MAKE YOUR OWN RECORDS AT HOME

THINK OF IT! I JUST MADE THIS RECORD WITH THE NEW HOME RECORDO!

YES, BOB, AND IT SURE SOUNDS LIKE YOUR VOICE!

IT'S WONDERFUL — AND SO SIMPLE — PLEASE LET ME MAKE A RECORD.

With HOME RECORDO you can make a record of your singing, talking, reciting or instrument playing right in your own home, too! No longer need the high prices of recording machines or studio facilities prevent you or your family or friends from hearing their own voices or playing. No experience necessary. No "mike" fright to worry about. No complicated gadgets. In a jiffy you can set up HOME RECORDO, play or sing or talk, and immediately you have a record which you and your friends can hear as often as you wish.

CHARLIE BARNET
and other famous orchestra leaders use HOME RECORDO

YOU TOO CAN MAKE RECORDS RIGHT IN YOUR OWN HOME

Everything is included. Nothing else to buy and nothing else to pay. You get complete HOME RECORDING UNIT, which includes special recording needle, playing needles, 6 two-sided unbreakable records. Also spiral feeding attachment and combination recording and playback unit suitable for recording a skit, voice, instrument or radio broadcast. ADDITIONAL, 2-SIDED BLANK RECORDS COST ONLY 75c per dozen.

Charlie Barnet in his private hotel suite checking a duet by Judy Ellington and Larry Taylor, Vocalists in his band.

HAVE RECORDING PARTIES

You'll get a real thrill out of HOME RECORDING. Surprises your friends by letting them hear your voice or playing right from a record. Record a snappy talking feature. Record jokes and become the life of the party. Great to help train your voice and to cultivate speech. Nothing to practice... you start recording at once... everything necessary included. Nothing else to buy. Just sing, speak or play and HOME RECORDO unit, which operates on your electric or hand-winding type phonograph, will do the recording on special blank records we furnish. You can immediately play the records back as often as you wish. Make your HOME MOVIE a talking picture with Home Records. Simply make the record while filming and play back while showing.

Judy Ellington heard in Charlie Barnet’s Band making a Home Records record for her personal album.

SEND NO MONEY! HURRY COUPON! START RECORDING AT ONCE!

HOME RECORDING CO.
STUDIO KL. 11 WEST 17TH ST
New York, N. Y.

Send entire HOME RECORDING OUTFIT (including 6 two-sided records) described above, by return mail. I will pay postman $2.50, plus postage, on arrival. (Send cash or money order now for $5.00 and save postage.)

Send ............................................., add. additional blank records at $1.75 each doz.

Name ........................................................................

Address .......................................................................

City and State. ................................................................

Note: Canadian and Foreign $3.00 with order.

Operates on Your A.C. or D.C. Electric Phonographs, Record Players, Radio-Phone Combinations, or Hand Winding Phonographs and Portables

COMPLETE OUTFIT $2.98
INCLUDING SIX TWO-SIDED BLANK RECORDS — ONLY

HOME RECORDING CO.
Studio KL
11 West 17th STREET.
NEW YORK, N. Y.
Accountancy Home-Study
made interesting and practical
thru problem method

You know as well as we do that Accountancy fits many
men for positions that pay three and five and ten thousand
dollars a year—gives many other men unusual opportunity to start
a profitable growing business of their own.

You probably realize also that—because of the new state and
federal legislation—the accounting profession faces now and for
the next few years the greatest opportunity it has ever had.

The only question is—how practical is it for you to train your-
self adequately in Accountancy through home study?

And the answer lies in the LaSalle Problem Method.

For this modern plan of training not only makes Accountancy
study at home thoroughly practi-
cal but makes it interesting as well.

And here’s how:

You Learn by Doing

Suppose it were your privilege every day
to sit in conference with the auditor of
your company or the head of a successful
accounting firm. Suppose every day he
were to lay before you in systematic order
the various problems he is compelled to
solve, and were to explain to you the
principles by which he solves them. Sup-
pose that one by one you were to work
those problems out—returning to him
every day for counsel and assistance.

Granted that privilege, surely your ad-
vancement would be faster by far than
that of the man who is compelled to
pick up his knowledge by study of theory
alone.

Under the LaSalle Problem Method
you pursue, to all intents and purposes,
that identical plan. You advance by solv-
ing problems.

Only—instead of having at your com-
mand the counsel of a single individual
—one accountant—you have back of you
the organized experience of a great busi-
ness training institution, the authorita-
tive findings of scores of able accounting
specialists, the actual procedure of the
most successful accountants.

Thus—instead of fumbling and blun-
dering—you are coached in the solv-
ing of the very problems you must face
in the higher accounting positions or in
the accounting practice of your own. Step
by step, you work them out for yourself
—until, at the end of your training, you
have the kind of ability and experience
for which business is willing and glad
to pay real money—just as it was glad
to pay these men.

Five Men Who Tested and
Proved It for You

For instance, there was the man who
started Accountancy training with us in
1916. After a short period of study, he
took a position as bookkeeper for a year
and then became accountant for a lead-
ing automobile manufacturer—with two
bookkeepers under him. He became audi-
tor of one of the foremost banks in his
state with a salary $325 percent larger
than when he started training.

He wrote, “My training is the best in-
estment I’ve ever made, showing a cash
value running into five figures.”

And the young clerk, earning $75 a
month eleven years ago and later getting
many times that as general auditor for
an outstanding, nation-wide organiza-
tion. Within six months after he began
our training, he was earning $125 a
month and within four years, he was
earning $250.

Do you wonder that he wrote, “While
LaSalle ads once seemed like fairy tales to
me, now I know from personal experience
the future is true.”

Or let us tell you about two men—one
a stenographer and the other a retail
clerk—neither of whom knew more than
the simplest elements of bookkeeping.

One became the comptroller and the
other the assistant comptroller of a large
company.

“LaSalle training in Higher Account-
ancy,” wrote both, “was the important
factor in our rapid climb.”

And if you are thinking about the
C.P.A. degree and a public accounting
business of your own, read about the
pharmacist who was earning $30 a week
some years ago when a LaSalle regis-
trar secured his enrollment for Accountancy
training. Eight months later he left the
drug store to take a bookkeeping job
at $20 a week—less money but larger
opportunity. Three years later he passed
the C.P.A. examination and a year later
yet he was earning $5,000 a year. Now
he runs his own highly successful public
accounting firm for which he says, “My
LaSalle training has been largely re-
ponsible.”

One-Tenth of All C. P. A.’s
Are LaSalle Trained

If you want still more proof, remember
that over 1800 C.P.A.’s—approximately
one-tenth of all those in the United
States who have ever passed the difficult
examination for this coveted degree—are
LaSalle alumni.

And knowing these facts, ask yourself
if there can be any further question about
the practicability of this training for you
—work rather if the real question is not
about the size of your own ambition and
the quality of your determination.

For Accountancy is no magic wand for
the lazy or the fearful or the quitter—it
offers success only to the alert adult who
has the courage to face the facts and the
will to carry on till the job is done.

If you are that individual, the coupon
below, filled out and mailed, will bring
you the free information that may open
up for you the future of which you have
dreamed—ability and income and suc-
cess.

Is it not worth getting that informa-
tion?

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A Correspondence Institution

4101 S. Michigan Ave., Dept. 8329-HR, Chicago, Ill.

Please send me, free of all cost or obligation, your 48-page, illustrated
book “Accountancy, the Profession That Pays,” telling about the
profession of accounting and your training for success in that field.

Name

Address

City

Position

Age

*Names and addresses given on request.*
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THE DESK SERGEANT
A Department 111

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I Jumped My Pay from $18 to $50 a Week!

Here's how I did it

by S. J. E.

(Employee only)

When I finished training I accepted a job as service man with a radio store. In three weeks I was made service manager at more than twice what I earned in the shoe factory.

"I had an $18 a week job in a shoe factory. I'd probably be at it today if I hadn't read about the opportunities in radio and started training at home for them."

Eight months later N. R. I. Employment Department wrote me to Station KWUL as a radio operator. Now I am Radio Engineer at Station WVUL. I am also connected with Television Station WXXK.

"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make $8 to $10 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."

"N. R. I. Training took me out of a low-pay shoe factory job and put me into Radio at good pay. Radio is growing fast."

Find out today how I train you at home to be a RADIO TECHNICIAN

If you can't see a future in your present job, feel you'll never earn much more money if you're in a seasonal field, subject to layoffs, it's time now to investigate Radio. Trained Radio Technicians make good money, and you don't have to give up your present job or leave home to learn Radio. I train you at home nights in your spare time.

Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

The broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ test- ers, inspectors, foremen, service men in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and servicemen. Many radio technicians own their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile Police, Aviation, Commercial Radio, Loudspeaker Systems, Electronic Devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N. R. I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open many good jobs soon.

Make $5 to $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll: I start teaching you Extra Money Job Sheets which start showing you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout our Course I send plans and directions which have helped many makes $300 to $500 a year in spare time while learning. I send special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and built circuits. This 50-56 training method makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL ALL-VACUUM SERVICING INSTRUMENT TO help you make money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time work after you graduate.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today! Mail the coupon for my 64-page book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." It points out radio's spare time and full-time opportunities and those coming in television; tells about my course in radio and television; shows more than 100 letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Read my money back agreement—NOW!

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MAIL NOW! Get 64 page book FREE

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J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. OH09, National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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Costly Work Formerly
“Sent Out” by Business Men
Now Done by Themselves
at a Fraction of the Expense

This is a call for men everywhere to handle exclusive agency for one of the most unique business inventions of the day.

For years ago the horse and buggy business was supreme—today almost extinct. Twenty years ago the phonograph industry ran into many millions—today practically a relic. Only a comparatively few foresighted men saw the fortunes ahead in the automobile and the radio. Yet irresistible waves of public buying swept these men to fortune, and sent the buggy and the phonograph into the discard. So are great successes made by men able to detect the shift in public favor from one industry to another.

Now another change is taking place. An old established industry—an integral and important part of the nation’s structure, in which millions of dollars change hands every year—is in thousands of cases being replaced by a truly astonishing, simple invention which does the work better—more easily—and AT A COST AS LOW AS 25% OF WHAT IS ORDINARILY PAID! It has not required very long for men who have taken over the rights to this valuable invention to do a remarkable business, and show earnings which in three times are almost unheard of for the average man.

Not a “Gadget”—
Not a “Knick-Knack”—
but a valuable, proved device which has been sold successfully by business novices as well as seasoned veterans.

Make no mistakes—this is no novelty—no flimsy creation which the inventor hopes to put on the market. You probably have seen nothing like it yet—perhaps never dreamed of the existence of such a device—yet it has already been used by corporations of outstanding prominence—by dealers of great corporations—by their branches—and by drugstores, newspapers, publishers, mail-order houses, etc., and by thousands of small business men. You don’t have to convince a man that he should use an electric bulb to light his office instead of a gas lamp. Nor do you have to tell the same business man the idea that some day he may need something like this invention. The need is real—what the money is usually being spent right at that very moment—and the desirability of saving the greatest part of this expense is obvious immediately.

Some of the Savings, You Can Show

You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for $11 which formerly could have cost them over $200. A building supply corporation pays over $15, whereas the bill could have been for $25. An automobile dealer pays our representative $15, whereas the expense could have been over $1,000. A department store has expense of $250 per month, and by using this device the business being well over $2,000. And so on. We could not possibly list all cases here. There are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reps which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

Profits Typical of the Young, Growing Industry

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a $7,50 order, $5.83 can be your share. On $1,500 worth of business, your share can be $1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar’s worth of business you do is 67 cents—on ten dollars’ worth $6.70, on a hundred dollars’ worth $67.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning as much larger percentages.

This Business Has Nothing to Do With House to House CANVASING

Nor do you have to know anything about high-pressure selling. “Selling” is unnecessary in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of hammering away at the customer and trying to sell him the first offer you make, you make a dignified, business-like call, leave the installation—whatever size the customer says he will accept—at our risk, let the customer sell himself after the device is in and working. This does away with the need for pressure on the customer—it eliminates the handicap of trying to get the money before the customer has really convinced himself 100%. You simply tell what you offer, showing proof of success in that customer’s particular line of business. Then leave the invention without a dollar down. It starts working at once. In a few short days, the installation should actually produce enough cash money to pay for the deal, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time. You then call back, collect your money. Nothing so convincing as our offer to let results speak for themselves without risk to the customer! While others fail to get even a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They have received the attention of the largest firms in the country, and sold to the smallest businesses by the thousands.

EARNINGS

One man in California earned over $1,600 per month for three months—close to $30,000 in 90 days’ time. Another writes from Delaware—“Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office, counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month.” A man working small city in New York State made $10,805 in 9 months. Texas man nets over $300 in less than a week’s time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from $3 to $60 per sale and more. A great deal of the business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

No Money Need Be Risked

In trying this business out, you can measure the possibilities and not be out a dollar. If you are looking for a business that is not overworked—a business that is just coming into its own—on the upgrade, instead of the downgrade—a business that offers the buyer relief from a burdensome, but unavoidable expense—a business that has a prospect practically in every office, store, or factory into which you can set foot—regardless of size—that is a necessity but does not have any price cutting to contend with as other necessities do—that because you control the sales in exclusive territory is your own business—that pays more on some individual sales than men make in a week and sometimes in a month’s time—if such a business looks as if it is worth investigating, get in touch with us as at once for the rights in your territory—don’t delay—because the chances are that if you do wait, someone else will have written to us in the meantime—and if it turns out that you were the better man—we’d both be sorry. So for convenience, use the coupon below—but send it right away—or wire if you wish. But do it now. Address

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THIS BEAUTIFUL DESK FOR ONLY $1.00

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A beautiful desk in a neutral blue-green—trided in black and silver—made of sturdy fibre board—now available for only one dollar ($1.00) to purchasers of a Remington Deluxe Noiseless Portable Typewriter. The desk is so light that it can be moved anywhere without trouble. It will hold six hundred (600) pounds. This combination gives you a miniature office at home. Mail the coupon today.

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To help you even further, you get Free with this special offer a 24-page booklet, prepared by experts, to teach you quickly how to typewrite by the touch method. When you buy a Noiseless you get this free Remington Typing Book. Send gift today and increase the pleasure of using your Remington Deluxe Noiseless Portable. Remember, the touch typing book is sent Free while this offer holds.

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Now, in a sensational new book, "THE DOORWAY TO YOUR SUCCESS", a simple explanation is given to these long hidden secrets. For the first time it is told how you, too, may "get out of the shadows and into the light of understanding"; how you can Control Your Destiny by breaking the shackles which bind the hidden powers within YOU!

WRITTEN FOR MEN AND WOMEN WHOSE MOST PRESSING NEED IS FOR MONEY!

Long hidden under high sounding names and cloaked by mysterious rites, this amazing book, which shows the way, is open to every person of ordinary intelligence who can achieve this success by utilizing the simple rules of Universal Nature. You are shown, step by step, how to put into practice certain fundamental principles which will help you solve your problems of WEALTH, SUCCESS, LOVE, HEALTH. This book is

ACTUAL SUCCESS EXPERIENCES DIVULGED FOR THE FIRST TIME

By way of proving the Great Truths which are revealed here for the first time, the author has devoted an important part of "THE DOORWAY TO YOUR SUCCESS" to true experiences of people who have practiced the principles explained and who have WON SUCCESS in the face of almost impossible odds. NOTHING HAS BEEN WITHHELD! Case 1 tells of a man who was forced to become a pauper in a limited time or go bankrupt. In 30 days he paid all of his debts. Case 2 describes a doorman who needed $8 that afternoon and the almost uncanny and unexpected manner in which he came into Love and Happiness. The Bible tells us that "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he". What you think about YOU? YOU ARE! You can attain anything you desire; overcome seemingly impossible obstacles; win riches, health, peace to your will if you use the Master Formula of Power Thinking as revealed in "THE DOORWAY TO YOUR SUCCESS"

Case 3 relates the true story of an old woman who was reduced to stealing milk before dawn and who received the $500 she desired before night. Case 4 tells the experience of a young man who could not afford to marry until he had learned the Universal Secret. Now he owns his love and achieved happiness is related here. These and other TRUE EXPERIENCES will show you the way to Supreme Mastery over every situation so that you, too, may in SUCCESS, LOVE, WEALTH AND HAPPINESS.

READ IT AT OUR EXPENSE—10 DAYS—FREE!

The thrill which will come to you as you read page after page of "THE DOORWAY TO YOUR SUCCESS" will be an inspiration. You'll wonder that you have never seen or realized nor understood the simple truths it contains. Here, at long last, is a book which throws down the challenge at misery", Accept the challenge by securing your copy of this book. SEND NO MONEY. Just deposit the sum of $1.00 plus a few cents postage with the mailman when he delivers "THE DOORWAY TO YOUR SUCCESS". Read it, study it 10 days. If you feel that it can not help you—return it and your deposit will be refunded at once! The first step to Success is positive action—so mail the coupon at once.

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- How to Attract Happiness in Marriage
- How You Can Win Mastery Over Others
- How to Break the Shackles of Fear
- How You Can Direct Your Personal Forces
- How to Make Each Daily Act Successful
- How the Power of Thoughts Can Be Turned into Actual Assets
- How to Retain Youthfulness of Spirit
- Actions and Deeds
- How Your Visions Can Be Turned into Actual Accomplishments
- And scores of other subjects too numerous to mention.

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CHAPTER I

Double for Trouble

The pretty redhead at the Picador Club smiled pertly as she took Martin Kerr's Panama hat. Her big blue eyes roamed approvingly over his lean young face, his tall, broad-shouldered figure.

"There will be a table ready in a few minutes, sir," she said. "You won't mind waiting?"

Would he mind waiting five minutes? Martin Kerr laughed. 'Hell, no! He had waited more than eigh-
teen months for this moment. It was a year and a half since he had last looked at a pretty white girl, sipped an American cocktail. And now some dazzling redhead was asking him if he'd mind waiting five more minutes!

Martin Kerr inhaled deeply of the smoke-filled air that drifted from the club's lounge. It was mingled with the exotic scents of costly perfume. Perfume that came from the smartly dressed, attractive women clustered around the horseshoe bar.

As a cool draft of air-conditioned breeze wafted over his tanned face, Martin Kerr reflected thoughtfully.
This was the life! Sure, it was a far cry from the South American jungles where he had helped build a railroad. But at least the air here didn’t suffocate you with its smothering blasts of scorching heat. Your lungs didn’t feel as if you were imprisoned in a bell-jar, with someone pumping out the air.

As the head-waiter appeared, leading Martin Kerr to a nearby table, he congratulated himself once more on finally being back in New York. Pretty faces to look at, instead of the misshapen native women. The gay lilt of merry, dinner music, instead of the angry buzz of insect pests. And every drink under the sun, from absinthe to zombies, instead of the raw rotgut stuff he had had.

“Anything to drink, sir?” the waiter said, as if divining his thoughts.

Kerr grinned, stroked his tanned forehead.

“I’ll say!” he replied. “The tallest Tom Collins you’ve got, with enough ice to freeze a polar bear! And waiter, another chair. I’m expecting a gentleman friend.”

That wasn’t fair, Kerr told himself, referring to Mike Davidson as a gentleman. Mike Davidson was the toughest hardboiled egg on the staff of the Daily Bulletin. Davidson had printer’s ink in his veins. He was the guy they sent out to cover electrocutions of old ladies. He was the guy who’d left his own New Year’s party to go down to the bottom of some flooded mine—for a story. It would be good seeing Mike again, even if the fellow would sell his best friend’s scalp for a scoop.

Kerr’s cocktail arrived, and the young adventurer sipped it slowly, preparing to wait for the arrival of his friend. He lighted a cigarette. As he was replacing the case in his pocket, a shadow fell across the polished surface of his table, from over his shoulder. Someone tapped his shoulder.

Kerr whirled about, prepared to look up into the eyes of Mike Davidson. But the man who confronted him was an utter stranger. He was a tall, thick-set man, with heavy, domineering features and bushy black beard and hair.

The stranger’s black eyes gleamed balefully.

“So you’re back in New York, eh?” he said ominously, and in his tone there seemed malicious satisfaction.

Martin Kerr gazed intently at the stranger’s face. Where the devil had he met this fellow? In China, where he had flown planes for some warlord? In Spain, where he had helped fight against the Fascists? Or some ocean-liner en route to some distant port, where men made casual acquaintances?

Kerr stalled, hoping to trick the stranger into revealing his identity first.

“Yes, I landed in town yesterday,” he said easily, exhaling twin streams of smoke.

Hostility was burning in the bearded man’s dark eyes.

“Don’t try to lie to me, you devil,” he growled. He took a step toward the young adventurer as he spoke, gripping the edge of the table with his huge hands. “Landed yesterday, huh?” he went on. “Hell, one of my
men spotted you last week, but lost you again."
Kerr snapped his fingers. Of course! He had never met this man. The stranger was mistaking him for someone else!

"So you think you'll be safe here, eh?" the stranger said menacingly.
Kerr looked about, scanned the faces of the gay crowd at the bar. He didn't want to cause a scene. Not before he had finished his drink, at least. And he wanted more of a chance to watch the people here. Like that lovely dark girl just coming in, for instance.

"Yes, I intend to be safe here, whatever you are," Martin Kerr said quietly. "I'm expecting a friend for lunch. And he doesn't like to pay his own check!"
The bearded stranger stared incredulously at Kerr, as if he could not believe his ears. His face turned a vivid scarlet.

"Confound you," he roared. "I'll fix your wagon!"
Martin Kerr flexed his right arm. This fellow was asking for it. He brought back his arm in a short arc, half-pivoted his body to get a good swing started, when a clear, musical voice broke in.

"Leave him alone, Father!" a girl's voice begged urgently. "Don't talk to him here."
Glancing past the bearded man, Kerr saw a girl tugging at the sleeve of the stranger. It was a lovely girl—the very girl he had just been admiring! Her thrilling beauty was accented by the ugliness of the man with whom she was pleading.

She had the supple grace and poise of a magazine cover model. Her dark hair, cascading in a glossy long bob, with sculptured curls, was the right setting for the oval of her face with its regular, beautifully formed features. Long, silk lashes veiled her dark blue eyes. Her skin was creamy, and her curved lips were a vivid crimson.

Martin Kerr sucked in his breath. This was getting an eyeful of the feminine beauty and charm he had traveled across two continents to find. Forgetting the bearded man, Kerr smiled cheerfully at the girl. Perhaps he could transfer an ugly incident into the beginning of a pleasant acquaintanceship.

But the girl returned his gaze with one of cold contempt. Kerr sensed the glacial ice in her eyes, turned away, embarrassed. Well, that was life, he muttered to himself. Meet a beautiful girl—just as you were about to sock her father!

"All right, Barbara, I'm coming," the bearded man was saying impatiently. He turned once more in the bewildered Kerr's direction.

"I warn you—unless you return what you took from me within two days, you'll be sorry!"
Kerr stared blankly at man and girl as they turned away. He heard a soft chuckle on the other side of him.

"What have you been up to now,
fellow?” asked a drawing voice, and he turned to see the perpetual grin of Mike Davidson. “Haven’t you seen enough action in your time?”

DAVIDSON was stockily built, dressed with surprising neatness, considering the reckless attire of most of his associates. His features were chubby, and his eyes twinkled merrily through his horn-rimmed glasses.

“It’s good to see you again, Mike,” Kerr said warmly. “Sit down—and are you still drinking double Scotches?”

The reporter nodded, gave his order to the waiter. “I wonder who on earth that bearded bird thought I was!” Kerr exclaimed. “If I’ve got a double, I’d like to know this better half. Or—is he worse?”

Mike Davidson downed his drink and lit a cigarette.

“Maybe I can’t tell you who you’re supposed to be,” he said softly, “but I can tell you who that bearded gent was. That, my friend, was Justin Shelley, a 50,000 watt big shot politician in this town. And a bad hombre to cross. Apparently, you’ve crossed him.”

“The girl with him was his daughter,” Kerr commented. “I didn’t do so well with her, either. Who is this Justin Shelley, anyway?”

Davidson, who knew every gambler on Broadway, every chorus girl behind the footlights, and every newsboy in the Times Square area, warmed to his subject.

“Justin Shelley is power. When he was younger, he had itching feet. As a free-lance soldier of fortune he traveled all over the world, starting revolutions in China, Spain and Venezuela. Like you. He’s a politician now, but he’s always mixed up in trouble. Just got back from China. Why, only last week some crazy Chinese tried to stab him in the back.” Davidson laughed and shrugged. “He must have been wanting to commit suicide; they’re still trying to put that yellow boy together at Bellevue. Yes, sir, Justin Shelley will never be too old to fight!”

“Why did the Chinese want to stab him?” asked Kerr. “Didn’t he like his face? I might be able to understand that.”

“Nobody knows,” said the reporter. “The newspaper boys haven’t been able to dig up a thing. It probably was on account of something that happened in China. Shelley’s a grim old ruffian, with a hell of a temper. His daughter can flare up, too, when she wants to. But she’s okay. Swell looker. Or did you notice?”

Kerr did not say whether he noticed or not. He picked up his refilled cocktail glass and drained it.

“Let’s eat,” he said. “I could sure go for a good old mixed grill and a bottle of Chablis.”

The two men found a table near a window, with deep leather seats against the wall. Not until they had given their order did Martin Kerr notice that, some distance away, Justin Shelley and his daughter Barbara were lunching. As Kerr look in their direction, the girl glanced up. Their eyes met, and she frowned as again that flicker of contempt swept her features.

Ready for it this time, Kerr simply looked steadily at her, with quiet amusement. A faint flush of anger touched her cheeks; her eyes blazed. But anger made her astoundingly lovely. For a few moments each tried to out-stare the other. Then, tossing her head, she looked away.

And not until then did Kerr become conscious that Davidson was speaking.

“... unusual to see a Chinese in here — must be a mandarin or something. But I swear he recognized you, guy.”

“Did he?” asked Kerr politely, though he hadn’t the faintest idea what his friend was talking about.
“He sure did—and looked away quick so I couldn’t see that expression of recognition. Look—see him there, three tables away? Who in thunderation is he?”

**Kerr** glanced toward the table where a rather distinguished-looking Chinese was having lunch. He shook his head.

“Never saw him before, that I know of.”

“Look here, my lad,” Davidson said scornfully, and laid down his fork as he bent toward Kerr accusingly. “Don’t try to play me for dumb! What goes on? I come here and find Big Guy Shelley who’s just got back from China, and who’s just had a yellow boy try to stab him—I find him, I say, as mad as hops at you. The next thing I see is an apparently big-time Chinese recognizing you and not wanting that known. So come clean, pal—come clean. Who do both those guys think you are?”

“Search me,” Kerr said calmly. “The King of Siam, probably. Anyway, why should I worry? I’ll probably never see Justin Shelley or this suave Chinese again. Why should I worry what they think?”

So Martin Kerr said, but he had every intention of seeing Justin Shelley—and his daughter—again. But the blond adventurer liked to form his own plans and go his own way, and only when he was keenly interested. He had a habit of hiding that interest behind a mask of lazy indifference. The more interested he was, the more indifferent did he appear outwardly.

“Oh, well,” said Davidson, “I’m not assigned to the story. It’s no skin off my nose. If I hear anything I’ll let you know . . . Say, what are you doing tonight?”

“I was thinking of the theatre. Can you come along?”

“Nope. Got to cover a masked ball at the Astor, for the St. Giles Hospital Fund—and have me a swell time.

It ought to be a good show, and plenty pretty girls. Why not come with me?” He grinned as he shot a glance at the Shelley’s table, and suggested: “It might be a great opportunity for you to improve your acquaintance with Boss Shelley and the fair Barbara.”

“Oh,” said Kerr, in a tone of no great interest. “Will they be there?”

“Why not? They’re patrons of the Fund. Like to be seen here and there. How about it?”

For a moment Kerr’s eyes lost that sleepy look and became thoughtful. A faint smile touched the corners of his lips.

“Thanks,” he said. “I’ll come. Where’ll I meet you?”

“In the cocktail bar, nine-thirty.”

Martin Kerr laughed. “Okay, it’s a date. But be on time for once!”

**They** finished their lunch and separated, Davidson to head for his office, and Kerr to look into the fancy dress situation. It did not take him long to select a costume and do some other necessary shopping. Then he
took a taxi to the small hotel he had for a long time called home when he was in New York.

He read till dinner time, had dinner in the hotel restaurant, then changed into fancy dress. "It was with some satisfaction that he regarded himself in the long mirror of the bathroom door. Dressed as a highwayman of the reign of Charles II, in a long, blue velvet cloak trimmed with silver brocade, a broad-brimmed hat, a wig, and with his face well masked, he made a picturesque and colorful figure. He was quite unrecognizable.

And an odd smile touched his lips as he rode down in the small elevator, left the hotel and hailed a taxi.

When the taxi had driven away, a man who had been loitering in the shadows across the street sauntered forward and looked calculatingly up at the window in which Martin Kerr had been seated a short time before. He was the Chinese who had sat at a nearby table in the Picador restaurant.

CHAPTER II

Unplanned Festivities

The dance was in full swing when Kerr and Davidson finally sauntered into the attractively decorated grand ballroom. The shining floor was crowded with masked couples, colorful costumes of all periods, moving rhythmically to the music of two celebrated "name" orchestras who played without waits.

Because of that, however, the dancers did not dance constantly. They poured in and out through the doors in a steady stream, for refreshments, or to gossip in the lounges.

After watching for a few moments, Davidson touched Kerr on the arm.

"There's Barbara Shelley," he observed. "Coming toward us. Can you spot her?"

Martin Kerr nodded, for he recognized her at once, without the least difficulty. She was dressed as Scarlett O'Hara, in a gray frock with a tight bodice and full crinoline skirt, a costume which suited her to perfection.

With her was a man who Kerr instinctively disliked at sight, though all that he could see of the tall, heavily-built man's face were the thick red lips, heavy chin, and small, coldly watchful dark eyes gleaming through the eyeholes of the mask. He wore an Arabian costume.

He and Barbara joined Justin Shelley, pompous as a bearded cardinal, and vanished into a nearby lounge.

"Who was that man with her?" asked Kerr.

"Name of Arthur Morden," Davidson said briefly. "Made money originally diamond mining in Brazil. Company promoter now. Smart, tough, and crooked as they come. Said to be a millionaire, but I hae me doots. Playing up to Shelley at the moment, but his eye is on Barbara. Anything else you'd like to know?"

"Not just now," Kerr said disinterestedly.

Declining Davidson's offer to find a girl to dance with him, Kerr sat down on a comfortable couch in the hallway to smoke a meditative cigarette. One cigarette followed another. Four dances passed while he sat there.

As the fifth dance was beginning, he saw Barbara Shelley standing alone by the ballroom door. In the distance, Morden was pressing through the crowd toward her. Martin Kerr's eyes became suddenly bright and alert. Here was his chance! He rose, and stepped forward swiftly.

"My dance, I think," he said coolly, and before Barbara could protest he had taken her in his arms and they were on the floor.

There was a brief silence while they
covered a dozen yards. Then he said:
“I was mighty anxious to dance with you. Are you very angry?”
Barbara supposed she ought to be angry. But Kerr was a good dancer
and Morden, who had been sticking to her persistently, monopolizing all her
time, was terrible.
“Very angry,” she said demurely.
“Do you make it a habit of violently seizing girls who are waiting for their
partners?”
“Not a habit,” said Kerr. “I’ve been
in South America—in the jungles—but I don’t believe I’ve learned jungle
habits. This is my first dance for more
than eighteen months, though, and I
wanted to enjoy it. Won’t you for-
give me?”
“I might,” Barbara said doubtfully,
“if you’ll leave me at that exit, where
I see my partner’s still waiting for
me.”

But the corners of her lips were
twitching with her effort not to
smile. Martin Kerr gave one careless
glance at the exit, and at the impa-
tient Morden, and danced on by.
“Too late now, I’m afraid,” he said.
“We’ll have to finish the dance.”
“You did pick up a few things in
the jungle, didn’t you?” said Barbara.
“But I can’t very well struggle to es-
cape from you in the middle of the
floor.”
“Wouldn’t that be shocking!” said
Kerr, and smiled down at her.
She looked back, her eyes a little
puzzled.
“I can’t think who you can be, but
surely we’ve met before. Have we?”
“Of course,” said Kerr. “You don’t
think I’d have asked a perfect stranger
for a dance.”
She couldn’t help smiling this time.
“I didn’t notice that you did much
asking,” she said. “Tell me—did I
know you before you went to South
America?”
“I’m a very mysterious man,” Kerr
said with mock solemnity. “But I’ll
tell you what. You give me the dance
when everybody has to unmask, and
see if you recognize me then.”
She hesitated for a moment, but was
sure she knew this man, though she
couldn’t place him.
“Very well,” she promised.
They finished the dance and were
walking toward the doors when Kerr
saw Morden nearing them, followed
by the big figure of Justin Shelley.
Kerr bowed, and was about to turn
away, when he felt a sudden loosening
of something about his face. He made
a grab, but too late. The elastic hold-
ing his mask had snapped! The mask
fluttered to the floor.
Barbara cried out in amazement, and
stepped quickly away from him, her
cheeks flaming with anger.
“Oh!” she gasped. “You—you—”
“Thanks awfully for the dance,”
said Kerr, and smiled at her pleas-
antly. “I enjoyed it immensely.”
Justin Shelley had stopped stock-
still, staring as if turned to stone.
Then, with a bellow of rage, he hurled
himself at Martin Kerr.
Hefty and strong as he was himself,
Kerr staggered under the impact of
that enormous bulk. Before he could
recover himself, the enraged Shelley was on him again, his huge hands clutching at the young explorer’s throat.

But Martin Kerr was not an easy man to attack in that manner. He had done plenty of boxing in his time, and had become proficient at rough and tumble in jungle camps where it needed a heavy hand to control white men and half-savages efficiently. Automatically he twisted, causing his antagonist to miss his grip. But the next moment the two men came together with a heavy shock, and were locked, struggling furiously, in one another’s arms.

There was a rush of feet and a confused chorus of voices as a dozen men tore them apart, and women screamed. Martin Kerr was hustled off, unresistingly, but he caught a glimpse of Justin Shelley still struggling with might and main in the grip of half a dozen dancers and officials who were trying to calm him down.

“You must leave this dance at once,” an official outside the ballroom told Kerr sternly. “Such conduct in a place like this is unbelievable.”

“Certainly,” Kerr said cheerfully.

He could not locate Mike Davidson who apparently had been too busy somewhere to witness the row, so got his hat and coat from the check room and left alone. As he was going down the wide steps that led from the main entrance of the hotel to the street, a heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

“You idiot!” snarled a hoarse, ill-tempered voice. “What the devil made you come here?”

He turned leisurely. Facing him was Morden.

“I wanted to dance,” he said calmly, wondering what Morden was driving at.

“You must be crazy!” Morden burst out, and swore savagely. “Can’t you see that you may have ruined every-

thing? Justin Shelley knows now that you’re in New York, and he’ll be after you.”

“He already knew it,” Kerr said un- concernedly. “He saw me himself at a mid-town bar at lunch time today, and we had quite a—er—pleasant encounter. He also remarked, if I recall correctly, that one of his men had seen me last week.”

“What’s that?”

Clearly Morden was both startled and annoyed. He stared at Kerr with angry, brooding eyes. Then he glanced uneasily at the hotel entrance, as if afraid of being seen.

“I can’t talk to you here,” he said, in a low, hurried voice. “I must be getting back, or I’ll be missed. Meet me tomorrow at two-thirty, at the usual place. And don’t try any funny business, if you know what’s good for you.”

He turned and went back into the hotel. Martin Kerr hailed a taxi and gave the driver his own hotel address. He was unusually thoughtful, driving home. At intervals he smiled. The situation looked promising. Things were picking up for a good, thorough-going mystery of the type he loved to solve.

Of course, everybody had taken him for somebody else, but who, he had not the faintest idea. And it seemed that varied people had varied interests in the person he was supposed to be. The political boss, Justin Shelley, and Barbara mistook him for some person whom they had a reason for disliking intensely. From what Shelley had said in the Picador, that reason was connected with something which had been stolen from him.

Had it been ordinary theft, however, Shelley, with all his influence, would have called in the police, instead of making threats of murderous vengeance on his own account. So it probably was not ordinary theft, and from Justin Shelley’s words, “So you’re back in New York, are you?”
the theft had not occurred in this
country.

So much was fairly clear, but where
did Morden come in? He had made
the same mistake regarding Kerr’s
identity as had Shelley—with a quite
different result. There seemed to be
some kind of underhand understand-
ing between Morden and Kerr’s
unknown double.

Yet Morden was friendly with Shel-
ley, or pretended to be. And what
Morden thought of Barbara was as
plain as if the man had shouted it
from the middle of the Hotel Astor
ballroom floor.

Considerable muddle. But it could
be straightened out, no doubt. That
would be an amusing occupation for
Martin Kerr during his visit to New
York. It might also give him a chance
to see Barbara Shelley again.

He paid off his taxi and mounted
the steps to the front door of the
hotel. The door was locked and the
night man not in sight in the dimly
lighted lobby. Kerr started to ring
the night bell, then decided not to
wait. Familiar as he was with this
little hotel, he knew where the ser-
vants’ entrance was, and that it prob-
ably was not locked. He had gone
into the hotel that way on many an-
other occasion when he hadn’t wanted
it known he was a night owl.

He made his way down the little al-
ley to the darkened servants’ entrance
in an areaway. Groping forward, he
was about to push the door inward
when one foot stumbled into some-
thing limp, and heavy, and yielding.
He bent over quickly, striking a
match. The body of a man was lying
in the darkness, in front of the door,
and a slowly widening pool of blood
was welling from a deep wound just
under the heart.

But what made Martin Kerr draw
a sharp breath of surprise, with a chill
of apprehension, was recognition of
the dead man—the Chinese who had
sat near him in the Picador!

Martin Kerr wasted no time in won-
dering who had murdered him and
why. He was swiftly on his way to
the nearest police station to report his
find. The one thing he did not report,
however, in the ensuing police ques-
tioning, was that he had ever seen this
Chinese before.

When he finally got back to his ho-
tel, another surprise was waiting for
him. His room had been thoroughly
and efficiently ransacked! All his
possessions were strewn haphazard
over the floor. The mattress had been
ripped open. The locks on the cabin
trunk where he kept his valuables had
been forced. A swift survey, though,
showed that nothing was missing.

Kerr regarded the litter in silence,
and his eyes were deeply thoughtful.
It was plain enough now that it was
no light comedy in which he had inno-
cently become involved. In some way
he could not explain he was entangled
in a conspiracy where men thought
nothing of human life, to whom mur-
der was of small account.

He took a deep breath, his lips grim.
Well, comedy or tragedy, he intended
to see it through—and he would get
to the bottom of this mystery in which
Barbara and her father, Morden, and
the dead Chinese were all involved.

CHAPTER III

The Fan Tong

MARTIN KERR awak-
ened early the follow-
ing morning. After
breakfast, the first
thing he did was to
look up Arthur Mor-
den’s address in the
telephone directory.
Morden had made an
appointment with
him for two-thirty “at the usual place,”
and Kerr intended to keep that appoint-
ment.

Since he did not know “the usual
place,” the only way to find it would be to follow Morden from the time he left his home until two-thirty.

So it was that when Morden left his Park Avenue home, just after ten, to be driven in his Rolls-Royce to his office in Wall Street, Martin Kerr was following him in a taxi. Kerr was also hanging around the entrance of the building when Morden re-emerged at a quarter to one for lunch.

At two o’clock the promoter left the restaurant and took a subway to Christopher Street. Kerr was also in the subway, and not far behind when Morden walked through the crooked streets of Greenwich Village, toward the Hudson River. Kerr darted back into a convenient doorway as Morden stopped not far from the river. The promoter glanced hastily around, then quickly disappeared down the steps into a dingy basement restaurant and saloon.

Kerr waited a few minutes, then followed Morden down the stairs. But at the bottom he stopped short, and drew back out of sight hastily.

Small booths were ranged around the dirty room. In one of them Morden and another man were sitting. And the man talking with Morden so earnestly was, feature for feature, almost Kerr’s exact double! Yet there was a difference. It was in the shiftiness of the other man’s eyes that were slightly paler than Kerr’s, and in the sneering curl about the corners of the man’s lips.

Kerr waited, hidden for a moment or two. Then he walked swiftly across the room, with his pulled-down hat shading his face, and took the next booth. As he gave his order, in a low voice, for a cup of coffee, Morden’s voice came to him clearly.

“So you got my wire, altering the place of appointment. I thought it would be safer not to use the same place too often.”

“You were right,” returned the other man, in a sullen voice that resembled Kerr’s only slightly. “Nothing’s safe just now. New York is full of eyes and ears, and most of them Chinese. Did you know the Fan Tong were here?”

“Who are they?” asked Morden. “I never heard of them.”

“Maybe you haven’t—but you will. That Chinese tong, one of their strongest secret societies, is about as dangerous as a nest of adders. They’ve got wind of the tablets somehow, and they’re after them.”

“Then they’re after you,” said Morden quickly.

“Hell, no! They don’t know about me yet. They’re after Justin Shelley and Prince Sung.”

“But I thought Sung was in prison, if he wasn’t dead,” objected Morden. “You told me so yourself.”

“I was wrong, worse luck. He’s right here in New York, and he and Shelley met the day before yesterday at Shelley’s home down in Long Island—Hempstead.” And he added vindictively: “A fat lot of good that will do either of them without the missing tablet.”

MORDEN broke in on him irritably.

“You tell me these things, you know damn well there’s all kinds of danger. And yet you go openly to a dance at the Astor—and dance with Justin Shelley’s daughter! Look here, Soames, what’s the matter with you?”

“I don’t know what the devil you’re talking about,” exclaimed the man called Soames, in a tone of pure astonishment. “You’re nuts! Why, I haven’t been anywhere near the Astor!”

“Say, what are you trying to put over now?” Morden snapped angrily. “When I saw you there myself, last night, and spoke to you. Why, I made this appointment with you there.”

“You made this appointment with me by wire,” growled Soames, his tone equally angry. “And if you want
to know what I was doing last night, I was with Pritchard and Deering, giving Justin Shelley’s house the once-over.”

“But—” began Morden uncertainly. Then swiftly he related what had taken place at the Astor the previous evening.

“Good Lord!” whispered Soames, fear in his voice. “The Fan Tong are in this. It couldn’t be anybody else. They’ve got onto me somehow, and they’re trying some kind of double game with me and Justin Shelley.”

“Well, what do you think we’d better do?” asked Morden.

“Do?” echoed Soames bitterly. “What can we do? They’re devils, I tell you—devils!” He laughed mirthlessly. “We’ve got to fight ‘em, that’s all. It won’t be much good trying to get away from ‘em.”

“Then we’ll fight them,” Morden growled. “They may be all you say they are, but I’m in touch with a pretty useful bunch of gunnies myself. I’m damned if I’ll let any crowd of Chinese highbinders give me cold feet. Will you?”

“Yes,” Soames said soberly. “And so will you when you know a little more about ‘em. But it’s no good arguing about that now. Have you found out where Shelley keeps that other tablet?”


There was the sound of a moving table in the other booth. Then as they looked around the corner Kerr’s back was revealed.

“I knew it!” exclaimed Soames vehemently. “Somebody has been listening. If—”

He broke off short in utter astonishment. Martin Kerr had turned, and Soames had caught sight of Kerr’s face.

But Morden, his face working with anger and excitement, reached out and caught Kerr by the arm.

“It was you at the Astor!” he exclaimed hoarsely. “Who are you? What’s your game?”

Kerr looked him straight in the eyes, smiling slightly. With a sharp twist of his muscular shoulder, he released his arm.

“That’s for you to find out, you doublecrossing crook,” he answered in his lazy, deliberate voice.

Morden’s face reddened. His thick lips drew back from his teeth in a threatening snarl. He made a movement forward, as if about to hurl himself at Kerr, who stood calm and smiling, watching him.

Something in the young man’s expression seemed to check the promoter. Muttering sullen threats, he turned back to his table.

Martin summoned the astonished waiter, paid his bill and leisurely ascended the steps from the restaurant. At the curb a large car was drawn up, but he was too absorbed in his own thoughts to pay much attention to it. He knew now that all that had happened during the last two days had centered around two tablets, one in the possession of Justin Shelley, the other, apparently, in the possession of Soames.

What those tablets were he did not know. It was up to him to find out, and he had to decide what his next move was to be.

It was decided for him with unexpected suddenness. As he approached the car, there was a low whistle. The back door of the car opened suddenly, and half a dozen Chinese came tumbling out, piling on him.

Taken by surprise as he was, he managed to get in one good right hand punch, which lifted the foremost Chinese off his feet and sent him sprawling senseless on the pavement. But the rest were not so easy. A heavy cloth was thrown over his face, and the sickly-sweet smell of chloroform was in his nostrils.
He struggled desperately. Once he got his right hand clear, and felt his blow land on a bony face, but half a dozen men were hanging onto him, and the drug was sapping his vitality. He felt his senses leaving him.

Consciousness returned to Martin Kerr with a sensation of extreme discomfort. He tried feebly to move, and could not, for his hands and feet were bound. His head was aching badly, and he felt a little sick. He blinked, and opened his eyes to the realization that he was lying on a wooden floor. With effort, he struggled to a sitting position and gazed uncertainly about.

He was in a long, low room, richly hung with Oriental draperies. On a divan of native workmanship, about ten paces away, a man was sitting, watching him—a Chinese of great age. His parchmentlike yellow skin was stretched tightly over his high cheek bones, giving him a gaunt, emaciated appearance. From the magnificently worked silken Chinese robes which covered him, his thin, folded hands and wrists protruded like dry, withered sticks.

He sat cross-legged, in an attitude of complete repose, still as a statue. Only his eyes, alive and palely gleaming amid a network of fine wrinkles, surveyed Kerr with a cold curiosity that had in it something infinitely menacing and hostile.

As the Chinese saw Kerr’s eyes open, he leaned forward slightly.

“Where is the tablet of Feng-Su?” he said in pure English, his voice low, soft.

“I’m damned if I know,” Kerr muttered resentfully.

The old Chinese nodded slightly. Then he smiled, a cruel smile, and clapped his hands together softly.

Heavy curtains parted at the end of the room, and another man entered. He bowed low and came and stood in front of the old Chinese who gave him directions in his own sing-song language. The second Chinese bowed again, and approached Kerr.

“You refuse answel hon’able Mandarin’s qlestions?” he said blandly. “I think you answel velly soon.”

From within his garments he produced a piece of thin whipcord. This he tied around Kerr’s head, above his eyes. Between the cord and Kerr’s forehead he inserted an ordinary lead pencil.


He gave the pencil a couple of sharp twists. Kerr felt a sense of intolerable compression in the top of his head. It seemed to be clasped in iron bands. But his expression did not alter. He looked the old Chinese in the eyes, and said in a calm, level voice:

“If you twist the top of my head off, I won’t be able to tell you anything. I don’t know anything. You think I’m Soames, but I’m not. You’re the third lot of people who’ve made the same mistake in the last two days.”

THERE was a ring of truth in his voice which evidently carried some conviction. The pressure round his head slackened as the old Chinese held up a clawlike hand.

“Who are you?” he asked in that low, soft voice. “Tell me about yourself, and about the other people who mistook you for Soames.”

Martin Kerr had no reason for hiding the truth about himself, and in all probability he knew nothing about Shelley or Morden which the old Chinese did not know already. The old one listened attentively, his face expressionless.

“If your story is false, you will regret it bitterly,” he said when Kerr had finished. “If it is true, I am sorry. But you should not have interfered in matters which did not concern you. I am afraid that we shall have to kill you, for it would be dangerous to let you go, now. But your death shall be
a pleasant one—without torture.”

“Thanks so much,” Kerr said ironically.

Once more the old Chinese clapped his hands, and another man entered. The two men carried the bound prisoner out of the room, between the heavy curtains, through a small antechamber, which led to a flight of steep stone steps. These they descended, and as they got lower and lower, the light grew fainter, until they were almost in darkness.

At last they stopped, dropping Kerr unceremoniously to the ground.

He heard a door grate harshly on rusty hinges, felt himself picked up again, swung through the air, and hurled forward. With a crash that almost stunned him, he fell onto a hard, stone floor. The door grated to again.

For a time he lay half-unconscious, motionless where he had fallen. Then, with returning strength, the desire for action reawakened. With another painful effort, he sat up.

He was sick, nauseated. Inside his head a little hammer seemed to be beating steadily. But he had led a hard, clean life, and now it stood him in good stead. Every moment brought a little renewed strength.

Well, it looked as if he were in a devil of a mess. Something must be done about it, and that quickly.

Straining his muscles to their utmost extent, he strove to break the cords that bound him. But five minutes’ futile endeavor convinced him of the uselessness of trying to break
them. He lay down on his back to rest and gather more strength. Almost instantly though, he sat up again, motionless, every sense on the alert. In the darkness he could hear his own heart beating, as he held his breath in a tense effort of listening. Then he could hear another sound, soft, barely audible, but steady and regular—the sound of human breathing. He was not alone!

As his eyes gradually grew more accustomed to the gloom, he could faintly distinguish the blurred outline of a huddled figure lying a short distance from him. Slowly and laboriously, he worked his way across the floor toward it. As he drew nearer, the shape resolved itself into that of a girl, lying bound and helpless in a deep, drugged sleep.

With a shock of horror, Martin Kerr recognized her. Barbara Shelley!

CHAPTER IV

Escape

BARBARA’S hands were bound behind her and her breathing was regular. She appeared to be in a deep, healthy sleep. She looked very innocent and helpless lying there so quietly. Rage stirred Kerr against the people who had brought her there. He was filled with a furious desire to strangle that wrinkled old Chinese and all his followers.

Again he struggled desperately. But his bonds remained firm. He lay still, bathed in perspiration. But that blind rage had been replaced by a cold, grim determination. By some means or another he intended to get free.

But how? He looked around with keen, scrutinizing eyes. The cell was about fifteen feet square, with a stone floor and walls. One dirty little barred window, so high up in the wall as to be out of his reach even had he been unbound, admitted meager light. In another wall there was a fireplace, and at the side of the fireplace, about three feet from the ground, some kind of small projection stuck out.

He wriggled across to the fireplace, and saw that the projection was a small, iron hook, fixed into the wall. With great difficulty, using the wall as a support for his back, he pushed himself to a standing position, and felt with his bound hands for the hook. It was old and rusty, but firmly fixed. With any luck it should serve.

Bending down slightly, he began to rub the cord which held his wrists, backward and forward along the rough, rusty iron. In a quarter of an hour his wrists were chafed and bleeding, and sweat was pouring down his face, but there was no perceptible diminution in the strength of the cord. It was going to be a long, painful job, but it had to be done—and as quickly as possible.

With his jaw firmly set, and the veins standing out on his forehead in the intensity of his effort, he went on steadily, pressing down upon the hook, working his wrists to and fro. Another half hour passed. He paused for a short rest, then strained with all his force against the rope which bound him. There was an agonized struggle as he wrenched at it with badly lacerated wrists. It gave a trifle; and then with a sharp snap it parted!

Quickly he untied his ankles, and with a sigh of relief, stretched his limbs to their full extent.

Barbara was tied more loosely, and he had little difficulty in freeing her. But she was still in that drugged sleep, and her hands were icy cold. Lifting her, limp and unresisting, in his arms, he carried her to a corner of the cell. As he lowered her to the ground again a wisp of her hair
brushed his cheek. With sudden impulse he kissed her. And he was amazed by his own action.

A curiously intent expression was in his eyes as he stood looking down at her. Then he took off his coat, covered her with it, and started to explore the cell.

As he had anticipated, there was no means of getting out of it. The dirty little window was out of reach; the door was solid, and bolted on the outside; the remainder of the cell was stone. Nothing for it but to wait.

For half an hour he waited, occupying the time by tearing strips from his shirt sleeves and binding up his torn wrists. Then he heard leisurely footsteps descending the stone stairs outside the cell.

He went across the cell, and stood flattened against the wall inside the door. Voices sounded outside the door. It opened gratingly, and two Chinese entered. One of them was carrying a flashlight, which he flashed into the cell. But they were not expecting trouble, and their entry had taken them past Kerr. And that moment was enough for Martin Kerr.

He hurled himself forward, hitting out with his right hand, with all his strength of well-trained muscle behind the blow. It caught the man carrying the light beneath the chin, lifted him off his feet and sent him crashing in the farther corner of the cell.

With the gun of the Chinese grasped in his right hand, he began cautiously to climb the stone stairs, and the darkness gave place to a faint, grayish light.

At the top of the stairs was a landing with a small window, and before him was a pair of thick, heavy curtains. Holding the unconscious girl in one arm, he stepped suddenly between them, gun ready for instant action.

He was in the large room in which he had talked to the old Chinese, but no one was there, now. At the other end of the room was another pair of curtains. He walked across to them, drew one of them cautiously aside, and peered through. He saw a short passage which widened into a hall, with doors on either side of it. From behind one of the doors came a murmur of voices.

In the farther wall of the hall was a larger door. As Kerr watched, it opened, and a Chinese in Occidental clothes came through it, and turned in the direction of one of the other doors, which he opened. The murmur of voices came more loudly, and died down as the Chinese closed it behind him.

It was evident that the large door led into the street. Kerr thrust aside the curtain, and tiptoed quickly and quietly across the hall, toward the big door.

He was halfway across the hall, when the Chinese he had seen entering a moment before re-emerged. Catching sight of Kerr with his burden, he paused for one moment in astonishment. Then with a shrill shout of alarm he sprang forward, barring Kerr’s way. Kerr’s gun roared, and the man fell, shot through the chest. Kerr was leaping for that big door again, when there came a rush of feet and three more Chinese were racing toward him.

Kerr realized he would not be able to get the door open before they were on him. He fired again, three quick
shots. With a scream, one of the Chinese pitched forward on his face. Another spun around, clapped his hand to his shoulder, and collapsed. The third dived back into the shelter of the room he had left.

Kerr wrenched the door open quickly, stepped through it, slamming it behind him. He saw instantly that he was somewhere out of town, for this house was the only one in sight, surrounded by a tall iron fence, and beyond the water of a river shimmered. Drawn up outside the opened gates was a waiting limousine.

He ran for it, thrust Barbara into the car, and climbed in after her. As he pressed the self-starter, he heard an uproar of shouting in the building he had just left. The clutch went in, and the car shot away. The big thing to do now was to get Barbara to a doctor.

They were not far from the main road when suddenly Barbara stirred. She raised one hand uncertainly to her face, blinked dazedly, then opened her eyes wide and stared at him. As recognition dawned they became at once coldly hostile. She sat up straight.

“You—you—” she began indignantly, if feebly.

“It’s all right,” Kerr said reassuringly. “You’re safe now.”

She did not seem to hear him. She was gazing at him with wide-eyed incredulity, but loathing, too, was in her look. Of course she still mistook him for Soames.

“I’m not who you think I am,” he said quickly. “My name’s Kerr—Martin Kerr. You’re mistaking me for someone else.”

BRIGHT color flamed in her cheeks. Her eyes glowed. Abruptly she seemed to recover her power of speech.

“You’ll find out who’s making a mistake when my father hears about this!” she declared. “You—you sneak-thief! I suppose you bribed Li Chang to drug my coffee. It’s the sort of low thing you would do.”

“Now, don’t get excited,” said Kerr. “I didn’t bribe anybody to drug your coffee. I didn’t even know you drank coffee. I don’t know who Li Chang is. I’m not Soames. I’ve only just arrived in New York from South America and my name’s Kerr.”

“And you are a cur,” she said stormily.

He grinned at her good-humoredly. “Neat,” he murmured. “But I had a notion that puns were slightly dated. Now if you’ll just calm down for about two minutes, I can explain—”

But he got no chance to explain anything. With startling suddenness she leaned forward and slapped him across the face.

“That’s just to be going on with, sneak-thief!” she raged as she wrenched open the door of the car when it slowed down for a traffic light in the small town they had reached, and a moment later was lost to sight.

He made an involuntary movement to follow her, but at that moment the traffic moved on. On either side of him cars were streaming by. There was an impatient tooting of horns behind him. He’d never catch her now.

He shrugged, and moved on with the traffic.

But he was irritated, to put it mildly. That look of loathing she had given him was oddly annoying. Why couldn’t she have listened to reason? A sneak-thief, eh? Well, she and her precious political highbinder of a father would have to acknowledge their error sooner or later. And “sooner” suited Martin Kerr.

He set his mouth in determination, frowning. He’d go and see Shelley right now, and have this whole business out with him. He was fed up with this misunderstanding—plenty!

At the outskirts of town he deliberately abandoned the car, and took the subway to his hotel. After he had
bathed, changed, and had a meal, he looked up the address of the Shelley home in Hempstead. Leaving the hotel he headed for Pennsylvania Station and a Long Island train.

In Hempstead, Martin Kerr took a taxi to the Shelley home.

A quarter of an hour's ride brought him to the entrance of some large grounds, and the taxi sped along a winding drive, overhung on either side by a thick growth of trees, toward a big, square house.

No light gleamed from the windows of the house, and as he approached nearer he saw that they were not only shuttered, but heavily barred. It was evident that Justin Shelley took his precautions against unwelcome visitors.

As Kerr dismissed his taxi, and was about to ring the front door-bell, he heard a sound on the gravel behind him. With his hand halfway to the bell, he turned. A man was coming toward him from some outbuildings at the side of the house.

"Who are you?" the man asked gruffly. "What d'you want?"

It was Justin Shelley himself. As he spoke he raised the flashlight he carried, and it swept Martin Kerr on the doorstep. With a sudden oath, the political boss' hand went swiftly to his pocket. It came out holding a pistol.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he observed sardonically. "Get your hands up, you rat! I'm going to have a word with you."

Kerr's intentions were peaceful. His sole object in visiting the house was to clear up the misunderstanding between himself and Shelley and his daughter Barbara. The last thing he wanted was another quarrel.

"There's no need for that," he said mildly. "I've come here on purpose to see you, to explain everything."

SUDDENLY Justin Shelley lost his temper completely. He took a pace forward, his gun menacing, threatening.

"Put up your hands, I said, you dirty thief!" he roared. "I'll tell you when to start explaining."

Kerr suppressed an impulse to tell him to go to the devil, and put up his hands.

"Turn around, with your back to me," commanded Shelley, and Kerr obeyed.

Shelley ran his hands over Kerr's clothes, and jerked the pistol, which Kerr had taken from the Chinese, out of his pocket. Then he reached past Kerr, and opened the front door of the house.

"Walk in, and keep your hands up!" he commanded.

As they entered the hall, Shelley called out, "Barbara!" A door opened, and she came out. She looked more

[Turn Page]
beautiful than ever in a flame-colored evening frock of costly simplicity. Kerr become annoyingly conscious of how ridiculous he must look with his hands above his head.

CHAPTER V

Prince Sung

To the sight of Kerr, Barbara stopped, and a mocking smile came about her lips.

“So you’ve caught the sneak-thief,” she said in pleased tones. And then to Martin: “I told you you’d be sorry.”

“Yes,” said Shelley exultantly. “The impudent dog was skulking on the front doorstep.” He poked Kerr in the ribs with his pistol. “Go on, into that farther room.”

Martin Kerr obeyed, but he was frowning. When Barbara and her father followed him into the room, he turned to face them, hands in his pockets.

“I was skulking on the doorstep because I wanted to talk to you,” he said steadily. “There’s no need for all this gun waving stuff. Do you intend to listen to me, or don’t you?”

“He’s going to tell us that he’s not a sneak-thief, but a cur,” Barbara said scornfully.

“He doesn’t need to tell us he’s both!” jeered her father. He glanced Kerr up and down with insolent eyes. “Who told you to take your hands down?” he demanded harshly. “Put them up again!”

Kerr considered him coolly, through slightly narrowed eyelids, and did not move. Then he gave Barbara a long glance. A faint smile touched his lips.

“I don’t think you ought to call me a sneak-thief,” he said evenly. “I’ve never stolen anything from either of you. Except, of course, a kiss.”

“What?” exclaimed Shelley and Barbara in one breath.

“Only a kiss,” Kerr said casually. “What do you mean, you lying dog?” demanded the politician, bristling with rage. “Are you daring to insinuate that you’ve kissed my daughter?”

“Yes,” said Kerr. “This afternoon.” “W-when I was unconscious,” stammered Barbara in a shocked, angry voice.

“That’s right,” Kerr said cheerfully. “And what’s more, I’m going to kiss you again, next time I get the chance. The ruder you are to me, the more often I’ll kiss you. If you’re rude enough to me, I’ll probably end by marrying you.”

For a speechless moment they could only stare at him, angry and astonished.

“T—that you s—hould d—dare—” gasped Barbara.

“Leave the room, Barbara,” Shelley shouted. “And tell Jennings to bring me my riding whip!”

Barbara sped from the room. Kerr continued standing there, hands in his coat pockets, that faint smile still about the corners of his lips. For a brief space the only sound was that of Justin Shelley’s heavy breathing. Then there came a knock on the door, and a servant entered, carrying a riding whip. Shelley glared at him as he took the whip.

“All the servants are to stay in the kitchen for the next quarter of an hour,” Shelley snapped. “If they hear anything, Jennings, they’re to take no notice. I’m going to thrash a dog!”

“Very good, sir,” Jennings murmured, and withdrew.

Justin Shelley locked the door and put the key in his pocket. He put the gun in his pocket also.

“To start with, for what you said about my daughter, I’m going to thrash you within an inch of your life,” he announced grimly. “The
other things I want to discuss with you can wait till Prince Sung comes, in the morning. Now—are you going to take it, or am I going to hold you?"

Kerr smiled cheerfully.

"Perhaps you'd better hold me," he said. "Otherwise, I might wriggle!"

Shelley scowled blackly. Kerr's behavior puzzled him. He had not expected this smiling calm. And what was the fellow doing here—literally putting his head into the lion's jaws?

THERE was something queer behind all this. But he advanced on Kerr confidently, reached out one enormous hand, and grasped his coat-collar. Knowing Soames, he expected a struggle. No man as big as Soames would submit to a hiding without putting up a fight. But he did not doubt that, with his own abnormal strength, he could hold him easily enough.

He got the shock of a lifetime. For as his hand touched Kerr's shoulder, Kerr brought his left hand up to Shelley's chin with a force that shook him to his toes. Kerr followed with a terrific right that lifted the political boss fairly off his feet and sent him staggering backward, to fall with a heavy thud to the floor.

That right was Kerr's favorite punch. Once he had broken a man's jaw with it. But Shelley's jaw was not broken. He was too tough for that. He was merely knocked out.

Martin bent over him, took the door key and the gun from his pocket and went out, locking the door after him. As he was crossing the hall Barbara emerged from a nearby room. She stopped, looking at him with eyes of wonder.

"Where's Father?" she asked rather foolishly.

"He's all right," said Kerr, and stepped quickly toward her.

He seized her gently, but firmly, by the elbows, lifted her, kissed her, set her down again, and made for the front door. It was all so utterly un-

expected that she had no time to resist. As the front door slammed she simply stood there, overcome.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Oh!" And stamped her foot. That didn't seem to do much good.

There came a loud bellowing and banging on the door across the hall. Justin Shelley had come to, and was making his displeasure audible. With some heavy piece of furniture, he was battering down the door. No one came to help him. The servants had had their instructions.

With a crash, the lock gave, and the door burst open. Shelley emerged, his face purple with rage.

"Where is he?" he roared.

"Gone," said Barbara, almost crying in her own vexation. "H-he kissed me again."

"What?" bawled her father, and instantly Barbara was sorry she had mentioned that kiss. But Shelley was occupied with his own feelings.

"He knocked me out!" he declared in outraged tones. "Curse his hide, he knocked me out." He stared at Barbara, with brooding eyes. "Confound his scoundrelly hide," he repeated heavily. "If the fellow wasn't such a blackguard, I could almost feel a certain respect for him."

Kerr returned to New York and his hotel in a cheerful frame of mind. The failure of his visit to the Shelley home did not greatly disturb him. If the political big shot wanted to be quarrelsome, that was his privilege.

As for Barbara, she was an amazingly pretty girl, and all the prettier when she was in a temper. No doubt she would lose her temper with him again—when he would certainly try to kiss her again. She could lose her temper with him as often as she liked.

AND so far as the mystery of the tablets was concerned, all he could do was to wait for further developments. He had an idea that they would not be long in coming.
He was right. They started the next morning while he was having breakfast. A bell boy brought him an unstamped letter.

“The clerk said to tell you he don’t know where this came from,” the boy said. “He found it on the counter.”

Kerr, wondering a little, opened it and read:

If you will come to the Hotel Splendide at one o’clock and ask for Mr. Robinson, he may tell you something interesting.

Kerr put the unsigned note in his pocket, and went on with his breakfast thoughtfully. At least there seemed nothing small-time about his unknown friend — picking out the world-famous Hotel Splendide as a place of rendezvous. He decided to keep the appointment.

Punctually at one o’clock he arrived at the hotel, and asked for Mr. Robinson. Apparently he was expected, for a bell boy took him to a handsome suite, where a table for two was laid in the sitting room. As they entered, a man rose from a chair.

“Mr. Kerr, this is extremely obliging of you,” a bland voice said.

Kerr showed no surprise, though he had reason for surprise on seeing that “Mr. Robinson” was a smartly dressed young Chinese.

“I was doubtful whether you would come,” the Chinese said, smiling.

“I’m always glad to meet any member of the Robinson family,” Kerr said gravely. “I have the greatest admiration for all the Robinsons.”

A humorous twinkle came into the dark eyes of the young Chinese.

“That is kind of you, Mr. Kerr,” he said. “You will join me in a cocktail before lunch, I hope?”

“Thank you,” said Kerr. “Manhattan, please.”

Though his manner was lazy and casual, and he showed no trace of curiosity, his eyes were missing nothing. What did this good-looking young Oriental want with him? And why take the name of Robinson?

His host seemed in no hurry to enlighten him. During an excellent lunch he confined his conversation to generalities, and showed himself to be both witty and well informed. His English was meticulously correct—a graduate of some big university, obviously.

After lunch, when the waiter had withdrawn, leaving them with their coffee and liqueurs, the manner of the Chinese changed.

“No doubt you are wondering why I requested this appointment, Mr. Kerr?” he asked, watchful seriousness in his eyes.

“Yes,” admitted Kerr. “And why you took the name of Robinson.”

Again the young Chinese smiled.

“I wanted you to be surprised when you saw me,” he said frankly. “It is my experience that one can read men’s characters more clearly in their faces when they are surprised. My real name is Ti’en Sung.”

Martin Kerr raised one eyebrow slightly.

“Prince Sung?” he queried.

“That is my name,” said the young Chinese.

CHAPTER VI

The Tablets of Feng-Su

For a moment they regarded one another guardedly across the table. Then Prince Sung leaned forward slightly.

“I should like you to tell me what you know about the tablets of Feng-Su,” he said.

“I thought that you were going to tell me something interesting,” objected Martin Kerr, smiling.

Prince Sung looked at him steadily for a few seconds. Then he nodded
slightly as if in confirmation of his own thoughts.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “I think that I shall tell you something most interesting.”

He paused only a moment, while Kerr said nothing, then went on.

“One of my men saw you arrive at Justin Shelley’s house last night, and followed you home,” he said. “Mr. Shelley himself phoned me and told me what had happened at his house. My interest was aroused, and I sent you that note the first thing this morning. Also I have had two clever agents making inquiries about you all morning. Your life has not been lacking in excitement, Mr. Kerr.”

“I suppose I’ve had my share of fun,” Kerr said easily.

“Undoubtedly,” agreed Prince Sung. “You have had many adventures, and you are a first-class fighter. Also you resemble the man Soames. I think you could be helpful to me, Mr. Kerr. Would you like some more fun, and the opportunity of earning a great deal of money?”

“Quite likely,” said Kerr. “But before we go on, how did you know I wasn’t Soames when I was at the Shelley house last night?”

“Soames is dead,” Prince Sung said coolly. “He died about half an hour before your arrival at Justin Shelley’s house last night. No one knows that he is dead, however—and his body will not be discovered.” He paused, and looked Martin Kerr full in the face. “I suggest that you take his place.”

Again he paused slightly, but went on before Kerr could speak.

“Soames was in communication with a member of the Fan Tong last night. They talked for a long while, and Soames agreed to work with the Fan Tong against Mr. Shelley and me. Shortly after that meeting he was killed. I am now asking you to go and live in his apartment, and carry on the work that he was doing.”

“And pass on any information I get from the Fan Tong to you and Justin Shelley, I suppose?” put in Kerr.

“To me—not to Mr. Shelley,” corrected Prince Sung. “He does not know that Soames is dead, and I shall not tell him. I like Mr. Shelley. He is my good friend. But he lacks subtlety. He is—that you call the bull in the glassware department. He cannot pretend. If he ceased to hate you, you would be in danger. The Fan Tong would suspect. They are wide-awake, those gentlemen, I assure you, Mr. Kerr. And if they once suspect—”

He finished with a gesture that was sufficiently expressive.

“Yes, I can guess the kind of thing they’d do,” said Kerr, and his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “I’ve had some. By the way, Soames had one of the tablets of Feng-Su. Didn’t whoever killed him get that tablet?”

Prince Sung shook his head regretfully.

“No. Unfortunately, we could not find the tablet. I am hoping that you will find it for us.”

Martin Kerr lit a cigarette with an abstracted air. The prince’s proposition rather appealed to him. But it would be a tricky business, impersonating a man he knew nothing about, and the risks—well he already knew enough about the methods of the Fan Tong fully to realize the risks he would be running.

A faint smile parted his lips. He looked across at the prince, and now his eyes were no longer sleepy, but keen and alert.

“What are the tablets of Feng-Su?” he asked.

THERE were a few moments’ silence after that question, as the prince slowly selected and lit a cigarette. He took a couple of puffs, then began to speak in a slow, even voice.

“It is rather a long story, Mr. Kerr. I must ask for your patience while I tell it to you. During the recent trouble
in China, my father's province, the province of Han-Ko, was overrun by the Northern Army. Early in the fighting which followed I was severely wounded. Two of my followers took me to a village and kept me hidden there till I was well enough to make my way across country to the main Southern Army.

"While I was in hiding, a battle was fought between my father's forces and the Northerners. Faced by immeasurably superior numbers, my father was defeated and captured. The Northern rabble looted the town of Han-Ko. They also pillaged and burned the palace of my ancestors. They captured a great deal of treasure while doing so.

"There were also things they did not capture. Faced with the certainty of defeat, my father, Prince Feng-Su, hid the heirlooms of our family. These heirlooms, jewelry, pottery, jade carvings, had been in the possession of my family for hundreds of years. The memory of my ancestors would have been dishonored had they fallen into the hands of the Northerners.

"After my father's capture, Justin Shelley, whom he had befriended, made a gallant, if ill-advised, attempt to rescue him. Mr. Shelley's followers were dispersed, and he himself was wounded, barely escaping with his life. The result of this attempt at rescue was that the execution of my father, which had already been decided on, was hastened. He was informed that he had one day to live.

"It was absolutely necessary that he should pass on to me the knowledge of where the family heirlooms were hidden. Up to the morning of his execution he could think of no means of passing on this knowledge. Then, he was allowed to see a friend—an old priest who had been in the service of the family for many years. This priest was searched when he entered my father's cell, and searched again when he came out of it. In spite of that, he bore a written message for me.

"The morning of the execution was rainy, and the priest's boots, his attire, had become covered with muddy clay. Of this clay my father made two tablets, on which he scratched, in Chinese characters, the whereabouts of the treasure. These the old priest took away with him and baked them. But he dared not keep them. He was almost at death's door himself. As he did not know my whereabouts, he sent the tablets by a messenger to Justin Shelley, to hold in trust for me.

"The tablets reached Mr. Shelley, who was ill. With him was Soames, whom he foolishly trusted, because he had saved Soames' life. Soames repaid him by taking advantage of his illness to try to steal the tablets. Luckily, he only got away with one of them."

"That was a pretty lousy trick," observed Kerr.

"Thief, murderer, blackmailer—he was skilled in blackguardism," agreed Prince Sung. "Even in China he was notorious."

" Didn't Mr. Shelley know about that?"

THE prince smiled and shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Mr. Shelley, as you may have guessed, is an obstinate man, who seldom listens to advice. He did not want to think that he had saved the life of a blackguard—preferred to think that he had saved the life of a good fellow whom the world had misjudged. Nothing could change his mind till Soames stole one tablet."

"And then?"

"Then Shelley swore that he would strangle Soames with his bare hands. But he had to find Soames first. After making many inquiries, and talking rather indiscreetly, he received a letter from Soames from Bombay, offering to return the tablet for a hundred thousand dollars. Shelley set off at
once for Bombay, to find that Soames had sailed for America. He followed.

"While Shelley was pursuing Soames, I recovered from my wounds and went to Shanghai. There, in the office of my father's agent, I found a letter from Shelley, informing me what had occurred, and promising to recover the tablet if he had to kill Soames.

"About the same time I became aware that the existence of the tablets had become known to the Fan Tong, a powerful secret society unfriendly to my family. In spite of my misfortunes, I am still rich, and my family has many friends all over the world. I immediately cabled to some friends in Bombay, and set out myself, with seven followers, in pursuit of Soames and Justin Shelley.

"Both had left Bombay when I arrived, and I followed them here, arriving three days ago. Now, is there any question you would like to ask me, Mr. Kerr?"

"One or two," said Kerr. "Shelley had both tablets in the first place. Can't he remember what was written on them?"

"He cannot read Chinese characters. The messenger who carried the tablets to him was also chosen because he could not read. The old priest is dead."

"Well, it's plain enough that Soames was after the treasure. One tablet was no good to him without the other. And yet he seems to have spent most of his time in running away from the other tablet. How do you explain that?"

"Easily. Soames was cunning. In China he had few friends and little money. He wanted Shelley to pursue him out of China. He purposely allowed Shelley to know that he was returning to America — because he wanted Shelley to come here. With the other tablet. In this city he has many friends in the criminal classes. Recently, two attempts at burglary have been made on Shelley's home, planned by Soames, I'm certain. There also was an attempt to stab him, but that was the Fan Tong."

"Between Soames and the Fan Tong, Justin Shelley seems to have been having even a livelier time than a big political boss usually expects," observed Kerr. "And where does Morden come in?"

"Morden?" the prince repeated soberly. "I have been told that he is most anxious to marry Mr. Shelley's daughter. But my private opinion is that he has been financing Soames."

"Then he's after the treasure, too."

"Yes. His business affairs have not been satisfactory for some time, and he is in need of money." He hesitated a moment, before he went on, a little apologetically. "You may wonder why it is that Mr. Shelley was not informed that Morden was Soames' backer. Mr. Kerr, I have the greatest admiration and liking for Mr. Shelley, but sometimes I cannot take him entirely into my confidence. If he even guessed that Morden was on the side of his enemies, his one idea would be to horsewhip the man. That would not suit my plans. Later, perhaps, but not yet. At the moment it is necessary for Mr. Shelley to believe that Morden is his friend, just as it is necessary that he should think you are his enemy."

"I think I can understand that," said Kerr. "Now, just one more question. Has Mr. Shelley got that tablet, or have you?"

The eyes of the prince searched Martin's face. He smiled slightly.

"Shelley thinks he has it," he said. "He suggested that it would be safer in his keeping than in mine. He regards me as young and inexperienced. Yes, he has a tablet, carefully locked in a big safe in his house, surrounded by all the newest burglar alarms and safety appliances. His butler is an ex-prizefighter, his chauffeur is an ex-
prizefighter, and he has two Chinese manservants who carry sharp knives. That tablet is undoubtedly well guarded."

"But it isn't the right tablet," put in Kerr.

"No. The right tablet was cleverly abstracted from the safe by a talented employee of my own, by name Li Chang. It was my opinion that, in spite of my youth and inexperience, the tablet would be safer in my keeping. I also considered it desirable that my enemies should continue to think that Mr. Shelley had the tablet."

"Li Chang—that's the fellow whom Miss Shelley suspected of drugging her coffee," said Kerr.

"Miss Shelley's suspicions now seem amply confirmed, since Li Chang has disappeared. But Li Chang did not drug her coffee. That, unless I am greatly mistaken, was the work of Jennings, the Shelley butler, guardian of the safe. I am taking steps to deal with Jennings."

Martin Kerr was thinking hard. This was an amazing business. The prince had told him a good deal but he wondered just how much the prince had not told him. About Shelley, for instance. Did the prince, by any chance, suspect that Shelley was after the treasure? Was that the reason he had taken the precaution of himself stealing the tablet?

Studying the bland, impassive countenance opposite him, it was impossible to say what thoughts were passing in the prince's mind.

"I think you understand the situation now, Mr. Kerr," the prince said, after a moment's thoughtful silence. "It is for you to decide whether you will help me. Shall we say fifty thousand for your services, and another fifty thousand if you succeed in getting the missing tablet?"

Kerr smiled and shook his head.

"No, I don't think so," he said casually. "I'm not so broke at present. Now will you give me Soames' ad-

dress, and tell me exactly what you would like me to do?"

The prince frowned slightly. "I should prefer to pay you."

"I'm sorry," Kerr said. "But I prefer not to be paid."

The prince shrugged. "Very well. In any case, I shall be grateful for your assistance. Soames' address is one hundred and twenty-three, Portland Street. His apartment is on the ground floor. All that you can do at present is to go there and wait. I do not believe it will be long before you receive visitors. Here is the key to the apartment. I'll appreciate it if you'll call my agent, Mr. Leonard Carson—you'll find his name in the phone book—tomorrow morning at eleven, and tell him any news."

"Right," said Kerr, taking the key. "I'll phone him, tomorrow, if anything turns up."

CHAPTER VII

Morden's Scheme

T was obvious to Martin, driving in a taxi to Portland Street, that he was crazy.

"Completely wacky," he muttered disgustedly.

In the first place he had involved himself deeply in a business which he only imperfectly understood, in which he had no personal concern whatever, and in which he was menaced by the gravest dangers on every side. More than that, he had just refused an offer of a hundred thousand dollars—and all purely and simply because of a childish whim. He wanted to find that missing tablet and present it, with his compliments, to Barbara Shelley. What she would do with it he neither knew nor cared. He only wanted to give it to her.
In spite of his conviction of his own lunacy, he was cheerful as he paid off his taxi and entered the apartment of the late Soames. As Prince Sung had prophesied, events would probably come quickly. The prospect pleased him.

His first action was to make a thorough search of the place, which consisted of a shabby bedroom, sitting room, and kitchen. Of course, it had already been searched once, by Prince Sung’s followers; still there could be no harm in searching it again. It was just possible that Prince Sung’s men had overlooked some important clue to the whereabouts of the tablet, or even the tablet itself.

For an hour he searched rigorously, without result. He had almost given up the search when there came a ring at the front door.

He went to see who wanted him. His visitor was Morden.

It was evident that Morden was in a state of high good humor. His small, dark eyes were shining with glee, his thick red lips were smiling. He flung himself into an easy-chair, took out a cigar and lit it.

“Well, Soames, my boy, it’s all fixed up,” he said in a tone of unctuous satisfaction. “I don’t mind telling you that I consider that tablet’s as good as in my pocket.”

“Is it?” said Kerr. He did not want to say very much until he knew exactly what Morden was talking about.

“It certainly is,” said Morden, chuckling. “They say that the devil looks after his own, and I’m beginning to believe it’s true.”

“What’s the latest?” asked Kerr. Morden chuckled.

“I didn’t have to hint for an invitation tonight. Shelley himself suggested that I come down and entertain his daughter. Not so hard to take, eh? A whole evening for a petting party. Shelley’ll be out himself till about midnight. What do you know about that for luck?”

“Are you sure there’s not a catch in it?” asked Kerr.

“Catch, nothing,” said Morden in a tone of disgust. “The old boy’s strong for me, I tell you—thinks I’m his best friend. Anyway, he doesn’t like to leave his daughter alone. He told me that he’d got in bad with a bunch of roughnecks, and that he’d be glad if I’d come down tonight and keep an eye on things. And so I shall. I’ve got a swell scheme fixed up.”

“It would be, if it’s yours,” Kerr said laconically.

“You can take it from me, it is,” Morden said emphatically. “Listen! At ten o’clock I’m going to turn the radio on strong in the living room. As soon as that happens, Jennings, the butler, is going to open the front door. I’m using that man of yours, ‘Slick Jimmy,’ and three more men of my own. They’re to come in quietly. Slick Jimmy’s to go straight to the study,
and get to work on the safe. He's okay, Slick Jimmy is, a slick worker. Tried him out this afternoon on a couple of safes in my office. Both of them are more up-to-date than Shelley's and he had the pair of 'em open inside ten minutes.

"While he's working on the safe, another man will stand by the front door, while the other two will stretch a wire across the end of the passage that leads from the kitchen. Jennings has fixed the burglar alarms. They won't go off until Jimmy's got the tablet."

MORDEN smiled fatuously, much pleased with himself.

“As soon as the burglar alarm does go off,” he said, “I make a dash out of the sitting room, slamming the door after me, and into the study, where Jimmy hands me the tablet. At the same time the lights go out. When the burglar alarm goes off, Shelley’s two wise bird Chinese probably will make a rush from the kitchen. They’ll get theirs when they fall over the wire at the end of the passage—enough to keep them quiet for about five minutes. Then there’ll be a rush for the front door.

“When Barbara comes out of the living room, and the lights go on again, she’ll find her two Chinese laid out in the hall, and me sitting on the floor of the study with a gun in my hand that I’ll have snatched from one of the raiders. Quite likely I’ll have a sprained wrist, or ankle. The whole thing will be over in five minutes, and the tablet will be in my pocket. What do you think of it?”

“Not much,” Kerr said frankly. “If Jennings can fix the burglar alarm and leave the front door open, I don’t see any need for all the rough-house. It ought to be simpler for Jimmy to get the tablet, make his getaway, and slip the tablet to me outside the house.”

Morden grinned. “Yeah. That would be pretty simple—too simple for me.” He leaned forward, his eyes threaten-

ing. “You’ll keep away tonight—get that! That tablet’s going into only one man’s pocket—mine! One table-
let’s quite enough for you, my lad! I’ve got my reasons for the rough-stuff, too. That should be plain enough, even to you. I’m getting that tablet, and getting the credit with Barbara for putting up a darn good fight as well!”

At Morden’s reference to Barbara, a dangerous glint came into Martin Kerr’s eyes. For a fraction of a sec-
ond he forgot that he was Soames, con-
scious only of a keen desire to smash his fist into Morden’s mouth.

What a dirty trick—to plan to steal the tablet, and at the same time gain credit for a gallant effort to defend it. It was only with tremendous effort that he mastered himself.

“Why are you taking all this trouble to gain Miss Shelley’s good opinion?” he asked evenly. “You’ll lose it as soon as you start after the treasure.”

Morden smiled complacently.

“I’m hoping we’ll be married before then,” he said. “She’s a nice kid. I like ’em with a bit of temper. Once we’re married, I’ll be able to manage her.”

“Married!” said Kerr. “Married!” He gave a short, derisive laugh. “Take a look at yourself in the glass, and forget it,” he said curtly. “Miss Shel-
ley wouldn’t fall for a fat man.”

Morden sat for a moment as if thun-
der-struck, his mouth half open. Then, slowly, his face went purple.

“Fat!” he said, in slow, incredulous tones. “Fat!”

Of a sudden he heaved himself to his feet, his lower jaw thrust out pug-
naciously.

“Say, are you trying to get fresh with me?” he bellowed.

“Don’t get steamed up,” said Kerr, restraining an intense desire to hit that out-thrust lower jaw. “I’m only advising you for your own good.”

Morden glowered, the veins stand-
ing out on his forehead.
“Well, now I’m advising you!” he said in an ugly tone. “You keep away from Hempstead tonight—a long way away—if you value your health. And don’t make any cracks at me, either. When I want your advice, I’ll ask for it!”

“I get you,” said Kerr.

MORDEN gave him a long, scowling look, and subsided sullenly into his chair.

“The trouble with you, Soames,” he growled, “is that you’re yellow. You scare too easily.” He looked Martin Kerr up and down contemptuously. “You poor, white-livered thing! Always scared of something. Shelley, that bunch of highbinders, the Fan Tong, me—I wonder you’ve the pluck to keep alive at all. And while we’re on the subject, what about that bunch of yellow babies? From what you told me, I expected first-class trouble from them, and they haven’t done a thing. When are they likely to make a move?”

Kerr shrugged, his face pale.

“I don’t know,” he said, “but they’ll make it, all right. You can lay odds on that.”

Morden laughed. “Okay. I guess I’m ready for them any time,” he said, and rose. “I’m going now, but I’ll be back in the morning, when I’ve got that tablet. Then we’ll talk a little business. So long!”

Martin Kerr heaved a sigh of relief as the door closed behind him. Never had he had such difficulty keeping his fist out of a man’s face. Even now, recalling that reference to Barbara, he was cold with anger. There would be a heavy reckoning later for those remarks.

But in addition to angering him, the interview had given him a good deal to think about. That very evening, an attempt was to be made to steal the fake tablet from Justin Shelley’s safe—an attempt in which Soames was not to participate.

A faint smile touched the corners of Kerr’s lips. He was going to start having his fun at ten that evening. First, though, he had a few preparations to make.

These did not take him long, since they consisted only in buying some water pistols, and a pint of strong ammonia. With these, and a pound of steak and some potatoes, he returned to the apartment, and set about cooking himself some supper. It would have been simpler to dine out, but he did not want to run the risk of missing any other possible callers.

CHAPTER VIII

The Rout

S

UPPER passed off uneventfully, and there was still half an hour to spare before Kerr had to start for Hempstead. In a corner of the sitting room was a small bookshelf, containing half a dozen books. He went across to it and looked at them. They were an unsatisfactory collection, each looking as dull as dish water. At random, he pulled a volume from the middle of the shelf.

As he opened the book, a piece of paper, folded as a book-marker, fell to the floor. He stooped, picked it up idly, and unfolded it. And then he stared, the deepest interest in his eyes. He was holding the receipt for a package left in the package room of Grand Central Station three days before.

He stared at it thoughtfully. Martin Kerr had a strong hunch, amounting almost to a conviction, that that package contained the missing tablet of Feng-Su. What safer hiding place could Soames have found than the check room of a big station like Grand Central?
Kerr’s first impulse was to head for
Grand Central at once and find out
whether his surmise was correct. But
after a minute’s reflection, he thought
better of that. Anything might hap-
pen at the Shelley home during the
evening, and for the present the ta-
blet was safer where it was. Barbara
was not safe! Not out there, practi-
cally alone with Morden and some
double-crossing servants. To protect
her was Kerr’s big purpose now. The
tablet could be returned later.

Hiding the receipt in another book,
he settled down and read for twenty
minutes. Then he put on his hat and
started for Hempstead.

The illuminated dial on Martin
Kerr’s wrist-watch showed half-past
nine as he entered the drive that led
toward Justin Shelley’s house. The
grounds were quiet. The house itself
was in darkness, save for a narrow
chink of light escaping from a shut-
tered window.

For twenty-five minutes he waited,
crouching in the darkness against the
wall of the house, a few feet from the
front door. Then, inside the house,
the radio began to play loudly. Hardly
had it started when Kerr heard a faint
clear click—the sound of a key being
turned—and saw a narrow chink of
light appear at the edge of the front
door. True to his agreement, Jen-
nings, the butler, had left the front
door open.

In another ten seconds came a sound
of stealthy footsteps coming up the
drive. But until the visitors turned
the bend in the drive, the house would
be hidden from them by the trees.

Martin Kerr decided to take the
chance that the butler, having done his
job, had left the hall. He ran swiftly
up the steps to the front door,
squeezed through as narrow an open-
ing as possible, pushed the door gen-
tly to behind him, and tiptoed lightly
across the hall to the study.

He opened the door of the study
and looked around keenly. The safe
stood in the further corner of the
room, and draped over the windows
were heavy Persian curtains. Swiftly
he crossed to them and slid behind
one of the curtains, straining his ears
to catch the slightest sound.

In a moment or so he heard stealthy
footsteps in the hall, even above the
loud playing of the radio. Then he
heard faintly whispering voices,
though he could not distinguish
words.

The door of the study opened softly,
and there came the soft pad-pad of
rubber-deadened footsteps crossing
the floor. Kerr pushed aside the edge
of the curtain and peeped cautiously
out. Kneeling by the safe was a small,
thin man, his ear against the safe, his
fingers juggling busily with the com-
bination.

As Kerr watched, the little man gave
a satisfied chuckle and pulled at the
safe door. It swung open. The little
man chuckled again.

“Kid’s play,” he muttered, in a low
voice.

THRUSTING his hand into the
safe, he withdrew an irregularly
shaped object, about the size and
thickness of a dog biscuit. As he
studied it, his brow knit in a puzzled
frown.

Then he shrugged, grinned, reached
out to the side of the safe, and touched
something. There was a high, shrill,
jangling sound. The little man had
touched the burglar alarm.

But as it sounded, Kerr stepped
quickly from behind the curtain and
held out a hand.

“Give it to me, Jimmy!” he snapped.

Turning in a flash, the little man’s
right hand darted to his pocket. Then
he grinned.

“Oh, it’s you, is it?” he whispered
hoarsely, in relief. “Hell, you most
scared me out of a year’s growth.”

He handed over the tablet.

“Now lam!” Kerr ordered gruffly.
In the next room the radio had
stopped abruptly. There was a shout, the sound of a door slamming, the pounding of heavy footsteps in the hall, and Morden's big figure filled the doorway.

"Quick!" he demanded, panting—and stopped abruptly as he saw Martin Kerr grinning at him.

Abruptly all the lights went out.

Kerr slipped the tablet into his coat pocket, crouched slightly, then sprang like a cat. There was a dull thud of two heavy bodies colliding, and a crash as they cannoned into the door, knocking over a small table. For a brief space there was a sound of thudding blows and men's hard, fierce breathing, as they fought desperately in the open doorway.

They went out through the doorway into the hall, still fighting. Then came a clattering, a sound of jangling iron, and another crash. The jangling and the crash were caused by Morden staggering back and falling heavily into the big, open fireplace.

There was no question, however, that Morden was not yellow when it came to fighting. He was out of that fireplace on the instant. With a snarl of rage, he heaved himself to his feet, his hand reaching out for a heavy poker. But he got no chance to use it. Martin Kerr was on him like a tiger, and the crash of Morden's second fall mingled with the sound of another crash, as the Shelley's Chinese servants, running full speed from the kitchen, tripped over the wire which had been stretched across the hallway and were neatly blackjacked by the two experts who were waiting there.

Then came a rush of shadowy figures for the open front door, and the sound of running feet growing fainter, along the drive. The raiding party had made a get-away according to plan. And almost at once the lights came on again.

In the light that flooded the hall, Kerr saw that Morden, on one knee, was trying groggily to rise. The two Chinese were sprawled, at the end of the hall toward the kitchen. One of them stirred and sat up. Kerr went across to them.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

The man looked at him suspiciously for a moment, then grinned.

"With many thanks for kind inquiries, am slightly better," he stated. "Recovery will shortly be complete."

"And what about him?" asked Kerr, indicating the other Chinese who was also showing signs of returning consciousness.

"Am confident that he will soon be functioning as usual," gravely replied the man questioned, and added: "Received instructions regarding your identity from illustrious Chinese nobleman this afternoon. Trust that no great damage has been done by invading party during own regrettable incapacity for action."

"No damage at all," said Kerr. "You'd better go and bathe your head. I'll deal with things in here."

He was relieved that neither of the Chinese was badly hurt. It had been rather on his conscience that he had not been able to warn them of their danger.

Morden had risen to his feet and was leaning unsteadily against the wall, a thin trickle of blood running down his lips and across his chin to his white shirt front. The glaring light in his eyes was that of a fiend.

"You—you—" he choked.

"Get out!" Kerr said curtly, and made a gesture toward the open front door.

As Morden seemed disinclined to move, Kerr stepped quickly forward, seized him by the coat collar, hustled him across the hall, kicked him through the door, and closed it. Then he went to find Barbara.

He found her in the study, kneeling forlornly by the open safe, the tears trickling slowly down her face. At his entrance she looked up wearily.
Then all at once, her expression changed, became suddenly animated. With a quick movement, she sprang to her feet—and in her hand a gun was glinting.

“Get your hands up!” she said tightly, and the expression in her eyes was dangerous.

Kerr shook his head and smiled broadly at her.

“No, no,” he answered good-humor- edly. “Not tonight.” He took the tablet from his pocket and held it out to her. “This is what you’re looking for, I think,” he said.

Her lovely blue eyes widened in astonishment. She took an eager step forward, then checked herself. She grinned coldly at him.

“Put it down—over there on that table,” she ordered tensely. “That’s right. Now stand away!”

Watching him warily, she picked up the tablet from the table. He stood and watched her, smiling.

“You needn’t be afraid I’m going to snatch your gun,” he said. “I might, if I thought you intended to shoot me. But you don’t.”

“I will—if you try any tricks,” she warned angrily.

“I heard that Morden was going to try to steal the tablet,” Kerr went on easily, as if he had not heard her threat. “So I thought I’d come along and stop him. That being the case, I don’t you think you ought to point that thing at me. I think you ought to say ‘Thank you.’”

She gave him a puzzled frown, and lowered the gun slightly.

“Mr. Morden!” she exclaimed. “But that’s nonsense! He couldn’t have tried to steal the tablet. He didn’t know anything about it.”

“Oh, yes he did,” Kerr said loftily. “He knew all about the tablet. Ask him, the next time you see him—if you ever see him again. You won’t see him again tonight, because he’s been suddenly called away.”

She looked at him steadily, a curi-ous expression of uncertainty in her dark blue eyes.

“I don’t understand,” she said slowly. “Why have you given me back the tablet? I believe you’re trying to play some trick on me.”

Kerr shook his head at her reproachfully.

“I’m afraid you’ve got a suspicious nature,” he said. “That’s too bad. Never mind why I gave you the tablet; just hang on tightly to it till your father comes. Now I’m going to fire your butler, and then I’m going. But first of all—”

H

E began to walk toward her with a purposeful air. Sudden panic came into her eyes. Her face flooded with color.

She raised the gun in a hand that trembled slightly.

“Keep away!” she said quickly, breathlessly. “I’ll shoot—I really mean it!”

But she did not fire—and once more Martin Kerr took her in his arms and kissed her. Then he turned quickly and walked toward the door without looking back.

She watched him as if rooted to the floor, the color in her cheeks flaming. When he was halfway to the door she raised her gun uncertainly, and lowered it again. The door closed behind him.

As Martin Kerr closed the door, his heart was beating more rapidly than he had ever remembered it to beat. He had a feeling that something of tremendous importance had just happened to him—at the very moment when his lips touched Barbara’s. It was a kiss different from any other he had ever known in all his twenty-eight years.

The realization, the sudden shock of discovery of what actually had happened amazed him. He was in love and he had never thought that anything like that could ever happen to him.
CHAPTER IX

The Tong Raiders

NLY for a moment, however, were Martin Kerr's thoughts in the air. As he stood there, wondering, he saw the butler stealthily open the front door. There was a sound of whispered words and a low whistle.

Kerr started forward quickly. A man was standing in the open doorway—a man whom Kerr recognized. The Chinese who had been present in the room when he had talked to the aged chief of the Fan Tong!

Dim figures were ascending the steps to the front door in the wake of the Chinese in the lead. Martin Kerr thought quickly. He had known that the Shelley butler was in league with the Fan Tong—Prince Sung had told him so. He ought to have kicked the fellow out at once, as soon as he had rid himself of Morden.

But this was no time for hesitation, for thought. Barbara was inside that house, unprotected, and these men thought she had the real tablet of Feng-Su!

Martin Kerr flung himself forward in a long jump. His body, at full speed, struck the half-open door and he went through, slamming it with terrific force in the face of a man who was about to enter. Shouting at the top of his voice for the Chinese servants in the kitchen, Kerr backed against the door, facing the butler and the Chinese who had already entered.

Taken by surprise, they had stepped back quickly. Then the hand of the Chinese went to his sleeve and with the speed of light he withdrew a small, pointed knife. The butler's thick lips drew back in a snarl as he poised his squat, powerful body for a spring.

But that moment's surprise had given Kerr the time he needed. His hand flashed to his pocket and came out with one of the water pistols he had bought that afternoon. Twice he pressed the trigger, and two small jets of liquid shot into the faces of his two antagonists.

Gasping and sputtering they staggered back, their hands up to their faces, blinded and helpless, as the pungent ammonia attacked their eyes and nostrils. The knife the Chinese had drawn tinkled to the floor.

There was a thudding of bodies against the front door, and a sound of raised, excited voices coming from the direction of the kitchen. Kerr shot a quick glance at the front door. It was stout enough. There would be no entrance through that. Taking careful aim at the blindly-exposed chins, he crashed through with two well-timed rights that snapped back the heads of his two antagonists. Then he darted down the hall toward the kitchen.

The back door was open. Three men had entered by it, and were in violent conflict with Shelley's Chinese servants in the pantry. From the yard outside footsteps sounded on the gravel. More enemies were on their way.

Swiftly, Martin Kerr refilled his pistols from a small bottle in his pocket.

The first thing to do was to get that back door closed. The two water pistols squirted simultaneously. Abruptly, the battle in the pantry ceased. One of the Chinese who had taken a charge of ammonia full in the face, was coughing and sputtering, definitely hors de combat. The others had momentarily drawn apart, not knowing what to make of this strange painful smell that caused their eyes and nostrils such discomfort.

In a couple of seconds the door was closed and bolted, and the fight was on again. Twice more the cocked right fist exploded on chins and two more
men sagged to the ground. The Shelley servants, taking their cue from Kerr, flung themselves with zest upon the remaining enemy, and fairly over-whelmed him.

"Look after these fellows," snapped Kerr. "I'm going back into the hall."

WITH streaming eyes, the Chinese to whom Kerr spoke, looked up and nodded.

"Shall perform the duty of looking after with the greatest conscientiousness and zeal, not to mention pleasure," he stated.

Kerr raced back into the hall. Barbara had come out of the study and was bending over the unconscious butler. As Martin entered, she looked up.

"What—" she began.

"The Fan Tong," Kerr explained hurriedly. "I caught the butler letting them in. Tell me—quick—is there any way of getting into the house with both the front and back doors fastened?"

"No," she said. "My father said it would take dynamite to force an entrance with the front and back doors locked."

"Fine! Now I want some good, strong rope."

Barbara hurried to get it for him, and within minutes the hands and feet of the two prisoners were securely bound. Kerr had just finished binding them, when a Chinese pattered from the kitchen.

"Have ascertained that hostile force consisted of eight men," he informed. "Five now out of action, leaving only three."

"How did you find out?" asked Kerr.

The Chinese smiled, a curious little smile.

"Prisoner told me, after slight persuasion," he said blandly.

Kerr merely lifted his eyebrows. He did not bother to ask what form that slight persuasion had taken.

"Eight men, you say?" he asked. "That includes Jennings?"

The Chinese shook his head. "Not including butler. Incautious member of invading party made unpleasant rattling noises at shutter of kitchen window. Self dropped heavy paper-weight on him from upstairs window."

"Good man!" commended Kerr. "Then there are only three of them left in the grounds. And there are three of us in here. They can't reach us, but they might ambush Mr. Shelley's car, when he returns."

"Might do," agreed the Chinese thoughtfully.

Kerr turned to Barbara.

"I'm going to leave you. Keep the house shut tight till your father returns. I'll fix those yellow devils outside."

With no further explanation, he switched off the hall light, opened the front door, and slipped through it into the darkness.

For half an hour, moving like a shadow, he searched the grounds. No trace remained of the invading party. They had evidently had enough, and left.

Near midnight, crouching in the undergrowth, he saw a big car stop before the house, and saw Justin Shelley leave it. Martin Kerr straightened up, and went home, not badly pleased with his night's work... .

Shelley listened to Barbara's rather confused explanations with some impatience. When she had finished he stood frowning at her.

"You say that Morden tried to steal the tablet?" he asked incredulously. "And Soames crowned him—Soames! And then Jennings let in the Fan Tong? You haven't by any chance gone crazy, have you, my dear?"

"No, Father. That's what happened." She spoke a little uncertainly, for her own mind was still in a whirl.

"H'm," said Shelley moodily.
He strode across to Jennings, lifted his bound form, and thrust the man into a chair.

“You treacherous cur!” he roared. “You’d sell me, would you? What have you got to say? And if I’m not satisfied that what you say’s the truth, I’ll hand you over to my Chinese to deal with. Speak up!”

In a rush of terrified words, the truth came out. Jennings admitted having taken bribes from the Fan Tong and from Morden. He had known the details of Morden’s scheme to steal the tablet, and had passed them on to the Fan Tong. He had then arranged with the Fan Tong to let them into the house immediately the tablet was safely in Morden’s possession, and Morden’s gang had made their getaway.

Justin Shelley gazed at him with huge disgust.

“You damned louse!” he bellowed. “You took my money, and betrayed me! You took Morden’s money and betrayed him! And now you’ve betrayed the Fan Tong. Damned if I don’t finish you off myself!”

“Let him go,” said Barbara, in a tone of cold contempt. “He’s not worth shooting.”

“There’s something in that,” sighed her father, a little unwillingly. Then he roared: “But I’ll horsewhip that scoundrel Morden within an inch of his life! Where’s that tablet you say that fellow Soames gave back to you, Barbara?”

She handed it to him. He looked at it hard, and scowled. For half a minute more he kept on looking at it—then he exploded.

“He’s tricked you!” he shouted. “This is not the tablet!”

Barbara’s eyes opened wide, in amazed horror. She had a sudden dreadful feeling that the ground had vanished from under her. Not only had she let Soames trick her, but she had let him kiss her, and she had not shot him. Utter desolation filled her.

“N-not the tablet?” she stammered. “Are you s-sure?”

Looking at her father, she could see that he was not quite sure. For he was examining the tablet again, still scowling blackly, but slightly puzzled.

“The characters look different to me,” he said. “I’ll have to send for Sung in the morning, and show it to him, but I’m convinced that it’s a fake. Why should Soames give you back the tablet?” He shook his great fists furiously. “If I could only get my hands on him again, just once!”

But Barbara had left him abruptly. She simply had to go somewhere and cry.

CHAPTER X

Menace of the Tong

ERR spent a sleepless night in the armchair in Soames’ sitting room, reading Soames’ dull books. He did not think that Morden or the Fan Tong would easily forgive him for his actions during the evening, and was taking no chances of being surprised by either of them while he was asleep.

But the night passed uneventfully. At seven-thirty in the morning he bathed and shaved and cooked himself some breakfast. Shortly after eight o’clock he set out for Grand Central Station.

In spite of his outward calm, he was in a state of high excitement as he handed over his slip of paper to the check room attendant. The time it took the attendant to dig up the package seemed like ages. Then a small parcel was laid on the counter.

“Thirty cents, please,” the attendant said. Kerr paid and walked away with the parcel. He went on to the rear of the waiting room, which was prac-
tically unoccupied at that early hour. Kerr began to untie the knotted string around the parcel. The knot was obstinate, and he was impatient. With a quick, sharp jerk at the string, he snapped it.

As he unfolded the wrappings, a piece of hard, baked clay was disclosed. It was covered on one side with Chinese characters. Sudden exultation filled Martin Kerr. He had found the missing tablet!

So absorbed had he been, that he had not seen anyone approaching. The first intimation he had that he was not alone, was when a calm voice said:

"Good morning!"

He looked up quickly. Facing him was a Chinese who was a complete stranger to him.

For a moment they faced one another, motionless, then Kerr put the tablet into his pocket. The Chinese smiled slightly.

"Shall we talk?" he suggested, sitting down on the bench beside the young explorer. "I think you have an explanation to offer me."

"I don't think so," Kerr said calmly. "To begin with, I haven't the faintest idea who you are."

The Chinese gave an understanding nod.

"That is all the explanation I require," he said. "Now I know that you are not Soames. You are the young man who resembles him. I suspected as much when I heard of your activity last night."

Plainly this Chinese was the agent of the Fan Tong with whom Soames had been negotiating. The knowledge did not worry Kerr. A single member of the Fan Tong could hardly get the tablet away from him in broad daylight in the Grand Central Station.

"That was clever of you," he said, uninterestedly.

"Thank you," the Chinese said gravely. "You also are clever, and cleverness should be rewarded. If you will hand me that tablet which is in your possession, I will pay you twice the sum that our opponents are prepared to pay you for it."

Martin Kerr merely smiled and shook his head.

"Three times the sum that our opponents offer," said the Chinese.

"That's no advance on your previous offer," said Martin. "Twice nothing's nothing. So is three times nothing. As it happens, I'm not in this business for money."

"That is, indeed, regrettable," replied the Chinese. "I should have much preferred to come to satisfactory terms with you." He rose, and bowed slightly. "Good morning," he said courteously, and walked away.

KERR watched him go, frowning slightly. He felt vaguely uneasy. It could be possible that the Fan Tong would be as capable of raiding this public place as they had been of raiding the home of a well-known political boss. The sooner he set about delivering the tablet, the more likely it was to reach its destination. He must not give the Fan Tong time to act.

He left the station quickly, jumped onto the step of a slowly moving taxi, and told the driver to take him to Elm Trees in Hempstead.

But he was still vaguely uneasy. That yellow-man had taken his refusal to discuss terms altogether too calmly. He had a feeling that the Fan Tong had something up their sleeves, that before he could deliver that tablet to Barbara, something unpleasant was going to happen.

But what could happen? How could the Fan Tong prevent him from delivering the tablet now?

He soon found out. He was safe enough on the run out to Long Island, and as long as they kept to the main road, but hardly had the taxi left Hempstead for the winding road that led to the Shelley home when Kerr heard another car behind him. He looked out quickly through the back
window. About four hundred yards away, rapidly overhauling the taxi, was a big, closed limousine.

And Martin Kerr recognized that car. It was the same one in which he had escaped from the Fan Tong with Barbara. Alarm ran through him. If the Fan Tong men in that car caught him before he reached Elm Trees, the tablet was lost. He leaned forward and yelled to the driver.

"Step on it! If you get me to Elm Trees without letting anybody pass us, there's a sawbuck in it for you."

"Can do!" came the driver's cheerful voice, and the taxi shot forward with renewed speed.

Glancing back anxiously, Kerr saw that it was going to be a near thing if he made it. The driver was getting every bit of speed possible out of the taxi, but the black limousine was faster, was gaining momentarily. Then half a mile ahead, he saw that the iron gates leading to the Shelley home were wide open.

"Drive straight through, and don't stop till you get to the house!" he shouted.

Again he glanced back anxiously. Slowly, but surely, the other car was overhauling them. The distance between the two cars lessened until Kerr could clearly see the slant eyes and yellow face of the driver.

But the entrance to the drive was only a few yards away now, and Martin Kerr realized, with a thrill of exultation, that they would probably just win the race.

He was right. The pursuing car was still a good thirty yards behind. The taxi shot in through the entrance to the grounds, skidded around the bend halfway along the drive, and pulled up with a screaming of protesting brakes outside the front door of the house.

Kerr piled out and leaped for the front door, pulling lustily on the bell. At the same instant the limousine pulled up sharply. Four men sprang from the back of it, and made for Kerr as their driver began to turn to face the entrance to the drive. Once they got the tablet, the Fan Tong would lose no time in making their getaway.

With his back to the front door, Martin Kerr met the onrush with a faint smile—his fighting smile. But with odds of four to one in their favor, his pursuers made the mistake of being over-confident. They did not realize that it might be difficult, even for the four of them, to pull one man down, take the tablet away from him, and get away again.

In that first rush they paid for that mistake. As the foremost Chinese came bounding up the steps, swinging a short, thick club, Kerr's right shot out at lightning speed to meet him, with all the power of his muscular body behind it. The blow caught the Chinese with terrific force, fairly on the point of the chin, knocking him flying backward off into the man behind him, hurling both of them to the ground. The club flew from his hand, and struck with a dull thud against the door of the house.

Dodging a blow aimed at his head, Kerr followed that right with a short, hard left, which sent another man staggering. The remaining Chinese hesitated, and stepped back. From the black car came a shrill sharp order, in Chinese. Three of the attackers drew back, leaving the fourth lying senseless at the foot of the steps.

Kerr's taxi driver's eyes were staring from his head as he stared from Kerr to the Chinese. Plainly he took this as his cue to be elsewhere—for as plainly the ruckus was not over. At the top of the steps stood Kerr, still smiling faintly, waiting for the next attack. The Chinese were also waiting, watching him with narrowed eyes.

Then, from the black car came a short, sharp, vicious crack as a gun exploded. Kerr felt a jarring pain in
his left shoulder, and sudden faintness overcame him. Something warm and wet was running down inside his shirt. Dimly, as from a distance, he heard the driver of the black car bark another order. There came another rush. Desperately, he braced himself to meet it, his dizzy mind intent on one thing only—to keep the tablet safe.

But his strength was unequal to his will. He felt himself sinking. Hands were clawing at him, pulling him down. He felt a savage blow upon his injured shoulder, followed by sickening pain. Then he heard an indignant shout in a raucous Hell’s Kitchen voice.

As if by a miracle, the clawing hands relaxed. The taxi driver’s first thought may have been to be law-abiding, but he was scandalized by the spectacle of a clean-cut young American being attacked and shot at by a yellow man, apparently on his own doorstep. He had suddenly entered the fray.

With a tremendous effort, Martin Kerr struggled upright, his back supported by the door. Through his dazed, half-conscious mind was running a continual refrain: “They must not get the tablet!”

Then the support behind him gave. He felt himself falling backward. His eyes closed wearily. Everything was getting farther and farther away. As from an immense distance, he heard a hallow of rage, and a sound of thudding blows. Then came the sound of a motor engine, drowning other sounds.

In a dim, subconscious way, he was aware of hands touching him, raising his head. He opened his eyes, to see a pair of dark blue, anxious eyes looking into his own.

Immense relief came over him. The tablet was safe.

“In right-hand side pocket—tablet—for—you—with my compliments,” he murmured feebly, and once again the faint smile touched his lips. “Darling,” he added.

Then everything faded into darkness, and he knew no more.

* * * * *

Martin Kerr could not have told how long it was before he opened his eyes, blinked drowsily, and stirred. All he was conscious of at the first moment of awareness was that he was comfortable in the extreme, with a lassitudinous sense of well-being. He seemed to be lying in a bed, but what bed, and where it was he did not know. He tried to prop himself up on an elbow and look around, but could not. His left arm was strapped closely to his side.

“So you’re awake, are you?” said a deep, booming voice. “How are you feeling now?”

Kerr turned his head in the direction of the voice. Sitting by his bedside was Justin Shelley. A short distance away, standing by a window of the bedroom, was Prince Sung.

“Not too bad,” Kerr said rather weakly. “How did I get here?”

“I put you there,” said the big political boss. “The Fan Tong plugged you through the shoulder.”

“What happened to them—the Fan Tong, I mean,” Kerr asked quickly. “They didn’t get the tablet?”

Justin Shelley shook his head and smiled grimly.

“No, they didn’t get the tablet. One of them got a broken arm, and another a broken head. You put one of them out yourself. The other, and the driver, got away.” He scowled, heavily, and went on: “You young rascal, what the devil do you mean by deceiving me—pretending you were that blackguard Soames? Knocking me out into the bargain, damn your eyes!”

“I didn’t pretend that I was Soames,” said Kerr. “You insisted that I was!”

“H’m,” said the politician, and stared at Kerr thoughtfully.

“You’re okay,” he said abruptly and unexpectedly. “The best thing you can do is give up this exploring busi-
ness of yours and tie up with me. I've got a kind of wanderlust myself, boy—don't stay put too long, without hitting for some place nobody ever heard of. You could come along with me, if you've got to explore. We'd make things hum between the two of us. Think it over."

He rose from his chair and looked around.

"Barbara's cooking your lunch herself. Making you some broth. Vile stuff, but it won't be any good arguing. You'll have to take it. I promised to let her know as soon as you came around."

He left the room, and when the door had closed, Prince Sung turned to Kerr.

"I am deeply grateful to you, Mr. Kerr," he murmured. "Through your efforts, I now have both tablets." He smiled. "Also I understand why you would accept no reward from me. I think you will obtain your reward from someone else."

"I'm glad you've got the tablets, Prince," said Kerr. "I hope you find your treasure all right."

Then a faint shade of uneasiness crossed his face.

"What do you think will happen now?" he went on. "I hate to be lying here all busted up and useless, while the Fan Tong may be up to all kinds of devilment against Mr. Shelley and his daughter."

Prince Sung shook his head reassuringly.

"I should not let that worry me," he said. "It is unlikely that the Fan Tong will bother about you or the Shelley's any more. They are after the tablets, and I have them. I sail for China tomorrow, and they will probably follow me. Then—" he shrugged lightly—"well, what is to be, will be... But one more thing I have to say to you. Mr. Shelley sent for me early this morning to look at a tablet which you left with his daughter last night. He had doubts as to its genuineness. It seemed to me that he might be a little offended if he discovered the precautions I had taken to guard the tablet, and I assured him that it was genuine."

The door of the bedroom opened, and Barbara entered. Prince Sung crossed the room to Martin Kerr's bedside and held out his hand.

"Good-bye, Mr. Kerr. Henceforward, please consider me among your friends. I hope that we shall meet again."

They shook hands, and he left the room.

Barbara crossed the room slowly, a little embarrassed, and came and stood by the bedside.

"How are you feeling now?" she asked.

"Fine!" said Kerr, and smiled at her.

A faint flush spread over her creamy skin, and she looked hurriedly away, as if unable to meet his eyes.

"I—I want to thank you for saving my life," she said, a little uncertainly. "Prince Sung told me how you saved me from the Fan Tong. I'm sorry I was so horrid to you afterwards."

"Horrid?" repeated Kerr, as if he could not understand that. "Were you horrid?"

"Y—you know I was!" she said, a trifle indignantly. "I—I slapped your face. And then Father wanted to horsewhip you—and all the time you were trying to help us. I—I don't know what you must think of me—of us!"

Martin Kerr looked at her steadily. "You do know what I think of you," he said. "Or do you want me to tell you?"

For a moment they looked deep into each other's eyes. The color in Barbara's face suddenly deepened.

"I—I think I'd better go and see about your lunch," she said hastily.

The young explorer reached out suddenly with his unwounded arm and grasped her hand.
“Sit down, right here,” he said.

A little hesitant, she sat down on the edge of the bed as he held tightly to her hand.

“You know exactly what I think of you,” he repeated fiercely. “Have I got to kidnap you, as the Fan Tong did, or are you going to marry me of your own accord?”

“I—I—” she began, then suddenly smiled joyously, and turned impulsively toward him. “It wouldn’t be good for you to kidnap people, with your wounded shoulder,” she said softly. “I suppose I’ll have to marry you of my own accord.”

“Darling!” said Martin.

His arm went round her, drawing her toward him. This time she did not resist when their lips met.

FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

MURDER FOR A MILLION
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JOEY DOANE knew there was something wrong when Big Tom Leslie came into the office. Leslie's face was flushed a deeper red than usual, and his lips were thinned against his clenched teeth. He swept off his hat, scaled it to a leather settee, and crossed to the massive walnut desk. His forehead glistened with sweat in the white dome-light. Joey had started to rise from the leathered chair behind the desk.

"Never mind, Joey," Leslie said. "I don't feel like sitting down, anyway. Something bad just happened. Something damn bad, get me?"

Joey nodded, waiting for Leslie to continue. He sat meekly behind Big Tom's desk, a little dapper man with slicked black hair and a bony sallow face. He looked like the errand boy and informer he was for Big Tom Leslie. Everything about him fitted the ordinary conception of the gutterbred, small time crook. Everything except his wide dark eyes.

There was a strange sensitiveness in his eyes, utterly foreign to the rest of his appearance. His big eyes watched Leslie, noting the throbbing vein in the thick neck, the tight curve of the mouth, the jumping muscle at the jaw.
Leslie was a gigantic man. He faced Joey across the desk, smelling strongly of tobacco and whiskey. Something of the awe and loyalty Joey felt for the man showed in his eyes.

"You're the only one I'd trust, Joey," Leslie said, smiling. "I've got to have help, understand? I wouldn't tell another soul." The smile turned into a grimace, and his right hand flicked inside his coat, reappearing with the glint of a heavy revolver. He placed the revolver on the desk, beside the little brass sign that read, "T. Leslie." "I just used this gun, Joey. I used it on Sam Vernon."

Joey sat slackly in the chair, staring up at him.

"Sam Vernon?" he asked hoarsely. "You mean you—shot him?"

"Killed him." Leslie's voice was harshly flat. "The rat was holding out some of the dough the 'Golden Pheasant Club' was taking in. You know that—it was you that put me wise in the first place. I went into his office a little while ago to have a showdown with him. I was so mad about it I wanted to handle the matter myself. We had an argument, and I told him I didn't want anything more to do with him or the club. I said he could have the whole joint if he came across with twenty grand by the end of the week. He blew up and made a move for that gun of his in the desk. I had to let him have it."

For seconds Joey looked up at Leslie without speaking. His tongue crept out and touched his lips.

"You—you didn't let any of the boys know yet?" he asked.

"No, and I'm not going to. It's the first time I ever knocked off a guy, Joey. I've shot guys before, but I never killed anyone, see? I can't let those torpedoes of mine know about it. I don't want them to get anything on me. You and I can handle this. You're the only one I'd trust, boy."

His sidekick nodded, feeling proud of that.

"How about witnesses?" he asked. Nobody saw you, or anything?"

Big Tom Leslie cursed harshly. "That's just it. It happened right in Sam's private office, and the place is practically soundproof. He had it made that way when the club moved in there. Well, the joint is soundproof as far as ordinary sounds go, but a big gun makes a lot of noise. Anybody in the dressing room next door could have heard it. And it was just my luck someone had to be in there at the time. You know, that dancing babe you been looking over all week—Marcia Trent."

"Marcia Trent." Joey repeated the name softly. He swallowed hard, thinking of lovely dark-haired Marcia Trent, who hardly knew he was alive. The thought of her made his heart beat wildly, and sent color flooding into his face. "She heard the shot, is that it?" he asked.

"Yeah. She don't usually start making up for her act until around six-thirty, but she came in early tonight because she wanted to try on a new costume and go through her routine before she went on. The shot sounded like cannon-fire in the office, but I was pretty sure nobody'd hear it outside. I figured all the dressing rooms were empty. But there she was, when I came out."

"What'd she say?"

"She said she thought she heard a shot. But I just laughed it off. I told her it was her imagination. She said maybe it was, because the sound was so faint she could hardly hear it. I told her Sam had gone out, and she went back into the dressing room."

"But what if somebody happens to go into the office?" Joey asked anxiously. "Then they'll—"

"No chance of that. I made sure I took the key from the inside and snapped the lock. It's the only key I know of to the office. They'll think he slipped out the back door into the alley. He did that a lot—you told me so yourself."

"Yeah." Joey's voice was dry and
watching Leslie thrust the revolver inside his coat. "Let's go. I won't let you down, Tom. . . ."

They watched the floor show at the Golden Pheasant Club from a table close to the orchestra dais. The Negro band was swinging it for a blond singer who was doing more swaying than singing. There was a sense of intimacy in the small, crowded club. Joey had always liked the place; it gave him a feeling of importance to sit there among some of the East's best known celebrities.

But tonight, sipping at a highball that had gone flat, he waited tensely for the singer to finish and the m.c. to announce Marcia Trent.

Across from him, Big Tom Leslie sat at ease, smoking a cigar, his face placid. There had been no alarm given yet; Sam Vernon was not being missed. Leslie was perfectly complacent, willing to wait until the opportunity came to get Marcia Trent.

The singer finished her act and vanished out of the spotlight. Then the m.c. announced in a nasal voice:

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Queen of Taps, the Darling of the Dance, Marcia Trent. . . ."

She came running lightly into the cone of brightness, a slim girl in silken blouse and shorts. Her legs were long and white and smooth looking; her small-boned face had a fresh, warm beauty. Joey forgot Big Tom Leslie. He watched her flying dark hair, her expressive hands and her more expressive feet. When her swift, professional routine was over and she had run off the floor with hardly a bow, Leslie tapped Joey on the arm.

"We better go back and see her in a few minutes," he said. "She's not even taking an encore. That shot of mine must have her thinking. Maybe she'd get a notion to call the cops before the night's over."

Joey rose a couple of minutes later and followed Leslie through a doorway that led to the dressing rooms. They could hear incessant talk and

whisper. "What do you intend to do, get rid of the body?"

"Of course, dope." Leslie took out a cigar, nipped off the end viciously, and lighted the slim brown cylinder. He sucked in smoke for a few moments then crushed out the cigar savagely. "The damn thing tastes lousy. Listen, Joey, we got to go back there and cart Sam out, get that? We got to dump him before anyone catches wise."

"Yeah, but when the cops find the body, Marcia will remember the shot she heard. She'll tell the cops you came out of Sam's office just afterwards, and—"

"Yeah, she'll be damn glad to get the chance," Leslie cut in sharply. "Ever since I tried to take her out that time, she's had a mad on. I give her a business proposition and she gets insulted. So she'll be tickled to put me on the spot. If she gets the chance. But right now, unless she's told someone else, she's the only one who knows. Get me, Joey?"

Joey nodded very slowly.

"You mean she's got to get the same dose as Sam got. But how—?"

"Let me handle the brainwork. All I need's a little help in getting Sam out of there, and maybe a little help with the babe. I'll show you the newest frame you ever saw."

JOEY looked from Leslie's set features to the dully glinting revolver on the desk. A corner of his mouth twitched; his right hand clenched and unclenched slowly.

"Any reason you wouldn't like to do this with me, Joey?" Leslie said quietly. "I don't want the job bungled. It's the first time I ever asked you to do anything like this. Are you going to let me down?"

"It means the girl, Marcia, has got to be killed, doesn't it?" Joey said.

"Yeah."

"Okay." Joey picked a scratch pad from the desk, leaned down, and opened a lower drawer. He slapped the pad inside. Then he came erect,
laughter from the various rooms, but the short hallway was deserted. The door to Marcia Trent's dressing quarters was open slightly. Her taut voice was low and clear:

"Paul, I know there's something wrong. I know it was a shot I heard. I tried the door after he left, and it was locked. I'm going to call in Sergeant Mullin. He can open the door with a master key. If Sam isn't in there and if there's no evidence of a shot having been fired, it won't even have to go in the records. But I've got to know."

"Of course, dear, you're right," a brisk masculine voice said. "If something's wrong it should be investigated right away. No harm in having this Mullin look over things. I'll call him now, if you want."

"There's a phone booth—" Marcia had begun to say.

L E S L I E had pushed in the door of the dressing room. Joey, standing in the hallway, looked along its length. There was nobody in sight. He slipped into the room, closed the door and locked it.

"Okay, babe, and you, handsome, stay where you are," Leslie said evenly. "Joey, frisk the guy."

Joey's glance was roving over the small room with its tiny closet, its dressing table and polished mirror and naked lights. His eyes, avoiding the girl, rested on the man's darkly handsome face. He was a tall young man, wide shouldered in tweeds, with wavy dark hair and strong, well moulded features. The girl stood beside him stiffly, the make-up bright and splotchy looking against her pale skin. She stared at Leslie's revolver.

"I—I'm sorry, Paul," she whispered.

"I should have called Sergeant Mullin right after I heard the shot."

The young man's lips twisted disdainfully.

"The king of the numbers racket and his pet rat—a formidable opposition," he said mockingly. "Sit down, gentlemen."

Leslie cursed, and Joey moved forward to pat the man's body quickly and efficiently. He knew Marcia was engaged to this young man; he knew his business, his reputation, and most of his habits. The young man was Paul Carroll, a lawyer associated with a famous law firm. Joey had gone through his record thoroughly, and he'd given Carroll a grudging commendation in his own mind. His eyes were veiled, his face blank when he stepped back.

"He's clean, Tom," he said.

"Okay." Fury rode in Leslie's voice.

"This guy don't know his manners, Joey. We may have a chance to beat some into him. Look out in the hallway. See if anyone's coming."

Joey unlocked the door, swept a glance along the hallway.

"Not a soul," he said. "They must all be on the floor now, starting the finale. Maybe they'll be paging Marcia in a minute." He ducked back into the room, locking the door. "Here comes Sully now. Lucky he didn't spot me."

Knuckles slammed the door a moment later.

"Finale, Miss Trent," a voice said.

"You've only got a few seconds."

Leslie stepped toward Carroll and the girl. He placed the muzzle of the gun against Carroll's breast pocket.

"Tell him you're sick, babe," he ordered in a whisper.

Marcia Trent looked at the gun, licked her lips, and called out hesitantly:

"I'm not feeling well, Sully. Tell Duke he'll have to skip my turn."

"Okay. Anything I can get you?"

"Nothing, thanks."

Leslie smiled.

"All right, Joey," he said after a few seconds, "open the door again. We're going to march right into Sam's office. There won't be anybody out there now for five minutes or so, with everybody on the floor. Plenty of time."

He shifted the revolver from Carroll's chest to the girl's back. They
went out quickly, along the empty hallway to Sam Vernon’s door. Leslie handed Joey the key. Joey unlocked the door, and they filed into the big, ornate office. A desk light was burning.

Sam Vernon was slumped in a far corner, blood glistening on his white shirt front and on the floor. Leslie pointed to the heavy sheet-metaled door at the rear of the office.

“That leads out to Sam’s car,” he said. “The keys are in his pocket. Get them, Joey. But first lock the other door.”

Joey snapped the key in the lock, searched Vernon, his stomach tightening at sight of the blood. He found a ring of keys, unlocked the rear door and swung it open. A bar of brightness from the desk light shot into the alley, glinting on the black low-slung car outside the door.

THEY stood looking at the car for a second, Leslie with the revolver at Marcia Trent’s back, Paul Carroll close to the doorway beside Joey, his handsome face white at the jaws. Marcia Trent had nothing over her dancing costume, and she shivered a little at the cool rush of air into the office. Joey tried to keep his glance from her, tried not to see the loathing in her eyes.

“Remember, fancy puss,” Leslie said harshly. “One wrong move and the babe gets a bullet in her back. You drive, Joey. The key’s on that ring. Take the Post Road and go as far as the Old Trail that leads up to the mountain. Know where I mean?”

“Yeah.” Joey knew there was a rustic cottage off the Old Trail, where Sam Vernon had often spent two or three days at a time taking it easy.

“We’ll leave Sam right here,” Leslie went on. “Lock the door after us, Joey.”

Joey clicked the door shut and slid into the car’s front seat while Leslie herded Carroll and Marcia into the rear. He heard a thud, a suppressed scream, and Leslie’s hard laugh.

“Had to do that, babe. Only way to keep him quiet. He’s not dead—yet. Drive careful, Joey.”

“Yeah, sure.” Joey half-turned, saw Carroll slouched loosely in a corner of the seat, with Marcia in the center, and Leslie on the outside. “What’d you do, bop him, Tom?”

“Yeah. Had to. He might try something funny. He’ll be unconscious until we get out to the Old Trail. You know where to turn off, don’t you?”

“The cottage, huh? Okay.” Joey sent the car rolling smoothly into the street. They swung along the dim thoroughfare, turned off it and headed for the Post Road. In the rear-view mirror, Joey could see Leslie wrapping a blanket around the girl’s shoulders.

“Good thing Sam kept this blanket in here,” Leslie said. “It’ll keep her warm until it gets time to put her on ice.”

Joey drove with deliberate care. He cut into the Post Road, driving slowly over the four-lane highway until they reached the rutted Old Trail. He swung into this. Woods and an occasional field and farmhouse came into view on either side. They reached a section where the road began an upgrade and pines thrust their green lengths into the sky.

Joey twisted the wheel, swinging the car into a narrower road between trees and brush that scraped at the sides and whispered against the roof. He guided the car at a bare ten miles an hour now, his hands clamped tautly to the wheel.

He was sweating; he could feel tiny rivulets trickle down his face. For the first time in his life he was directly connected with murder, and every instinct in him was fighting the thought. He knew the truth—that he wanted Marcia Trent to live. Joey had known many women, but he had never known one who had attracted him like Marcia. She was clean, wholesome, fine, every-
thing he had ever dreamed about in a girl. Joey’s teeth ground together at the thought that she was to be murdered...

Leslie’s voice cut harshly into his mind.

“Safe landing, boy. There’s the cottage ahead.”

In the white glow of the headlights, the grey cottage ahead in the clearing looked battered, ready to crumble in the rushing wind. Joey braked the car in front of a row of tree stumps, slid from under the wheel to the ground.

CARROLL groaned a little in the rear seat, and Marcia soothed him with soft words.

“We’ll be all right, darling,” she whispered. “They haven’t the nerve to kill us. They’ll—”

“Out, babe,” Leslie snapped. “You, too, fancy pants. Walk ahead, where I can see you. Remember, this gun is still loaded.”

Marcia got out first, thrusting her smooth, long legs out to the rough ground. Leslie followed, holding the revolver close to her spine. Carroll climbed out the other side, reeled for a moment, then turned toward the cottage. He stumbled, fell to his knees, and rose slowly. Leslie cursed him.

“You ought to get it now, handsome. Hurry it up.”

Joey followed them across the clearing and up the warped steps to the sagging door. He shoved in through the unlocked porch. An unlighted oil lamp gleamed faintly on a solid, roughly hewn table. Joey lighted it, and the wavering glow sent eerie shadows chasing across the walls and the beamed ceiling. The room was big and dusty, with rustic tables and chairs, a stone fireplace, and a huge couch under the windows.

Leslie opened a door and looked into a smaller sized bedroom. There was an unmade bed against the wall, an old-fashioned dresser with masculine undergarments piled on it. Some pieces of clothing hung on wall hooks.

Leslie closed the door, saying:

“Just the proper atmosphere for our work. The idea is this, Joey: Sam brought Marcia out here, then had to go back to the club for something. Carroll had a row with him there and shot him. Then fancy pants came out here, and killed the babe, then himself. You see? The babe’s cheating on him, and Carroll gets sore enough to bump off all three, including himself. It’s the only way the cops can figure it. Nobody’ll miss Sam for a day or two. He used to run off at odd times—nobody’ll get wise for a couple of days. Then when they get anxious, they’ll bust into the office and come look up here. The difference of less than a couple hours in the deaths won’t matter then.”

“Yeah, but—” Joey protested.

“But nothing,” Leslie said. “It’s perfect. At first I had the idea of cleaning up the blood in the office and dumping Sam and the babe up here together. But with fancy pants getting in on things, I figured it out this way. After we bump them, we drive back to town. Then I’ll get my car and drive it out here again, with you driving Sam’s. We leave Sam’s car here and go back to town again. It’s a little troublesome, but worth it. It’ll be too neat for the cops to bungle. Don’t it sound okay, Joey?”

“We-ell, yeah, I guess so.” Joey’s voice was a dry whisper. “But still, Tom, it’s taking a long chance. You can’t tell where you might slip up and—”

“Nuts. It’s the only chance. All we got to do is keep quiet. I’ll take over the club, and that’s one more doublecrosser out of the way. You’re not scared, Joey? You’re the only guy I’d trust—I told you that.”

“Yeah.” Joey looked at Marcia Trent. Her face was very white under the make-up, but her mouth was tight with defiance. She stood within a few feet of Carroll, clutching the blanket that covered the upper part of her body. Carroll’s eyes flicked from Les-
lie to the girl and back again. His strong face was taut, the jaw muscles bulging whitely.

JOEY sighed a little. Two elements were fighting in him: his loyalty to Leslie, and his desire to see the girl and Carroll live. Leslie watched him with puzzlement in his eyes. Joey’s lips compressed into a firm line. His right hand slid into his side pocket. He brought out the hand gripping a small automatic!

“Tom,” he said huskily, “this is the showdown.” He kept the automatic pointing at the floor, and drops of sweat from his face spattered on the black metal. “I took this gun from your desk when I put away that pad. I had an idea I might need it.”

“What the hell?” Leslie stepped away from the girl, backed against a table, his eyes narrowing. “What’s the idea, Joey? You lost your nerve?”

“I don’t think so, Tom,” Joey said evenly. “Maybe I’ve got some nerve, for the first time in my life. Ever since you told me about killing Sam, I been fighting myself. Now—well, now, I’m telling you, you can’t kill them, see?”

“Why, you little dope.” Leslie spoke through clenched teeth. “You fell for the babe, is that it?”

“In a way,” Joey said quietly. “I never knowingly had anything to do with a killing in my life. I don’t want to start in now.” He touched his lips with a dry tongue. “Listen, Tom, why not let them go? It’s their lives for silence, see? Sam was a no-good. They won’t mind keeping quiet about him if you let them go. Listen—”

“Shut up, dope!” Leslie swore harshly. “Put that gun away, get me?”

The only sounds in the room then for long moments were the sibilant breathing of the girl, the faraway cry of birds, the scuttling of a mouse in a corner. Carroll and Marcia Trent were staring at Joey; the girl’s eyes were wide and shining. Joey raised the automatic, centered it on Leslie. His face looked drawn and pallid. His forehead was slick with sweat.

“It’s like that, Tom,” he said tightly. “I won’t let you kill them. God knows I wish there was some other way.”

“Damn you,” Leslie snapped. “You know I couldn’t take the chance of letting them go. You were the only guy I’d trust, and now—” He cursed softly. “Put that gun away, or by God, I’ll kill you.”

“I won’t put the gun away, Tom,” Joey said very slowly. “You’ll have to kill me. . . .”

They faced each other, tense, white-faced. Joey was sure that in another second his knees would fade away under him. His head was beginning to whirl, and his eyes had difficulty in focusing. Only his gun-hand was steady.

“Damn you, damn you, Joey!” Leslie raged in a choked voice. He fired, the revolver recoiling slightly in his hand. The sound was like thunder roaring in the big room. Joey reeled, his left hand clawing at his chest. Blood leaked between his spread fingers. He shot, twice, then smashed down on his face. The automatic loosened from his fingers and skidded away. He looked up at Leslie. The big man was staggering; his revolver thudded to the floor. There was a growing blossom of red at his side, and another at his chest. He fell to his knees.

“You did it, Joey,” Leslie whispered painfully. “Damn you, you—”

Joey watched through glazed eyes. He saw Leslie’s prone figure stiffen, saw Marcia Trent and Carroll cling together for a moment. Then Carroll was picking up the two guns, tossing them to a leather-cushioned chair. Joey was aware that Marcia was kneeling over him. Her hands were tugging at his vest now. She turned away then.

“He—he’s done for, Paul,” she said unsteadily. “I’d give anything for him to live.”

Joey didn’t mind the blood that was spilling from his mouth. He didn’t mind the blindness, or his choking throat.

He was conscious only of Marcia’s faint voice.

“It’s a case of live by the gun, die by the gun, I guess,” she went on. “Leslie deserved to die that way. But Joey—I wish, somehow, I’d had a chance to know him better. . . .”

Joey heard no more than that, but there was a semblance of a smile at his lips that even death couldn’t smooth away. . . .

Next Issue: SEACOAST OF DEATH, a Complete Novelet of Federal Agents on a Smuggling Trail, by DENSLOW M. DADE—and Many Other Stories

When a girl needs help

Don’t Offend... Use SEN-SEN
Breath Sweetener... Delightful Confection
HE GAVE HIM A GUN
By LAURENCE DONOVAN
Author of "The Thing in the Lake," "Murder Pin," etc.

To Avenge the Murder of His Best Friend, George Burke Grimly Battles to Outsmart a Wily Killer!

MORIARITY, the traffic cop, rubbed the back of a red-haired hand across his eyes. When he took his hand away, the man with the gun was still there. He was walking toward the Greystone Branch Bank now.

The man with the gun was wearing a neat, brown business suit. A soft hat that had a snap-brim at the right angle to shade his vision from the mid-afternoon sun. He was moving purposely toward the entrance to the bank.

The gun was carried carefully under the man's left arm, the muzzle pointed down at the sidewalk. The man appeared entirely oblivious to the gaping peasantry of midtown Manhattan. He seemed to be accustomed to those villagers who will crowd around a ballyhoo boy threading a needle, and who will buy thread because it went into the needle.

Moriarity's traffic whistle shrilled. His thumb flicked a button on the flap of his holstered revolver.

"Hey, you!" he shouted, leaving traffic on its own andshouldering his
way onto the sidewalk. "You with that gun! Stand still there now! What th' devil do you think you're doin'?"

The tall man halted, turning mild, blue eyes upon the cop. He blinked behind rimless glasses secured on a fine gold chain. His left hand gently stroked his long chin.

"Meaning me, Moriarity?" he said pleasantly. "I'm the only one about who seems to have a gun."

The traffic cop partly restored his dignity by roughly pushing three goggling youths and wanted to know why they were holding up traffic that way? Moriarity's ripe tomato face suddenly became redder. He made a movement to conceal the hand that had been furtively sneaking his revolver from its leather. His other hand wiped sweat from his forehead.

"By damn!" he grunted apologetically. "I didn't know you, Mr. Burke, in that new suit. Everybody was actin' kind of scared when they seen you—"

"Apparently going out for a little hunting in the peaceful jungles of the West Side," finished the tall man cheerfully. "It's a fowling piece, Moriarity, designed to kill birds. Seeing that birdshot would hardly make a dent in the tough stool pigeons of this district, and they being probably the only worthwhile game on the wing. I'll not be violating the ordinance against discharging firearms, et cetera."

"That's a good one, Mr. Burke," said Moriarity, chuckling. "But I seen you goin' toward the bank an' I had to think fast. Maybe you might've been a tougher bird than a stool pigeon."

He saw George Burke's mild grin, so he judged his retort must have been clever and he laughed. A policeman halting a man with a gun carried openly was enough to block any sidewalk. Moriarity turned and waved a big hand.

"Move along, alla yuh! There ain't gonna be any shootin'! Out of the way there, an' let Mr. Burke through to his bank, you. This way, Mr. Burke."

Moriarity wedged an opening with a rough shoulder. In the entrance to the bank, George Burke smiled again.

"Thanks, Moriarty," he said. "Sorry to have caused you all that trouble. The fowling piece has jammed and I couldn't find the carrying case for it. I brought it down to a shop to be fixed. I'm going up country tonight. Season opens at midnight."

"Good luck, Mr. Burke," Moriarity said, and went back to unsnarl the traffic at the corner.

So Moriarity failed to see the stony grimness that erased all the smiling mildness from Burke's face. He did not hear the words that gritted through Burke's suddenly clenched teeth.

"And good hunting, Mr. Burke!" said the banker to himself.

Moriarity, four years now on the bank corner, the recipient each Christmas of a brand new five-dollar bill from the mild George Burke, would have been greatly shocked to know that a dead man sat in a locked apartment which Burke had visited less than an hour before. A dead man dressed in a tuxedo and a bullet in his head, whose very evident suicide the mild George Burke had set himself out to avenge.

George Burke walked swiftly through the bank lobby. Two clerks who were checking up books, glanced up and saw his long-chinned face, and immediately returned to their figures. Burke opened the door with the word "President" marked on its frosted glass.

He walked inside and set the light shotgun, a hand-tooled fowling piece, inside the washroom door. Then he came back to the wide, neatly kept desk. James Foster, the president, had always been a careful, orderly man. His desk always was as clean when he went to lunch, as when his papers were locked away for the day. It was well that this was so, for today James Foster had not returned from lunch.

Burke had been at his own cashier's
desk when Foster had gone out at one o'clock. Foster had nodded, then had an afterthought and turned back. He had removed a bright, newly notched key from his ring.

"Thought you should have a key to my private file, George," he had said, and smiled when he said it. "Might save you the trouble of having it jim-mied open if I should forget to come back from lunch some day."

Burke now took this bright, new key from his pocket. He went over and inserted it into a steel filing case, the oldest and least modern in the office. Before he removed any papers, Burke stepped swiftly to the narrow, heavily barred window giving light from a short alleyway at the rear of the bank.

"I didn't imagine it then," he muttered. "They were in the crowd when Moriaty stopped me, and they followed me here."

All he had seen in the alleyway had been a man's slouch hat. But it had been pulled back too quickly as he had walked to the window. Burke reached up and closed the slatted shade.

THERE were various papers concerning the bank's business in James Foster's private file. Burke's mouth went tight when he picked up one and read:

Changes in my will, as suggested, doubtless will be unimportant when this document is read. It is my sincere hope and belief that my daughter, Lela, will by this time have become Mrs. George Burke. . . .

Burke's face was grimmer still a minute later. His hand shoved aside all other papers when he had opened a letter from a small package that had been carefully sealed. He read:

So, my dear Foss, I told you in stir why I never would carry a gun. I didn't start out to become a torpedo. They take the raps, just as I took that one. I leave the rods and the choppers to the boys. That has kept me out of trouble. The Law can be morally certain of my little rackets, but the damned cops will never pin another rap on me.

This time I am compelled to request more than the usual remittance. The time has arrived to clean up our old affair. So you will get together the fifty grand by the 20th, even if you have to "borrow" some from your bank. Much better this way than to see the depositors lined up after the tabloids have been anonymously informed that James Foster, bank president, is none other than one Gilbert Foss who served a stretch up the river.

A crossed "X" was the only signature. But Burke's blue eyes were no longer mild behind his gold-chain glasses.

"So that was why he was sitting in that East Side dump with 'Silky' Stevens the night I blundered upon him," murmured Burke. "If he had seen me then—" Burke broke off his short soliloquy sharply. He pulled newspaper clippings from his pocket. One of these said:

Inspector Monahan told the Reflector that the man killed attempting to collect the Groton extortion money is a member of the Silky Stevens crowd. It's a moral certainty that Silky knows all the answers in the Groton case, as well as in several unsolved homicides.

The public criticizes the police for not taking drastic action against such known employers of killers and heads of rackets. But the best boys from the D. A.'s office never have pinned anything on Silky. His alibi is always unbreakable. He has personally never been known to go armed.

Surprised in his office at the Red Roller Roadhouse, Silky Stevens has proved more than once that he will not permit a more dangerous weapon than a toothpick about him, unless it is in the pocket of one of his own personal torpedoes. Though absolutely convinced that Silky is the head of numerous shady enterprises, there has never been a time when the police have been able to get evidence that would stick.

For more than twenty years, the smooth Silky had beaten every possible rap. The cops can't walk in and shoot a man down, however strong may be their personal belief he is a killer who works through others. . . .

The clipping was dated but two weeks before.

GEORGE BURKE read it through twice. Then he stuffed it with the letter from James Foster's personal file into an inner pocket. The open statement in the Reflector merely repeated the charges that had appeared in other newspapers. It was easy to see that editors had little fear of libel.
“You can’t libel a man who openly boasts of his power and hires killers,” said Burke softly. “The big town’s full of them. The police know them by their first names all over, and the dumbest cop on a beat can pretty well recite the rackets and the murders for which they are responsible.”

Burke arose to his little better than six feet, then his shoulders drooped slightly. They helped maintain the mild aspect of his blue eyes and queer, long chin. He went into his own office, came out with a short ramrod and an oiled cloth. Glancing at the shaded window, he walked into the washroom.

Anyone close to the door would have heard a phrase coming from his tight-set teeth.

“I told you in stir I never would carry a gun,” he recited. “I leave the rods and choppers to the boys.”

The ramrod could be heard thudding softly as George Burke cleaned the hand-tooled fowling piece.

One of the clerks looked up as Burke emerged a few minutes later from his own room and locker at the rear of the bank. Burke was wearing a light tan coat, cord breeches and laced boots, with a long-visored cap over his gold-chained eye-glasses.

“Well, well, Mr. Burke!” said the clerk cheerfully. “I can see this weekend is going to be tough on the birds. How about a pheasant for my collection?”

“Perhaps I’ll have no luck, Jenkins,” said Burke, smiling. “Would you like a nice stuffed buzzard? Or a crow, Jenkins? Last season I shot only a skunk. Purely in self defense, of course.”

The clerks guffawed over the pleasant humor of their boss.

“Good hunting, Mr. Burke!” the other clerk wished heartily....

George Burke brought his coupé into the parking spot at the Red Roller Roadhouse in a drenching rain that made the darkness of the night more tense, and the lights of the roadhouse more brilliant. When he climbed out, his tan hunting coat was spattered with red clay and hung in discouraged, wet folds around his slightly stooped, bony shoulders.

Only a dozen customers were in the dining room around the dancing floor. A fat bartender was wiping glasses. The orchestra hadn’t begun to get hot yet. Perhaps there were other customers behind the green baize doors at the head of a stairway. Burke wondered if newspaper hints that Silky Stevens paid good protection to county officials for his gambling layout might be true?

A hat-check girl drooped a lower red lip and stared at him. Burke strode past her, wiping the rain from his glasses, his right arm cradling a muddied shotgun lightly. A broad-faced doorman with a squint in one eye and bulging shoulders, stared awedly at the new arrival.

His eyes played over the uncased fowling piece. It was his business to make sure none of the customers threatened the dignity of the Red Roller by appearing with weapons conveniently concealed.

“Wait a minute, mister,” he said to Burke. “Better check your artillery. This ain’t no target range.”

BURKE blinked at him benevolently, and looked ruefully at his light shotgun.

“I am merely having a drink to keep me warm, and I must wipe off the mud before it spots the barrel,” he stated quietly. “It’s a nice piece, hand-tooled by Steger. You know, the Steger who puts in weeks on a light gun like this.”

The doorman quirked his mouth and scratched a crumpled ear.

“Steger?” he said. “You wouldn’t mean ‘Butch’ Steger over in Brooklyn? Hell, mister, he’s poison. An’ he ain’t peddlin’ no rods. He buys ’em.”

“I’m afraid we are not thinking together,” said Burke gently. “I’ll not
spoil any napkins. I've got an oiled rag in my pocket. Going upstate for the birds in the morning. Season opens, you know."

Two waiters wearing coats with side pockets conferred quickly with the fat bartender. A drunk customer mumbled and pointed. The other customers faced around, but Burke sat down at a table and beckoned to a waiter.

"Todd," he said. "Hot, with cinnamon."

He ignored the waiter's narrowed eyes on the shotgun. The waiter swallowed a couple of times and went after the toddy. Something ought to be done about it, the waiter was thinking, but he didn't know any more what to do than the ex-pug at the door.

Another man with slick, black hair went through a door at the end of the bar. Burke was busily rubbing the mud off the blue, hand-tooled shotgun with an oily rag. Presently his drink came and he sipped at it. The muttering drunk had had enough liquor to have intuition.

"’Tain't right," he muttered to a slack-mouthed woman. "Come on, baby, we're gettin' outta here. It's too funny to be funny."

Burke was aware he might have been followed here. He had been closely shadowed ever since he had left the apartment where the dead man probably was still sitting. The men who had followed him didn't know the man was dead, for they had been only street shadows when he had entered and left the apartment building.

A man equipped with big muscles came from the door by the bar and a diamond flashed on his little finger as he leaned nonchalantly for a moment on the mahogany. He talked a minute with the bartender and permitted his little black eyes to stray to Burke's table.

Burke guessed Silky Stevens did not identify him. Perhaps he had never seen George Burke, the cashier. Silky nodded and smiled a little at the spectacle of a customer openly cleaning a gun at one of his tables. Two waiters replied to the nod, but they didn't smile.

Other customers went on with their drinking, eyes only flashing now and then to the man with the gun. Hell, they thought, the spattered hunter was too damned casual to mean anything. Burke downed the last of a steaming toddy.

Then he arose cradled the light fowling piece carefully over his left arm, and started toward the exit door. He paused, rubbed his long chin with the back of one hand and turned. The waiters, the doorman and two other hard-eyed men were breathing easier now.

Burke walked straight toward Silky's office door then. That wasn't a common thing for a stranger to do in the Red Roller. But only one man soft-footed to his side before he reached the door. The customers were stirring at the tables. They weren't so sure now that this didn't mean anything.

The man came beside Burke and his hand in his side pocket was roughly suggestive.

"Wait a minute, you!" he snapped. "Where you goin'?"

Burke's mild eyes showed bland surprise.

"Why, I wish to speak to Mr. Stevens about his hunting farm upstate," he said. "I thought perhaps he might permit me to have a go at a few birds. He has the best cover in the country."

The bouncer-bodyguard of the person of Silky Stevens shook his head dazedly and swallowed hard.

"He ain't got no—" he began, then he changed it. "That's right, I've heard him mention it. But maybe he don't want to see you, mister."

"Surely, he will see me," said Burke patiently. "A friend of his, James Foster, the bank president, said Mr.
Stevens was a good fellow and—"

The guard’s whole body stiffened suddenly. The thing in his pocket abruptly jabbed hard into Burke’s ribs.

"Okay! Okay!" he said icily. "You’ll see him, brother. But I’ll take care of that shotgun."

"Why, yes, certainly," agreed Burke, passing the fowling piece into the guard’s hand without hesitation. "You can hold it for me until I talk to Mr. Stevens."

The guard’s eyes blinked rapidly. He took the shotgun into one hand.

"Walk on in, mister," he said then.

Silky Stevens sat beside the single desk in the room. Two other men lounged over at one side. Silky looked up with sleepy black eyes.

"Well, what is it, Card?" he demanded.

"This fella wants to see you about some huntin’, Silky," said the guard. "I took his gun because—"


Silky’s hand went out and his fat fingers rubbed along the hand-tooled barrel. He smiled with his mouth at Burke, but his eyes did not smile.

The guard leaned closer to Silky. Burke didn’t hear all he said, but the name “Foster” could be seen on his thick lips. Silky Stevens showed no reaction outwardly, but his eyes studied Burke more intently now.

Silky waved the guard to one side. The man joined the other two at the side of the room, thus placing the three partly behind Burke.

"Sit down," Silky said. "Have a cigar, Mr—?"

"Burke’s the name and—"

The phone on Silky’s desk buzzed softly. Silky reached for it. So, Burke decided, he had been followed from the dead man’s apartment. No time now for preliminaries and Burke hadn’t intended any.

"Don’t touch that phone, Silky!" he snapped. "You other punks, get ‘em up! It’s a holdup! I said, up!"

Three gasping mugs saw a hand move faster than light. A neat, blue automatic came from under Burke’s tan hunting coat. The guard who had taken his shotgun swore over his stupid oversight. Then he made an instant move to correct it. His hand dived into his pocket and stayed there.

FIRE leaped at him from Burke’s hand. The mug knew then what it felt like to have a leaden slug pound into a man’s vitals. He didn’t feel it long, for he was dead when he toppled over. Another of the three had been trying to crab sideways. But his hands were up.

"Drop your rods one at a time, or you get it, too!" commanded Burke.

He was all the way around now, his back presented to Silky, Silky Stevens who wouldn’t have a gun about his person since he took a rap up the river because of one. Burke heard feet scuffling as customers milled about excitedly in the room outside.

Still he heard no movement behind him. Then he started, as if to turn slowly toward Silky. One guard whipped a hand downward. But Burke had not turned all the way. A slug jumped from the automatic and made a neat slicing wound in the mug’s throat. The guard looked surprised and sat down, dead.

Burke heard the shotgun scrape across Silky’s desk, but he started walking toward the remaining guard, anyway. “I’ll take your rod, fellow!” he said tersely. “It might be unlucky for you, too.”

Burke knew now that Silky had a gun. He could almost feel the hand-tooled barrel of the fowling piece centered upon his back. He knew the instant when Silky’s forefinger was tightening on the trigger. Silky had never possessed a gun of his own since that rap up the river. Silky was about to kill a man with the man’s own gun.

Burke fired his next shot deliberately, cold-bloodedly, adding up all of several events until they came to
the dead man sitting at a table in his apartment. The score came to justified murder.

Until Silky Stevens pulled the trigger Time passed with dragging slowness for Burke. But in only one swift second, all hell erupted.

It came with a detonating, bursting blast of splitting steel and smoking, gaseous flame. A tearing piece of metal went into Burke's shoulder. His back tingled as if it were bare and the coat had been blown off of it.

The hand-tooled forward half of the fowling piece hit the rug and slid past Burke's feet to jam into the wall. Burke now slowly turned around.

Silky Stevens must have sat down heavily in his chair. But he did not know about that though. Where his face had been was only the bare, crushed frontal bones of his skull. The hands that had not used a rod in the years since that rap were no longer on the bleeding dead arms hanging inertly at his sides.

The phone was shattered, and lay on the floor. Burke knew the police soon would come. Two waiters with drawn guns appeared in the opening door. But they gaped and mumbled, and they suddenly decided to go away before the police arrived.

* * * * *

"You say James Foster was cleaning his revolver when an old cartridge exploded?" said Inspector Monahan. George Burke nodded.

"It looked that way to me, Mr. Monahan," he said. "His daughter, my wife, was up in the country. Foster had the short gun and the oiled rag in his hand when I found him. I knew he had been desperately worried over threats that came from Silky Stevens."

"So you started on the hunting trip, and dropped in to have a word with Silky, is that it, Mr. Burke?"

"That was it, Inspector," stated Burke in a mild voice. "I had dropped my fowling piece in the mud. Perhaps some got into the barrel and I hadn't noticed. When I mentioned Foster's name, Silky's boys decided to get rough. I was compelled to defend myself."

"And the wounds from the bursting shotgun are convincing proof that Silky tried shooting you in the back, Mr. Burke," said Monahan slowly. "But what about the matter of the threat, Mr. Burke?" he added. "The motive for Foster planning—well, cleaning his revolver?"

"I believe Silky Stevens threatened to kidnap Foster's daughter," said Burke. "That was mainly why I dropped in to speak to Silky."

"And gave him a gun," said Monahan thoughtfully. "That shell made one helluva blast."

"Smokeless powder is powerful, Inspector," said Burke. But not one-tenth as destructive as the nitro poured into the magazine under the choked and exploding shell, he said to himself. "Yes, I gave him a gun," added Burke, aloud.
Jim Thatcher Holds the Key Down on Danger When Big-City Gangsters Unleash Death and Destruction in a Melee of Double-Track Doom!

CHAPTER I

Shock at Midnight

After an hour of constant activity the telephone buzzer was quiet and the telegraph sounder had ceased its wild clatter. A silence that was almost oppressive fell over the operator’s room in the little depot at Cedarville.

Jim Thatcher, night track man, sighed his relief as he leaned back in his squeaky swivel chair comfortably cushioned with old newspapers, put his feet upon the telegraph board, and relaxed. He had been on night duty for some time in this peaceful village midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, where the mountains came tumbling down to meet the sea.

Now he glanced up at the clock on the wall, and saw that it was almost midnight. From force of habit, he compared his watch with the clock. Standing up Jim Thatcher yawned and stretched his arms. He was twenty-eight, tall, with quite ordinary features and a tousled mass of yellow hair. His pale blue eyes gave him a
sleepy expression generally, but they could look like cold steel on occasion.

Jim Thatcher suddenly went cold, felt uncomfortable. He shrugged. Just nerves, he thought. Then he smiled warmly as he thought of Clara Millard, the object of all his adoration. Thatcher had two burning ambitions at present: to get married and be promoted to the day shift—but especially married. And to get married he'd need that promotion.

Suddenly, he frowned as he thought of Barney Crogan, the state highway policeman who cruised this district at night on a high-powered motorcycle. His brow furrowed still more as he thought about Ben Mead.

Mead had come to Cedarville about two weeks ago and stopped at Clara's mother's rooming house. Mead claimed that he was from San Francisco. Thatcher didn't like anything about Mead, especially his too-friendly attitude toward Clara. His anger and jealousy got so much the best of him that he even imagined Mead to be a fugitive from justice.

Suddenly, the mad chatter of the clicking telegraph snapped his rev-
erie. Thatcher's brow corrugated as he listened intently.

Something had happened to one of the overnight limiteds that operated between San Francisco and Los Angeles. The northbound train had lost an hour already because of locomotive trouble.

A frantic dispatcher was trying to make a swift readjustment of schedules. At Jim's section it was a single track division, and the trains had to meet and pass here.

Finally the dispatcher was finished with him and the other operators along the line, and the sounder was silent again. Thatcher bent forward and glanced through the north window at the twin lines of steel glistening in the bright moonlight. Down the track, the semaphore burned. Everything was all right in that direction.

He turned then to make his routine inspection through the south window. After a single glance his lower jaw sagged in an expression of puzzled astonishment. He gripped the arms of his chair and gathered his feet beneath him preparatory to springing up.

A woman's face was at the window—a beautiful face framed in a mass of disheveled dark hair and twisted in a spasm of pain. She reeled against the window, putting both hands against the casement to steady herself.

Thatcher saw she was wearing an evening gown and an expensive-looking wrap. Jewels gleamed at her throat and in her dark hair. The left side of her light-colored gown was crimson, and blood was trickling down her bare arm.

Her mouth opened; her lips moved. She seemed to be making an effort to speak.

"Help... Help!" her lips formed the words.

"I'll be right there!" Thatcher shouted.

He opened the door of the dark waiting room, dashed over and opened the outside door. A motor car accident, he thought grimly. Cars were always traveling the state highway at terrific speed during the night, and there were many accidents.

She was clutching at the window casement when Thatcher reached her. Her eyes were closed, and she was breathing in gasps. She's probably a guest staying at one of the big estates on the coast down the highway. Thatcher surmised. Or at the health resort a short distance back in the hills.

Thatcher supported her and led her to the door of the waiting room. As she sagged against him and seemed about to collapse, he carried her into the operator's room and helped her to an old easy chair.

"Help... Help!" she was moaning monotonously.

Thatcher hurried to the water cooler and returned with a cup of water, which he held to her lips. But she was unable to drink.

"Did you have a motor crack-up?" Thatcher asked. "Anybody else hurt? I'll phone the state highway cops—"

"Yes... call... police," she muttered, speaking with an effort.

"Where did you crack up?" he asked tersely. "How far from here?"

He stopped talking abruptly as her head suddenly sagged to one side. Her body slumped down into the chair sickeningly. Thatcher's eyes grew wide as he stared at her.

No motor car accident had brought this unknown beauty stumbling to the depot for aid. Thatcher knew a bullet wound when he saw one.

He could not decide whether she had merely lost consciousness or had died. He fumbled for her pulse, but could feel none. He dashed water into her face, rubbed her hands briskly. Her eyes opened momentarily, then closed again.

Thatcher became genuinely alarmed. This woman needed immediate medical attention. Cedarville's only doctor
was in San Francisco. But there was a house physician at the big resort hotel back in the hills.

We walked briskly across the office to where the public telephone was fastened to the wall. Thatcher unhooked the receiver, put it to his ear and waited.

"Yeah?" somebody barked over the wire.

Thatcher finched at the sound of the voice. It was not the pleasant, quiet voice of Ed Carter, the regular night operator.

"Give me Main Six-O," Thatcher said.

He was wondering what had happened to Ed Carter, and why a strange man was taking Ed's place at the switchboard. The connection with the hotel was not completed immediately, and Thatcher jiggled the receiver hook.

"Yeah?" the man at the other end of the wire snarled again.

"Get that number quickly!" Thatcher said excitedly. "Hurry, man! I've got to have the doctor right away. There's been an accident!"

"Line's out of order."

"Out of order? It was all right a couple of hours ago."

"Yeah, but that was a couple of hours ago. It's out of order now."

"I must get the hotel, I tell you! Where's Ed Carter?" Thatcher demanded.

"I'm sittin' in for him. You don't know me, buddy, and you don't want to know me. You run your little railroad—"

"Listen, whoever you are!" Thatcher begged. "I've got to get a doctor here at once. There's a woman here who's been shot—"

"What's that? Woman shot? What's she look like?" The man at the other end of the wire seemed excited.

"She's a small brunette — class. Listen! I can't leave the depot. Train orders may come through. You connect me with Dave's garage. I'll wake him up and—"

"That line's out of order, too," the man said curtly. "You're out of luck, buddy. All the lines are out of order — includin' yours." He broke the connection.

Thatcher jiggled the hook furiously, but could get no reply. He had a sudden idea then. He would use the railroad's private telephone system. He would telephone down to the nearest station, having a night trick man, and ask him to tell the state police what had happened.

He seized the telephone instrument, plugged in the proper station, and touched a button to signal. He slapped the receiver to his ear, waiting for a response. A peculiar expression came into his face. The line was dead.

That was a serious thing. The railroad's private telephone system supplemented the telegraph service and was used almost equally by the dispatchers. It was unthinkable it could be dead.

CHAPTER II

Silent Wires

UT dead it was. Thatcher knew he could telegraph his brother operators along the line about what had happened and have them notify the police by telephone. It was his immediate duty to report his dead telephone line, too.

He flicked open the switch and struck the telegraph key with a practiced hand. But no swift flow of resonant dots and dashes came from beneath his fingers, only a series of flat-sounding metallic clicks. The telegraph line was also dead.

A sense of peril came to Jim Thatcher. Something was definitely wrong. This was not an act of the elements. Somebody had deliberately destroyed all means of communication
between Cedarville and the outside world since he had helped the wounded woman into the depot.

He glanced quickly through the window, half expecting to see scowling faces and menacing guns, but the bright moonlight and the lights over the station platform revealed nobody. Swiftly, he lowered the window shades, jerked open a drawer beneath the telegraph board and got out a heavy revolver and thrust it into his coat pocket.

It was against the company’s regulations for him to leave the depot. And he could not communicate with the outside. He felt that something wrong was transpiring, and wondered if the state police knew what was happening.

Hurrying to the radio he kept in a corner of the office, he turned it on and tuned in on the state police wave length. As he began listening to the official broadcast, he bent over the wounded woman again. He felt her pulse, and thought he could detect a flutter of life. The wound in her chest had almost stopped bleeding.

She was not more than twenty-five, Thatcher judged, and was a beautiful brunette. She was small, not more than five feet two, and did not weigh more than a hundred pounds. Her clothes and jewels indicated wealth. She was class, real class, Thatcher decided.

Her high-heeled evening pumps revealed that she had walked quite a distance to get to the depot, and not on the paved highway either. Burrs and wisps of dry weeds clinging to the hem of her gown told that she had cut across vacant land to get there.

Thatcher’s ear suddenly caught the state police broadcast:

“. . . calling Car Twelve . . . car One, Two . . . go to Cedarville . . . telephone company reports office there can’t be reached . . .”

There it was—good old State Highway Police! The broadcast promptly continued:

“. . . calling all cars and stations in the central district . . . intercept Motorcycle Officer Crogan . . . instruct him to go to Cedarville immediately and investigate . . .”

Suddenly, his ears caught a welcome sound — the unmistakable exhaust of a high-powered motorcycle running smoothly. Without being aware of how badly his presence there was desired, Barney Crogan was coming.

Jim Thatcher turned toward the wounded woman again. Her eyelids were fluttering slightly now. He got more water from the cooler and held the cup to her lips, but she did not drink.

“Help’s comin’,” Thatcher said to her. “We’ll soon have a doctor for you.”

He left her then and dashed through the waiting room to the outside door. He got the revolver out of his pocket and held it ready as he peered out cautiously. The exhaust of the motorcycle had stopped.

“Barney! . . . Barney!” he shouted. There was no answer. Thatcher hurried out. He made out the motorcycle at the end of the platform under one of the lights, and Barney Crogan sitting beside it.

“Barney!” he shouted again, and ran toward him.

Barney Crogan was bracing himself with the palms of his hands pressed flat against the platform on either side of him. The light showed Thatcher that the policeman’s face was drained of color and racked with pain.

“What is it, Barney?” he cried. “Help me, Jim, I’m shot,” Crogan muttered.

“Shot?”

“Just as I turned into the street . . . somebody shot from behind tree . . . my right leg . . . Help me to my feet. I’ll drag along.”

As he helped, Thatcher rapidly told him what had happened. He got Crogan on his feet, and the highway
policeman leaned against him heavily and managed to reach the waiting room. As he dropped on a bench there, Thatcher closed the door and turned on the lights.

"Knife in my pocket . . . cut pants—" Crogan muttered.

Thatcher got the knife out, and slashed through the tough uniform cloth and exposed a bullet wound in the upper right leg. He made a tourniquet with the officer’s belt, twisted it tight with his blackjack, stopping the flow of blood.

"Tell me again," Crogan ordered.
Thatcher told him swiftly.

"I deputize you, Jim," Barney Crogan said. "Get me into the operator’s room. I’ll give the orders, and you’ll have to carry ‘em out till help comes. Got nerve?"

"Hope so," Thatcher replied.

"You’d better have some. This is something big. The telephone office—that’s the first thing. Got to get an alarm out. Got to have cops—and a doctor for the woman and me both."

"I thought at first that it was a motor smash," Thatcher said. "But her wound, and the wires being cut, and you shot—"

"Maybe the wires weren’t cut just to keep you from sending out word about her."

"It’s all pretty fishy," Thatcher said.

"You’d have to know just where to cut. And all three of the lines—public phone, company phone and the telegraph line—were all put out of business inside a few minutes."

"Help me into the operator’s room now," Crogan ordered. "I want a look at the woman. Remember. You’re a deputy now, Jim."

WITH some difficulty, Barney Crogan got to his feet. Thatcher supported him, helped him along the wall slowly to the door of the office. As they entered the operator’s room, Thatcher gave a cry of surprise.

The wounded woman was gone!

The rear window was open, and the back door, which had been both locked and barred on the inside, now stood open also.

"She was almost dead," Thatcher said, as he got Crogan to the chair in front of the telegraph board. "She couldn’t have walked."

"Somebody probably got in through the window and got her, and took her out through that back door," Crogan said. "If she’s small, like you told me, she could have been carried out easily."

Thatcher ran to the back door and looked out, half expecting a shot out of the night. Nobody was in sight, but there were deep shadows beside the freight warehouse where somebody could be hiding in wait. Thatcher closed and barred the door, and closed the window and pulled down the shade.

"If the telegraph line comes alive while I’m gone—" Thatcher said.

"You’ve taught me to dot-and-dash some, Jim," Crogan interrupted. "If the line comes alive, I’ll try to explain the situation here. Anyhow, you’re in the clear if you leave the depot. I’ve made you an emergency deputy."

"But what if there are any important train orders—"

"I’ll do my best, Jim. Throw the board."

"There’s no train due through for almost an hour."

"Throw the board anyhow. It’ll stop anything that happens along in case you’re not back by then."

Thatcher quickly threw the board, and a glaring red semaphore eye flashed the stop signal for any train that might come along.

"Now, hand me my gun," Barney Crogan ordered.

Thatcher gave him the gun. Then he hurried into the waiting room, closing the office door. He turned out the lights, went to the outside door, listened, heard nothing, and unlocked the door quietly. With his gun held ready, he stepped out onto the platform.
It was a little more than a block down the street to the telephone office, and Barney Crogan's motorcycle was standing at the end of the platform. Thatcher desired to use the vehicle to save time.

With searching eyes, he probed the shadows at the far end of the platform, but saw nobody. Then he slipped swiftly along the side of the depot toward the motorcycle. As he neared it, he emerged into a streak of light. Suddenly a gun cracked not far away, and a bullet whistled past his head.

Thatcher quickly flattened himself on the platform and squirmed to a dark spot. Another bullet came whistling out of the night. Thatcher fired directly at the flash of the gun across the street. He wondered whether the shooting would arouse some of the villagers. Cars and trucks passing on the state highway often backfired with a sound like the bark of a gun.

Reaching the telephone office as quickly as possible was the important thing now. To try to use Crogan's motorcycle would be committing suicide. The man behind the tree across the street obviously did not want that motorcycle to be used, and was in a position of command.

CHAPTER III

Guns Ablaze

MOVING slowly and carefully, and keeping in the deeper shadows as much as possible, Thatcher stole away from the platform. No more shots were fired at him. Unseen, he went cautiously to the street, every instant expecting to hear the crack of a gun and feel the hot impact of a bullet tearing in his body.

The telephone exchange was located on the second floor of a two-story building. Thatcher came to the bottom of the stairway safely, and looked up. He saw a streak of light showing beneath the door. And the door was the only way into the office. There was a window in the rear, but it could not be reached from the outside except with a ladder.

Thatcher went up the narrow stairs carefully, holding his gun ready. At the top, he stood back against the wall, listening. At first, he heard no sound. Then he heard somebody cough, and the sounds of footsteps as somebody paced nervously around the room. He reached out and knocked boldly on the door with the barrel of his gun.

"Open up!" he ordered. "We've got you!"

No answer came.

"March out with your hands in the air!" Thatcher shouted. "Try to use the window, and you'll be filled with hot lead!"

He got an answer now.

"Get away from there—whoever you are! You're not a cop. The cop got blasted—I saw it. You'll be findin' a couple of tough mugs at your back in a couple of minutes, when they come along to pick me up. Go home and you'll live longer."

The words indicated a gang at work, that some crime so big was being committed that unusual precautions had to be taken.

Thatcher raised his gun, aimed carefully at the lock and fired. A cloud of acrid smoke engulfed him and the echoes of the shot roared in the narrow hallway. He fired again and looked. The door sagged inward a couple of inches. Thatcher bent forward, swung his right leg and kicked the door open wider. Then he saw a heavy-set, middle-aged man with a swarthy face, standing crouched with an automatic pistol held ready.

Thatcher fired in the same instant the automatic cracked. A bullet scorched his left arm. Then he saw the man drop his gun and sprawl on the floor, writhing violently. Thatcher sprang into the office and kicked the
automatic out of the other man's reach. But it was unnecessary, for the man on the floor was beyond using a gun at the moment.

Thatcher turned quickly toward the switchboard—and came to an abrupt stop. In a corner of the office, bound and gagged was Ed Carter. Thatcher rushed to him, worked swiftly to remove the gag and get off the ropes. Ed Carter began talking immediately.

"I got to thinkin' that nobody would ever come. That man came in here and smashed me—"

"Did he say anything to give you an idea what's going on?" Thatcher asked.

"Plenty," Carter said. "There's a gang raidin' the resort hotel and it was his job to seize the telephone office and keep the news of the raid from gettin' out too quick. There's another man watchin' around town, he said, and the rest of the gang's at the hotel."

Quickly, Thatcher told Carter what had happened at the railroad depot.

"You call the highway cops the first thing, Ed," he said. "Then call the hotel and have the doctor rush here, too."

As he spoke, he helped Ed Carter to his feet and across to the switchboard, then used the rope he had taken off Ed to bind the man he had shot.

"The hotel line's out—cut up there, prob'ly," Ed Carter said, frowning. "The village lines and the main trunks seem to be all right. Wonder why they didn't cut them, too? Prob'ly thought it'd bring an emergency repair crew on 'em too quick. I'll try to get the cops."

He called the nearest State Highway Police station through the main trunk line, and hurriedly told the story. But it would take some time for the highway police to get to Cedarville, and fully as long for the sheriff's men to arrive from the county seat.

"You ring Dave's garage and wake him up, and tell him all about this," Thatcher ordered Ed Carter. "Wake up anybody else you think has nerve enough to tangle in this mess. We'll need a lot of help."

"Maybe the gang raidin' the hotel hasn't come down from there yet," Ed Carter said.

"Probably. Maybe we can wake up some folks and be ready for the crooks when they come down the hill road. Keep your eyes open, Ed, and get busy at that switchboard. Keep your gun handy and be ready to use it. I've got to get back to the depot."

"Maybe I can get a doctor in Dobysville."

"Get him if you can," Thatcher snapped. "Tell him to come right to the depot."

He left Ed Carter at the switchboard and hurried down the stairs. He was thinking about the wounded woman who had disappeared so mysteriously. He could not believe she had left the depot herself. And, if somebody had got into the depot and taken her away—why? Was she allied to a band of criminals, and had they taken her away so she could not be identified and point the way to the others?

But he had other things to worry about now. He had not forgotten the man who had fired at him near the depot. He must have heard the shooting at the telephone office, and surely he would come to make an investigation if he thought a pal was in trouble.

Jim Thatcher was cautious as he stepped out into the street. He crouched in the darkness against the front of the building; listening, watching. He saw nobody, heard nothing unusual. Evidently, the shooting had not aroused any of the townsmen. But Ed Carter would soon awaken some of them by telephone. Thatcher could hear a telephone ringing in the distance now, in Dave's garage.

He stepped out from under the awning and started briskly down the street. He was eager now to get back to the depot and learn if anything new
had happened there.
"Stop right where you are!" a hoarse voice ordered.

THATCHER was holding his gun ready. His nerves were keyed to the cracking point. He flinched at the sound of that unexpected voice. Suddenly, he fired and got results.

His gun barked and blazed. There was a wild howl of pain and a blistering curse as the man lurching toward him dropped his own gun and clutched with a left hand at a wounded right arm. Thatcher sprang forward.

"Turn around!" he snapped at his victim. "Get your good arm up in the air! We're goin' to the depot. March!"

"You'll have plenty happen to you for this, smart guy!" the other threatened.

"Shut up and move!" Thatcher snapped. "I handled your pal in the telephone office, and I can handle you. And your whole gang will be taken care of."

"Smart guy, huh?"

"You can't get away it! Coming here and holding up hotels and shooting women!" Thatcher said, growling. "Cutting wires and shooting cops! You're the gent who shot Barney Crogan, I suppose. You'll pay for that."

"Where do you come in, Boy Scout? You're no cop."

"I come into this double. I'm a railroad man, and your outfit messed up our wires. And right now I'm a deputy cop, too."

"You'd better let me go and 'tend to your railroad. If you don't—"

"Thatcher prodded him in the back with the muzzle of the gun. He was nervous. He never had shot a man until tonight, and he never had held a criminal a prisoner before. He compelled the other to start down the street, and he kept close behind him with the muzzle of the gun pressed against the prisoner's spine.

He hoped that Ed Carter would keep busy arousing the town. If the crooks came down from the hotel, they would have to be handled promptly to prevent their escape. The highway police would guard every road, but a clever getaway might have been planned.

Thatcher glanced into the shadows on either side of the street, fearing that they held enemies. He neared the street up which the Millard boarding house was located. He caught sight of a flash of white beneath one of the street lights, and heard a woman call:

"Jim! Are you all right?"

It was Clara Millard. What was she doing up at such an hour?

"Get back home, Clara," he shouted. "A gang of crooks are raiding the hotel. They'll be coming back to town—"

"I know, Jim. I want to tell you—"

She started toward him. But a man darted from the shadows and up to her. Thatcher instantly recognized him as Ben Mead.

"Clara, don't tell him anything! Remember your promise!" Ben Mead shouted.

CHAPTER IV

Another Shock

HIS man Mead was in with the gang of crooks, Thatcher decided. That was the explanation of his presence in the village for the past two weeks. He had been the lookout for the gang, learning the land of the land.

"Clara!" Thatcher said loudly. "Come here."

He could see that Ben Mead was beside her now, talking to her.

"You, too, Ben Mead!" Thatcher ordered. "Come here to me, or I'll do some shootin'. I've landed a couple of your pals already—"

"Don't be a fool!" Mead yelled.

He said something else to Clara Mil-
lard, then turned and darted into the shadows. Thatcher promptly sent a shot singing in that direction. No answering slug came in reply. Clara Millard started running straight toward Thatcher, calling to him not to shoot again.

In that instant Thatcher’s prisoner whirled, struck out with his left fist, then turned again and fled into the shadows, and continued his flight in zigzag fashion. Thatcher reeled from the blow, quickly recovered and fired a shot after the fleeing man. Then, Clara was beside him.

"Jim! It’s all right!” she cried.

“What’s all right?” he demanded.

“What secrets have you got with Ben Mead. He’s a crook—”

“He’s all right, Jim.”

“What’d he mean by you remembering your promise?”

“I can’t tell you, Jim,” Clara said softly.

“Are you crazy, Clara? That Ben Mead—he’s a crook, I tell you. How come you’re up at this hour? You’d better get home now. You’ve made me lose my prisoner. Barney Crogan’s been shot, and he made me his deputy—”

“Jim, if you’d only listen—” she pleaded.

“I’m listening. What did you promise Ben Mead? What is it he doesn’t want you to tell me?”

“Jim, you’re jealous!” she accused.

“I haven’t time to be. I tell you Ben Mead is a crook. The wires are down. The hotel’s being raided. Barney’s been shot. And you—you—”

He did not have a chance to continue his denunciation. Clara Millard sobbed and turned and fled along the street toward her home. Thatcher called after her, but she did not stop. He had to get back to the depot.

He kept in the shadows as much as possible. As he hurried along, Thatcher reloaded his gun with shells he had taken from the man in the telephone office. In the far distance, he heard a motor car traveling at a high rate of speed. It was coming down the winding hill road—the only road which ran to the hotel from the state highway and the village!

He could see the headlights flashing as the car sped around curves. The crooks were coming back to escape on the main highway! And the man who had escaped from him undoubtedly would meet them and explain the situation in the town. Thatcher’s proper place now was at the depot, where Barney Crogan could give him orders and advice.

As he raced toward the depot, he caught a glimpse of another figure running through the shadows, and recognized Ben Mead hurrying toward the railroad tracks. Thatcher sped toward the depot, jumped up on the platform and ran to the operator’s room as swiftly as he could.

“Barney! It’s Jim!” he called, as he came to the door. He swung the door open and darted into the operator’s office, and came to an abrupt stop. Again, the rear door was unbarred, unlocked, standing open.

And Barney Crogan, the wounded officer, was gone!

Thatcher could not believe that Crogan had left the depot of his own volition. He would not desert the telegraph board without good cause. Yet, he had disappeared as completely as the wounded woman, and in the same direction.

Thatcher, seeing a trail of blood drops on the floor, raced across to the open rear door and looked out. A dark shadow he knew was a man was dodging alongside the freight warehouse. When he passed through a streak of moonlight, Thatcher recognized him. It was Ben Mead!

The shadow drifted on toward the end of the warehouse. Thatcher sent a shot singing in that direction. Then he closed and barred the door and ran
to the telephone. Ed Carter answered his call immediately.

"Watch out for yourself, Ed," Thatcher warned. "A car is coming down the hill road. It may be the gang from the hotel. Barney's disappeared."

"That man you shot in here—I rolled him out into the hall and braced a lot of stuff against the door," Ed Carter reported. "They won't get in here easy. I got the Dobbsville doctor, and he's on his way. The highway cops are closin' in, but it'll take 'em some time to get here."

"Good!" Thatcher approved.

Cradling the receiver, Thatcher remembered that he had left the outside door open, so he raced through the waiting room and locked it. He locked the inner door, too. He was a prisoner in the operator's room.

He tried the railroad telephone line and the telegraph again, and found them still dead. The board was still red, but it would be at least fifteen minutes before the southbound limited arrived. He could not hold the limited long, regardless of the situation. And he would have to stop and sidetrack the freight following it, to let the delayed northbound limited through.

He heard a motor car stop not far from the depot, and the voices of excited men. Then it was quiet. Thatcher hurried to the telephone again.

"Did you manage to get anybody up, Ed?" he asked.

"I got Dave at the garage, and he said that he'd rout out a few others."

"I think the gang from the hotel is outside now."

"Yeah, I heard 'em talkin' through the window," Ed Carter said. "That man you shot down in the street was yellin' somethin' at them. You watch out for yourself."

"They'll probably stop to pick up that man you put out into the hall, and may get nasty with you," Thatcher said warningly.

"I'm ready for 'em!" Carter said firmly.

Thatcher broke the connection and stood in the middle of the office, listening.

He thought he heard steps outside on the platform. Quickly he snapped off all the lights except the one over the telegraph board.

Then he heard a crash, and realized that somebody had smashed in the door of the waiting room. He made sure that his revolver was loaded, and stood back against the wall holding it ready.

He could hear somebody moving around in the waiting room, heard steps again on the platform outside the window.

Then he flinched, jumped. The telegraph sounder had broken the tension by starting its melodious clatter. The line was alive again!

The dispatcher was giving the Cedarville call signal.

Thatcher moved slowly toward the telegraph board. He would be in a precarious position there. The light would throw his shadow on the window shades.

There would be nothing but glass on three sides of him. He was an easy target for a bullet.

He crouched and went forward slowly. He knelt before the board, held his revolver in his left hand, reached the key with his right, flicked the switch open and answered:

"I . . . I . . . 'CV . . . I."

"What's up?" the distant dispatcher demanded.

"Crooks raiding resort hotel . . . cut all wires," Thatcher reported. "Highway police . . . on their way here now."

"Number Four must go through, regardless," the dispatcher flashed.

Number Four was the southbound limited.

"She'll get through," Thatcher promised.

"Flag and sidetrack extra Number Sixty-seven following. Imperative we have a clear track for Number Three."

He
Number Three was the badly delayed northbound limited. Thatcher knew what the dispatcher meant. It would be a close meeting point between the extra freight and the northbound limited at Cedarville. The slightest miscalculation might mean a catastrophe.

Thatcher heard an operator down the line reporting the passage of the southbound limited. She should go through Cedarville in less than fifteen minutes.

The board was red. Thatcher threw the lever and cleared it. The limited would flash through with a snort from the locomotive’s whistle.

There was a sudden crash behind him, and he whirled, bringing up his gun. The rear window had been smashed. And, at the same instant, there was a crash against the waiting room door, and also at the front window. He did not have a chance to shoot. Guns were covering him from both windows, and to fire would have meant instant death for him. The door crashed in, and men bounded in.

“Drop that gun and get your hands up!” one of the crooks ordered.

Thatcher dropped the revolver. It was the sensible thing to do. Then he glanced about him. The men at the windows remained in position, their guns menacing him.

Three men strode into the office, and one was the man Thatcher had wounded in the street.

“Back up there against the wall,” the leader ordered.

Thatcher backed up with his hands held high. The leader, he saw, was middle-aged, tall and heavy in body. One of the men beside him was short and squat, and younger. The wounded man was tall and slender, almost emaciated, his gleaming eyes those of a drug addict.

“Tryin’ to play cop, huh?” the leader asked Thatcher. “Well, you put on a pretty good show, at that. Get over to the telegraph key.”
ward and listened. Perhaps he could read Morse, and perhaps not. Thatcher wished he knew for sure. He sent the bogus alarm—but said north instead of south. The gang leader did not correct him. Thatcher smiled inwardly.

The dispatcher broke in, demanding to know what was up. Thatcher took a chance. He tapped out that he was being forced to send the message, that some of the hotel raiders were in the office at the moment.

"What'd he want?" the leader demanded of Thatcher.

"He was asking how many of you there were, and what you looked like, and all that kind of stuff. I told him I didn't get a good look at you."

"You're a wise Boy Scout," the leader said. "Let's see, now, if you can go on bein' smart. We know that the cops are comin', and that they'll be here mighty soon. We've planned a getaway that'll shock 'em some. It's time for us to be goin' now, and if you value your hide any make quick talk. Where is she?"

"Where is who?" Thatcher asked.

"Where's the dame who stumbled in here tonight with a bullet in her? We want her, and then we'll go. Where'd you put her?"

THATCHER gulped.

"I don't know where she is," he replied. "She came here to the depot, and seemed about dead. Then Barney Crogan, the state highway cop, came riding in wounded. I helped him in here, and found the woman gone."

"How could she be gone, if she was almost dead?" the gang leader demanded.

"That puzzles me, too," Thatcher said. "Somebody must have come in here while I was out in front, and carried her away. Then, later, Barney Crogan disappeared."

"I don't want any of your damned lies!" the gang leader shouted. "Talk straight. What do you know about that woman?"

"Nothing. I never saw her before in my life. And she was so bad hurt she couldn't talk and tell me anything."

"Listen, you! We raided the hotel in the hills, all right, and got some good pickin's out of it. But that was just on the side. We staged that raid just to get hold of that woman. She got away from us even though she got shot durin' the brawl."

"She wasn't able to tell me anything," Thatcher said.

"I'm tellin' you now. She came here to get help. I had a couple of my men stationed here in town, and this one beside me says—"

"I saw him help the woman into the depot, and saw the copper come ridin' in," the wounded man interrupted. "I followed this yap to the telephone office when I heard the shootin' there."

The gang leader whirled to face Thatcher again.

"I want that dame!" he said icily. "She's the big haul in this raid. It's none of your business why I want her. But I want her enough to blast anybody who tries to keep me from findin' her. Now, you talk!"

"But I don't know where she is," Thatcher protested. "I've told you the truth. When I got Barney Crogan into the depot, she was missing."

"Yeah? We'll soon make you talk. Butcher, bring that girl in here."

The short, heavy man stepped out of the waiting room. He was back again immediately, thrusting Clara Millard into the office ahead of him. Her wrists were tied behind her back and she was gagged with a piece of cloth.

"What—" Thatcher cried.

"Steady!" the leader warned. "This is your girl, huh? This pal of mine you shot says so, and we picked her up as she was comin' to the depot. Now, Boy Scout, we don't mean you any harm, and you can save yourself and this little lady a lot of nasty trouble. Where's that other dame? I'm tradin' you this one for her."

Thatcher started forward, but one of the men stopped him. They re-
moved Clara Millard’s gag, and she gasped for breath.

“LISTEN to me!” Thatcher begged. “I don’t know what became of that woman. When I got back here, she was gone.”

“And where’s that cop?”

“I don’t know that, either. He disappeared, too. And they were both hurt bad.”

“I’ll give you just two minutes to tell me where you hid that dame,” the gang leader said. “This girl of yours is safe just that long.”

Clara Millard was looking at him imploringly. Yet he had not the slightest idea of what had become of the wounded woman. But he knew these men never would believe that.

“You put that skirt somewhere,” the leader accused. “She probably told you all about everything—”

“She couldn’t talk at all,” Thatcher said. “I tell you she was almost dead.”

“We’d better hurry it up, Chief,” the short, heavy man warned the leader. “The cops will be comin’ in flocks, and one of the boys says the village hicks are gatherin’.”

“Where’s that woman?” the leader howled at Thatcher.

“I don’t know.”

“He’s not lying to you,” Clara Millard cried. “He honestly doesn’t know. He’d talk to save me, if he knew.”

“Who else could have got her away from here?” the leader snapped. “He was the only person here with her. And he helped that cop get away, too. The cop’s with the woman. Talk quick, mug!”

Thatcher felt sick, helpless. He could do nothing, not even to save his own girl. He glanced at Clara again, and thought she was trying to flash him some sort of message.

The gang leader whipped out an automatic.

“Talk quick, or I’ll blast this girl of yours right before your eyes!” he said.

“We’d better get goin’, Chief,” the heavy-set man said again.

“We came here to get that woman, and we’re goin’ to have her!” the leader declared.

He whirled back toward Thatcher again and brought up the automatic. And again there came a shriek from the whistle of a locomotive.

The extra freight was coming!

Without thinking what he was doing, Thatcher started forward. The move was instinctive. He had imperative orders to stop and sidetrack that freight, to clear the line for the delayed northbound limited.

“Here, you! Where do you think you’re goin’?” the gang leader demanded. “Get back there!”

“That freight’s got to be stopped!”

“So the crew can barge in here and help you, huh? Do you think we’re idiots?”

“Listen!” Thatcher begged. “The northbound limited—if the freight gets through Cedarville, they’ll meet. The limited—”

“What’s a little wreck? You tell me where you put that woman.”

“I don’t know where the woman is, I tell you! Please listen to me! If that freight goes through, there’ll be a terrible catastrophe.”

“Get back there against the wall and tell me what I want to know. Quick! I’m fed up with your stallin’.”

CHAPTER VI

On Time

In that instant, Thatcher had a swift vision of the aristocratic limited meeting the heavy freight head-on at terrific speed, of a rending crash, twisted steel, escaping steam, fire, broken human bodies, men and women shrieking in agony... wrecking trains, doctors and nurses, newspaper headlines.
He had to do something to stop it. But what could he do? Unless—
Three of the men were standing in front of Thatcher, and a couple more were stationed at the windows. But Thatcher did not hesitate. He hurled himself forward suddenly, at the same instant whipping the automatic out of his pocket.

His unexpected move took them by surprise. They didn’t dream he would dare attempt such a thing with the odds so heavy against him. The automatic he held cracked and flamed, and one of the men reeled back against the wall.

Then Thatcher made two moves so swiftly that they did not realize what he was doing. He threw the light switch and plunged the office into total darkness. Then he seized the lever and threw the board, and flattened himself on the floor.

Two guns were flaming and barking, and the leader of the gang was howling for his men to stop shooting, that they might hit one another.

A wild screech sounded from the locomotive whistle of the freight train. The red board had flashed almost in the face of the engineer. The heavy train rolled past the depot with the wheels spinning, sliding, sending out showers of sparks as the man at the throttle worked desperately to make an emergency stop.

"Throw on the lights!" the gang leader was yelling. "You boys outside take care of that freight crew. Grab this wild mug, but don’t kill him—yet."

Thatcher tried to get to the door. He heard the train grind to a stop, then the labored exhaust of the locomotive as it sought to back up the heavy load. Outside the depot, guns began blazing and barking.

Lights suddenly flashed on in the office, and they grabbed him before he could use the automatic again. They slapped him back against the wall, and the gang leader grasped his throat cruelly.

"Stand that girl up in the corner!" the leader howled. "And if this Boy Scout doesn’t tell us where that woman is—"

"I don’t know!" Thatcher shouted. "Wait!" Clara Millard cried. "He’s telling the truth. He doesn’t know where she is—but I do."

"You?" The gang leader whirled toward her.

"Yes. She’s in the freight warehouse. Somebody took her there—took the state policeman there, too."

"In the freight warehouse? We’ll get her. Bring this railroad pest along till we’re sure. And make it quick! We’ve got to be gettin’ out of here."

Outside the building, there was a burst of gunfire that seemed unusually heavy.

"Chief! They’re on us!" some man howled.

The gang leader cursed and whirled toward the door. Outside, men were yelling. Thatcher guessed that some of the highway police had reached the scene, and that some of the townsmen were helping them. The crew of the freight would be in the fighting, too.

The man holding Clara Millard let go of her and lurched toward the door, whipping out his gun. Thatcher sprang to the girl’s side. He grabbed up his automatic from the floor.

But there was no escape for the three gangsters in the office. They reeled back from the waiting room. Men appeared suddenly at all the broken windows and in the doorway, guns held ready for instant use. One of the three gangsters fired wildly and got a bullet in reply which sent him reeling back against the wall.

"Hands up, or you get it!" somebody shouted.

The face of the gang leader had suddenly gone white. He glanced at the wounded man, and at the other Thatcher had shot in the arm earlier. They could not help him now. He threw down his gun and gestured for the other two to submit to the Law.
The group at the door parted, and a man strode into the office with the air of one in command of the situation. Thatcher’s eyes bulged. Ben Mead!

Mead’s eyes were glittering and his face was stern.

His lips curled contemptuously as he looked at the three gangsters standing against the wall.

“Good evening, Jed Joyce!” he greeted the leader. “Ah! ‘Butcher’ Wykes and ‘Slim’ Barlott, too. We captured some interesting gentlemen outside, too, and had to shoot up a couple. This is the end of the trail for you, Joyce.”

“Maybe not.”

Ben Mead gestured to the state policemen behind him.

“Take them away,” he ordered. “The town boys will help you mop up outside. This is a better night’s work than you suspect.”

Tongue-tied, Jim Thatcher leaned weakly against the wall and watched. Clara Millard sank into a chair, on the verge of fainting. The gangsters were seized and hustled out of the operator’s room, and their captors were none too gentle.

“What—” Thatcher began.

“Me?” Ben Mead grinned at him. “You thought I was a crook, and was trying to steal your girl, huh? She’s worth stealing, at that, but I think you’ve got her safe enough.”

“But, what—” Thatcher asked again. “You attend to your railroad business first, Thatcher. Then I’ll explain.”

The conductor of the extra freight was standing in the doorway.

“What’s all this excitement about?” he wanted to know.

“Here!” Thatcher handed him a written order he grabbed up from the telegraph board. “Sidetrack, quick! The northbound limited’s coming through late. You’d have smashed into her if you’d passed the board.”

The freight conductor was already on his way out to the platform, howling for his brakeman.

“Now,” Ben Mead said, grinning again. “I’ve got Barney Crogan safe enough in the freight warehouse. The woman is there, too. The Dobyville doctor is taking care of them. It’s like this, Thatcher. The lady who stumbled in here wounded is Miss Jeanette Nartley. Some time ago, she was a witness to a robbery and killing in a San Francisco night club. And her testimony will convict a couple of killers. We were afraid she might not live to give it.”

“So that’s it!”

“Partially. We sent her to the resort hotel and announced that she’d gone to Europe to spend the season. When the gang learned where she was hiding, I came down here to keep an eye on things.”

“Who are you?” Thatcher asked.

“Me? I’m just a San Francisco cop. Tonight, I got wise that the gang was coming. But they had already raided the hotel while a party was going on. But that was only a blind. The real object of the raid was to abduct Miss Nartley, thinking they could get their two pals released as the price of letting her go.

“But she got wise the moment the raid on the hotel began, and tried to get away. One of the gang lost his head and shot her. But she managed to get to a car and make a getaway, and got as far as the depot here. I saw you help her inside, and then Barney Crogan came. While you were helping him, I got the girl out of the office and hid her in the freight warehouse.”

“Why?”

“I was afraid that you might weaken if that gang got to you.”

“I’d have helped.”

“I know that now. I identified myself to Crogan and got him into the warehouse also, so he could protect Miss Nartley while I went about my business. I told Miss Millard and her mother because I needed women’s help, and made Clara promise not to tell you what was going on.”
“And I was the one who finally weakened and told,” Clara said.
“Can’t blame you,” Mead told her.
“You held out longer than most girls would.”

The telephone bell jangled. Thatcher hurried to the instrument.
“Hello!” he said.
“This is Ed Carter, Jim. What’s all the shootin’ for?”
“We’ve cleaned up the gang,” Thatcher told him. “It’s safe now.”

He was grinning as he hung up the receiver and turned to face the others again.
“I think I’d better apologize for thinking that you were a crook,” he told Ben Mead, flushing.
“Oh, I like a man who’s a bit jealous,” Clara said, laughing.
“It probably was a good night’s work for you personally, Thatcher,” Ben Mead put in. “Miss Nartley thinks that you’re a hero. Her uncle is vice president of the railroad company. And you can be pretty sure of promotion, now.”

They heard the screech of a locomotive whistle again, and again Jim Thatcher remembered that he was above all a railroad man. The extra freight was in the clear, and the northbound limited was coming at top speed.

Thatcher sprang across the room and pulled the lever. Outside, the red eye disappeared, and a green one burned in its place. An answering belch came from the locomotive’s whistle.

Then the little Cedarville depot shook as the heavy train rushed past in a whirl of steam and smoke, cinders and dust. Then the limited was gone, flinging back another screech of the whistle as it flashed around a distant curve.

Thatcher shivered. What if the limited had met the heavy freight head on? Then, shrugging, he reached out a hand and found the telegraph key, and reported the northbound limited safely in and out of the station at Cedarville.

“I’m worried about Barney Crogan,” he told Ben Mead. “I wish you’d see how he’s getting along, and let me know. I can’t leave the depot.”

Ben Mead looked from Thatcher to Clara Millard, grinned at them, and turned toward the door.

“It couldn’t be that you want to be alone with your girl, could it?” Mead said, grinning broadly. “Well, may the semaphores always burn green for you two!”

He laughed a little and hurried outside. Jim Thatcher took Clara in his arms.

“He’s not a bad guy, at that,” he admitted.

Next Month: Complete novel by NELSON S. BOND, Novelet by DENSLOW M. DADE, and Many Other Thrillers
UEER? It was crazy as hell—the telegram which had been forwarded to Dick Graham from Headquarters. It was a despairing and desperate appeal from out of the past.

COME AT ONCE. THE LIFE OF MY FIANCE, GERALD TOWERSEND, IS IN TERRIBLE DANGER. HE HAS BEEN THREATENED BY THE BLACK PRIARS.

MARCIA BROUGH.

A Desperate Plea for Aid Brings Federal Man Graham Right Into the Thick of a Grimly Mysterious and Murderous Smuggler Plot!

A message from Marcia, his childhood sweetheart, begging him to come to Fernandina, Florida, to protect the life of Gerald Towersend.
The crazy part was that Graham was already in Fernandina. He had just arrived—to check clues which led to Gerald Towersend as the probable partner of Louie Corellio in a smuggling racket.

Louie Corellio was the slickest international smuggler the Department had run across in years. He smuggled anything, everything that paid money. He had a dozen different setups with points of unlawful entry into the United States along the Canadian Border, the Mexican Border, and the Atlantic seaboard. And not a shred of evidence which would stand in court had the Secret Service operatives been able to get on him.

But because of a telephone conversation between the smuggling king and a man by the name of Gerald Towersend, Graham had been sent here to investigate. Corelli was lazying away the season in Fernandina. Graham had never heard of Towersend before—and here Marcia Brough was engaged to marry the guy.

Graham shoved the message into his pocket and set about learning the lay of things in the old Spanish city. Inside an hour he had learned that though Fernandina was not as old a town as St. Augustine, it was nevertheless hoary with age. On a slight prominence was an old monastery which had been built by an order of monks called the Black Friars. But today the building lay in ruins. No monk had been seen around the ruins for a hundred years. So somebody was nuts about the Black Friars being dangerous, but this Towersend business was right down Graham's alley.

Graham first got a line on Louie Corellio. As the smuggler did not know him by sight, Graham went to the Royal Palms—Corellio's hotel—to start his casual inquiries. Mr. Corellio, he learned, had left the hotel the evening before about seven o'clock, saying that he was going to the Marble Casino, a de luxe gambling house in which Corellio had spent many expensive hours. However, he had not arrived there last night.

This trail petered out, Graham took the bull by the horns and went to see Marcia. It was still morning and the sweet scent of honeysuckle was heavy in the air. Memory of Marcia smote him keenly as he walked up the winding drive to the Brough mansion.

To Graham's surprise he found the Brough home lousy with cops. A suspicious sergeant with a hard gray eye was all set to question him when Marcia came into the library. She was as lovely as ever. But her sweet face was wan beneath its crowning glory of auburn hair.

"Dick!" she cried. "How glad I am to see you!" And she was suddenly in his arms, sobbing and laughing.

"Here, here, kitten," he soothed. "What goes on around here?"
"It's Gerald!" she cried. "And you're too late! Gerald has been—kidnapped." She turned quickly to the hard-eyed sergeant. "I will vouch for Mr. Graham, Sergeant Clausen," she said. "I want to talk to him privately—at once. You can question him later, if it's necessary to question a secret—""

"Marcia!" said Graham sharply. The policeman was not dumb. He caught wise and stared keenly at the stalwart Graham. Graham nodded imperceptibly. The sergeant grinned and withdrew from the library.

"What's all this about Towersend?" Graham asked Marcia a bit grimly.

"He was here for dinner last night," Marcia began, her lips trembling. "I knew he had been threatened by a mysterious organization called the Black Friars, and I told him I had sent you a wire. He had already agreed that it might be a sensible thing to do. I told him what an old friend you were and—and—"

She began to cry softly. "Go on," he said.

It seemed that the engaged couple had been seated at the table discussing
the inexplicable warning note Towersend had received, signed "The Black Friars," when, as if appearing by magic, a hulking figure in a black robe and cowl that completely masked his identity had suddenly advanced out of the shadows like a ghost.

In one swift leap the strange intruder jumped behind Towersend and brought the barrel of his gun down on Towersend's head with a dull and ghastly clunk. Towersend had groaned once and sagged to the floor. Then, before Marcia could cry out the cowled man had menaced her with his gun.

"One peep outa you, sister, and the Black Friars will be saying a black mass over your soul!" he had warned.

As Marcia had sat there, paralyzed with terror, the stranger picked up the unconscious Towersend and swiftly stepped out onto the veranda. Then Marcia had sent scream after scream out of her throat. The servants had come rushing to her, but both the cowled man and his victim had completely disappeared. The police had been on the job since midnight, but so far had learned nothing.

"Just what was this warning of the Black Friars about?" demanded Graham, his mind already busily at work fitting stray bits of information together—Corellio, smuggling, Towersend's possible complicity, Corellio's disappearance after leaving his hotel the night before.

"He didn't explain clearly," whispered the girl. "He just laughed about the sinister warning, saying it was an old Spanish custom."

"What do the police think of it?"

"I haven't told them about the Black Friars," she confessed. "Gerald said not to tell anybody but you. But if you hadn't come so promptly I think I would have told Sergeant Clausen."

"It seems melodramatic," admitted Graham, though he knew that Louie Corellio would have put Towersend out of the way if he knew that there was a chance an investigation of Towersend might pin certain nefarious matters on Corellio. "Tell me something about this Towersend bird. Do you love him?"

"Gerald is a splendid gentleman," said Marcia. "Dad liked him, and when he wanted to marry me—I—I—well, somehow, I accepted him."

Graham's lips tightened grimly. He only hoped, for Marcia's sake, that Towersend was not mixed up in any shady business. He couldn't even tell her that it had not been her telegram which had brought him to Fernandina.

"Don't worry, honey," he comforted her. "We'll find Gerald for you."

Excusing himself, he went in search of Clausen, and revealed his identity.

"Keep this to yourself, Sergeant," he said. "And here's what I want you local police to do—find Louie Corellio, quick! He's been missing since last night."

The hunt was on. But neither Corellio nor Towersend could be found. It was late in the afternoon that Graham returned to talk to Marcia.

"No news," he admitted gravely. "But I'm going out on a special trip tonight, and if you don't hear from me by nine o'clock in the morning, kitten, tell Clausen about everything. Understand?"

"Yes," she said. "But where are you going?"

"I'm going to poke around about that Black Friar stuff. I'm going to explore the old monastery ruins after dark."

"I'm going with you," she declared. He tried to protest, but she was adamant. He shrugged. After all, what difference did it make? There wouldn't be anything at the ruins, and if he did find Towersend and Corellio in cahoots there, this would be as painless a disillusionment as Marcia could expect.

Armed with a flashlight and a couple of .45s, they set out. It was scarcely nine when they approached the
desolate stone ruins. Not a soul was in sight as they picked their path into the black interior of the gloomy old structure. Only a night bird or two, flapping away from a roost, disturbed them.

They explored the ground floor without encountering any evidence that a living person had been here for years. Then Graham discovered the stone steps leading down an interminable distance to the dungeons which had been put to unpleasant use. They descended, Graham using his flashlight.

They entered what proved to be a veritable labyrinth of passageways and prison cells, all of stone and with arched doorways. And still no evidence of recent human occupancy. The walls were moldy and damp, lichen-covered. The stones were wet with green slime. A nice place for a ghoul and ghost ball.

Graham and Marcia were midway in a vaulted passage tunnel when they heard the slithering, whispering sound far behind them. She clutched his arm fearfully.

"Listen, Dick!" she whispered. "Do you hear that? Like the whispering of monks' robes!"

Graham listened, without moving or breathing. But the sound had stopped. He flashed his light back the way they had come. It revealed nothing—except one uncomfortable thing. The floor of this tunnel was bare and clean, free of debris, as if it were in use.

"Nuts to the Black Friars!" growled Graham. "There's a bend in the corridor just ahead of us. Come on, we'll see where that leads. Then I'm ready to call it a day."

Fifty feet beyond the angle of the passageway the tunnel opened into a queer sort of a room. There was a light, the source of which was not visible from where they stood to one side of the arched opening. The far end of the room looked like a steel and riveted wall with a rectangular window of plate glass. Seated motionless on a crude sort of straight chair was a man in his shirt sleeves. His arms were strapped behind him, and a black hood completely covered his face.

Marcia gave a little cry. "Gerald! He's being held prisoner!"

"Seems so," admitted Graham. And then before he could grab the girl or caution her, she darted forward, crying out her fiancé's name.

Graham drew one of his guns and followed.

At the threshold of the room Marcia cried out in horror, her voice echoing weirdly through the tunnel. And there was reason for her cry. The hood over the prisoner's head had copper disks in it which were connected to heavy wires. There was an electrode about his left ankle. Some fiend had strapped this silent, helpless figure in a crude sort of electric chair.

The girl darted forward to tug at the straps which bound the motionless figure. "Gerald! We'll free you!"

At that instant a shot roared out from the tunnel behind them, and the slug spanged against the steel bulwark that was the far wall of the room. Graham leaped behind the angle of the archway and returned the fire. But no more shots came. He flashed his light down the length of the corridor, and saw nothing, but he heard the trampling of feet as several persons ducked back around the bend.

"Release him, Marcia," he flung over his shoulder, "while I hold these devils back. If they reach the tunnel they'll shoot us down! Get him out of line behind the wall shoulder."

Another shot ricocheted screamingly down the tunnel, and Graham hastily returned the fire. Unseen by the detective, a black-cowled and robed figure wearing rubber-soled shoes dropped down the ladder of iron bars which led up the face of the steel wall. Behind the rectangular window another cowled figure with the same sort of pasty-gray face was reaching to throw a heavy switch.
THE cowled man in the black domino leaned out from the ladder behind Graham’s back and suddenly grasped Marcia by the upper arm, snatching her from the side of the bound figure just as his confederate closed the switch.

The girl screamed. There was a crackling discharge of electricity and the faint smell of burning flesh. But the figure in the chair did not move. Graham whirled, placing his back to the stone wall, just in time to exchange shots with the “Black Friar” above the struggling girl’s head. A slug knocked the detective’s flashlight to pieces, but his own bullet neatly drilled a hole at the base of the cowled man’s nose.

There were renewed shots and shouts down the corridor, and then more noise from overhead. And as the man in black released Marcia and crumpled to the stone flagging, blue coats came charging along the tunnel. Sergeant Clausen was in the lead.

“We cleaned ‘em out, Graham!” he bellowed. “Not a one got away. Are you and Miss Brough all right?”

“Yes,” panted Graham. “Get a man inside this steel bulkhead and capture anybody there—and turn off this juice. They’ve electrocuted this man!”

Marcia was moaning as she stared at the smoking figure in the chair. Then the crackling of electricity and the hum of the dynamo suddenly ceased. A door opened in the steel wall, and an officer came through.

“Got all the rats, sir,” he announced. “And you ought to see what a store-room’s behind there. Boy, have they been smuggling in goods!”

“Gerald!” moaned Marcia. “He’s been killed!”

Sergeant Clausen leaped forward and ripped off the hood from the man in the chair. The burned features of Louie Corellio were exposed. But the jolt of electricity had not killed the king smuggler. He had been shot. His body was already stiff.

“That’s not Gerald,” Marcia cried, and looked wildly around.

“Brace yourself for a shock, kitten,” Graham said tersely. “This is going to be a little rough on you.”

He bent down and ripped the cowl and domino from the face of the man who had snatched the girl away from the chair and then had tried to shoot down the Federal man. The pasty-gray features, smeared with make-up, were scarcely recognizable, thanks to the bullet Graham had planted there. But Sergeant Clausen had no difficulty.

“This is Gerald Towersend!” he grunted. “You were right, Graham.”

“I was afraid so,” the Federal man said grimly. “He arranged his own abduction when Marcia told him I was coming. He had already made plans to leave Corellio holding the sack. When he learned the United States Government was on to him, he planned to kill his partner to silence him, and somehow get himself out of the jam with his mumbo-jumbo Black Friar stuff. He would claim that some mysterious organization had kidnapped him and killed Louie Corellio who was their leader. Then he’d say he had learned of Corellio’s smuggling and was about to expose him. But I’ve an idea we’ll have no trouble making the rats you caught in this trap squeal.”

“But how did you know it would work out like this?” asked Clausen.

“Didn’t know Towersend was planning to kill Corellio,” said Graham, “but I was sure they were linked up together. I was on the way here when Towersend learned from Marcia that she was going to wire me. So I had a twenty-four-hour jump on him.”

Marcia looked down at the body of the man to whom she had been engaged.

She gave one shuddering sigh, then wilted in Graham’s arms. The Federal man held her gently.

“You finish things here, Sergeant,” he said. “I’ve got some unfinished business of my own to take care of.”
KILLER'S LUNCH HOUR

By LLOYD LLEWELL

Author of "Alibi Murders," "Death Follows the Line," etc.

Nurse Judy Raymond, Eye-Witness to a Wanton Killing, Finds Two Lives in Jeopardy!

JUDY RAYMOND tipped a little warm water from the iron kettle on the black stove into a glass and handed it to her assistant. "See if you can manipulate that old-fashioned pump by the sink, Margy. This is a little too warm for Mrs. Benson."

Judy Raymond brushed a curl of soft, honey-gold hair from her forehead with the back of one slender, professional hand. Her neatly starched white uniform swished softly as she turned to watch her younger sister. This was the first time she had taken Margy with her on a case, and pride glowed in her blue eyes. The kid had carried on like a professional.

Margy nodded her curly head towards the window. "I think Mr. Benson is coming back by the house to see how his wife is," she announced.

Judy started to say something, but her lips stayed half-open and the muscles of her fine face seemed frozen with quick, understanding terror.

A long, powerful sedan was crunching the gravel of the driveway, visible

Trimmer fired without warning
from the kitchen side window. Both girls, being on a little higher level than the car could look down into it through the curtained window, could see the five men, could see the guns in the hands of four of them.

Something gurgled in Margy’s throat. She swallowed twice. Her face turned the color of cold ashes. “The Milltown bank robbers!” she whispered, her hand shaking so much that she spilled some water from the tumbler.

Judy’s long, tapering fingers with their rounded nurse’s nails softly touched the little gold insignia of her profession that was pinned into the starchly waist of her dress. It was her talisman, her source of courage. She took the glass from Margy’s trembling hands and set it on the sink.

“Yes,” she said steadily. “It looks like it. Keep up your nerve, Margy.”

Margy wasn’t listening. She was staring out of the curtained side window. The four men stepped from the car. Their guns disappeared. One, a tall, lanky man with a limping left leg, went to Judy’s new green sedan, standing a few feet beyond the gunmen’s car.

“This bus is full of gas, Trimmer,” he called to a powerfully built man, who seemed to be the leader.

TRIMMER nodded that he had understood and said something in too low a voice for the girls to understand, then added in a louder tone. “Here’s the hick farmer now.”

Benson was coming from the barn, followed by a team of fat mares. There was something springy, something happy in his walk that even his much-mended, much-washed overalls couldn’t hide. A smile was on his wind-hammered face. The doctor had said his wife was going to get well.

“Got any gas?” Trimmer called sharply as the farmer stopped short in surprise.

Benson took off his battered hat and swished it against his dusty leg. “Sor-
She grabbed the glass off the sink and hurried to her patient. Mrs. Benson was half-sitting up in bed. Her large eyes, with heavy dark rings underneath, hurled a frightened question at Judy. "What is it?" she asked, trembling with weak excitement.

Judy's clear cut features were calmy professional. "Car backfired, Mrs. Benson," she said unhurriedly. She opened her bag, took from it a small bottle and poured a few drops into the glass. It wasn't the best thing for the patient, she knew, but there was no time for a hypodermic. "Better drink your medicine, Mrs. Benson."

JUDY held her patient's head until she felt the medicine take hold, until the woman's body became slack. Then she lowered it, and hurried back to the kitchen. The black car and Benson's body were out of sight. Three men were settled in her green sedan, but Trimmer and the lanky one with the yellow face were coming toward the rear porch. Trimmer still had the automatic in his fist.

Judy's tall, lean body moved with quick, unhesitating motions. She dragged Margy off to one side. Then she snatched the heavy shotgun from the hanger over the door, broke it and smiled grimly at the two shells that were in the breech. She emptied a box of shells on the sinkboard and stuffed several into the pocket of her dress, but her eyes never left the back door.

She saw the knob turn softly, slowly. Her lovely young face became hard and brittle. The heavy gun lifted to her shoulder. Her finger squeezed the trigger, and a hole appeared suddenly in the panel of the door, five inches from the knob.

A scream of pain blasted through the broken door. Livid curses followed it, but the knob turned no more.

Grimly Judy snapped a fresh shell into place and waited. For a breathtaking moment nothing happened. Then a savage volley of hurling, screaming lead plowed through the door, ripping long slivers of yellow pine from the wood.

Judy hardly felt the sting of a ricocheting bullet as it slashed through her starched dress and seared her flesh. She only thought of Margy, of her patient, of the callously killed husband of the sick woman. White shoes planted firmly, she again raised the gun. Her body rocked with the recoil. Her shoulder jerked as the heavy gun belowed, blasting a new hole in the door, higher up and to the left.

Dimly, as from still very far away, Judy heard the sharp keening of a police siren. But it meant nothing to her. Only one thought hammered at her shocked brain.

No killer must come through that door!

The pungent powdersmoke brought tears to her eyes. Her pearly white teeth were buried deep in her bleeding lips and a cruel bruise came on the satiny skin of her cheek where the gun-stock had cracked against it. But mechanically she reloaded. Her eyes flicked to the window. One of the other thugs was half out of her car, shouting frenziedly something about cops, a surprised look on his face.

Coolly Judy lifted her weapon, sent a hail of heavy shot through the window. Sharp cries of pain bellowed from the surprised gunman. He catapulted back into the car. The motor started to race. Trimmer and the yellow-faced thug came racing from the porch, hurled themselves into the car. For a brief instant the killer's eyes met Judy's through the window, and the girl shuddered at the terrible look she read on his face.

The motor roared louder. The spinning wheels, threw a curtain of gray dust and then the car slewed crazily and shot through the barn-gate onto the highway before the murderer could take a shot at her. The empty gun dropped from Judy's limp hands, thumped onto the linoleum and then Judy herself crumpled across the shotgun.
THE next two weeks were a nightmare of sheriffs and state troopers, district attorneys and newspapermen. But finally the excitement died down and life settled back in its old groove.

Four of the bank robbers had been cornered and shot to death. But the leader, Trimmer Duprey, the wanton murderer of Benson, had escaped the dragnet. With him went the loot from the Milltown National Bank that the bandits had held up before making it to Benson’s place that morning, their gas tank empty because an officer’s lucky bullet had punctured it in the getaway. Judy got her car back, but all the law had was the testimony of the two girls which was useless until the killer was captured.

Judy was setting the table for lunch in her own small kitchen, as lovely as the bright May morning outside. Her blue cape, with its little gold pin, was draped across a chair, half-covering her little black bag. She was going out on her first case since the Benson affair this afternoon.

She hummed a gay little tune and threw a glance at the clock. Quarter of twelve. She went to the window and waved at the officers in the squad car. The D. A. wasn’t taking any chances with his best witness. Day and night, two officers were on watch. Sergeant Flaherty waved back to her, and the patrol car started to move, going to bring Margy from the Nurses School, as they had done every day since the killing at Benson’s place.

Judy watched the car out of sight, and then her heart missed its beat. She knew she wasn’t alone. She knew that someone was behind her, that death lurked at her back.

Her stiffened body turned slowly, the humorous little quirk frozen on her icy lips.

Trimmer Duprey was leaning carelessly against the closed back door. A large automatic with a thick knobby thing on the end of it, was in his hand. A cold light crawled in the murky depths of his black eyes that were half-lidded as if the lids were weighted with too much tissue.

“Surprised?” He grinned, showing uneven, irregular and discolored teeth.

Judy’s heart started beating again. She leaned against the refrigerator, fear gnawing at her soul. But her voice was unnaturally calm.

“You had better get away as quickly as possible,” she said, trying desperately to stop the twitching of the muscles on the white column of her throat. “There are two officers outside—”

Trimmer’s smooth - muscled body shook with silent laughter.

“Those two mugs?” he asked disdainfully. “Don’t kid me. I’ve watched them every day. They’ll bring your kid sister from school and then eat their lunch in the car.” A tantalizing thought crossed his perverted mind that was soaked with conceit and self-adoration. “Go right on settin’ the table. Since I have to wait for the kid anyhow, I think I’ll eat with you.”

Judy stayed rooted. Terror-driven thoughts raced through her, agonizing every fibre of her body. Trimmer would never let Margy or herself go as witnesses into court! He had come here to kill them, as he had killed Mr. Benson—because they had seen him kill Benson.

“What do you want?” she asked desperately.

Trimmer’s breath made a rough, whistling sound in his flaring nostrils. Blotches of color came into his high cheekbones and for a moment a soul as cruel as Satan’s stirred the muddy black pools of his eyes. He took a step forward.

JUDY’S hands dropped to her side. Her fingers touched the handle of her black bag, and a desperate plan surged through her groping mind. Savagely she clawed at the bag, flung it with all her might at the killer’s head.

But Trimmer knocked it aside easily. It slammed to the floor, spilled its
contents. The killer’s fingers clawed around her wrist, held her motionless.

“You little devil,” he snapped, his silenced gun inches from her heaving breast. “I ought to let you have it right now.”

He gave her arms a wicked twist, forcing her down on her knees. “Pick up them things and get the eats ready. I’m hungry,” he snarled.

Mechanically Judy did as she was told. She picked up the spilled things, packed them back in her bag. All but one small little bottle. That she slipped into the pocket of her dress. Then she rose to her feet and worked like an automaton. She lit the gas and set the percolator to boil and put slices of ham ready in the pan to fry as soon as Margy arrived.

Trimmer stood silently by, watching her every movement. His black hair, dark as midnight, smelled repellently of cheap perfume. His thick mouth, with its cruel corners, sneered silently.

Judy took the lettuce from the refrigerator, washed it. She made the dressing for the salad with quick, trained motions, mixing it at the sink. Once her hand dipped quickly into her pocket. A moment later the little bottle was back out of sight, empty. Then she carried the salad to the little dinette.

Suddenly she stopped, halfway to the kitchen door. But Trimmer had heard it, too, the returning car. Swiftly he slipped forward on silent feet. His gun pressed against her spine. His voice girted harshly.

“Don’t try anything funny, sister,” he murmured tersely. “I heard the cop car come back. You go to the door and let the kid in. One wrong movement, and I’ll blast first her and then you. Maybe I won’t get away, but what good will that do you?” His gun poked her in the ribs. “Get going. And don’t forget, I’ll be right behind you.”

Judy slowly walked across the living-room. They lived in a small bun-
galow. A broad lawn in front of the house was bisected by a concrete walk. Through the window Judy saw Margy jump from the squad car, run up the walk and noisily bounce on the small porch.

Trimmer stepped to one side, so that he was behind the glass front door as Judy opened it. They heard Sergeant Flaherty call:

“Tell Judy I’ll be up tonight to see her.”

Margy turned back to the officer, a mischievous grin on her face. Judy saw Trimmer’s gun trained on her sister’s back.

“Okay, flatfoot.” Margy yelled to Flaherty. “You leave a quart of ice cream in the car with Officer Jonesy and I’ll give you an hour alone with her in the house. It’ll take me an hour to eat it.”

She whirled and stormed through the door. “Hi, sis,” she said. “What’s the matt—”

Then she saw Trimmer. Her eyes grew round. She rose on her toes. Her mouth opened to scream. Trimmer slammed the door shut behind her and with the same motion cracked a fist under her chin.

“Damn you,” he snarled viciously. “Shut up! You ain’t going to pull no Torchy Blaine on me.”

MARGY whimpered queerly, staggered on her jellied legs, Judy’s supporting arm around her. Trimmer’s tall body was crouched low. The gun in his talonlike hand was unwavering, and terrible menace glowed wickedly in every facial movement.

“Get back into the kitchen,” he snarled, his eyes feverishly agleam. Murder glittered in them. “We’ll eat first.”

Judy’s neat, dainty feet felt like huge leaden weights as she stumblingly helped Margy to the dinette table. The younger girl was paralyzed with fear.

Trimmer stood against the wall. His gun made a short, arcing movement.
“Sit down, kid,” he ordered roughly, and then turning to Judy: “Get the grub going.”

Judy lit the jets on her small gas stove, and in a moment the ham in the frying-pan started to sizzle. She took a can of tomato puree from the shelf and set it on a blazing burner. Mechanically she turned the frying ham two or three times. She poured the coffee and set the platter of ham on the table.

Trimmer dragged a chair forward with his foot. “Get in there, sister,” he told Judy, pointing to the pullman seat. “I’ll sit at the end here.”

He parked his gun on his lap underneath the table and helped himself lavishly. Neither Judy nor Margy could eat. The younger girl’s frightened eyes couldn’t leave the killer’s face. It got Trimmer’s goat.

“Eat, damn you!” he snapped at her.

Both Judy and Margy started nibbling half-heartedly, the food choking in their throats.

Trimmer enjoyed his meal. “I’m really not a bad guy,” he told them. “Sure wish I didn’t have to do it.”

A diabolical light suddenly glowed in the depths of his muddy eyes. He reached for the dish of salad. “You girls ain’t eatin’ like you oughta,” he smirked at them, heaping salad on their plates. “Come on, eat it. You’ll like it.”

Consternation flicked through Judy. Desperately she tried to warn Margy, tried to tell her that the salad was doped. At that Trimmer burst into loud, uncontrolled guffaws. He had a knife in one hand, a fork in the other. With them he pounded the table.

“Ha-ha-ha,” he bellowed, “if that ain’t funny. You tried to spike the salad, eh, sister? Thought Trimmer was just a dumb sucker, eh?”

He dropped his fork and grabbed Judy, dragging her toward him. His hand snaked into her pocket and brought out the little bottle.

“Chloral Hydrate,” he read on the label, “good old Mickey Finn. So you thought you’d—”

Judy’s eyes burned, her lips quivered. “All right, Trimmer,” she said tightly, “my little scheme failed. You were too smart for me. You’ll kill Margy and me. I haven’t any hope left. You came here just to do that. But some day you’ll get what’s coming to you. One of your yellow partners will shoot you in the back.” She slammed her small hand sharply down on the table. “Like that,” she repeated. “In the back.”

She gulped a deep breath. “Yes, Trimmer, in the back. They won’t give you any more chance than you give your own victims. They’ll sneak up to you, perhaps in the dark. You’ll hear the sound of the gun”—again her hand crashed down on the cloth, made the dishes rattle—“that’s all you’ll hear. You won’t know—”

Then it happened. Hell seemed to split asunder behind Trimmer. Boiling, sizzling bloody stuff rained over him, seared him, bit into him. He grabbed up his gun, fired behind him even as he whirled.

Judy’s hand streaked for the percolator. She heaved it straight at Trimmer’s head. Snarling, shouting vile curses, the thug whirled. His gun belowed wickedly, the bullet plowing into the dishes on the table. Trimmer’s eyes were closed, blinded by the red-hot blood, by the stinging coffee.

For once in her life, Judy was no thinking, reasoning nurse. She became a wild dynamo of anger, of desperate hatred. Her hand grabbed the frying-pan. She didn’t feel the too-hot handle burn her flesh. She slashed the hot grease over Trimmer’s head, knocked the wavering gun from his fist, battered his face.

Then a strong hand clamped around her wrist, held her.

“Steady now, Judy,” Sergeant Flaherty tried to soothe her. “You’ve laid the lunkhead out cold.” He snapped handcuffs on Trimmer’s wrists. “Look—

(Concluded on page 110)
Ed Farrell, Insurance Detective, Stalks a Murdering Saboteur Through a Sinister Maze of Political Corruption!

OVER in town, a clock tolled seven as I parked on the bridge approach. The construction shack squatted there was like all others I'd seen on Reliance Bridge Company jobs—unpainted, boxlike. Only one detail differed here. A dark piece of crepe fluttered from the door.

The door opened as I jumped from my coupé. A stocky, booted man stepped out. "You're Farrell, the insurance company detective?" he asked me. "I'm Dade, job superintendent." He nodded somberly toward the crepe. "Fellow named Wicker, poor chap. He was our night-watchman."

"Natural death?" I asked.
"No, somebody slugged him," he said. "About four this morning. We didn't get word to Chicago till you'd left. He'd flopped right where you're
standing—See the blood?"

The Reliance Bridge Company carries construction insurance with Federated American, the company I sleuth for. On each new bridge-building contract, they take out one policy covering intentional damage. Human damage. There's always the chance some fired workman will sabotage a bridge for spite. More likely, it's some crook posing as a workman.

My employer at the Chicago home office had called me in early that morning.

"This Clay Hill bridge," he explained, "will connect that town of twenty thousand with a rich farming section, the Bottoms, across the river. A Reliance executive just phoned me, from their office here. He's panicky about a message they just received. "They got a threatening letter once before. It was last summer, when they bid this job in. They were warned that they'd never finish their bridge. They put that down as a crackpot's work, didn't even report it to us. Now they received this new threat."

"Another letter?"
He nodded worriedly.
"It says: 'You had your warning about Clay Hill bridge, suckers!'"

The boss explained Reliance's jitters further. This was a steel-arch bridge, a hundred-yard span. They'd been building several months from both river banks. The day after tomorrow they'd join the two reaching arms in the center. But till then the arms, resting on frail props or "bents," wouldn't stand much jolting.

"Reliance is worried about dynamite," my boss finished. "So am I—plenty! Reliance would lose twenty percent if the bridge was wrecked. But Federated American Insurance would lose the rest—nearly two hundred grand! Ed, it's up to you to see that nothing happens to that bridge!"

Lights, following the arch, faintly illuminated the girders. A half moon careened through fuzzy clouds, silhouetting the framework like the stark ribs of a prehistoric monster.

Shivering, I stepped inside the office crammed with blueprints, tools, and welcome heat. I asked Dade about the killing.

"I'd stationed two watchmen," he said. "One at each approach. I'd heard about that first threat and, the arch-closing being a crucial moment, I remembered it."

"You didn't know about the new letter yet?" I asked.

"No, not till I phoned Chicago this morning after the murder. Wicker had lights burning here—you noticed the bulbs on the arch and approaches? Besides, a searchlight's spotted on the water where each bent rises from the river bottom. A 'bent' is the support propping each arm. I figured that if I could keep a wrecker off the approaches and bends, he couldn't touch the bridge."

"Who found the body?"

"A girl. She lives under the abutment here and heard the shot. A brave kid. She grabbed her gun, ran up here and chased the killer off single-handed. The lights had gone out—damn that power company! So she couldn't see much of this running man by moonlight. Then she discovered poor Wicker, this Miss McElroy did, and phoned me."

"McElroy?" I said, startled. "Betty? Is she here?"

He nodded approvingly.
"Guess you've handled our cases before."

Betty McElroy! Every time Reliance finished a job, Betty and her mother would load their cookstove and kitchen utensils into their trailer, light out to another Reliance location. Then they'd rent a building nearby or have one hammered together. And presto! she had another restaurant and was feeding all the construction hands. Why? Her fare was good, the
company recommended her, and—she was a swell kid.

"The local mayor came here today," Dade continued, "and offered me police protection. I told him we'd leave all arrangements to you." His hands trembled when he lit a match. "That's all I know."

"Look," I said. "You've been around this town three months. You must know some people, hear things. What about suspects?"

Dade tugged at a hairy ear.

"There's three you might investigate," he said. "The first is Mayor Gorse, a smooth-talking, ambitious politician. He's against the new bridge. When the bids were opened on this job, he had them drawn illegally. But an alderman caught on. It was some kind of trick to delay the contract award until next city election, then take a new bridge vote. Besides, Gorse is linked with the local power company."

"Crooked?" I asked.

"So I gather. Then there's Blodgett. He owns the river ferry just below here."

"He opposes the bridge because it'll hurt his ferry business?" I guessed.

Dade shook his head. "It'll ruin it! The city's already gone to court, canceled his franchise. He can't even operate after the bridge is finished! Also, there's Parelli, a banker at Oakville, twenty miles across the river. Oakville depends entirely on farm trade with The Bottoms. The free bridge will bring that here, because Clay Hill is much nearer that section. Farmers go to Oakville now to save ferry fare. The bridge will wreck Oakville, and Parelli practically owns the little town. So he'd rather see it in the river than over it!"

Outside, the wind whistled a vibrant, urging tune. I jumped to my feet, turned my coat collar up.

"Driving down," I said, "I hoped this threat was a practical joke. Now I know better. That murderer won't hesitate to make mincemeat of this bridge! His only problem's how, and when. I'm out to stop him. Not just while the arch is being joined but till the job's done! What's more, the Clay Hill people never can feel their bridge is safe until this killer's put away. And Wicker—we're not forgetting him. I mean to get that rat!"

After introducing Hull, the new night-watchman, Dade left. Then I had another look at the bridge. The road continued only to the abutment end. The bridge floor wouldn't be swung from the suspenders until the arch was closed.

The moon played ghostly tag with breaking clouds. The near arch-arm curved over a crutchlike bent, projected free beyond for forty feet. The other arm, stretching from the far side, had steadier support. Its bent stood much nearer the free end.

If anybody desired to commit big damage, the arm on our side was the one to blast. The arms were twelve feet apart now, Hull said. Two more days of work would link them together. And it was sixty feet down to water from up there.

Hull was nervous. He kept wetting his lips, rubbing horny hands. A riveter, he'd been given the guard job after Wicker left a vacancy. Thick muscles lumped out his sleeves.

He showed me a telephone that was connected with the far bank. I phoned the other watchman, Charley. All quiet over there, his voice told me. Then I asked Hull where I could locate Clay Hill's mayor.

"City Hall." Hull squinted his watch. "Evening paper announces a regular city council meeting there at seven. It's seven-fifteen now."

It was eight blocks downtown, he said. With the night becoming clearer, I decided to walk it.

Two hundred yards from the bridge the road right-angled into a town street. A little old man stood under the intersection light, scanning the sky.
“She’s gonna stay out, hey?” he croaked at me.

“The moon? Yeah, it isn’t going to rain after all.”

He hopped birdlike inside a coop-size booth off the sidewalk. His arm levered and the intersection light went out. I stared downtown. All the streetlights were blacked out.

“Did you do that?” I asked, scowling.

“I’m Jelk, city moon-watcher,” he cackled proudly. “When the moon’s bright, we save light! Forty smackers a night, my nephew the mayor says!”

I snorted.

“So your nephew Mayor Gorse pays you city money to watch the moon and yank a switch. Hard work.” I glanced back where I’d walked from and my jaw dropped. “Hey, the bridge lights are out, too!”

“Yep, same powerline.” He giggled. “This is the second time I’ve jerked that switch. My job only started last week.”

I grabbed his arm, shook him.

“So you had those lights off when Wicker was shot! Now you’ll scare the new watchman. Switch those lights on!”

The old man jumped into his doghouse, slammed the door. A bolt grated.

“Hull knows I might turn ’em off,” he yelled at me. “I told him today. You see the mayor, mister! This here’s my job!”

You bet I’d see the mayor. I started downtown.

There was only a house or two to the block out here. The rest were vacant lots, bare trees, bushes. Frosty shadows loomed everywhere. Then I heard something thump! It sounded just ahead, in a dark clump of bushes. The bushes shook. I stopped, braced myself. Then I understood. Somebody had tossed a rock in that bush to distract me.

I whirled, ducked from an onrushing masked shape. A club crashed off my skull. Skyrockets exploded in my seething brain. I staggered, but kept my feet. Then he ran away and scooted behind a board fence as I whipped my gun out and shot three times. Bending low, I ran to the fence, peered over.

I saw lots of trees—a park probably. My assailant was hidden there by now. All I knew was that he’d worn a dark cloth over his lower face. I didn’t even know if he was big or little.

Waggling a groggy head, I staggered toward town. Then I broke into a trot. When I reached City Hall, my head was clear and I was running hard.

“Where’s that council meeting?” I asked the uniformed cop at the desk downstairs.

“Postponed.” He blinked. “The mayor had to leave. Got a phone call a few minutes back, so he left with Mr. Stroud.”

“Stroud? The power company owner?”

“Yep.” The cop started running around the desk. “Hold on, young fella! You been fightin’?”

I ran outside. I’d forgotten my face was all bloody. I found a cab, hopped the hackie a buck to wheel me to the bridge fast. When I jumped out there, he left looking scared. I yelled for Hull. A flashlight beam drilled me.

“You, Mr. Farrell?” It was Hull, a gun in his fist. “Wanted to make sure. I chased a guy off ten minutes ago. Right after the lights went out. Caught him sneaking onto the bridge.”

“Recognize him?”

“No, sir. He ran like a deer, after I shot. But he dropped this. Heard it pop the planking and found it with my flash.”

He laid a gold watch in my palm. I flipped it over. On the back was engraved the letter “P.”

After keeping Hull company for half the night, I drifted into Betty McElroy’s lunchroom for a late breakfast. I perched on a stool at the clean white counter.
“Ed!” Betty waltzed out of the kitchen, shook hands warmly. “I heard about last night. I’ve been expecting you. How’s your head?”

It still throbbed from a knot under my snap-brim, but seeing Betty again made me feel fine all over. She looked swell. She had dark shining hair, a million-dollar figure and blue Irish eyes a mile deep.

She fried ham and eggs on the spick and span griddle. She told me her mother was out back in their trailer. She was in bed, half sick from the excitement. Betty was keeping her .32 under the counter, in case the killer showed again.

She’d heard local news around the lunchroom. For instance, that Blodgett, the ferryman, had been defeated for mayor by Gorse in the last three elections. He would run again next February. Some townfolks predicted he would win.

The campaign issue was utilities—lights, water, gas. This bird Stroud owned the local plant that supplied all three. Blodgett wanted to boot him out, let the city operate its own plant. Blodgett claimed he’d made a study of power rates. He branded Stroud’s rates exorbitant.

Blodgett charged that Mayor Gorse had persuaded the council to keep Stroud’s plant. For this work Stroud was furnishing free gas to run a mill Gorse owned. Blodgett couldn’t prove this story, but it threatened Gorse’s chances for re-election.

“I’ll interview the mayor,” I told curvesome Betty. “And, pet, if there’s more shooting necessary, leave it to me!”

“I haven’t seen you for months,” she said, “so don’t get yourself plugged!”

She’d tried to joke, but suddenly shuddered and went white as a flour sack...

At City Hall the mayor sent word I could come upstairs. Lanky, about thirty-five, this dapper fashion plate shook hands damply. He ran a palm over slick black hair.

“Heard about you,” he said silkily. “Meet my friend Stroud.”

This other man in the little office was shorter than Gorse, but huge! Three hundred and fifty pounds anyway! Age about forty-five. He didn’t even try to rise for manners. Nobody could blame him.

“A pleasure,” he said, slipping me a limp ham hand. “The mayor was just telling me you got slugged last night, son.”

Gorse’s sanctum was small but ornate and expensive. There were new deep-cushioned chairs, a gigantic shiny desk for His Honor. A framed motto on it read: “Strike While the Iron Is Hot.”

Gorse blew a bulging smoke ring. “Heard about it this morning, Farrell,” he said. “Next time, cut us in. My city force would have the hoodlum in the clink by now.”

“Thanks,” I said, scowling darkly. “Also for offering your cops to guard the bridge, which I understand you did.”

Gorse assumed a platform pose, waved a slim cigar airily.

“And Dade, the superintendent, cruelly refused our aid! No gentleman, that fellow. You’d think I was after the bridge! If Dade was the only one concerned, I’d say let his arch go splash!”

He and Stroud swapped quick, apprehensive glances.

“Of course, I’d hate to see you insurance people hurt,” Gorse added, waxy eyelids fluttering. “And this city—why, this bridge’ll be wonderful for Clay Hill! I love my town, Farrell! Living in Chicago, maybe you’ve never felt the warm fire in your heart for a small town like...”

When Gorse’s flowery oration ended, I told him about the bridge lights’ blackout last night.

“Why can’t the power company give us a private line? Instead of that street light hookup? If you love Clay Hill’s bridge so, how about letting
those lights burn uninterruptedly till we can close that arch?"

A cold, contemptuous grin twisted the corners of Gorse’s handsome lips. “You don’t know politics here,” he said. “And you don’t know Blodgett!”

“What’s the connection?”

The mayor and Stroud exchanged more furtive glances. The ponderous powerman sat quietly, like a placid Oriental idol—except his slitted, venomous eyes. I understood now where Gorse looked for directions. But though Stroud might be engineering all this deviltry, he’d had help. With his giant bulk, he couldn’t run as speedily as my attacker had.

“Here’s the set-up, Farrell,” Gorse said smoothly. “Recently I read how various mayors had saved their cities money with this moonlight saving plan. But the minute I started it, what did that crank Blodgett do? He began yapping that I was raising an economy smoke screen, a publicity stunt just to capture votes next February! While I’m really helping Mr. Stroud bleed the citizens with high power rates, he said!”

“Blodgett’s wrong there?” I asked, twisting my wide lips wryly.

Gorse shot me a venomous scowl. His brow furrowed. His expression molded into one of martyred pain.

“It’s no joke, Farrell,” the mayor said coldly. “I must march on with my moonlight economy project! If I retreated even one night to help your watchmen, Blodgett would jeer how he’d exposed me as a scheming politician! It might win him the election. A calamity!”

I wheeled on enormous Stroud, owner of power plants in half a dozen towns.

“Can’t you give Dade a private line?” I asked. “Short on wire, or what?”

“I intend to, son,” he said expansively. “We didn’t know about the mayor’s moon business when we hooked up the bridge. I’ll give you a private line as soon as I can pull some linemen off last night’s windstorm damage to my Oakville wiring. Just a couple of days.”

“Swell!” I exploded angrily. “Lights for river catfish! In two days maybe there won’t be any bridge.” I wheeled on the mayor. “You and Stroud are very chummy, eh? Damn funny you’re anxious to cut his power profits by this moon scheme!”

**Mayor Gorse** drew up. Anger shook him like a seething, pent-up volcano.

“Personal friendship,” he said in a harsh voice, “has no bearing on my public duty. I don’t like your tone!”

“Listen, glamor boy,” I snapped. “Maybe you haven’t heard the gossip—about your mill getting free gas.”

“Blodgett!” Gorse shouted, his face working spasmodically with hate. “He’s lied about me for years. Where’s his proof? I’ve never received free gas. I simply oppose municipal ownership because it wouldn’t pay here. Damn Blodgett!”

Stroud clamped a ham hand on Gorse’s arm. He’d actually struggled to his feet. He shoved Gorse into a chair, whispered sibilantly in his ear. Then he patted my shoulder jarringly.

“Sure, you’ve got to investigate rumors, son,” he said purring. “But weigh everything you hear. Remember, the mayor’s beaten Blodgett for office three times. So the fellow’s mighty bitter.”

“As for lying little Parelli—” Gorse sputtered, then stopped with a yell of pain. Stroud’s gigantic foot had quietly mashed Gorse’s small one to shut off his words.

“What about Parelli, the Oakville banker?” I snapped.

“Blodgett’s a lying miser!” Gorse yelled. His wild, bloodshot eyes avoided me. He limped to the door, threw it open. “Go see him personally. Then you’ll realize why I can’t give such a man any advantage! Now get out!”
It was my intention to locate Blodgett anyhow. That afternoon I walked a hundred yards below the bridge to his ferry. Moored in its slip, it listed badly. It needed new red paint. Blodgett squatted on its rickety apron, waiting for a fare.

Nearing fifty, he was burly, red-faced. He wore patched overalls. For twenty years this boat had been a gold mine, but old Blodgett was still too stingy to install a motor. He propelled it along a cable by means of a grip-bar. That long exercise had given him bull shoulders.

I wanted to interview him, I said, because maybe he had heard something on the murder night. His house was nearby. Besides, perhaps he had an inside tip on my case.

"Nope," he said, spitting downstream toward a dam. "I mind my own business and favor others doing likewise." His eyes suddenly flecked with hatred. "They're robbing me, that's what they're doing! . . . Still, I wouldn't want anyone killed."

His sudden outburst startled me.

"Robbing you? Who?" I asked quickly.

He sprang up suddenly, stuck his maniacal face into mine. His bulging eyes were seared with passion.

"I had the exclusive franchise to operate this ferry," he yelled. "Got it fair and legal. I've worked hard, lugging people across this river. Then this gang started talking this bridge! They had the state's control over my franchise transferred to the city, provided they'd build a city bridge. Then they revoked my franchise. I can't operate after that bridge opens! Is that justice?"

"But you got damages, didn't you?" I asked.

"Five thousand dollars!" he said, snarling. "You call that compensation after a man's put twenty years in a business? His best years, his life's blood?"

"Why don't you appeal the condemnation award then?"

**His jaws bunched. Something popped inside.**

"I did. But they wouldn't change it. That same gang of politicians fixed my appeal, too. Mayor Gorse and his hellish crew!"

"I don't quite get your point of view," I told the raging ferryman. "You're supposed to champion a city-owned power plant, basing your mayor race on that platform. Then why can't the city also own the transportation facilities across the river? Does a bridge happen to hit your pocketbook?"

His big fist knotted. I half ducked, expecting a blow. But the fist shook at the bridge, where workmen climbed preparatory to joining the two reaching arms on the morrow.

"Because this damn bridge won't help the city!" he yelled savagely. "When Clay Hill gets cheap utility rates, that'll help every resident, won't it? But who will this bridge help? A few merchants, yes. The banker, oh, yes! But what about laborers, railroad men, me? Nobody'll travel that side road across the river but Bottoms farmers. Yet we've all got to pay for the bridge. It ain't fair!"

"But Mayor Gorse doesn't agree with you, eh?" I said.

He peered at his shack with smoldering, suspicious eyes. Then he looked up the road into town, back at me. He licked thick lips.

"Listen," he said. "I was keeping this secret till my campaign got hot. Mayor Gorse favors a bridge—but not this one! Oh, no! If those Bottoms farmers come here toll-free, how will the trading switch affect Oakville? It'll wreck it! Well, Stroud owns the power plant there, too. Maybe his power business here would improve some, not much. But his Oakville plant—blooey! Altogether, Stroud'd get burnt plenty. So he's against a bridge."

"And Gorse? What did you start to say about him?"

Blodgett tugged on my lapel, point-
ed a blunt finger downstream.

"See the gap in the hill where that power dam reaches back?" he said in a low voice. "Gorse wanted the bridge there. Stroud, too, if one had to come. Figured maybe he could recoup his Oakville plant loss that way."

"But how?" I asked.

"Stroud would have gotten plenty for a right-of-way across his plant grounds by the dam. But Gorse, he'd really have feathered his nest with options!"

"Options?" I echoed.

"Gorse dabbles in real estate," Blodgett said. "If the bridge had been built down there, its road couldn't have entered town on Cedar Street, like it does now. The hill's in the way! Its traffic would have emptied into Locust Street—there's no other way. That's how the options come in."

"You mean—?"

His beefy head nodded vigorously.

"Gorse bought options all along Locust, a quiet back street. They gave him the right, when the traffic increased property values there, to buy cheap. And sell sky-high!"

I nodded. Something icy was forming along my spine.

"And if this present bridge was wrecked? Maybe after the next election Gorse could get the bridge site changed?"

Blodgett bent, plucked up some dirty twine, pocketed it frugally. His eyes returned to me with baleful, crafty malevolence.

"What do you think? The options are still good. They're on record at the courthouse."

Another guy was bothering me. Maybe testy Blodgett could help me on him, too. I took a wild stab.

"Didn't I hear Gorse and Parelli were partners or something?"

"Been hearing about Parelli, have you?" he said. "Well, Parelli can't afford a bridge at any point. He practically owns Oakville. Then the way (Continued on page 104)"
this crooked ring will handle tolls, Bottoms farmers can’t use the bridge free unless they make their spring crop loans with Canby, the Clay Hill banker who is in cahoots with the ring. But Bottoms crop loans are what made that vulture Parelli. Losing that business along with real estate depreciation, will break him.”

“Parelli in Oakville now?” I asked.

“I dunno. Maybe he’s still in Clay Hill. I ferried him across the day before yesterday. Nervous as a cat! He can’t swim a lick and nearly drowned last summer. He kept hollering at me not to sink the boat, and kept looking at his watch.”

“Watch, huh?” I took out a watch, showed him the letter on the back.

“Ever see this before?”

Blodgett’s bushy eyebrows meshed.

“Why, it’s his! I noticed it particular yesterday...”

Around four that afternoon I located Parelli in his Clay Hill hotel room.

“But why do you want to see me?” he asked suspiciously when I told him my business. Short, hatchet-faced, he had bristly gray hair, a complexion brown and pitted like a Graham cracker.

“A man’s dead,” I said quietly. “Somebody’s trying to wreck a bridge. I want the culprit. And, frankly, you’re a suspect.”

Panic whirled in sharp, slate-colored eyes. He rubbed his palms on his tailored coat, regained some control.

“I’ve opposed the bridge. Naturally you’d wonder about me.” He swallowed jerkily. “Unfortunately I haven’t an alibi—is that the word? This morning early I drove to the country. Alone.”

“Why are you in Clay Hill today?” I asked. “And yesterday?”

He spread thin, shaking hands.

“I came in the day before yesterday to confer with Canby of the Farmers Bank. Hoped to make a deal with him to divide all future crop loans we both should make. Bottoms farmers arrange their loans in February. I’m afraid they’ll all see Canby now instead of me.”

“So!” I snapped. “Canby turned your proposal down! So you tried to wreck the bridge then and the watchman got in your way. Or did you hire somebody to kill Wicker?”

“No!” the banker shrieked. “I didn’t! No!”

“Then why did you stay over after Canby refused to split? To slug me last night?” I jumped, grabbed his frail shoulders as he reached for an open suitcase. He’d managed to snap it shut. I yanked at the bag. It was locked. “Trying to gun me, huh?” I snarled.

He threw a hand over his eyes.

“I don’t own a gun! There’s private papers in there. Nothing to do with your case.” He wrung his hands despairingly.

“Why’d you remain in Clay Hill?” I demanded.

HE sank limp in a chair. “I’d hoped to see Canby again,” he said. “Besides, I’d lost a luck piece here. I’ve owned it ever since I became successful.”

I held out the gold watch. He snatched at it feverishly. His mouth worked crazily when I pocketed it again.

“Luck piece, is it?” I snapped. “We’ll see.”

A little later I drove to the bridge. It was a cold, cloudy night. Tomorrow the crew would join the arch. Unless—

Yes, the wrecker would strike tonight, if ever. How? Where? Parelli, Gorse, Blodgett—all three hated this bridge! Who would it be?

I insisted that Dade go to his hotel. He looked dog-tired, and I had two good watchmen without him. Besides, Dade’s job was building this bridge. Protecting it was mine!

At nine P.M. I left Hull, slid down
the gravelled abutment to Betty’s place for coffee. She’d just come from the trailer, she said. Her mother, abed with a splitting headache, had imagined the trailer wheels weren’t level. Betty had moved it a bit to humor her.

Betty’s jet-black hair was brushed in that up-do. Long-lashed blue eyes twinkled in a beautiful, oval face. In her perky blue restaurant uniform she was a picture to take your breath away.

“Someday,” I said, “I’ll catch you on one of these construction jobs and marry you.”

“I’m still waiting!” she said, and swungly carried some cups into the kitchen.

There was a light tap at the front window. I looked around. A staring face bleared against it, wearing a handkerchief mask! Then it disappeared. I lunged to the door, stared outside. Nobody was there. I thought I heard gravel sliding. Betty ran out. She knew from my face something was wrong.

“Keep your gun in hand!” I whispered what I’d seen. “I don’t know why he rapped. Maybe he wanted only to see him while you were in the kitchen. I’m heading after him.”

“I’ll go too!”

“No. Stay with your mother!”

I raced to the abutment and called Hull as I scuttled upward through loose gravel. No answer came. The moon peeped fitfully through scudding clouds. The bridge lights were off again.

In front of the construction office I stumbled over something soft. It was Hull. He was alive, with a big knot on his head behind. He’d live. I wondered if he’d been left there for me to find. Then I heard another tapping.

Metal carries sound. This was like a tapping carried by a railroad rail. I slipped across the roadway, set my ear against the arch frame that rose from there.

Click-click-click.

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(Continued from page 105)

I loosed the gun under my arm. Somebody waited on that curving arm. For me! And I accepted the invitation.

I began the crawling climb. The steel girders were icy. At each upright I crouched, hooked a leg around while I rubbed my numbing hands and peered upward. The tapper was making a mistake. With the garish moon sailing out from behind a cloud, he’d be easier to spot up there than I would.

Then I saw him silhouetted, at the very end of the arm thirty yards away. I was certain because he’d moved. Then he was gone.

He quit tapping a moment. Then began hammering! Loudly!

Clang-clang-clang!

"Mr. Farrell!" somebody yelled from across the river. "What’s that noise over there?" It was Charley, the other watchman.

I crawled faster. Up here the arch was leveling out. I looked down, shuddered. High places always did get my goat. I was over the river now.

"Hull!" yelled Charley. "Answer me!"

The bent loomed just ahead of me. Dade’s crew had left the sliding platform which holds the erecting derrick. It stood directly above the supporting bent, to lighten the load on the projecting arm.

I clutched the platform with dead fingers. Pulled myself shakily onto it. Three names swam through my giddy head. Blodgett, Gorse, Parelli. I stared far down at the river. Something clicked in my seething brain. The bridge lights flashed on.

I knew the killer now!

Crouching in the derrick’s shadow, I looked along the arm. The bulbs spotted along it didn’t give too much light. I’d wait. Before long his head would stick from that framework. Then I’d—

"Drop your gun!" a voice snapped behind me.

My fingers spread. I heard my gun splash sixty feet below.

"You’ve got me, Blodgett," I said turning slowly. "What next, Blodgett?"

I called his name pretty loud, hoping Charley could hear.

In the semi-darkness I made out Blodgett’s leering face, bull shoulders. He wore no coat, just flapping overalls and—no shoes. A handkerchief dangled under his chin. A gun glinted in his fist.

"Mr. Farrell!" the watchman shouted. "I’m phoning the cops!"

Odd that Blodgett didn’t warn me against answering.

"I don’t care how loud you talk," he chuckled softly, reading my thoughts. "So long as my voice isn’t overheard."

"You—?"

"Catching on? Folks’ll say you climbed here to dynamite the bridge yourself. Know what else they’ll say? They’ll say, ‘Farrell was bought! He staged things to look like he’d chased somebody up that arch. He tugged on that girl’s window, told her a lie about a face he saw. He knocked Hull down from behind. Even talked to himself on the arch so the other watchman would think there were two men aloft.

"Then he lit the dynamite fuse, tried to escape by jumping in the river. But his foot tangled in a rope. When the divers went down to the sunken span, he was snagged there. His pockets were stuffed with articles he meant to leave behind, to throw blame on Parelli and Blodgett! ‘Folks, it looks like Gorse engineered it.’ That’s what they’ll say!"

My forehead poured sweat. Stark horror welled inside me.

"So your blast is ready to light, Blodgett?" I said. "You’ll escape by swimming." I summoned a crazy bravado. "I won’t let you tie me to the arch. You’ll have to slug me first. That’ll leave a give-away wound."

"Leave the details to me," he said, jeeringly. Then, "Damn that moon!"
THE moon played tag with clouds again, flitting shadows across the tiny platform. A light shone from the townside bank. The trailer's doorway! Betty stood framed in its yellow rectangle.

My breath whistled in. She'd moved the trailer directly under the arch! When this giant arm collapsed, it couldn't miss the trailer. Betty and her mother—thousands of tons of crushing steel!

I tried to turn. A gun-snout jabbed my back, a viselike elbow clamped my head and something damp slapped over mouth and nose. A sickening vapor seared into my lungs. Ether! My legs, arms tingled. Reeling, I scratched futilely at the rag. Strength oozed from me. The moon, dancing through the sky, careened wildly. The moon, the mayor's moon. My last chance—

"The Gorse in the moon!" I yelled wildly, "Look out! He's flying through the air at us!"

It was just goofy enough.

"What?" Blodgett's grip relaxed. He glanced backward. And I kicked that gat from his fist.

The kick nearly yanked me off the platform. I teetered precariously on the edge, flung myself on all fours. Blodgett stomped me with a heel. Then his fists flailed my face. Each time he struck, I shook my head, came higher on my knees. He took one last kick. And when I tottered to my feet, he was gone.

Hearing a splash, I looked overside, saw his head bob in the golden, far-off water. My stomach withered. A thousand devils of giddiness made my head whirl. The killer was swimming away! Charley couldn't stop him. Nobody could but me. No time to climb down and get a boat. Only one chance, to jump and—

I stepped off into space. My eyelids ballooned like parachutes. Water hot-footed me, blistered my face. icy water closed overhead. Somehow I (Continued on page 108)
floundered to the surface. Then I saw Blodgett ahead. He swam with long, silent strokes.

My clothes dragged like window-weights. I went under, got one shoe off, then the other and the heavy coat. I struck out after him.

He’d been swimming for his ferry. Now he veered midstream, heading straight for the power dam. Maybe he’d shot it before, knew a getaway trick. My arms churned faster.

I caught him at the dam and clutched his shirt. Together we catapulted over, all arms and legs. We rose in bubbling water. He kicked my face. Icocked my fist, smashed him on the temple. He sobbed, strangled. I grabbed him just in time to keep Old Man River from beating the hot squat to him...

"Queer customer, Blodgett," I said at the construction shack later. Dade and the mayor were present. Also Parelli, Stroud, Betty and the two watchmen. "He was really public-spirited and sincerely believed a city-owned power plant would be better for Clay Hill than a private one. He was ready to fight for it! But the bridge—that hit his own pocketbook hard. So he meant to wreck it."

Gorse snorted contemptuously.

"Why did he threaten Reliance?"

Dade asked me.

"At first he hoped to scare bidders off this job. Later, when that hadn’t worked, he referred to the first threatening letter in a second. Meant in the end to throw all the blame on Mayor Gorse and to link the first letter with the crime.

"He stole Parelli’s watch on the ferry. Not to cast final suspicion on him, but to leave the watch in Gorse’s pocket after he’d killed Gorse. At first he intended to dynamite the mayor with the bridge! But Wicker surprised him with his preparations. So he put off dynamiting till tonight and picked on me."

"Why did he knock on my win-
dow?” Betty asked.

“He thought I was nearer to catching him than I was. That’s why he tried to kill me last night. He didn’t realize that, until just before he nabbed me, I suspected Gorse and Parelli as much as him.”

“Just before?” she said. “Did you know that Blodgett was the killer before he captured you on the platform?”

“Yes, when the bridge lights flashed on. If the mayor was guilty, he’d have prevented that. Because with him lying in wait for me, those lights would have given an advantage to me, not him. The only avenue of escape left to the murderer, after killing me, was the water. There was no boat below so I knew he meant to dive. But Blodgett himself told me that you can’t dive Parelli. And that left only Blodgett.”

Mayor Gorse waved his cigar, airily.

“Next time, wise guy,” he said, “don’t suspect the mayor. I ought to lock you up with Blodgett. Anyhow, he’s through running for mayor. That’s something, eh, Stroud?”

“Whoever does run,” I predicted, “will beat you very easily.”

Stroud stared at Gorse, then Parelli.

“You told!” he screamed, and tried to whip a nasty left hook to Gorse’s jaw. But the Mayor quickly sidestepped the blow. Then I jumped in and quieted the raging banker.

I faced the Mayor calmly.

“You’ve been getting bribe money from Stroud,” I snapped at the cowed Gorse, “to pay for your help in keeping his power plant in Clay City. But that’s hard to prove. Next time don’t take checks on Parelli’s bank for it. If a transcript of the account became public, you’d have difficulty explaining those big items!”

“Parelli brought such a transcript along to use as an axe over Canby, one of your crowd, to make Canby play ball with him on splitting some crop loans. It had you plenty worried and

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Fistula Sufferers

Face Danger

One of the tragic results of neglected fistula frequently is loss of bowel control together with nervous diseases and general ill health caused by self poisoning. Thousands could save themselves from humiliation and serious illness by taking proper treatment in time. The Thornton & Minor Clinic—oldest known rectal institution in the world—offers a FREE Book which explains Fistula and other rectal diseases; tells how more than 80,000 persons have been benefited by their mild, corrective institutional treatment—without hospital confinement. Write for this Free Book and Reference List. Address Thornton & Minor Clinic, Suite 856, 926 McGee St., Kansas City, Mo.

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made you and Stroud leave council meeting, go into a huddle with Canby. I forced Parelli’s bag for the transcript today when he left his room. So stop that moonlight saving comedy to capture votes, Gorse. You’re finished politically!”

After the others left, Betty’s hand squeezed mine.

“Ed, Mother says thanks for everything,” she said, smiling. “If there’s anything she can do . . . ever—”

“There is one little thing,” I said. “The bridge won’t need guarding tomorrow night. So if she’d persuade her daughter to give me a date . . .”

Betty’s hand clamped tighter.

“I was hoping,” she said, “you’d think of that!”

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A Department for Readers

“A nice place for a murder!” Red Drake said as he moved through the winding gravel paths of the Warburton estate outside Philadelphia. His words were prophetic. He turned to Max Jaeger, the Warburton gardener, and went on: “Just where was Mr. Warburton killed?”

The old gardener hobbled a few paces forward toward the lock house controlling the water in the garden pond. He pointed down dramatically and said:

“Here’s where he was killed. Right on this spot.”

Red looked around with some surprise. “It’s pretty open here,” he said. “Anyone could have seen the murder.”

Would Anyone Testify?

It was true. Anyone could have seen the murder of Mr. Warburton, but would anyone who had seen the killing testify against the killer? Were there other considerations that prompted the closed-mouthed interference with the investigation of the strange death on the Pennsylvania estate?

These were some of the questions that confronted Red Drake, private investigator, and his pal Mickey Donlin, newspaper reporter. Mickey himself was something of a character, the (Continued on page 112)

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It isn’t because the police don’t want to catch them, it’s simply that when the boats are searched from stem to stern and from forepeak to bilge there isn’t anything to be found. Yet this steady stream of narcotics continues to deluge the metropolitan area.

When this situation becomes rather embarrassing for the Federal Narcotics Bureau and the New York and Connecticut local police, Ted Burgess and Joe Osborn go into action. They ply the Sound in a stubby launch, and feel certain that it will be only a question of time before the smugglers try to salvage a cargo of dope. Then they will be right on the job for the pinch.
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But it isn’t as easy as that. Out of the darkness of the night, the two narcotics agents are suddenly menaced by the sharp-prow of a speedy cruiser, and before they can do more than port the helm, they have been struck and scuttled.

What happens from then on out? Well, boys—and the girls, too—you wouldn’t want me to spoil this whole fiction feast for you, now would you? But I’m telling you here and now that it’s the sort of a treat that you are going to remember for some time to come. Get yourself a box seat on the sidelines and see if you don’t just boil up with enthusiasm when the Federal men finally come to grips with the dope smugglers, and when they solve the mystery of the fantastic device that permits these ruthless men to bring in their drugs even from the bottom of the sea.

Many Other Stories
MURDER FOR A MILLION and SEACOAST OF DEATH—they’re both swell yarns and they’re only two of the many masterpieces of mystery scheduled for the next number of EXCITING DETECTIVE. From start to finish, it will be a gala issue made memorable by some of the best stories of America’s most popular writers of crime fiction.

There are plenty of thrills in store for you! Issue after issue of EXCITING DETECTIVE, we’ll present the cream of the crop—and constant improvement will be our motto! You can help us achieve this aim. A regular feature of this department will consist of excerpts from the best letters sent in by readers. Letters that contain criticism, comments, opinions and suggestions. Please write telling us what you think of this number—address The Editor, EXCITING DETECTIVE, 14th Floor, 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y.

A knock is as welcome as a boost—and a postcard will do as well as a letter. So chime in—and we will be guided by your statements in planning future issues! Every reader is invited to take a hand in the editing of this magazine!

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