosh! I can't remember. In Flushing, I think. No—come to think of it—it's Scarsdale. Or—somewhere in Connecticut." Grinning impudently, Vedder stepped to the door.

He turned for a last nod to the Eisenscheins; then he stepped out through the door.

VIII.

In the hotel lobby he went to a telephone booth and dialed Emma Todd's number. She answered promptly:

"Sherlock? Bobcat's telephoned twice. That pug's hanging around a hotel on Forty-fourth Street—"

"The Worden?" Vedder cried.

"Yes. Bobcat's outside, too."

"And I'm inside. Yes—I'm telephoning from the Hotel Worden, right now. I've just had an interesting talk with Felix Eisenschein and his son."

"Well," snapped Emma, "what about it?"

"Nothing. We just talked about books and things. Say, did you mail that thing all right?"

"Of course I mailed it. It's safe. You better go right from that hotel to a lunchroom across the street, where Bobcat's waiting. You . . . you better be careful—"

"Why, pet?" Vedder chuckled.

Emma replied tartly: "Because if you get hurt and can't work, Captain Billy will dock you."

"He's already docked me four fifths of my salary for the next month," Vedder retorted. "Well, if I don't show up, call the Bellevue Hospital. But I don't think so. I've already beat the tar out of Roscoe tonight. I can do it again. So long, pet."

He hung up the receiver and looked at the telephone for a moment. Then, shrugging, he stepped out and walked toward the door. He stopped just inside and picked out the lunchroom across the street. Then he took a deep breath and opened the door.

He collided smartly with Susan Prescott!

"Excuse—" Susan Prescott began, then recognized him. "You! You're just the man I want to see. Come with me—"

Vedder shot a quick glance around. He couldn't see Roscoe, the gunman, but he didn't doubt that he was around somewhere. If Bobcat had followed him here, he must be around. Bobcat never made mistakes—not twice in one evening.

And Bobcat was across the street.

Grimacing, Vedder took Susan's fox-furred jacket sleeve. "Is your car around?"

"No—let's take a taxi. I must talk with you!"

Vedder walked her fifty feet toward Sixth Avenue, so they would not be compelled to take one of the taxies lined up before the Hotel Worden. He helped her into a cab, then stepped in himself.

"Where to, mister?" the cab driver asked.

Susan Prescott answered: "Toward Central Park.

"We'll tell you later just where."

The cab scooted to Sixth Avenue and, catching a green light, turned left. Sam Vedder was tempted to look back through the little rear window, but resisted the temptation. Roscoe was following, probably. And if he was, it was a cinch that Bobcat was following Roscoe. It was a regular parade.

Vedder turned inquiringly toward Susan Prescott. "Go ahead," he said.

But now she seemed to have trouble in beginning. She frowned. "Well, father's had a change of heart. He wants to employ you, now."

Vedder shook his head. "Sorry. You can fire me, but you'll have to see Captain Bligh about rehiring me. He's the boss."

She gasped. "But that's absurd! I employed you this afternoon."

"And you fired me this afternoon."

"Forget that. I . . . we need you. We'll pay you whatever you ask."

Vedder rubbed his chin with the back of his hand. "Has your father been threatened again?"

She started to nod, then shook her head. "No, I'll tell the truth. Father collects first editions—rare books. He's been trying to get one of the rarest books in existence. A copy of Edgar Allan Poe's 'Murders In The Rue Morgue.'"



"How much," asked Vedder, "is Eisenschein asking for it?"

"Eisenschein?" cried Susan Prescott. "How—"

"Certainly your running into me at the Hotel Worden—where Felix Eisenschein happens to live—wasn't a coincidence. Come clean, Miss Prescott. If I'm going to help you, you'll have to tell me the truth. All of it!"

She sighed in surrender. "Very well. Father

has been negotiating for 'The Murders In The Rue Morgue.' It's a very rare book. Eisenschein claimed he knew where one was. It had been unearthed by accident. He was trying to buy it, and today he reported that he had succeeded—"

"And then someone else came to your father and offered another copy?"

Her eyes widened. "How did you know? Only—there were two people. One early this morning and one this evening—"

It was Vedder's turn to be surprised. "One call in the morning? Who was it?"

"The man wouldn't say. All he would admit was that he had a copy, and he'd sell it for less than Eisenschein would sell father a copy. That was the reason I went to your agency. You see, there simply *can't* be two such copies in existence. We—that is—I became suspicious that there was something crooked about the whole thing, and I wanted to find out. Father wouldn't listen. He was expecting the man to call again later. He did; only it was an entirely different man, and from the way he talked we came to the conclusion that the second party didn't even know about the first call. So naturally—"

"You're puzzled. Very well, Miss Prescott, I'll make a confession. The second call—the one this evening—I made."

"You!" She was aghast. "Why, how would you know—"

"When Hotchkiss was killed this morning, the murderer was in such a hurry to make his getaway—or maybe it was because I bumped into him—that he left a little booklet lying beside Hotchkiss. Yes, it was the 'Murders In The Rue Morgue.' I stuck it in my pocket. I didn't know what it was. In fact—I threw it away."

Susan Prescott cried out in horror.

"Then," Vedder went on, "some thugs knocked me around, trying to get the book from me. After they left, I went back to the ash can where I'd thrown the book and reclaimed it."

"And you have it now?"

"Not exactly. But it's in a safe place."

"But you can get it. Father will buy it from you—"

"No, he can't. You see, the book doesn't belong to me. I'll have to turn it over to the police, who will, in turn, see that Hotchkiss' heirs get it."

"But Clyde Hotchkiss was a thief!"

"You think he stole the book?"

"Of course! That was his business. Father said so. Hotchkiss was rather notorious. He made his living stealing rare books and selling them."

"Well," said Vedder, "I don't know anything about that. If he stole 'The Morgue,' whoever he stole it from will step forward and make his claim. Your father will have to try to buy the book from that party—or from Eisenschein."

"But Eisenschein can't have another copy! This

must be the one he's been trying to sell father. It's too much of a coincidence that—"

The cab driver turned around. "Where to now, folks?"

Vedder looked ahead and saw that they were at Sixth Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street, with Central Park straight ahead. He looked inquiringly at Susan Prescott. She gave the driver the address of her home on Fifth Avenue.

"Why," said Vedder, "can't Eisenschein have another copy? As a matter of fact, I was in his apartment when your father called. That was just five minutes before I bumped into you, downstairs."

She started. "Father telephoned Felix Eisenschein? He— Why, I wonder why he did that."

"I thought you might know." He looked sharply at her, for she was frowning.

She tossed her head impatiently. "Something must have come up after I left. Father wouldn't have telephoned Eisenschein, otherwise, since he sent me up there."

"Miss Prescott," said Vedder bluntly, "how is it that *you* take such an active interest in your father's affairs, run all around town for him? Why doesn't he—"

"Oh, but he can't! I thought you noticed. Father can only walk a few steps at a time. He's partially paralyzed."

Vedder recalled that Prescott had been seated in a deep Morris chair when he had seen him that afternoon. He hadn't guessed, however, that the millionaire was incapacitated. Now that he knew, it made things clearer. Prescott's hobby was definitely the kind a wealthy invalid would go in for. It explained, also, his daughter's fierce devotion and interest in his hobby.

He said sympathetically: "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

He twisted his head and looked through the rear window. Another taxi was close behind, and as they made one of the turns in the park, he saw that still another pair of headlights was behind his own pursuer.

"All right, Miss Prescott," he said, "I'll spill everything I know—as long as I'm working for you. Felix Eisenschein has not one, but three copies of 'The Murders In The Rue Morgue.' He's had them for a long time, and all that business of trying to find one was a build-up for your father. He did it to raise the price—"

"But that's impossible!" cried Susan Prescott. "There simply couldn't be *four* copies of the 'Morgue'—in addition to the three or four that are in known collections."

Vedder said grimly: "You don't really know Eisenschein. He's a pretty shrewd bird. Well, now that you know, you ought to be able to buy a copy from him pretty cheap."

"Oh, father will pay him a fair price. But—thanks! I'm sure father will add something to

Captain Bligh's bill." She smiled at him, and for an instant Vedder had to force himself not to follow through.

He was on a murder case—working. Pleasure and personal affairs had to wait until his job was finished.

The taxi drew up to the curb. Another whipped past and stopped a half block up the street. Vedder, climbing out, shot a look to the rear and saw a third taxi pulling up fifty feet away. He helped Susan Prescott out of the cab, then paid the taximeter charge and added a dime tip. The cabby looked pointedly at Susan Prescott's silver-fox jacket, and his lips curled.

The front door of the brownstone house opened before they even reached the stairs. The liveried butler popped out. "Miss Susan!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Prescott—" He stopped as he saw Vedder.

Susan ran quickly up the short flight of stairs. "What is it, Carmichael?" she asked.

The three of them were inside the house by this time and Susan Prescott was heading for the library. The butler hurried beside her. "He's gone out, Miss Susan!" he cried desperately. "Some men—they helped him!"

Susan Prescott tore open the library door. Then she whirled. "What men?" she cried in horror.

The butler wrung his hands. "They . . . they practically forced their way in. I . . . I wanted to call the police, but Mr. Prescott said it was all right. And then he went away with them—"

"How?" Vedder snapped.

"They . . . they carried him to a car."

"Was one of them a little rat-faced fellow and the other a big bruiser?"

The butler's face creased worriedly. "One . . . er . . . was rather large, and he looked very much like a pugilist."

"Damn!" said Vedder.

Susan Prescott's eyes were staring; her face was as pale as Grade B milk. "He hasn't left the house in months!" she said. "I don't understand—"

Sam Vedder started grimly toward the front door. Then a staggering thought struck him. He whirled. "No! He's outside. Roscoe couldn't have been one of them!"

"Roscoe?" Susan Prescott asked weakly.

"Those two thugs I told you about—the ones that attacked me. One fits your butler's description, but the other— Carmichael! Describe the second man."

"Why, he's rather hard to describe. He was rather ordinary-looking."

In disgust, Vedder started again toward the door. But, with a sharp cry, Susan Prescott ran around him and blocked his passage. "You . . . you don't think he's in danger?"

"I don't know—frankly!" Vedder said soberly.

"But I'm going to find out. An assistant of mine is outside—"

"What? Why, how—"

"He was waiting across the street from the hotel. And there's someone else outside. The fellow who is the accomplice of this big fellow. He was at the hotel, too. He followed us!"

Susan Prescott cried out in horror. "But you didn't say anything!"

"There was no need. Now, you stay here, while I go out and get this Roscoe."

"I'll call the police!"

"That won't be necessary, Miss Prescott. In fact, it might be better not to—on account of your father. Just leave it to me. All of it!"

For an instant she looked into his eyes, then nodded. "Very well. I've got confidence in you."

Vedder had heard the phone ring but paid no attention. Now, Carmichael, the butler, said: "I believe this is for you, sir. A Captain Bligh!"

"Captain Bligh!" Vedder snarled. "Tell him to go peel a grape!"

He whipped open the door and raced out to the stairs. Roscoe, leaning against the balustrade, five feet below, said:

"Easy, Vedder! This is me, again!" He called attention to his right hand, which was out of sight, beneath the left breast of his coat.

Vedder went down two steps. He said: "You missed Louie by ten minutes. He was here. He's gone in for snatching!"

Bobcat was approaching behind Roscoe. He was walking along the sidewalk as noiselessly as his namesake. Roscoe was unaware of his approach, until Bobcat struck a rigid thumb into Roscoe's spine and hissed: "Reach, sucker!"

Roscoe leaped forward and Vedder met him and whipped the gun out of Roscoe's shoulder holster. Then he gripped one of the hood's arms and started propelling him toward Bobcat's taxicab, still waiting at the curb.

Roscoe didn't like it. "What's the idea?" he snarled.

Vedder jerked open the door of the taxicab and shoved Roscoe violently forward. "Get in, you louse!"

Bobcat used the toe of his right shoe to help the gunman into the cab. He clambered in after him and then Vedder stooped and entered.

"Sixth Avenue and Forty-eighth Street," he called to the driver. Then in a lower tone: "Is he all right, Bobcat?"

"He's a pal of mine," Bobcat said. "What goes on, Sam? I see you and Miss Fox Fur got together again."

"Her father's been snatched," Vedder said, "by this monkey's pal and someone else. Roscoe, we're not kidding this time. Where has Louie taken Prescott?"

"I haven't seen Louie since this afternoon," Roscoe retorted sullenly.

"So, you're going to be like that. Bobcat, have you got the brass with you?"

Bobcat promptly brought it out of his pocket—a set of gleaming brass knuckles. He slipped them on his right hand and displayed the mailed fist to Roscoe.

"Sam asked you a question, chum!" Bobcat said.

Roscoe began to breathe hoarsely. "Honest, fellas!" he bleated. "Me and Louie was only hired for the one job. I don't know where Louie went after we broke up."

"You get just one more chance," Vedder said, "then Bobcat gives you a massage. Why were you hanging around the Hotel Worden? You knew that Felix Eisenschein lives there. But why didn't you come right up?"

Roscoe groaned. "I tell you I don't know a thing— Don't!" he screamed as Bobcat drew back his fist.

"Talk!" Bobcat snarled.

Roscoe slumped down between the two private detectives. "Amos Teeple's made me do it. He said a dame wearing a silver-fox coat would be coming to the Worden and to follow her after she left."

"How did Amos know Miss Prescott would be calling at the Worden?" Vedder demanded.

"He got a telephone call."

"From whom?"

"I don't know—"

"One more of those 'I don't know's' and Bobcat breaks out half a dozen of your teeth," Vedder warned.

Bobcat flourished his brass knuckles again.

"I don't—" Roscoe began, then switched it to: "Amos Teeple's never told us anything. This afternoon he said you had that book, and he gave me and Louie your address. When we didn't bring the book back he gave us hell. He chased Louie home."

"All right," said Vedder. "Why were you hanging around in that back room?"

"He wanted me to wait. He always made us wait in that room. I guess he didn't want customers to see us."

"I don't blame him for that," Vedder said sarcastically. "Now, I want you to think before you answer the next question. Before I came into that back room, someone else passed through. Who was that?"

Roscoe frowned fearfully, but finally shook his head. "I don't know him. Amos let him out."

"Amos knew him? He'd been around the print shop before?"

"Yeah, but—"

Vedder peered closer into the little gunman's face. Roscoe wasn't at all happy at the situation he was in. A gunman, he didn't like to be hurt



himself. And Bobcat's flourishing of the brass knuckles was not at all to his liking. He couldn't know that Bobcat would no more have actually used the brass knuckles on someone else than he would have relished being beaten with them himself.

Vedder prompted Roscoe. "I'm warning you for the last time, Roscoe. Now, talk! And say something. Chisholm was an old friend of Amos Teeple's, wasn't he?"

"I'd seen him at the shop once or twice, that's all. But Amos always ran me into the back room when Chisholm came. I got the idea that he was scared of Chisholm, himself—sorta."

Bobcat interrupted: "What was Teeple's racket?"

Vedder had been wondering about that himself.

But he hadn't wanted to ask Roscoe that question directly. He shifted to another: "A sporty-looking bird, with a waxed mustache, about fifty years old—name of Hotchkiss; what about him?"

The shot told. Roscoe gasped. "You . . . you know about him?"

"Of course I do," Vedder snapped. "I know just about everything. I'm merely checking up to see if you're telling the truth. What about Hotchkiss?"

Roscoe was perspiring freely by this time. "I don't know, except that he came around a lot. Almost every day. But Amos always ran me out, if I happened to be around."

"But why shouldn't you be around? You worked

in the print shop, didn't you?"

A look of disgust came over Roscoe's face. "Naw, I didn't work there, except to run errands. Hell, Amos wouldn't let anyone in the place. He was suspicious of everyone."

Bobcat's cab driver turned around. "Which corner, Bobcat?"

"Right up to the joint," Vedder said. "The print shop around the corner."

The driver made a right turn around the corner and swooped down toward the print shop. There was no parking space for him.

Vedder exclaimed: "The place is dark! Teeple's has gone home."

Beside him, he felt Roscoe wheeze in relief. Vedder said coldly: "Take this, Bobcat, and drive around the block a couple of times. I'm going to see what's what?"

He handed Bobcat Roscoe's gun, then opened the cab door and stepped out.

IX.

He slipped between two parked cars and crossed the sidewalk to the print shop.

There was a huge padlock on the door. Vedder swore softly, then walked to Sixth Avenue, turned the corner and entered the shooting gallery.

He fooled around a moment by the marble games; then, watching his opportunity, he slipped to the door by which he had previously made egress from the print shop. It was unlocked, and he walked quickly along the short, dimly lighted corridor.

The door entering upon Amos Teeple's stock room was locked. But it wasn't a padlock, and Vedder took a bunch of keys from his pocket. Every one was a skeleton key intended to fit a specific type of lock. The second one he tried turned the lock.

He shoved the door open violently. If anyone was standing behind it, Vedder would have the advantage. But the little stock room was empty.

He even struck a match and pulled an electric-light cord. He spent two or three minutes going over the room. But it was exactly what Amos Teeple's had told him it was—a stock room. It was filled with various types of paper, cans of printer's ink, a few halftones and line cuts and printer's paraphernalia.

After he had satisfied himself, Vedder finally stepped to the door leading to the print shop proper. He took the precaution of extinguishing the light in the stock room.

He opened the door an inch and listened carefully. He heard no sounds except the rumble of street traffic, which came through the front windows and doors.

Enough light came in from the street, too, to enable him to distinguish the printer's machinery and large objects here and there.

He entered the shop and moved toward a roll-top

desk, near the front. It was innocently standing open, and he wasted only a few minutes going through the drawers. A horn tooted cautiously outside as he was about to step away. Squinting, he saw a car double-parked outside. After a moment it moved away.

"I'll get them the next time around," he said to himself.

Sighing, he went to the rear of the shop. The first thing that caught his eye was a huge steel safe of a size you would expect to see in a large office, rather than a small one-man print shop.

Vedder scowled at it. No wonder old Amos didn't even bother to close his roll-top desk. Anything he had of the slightest value he could put into this safe. And, considering the fact that it faced busy Forty-eighth Street, it was virtually burglarproof.

Vedder was tempted to kick the big iron thing, except that he knew his foot would come out second best. Well, there was no use looking farther for anything in here.

In the darkness, he moved toward the stock room. His shin struck a projecting piece of machinery, and he swore and stooped to rub his bruised shin. In straightening, his elbow hit the flywheel of a paper press.

Vedder spun it angrily and the wheel went up, taking with it the flat steel plate. He jerked at some flattened pamphlets under the plate. Something about the texture of the paper—brittle and slightly greasy, as if from age—registered with him.

He took one of the pamphlets and, crouching to the floor, struck a match. He blew it out instantly and then remained crouched for a moment or two. Finally, he straightened and took from the paper press six pamphlets, identical in size and feel to the first.

He continued on to the stock room and, after he had closed the print-shop door, switched on the light. He obtained a large sheet of wrapping paper and wrapped the seven pamphlets securely.

Then, at last, he made his exit from the premises of Amos Teeple's, via the shooting gallery and Sixth Avenue.

He circled to Forty-eighth Street and stood on the sidewalk near Amos Teeple's print shop for more than five minutes, waiting for Bobcat and his taxicab to show up on their second time around the block.

It was getting late and traffic was lighter than it had been earlier in the evening; still not so light, however, that the curb was not lined with parked cars.

He waited a second five minutes and Bobcat still did not show up. Vedder began to be alarmed. He had left Roscoe's gun with Bobcat. Had Roscoe overpowered Bobcat and made his escape after shooting the detective?

He looked toward Seventh Avenue. There was no unusual congestion down there, so nothing had happened on Seventh Avenue or Forty-eighth. It could have happened on Forty-ninth Street, however, and he be unaware of it.

He waited a third five-minute period; then, unable to stand it any longer, he dashed across the street to a restaurant. They had no private telephone booth, but there was a wall phone near the front window, and from it he could look out upon the street.

He dropped a nickel into the slot and quickly dialed Emma Todd's number. She answered promptly, exclaiming: "Sam! I've been waiting here for hours to hear from you. Captain Bligh—"

"The devil with him! Has Bobcat called in the last half-hour?"

"No, but Captain Bligh did. He's furious. He tried to get you at Prescott's house and—"

"I know. I dodged him. Something's happened to Bobcat. I'm worried about him. I left him riding in a taxicab, holding a gun on a rather desperate man—"

"Sam!" cried Emma. "Why did you do that? You know he's no match physically for a desperate thug. Captain Bligh—"

Vedder groaned. "The hell with Bligh. Look, Emma, I want James Chisholm's address—"

"That's it!" Emma exclaimed. "Captain Bligh talked to Chisholm earlier in the evening. That's what he wants to talk to *you* about. He wants you to call him at his home."

"Bligh's home? I don't know where he lives. Don't give me his telephone number. But I do want Chisholm's address and any information about him that you know."

"I know nothing about him. He didn't come to the office when he hired the agency. The captain met him at his club—or wherever it is he picks up these screwy clients. All I know is that the captain's madder than a wet hen at you about something."

"I know, I know," Vedder cut in impatiently. "But you had Chisholm's address at the office. Bobcat ran up there earlier and picked him up. Do you remember what the number was?"

"It's an apartment house on Seventy-ninth Street. Baltimore or something like that is the name of it. No, it's not Baltimore. Balmoral, maybe—"

"Thanks," said Vedder. "And hang onto your telephone. If Bobcat calls, tell him I've gone up to see Chisholm."

He slammed out of the restaurant and took one last, desperate look up and down the street. There was no idling taxicab. He ran to Sixth Avenue, crossed the street and hailed a taxicab. He piled in.

"Central Park West and Seventy-ninth Street!"

At Seventy-ninth and Central Park West, Vedder instructed his driver: "Go west, slow. I'm looking



for an apartment house and I'm not quite sure of the name. Balmoral, Baltimore or something like that."

The driver slammed on his brakes. "Right there she is!" he exclaimed. "The Ball Martin."

X.

Vedder entered the apartment house. It was a swank place. There was a switchboard presided over by a Negro and another was peering out of an open elevator door, nearby.

Vedder took two one-dollar bills from his pocket. He handed one to the switchboard operator. "Mr. James Chisholm's apartment, and I don't want you



to ring it. I'm surprising him."

"7B, mister," the operator replied.

Vedder carried the second dollar to the elevator operator.

"Seven, please!"

The apartments were large ones, only four to a floor. Apartment 7B was in front. Vedder pretended to push the door buzzer and waited until the elevator door had closed. Then, unabashed, he put his ear to the door. He heard a faint rumble of voices, but could not distinguish any of the words.

Softly, he tried the doorknob, but it wouldn't turn. And the lock was a tumbler lock; none of his skeleton keys would fit it.

There was nothing to do but press the door button. He gave it two shorts, a long and two more shorts.

The door opened inward and Vedder stuck his automatic into the muscular stomach of Louie, the ex-wrestler. "In you go, pal!" Vedder snarled, pushing against Louie.

In the living room, two men came to their feet. A third, Prescott, remained seated.

The two men on their feet were Amos Teeples and—Vedder gasped in utter astonishment—his old friend, Johnny Jackson, who ran the little secondhand bookshop near Columbia University.

Jackson was as surprised as Vedder himself—and more disconcerted.

It was Prescott who spoke first. "What's the meaning of this?" he asked sharply.

Vedder blinked. "Huh!"

Jackson recovered swiftly. He came toward Vedder, pushed at his hand holding the gun and said earnestly: "Scram, Sam. I mean it. You'll spoil"—his voice dropped—"a big deal."

Vedder took a step back and almost retreated. The only thing that prevented him was the ugly expression on Louie's face. Then he recalled things that he had almost forgotten in his astonishment at seeing Johnny Jackson here.

"Nix," he said. "You can't get away with it, Jackson."

"Jackson?" said Prescott.

Johnny Jackson's face twisted in rage. "Get out of here, you drunken bum. Louie!"

Louie lunged forward, his arms extended, like a wrestler about to pounce on an opponent. Vedder, remembering Louie's brutality of that afternoon, chopped against the big bruiser's jaw with the cupped automatic! The gun landed with a loud smack and Louie reeled back. He bumped a coffee table and upset it.

Then he shook his head and bellowed. Vedder stepped forward to land a finishing blow and the big wrestler suddenly ducked his head and hurtled forward in a savage flying tackle.

Vedder chopped down with the gun, but it was too late. He landed, but so did Louie! And Louie's was the more devastating attack. His head and shoulders collided with Vedder and he was hurled back to a sofa, clear across the room. The gun was knocked from his hand. He did, however, retain the thin packet he had wrapped at Amos Teeples' print shop.

He landed heavily on the sofa, the breath knocked out of him. Dimly, he saw Louie advancing toward him. Prescott's sharp voice cut through his foggy senses.

"Stop that!" he cried.

Vedder half rolled to his side, caught a glimpse of Johnny Jackson's snarling face. With a quick flip, he threw the packet containing the pamphlets toward Prescott.

"Look at that, Mr. Prescott!" he gasped.

The package landed on the rug at Prescott's feet and burst open. Prescott stooped and cried out in amazement.

"'Murders In The Rue Morgue!'"

Johnny Jackson scooped up Vedder's gun from the floor. He pointed it at Vedder. "Where'd you get those?" he cried.

Strength was coming back to Vedder. He sat

up on the sofa. "From Amos Teeples' Print Shop. I burgled it!"

"But six copies!" gasped Prescott. "There are only three or four in existence. These are virtually mint copies—"

"I imagine mint means new," Vedder said. "Well, those are—"

"Shut your mouth!" screamed Jackson.

Amos Teeples popped over toward Vedder. "You never got those from my shop, you thief. I only had one copy of 'The Morgue' and Mr. Prescott has just bought that."

"You paid for it?" Vedder cried.

Prescott nodded. "I've given them a check. But now I don't understand."

"I do, Mr. Prescott," Jackson snarled. "This man's a thief. He's in the employ of that crook, Eisenschein."

Prescott looked coldly at Jackson. "But seven copies, Mr. Chisholm—"

"Chisholm!" cried Vedder. "His name's Johnny Jackson. I've known him for years. He runs a dump up on Broadway. I was up there this afternoon—and the only reason that I got away again was because he was afraid to reveal his connection with this racket too soon."

Jackson sneered. "A liar, too. I never saw this man before in all my life."

Prescott was not stupid enough to believe that. He had been fully aware of the little byplay between Vedder and Jackson, when the detective had made his forced entry into the room.

"These books," he persisted. "Seven copies—and each looking exactly like the one you tried to sell me."

"Sold you," corrected Jackson, alias Chisholm. "You gave me the check and—"

"And I'll stop payment on it. I'm not paying forty-two thousand dollars for a copy of 'Murders In The Rue Morgue' if there are this many in existence."

"Especially," said Vedder, "if they're forgeries!"

For an instant Vedder thought Jackson would shoot him, so furious did the bookseller become. He actually frothed at the mouth.

"Vedder, you—" he began thickly.

Prescott reached toward a telephone on a stand near his chair. "I think I'll call for my chauffeur—"

It was Amos Teeples who whisked the telephone from under Prescott's hands and deposited it on the floor out of his reach.

"No," he said, "you're not going home until that check is cashed."

"You can't keep me here!" Prescott blustered.

Old Amos showed his teeth in a wolfish grin. "You going to walk home, Mr. Prescott?"

There was a thick cane leaning against Prescott's chair. He picked it up and used it to help

lift himself to his feet. He stood a moment, tottering.

"I'll walk!" he gasped.

Vedder, fully recovered, sprang to his feet. Big Louie instantly shoved him back to the sofa. Johnny Jackson said thinly: "You bought that book in good faith, Mr. Prescott, and you can't renege. To make sure, I'm not going to let you go until that check's cleared"—he flicked up the cuff of his coat—"in exactly seven hours and fifty minutes. It is now ten minutes after one. We'll cash the check at nine o'clock, when the bank opens."

Prescott let himself fall heavily back into his chair. "You're keeping me here against my will, you understand. The police—"

"We didn't kidnap you," sneered Jackson. "You came here of your own free will—to see a book. We sold it to you. If you didn't want to leave here—or couldn't—that's no skin off our noses. I don't have to let you use my telephone if I don't want to."

"Cut out the whitewashing, Jackson!" Vedder snapped. "You know damn well you've already killed one man today. Clyde Hotchkiss!"

"Batty!" said Jackson. "You're plain batty."

"Am I?" retorted Vedder. "You hired our agency to shadow Hotchkiss. You wanted to know where he went today. He'd got hold of one of your forgeries, somehow, and you were afraid he was going to blow the lid off your racket. You hung around Eisenschein's office and when Hotchkiss showed up, you got panic-stricken and hit him with a chunk of lead pipe, wrapped up in a newspaper."

Old Amos' eyes were glowing. "Johnny, you promised—"

Vedder snapped: "Johnny! Your own stooge is giving you away."

Jackson shot daggers at old Amos. Then he suddenly shrugged. "All right, wise guy. But if you think you're going to tell that story outside of here, you're crazy!"

"Well," said Vedder, "that may be. At any rate, I've queered your little game, haven't I? You ran a little shop up on Broadway, for a front—just like Eisenschein does on Sixth Avenue. You accidentally found a copy of the 'Murder In The Rue Morgue' and you'd sell it to a sucker—"

"I did find one!" Jackson said, grimly. "I found one three years ago and I didn't know what it was worth. Not then. I sold it to that crook, Eisenschein for twenty dollars. He got thirty thousand for it. When I heard about it I went to him, and he laughed in my face. Well—I got even with him! I sold him three more copies during these three years—phonies, and he didn't know it. I nicked him for ten thousand dollars on each. He didn't know I had a finger in it, even. Amos sold one;

Hotchkiss sold one; and a stooge in Cincinnati sold him the third—"

Prescott exclaimed in bewilderment. "But how could you deceive Eisenschein? He *knows* books!"

"He doesn't know Amos," said Jackson. "Amos is the best printer and paper man in this country. He took a tiny fragment of paper from one of the original copies he looked at in a collection and made his own paper—matching it perfectly, with the stuff they used away back in 1843. He's got a system for aging papers that's a honey. And printing—"

"He's good!" said Vedder. "And if he'd used his skill for honest stuff—"

"Bah!" spat Amos. "I was honest for sixty years and what did it get me? Me, the best fine-printer in America."

"And so," said Vedder, "Hotchkiss stole one of your phonies and decided to cut out you fellows and make a wad on his own. You couldn't expose him for fear of exposing yourselves. Tough, boys! Especially since no bank's going to honor a check for forty-two thousand dollars without verification—"

"Prescott will verify it," Jackson said grimly. "Won't you, Prescott?"

"No," roared the wealthy book collector. "I've never been intimidated in my life and—"

"Oh," said Jackson, "we won't intimidate you. But I believe you have a daughter, Mr. Prescott. And she's all alone at home tonight—" He bobbed his head up and down. "Louie!"

Prescott turned ashen. "You wouldn't dare!"

"No? Louie, that place on Fifth Avenue where we picked up Mr. Prescott. Get Roscoe and—"

The door buzzer whirled!

Startled, Jackson whirled toward the door. Then he took a step forward and brandished the automatic in Vedder's face. "Keep your mouth shut!"

No one made any move toward the door. The buzzer whirled again—and again. And then a voice cried out—Bobcat's voice: "Open up, Chisholm, or we'll break down the door!"

Johnny Jackson, alias James Chisholm, gasped. He gestured toward Louie. "Open the door and bring him in—quietly!"

Louie went toward the door. Vedder, straining his ears for the sound of the knob turning, suddenly cried: "Look out, Bobcat!"

There was a smacking sound, a yell and loud scuffling, and Louie came hurtling backward into the room. Behind him charged little Bobcat and—Captain Billy Bligh, in person!

By the time Captain Billy emerged from the short corridor into the living room, Louie had regained his balance and was charging forward.

Bobcat bent at the middle and threw his little body violently at big Louie's knees. The bruiser

tripped forward, yelped and fell against Billy Bligh, smashing the captain against the corner of a shelf of books.

Billy Bligh roared in pain and anger. His voice was two notes below that of a bull elephant.

It gave Vedder his chance! Jackson, already watching the proceedings with one eye, took his other off Vedder for an instant when the captain roared. Vedder fell back on his shoulder blades and lashed out at Jackson with both feet.

He caught the bookseller-murderer squarely on the hip as he was turned sideward and bowled him over on top of Bobcat, on his hands and knees on the floor.

Vedder came up, himself, then, and pounced into the general mêlée. Louie was down on top of Captain Billy Bligh and not having such an easy time of it. The captain, despite his forty-five years, had learned the business in a hard school. He was big and tough. He took everything the muscle-bound wrestler had to offer and it wasn't enough.

He suddenly spilled big Louie to the floor, and with a bellow of rage came up and threw himself upon the big bruiser. He caught the thick head in both of his brawny fists and banged it heavily on the floor! He picked it up again and banged it down again. Louie became limp.

Vedder, clutching the squirming Jackson, was so fascinated by the other fight that he almost lost Jackson. It was little Bobcat who finally got a half nelson on Jackson and subdued him. And then

Captain Billy got to his feet. There was a triumphant gleam in his eyes.

"I haven't had so much fun in twenty years!" he boomed. "Vedder, my boy, I'm going to suspend that fine I slapped on you."

Vedder climbed to his feet. He took the automatic from Jackson's limp hand and stowed it in his pocket. He shot only a passing glance at old Amos Teeples, who had taken no part in the fight.

"Bobcat!" he cried, "what became of you and Roscoe?"

Bobcat grunted. "He got smart and tried to jump out of the cab. I jumped him and then a couple of traffic cops nailed the both of us."

"And I," said Captain Billy, "had to bail Bobcat out of jail."

Vedder chuckled. "Boss, what were you trying to tell me all evening? I heard you were telephoning all around town for me?"

For a moment Captain Bligh looked blank. Then he guffawed. "Why, Emma put me up to that. She kept telephoning me about the terrible risks you were running for the Bligh Agency. And I wanted to tell you to cut it out. We didn't have a client and we don't work without pay, you know—"

"I," said Prescott, "will see that you're paid. Well paid! And Mr. Vedder, I'd like to have you come up to my place tomorrow night for dinner."

"Tomorrow?" said Vedder. "Tomorrow's Saturday, and I've got a date—with a little girl who works in our office!"

THE END.

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I'LL NEVER LET YOU GO

by STEVE FISHER



I.

SAXON came into his apartment and closed the door. He was tired. His face was pale, and his eyes were bloodshot. He took off his hat and tossed it to a chair, then he put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. He was a medium-sized man and blond. He looked like any ordinary citizen, except perhaps the lines which made his countenance were harder. It was a fixed hardness which had grown there.

He looked around at the apartment—the windows through which late-afternoon sunshine tumbled secondhand. It was a sun which slanted off the rooftops across Market Street and filtered through dust before it reached here. The furniture was old, the paneling in the walls was ancient. But it was the kind of place you got in San Francisco; the kind of dump he had always known. He couldn't tell what was wrong with him now, why he was so sour.

He moved into the kitchen and went through the process of making himself a Tom Collins. Too much work, that was what was the matter. You never got through when you were a parole officer. That was what the San Francisco *Blade* had said in its feature articles about parole work. A man was never through; one detective was burdened down with seventy-five ex-convicts on whom he had to keep constant tab. And the trouble was, you couldn't be hard with them. There were orders to the contrary. You had to take their lip. You had to be their adviser, their consoler; you had to find them jobs, loan them money. While all the time you knew they were laughing at you. You could keep your own ideas of a crook, of course. Saxon knew they were all the same. They'd get what they could from a parole officer; they'd fake and lie, and put you to a lot of trouble; they'd try to fool you right up to the end. And, in the end, nine out of ten went right back to the clink.

Saxon poured the gin into his drink and slowly stirred it.

That was it, that was what got you—being nice to sniveling punks that'd cut your throat; being the stir-bug's apparent One-Friend-in-Need, while at the same time you were responsible for him at headquarters. It was up to you to make the arrest the moment the ex-con stepped out of line.

Saxon lifted the Tom Collins. "Here's to your seventy-five crummy charges," he said.

He had just put the glass to his lips when the phone rang. He left the drink on the sink and went into the living room and answered.

"Saxon? I've been trying to get you for a couple of hours. This is Chief Craig."

"Hello, chief."

"I haven't much time, Sax. Tell you why I called. There's a woman getting out of the woman's prison today, and I see from my records that the case was yours from the beginning."

"Yeah?"

"Well, we've assigned a woman parole cop to her, but I thought I'd ask you to take over the actual parole job. It isn't done, usually. You guys don't always handle females. But this is different. I think the girl might be dangerous. Besides—"

"What's her name?"

"Listen, you'll remember when I tell you this, Saxon—right after her courtroom trial she threatened to kill you when she got out."

"Things like that don't mean anything," Saxon said irritably. "I've had maybe a dozen similar threats."

"O. K., then. The girl's name is Laura Mead."

Saxon stiffened. "Oh," he said.

The chief went on: "I remember you making a statement once that what soured you on women was seeing this Mead girl, how hard and false she could

be, while she looked so pretty and innocent on the surface. Well, you still ain't tied up with any babe, so I guess you're still pretty sour."

"That's right."

"You interested in the case?"

"I'll handle it," Saxon said.

"O. K. Remember what I told you a long time ago—once a crook, always a crook. Don't let that face make you forget a thing so important as that."

"Don't you worry about me," Saxon breathed. "I work with these I'm-on-the-straight-and-narrow pledgers day in and day out, and they *all* lie. They're always crooks. They *never* change."

"All right. You'll be responsible for the girl. Don't let her get away with anything."

"I won't," Saxon said. "I'll hound her."

Saxon was waiting in the shed when the prison ferry docked, and he was the first to see her. She stepped off the boat and looked out to the street toward the network of buildings that was San Francisco. She was carrying one bag.

Saxon didn't step forward immediately. He was watching her. She was very pale, and considerably thinner than when he'd seen her last. Her gray suit looked drab, and there was something in her dark eyes that flickered between fatigue and hope. She had nice hair, shiny, like mahogany; and she was no less pretty than she had been. Prison hadn't taken her beauty. She was more matured now. He looked at her card which he had in his hand. Twenty-five. Twenty-five now. That reminded him he was older, too. Time does pass; the years do go by you.

She came forward with the crowd and, standing back by some casing, he noticed that she was more eager than she had been a moment ago. When she had passed, he drifted out and followed. Outside the shed she stood and took air into her lungs, and she actually smiled. He thought he saw tears in the corners of her eyes. He was unimpressed. She hailed a taxicab. When the door had been opened, and she was ready to step in, Saxon caught her arm.

"Move on, cabby," he said to the driver.

The girl turned, embarrassed. Two or three people glanced around. It was so obvious—cop and a girl. Laura stared at Saxon. He had thought her face was pale. But it was different now; it was blanched. Her eyes grew hard and bitter with hatred. She made a screaming face, but no sound came from her throat to match it. Her voice was low, flat.

"What do you want?"

"Maybe we can walk along, up Market Street. I can tell you then."

"I don't have to. I'm free now. I—"

"Baby, you give me one more word of lip and I'll send you right back up the stream. You're not free.

You're a charge of the State. You're on parole, and you're *my* charge!"

Her eyes dropped.

"Now come along," he said.

She carried her bag, and walked along with him.

Saxon said: "You were going to kill me. Do you still have that in mind?"

She was over her anger, she realized her position. Her voice pleaded. "I was young then. I was hysterical when I was sentenced. I didn't know what I was saying."

"Do you still maintain you were innocent?"

"Yes," she said. Her voice hardened. "Yes."

Saxon laughed softly. "What have you in mind? Any work?"

"I'm going to get a job; yes."

"Have it lined up?"

"No," she replied, "but I'll start looking tomorrow."

He glanced at the card in his hand again. "That won't be necessary. We've got one fixed up for you. You dance?"

"No."

"Then you can learn. Chorus routine. Only six girls. Cheesy little beer joint in the Russian district. It won't take much talent. You'll get twelve dollars a week after they've taught you the routine."

"But I don't want a job like that!"

He went into his patter: "We of the parole have considered you from every standpoint. We are interested only in seeing that you make a good start in your new life. It is our earnest desire to fit you into a niche in the world today for which you will be properly fitted. Now, you have a good figure and a fair personality. Do you want this job, or



Saxon said, "Move on, cabbie!"

would you rather go back to prison?"

Crushed, she said: "All right. I'm supposed to live on twelve dollars, is that right?"

He nodded. "And you'll report to me three times a week. You'll return to your room the moment the show in the club is over. You'll confine your mornings to walking only around your own neighborhood. You are allowed no friends, male or female, until I've approved of them. And certainly no dates. A matron will give you a weekly physical examination—"

She whirled on him. "I hate you! I hate you! All of my life I have spent hating you!"

She began to sob.

II.

That night, in his apartment, he went over the notes he had kept on Laura Mead throughout the years. It wasn't necessary to refer to them, because this was one case he knew in detail; but he was a deliberate, methodical man, which was what had prompted him to make the notes, and now caused him to go over them.

The first read:

This is the biggest day of my life. Made an arrest in the Lambert kidnaping, and recovered alive the Lambert two-year-old baby. Only prisoner is a girl, Laura Mead. They are grilling her now to discover whereabouts of the rest of the gang. My name is in the papers. The cracking of this case is a cinch to get me promoted into plain clothes.

He read that, and then he sat back, remembering. He had been very young, and his police uniform wasn't over a year old. He remembered things very vividly back to that year, because he had been more easily impressed than now. He had been inexperienced, less hard. There was tenderness in his heart for the life he had known then, and since had gradually lost.

It was 1931, and his beat had been upper Market Street, outside the sailor dance hall, Balconades. The Fox Theater, across the street, was a new million-dollar project with pictures and musical-comedy stage shows that featured such then unknowns as Ginger Rogers. The depression was on, and everywhere stores were closed, and big markets lay empty. On all the corner lots there were miniature golf courses which were the rage. Along with prohibition, bathtub gin. Bing Crosby had just scored from coast to coast with a song called "Blue of the Night," and a local boy, Russ Columbo, was imitating him and singing ballads like "Time on My Hands" and "You May Call It Madness" and "Can't We Talk It Over." A genius named Disney had made a cartoon picture in which there was a song about The Big Bad Wolf which still had the financiers scared; and people were talking about Prosperity Around the Corner, and a Chicken in Every Pot. Viña Delmar had just written "Bad Girl."

He remembered this, and that in the papers there was news of the Lambert kidnaping. It was sensational, because the Lindbergh baby had just been found, and people were worked up. Saxon was a dumb cop; he didn't know any more about it than anyone else. But he had been told that if you were smart you got information, and plenty of it, from stool pigeons. So when a stoolie had whispered in his ear, he had listened.

Afterward, he had gone straight to Laura Mead's address. That was when he'd seen her for the first time. She was just seventeen, with big eyes, and dark hair, worn wind-blown, which was the style. He had stood at the door.

"I'd like to ask you some questions."

"Come in," she had said.

He had entered and looked around. "Nice little place. You live here alone?"

"No. With my brother. Our mother and father died when we were very small."

"I see. You work?"

"No," she had said simply, "my brother works."

He remembered that—the simplicity of her, the innocence. It was so convincing he had doubted he was on the right track. That was why, afterward, he became so bitter.

"What does your brother do?"

"He's a mechanic."

Saxon had been self-conscious. He had barked out the next like a movie detective. "All right, sister, where's the kid?"

"Kid?"

"You've got a two-year-old baby you're keeping here, haven't you?"

"Why . . . why, yes. My brother brought him. Belonged to a friend of his—his wife had to go to the hospital. I'm keeping the baby till she gets back."

Saxon had laughed harshly. She led him to the child, which was taking its nap. It was very pink and healthy. There had been no late pictures of the Lambert baby, so there was nothing for Saxon to recognize. But he had been very big and important.

"That's him! That's the Lambert baby!"

"You're crazy!" Laura snapped. "You're crazy, officer!" Then, in a minute: "I tell you this baby belongs to a friend of my brother. The woman had to go to the hospital, I tell you—" A few minutes later, screaming: "You can't do this! You can't arrest me! I haven't done anything. I don't know anything about this. I tell you—"

Saxon gazed down at the next notation in the note book:

It came through—I'm a third-class detective! Police and Federal men have thrown a network around San Francisco for Mike Mead, Laura's brother, and two other men believed to be implicated in the kidnaping. It's just a

matter of hours before they'll be captured. Saw Laura Mead in the line-up today. She was very pale.

He remembered seeing her there on the stage, the spotlight in her eyes. She looked very young and frightened—just a girl.

"Your name?"

"Laura Mead."

"Age?"

"Seventeen." Then: "I tell you I'm innocent, I—"

Five weeks, and the first break came in the Lambert kidnaping case since the arrest of Laura Mead: Mike Mead was found floating in the harbor. His body had been in the water so long that it was almost entirely decomposed. The other two believed members of the kidnaping ring have vanished. It is beginning to look hopeless than any trace of the forty thousand dollars ransom paid by Mr. Lambert will ever be recovered. Laura Mead still refuses to reveal the identity of the two missing men by pleading innocent. She goes on trial tomorrow.

A hard, embittered detective who had been assigned to the kidnaping even before Laura's arrest had said to Saxon: "You're new at this, kid. But I'll tell you how it is with these cases. We get 'em, and we have to build 'em before we hand them to the D. A. Now, these hard little youngster criminals are the worst. If we're to penetrate their arrogant bluff and convict them, we must use every legal



"That's the Lambert baby!"

trick we know. So we can hand the case over to the prosecutor cold turkey. Now there are one or two points . . . as to clues—"

"I don't know what you mean," Saxon replied.

"Well, you can't be too hard on crooks," the detective had continued. "You've got to fight fire with fire. Now there are two small points that'll come

up in your testimony where it will be best if you . . . ah . . . exaggerate. Just to a very small degree, you understand—"

Saxon had considered experienced dicks right along with gods in those days, and his inexperienced ears had drunk all this in.

During the trial, he sat there on the witness stand.

"You made the arrest."

"Yes, sir."

"When you entered the Mead apartment tell us exactly what you saw."

"Well, there was a newspaper on the divan, with the Lambert kidnaping headlined. I remember that and—"

The attorney held up a curious stubby pencil. It was very thick and blunt.

"Did you by any chance see this?"

"Yes."

"How do you remember that you saw it?"

"Because I accidentally knocked it off the desk; I picked it up and gave it back to Miss Mead."

Laura Mead, white and shaken, leaped to her feet. "He's lying! He's lying! God in heaven, is there no justice!"

The D. A. was talking through her protest: "This" was the pencil with which the ransom notes had been written.

The whole scene, the entire experience, had given Saxon a chill down his back. Only the assurance of the old-time detective who had built up the material evidence had consoled him: "Listen, that pencil was a small item. You didn't see it, no. But *I* say it was found in the apartment; so it was. Only to make it more important in the trial, you had to say *you* saw it there. That's so they won't think I planted it. You got to do things like that. The pencil was in the apartment, and it was either she or her brother that used it."

The trial had gone on, day after day. Saxon had made this further notation:

There can be no doubt that she's guilty, even Simon Rand, one of the country's smartest criminal lawyers, keeps losing point after point to the D. A.; and Simon, as though he senses the hopelessness of this case, the tremendous amount of evidence against the guilty girl, is listless, has none of his usual courtroom fire.

Simon Rand, the well-known criminal lawyer, called shyster in polite company, was a thin, smallish man. He was filled to the brim with nervous energy, and his favorite pose was to stand tapping a pencil against his lip. He wore pince-nez glasses and he had a pink, round face. His hair was sandy. Saxon remembered his various squabbles with Laura Mead during the trial, and then Rand's summing up:

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. I ask you only this—to take the word of this innocent child.

To sit in judgment as though you were a mother, or a father; to try to understand her. She is too young, too sweet, to be sent to prison. That is why the people of San Francisco took up a collection in her behalf to employ me to handle her case. But if they hadn't, if I didn't make a cent from this trial, I should have defended Laura Mead out of the kindness of my heart. I should have defended her because, like each of you, I am a warm-hearted human being."

Eloquent, but empty. Appealing to emotion rather than logic.

This was before the famous California law which now puts kidnapers to death on the gallows. Saxon wrote in his book in October, 1931:

The jury found Laura Mead guilty of conspiracy to aid a kidnaping, but because of her age was recommended clemency. Judge Rollins sentenced her to fifteen years at hard labor.

Laura listened to the sentence, and then she shrieked: "I'm innocent! I tell you, I knew nothing about the baby. My brother brought it home, he—"

She had whirled, pointing to Simon Rand: "He helped convict me. He's in the pay of the men who have the ransom. The men who killed my brother. He didn't try to fight for me! He refused to consider what defense I had! I shall kill him some day. Kill him— Kill him, and kill that police officer who testified, who lied on the stand— I—"

She had fainted.

III.

Saxon rubbed his hand across his eyes, and lit a cigarette.

He turned the pages of his book: 1932—The election of a man named Franklin Delano Roosevelt— The Winchell craze and the movie Blessed Event, in which a new actor had his first tiny part, Dick Powell. Miniature golf going out, lending libraries just coming in. The Bank Holiday. The flood of mediocre sex novels trying to imitate "Bad Girl." The earthquake in Los Angeles and Long Beach. The new radio program sensation: March of Time. Kate Smith and Connie Boswell and Morton Downey. The new heavyweight champion of the world, Max Baer.

Up for second-class detective; two men were arrested in Fresno, and questioned in the old Lambert kidnaping. They are Hollis Smith and Joe Ritz. Both are ex-cons and were convicted on a new charge of robbery. Each drew ten years in San Quentin. Claimed no knowledge of the Lambert case. None of the ransom money has ever turned up.

A few months later:

I have been promoted to second class. Heard that Joe Ritz, robber, once questioned in the Lambert case, died of

influenza in San Quintin. Mumbled incoherently on deathbed about kidnaping, but gave no new light on the case. Hollis Smith questioned again, still denies all knowledge in the Lambert affair.

Still later:

Cache of twenty thousand dollars, half of the Lambert ransom money, found near Fresno. Only a few bills missing. Cache believed to be the share of the cash received by Joe Ritz and hidden away by him. Fresno cops are now looking for the other twenty thousand still missing. Hollis Smith told of the discovery, but displayed no outward emotion. This Smith lad is still playing his cards close to the chest.

Saxon kept turning the pages. 1933— 1934—

Repeal. The Dionne quintuplets. Hauptmann arrested. Hitler. Ethel Merman singing "Heat Wave"; the song "Day and Night" on every radio. People read "North of the Orient," and sex novels were dying; left-wing literature magazines flourished briefly; Gertrude Stein was laughed at, and William Saroyan was the fading sensation. *Esquire* was born, and Hemmingway began to write again. Marie Dressler died. Darrel Zanuck walked out on Warner Brothers and started his own company. Shirley Temple. Upton Sinclair running for governor on the EPIC plan in California, with everybody in Frisco scared.

Promoted to first-class detective. There is some talk about putting me on the parole officer staff. Trying hard to get it: I'd be assistant chief parole officer in San Francisco—studying all of the angles.

Later:

I'm on!

Then, in November, 1934:

Called to the new woman's prison to sit in on meeting of citizen parole board and to give opinion and advice on various cases, some of which I am personally acquainted with. Enjoyed this new role immensely, only one bad moment: they brought in Laura Mead.

"Miss Mead is very young and she has been recommended as a subject for parole. Have you any opinion as to the advisability of this, Mr. Saxon?" Saxon had been nervous. "What's her record?" "Perfect."

He had sat there, watching his fingernails, conscious of her eyes on him: the hope, the fear.

He saw that she had changed, she was growing up. She was twenty now. He paused, then he realized that he was letting sentiment and sympathy sway him, and for fear that his judgment would be questioned by the parole board since he was new in the job, he said officiously:

"It has been my experience that persons of her type, after a few years in prison, either return to crime, or resort to an evil well known to all of us."

"The parole would be strict, Mr. Saxon. Don't you think she should be given a chance?"

He had been ready to say yes, then he saw her looking at him—the wild hatred that was in her eyes. He gazed back at her, coolly.

"No," he said. "I think giving her a chance would be futile."

Her first parole had been denied. He didn't know whether it was his testimony or not. He was aware that he counted very little in the final consideration of the applicants, but he knew what she would always think, and there grew now a feeling between himself and the girl. He could not define it. He hated her. He did not know why he should think about her seriously enough to hate, but that's the way it was. As the days passed, it grew worse. He tried to analyze the hatred. Once he thought it might be his own conscience, because of the possibility that she was innocent. But his methodical police mind discarded this theory as absurd. None the less, he was unable to forget her.

Everywhere he went, the thought of her haunted him. He saw the weeks and the months going by; he saw news made, and saw it give way to newer stuff. He saw celebrities made, and read of men dying. The world surged on—the crowds of San Francisco packed Market Street, the four trolley tracks hummed, the cable cars went up and down the steep hills; they were building a bridge across the harbor. But up there, in prison, a girl, twenty, now twenty-one, lived one day that was exactly like another. She had no hope, nothing to which to look forward. Hard labor. Dreary routine. Early hours. Poor food. No newspapers. No one to write to her. No one to visit her. Day after day, never a change, never variety. The thought obsessed Saxon. He was miserable with it.

It drove him to see Simon Rand.

The criminal lawyer was very bland. Sandy hair, pince-nez glasses, pinkish face, he sat and listened; and then he had to look up the case before he fully remembered it. At least, these were the motions he went through.

"No, I'm afraid she was guilty, all right."

"But are you sure? Did you investigate every angle?"

Simon Rand nodded, smiling without humor. "I remember her perfectly now. And, as a matter of fact, in strict confidence, she confessed to me she had been in on the kidnaping."

"She—"

"As her attorney, she felt she could tell me."

"I see." Saxon rose. He was awkward with his hands. He felt vast relief surging through him. Of course, he had known all along that she was guilty; it was pure police logic. At best there was only her word for what had happened. But this was different. This was the cincher.

"Thanks very much, Mr. Rand."

Simon Rand replied: "You are entirely welcome."

Walking down Geary Street, Saxon felt much better. He remembered all of his own parole mottoes—once a crook, always a crook. They're born like that. You shouldn't ever give them a chance. Parole's a mistake, but since they have it, all you can do is hound them and hunt them, and try to keep them straight. When they do revert to form, be there and pick up the pieces, and send them back to the clink.

He stopped in front of a burlesque theater and looked at the posters. Then he paid his quarter and went in. He bought a bag of peanuts, and sat there eating them, and watching a strip tease.

He was relaxing.

IV.

In the next four years, though, he never quite forgot her. Charges came to him, and left him. He met people, he went places. There was the case of the hophead on parole, whom he'd chased through Chinatown. There was a gun fight on a roof with a youth who'd been on parole. In off hours there'd been a girl he'd taken twice to the movies. She was a cashier in a beer joint and neglected telling him she was married until after her husband had blackened Saxon's eyes. There was a nurse he had met on an emergency case; that was his closest to being in love. It lasted a year, and she married an intern. He hadn't shown enough interest. But the thing was, he lived life, like every human lives it.

Things happened to him. Each passing day was a new life, a new world within itself, and the past grew dark and became a tunnel. He kept going forward into new sunshine, forgetting the shadow of yesterday behind him. But never once again did he forget Laura Mead. He didn't know why her memory stayed with him. He came to accept it after a while. He'd be doing some silly thing, stirring his coffee, or waiting in line to see Stanford play in a football game, or lecturing to some miserable parolee, then he'd think of her again. He'd see her face, and her hair like dark mahogany, glistening; and her eyes.

He hated her. Hated her because she affected him this way. Because he knew she was guilty, and yet she had that false innocent look. She was a type, he told himself. Yet he'd never seen another quite her type.

The days passed him. Hauptmann burned in the electric chair. There was the Roosevelt landslide. Spain began a civil war. Japan landed troops in China and began to fight in earnest. Hitler became more powerful. "Gone With the Wind" became a landmark. Will Rogers and Wiley Post crashed, Jean Harlow died in Hollywood. Swing music

came in; Benny Goodman sent kids crazy playing his clarinet. Disney made "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." Corrigan flew the wrong way. People sang "Thanks for the Memory." Paul Gallico and Richard Sherman became the writing favorites; and Clifford Odets went to Hollywood at two thousand a week. The G-man craze rose and gradually faded. The press panned Robert Taylor. Time passed, the calendar caught up with itself, but Saxon never again forgot Laura Mead, up the river in prison, missing all this.

He wrote a new notation in the book now:

Laura Mead was finally paroled. She arrived today and in my charge. Got her a job in Russian Hill at Ivan's Nite Spot.

Two days later he went to Ivan's Nite Spot so she could make her first report. The show was on, and he took a table and sat and watched her. He was conscious from this moment of an intensity that attached itself to his consideration of her. He became aware with a frightened backward glance, that she was no longer just a case, a parolee, if indeed she had ever been. Insanely, he had the desire to crush her, to choke her. It was one of those emotions that come to human beings and make them glad others can only see them on the surface. Saxon's hands worked in and out; he lit a cigarette.

Perhaps it was because she was so beautiful: so beautiful and still so young. So innocent-seeming, so sweet. He had never seen her in tights before. And Ivan, though he may have made his girls wear fur, white fur, panties, they were entirely scant; the breast strap scarcely covered the parts for which it was meant. And Laura's body was full, and vital and rich. Her legs were perfectly shaped; her figure was almost sensuous. She danced in line with the others, but she was easily the knockout on the floor. None of the other cheap, washed-out ex-burlesque hoofers Ivan hired could hold a candle to her. Young, and pretty, and pale; dark, shiny hair; glistening red lips. There was only one thing. Saxon noticed it at once. Laura's eyes. Still frightened. That hunted look. He smiled.

She saw him, and came over to his table during the intermission. He saw that the other girls mixed with the customers, also. They sat, still in their scant costumes, and drank. This was business. Ivan paid them for this, as well as for dancing. Laura did not look at Saxon; she sat down opposite him. She kept her eyes on the table, as though she were ashamed of being so undressed; as though she was embarrassed, and resented him and the club and everything about it.

"How have you made out?" he asked.

"All right."

"Does the world seem different to you?"

"After seven and a half years," she said, "how do you think it would seem?"

He was officious: "This attitude will do you no good, you understand that."

"I hate you!" she replied. "I've hated you, and that lawyer, ever since the trial."

He put his cigarette out. "Want a drink?"

"Not with you. Do I have to do any more reporting?"

"No. That's all for this time."

He sat there, numb, cold with fury. When the next chorus number went on in ten minutes, he watched her. She saw him, too. The number finished. The girls ran backstage to dress. Saxon got up and followed backstage. Laura saw him as he arrived near the dressing rooms. Her eyes went wide with horror. There was no reason. No explanation. Fear—the hunted. She turned and ran. She ran into her dressing room and slammed the door.

He had meant only to tell her she was doing all right, to give her some little word of encouragement. But now his blood pulsed hot. Instinctive desire surged through him—to chase, to pursue, to capture. He ran after her. He banged on her door. He had no right to do this, no right to intrude, but he crashed against the door. His temples throbbed. He forced the lock and moved into the room.

She was crouched back against the opposite wall, her eyes still wide with terror. His fingers were moving, but now they stopped. His hands dropped to his side. She was like an animal. Like a rabbit that had run into its hole; but he had come in after her. It was all over now. She was here. He was awkward; there was nothing he could say. Cat and mouse. He smiled emptily and walked out.

A game between them. His heart beat so hard it hurt him. He had that wild, tingling sensation in his stomach which made him dizzy. And yet, when he was on the street again, in the night air, he felt very big. He felt like a conqueror. He had the primitive desire to scream and beat his chest.

He was afraid of himself.

He was at headquarters, talking to Chief Craig, when the news came in. It had been three days since he had seen Laura, and he was making routine reports when the word flashed around the office.

"Simon Rand's been murdered!" Craig said.

"Rand?"

"Yeah. The criminal's shyster. I'm surprised somebody didn't think of that a long while ago."

Saxon left at once.

He arrived at Simon Rand's office shortly after the homicide men. The pink-faced lawyer was lying stretched out on the floor. His pince-nez glasses had been broken. There was a bullet hole in his head, and blood clotted his sandy hair. The coroner came in. Fingerprint men began dusting. A police

captain opened and closed drawers, talked very fast. A third-grade detective took down notes in shorthand.

Saxon stood there at the door, and then he moved forward. He bent, and from the wastebasket he picked out a handkerchief. Initials were sewn into the corner of it. "L. M." Saxon stared at it.

The police captain was holding a lipstick container. "Some dame must have spilled open her purse, and didn't pick up everything afterward. This had rolled under the cabinet."

Saxon's eyes were on the lipstick. Blood came up into his cheeks.



"I've got the angle on this—and I'll make the arrest!"

"I got the angle on this case," he said quietly. "I'll make the arrest."

"We got angles, too," said the captain.

Saxon didn't hear. He was headed for Russian Hill.

V.

She was dressed in a green skirt that was nice on her figure, and a green wool sweater. She was hatless, and her black hair clung to her shoulders. Her face was still very white, her eyes dark.

"You came for the report?" she said.

He looked around the room. Then he opened his clenched hand and showed her the handkerchief.

"This yours?"

She looked at it, nodded.

He showed her the lipstick. She nodded again.

"So you killed him. I suppose I was next."

"Killed who?"

"Rand. Simon Rand."

She stepped back, incredulous with disbelief, "No!"

"You lied like that before."

She was watching him now. "He's dead?"

"That's right. Why don't you confess it? This is the postman's second ring. We have you, no matter whether you admit it or don't. Ex-convicts don't have the opportunity of lying in court like first offenders."

She drank in his words, watching him, entirely fascinated by him. She spoke in almost a whisper.

"You . . . you're a machine, aren't you?"

"A very efficient one," he said.

"A law machine, mechanical, punctual. You never miss a trick. Everything is evidence, logic, material reasoning."

"I do all right," he said. "You admit you killed Rand?"

She nodded. She made a screaming face again, but laughter came instead. "Sure," she said, "I killed him. See, it

isn't hard for you this time. Aren't you disappointed? You'd like to grill me, and break me down. But I won't let you."

He moved toward her numbly.

The next he knew she had a china lamp in her

hand. It was coming at him.

Then he didn't know any more.

When he regained consciousness he was still in the room, and it wasn't very much later.

But she was gone, and her bag was gone.

He got up and picked a splinter of china out of his forehead. Then he washed the wound, and soothed it with a hot cloth. His heart was jumping.

When he left the place he didn't bother to call in and report. He went directly to Ivan.

"She drew thirty dollars in advance," said Ivan. "Why?"

"How long ago was she here?"

"About half an hour."

"Half an hour," Saxon said.

Give the fox thirty minutes' start. Any good hound can pick up the trail—

He used the telephone, and checked on Greyhound busses. Then he began driving. The car ate up the road, and he took a short cut. He was in the terminal at Fresno waiting when two busses pulled in, one from Los Angeles, the other from San Francisco. He stood back, watching. People poured in from the bus landings to get a meal. There was an awful crowd. He made his way through it.

He didn't see her; but she must have seen him, because when the busses pulled out, she was not on either one of them. He had a description, but no way of being sure, absolutely positive, she had taken the Fresno bus. No way except instinct—the instinct of the pursuer. He had felt her in that crowd just as sure he had tasted his own breath. He had been aware of her personality, of her fright, and of her fleeing. But he had not seen her.

So he stayed in Fresno, because he knew she was here.

He had local police check on all the hotels, rooming houses and tourist camps, in case she checked in. They would get word the moment she tried to rent a room. He had a watch put on cafés.

But then, he himself went to the far end of town where the highway left Fresno; because he sensed that her flight had just begun, and that she would know it was impossible to stay in town. He moved from filling station to filling station. At last, at seven that night:

"Why, yeah, mister, a girl like that got a ride on a truck going down through the valley. They left about an hour and a half ago."

Easy, he thought; easy. Trucks go slowly.

He had the State Highway Patrol with him. They stopped one truck after another, and he inspected them as he caught up. She wouldn't necessarily be driving in the driver's compartment, though that seemed logical. She might be hidden



The lamp was coming at him. . . .

in the freight. The inspections held him up. At midnight he was still on the highway and the Los Angeles Greyhound bus, a huge double-decker, glittering through the night with its lights on, swept by him going eighty miles an hour.

He passed the bus at the next town, but it went on around him the next truck he inspected.

This kept happening for hours, then the bus got a big lead and left him. The fastest private motorists had never beaten the busses on this route.

Saxon caught her trail again in Modesto. She had eaten there. The truck on which she had ridden had been a fruit express and had unwittingly been faster than the net stretched out to get it. Saxon talked to the driver.

"She was just a scared kid; said she had to get to Los Angeles. So I took her this far. This is as far as I go. She bought me a meal here, to square up, she said. Funny kid, insisted on being square."

"Where did she go when she left here?"

"Search me."

"Is she staying in town?"

The counterman in the diner spoke up. "There was a local milk train pulling out, mister. It don't go far, but it has one passenger car. She might have got that."

"What makes you think so?" Saxon snapped.

"Well, she was asking about schedules."

The train carried milk only as far as Pixley, or a few miles farther.

Pixley was a very small, very quiet town at five in the morning. Only the old wooden-front hotel was open, and farther along the line a café. He went to the hotel. The sleepy clerk, aroused from his slumber on the second floor, knew nothing.

Saxon went out.

Afterward, he learned she was sitting right there in the lobby, slumped down in a leather chair, too tired to move. It was in a dark corner. She had been almost asleep when she heard him, the noise, the roar he made.

He went to the café and had coffee. He sat around, and a little while later ate his breakfast. He was at the station when the first passenger arrived, and left. She didn't get on it. He checked up the next Greyhound that came in. Everyone was asleep. No one got on at Pixley. While he waited there at the bus stop, a freight train pulled out.

Somehow, instinctively, he was drawn to it. He watched it; then he ran across the railroad yard to the tracks. The train was going very slowly. He had the impulse to catch it, but he restrained himself. There was no proof that she was aboard. The train picked up speed. He saw her in one of the last cars, but it was too late to jump. She still had her bag.

This was easy, easy.

He got his car and raced along the highway, faster than the train. He stopped once, found out where the freight's first stop would be, and drove hurriedly to the town. It was a long stretch, half-way to Bakersfield.

When the train came in he had local cops to help him. But she wasn't aboard.

The engineer said: "We stopped once for water."

So he had to go back, miles back, to where the train had stopped for water.

A gasoline attendant had seen her. "Sure, she came in here and hung around until a lone tourist drove up that was going straight through to Los Angeles. He agreed to give her a ride. A man of about fifty, I'd say. Had a nice Stutz, and he drove fast."

Saxon drove fast.

Bakersfield—a long, straight stretch, the longest and straightest in the world from the other side of Bakersfield to the Ridge Route. Saxon was feverish. A Stutz, easy to spot. But the Stutz was well ahead, too far ahead.

Saxon's car climbed the mountains, the grapevine, dizzy with cliffs and curves. His tires whined as he whipped around curves; the motor droned as it pulled him up—up—higher and higher. Twenty-six miles of Ridge Route. Peril and disaster at every turn—

Then, grinding down the other side, Los Angeles not far ahead.

If she ever gets to Los Angeles, God help me!

He drove resolutely, filled with despair and panic, lest he had lost the trail. Worn and panting; tired dog; tired hound. The keenness of the hunt worn to an edge.

Then luck played with him, just as it had played

against him. He spotted the Stutz at a curb in front of a café. It was in Burbank, or on the outskirts, just a stone's throw from Hollywood, and, once there, he would have lost her trail.

He slammed on the brakes and climbed out of his car.

VI.

The owner of the Stutz turned out to be a movie producer. He didn't want any run-in with the law.

"Believe me mister. She told me her sister was dying, that she needed an operation, and that it was necessary to get to Los Angeles as quickly as possible. When I stopped here for something to eat before pulling on into Hollywood, she just said thanks, and out she went."

"Which way did she go?"

"I didn't notice."

Saxon went back outside. Fortunately, the neighborhood was residential, which didn't afford her much opportunity. After such a fast ride through Bakersfield and over the mountains, she must have figured she had left Saxon somewhere back in San Joaquin Valley. She thought she was ahead of him, that she would fool him by stopping here instead of going the rest of the way into Los Angeles. Her logic was good; he would never have guessed she would stop off before the actual destination. Criminals usually overshot, rather than undershot, their mark. He had with him now the element of surprise. There were no more than two or three places where, at best, she could rent a room.

He approached the first. He was tired, worn out, but the scent of bait so close revived him so that he was excited. His system, his very being, rose to meet the crisis, the ultimate; and fatigue faded, was set aside to be salved later.

The place he entered was an apartment house—a cheap, wooden one with weekly rentals. She would have just about enough left for a week's rent, and food. He rang the manager's bell. He didn't want to arouse any suspicion. This was all his own show.

"I think my sister was going to stop here; I wanted to give her a message." He described Laura. The manager looked him over, then told him the room number. It was on the second floor in the rear, she said.

Saxon climbed the stairs. This was it; this was what he had been waiting for.

In front of the room door, he paused. He was breathing very hard, like an actor before a stage entrance; this stimulation made palsy of his nervous system. He was cold all over; yet his temples were hot, hot. There would be no trouble. Quietly, he tried the door. It was locked. He rang. She couldn't get away. She couldn't jump out the window without breaking her legs. He rang again. He

waited. He was intolerably patient. He had all of the world of time. In a minute he heard the lock click back. He tried the door. It opened easily. He stepped in.

The door slammed shut. He whirled around. But it was too late. She had been waiting behind the door. Now she leaned back against it, her face very white. There was a gun in her hand. He had no time to go for his own weapon. A gun was the last thing in the world he expected from her. He gazed at her, and the gun. It was a black automatic, very old, very used. She must have had it beside her in the kitchen as she ate, because there was a smear of butter on it.

"The gun," she said, "something I picked up in a Fresno hock shop—two dollars."

"Very pretty," he said.

"Makes noise," she replied. She was very hard and cold.

"Going to use it?"

"Yes," she said. Then: "Don't try to draw, you'd be stupidly slow. And stand right where you are."

"I'm your obedient servant," he said.

She laughed softly. "You put me away, out of the world for seven and a half years. For something I didn't do. For something of which I was innocent. Now you were ready to send me to the gallows for the murder of Simon Rand, which I didn't commit. If I hadn't seen cockeyed justice before, I might have pleaded my innocence again. Like I did the first time. But it was no use. I saw that look in your eyes."

"You did it," he said, "you know you did."

"You mean *you* know I did. This is a world which is a façade, a street embanked with buildings, and boats and people so that you may swagger down the center. There is no other human being. The world exists for your pleasure; your calculations. You are the infallible law. You feel nothing for others. They are puppets, machinery which you move in positions designated by the small ticking of your mind."

"Very pretty," he said.

"Yes," she replied, "my parting eloquence to hatred. Rehearsed, edited, thought out, on trains and busses and trucks and in cars all the way through the San Joaquin Valley. Because I knew, you see, that eventually you'd catch up. I knew, somehow, it was futile to keep fleeing. You are too dogged, too narrow, to err."

"Thank you."

She went on: "You've hounded me, you've persecuted me; relentlessly you've pursued and tortured me through my life. You've chased me and hunted me. And now I'm here before you. Only it's my show. I never committed a crime in my life. But now I'm going to. Because you've driven me to it."

He just nodded, and coldly, living fury, she stood before him—seven and a half years dead, out of the world; a live thing now, eyes flashing, beautiful hair. She watched him, and she was right. It was her game. He saw her hand tighten on the gun. You don't think of anything. You don't have time to be scared in a moment like that.

She fired.

He dropped to his knees first, grasping his side, and still staring at her.

Then he flopped forward on his face.

VII.

Those next days were very dim at first, and the way he remembered things was in snatches; and he would not remember one conscious spell from the next, so that each time he awakened and tried to clear his mind it would be like the first awakening; and each time he would have to adjust himself to that which was around him. But gradually he became used to it, so that it was as though he had been here always.

The first time he remembered great pain in his side, and when his eyelids fluttered there was a doctor bending over him; he remembered the stethoscope, and that the doctor had a short Vandike beard. Then everything faded.

Later in the week, he got so that he could hear the things that were being said, and he was conscious long enough to realize this was the Los Angeles City Hospital.

Somebody said: "The wound would heal—it isn't so bad. But now that pneumonia's set in, I wouldn't gamble on his chances—"

Then again, later: "I'm a cop down from San Francisco. He's Saxon, all right. Been missing several days. Where'd you say you found him?"

"Apartment house in Burbank. Landlady heard a shot and called the cops."

"Know who did it?"

"Yeah. She says a girl checked into the place a little while before. But she must have gotten out by the rear fire escape. She wasn't there."

"Her name?"

"Mary Maloney."

"Probably fake," said the voice of the detective.

"Probably a fake name all right," replied the other voice.

"Well," the detective concluded, "I'll hang around L. A. till he comes out of it enough to talk. If he does. There's no doubt he knows the name of the girl that shot him. He didn't come all the way down here for nothing. If he'll identify the girl, we'll really have something."

Saxon had tried to speak then, but he faded back into unconsciousness. When his mind was clear the next time, he remembered that he hadn't even checked out in San Francisco. He'd been so



She fired. . . . He flopped forward on his face.

eager to pick up Laura's trail, so sure that she was guilty and he'd arrest her easily, that he had told no one.

Then one morning he awakened and most of the pain was gone; he could see things and hear things. He gazed at the nurse who fed him, and later he talked to the doctor. He spoke, though his voice was only a whisper:

"Will I be all right?"

"You'll be fine."

"Is there a detective down here waiting for me—an officer from San Francisco?"

"Well," said the doctor, "he was called back."

"Did he leave any message?"

"Yes. He said to get whoever had shot you, if you could. And to phone them about it as soon as you were able."

Saxon's eyes flickered grimly.

He tried not to think any more about her. He was waiting until he could get up. But the next day he still couldn't leave his bed and there was time on his hands, so he asked the nurse to bring him the back issues of newspapers he had missed.

He stared at the first headline:

HOLLIS SMITH ARRESTED FOR MURDER OF SIMON RAND

Found With Old Lambert Kidnap Ransom Notes

Smith, Ex-convict, Confesses In Face Of Overwhelming Evidence

Saxon rubbed his hand across his face. He was cold with sweat.

Hotchkiss had called at the shooting gallery on Sixth Avenue that had entry to Amos Teeples' Print Shop. Chisholm had gone there straight as a homing pigeon when frightened by Bobcat.

Again, Hotchkiss had stopped at the secondhand bookstore presided over by young Eisenschein. After that, he had gone to Eisenschein, Sr.'s, place and met his fate.

Susan Prescott had employed the Bligh Agency—specifically the man who had shadowed Hotchkiss—because her father's life had been threatened. But Vedder had only her word for that. Prescott, Sr., had promptly dismissed him—after Susan Prescott had pumped him dry.

The more he thought about it all, the madder Sam Vedder got. They were all in on it, in some way: Susan Prescott, her father, the two Eisenscheins, James Chisholm, old man Teeples, and the two thugs, Roscoe and Louie.

Vedder approached the secondhand bookstore near Forty-third Street. It was still running full blast. He pushed open the door and turned toward the cash register. Young Eisenschein was not behind it. But in his place was a beetle-browed, hulking man of about fifty, who did not resemble young Eisenschein at all.

Vedder grinned icily. "You Felix Eisenschein?"

The big man said: "So?"

"I was talking to your son, earlier this evening, about a book I have to sell. He tried to gyp me—"

Felix Eisenschein's eyes glittered. "Y'u wouldn't be the fellow who had the Poe book, would y'u?"

"I would," Vedder snapped, "and I been asking around. Your son offered me a buck for the book. What the hell, a guy on Fourth Avenue told me it's a very rare collector's item. He offered me two hundred and fifty bucks for it, sight unseen."

"Mister," said Felix Eisenschein, "if y'u got a genuine 'Murders In The Rue Morgue,' I'll give y'u five hundred for it. My son, he's a dope. He don't know nothin' about books. That's why I keep him here in this dump—"

"Five hundred," said Vedder. "Now you're beginning to talk. Only I haven't got the book with me—"

"Right around the corner," said Eisenschein, "is my hotel. I got a picture of the 'Rue Morgue.' Come along and take a look at it. If it's the same, we go to your place—Oscar!"

A sallow youth of about eighteen, who had been sauntering about the rear of the shop to see that customers didn't slip magazines into their pockets, came up.

"Oscar," Eisenschein said, "watch the place. I'm going home for a few minutes."

He took a derby from a stack of books and put it on his head. "Come on, mister."

Vedder felt the weight of the .32 in his coat pocket. He shrugged. "Let's go."

They walked up Sixth Avenue to Forty-fourth

Street and turned west. Halfway up the block, Eisenschein took Vedder's arm and led him into the Hotel Worden. They got into the elevator.

"I got an apartment here," Eisenschein said. "It's close to business. Y'unnerstand, that dump on Sixth Avenue, it's only a feeder for my regular business. Dopes bring old books and magazines there and we buy them in big lots. Mosta the stuff we sell to bums and such, without no profit. But in that old stuff now and then comes a piece like—well, like your 'Murders In The Rue Morgue.' That's why I keep the dump—"

The elevator started up. Vedder said: "But you said your son didn't know anything about books."

"He don't. I check up on the stuff that comes in, once a week. Here we are."

The elevator had stopped at the top floor, the seventeenth. Eisenschein led Vedder to the door of an apartment which he unlocked. They entered, after Eisenschein switched on a light.

Vedder was surprised. The Hotel Worden was a third-rate place; he would not have expected to find such a luxurious apartment here. The place consisted of several rooms and was furnished in good taste, but it was dominated entirely by books. There were shelves everywhere.

"I got an office on Forty-second Street, too," Eisenschein said. "But I keep the best stuff here. I'm the biggest rare-book dealer in the country—maybe. Just a minute."

He went to a steel filing cabinet, rummaged about for a moment, then produced a thin pamphlet. He came back to Vedder with it.

Vedder looked at the pamphlet and gasped. "Say, this is just like it. Exactly like mine. I thought you said you just had a picture of it."

"Me?" said Eisenschein. "I got three copies of 'Murders In The Rue Morgue.'"

"Huh? I thought there were only three copies—"

"Yeah!" said Eisenschein. "That's what everybody thinks. For that reason, eacha those three is worth a lot of money. Because there's only three, you see. If folks think there's six, the price drops. Y'u see, it's a case of supply and demand in this business. I'm holdin' these copies until I hear of a rich guy who really wants to lay out sugar for one of them. Then, when I get him built up, I 'accidentally' find—acquire—one of these." He winked at Vedder. "Y'unnerstand?"

"Yes," said Vedder, "I think I do. But if you've got three copies already, why would you want another? Mine?"

"To keep it off the market. Too many get floatin' around it cuts the price of those I already got. Y'unnerstand? Well, y'u say yours is just like this one?"

"Yes. Only mine's in a little better condition."

"That's fine. The better the condition, the more the book's worth. Come on, let's go up to your

all the obvious places, got information from all of the obvious sources. When he found her she was in a room on Jones Street.

He knocked on the door.

She answered it, then tried to slam it in his face. He had his foot in the jamb; he pushed the door back and came in. She retreated from him, her face very white.

"You thought I was dead?" he asked.

She shook her head slowly. "No. I knew you'd live. I—" She caught her breath. "I didn't shoot to kill." Then suddenly: "What do you want of me now? Are you going to—"

"No," he said. He said it crisply, cutting her short.

She kept watching him.

He tried to keep her gaze, but he couldn't. And

he was taking off his hat. A hard guy like him. He was taking off his hat.

"No, Laura. The hunt's all over. The reason I had to find you was—"

"Yes?"

He met her eyes now. "I'm sorry, that's all."

She stared at him, and then what he said seemed to reach her, to free her; comprehension burst within her like a flood of sunlight. She started to laugh, because she was happy, she was free, but then she choked, and she sat down and sobbed.

Saxon stood at the door. "Maybe I could come around once in a while. Coming around's got to be a habit, and maybe I could make it up to you, by— You see, I can never let you go."

She was still crying, but she was nodding, too.

He left, and went quietly down the stairs.

THE END.

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THE LEE SIDE OF MURDER

by B. B. FOWLER

THERE were various shades of emotions depicted on the faces of the group of men in the chill, gloomy chamber. Various shades of one emotion—worry.

Big Jim Bannerman, Ashton's political boss, chewed a dead cigar with slow, heavy motions of his jowls. Those jowls that were usually pink and well barbered were now mottled and grayish. He kept shaking his head from side to side as he chewed at the cigar, as though in an unspoken utterance of defeat.

Irve Dolliver, the district attorney, stood with his legs spread wide, hands deep in his pockets, his face a dark, rigid mask. Dolliver was a lean, compact man, with a severe mouth and guarded eyes. Just now the worry had gotten into his eyes and tightened the corners of his mouth. That was the only sign he gave of how he felt.

The third man of the little group was obviously the most harassed. That was Allen Castleton, the mayor. Castleton was a typical mayor. He had a golden smile that he could turn off and on at will. He was the typical back-slapping, speech-making mayor. Usually, that is, but not now. His face was as gray as Bannerman's jowls. His mouth was twisted, his eyes haunted. The plump hand that toyed with the watch charm trembled visibly.

The man in the doorway had come in without any of the men in the room noticing him. He stood now, a slender little man, one shoulder leaning against the door frame, his wide, sensitive mouth crooked a little in a one-sided, ironical smile. His expressive gray eyes were clouded with the same deprecating disillusion that gave the down twist to his mouth.

No one was aware of his presence till he drawled, "Ah, the mourners are in session, I see."

Everyone in the room looked at the door. Irve Dolliver was the only one who spoke. He said harshly:

"You damned snooping buzzard! How did you find out about this?"

The little man in the doorway seemed very much

amused by what he saw on all the faces. Added to their worry was now a new fear. They were frightened of him, Bill Lee, the columnist. He knew they were afraid of him, especially Castleton and Big Jim Bannerman. They were afraid of what might now appear in his column, "The Lee Side," that acidly humorous, pungently direct column that held up to public ridicule and derision the stuffed shirts, frauds, and fakes. And there was a little of all these, he believed, in Big Jim Bannerman and his mayor, Castleton.

Bill Lee said gently: "Always the crusader for the public weal, Dolliver. Not much goes on that I don't get. Not many floaters are fished out of the river without my knowledge."

He walked across the room and stood beside Captain Osborne of homicide. Beside the burly, heavy-jowled captain, Lee looked even slighter and more frail.

The cynical humor flowed out of his eyes and the sensitive mouth went a little grim as he gazed down at the figure on the marble slab. Once she had been pretty. He remembered seeing her around town, her hair a little too metallically blond, with a little too much make-up, and too much effort in her shrill laughter.

But death had wiped all that away and what was left was not nice to see. Death had washed away the glossy shell and left her looking both haggard and haggish. Her features had begun to bloat, blurring their edged sharpness. She had been pretty with a sort of defiant prettiness. Now she was ugly and somehow very touchingly pathetic.

Bill Lee said softly, "Ugly," and the word weighted the room with multiple allusions. "I guess, Dolliver, that someone didn't want her to testify."

Dolliver almost snarled at Bill: "Some day, snooper, you're going to go too damn far in that smelly column of yours. When you do, look out."

Allen Castleton said with heavy resignation, "He can't make it look any worse than it is." He turned to face Bill, saying: "Do your worst. You can't add anything to the record. Myra Ganong was the



eyewitness to the killing of Gus Angoff. Her testimony is already in transcript form, duly witnessed and signed. That she's dead doesn't help my son's case. Go ahead and ride us some more." Bitterness crept into his voice. "Heaven knows you've had your fun riding us in the past."

Some of Big Jim Bannerman's bluff assurance got into his voice as he said, "Now, now, Allen, don't take that attitude."

He gave Bill Lee a ghost of his campaign smile. "Bill isn't going to kick a guy when he's down."

"The hell he's not," Irve Dolliver rasped. "Lee would kick his mother in the face if it would add anything to his dirty column."

Bill said easily, "Dirty to you, because I've taken you and your boys for a few rides, Dolliver. It's your guys who have dished up the dirt. I've just shown it for what it is."

He swept them with his crooked, ironical smile. "I'll be on my way, boys, and leave you to your grief. As Big Jim says, I wouldn't kick a guy when he is down. And you boys are down, believe me. The coming election will be a joke."

He looked directly at Allen Castleton, as he said: "And it all could have been avoided if you'd only taken that son of yours out into the woodshed a few times when he was younger."

He turned his back on Dolliver's growl and sauntered out of the miasmic chill of the morgue toward the street.

But, as he went, he was wondering what anyone had to gain by Myra Ganong's death. Bumping her and tossing her into the river wouldn't change the sordid mess into which the ruling civic machine had become bogged.

The whole case was now a matter of record. Just two weeks ago the city had been jarred by the story in the morning papers. It had broken. Not all the power of Big Jim Bannerman and the D. A.'s office had been able to kill it.

It all centered around Lou Castleton, the mayor's prodigal son. Lou was a handsome blond guy with a taste for liquor and the ladies. Knowing that, and knowing that a scandal might unseat the mayor, Big Jim Bannerman had given Lou a sort of bodyguard, a Gus Angoff, produced by Dolliver, the D. A.

On the night in question Lou had thrown a wild party at the Monarch Hotel, a rather flamboyant hostelry with a notorious night club and a not-too-strict set of house rules.

The party had broken up early in the morning. Lou's guests had staggered home, leaving Lou, well lit, with Myra Ganong and Gus Angoff. According to Myra's story, Lou wanted to wind up the event at the bar below. Gus tried to stop him. Their tussle riled Lou, who grabbed a bottle and struck Gus over the head.

When the cops arrived after Myra's frantic calls, they found Gus dead and Lou passing out. They got the story from Myra, and Lou went to jail to

have a manslaughter charge slapped on him.

There were a lot of queer angles to the case, the queerest one of which was the finding of Myra floating in the river with a bullet through her heart.

But angles or no angles, it spelled the end of the Bannerman machine. Carter Meade, millionaire realtor and backer of the reform ticket, had jumped on the case with both feet. The opposition papers had blasted the thing wide open. They had harried Dolliver and demanded that an example be made of Lou. They had dug up some nasty scandals out of the boy's past and smeared them in newsprint. With the election only a month away, the Bannerman ticket didn't stand a ghost of a chance.

In his column in the *Express*, Bill Lee had added his scathing and pungent bits to the general attack on the machine. Lately Bill had let up a little. It was all too much like beating a dead horse and had gotten so it made him a little sick at the stomach.

As Bill proceeded toward the street, he wondered how he could avoid any mention of this morning's scene. This was one case that he was about ready to drop. The trouble was that his boss didn't see it that way. The *Express* was riding the Carter Meade band wagon.

He didn't see the girl in the outer office until she called his name. He stopped short and turned toward her, the crooked smile almost straight, the gray eyes losing some of their irony.

Margie Castleton was enough to wipe irony off almost any man's face. She was tiny, pert, with soft brown eyes that were almost golden, yet reflected glints of red from her coppery hair.

There were spots of color in her cheeks that rouge had never put there, and the coppery glints in her eyes were more pronounced as she stood in front of Bill; very straight she stood, vibrant with the emotion that had put the color in her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes. This emotion trembled in her voice as she said: "You must be very proud of yourself, Bill Lee. You must be proud of your clever column."

Bill's voice was gentle. "I wouldn't say it was pride I felt, Margie."

"If you have a single spark of decency left, you wouldn't," Margie said. "But I doubt if you have. I've been wanting to run into you for weeks, just to tell you that I think you're low, Bill Lee. You're low and mean and petty. Oh, yes, I know you and your paper have tried to beat the machine. But you must be pretty desperate when you have to trade on personal tragedy and rattle family skeletons to beat the machine."

Bill said quietly: "Whoa, Margie. Wait just a minute. These skeletons didn't even wait to be rattled. They pranced right out by themselves and did a dance macabre to their own accompaniment. I wouldn't be a newspaperman if I didn't notice their gyrations."

He watched her lips compress in swift anger and

went on swiftly: "I know how you feel, Margie. Sometimes I feel the same way. I can look back and see the four of us as we were not so many years ago. There was me, a skinny little guy who hadn't much on the ball. I guess the most noticeable thing about me, as a kid, was my hero complex where Lou was concerned. Lou was everything that I would have liked to be. He was big and good-looking and athletic. To me he was little short of an idol.

"Then there was Don Meade. He had about as much on the ball as Lou. And there was you, a little snippet in pigtails. Now look at us."

His gray eyes were somber. "Now look at us. Lou is waiting to face a jury on a manslaughter charge. Don Meade is on the other side of the fence, playing along with his old man on the reform ticket; a handsome brute who will no doubt be a power in this town one day. You, of course, are on the side of your brother and father. Me, I'm just the Lee Side. But it's my side, Margie. I'm sorrier than you'd guess when my job takes me into a mess like this. But, there I am. I've got to play things the way they happen."

Margie burst forth angrily: "Words. Words! You always were clever with words. That's all you ever had, Bill Lee; just words. Go ahead and use them to blast reputations and ruin lives."

Bill said soberly: "There's a dead girl back there on a marble slab, Margie. Before that there was a guy killed in a hotel suite. Words didn't kill them, kitten. A bottle killed Gus Angoff. A bullet finished Myra Ganong. I think I'll just stick to words if you don't mind."

Margie said passionately: "I thought I might jar you out of your smug cleverness, Bill Lee. Lou is in jail, slowly going mad. The whole thing has broken father; made an old man of him. I don't believe Lou killed Gus Angoff. Lou is wild, I'll admit. But he has never been vicious. He certainly didn't have anything to do with the murder of Myra Ganong. But your words will help convict him. Perhaps they will even convict dad of having had a hand in the murder of Myra Ganong. That's what your words can do"

She turned abruptly and walked across the office. Bill took a step after her, stopped, shrugged and turned toward the door.

II.

By the time he got to the *Express* office, the crooked, one-sided smile was back on his lips and there was an odd gleam in his eyes.

He walked straight to the city editor's desk and hooked a thigh over the edge of the desk. "I want you to kill the lead for today's column, Burnsie," he said, "I'm writing another."

Burns glanced up, his thin gray mustache bristling, his sharp little eyes like a terrier's. "Are you nuts? The deadline is half an hour off. What's

the matter with the copy you gave me this noon?"

"It's tripe," Bill said cheerfully. "I'm going to hand you dynamite. Kill it. I'll have the other stuff ready on the line."

He went back to his desk as Burns barked at the copy boy. He sat down before his battered old desk and stared at his typewriter, one eyebrow lifting to balance the smile that tugged his lip down at the opposite side of his face. It gave him a queer, lopsided expression, like the face of a rakish imp.

He put paper in the typewriter, adjusted it, as he said softly: "Words. Words. We'll see what words will do, my proud beauty." Then he began to tap the keys swiftly.

The copy he dropped on the city editor's desk twenty minutes later was the queerest-looking stuff that that gentleman had ever dropped there. He read it, scowling, wondering if perhaps Bill Lee was going crazy.

It read, in choppy sentences, well broken by asterisks to make it cover space:

The untimely demise of Myra Ganong, eyewitness to the killing of Gus Angoff, seems, to The Lee Side, to raise a few pertinent questions which this columnist would like to pose at the moment.

One: Which is worth more in court, a live witness or a nice, legally witnessed transcript of testimony?

Two: Or, on the other hand, which is the worse to be stuck with?

Three: From the bewildered Lee Side, why?

Four: Since a transcript of testimony cannot be changed, why kill a witness whose testimony is the transcript?

Five: Is it possible that, while a witness' testimony can be changed, a transcript's cannot?

Six: Here The Lee Side pauses and merely asks: Why?

Seven: No question at all. Simply a reminder to look to The Lee Side for answers which will be forthcoming.

City Editor Burns lifted his face out of the copy to face Bill Lee. He shook his head slowly, then asked, "Are you sure you know what you are doing?"

Bill's crooked smile wasn't crooked any longer. It was wide and straight and boyish as he said: "Sure, I'm sticking my neck out."

"For what?" asked Burns sourly.

"For anybody who feels like slapping down on it."

Burns kept shaking his head in the same slow fashion. "Kid, I've known you a long time. I've watched you come up. I've always thought that you were smart. Right now I think you are acting dumb."

The crooked smile came back. "Maybe you're right, Burnsie. But, tell me the name of one man who got anything without taking a chance. Tell me the name of one man who saw anything without sticking his neck around a corner."

The head shaking from side to side seemed to have become automatic with Burns. He said: "It's

your column, kid. And it's your neck. Personally, I think it's the hard way to get information."

He threw the pages at a copy boy, saying: "Shoot it. It's Lee's last-minute stuff. The presses are waiting."

He turned back to Bill Lee. "Kid," he said seriously, "I honestly hope you know what you're doing." He thrust out a lean, hairy hand. "If I don't see you again alive, here's my best."

Bill gripped the hand, the crooked smile getting more lopsided. He said: "I'm going to fool you, Burnsie. I'm going to bob up with the biggest story of the year." He paused, then went on: "If I'm very, very lucky."

"If not," Burns put in, "that was your last column. And it's the screwiest column I ever hope to see."

Bill went back to his desk, parked his feet there and smoked cigarettes while the big presses in the basement made the building tremble with their grinding thunder.

His thin face was very serious as he smoked, his gray eyes veiled. Behind the veil he was seeing things. He was seeing newsboys selling the evening edition of the *Express* on the downtown corners. Some of those papers were destined to give rise to startled thoughts and speculations. After that there would be action.

He sat there for a long time, remembering things: a spoiled young guy who had always had things too easy; a handsome, arrogant youngster who had the world by the tail. He recalled him as he had just seen him, all the arrogance vanished, leaving him just a scared guy, his mind wiped clean of all memory of the night in the hotel suite.

Lee's sensitive mouth tightened as he thought of other things: of a dead girl on a marble slab in the morgue, a cheap little gold digger in life, in death pathetic, her ravaged face pleading for something that life had never given her.

The presses were silent again when Bill went slowly down to the street. He walked several blocks, his chin on his chest, hands deep in his pockets, moving like a man in a dream.

He paused outside Jake's Hofbrau and glanced across the street where a shadow moved in the dimness of a doorway. He turned and went into Jake's, his smile more one-sided than ever, the one eyebrow lifting toward his light-brown hair.

The man behind Jake's bar was fat, red-faced, with very red lips and little black eyes that brightened as Bill slid onto a stool. He put thick hands flat on the bar and asked: "What's it, Mr. Lee?"

"Something to take the edge off carking care, Mike. Something with the smoothness of down and the potential power of TNT. Something that will ease dull memory and soften the ache of sick remembrance."

Mike chuckled. "We got some rye that is like that. A nice old-fashioned, maybe, Mr. Lee?"

Bill drank the old-fashioned and ordered another, watching out of the corners of his eyes the shadow across the street that had become a motionless fixture in the doorway. He could see the white blob of the face atop the shadow, staring across to Jake's entrance.

He said to Mike: "The press, my cheerful friend, is a great institution. Have you ever paused to consider the eager little faces of the public conning its pages to learn more about the doings in the big, busy world?"

"How else would they find out?" Mike asked philosophically. "Unless maybe they listened to the radio."

"My point exactly," Bill said. "And now, Mike, if you will beckon to the waiter who seems to regard me with a positively passionate apathy, I'll order something to eat and sally forth."

When he sallied, an hour later, the shadow in the doorway moved. Bill watched it without seeming to look, then went slowly along the street to the taxi stand on the corner.

As he gave directions to the cabby, he watched the shadow emerge from the doorway and become a tall man in a tan suit, with the snap brim of a tan hat low over his eyes, throwing a shadow that covered all his face down to the thin black mustache. The man crossed the street in long, swift strides and headed toward a cab behind him.

Leaning back in his seat, Bill smiled into the driver's rear-view mirror, watching the second cab wheel out of line and fall in behind them.

Outside the Monarch Hotel, Bill bought a copy of the *Express*. He carried it into the bar lounge and sat at a table, spreading the paper out before him.

There was a front-page story; an interview with Carter Meade, the leader of the reform ticket. Reading the interview, Bill fancied he could hear Meade's sonorous voice saying: "The death of Miss Ganong does not alter the case against Louis Castleton. The district attorney's office has a transcript of Miss Ganong's testimony. I shall make it my personal business to see that this case is carried through to a conclusion. The machine that has held Ashton in its grip shall not be allowed to evade the issue this time."

As Bill folded the paper, he saw the tall man come into the lounge. He was young, too smoothly and darkly handsome. The mustache seemed to Bill to be wholly affectation. The chin was strong, with a deep cleft in it.

The fellow was very careful not to look at Bill. His dark eyes roved over the tables, then he picked one beyond the bar from where he had a clear view of Bill's table.

Chris Weller, owner of the Monarch, was standing at one end of the bar. Weller was tall and slight, with blond hair. His lips were almost bloodless, as pale as the eyes that were also too careful

not to look at Bill directly.

Don Meade, son of the reform leader, saw Bill, got up from his table and walked toward him.

Watching him approach, Bill thought how much the fellow resembled his father. He had the same deep-set eyes, the length of jaw and thinness of lip.

His voice had something of the elder Meade's resonant timbre as he said, "Hello, Bill." His dark eyes rested briefly on the paper. "I see that you're hinting at some new developments."

Bill lifted one shoulder. "Only those developments that should occur to any thinking person."

"There are those," Don said carefully, "who believe that Myra Ganong's murder was just one move to kill the case against Lou. I've heard it rumored that the transcript of her testimony might now be conveniently mislaid."

Bill shook his head. "I don't think it's so simple as that. I don't think that Dolliver is quite that naïve."

Don gazed down at him unsmilingly. "Don't get me wrong Bill. You know which side of the fence I'm on. But I hate to see Lou in this spot. There are times when political affiliations don't count for much. Personally, I'd like to see Lou get out from under."

He turned his head and a tiny smile touched his lips. "Here's someone looking for you, Bill. And he looks as though he wanted some of those answers you hinted you knew." As he turned away, he said: "I'll be seeing you, Bill."

Watching Dolliver cross the room toward him in hard, angry strides, tightly twisted newspaper gripped in one swinging hand, Bill was conscious of a faint amusement stirring deep down inside him. He had asked a few questions and as a result had become the center of all attention.

Those questions had been such natural and obvious ones. He knew that it was these same questions which were moving so many men with different emotions. They were converging on him now because they believed that he had the answers; answers that they so desperately wanted. And that was exactly what he wanted them to believe.

Dolliver flung the newspaper on the table in front of Bill. As it lay there, it slowly unfurled and he saw the heading of his column, "The Lee Side."

Dolliver's voice was harsh with an edge of cold anger. "So you're holding out on us. I always knew you were a smart snooper. This time you're being just too smart."

When Bill made no answer, he went on in the same harsh tone: "You can't get away with this, Lee. Ever since that damned column appeared, I've been looking for you."

"I haven't been hiding, Dolliver," Bill said gently. He glanced at the column and his smile grew more lopsided. "Since when has it gotten so that a guy can't ask a few questions that are bothering him?"

"Bothering, eh? Hell!" Dolliver snapped. "You

said the answers would be forthcoming in the column. You know plenty. And I've got a good mind to haul you down to the office and get some of that information out of you. I could do that, you know. I could take you down and have the boys work you over."

Bill shook his head slowly and said in the same gentle tone: "Oh, no, you couldn't, Dolliver. You couldn't get away with it. You'd no sooner have me down there than you'd have the *Express* in your hair. Then you'd be on a worse spot than you are right now."

Dolliver put his clenched fist on the table and leaned his weight on the knuckles, his shoulders hunched forward, black brows pulled down as he glared at Bill. "Listen, Lee. The spot we're on couldn't be any worse. I'm not trying to equivocate. I know as well as you know that that damned tub thumper, Meade, has us across a barrel. So I don't mind taking a few chances."

He paused, his mouth drawing into a tight line. "You know something, Lee; something that we would like to know. I'm going to give you twenty-four hours to come across. You've got twenty-four hours in which to come clean. If you don't"—his words came slower, more bitingly distinct—"I'm going to haul you in. I'll take you over the jumps and find out what you know if it's the last thing I do."

As he listened to Dolliver, Bill let his gaze travel slowly around the lounge. Cool amusement touched him again as he noticed the attention that was being focused on him and Dolliver.

Don Meade was back at his table, his long fingers toying with the glass in front of him, head bent, seeming oblivious to everything but his own thoughts. Yet Bill knew that he was straining every nerve to hear what passed between him and Dolliver.

Bill frowned slightly as he wondered what possible angle Don Meade could be playing. After all, his interests in the case should be purely academic.

Chris Weller was still at the end of the bar. He stood there, leaning on one elbow, his head half turned, listening.

The tall guy in the tan suit had walked over to the bar. He was directly opposite Bill now, his back to the table. But his whole attitude was one of intent and concentrated listening.

Bill brought his gaze back to Dolliver. He lifted his voice; sharply and clearly he said: "O. K., Dolliver, twenty-four hours. You might not have to wait that long. I may have something a lot quicker than that."

Dolliver snapped: "Twenty-four hours is the limit. I'm tired of horsing around. I want action and I'm going to get it."

He swung on his heel and went out, walking in the same swift, angry strides. Then, as though Dolliver's departure had been a signal, the pattern that

had been formed there in the lounge began to break up.

Don Meade stood up suddenly, tossed money on the table, and went out past Bill's table toward the door. He nodded to Bill as he passed and Bill wondered if it was just his imagination or if Don's face was not a little paler and more tense.

Chris Weller left his place at the corner of the bar, walked the length of the counter, and disappeared through a door marked "Private." He continued, very obviously, to refrain from casting so much as a glance in Bill's direction.

The only one who had not moved was the tall guy in the tan suit. He was still hunched over the bar, his back to Bill.

He remained there at the bar until Bill called the waiter to ask for his check. While Bill was paying the charge, the tall man left the bar and walked out toward the street.

The smile on Bill's lips was straighter and full of some secret amusement as he put on his hat and walked slowly out to the street. There he stood for a moment, then crossed the sidewalk toward a parked cab.

The exit from the lounge was a few yards removed from the main entrance with its liveried doorman. Bill was halfway across the sidewalk when the tall guy in the tan suit stepped close beside him and said:

"We'll go along together, Lee."

Bill glanced at the man. The set of the mouth and the hard glitter of the eyes under the hat brim told him that the hand in the pocket next to him was no mere bluff. He shrugged, the lopsided smile coming back. "If you insist."

The fellow got into the cab behind Bill and slumped beside him in the seat. To the cabby he said:

"Corner of Locust and Spring."

As the cab pulled away from the curb, he said in a tight voice: "So you were thinking of making a deal with the D. A."

"Who else would I deal with?" Bill asked dryly. "After all, the ends of justice must be served. The D. A. is the servant of the people."

"Baloney," the tall man said roughly. "I think you've got something that is worth plenty of dough in the right quarters. And I like dough. I like plenty of it."

III.

The corner of Locust and Spring was just on the edge of the better residential section of the city, where apartment houses began to give way to tenements.

The tall guy walked Bill along Locust to a low building that looked as though it were a compromise between the two districts. The tall guy pushed Bill ahead of him, up a flight of stairs and into an apartment that was furnished with a hodge-podge

of imitation antique, pseudo modernistic, and just plain junk.

The living room had a shabby divan, a couple of easy-chairs, an imitation Oriental rug that was threadbare in front of the chairs. There was a walnut highboy beside the door of a bedroom that stood open and gave Bill a glimpse of a shabby dresser and an unmade bed.

The door on the other side of the living room, Bill guessed, would be to the kitchenette. Across the room he could see, through a bleared window, the framework of a fire escape.

The hand that had been in the pocket came out with a gun. The tall guy motioned toward a chair with it as he said:

"Sit down and talk. If you're as smart as I think you are, you'll remember the answers."

Bill sat down, his eyes on the taut, dark face. He was trying to place this guy. And all he knew was that he had been Myra Ganong's boy friend. He had kept himself pretty well in the background. Which was understandable. Gold diggers like Myra always kept boys like this discreetly in the background.

The lopsided smile was the frailest shadow of a smile now. Bill could feel things piling up about him. He had asked his questions and set in motion certain factors that would not become quiescent until there was a solution.

He felt a little cold when he thought of the potentialities of those forces which were closing in on him. A girl had been killed, coldly and without compunction. He would die just as surely, though perhaps a little more slowly and painfully, unless he could stall until there was a clash of opposing forces.

His voice was very quiet, almost gentle as he said: "Your girl friend didn't take you into her confidence very fully, did she?"

The tall guy's face darkened and grew more tense. His lips writhed in the passion that got into his eyes. "That dirty little two-timer! She would try to hog the works. She got what was coming to her."

Bill thought of Myra Ganong as he had seen her last, lying on the slab in the morgue, with death making her ugly and haggard and forlorn. The pathos of it struck him again, more forcibly now. But he kept that out of his voice as he went on, talking against time; stalling while he waited for what he knew had to happen. "Maybe she never got a chance to talk to you after that night."

The tall guy snarled: "Listen, I'm not interested in your guesses. I want to know what racket she was running. I want to know who she had her hooks into."

Bill watched the mouth twist savagely and the dark eyes smolder. The fellow took a step forward, his fingers tightening on the gun butt. "And you're going to tell. So start talking before I begin push-

ing you around. And don't think I won't."

Watching him, Bill felt a cold trickle run along his spine again. The fellow meant business, dirty, murderous business. Bill had seen his kind before, men without ruth or mercy, motivated only by a desire that wasn't too fussy about how its end was obtained.

Still he had to stall. In the quietness of the room he thought he heard something like the scrape of leather on iron. But he wasn't sure. Beyond the tall guy he could see the iron framework of the fire escape, gaunt and black against the lights of far buildings.

Bill sighed. "I thought you knew something of what was going on. You knew she was going to that party with young Castleton, didn't you?"

"Yeah, yeah, I knew that," the tall guy said impatiently. "I knew she was playing the young dope for a sucker. But what I want to know now is what happened up there in that suite at the Monarch. Who killed Gus Angoff?"

There it was, out in the open. At that moment Bill heard the scrape of leather on iron again. This time he was sure of it. He went on stalling. He had to. Although he knew by the tenseness of the tall guy, by the crazy glitter in his eyes that he couldn't get by with much more stalling.

Bill grinned crookedly. "You didn't even know who paid her to make that transcript of testimony? You don't know who did that and then killed her because they knew that she would change her story if she were offered enough?"

The gun in the tall guy's hand rose as he stepped forward. "Do you think I'd be kicking the gong around this way if I knew that? That's what you're going to tell me, wise guy. And you're going to start telling me now or get your face scrambled."

Bill glanced past the tall guy and saw the man on the fire escape, huge and misshapen in the trick light as he crouched there, facing the window. He could see the glint of light on the gun barrel as it leveled on the room.

Bill yelled shrilly. "Look out! The window!" He ducked low, sliding down in the chair as he yelled.

The tall guy snarled: "That one has whiskers on it, wise guy."

As he spoke, he slashed down with the gun in his hand. Bill threw up his left shoulder and took the slash of the gun on his back. The shock numbed his whole left side.

At the same instant the gun out on the fire escape banged. The tall guy started to turn, the fingers on his gun straightening stiffly, blank amazement blurring all the sharpness and tautness of his face.

As he turned, Bill dived out of the chair. He could hear the impact of the second slug as it hit the tall guy. The gun fell with a little thud on the threadbare rug beside him, then the tall guy pitched across his feet.

As Bill clawed for the gun, the man on the fire escape fired again and the bullet smacked into the chair he had just left.

He got his hand on the gun, swiveled around, fighting to get his legs from under the tall guy's body. He got the gun up and squeezed the trigger three times, the gun butt jolting against his arm.

The man outside came into the room with a crash of glass. He fell across the sill and hung there, his arms lax, his head lolling.

Bill got shakily to his feet and stood there for a moment trembling, staring at the man lying across the sill. Somehow he couldn't believe it. It was what he had waited for since he had watched the car tailing them from the Monarch. And now that it had happened, he couldn't believe that he was alive and the tall guy dead.

He walked across the room and forced himself to lift the head of the man who had fallen in from the fire escape. He put a hand under his chin and stared for a long moment into the dead face. It gave him a creepy, eerie feeling to realize that but a moment before this had been a living person. He let the head sag, slowly. He had what he wanted. He had seen this man before and the memory of where he had seen him was the first glimmer of light in the mystery.

He glanced down at the tall guy as he went across the room toward the door. The side of the guy's face was pressed against the rug, his mouth gaping, still carrying the expression of shocked surprise.

As Bill opened the door, a man in pajamas yelled at him hoarsely. In a door farther down, a woman in a nightgown screamed shrilly, then slammed the door with a force that shook the wall.

Bill turned and ran down the stairs with the hoarse yells of the man following him. He was at the outside door when he realized that the man on the fire escape would hardly have come alone.

The thought set him back on his heels, jerking him back from the open door, just as a gun in the car at the curb blasted and lead slammed into the door frame where he had been standing a second before.

Bill whirled and ran back along the corridor. He had a momentary feeling of being helplessly trapped. His hands shook as he tried a door. He sighed gustily as the door opened on a stairway going down with a single dusty bulb burning at the foot.

He went out through the basement, past a dead furnace that emanated a smell of wet ashes to mingle with the dusty dead air of the cellar. Overhead heavy feet banged along the corridor toward the door through which he had come.

From the cellar he went out into an alley and began to run, head down, digging his toes in as he pushed his body forward. Behind him the gun banged and lead glanced screamingly off the brick wall to ring a great hollow tone on a garbage can.

He ran from the alley into the street, up half a block and into another alley. He came out of the alley stumbling, swaying, his breath coming in broken gasps. When he stopped, he had to lean against the building for support.

It was a long time before strength came back to his legs; before his lungs stopped laboring. During these few minutes he was conscious of a sort of fatalistic carelessness. He suddenly didn't care

As he went, he could hear the far wails of sirens. That would be the police hurrying to the scene of the shooting.

Bill had a strange, empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. He was no man of violence. He was just a dealer in words; a collector and retailer of facts that went to make up the news of the day. He had pecked away on his typewriter a few hours earlier and asked some questions that had started all this violence. And because of those words he had pecked out on his typewriter, two men were dead. And Bill had a hunch that there would be more dead before finis had been written to the story.

He found himself wondering why he had stuck his neck out in the first place. After all, it was a business for the police and the D. A.'s office. It had been their headache and now he was stuck with it. Because he was certain now that Dolliver would never believe that his questions had been, in a sense, purely academic.

Wondering, he remembered Margie Castleton's face as he had seen it when she had faced him in the morgue waiting room. The queer, self-deprecating smile pulled down one corner of his mouth while the eyebrow lifted. He said aloud: "How I must love that gal!"

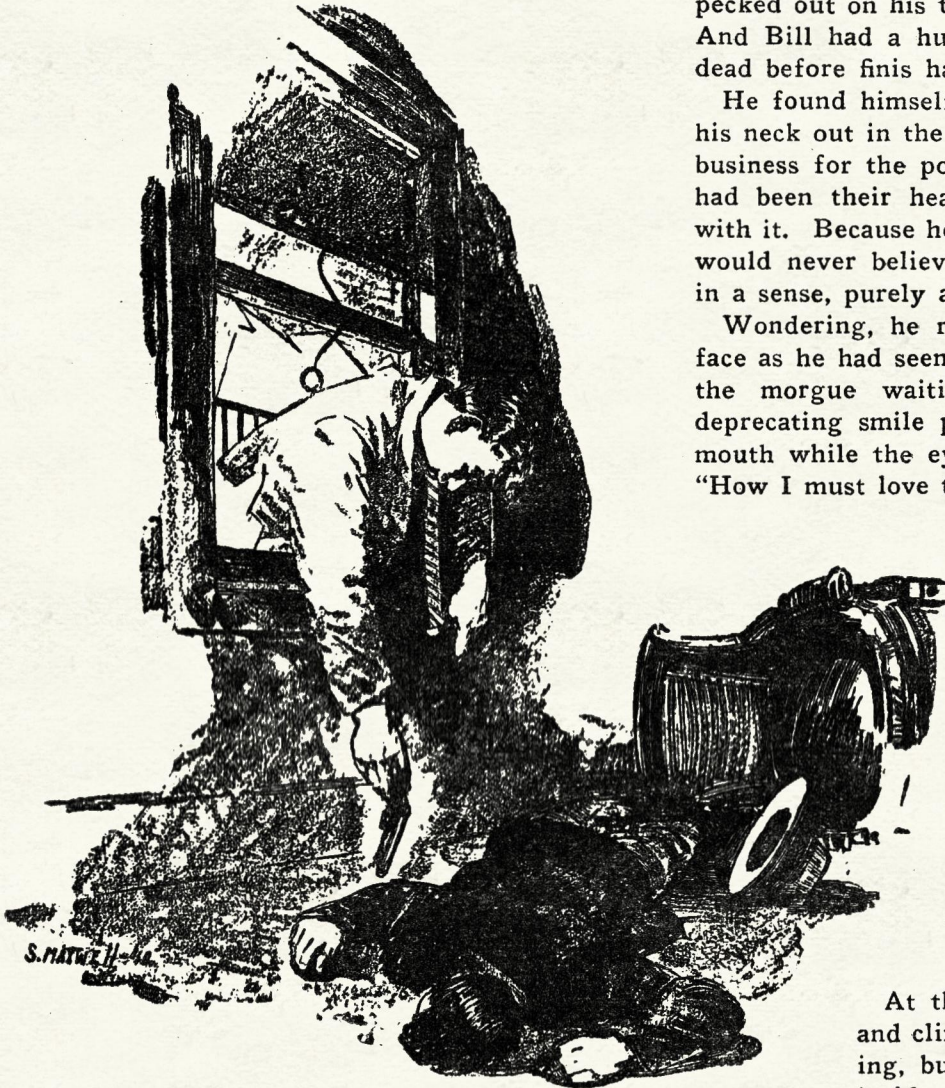
He realized then that he had loved her since he had faced her there in the waiting room. He had played with her when they both were kids. He had watched her grow up into something lovely and sweet. But it had taken the pain and misery in her eyes to drive the fact home to him. Her scorn of him had goaded him into a dangerous game of bluff.

At the next corner he found a cab and climbed in. He had stopped shaking, but he still felt weak and gone inside. His throat felt raw and dry and he wanted a drink.

As he rode to Jake's Hofbrau, he put his hand in his pocket around the butt of the gun. He hadn't liked what he had met since he started moving in these new circles. And he had an idea that he would like even less what lay ahead. But he knew at the same time that he had to go through with it. He had to play this little game out to the end, no matter what violence and terror and other worse things lay ahead.

In Jake's he sat at the bar and said to Mike in his dry, whimsical voice: "Mike, have you ever attempted to separate the sheep from the goats among those in your circle of acquaintances?"

Mike grinned and said: "Should I start to do



The man outside came into the room with a crash of glass. He fell across the sill and hung there, his arms lax, his head rolling.

anything about the man who had chased him, firing at him as he had run through the alley. If he caught up to him now, he'd give up without a fight.

When he could walk again, he went along the dim street toward the brighter lights of a busier thoroughfare. He had walked almost to the corner before he realized that he still gripped the automatic he had picked up from the floor. He grinned ruefully, shaking his head as he snapped the safety catch on and slipped the gun into his pocket where it made a strange, uncomfortable sag in his coat.

Walking hurriedly, he covered several blocks.

that, Mr. Lee, would I be a bartender any more? Maybe, even, I might find myself one of the goats."

"Mike, I perceive that you are a philosopher. Take a tip from a kindred spirit and don't ever do it. And don't carelessly start turning over nice, quiet, inoffensive stones. Because, if you do, you'll be sick at the sight of the horrible things you find under them. Give me a drink, Mike; a long rye and soda with a generous amount of rye."

He spent a long time over the rye and soda. The face of the man he had shot on Locust Street had given him his lead. He knew where he had to go next. And he was beginning to get an inkling of what lay beyond that. But he hated to take that next step.

Being a detective, he told himself, wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. As he had told Mike, he was finding too many crawling horrors under the stones he was turning up.

Therefore, he took plenty of time with the rye. When he knew he could stall no longer, he slid down from the stool and went slowly out to the street, a short, slender man, with a lopsided, ironical smile and gray eyes that were quizzically humorous; not at all the kind of chap who should be sticking his neck out in a game of death to cover death.

From Jake's he took another cab to the Monarch. But, before he went into the hotel, he entered a booth in a cigar stand on the corner and used the telephone.

On the street again, Bill paused, hands deep in his pockets, and stared across at the Monarch. After a few minutes he sighed softly and crossed the street to the lounge entrance.

The crowd in the Monarch bar lounge was typical of the Monarch late at night. The majority had had too much to drink. They were loud and boisterous. The air in the lounge was thick enough to be cut with a knife and the long bar was crowded.

Bill picked his way among the tables and skirted the crowd at the bar.

Chris Weller wasn't in sight. Bill was conscious of a flutter in his breast and a little weakness about the knees as he stood in front of the door marked "Private," staring at the knob as if uncertain whether to open it or not.

He was standing there irresolutely when someone stepped up behind him and prodded him in the back. The man behind him growled:

"Well, don't hesitate; go right on in."

A hairy hand reached past him, turned the knob, then he was pushed into the room.

IV.

It was a big room, somberly furnished in heavy carved oak, with heavy drapes shrouding the windows and a rug on the floor that swallowed the sound of his feet. As the heavy door closed behind

him, the noise of the crowd outside died to a faint murmur of sound.

Chris Weller was sitting behind a wide desk at the far side of the room. A big reading lamp at his elbow dropped a cone of light over his thin blond hair, making his lips look even more bloodless and his eyes paler.

At the sight of Bill the pale lids drooped lower over his eyes and the bloodless lips tightened a little.

The man who had brought Bill in was a paunchy guy with a bristle of black eyebrows and blue-black jowls. He said hoarsely, "Here's your snooper. He walked right in."

Weller said tonelessly: "So you found out, did you, Lee?"

When Bill nodded silently, Weller frowned a little and said: "I'd like to know how you got wise."

Bill shrugged. "It was very simple. When you killed Myra Ganong, you started a lot of people asking questions. That was a bad mistake."

Weller's eyes were like ice, his voice bleak, as he said: "There are people, Lee, that are not safe so long as they are alive. Mary Ganong was one of that kind."

His tone and eyes said that Bill was another. In spite of remembering his telephone call, Bill shivered.

While Weller talked, the man who had brought him in searched Bill and found the gun in his pocket. He tossed the gun on Weller's desk, asking: "Do we take him out now, boss?"

Weller said: "Get Tony. Come straight back and take him out. He may have put in a call to cover himself. In that case we'll have to move fast."

The sound of the door closing behind the dark guy was like the closing of all hope. Bill struggled to keep that out of his eyes as he faced Weller.

Weller went on: "I still can't figure out how you got wise. No one was in on it except a few boys who never talk."

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to make a deal?" Bill asked.

Weller sneered. "Any deal you would make, Lee, would only be a stall. I know your kind. And I don't deal with them. You've got to go. Sorry, but it's that way."

"Yeah," Bill drawled, "I can imagine that it's breaking your heart."

He tried another shot in the dark. "You must love that guy to get mixed up in murder to cover for him. Because I can't see him paying you enough to make it worth your while to flirt with the chair."

"You are a wise guy, aren't you?" Weller said slowly.

He picked up the telephone on the desk and dialed a number. Bill watched him, his own eyes

narrowing. Even if he were to die, he had found out something. Weller had swallowed his bait; had not called his bluff, but taken for granted a knowledge he had not possessed. The only thing he had been certain of was that Weller was acting for someone else.

Bill could hear the edgy voice on the other end of the line. Weller said calmly. "It's all right. I've got the guy here. He'll never talk."

His voice took on a colder edge. "Now, don't get jittery. This is the only way to handle it. We're in so deep that another one won't make it any worse."

He listened to the voice on the other end, then said: "Of course the guy knows. How in hell he dug it up, I don't know. But he did. And now everyone is after him. I heard Dolliver after him tonight. He was holding out on Dolliver. Sure, he's one of these would-be sleuths. He wanted to break the thing and get the story all by himself."

He listened again for a moment. Impatience crept into his voice. "I told you to stop jittering. This is the one guy who knows anything. And he'll never talk. Now go on to bed and forget about it. I'll handle this just as I have handled the rest."

As Weller dropped the instrument back into its cradle, the door opened and the dark guy came in with Tony. Tony was squat and thick and wide. His olive skin was so greasy that it looked as if it were oiled.

"O. K., Ranse," Weller said to the dark guy, "take him out. And don't bungle this the way you did the other. This smart guy has got to disappear. We don't want him turning up in the river."

Ranse said: "Don't worry. This guy will never turn up."

The door into the lounge opened and a man said sharply: "Dolliver and Osborne just pulled up to the curb in a car. They're coming in."

Weller's face tightened as he jerked his head toward a door at the side of the room. "Take him out that way, through the back to the car. I'll stall Osborne and Dolliver. We haven't even seen this guy."

Bill said: "You're finished, Weller. You can't get away with it."

Weller said nothing. Ranse opened the side door, the gun in his hand on Bill. Tony took a step toward Bill. He whacked a blackjack into his left hand and said:

"You want a slap with this before you go? Or do you go under your own power?"

As Bill backed away from Tony, Ranse reached out and hooked heavy fingers in Bill's collar. He jerked him backward through the door and slammed it hard.

Bill spun around, smashed against the wall, and fell. Ranse kicked him in the ribs and said thickly:

"Get up, stupid, and get going."

A door opened and a voice said thickly: "Hey,

you can't do that. Guy's drunk. Can't hit a guy when he's drunk."

Bill came up slowly. He saw then that the washrooms for the lounge crowd were off this corridor. The guy who had spoken was standing in the door of the men's room, swaying on his feet. He was red-faced and bleary-eyed. He hiccuped and took a step toward Ranse, growling: "Can't do that."

He took a wide swing at Ranse, missed and fell into Tony, knocking him off balance.

Ranse swore hoarsely, the gun in his hand slashing at the drunk. In that moment Bill saw his break. He saw just one out—and took it, smashing into the door to the ladies' room and diving through.

He slammed the door behind him, fumbled for a lock and found it. As he turned, a woman screamed shrilly.

He grinned crookedly. The woman was just about as tight as the man who had just saved his bacon. Her screams became words for a second: "Get out. Get out!" Then the scream went shuddering up into a soprano peak as she threw herself at Bill, clawing.

Bill pushed her away, out of the line of the doorway as a gun banged thunderously in the corridor outside and splinters flew out of the door.

Far off another gun blasted twice, sounding like hollow echoes of the shots in the corridor.

Then there was gunfire in the corridor again. Someone banged against the door of the ladies' room and gave a choked yell, then slid down along the door, clothing scraping against it. The woman threw herself at Bill and began to claw again, screaming: "Help! Help!"

Someone hammered on the door and an authoritative voice barked: "Come on, open up in there."

Bill tried to get to the door. The woman flung herself against it first. She was clawing at Bill's face with one hand while she tried to unlock the door.

The lock turned and she yanked the door open. It swung back violently, throwing her to the floor. She got to her hands and knees, a hat that looked like an inverted flowerpot cocked over one eye.

She remained on hands and knees for a second, staring drunkenly up at the man in the doorway, screaming: "Arrest him! Police! Help!"

Captain Osborne stood there, the gun in his hand pointing at the floor. His heavy face twisted in a sardonic grin as he said: "O. K., lady, we'll take care of him. He's an old offender."

Behind him Dolliver said crisply: "Cut the horseplay, Osborne."

Bill came out of the room slowly. The intoxicated woman made a last slash at him with her nails. This time she made it and raked him down the side of his face.

Ranse was lying face down in the corridor. Tony was backed against the wall, his face a dirty gray-

green. Farther up the corridor a cop was holding the door against people who tried to crowd in from the lounge.

Beyond the door that the cop was trying to hold, a voice was yelling: "My wife, she's being murdered! Let me in."

Dolliver said disgustedly: "For the love of Heaven, get that woman out of here."

To Bill he said: "Come on, Lee. It's about time to have a show-down. Into Weller's office and do some explaining."

The door closed behind Bill, shutting out the clamor in the corridor. Bill drew a deep breath, then let it out slowly as he stared across the room at Weller who was sprawled face down across the top of his desk.

Dolliver said: "He was stalling, telling me that he hadn't seen you, when all hell broke loose in the corridor. He went for his gun then and Osborne took him."

Osborne had brought Tony into the office with them. He slammed him against the wall, with Tony blubbering. "I don't know a damn thing. Weller didn't tell me nothing. He just said to take this guy out and keep him hid."

"Sure," Bill said sarcastically, "just like he told you to take Myra Ganong out."

Tony's voice rose in a yell of protest. "That was Ranse. Ranse killed her. I didn't have nothing to do with that. I just drove the car."

Dolliver said: "Weller wouldn't let his hired men in on the real story. You've got that, Lee. Come on, let's have it."

Osborne stared at Bill, his heavy face creased in lines of bewilderment. "I don't get it at all, Lee. All I know is that you'd better have a good story."

Bill said wearily: "You had as much chance to dope it out as I did. When I asked my questions, I was as much in the dark as you are. But you, like everyone else, jumped to the conclusion that I knew everything."

He sucked in a deep breath as he gazed at Weller's body. "That's what I expected to happen. But if I had realized how I was going to get kicked around, I never would have stuck my neck out at all."

"Come on, Lee; give," Dolliver said brusquely. "Stop stalling."

Bill shrugged. "You should be able to see it now. Obviously Myra Ganong was paid to tell a story. She told it and got paid. Then she probably got ambitious and decided she could get even more for reversing her story and telling the truth. But Weller wasn't taking any chances. He had his boys take her out, put a bullet in her, and dump her in the river."

"It was Ranse," Tony yelled in panic. "I didn't have nothing to do with it."

Osborne hit Tony with his open hand, banging him back against the wall, growling: "You'll get

your chance to talk, lug. For the moment keep your trap closed."

"I suppose you're going to tell me that Weller killed Gus Angoff."

Bill shook his head wearily. He felt old and tired and all shot. "I wish it was as simple as that," he said heavily. "I wish that was all there was to it."

Dolliver said: "I'm getting tired of hints and allusions, Lee."

Bill said: "You see, Weller was getting paid, too. He was engineering the cover-up. He thought he was safe. He believed that he and Myra were the only ones who knew the truth. But he couldn't be sure. When I began to ask my questions, he acted like any other guilty guy. He began to worry. When he worried, he tried to figure out how to get me out of the picture. He was the one who stuck his neck out then."

"We found one of his boys on Locust," Osborne put in. "We didn't know what the hell it was all about till you telephoned and asked us to meet you here. The one on the fire escape was one of Weller's tough boys. The other guy was a gigolo named Des Veeder."

His hard mouth clamped for a second, then he said: "Let's have the rest of it."

"I'll show you the rest," Bill said. "If you'll take a little ride with me. I'll hand you the rest of the puzzle."

They went out through the lounge, past the two cops who were standing guard over Weller's door. The woman who had clawed him in the washroom was in the center of a knot of excited women, all quite tight.

She saw Bill and screamed: "There he is; there's the guy! They oughta give him life."

Captain Osborne said: "Lee, I never thought it of you."

Dolliver's voice was edgy as he snapped: "Cut it out, Osborne."

Dolliver showed the strain under which he had been laboring. His dark face was drawn and lined and his eyes were bloodshot.

They climbed into the big police sedan that was at the curb. Bill said:

"Drive out to the Glendale section. I'll show you where to stop."

Dolliver frowned at him, his eyes speculative. Then he eased back in the seat, saying nothing.

Captain Osborne turned from his place beside the driver and said: "You sure you've got this thing doped, Lee?"

"Positive, Osborne. Weller did some telephoning to quiet some jangled nerves. I saw the number he dialed."

Bill leaned forward as the car rolled down the wide, quiet street and pointed to the house set back from the street, lamplight from its windows shining across the lawn that had a sheen under the lights.

As they got out of the car, Dolliver's voice

showed the first excitement that Bill had ever heard in it. "Good heavens, man," he exploded, "are you sure of this?"

Bill nodded as he led the way to the front door. "I'm sure, Dolliver. When we get in, just pull a good bluff and see what happens."

They rang the bell, then followed the butler down a wide hall to the huge room at the end. Bill felt the strain in the house as he went in ahead of Dolliver and Osborne.

Carter Meade was standing at the end of a long table. He watched the three men come in silently. His deep-set eyes were dull. His mouth was set in tight lines, strain pulling white lines down from the sides of his beaked nose.

Don Meade was plainly scared. His eyes had a hunted expression. He stood across the table from his father, his hands clenching and unclenching.

Dolliver spoke, his voice hard and toneless. "Weller talked before he died, Meade."

Carter Meade glanced at his son. Don leaned on the table for support and said in a high-pitched, unnatural voice:

"It was an accident. I was high when I went up to Lou's suite at the Monarch. Lou had passed out. Gus Angoff tried to throw me out. I grabbed a bottle and hit him. It was self-defense. I tell you it was self-defense."

His voice was almost hysterical as he babbled. Bill felt sick. He suddenly wanted to get out of this and as far away as possible; he wanted to get away more than he had ever wanted anything in his life.

Dolliver's hard voice was like the voice of sanity in a madhouse. "I suppose the killing of Myra Ganong was self-defense, too."

Carter Meade said: "We had nothing to do with that. I wouldn't have condoned murder. But Weller acted before I knew anything about it."

Dolliver said hoarsely: "Why, you damned reformer! You and your prating about honesty in high places. You'd see another man go up for a crime your pup committed. And you'd stand there and let murder be committed to help cover him. And then you prattle about not condoning murder."

Afterward Bill rode back downtown with Dolliver and Osborne. That was after another car had taken Meade and his son to headquarters.

They rode for a long time in silence. Finally Dolliver said flatly:

"Let that be a lesson to you, Lee. You and your paper yelling about civic reform. Damn all reformers. The machine may not look good at times. But, by thunder, we never pulled anything like this."

Bill made no reply. It seemed to him that there was nothing to say.

Dolliver went on, almost impatiently: "You're a shrewd guy, Lee. You can see as far through a brick wall as the next fellow. But you've had a blind spot. You, and a lot of people like you, get the idea in your heads that everyone in our party is a crook. We're in control. We've had a machine that functions smoothly. That proves us crooks. In that frame of mind you were ready to beat the drum for any windbag like Meade who promised to put us out of business. Grow up, Lee. Grow up."

Bill's voice was very bored. "Don't give me a sales talk, Dolliver. I've never kidded myself. I guess you and the rest of the boys are as good as any bunch of politicians that we might put in. Sure, I beat the drum for Meade. That was O. K. I'll probably continue to beat the drum for anyone who runs against the Bannerman crowd. Meade was a worse rotter than anyone now in office. But we didn't know that till I showed him up."

He gave Dolliver his lopsided grin, a thoughtful note in his voice. "I'm beginning to understand something I never understood before. Guys like myself will always keep you and the rest of the gang reasonably honest. We'll do it with words. I'm beginning to appreciate my profession for the first time. I got you out of a mess that was framed around you. Look out for me if you start gumming the cards next time."

He got out of the car at headquarters, saying to Dolliver and Osborne: "I'm going along now. You don't need me in there. I've done my part. I stuck my neck out and got the answers. You can handle the rest."

Osborne looked at him queerly and said gruffly: "Don't let it get you, kid. Murder is dirty; a smelly business. Next time let us handle it." He glanced at Dolliver and smiled gently. "I'm a cop. I try to get at the truth in every case that comes. I guess I'm like you, just a kind of balance wheel."

Bill's smile grew more one-sided. "Don't worry about me, Osborne. I'll not play detective again, unless I have to. I don't like the smell of crime."

He stood on the walk in front of headquarters for quite a while after Dolliver and Osborne had gone inside. Gradually some of his depression began to lift. He found himself able to put the Meades out of his mind. He didn't even condemn them now. Carter Meade had found his son in a bad jam and had used what influence he had to get him out. Once started in that direction, he had to go on, through crookedness and murder.

He felt sorrier for Carter Meade than anyone else in the whole mess.

Feeling sorry for Meade brought the Castletons back to his mind. And when he thought of the Castletons, he thought of Margie. His smile became warmer and his gray eyes began to shine as he headed for a telephone.

THE END.



TRIPLE THREAT

by CLEVE F. ADAMS

I'VE got a funny one," Hammerschlag said. Hammerschlag worked out of the missing persons bureau. Passing McCord's door and seeing McCord with his feet on the desk and apparently nothing on his mind, it was second nature for Hammerschlag to pause and observe that he had a funny one. Sometimes he really had, though McCord always pretended to be very skeptical about this.

McCord spread his feet a little, so that he could see Hammerschlag's moonface between them. "I'll bet," he said. McCord was a long man, long and thin, with an amiably cynical mouth and eyes like a disillusioned spaniel's. He ran the homicide detail, nights. "I'll bet."

"Well, I have," Hammerschlag said aggrievedly. He felt around in a sagging coat pocket of his baggy blue serge and brought out two halves of a sadly mutilated cigar. These he fitted together with great care and joined precariously with a moistened cigarette paper. "I think she's faking," he said.

"Who?"

"Ain't I been telling you?" Hammerschlag demanded. "The girl!"

"Oh." McCord watched Hammerschlag's futile struggle to draw smoke through the battered cigar. Presently he relented and got the skipper's private box out of the desk. "Have one on the house, Dutch."

"Well," Hammerschlag said, "I don't mind if I do." He did not throw his own masterpiece away, though. He put it back in his pocket. His bulbous nose savored the dappled richness of Captain O'Meare's Havana. "Whee-ee!"

"Maybe you'll be a captain some day," McCord said. "Then people can steal your cigars." He took his feet off the desk so that he could scratch a match on it. Smoke billowed from his blackened

brier. "What's so funny about the girl?"

"Well," Hammerschlag said—he nearly always began his sentences with "Well"; the brief hesitation gave his mind time to catch up with his mouth—"well, they bring this dame in around seven o'clock and she's got concussion and a flock o' bruises, like maybe a car hit her."

"And you think that's funny," McCord said.

Hammerschlag glared at him. "Now look. I didn't mean it was funny. I mean it's—now—"

"Peculiar?"

"Yeah, peculiar. Not on account of she's hurt and all, but on account of there ain't a thing on her in the way of identification." Hammerschlag blushed as McCord grinned at him. "Now there you go, always jumping to conclusions. Of course she had her clothes on."

"Then how do you know there were bruises?"

Hammerschlag was outraged. "I'll have you to know us cops have got morals just like anybody else!"

"That's right," McCord said. "Cops are just like everybody else." He sighed. "Well, let it pass, Dutch. You could have found out about the bruises from Doc Stein."

Mollified, Hammerschlag continued: "So they put her in receiving and the doc goes to work on her. After a while he brings her around, but she claims she don't remember nothing. Hell, she don't even remember who she is. At least this is what she claims, only I don't believe it. Like I tell you, I think she's faking it."

McCord was really interested now. "Why should she?"

"You tell me," Hammerschlag said. "All I know is, a guy has a hunch or he don't. Me, I got one. She's faking a loss of memory that ain't really so,

and I got no time to go chasing shoe labels and one thing and another. So I call the boys in and we get a picture and rush it down for the late editions. I'll fix her."

"A fine business," McCord sneered. "I hope she had her clothes on."

"Darn you, McCord," Hammerschlag yelled, "all we took was her head!"

"I still say it's a fine business," McCord contended. "How's she going to remember anything if you took her head?" He stood up suddenly as Hammerschlag dashed the skipper's cigar to the floor. "O. K., Dutch, let's go down and have a look. That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Well—"

"But I'll have no more of your insults," McCord insisted. "I'm only doing this for the good of the service, understand? *Esprit de corps*, that sort of thing."

Hammerschlag made an inelegant sound with his mouth. "You oughta go on the radio." He bent, grunting, and retrieved the smoldering cigar, wiping the chewed end on a coat sleeve. "You know what you are? You're a heel!"

McCord picked up the interoffice phone. "The heel speaking. . . . Well, a guy just called me that. Look, Jake. I'm going down to Emergency for a minute. You can get me there."

McCord snapped off the switch and looked at Hammerschlag as if waiting for approval of his action. But Hammerschlag wasn't interested much in giving approval. He was more interested in getting out of the place—doing something about his problem. So McCord got off his chair and followed to the door.

Out in the corridor it was a little noisier, not much. Eight o'clock in the evening is a dull hour in the detective division. There was the click of the teletypes; here and there a phone rang. A civil clerk with a batch of reports came out of the press room where he had, no doubt, been giving the legmen a preview of the night's doings before passing the information on to Regan, the night chief.

McCord and Hammerschlag caught a down elevator and descended to the basement. The receiving hospital adjoined the police garage. An ambulance was just clanging its way up the ramp to the street level. Hammerschlag pushed through double swing doors, past the receiving desk presided over by the horse-faced Miss Kling, and paused outside the open door of one of the semi-private cubicles. Doc Stein and a male nurse, both in stiffly starched white, were staring resentfully at the girl on the cot.

McCord went in. The

girl was beautiful, there was no arguing that. Even without rouge and lipstick, and with her blue-black hair drawn straight back from her forehead, she was beautiful. Blue eyes regarded McCord without interest.

"I can't understand it," Doc Stein said irritably. "She's as normal as I am, yet she can't remember." Stein was a gnomelike little man. The thick lenses of his pince-nez gave his eyes an owl-like look. "I don't understand it."

McCord patted his shoulder. "Forget it, doc. We know who she is. Some of the boys found her bag."

Hammerschlag opened his mouth to deny this. McCord winked at him. Quite suddenly he turned his eyes full on the girl.

"Who hit you, hon?"

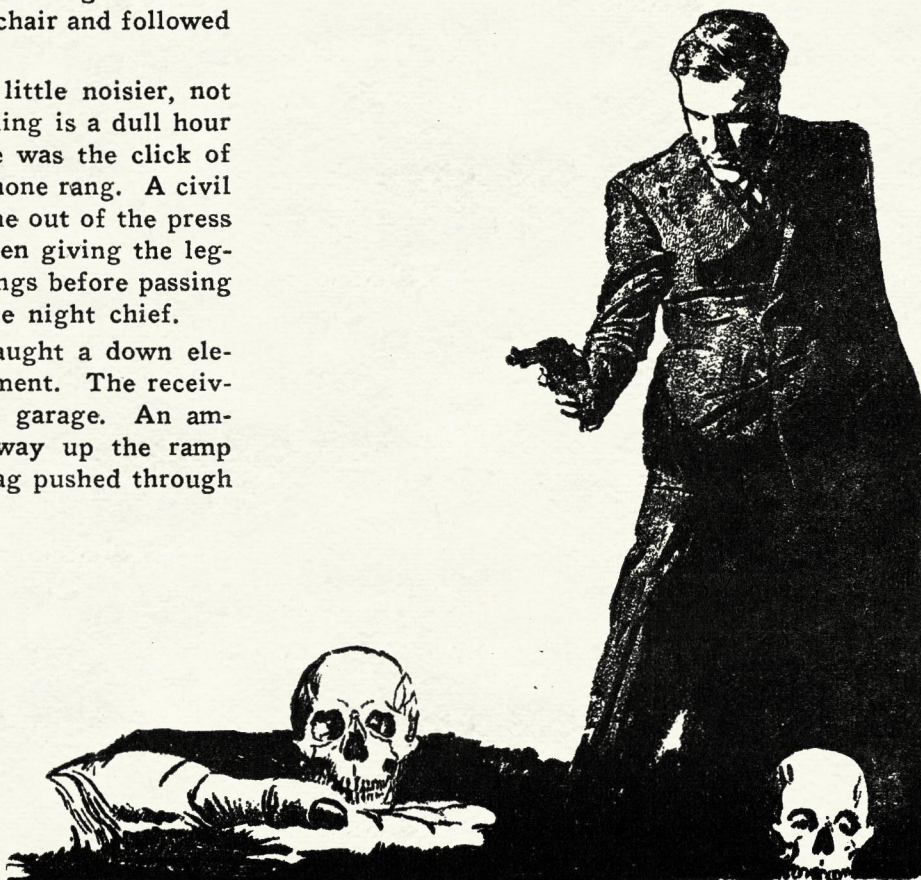
Something very like terror flared in her eyes for an instant. Then it was gone and her face was utterly blank again. "I don't know. I can't remember."

McCord shrugged. "All right, don't worry about it, sister."

He turned and went out. Hammerschlag and Dr. Stein followed him.

"What's the idea?" Hammerschlag wanted to know.

McCord looked at him. "Your hunch was good, Dutch. She is faking it. She's scared to death, and if I were you, I wouldn't leave her alone for a minute."



Doc Stein took off his glasses and pointed them at McCord's nose. "You were lying about the bag."

"Of course," McCord said. "She knew I was lying, too, when she stopped to think of it. But for just a second it caught her off guard. There's nothing wrong with her memory. The trouble is, she remembers too much."

"You mean she knows who did it and won't talk?"

"I think so," McCord said. He took out his pipe, looked at it, finally put it back in his pocket again. "Anyway, it's your case, Dutch, though I wouldn't exactly call her a missing person."

Hammerschlag sighed heavily. "Regan thought we could get an identification quicker'n anybody else." He made a fist of a hamlike right hand. "I got a good notion to go in and finish up what the other guys started. She can't do this to me!"

"There's always her picture," McCord suggested. "The papers ought to be on the street pretty soon now." He nodded to Doc Stein, went out and caught an elevator back up to his own office.

Routine matters claimed him for the next twenty or thirty minutes, but somehow he couldn't get the girl out of his mind. Despite her good looks and the undeniable fact that she had been hurt, there was a certain indefinable hardness about her. Another girl would have wept or had hysterics or something. This one was thinking every minute. What she was thinking about, her reason for not opening up, was a deep dark mystery, and mysteries rode McCord like a nagging woman. He was just about to call Hammerschlag when one of the phones on his desk rang. Answering it, he recognized Acting Chief Regan's bellow.

"You, McCord! What do you know about this dame down in Emergency?"

"Not a thing," McCord said. "Nothing beyond what I told Hammerschlag and Doc Stein. Why?"

"Because she ain't in Emergency any more," Regan yelled. "She's gone!"

II.

Acting Chief Regan was dynamic in the sense that a tornado is dynamic. He barged into McCord's office under full steam, cursing a blue streak and loudly wondering what the police department was coming to. He looked like Jiggs. Behind him, a lumbering and apologetic Saint Bernard, came Hammerschlag. McCord just sat there.

"Hell's hinges," Regan yelled. "I'll see you broken for this night's work!"

McCord yawned. "I'm supposed to be homicide."

"You're a dick, aren't you?"

"I've been called that," McCord admitted, "among other things."

"Then you and your crew get busy and find that girl!"

"All right," McCord said. He waited till Regan had stamped angrily out before even pretending to notice Hammerschlag. Then: "What happened, Dutch?"

Hammerschlag looked miserable. "Well, look, Steve. It's just one o' them things, I guess. You can believe it or not, but inside ten minutes after you and me were downstairs, there was a plane crash, a streetcar accident, and a three-alarm fire. Naturally, Emergency was a madhouse. In the excitement the gal managed to walk out without being noticed. She even took her clothes." He licked his lips. "She's . . . she's just gone, that's all."

McCord tamped tobacco into his pipe. "Cheer up, keed. When the papers hit the street, somebody will come in and identify her."

"That's the devil of it," Hammerschlag groaned. "We ask a million people do they know this girl, and when they come in and say they do, we ain't got the girl. That's what Regan's sore about. The papers are gonna rib hell out of us."

McCord hadn't thought of this angle. It seemed a simple enough matter to trace the girl once you found out who she was. But there was now a new danger. Suppose the girl, on the loose, was once more spotted by the guy or guys who caught up with her the first time? Suppose they were tired of fooling and really made a job of it? She'd be picked out of some ditch and then the department would be held responsible. Not so good.

McCord got up and went to the squad-room door. "Outside, gang. Out on the streets and look for this girl." Aided by Hammerschlag, he pieced together an excellent description, including the clothes. "If you can get copies of the late editions, you'll find her picture spread all over the front page."

The room emptied. Hammerschlag fiddled with his hat.

"Well, now, look, Steve. I'm sorry as hell about—I mean, if I hadn't asked you to—"

"Forget it," McCord said.

He picked up a phone, got the radio room, and found that Regan had already put the call on the air. Presently Hammerschlag went away. McCord was at the locker in the corner, getting out his topcoat, when footsteps paused outside his open door. He turned.

"Pardon me," the girl said, "I'm looking for the missing persons bureau."

McCord felt little icy prickles race up and down his spine. Most people experience the same sensation when coming face to face with a lunatic, and obviously you have to be one to escape from a place and then walk right back into it. He made his voice carefully casual. "Oh," he said. "Oh, yes, of course." Fixing her with his eye, like the hypnotists do, he edged around her and closed and locked the door. "Now baby," he said, "you and I are going to have a little talk."

Her eyes widened with swift apprehension. "I . . . I don't believe I quite understand."

"Beautiful," he thought. "Beautiful as hell. And crazier than seven hundred dollars." He decided to be nonchalant about it. "That makes two of us," he said. He leaned on the annunciator switch. "Get me Regan and Hammerschlag. In a hurry."

The girl stared at him. "See here. Is this the missing persons bureau or isn't it?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "Yes, this is the missing persons bureau." He forced a smile. "It's a nice day, isn't it?"

"You know what I think?" the girl said. "I think you're crazy."

"They always do," McCord said under his breath. There was a sudden banging at the door and he went to it. The girl pivoted slowly, eying him with what seemed like a macabre intensity. He unlocked the door. Hammerschlag and Regan almost fell on their faces. McCord waved a casual hand. "There."

Hammerschlag sucked in a great gulp of air. "Well, I'll be damned!"

"Where did you get her?" demanded Regan.

"It's nothing," McCord assured him. "Nothing at all. Just give us an assignment, that's all homicide asks. You lose 'em, we find 'em."

Hammerschlag moved in on the girl. "All right, sister, why did you do it?"

The swift anger on her face was replaced by sudden terror. She dodged Hammerschlag and raced for the door. Regan stuck out a foot and tripped her. Almost before she hit the floor, she began screaming. The sound was worse than eighty-seven sirens. Regan bent and hauled her to her feet.

"Shut up, you! Nobody's going to hurt you."

"You're all crazy!" the girl panted. "Crazy as loons!"

"Oh, yeah?" Regan pinioned her flailing arms, meanwhile looking rather helplessly at McCord. Outside, the corridor filled rapidly with detectives, reporters, the usual gang who hung around the detective division at night. The girl ducked her head suddenly and bit Regan on the wrist. He let out a howl that could have been heard clear down in the middle of civic center. "Take her away!" he yelled. "Take her away!"

A couple of detectives from the loft squad took her away. Her screams drifted back to the group in McCord's office. "You're all crazy, I tell you! Crazy as March hares!"

McCord wiped little beads of sweat from his forehead. "Damned if I don't think she's right, at that."

A new commotion outside centered his attention once more on the door and he saw the inseparables. Saul Saracco and his mouthpiece, little Manny Grossman. Saracco had a press-damp copy of the

Journal in his hands. "That the gal you were looking for?"

Acting Chief Regan snatched at the paper. Over his shoulder McCord could see the girl's picture under the glaring caption: "Do you know this girl?" People who did were advised to communicate with the missing persons bureau.

Regan flung the paper from him and began sucking at his bleeding wrist. "The little hellcat!" He broke off suddenly to stare at Saracco. "What brings you down here?"

Saracco was a big man, broad and flat of face. Pockmarks left by an earlier affliction puckered his dark skin, but he was still good-looking. He lobbied for the paving and street-lighting interests. There were some who said that he had a fist in other things no less profitable but not so legal. Everybody was sure he had friends in the current administration. He grinned, showing very white teeth. "Friend of mine was picked up for drunk driving. Mind?"

"Mind!" Regan snapped. "I'm damn glad of it!" He didn't like Saracco very well.

McCord engaged little Manny Grossman in conversation. "You're looking well, counselor. You wouldn't happen to know this gal, would you?"

Grossman looked startled. "Who me?" He was tiny and dapper and barbered within an inch of his life. He was a good court actor, though. Birdlike eyes probed McCord's face. "You mean you don't?"

"That's right," McCord said.

Hammerschlag was recounting to the reporters the manner in which the girl had been brought to the department's attention, her escape and later re-appearance. Regan, annoyed no end, stamped out. Gradually the room emptied and McCord sank into his own chair. He was a little shaken.

Presently he bethought himself of all his own detectives, not to mention the uniformed men, who were combing the city for a girl who was once more in custody. He pulled a phone toward him and canceled the order. Relaxed, he leaned back and closed his eyes.

"Pardon me," a girl's voice said, "can you direct me to the missing persons bureau?"

McCord opened his eyes. He shuddered violently. "Again?" Then, convinced that it couldn't be, that this was just an illusion, he once more leaned back and relaxed.

This illusion was persistent as hell, though. "I said—"

"I heard you," McCord said, adding: "But I don't believe it. It isn't possible."

"What isn't?"

"Well," McCord said, "if you must know, you aren't. You're a vision, a pixie, a—" He suddenly opened his eyes very wide indeed, and for the first time noted something that he should have noticed before. This girl before him had the same face, the same blue-black hair and startling blue eyes,

but her clothes were not the same. Not only that, she carried a handbag and a folded newspaper. Granted that she had escaped from durance vile, she still wouldn't have had time for a complete change of costume. McCord hastily attained his feet. "Excuse it, lady. We've had a rather trying time of it around here the last hour or so. I believe you said you wanted the—"

"The missing persons bureau." A faint frown creased an otherwise perfect brow. It's . . . it's about my sister." She held out the newspaper.

"Oh." McCord, in accepting the paper, managed to touch her hand. He still wasn't quite sure that she was real. "Oh, yes, about your sister!"

She was becoming annoyed. "Aren't you a little vague? I always understood that policemen were—well, efficient."

"Oh, we are!" McCord assured her. He put on a great show of efficiency by picking up the phone and calling the detention cells upstairs. "Hey, have you still got the . . . uh . . . lady up there that Regan sent up? . . . Oh, you have! Well, that's fine. That's just ducky. Hang on to her." He next addressed the girl. "Your name?"

"Martin—Constance Martin."

McCord bowed. "Lieutenant McCord. And your sister's name?"

"Hope Martin."

"Let's go up and see her," McCord said. He took the girl's arm because he was still a little afraid she would vanish.

"Is . . . is she hurt badly?"

"Oh, no," McCord said. "Hardly at all. That is, not very much. I'm sure that after she sees you she'll be quite all right." Going up in the elevator, he looked down at the most beautiful profile in the world. "Are you familiar with your sister's . . . um . . . friends? Any idea of who would wish to do her harm?"

Startled eyes lifted to meet his. "Why, no! That is, as a matter of fact I haven't seen or heard from Hope for over a year."

"This way," McCord said. He ushered her down the whitewashed concrete corridor to the cell blocks. The turnkey let them through. There was no need for further directions. The first Miss Martin was making herself heard far and wide, and a bulky matron in gray denim was looking longingly at the sap slung from her right wrist.

The girl with McCord clutched the bars. "Val!" Abruptly the cacophony ceased. "Connie!"

The two girls stared at each other for one amazed instant. Then, as one, they demanded:

"What are you doing here?"

Miss Constance Martin turned indignant eyes on McCord. "This isn't Hope. This is Valour!"

McCord drew a deep breath. "You mean that this isn't the girl in the picture?"

The girl beyond the bars gave every indication of going crazy again. "Of course I'm not, stupid!

That's what I've been trying to tell everybody!"

McCord wet his lips. "Then you're not—you must be—"

"Of course," Constance said. "We're triplets. And where is our sister, Hope?"

"I wouldn't know," McCord said sadly. "I don't believe I even care to know. Triplets! Well, I'll be—"

III.

To all intents and purposes police headquarters was a madhouse for the next hour or so. What Chief Regan had feared had now actually come to pass. They had a bona-fide missing persons case, with two positive identifications and a formal demand for the person of one Hope Martin. The department also faced charges of gross negligence, false arrest, and one thing and another. In addition to the internal turmoil there was a veritable barrage of phone calls from without, all purporting to identify the girl whose likeness appeared in the late editions. At least half of these were utterly worthless. The other half identified the girl as either one or the other of her two counterparts. Hope Martin herself was still missing.

In Hammerschlag's office the battle raged on and on, Hammerschlag and Regan versus the Misses Constance and Valour Martin. McCord, on the side lines, sucked at a dead pipe and considered such salient facts as boiled to the surface. He was not pleased with his own participation in the affair.

Miss Valour Martin, it developed, was a sort of glorified schoolteacher, a supervisor attending a national convention of supervisors being held in the city. Practically the entire convention had called up to identify the girl in the picture as Valour.

Miss Constance Martin was not so well known, though even without her sister's presence she had ample identification, including a passport, upon her person. She, it seemed, was the secretary and traveling companion to a wealthy old lady named Van Dorn. It was pure coincidence that the three sisters, each unaware of the exact whereabouts of the others, should all land in the same city at the same time. It was this point which graveled Chief Regan the most. It could not be a coincidence, he insisted. It was a subtle plot by the opposition to make the department ridiculous in the eyes of the taxpayers.

Miss Valour Martin didn't give one little darn, she said, about the taxpayers. She had been man-handled and thrown into a cell for no reason at all. And what would her sister supervisors think? And where was Hope?

Constance, perhaps because she hadn't been subjected to so many indignities, was less vituperative than Valour. Presently, catching McCord's eye upon her, she rose and came over to his side.

"It really isn't such a coincidence as it seems,"

she said. "I mean, after all, this is a logical stop on the way back from a pleasure cruise. Also, it is one of the notable convention cities."

McCord put his pipe away. "That takes care of you and your sister, Valour. It hardly accounts for your sister, Hope." He was finding it very difficult to stay as angry with Constance as the occasion seemed to demand. Especially with her standing so close to him and the perfume of her blue-black hair in his nostrils. She was, he decided, much more beautiful than either of her two sisters. "Maybe you'd better just run over it again," he suggested.

She wrinkled her nose. It was a very lovely nose indeed. "Well," she said, "we decided a long time ago that we didn't want to be triplets."

"Praiseworthy," McCord conceded, "but a little odd."

She frowned at him. "I mean, we were going to lead our own lives, be individuals, not exhibited collectively"—blue eyes lifted to his—"you're not laughing?"

"No," he said gravely.

She nodded, as if she knew all the time that he wasn't the kind to laugh at things like that. "So we . . . we just separated, that's all."

"I see. And Valour became a schoolteacher and you a secretary to old ladies with money. Hope, I think you said, is a dancer and you last heard from her in San Francisco. She was working the cafés?"

Constance flushed a little. "I . . . I understood she was at the fair." Then, meeting his eyes squarely: "I may as well tell you. She was a bubble dancer."

McCord gave no sign that he was startled. As a matter of fact, his brief interview with the missing triplet had convinced him that she had been around. That and her condition was almost proof positive that she was mixed up with some pretty tough people. On a sudden impulse McCord put a hand under the girl's chin. "Do me a favor, Constance Martin?"

"I . . . I don't know." She shivered a little. "About Hope—you said that—"

"That's what I mean," he said. "We've got to think about her. On the face of it we cops are a pretty dumb bunch, but you've got to admit that the circumstances are a little—well, unusual. Persuade your sister to go back to her hotel, will you? And you go back to yours. Believe me, all that can be done is being done. It's only going to make the job a lot more complicated with you two roaming around. Do you see that?"

She considered this for a moment. "Yes, I think I do. I'll have a talk with Valour."

She crossed to where recriminations were still being hurled back and forth across Hammerschlag's desk. The battery of phones in the adjoining office made a cacophony of sound. Identifications were

still pouring in. Whatever Constance Martin said to Valour Martin, the results were almost immediate. The two girls, escorted by Chief Regan, withdrew. Hammerschlag, exhausted, flopped in the desk chair. "Would you believe it?" he said.

McCord said he wouldn't. He took a sheaf of scrawled notations from one of the detectives working the telephones. Out of the whole bunch there was only one that offered definite promise. "Look, Dutch. Here's a call from a guy that runs the Hotel Metropole. Says the picture looks like a Hope Delancey, a guest. The first name—well, what do you think?"

Hammerschlag snatched at the paper. "Mine! Hell's hinges, it'll be a relief to get out of this bedlam." He looked at McCord. "Mind taking over here for a while?"

McCord loaded his pipe. "Anything for a pal, Dutch."

He dropped into the chair vacated by the elephantine Hammerschlag and put his feet on the desk. Hammerschlag went away. McCord appeared to doze, though this attitude was always a more or less mild deception. From time to time he accepted a new batch of reports or took a call relayed from the other room. Nothing new developed for perhaps a half-hour and McCord was beginning to think that nothing would when the hall door opened and a man came in. He was a very young man, very fat, with pink-and-white cheeks and a rosebud mouth. His voice, his manner, everything about him but the clothes he wore was effeminate. He minced forward, pale eyes centered on the soles of McCord's shoes.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I'm looking for a Miss Constance Martin, whose picture—"

McCord removed his feet from the desk. He did not tell the young man that the news photo was not that of Constance. "Yes?"

The young man carried a handkerchief in his sleeve. He took this out and wiped his hands daintily. "Is she dead?"

McCord had the distinct impression that the effeminate young man hoped she was. He could not have told you why he evaded the question, except that there had been fewer calls about Constance than there had been about the supervisor-convention-attending Valour. He certainly would not have admitted that of all three he was most interested in Constance. "Well," he said, "not quite. Did you wish to see her?"

"Oh, no!" the pink young man said hastily. "Oh, no, indeed! I . . . er . . . just wanted to—" Embarrassment overcame him and he again had recourse to the handkerchief.

McCord probed gently. "You are, perhaps, a relative?"

"Oh, no. No, I am just in— Well, you see, Miss Martin works for my mother. I am Egbert van Dorn."

"I see," McCord said. He couldn't quite make up his mind about the young man. Aside from the strange manner there was something vaguely repellent, almost sinister, about Egbert's veiled interest in Miss Constance Martin. Perhaps it was the tone of that first query: "Is she dead?"

McCord's chair creaked. "I'm afraid I have a disappointment for you. The lady in the picture is not your Constance Martin."

The pink ebbed from Egbert's cheeks. "But she must be!" And then something almost like a veil slid over the pale, stary eyes. "Why did you say that? Why should it be a disappointment?"

"It was just an idea I had," McCord said. Immediately he had another curious idea. "The girl in the picture is Constance Martin's sister, Hope. Constance is, or should be by this time, safely back at your hotel."

Egbert breathed softly. "And this . . . this sister?"

"We can't find her," McCord confessed. "We had her once, but she got away."

Again there was something like a lambent flame behind Egbert's pale eyes. He veiled it swiftly. "Then she's a criminal!"

McCord involuntarily shivered. He could not explain it, but he would have sworn that the unwholesome young man before him hated Constance Martin with a consuming hatred. It was almost as though having a criminal sister were as good as being dead. He stood up suddenly. "Where were you between five thirty and seven o'clock this evening?"

"Why . . . why, having dinner with my mother!" Swift anger replaced the surprise. "What's the idea? Why should I have to tell you what I was doing?"

"My mistake," McCord said. It was, too. For a brief moment it had occurred to him that possibly Egbert was responsible for the attack on Hope, in the mistaken belief that it was Constance. But Egbert's ready answer, his obvious surprise, was too convincing to be doubted. McCord pointed his pipe at the young man's nose. "O. K., get out of here." He watched Egbert get out. Then, once more in his chair, he picked up the phone and called the Seaview Hotel and asked for Miss Constance Martin.

Presently her voice came to him, cool, carefully contained. "Yes? Mrs. van Dorn's secretary speaking."

"Stephen McCord, Constance."

"Oh?" She caught her breath. "Then you have news?"

"In a way," he said. "Not news of Hope, though we have a lead. This concerns you." He pointed his pipe, just as though she were there in front of him. "I've just met Egbert."

She was definitely startled this time. "You . . . you have?"

"Egbert doesn't like you very well," McCord said.

"Don't be silly. He wants to marry me!"

McCord said a very unlovely word. "Oh, he does, does he?" In sudden savage disgust he flung his pipe at the door. "Look, Connie—excuse it, Miss Martin—look. What does Mrs. Gretchen van Dorn think about the idea?"

"Why, she's in favor of it!"

He coughed suddenly. "And you?"

"See here, Lieutenant McCord, I don't know by what right you're making my personal affairs your business!"

"Sorry," he said. "My mistake." He replaced the phone with a discouraged air and got up and retrieved his pipe. He just had it going nicely when the door banged open and Chief Regan stormed in.

"Well, lug, you claim you're a homicide dick. We've got a job for you. Somebody just knocked off Hammerschlag."

IV.

McCord and Regan, passing through the headquarters lobby on their way out to the car, ran into Manny Grossman.

The little attorney offered his sympathy. "Too bad about Hammerschlag."

Regan grunted. "A lot you care!"

McCord said nothing at all. He was feeling too bad to discuss the case with an outsider. He had been fond of the Dutchman. Big Saul Saracco pushed out of a phone booth.

"Hello, chief. Hello, McCord. Tough about—"

"You still around?" Regan said. He, too, had been fond of Hammerschlag and his grief, while concealed, was making him even more brusque than usual. "You must be losing your grip."

Saracco smiled easily. "Oh, no. No, Saracco isn't losing his grip. We managed to spring my boy some time ago."

McCord, on a sudden impulse, said, "Then why are you hanging around?" He thought he detected a startled look in Manny Grossman's beady black eyes, but before he could be sure, the lawyer turned his head.

Saracco laughed. "Headquarters is an interesting spot tonight, lieutenant, what with triplets and one thing and another. Any law against our watching the fun?"

Regan cursed. "Fun, eh? I'd like to—" He broke off as the deputy medical examiner got out of an elevator. "Come on, McCord; let's get out of here before I lose my temper."

They pushed through the revolving doors and descended to the police sedan at the curb. McCord rode in back with the examiner, Regan with the driver up front. The siren cut a wide swath through traffic. McCord was surprised to note that it was only a little after nine o'clock. It scarcely

seemed possible that so much could have happened in so short a time. Rubber shrieked as the car slid into the curb before the Metropole.

It wasn't much of a hotel, the Metropole. Like a lot of others in the same section it had never claimed to be more than second class, and now, definitely, it was a notch lower than that. There were two prowler cars already on the spot; that made two men to keep the sidewalk clear, two to control the crowd in the small lobby. There was surprisingly little confusion. The driver of the sedan did not get out. Regan, McCord, and the M. E. went in and rode with one of the uniformed men inside up to the third floor. Hammerschlag was in 316.

He lay in a disordered heap just beyond the door, curiously deflated, as though life in leaving him had taken some of his bulk, too. The first slug had caught him high up in the chest. McCord knew it was the first, because the other two were contact wounds directly over the heart. The first would have been enough to knock him off his feet. There was only one conclusion to draw from the others. Hammerschlag had recognized the killer.

Chief Regan blew his nose loudly. "A good cop," he said.

"A good cop," McCord agreed soberly. Dutch Hammerschlag would have been pleased.

The uniformed cop admitted the house detective and the clerk. It was the house detective who had heard the shots. He had been up on the fourth floor at the time.

McCord looked at the clerk. "Well?"

The clerk was a pale, old-young man with a cynical mouth. "Nothing beyond what I told the prowler crew. I thought I recognized the picture in the papers and called in about it. Right after that the girl came in and got her key. When Hammerschlag arrived, I told him she was up here and—"

"You didn't come up with him?"

"He didn't want me to."

Chief Regan stabbed a blunt forefinger at the house detective. "O. K., you're next."

The house detective was not much help. "Like I tell you, I was up on the fourth, trying to quiet down a family brawl. I heard the shots, but by the time I located the spot, there was nobody around." He shrugged a shoulder at Hammerschlag's body. "Nobody but him." In response to McCord's stare he added defensively: "Sure, I tried! The dame must have used the service door down on the alley. It was unlocked."

McCord moved around the room. There was no doubt that Hope Martin had occupied it, no matter what name she had used. There were half a dozen eight-by-ten theatrical prints of her on the dresser.

Chief Regan blew his nose again. "Well, it's a straight murder rap this time. The boys'll be interested." What he meant was that the search

for a missing girl would be nothing compared with the hunt for a cop killer.

"Yes," McCord said, almost absently. He picked up one of the photographs. She was like Constance, very like her, just as both girls were like Valour, the third sister. Seen separately, it would be no trick at all to mistake one for the other. Across the hall a radio blared the tail ends of a news broadcast. The announcer appeared to think it was a great joke, the story of the Martin triplets.

Regan shook his fist impotently. "I wish they'd never invented radio! Right now there are a million people that know as much about this case as we do."

McCord's eyes were more like a disillusioned spaniel's than ever as they rested fleetingly on Hammerschlag. "We'll do the best we can, Dutch." He said it just as though Hammerschlag could hear him.

The telephone rang. McCord, answering it, found that the call was relayed through headquarters. "This is Valour Martin, lieutenant. Is Constance with you?"

"With me? Why should she be with me?"

"Well," Valour said tartly, "I haven't been able to find her anywhere else."

McCord shivered suddenly. "Where are you now?"

"At Connie's hotel, of course! You told her to stay here, didn't you? And she isn't there, is she? So I thought—"

"I see," McCord said. He took a deep breath. "Just wait for me there, will you, please? I'll be right over."

V.

The Seaview was one of those tremendous hostelties, spread over acres of ground, where anything could happen. An integral part of it was the Palm Room, a supper club patronized by thousands, so that in addition to the regular guests the staff was compelled to watch over a horde of nonresidents. Checking the movements of any one particular person was almost impossible. McCord found this to be true of Constance Martin. Apparently no one had seen her leave. She had not turned in her key at the desk.

Valour, at McCord's elbow, was getting more jittery by the minute. "I can't understand Connie doing a thing like this. Right after you told her to stay here."

McCord looked down at her. Strangely enough, when he was with one of these girls, the others sort of faded out, or rather merged into a composite of all. "I told you to stay put, too," he pointed out gently.

"But there was a reason for me! When I called Connie and found she . . . she wasn't here, why, I had to come over, didn't I?"

"Sure," McCord said. "Sure you did." He let

his eyes travel over the thronged main lobby. He had not as yet told Valour that one of her sisters was suspected of killing a cop. Quite suddenly his mind centered on something. Suppose Hope had had access to a radio? In this manner she could have learned that Constance and Valour were in town; she could have discovered their whereabouts and, finding herself in a spot, what more natural than that she should appeal to one or the other, or both? Had she appealed to Constance, asked for a meeting? That would explain Constance's absence. It also implied that Connie was willing to go to almost any length to protect her sister.

McCord compressed his lips. "You wouldn't, by chance, have heard from Hope?"

Valour was obviously startled. "From Hope! Why . . . why, no! You don't think that—"

"I don't know," McCord said in a tired voice. "I'm beginning to believe I've lost the ability to think." He took her arm, walking her toward the elevators. "You've talked with the van Dorns?"

"Of course. They thought Connie was still in her room."

"We'll go up and talk some more," McCord said.

They got in the first car and rode to the seventh and went along a quiet corridor to the van Dorn suite.

It was Egbert who answered McCord's knock. "Oh, hello, there!"

"Hello," McCord said. Over Egbert's shoulder he could see a very ancient lady in stiff black taffeta and a black lace cap. She was rocking placidly in a chair which the management must have disinterred from the basement, especially for her benefit. Very sharp, very black eyes peered at McCord and the girl. Her skin was like wrinkled parchment.

"Well, Egbert," she said tartly, "are you going to invite them in or aren't you?"

Egbert stood aside.

"I'm Lieutenant McCord, Mrs. van Dorn. It

may be necessary for me to ask you some rather personal questions."

She nodded. "The rich," she said, "are used to personal questions." The bright black eyes held a glint of humor. They shifted to where Egbert was pouring himself a good stiff jolt of Scotch. "Put it down, Egbert."

He put it down sulkily, like a bad little boy forbidden the cookie jar. Long lashes drooped over pinkly white cheeks, but not before McCord had seen the stark living hatred in the young man's pale eyes.

"Egbert hates me," the old lady said complacently.

McCord felt his stomach curl into sudden knots. He wondered if he himself weren't slightly unbalanced.

"It may be necessary for me to ask you some rather personal questions," McCord told the old lady.



Mrs. van Dorn was examining Valour with brightly probing eyes. "So like Constance," she marveled. "So very like dear, dear Constance." The bright eyes fixed McCord with birdlike intensity. "Egbert is going to marry Constance, you know."

"So I heard," McCord said gravely. He watched Egbert, who, in turn, was watching Valour. Presently he cleared his throat. "About Constance going out, did you know she was? Did she, perhaps, get a telephone call?"

Mrs. van Dorn shook her lace-capped head. "I do not spy upon people. Except Egbert," she added maliciously. "Egbert is queer, you know."

"Mamma!"

"Well, you are."



McCord almost choked. Happening to catch Valour's eye, he saw that she looked somewhat dazed. He suddenly found himself feeling almost sorry for Egbert. "May I see Miss Connie's room?"

"Of course." The old lady waved a fragile hand at a door. "That one belongs to Constance. Mine is on the other side of this. Egbert's is across the hall."

Valour followed McCord into her sister's room, closed the door, and sagged weakly against it. "They must be crazy!"

"Or we are," McCord said. He inventoried the room swiftly. There was no sign of an unusually hurried departure, none of a struggle. Obviously, then, Constance had left of her own accord.

He went to the phone on the bedside table and got the chief operator downstairs. "Lieutenant McCord speaking and this is police business. Have there been any calls to this room in, say, the last hour?" There was a moment's wait, then: "Just one? How long ago was that?" Presently he cradled the phone and looked at Valour.

"There was a call from one of the booths down in the lobby. Constance must have gone out in answer to that."

Valour's blue eyes were definitely frightened now. "Why is Hope hiding out like this? Why should she have run away from the police in the first place? And who could have—"

"Beaten her?" McCord suggested. He made a bitter mouth. "That's just one of the million things we don't know, hon." On a sudden impulse he added: "Though I'm beginning to suspect that the beating was intended to be permanent." He thought a moment. "That doesn't account for Hammerschlag, though."

Valour stared at him. "Hammerschlag! That was the fat detective—the funny one. What happened to him?"

"He was shot to death," McCord said brutally. "In your sister's, Hope's, room." As Valour's knees buckled under her, he caught her and dumped her in the nearest chair. "Take a brace, baby. Maybe she didn't do it."

He left her abruptly and went back to the phone and got Chief Regan at headquarters. "You get anything on the one from San Francisco?"

Regan's voice sounded hoarse. "She was what the other one—Constance—said she was. A dancer at the fair. When it closed, she checked out. Say, come to think of it, the hotel she checked out of was the one where Welles was killed. You know, the commissioner of public works. You s'pose—"

"She killed him, too?" McCord shook his head, just as though Regan could see him. "Listen, I don't think this gal is in the wholesale business. She might have known about the Welles kill, though. Check back with the Frisco cops, will you?" A sudden idea hit him. "Look, a commissioner of public works. Mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing," Regan confessed.

"Who do we know who sells paving and street lights and one thing and another?"

Regan was incredulous. "Saul Saracco? Hell, why would he kill the goose that lays the golden eggs? Besides, that was in Frisco. Not our case."

McCord's lips moved as though he might be cursing. "Is there any reason Saracco couldn't have been in Frisco at the time? The girl is from Frisco, too, living in the same hotel where it happened. And who has been hanging around headquarters ever since the papers hit the streets?"

Regan said, "Maybe you've got something there!" As McCord was about to hang up, he added, "Hey, what's new at your end?"

"I'm short two girls now," McCord said gloomily.

He replaced the phone only to have it immediately start ringing. About to answer it, he had a swift hunch and motioned Valour to take the call.

She came out of her chair eagerly. "Yes? . . . No, this is Val, dear." Her eyes, meeting McCord's, were wide, and her lips formed the one word:

"Hope." Then, listening intently, she picked up a pencil and began writing on the phone pad. "Yes . . . Yes, I understand, darling."

McCord, poised like a runner awaiting the gun, heard sudden loud voices in the adjoining room. One was more like a bleat of terror. The other was soft, yet somehow filled with unmistakable menace. It was this one that said, quite plainly, "So you wanna play, do you?"

McCord, fumbling his gun out, eased the door open. There were now three in the sitting room: Mrs. van Dorn, Egbert, and a gunman named Eddy Turk. McCord had arrested the fellow half a dozen times himself. Turk was very natty in a blue Chesterfield with a velvet collar. He had a gun in his hand. None of the three was aware of McCord.

"You put that thing away, young man!" Mrs. van Dorn said.

Saliva drooled from the corner of Egbert's mouth. "I know nothing about it, I tell you!"

Turk lifted his weapon a little. "Don't give me that, Rosamond. We had a little argument with the two punks you hired. The girl says they were taking her to her sister, only she claims she don't know where."

Egbert's eyes were wild. "Then why don't you ask the . . . the punks? I tell you I know nothing about—"

"The punks are in no condition to talk, Rosamond. They're kind of dead. Like you'll be if you don't open up."

"Egbert," Mrs. van Dorn said sternly, "what is the meaning of this?"

Egbert never took his eyes from Turk's gun. "Shut up, you old fool!" Panic gripped him then, and he screamed and ran for the communicating door just as McCord flung it open. "Hold it!" McCord said sharply. Egbert didn't hold it. He swerved and darted back directly in the path of Eddy Turk's first blast. McCord fired, trying only to stop the sudden hail of lead, but he was hur-

ried. Ducking, Turk took the slug squarely in the top of his head. He crashed down to the floor. It was pure reflex action that emptied his gun into the jellylike mass of Egbert van Dorn. McCord, stunned by the swiftness of it, turned harried eyes on the old lady. She was still sitting in her rocker, though even as McCord watched her, she swayed far over to one side and her eyes closed. Cursing luridly, he ran over and straightened her up. There was not a mark on her, but she was none the less dead. Her old heart hadn't been able to take it.

Outside in the hall there was the pound of running feet and shouted inquiries echoed back and forth. McCord, remembering Valour, hurried to the bedroom door. The girl had vanished. So, too, had the penciled notation on the phone pad.

VI.

"It looks to me," Chief Regan said, "as though we're going to have a new night man on the homicide desk. Even you can't talk yourself out of this one, McCord."

McCord's mouth drooped. "Who gives a damn?" He and Regan were closeted in Connie Martin's



bedroom. In the adjoining room the technicians and half a dozen detectives were waiting for the medical examiner's O. K. before tearing the place apart. The halls were filled with cops. "You check back on the Frisco kill?"

Regan nodded. "The girl was in the hotel at the time. She was questioned, but nothing came of it."

McCord for the first time showed signs of anger. "what do you mean, nothing came of it? Did you or didn't you see Saul Saracco?"

"Hell's fire," Regan shouted, "of course I saw him! He just laughed it off."

McCord took a card out of his pocket. "I found this on Eddy Turk. Unfortunately Eddy isn't alive to laugh it off."

Regan snatched at the bit of pasteboard. "Manny Grossman!" He wilted suddenly. "Hell, that don't mean anything. Grossman's a criminal lawyer. The fact that he's also Saracco's attorney needn't have any bearing." He glared at McCord. "Listen. It don't make sense, I tell you! First thing I know, you'll be telling me this Egbert was really working for Saracco."

"Egbert was working for Egbert," McCord said. "I don't know just why, but he saw an opportunity in this case. He could get rid of Constance with little or no danger to himself. Everybody knew that Hope had been beaten up and that the cops were looking for her. No matter what happened to Constance, it would be believed she had been mistaken for Hope. Egbert simply hired himself a couple of punks to take care of it for him. They lured Constance out on the pretense that they were taking her to Hope."

Regan was incredulous. "And Eddy Turk high-jacked the girl?"

McCord shrugged. "You found the two punks, didn't you? Just as dead as Turk said they were. And Turk came back after Egbert van Dorn, didn't he?"

There was a knock on the door and Regan opened it. The medical examiner was through. McCord beckoned one of the technicians into the bedroom as Regan went out. "See what you can do with the telephone pad, keed. I tried lead pencil scrapings without getting a thing. Maybe you can do better."

He moved aimlessly about the room as the technician got out his powders and brushes and went to work. He didn't blame Regan particularly. Certainly he, McCord, had played a far from heroic part in the evening's work. Including the two punks hired by Egbert, there were six people dead as a direct result of the Martin triplets, and the girls were still wandering around, potential fulminating caps in explosions yet to come. McCord thought a little about Valour, his latest failure, and about Eddy Turk's companions. A car had left a

side entrance to the hotel rather hurriedly immediately following the shots. No one so far had identified it.

"Here's something," the technician said. "Not much." He held a magnifying glass for McCord to look through. Very faintly there now appeared part of an address. The impression hadn't been deep enough to get the whole thing. "Rm 7" was clear enough, but between that and "Town" there was a gap.

"Town," the technician said. "What town?"

McCord looked at him. "Room 7, any town, doesn't make sense, stupe. How about Room 7, some place on Towner Avenue?"

"Well," the technician said, "I wish you luck. There can't be more than three or four hundred Room 7s, even on Towner Avenue."

"After what's happened tonight," McCord said sourly, "three or four hundred to one is swell odds." He chose the hall door instead of going out through the crowded living room, not because of the traffic but because he didn't want to argue with Chief Regan. Pushing through the crowded main lobby, he ran into Manny Grossman, no less.

The small lawyer's beady eyes gleamed sardonic amusement. "Well, one sees you everywhere, lieutenant!"

McCord's eyes were not amused. "One could say the same for you, counselor. It's getting so it could hardly be called a coincidence, don't you think?"

"Oh, I don't know," Grossman said easily. "Eddy Turk was once a client of mine. I thought I'd drop around to pay my respects." His eyes lifted quite suddenly. "And incidentally to warn you, lieutenant. There is such a thing as libel, you know. Lay off of Saracco."

"I'll think it over," McCord said.

He swiveled on a heel and went out to his car. He did not use the siren, for he was not an imaginative man and it would take a dyed-in-the-wool optimist to believe in so slim a chance. But as he neared the center of town, it was borne in upon him that there was a need for hurry. Whatever was going to happen was happening now. All the careful combing of the district at some later time was not going to help the triplets. He touched the siren button with sudden decision, flipped on the red spotlight and went racing along. Traffic opened magically before him. And then he thought: "This is silly. Honest people aren't the only ones who can hear sirens." He cut both siren and spot and slowed to a more moderate pace. Presently, swinging left into Towner Avenue, he remembered something he had practically forgotten before. Towner Avenue was only four blocks long. There was no through traffic at all and very little of any other kind, because the people who lived down here could not afford cars. Outmoded old houses, nearly all of them bearing signs: "Rooms to Let," were inter-

persed with small manufacturing and wholesale concerns, these last long since closed.

In the second block McCord slowed to a crawl as a man and a woman came out of one of the old houses and down the steps. But the woman was not one of those he was looking for. Besides, there was no car at the curb. He was almost sure there would have to be a car, unless he was too late. And then, just after he had passed the second corner, he saw a car parked about halfway down the block. The car had no lights, but behind the windshield a cigarette glowed, then faded. Up on the porch of the house a door opened and another man and a woman came out. The man was supporting

to the running board, yanked the hand throttle wide open and twisted the wheel hard over. He didn't have to jump. The lurch of the car threw him sprawling into the street. The crash was terrific. Echoes of it were still racketing up and down the avenue when McCord, flat on his stomach, hauled out his gun and sent a warning shot past Saracco's ear.

"Hold it, Saul!"

Saracco dropped the girl like a bundle of old rags. Then, firing slowly, doubled over, he began a swift zigzagging run, not away from McCord, but toward him. The big man was not a coward apparently. Lead screamed suddenly and asphalt stung McCord's face. Quite methodically he shot Saracco's legs from under him.

VII.

Chief Regan was not in a happy mood. For that matter none of the others in his office could be considered exactly jubilant. Perhaps the most nonchalant of all was a fellow by the name of Franco the Monk. It had been Franco who had driven Saracco to the house on Towner Avenue. McCord's car had almost broken the Monk's neck. He was a short, thick man with knobby bunches of scar tissue around the ears and eyes, memoirs of his pork-and-beans days. He was manacled to a uniformed cop who was trying desperately to look uninterested.

Regan himself was behind the desk. Facing him, in three chairs and in various stages of dishevelment, were the triplets Martin. McCord, over by the windows, was reminded of a particularly long-winded and inane story; something to do with the three trees, there, there, and there.

Regan banged the desk, using his fist like a gavel, and glared at Hope. "All right, you first!"

She looked appealingly at McCord. For a bubble dancer she seemed curiously unsophisticated. "Well—" With some difficulty she brought her eyes back to Regan. "In my racket you get so you mind your own business. Besides, there have been plenty of murder witnesses who haven't lived very long afterward." She shivered. "I didn't want to be one of those."

Regan stabbed an accusing finger. "But you did see Saul Saracco come out of the murder room in that hotel in San Francisco?"

She moistened her lips. "Well, yes and no. I didn't know he was Saul Saracco. In fact, I couldn't have described him well enough to do any good. And I was afraid that if I tried I would be putting myself on a spot. He could have come back, you know."

"A fine citizen!" Regan sneered.

"A live one, no thanks to you!" She looked at McCord. "All right, so I'm a coward. I minded



the woman, almost carrying her. McCord knew that he had run into something. The man was Saul Saracco.

McCord wished suddenly that he had brought Regan and a wrecking crew. McCord was not a hero. His first impulse was to cut in the siren and run for the nearest call box, but he saw instantly that too many things could happen in the interim before help arrived. He did what to him seemed the next best thing. Opening the car door, he slid

my own business. And then after the fair closed, I came here looking for a job. I had a card to Saracco from a friend of mine. Saracco was supposed to be somebody with connections in this town. So I dropped into his office this afternoon and—"

"He recognized you?"

Her sudden pallor gave evidence that she was still frightened. "No, I . . . I recognized him. I guess I kind of lost my head then. Maybe it was my conscience, maybe it was his, but suddenly we both seemed to know, and I tried to run and he caught me. A couple of his men came in then and went to work on me." She closed her eyes. "After a while I realized that the only possible chance I had was to lie a little. I . . . I told them I had written it all out in a letter and that if I was found dead, the letter would be delivered to the authorities."

Her pause was so long that Regan banged the desk again. "So what happened?"

"So that was a bum idea, too," she confessed. "Trying to find out where the letter was, they almost killed me. The next I knew, I woke up in the Emergency Hospital."

McCord went over and kicked Franco the Monk in the shins. "Your turn, punk. You and Eddy Turk and Saracco thought she was dead, is that it?"

"Am I arguing?" Franco demanded. "Saracco kept her bag, hoping to trace her through that. Me and Eddy took her out and dumped her in a gutter."

McCord looked at Regan. "Well, the letter business clears up part of it. There was nothing in her bag to help Saracco. Then, when the papers hit the streets, he discovered that she was still alive, or at least that the cops had her. So he and his shyster came down to see what was what."

"Only by that time she was gone."

Hope Martin again took up her own defense. "What would you have done? For all I knew, Saracco had enough influence to control even the police. It's happened, you know."

Regan purpled, about to explode, but McCord intervened:

"O. K., hon, so you were still afraid Saracco would somehow catch up with you again. You ran out on us. And then?"

She took a breath. "Well, my bag was gone, and with it most of my money. I had a little—two or three dollars—in a change purse in my hotel. I'm a stranger here and I needed at least carfare. So I went and got it. But I couldn't stay there, because I couldn't remember exactly what was in my bag. There might have been something by which Saracco could have traced me."

Little by little they got the rest of it. Looking for a cheap room, she had finally gotten the place on Towner Avenue. Someone across the hall had a

radio going full blast and she had learned of her sisters; also that a cop named Hammerschlag had been killed in her old room. She was now wanted for murder. Naturally she had turned to her sisters, but Valour didn't answer the phone. She next called Constance, getting Valour instead.

McCord looked at Constance. "Well?"

She flushed. "I'm like Hope. What would you have done? Someone calls you and says your sister needs you. Would you laugh it off and go back to polishing your nails?" She glared at Franco the Monk. "Downstairs a couple men grabbed me and put me in a car. From their remarks I gathered only too plainly that I was not supposed to come back—ever. Egbert was having me erased."

"But why?" Regan demanded. "In Heaven's name, why?"

Constance explained the matter of Egbert quite calmly. "His mother conceived the idea of leaving all her money to me. I was to marry Egbert and exercise the same control over him that she herself had. Naturally Egbert didn't like this very well. He wanted the money with no strings. Killing her wouldn't get it for him, because the will was already recorded. Killing me would have been dangerous, because his mother would have immediately suspected him."

Regan almost choked. "And how did you feel about all this?"

"Well, I didn't like Egbert," Constance confessed. "On the other hand I liked his mother a lot. She was so set on the idea that—well, we just sort of let things drift." She looked at McCord. "I see now that you were right. Egbert hated me from the bottom of his heart, if any, but for the record he was quite amiable." She considered. "I might have married him at that. I could have divorced him, given him a share of the money, after his mother was—gone."

McCord smiled bleakly. "That makes you a rather wealthy young woman, doesn't it? She is gone and so is Egbert."

Hope stamped her foot. "You let her alone!"

McCord looked at her. "I'm not accusing your sister of anything. Not yet." He looked at Franco the Monk. "There really were two punks? I mean, of course we found them, but they were using coercion on this young lady?"

"They was using rods, not no coercion." Now that he was in the bag, the Monk seemed not to mind explaining any little details that were missing. "The boss still can't find the dame he wants, see? And he's afraid to leave headquarters for fear something will break that he don't know about. On the spot he can get the low-down on what is given out. So he contacts Turk and me to tail the other two gals, just in case the first dame gets in touch with 'em. He has to do this by phone, o' course, on account of him sticking around here." The

Monk took a breath. "So Eddy is about to drop me off at the Seaview before goin' on to the other drop, when who should come out but this wren." He indicated Constance. "There's a couple punks with her that we reco'nize and we know they ain't working for the boss. So we tail along and by-and-by they come to a dark street and start to give her the business. Me and Eddy kind of mix in and the first thing you know, these punks are dead as hell." He grinned toothily. "A pity, on account of all the dame knows is that some guy named Egbert van Dorn hired the punks to kill her. But she mentioned that she was tolled out by some message about her sister, so Eddy and me think maybe this Egbert really knows where the sister is. We bundle the dame up nicely in the back seat and Eddy returns to interview Egbert."

McCord coughed on a sudden thought. "Then you were downstairs with one girl when the other one came out!"

Franco the Monk was mildly embarrassed. "Well, what with all the shots and all, I get the idea Eddy Turk is in trouble. I am just about to scam when a dead ringer for the first gal comes bailing out, almost right in my lap. So I just cop her off and bring her along. It was nothing."

The door opened and Manny Grossman came in. "What's this I hear about Saul?"

McCord moved around till he was between the lawyer and the door.

"We've been expecting you, Manny," he said easily. "You're the perfect alibi for the Dutch Hammerschlag kill."

Grossman's eyes opened very wide. "I don't get it."

"You will," McCord assured him. "Between you and Saul you managed to establish a record for being here at headquarters tonight while things were happening elsewhere. Saul says it was you who pumped Hammerschlag about where he was going and then detained him long enough for Saul to run down there and look for the letter."

"Saul is a liar!"

McCord shook his head. "Men with their legs almost shot off don't lie very often, Manny. I think we can make an accessory charge fit you very nicely."

Grossman tried for the door. McCord let him get almost there before he hit him. Then, turning to Regan, he grinned crookedly.

"I guess that's the works. I wouldn't know, though, for sure. And about that night desk job, I wouldn't mind. A nice quiet beat in the sticks would suit me just fine."

Regan's mouth drooped. "Oh, yeah?" He shook a fist at Franco the Monk. "You mean to tell me



you brought both of those girls right down here to headquarters?"

"What's wrong with that?" the Monk wanted to know. "The boss was here, wasn't he? And he was getting real indignant about so many fumbles. So I tell him what the hell, he better handle it himself. He looked at Valour. "The last dame I copped had a address written down, so the boss says he *will* handle it himself. He don't do no better, though," the Monk added sadly. "He runs smack into a cop that don't give a damn what he does with the taxpayer's cars."

Regan yelped. "And that's something else, McCord. That was my car you wrecked!"

"I don't want anything else," McCord said. His disillusioned eyes rested on the triplets. "Not ever."

Valour stood up. "Well, I must say that isn't very gallant of you, lieutenant!"

McCord looked at her. "Let's see, now. You're the one that screams, and bites policemen on the wrist, and runs out when a guy is battling to the death with an outraged gunman. You are, in fact, almost normal. Could I see you alone for a minute?"

THE END.

MARKSMAN

by WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT



I AM very ordinary. I am of medium height, medium income, average intelligence—strictly middle class. In fact, I'm a little less than ordinary because I lack physical courage.

Still, I murdered a man! My neighbors all know it. The whole country knows it. And when my eighteen-month-old son grows up, he will hear about it. And that hurts more than all the rest. But I couldn't help it. I had to—

I was sitting in my living room. I was reading about the Finns' gallant stand against the Russians and feeling the admiration that weak men feel for the brave. I admired them particularly for the beautiful way they were handling their rifles. I could appreciate that, because in this one way I am a little above the ordinary. I am president of the local rifle club, and last year I won the Southern States Championship.

I was sitting there alone because Alice had gone out to her bridge club and I had to stay home with Buster. There were just the two of us in the house. Buster was in the back bedroom, asleep in his crib. I was in the living room reading about the Finns and I began to feel nervous.

I began to feel nervous because I am afraid of the dark, and if you think that's funny in a grown man, let me correct you. It's sad and damnable and maddening; but it's not funny—not at all.

I put the paper down. It was a gloomy night outside, and the light from the street lamp was haloed in a late spring fog. It was a hell of a night for a man afraid of the dark to be home alone.

I decided to put Buster into the big bed and climb in with him. I am just ordinary enough to enjoy that. I turned out the lights in the living room and was halfway to the bedroom when the phone rang.

I had a premonition as I picked up the receiver. Or perhaps I was just scared. Perhaps, if it had been Alice, I would have had the same chilled feeling. But it wasn't Alice. It was a man's voice, low, muffled.

He said: "It's important that I see you tonight, Mr. Johnson. Where can you meet me?"

I hesitated. "Who is this?"

"It's about the Reform League," he said. "I can't give you my name over the phone."

I knew him for a phony then. Because if he

could say "Reform League" over a phone, he could give his name. There was nothing secret about that. All of us were listed on the league stationery.

My heart began to hammer and I fought to keep my voice calm. I said: "You can see me at my store in the morning."

"No!" the voice said. "I'll be over in about ten minutes."

I started to object but the line was dead.

I was scared. I went into the baby's room and closed the window. I latched it. I looked into his closet. Then I watched him for a second, and I was close to tears. He was lying flat on his back, his hands above his head. He was smiling faintly. I turned off the light and looked out the window into the back yard.

But all I could see was mist and shadow.

From the shelf in my closet, I took out the Camp Perry model Colt that Alice had given me for Christmas. It had a long barrel, but the pockets in my corduroy house jacket were ample. I turned on the porch light and sat down to wait.

This Reform League was the latest attempt to clean up our town. And it wasn't having any more success than its predecessors, because whoever controlled the graft in this rotten little metropolis was in absolute control.

The police dragged in hoodlum after hoodlum and turned on the heat. They even pulled in one poor snowbird and kept him off the street for a week. He was about ready for the asylum then, but it did no good. Nobody would break.

All the law could do was sentence them; squealing would mean certain suicide.

I had been made an honorary member when I won the Southern States and had promptly forgotten all about it. But evidently somebody else hadn't.

I shivered a little and looked out the window. I hoped against hope that Alice wouldn't come home early. Then, as I fingered the Colt in my pocket, the doorbell rang.

I could feel the hair on my neck bristle, and my hand on the doorknob shook. The man standing on the porch was about my height, but broad.

I said: "Come in."

He didn't say a word as he walked into the living room. He was foreign-looking, with a bluish cast to his beard stubble, and dark, murky eyes. He sat down on the room's biggest chair and tensed on its edge.

He didn't give me a chance to open my mouth. He said: "You're a good shot with a rifle? An expert?"

I nodded.

"We've got a job for you—to kill a man!"

I was plenty scared. But I took out the Colt. I said: "What's to prevent me from doing that right now?"

I was the only frightened person in that room. He said: "Put it away. You could kill me all right. But your wife—and the kid—" He shrugged. "The boss never makes a mistake. You'd better just sit and listen."

I thought of Alice and Buster. I sat down shakily.

He said: "Bruce Barnum is going to give a surprise talk at the band concert in the city park. He's got some names to name and dirt to spill. You will be in the loft of that garage across the street. You will kill him from the window with a rifle. The boss thinks it should put an end to all this reform stuff. The boss is getting annoyed with all these reform movements that keep popping up."

Bruce Barnum was head of the league. He was fearless and a bachelor. That's why they'd picked him for the job. And he was my friend. I told Bluebeard that.

He shrugged again. "Even if I felt sorry for you, it wouldn't make any difference. I work under orders."

I said slowly: "There's quite a bit of money represented on the league board. It would be worth all we could raise to learn the name of the boss."

He smiled faintly. "I'm one of the few guys who know that. And there isn't enough money in the world to buy my life." He paused. "We've tried to get Barnum a couple of times. But he's pretty well guarded. That's why we have to do it from a distance. And you just happen to be the unlucky guy."

"And if I refuse?"

For the third time he shrugged. "Maybe you, maybe your wife or the kid—"

I almost went for the Colt again. But it would do no good. As he said, he was only working under orders.

As he rose to go, he said casually: "Don't look so sick. Murder's a little tough the first time. But you get used to it." His eyes fell on the paper. "They're sure getting used to it in Russia."

The whole thing was like something out of a gangster movie, one of those wild B pictures. But this was no movie. This was happening to me, George Johnson, citizen. I tried to get a grip on myself, reason sanely. But my mind was numb.

At the door, Bluebeard said: "We'll get in touch with you again, probably tomorrow."

I only nodded.

I went back to the living room and sat down again. I was still sitting there, staring dumbly at nothing, when Alice and Fred Lock came in.

Alice said: "Why, George Fraidy-cat Johnson! Don't tell me you saw another ghost?"

I tried to smile. Fred Lock was looking at me curiously.

Alice sensed, then, that this was something more

than my usual home-alone nervousness. "What happened?" she asked.

I hesitated. It was Fred who had nominated me for the league. If I told anyone, I could tell him. But I shook my head. "Nothing happened," I said. "I don't feel so well."

Fred left then, and Alice said: "You're not jealous, are you, George? I mean . . . I know he's been around a lot lately, but—"

That was almost funny. Alice and Fred had been practically engaged all through college. Then Fred went to law school and I stepped in. Fred just couldn't keep away from her, now, and I wouldn't have liked that if I hadn't trusted Alice a hundred percent.

"I'm not jealous," I told her. "I'm a little fagged out. There's been a lot of trouble at the store lately, spring inventory and all." I knew then that I'd never be able to tell her.

I remembered Bluebeard's comment, and I tried to tell myself that mass murder was going on in Europe; that I had to do this for my family. But I couldn't. I'd never even been able to go hunting, and, now, I was expected to kill a man.

I wasn't worth anything at the store next morning. I thought of taking the family out of town. But I would probably be trailed, and I didn't have the money to re-establish myself in another town.

There was a luncheon meeting of the league at noon. I had to stay active to keep from going crazy so I attended.

When Bruce Barnum got up to speak, I kept my eyes averted. I kept seeing a bullet hole in his high forehead, blood in the grayish-black of his hair. Nausea stirred in me. Fred Lock was sitting next to me, and he whispered: "What's the matter, George? You still sick?"

I nodded.

Barnum was saying: "I want you all to understand that the police are one hundred percent behind us. There have been rumors—and one of the papers has hinted—that a corrupt police department is partly responsible for this town's criminal record. I have investigated this thoroughly for the past month and have proved to myself that the rumor has no basis in fact. I wish you would give this information all the publicity within your power. I know an—"

I couldn't listen any more. I mumbled something to Fred about explaining to the others; then I slipped out the door.

But, outside, there was no place to go. I could have gone back to the store; but it's a sporting-goods store, and I feature a complete line of rifles. I didn't want to look at any rifles this afternoon. I got into my car and headed for the country.

It was beautiful. The mist of the evening before had brought out all the sleepy beauty of our Southern spring. The sun was hot, but the sun

could never get too hot for me. I love it too well. Which is just another way of saying I hate the dark.

I think, if Bluebeard had approached me in the daytime, I would have shot him.

My mind went back to the luncheon. I remembered Barnum's words regarding the police department. Perhaps—just perhaps—the police had uncovered something new. I turned the car back toward town.

My association with the league gave me a few privileges, and I had known the chief of police since boyhood. He shook his head at my question.

"Nothing new, George. It's the same old story, and it will continue to be the same story until we get the headman." He shook his bushy head hopelessly. "Terror rules this gang. If we could get the boss, the organization would dissolve. I know that as well as I know my name. I'm willing to admit that we've hit a new low in the viciousness of our third degrees; but not a man will break. They're scum, every last one of them, but their fear of the boss is greater than their fear of us."

I knew that too well. Because here I was, three feet from the law, and I was no criminal. Still, I couldn't say what I wanted to say. I couldn't tell an old friend about Bluebeard. I couldn't go to the law which I was pledged to uphold. It was like living under a dictator—a criminal dictator! It wasn't American.

Oh, I cursed myself silently. And I was thoroughly ashamed of my yellow streak. But I didn't say anything. That, really, is what is important. I left, and again I had no place to go.

Then I remembered I had to go one place. Fred Lock had borrowed my Varminter a few weeks ago for a local meet. It was the gun I intended to use. I drove over to the boulevard.

There was a black sedan in the drive. If it was Fred's, it was a new one. But it wasn't Fred's. A little man in a loud suit was sitting in Fred's study when the butler ushered me in.

Fred was saying: "And you can tell your boss that I have no price. You can tell him that it's only a matter of weeks, now, before we bust his rotten ring wide open. Now, get out of here!"

The little fellow growled something, shot me a scornful glance and walked out.

Fred was smiling grimly. "One of the big boy's stooges trying to buy me off. I'd have thrown him in jail if I thought it would do any good."

I said something about his courage, and he shook his head. "It's not courage. I have all the money I need and enough love for my home town to fight for it."

I asked for my gun, and he lifted it from the rack in one corner of the room.

"It's a beauty, George. If you ever want to sell it—"

After I used it, I would be glad to give it away. But I didn't tell Fred that.

It was late enough now to go home. And I dreaded it because the more I saw of Alice and Buster now, the more I would miss them later. For I knew, despite my weakness, that I could never again face them unless I confessed. And that would mean a life sentence, at least.

Buster was in one of his playful moods. For a half-hour I tried to share that mood; tried to hide the sickness and the fear within me. But it was hopeless. I went down into the basement to load some cartridges. As I passed through the kitchen, Alice looked at me curiously. But she said nothing.

I have all the paraphernalia for making my own cartridges, including a mold of my own design. It would be possible for me to make a bullet which would hit Bruce Barnum between the eyes and still not kill him.

For a moment I toyed with the idea. It would be possible, but the results would not be a certainty. And if Bluebeard's boss should suspect—I shivered.

I heard Buster's feet on the floor above; heard Alice moving about the kitchen. I was a weak man, but I could commit murder for them.

I compromised then. Two of the cartridges carried the regular load; the third I loaded lightly.

I put the gun in a machine rest and fired it with the light load. Then I examined the pine board I had used as a target. If I were to use a load that light, I would have to compensate for the comparatively short distance from the garage loft to the bandstand. And Bruce Barnum would be blind for life, even if I didn't kill him!

I made another of the light cartridges before Alice called me to dinner. I would take it along, tomorrow night, and perhaps I would have the nerve to use it.

Bluebeard called at ten o'clock. "Tomorrow night's the band concert," he said. "I'll pick you up in front of your store at eight."

I mumbled something and hung up.

Back in the living room, Alice put down her paper. She said: "I want to know what's wrong, George." Her blue eyes were filled with worry. "Don't tell me it's business. And it's not your health. It's something a lot more important than either—and I want to help."

I was silent for seconds. Finally, I said: "You'll know by Saturday. It's about the league and I'm pledged to secrecy. But I promise you'll have all the details by Saturday. Everything will be clear by then."



Quietly, she asked: "Is it dangerous, George?"

I nodded. "It's dangerous, honey. But I have to go through with it." I looked at her squarely. "Remember, honey, that whatever I do, I do for you and Buster. I'm not the cinema type, but you can believe that no one could love you more than I do."

She smiled then, and there was more than love



in that smile. There was admiration, and that was something I didn't deserve. I kissed her humbly.

That night was sleepless of course. And I will never remember that next day. I was going through the mechanics of my regular routine. But behind the front, I was a jumbled mass of nerves, and I knew that without some form of opiate, I would be a poor marksman that night. All the long day I fought myself, and by six o'clock I had regained some semblance of normalcy.

I had brought my rifle down in the morning; so I didn't need to go home for dinner. I decided to eat at a restaurant, and then come back to the store to meet Bluebeard.

I called Alice.

"This business," she asked hesitantly, "Is it coming off tonight?"

"It is," I said.

The line was quiet a moment. Then: "You took your rifle this morning, George—that new one."

"I did," I said.

Her voice was almost a whisper, now. "I'll wait up for you, George. And—I'll pray."

I was physically sick for the next fifteen minutes. I decided not to eat. I locked the store and turned out the lights. And for the next two hours, I walked the streets.

I don't know what streets. I walked and cursed. I cursed myself and the criminal boss. I even cursed Barnum for starting the league. But, mostly, I cursed myself.

I was in front of the store at eight o'clock. And a big black sedan was waiting. The front door was open. Bluebeard was behind the wheel. I got my gun and came out again.

Without a word I climbed in. Bluebeard just nodded; then he swung the big car away from the curb and up toward the city park.

The park was nearly filled when we pulled into the alley alongside the garage. The huge bandstand was brilliantly lighted; the shell behind it looking like an inverted sea shell, magnified thousands of times.

Bluebeard said: "You've got a good white background there, and the lights in the garage will do."

I said nothing.

Only one man was in the lower part of the garage. He watched us as we silently climbed the stairs to the loft. He may have been an accomplice or he may have been another me. I didn't know, and I didn't care.

The loft smelled of oil and rubber and dust. At one end, the window was open toward the park. The light was all right, and it was an easy shot. And my nervousness was gone. I was an inanimate piece of flesh at the moment. A murderer!

There were three men on the bandstand, three men in evening clothes. Their black suits stood out against the shell of the rostrum. The middle man was Barnum. The man on the left, the man who was rising to speak, was Fred Lock. He said over the public address system: "We have a surprise for you tonight—"

I didn't listen; Bluebeard was talking. "We thought you might try to pull a double cross; so I brought along a cartridge that we know will do the trick. I'll have those you have in your pocket."

I handed him the three I had brought along. He took a stand against the opposite wall. The muzzle of his automatic was on me and it didn't waver a bit.

I broke open the breech. From force of habit, I weighed the cartridge in my hand; glanced at it.

For a second my heart stopped beating.

That mark on the rim! Was it— It was, beyond a doubt. And the bullet had been cast in my own mold. The taper was unmistakable, and so was that mark that had been made when my tool slipped—the J-shaped mark that wouldn't be duplicated in a million shells.

It was one of the cartridges I had given Fred Lock!

All the incidents of the past turbulent days came to my mind. The car in Fred's drive, the same that had carried me tonight. I had caught him unawares, and he had covered his windy speech to the little fellow. And tonight's talk was to be a secret among the members of the league. Yet, Bluebeard had known the night he first came to call. And I remembered that Fred had been a poor credit risk two years ago; while today he was wealthy. And he had always coveted Alice. He would want me out of the way!

I snapped the gun shut and laid it on the sill. I wasn't afraid. I wasn't nervous. I was something far worse than that. I was filled with hate!

I knelt behind the rifle, my hands steady. I caught Fred's forehead in the 'scope. I pulled the trigger gently.

It was an easy shot.

It wasn't courage that filled me when I turned to Bluebeard. I was beyond courage. I wasn't even fully conscious.

"I missed Barnum," I said.

His face was stoical as he crossed the room toward me. He had the automatic jammed in my ribs as he looked out the window. The people were streaming onto the stand, but he saw what he wanted to see.

Then he turned to me, and still I felt no fear.

"Maybe," he said softly, "you didn't miss. You'd better git; nobody's coming this way, yet."

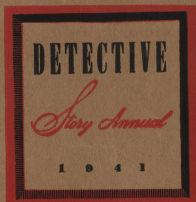
"I said: 'You mean you're not going to—'"

"Nobody wants to kill," he said. "Not even me, unless there's money in it. And who'd pay me, now?" He threw the automatic behind a pile of tires and clomped down the stairs, out of my sight and out of my life—

I was cleared of course. Especially after a police search of Lock's papers. And our town is clean. But I killed a man! And it doesn't help to know I had to. My guns are sold, my beautiful guns. And fishing isn't in it with target shooting.

But I suppose I'll learn to like it after a while.

THE END.



A S T R E E T & S M I T H P U B L I C A T I O N