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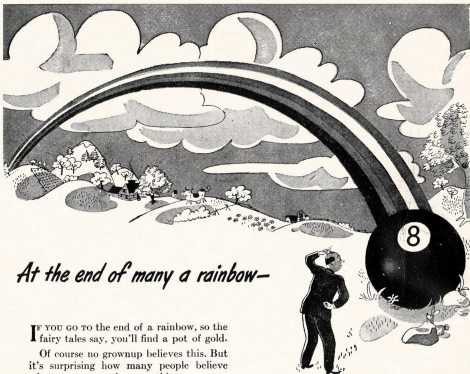
THE *Looting*
OF LAS VERDES

*A Complete
Dan Fowler
Mystery Novel
By EDWARD
CHURCHILL*

A THRILLING
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A musical staff in treble clef showing the C major scale: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (half). Below the staff, a keyboard diagram shows the corresponding keys: C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C.

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DETECTIVE

VOL. XXXI, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

May, 1947

A Complete Dan Fowler Novel

THE LOOTING OF LAS VERDES

By EDWARD CHURCHILL



The ace of the F. B. I. and his aides tackle a baffling crime and counterfeiting mystery in a booming, wide-open desert town where grim death holds the stakes!.....

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FEDERAL FLASHES

A DEPARTMENT WHERE READERS AND THE EDITOR MEET

IT IS a strange fact that many things which are a terrible evil also may be the greatest blessing. We are all well aware, for example, of the horrible evil of the atomic bomb. Yet atomic energy may prove the most wonderful blessing ever bequeathed to mankind. It's not the atom, but another of these twin good-evil combinations—drugs—that concerns our famous friends Dan Fowler, Larry Kendal and Sally Vane of the Department of Justice in next issue's smashing-action novel:

LIVE AND LET DIE

by

JEAN FRANCIS WEBB

This gripping story opens on a special military freight train heading west toward a Pacific port carrying thousands of drums of deadly-poisonous mustard gas.

All during the war years the U.S. Chemical Warfare branch had been piling up huge stores of the stuff, and now that the world was again at peace the government was totting twelve thousand drums of straight hell over the mountains to the Pacific when it would be loaded on a lot of de-commissioned supply ships which would then be towed out to sea and scuttled. The gas would be gone forever. That much evil vanished clean off the face of the earth.

The Three Guards

Guarding the deadly shipment of gas was a military detail of three men. Sid Capello, the youngest of them, and a product of the flat, hot, dirty pavements south of Houston Street in New York, was all excited at his first view of the great Sierra Nevada mountains through which they were passing.

Joe Everett, the second guard, was a grizzle-pated oldster who had been a veteran of the first World War and had stuck to the Army ever since. The third guard was "Lippy" Faust, a character who never unbuttoned his lip, or had much of anything to say for himself. He was lean and as dark as Capello though about five years older. A long scar traveled the whole length of his

hollowed-out right cheek. Iwo Jima, somebody back at the dump had said. A shell fragment.

The train was close to the crest of the mountain pass when Lippy Faust struck a match. A cigarette dangled from his lower lip, but he didn't touch the match to his smoke. Instead he touched the flame to a fine thread that somehow no one had noticed before.

Immediately a little dancing spark climbed the thread which ran up over a drum and disappeared forward toward the car wall.

"A fuse!" Capello cried, seeing the dot of living red.

He started forward automatically, one hand tugging off his fatigue cap to beat it out.

"Stand right where you are!" Lippy ordered.

Above the muzzle of the compact revolver which had fanned out of nowhere into his hand, cold black eyes glittered a warning more deadly than any words. Lippy Faust's long scar seemed to twist, snake style, on the thin, hard countenance it disfigured.

"Hey!" It was Joe, at Capello's shoulder. "What goes on here?"

"You're not going anyplace," Faust said. "Neither of you."

Capello couldn't figure it. Why a fellow who was guarding the same shipment you were should pull a gat on you—there wasn't any answer. But Everett found one.

"You dirty yellow—!" Everett's words fanned past Capello's ear, savage with contempt. "Hijacker, huh? Dynamite in the coupling, huh? You must be ravin' loco to figure you can get away with it."

"Who's going to stop me?" Faust grated. "You, Buddy?"

For reply, Everett launched forward. The weapon in Faust's hand spoke flatly. Joe Everett fell, kicked once, then lay still.

"Hey!" Capello gasped. "You can't—that's murder. You murdered Joe, you crook!"

"Do tell," purred Faust, behind the gun muzzle.

Capello heard an explosion forward then. He felt the car shudder. Suddenly the car

was rolling backward, down the long grade, instead of climbing. It was loose from the rest of the clicking freight.

"Joe was right!" Capello mumbled. "Dynamite—in the coupling! That's where the fuse went. And you murdered him!"

He felt something black and hot boil up in him. He started forward, straight for Faust and that gun. . . .

Enter—Dan Fowler!

Twenty-four hours later, Dan Fowler and Larry Kendal, crack operatives of the Department of Justice stood on a remote railway crossing in eastern Washington, almost a continent removed from the city of the same name in which he had received his first news of the stolen mustard gas. Ezra Baker, a railroad detective, and Jed Lamonde, a local sheriff, repeated almost the same story that Dan Fowler's chief had told him the day before:

The railroad car had been uncoupled by an explosion and stripped clean of its cargo of mustard gas. After a prompt alarm, searchers had recovered two of the car's three guards—both shot through the head and dumped overboard. The third soldier, Faust, had not yet been discovered.

"I just don't get it," the Chief had complained to Dan. "Gold or diamonds or firearms or almost anything under the sun, yes. But mustard gas! It has no industrial value whatever."

"But I can think of an excellent market for it," Dan Fowler interposed. "A market among under-the-counter medical talent. Unlicensed quacks."

"Mustard gas is sure death, not a cure, man!"

Dan Fowler shook his head.

"It may be a cure too. I was reading about it, sir. Scientists have recently found that some of the killer gases can be lifesavers too. Myasthenia and other diseases—Leukemia, for one—seem to respond to certain gas derivatives. But the experiments aren't complete nor the cures perfected. Still, some quack cure, based on incompleated experiments, could be set loose on suffering humanity and would be gobbled by thousands of human guinea pigs too sick or stupid to knows the risks they'd be running."

The chief raised his brows.

"You expect me to believe those three guards were shot down in the high-minded interests of bringing even inexperienced mercy to the ill?"

[Turn page]

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"No, sir. In the interests of hauling immense profits into some unholy ghoul's private till. There'd be a fortune in a cure-all that actually seemed to alleviate previously incurable diseases, even though the end result would be coffins for the poor, unsuspecting users. As for the guards—only two are known to be dead, so far, sir. The third man, Faust, is merely missing."

An Important Clue

Now, along the roadbed where the shipment of murder had been hijacked, Dan Fowler found his first important clue. He showed it to his assistant, Larry Kendal, the moment he got Larry alone. It was a limp object about a quarter inch wide and three inches long. It was a piece of theatrical gauze on which grease paint had been built up and moulded.

"Exhibit A against Lippy Faust," Dan said. "Faust's scar was a phony, a clever bit of make-up. For the rest, he was a nebulous figure. That scar was Faust. Without it, I'll bet he could play poker with a lot of the men who knew him, and never be recognized.

Then Dan offered an amazing theory: Ezra Baker, the railroad detective, who had shown them about the scene of the robbery and murder might be Lippy Faust, minus the scar!

Detailing Larry Kendal to investigate Baker, Dan Fowler picked up Sally Vane at the airport. Dan's pretty aide had just arrived from Washington to help on the case. And then it happened.

Dan and Sally had scarcely left the airport behind when the blonde girl cried out in sudden terror.

"Dan! Up there, ahead! Look out!"

Machine-Gun Trap

Sally's cry was followed so closely by the violent twist of Fowler's steering wheel that it seemed almost like part of the same explosive reaction. But fast as Dan had moved, the chattering of the sub-machinegun from the top of the rise ahead cut murderously into the very echo of her warning.

The windshield ahead of them splintered suddenly, like thin ice in a spring thaw, and Dan heard the thud-thud-thud of hot lead against it. . . .

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magazine there'll be a colorful action novelet:

WINGS OF THE DARK ANGEL

by
WILLIAM HOPSON

You'll like this wise-talking, tough-guy yarn about a man who owns a small airport near the Mexican border, and what happens when he meets up with three smart boys who try to kidnap the daughter of a wealthy Eastern trucking magnet. It's a whopper of a story, tight with suspense and bristling with gun-play and surprises! You'll be on the edge of your chair, wondering what's going to happen next, when you read WINGS OF THE DARK ANGEL!

Be on hand for the next issue of G-MEN DETECTIVE! Besides the two great stories we've told you about, there will be many other exciting tales of adventure, mystery, and action—plus unusual features.

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

THANKS, folks, for all the swell letters you have sent us during the past few weeks. As you know, your letters are immensely valuable to us in planning future issues of our magazine, for it's only through your letters that we can know what stories you like best and which authors are your favorites.

Here are excerpts from a number of interesting and typical letters recently received:

I have read quite a few issues of G-MEN DETECTIVE during my spare time. I do plan police work. I think the G-MEN mag is a swell book, and it sometimes gives me ideas of how to go about solving cases. Thank you.—*William D. Van Gelder, Cleveland, Ohio.*

I always enjoy the covers on G-MEN DETECTIVE for I always wonder which story the cover picture illustrates. Then, as I read the book, I get a lift when I come to the scene it fits. I think it is a good idea having the cover pictures illustrate one of the stories in the book. I notice that many magazines put out by other companies do not do this. More power to Thrilling Publications and G-MEN DETECTIVE!—*Virgil James Schuster, Holyoke, Mass.*

I think Dan Fowler is an awful stuffed shirt. Larry Kendal is a better guy. But I always like the G-MEN stories.—*David Neinswander, Jr., Globe, Arizona.*

Dan Fowler is ter-r-rific!—*Billy Bauer, Kokomo, Ind.*

I have just finished reading the latest issue of G-MEN DETECTIVE and think it is swell. I can hardly wait to get the next one. Why don't Dan Fowler and Sally Vane get married? Then they could work together better than ever and Dan would have someone to take care of him if he ever got wounded.—*Laura Rodell, Carthage, N. Y.*

The stories I liked best in your recent books are BLUEPRINT OF EVIL, by Jean Francis Webb, GUARDIAN TO A CORPSE, by Anthony Tompkins,
(Concluded on page 113)

To People who want to write but can't get started

Do you have that constant urge to write but the fear that a beginner hasn't a chance. Then listen to what the former editor of Liberty said on this subject:

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JACK PLAYED IN LUCK WHEN...

MOTOR CRUISER "ELENA" REPORTED
IN DISTRESS OFF CATFISH SHOALS.
RESCUE CRAFT . . .

JEEPERS! THERE
SHE IS!

JACK LEVEL AND LOU MCKIEL, EX-SEABEES,
ARE ON THE SECOND DAY OF A ROUGH
RUN DOWN THE COAST IN THEIR NEWLY-
PURCHASED NAVY "SURPLUS" BOAT, WHEN..

MY ENGINE'S DEAD! ARE YOU
THE RESCUE CRAFT?

NO, BUT I DO
KNOW ENGINES
HEAVE US A
LINE

20
M
I
N
U
T
E
S
L
A
T
E
R

WE'RE BLOWING
ONTO THE
SHOALS!

TELL YOUR DAD
WE'RE O.K., MISS.
THE ENGINE'LL
START NOW

YOU GOT US OUT
OF A NASTY FIX.
I WAS ABSOLUTELY
HELPLESS

CATFISH SHOALS
HAVE BEEN BAD NEWS
FOR MANY A VESSEL

COME ABOARD WHEN
WE ANCHOR. WE'RE
INVITED FOR CHOW

I'LL START SUPPER,
DAD, WHILE YOU
MEN CLEAN UP

SAY, THIS BLADE'S
A PIP. NEVER GOT
RID OF WHISKERS
FASTER OR EASIER

IT'S A THIN
GILLETTE
. . . AND
PLENTY KEEN

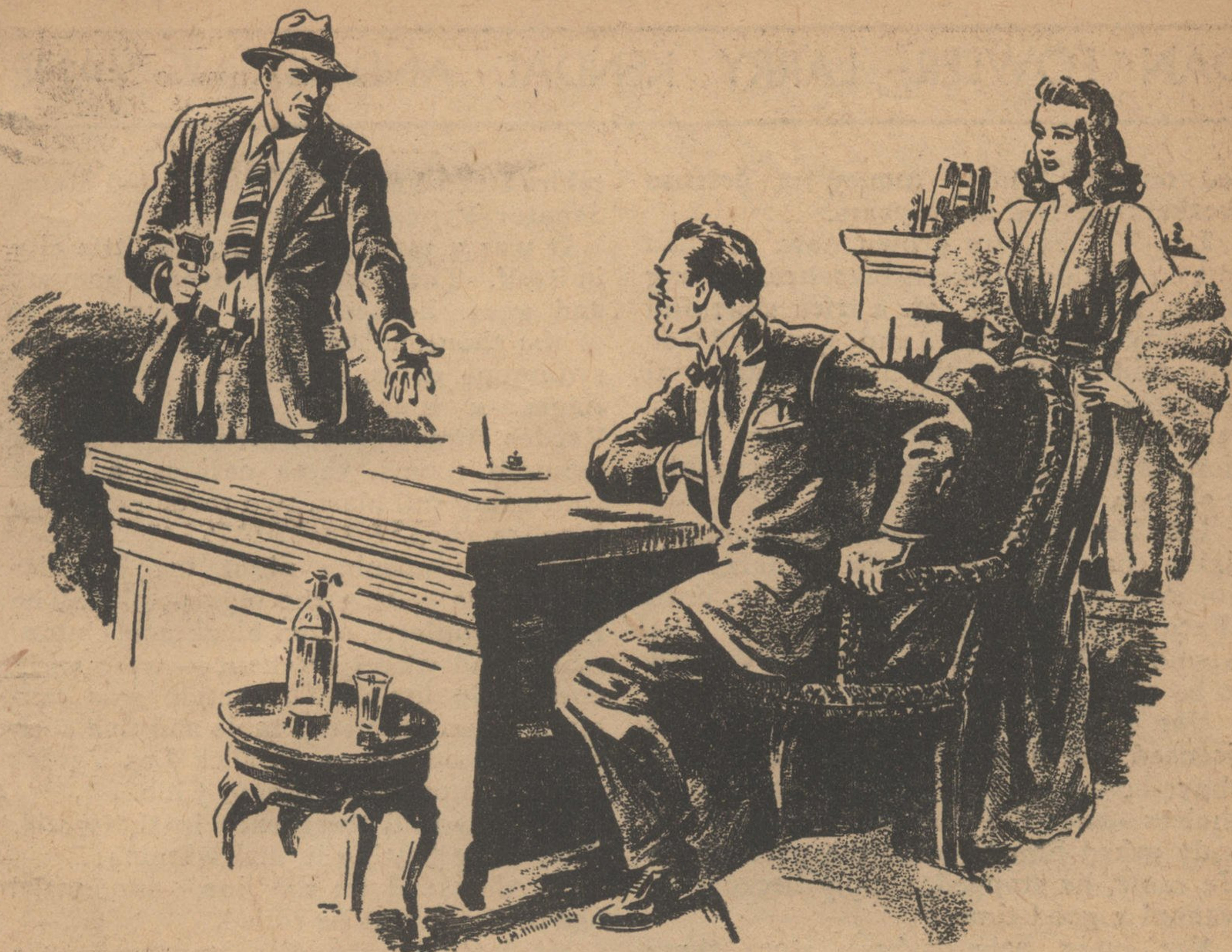
WE PLAN TO FIX
UP OUR TUB AND
START A FISHING
SERVICE

THAT'S A WASTE OF TALENT.
MY CONSTRUCTION FIRM
NEEDS MEN LIKE YOU

HE'S CERTAINLY
HANDSOME

I'M PUTTING IT STRAIGHT, MEN, WHEN I
SAY YOU GET **REAL SHAVING SPEED AND
COMFORT WITH THIN GILLETTES**. THEY'RE
THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN
THE LOW-PRICE FIELD, AND BECAUSE THEY
FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, YOU'RE
PROTECTED AGAINST THE SCRAPE AND
IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT
BLADES. ASK FOR
THIN GILLETES





"Give," Fowler ordered the dinner-jacketed gambler, "and keep your fingers away from any push buttons" (CHAPTER IV)

THE LOOTING OF LAS VERDES

By EDWARD CHURCHILL

The ace of the F. B. I. and his aides tackle a baffling crime and counterfeiting case in a booming, wide-open desert gambling town where grim death holds the stakes!

CHAPTER I

Fatal Frontier

JUST before the trouble started the Alamo Club was making social and gaming history at Las Verdes, the desert city which already had smeared its name in modern frontier annals. For the club was more than a club—the biggest thing to hit Mojave County

since Las Verdes was born. It was the spawn of miners, of desert rats, of a railroad.

A lusty desert urchin with dust in its lungs, it first lay raw and naked under a Western sun.

The building of the Mojave Dam, with its antlike workers tearing at rugged nature with mechanical claws, had hardened it to vigorous young manhood. It had

A COMPLETE DAN FOWLER MYSTERY NOVEL

fed on the folding money of defense workers for five more years.

Las Verdes was grown now. It had put on pseudo-Western breeches, shining boots, a ten-gallon hat, a trick shirt and a gaudy neckerchief, and sprawled for ten miles along the transcontinental highway. It carried no gun. It simply reached into the pockets of unwary vacationists, travelers—anyone willing to take a chance.

Las Verdes, which had a lot more red lights than were on traffic signals, was not even dishonest. Its philosophy, until "Faro Frank" Brockett opened the Alamo Club, was that if anyone wanted to be a sucker, let him be.

Nor was it illegal. Everything was licensed, everything was wide open and above-board, and a guy had a million choices—with the odds against him. Nobody asked him to buck the percentage. He came, he stopped, simply because he wanted a good time.

For every haberdashery store there were ten saloons. For every church there were ten gambling dens. For one library there were twenty night clubs. For every quiet residential hotel there were three roadside emporiums as long as a freight train, as wide open as a barn door, as swank as a motion picture set, as gay as Mardi Gras, complete from chapels to casinos, from dining rooms to swimming pools.

Elopers from Los Angeles could be married at any spot on the clock in a matter of minutes—and get a divorce just as easy six weeks later.

Quick and easy—that was Las Verdes until the multi-million-dollar Alamo Club opened. Dusty by day, neon by night. Hot under the sun, cold under the stars, only half-snug in its plainlike valley, only half-sheltered by its distant mountains which were metallic by day, lavender under the sunset, velvet by night—and frightening the morning after.

A LOT of people were congratulating Faro Frank Brockett this night. A strange mixture of people ranging from cowboys in high-heeled boots to aviators in leather jackets, from movie glamour girls to civic officials, from lowly shills who kept the games going when the

tables started to go dead, to United States Senator Vance McLain.

It was a plant, all right. A little city in itself. There were the airport, hangars and guest houses, which covered most of the thousand acres. There were two swimming pools, a chapel for quick marriages, a limousine service into Las Verdes, three miles to the northwest, five hundred rooms, three casinos, a night club going full blast, two restaurants and a coffee shop.

On this opening night the Frontier Room was getting the biggest play. The games—roulette, craps, blackjack, chuck-a-luck and wheel of chance—were wide open. No limit. The action was centered around the crap table and five slick men, too slick for even slick Las Verdes and the super-slick Alamo Club.

They had all the money in the world. They were betting it, and winning.

"A thousand on the line," announced one of the five as he rolled.

He lost, for the dice staggered to a final two sixes. One of his companions had bet on "any craps." Another had won on twelve. The sweating house-man raked in the dice and examined them in his wet hands. The pay-off man handed out sixty thousand dollars, and his hand was shaking in the tight air.

The floormen had moved in, for the house-man had signaled them by rubbing his hand through his hair. That had meant that each of the five men packed a flat rod under his carefully tailored dinner jacket!

The house-man palmed the dice, slipped them to the white-faced floor manager beside him, feeling that those two cubes might be the only dam against the ruination of the Alamo Club on its opening night. "Check them with the micrometer!" he snapped from the corner of his mouth. "Get Faro Frank!"

The game went on, even tighter. Play in the Frontier Room stopped as smaller gamblers crowded in, eyes popping, to watch the house go down. Shills, wasting away alone, knowing that only the crap table held interest, shrugged away the jobs they were losing and joined the excited throng. Word spread to the night clubs, the other casinos, the various lobbies.

FIGHT FOR JUSTICE AGAINST CRIMINAL ODDS!

Micrometers tested pair after pair of dice. Nothing seemed wrong with them. The five men, with unlimited resources, simply were winning by doubling, tripling and quadrupling bets.

The floor manager found Faro Frank Brockett in his office, his face white and cold and lined, his fists doubled, suffering like a man in an appendicitis attack.

heavy, rugged form to his feet. He eyed Faro Frank Brockett.

"My advice to you, young man," he said ponderously, as if addressing his Washington colleagues, "is to set a limit. It's your only chance!"

A futile negative was in Brockett's head shake.

"It's too late." He looked at his floor



DAN FOWLER

With him were two people—Vardis Lamont, the club's mistress of ceremonies, pale under her rouge, her eyes wider than mascara had ever made them look, her long, delicate hands grapevining, and Senator Vance McLain, who ran his hand through his sweep of white hair, the mane which had brought him fame.

They were sitting stolidly, silently, like three persons waiting death, when the floor manager came in.

"I've checked the dice, Frank," he said. "They're okay. The money's okay. They've just got too much dough. They lose, double up, and win."

Senator Vance McClain pulled his

manager. "How much are we down?"

"Four hundred and ten thousand. I've sent Baker to the bank to get fifty or a hundred more if they'll give it to us—providing we can get Jim Moffitt out of his presidential bed."

The wall clock ticked off a dismal two. Vardis Lamont lifted her heavy lashes, opened her firm lips.

"This is terrible! I—" she moaned.

Faro Frank Brockett's blast interrupted her.

"Those men were sent here by Honest John Farmer to ruin me!" He buried his face in his hands. "Two million in mortgages against this place! I'm sunk!"

HE ROSE mechanically, as if the life had gone out of him. He walked slowly from the office, through a lobby, a half-deserted casino, where tense dealers and croupiers watched him, tragedy on their faces, small whispers on their lips. He pushed his way through the crowd, heard the fatal click of the dice. He shoved players and watchers aside, heard the dreadful monotony off:

"Pay the gentleman here five thousand. That man gets twelve!"

The pay-off man looked up at Faro Frank Brockett.

"Sir," he said, "we're cleaned out."

Brockett raised a faltering hand.

"That's all gentlemen!" his voice rasped. "The casino's closing."

The five men assumed the cover of the crying, exclaiming, whispering crowd, shocked by a strange phenomenon—a Las Verdes gaming place going broke. Brockett stood with his head down, his hands gripping the edge of the heavy cloth-lined table.

Once outside the casino the quintet of men formed tightly, their feet pushing toward the parking lot beyond the bushes and the lawn. Fifty yards to the right of them was a twin-engined monoplane, its engines turning slowly. They ignored it as they headed for their car. A sixth man came out of the shadows, and joined them.

In other shadows, half-concealed by bushes, a furtive man lurked, his small, bent figure telling his age. A flash of light from the circling airport beacon painted his face against the night. The sixth man brought up his quick step and his hand clutched the arm of the man next to him.

"Watch!" he whispered.

His free hand vanished and blue steel came out with it. The big light swung its pencil again, this time green, limning the bent little man with the color of death.

Crimson licked at the night. The gun jumped in Number Six's hand. A sudden roar of the plane's engines drowned the noise. The little man bent forward like a folding traffic arm and clutched at his abdomen. He rolled sideward, kicked a couple of times, and that jerked his wispy body under an oleander bush.

Beneath him the lawn was wet with dew. He didn't feel it.

"Why'd you do that, boss?" the man next to the killer asked fearfully as the

murderer leaped toward his victim.

He saw that the little man was dead, came back to the startled group.

"Shut up, Jake!" he slammed. "He shouldn't have been here. He never should be seen. He was going to tip somebody. So he had to go."

"What do we do now?" another man asked. "If we use the car they'll get us before we hit the State Line."

Number Six made an inspirational swing toward the airplane and started running. The others followed him. Behind them they left death. With them they took more than half a million dollars. They reached the plane.

The leader's gun came out, aimed up at the pilot in the cockpit.

"Get in, Jake!" he snapped. "Cover him. You other men pile in, too."

Back in the shadows of the oleander bush, another drama was being enacted, unseen. Vardis Lamont, looking anything but glamorous, her sequined gown drenched with dew, was on her knees. Her hand groped swiftly in the dead man's right-hand pocket. It came out with a pocket-knife and a small flat stone. She slipped the stone into the V of her dress, worked fast with the knife, tears washing mascara down her cheeks, sobs choking her. Quickly, expertly, she cut the labels out of the clothing, slashed away laundry marks desperately.

She was too busy either to hear or see the plane roar into the night.

When she finished, she slipped into the side entrance of the nearest building, moved rapidly to the ladies' room. Water carried away all the telltale laundry marks, personal possessions and labels.

The plane roared to the southwest. The leader of the group and the man who had been called Jake stood behind the pilot, their guns threatening.

"Why'd you kill the guy?" Jake demanded. "Until then it was all legal. They didn't have nothin' on us."

"They would have had something, if VJ had talked—and that's what he was going to do."

"Who's VJ?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

The killer peered out of the window. After a long time, he spotted a deserted wartime Army air field.

"Set her down here!" he ordered.

The pilot circled, powered in, cut his throttles. The plane rolled to a stop.

"Nice landing," said the leader.

He fired a shot into the back of the pilot's head.

CHAPTER II

Who's Senator McClain?



HE hard, muscular leanness was subdued in Inspector Dan Fowler, of the F.B.I., and a smile played around his lips as he sat in his office in the colonnaded Department of Justice Building in Washington.

He was having a rare moment of relaxation reading the comic strips in his morning paper. His large, well-shod feet were resting comfortably on a pulled-out drawer of his desk. His usually stern features were tranquil, and the hard lines gone from his face. A soft, well-worn and well-known fedora rested on the back of his head, disclosing a high, intelligent forehead and thick, dark hair.

He always read the funnies ahead of the headlines, for the front page usually spelled trouble.

This time he didn't find any as he turned to the news section. Plenty of crime, yes. An item from Las Verdes—wasn't it a red-hot resort and gambling town out West?—telling about the finding of an unidentified old man murdered on the grounds of the Alamo Club. Nothing there. Stories on investigations of this and that when Congress reconvened. Efforts to end the housing shortage. The President anticipating a weekend voyage down the Potomac. A political feud in Detroit.

Ground being broken for the new Bagdad Dam on the Nevada River following a one-hundred-million-dollar appropriation, with Senator Vance McClain acting as master of ceremonies. McClain, the report stated, had fathered the bill creating the dam which would dwarf gigantic Boulder, on the Colorado.

With a frown, Fowler pictured McClain—bluff, arrogant, bombastic, haranguing the Senate, issuing statements on everything under the sun, getting his heavy-jowled face into news pictures with charges, counter-charges, demands for investigations.

The G-man was jarred from this unpleasant occupation by the ringing of his telephone. He answered, rocking forward in his swivel chair.

"Mr. Fowler, the Director would like to see you!"

"Okay."

Fowler cradled the instrument, rose, brushed the wrinkles from his gray suit, and darted out of the office.

In moments he was standing before his superior.

"Good morning, Dan," the Director said. "You look pretty well rested since your last foray."

"Fit as a fiddle, sir. Thanks."

The Director passed him a teletyped message. It concerned what Fowler considered a rather small item and one about which he knew something already—the death of the unidentified man at the Alamo Club in Las Verdes.

"Read the last line carefully," the Director advised.

He did so.

After the killing the suspects fled in a stolen airplane, shooting the pilot and abandoning it on an Army air field near Los Angeles.

Fowler eyed the man across the desk.

"Then it's our case."

"That's right. Under latest regulations we have investigative jurisdiction in cases of theft of aircraft in interstate flight. Not only that but the pilot was killed on Government property."

Fowler thought a moment. "In other words, I've got a job."

"Right. Perhaps it doesn't seem very important to you, but I've an idea there's something underneath it all. There's a lot to be smoked out. Here—look at this."

He passed over a telegram. It was from Las Verdes and stated in part:

INASMUCH AS THIS IS PURELY LOCAL CRIME LAW ENFORCEMENT BODIES HERE WILL BE DEEPLY OFFENDED IF FBI IS CALLED IN. WE FEEL HERE THAT WE CAN POLICE OURSELVES AND ONLY SERIOUS TROUBLE WILL RESULT FROM YOUR INTERFERENCE.

SENATOR VANCE McCLAIN

"He didn't know when he sent that," the Director stated, his face clouded, "that the airplane had gone out of the State or that the pilot had been murdered. He's probably too dumb to have learned of the new regulation which empowers us to investigate."



"Hands up!" Sally commanded, and the men

He paused. His face grew even grimmer as he added:

"I think you recall that in Nineteen-twenty-four, Attorney General Harlan F. Stone reorganized the Bureau and one of the cardinal rules enunciated at that time was that the Bureau should be completely divorced from the vagaries of political influence. McClain is waving a red flag in front of the bull."

"Two bulls, Chief," Fowler said fervently. "I'm on my way."

He started for the door.

"Make it fast and thorough," the Director called after him. "Use Sally Vane and Larry Kendal if you need them."

"Thanks," Fowler called back.

AS HE walked down the stone corridor, he grinned. Nothing would suit him better than to have blond Sally

Vane, who had worked her way up from secretary to special investigator, and dapper Larry Kendal, his best friend, working with him as they had done for years. There was more than an official bond between them. They worked together as unwavering, devoted and loyal friends.

Between Dan Fowler and pert, clever Sally Vane there was an even stronger relationship. . . .

Twenty-four hours after Dan Fowler's talk with the F.B.I. Director in Washington, two complete strangers alighted at the commercial airport at Las Verdes just before sunset. The girl was a shy young thing who looked like a secretary on a vacation, and her name was Sally Vane. The other was a tough-muscled, raw-boned, hard-jawed man who might have been an executive of some large firm, ar-



whirled, disbelief on their faces in the ghostly light (CHAPTER V)

iving to secure a million dollar contract. That was Inspector Fowler.

Neither glanced at the other. Sally waited for her bags demurely, went outside, climbed into a waiting taxi and asked to be taken to the Rangeland Hotel. Fowler loitered behind, intuition telling him that a tall blond man was extremely interested in whatever he did.

Fowler saw that the man apparently was not going anywhere, for he had no baggage and didn't go to the plane when the station agent announced through the loud-speaker that all passengers bound for Los Angeles should board it. The third member of the F.B.I. triumvirate, Larry Kendal, was on that plane heading for the Coast city.

Fowler, skilled as a result of years of experience, sized up the young man who was so interested in him without seem-

ing to look at him. About thirty-five years old. Six feet tall. Weight, about one hundred and sixty pounds. Intelligent blue eyes, fringed by almost no lashes. Thin eyebrows. Hair probably thin under a brown fedora. Long, horsy face, moderately strong jaw. Sensitive nose. Thin cheeks. Expensive pebble grain oxfords, obviously tailored suit, spotless white shirt. Good taste in ties.

Summing up—a smart guy with a good job and money.

"Well, Grogan," the fellow said to the station agent in a too-loud voice, "I guess my friends missed the plane. What are the next flights from the East?"

Fowler ducked out, found a waiting taxicab, piled in. He looked back. The blond man was darting from the station, his conversation checked quite suddenly. Fowler told his driver to wait a moment.

The blond man couldn't seem to find his keys. Fowler, his curiosity aroused, told the driver to go ahead. The blond man found his keys quickly.

Fowler asked for the Las Verdes Hotel. The trailing car somehow jammed up behind the taxicab as it pulled only half-way to the curbing when the hotel was reached.

"Strictly an amateur," Fowler mumbled.

He got out, paid the driver, went inside and registered. He went to his room with the bell-hop, freshened up, came back to the lobby. At the newsstand he bought a paper and walked out onto the crowded street, technicolored with neon signs announcing bars, gaming houses, night clubs. The town reminded him of Coney Island, minus the ocean and boardwalk.

By the time he had walked half a block and had passed three gambling spots he knew the blond man was tailing him. He didn't carry a cigarette lighter with a small mirror in it to admire his face.

He went into the fourth emporium, a small place called the Ace High Club. He watched the gambling for a few moments, sized up the place. Then he went through a rear door marked "Private," down a corridor, and out into an alley. He walked down the alley, cut back so that he stood opposite the Ace High Club. He smiled grimly at his tail's indecision. Should he go through the rear door after Fowler or should he wait until he came out?

Tailer and tailed now held reversed positions. He saw the blond man shake his head dejectedly after ten minutes of waiting. The fellow started briskly down the street. Fowler sauntered after him, apparently an aimless visitor in town. His quarry went to the Las Verdes National Bank Building which was on a corner, and entered.

FOWLER looked at his watch. It was after seven o'clock.

He let his quarry go, walked quickly across the intersection, stood so that he could see both sides of the five-story building. His alert eyes scanned it for a light to go on in windows which would indicate which office the man had entered. At the same time he noticed what lights were already on. Because of the lateness of the hour only two sets burned—one on the third, and one on the fourth floor.

After a short wait he saw that nothing

blinked on. That meant that the man had entered one of the illuminated suites.

Fowler avoided the automatic elevator, used the stairs to go to the third floor. The sign on the door of the suite he sought read:

LAS VERDES IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION

He heard a mumbling jumble of voices inside. He tried the door, found it unlocked and entered. He was in a reception room with a center table piled high with business magazines. There was a receptionist's vacant desk, and several chairs. To his right was a door marked "Conference Room." The voices coming from behind it were louder, but still indistinguishable.

He turned the knob, opened the door and stepped into the room.

CHAPTER III

No F.B.I. Wanted



IVE startled faces—there was a shade of indignation in them, too, because of the intrusion—turned toward the G-man. The blond man rose half out of his seat, his eyes popping.

Fowler smiled grimly, turned to the only man in the group he knew—Senator McClain, mop of white hair sweeping back like a mane, heavy lines mapping his features.

"Good evening, Senator!" he exclaimed. "This is an unexpected pleasure."

"Dan Fowler!" the senator snapped. "I thought I wired the F.B.I. to keep out of this!"

"You did," replied the G-man. "But it didn't mean anything. Now, if you'll be good enough to introduce me to your friends?"

The man beside Senator McClain rose, extended his hand.

"I'm Emmett Buck, president of the Las Verdes Improvement Association," he declared.

He was a man of medium size, thin, with rough, leathery cheeks which were little more than hollows. He had a faded

blond mustache and a wisp of hair brushed back bravely over his balding head.

His identification of himself was followed by a silence which bristled with resentment. He looked around uncertainly.

Buck indicated a square, stocky man with black hair, a jut-jawed face, black eyebrows which extended in a straight line below his forehead, and piercing brown eyes.

"This is James Moffitt," he said diffidently. "Mr. Moffitt is president of Moffitt Mines, Limited, and also president of the Las Verdes National Bank."

Moffitt unbent to the extent of a nod.

The fourth man, his face strained with worry, his dark eyes unnaturally bright, his hands nervously rubbing each other, seemed to want to help out the tense situation.

"My name's Brockett," he said. His voice sounded as if he were ready to explode. "Faro Frank Brockett." He turned to the blond man next to him as Emmett Buck sat down. "This is Jason Jeffrey, secretary to Mr. Moffett."

Jeffrey, the man who had tailed Fowler, neither rose nor offered his hand.

The senator cleared his throat. "I don't know how you got here, or how you knew we were meeting," he declared, "but I must say that I consider this an intrusion and will have to ask you to retire."

"Just a minute!" Fowler snapped. "You know the extent of my authority, McClain." He turned to the others. "Two men have been murdered and an airplane stolen. The theft of the airplane calls for action from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The murders are part and parcel of the theft. I know that none of you men would want to be in a position to obstruct justice."

Faro Frank Brockett leaped to his feet. "That's right!" he exploded. "We don't want to do that—and I want justice! It was my airplane which was stolen, my pilot who was killed!"

James Moffitt lost his banker's aplomb. "Snap out of it, Brockett!" he popped.

The gambler paid no attention. "The truth, Fowler," he hurried on, the words spilling all over the place, "is that there's a conspiracy here to take over the city of Las Verdes. And I know who's behind it!"

"Shut up!" snapped Senator McClain, his fists working.

"I'll not shut up! Fowler, the man behind all this is Honest John Farmer. He sent his thugs to ruin me, and they did!"

He sank back in his chair as if the words had recalled to him his tragic predicament, and had beaten him down. Fowler looked at dark, beetle-browed Moffitt, the banker and mine owner.

"Any truth to these charges?" he demanded. He thought quickly, "Suppose, for instance, Farmer held a heavy mortgage on the Alamo Club."

"As a banker," Moffitt said, "I respect certain ethics. One rule I have is not to discuss the affairs of my depositors."

Fowler smiled grimly. "That can come later," he declared.

"Inspector Fowler," Emmett Buck's thin voice piped up, "we organized the Improvement Association of which I'm president, to keep everything in Las Verdes clean and aboveboard. As long as you're here, we want to cooperate with you. There is something sinister going on in Las Verdes. Things are going underground—I guess that's the best way to say it. People are being cheated. We've got to stop it or the city'll be ruined. Visitors won't come here to patronize crooks and racketeers, and they won't gamble with the cards stacked against them. In fact, that's why we called this meeting—to fight what's going on beneath the surface!"

"Bosh!" exclaimed Senator McClain.

A TELEPHONE bell rang shrilly.

Tall, blond Jason Jeffrey uncuddled the instrument, answered, and held it out toward Faro Frank Brockett, who took it in a trembling hand.

"Yes?" he asked. "Look, Vardis, I can't talk now. You shouldn't have called me. . . . What's that? . . . I'll see you later."

He banged up the receiver, looked at the others. "I beg your pardon," he said. "And now?"

"I think, gentlemen," Emmett Buck said, "we might as well adjourn. We came here to discuss a crisis in Las Verdes' life, and I think Mr. Fowler has given us the answer. The F.B.I. is here, and we ought to string along with the Federal men."

McClain grunted.

"That's right," said Faro Frank Brockett.

"At any rate, let's get out of here,"

added Jason Jeffrey.

He rose, picked up his hat from the conference table and slammed it on his head. He went out. The others followed his lead. Buck said he would remain behind. Fowler went to the senator.

"I'll go to the street with you," he said. His answer was another grunt. "Senator," Fowler asked him on the way down, "just what's your motive for not wanting the Bureau here?"

The Senator glared at him. "Too much Federal interference," he growled. "You guys are always in somebody's hair. This is a free country out here. We're rugged individualists. We don't think we need somebody three thousand miles away to nurse us along."

Fowler returned the belligerent stare. "We'll see whether your motives are as simple as that," he said.

They had reached the street. Fowler walked away, leaving the senator's fists working angrily.

Inspector Dan Fowler ducked into a drug store and called the Rangeland Hotel. He asked for Mary Barry, an alias which Sally Vane often used when working under cover. He heard her soft voice with a thrill that never died.

"Yes, darling," she said.

"Look, Mary—run down a gal whose first name is Vardis. Has some connection with Faro Frank Brockett. Get on her trail and stay with her. I want to know everything about her—where she goes and what she does and what she says."

He heard Sally's low laugh. "You don't need to draw a blueprint, my dear."

He chuckled. "Okay. I'll be seeing you."

He rang off, looked up another number, and dialed. A feminine voice answered.

"I'd like to speak to Sheriff Clancy Nighthoff," he said.

A moment later a gruff voice was demanding resentfully:

"What is it?"

Fowler identified himself to an angry silence.

"Yeah?" said Nighthoff then. "What's up?"

"I'd like to have you meet me at the County Building."

"And I'm just finishin' dinner. If you have to see me, why not come out here?"

"I want to see the corpse."

"I don't know why. He was some stum-

blebum or a dope that figured he could stick up five guys and make a million. I can't see why you want to look him over."

"I'll meet you at the County Building in half an hour," Fowler said, and hung up.

He found a lunch counter and grabbed a quick, greasy dinner. Then he walked to the County Building, a dark, sleeping three-story brick affair centered in a large, grassy, tree-sheltered park which covered about two city blocks.

He walked through the park and into the building. An arrow pointed to the right and beneath it was "Marriage License Bureau." The only activity in the place stirred there. Another arrow pointed to the left to the sheriff's office.

The room was lighted and Fowler walked in. Pig-eyed, fat Sheriff Nighthoff sat behind a desk with his feet on it, his body testing the seams of his uniform. He was chewing on a toothpick. When the G-man entered he made no move.

"Fowler, I s'pose?" he demanded.

"That's right. Now, about this body. You say there was no identifying marks on it?"

"I told you that. Look here, Fowler, everything's been taken care of. I sent fingerprints and photographs to Washington. The coroner dug out the bullet. As far as Mojave County is concerned, the case is closed.

THE rolypoly lawman was breathing fast in his anger.

"Just the same," persisted Fowler, "I'd like to see the body."

He watched Sheriff Nighthoff simmer, waited for him to boil over. But the man evidently thought better of it. He finally dragged his heavy legs from the desk top, thudding them to the floor, and dericked his bulk out of his chair.

"Okay," he said. "Come on."

They went to the basement. Nighthoff unlocked a door labelled "County Morgue." They went inside and turned on the lights.

Fowler glanced around. There was the usual gruesome paraphernalia. At least three doors entered the big room, and there were several ceiling-high windows. Nighthoff waddled to a huge refrigerator, pulled out one of the sliding drawers. All that remained of the bent little man lay there.

Fowler examined the body, bluish and cold in death. After several minutes of examination he felt surprise, but did not show it, as he rubbed a sensitive finger over the thumbnail on the left hand. He bent over, studied it. It was very rough, the surface of the nail appearing to have been pierced slightly at least a hundred times. He mentally photographed the phenomenon.

Then he turned to Nighthoff, who stood eyeing him sulkily.

"Clothing?" he asked.

Nighthoff pointed to a large cardboard box.

"We've been all through them," he said, defensively. "Nothing there."

Fowler opened the box, examined the garments. He saw that the labels and laundry marks had been cut off everything. But he was interested in the worn suit, for he saw that though it was several years old it was of excellent and unusual material, and oddly tailored and sewn. He gave close attention to the stitching and lining.

"This stuff will have to go to Washington," he told the sheriff. "Technical laboratory."

He covered the box, picked it up. Nighthoff grabbed it.

"Nothing doing!"

Fowler smiled grimly.

"This is evidence," he said. "You wouldn't want to suppress it."

What was left of Nighthoff's chest sagged into his paunch and he sighed dejectedly.

"Okay," he said.

CHAPTER IV

Fresh Leads



NIGHTHOFF started for a series of pigeon-holes which looked like letter boxes in a post office, his manner suddenly changing.

"You'll probably want to see the bullet, too," he said. "It's in an envelope right here—"

The overhead lights blinked out. From the marriage license bureau upstairs came startled cries and shouts. Through the faint hubbub from above, Fowler heard a slight scraping sound of feet on the ce-

ment floor near him. His hand lashed to his coat and back, gripping his .38 automatic.

"Stop or I'll fire!" he commanded.

There was no answer as he felt, rather than heard, the progress of an intruder within a few yards of him. By listening intently he finally thought he had located whoever it was. He darted forward. An ochre tube of light sparked the gloom.

Plaster splattered the floor as Fowler's gun jumped in his hand. More plaster ticked on cement.

"What the devil!" growled Nighthoff.

His own .38 Service revolver boomed. Glass from one of the windows crashed downward, tinkled. The intruder's gun spoke hotly, stuttering, the man shifting as he fired, weaving like a fighter. Fowler fired again and again. Then came the deathly truce of silence. After that, emptiness.

"He got out through the pane you blasted, Nighthoff!" Fowler snapped, as he dashed for the shattered window.

He pulled himself up and vaulted through the high window. He shot across the dark, tree-dotted lawn, pistol in hand. He combed the place, groped into bushes, stalked trees, but the intruder had vanished. By this time, the lights in the marriage bureau in the lower corridor, and the basement had flashed on.

Giving up his search as hopeless, Fowler returned to the County Building. Nighthoff met him in the first floor corridor. He appeared on the verge of apoplexy, so infuriated his heavy features were working and the fat that framed his jaws trembling.

"Can you beat that!" he stormed. "And right under my nose. I'll see about such doin's!" He took a deep breath to calm himself. "But nothin's missin'," he added.

Fowler let the sheriff puff along after him to the furnace room and found the master switch, closed now. The intruder had pulled it, the sheriff said, and one of the men in the marriage license bureau had reclosed it. That meant no fingerprints.

The invader had ducked into the morgue, apparently trying to find something. Challenged, he had replied with lead, then had escaped through the window which Nighthoff's bullet had shattered. The body, however, had not been touched. The paper box containing the

clothing was intact.

"And here," said Nighthoff, pulling an envelope from one of the pigeonholes, "is your death bullet."

"Thanks," replied Fowler grimly.

He examined the pellet and put it back. He slipped the envelope into his inside coat pocket. He checked the window frame carefully, looked at the hard ground outside.

"We sure scared him away," Nighthoff said. Fowler raised an eyebrow as he looked at him.

"Scared him away," he asked, "or helped him away?"

Hurrying back to the Las Verdes Hotel, Fowler procured wrapping paper and twine from the room clerk, prepared his package of clothing for shipping, and addressed it to the Technical Laboratory, F.B.I., at Washington, D. C. He dispatched a bell-hop to the airport with it. He was just sending the lad on his way when the night clerk, holding a telephone, called:

"They want you, Mr. Fowler!" He waved toward a booth. "You can take it in there."

Fowler went to the booth, answered. The operator told him to wait a minute, and the next thing he knew he was listening to Larry Kendal.

"I picked up the thugs' trail after they made their getaway from the abandoned Army air field," Kendal reported. "Six dinner jackets weren't hard to follow. They stopped in an all-night lunch about four miles from the field and called a taxi. I found the driver, who said he'd taken them to the Ambassador-Biltmore. But by that time I was working about twelve hours behind 'em."

"I got Bender, of the Los Angeles field offices, and some men. We moved in on the hotel and found that they'd lammed. We put a double-check on all highways, bus lines, railroads and airlines, but we don't know whether they headed back to Las Verdes, toward Canada or Mexico. All I've got is the slug from the pilot's body."

"However, we did find that they'd bought ready-made business suits and other clothing at a store in the hotel, and we've got nearly perfect descriptions. Los Angeles is still working the trail, but it's gone cold."

Kendal paused, then said, hopefully:

"Bender can handle this end. What's for me?"

FOWLER detected his eagerness to be in Las Verdes.

"They might have come back here," Fowler told him. "You'd better hightail it up here yourself."

"Got it!" Larry snapped. "I'll be with you soon."

He hung up.

Fowler did the same, walked out of the booth, through the lobby and onto the human-cluttered street. It was late now, but the carefree crowd had increased, rather than diminished, in this twenty-four-hour city of chance.

He hailed a taxi.

"Take me to the Concha Club," he ordered.

The driver honked and greased the car through traffic, congested by cars and by people walking willy-nilly in the streets. They went south, turned right out the main highway for a mile, stopped just beyond the city limits at a garishly lit one-story building which looked as harmless as an oversized honeymoon cottage.

He walked along a hedge-lined flagstone promenade flanked by lawn which was bright green under the lights, onto a wide porch, and went inside. He found himself in a casino which boasted of all the standard games—craps, chuck-a-luck, blackjack, roulette. The room was in excellent taste, with heavy pebbled broadloom carpet, mauve drapes, indirect lighting. The crowds around the tables were tense, quiet, well-mannered.

His heart leaped as he looked over and beyond the heads of the intent players, croupiers, floormen and shills toward a large alcove, where slot machines glistened invitingly—one-armed bandits which, now that post-war miracles were at hand, took your money without even making you pull a lever.

Playing a five-cent machine—Dan had always contended that somewhere in her background lurked Scotch ancestors—was blond Sally Vane. Fowler knew she wasn't playing just to amuse herself, and he knew that he couldn't speak to a girl who was known as Mary Barry and was now on the trail of a girl whose first name was Vardis.

Fowler's intense curiosity about the place had not gone unnoticed. A ratty individual only a few inches over five feet, thin, with an egg-shaped head, bad teeth, and flat blue eyes under a wild shock of hair sidled up.

"Who'd you want to see, buddy?" he demanded, with an incongruous New England accent.

Fowler lowered his gaze and surveyed him.

"Honest John Farmer," he snapped. "And fast."

"Ain't everybody sees him."

"Tell him Fowler of the F.B.I. is waiting."

The runt's eyes widened a shade. "Okay, boss. No offense meant."

He scurried across the soft broadloom, opened a door marked "Private" and went in. He wasn't gone more than a minute.

"Sorry," he said, when he came back. "Honest John ain't in. Besides, he's busy."

Fowler's jaws set. "So that's it!" he muttered.

He heeled around, went outside, and walked far into the night, where a blanket of darkness wiped out the neons. He circled, came up in the rear of the gay building, finding it much larger than he had supposed. He stepped to a door, pressed against it lightly, turning the knob at the same time. His sensitive fingers told him that it was secured by a heavy lock and a bolt as well.

He continued on around the place, working behind the oleander bushes until he found an opened window. Slipping out a pocket-knife with a spatulate blade, he forced the screen catch and climbed inside.

He was in a small room, neatly furnished with desks and chairs. He paused, listened. He heard the sound of a man's voice and then that of a woman's coming through a door to his right. He stepped to it, tried to catch words.

He was struck by the soft, melodic quality of the woman's tone. It was definitely seductive, as if she might be a singer. He could not hear what was said.

He decided he ought to, so he put his hand on the knob and opened the door. Two taut faces turned toward him at his entry. The man's hand flicked inside his dinner jacket, and that was as far as it got.

Automatic in hand, Fowler eyed the man first.

"Give," he said. He held out his hand. "And keep your fingers away from any push buttons," he ordered.

He measured the dinner-jacketed

frame of the man, who was about six feet tall. The tailor hadn't been able to hide the muscle bulges. His eyes were glacier cold and gray, but now fired by a baleful glint. Fowler read shrewdness and intelligence in them. The man's features were hardened and sharpened by a coat of tan. His whole bearing spoke command—and action.

"You're Fowler," he said softly, handing over a .38 automatic butt first.

DAN FOWLER took it, sniffed at the barrel, the acrid odor telling him that it had been fired recently.

"I thought we ought to talk, Farmer," the G-man replied, slipping the gun in his pocket.

"So you just dropped in."

"That's right."

Fowler looked at the girl. She was a statue. Her long legs gave enticing shape to a chartreuse evening gown which draped from her waist to golden slippers. The waist was small, the gown flaring over hips a model would diet a month to get. She was unusually full-chested, her wide shoulders carrying her entire body regally. A diamond clasp held the vee together below her smooth, long throat.

Her face interested him most, however, because it flashed a hard, calculating hate, an emotion which had suffused it at mention of his name. Her full lips were so flat against her teeth that they made her carmined lips look artificial. The skin on her nose was drawn tight. The flame from her large brown eyes, framed by lashes covered with mascara, leaped out at him beneath her carefully shaped eyebrows and high, wide forehead. Her hair was as dark and soft as the night outside.

Fowler looked at the length of her fingernails, wondering how they would feel, as she gave him a final bonfire appraisal, then turned to the solidly knit man with whom she had been talking.

"I'll go now," she said, crossing her long, expressive hands to pull a light fur jacket more tightly over her soft shoulders. "The room is too crowded."

There was no attempt on her part to hide her distaste for the law, although Fowler rather wondered if she had not made the statement to impress her escort. She was a girl who not only could think quickly but she also could act very fast. Which she did now.

CHAPTER V

Gambler's Chance

BEFORE either man could answer or restrain her, the dark-haired girl slipped through the door like a cat. Fowler weighed her voice as the door clicked shut behind her. Was there an ever-so-slight accent? He turned to the gaming house proprietor, indicating the heavy panel.

"Locked?" he asked.

"From the inside. Safe as a bank."

"Who is she, Farmer?"

The gambler shrugged. "Personal friend."

"Nice going."

"You're not here to discuss my love life, Fowler. In fact, you wouldn't be here at all if you weren't so fast with a rod."

"Thanks. First question isn't a question, exactly. I understand you're trying to take over Las Verdes."

The gambler's faded eyebrows went up.

"A nice little racket, Farmer. You're in solid. You own this joint and four others—Silver Dollar, the Las Verdes, the Gold Mine, and now the Alamo."

"That's all a matter of record. I landed here ten years ago with five bucks and a broken down jalopy."

"And worked fast, Farmer."

A trace of a grin showed at the corners of the gambler's hard mouth. "I had faith in the town. I still have. Honest games are—"

"Save that spiel for the Chamber of Commerce, Farmer. You have some funny methods."

"Like what?"

"Like sending in a bunch of men to a new house with enough money on them to break the joint by doubling, tripling and quadrupling their bets."

"That's legitimate. The money's good. The boys play fair. I take a chance. I've been clipped myself a couple of times."

"You've a nice system, Farmer. A sucker who wants to start a club comes to you for added financing, because he can't make the grade all by himself. You loan him the money, break him, take

over the club, the way you did with the Alamo."

Farmer leaned over his desk. "You're smart, Fowler. You learn fast. But you're wrong about the Alamo."

"You held the mortgage," said the G-man.

"Yes, I helped out Faro Frank. He's a nice guy and the club's an asset to the community. I admit that I took the joint over twenty-four hours after his dice table was raided. I had to for my own protection. But I didn't send those boys in to clean him!"

Fowler listened to the anger rise in Farmer's voice in spite of his effort at self-control.

"There was something odd about that," the F.B.I. man said. "Five men took Faro Frank Brockett. They escaped in his plane and killed his pilot. But six men landed in Los Angeles, Farmer."

"What are you getting at, Fowler?"

"The sixth man, Farmer. The killer. The guy who put the heat on everybody in Las Verdes, the way it looks. That is, if he shot the little man and the pilot. We have the lead out of both men."

He watched the gambler's hands tighten into hard square blocks.

"You think I did it?"

Fowler shrugged. "It might be anybody. I suppose you can dish up a non-leaking alibi."

"I was—" Farmer suddenly choked.

"You'd better get a good one," advised Dan Fowler. "By the way, I'm taking your gat. I suppose you have several, so I won't leave you naked?"

"I change 'em with my suits. I have a special gold inlaid job for dress occasions."

Fowler put his hand on the doorknob. He turned back. "As long as you're shopping for alibis," he said slowly, "you might find one for the last two hours."

Farmer pressed a button and the lock buzzed like a rattlesnake warning.

"So we play games," he said. "It ought to be fun, G-man."

Fowler went out. As he walked through the place the two most important spots on his body were his right hand and the gun under his left armpit. Outside, he felt better.

He had not seen Sally Vane as he had left the club. He had hardly expected he would. For he had a notion the girl he had seen with Farmer was the Vardis whom Sally was trailing. . . .

VARDIS LAMONT, Sally Vane had decided, was very much in a dither as she walked out of the room marked "Private" and headed for the night outside of the Concha Club. To Sally's keen eyes and mind, Vardis Lamont's eyes were troubled, and even her fast walk through the gaming room reflected both anger and apprehension. The girl shot glances about her which were anything but seductive or exotic.

Sally had had no trouble putting the finger on her. Vardis Lamont had come to Las Verdes just before the beginning of the war. She had come, apparently, from nowhere, as people had a habit of doing when arriving in Las Verdes. Nobody asked about pasts.

She had found a room in a cheap hotel, had started singing in first one night club, then another, and had prospered. She had moved from her single room to a suite in the Las Verdes-Biltmore as her salary had moved rapidly upward.

Her selection as singer and mistress of ceremonies at the Alamo Club had been her biggest break, and she had celebrated in advance by buying a home on the outskirts of the city. It was a five-room house, low and rambling, of white-washed brick, nearly two miles from the business district, and was surrounded by ten acres and a high barbed wire fence.

Cottonwoods nodded over the low tile roof, and tamaracks stood as sentinels to guard her privacy. Vardis Lamont, from her first appearance in the gaming city, had wanted to be alone. She arrived at the appointed times for her songs, but unlike other entertainers, she never mixed with the customers, never let them buy her drinks, never gambled.

Her work done, she simply disappeared. If she had been any place else she would have been dubbed a "mystery

woman" or a "hermitess."

All this Sally had found out through carefully veiled questioning in a few short hours—casual inquiries made here and there about the city. She also had hired an automobile which she had driven to Vardis Lamont's desert hide-out, which had appeared dark and uninviting behind the barbed wire. Now, the car which she had engaged, a small coupe, was standing in the parking lot of the Concha Club.

As Vardis Lamont passed her, Sally lost all interest in the nickel slot machine. She turned away, giving it a last dirty look, realizing that she was a dollar and eighty-five cents poorer than she had been when she had started feeding coins into its hungry maw. She put her remaining money into her bag, where snuggled the .25 caliber automatic Fowler had given her as a birthday present several years before, snapped it shut and, looking as much as possible like a bilked and disgusted tourist, left the Concha Club.

Light and darkness dappled her quarry as the girl went toward the parking lot. Close in, post-war models glistened brave and new under the glow from the club, but farther back there were shadows. Vardis Lamont's quick feet crunched on the gravel as she retreated to a far corner. Sally moved forward swiftly, silently, to pick up Vardis' license number and to memorize the color and lines of her car.

As Vardis Lamont went deeper into the shadows, Sally Vane closed in on her. The entertainer headed for a low-slung Prescott cabriolet.

She was putting the key into the door lock and Sally was memorizing the license number—6070-B—when two men

[Turn page]



TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER



lashed out of the darkness. Vardis, glancing nervously around, saw them coming and made a break for the lighted area. She got no more than half a dozen steps when one of the men, closing in, brought down a blackjack.

Sally heard its dull thud as she ducked down behind the fender of a nearby car, saw the singer fold up like an empty flour sack. One of the attackers picked her up. Sally's hand groped in her purse, closed over the little .25. Before she could bring it into play, however, the attackers had darted behind another car, carrying the limp singer with them. A starter ground and a long, low black sedan of expensive make rolled out of the parking lot and turned down the main Transcontinental Highway in the opposite direction from Las Verdes.

Sally sprinted to her own coupe, leaped in, started it, and set out in pursuit, feeling hopelessly that the big car would easily outdistance her. Apparently, however, the men were taking no chances on being stopped by the highway patrol and the driver kept within speed limits.

The car went south along the highway for about five miles, swung left on the road to Mojave City and the great Mojave Lake, piled up, dark and cold, for more than one hundred miles behind its mighty dam, surrounded by naked mountains, frighteningly beautiful in their majestic isolation.

SALLY gave the big car a half-mile lead. As it rolled onward, she wondered what fate was in store for Vardis Lamont. The vast lake held a thousand hidden coves—quick death under its aquamarine surface.

For miles along its shores there was no human life. All it offered was stark desolation. Furthermore, Sally thought grimly, it was a great Government reservation, and anything violent which happened within its boundaries was strictly the business of the F.B.I.—in this case, of herself.

The car continued down the Mojave City road for ten miles, then abruptly slowed and swung onto a dirt road which, Sally saw, headed in the direction of the lake. She found the turn-off without difficulty, switched off her lights, and sent the coupe plunging over the rough road which had been carved out of sagebrush, mesquite and rock. Be-

side her, on the seat, was the automatic which she hadn't yet had a chance to use.

The road swung, turned, twisted and started downward through the forbidding terrain. Sally held the wheel with both hands, worked her brakes overtime and wished she'd eaten more carrots so that she could see better to drive on a dark night without lights. The only clue she had to the road ahead was an infrequent view of the pursued car's tail-lights.

Then, below her, she saw the black outline of the lake. The big car came to a stop. That meant she would have to stop, too, so that the men she chased wouldn't hear the sound of her engine. She shut off the ignition and grabbed the .25. Armed with only that, she started directly for the lake, hoping she would get there in time to prevent tragedy for Vardis. It was apparent to her now that the entertainer held the key to the mystery, and that she was in some way connected with the gang operating in Las Verdes.

Sally wore sensible walking shoes but, as she progressed, her ankles turned on loose rocks. Her clothing snagged on mesquite. Twice she fell to her hands and knees. As she advanced to the lake she moved more and more slowly, fearful that she would make a sound which would give her position away, and let those she pursued know that someone was on their trail.

She managed to get within ten yards of her quarry, covering her approach with a mesquite bush. The eerie light from a flash told a grisly story. Vardis Lamont, apparently still unconscious from the vicious blow on her head, was being weighted with cement building blocks wired to her ankles!

A small power-boat stood by, an ancient-looking craft which now and then fell under the rays of the flashlights. Three men were working over the girl. That would be right, Sally thought—the two kidnapers who had brought the girl, and the skipper of the launch.

The muscles in Sally's calves were trembling and her hands were wet as she clicked the safety off the automatic and walked forward from her hiding point. She tried to make her voice sound steady and convincing—she was afraid of a dry, frightened croak giving away her fear—as she commanded:

"Hands up!"

The three men stood erect, whirled, disbelief on their faces, dim in the ghostly night.

"What th' devil!" growled one.

"It's only a dame, Jake."

"Who can shoot," Sally finished. "Get to work and release that girl!"

Her command was greeted by a guffaw.

"Put that gun away and stop playing games, sister!" one of the men ordered.

The warning sound of a rolling rock behind her came too late for her to do anything but move her head sideward. A fourth man she hadn't seen, apparently a lookout, had come up from the back as the trio had stalled for time.

For Sally, the sky was filled with a thousand more stars than had been there before. Several of the stars exploded as she fought a losing battle with her fading senses. She pitched forward, her little weapon released by her nerveless hand.

"Well, that's that," said the boatman as he picked up the gun and slipped it into his pocket. "What'll we do with the girl scout?"

"Same as we give the other dame," said Jake. "But fast! We don't want nobody else to come snoopin'. The sooner we get these dames on the bottom of the lake, the better. Makin' 'em disappear—that's better 'n leavin' 'em around to make trouble. What one fem already knows she'll tell the other. What's more, where there ain't no body, there ain't no crime, see?"

THE other two men were already at work on the limp form of Sally Vane. They bound her wrists and feet with rope, gagged her, then wired the heavy building blocks to her ankles.

"Let's go, Jake!" said one of the men as he straightened up. "Give us a hand with th' dames!"

The men waded to the ancient tub which rocked quietly on the water of the lake, little waves slap-slapping against her worn and battered hull. They were carrying Vardis Lamont. Then they came back, picked up Sally and lowered her amidships, well aft of the two-cylinder engine with its huge flywheel. The pilot stepped on the starter button, the cylinders coughed asthmatically, chuffed, settled down to jerking, complaining work.

"Get 'em out as far as you can before

you dump 'em—good, deep water," Jake ordered. "We don't want to take no chances on their bodies comin' up in a week or two."

"Yeah," said the pilot. "I'll go 'way out."

Facing forward, he pulled up the anchor, shifted the huge clutch lever beside him and swung the wheel. The craft nosed out toward the black center of the lake.

The three men remaining on shore watched the death boat go out into the night.

"Well, that's that," remarked Jake, rubbing his hands as if to wash off the stain of what he had done.

CHAPTER VI

Telltale Bullets



WHEN Larry Kendal reached his room in the Las Verdes Hotel the first thing he did was remove his soiled clothing. He had not had the garments off for more than forty-eight hours. Wearily he tossed them onto the bed. And, even though it was late at night, he got out his electric razor, went into the bathroom and shaved, more asleep than awake. He had managed a brief nap on the shuttle plane from Los Angeles, and had been only half-awake on leaving it.

Although he had taken the precaution to look around for any suspicious characters, he had missed his welcoming committee of one. The man trailing him, far more skilled in tailing than tall blond Jason Jeffrey, had ducked into the washroom after spotting him. He had remained there until Kendal had gone through the station and out into the night to a waiting taxi.

Kendal had had no idea he was being watched as the cab pulled away from the parking area, and his follower hadn't bothered to leave the airport until the G-man was well on his way. It was only at the city limits that the inconspicuous coupé had closed in. The car had passed Kendal as he alighted from his taxi and went into the Las Verdes Hotel, but had not stopped.

Kendal had made inquiries about Fowler at the desk while registering, only to find that his whereabouts was not known. Then Kendal had gone directly to his room.

Now he fought sleep as he plied the electric razor, listened absently to its drone, wondering where his running mate might be and how soon he himself would be called to action. As he cut off the current he paused for an instant—and detected a sound outside the bathroom door. He started the razor again to give the intruder the idea that he was still shaving, laid it on the wash basin, and moved toward the door cautiously.

He looked into the room. He could see no one in the area visible to him. His clothing still lay in disorder on the bed, but his coat, he was sure, had been moved. He started into the bedroom. The door was slammed in his face. He plunged at it. At the same instant he heard a chair bang against it. By the time he had dislodged it and darted into the bedroom, the room was empty. The door leading to the hall closed.

Clad only in shorts, he dashed for his holster, which hung over a chair, found his automatic and pulled it out. He ran into the hall, saw no one. But a door at the far end of the corridor was just closing. He raced to it, pulled it open. It led onto a fire-escape.

He looked down. The intruder had had only two floors to go. He heard a thud below and before he could line up a shot, the man sped around the corner of the building, out of range. Kendal cursed the iron-work which had deprived him of a chance to wing the invader, and went back to his room.

Inside, he made a thorough search. He found everything in place—his wallet, with the same amount of money he had had when he'd paid the taxi driver, his identification papers and badge, his keys, key chain, assorted papers. The bullet which had killed Faro Frank Brockett's pilot at Los Angeles was still resting snugly in the F.B.I. marked envelope. Even a soiled handkerchief and the papers which he carried in a leather folder in the inside pocket of his coat were untouched.

Breathing easier, he headed for the shower. He was half through rinsing when he heard the summons of the telephone. He threw a towel about him, went to it.

"This is Fowler," he heard. "What's up?"

Kendal told him quickly about the intruder.

"You get fast action in this town," he said. "But I guess I scared him off before he got anything. Everything seems to be intact."

"I'm heading for Police Headquarters," Fowler said. "I'll meet you there, Larry."

"Okay, Dan."

When Fowler had hung up—he was in a booth not far from the Concha Club—he looked up a number, dialed the home of Sheriff Clancy Nighthoff, and was greeted by a sleepy grunt.

"This is Fowler," he told the bumbling sheriff. "I want to run a ballistics test on a gun I borrowed from Honest John Farmer. Got a comparison microscope?"

"Devil of a time to do that," Nighthoff muttered, his voice heavy with sleep. "Why don't you guys go to bed?"

"I asked you a question."

"I ain't got one, but Chief of Police Hargis has, over at Headquarters. There's everything you need. We use his stuff now and then."

"That's what I heard. Coming along?"

"I suppose so," the sheriff said wearily.

The wire clicked in Fowler's ear. He hung up, found Hargis' home number and dialed, got permission to use his equipment.

"I'll drop down," Hargis said.

FOWLER replaced the instrument. He went out to the highway, commandeered a taxi and was driven to Police Headquarters, a dingy place on a side street. The "crime laboratory," such as it was, was fairly well equipped. While Kendal and Hargis looked on, Fowler fired bullets from the pistol which he had taken from Honest John Farmer into cotton batting, removed them.

Kendal went to the comparison microscope with Chief Hargis, a cadaverous individual with a lined, tired face, whose main object in life, according to his conversation, was to throw drunks into the tank.

"That's all we do up here," he said. "That is, until lately. I don't like this."

Kendal worked with two bullets—the one taken from the body of the little man who had been killed in the shadows at the Alamo Club and the one found in the head of the dead pilot at Los Angeles.

He looked up. "There's no doubt about it," he told Fowler. "Both bullets came from the same gun."

The door to the laboratory opened just as Fowler handed Kendal the slug from the weapon he had just fired. His eyes bloodshot, his uniform askew on his heavy body, Sheriff Nighthoff glared glumly, grunted at his introduction to Kendal.

"A cop's work is never done," he mumbled. "What's this false alarm?"

Kendal adjusted the bullets in the comparison microscope, the one from the gun Fowler had just fired and the other from the body of the little man.

"They compare," he said, eventually.

"That means, then, that this gun, owned by Farmer, killed both the little man and the pilot," Fowler said.

"What?" exploded Nighthoff, his torpor suddenly vanishing. "You mean to tell me that Honest John killed both those people? What's going on here, anyway?"

"You ought to catch up," Fowler replied.

Nighthoff drew in as much of his abdomen as his sagging muscles would permit. He patted his holster.

"So Honest John done it!" he exclaimed. "I always figgered that guy was tryin' to control gamin' here, but I never thought he'd go that far!"

He started for the door.

"Wait a minute!" Fowler snapped. "We know his gun did it, but we don't know he did."

Nighthoff looked down his ample nose. "That's enough for me!" he barked. "I'm gettin' a warrant for murder. That killin' took place in Mojave county, my territory, and I'm goin' to work Honest John Farmer over. Nobody's goin' to say I don't do my duty."

The telephone rang, hollowly and unexpectedly, in the silence that followed Nighthoff's angry speech. Fowler answered. The voice sounded familiar. He passed it to Nighthoff.

"For you," he said.

Nighthoff's conversation was one of oaths and ejaculations. Then he slammed up the receiver.

"That was Jason Jeffrey," he said. "Claims they're usin' phony dice and a wired wheel out at the Silver Dollar, another county spot!" He glared at Hargis. "Why do things always have to happen to me?"



LARRY KENDAL

"Doesn't Honest John Farmer own the Silver Dollar?" Fowler asked.

Nighthoff slapped his heavy thigh. "That cinches it!" he exclaimed. "Farmer runs it, all right. First he cleans out the Alamo Club. Somethin' goes wrong and he plugs the little guy because maybe the little guy knows something. Then he plugs the pilot. Now he's started cheatin' at his clubs. It's open and shut, I tell you! Motive right down the line!"

"How much did Jason Jeffrey lose?" Fowler asked.

"Fifty grand!"

"Where'd he get that kind of money? I thought he was just secretary to James Moffitt."

"You don't know Jeffrey. That baby's heeled, and he's got power. Used to be secretary to Senator McClain. Took a confidential trip to Europe with McClain in Nineteen-forty-four, request of the President himself. Papers were full of it. Jeffrey handled all the senator's affairs, cashed in on the side, probably."

Fowler weighed this information. "So now?"

"I'm goin' to clean out the Silver Dollar. Pinch 'em all for illegal gamblin'. Violatin' their license. Then I'll break down Honest John and wipe up this mess." He paused, eyed Fowler. "Confidential," he said, "Jeffrey's raisin' Ned. Claims that once dishonest gamblin'."

starts th' word'll go all over th' country and Las Verdes'll fold up as a result."

THE telephone rang again. Fowler answered.

"Sounds like Grand Hotel," Kendal said.

Nighthoff went out the door. Fowler turned to Hargis. "Now it's your turn," he told him.

"More grief!" Hargis exclaimed, as he took the instrument. He grumbled his name. Then he slammed the phone down on its cradle. "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" he exclaimed. "They've knocked over the Gold Mine! Same system they used on the Alamo Club. Come in with wads of money big enough to choke elephants and shot th' works. Honest John—"

"That's Honest John Farmer's club too, isn't it?" Fowler asked quietly.

"That's right. He's had it—say!" Hargis' eyes grew bright with a thought. "He wouldn't clean out his own club, would he?"

"I wouldn't know," Fowler said.

The lines came back into Hargis' face.

"Then again, with th' heat on him, he might take his own club just to throw suspicion off himself." He looked from Fowler to Kendal. "Any way you look at it," he said finally, "it's confusin'."

Fowler turned to Kendal. "You'd better go out and have a talk with Jason Jeffrey," he said. "Maybe he can sort of clear things up a bit."

"Okay, Dan."

Kendal went out.

CHAPTER VII

Lady on the Lake



ASOUND which Sally Vane thought was what awakened her to consciousness was the erratic beat of the wheezing old engine. She lay quietly, trying to get enough ache out of her head to remember what had happened. Soon it all became clear to her, together with her present position. Her head was uncomfortably near the engine. She was about six feet back from the wheel. The man who was taking her to her watery end was standing with his back to her.

Suddenly, as if subconsciously realizing she had regained her senses, he looked around and down at her. She closed her eyes for quite a time to feign unconsciousness. She finally peered from between her heavy eyelashes, just opening her lids to slits, and saw that he had turned forward again to keep the small launch on its course.

Sally realized that never, in her entire career, had death been so near at hand. She tried to lift her legs. They moved inches and then the wires which held the building blocks cut cruelly into her ankles. Womanlike, she shuddered at the thought of what they might be doing to her precious nylons, which Dan had given her for her birthday.

She made a grimace, beneath the choking gag, as she saw, at this point, just how unimportant nylons really were.

She tried moving her ankles again. They were not only wired, but roped together. She attempted to move her wrists, squirming into a half-sitting position. She found that they were securely tied. She scrunched down just in time as the helmsman turned back again. She used the same system—slitting her eyelids—to determine when his attention went back to the course. No chance of getting her hands free.

She felt an uncomfortable prodding in the small of her back, shifted slightly. Underneath her lay some kind of a heavy wrench. A lot of good that did her. She couldn't get her hands on the handle and, if she did, it would avail her nothing. Wrenches didn't untie ropes and you couldn't hit anyone over the head with your hands tied behind your back.

Again the helmsman eyed her. She played 'possum.

While her lids were closed, her mind was working. That roughly operating engine, with its ponderous flywheel, was driving needles into her aching brain. She turned, looked at it, inches away from her back, smooth on top, but with starter teeth on the side.

For several minutes she watched it go around, shadowy in the darkness, yet limned against the stars, before she got the inspiration.

After that, it was still a hard job, one that called for the tense use of all her shoulder and arm and wrist muscles until they complained bitterly. Twinges shot through them, made every nerve in her body jump. The slightest miscalculation,

as she worked, would mean permanent injury, the loss of one or both of her arms.

But she managed to get the rope which bound her wrists next to the flywheel teeth, and they cut slowly. Now and then she felt the bite of those teeth in her flesh. Then the hot burn as they scraped her skin. As they worked, she pulled her wrist's apart so that the rope would give the minute it was nearly cut through.

She became conscious of Vardis Lamont, not three feet from her, now groaning. Twice the pilot looked back at Sally to see that she was still out of the picture, and once she was sure she was detected.

She was just beginning to think that the rope was almost severed when the engine coughed, spluttered. It took all her courage to jam her wrists against the flywheel before it stopped, but still the rope didn't give. Perhaps it was her realization that death was so close that gave her strength for one last, mighty tug—and the rope snapped free!

The boat was losing headway. The helmsman was still facing forward, steering. The fact that he showed no signs of alarm and gave no attention told her that this was the end of the ride.

He turned finally, bent over her, and pulled her to a sitting position so that he could get his arms under her body. Sally's right hand closed over the wrench. While he stooped, trying to get a good grip on her, she swung the wrench. He fell on top of her as the heavy tool thudded on his skull.

It took Sally minutes to get from beneath his inert weight, then undo the wires which held the blocks and untie the ropes which held her ankles. Taking no chances on his sudden awakening, she used the ropes to bind his wrists and ankles, adding the wire for good measure.

She went through his pockets and got back her twenty-five automatic. Only after that did she remove her gag and turn her attention to Vardis Lamont.

TO BE on the safe side, she decided to leave Vardis bound until she managed, somehow, to get the tiny craft to shore.

She eyed the wheel, realizing suddenly that she knew very little about boats, her sole experience having been on an excursion steamer down the Potomac when a secretary in the F.B.I. She lit matches,

found a switch labelled "Off" and "On."

She turned it to the "On" position, lit more matches and found a button on the floor. She stepped on it and was rewarded by the grind of the starter and the clash of meshing gears. The flywheel turned, but the engine didn't fire. She tried again. This time it worked.

She had a general idea of the course the boat had taken, for she had watched the stars. It had come in an easterly direction. She had no desire to return to any portion of the long western shore where the trio there might still be waiting for the boatman to return. They could easily pick up the sound of the wheezing engine as she approached them, and she would be in trouble all over again.

To the north, beyond a low mountain, the neon glow from the garish signs in around-the-clock Las Verdes reached into the skies. She would kill two birds with one stone—evade the thugs who had attempted to murder her and Vardis Lamont, and wind up nearer the city than if she had gone westward. She swung the wheel and found that the little boat responded fairly well.

Nearly an hour later she reached the shore. She jumped out into the shallow water after shutting off the ignition. Dropping the anchor, she pulled the boat up until its prow ground on sand. Then she went back to it, worked feverishly to free and arouse Vardis Lamont. The girl moaned as Sally began to work her arms and legs.

Sally found a bailing can, filled it with water, and sloshed it into the girl's face. That did the trick. Vardis got her hands behind her, pushed herself erect, asking where she was.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Sally replied. "I think we're on the north shore of Mojave Lake south of Las Verdes."

Sally inspected the bonds of the unconscious man. He was still very much out. Sally realized that without transportation she couldn't handle him in that condition. Not him and Vardis Lamont, too. She would just have to take a chance on leaving him, get to Dan Fowler as quickly as possible, and have him help her. Vardis Lamont would have to go along with her.

She bent over, held out her hands to the now sitting girl.

"Come on," she said. "Get up. We've got a long walk."

"I—I can't make it!" Vardis moaned.

"I simply can't. Don't you know what I've been through?"

"I ought to," replied Sally impatiently. "I got the same thing. Even the sock on the head." She reached into the pocket of her jacket, pulled out the little .25.

"Now, sister!" she demanded. "Quit stalling and get going!"

The girls started working their way north through the sagebrush and mesquite. Far in the distance Sally could see lights racing along a highway. Weary and aching, she geared her mind and body to get there. She walked behind Vardis Lamont, holding the gun in her hand....

At that moment, in Las Verdes, Larry Kendal was talking over the telephone to Dan Fowler, who had returned to the Las Verdes Hotel to check up after leaving Police Headquarters.

"I'm out at Jason Jeffrey's house," Kendal was saying. "There was the sound of a shot a couple of minutes before I got here. It came from the den. The den's door and window are both locked from the inside. The room's dark. I haven't touched a thing, and I haven't notified either Sheriff Nighthoff or Chief Hargis."

"Don't," Fowler replied. "What's the address? I'll be right out."

He memorized it as Kendal gave it, went into the lobby, onto the street and called a cab. Five minutes later he was being rolled up in front of a low, flat home constructed of white building brick. It had a dark shingle roof. Most of the lights were on. As he approached up the walk he saw that it was larger than it had first appeared to be, and that it must have cost plenty of money to build. It was in the center of an exclusive residential district.

HE DID not have to ring the doorbell. Kendal opened the door as Fowler crossed the long, low, covered, Spanish-type porch. As he walked into the large, modernly furnished living room, he heard the sound of low sobbing, and raised an eyebrow at Kendal.

"Mrs. Jeffrey," Kendal said. "She's in the library. I've already talked to her and she knows from nothing. Didn't hear her husband come in. Didn't hear anything until the gun went off in the den. That woke her up. She tried the knob on the door of Jeffrey's den and it was locked on the inside. She was heading for the telephone when I rang the

doorbell. She let me in and I've stuck fast."

"Good," said Fowler. "Let's have a look."

"I tried to get the key out of the door but it won't push inward. The French window's locked from the inside. Points to suicide, Dan."

Fowler went out of the house with Kendal on his heels. As he left, he looked around him. It was a warm night and all of the windows were open to cool the house. He stopped, turned to his companion.

"I want to see Mrs. Jeffrey," he said.

Kendal doubled back into the library with him. Fowler found himself bending over a tall, brown-haired woman who was seated in a chair, her face buried in a handkerchief. Long, dry sobs were choking her. She wore a quilted robe over her nightgown.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mrs. Jeffrey," he said, "but is this house air-conditioned?"

The woman stared up blankly, as if the oddity of the question, under the circumstances, had floored her completely.

"No!" she gasped. "No! For heaven's sake, stop torturing me and find out what's happened to Jason!"

"We will."

Fowler turned, went through the living room and outside again. With a flash, he examined the ground below the window. Someone had been watering the shrubs just beneath it, and two prints showed clearly, going in opposite directions, one superimposed on the other.

Being careful to avoid them, he drew out of his pocket a flat case, produced a bent wire, shoved it through the screen and slipped the hook. Raising the screen, he put the wire away and brought out a flat piece of steel. With that inserted between the two panels of the French window he lifted it. It forced up the inside catch and he shoved the window inward.

He pulled himself into the room, careful not to damage any possible fingerprints, used his flash to find the light switch, and flipped it.

Jason Jeffrey was slumped over his desk, one cheek resting on his left arm. There was a bullet-hole in his right temple. His right hand was closed around a .32 automatic. On the desk

beside him was a hastily scrawled note. Without touching it, Fowler read:

To Whom It May Concern:

I am sorry if I have caused anyone any trouble. My gambling losses have bankrupted me. Of Molly, my wife, I ask forgiveness. She knows nothing of my affairs. Perhaps Honest John Farmer can explain a few things. Or Senator McClain.

Jason Jeffrey

"Senator McClain!" Kendal exclaimed. "He's the man who's been fighting to get that one-hundred-million-dollar appropriation through for the Bagdad Dam, over on the Nevada River!"

"That's right. And remember, Night-off said Jeffrey used to be McClain's secretary. Made a confidential trip to Europe together, secret Presidential mission."

Kendal glanced at the body. "Looks like suicide, all right."

"Could be, Larry."

"The room was locked—from the inside, Dan. And he left the note."

Fowler went to the door, turned the key.

"You go out with Mrs. Jeffrey. Tell her that her husband's dead, then call the family physician."

"Okay."

"Kendal slipped from the room."

CHAPTER VIII

Suicide?



DAN FOWLER'S examination was anything but cursory. He examined Jeffrey's head first. There was a reddish bruise around his right eye and a lump on his jaw. Fowler looked at the man's left hand. The skin beneath the nails of the index and second fingers was red. He noticed that a button of Jeffrey's shirt was undone, pulled the shirt and underwear back, and saw a round, red mark there.

He noticed the wall safe and the file. He fished into Jeffrey's pocket and found a key ring. He tried every key on the heavy locked file. None fitted. He pulled out his own packet and went to work with them. He tried several combinations of metal strips before the lock

gave. The file was in complete disorder. He gave up on that.

Next, after replacing the key ring, he found numbers in Jeffrey's wallet which might be the combination to the safe. He tried them. They were. He opened the door. The safe had been cleaned out save for a couple of newspaper clippings and a torn letterhead which said only:

... INVESTMENT CORPORATION

He shoved these meager clues into his coat pocket, closed the safe as Kendal came back into the den.

"I've told Mrs. Jeffrey and sent for the doctor," Kendal said.

"Good. Now call Hargis. This is inside the city limits, Harry—his territory. I'll meet you outside the house."

Kendal departed. Fowler went back into the den. He relocked the window and recaught the screen hook. He went out and around the house, bent over, and examined the footprints for a second time. There was no use trying to make a moulage, he decided, as one print canceled out the other. He noticed several other, shallower prints, under his light, also of no value.

He returned to the porch. Kendal came out and joined him.

"Did you lock up?" he asked.

"I left everything except the den door just as I found it," Fowler said. "How's about walking back to town?"

"Sure. Dan, I don't think you go for the suicide theory."

Fowler smiled grimly. "I'm afraid not, Larry. Let's put it together from the beginning. Jason Jeffrey wasn't shot on the premises. There are two indications of that. One is that the footprints outside the window showed that a heavy burden was carried and lifted into that window. Another is that more blood would run out of a rat than was underneath Jeffrey's head. He'd have bled much more freely if he'd shot himself at the desk. The truth is, Larry, he was tortured, too."

"How do you know that?"

"I'm quite sure that any guy who planned to bump himself off wouldn't run a series of painful experiments on himself. He wouldn't hit himself in the eye, hit himself in the jaw, drive wedges under his fingernails and then burn himself on the chest with a cigar just to

get himself in the mood."

"Hardly, Dan."

"What I think happened was that Jeffrey was picked up by members of a mob, taken some place, tortured, and then held while he was forced to grip the gun and shoot himself. Then he was brought to his home. The lack of blood would indicate that."

"But the shot?"

"Anyone could fire a gun out a window."

"I get it. What did you ask Mrs. Jeffrey about air-conditioning for?"

"That was my first clue. Every window in that house was open except the one in the den. It was a hot night. The den window should have been opened, too, unless air-conditioned. I soon got the idea that it had been deliberately locked from the outside to lead anybody who checked up to believe that nobody could have killed Jeffrey but himself. By the way, what did you tell Hargis?"

"That we'd found door and window locked after a shot had been heard and we thought Jeffrey must've killed himself."

"Very good. Now that minor mystery will keep 'em occupied and out of our hair."

Fowler and Kendal turned a corner onto Third street. Ahead of them a taxi was parked.

"I think I'll stop in at the Silver Dollar," Fowler said, as he hurried forward.

They got into the cab, rode well out to county territory. The driver stopped at a Colonial type mansion.

FOWLER and Kendal went in through the ornate glass doors, found that the crowd had thinned, and that dealers were pulling rubberized sheets over some of the tables.

"I want to see the manager," Fowler said to one of the ferret-eyed men.

The fellow thumbed and Fowler saw a short, stocky, rosy-cheeked man standing alone and glum. He and Kendal went up to him. They introduced themselves. The manager gave his name as Grogan and his face clouded even more when he realized he was facing two of the F.B.I.'s crack operatives.

"The word's going around that your wheel is wired and your dice are either shaved or balanced."

The manager, Grogan, gave them a

thin, humorless grin.

"That's what that fat slob, Nighthoff, tried to tell us. What's it to you guys?"

"Nothing official," Fowler said, placatingly. "The F.B.I. hasn't any direct interest in your gambling operations."

The unhappy fat man crooked a finger at them.

"Come here," he said

A croupier was just lifting the heavy, balanced roulette wheel from its ball-bearing socket. The socket was set in plate glass. By looking down from above and up from below it was apparent to a child that it would be impossible to wire such a device.

"The wheel's wood, and wood doesn't react to magnets," he said. "Now, I want you to see something else. Follow me."

He led them into his office, opened a safe and removed a sealed box. He broke the seals, lifted out oblong packages, broke one open. Two dice were revealed. He put them against a light first to show that they were transparent then tested them on a micrometer.

"We change 'em every twelve hours, put new ones in the game," he said. "That's because they cloud up after use and the customers want 'em clear."

"You could still shave 'em on one or two sides to make certain points," Kendal suggested.

"Yeah? Think, G-man—players are all around the table, betting on the player winning, on craps, the field, sixes and eights, points the hard way. They're betting for and against the house. What the devil good would it do us to tamper with the dice? Guys from the outside try to come in with phonys because they'll roll to certain points, so we have to watch everybody. But us—if we fixed 'em we'd lose on one thing and win on another just the same, and what good would that do us?"

Fowler sighed. "I get the idea," he said. He eyed the sad-looking man. "Then how did Jason Jeffrey lose fifty grand in here tonight?"

Grogan's laugh was hard. "I told Nighthoff this, too. I haven't seen Jason Jeffrey in here for a month."

Fowler thanked Grogan and left the place, wishing that he could see Sally Vane for a change. He wondered where Sally was, and how she was doing, trailing the girl named Vardis.

Right about then, Sally was having her own troubles, and at the moment a

large part of them was Vardis.

After a long, tortuous trek through miles of desert, during which Sally attempted to first question and then gain the confidence of the straggling woman who was her prisoner, she got no place. Vardis Lamont parried question after question with rapierlike skill in spite of her fatigue.

At first, Sally thought Vardis Lamont would break down under the physical grind of sharp rocks which bruised her thinly soled feet, thirst, and a general aching weariness as well as obvious mental strain. But Vardis wasn't talking.

After a walk lasting nearly two hours, which led through gulleys and washes, Sally made the highway with her prisoner. She looked down at herself under the headlight glare of cars which speeded by unheeding in spite of her waving hand. Her clothes were torn, her nylons were ruined, her oxfords were dusty and scuffed. There were splotches of oil on her coat. Vardis Lamont was in even worse condition. Her expensive fur wrap was gone, her sheer evening dress hung in shreds, her hair was matted from the water-soaking which Sally had given her. No wonder nobody would stop. They were decidedly unattractive.

Then, at last, a driver did—a shadowy man behind the wheel of a sleek, expensive cabriolet. Sally hurriedly identified herself as Mary Barry, and asked to be taken to the Rangeland Hotel in Las Verdes. The man eyed her closely as she spoke. Then he looked at Vardis as if he knew her. Vardis stared at him, started, but recovered.

"What happened?" he asked, with far more than casual interest, Sally decided.

"We went out with the wrong fellows," she replied, "and it was a hard fight and a long walk back."

VARDIS staggered suddenly and would have fallen if Sally had not caught her. The girl looked wretched. Sally helped her, and the man got out and assisted. They finally lifted her into the car. She collapsed in the corner of the rear seat. Sally got in beside her, ostensibly to aid her, but in reality to cover the tall, lean-faced driver from behind.

The man was strangely silent as they reached the edge of Las Verdes, where the road split, one arm being the regular highway and the other a truck route through a darkened section of the city. He turned his wheel, took the truck route.

"This is not the way to the Rangeland Hotel!" Sally snapped.

"I know it."

Sally Vane pressed the muzzle of her gun against the back of his neck.

"Take it easy, lady!"

"Get back on the right road."

"That's what a guy gets for trying to help. I was going to take you to a doctor friend of mine. That girl—she needs medical attention immediately."

"I'll get it, thank you!" Sally snapped.

The driver, wincing under her tone and the cold metal, turned the car, drove it back onto the transcontinental artery. He made the rest of the trip as if stunned to silence, drew up in front of the hotel. Sally shook Vardis to life, got her out of the car. Vardis swayed on the sidewalk. Sally still held her gun.

"You ought to get that girl to a hospital," the driver protested desperately. "You've got to do something for her."

"I'll take care of her—and thanks for the ride, not including the detour."

The tall, big-boned blond man grinned with thin lips.

[Turn page]

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign Of Tired Kidneys

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of

pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. **Get Doan's Pills.**

Adv.

"Skip it, sister."

He seemed in a hurry to go. He raced his engine. When he was at a safe distance, Sally put her arm around Vardis and got into the lobby as quickly as she could.

She shook her charge and demanded:

"You know that man. Who is he?"

Vardis stared at her blankly, stopped dead in her tracks.

"Honest—John Farmer," she mumbled.

She rocked, and would have fallen if Sally had not held her upright. A night bellhop ran across the deserted lobby to them.

"Help, ma'am?"

"Yes. Get me the key to Four-o-nine, then come back and help me with my friend, please."

The bellhop, bug-eyed, his lips ready to bubble with questions, got the pair into the elevator. Twice, Vardis seemed to lose consciousness, and each time they were forced to seat her and allow her to rest. Sally heard a buzz on the switchboard once. The night clerk, who had been eyeing them curiously, answered and mumbled something. Then he hung up.

The battered cavalcade finally reached the elevator, which creaked to the fourth floor. It was a job getting Vardis out of it. Sally was sure that they would never make it to her room. But after what seemed ages, they did. The bellhop unlocked the door and opened it.

"Call a doctor at once, please," Sally told him, after she'd found a tip in a coin purse which she carried for emergencies.

"You bet, miss." The bellhop left.

CHAPTER IX

Hard to Hold



SALLY VANE had an uncanny feeling that someone was in the room. She lowered Vardis onto the bed, her free hand clutching the .25 automatic. She stepped back, flung the closet wide, found no one there. She opened the bathroom door, with the same result. She peered up and down the hall,

and saw no one.

She still had a vague feeling that someone had been in the room recently, and the uncanny sensation frightened her. She went to the window and looked out, but could see nothing except the neon glare coming up from Kearney Street.

She must reach Dan Fowler immediately, turn this girl over to him.

Sally bent over the reclining form. Vardis Lamont was mumbling in some foreign language. Sally bent closer and listened. She knew enough German to recognize the language, but could not catch the words Vardis spoke. She took Vardis' pulse, pushed back her eyelids, pinched her, but got no reaction of any kind. The girl was really unconscious, not feigning.

Sally darted to the telephone, lifted the instrument. It had an ominous, dead sound. She moved the buttons in the base up and down. Nothing happened. She ran her hand down the wire from the instrument to the box, could feel no break. Then she found it below the wall box—a clean cut. Terror struck at her heart.

She went to the window quickly, found that it was locked.

Tiptoeing to the door, she took out the key, went outside, closed and locked it. Then she dashed to the elevator. The bellhop was operating it.

"I called the doctor, Miss," he said. "He'll be here pretty soon."

"Thanks."

As she rode downward she realized that her true identity was known to someone. How? Then she remembered one way it might have leaked out. In hiring a car she had had to produce her real credentials for the garage man. The car now, as far as she knew, might still be parked somewhere on the shores of Mojave Lake. That man was out there, somewhere, too—tied in the boat. She had to get Dan Fowler!

Darting from the elevator into the telephone booth, she asked the night clerk to get her the Las Verdes Hotel. A sleepy voice answered. She asked for Fowler, heard a plug in and several buzzes. His room was being rung all right. Why didn't he answer?

Her world stood still as she waited. She had to get back to Vardis Lamont! The doctor would come.

"Mr. Fowler isn't in his room," the

clerk finally said.

"Do you have a Larry Kendal?"

Sally tapped her foot nervously as the same routine followed, with the same answer.

"Have them call Mary Barry at the Rangeland the minute they come in," she said quickly.

"Yes, ma'am."

As she replaced the instrument, she felt suddenly weary and sick. She went to the desk, reported to the clerk that her telephone had been tampered with. The clerk eyed her incredulously.

"I'll have it seen to in the morning," he said. "There's nothing we can do tonight."

"Very well. Have there been any calls for me—Mary Barry?"

"Nothing." He scratched his head with his pencil. "No— Let me see—" His brain seemed to move so slowly that Sally wanted to shake him. "Oh, yes. Somebody called to ask what room you were in."

"When I was bringing in—that girl?" asked Sally, playing a hunch.

"That's right. They just asked what room you were in and hung up."

"Thanks. And when the doctor comes in, please send him up to my room. Don't waste a minute."

"I won't, miss."

The bellhop was waiting at the elevator, still wide-eyed at the sight of a disheveled girl in torn clothing racing through the hotel at such an unearthly hour. He let her out at her floor. She hurried to her room, unlocked the door.

Vardis Lamont no longer lay on the bed. Sally, a shock of fright sending her blood pounding, looked in the closet and the bathroom. The girl was gone!

Sally suddenly realized she wouldn't need the doctor after all. Poor fellow—all this trouble for nothing! The whole nightmare seemed suddenly funny. She laughed almost hysterically. What next?

SHE went to the door and examined the lock. It was of standard type, could have been opened easily with a passkey. Walking over to the window, she was startled to find that it had been unlocked. She raised it, looked downward. There was a narrow ledge three feet below, running some five feet to a fire-escape. Sally knew that she could walk that ledge—but could a girl who

was in Vardis Lamont's condition?

Still, Vardis could have regained possession of her senses. Inspired by fear or fired by determination to flee, she might have made it. Sally had known people to accomplish seemingly impossible exploits under such circumstances.

Vardis Lamont could have left under two conditions—either out the window, under her own power, or she could have been abducted.

Sally went to her suitcase, opened a small package, poured a quantity of a light powder onto the palm of her hand, then blew it against the frame of the window around the catch. The powder clung to a maze of loops and whorls, brought them out clearly. The prints were not Sally's—she knew her own. But they were small, narrow, tapered fingers, those of a woman.

Dan Fowler had told her to pick up a girl named Vardis and stay with her. She would do that or die in the attempt. As quickly as she could, she changed her torn, stained clothing, repaired her makeup and combed her hair. As she worked with feverish speed she tried to decide where she would go under the circumstances in which Vardis Lamont had found herself.

The most logical answer was home. . . .

Sally Vane told her nonplussed driver to park his taxi in a hollow beneath the shelter of a cottonwood tree about two hundred yards from Vardis Lamont's isolated ranch home. To silence the driver's complaints about pulling off the main road and his comments on "this screwy business" she slipped a bill of large denomination in his hand and told him to wait an hour. If she failed to return then, he was to report to Dan Fowler and Larry Kendal at the Las Verdes Hotel and bring them out to the Lamont house.

As she walked as silently as a wraith toward the cottonwood and tamarack-sheltered house, low under its tiled roof, she gripped the .25 in the pocket of her trim navy blue suit. She was scarcely to be seen in this well-chosen dark costume.

In another pocket she carried the small, flat kit filled with instruments. Fowler had painstakingly taught her to use them, until practically nothing now in the nature of a lock could withstand the skill of her agile fingers.

At first she used the trees for protection as she crossed the big yard but finally darted into the open, across the lawn and onto the front porch. As she worked forward, she noticed that the house was as dark and silent as a tomb. An eerie, before-dawn wind rustled through the trees, making her think of whispering. The place seemed desolate, forbidding, untenanted, and yet—

Sally's hand reached the knob on the front door and turned it. It was locked. She looked around, thinking she heard a human sound behind her, but it was only the wind talking to the trees. Then she ran on her toes along the wide porch to the west end of the house.

Working in and out among the heavy shrubs she tried window after window and finally the back door. All were secured.

"Looks like I've got to go to work," she told herself, clamping her jaws to keep her teeth from chattering, and blaming this symptom on the suddenly cool breeze.

She found what she considered a likely window, unhooked the screen with her bent wire. Forcing a blade between the sashes of a double-hung window she opened it and pulled herself inside.

She looked around, not daring to use her flat flashlight.

As her eyes became accustomed to what amounted to a blackout and her nose picked up the exotic fragrance of Vardis Lamont's perfume she realized she was in the singer's bedroom.

She moved slowly, her hands groping knee high ahead of her so she would not slam into anything. She reached a door into a corridor, paused to listen. Small, ethereal sounds reached her, like the distant noise of mice. Accompanying them were a series of irregular clicks. She darted down the heavily carpeted hall, found herself looking into an open-doored room.

A circle of light centered on a wall safe in what Sally judged to be a small library. A picture had been shoved back. In the center of the bright circle a woman's hand made shadowgraphs, like those made by a child using a light to make grotesque figures on a wall.

THE hands belonged to only one woman, Vardis Lamont, limned in the backlash of the ray. Sally's hand clutched her automatic. Here was where

the clicking sounds came from. She raised the gun, held it steadily, so great was her suspense as she heard the fall of the tumblers.

The hands swung the door of the safe open.

Sally Vane stepped into the room.

"Up with them, Vardis Lamont!" she snapped, her voice low.

The girl spun around, her cry hanging in the air, a tragic exclamation of shock and frustration.

Sally advanced on her as the flashlight fell from her hand. It made a long diamond on the rich carpet.

Sally looked into the safe—and gasped!

There was a small stone, smooth, elongated, and it lay there like a gem. Vardis reached for it. Sally's hand was too quick. She slipped it into her pocket. There was an envelope filled with papers, too. Sally grabbed Vardis' wrist as the singer went for it, and it was Sally who shoved it into her pocket.

"This time," Sally said, "you're not getting away."

"You're so clever, my dear!"

Without moving, Vardis Lamont reached for a heavy figurine on a low bookcase beside her, and beneath Venetian blinds. Sally was there first. She knocked it away.

"One more move from you," Sally told her, "and I'm going to shoot you. My patience is gone."

She reached up and with a mighty tug, pulled down the cords which adjusted the blinds. The whole thing pulled loose, but Sally got the length of cord she wanted. She bound the girl's wrists, then bound her feet with another section. She stuffed her own handkerchief in the girl's mouth and fastened it in place with a torn section of drape.

This had taken quite some time.

Suddenly she became aware of another presence. Perhaps it was the click of the lock on the front door. Perhaps it was a faint breath of air stirring. Perhaps it was the mice sounds again. She stiffened.

Before her, next to the safe, was a desk. On that rested a telephone. She pulled it to the floor and then, slowly and deliberately, muffling the sound with her hand, she dialed "zero."

"Number, please?" she heard.

The sound of a human being was at hand. A silent human who, through very

quietude, gave itself away.

"Get out of Vardis Lamont's house or I'll call the police!" Sally shouted quickly.

"Shut up!"

The words were spoken in a masculine voice. A strange, unfamiliar voice—or had she heard it before?

"Don't try to murder me!" she snapped. "The police'll be wised!"

"The cops? I'm laughing!"

"The sheriff knows. He'll be told. He'll come out and save me!"

"Cut the melodrama. You're covered!"

Sally took aim at the sound of the voice, pressed the trigger of the little automatic. In the stark silence of the room the gun boomed like a cannon. She heard breath exhaust and the catspaw sound of retreating feet.

"Stand in that door again," she said coldly, wondering at the brittleness of her own voice, "and I'll kill you!"

Sweat wet her hands—fear sweat—and her forehead felt cold and hot in turn. A shot crashed within two inches of her head, directly behind her. She let her own weapon speak at the blast. Plaster fell. Silence again.

Seconds had ticked into minutes. Here were more minutes. She knew now that sooner or later lead would pour into her or into Vardis Lamont. This was stretching the string of life to the end.

There was the sound of movement.

"Come out of there, you witch, or I'll drill you!" was the next command.

She reached over, jammed Vardis Lamont's head to the floor and ducked herself. The brittle rattle and crash of glass followed the ochre blast.

"Give me those papers!"

CHAPTER X

Pay for Murder?



OUT of her weakness, brought on by the bitter and grueling hours that lay behind her, Sally found strength. The operator must have heard her message a long time ago. She must have done something about it.

"Stand back!"

The gun roared again. She fired at its penciled streak. The man

who had been there wasn't. Seconds ticked into minutes, minutes into hours, hours into days. Again the encroachment of silent sound, the advance of death on cat's paws.

"Give me—"

The muzzle of Sally's little pistol up-ended as if leaping in fright. She rolled as she shot. Hot metal answered. Plaster dropped on the floor. Then, far in the distance, she heard the wail of a siren.

"The fools!" Sally exploded inside herself. "They're tipping the killer they're coming!"

In her anger she cut loose with the rest of her lead, hoping a wild shot would stop the gunman who lurked in the darkness. The bullets splattered vainly. Feet stole fast along the carpet. She felt the air stir and heard a door click, leaped to her feet and started after the sound.

She was heading toward the back door when she heard the scraping of feet on the front porch, whirled, raced in that direction. She plunged into the heavy figure of Nighthoff.

"What th' thunderation!" the sheriff gasped, swinging his flashlight into her face. "Who're you?"

"Never mind!" Sally snapped. "Get after him! He went out the back way!"

"Who?"

Sally slumped hopelessly.

"The gunman, the man I shot it out with."

Two men loomed behind Nighthoff in the darkness. He turned to them.

"Scout around out back," he said, "while I find out what this is all about." He turned to a third man. "You, Dakin, see what's the matter with th' lights."

As the men groped out, Sally turned the full force of her wrath on Nighthoff.

"Of all the idiotic things—using that siren! There are no cross streets. You ought to put a bell around your neck, too."

"Say, just who are you, anyway?" the sheriff growled.

At this point the lights came on.

"A friend of Dan Fowler's," Sally said in a low voice.

"Oh, I get it."

"And look. I suppose you're the local sheriff, so let's get going. The gunman's somewhere on the desert unless he had a car staked out. You might check up on my taxicab driver. He's got his car

under a tree about a hundred yards from here. When you get through with that, I've a prisoner for you."

"Say, not so fast."

The deputy named Dakin returned. "Somebody pulled the master switch," he said.

"Go look for a taxi driver and bring him in," Nighthoff told him.

"You bet." Dakin went out again.

"Where's the prisoner?" Nighthoff asked Sally.

"In the library," she told him.

Sally reached into her pocket, produced an envelope—the one she had taken from Vardis Lamont—and opened it. The printing on the small paper she unfolded was in German. She studied it carefully, puzzling over the words, made out the fact that it was a birth certificate. The name was "Natalie Von Ulm." The place of birth was Zell, which she recalled was in the southern part of Germany.

The door behind Sally opened. She whirled. Larry Kendal, worry lining his face, moved swiftly toward her.

"Larry!" she exclaimed. "Thank heavens!"

"What's up?" he demanded. "We got a flash from Chief Hargis."

Sally told him what had happened in swift, tight sentences.

"Let's see the girl—this Vardis Lamont," Kendal said.

"Not so fast." Sally showed him the birth certificate. "I've a hunch," she said. "I want to try it."

She explained her plan to Kendal and Nighthoff.

THE three walked into the library. Sally bent, untied the girl's bonds. Kendal and Nighthoff watched. Sally got the girl to her feet in such a position that she was half turned away from the G-man.

"Natalie!" Kendal's voice cracked like a shot. The girl's head swung at him, her eyes wide.

"So you're Natalie Von Ulm!" Sally exclaimed.

Dakin stuck his head in the door.

"No driver or cab within a quarter of a mile of here," he said.

"Okay," growled Nighthoff.

Sally looked at the sheriff. "We'll hold this girl in the county jail," she said, "and I want a special guard for her. I think her life is in danger."

"What charge?" he asked.

"Suspicion of illegal entry into the country. Notify Immigration."

"Yes, ma'am," the sheriff said meekly.

The face of Vardis Lamont, alias Natalie Von Ulm, went white.

"Nobody," said Sally musingly, with womanly intuition, "would inflict a name like Vardis Lamont on a defenseless child—unless they lived in Hollywood. . . ."

In a jeep commandeered from the Army Air Forces field a few miles outside Las Verdes, Sally Vane, Larry Kendal, and Dan Fowler bounced across the night-drenched wasteland toward Mojave Lake. Dawn was paling the eastern sky as they reached the desolate shore. As the light increased, Sally spotted the boat, anchored as she had left it.

As Larry Kendal drove the powerful little car toward it, Fowler fumbled with the small stone Sally had given him, wondering why anyone would keep such an object in a safe. What value did it have?

Kendal directed the bumping, sturdy little car to the side of the small boat. The trio rose and looked into it. The man who would have murdered both Natalie Von Ulm and Sally was lying beneath the wheel in almost the exact spot where he had fallen.

He was conscious. His eyes were angry. Kendal and Fowler untied him while Sally looked on.

"The deputy sheriffs didn't get their man at the Lamont place," Fowler said, "but we've at least got this fellow."

"Too bad Nighthoff wasn't here with his siren," Sally remarked wearily. "This one probably would have been scared overboard."

Fowler grinned at her.

Kendal pulled the gag from the captive's mouth.

"Nice going," he said. "Shows you what you get when you pick on the wrong woman."

"I ain't talkin'," the fellow said.

The reply was choked by mouth dryness, and he ran his tongue around his lips. Kendal pulled him to his feet and Fowler felt through his pockets. The G-man produced a bunch of keys, a wallet, some small change. He looked into the wallet. His eyes popped. He pulled out a stack of one-hundred-dollar bills. He gave a low whistle as he counted them. There were twenty.

"Thousand dollars a head, eh?" he said.

"I ain't talkin'," the man repeated.

Fowler shoved the bills into his pocket, noting how crisp and new they were. Fresh off the presses of the Bureau of Printing and Engraving. The man wasn't so crisp, though. He looked as if he had slept just where he had lain, and in clothes that were none too neat and clean to begin with.

Fowler examined the papers in the wallet. Driver's license and Social Security card bore the name: "Fred Fink."

"Well, Mr. Fink," said Fowler, "you've got a date at the county jail—charge, attempted murder. We'd offer you the luxury of a Federal cell but, unfortunately, there isn't one in Las Verdes."

"You ain't gettin' nothin' out of me." The voice was harsh and sullen.

Fred Fink apparently meant what he said. Booked at the county jail he wouldn't talk. As far as the charge against him was concerned, he didn't have to do so. Both Natalie Von Ulm and Sally Vane could testify to exactly what he had intended to do. But the information that Fowler and Kendal so vitally needed—who his accomplices were, and who had paid him—was not forthcoming.

"He'll talk!" Nighthoff promised. "I'll make him talk!"

The G-men took this with a grain of salt. Fowler urged Sally to go to the Rangeland Hotel and get a few hours rest, but Sally refused the elegance of that hostelry.

"I've a better idea," she said. "I want to be locked up with Natalie Von Ulm. Maybe she'll give us a break in the case. I'm quite sure she doesn't know yet who I am or what I'm after."

IN SPITE of both Fowler's and Kendal's pleas she was obdurate, and they left her at the jail, being escorted by a turnkey to Natalie's cell.

As they walked back to the Las Verdes Hotel, Kendal said:

"Not that it means anything, but—"

He reached into his hip pocket, withdrew his wallet, pulled a crisp new one-hundred-dollar bill from it, and handed it to his companion.

"Federal Reserve note," Fowler said. "Same as the twenty Fred Fink had. Where'd you get it?"

"Paid ten ten-dollar bills for it when I went over to investigate the clean-out of the Gold Mine. Five men did it, but they weren't the same five who knocked over the Alamo. I checked dealers, croupiers, floormen and even shills, and the descriptions don't tally at all. But the method does. Backed by all the dough in the world, the boys simply doubled and tripled their bets until they hit. No place in Las Verdes has enough dough to buck a deal like that."

Fowler's eyes narrowed. "What kind of money did they show?"

"One-hundred-dollar bills. Same as this one. They had hundreds of 'em."

"H'm. Look, Larry—are you sure you didn't pay ten good ten dollar bills for a phony?"

Larry laughed. "Don't be like that. I had the cashier check it before I bought it. That guy's been in the racket for twenty-five years. He says the bill is absolutely okay. He looked it over from every angle. He says he's never been fooled. He told me there isn't such a thing as a perfect counterfeit, and that he can spot one a mile away. So that's out."

"Okay, Larry—only I don't want you to get stuck. That's a hard thing to get by with on an F.B.I. expense account."

The men turned into the hotel and went across the lobby to get their keys.

"Telegram for you, Mr. Fowler," the night clerk said, and passed it over to him. He ripped the envelope and glanced over it.

"Hey, Larry!" he exclaimed. "Get a load of this. It's from the technical laboratory."

They read the message together.

CLOTHING SUBMITTED ABOUT SIX YEARS OLD. CUT AND TAILORING DEFINITELY FOREIGN, PROBABLY GERMAN OR SWISS. SAMPLES OF GOODS SHOW MANUFACTURED IN GERMANY AND SOLD GENERALLY THERE. TEST OF VACUUM FINDINGS SHOWS ALKALI DUST, TRACES IRON PYRITES, QUARTZ DUST, FINE STEEL SHAVINGS. INDICATES MAN MAY HAVE BEEN MINER, OR INVOLVED IN INDUSTRIAL ENTERPRISE. GRIMES.

"I'm playing a hunch, Larry," Fowler said. "Get Jason Jeffrey's clothes. Go over them with a vacuum cleaner and take the dust from them to a mine chemist. Find out the chemical and mineral composition of it."

"Okay, Dan."

Fowler reached for the ringing telephone.

"Yes?" he asked. "This is Fowler. What's that? Okay. I hope you're right." He replaced the instrument and turned to Kendal. "Nighthoff's picked up Honest John Farmer. He's booking him at the county jail right now. Wants to see me. Says he has enough evidence to take the case to the D.A."

Kendal rubbed his chin reflectively. A sudden fusillade of shots caused him to tighten his hand.

"Thirty-eights!" Fowler's words were clipped. "Let's go!"

CHAPTER XI

Fresh Clues



RAPIDLY Dan Fowler and Larry Kendal reached the county jail on the second floor of the building. They found it guarded by a lone deputy who was both shaken and hang-dog.

"What's happened?" Fowler snapped.

"Honest John—he got away!" the deputy blurted. He pointed his hand at his empty holster. "Grabbed my gun while Nighthoff and me was booking him, socked Nighthoff and covered me. Went back into the jail, put his gun on the jailer, and got that Vardis Lamont, or Natalie Von Ulm."

Fowler stiffened. "Where's Mary Barry, the blonde?"

Sally, coming out of the door leading to the cell block, answered for herself.

"Safe and sound."

"Great!"

"I'm afraid Honest John works fast—and gets what he wants," she lamented.

"He didn't take Fred Fink?"

"No."

"Maybe he didn't have time," suggested Kendal.

"How'd he get away?" Fowler asked the crestfallen deputy.

"His own car. Me and Nighthoff picked him up when he was in it, and we drove him in. Locked it up. He musta had an extra set of keys." He coughed. "He sure cleared out. His cabriolet's the fastest job in the county. Nighthoff'll

never catch him."

Fowler whirled on Kendal.

"Call the Alamo Club!" he ordered. "Charter the speediest plane they have. Then get those clothes to the chemist."

"You bet."

Fowler turned to Sally. "Learn anything?"

"Only that it was Honest John Farmer who hijacked her from my room at the hotel, took her home because she wouldn't go to a hospital."

"Then it could have been Farmer who shot it out with you at her house."

"It could have been."

"You pick up her trail, and if you have any luck report to Larry. Try her friends. Work the telephones to the checking stations on the main highways. Your car has vanished—probably been dumped in the lake. There's another in front of the Rangeland. Keys are in the glove compartment."

"Thanks, Dan."

Fowler raced down the stairs and out of the County Building, hailed a taxicab and, with the aid of his badge and a bill, got to the Alamo Club faster than any human had probably ever made it before. The plane was ready, its engines warming—a twin-engined Cessna. Fowler climbed in, described Farmer's long, low distinctive cabriolet to the pilot.

"I know the car," the pilot said.

"Cover every road in the county," Fowler told him. "We've got to find it!"

Once in the air, Dan Fowler began peering through the windshield. The pilot flew him at altitudes ranging from one hundred to two hundred feet, sometimes going down tree high to examine cars which looked something like "Honest John" Farmer's.

Fowler's hand in his pocket closed over some crisp paper. He fingered it absently and he gazed intently down the highway ahead of him, then became aware of what he was doing. Absent-mindedly he pulled the paper out.

It was the collection of money which he had taken from Fred Fink, the boatman Sally had captured. He had forgotten to turn it in when Fink was booked. He shoved it back into his pocket and continued to stare at the highway.

"I've got to go in and get some more gas," the pilot said three hours later.

Fowler shook his head sadly. "We've covered all the roads within a radius of fifty miles, haven't we?"

"Right."

"Then it's no go."

WHEN the pilot landed, Fowler commandeered one of the Alamo Club limousines and was driven back to Las Verdes. He went to the Las Verdes Hotel and found an urgent message from Sally, and called her at the Rangeland.

"I've got just one piece of news," Sally told him. "My hunch on Vardis Lamont, alias Natalie Von Ulm, entering the country illegally is right. Immigration just called. There's no record on her under either name."

"Thanks, darling," Fowler said. "See if you can't pick her up, so we'll have her to turn over to them."

Dan Fowler hung up, and thereafter was a very busy man. His first visit was to the State Investment Company, where he found Emmett Buck, the thin, balding, light-haired man, with the wispy mustache who had introduced himself as president of the Las Verdes Improvement Association when Fowler had barged in on the first conference.

"I'm secretary here," Buck said, in answer to Fowler's question.

"This firm handles real estate?"

Buck nodded, smiled weakly. "We handle just about all the private land in the State. Of course, you know that a large percentage of it is Government, but we can put the finger on any owned by individuals."

"Good." Fowler produced the torn letterhead which showed only the two words, "INVESTMENT COMPANY."

"That yours?" he asked.

"Right." Buck nodded.

"Let's go through your files and see what the letter which you wrote to Jason Jeffrey said."

Emmett Buck paled, but complied bravely. "Yes, indeed."

Fowler spent an hour with the timid man, going over maps of all kinds.

After that, he sought out the offices of Senator Vance McClain. He found the senator pacing up and down, running his hand through his mop of gray hair, dictating to his secretary.

"I'm very busy," the senator said aloofly when Fowler told him he wanted to talk to him. "Letters to my constituents, you know."

"Your constituents can wait, Senator," Fowler said.

McClain waved his secretary out. She

closed the door behind her.

"You're a very brash young man, Fowler," the senator told him, reddening. "I shall take this up with your Director."

Fowler's lips tightened into a cold grin. "I wish you would, Senator. I just wish you would. The Director can hardly wait for political interference. In fact, he thrives on it!"

"Very well, what do you want?"

"It seems, Senator, that you've been very interested in the private land surrounding the new Bagdad Dam which you've championed. Running true to political form. Buying the land, then pushing a dam through to make millions."

"That's a dastardly lie!"

"Just a minute, Senator. You know what goes on in this State. Mostly saloons, night clubs, and gambling places. You know that saloons and gambling are barred from Government property, don't you?"

"Why—why, of course!"

"A man could make those millions I just mentioned by controlling all the private land near the dam. He could start a regular town—hotels, saloons, casinos, everything. He'd be the biggest shot in the southern part of the State. And frankly, Senator, you've just followed the beaten trail. Politicians have been doing it for years—buying up land and selling it to a city or a county or a state for a pet project, having some relative buy land in order to clean up, because it's a secret a railroad is going through, or that the place is wanted for anything from a schoolhouse to an airport."

Senator McClain went white. "I don't like your insinuations, Fowler. If you'll check the records, you'll find that any land I purchased came into my possession after the dam was assured."

"Correct, Senator. But several years ago Jason Jeffrey was your secretary, and it was Jason Jeffrey who bought the land, dirt cheap, and I don't mean to pun."

"I paid him a large price for it—"

"Unfortunately, the deeds don't show that. It could have been a mere formality. And if you want to carry the thing further, Jason Jeffrey is dead, remember."

"You mean—" the senator gasped.

"I mean that if it came out that you had bought that land for your own ends and then forced a dam through to make millions, your reputation wouldn't be

worth a plugged nickel. You'd be driven out of office, disgraced. Jason Jeffrey knew all that. He had a nice blackmail weapon over you."

THE senator sank into his chair.

"Don't be a fool, Fowler. Jason Jeffrey killed himself. Why would a man who could get unlimited funds kill himself over a gambling loss?"

"He didn't, Senator McClain. He was murdered."

Senator McClain pulled himself to his full height and took on his best senatorial manner, but his hands were shaking.

"But the newspapers stated it was suicide," he said.

"The newspapers are sometimes wrong, Senator."

McClain seemed to recover some of the fire which had made him famous.

"Preposterous, Fowler!" he exploded. "You can't come in here with a cock and bull story. You haven't a bit of evidence. Get out of my office and stay out!"

Fowler smiled grimly. "I'm going," he said. "But to paraphrase General MacArthur, I will return."

Outside, Fowler sought a telephone booth and called Larry Kendal. The room clerk gave him a number where Kendal could be reached.

"What's new?" Fowler asked when he got Larry on the wire.

"I'm at the chemist's. We've just run the tests. Jeffrey's shoes had alkali and blow sand ground into 'em. Trouser cuffs showed traces of iron pyrites. The suit had been cleaned recently. Apparently he'd only worn it once—the night he was killed. I checked with Mrs. Jeffrey. She said that was right. He'd got all dolled up to go somewhere just before dinner"

"Thanks."

Fowler's next stop was at the offices of the Bureau of Mines. He spent an interesting fifteen minutes asking questions of the manager.

After that he dropped into the Las Verdes National Bank and announced himself to James Moffitt, the president of the bank and of Moffitt Mines, Ltd. Moffitt saw him immediately. He was seated behind his desk, on which were stacked several large piles of bills of various denominations.

Fowler looked them over carefully. Then he eyed Moffitt.

"Wish I had some of that," he said, grinning. "Then I could stop dodging bullets and retire."

At the same time he thought of Sally Vane, a little cottage with a white fence around it, the things they'd always wanted—some day.

"It's nice stuff to have," Moffitt said. "I wish it were mine, too."

"With a bank and a mine," Fowler said, "you ought to have plenty. In fact, being president of a mining company, I thought maybe you'd be able to tell me something. Just what are iron pyrites?"

The stocky, square, dark-haired man smiled genially.

"Iron pyrites," he said, "are fool's gold. They shine like gold. But they have no value. They've tricked a lot of men. Why?"

"I was just wondering," Fowler said, almost absently. "I knew you could tell me."

"That's all right—glad to help you. Anything else?"

"No, that's all."

"Come in any time."

CHAPTER XII

The Low Cabriolet



IN THE lobby of the bank, Dan Fowler went to a teller's cage, fished into his pocket and pulled out one of the hundred-dollar-bills which had come from the boatman's wallet. He asked if the teller would exchange it for a worn one. With a puzzled expression the fellow took the bill, examined it carefully, put it in his cash drawer and handed him one which had seen plenty of service.

"Thanks," said the G-man, and walked away.

The teller looked after him with an expression which asked if Fowler were quite all there mentally.

Inspector Dan Fowler's next stop was at a jewelry store. He was thinking that jewelers must do a lot of business in Las Verdes with so many couples eloping from neighboring states, where several days must elapse between taking out a license and going before a preacher. Las

Verdes married more brides and bridegrooms than any other city of its size in America, and in a very few minutes.

The jeweler left his work at his bench and raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"Wedding ring?" he asked.

"Wish I could say so," the G-man replied. "What I'd like is to rent a jeweler's glass, one of those things you put in your eye."

The jeweler gazed at him speculatively at this peculiar request.

"Why, yes," he finally said. "I'll have to have a deposit, though."

Fowler fished out his wallet as the man went to get a little magnifying glass. He returned, held it toward the G-man. Fowler reached out, grabbed his hand, looking down at his left thumb. The nail was covered with countless tiny nicks. The jeweler pulled his hand away.

"Say—what is this?" he demanded, angrily. Fowler identified himself and explained that the markings had fascinated him.

"What makes 'em?" he asked.

"Oh," said the fellow, mollified. "That's from engraving. Wait a minute. I'll show you." He came back with a pointed instrument.

"This is my graver," he continued. "We engrave a lot of wedding rings, and it's delicate work, especially on this narrow, modern stuff, when there's an inscription of some kind. The gravers have to be sharp. Every engraver tests the sharpness of his graver by pushing the point against his thumbnail, like this." He illustrated. "If the graver's sharp enough to do the job, it pierces the nail enamel. If it isn't, it slides on top of it."

"Thanks," said Fowler.

"I'm doing a ring now," said the engraver. "Want to watch?"

Fowler said he did. He went behind the counter and peered over the jeweler's shoulder. It was then that he saw the stone.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"Burnishing stone. Rubs the burrs off the furrow made by the graver?"

"A stone like this?"

Fowler produced the one which he had been given by Sally, who had taken it from Natalie Von Ulm. The jeweler's eyes lighted.

"That's a good one!" he exclaimed.

"They're valuable. You know, one engraver has to like another mighty well before he'll even lend a stone. They get very attached to them. Where'd you get it?"

Fowler smiled. "Some day I'll tell you."

He paid a deposit on the little magnifying glass and hurried to his hotel. He went to the desk in front of the window in his room, removed the worn bill and one of the new, crisp ones and screwed the glass into his eye. He studied the two bills for half an hour, an hour, two hours.

Then suddenly he tensed all over.

In his studies of bank notes, which he had made in his own interest, coupled with several visits to the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, he had been told or had read again and again that there was no perfect counterfeit. For all of these two hours, as he had studied the engraving of Benjamin Franklin, of Independence Hall, he had been able to detect no flaw. Yet somehow he felt that there was something wrong with the new bills.

THEY had first showed up as being used by the raiding players. Fred
[Turn page]

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE

***F-N TEST?**



***The Famous
Finger Nail Test**

1 "It's F-N, the test for men!" Scratch your head—if you find dryness or loose dandruff you need Wildroot Cream-Oil. Buy the large economy size.

**YOUR HAIR CAN LOOK
LIKE THIS WITH NEW
WILDROOT
CREAM-OIL**

2 Only a little Wildroot Cream-Oil can do a big job for your hair. Keeps your hair well groomed all day long without a trace of that greasy, plastered down look! Get Wildroot Cream-Oil from your barber or toilet goods counter.



**CREAM-OIL CHARLIE
SAYS: "IT CONTAINS
LANOLIN!"**

**3 And TUNE IN:
2 NETWORK
SHOWS! "The
Adventures of
Sam Spade" Sun.
evenings, CBS
Network; "King
Cole Trio Time"
Sat. afternoons,
NBC Network.**



Fink had had twenty. There had been a crisp stack of them on the desk of James Moffitt when he had visited him in the bank. That pile had seemed to guarantee their authenticity. For if a teller, cashier, or any member of a bank staff accepts a counterfeit, it is charged to him. Phony money would never get by the bank employees and onto James Moffitt's desk.

But then he found it—that extra dot on the bell tower of Independence Hall. To make sure, he took both bills, went to the police laboratory, put the two bills under the comparison microscope. Only here was he sure that the original contained the almost infinitesimal speck that was lacking on the crisp new one. A single oversight in a million!

Still he wasn't absolutely sure. Prefix letter, serial number, geometrical border, portrait and name, overprinted treasury seal, face plate number, and all the other features were perfect, even under the comparison microscope.

This phase of the case wasn't his. The Secret Service handled counterfeiting. He put in a call to Los Angeles, asked for experts and was rewarded with the promise that they would be on the next plane to investigate.

After that he called the Bureau of Printing and Engraving and asked to speak to the director. He explained what he had found—what seemed to be an almost perfect counterfeit.

"That seems impossible," said the director. "You know, there are not more than twenty-five men in the world who could possibly turn out anything like that, even if they had the equipment. Most of them are in the United States, in the employ of the bureau."

"Can you get me a list?" asked Fowler.

"In a short time."

"Will you call me back?"

"Gladly, Fowler."

Fowler turned back to study the bills again. The telephone extension beside the desk he was using summoned his attention. He answered. It was Larry Kendal.

"Sally and I are at the checking station on the Bagdad Dam road," he said. "The fellow on duty says he's interested only in trucks, but that a car answering the description of Farmer's cabriolet went through here so fast he looked up and got a glimpse of it."

"Good. You and Sally keep after it.

Check in again in two hours."

Fowler hung up, thought a minute, and then dialed Senator McClain's office. There was some delay after he got the secretary, but McClain's gruff, belligerent voice finally came over.

"When you and Jason Jeffrey made that confidential mission to Europe did you have diplomatic immunity?" Inspector Fowler asked.

"We did," McClain said shortly.

"Where did you go?"

"That's a military secret."

"The war's over, Senator. I have other sources."

"Berne, Switzerland."

Before he could thank the angry legislator, the man had slammed up the receiver.

The next call was from Washington. The Director of the Bureau of Printing and Engraving had a list of names of engravers which, he said, might be capable of making as good a counterfeit as the G-Man had described. Fowler jotted them down and with each name his hopes did a nose dive.

"That's all," said the director, finally.

"That is, the only live ones."

"What do you mean by that?"

"There's one on the missing list. A little wizard who did Hitler's engraving during the Third Reich."

Fowler's hand tightened on the instrument.

"Who was he?" he demanded.

"Von Ulm—Vilhelm Johannes Von Ulm."

Fowler fought back his excitement. "What do you know about him?"

"Well, let's think. His original home was in Zell, in the southern part of Germany."

"Near Berne, Switzerland?"

"That's right. He was famous under the Hohenzollerns, even as a young man, before World War One. He worked right through the Von Hindenburg regime and did all the important state engraving until Hitler came in. Hitler hung onto him until a couple of years ago, then he vanished entirely."

"Thanks."

Fowler hung up. Well, at last he'd put part of the puzzle together. The little man first killed was Vilhelm Johannes Von Ulm, apparently a fugitive from the Hitler rule, one of the most skilled engravers in the world, and possibly the father of Natalie Von Ulm—surely re-

lated in some way.

Von Ulm, the master engraver. Plenty of one-hundred-dollar bills, crisp and new, almost perfect. Well, the Secret Service would have to answer that one.

LARRY KENDAL and Sally Vane continued onward along the Bagdad road until they reached a filling station, lonely on a sagebrushed slope. Kendal tooled the coupe under the wooden canopy which covered the gasoline pumps. A dirt trail swung off to the right, nothing more than a scar on the desert reaching out toward cobbled mountains at the edge of the flat valley.

The young attendant came out.

"Fill her up," Kendal said.

He got out of the car, watched the operation.

"Seen anything of a long, low cabriolet?" he asked.

The fellow's eyes widened and he whistled. "Seen it? It darned near kissed me."

"How come?"

"It was batting down from Las Verdes. Got here. I saw it coming and ducked. The big guy at the wheel braked, cut into the Lost Valley trail there. Only he didn't quite make it. Nearly took off the side of the station."

The attendant finished filling the tank, hung up the hose.

"C'mere," he said. "I'll show you how close."

Kendal followed him to the side of the faded frame building. He saw the fresh tracks in the blow sand, clear and sharp. He memorized the design.

"Did he stop?" he asked.

"For a second, to straighten out, then kept right on hightailing right up the trail." The attendant pointed.

"What's up there?" Kendal asked.

"Road dead-ends in Lost Valley. Goes through Mesquite Gap first."

"And what else?"

"Nothing. Only thing near it is the Moffitt mine. There's some old mines beyond, but that's the only one they're working."

Kendal's mind clicked at mention of the name.

"That'll be two-fifty-three," said the attendant, looking at the pump. "How's your oil and water? Clean your windshield?"

"Everything's okay, thanks."

Kendal paid him, crawled back behind

the wheel, looked at Sally as he swung into the rutted, brush-lined trail.

"Hear what he said?" Sally nodded.

CHAPTER XIII

Paying Mine



GRIMLY bare, steep mountains lay ahead as the car bumped onward. Soon it began to twist like a snake and climb. Sally, peering ahead, pointed. High above the road, up a steep, jagged slope was a shed of galvanized iron.

"That must be it,"

she said.

Kendal looked. "Yep," he replied. Then, as the coupe drew nearer: "There's Farmer's car!"

Close against the side of the slope, protected from sight by a natural grotto, was the long, low car. Kendal drove beside it, parked, got out. He raised the hood of the sleek vehicle, took off the distributor head and removed the rotor. He put it in his pocket.

"His keys won't do him any good if he tries a getaway this time," Kendal told Sally.

He pulled out his .38, pumped a shell into the barrel, and pointed to a path up the mountain. Sally brought out her own .25 and checked it.

"You follow me," Kendal said. "Keep well back. If they get me, move in on 'em."

He started up the path, which zigzagged along the slope. From this point the galvanized building at the head of the shaft could not be seen. Soon Kendal found himself in a narrow defile. He rounded a sharp turn, his gun ready.

All he felt was a heavy, wrenching pain as a man leaped down on him, and he pitched forward. At the same time two more men hurtled around the sharp curve. Before he could get his gun up a heavy foot crunched on his wrist and the weapon was jerked from his hand.

Then the man who had leaped on his shoulders got up. Kendal was pulled to his feet. He managed to look behind, hoping for help from Sally, and saw her coming. A man had both her arms pinned back of her, was shoving her along.

"Just two of 'em, Jake," announced the man who held Sally. He had scratches on his face. "One wildcat's enough."

Sally looked at Jake, recognized him as the leader of the three men on the shore who had bound her and Natalie Von Ulm and had turned them over to Fred Fink, the boatman. She recognized the other two. They were holding guns on Kendal.

"Nice reception," drawled Kendal.

He got no answer.

"How'd you know we were coming?" he asked Jake.

"Black lights," the big thug replied. "One east and one west. If you go through one, a red light flashes along the shaft and in the building at the shaft head. If you go through both, the red light goes out and we know you ain't stopped. Neat, eh?"

"Don't talk too much, Jake," said one of the men Sally had recognized.

"It don't matter to them now. Let's get goin'."

The men prodded their captives up the trail a short distance to the sheet-iron building, pushed them inside. Kendal looked around. He saw the narrow gauge track leading into the mine with the ore car on it. There were at least five more men waiting, guns in their hands.

"Lash 'em up!" snapped Jake. "We got no time to lose."

Kendal looked at Sally as their wrists and feet were bound. Her face was white and strained and grim, but there was no fear in it. Then they were gagged.

When the job was finished, two men picked up the G-man and dropped him into the ore car. A third man dumped Sally in on top of him. The car rocked and creaked lugubriously down the tracks, a melancholy death dirge, Kendal thought. He had a terrible feeling of finality.

The car stopped at a side shaft.

"Put 'em in!" Jake commanded. Sally was carried into the pitch dark shaft first and dumped on the dusty rock floor. She sensed the presence of others—an eerie feeling—but she could see nothing. Kendal was brought in then, and uncere- moniously and painfully dropped.

"How's about blastin' 'em in now, Jake?" asked one of the thugs.

"Can't." Jake replied. "Got to wait for the boss."

A shudder went through Larry Kendal's aching body. Blast 'em in! That

meant only one thing. They were to be entombed in the side shaft. Closed in for eternity. And who was the boss?

He gingerly moved his body around so he could look out the dim shaft mouth. Two men were standing guard. The others were turning back toward the head of the main shaft. . . .

DAN FOWLER, returning from Keene, the county seat of Bagdad, raced up the Bagdad road toward Las Verdes. His evidence was now complete, he reflected. He knew the killer. Deeds recorded at the courthouse there had given him the final pay-off. And, piece by piece, he was building the entire case up back through the years. Everything fitted together. Even the Bagdad County marriage records had tied in a part of the grim story.

He was barreling along the lonely stretch of highway east of the low, rugged mountains when he noticed that his gasoline was running low. There was a weather-worn filling station ahead, the only one he had passed for miles, and the only one he would pass for many more miles. Besides, he wanted to look at the map he had.

He pulled in. The young attendant came out.

"Fill her up," Fowler ordered.

He glanced at his wrist watch. He had left Las Verdes for his fast run to Keene's dilapidated courthouse more than four hours before. Then he pulled out a map and started studying it.

"Check your oil and water?" the attendant interrupted him.

"They're okay," Fowler answered.

"Gee, you're the second Easterner who's been by in the last hour," the fellow said.

Fowler looked up abruptly.

"How'd you know I'm from the East?" he asked.

"Any real Westerner never takes chances out here with fillin' stations so far apart. When I ask if they want oil and water they tell me to look. You and this other guy said to skip it"

"Nice deduction, son. You ought to be a detective."

He looked back at the map and started. This must be Caliente. From here the road led to Lost Valley, passing the Moffitt mine.

"Who was in that other car?" he asked.

"Good-looking dapper guy in Eastern clothes was driving. Had a cute little blonde with him. He had on a gray suit and a blue tie and a soft fedora pushed back on account of the heat. She had a straw hat with some flowers on it, a powder blue suit and a white waist. They seemed kinda excited when I showed 'em th' tracks of a big car that like to took the side off the building. I showed the fellow the tracks and he hopped into the car and headed up the Lost Valley trail."

Fowler whistled. "You certainly ought to be a detective, son. Quick—how much do I owe you?"

"Three twenty-one. Rented car, ain't it?" the lad added, as he got change.

"I'll see you when you make the F.B.I.," Fowler said, as he ignored the change proffered him, ground down on the starter and meshed the gears.

The car leaped ahead, Fowler grinning as he saw the open-mouthed expression on the lad's face.

He sent the car bucking like a bronco across the wasteland. Soon the mountain was at hand. Ahead of him, in the distance, he saw the cars parked in the natural grotto. He slammed on his brakes, drove into a wash where his own vehicle would not be visible to anyone in the building at the mine head, and swung it around for a quick getaway.

Then he started on foot for the big sheet-iron structure, keeping out of sight behind mesquite and using the dry washes. He worked his way up the pathless base of the mountain. It was hard going.

Sweat soaked his clothes and he gasped for breath, fit as he was.

* * * * *

The man stood in the shadows. He was directly opposite the side shaft.

The men were clustered around the entrance to it. Jake came out, a flashlight in his hand.

"They're in there, shipshape, boss," he said. "Shall I light the fuse?"

"Not yet."

Steel that suddenly flicked into the man's hands was blue in the pale light, but it was there. The voice was colder than steel.

"Get in that shaft—all of you."

Jake's fear-shot voice had a tremolo in it. "What's this, boss—a gag?"

"Get in that shaft. Everyone of you rats. You've served your purpose. I don't need you any more. There are too many mouths among you. So you go."

Jake's voice steadied. "You mean you're getting rid of us like VJ and the pilot?"

The man's voice cut through in a low, sadistic chuckle. "You've got the idea."

Cold light glimmered in Jake's hand. Orange spat from the man's right gun. Jake coughed weakly and slumped forward.

"Pick him up," the man directed. "Take him in with you. I want no evidence lingering."

"Say, boss—" There was cold fear in the voice that spoke, a weak protest against a ghastly fate.

The gun's roar echoed hollowly along the mine shaft. The man who protested pitched sideward, bubbles on his lips.

"Get going," ordered the man called "Boss."

THIS time the others bent, lifted the two dead men back into the side shaft. The man in the shadows stepped forward, his left-hand gun sliding into his coat pocket, a cigarette lighter appearing in its place.

The flint scraped ominously close to the wall, touched a fuse, which sizzled its promise of death. It was burning fast, burning into the wall, so that when it hit the dynamite the blast would shatter the wall, seal the shaft in, leaving the living to die amid the stench of the dead.

"Not a trace of you," the man said to those in the cave. "Not a single mouth to talk."

Then from the darkness came a voice which had the lash of a whip.

"That's all, Moffitt!"

"The banker-mine-owner swung around, but not fast enough. Lead spun from Dan Fowler's gun. Moffitt grabbed his arm as the shot rocked him backward, half-spinning him. Then he went for the second gun in his pocket. Too late. Fowler's fist shot out, and Moffitt dropped like a felled tree.

Fowler swung toward the entrance to the cave just as an unearthly roar filled the shaft, followed by a rumble, the shake of the floor and walls, the hurtling of blast torn rocks into the opening which separated Dan Fowler from Sally Vane, Larry Kendal and the thugs.

Not two seconds had passed since Fowler had fired his first shot. But he realized that he had come too late, that all were buried behind tons of rocks, perhaps even now starting to suffocate.

He darted at Moffitt, took his guns, slapped manacles on his wrists and ankles. There was no time to bother with him now. He dashed out of the main shaft, through the building and down the path. He tried all of the three cars parked in the grotto, found them locked, then raced to his own car and got in.

His foot held the accelerator on the floor until he reached the courthouse at Las Verdes. He raced across the lawn, through the corridor and into Nighthoff's office. The fat sheriff was sitting in his chair, his feet on his desk.

"Where you been?" His voice was lazy and reproachful. "These here fellers been lookin' fer you fer hours."

The men were on impatient feet.

"I'm Dwyer, of the Secret Service," one said. "This is Agee. That bill's counterfeit all right."

"Good work," Fowler snapped. "You'll come with me." He whirled on Nighthoff. "Call the Bureau of Mines!" he ordered. "Get a rescue squad. Send it out to the Moffitt mine!"

"What's goin' on?"

"Snap out of it!"

Fowler's tone flicked Nighthoff into sudden action. He called, following the G-man's instructions.

"Now, have Dakin round up every available man and go to the mine!" ordered Inspector Dan Fowler.

CHAPTER XIV

Entombed



PUZZLED, Nighthoff lumbered out, with Fowler and the two alert Secret Service men at his heels. After the sheriff had given his orders, Fowler told him and the others to get into the car, and started rolling back out the Bagdad Road.

Quickly, concisely then, he explained what had happened. Nighthoff was fully awake now, but stunned. "Jim Moffitt!" he gasped. "Who'd of thought he was a killer!"

"Forget him. We've got at least a dozen people trapped out there!" Fowler turned to the Secret Service men. "I've the whole story. What you need to know right now is this. A gang of counterfeiters working under a German engraver named Vilhelm Johannes Von Ulm has been making hundred-dollar-bills like the one you saw, so close to perfect they've fooled experts."

"Von Ulm!" Agee exclaimed. "We've got secret information from Germany he's dead."

"He's dead all right, but he didn't die on schedule," Fowler replied.

The car rocked and swayed wildly out Bagdad Road under full power as Fowler answered a flood of questions. He cut off the road, bumped along the trail, slammed to a stop and led his companions up the path to the mine.

"Jim Moffitt!" Nighthoff panted. "I can't believe it! Bank president—mine owner!"

"Banks don't always pay presidents fortunes," Fowler replied. "All Moffitt ever got out of this mine were iron pyrites—fools' gold. I found that out at the Bureau of Mines."

They went into the barnlike building, found picks and shovels, hurried down the main shaft and went to work. Fowler sent Nighthoff with the not seriously wounded Moffitt to the sheriff's car.

Fowler and the two Secret Service men found their efforts puny against the tons of rock. Half an hour passed before the mine rescue squad arrived and put pneumatic drills and other powered equipment to work.

Fowler turned to the two exhausted Secret Service men.

"Explore the mine," he said. "I think you'll find something."

They left, armed with flashlights. Fowler, thinking of Sally and Kendal, continued to dig frantically. The deputies arrived, carrying machine-guns, put them down to help with the rescue. Minutes lengthened into hours. The Secret Service men came back.

"You were right," Agee told Fowler, his eyes wide. "We found the stuff. It's unbelievable. Transfer press—flat bed press—better equipment than they have at the Bureau of Printing and Engraving. We'll ship it to Washington. The director'll be able to improve his own methods. The plates are the finest I've seen since Charles Burt engraved Lin-

coln. There's at least five million dollars in worthless paper stashed."

"And the equipment is of German make," Fowler added.

"How'd you know?" asked Dwyer.

"It had to be."

Fowler turned back to his digging. A shout went up. A hole was showing.

"Get us out of here" a thug's voice cried frantically.

The deputies laid aside their tools and picked up their machine-guns as the rescue crews finished the job of opening a place big enough for the trapped victims to emerge. "Come out with your hands up!" Fowler ordered.

The thugs complied. The deputies manacled them as Fowler went into the side shaft. He unbound Sally, Kendal, Honest John Farmer and Natalie Von Ulm. . . .

In the car driving back were Dan Fowler, Larry Kendal and Sally Vane, together with Honest John Farmer and Natalie Von Ulm.

"Tell us about it, Dan—how'd you work it out?" Sally asked.

"If she's willing, we'll let Mrs. Honest John Farmer start the story."

Natalie Von Ulm stiffened. "How did you know we're married?" she asked.

"License records at Keene," Fowler replied.

"We kept it secret," Honest John Farmer said, "because of Natalie's work. She was afraid that if it became known, it would hurt her career."

"More than that," she said. "I was afraid to attract attention because of my father and I—our illegal entry—and my father's—work here."

"That explains the weird act you put on in the car when you picked us up that night, and why you kidnapped her twice," Sally said to Farmer.

"Right."

"Being married to an American will have bearing on your case," Fowler told Natalie, "and you'll find Immigration has a heart—when they hear the full story. Now, Natalie, tell us."

NATALIE began her story at once, told it simply.

"I was born in Zell," she said. "My father was a government engraver under Von Hindenburg. My mother died when I was very young. When Hitler came to power my father was afraid for me. Although we loved each other

dearly, he decided that it would be best for me to go to far-off Los Angeles.

"He cleverly forged passports and gave me money. I went from Germany through Switzerland and France, and by arrangement, boarded a tramp steamer at Marseilles. Eventually I reached Mexico and was smuggled into California. I got to my uncle and aunt in Los Angeles. Already I could sing and I was given training. I sang there until two years ago when I heard through underground channels that my dear father was in Las Verdes.

"I came to Las Verdes to find him. Only once did I see him—on the street—a few days before he was killed. We had a rendezvous and he told me he was a prisoner in a mine. He said that it all started when he was directed to make various presses and other equipment for the Third Reich. Piece by piece he smuggled additional parts of everything he was making to print Reich banknotes to our home in Zell and buried it in the basement.

"He hated the Hitler regime and the Nazis. He was spied on by the Gestapo. He had improved engraving methods, and he wanted to sell them to the United States and come here. He heard that Senator McClain was in Berne and he stole across the border to see this influential man whom he was sure would help him.

"He didn't get to McClain. He saw his secretary, Jason Jeffrey, instead. He made a deal with Jeffrey to smuggle his presses and other equipment into Berne and then Jeffrey was to bring them into the United States, using the cloak of Senator McClain's diplomatic immunity and secret mission. McClain never knew, for Jeffrey handled all his affairs.

"Jeffrey used McClain's position to smuggle Father through the underground and into this country. He came to Las Verdes, and to his horror was told to print false United States notes, and was kept a prisoner at the mine.

"That was my first clue," Fowler said. "Iron pyrites and quartz dust in his clothing. That and fine steel from his engraving work."

"That's my story," Natalie concluded. "He never had been able to learn Moffitt's name or his plans. He made a date with me, saying he could escape the night the Alamo Club opened. He was able to meet me only in a place I de-

scribed in the shrubbery at an appointed time. He was going to tell me everything he had learned, and see if I could appeal to the authorities. I went out there, and found him shot to death on the lawn. I destroyed all identifying marks so he would not be disgraced, and to save myself."

"I can tell you Moffitt's plan, Natalie," Fowler said. "Jason Jeffrey had worked it out. They were to print what they thought were perfect banknotes. Moffitt's men, armed with these, were to break club after club. Their resources were unlimited. They intended to ruin Las Verdes, cleaning it out and smearing its reputation for honest games."

"Moffitt was in an ideal position. Few of the bills would actually go into circulation, simply because the gang was using them only to get good money. That was what Moffitt needed, because he was buying up the property around Bagdad Dam from McClain and expected to develop it into the most lavish hole of iniquity in the country. The gang won the phony money back with the good."

"As president of the bank, he could easily pick up the few bills which slipped through. They would not go any farther."

"His first gambling raid was on the Alamo Club, where there was no opening night limit. But your father, Natalie, started spoiling his plans. Moffitt knew that your father, an unwilling and escaped prisoner, was at the Alamo Club for only one purpose—to reveal his grandiose scheme. So he killed him."

"Next, he killed the pilot, who might identify him. Some of his gang must've seen you with your father on that first visit. Moffitt then decided you were dangerous because you knew too much. He had his men kidnap you and planned to drown you in the lake."

"And I would have been drowned, if it hadn't been for Sally."

THE girl shot the blond G-woman a look of gratitude.

"I wish I could have talked then, but I was afraid I would be badly punished as an alien who had entered the country illegally," she added.

"From then on," continued Fowler, "things turned against Moffitt fast."

"First, he had his thugs steal Honest John Farmer's gun and fire a couple of shots from it. Farmer had already

been charged with crooked practises by Faro Frank Brockett, who claimed he had ruined him and had taken the Alamo Club away from him. Moffitt, or one of his gang substituted these bullets for the ones which had come from his own gun in killing your father and the pilot, Natalie. That would get your husband out of his way."

"I understand now," she murmured.

"And when Sally freed you, Moffitt found out about it. He must have been searching your room when you and Sally came into the hotel. He trailed you and Farmer to your home after you escaped, tried to find out how much you really knew, what connection you had with Von Ulm. Sally shot it out with him. Nighthoff's siren warned him to flee."

"Jason Jeffrey was getting in his hair. He knew too much and was demanding a payoff. Moffitt lured Jeffrey to the mine, forced him to make that telephone call that he'd been fleeced in one of Farmer's places to throw further suspicion on your husband and discredit Las Verdes, forced him to write that suicide note and then killed him. Later he and his men planted Jeffrey's body in his own study. Iron pyrites dust in his clothing showed he had been in a mine."

"I had a hunch that the place was headquarters for the gang," Farmer said. "That's why I went out there. I knew something phony was going on, and I intended to clear myself."

"And you and Natalie nearly suffered Jason Jeffrey's fate, because you knew too much," Fowler declared. "Well, that's about all there is to the story. Your father's scarred thumbnail and his burnishing stone were important clues. Moffitt shouldn't have had those phony one-hundred-dollar bills on his desk when I came in, either. I knew it was Moffitt for sure when I found Moffitt had been using his illicit gains to buy the land from Senator McClain."

"Nice going, Dan," Larry said. "And tomorrow—well, I guess we'll be heading back to Washington."

"We still have tonight," Fowler replied, pressing Sally's hand as she sat beside him. "I'm going to get a great big steak inside me and try my luck on at least one of those slot machines."

"Sucker," belittled Sally.

Fowler shot a wise look at Kendal.

"I'll use change from Larry's almost perfect one-hundred-dollar bill," he said.

Seeing the dead man in the chair, the ex-convict came to a dead stop, threw back his head and laughed ghoulishly



SPECIAL NIGHT FOR MURDER

By NORMAN A. DANIELS

Private Detective Ben Porter is visited by the suspect in an odd case of homicide that has not yet been committed!

WALTER WAYNE looked around Ben Porter's pleasant quarters, and smiled.

"I thought," he said, "that private detectives had dirty offices with elevated tracks right outside the windows, and that neighbors pounded on the walls all the time to stop the racket which also

appears to be part of a private detective's way of life."

Ben Porter laughed. "There are a few like that, sir. Some who even keep their offices in their hats, but the good ones—well, they do business in a place like this."

He waved a hand at the office. It was

done in modern, was air-conditioned, equipped with filing cabinets, a large safe, a yellow couch which was as clean as the New York soot-laden atmosphere allows anything to be clean. There were good portraits on the walls—not masterpieces by any stretch of the imagination, but sound, intelligent stuff to lend color. Deep yellow drapes framed the windows, and the rug was thick and rich.

"Perhaps that's why I selected you," Walter Wayne said. "Because of the address. It means you must be a good detective. Only success would enable you to run an office like this."

Ben Porter surveyed the man shrewdly. He didn't know whether he liked the fellow or not, despite the compliments. Wayne was about fifty. A strong looking, sturdily built individual with clear eyes, an intelligent forehead, and an impressive manner. That he had money was evident by the cigar he smoked, the hat he wore jauntily, and the topcoat and suit which were strictly Fifth Avenue. He wore an American Legion pin.

"Suppose we get down to business, Mr. Wayne," Porter said. "My rates, for ordinary cases—"

"I'm not interested in rates for ordinary stuff," Wayne interrupted. "You may charge me anything you like, commensurate with the work you do. What I want from you is simple enough, but I thought expert advice would be helpful and safer. I want you to prove that it was physically impossible for me to murder a man."

Porter's gray eyes flicked the slightest in interest.

"Did you murder anyone, Mr. Wayne?" he asked smoothly.

"No, of course I didn't." Wayne laughed. "Yet a man is going to die and I shall be blamed for it. Because he is on the verge of doing me a grave amount of trouble, I hate him intensely and every suspicion will point directly at me."

PORTER leaned back comfortably, wondering if he was dealing with a crank. "I'd like more details before I accept a case of this kind," he said.

"And you are entitled to them. I am a broker. Some of my methods may not have been exactly—well—honest, I suppose you might say. But I've managed to get away with it, to build up a pleasant fortune, and I'd hate to have anything happen to it. Stanley Lasher in-

tends to break me, if not install me in a prison cell."

"Lasher is the man who is going to die?" Porter asked. "How do you know?"

"A week ago I was at his home when a letter was delivered by hand. Lasher took it. He read the thing and chuckled, and let me look at it. The note—I can't remember the exact words—stated that tonight Stanley Lasher would die."

"He didn't take it seriously?"

"Not at all. He flung it into a desk drawer. Now, it may be as phony as he accepted it. I don't know. But if anything happens to him, I want to be in the clear. Call it a hunch if you like, but I believe Lasher is going to die."

"I think it's a matter for the police," Porter said. "The best way to protect yourself is to stop the murderer."

"Ah"—Wayne gave a crooked smile—"but I should like it very much if Lasher were killed. I have absolutely no interest in saving him. If he does not wish to ask police protection, that is his choice. All I want is to be protected from even remote suspicion. I'm willing to pay heavily."

"Suppose you tell me why you dislike Lasher so much."

"Of course. It is no secret. Lasher used to be a district attorney. Probably the toughest, most ruthless prosecutor the courts ever knew. He was absolutely without the slightest hint of mercy. His tirades to juries are famous. A man like that couldn't last. He wasn't even re-nominated because he stepped on too many toes, as you might suspect."

"That was about fifteen years ago. Since then he has practised law. A corporation I founded is slipping. Lasher claims I took too much money out of it. Whether I did or not, doesn't concern you. I could handle any other attorney, but not Lasher. He can do me irreparable harm and I should very much enjoy reading his obituary."

"The fee," Porter said cozily, "will be five thousand dollars, if I prove you could not have possibly murdered Lasher. I handle things my own way. You take orders without questioning them. I must have permission to try and save Lasher, to call in the police and do anything I see fit."

Wayne seemed worried. "Couldn't we handle it in a more quiet fashion? Do the thing in a simple way so that when Lasher is found dead, the police

can come for me and I'll be prepared with an alibi which cannot be broken. Remember, that I, and not Lasher, shall be paying your fee."

Porter rubbed his chin. Everything told him not to accept such a job. Here was a man who knew a deadly enemy was to be killed, who wanted him killed, but also required an alibi. Porter was wondering if Wayne could have laid a trap which would snap only when he was protected.

"When did you see Lasher last?" he asked.

"One week ago."

"Will you place yourself in my charge as of right now?"

"I intended to demand just such a stipulation."

Porter reached for the phone. "Then the first thing to do is determine that Lasher is alive at this moment. You haven't been near his house since last week?"

"I got back to town two hours ago. I was taking it easy in Florida. In a small inland town where I was seen ten times a day. You can check on that."

Porter looked up Lasher's number and dialed it. A man answered and he asked for Lasher.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lasher can't be disturbed. Who is calling, please?"

"It doesn't make any difference," Porter said. "All I want to know is whether or not Mr. Lasher is alive at this moment. Will you go see?"

"Alive? What do you mean? What's this all about?"

"Just go and look in on him," Porter urged. "It's important, and you will know the explanation for it all later on."

"We-ell, okay, I'll look. He's in the library. See here, if this is a joke—"

"I assure you there is nothing funny about it," Porter vowed. Something in his voice must have been convincing because the man on the phone went away for a couple of minutes.

"He's alive all right," he reported. "He just threw a book at me for opening the library door. And he told me to get the heck out of the house and stay out until after midnight."

"Will anyone else be at home?"

"No—all the servants were given the night off too. It's some kind of a special night, I guess. He either wants to be alone or he has a date to meet some-

one and doesn't want anybody to know about it."

"Who are you, by the way?" Porter queried.

"Hugh Sinclair. Mr. Lasher is my guardian. Now you've got to tell me who you are and what this means!"

BEN PORTER hung up quietly. He looked across his desk at Wayne.

"Well, he's alive at this moment. But I warn you, Mr. Wayne, should Lasher die of some trick, some trap which could have been set days ago, then I promise nothing. I'll even try to prove you are the murderer—and my fee still holds."

Wayne offered his hand.

"I hoped you'd say that. I want you to feel positive I couldn't have killed him. Perhaps it's just a lot of nonsense anyway. I base my hunch only upon this anonymous letter which Lasher brushed off. I imagine a man with his disposition gets plenty of them. Now, just what do we do?"

Porter thought a moment. "Make a visit to the police and explain things. To prove that you are trying to protect yourself and put your suspicions on record. Then we'll go somewhere. A spot where there are a lot of people, many of whom must know you. We'll stay among them until dawn, if necessary. I'll back up your alibi, but someone else has to back me up. Otherwise it won't hold water."

Wayne agreed. Porter drove him to Police Headquarters where they talked to Lieutenant Ferguson, a calm, considerate man with an excellent record. He listened to the whole thing.

"I don't blame you, Mr. Wayne," he said. "People shouldn't take anonymous threats lightly. I'll run over and see Lasher. Whether he likes it or not I'll throw a guard around his place. Every precaution will be taken, and see that your own skirts are clean."

Porter then took Wayne to dinner at a fancy hotel room which was crowded. Every time Wayne saw someone he knew, Porter made him go over to the table for a short chat. At ten o'clock they went to a busy night club. Porter tipped the headwaiter fifty dollars and insisted on a table where they would be as prominent as the floor show.

"We'll stay right here until the place closes," he told Wayne. "I'd like to see anyone break this alibi."

Wayne rubbed his hands. "Ah, so would I. Everything is perfect."

Shortly before one in the morning, a waiter came over and bent close to Porter. There was an urgent phone call. He had half a premonition of what the news would be. Only Lieutenant Ferguson knew he was at this night club. Wayne too, realized what it meant and he slowly put down his half-consumed glass of champagne.

Porter was gone three minutes. When he returned he looked grim.

"Well, it's happened," he said. "Ferguson went to Lasher's house to warn him and Lasher told him to go away. Fergy threw a four-man cordon around the estate. They rounded up one suspect whom I'll tell you about later. Twenty minutes ago that young man I talked to on the phone, returned home. He looked in on Lasher and found him dead. Poisoned!"

"Oh, my!" Wayne's voice was a croak. "Porter, I feel sorry for the old boy. I'm out of a mess, but just the same I wish it hadn't happened."

"You may be out of one mess," Porter warned, "but you're in another up to your chin. Ferguson will probe and question for days. He's Scotch and has a tenacity that will surprise you. He believes nothing and nobody without positive proof. We're leaving. He wants us at Lasher's house."

Wayne signaled for the check. "I'm ready," he said. "The fool—Lasher, I mean. Why didn't he take heed of that warning? It wasn't directed at me, but it scared me."

Porter established the exact time of their leaving with enough witnesses to satisfy a dozen Lieutenant Fergusons. He drove to Long Island, where Lasher had his estate and knew that not even by the sheerest imagination could Wayne be tied up with the kill. Unless it had been a trap. Poison suggested such a thing. Porter wouldn't feel confident until he knew every fact.

Ferguson had left word with the patrolman on guard and Porter was quickly admitted. Ferguson met them in the hallway. He was a ruddy-faced, bland sort of man with grizzly hair combed to cover a bald spot. He had shrewd eyes; those of a man who is always suspicious, and rarely satisfied with things.

"Lasher asked for this," he said. "He wouldn't even unlock the door and let

me in. Porter, you're smart. I've always admired your work. Therefore, I'm not saying a word as to what I think happened. I want you to look around and reach your own conclusions. If they jibe with mine, we're both smart. Mr. Wayne, you are to stay right here."

Ferguson nodded in the direction of a patrolman and there wasn't much question but that Wayne would stay where he was. Porter followed the detective-lieutenant down the corridor to the library. The door was closed. Ferguson opened it and stepped aside. Porter walked in.

HE WAS accustomed to death and not affected by it. His mind was calm and wide open. Lasher had been a mean-looking individual with a long, slim nose and a narrow face to go with it. He must have been around sixty.

He sat behind a small, ornamental desk. There was a bottle of brandy on the desk, a glass in front of the dead man, and another glass about two feet away, near the edge of the desk and directly in front of an empty chair.

Porter went over and sniffed of the two glasses. He got only the odor of brandy. He arranged a floor lamp so it would shine through the amber fluid in both glasses and the bottle. Then he bent down and studied their contents.

"The glass in front of Lasher shows a slight precipitate," he told Ferguson. "The other glass does not and neither does the contents of the bottle. Which probably means that the guest slipped the poison into Lasher's glass."

"Uh-huh," Ferguson said. "What else?"

"Lasher expected his visitor, of course, and for some reason wanted his identity kept secret. He sent the servants out and made his ward go away. Lasher wanted to be alone. Apparently he was in no fear of his guest. There isn't a sign of any struggle. I don't know who the murdering guest was, but I know who he could not have been."

"Wayne," Ferguson nodded. "Don't worry—I thought of that too. What I looked for was some kind of a trick that Wayne could have put to work earlier. But it wasn't a trick. We have evidence that there was a second person here. That he drank with Lasher. The guest's glass is almost empty. He wasn't afraid to drink. Lasher took no more than a

couple of sips."

"Did you find the threatening letter?" Porter asked.

"Not yet. We haven't really looked. I wanted you to see this and have the room photographed and printed before I messed things up. I guess you earned your fee. You couldn't get me to pinch Wayne. The only thing against him is the fact that his hunch worked out."

"And you have nothing else? Not a single thing?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that. The boys I posted here tonight saw nobody enter or leave, but a killer sometimes has unjustifiable luck. Maybe he got past them. However, one of the boys planted at the front of the house saw a man he knew. Fellow named Otto Hahn who got out of prison ten days ago, and whom Lasher sent up. Hahn seemed to be casing the place, but he didn't go in. I've got an alarm out for him."

"What about Hugh Sinclair, Lasher's ward?"

"Alibied as strongly as Wayne. Or almost, anyway. He went to a movie house. A neighborhood place where he is known. He came out after Lasher was dead. At least the M.E. claims the man was dead an hour before Sinclair found him."

"It's not hard to slip out of a movie theatre," Porter said. "Well, this is your headache, Lieutenant. Mine is all over. I'd better reassure Wayne. He is my client and expects something for his money."

"Tell him to stick around," Ferguson said. "If he wants to look the room over, that's okay provided you're with him every second."

Porter went back to the living room. The patrolman withdrew and Porter sat down beside Wayne.

"Well, it's been done," he said. "Neatly too. There is just one suspect. A hot one, but I never have much faith in the obvious and this man is almost too obvious."

"I'm not going to be arrested?" Wayne asked.

"There'd be cuffs around your wrists by now if Ferguson suspected you. No—you're quite free, though he wants you to stay around a little while. Maybe to identify that note, if Lasher didn't destroy it."

"But what—how did it happen?" Wayne asked.

"Lasher had a visitor. Someone he trusted because he brought out a bottle of mighty rare old brandy. You couldn't buy that kind today for a thousand dollars a bottle. He gave it to his guest in a unique glass, all studded with little bulges and bumps. The visitor found an opportunity to put something deadly into Lasher's drink. The stuff was only in the glass Lasher drank from. He must have died within a space of two or three seconds. The visitor then walked out, entirely unseen by the four men Ferguson had posted around the house."

Wayne shuddered. "Pretty grim, isn't it?"

"Murder usually is," Porter commented wryly. "My work is done, Mr. Wayne. You hired me to provide an alibi and I did. Ferguson backs me up."

"And so do I," Wayne said. "I'm very grateful. I want to pay you now. I was so certain of your abilities that I provided myself with sufficient cash."

He took out a wallet, counted out ten five hundred dollar bills and laid them in Porter's hand.

"A lot of money for a simple job," he commented, "but it had to be done by an expert, and I can afford it."

Porter smiled. "If you were honest, you'd say you had this cash to wave in front of me if I hesitated at taking the job. Very well, you have my thanks. I fulfilled our contract successfully?"

"Quite. Porter, whom do you think killed him?"

PORTER folded the money, raised a hip and slid the bills into his pants pocket.

"You did," he said, "though how you accomplished it is beyond me."

Wayne laughed. "Some joke, eh? Don't make those cracks when Ferguson is around."

"No, I mean it," Porter insisted. "You did kill him, somehow. Ferguson thinks so too, but there isn't a thing anybody can do about it. You are cleared—free to go soon and there should never be any trouble about this again. Not unless you slipped somewhere."

Wayne seemed annoyed. "I resent your attitude, Mr. Porter. I paid enough to get respect."

Porter arose. "Why do you suppose I named such a fancy fee? Five thousand for a night's easy work. I wanted to find out if you'd pay any such outrageous

figure, and you never batted an eyelash. Because the way you saw things, it was worth five thousand. When you handed over the money, I felt certain you'd killed Lasher. Though, as I have said, I don't know how you did it."

Porter walked out, closing the door behind him. He no longer wondered whether or not he liked Wayne.

Two detectives arrived with a prisoner in tow. A gray-haired, wizen-faced little man who had that characteristic sullen expression which too many years in prison develops. He looked like a mongrel who had been kicked too often.

Ferguson came out of the library.

"Oh, so they finally picked you up," he said to the little man. "Bring him in here, boys. Let him see the results of his work."

"Otto Hahn?" Porter whispered.

"Who else?" Ferguson shrugged. "I'm trying the old psychology on him. He hasn't the faintest idea why he was picked up—unless he bumped Lasher. I want to see his face when he spots the body."

Hahn was pushed into the room. He came to a dead stop, staring at the seated corpse. Then he threw back his head and laughed. It was the most ghoulish thing Porter had heard or witnessed in years. Hahn kept on laughing until Ferguson shook him violently.

Hahn wiped his eyes. "So he's dead, is he? I'm shedding tears of happiness because I wanted to kill him and couldn't work up nerve enough. If he'd been decent, I'd have got no more than a year. But he bored into me. He made me out a first-class crook and I got the limit. I'm glad he's dead! I wish I'd killed him. There'd have been a lot of satisfaction in that."

Ferguson questioned him at length. Then he ordered his arrest. Otto Hahn admitted casing the house, admitted he had ideas of murder. He reiterated that all he'd thought of in prison was revenge.

Porter stepped up to him.

"Otto," he said, "how come you picked this particular night to look around the house? Was there any reason for it?"

"You bet there was," Hahn said arrogantly. "Lasher called me up this morning and told me I wouldn't be free for long. That he had something else up his sleeve. Said I could come see him if I wanted to."

Ferguson whistled. "And you told him you would? You were the man he expected?"

"Oh, no," Porter interrupted. "Would Lasher have offered this man, whom he hated, brandy that you couldn't buy for ten dollars a shot? Otto, why did he hate you so much?"

"No reason except that he was so mean he even hated himself. I'm no specially selected lily. He hated everybody he prosecuted. That's why he did such a good job of it."

"I think Otto has got something there," Porter said. "Where is Sinclair, Lasher's ward?"

Ferguson had Otto taken away, under arrest. He sat down on the arm of a chair. Neither man paid the slightest attention to the macabre scene almost at their elbows.

"How do you stand on this, Porter?" Ferguson said. "I know you're a square dick but after all, you were working for Wayne."

"As of a couple of minutes ago I was paid off and quit. My contract called only for providing my client with an alibi and that I did—thoroughly. Now I'm on my own, and I find I can't help but think that Wayne killed Lasher."

"Um," Ferguson grunted. "We think alike. Just the same, we've got to consider all other angles, because if Wayne is the guilty man, he's going free. I know the alibi you cooked up for him will stand."

"No one could break it down," Porter said.

He walked over to the further wall. It was adorned with several old photographs showing two men in 1918 army uniforms. One of the men was Lasher. In those days he hadn't appeared so severe, and the way he had one arm around the other man's shoulder, indicated they were bosom companions.

THERE were four more photos of the same two men. Porter shrugged, thinking that had no meaning as far as the murder was concerned. The fingerprint men bustled in then and went to work. Two men from the morgue, with their familiar wicker basket, lounged around, waiting until the corpse was no longer needed.

"Fergy," Porter said, "you were going to tell me about Sinclair, Lasher's ward. Somehow I got the idea he's important

in this."

"You're a mind reader," Ferguson answered. "Sinclair is upstairs, under guard. It seems that Lasher, many years ago, sent the boy's father to the electric chair. Wife murder. Then Lasher took the boy in and all but adopted him. The kid gets Lasher's estate, with the exception of some big charitable bequests."

"Lasher—did that?" Porter frowned. "I figured him for a mean old skinflint who didn't know the meaning of mercy and charity."

"He was mean as sin on the outside," Ferguson said, "but underneath he was a pretty nice guy. A few years ago he donated one million bucks for a new hospital. Or a new wing anyway, I don't remember which. It's the Blystone wing. The name comes back."

"Why Blystone? If he donated it, why didn't he use his own name?"

"You got me there," Ferguson said. "Want to talk with young Sinclair? He's badly broken up."

Sinclair was about twenty-two, a handsome boy with wavy hair and the build of a football player. His quarters were those of a rich man's son. Nothing was lacking. Porter thought it still odd that a man with Lasher's reputation for meanness had taken in a boy whom he had orphaned.

Sinclair was perfectly willing to talk. In fact, it seemed he wanted to, and Porter was an excellent audience. Sinclair retold his alibi. It was none too firm. He admitted majoring in chemistry at school, which added to the suspicion, for Porter knew the lethal drug had been no ordinary poison to kill so fast and surely. As for motive, Sinclair's was good.

It seemed that Lasher had told Sinclair the full truth about his parents long ago. And, according to the boy, Lasher had what was almost a dual personality. He would curse and throw things and carry on like a maddened bull. Then he could be as kind as anyone. Generous, tolerant and good.

"It was I who phoned you late this afternoon," Porter explained. "You remember—about seeing if Lasher was alive?"

"Oh—oh, yes. I wondered about that. I told Ferguson, but he didn't seem much surprised."

"I told him, too, so he wasn't." Porter was staring at more photographs of

Lasher and his buddy. They were all over the house. He pointed to the photo. "Who is the man with Lasher?"

Sinclair glanced at the picture. "Just an old friend. They were in World War One together, and he saved Mr. Lasher's life. Carried him out of a shell-hole smack in No-Man's Land. Dangerous stuff in those days, they tell me."

"Bet on it," Porter assured him. "I imagine Mr. Lasher did a lot for this pal of his."

"No—and nothing ever made him any sorrier. You see, Blystone was killed in action two days later. Mr. Lasher never forgot."

"Blystone?" Porter said quickly. "Lasher named a hospital wing after him, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did. People just didn't understand Mr. Lasher. They only went by his gruffness. Really, he was a decent man. Look what he did for me. Or do you know the story?"

"I know. And you happen to be his heir, which provides a neat reason why you must be suspected."

Sinclair got white around the mouth, but he restrained himself.

"I thought of it, naturally," he admitted. "Along with the fact that Lasher just about killed my father, I have plenty of reason to have hated him. But I didn't. I never knew my father. Lasher was my whole family. It wasn't his fault that my father killed my mother and then died in the electric chair."

"Keep your chin up," Porter said. "Now suppose we try to understand why Lasher wanted everyone out of the house tonight. Can you think of any reason?"

"No, sir. But whenever he tried to hide something kind he was doing, he always wanted to be by himself. He flew into fake tantrums which I understood. Tonight, it seemed, he was self-conscious. He cussed me out when I looked in on him, but he never meant it. I think he was trying to hide something."

"I wonder what?" Porter mused. "Did you ever get to see inside the big safe in the library?"

"No, sir. He never permitted it. He didn't keep much there. He always said keeping money and valuables around just makes criminals. He was secretive about the contents of the safe."

"There is so little in it, I wondered," Porter said. "He must have a beautiful wine cellar from the type of brandy he

served his guests."

"Brandy?" Sinclair muttered. "But he never drank. He doesn't keep a drop in the house. That's odd. No one told me the poison had been put in brandy."

PORTER thanked the young man and walked downstairs swiftly. The body had been removed. Ferguson was seated behind the desk, eyeing the brandy bottle and the two glasses glumly.

"No prints, no nothing," he muttered. "I'm stumped, Porter."

"There are a few things," Porter said. "I haven't any explanations, but they are interesting. Lasher named the hospital wing after the man who appears in so many photos with him. The man named Blystone who saved Lasher's life during World War One. It seems, beneath his harsh exterior, Lasher was a sentimental sort, but determined nobody would ever learn it. How old would you say Wayne was?"

"About Lasher's age. Why?"

"I was just wondering. One of the photos indicated Lasher and Blystone were in Company B of the Hundred and Seventy-fifth Infantry. Stationed in France. Now the brandy is imported from France, too. Very old—even mellowed in Nineteen-seventeen. If you notice, Fergy, there isn't any sign of a United States tax stamp on it. Which means it could have been bought in France. In fact, the chances are it was. I'm going to make a phone call."

"I'm going to have another talk with Sinclair," Ferguson said.

Porter hesitated at the foot of the staircase, turned, and went into the living room. Wayne was still there, running over the pages of a book he had taken from a table.

"I think we'll be finished in another few minutes," Porter said cheerfully. "Then we can go home. Ferguson says it will be all right."

"Good," Wayne approved delightedly. "I'm fed up with hanging around here. And I'd like to argue a point you made. About me being the killer."

"Okay. Fergy and I are going upstairs for a little while. He seems to be sure it's that ex-convict, and I guess he has a case that may hold, too."

Upstairs, from the privacy of a den, Porter phoned several American Legion officials before he got the right answer.

One official advised him to contact Colonel Blake who knew all about the friendship between Lasher and Blystone. Porter made the call, and was lucky enough to contact Colonel Blake at once.

"Of course I remember," Blake said. "They enlisted the same day, met one another during their physical examinations and went to camp together. They were promoted at the same time, went to O.C.S. together and overseas on the same ship. Damon and Pythias stuff, but as real and honest as anything you ever saw."

"Blystone was killed in action, wasn't he?" Porter asked.

"Yes. Lasher stopped one, and Blystone went out after him. Brought him back, too. Shortly afterward, while Lasher was in the hospital, Blystone got his. I remember how everyone was afraid to tell Lasher. They had great plans, those two men. And they also had a weird agreement that if one got it, the other would drink to his death on the anniversary."

"That does it!" Porter cried. "Thank you. And, Colonel, there was another man in that regiment. By the name of Walter Wayne. Am I right?"

"Wayne? Yes—oh, yes, a second lieutenant."

Porter shouted for Ferguson and led him down the stairs at a fast pace. Then he slowed up and pondered a moment or two.

"Fergy," he asked, "did you find that threatening letter yet?"

"No, but I haven't checked through the desk thoroughly. I intend to do so now."

"Good," Porter said. "Call me when you find it. And I don't think it will take you long."

Porter entered the living room. Wayne arose, picked up his topcoat and put it on. He drew out the gloves from his pocket and reached for his hat.

"Wayne," Porter said, "you knew Lasher much better than you let on. You served in the same regiment with him during the first war. Is that correct?"

"Why, yes. I didn't think it necessary to relate our past history, but if it has any bearing on this mess, I'll gladly tell you. Lasher was a captain, my commanding officer. That is how our friendship began. But what in the world has that to do with his murder?"

"Perhaps nothing," Porter said. "Let's

go see if Fergy located that threatening letter yet. You really need it to back up your story. Then we can all go home."

Ferguson had the letter. It was written in block letters, crude and impossible to identify. Porter picked up the note, slanted it toward the floor lamp and grunted.

"There's a black smudge on it, Fergy," the private detective said. "Better check for prints. You never can tell. And while we're all nice and cozy, maybe I'll tell you just what happened in here tonight."

FERGUSON rotated half a turn in the swivel chair behind the desk.

"I'm listening," he said.

Porter sat down on the corner of the desk.

"Lasher," he said, "was a sentimentalist, as I told you before. His greatest friend was killed in battle. The friend who saved Lasher's life. In his memory Lasher donated a million dollar hospital wing, but did so anonymously. Every charitable act he performed was done with the stipulation that his part not be known. He hated being thought of as a softy, because he was the sofest type.

"He and Blystone bought a bottle of brandy in Paris one leave. They agreed that if one died, the survivor was to pour two drinks, toast the dead man and drink both glasses. Lasher kept the bottle and the two glasses in that big safe which was open tonight. It is hardly ever opened, but tonight he had to get out the bottle and glasses.

"So Lasher put everybody out of the house. It was a special night. He wanted to be alone. He thought people might laugh at his giving in to such a sentimental thing as drinking to the memory of a friend long dead. Lasher filled both glasses. He drank the one poured for Blystone first. Then he drank his own—and died. Because that glass had been coated with a poison some time ago."

"Wayne?" Ferguson asked with a wary eye on the man.

"Certainly Wayne," Porter said. "He knew all about Lasher's promise to drink once a year from one certain bottle, and

out of certain glasses reserved for the occasion. Somehow he managed to poison one of the glasses. Perhaps days ago—but he did it. Then he made certain he could not be suspected. He arranged for Otto Hahn to be around so you'd probably blame him. The threatening note was something Lasher never saw. It was put in the desk drawer a few minutes ago by Wayne."

Wayne gave a sullen sort of smile. "And I thought you were a good detective. Where is your proof, Porter?"

"In the first place," Porter said, "you knew about Lasher's annual drink of brandy. The only time he ever drank. You were soldiering with him when the pact was made. You alone knew Lasher would die tonight. The note wasn't in the desk prior to a short time ago. It was in your pocket. Shall I tell you just what you did?"

"I'd be greatly interested." Wayne had a fine film of perspiration between his eyes.

"You were watched when we first arrived, so there was no chance to get the note into Lasher's desk. But when Ferguson and I went upstairs, you were unguarded and you took advantage of the fact. You put on gloves first, because you wanted no prints on the note. You let yourself into this room, opened the desk drawer, took the note out of your pocket and put it inside. But you didn't see how fingerprint powder covered darn near everything in this room. Some of it got on your gloved finger ends and was smeared on the note. There will be smears on your gloves."

"How silly," Wayne said. "Have a look at my gloves if you wish. . . ."

He dug a hand into his pocket, but he didn't extract gloves. There was a small automatic in his fist.

Lieutenant Ferguson shot him with his police service pistol. It had been in his hand from the first moment Porter had accused Wayne directly.

"Trouble with these guys," Ferguson said, as he knelt beside Wayne, "is they get too smart. When I noticed the smudge on the note, I became suspicious too. Well, he won't die now, though I doubt he'll live a normal life span."

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MURDER FOR ME

By CHANDLER CHANNING

Private eye Kip Randall takes on a tough blackmail case and finds that it lands him right in the middle of the neatest crime frame he's ever encountered in his career!

CHAPTER I

First Assignment

THE only good thing about it was that I'd saved up—involuntarily—a little better than six hundred dollars in the pension fund. A cop who is tossed out on his ear, isn't expected to demand a pension, so they gave me back the money. It bought me the office I was looking at now. The letters on the door read:

KIP RANDALL—PRIVATE
INVESTIGATIONS

It wasn't much of an office. In fact, I sneered at it openly. I had bought the

lease and the furniture from a guy who went bust trying to sell broken-down vacuum cleaners and things like that. He had made out until the manufacturers started selling brand new stuff for about the same price he charged for the ancient wheezes he had been able to buy.

I suppose the place was a bargain for three hundred dollars, including the first month's rent, but I remembered the slick office I had at Police Headquarters, where the sign had my name on it and right below, DETECTIVE LIEUTENANT.

The neat gold badge was much nicer than the tin thing I now carried. It packed a lot more authority too. But I

*An Exciting
Novelet*



By the match light I saw him lying on his face,



his blue automatic inches from his outflung hand

had to be content. It was all my fault. And that of my parents. They had been wild-eyed when they were sore, too. Just like me.

Only when I stopped that near riot at Armando's, I thought the kid in a tuxedo was reaching for a gun. That's why I biffed him with my sap. Only he had no gun and he was the son of Lawton Colby, who didn't like cops in general.

They unrolled the carpet for me to stand on and I lasted about five minutes. The Commissioners were all friends of Colby, and I had a rep for using my fists and a sap too much. So I was out.

After sixteen years of police work, a man like me doesn't know much else. The town needed a private eye anyway. I had seen plenty of occasions for a good one while I was a cop.

There hadn't been too much trouble getting the license. I still had a lot of friends on the Force. So now I owned my own office and still had forty dollars in my pocket. Creditors didn't seem to like me after I stopped working steadily.

SITTING down behind the oak desk, I tried it for size, wondering just how a private detective went about soliciting business. I had an ad in the morning paper and a couple of reporters who liked me had made quite a story of my new work. Maybe it would draw.

From nine to five seemed endless. Not a soul came near the place. Just about the time I stopped wondering what had happened in the way of crime in our fair city, and decided to go out and eat, I saw the shadow through the glass upper half of my door.

I stopped breathing for a moment, then shrugged. Whoever it was, must either be kneeling on the floor or he was a midget. The hat didn't clear the solid part of the door by much.

It opened though, and a man walked in. I judged he was no more than four feet ten with the hat on. Otherwise, he seemed like a normal man. I guess he was about forty-five and he had nice pink cheeks like somebody who drinks a lot of milk instead of Martinis.

"You are Mr. Randall?" he asked. "Kip Randall?"

"If you want to be formal about it, the full name is Kipling Randall, though I don't go for it much."

He waved a small arm. "The name means nothing. You're the detective who

was discharged from the Police Force a few days ago because you were unnecessarily rough."

"That's me," I said wryly.

He sat down. "Good. I need a tough man to do something for me. The tougher he is, the better. What are your fees?"

I took a long breath. "For regular investigating service I charge twenty-five a day and car expenses."

He frowned. "Rather high, but perhaps worth it. I want you to accompany me tonight. You will have to bring along a gun. It may be dangerous."

The earth-shaking prospects of my first job came down from soaring heights with a nice big thump.

"Before we go on, sir," I said, "I'm strictly on the up-and-up. Nothing off color, and that includes using a gun."

He smiled as if he pitied my mighty intellect. "Naturally, you would use a gun if you had to. If your life or your client's was in danger. Of course you would. I'll continue my story. Tonight, at eleven, I'm due at a certain rendezvous to make a blackmail payment. I have reasons to believe the blackmailer may try to kill me because I can't pay him another cent. He has bled me white, and I presume he will be afraid that I'll go to the police."

"Blackmail for what?" I asked.

"Oh, come now," he remonstrated. "After all, do you have to know everything?"

"In this case, yes," I snapped. "I'm not condoning or abetting a murderer, for instance."

The little guy shuddered. "It isn't exactly—murder. Can I trust you?"

"Look," I said. "I'm in this business to make money honestly. If I wanted to do some blackmailing myself, I wouldn't have opened an office. And, believe me, I know enough about a lot of people in this town to shake down fifty of them. What you tell me is strictly confidential. I only reserve the right to turn down your case."

"Fair enough," he said. "My name is Bradley Hill. I'm in the real estate business. Having been an officer, you will recall the death of Irving Frawley two years ago?"

"Frawley?" I thought back. "Yes, I do remember. He was killed by a hit-and-run driver."

"That's right. I was—the driver of

that car. Now wait, before you decide not to take my case. The accident happened during the gray of dawn. I'd attended a stag party. I was alone, going pretty fast, I suppose. I felt the car hit something. I swear I didn't see the man. I stopped, backed up and got out. The man was dead. He was dressed in seedy, old clothes with run-down shoes and a battered hat. I figured he was just some tramp. I didn't know it was Frawley, or that he was in the habit of taking dawn walks and dressing in old clothes."

"Okay," I said. "But even so, you should have reported it."

"I was under the influence of liquor," Hill confessed. "I'd have been convicted of manslaughter. My business was coming along, I had a good reputation, and I had to take a chance. The man was dead. My going to prison wouldn't bring him back. Maybe I didn't think straight—I don't know. At any rate, when I sobered up sufficiently to use my head, it was too late."

I LOOKED at him hard. "You let it ride after finding out it was Frawley who was killed. A prominent and well-liked man. All right—what next?"

"About two months later, I received a phone call. From a man who told me he had witnessed the accident and claimed I'd driven off the road, that Frawley had been run down only because I was intoxicated. This man described the scene of the crime and everything that happened so well I knew he must have seen it. I agreed to pay. I paid and paid and paid. Every month right up to now."

"I wish I could sympathize with you," I said. "I can't, because I was assigned to that case and batted my brains out trying to make some headway. So now the blackmailer wants more money, you haven't got it, and he thinks you may go to the cops with the whole story. What makes you think he'll get rough?"

"He doesn't believe I'm broke. And he—told me he'd—harm me if I didn't come through. I am broke. I see now what a mistake I made. If he refuses to accept tonight's payment as the last, I intend to arrest him and turn him over to the police."

"Then why not bring a regular cop along?" I asked. This guy's way of thinking was definitely on the screwy side.

"Suppose I go to the police with this

story," Hill remonstrated. "Suppose they agree to help me nab the blackmailer. And suppose he isn't there? What happens to me? A nice cell. I paid for two years of freedom. If I have to go to jail now, I want that blasted blackmailer to go with me. And another thing. I can't tackle him alone. Take a look at me. I'm so small a sixteen year old kid could whip the daylights out of me."

He had something there. I was forced to admit it.

"Who is this blackmailer?" I asked.

"I don't know. I haven't been able to find out. He's no ordinary mug, not from the way he speaks over the phone. I've half an idea it's someone I know and meet almost daily. Someone who, possibly, was even at the stag affair I attended the night Frawley was run down. Can't you see why I need the help of an honest and tough individual?"

"I'll take the job," I told him. "Where do we go, and when?"

"Be at my home no later than ten o'clock. We've got some distance to travel. That's all I'll say now. Thanks, Mr. Randall. If you help me manage to save the sum I'm supposed to pay tonight, I'll hand you a bonus of two hundred dollars."

The sounded nice. Next month's rent and eating money.

I shook hands with him, counted the twenty-five dollar retainer he handed over and he minced out of the office, clearly not too impressed. I didn't blame him. I decided I'd have to invest part of his money in new window shades. The two now on display had more holes than material.

CHAPTER II

Bullets in the Night



I DROVE my coupé out to Hill's home that night, and at ten on the dot he emerged. He went around to the back of the house and pretty soon a low-slung sedan pulled down the driveway and stopped. I went over to it. "Get in," Hill invited. After we were on our way, he continued:

"I've been thinking this out pretty well. I want you to take the envelope of cash. Where we're going, it will be dark and desolate. You can pass for me even if you are more than a foot taller. Bend your knees a little. Grab that man for me, Randall. Nail him good. I've made up my mind to pay no more blackmail and to take the consequences for what I did two years ago. Are you armed?"

"I'm ready." I patted the shoulder holster under my left armpit. "What makes you think this blackmailer carries a gun?"

Hill snorted. "Every time I've done business with him, I've seen his gun. He kept himself hidden, but he showed the weapon. Our destination is a lunchroom along Route Four. During this season the place is closed up. Somehow, he has a key and waits for me. I just step up to the counter as if I were ordering a sandwich, pay off and then leave."

I didn't make any cracks. Perhaps the little guy was right, and I could see how two years of worry may have made him think funny. At any rate, I was sitting pretty. I would have the case of Frawley's death in my lap and also a blackmailer.

Maybe the Commissioners would wish they had never tossed me out.

Hill stopped about half a mile from the roadside restaurant. I slid behind the wheel and we got going again. I pulled right up to the place, stopping near two gasoline pumps that were not in use either. It was a one-story shack, fairly large, with an open porch for use as a dining room during the summer. There was one door.

I tucked the envelope of money into my pocket, eased my .38 a little and slid out of the car. I bent my knees as Hill suggested, and approached the place. I thought it was all wild goose until I saw the door open about three inches and stay that way.

The darkness was terrific. There was no moon, only a few faded stars and no traffic at all. I had shut off the headlights on Hill's car. Glancing around, I couldn't even see the bus for the gloom. Then I pushed the door wider and took one step inside the place.

The darkness was shattered then. By flame from a gun muzzle. I felt red-hot steel rip across my cheek. The gun fired two more times. The slugs hit the door jamb behind me and darned near

seared off my ears. That guy was shooting for keeps.

I had my knees bent anyway so I just let them go all the way. Another slug zipped the air right where my head had been. I realized that, framed in the doorway, even with the darkness behind me, I was a very perfect target.

I had my own gun ready, muzzle slightly raised so I could bring it down in a quick snap shot. Because that guy was going to shoot again. I knew darn well he was and when he did, I meant to put a slug right where he held the muzzle of his gun.

Blood streamed down my cheek and tasted salty and hot as it ran between my lips. My heart had stopped beating long ago. I estimated that from the moment I'd been greeted by the first bullet, no more than twenty seconds had passed.

Now he fired again, aiming low, but I was ready for him. I had a wild idea our bullets must have passed one another. His missed. Mine didn't. I heard a gurgling sound, but I didn't move, just lay there ready to trigger again if he was faking.

At that moment, Hill let out a shriek. Somebody threw a chunk of lead near the car. The motor roared and the car pulled away. Hill was yelling his lungs out, but the cry stopped as if it had been cut with a knife. I didn't dare move. That might be part of some scheme to make me present myself as a target. Hill would have to take care of himself.

The sound of the car motor died away. Nothing moved in the lunchroom. I stuck out my left hand and scratched the floor as far from where I was lying as I could reach. Nothing happened. I arose slowly, felt in my pocket for a match, and crawled a little closer to the spot where I estimated the gunman must be.

I LIT the match, holding it high. He was lying on his face, near the end of the counter. Two inches from one outflung hand lay his gun, a pretty blue-black automatic. I kept my own gun pointed, grasped him by the collar and turned him over. Then I lit another match.

The weak light began to flicker like a candle in a breeze and I suddenly realized that was due to the trembling of my hand. I blew out the match and lit an-

other. I had to be sure. This time I bent down and studied the gunman's face. My slug had drilled him neatly between the eyes. That didn't disfigure him too much, but still I couldn't believe it possible, so I frisked him. Then I had positive proof.

This was Lawton Colby, the man whose son I had mistakenly slugged, and who had me heaved off the Force. It certainly didn't look good for me. Hill was gone, too, and I was wondering about him. What I wondered wasn't nice.

This could have been one beautiful frame-up with me as the goat. Hill could have fenagled the whole thing, believing that if I killed Colby, the cops would say "Murder" and believe nothing of what I said.

I straightened up and found a light switch. The juice hadn't been turned off. There was a phone booth, too, and service hadn't been disconnected in this one. I stepped inside, dropped a coin into the slot and dialed Headquarters. I asked for Captain Steve Taylor. I explained only what was necessary to make him know I wasn't joking. Then I straddled a stool at the counter and proceeded to wait.

Taylor arrived half an hour later, in company with the usual array of talent needed on a murder case. Taylor took me to one of the rear booths, sat down across the table from me, and I didn't like the look in his eyes.

"Okay, Kip," he said. "Let's have it, and you know better than to think I'll believe some trumped-up story."

"Brother," I groaned, "this one sure sounds trumped-up. I'm not kidding either."

I told him the yarn right from its beginning, and I could see the doubt growing darker in his eyes.

"Kip," he said, "do you think a jury will believe that?"

"Maybe they'll believe the plowing Colby's slug did to my cheek." I winced as I touched it. "Or the bullets lodged all around the door. Ballistics will prove they came from the gun Colby used. I didn't touch it, so only his prints must be on the rod. Sure I killed him—in self-defense—and if Hill wasn't lying, Colby was a low-down blackmailer."

"And where do you suppose Hill is?" Captain Taylor sniffed.

"How do I know? It sounded like

somebody stuck a gun in his back and snatched him. I couldn't investigate on account of Colby, waiting to cut me down if I moved a hair. It was self-defense, Steve. There's evidence enough to prove it."

"Maybe," he admitted. "If it had been anyone but Colby you plugged. That makes it hard. You had reason to hate him. Of course, if Hill backs up your story—he was practically a witness—then you're in the clear pretty well."

"If Hill backs me up," I sighed. "If he wasn't snatched and he framed this on me, he'll never show up again. I don't know what to think, Steve. Except that I hope you'll give me a break. I can't clear myself if I'm locked up."

Taylor frowned. I could see that he didn't like the implication of my words.

"We've been friends a long time, Kip," he said. "I always thought you'd step into my shoes when I quit. But that black temper of yours boiled once too often. Colby had a temper, too, and he didn't like what you did to his son. The kid is a heel, but that makes no difference. Colby went after your scalp and hung it over his mantel. I don't know what to do."

"Look," I said earnestly. "Colby's prints are on the gun, his bullets in the wall. One slug fired from my gun—everything points to the truth of my story. At face value, it holds water."

"Yes, but that's Colby who is dead, Kip. Yet I've known you so long. You never doublecrossed anyone in your life. I don't think you'll start now. If I'm heaved off the Force because of this—what's the difference? I'm slated for retirement anyhow. Go ahead—beat it."

I grasped his hand. "Thanks, Steve. Maybe even I wouldn't have handed out a break like this. That's why I appreciate it so much. I've got to find Hill. That's my first move."

"You've got to clear yourself whether it means finding Hill or not," Taylor snapped. "I'm just as much interested in that phase as you are. So don't get too liberal with your time and waste it helping out the other fellow. Remember that. Hill might be able to help himself better than you can help him."

"I'll remember," I said, hiding a grin. "I'm working for myself now. Not Hill."

"You're also working for me," Taylor pointed out, scowling.

"I won't let you down," I promised.

CHAPTER III

Blackmailer?

ON GET back to town I bummed a ride on the meat wagon. It was kind of eerie riding in front, while the man who just died by my gun, rode in the basket behind me. I figured I might as well get used to things like that if the private detective business was going to provide cases like this one.

I suddenly thought of the envelope of dough in my pocket, which I hadn't even mentioned to Taylor. I took it out and broke the seal. If it was a frame on Hill's part, the envelope would be filled with nice newspaper clips.

It contained ten thousand dollars in fifty-dollar bills!

That floored me. Hill really had meant to pay off then. That indicated he really had been snatched. Perhaps Colby wasn't working the racket alone and some monkey posted outside, had realized what had happened and thought Hill would have the money. At any rate, Hill's story was backed up to the tune of ten thousand dollars.

I turned to the driver of the morgue wagon.

"Hey, Pete," I said, "mind dropping me near Cherry Street? My office is there."

Pete grinned. "Sure—why not? My other passenger ain't in no hurry. Tell me where your office is and I'll drop you in style."

He did, too, and I shivered as I watched the grim vehicle pull away from the curb.

The reason I thought the office was the best place to go was based on the idea that whoever had snatched Hill would soon know he didn't have the cash. The blackmail angle might turn into a kidnap one with Hill held until I paid off the ten grand. It was his money, so I had no reason to hesitate if such demands were made.

Furthermore, the radio news broadcasts would be full of the story. The kidnaper was bound to listen, and even if Hill didn't—or couldn't—talk, the

snatcher would find out that in all likelihood I had the dough. I thought about all this while I cleaned that gouge in my cheek and applied a dressing on it.

I telephoned Hill's house just on a hunch. Nobody answered the phone. I hadn't expected the call would go through. I sat back, thinking that my first day as a private dick was much more dangerous than sixteen years as a cop. If Hill never showed up again, I'd be in a nice spot. They'd say I bumped him to back up my own story.

It got to be around three A.M., but I wasn't sleepy. I thought I'd probably never sleep again. Then the phone rang and I grabbed it eagerly. Captain Taylor was calling.

"It looks bad, Kip," he said. "I turned in a report. The Commissioners are calling a meeting for five this morning. None of them like you because you told them off, sort of. The Chief agrees you deserve a break, but what can he do if the Commissioners decide you ought to be hauled in?"

"I've got until about six in the morning then." I glanced at my watch. "Three hours. I'm going to need an awful lot of luck on my side, Steve. I'm waiting to see if the guys who snatched Hill will call me. I've got the dough Hill was going to pay off with and they'll know it by now."

Taylor snorted. "I think the whole thing is a fix, Kip. Somebody who hates you as much as Colby did, is trying to put a neat finishing touch on you. Or else this guy hated and feared Colby, and figured you for a nice fall guy. Either way, you're in a tough spot. I wish I could help."

"How about the prints on Colby's gun and the ballistic reports on the bullets it fired?"

"Checks with your story—which doesn't mean a thing. You're smart enough in police methods to have fired Colby's gun, even raked your cheek with one slug, and not disturbed his prints. Even a rookie cop who went out there with me offered that suggestion."

"Yeah," I said. "I hope he always stays a rookie. Steve, if anything happens, I'll give you a call right away. I'm through moving about on my own. A guy in my position needs witnesses."

"I'll be on deck all night. Better start praying, Kip. If the Commissioners think you should be pinched, the D.A.

will follow their recommendation. I'll have to haul you in."

"I'LL be right here," I told him, and hung up.

I had wanted to hang up long before because the kidnapers of Hill might try to contact me only once and say the devil with it when they couldn't get through. Guys like that are usually pretty jittery.

Yet I couldn't just sit there. In about two and a half hours I'd be locked up, then all hope of proving my innocence would be gone, especially if Hill never showed up.

I thumbed through the phone book and took a chance on using the phone again. I called Tom Lynch, president of the biggest bank in town. He answered in a sleepy, annoyed voice.

"Mr. Lynch," I said, "this is former Detective-lieutenant Kip Randall. A few times when I was on the Force, I helped you out. Now I need your help. Yes, even at this hour of the night. I want to know about the bank accounts of two people. I'm sure they deal with your bank."

"But, Kip," Lynch protested, "can't it wait until morning? Anyway, I've no right to give out such information."

I hated to do it, but my own future was at stake.

"Mr. Lynch," I said, "do you remember that raid on a gambling house in which a certain woman escaped through a side door even after the cops had closed in?"

That had been his wife, and he knew all about the affair. Maybe it was a dirty trick to remind him of it, but I was desperate.

"I'll be at the bank in about twenty minutes," he said. "Whom do you want to know about, Kip?"

"Lawton Colby and Bradley Hill. Colby was a director on your board, so you'll have his account. I'm not so sure about Hill."

"We have them both," Lynch said. "And Colby is still a director. If this leaks out, I'll be in trouble."

"Mr. Lynch," I said with real earnestness, "I'll swear that Colby will never hear a thing about it. Even if he does, I'll swear he won't say a word."

I hoped that Lynch wouldn't tune in his auto radio and hear any early morning news broadcasts. I waited then, feeling like biting my nails, but smoking cigarettes chain fashion instead, until my

mouth was burning.

Lynch finally called.

"I have their accounts before me, Kip," he said. "Colby's balance looks good. Hill's not so good. Hill made periodic withdrawals over the last several months, all good-sized sums. Colby, on the other hand, has been building his up fairly well."

"How do Colby's deposits check with the amounts Hill withdrew?" I asked.

"They're much more. Colby has been liquidating a lot of stuff lately. Even so, he should have deposited more. Maybe he has another bank. They both have safe deposit vaults here, and that's about all I can tell you unless you want actual figures."

"No, thanks just the same. I'm very grateful, Mr. Lynch. I won't forget the favor."

"I owed it to you several times over," Lynch said. "Call on me again if you need anything."

I hung up, trying to figure it out. It jibed all right. Hill had withdrawn sums to pay off Colby who, in turn, had been building up his own account. That might help my story just a little. About as much as crossing my fingers and hoping, maybe.

I needed more than figures to offset the evidence against me right now.

It was four-ten when the phone rang again and I answered so eagerly I couldn't speak at first. I squeaked a "Hello."

"Kip Randall?" a high-pitched voice queried. "Listen carefully. Don't interrupt, and don't leave the phone for one second. We've got Hill. He's okay up to now. We want the ten grand he was supposed to be carrying. If we don't get it, you'll find him in twenty pieces, and you won't be so well off yourself."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked, my heart doing a fast sixty. "I'm willing to dicker."

"Dicker nothing. You'll take orders. Bring that ten grand, just as it is, to Twenty-one-twenty-nine Vernon Avenue. That's a two-room shack on the outskirts of town. The numbers are fastened on the gate. Go inside and put the envelope on a table at the far end of the living room. That's all you do. Then go back to your office and be there at five o'clock. We'll call again to make sure you're not setting a trap. If we get the dough okay, we let Hill go."

THE phone clicked in my ear. I made a hasty memo of the address, jammed on my hat and started for the door. They weren't giving me much time.

I drove about four blocks to where a friend of mine conducted a store that sold thread and other kinds of sewing equipment. He lived in a little back room and I woke him up.

"There's no time to explain," I told him. "I need a tape measure and some thread. The finest and blackest stuff you have in the place. Like a black spider web if you have anything like that."

"What do you think women sew?" he demanded irritably. "Spider webs? And since when did you go in for sewing?"

I grinned. "With luck, pal, I'm going to weave a skein that certain parties aren't going to be able to get out of. Will you step on it? And where's your phone?"

I called Captain Taylor and asked him to meet me at once. Taylor wasn't too eager. The Commissioners were assembling and they were bound to call him.

"If this turns out, you can tell the Commissioners to go hang," I said. "In ten minutes, Steve. I'll be driving my crate."

CHAPTER IV

The Trap of Thread



AS WE drove to Vernon Avenue, I told Taylor all about it. He looked a bit skeptical.

"Know what they'd say to this, Kip? That you never had ten grand. That Hill is dead, you faked that phone call and all this bunk about leaving dough for kidnapers is just that—bunk."

"How do you feel about it?" I asked him frankly.

He shrugged. "Kip, I don't know. I ought to take you in, save myself the trouble later on and salvage my own neck. Have you really got ten grand?"

I fished the envelope out of my pocket and dropped it in his lap. He flicked a thumb across the wad of bills.

"Whew!" he exhaled sharply. "I believe you now, Kip. You never could

have got up this kind of dough."

"And what'll they say about that?" I asked sarcastically.

Steve groaned. "It's easy. Colby had the dough on him, you killed him for it, and planting it for kidnapers is just a fake meant to impress us. Okay, I'm traveling along. You're going to follow orders and leave the money. Suppose it disappears and Hill never comes back? Are you any better off?"

"Worse." I grinned. "But I'm doing it anyway. Furthermore, when the money is left there, we're going back to my office. Just as I was told."

"It's your funeral." Steve shrugged. "I'm just hanging around to make the pinch. If it's you—well, I'll make the pinch."

I stopped the car close by the gate of that little two-room shack. It was dark and I figured Steve could slip in without being seen. I followed him. We didn't turn on any lights and I worked fast. After all, I was only supposed to put the money there and scam.

"What are you doing with a tape measure?" Steve wanted to know. "And what's that—a spool of string?"

"Thread. The finest silk thread money can buy. Cost me fifteen cents and the man who sold it to me was a friend of mine. Hold this end and don't waste time asking questions."

We were out of there in four minutes and I drove back to the office with plenty of time to spare. Promptly at the agreed upon time, the phone rang. The same squeaky voice seemed a bit more elated this time.

"So you really didn't wait to try to trap us. Good, Randall. If the money is there and nothing happens, we'll let Hill go within the next thirty minutes."

He hung up before I could say a word. I turned to Captain Taylor.

"Call Headquarters and when, and if, Hill is released and found, have them give you a flash here and have Hill brought here too."

"When and if." Taylor reached for the phone. "Kip, do you really think they'll let Hill go?"

"I know what I'm doing, Steve," I told him patiently. "Just make that call."

"You know what you're doing," he grunted. "So did Mussolini, and he ended feet up in the air."

He made the call though and we sat back to wait. I kept smiling, purely as

false a front as the big cabinet of a four-tube radio set. I was less sure of myself than Captain Taylor was of me. Yet this had to work. Everything depended upon it.

The flash came at a quarter of six and along with it came an order for Taylor to bring me in on a murder rap—first degree. The D.A. wasn't fooling.

"Now see what I've got into," Taylor groaned. "I'm supposed to pinch—for murder—a guy I've been hobnobbing with half the night."

"The pinch," I said, "won't be made until after Hill gets here and we take a little trip. After that, it won't even be necessary. Wait and see."

IF I COULD only feel as sure as I sounded. The palms of both hands were aching from fingernails being pushed deeply into them. I heard a car stop out front and I literally hung out of the window. It was Hill all right, with two uniformed cops.

"Get rid of the boys," I told Taylor. "Tell them you're waiting in case I return. Come on, man, one last favor."

Taylor sighed. "It's that one last favor I'm afraid of. This goes on and on. Okay—duck into that supply closet and close the door."

I heard a mutter of voices, then Taylor opened the door and beckoned me to come out. Hill was seated in front of my desk and he looked scared. I asked him to relate full details, and he did. At least, my story was backed up and that was worth ten grand of Hill's money any time. He showed wrists and ankles that were cut from ropes binding him too tightly. The corners of his mouth had little cuts.

"They kept me gagged," he explained. "I don't know who they were nor where they held me. When you entered the lunchroom, two men slipped up and before I could do anything, they jumped on me. I was hit on the head."

"Tough," I said. "But we'll have them soon. I want to take you back to the shack where I left the money for your ransom. Maybe that's where you were held, and the place will be full of clues. Let's go, Steve."

We drove back and I went in first, to reconnoiter, I explained. Then I called them. As they entered the living room, still dark, I said:

"Mr. Hill, I put the envelope of money

on that table at the far end of the room. I want you to walk there and just stand, so that Taylor and I can size up the place. Oh, yes—those guys who snatched you. Were they heavy or light in build? Tall or short?"

"Big men, what I saw of them—heavy and tall," Hill said.

He walked slowly toward the far end of the room.

"Steve," I said to Taylor, "measure off the paces to that table. Go on. Do as I say."

He grunted something and started moving across the room. Half-way he stopped, and fanned the air with both hands.

"Cobwebs," he muttered, "or something. No wait! It's that—"

I snapped on the lights and saw exactly what I had expected to see.

"It's that fine and invisible thread I fastened across the room after we put the money on the table," I said.

"To get the money, the kidnapers had to cross the room. That thread was placed tight, at exactly five feet three inches. I figured Hill would clear it even with his hat on. The money is gone, the thread wasn't broken until you broke it, so Hill—"

The little guy had spunk enough. He tried to do a nose dive through the window beside him. Taylor got him by the heels just in time. Hill fought like a wildcat and the things he called me were a complete education in gutter language. Finally, he was cuffed and stuffed into the car.

"There is your rat," I told Taylor. "He was blackmailing Colby, not the other way around, as Hill would have us believe. Colby found out who he was. Hill knew very well what Colby's temper was like. He discovered that Colby was going to let him have it, so he came to me with that twisted story. I went in his place and Colby started blasting at me. He meant business, thinking I was Hill, and the only way I could save my life was to let him have it. Hill then pretended he'd been snatched, although he just screeched and drove the car off himself. He did the phoning with a disguised voice, he made all the arrangements for his own pretended release. Those marks on his wrists, ankles and lips were self-inflicted.

"Why?" Taylor asked. "What did it get him?"

I TOLD him plenty. "The ten grand he used to tease me with and make me believe his story about paying blackmail. He's a greedy little guy and ten grand is ten grand. He didn't have anything against me. He'd have sworn that Colby was blackmailing him. I guessed the truth when I found out Colby was liquidating assets. Why should he be, unless he needed a lot of cash? Hill did take the precaution of emptying his account systematically so he could back up his story of paying blackmail, but that dough is in his safe deposit box. We'll open it in the morning. He was willing to take the blame for that hit-run accident even if he didn't do it. A jury would sympathize with a blackmail victim who risked so much to expose a blackmailer.

"So I set this simple little trap for him. If the thread was broken, a man of normal size got the money. I doubted that if the snatch was on the level, the guy who came for the dough would be next

door to a midget. Hill never knew the thread was there. He didn't dare turn on any lights for fear someone was watching."

"Say, wait." Taylor seemed startled. "Then Colby ran down and killed that man two years ago. Hill just told the story as if he was the guy. Kip, you ought to get a lot of satisfaction out of that, seeing how Colby had you kicked off the Force."

"He's dead," I said. "I don't get any kick out of gloating over a dead man."

"Well, anyway," Taylor went on, "I'll bet this will get you back on the Force without any red tape."

"On the Force!" I bristled. "Look, Captain Taylor, I handled this job for Hill. He paid me in advance. Twenty-five bucks for less than twenty-four hours' work. How can you make that kind of dough on the Force? Unless you graft! Of course, the work isn't so steady, but I like it. The Force? No—thanks."



*"I Ain't Got an Engraved Visiting Card, Fed—but
This Gun's Introduction Enough!"*

THE man eased into view, soundlessly, and stared at Dan Fowler. One bony paw gripped an ugly little automatic. Fowler sat in his chair, staring back, his service revolver precisely in line with his visitor's heart. They were two granite images, rather than breathing men.

The eyes of Dan Fowler's caller were flint hard. The weathered face had a sinister quality. There was death in the air. Both men were motionless. The mere flick of a finger, the mere twitch of one tendon, might have served to blast whichever man moved second out of Creation. But neither gun finger constricted. Neither weapon cracked the stillness. And then—

This tense situation, which leads to one of the most exciting fights in Dan Fowler's career, is only one of the many highspots in *LIVE AND LET DIE*, Jean Francis Webb's exciting book-length Dan Fowler novel in the next issue of *G-MEN DETECTIVE*.

It's a novel of grim and baffling mystery—of murder and hijacking which follow a shipment of deadly mustard gas on a military freight train moving west. In *LIVE AND LET DIE* Dan Fowler is at his fighting, sleuthing best as he pits his skill and scientific knowledge against a sinister conspiracy that will astound you! Look forward to this unusual thriller!



A Department for Cipher Solvers By M. K. DIRIGO

IN HOW many different ways could you rearrange the letters of a three-letter word—any three-letter word, for example "THE"?

This being written for beginners, if you don't know the answer, the best way to find out is to do it—thus:

THE-TEH-HET-HTE-ETH-EHT

—and the answer is that a three-letter word may be rearranged in six different ways!

How about a four-letter word? Let us try it. Forgetting the hyphen, let's say the word is "GMEN."

GMEN - GMNE - GEMN - GENM - GNEM - GNME - MGEN - MGNE - MEGN - MENG - MNGE - MNEG - EGMN - EGNM - EMGN - EMNG - ENMG - ENGM - NEGM - NEMG - NGEM - NGME - NMGE - NMEG

—and we have twenty-four different arrangements.

If you tried it with a five-letter word, you would get one hundred and twenty combinations.

Of course it would not necessarily have to be a five-letter word. It could be two words with a total of five letters, as "TRY ON" or "USE IT", etc.

A six-letter group could be rearranged in 720 different combinations!

Multiply the Units

Mathematically you could find out in advance how many combinations there are in such groups by multiplying all the units that count up to the desired group. In a three-letter word, you count your units, one, two, three, or 1-2-3. Then, multiplying, $1 \times 2 \times 3 = 6$, you know that a 3-letter word will produce 6 combinations.

In a 4-letter group, you multiply $1 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4$ and you get 24, which we have already proved to be correct by writing out all the combinations.

Similarly with 6: $1 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4 \times 5 \times 6 = 720$. If you are interested in a few more of these

calculations and you do not want to take the trouble to go through the multiplications, here are just a few.

7 letters produce 5,040 combinations

8 letters produce 40,320 combinations

9 letters produce 362,880 combinations

10 letters produce 3,628,800 combinations

—and just for the fun of it, notice 20 letters = 2,432,902,007,245,400,000 combinations!

Well, what does all this mean? What does it have to do with cryptography?

Just this:

If you had a message of say 20 letters, the number of different ways in which you could rearrange those letters would be the above figure—2, with 18 digits added or annexed, namely, 2 quintillion.

Systematic Unscrambling

We will venture to say that if you had to solve a message of 20 letters, and you had the knowledge that the message was written by scrambling the original letters around until in their new arrangement they made no sense, were incoherent, you might be awed or frightened at the thought of having to go through that many experiments to unscramble the message. Why, it might take a lifetime to do that!

Therefore, in order to be practical, and remove the apparent "almost impossibility" of the solving methods of such a system—it becomes necessary to do the so-called scrambling and unscrambling of the letters in some systematic manner, so that both processes may be accomplished in a reasonable length of time by the persons knowing the system used.

Suppose for example you had to solve this group of rearranged letters:

EVAEL EHTYR TNUOC TAECNO

The original message was scrambled into this arrangement. The scrambling was not haphazard. It was done in a systematic man-

ner. The recipient of this message could read it at a glance because he knew the system which was used.

However, this particular system, or method, happens to be such an easy one, that even an amateur would have no trouble solving it, even without knowing the system.

Each word was written backwards and reads LEAVE THE COUNTRY AT ONCE. Notice that the word LEAVE is immediately distinguishable, and is a tip-off to the system.

Suppose the scrambling of the same message were written this way:

LTUA EHNT AETO VCRN EOYCE.

Looks like you have some solving to do.

Yet, if you knew the system used, you would again be able to read it at sight. Read the first letter of each word, then the second, then the third, etc., until finished.

Regrouping the Letters

Even if you did not know the system used, the method of solution would bring results quickly. You have only to regroup the letters into sections containing 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 or more letters, then see in which geometrical direction sequences of letters become coherent.

For example, suppose you tried rearranging them into groups of 7 letters each, because there are a total of 21 letters in the message, seven suggests itself because it is a multiple of 7 and it would result in an even grouping, as follows:

L T U A E H N
T A E T O V C
R N E O Y C E

Now look for coherent sequences. Start with the first "L" and follow straight down "LTR", and continue with the second column, in both directions, up "NAT", and down, "TAN", and continue this with each column until you hit a favorable sequence.

Do the same thing backwards, beginning with the "N" at the end of the top line, also with the "E" at the end of the last line, etc. Also check on diagonals, as "LAE", "TEO", etc., in a south-eastern direction. Beginning with "N" at the end of the top line, follow in a south-western direction, "NVY",

etc. At this point, notice that "NVY" is a good sequence, and could be part of a word, as ENVY, etc. But the follow up with HOO, or OOH proves it to be just a coincidence.

In this fashion, glance through the message for every possible geometrical direction. You could, and in practice, you would, experiment with regroupings of different units until you hit the right one.

To save time, we will now try the right one, and watch the results. Use groups of four letters, each, as follows:

L T U A
E H N T
A E T O
V C R N
E O Y C
E

Now read the message in the columns, from top to bottom, going from one column to the next, etc. But since you are now left with the last letter—a lonely letter, all by itself, it must either be added to the last word, or just left as a singleton.

Nulls

In actual practice it might be advisable to add three indifferent letters to this one to make up another group of four letters. These three letters are known as NULLS and besides helping to form more uniform groups, they tend to further confuse the uninitiated in their efforts at solution.

If three NULLS had been added to this message, the total number of letters in the cryptogram would then have been 24 and the message could have been inscribed into any of the following rectangles:

2 x 12, 3 x 8, 4 x 6, 6 x 4, 8 x 3, 12 x 2.

In solving, each of these rectangles would be suspected because they make up all the multiples of 24 and it would only be necessary to find the right one. Later on we will explain how you may find short cuts in locating the right rectangle.

For a practice work out, problem No. 386 in this issue is presented as one of the cryptograms of this type. See what you can do with it. Next issue we will give you another one of the same type. We think you will like them.

ANSWERS TO CRYPTOGRAMS IN THE MARCH ISSUE

No. 379. There was an old man who said "Gee!
I can't multiply seven by three.
Though fourteen seems plenty
It might come to twenty,
I haven't the slightest idee!"

No. 380. Conversation enriches the understanding but solitude is the school of genius.

No. 381. A wise man keeps on good terms with his wife, his conscience and his stomach.

No. 382. Adipose abusive artist abducts adorable angelic accordionist; administers alcohol; argument; admonishment; arrest.

No. 383. Spirit of joyous optimistic expectation for futurity ever leaps upward and promises so to continue eternally within the depths of the anterior portion of man's torso. *In plain English:* Hope springs eternal in the human breast.

TRY TO SOLVE THESE NEW CRYPTOGRAMS

HERE are five more cryptograms for your puzzlement! This is an entertaining batch, containing as it does one of our amusing limericks for beginners, plus, for the first time in this department, a transposition cipher. In addition, a clever pedantic proverb.

Here are some hints to help you solve the limerick:

1. There are nineteen repetitions of the letter "E" and they are easy to spot.
2. The one-letter word "K" is a dead give-away.
3. The first word, JGFYF, is the most frequent beginning of all limericks. Besides, it is also one of the most popular pattern words in Index 35.

Those clues should help to make Cryptogram No. 384 rather easy for you. As to the other cryptograms below, you're on your own.

Please send in your solutions and comments, addressing all letters and postcards to The Black Chamber, % G-MEN DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Excerpts from some of the best letters will appear in this department from time to time. Thank you and happy solving to everybody!

No. 384—A Limerick for Beginners.

JGFYF PKT K XIRSV EKS SKEFN KMGAZZFT
PGITF PYISVT KZPKXT VKCF GAE JGF PAZZAFT
TI GF TRZUFN AS GAT JFSJ
ZAUF K GKZQ PAJJFN VFSJ
TKX PKTS'J JGFE GFYIFT JGF TAZZAFT!

No. 385—Isn't it True?

PDB RCHT JODPIDUQDI LBJC YB
YJODLIJLNYU WMKZPDBJ AV YJODLIJLNYU
FHYNJLNDI

No. 386—Transposition.

OITPT UTUUS IPHTH TRIOE AIIDC
NNATN NEOAE RITGA NCVST HITST
ETWIS HTURO ISCAI AYPLW ENTLT
RLORD UOHOL RTTTP IMALA AIENI
SDIXO RGSTN NENAA EBOBS

No. 387—Alliteration.

QFQLUVLELRM QLCULCFX QCFZWM QVWCCG
QLTEFQ QLEMRSWM QLUPLRMXG QVFXXWETWM
QLXLEWX QLEMHPHRHWM QCPSW QLEKWSEWK

No. 388—A Pedantic Proverb.

LJ LI JOD ELBYU ALJ CE KHLDK ZHYII
JOYJ YEELSDK JC JOD AMHKDB FHDQLCMIUV
YNGMLHDK LBKMNDI HMFJMH D CE JOD
KCHIYU FCHJLCB CE JOD IOLF CE
JOD KDIDHJ

First solve the cryptogram, then translate it into plain English.

(Pattern Word List on next page)

HANDY LIST OF PATTERN WORDS

We continue our Pattern Word list with eight-letter words indexed 28-35 to 28-67, 34-56 to 34-78, 35-46 to 35-78, and 36-45 to 36-48.

Pattern words are words in which one or more letters of the alphabet appear more than once. For example, look at any word in Index 28-35 and you will see that two letters are each repeated twice. One letter appears twice, in the second and eighth positions of the word.

Another letter likewise appears twice, in the third and fifth positions of the word.

Pattern words are used as helps in solving cryptograms, and are of invaluable assistance to cipher-solvers. Many code words can be recognized by their patterns.

The list of Pattern Words which we have been publishing serially is the best and most complete list which has ever been compiled.

EIGHT-LETTER PATTERN WORDS

INDEX 28-35

eCOOnOmIC.
hEArAbLE.
oENAnThE.
pENkNifE, pERoRatE, pROmOteR, pROvOkeR.
rEAdAbLE.
sELf-LovE.
tHOrOugh.
WEArAbLE.

INDEX 28-36

aGIstInG.
cHildIsH, cLay-mArL, cONtaNgO.
dENouNcE.
eCTroTiC.
gEAr-cAsE.
hEAtwAvE.
mElonItE.
pERfoRcE, pETunTsE.
rE-IgnItE, rENouNcE.
sEA-plANE, sEPtuPIE, sTAlwArT.
tENdaNcE, tHickIsH, tHievIsH.

INDEX 28-37

aSTricTS.
bEChanCE, bEGrudGE, bLUshFUL, bREathER,
bREwstER.
cLubhaUL.
dETonaTE, dRAw-geAR, dRENchER.
gELdabLE.
kREutzER.
lITeraTI.
nECKlaCE.
oRAcular.
pETalITE, pREachER, pREfacER, pREludER,
pREsager, pRESumer, pRObator, pROditor,
pROMisor, pRONator, pROvisor.
rELiabLE, rESponSE.
sCIoptIC, sLip-raIL, sTOckpOT.
tREmblER, tRENchER, TRIumvIR.
wELdabLE, wREstLER.

INDEX 28-45

aGrEEinG.
bLISSfuL.
cRoSSbaR.
dRaBBleR, dRiBBleR.
fRiBBleR, fRiZZleR.
gLaSSfuL.
pRaTTleR.
rEuSSItE.
sLoP-PaiL.
uNIOOseN.
wRiGgleR.

INDEX 28-46

aMoEbEuM, aStOmOuS.
cYtOlOgY.
dEcIsIvE, dEfInItE, dErIsIvE, dIkAmAlI.
eCsTaTiC.
fELicIdE, fEmIcIdE, fEmInIzE, fEtIcIdE.
gEnItIvE.
lEnItIvE.
mEdIcInE, mElInItE, mEnIIIte, mEtAyAgE,
mYcOlOgY.
nEmOrOsE.
rEgIcIdE.
sEpArAtE, sErIcItE, sTrEpEnT.
tYpOlOgY.
zYmOlOgY.

INDEX 28-47

aDfEctED, aDjEctED, aDvErTEd, aSpErgES.
bEaT-noTE.
eClIptIC.

sTaRfoRT, sTaRwoRT.
uNbEatEN.
wEiGhaGE.

INDEX 28-56

aDmiTTed.
bEdaGGIE, bEdaZZIE, bEmuDDIE.
cAmeLLIA.
eNcoFFIN.
fEn-gOOSE.
uNbIDDeN, uNdeRRaN, uNfaLLeN, uNgOTTeN.

INDEX 28-57

aConItIC.
cEraTiTE.
dEnoTaTE.
gArcInIA.
hEmaTiTE, hEpaTiTE, hEsiTaTE.
lEviTaTE.
mEcoNiNE, mEdiTaTE.
nOctIIIIO.
sOmBRERO, sTake-nET.

INDEX 28-67

fLy-whEEL.
mAntiLLA, mAntiSSA.
rAchiLLA, rEpousSE.
tEnaiLLE, tRapdOOR.

INDEX 34-56

waLLOOed.

INDEX 34-57

baLLCoCk, baNNERed, baNNERet, baTTEled,
baTTEned, baTTEred, biLLEted, biTTERed,
boNNETed, buFFETed, buTTERed.
ciNNAbar, coFFETed, coLLEger, coPPERed,
coSSEted, crOONing.
diSSEver, doGGERel, doTTERel.
fatTEned, fatTEner, feLLInIc, fILLEted,
fuLLERed, fuLL-Eyed.
gaRREted, gaRRUIUs, giBBERed, goFFERed,
guTTERed.
haMMERed, haPPENed, hoGGERel, hoRRIfIc.
jaBBERed, jiGGERed.
kiLLAdAr, kiNNERed, kiTTEned.
laNNERet, laRRIkIn, liTTERed, loPPERed.
maNNERed, maSSEter, maTTERed, meLLIfIc,
miSSTaTe, muTTERed.
ohMMEter.
paTTEned, paTTERed, piTTAcAl, poLLIwig,
poTTERed, prEENing.
quEENing.
raBBETed, raBBInIc, raTTEned.
scOONing, siMMERed, soLLERet, spOONing,
stEENing, suFFERed, suMMERed, swOONing.
teRRIfIc, tiLLERed.
voLLEyed.
waPPERed, weLLAdAy.

INDEX 34-58

bLOOD-reD, bLOODied.
caFFEInE, coMMERge, crOODied.
kNEE-High.
miSServe.
peLLAgrA.
suPPLiaL.

INDEX 34-67

biLLhOOk, buLLweEd.
caSS-weEd, ceSSpOol.
gaRRoTTe.
haLL-dOOR.
kiLLdeER.

paSS-bOOk.
roCCeLLa.
weLL-rQOm.

INDEX 34-68

buLL's-EyE.
coLLiDeD, coLLuDeD.
diFFuSeS.
kyLLoSiS.
SiLLaBuB, syLLaBuB.
weLL-to-dO.

INDEX 34-78

buMMaReE, buTTreSS.
doG-GraSS.
frEE-wiLL, fuZZ-baLL.
giLLarOO.
hiCCatEE.
maTTreSS, miSSpeLL.
puFF-baLL, puGGaReE.
saDDuceE.
taLLneSS.
waLL-moSS, waLL-treE.

INDEX 35-46

auTOTomy.
peTITion, prONONce.
reVIVify, reVIVing.
sieGE-Gun.

INDEX 35-47

coRN-ReNt, crEDenDa.
prETExTs.
roCK-CaKe.
scALaBLE.
unTETHer.

INDEX 35-48

cuBEBinE.
grADateD.
hoMEMadE.
myOSotiS.
oxIDizeD.
poRTraIT, prESEnts.
spIRifeR.
thEREfoR.

INDEX 35-67

alEbERRY.
faE-bERRY.
haWkWEEd.
onE-bERRY, opErETTA.
prEdELLA.
teA-cADDy, trEmELLA.
waRd-ROOm, waRe-ROOm, waRpROOf.

INDEX 35-68

agEnESiS, apOdOSiS.
myOnOSuS.

INDEX 35-78

caNoNeSS.
foLdLeSS, foNdNeSS, foRtReSS.

goLd-LeSS.
kiNdNeSS.
laNkNeSS.
poRtReSS, puNiNeSS.
raIsInEE, raNkNeSS.

INDEX 36-45

amiSSing.
bloSSOmy, brACCate, brASSAge, brIMMing,
broCColi.
chILLing, chIPPing, chIRRIing, clIPPing,
coIFFing, crIBBing.
diALLage, drIBBing, drILLing, drIPPing.
emiSSion, emITTING.
flIPPing, flITTING, floCCOse, frILLing,
frITTING, frIZZing.
glOWWorm.
omiSSive, omITTING.
plIMMING, priGGish, priGGism, prIMMING.
quELLerz, quIDDity, quILLing, quIPPing,
quITTING, quIZZing.
reATTach.
scABBard, shILLing, shIMMING, shIPPING,
skIDDing, skILLing, skIMMING, skIPPING,
slIPPing, slITTING, slOW-Worm, smALLage,
spIFFing, spILLing, spITTING, stAGGard,
stALLage, stANNary, stILLing, stILLion,
stIRRIing, suLLline, swILLing, swIMMING.
trILLing, trILLion, trIMMING, triPPing,
troLLOpy, twILLing.
whERREts, whIFFing, whINNied, whINNies,
whIPPing, whIRRIing, whIZZing, wrAPPage.

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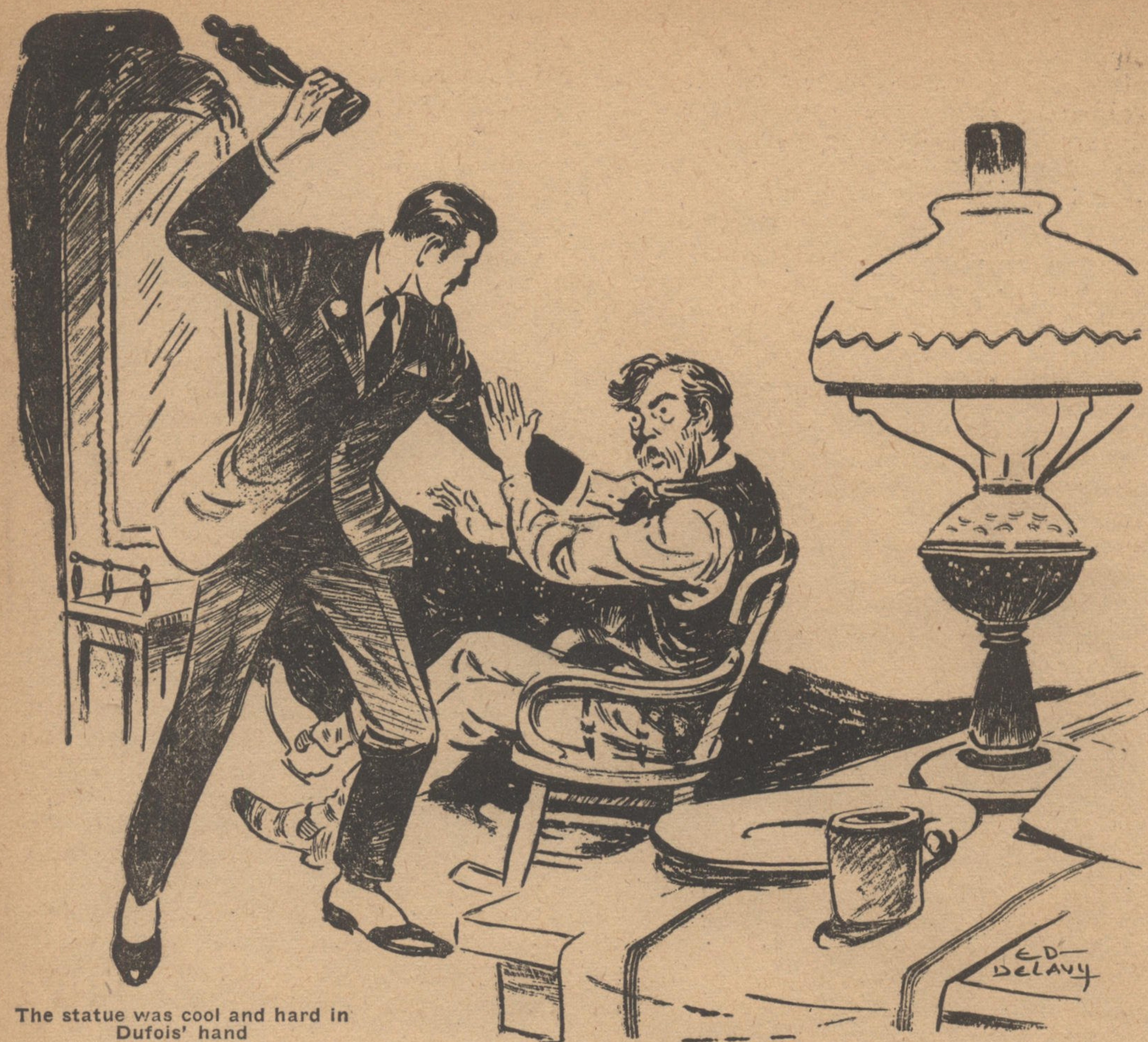
anOURous, arTisTic.
beARwARD, blINDing, blINKing, brINDing.
chINKing, chINsING, clINKing, coNTEnts,
coRAL-Rag.
diAStase, diStaste, drINKing.
faINTing, feINTing.
guILTily.
joINTing.
naILfile.
obTEctED, obTEsted.
paINTing, paTEntED, poINDing, poINTing,
prINKing, prINTing.
saINTing, slINKing, stINKing, swINKing.
thINKing, toURnURE, triAXIAL, twINIING.
unIAXIAL, unTEsted.
whEAt-EAR.

INDEX 36-48

abETmEnT.
coNSeNtS.
frEShEnS.
heADbAnD, heADlAnD.
imPRoPeR, inTErtIE.
meRCuRiC.
nuTHaTch.
ovERbEaR, ovERhEaR.
plANTain.
shOTbOIT.
taIGhInG.
unPEoPIE.
weiGHInG.



COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE
WINGS OF THE DARK ANGEL
A Gripping Complete Mystery Novelet
By WILLIAM HOPSON
AND MANY OTHER EXCITING CRIME STORIES



THAT WELL-GROOMED LOOK

By RAY CUMMINGS

It looked as though nobody could ever discover the slip-up in George Dufois' perfectly-planned act of murder, and yet—

WITH his pearl gray fedora hat set rakishly, and his natty rain-coat over his arm, George Dufois walked rapidly along the hot and dusty road. Beside him, the drab expanse of Snakeroot Flats stretched out in the darkness, a vague monochrome of brown. A few squat and ugly trees stood here in the gloom along the road like little misshapen dwarfs.

What a place to live! And Alton Kane was rich, or at least comfortably well off so that at sixty he had no need ever to

work again. That was possibly, of course, because Kane lived alone, did all his own work, spent almost nothing. No wonder these ragged, ignorant natives around here—what few of them there were in the lonely, desolate region they called Snakeroot Flats—considered Alton Kane an eccentric miser.

Young George Dufois chuckled to himself now as he thought of it. He had heard the vague talk that Kane was rolling in money; that he kept his gold in the house. There were stories that at

night he got it out of its secret hiding place and gloated over it, clinking the gold coins, riffling them through his bony fingers as he cackled with lustful laughter. The natives of Snakeroot Flats had seen that sort of thing in the movies.

The set-up was perfect! What was more reasonable than that on a dark and gloomy night like this, some crook who had heard such stories would come here.

A tiny feel of premonitory raindrops made Dufois hastily don his voluminous, handsome raincoat, and he quickened his pace. He was almost there now. Ahead of him he could see a single, winking yellow light which was one of the windows of Kane's cottage. Then he reached it and went through the rickety front gate.

Kane's bleak front yard was a shabby little rectangle of brown dirt without a flower or a shrub to decorate it. The front porch was just a vacant platform up three steps and under a sloping roof. The whole place gave Dufois the creeps. There wasn't even a gravel path up to the porch where there should have been an entrance walk and flower beds.

It occurred to George Dufois then, what an incongruous figure he made in such surroundings. George Dufois with his fastidious, well groomed look, that perfection of every little detail in his personal appearance on which he prided himself. And yet this was the home of his grandfather.

The front door of the house was unlocked. Dufois entered quietly. In the dim hall as he took off his raincoat and hat and put them carefully on a table, he could see that the living room doorway was partly open. Kane was there by a table where the telephone and big oil lamp stood in a litter of books, newspapers and magazines. Kane was mashing out a cigarette in an ash tray, and rising to his feet. Then he heard the front door close, and he called out:

"Who's there?"

"It's George," Dufois said. Surprisingly, his voice sounded strained, almost unnatural. He hadn't realized how tense and excited he was, now that the time actually had come. He steadied himself. Maybe he wouldn't have to do this thing. Maybe old man Kane would listen to reason.

"The bus made a quick trip," Dufois said.

"Come in, George. Glad to see you."

QUIETLY, holding himself calm as he could, Dufois went into the little old-fashioned living room. It was comfortable enough, if you liked that sort of thing. Kane's wife had bought the furnishings at least forty years ago. A big mirror hung on the wall, and instinctively Dufois glanced at his reflection.

He noted his sleek, carefully combed hair, his natty collar and tie, his perfectly tailored, gray-blue striped suit, with the small carnation in his button-hole. A tip of gray-blue bordered handkerchief just showed from his upper pocket, and his pearl-gray spats and glistening, modish shoes were just right. How modernly sophisticated, and how out of place he looked here!

"Oh, you look all right," Kane said tartly. "Forget yourself for a minute. Did you stop in at the bank for me?"

"Yes," Dufois said.

He had been coming out here each Saturday to spend Sunday with his grandfather. Kane had asked him to stop at the bank in the city and bring a hundred dollars from Kane's safe deposit box. He had written the bank, giving Dufois access to the box.

It turned out to be an interesting visit. Kane didn't believe in bank accounts. He never used checks. In the box there had been just a hundred dollars in cash. There had also been a very nice stack of stocks, non-transferable bonds, mortgages, deeds, and Kane's will.

"Good," Kane said. "That hundred will run me quite a while."

Dufois had settled himself comfortably in a shabby old easy chair. He crossed his legs, but somehow his tenseness made his dangling foot shake so that he put it back to the floor.

"I lost my job at the haberdasher shop," Dufois said suddenly. "I thought you'd be interested."

"You did, George? Too bad." On Kane's thin face with the scraggy thatch of iron-gray hair above it, there was a sarcastic look. "You held it two months. That's about a record, isn't it?" He was holding out his hand for the hundred dollars which Dufois was taking from his pocket. "Too bad—anyway, I'll take my hundred, if you don't mind."

Dufois handed it to him. Miserable old skinflint—Dufois felt a sudden rising anger at the sarcastic grin of the old man.

"Thanks," Kane said as he pocketed

the money. "So you lost your job?"

"They didn't appreciate me," Dufois said. "But I told them where they could get off."

"I bet you did. And what are you going to do now, George?"

Now for it! Make it brief and to the point! Dufois sucked in his breath.

"I'm going to open a shop of my own," he said. "I—well I was pretty sure you'd lend me the capital. Ten thousand—I could do it on that."

His words came now with a rush: "Oh I know you don't have much cash on hand ever. But that wouldn't be necessary. Your endorsement of my note at the bank—I asked them and they said that would be okay. You'll do that for me, won't you?"

Dufois seemed to have stopped breathing. He could feel his pulse beating in his throat. It seemed as though all his world hung on the old man's answer.

"Take a chance on you for ten thousand dollars?" Kane said. "Don't be a fool, George. Of course I won't!"

"Why—why not? I—"

"My hard-earned money—it's safety depending on you? Wouldn't it just please your ego to death! I can see you strutting up and down in your own shop! I suppose you think you'd be a sort of walking advertisement—what the well dressed man is wearing, eh?"

"I—I'd make money—"

The sarcastic grin on Kane's face suddenly faded. "You want some plain words, George?"

"Why—I—"

"You haven't got the brains to make a go of anything! You haven't got any thoughts at all—except how you look!"

"Why—you—"

"A rack to hang clothes on, that's you! A conceited—"

"You—"

Stingy old buzzard! Okay, he was asking for it!

"A conceited ass, without the nerve to do anything but admire himself in the mirror! And you think I'll risk ten thousand on you?"

No nerve! He'd find out quick enough! Dufois was out of his chair. He heard himself muttering, "Okay, so now we understand each other." The lamplit room was a dim blur to Dufois, a swaying phantom of a room in which there was just the vision of the old man seated in a chair with that silly grin on his face.

That and the gleam of the little white marble statue with the onyx base that stood on a pedestal here beside Dufois.

"George!" There was a sudden wonderment, a startled look on the old man's face and a terrified quaver in his voice. And then he was really frightened. He was trying to get out of his chair but he had no time. The statue was cool and hard and sleek as Dufois grasped it.

And then he crashed it down. The cracking thud on Kane's head was horrible. His gasping, gurgling cry was horrible. There was just a sickening, blurred horror over everything as the statue clattered on down to the floor, and Dufois staggered back and stood reeling, panting.

Then in a moment his head cleared. In the old rocker, the body of Alton Kane lay slumped, with arms hanging limp and the ghastly crimsoned head dangling sideward with contorted face, goggling mouth and staring dead eyes.

BUT the thing was over! It had to be done, and it was done. There was a shuddering fear inside Dufois that turned him cold. But with it, a slow, sure triumph was mingling. Everything was all right now. His pressing debts, his tailor who already had started suit to collect his bill—how easy all that would be now!

No doubt about it, in a few months he'd open a shop of his own. How nice it would be, meeting Vivian at the theatre after the matinee, taking her to show her his place of business. Things would be different with Vivian from now on.

That sight of old man Kane's will in the deposit box had verified everything Dufois hoped. A quarter of it to George Dufois, and three-quarters to Dufois' crippled sister in Spokane. Which was the same thing, because Ellen would do anything that her brother George wanted her to do.

Dufois jerked himself out of his roaming thoughts and looked at his watch. He had calculated everything carefully, in case he had to do this thing, and he mustn't make any errors now. In five minutes he would call the police, tell them he had just arrived here and found Alton Kane lying in his chair, dead.

Actually Dufois had gotten here from the bus terminal in town, in just ten minutes. It was a full half hour's walk, anyone would agree to that, even if you

walked quickly. Luck had been with Dufois, as he had hoped and planned. A passing tourist on the main highway had lifted him the two miles, and it hadn't taken over three minutes.

Now that unknown driver was gone. No one knew about him, nor did he know anything of Dufois. It was as though every circumstance tonight had been conspiring to set the stage just right.

The statue, with blood on its base, lay here on the floor. Dufois wiped it clear of any possible fingerprints. Then carefully he took from Kane's pocket the little wad of bills that went to make up the hundred dollars which he had brought from the bank to Kane. He would tell the police all about that, of course, and hand them the money. It would be a neat touch of complete honesty.

Now he was ready to telephone. As he passed the big mirror on the wall, again he glanced at his reflection. Then he moved closer, inspecting himself carefully. Nothing was wrong with his appearance. He smoothed his hair a trifle, though it didn't need it.

The flower in his buttonhole, the gray-blue border of the handkerchief, all were perfect. He tightened his blue-toned, four-in-hand tie just a little. Nothing wrong. No one, looking at him, could possibly imagine that a man so faultlessly attired could have just been engaged in a deed of violence! Quite the opposite. He looked calm, unruffled as always. The perfect well groomed look.

George Dufois turned from the mirror, went to the telephone and in a voice that sounded breathless with startled horror, gasped out the news that he had just found Alton Kane lying there—murdered!

"I came out from the city by bus, Sergeant," Dufois was saying quietly. "I walked from Grafton out here—I suppose it took me about half an hour."

The police had arrived from Grafton in a small car, in response to Dufois' message. There were four uniformed men and this Sergeant McFee. He was a ruddy, chubby, good natured looking fellow. He must have been impressed by Dufois' appearance and poise, because he seemed very friendly and sympathetic as he questioned Dufois about his relationship to the dead man—and about little crippled Ellen, the only other relative.

"Guess you ought to wire her," McFee had said.

"I thought I'd telephone," Dufois told him quietly. "Poor Ellen—it'll be an awful shock to her. She was terribly fond of her grandfather."

The policemen were tracking around the cottage, examining things. They had readily discovered that the marble statue was the murder weapon, which of course was obvious. Also that it bore no fingerprints. There were no suspicious fingerprints apparently to be found.

"When you arrived," the sergeant said, "you say you found the front door unlocked?"

"Yes. Closed, but unlocked. It's always that way, Sergeant. You see, I usually come out on Saturdays. This morning, my grandfather phoned me. He wanted me to stop at his bank and bring him some money from his safe deposit box."

WITH a faint, grave and deprecating smile, Dufois produced the hundred dollars. "Here it is, Sergeant. It doesn't belong to me. I suppose it's proper for you to keep it as evidence or something."

McFee was palpably impressed. And that led quite naturally to what McFee and his men perhaps had already heard, that Alton Kane was eccentric. There were those rumors that he had hoards of wealth here.

"Of course, that's ridiculous, Sergeant. My grandfather was a frugal man, eccentric, yes, but he wasn't a crackpot. By what he said, he'd run out of cash, that's why he wanted me to bring him this money."

"But some killer might have heard that sort of thing," McFee agreed.

Everything was going just right. "When I arrived," Dufois resumed easily, "I just walked in. I remember I took off my raincoat and hat and put them on the hall table. I called out to Mr. Kane, but he didn't answer."

"The living room door was open and I could see the light in here. Then I came in and saw—well, what you see now, Sergeant. I was shocked, horribly frightened. I didn't touch anything. I remembered not to do that, so I just called you at once."

"I see," the Sergeant nodded.

They were in the lamplit living room, where the gruesome dead thing still lay crumpled in its chair. Somebody had gotten a sheet from the bedroom to

shroud it.

"Sergeant Mac, c'mere a minute, will you?" It was one of McFee's men calling from the front porch. There had been the sound of some man arriving out there. His voice was audible now, murmuring to the policemen.

"Wait here a minute," the Sergeant said.

Dufois stood leaning against the living room wall, smoking. From where he stood he could see out onto the front porch. The little porch light was on. It was Kane's only close neighbor who had arrived. Dufois knew him, a big rawboned, uncouth fellow named Peter Jackson.

This man farmed a small piece of land which Kane owned, about half a mile away. What was he doing here, talking so excitedly? It sent a little thrill of fear through Dufois. Only a fragment of what he was saying floated in to the living room: "I heard your car siren when you come," Jackson said. "So I come over to see what was the trouble."

Then the Sergeant shot him a question, and their voices fell lower. And in another minute McFee had come back. It startled Dufois still further, because now the pleasant-faced Police Sergeant was very grim. His gaze seemed to dart at Dufois, eyeing him suspiciously.

"What—what is it, Sergeant?" Dufois said.

"Seems Mr. Kane telephoned to Jackson tonight," the Sergeant said. "Wanted him to come over here and talk business or somethin'. It was just startin' to rain, so Jackson didn't come. He said he'd come tomorrow."

What an escape for Dufois! His mind roved back. When he had arrived, he had seen Kane just rising from the table by the phone. Evidently he had just hung up. If it hadn't been for the rain, Jackson would have come right then!

"So we know pretty well what time the murder was," McFee was saying. "Kane was alive when the rain started. You must have come awhile after that—after the killer had beat it."

"Oh yes, of course," Dufois said. His

heart was racing. The Sergeant was staring at him grimly, with a gaze that covered him from head to feet.

"Didn't rain long," McFee was saying.

"No—no, it didn't. I remember now, I was on my way here. I got a little wet, not much." Keep talking! Don't let him see you're frightened! "I guess my rain-coat and hat are about dry by now. They're out in the hall." Dufois tried to keep from stammering.

"Kane was alive, talkin' to Jackson," the grim Sergeant reiterated. "An' right after Jackson and he hung up, the rain came like a cloudburst for a little while. You came maybe twenty minutes after that an' you phoned us right away, you say."

"Yes—yes, of course I did. I—"

"Guess you haven't been out on the porch an' noticed Mr. Kane's front yard," McFee retorted. "An' all around the house. Just pretty solid with sticky red mud."

The Sergeant lifted one of his feet, his heavy square-toed shoe with the brown-red wet clay of Snakeroot Flats sticking to it.

"Nobody could get in here since that rain without trackin' up the place with mud," McFee said. "An' when we came, I noticed there wasn't anything like that! Them's nice shoes you got on, Dufois! It just wasn't physically possible for you to get into this house without leavin' mud tracks on the porch an' inside here! An' have your shoes so nice too!"

The room was whirling around Dufois. His glance went down to his modish shoes, encased in their pearl-gray, immaculate spats!

"Kane was still alive when that dry red clay outside began turnin' into mud," McFee was saying. "You couldn't have come since, so you were here then! We've got you, Dufois, no argument on that!"

George Dufois' wild gaze, like the gaze of a trapped animal, roved around the room. And it caught the big mirror, where the reflection of himself stared back at him—his modish figure, so fastidious, so immaculate, with that damnable well groomed look!

Coming Next Issue: Bill "Baron Munchausen" Tolliver tackles one of the most difficult cases of his career in **A DOG'S LIFE FOR THE BARON**, an exciting crime yarn by Curtiss T. Gardner in which the intrepid insurance investigator takes the trail of loot and murder!



"Hey!" one of the guerrillas suddenly shouted. "This cop ain't got a gun!"

MURDER TRAIL

By ANTHONY TOMPKINS

When a kid swipes a gun from Hank Carmel of Homicide, it leads Hank right to the solution of a grim crime mystery!

SERGEANT HANK CARMEL, Homicide Squad, tilted his hat to the back of his head, placed both feet comfortably on the edge of his desk and leaned back to study the State Police reports on the hijack murder which had taken place upstate. But like many of those things, the crime had its roots in New York. Here it had been plotted, here the loot of nylon stockings would be disposed of. So, the job was draped

across the sturdy shoulders of Homicide. Someone opened the office door. Carmel didn't turn around.

"Yes?" he said. "What is it?"

The answering voice seemed to come from the region of the floor, and was shrill.

"Please, mister, is your name Sergeant Carmel?"

Carmel swung around, brought his feet to the floor with a crash, and while in

this sitting position found himself eye to eye with the scrawniest boy he had seen in a long time.

The boy weighed no more than sixty pounds. Still, he looked healthy enough, and he was scrubbed as if on his way to Sunday School. A cap adorned his head but red curls popped out all around it. His eyes were azure blue and a bit frightened. He prodded the unyielding floor with one shoe, scuffing the toe of it more and more with each prod.

"Well"—Carmel grinned—"don't tell me you're wanted for something?"

"No, mister," The boy shook his red head. "I ain't wanted. The man in front—the one back of the big desk, he said I should come and see you. He said I wasn't to be scared, and that cops ain't all bad."

Carmel pursed his lips. "Such a statement, coming from just another cop, can't be seriously taken, son. We've some bad ones among us."

"You ain't," the boy said promptly.

"Well, thanks." Carmel feigned a punch at the boy's chin. "Now suppose you tell me what's on your mind? My job is to serve men like you. You're a taxpayer—or will be some day. Let's have it, kid."

"I want to see my pop."

"Ah-ha!" Carmel said. "Now who is your pop?"

"Jack Kirby!"

The boy's face grew pinkish for a moment. Then it turned as stern as a twelve-year-old boy's face can be stern.

Carmel whistled softly. "So you're Jack Kirby's son. We sent a man to hunt you up, to make sure you were taken care of. Now look, son, maybe your pop doesn't want to see you."

"Maybe he does too. I know I want to see him. He ain't bad, even if you do say he killed Andy Graham."

CARMEL sighed, put an arm around the boy's shoulders and pulled him a bit closer.

"Now see here, Al—yes, I know your name—we don't say your father killed Graham. He says so himself. I guess maybe he did, too, but we don't regard him as a criminal. You know what he went through, don't you?"

"Yes, sir. He was torpedoed and lived for nineteen days on a raft and everybody else with him died and Pop got

home safe."

"That's right. But not entirely safe, Al. You see, I—"

Carmel stopped talking and wondered how to tell a twelve-year-old boy that his father was a homicidal maniac.

"You gonna let me see him?" young Al asked. "Or do I have to see somebody bigger'n you?"

Carmel laughed. "Oh, no. No, I can take care of it. But first I've got to ask your father if he wants to see you. That's the rule. Stay right here. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

He drew in a sharp breath as he walked slowly down the long corridor to the cell room. The turnkey opened the main gate.

"Bring Kirby into the visiting room," Carmel said.

Kirby soon appeared. He was a burly man with a thick neck and big arms. His face was wholesomely tanned and his eyes were deep-set and harrowed. He wore a pair of work pants, work shoes and the leather jacket he always wore when he drove trucks. He sat down without saying a word, without changing the anguished expression on his face one whit.

"Your kid is here," Carmel said. "He wants to see you."

Kirby's eyes changed then. They seemed to acquire life in them. He half arose, groaned, and sat back again wearily.

"No use, Sarge. I don't want the kid to see me in here. I don't want him to ever know that his old man is crazy. A crazy killer."

Carmel nodded. "I guess I can't blame you much. Did the psychiatrists show up yet?"

"No. Why should they hurry? I can't harm anyone else. And why should I go all through that again anyway? I know what the war did to me. It's happened to a lot of us guys. Better guys than me—only they never got to the stage where they killed a man."

Carmel took out a pack of cigarettes, extracted one and handed the rest of the pack to Kirby.

"The kid must have known about those dreams of yours," he said.

"No—no, I made sure of that. I made him sleep in a room at the end of the flat, and I locked myself into my room every night. So when those dreams came, he

wouldn't hear me yelling. They were letting up—some—before this happened."

Carmel puffed on his cigarette for a full two minutes. He looked at Kirby through the haze of smoke.

"It's tough," he murmured. "Even tougher when you have a kid like Al. You should have let the Maritime Commission hospitalize you and keep you there."

Kirby jerked his head up and down nervously. "Sure—and leave my kid with his mother's folks to be raised any way at all. To be worked to death, be half starved. Don't you think I know all about them? My wife died three years ago because of an illness she contracted when she was a kid about Al's age. No, I couldn't see it. I was willing to take my chances so long as I could be with him."

"It might have worked too," Carmel said, "if you had laid off the booze and stopped hating Andy Graham. From the reports we have, you were always okay until you drank, and then something hit you. Turned you into a killer. Like night before last when you knifed Graham. You hated him so much. Why?"

Kirby closed his eyes slowly.

"We've been all over that, Sarge," he said bitterly. "When the war came, I had a nice little trucking business with Graham as a partner. He agreed to carry on while I went into the Maritime. And he promised to take care of the kid. So what happens? I find he sold out the business, made a lot of dough, and kept every dime. He licked the kid two or three times when he asked for money—because I told him when he needed anything to see Graham."

"Tell me about what happened to make you blow your top night before last," Carmel said.

"Sure, why not? I haven't a thing to hide. I got a job when they let me out of the hospital. Working for McKinney, driving one of his eight-wheelers. It paid well. I was doing okay and saving a little so I could buy my own truck again. Then Graham put his oar in. Somebody swiped two cases of goods off my truck. Graham said they never were swiped at all. I just took them. He also said I was going into business for myself and give McKinney competition."

"And McKinney fired you," Carmel said. "I know the rest of it. You got

drunk. Graham came into the café with a friend and took a booth. You worked up a good rage, went into the booth and stabbed him with a swivel knife."

KIRBY pressed a hand hard against his forehead. "I don't remember," he said. "I don't remember a thing except that I wanted to beat Graham up. Everything he'd ever done to me came back in one big lump. I hated him. Sure, I killed him. I must have. With his own knife. He was using it to defend himself with. So his pal said. I took it away and shoved it into his heart. But I don't remember doing it. I was in one of those mental blackouts."

"I understand," Carmel said. "I'll send the kid away. And, Jack, don't worry about him. I'll see he's okay. I know a nice boy when I see one."

"They don't come any better," Kirby said, and his eyes glittered for a second in pride. "Thanks, Sarge. I feel a lot better."

Carmel went back to the office, pushed open the door and looked around. The boy was gone. Automatically his eyes darted to the shoulder harness which he had hung on the clothes tree in the corner. The harness was there but its holster was empty. Carmel let out a yell and stormed to the front of Headquarters.

"The kid?" Sergeant Mahoney, on desk duty, pointed at the door. "He went through there about five minutes ago like he was shot out of a gun."

"Out of a gun, my eye. *With* a gun! My thirty-eight. I'm taking a car. Be back as soon as I can."

Carmel raced around to the garage, took out a coupé and sent it rolling toward the slum area where Jack Kirby had made his home. He didn't know what the kid wanted with that gun, but if he was like his father there might be no telling what would happen.

Kirby lived on the top floor of a four-story, eight-family tenement block. Carmel ran up the steps, thinking a bit abstractly that he puffed more than usual, and that he might be getting old. He pounded on Kirby's door, stepped back, and smashed in the flimsy door.

The apartment was not badly fitted out. The living room furniture was standard mohair, old but scrupulously clean. The worn kitchen linoleum glis-

tened like the deck of a battleship equipped with a grouchy skipper. There were two bedrooms, one with two stout locks. When Kirby Senior, locked himself in for the night he made sure that when those bad dreams came he would stay inside the room. Or have a difficult time getting out.

But there were no signs of the kid. Carmel cursed softly. If the boy had decided to avenge his father and went after old McKinney, there would be repercussions that were bound to put Carmel on the longest and loneliest beat they could invent.

There was a light footstep behind him and he turned quickly, but he saw only a girl about Al Kirby's age. She had pig-tails and a mischievous smile.

"I know where Al is if you gimme a dime," she said in one breath.

"You bandit," Carmel grunted. "Okay, a dime it is."

She regarded him somberly for a moment. "Maybe I better ask for a quarter, mister, on account of Al has got a gun and you're awful worried."

"Where do you live?"

Carmel approached her slowly, not wanting to frighten the child. Not until he had a good firm grip on her arm.

"Downstairs with my grandma. She drinks."

"She must have fed you a pint of bourbon," Carmel said.

He lunged at her. She didn't move at all.

"Why did you do that?" she asked. "I wasn't going to run away."

Carmel held her tightly. "That's the truth, anyway. Not now you won't run. Okay, where is he?"

"Give me the quarter, mister. I won't say a word until you do."

Carmel dug a hand into his pocket, fished out a coin and put it into the palm of her hand.

"There—now talk."

"He went over to where Mr. Graham lived before he was killed."

Carmel tried to figure it out. Graham lived in a cheap apartment hotel. He had lived alone, so the kid wouldn't find anyone there to serve as a target. Perhaps, Carmel thought, the kid meant to vent his spleen by pumping bullets into Graham's furniture. Kids had done crazier things than that.

Carmel pushed the girl into the hall-

way, closed the battered door and gave up trying to fasten it shut. He had demolished the lock. The girl walked toward the steps. Carmel thought there was something odd about her. She was wearing stockings. Sheer, beautiful nylons which were sizes too big and fell wrinkled and haphazardly around her skinny legs. And nylons in this neighborhood were about as common as polar bears in Bermuda.

"Hey—you!" Carmel shouted.

THE girl gave one frightened look over her shoulder and ran. She went down those steps faster than a deer runs from a mountain lion. She was at the bottom when Carmel reached the third-floor landing.

He steadied himself, wished again that he didn't puff so much and decided to take one thing at a time. Just one at a time. Find the kid first, get the gun away from him, and then try to discover where that girl had got herself a pair of three-fifty nylons.

His car was still at the curb, which fact he construed as some minor miracle the way things were happening to him so far. He used the siren this time and swung corners on wheels that skimmed the pavement. He pulled up in front of Graham's apartment house with a jerk that knocked the wind out of him.

He ran into the lobby and found a bored super swabbing the floor. Carmel seized him by one shoulder.

"I'm the law. Did you see a kid, kind of skinny, wearing a cap?"

"He went up about ten minutes ago. What's he done? Murdered somebody?"

"Maybe," Carmel answered, and hoped he wasn't telling the truth.

He had to wait while the self-service lift crawled down. It crawled back up, too—as far as the ninth floor. Carmel pushed the door back, stepped into the illy illuminated hallway and started hunting apartment numbers tacked to the various doors.

He found Graham's. The door was not locked. He opened it slowly, noiselessly and held his breath. Perhaps this would be the end of the chase. He didn't know how much longer he could take it. Chasing an armed crook was simple compared to catching up with a twelve-year-old kid.

He closed the door behind him, took

the precaution of locking it and putting the key into his pocket. Then he began a room-to-room search. There wasn't a sign of the boy. In the bedroom Carmel found a locked closet door. There was no key in it. He smiled wryly.

"Okay, kid, come on out," he called. "You can't get away."

That drew no answer. He banged on the door as hard as he could and still there wasn't even a whimper. Carmel drew back, muttered savagely under his breath and attacked the door with a shoulder. He bounced back, tried again, and finally splintered one panel. He ripped out sections of wood, fumbled for the key which should be on the other side of the lock and found none.

He snapped on his flash and sprayed the interior of the closet with its beam. The kid certainly was not here. He exhaled slowly, snapped off the flash, then turned it on again. He had only half-noticed the two large traveling bags, but something sticking out of one of them attracted him. He blinked several times, for what he saw was rapidly becoming the bane of his existence. A woman's stocking dangled limply alongside the suitcase.

Carmel got the door open finally, pulled out the two suitcases and opened them. He whistled shrilly, for both were stuffed with brand-new nylons. He couldn't even hazard a guess as to how many pair were there. They were packed in thin boxes, each one bearing the trade name of "Ultrasheer."

Carmel hurried into the next room and dialed Headquarters. He asked one question.

"What was the trade name of those nylons which were hijacked last week upstate?"

His memory was not slipping. These stockings in a dead man's apartment were the same brand as those thousands of pairs stolen from a truck many miles from the city. He sat down slowly, trying to think. Trying to associate facts.

Graham had not been a crook—not to Carmel's knowledge. But then, he didn't know every thief or bandit. These suitcases might be jammed with part of the loot from that hijack job in which the truck driver had been mercilessly shot to death.

Carmel shoved both suitcases under the bed. Whatever they meant, he could

investigate later. Right now he had to find a crazy kid with a gun. A cop's gun. His gun! Nothing seemed more important than that.

The kid hadn't swiped the gun just for the sake of stealing something. It had been with a purpose. Graham had been his father's bitter enemy, but Graham was dead and the kid knew it. So whom did he think he had to go hunting for?

McKinney, the owner of the trucking firm where Kirby had worked and been fired the day he had encountered Graham and killed him? Discharged through the efforts of Graham. Maybe the kid had some crazy idea that McKinney was responsible, too.

Carmel headed for the North River side of town, hunted up McKinney's warehouse and garage and went inside. McKinney was big-time, operating a fleet of more than a hundred big trucks and contracting for all sorts of long-distance haulage.

THERE was a modern and well-fitted office in the warehouse. Two men, dressed like truck drivers, were lounging about. Carmel eyed a door marked "Private" and asked for McKinney.

"Who wants to see him?" one of the men demanded.

"Carmel—Homicide," the detective said. "And snap into it. Where is he? I have reason to think he's in danger."

One man disappeared into the other office. The second blocked Carmel, and looked as if he would get tough. McKinney came to the door of his private office.

"You're a detective?" he asked. "And I'm supposed to be in some sort of danger?"

Carmel shoved the driver aside and walked up to the owner of the business. McKinney was fifty-five or so, heavily jowled, with sparse hair and a fairly benevolent expression. He was dressed as if he owned the biggest bank in town, but then Carmel reasoned, there was probably a lot of money in this business.

"Have you seen anything of a kid?" Carmel said. "About twelve years old? Jack Kirby's son."

"Why, no," McKinney said. "Should I have?"

"The kid stole a gun," Carmel explained. "My gun, if you want it cold. He swiped it for a purpose. You fired

his father and started the ball rolling which ended in Andy Graham's murder. The kid may blame you."

McKinney gulped and looked around anxiously.

"Pete," he ordered one man, "get outside and watch for the kid. Any kid." He turned to Carmel. "Sergeant, what kind of a police force do we have where a twelve-year-old boy can steal a detective's gun? Certainly he's after me, and you can't reason with a child like that. I don't mind telling you, I'm frightened. He may hide anywhere, pop out and start shooting. Even if he can't shoot straight, there is a chance I'll be hit."

"My advice is to stay under cover, Mr. McKinney," Carmel said. "And about the boy's father. You did fire him, didn't you?"

"Of course I did. In the first place he was taking lists of my customers, intending to get their business when he had enough money to go in on his own. I suspect he stole freight off one of my trucks. Furthermore, when I discovered he was subject to spells where he became a virtual maniac, I knew he had to go. Imagine what would happen if he was driving one of my ten-wheelers and had one of those spells? He might kill a lot of people."

"You're right," Carmel admitted. "Just for the records, it was Graham who told you all this?"

"Yes. He thought it his duty to tell me. I had no idea Kirby was as bad as he turned out to be. He demanded to know where I'd received this information and I told him. I fired him the same day that Graham passed on his information. Now he's killed Graham, and his son is running loose with a gun. Of course he's after me."

"I'll keep hunting," Carmel said. "If I find him, I'll let you know."

He left the warehouse and went back to where his car was parked. He drove rapidly away, with one eye on the rear view mirror. He wasn't being tailed. He stopped in front of Graham's apartment house again and went up to the dead man's suite. He opened the door and left it open a crack, but he didn't go inside. He moved down the hallway to the fire stairs and concealed himself there.

He didn't have to wait long. A pair of well-known guerrillas appeared and

went straight to the apartment. They eyed the open door suspiciously. One went in, the other remained outside with a hand dug into his pocket until the first man called him.

Carmel tiptoed up to the door and stepped inside. He suddenly realized he was not armed. He stuck a hand into his coat pocket and barged toward the bedroom. The pair of crooks were busy hauling out the two suitcases from beneath the bed.

"Freeze!" Carmel snapped. "Stay down that way and keep your hands right on top of those suitcases."

He was praying that they wouldn't detect the fact that he was bluffing. He approached them warily. The first thing to do was disarm the pair. Then he would feel safer.

"Hey!" one of the men suddenly shouted. "This cop ain't got a gun!"

Both of them jumped to their feet. Carmel rushed them, but he had timed it a fraction of a second too late. He did send one man flat on the floor, but the other was on his feet and had drawn a gun. He used it as a club. Carmel was half stunned by the impact of the first blow, but he fought on.

The course of battle brought him close to the living room door. He gave the man nearest him a hard shove, backed through the door and slammed it. He managed to twist the key before the pair attacked.

CARMEL was as brave as the next detective, but he didn't believe in committing suicide. He knew they would shoot the lock off that door in a matter of seconds. He picked up the phone in the hall, dialed the operator and spoke tersely.

"This is Sergeant Carmel—Police! I want a flock of radio cars and the Emergency Squad. Fast! The address is Twenty-two-fifty-nine Waverly Avenue."

If the operator was in any manner doubtful as to the authenticity of the call, her doubts must have been punctured by the sound of guns. The lock flew out of the door and Carmel went sprinting for the one service elevator. If he could reach it, if it was still on the floor, he would have those men trapped long enough for some portion of the help he had demanded to reach him.

The elevator was there. As the car dropped, a bullet smashed through the door. Then he was going down slowly, but much faster than anyone could descend the steps.

By the time he reached the curb, a radio car howled along the street. It stopped and Carmel borrowed a gun from one patrolman. He sent both of them to guard the rear door. More cars arrived, then the Emergency truck along with Captain Burke's official sedan.

A search of the whole building began. Carmel stayed on the street explaining things.

"I've been working on the hijack case," he explained, carefully saying nothing about Al Kirby and the missing service pistol. "Acting on certain information I investigated the apartment of Andy Graham, the guy who was knifed the other night. Sure enough, I found two suitcases full of nylons. Same brand as those which were stolen."

"Good work," Burke complimented him. "You couldn't have gone wrong on the nylons. None with that trade name had been released for sale as yet. . . . Now, what about the boy who stole your gun?"

"Nothing but a prank," Carmel said. "You know how kids are. I—ah—I'll get him later. The tip on Graham was more important."

"Very well, Sergeant. But see that you get your gun back. It's bad enough when a criminal takes it away from a policeman, but a twelve-year-old boy—that's something!"

Carmel ducked, entered the building, and helped with a search that proved vain. The two gunmen had raced to the roof and got away. With them had gone the two suitcases of nylons.

Carmel decided it might not be wise to encounter Captain Burke at this particular moment. He departed via the back door.

Fifteen minutes later he was at Kirby's house again, but on the first floor this time and ringing the landlady's doorbell. She was a hefty, somewhat bedraggled specimen with a strong smell of whisky on her breath, and a slight weave in her walk.

"There is a little girl living in this building," Carmel explained. "Ten, maybe eleven years old. Pigtails, thin, and

wearing nylon stockings that she must have swiped somewhere."

"Ain't seen her." The door began to close. Carmel shoved his foot into it.

"Lady, I'm the police," he said.

She regarded him stonily for a moment. "Lots of kids around here who look like that. How do I know which one you mean?"

Suddenly it came back to Carmel. The little girl said she lived here with her grandmother who, she had explained with the frankness of extreme youth, drank. This woman fitted the description well. She was old enough to be a grandmother, and she certainly drank.

"I'm coming in," Carmel said. "Don't try to stop me or it will mean a pinch."

The woman turned her head suddenly. "Marybelle—run. Run!"

A door slammed somewhere. Carmel raced for the porch, down it and around to the alley. He encountered the pigtailed girl almost head-on. She wasn't running, and a look of intense worry on her face faded to serenity when she saw him.

"Now," he said, "suppose we have a little talk. Why didn't your grandma want me to find you?"

"She don't like cops."

Carmel grinned. "That, I realized two seconds after I saw her. Al Kirby told you to send me to Graham's house, didn't he?"

"Nope. He just said he was going there." She was shifting her weight from one foot to the other and seemed ready to make a sprint for it.

"What does your grandma do for a living, Marybelle?"

"She takes in boarders, when she gets any. That ain't often."

"Suppose you tell me where Al Kirby is now, eh?"

"Wasn't he over at Mr. Graham's?" she blurted.

"No—and I don't believe he went there at all. But he wanted me to go there. Why?"

"He didn't tell me nothing, mister. Please, if I keep talking to you, my grandma will tan me good."

SERGEANT CARMEL glanced down at her thin legs. She wasn't wearing the nylons now. "All right," he said. "You can run along. And here—a dollar for you. I'll bet that's more than Mr.

Graham gave you."

"No, it ain't," she retorted. "He gave me five dollars to get him a lot of stuff he needed. And some stockings too."

"Well, Mr. Graham was much richer than I am," Carmel acknowledged. "Run along now. I'll see you later on."

Carmel returned to his car, got in, and drove straight to McKinney's warehouse. He was instantly admitted this time. McKinney regarded him sourly.

"Well, did you get him, or must I stay locked up here for the entire night?"

"He's a smart one," Carmel said. "But I figure you are his target and he's bound to come here sooner or later, so I'm going to stick around. I'm sure you'll be glad to have somebody here to stop the slugs if the kid does open fire."

Carmel sat down and lit a cigarette. He leaned back comfortably as if he intended to stay a while. McKinney growled something, bent over the papers on his desk, and fiddled with them. He may have looked as if he was at work, but Carmel knew very well that McKinney's mind was on far more serious things.

Finally he looked up. "I can't stay here all night," he said. "If you intend to act as my bodyguard, come along with me. I'm going home."

"No," Carmel said. "Not until you produce the kid. And keep your hands flat on the desk, McKinney. If you reach into the drawer, I'll let you have it. I'm armed now. You might tell that to the boys you told all about the fact that I wasn't carrying a gun a little while ago."

"What do you mean by that?" McKinney demanded. "What's this all about?"

"Three things. Hijacking, murder and kidnaping. The first one will get you ten years, the second the chair, and the third life. I wouldn't want to face the prospect of being charged with three such crimes, Mr. McKinney. Where is the boy?"

"How do I know? And I think you're as crazy as that lunatic Kirby."

"Fine. I'll be content with that. Because Kirby isn't crazy at all. Furthermore, he did not kill Graham. You did—or had it done. . . . The hands, McKinney. Remember?"

McKinney brought his right hand into view again. Carmel's gun was centered on the man's chest.

"Lift the phone and ask somebody to bring the boy in here. If he has been

hurt, I'll personally beat the stuffing out of you. If he's dead, you're dead. Get on the phone."

"But he isn't here. You're making a terrible mistake!"

"Not now. My mistake was made when I believed that Kirby had killed Graham. The fact is, Graham helped to hijack a truck upstate. Only he pinched some of the stuff and you found out about it. You started a hunt for him and he holed up in the same tenement house where Kirby lived. Oh, you found him all right. You probably even convinced him that he was forgiven. He went to a café, escorted by one of your boys. Kirby was there. You saw to that. And Kirby had been given the works just before. Called a thief, a maniac, and fired. You knew he'd get drunk. He always did when things went sour. You knew he'd go berserk at the sight of Graham."

"Now see here—" McKinney said, blusteringly.

"Keep quiet," barked Carmel. "Kirby acted just as you were so sure he would. He went to beat up Graham. It all happened in a booth where nobody could see much. Your boy, with Graham, just hauled out a knife, stabbed Graham, and saw that the knife got into Kirby's possession. Kirby thought he'd killed Graham. You were having murder done neatly. A man would even admit he'd killed Graham because Kirby never realized what he was doing when he was in one of those spells."

McKinney said nothing, but he was careful not to move his hands. "The kid, McKinney," Carmel said. "Now!"

McKinney slowly reached for the phone. He dialed a single number.

"Bring the kid in here," he ordered.

"You're being smart," Carmel said.

McKinney shrugged. "You wouldn't be fool enough to come here alone. The whole place is probably covered. Yes, I have the boy. I was going to beat him until he understood that stealing and playing with guns is not for children. The rest of what you say is all nonsense, and I'll stand pat on that."

"Sure," Carmel arose, and backed toward the door. He stood where he would be shielded when it opened. "Stand pat on it and see how far you get."

"There is absolutely no evidence to prove a word of that insane story," McKinney insisted. "I'm not afraid of you."

Someone tapped on the door. McKinney called a command and the door opened. A husky man in a truck driver's cap led Al Kirby into the room. Led him through the door, and then shoved him hard. The boy lost his balance and fell.

CARMEL kicked the door shut. The truck driver was trying to figure out what was wrong with McKinney, but when he heard the door close, he guessed and spun around. Carmel clipped him on the jaw with his left fist.

"I'll use the barrel of the gun next time," he warned. "Stand over against the wall. McKinney, get up and join him. Both of you face the wall, and don't move . . . Al, come here."

The boy showed signs of having been beaten. He clung to Carmel's arm tightly. "Al, you got me into this," Carmel said. "You knew all along that McKinney was a liar when he said Graham had told him about your father."

"Yes," the boy said meekly. "But I ain't saying anything else, because I ain't a snitch. I won't say anything else."

"You don't have to, Al. Not another word. Now walk over to the telephone on that desk and dial the operator. Tell her that you want a lot of policemen to come here fast."

McKinney blurted something and started to turn. Carmel waved the gun.

"Stay put," he warned. "I did come alone, McKinney. I was afraid you'd do something to the boy. And that you'd get rid of the nylons you had hijacked. So just stand pretty, and it would be too bad if any of your boys happened to blunder in here because I'd have to shoot you first. You and your pal."

Carmel, with one arm around the boy's shoulder, told the whole story to Captain Burke a few moments later.

"I figured the kid knew more than he'd told me. You see Graham had chiseled on the hijack job. He learned that McKinney had found it out, and Graham went into hiding—downstairs in the

same house where Kirby lived. The kid knew it. He also knew that Graham hadn't been out of the house for days, hadn't used a phone because there isn't any, and therefore he couldn't have told McKinney about Kirby. McKinney only said that Graham had told him, so Kirby would get sore at Graham and provide the motive for the kill.

"Then he sent Kirby out—discharged. He saw to it that a driver who had been friendly with Kirby went along. This driver made certain that Kirby drank himself in that state where his mind snapped. Then Graham was brought in. That did it."

Burke nodded. "We've got enough on McKinney's boys so some of them will crack," he commented. "But how'd you ever get onto McKinney? No one has ever suspected him."

"He sent a couple of punks to Graham's address to pick up a lot of nylons Graham had kept," Carmel explained. "The two men we tried to take there. I didn't have a gun at the time, so I tried to bluff them. They didn't bluff because they knew I was unarmed and they said so. The only person who could have told them was McKinney."

"You'll get something out of this," Burke said. "A bar on your shoulder at least."

Carmel smiled and pulled the boy closer.

"I'll take it too, sir, although I'm pretty certain this lad deserves it more than I. He swiped my gun to make me follow him, and he led me a merry trail so I'd find the evidence to put things right. He wouldn't just say that Graham couldn't have told McKinney, because he'd be snitching on a girl friend's grandmother. The two kids had figured that, seeing that Graham was keeping under cover, he was wanted by the police, and the girl's grandmother would get into a jam. I'll bring Al home. As soon as possible, send Jack Kirby home. The kid earned that much."

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Bassett saw the Baron hit Rue squarely across the head and the watchman go tumbling to the floor

An Exciting Bill Tolliver Story

THE BARON

AS THEY crossed the alley from the Live-and-Let-Live Lunchroom toward the office building housing the Imperial Casualty Company's local offices, the sharp black eyes of Bill "Baron Munchausen" Tolliver sought his wrist watch.

"We're ten minutes early this morning," he remarked to "Baldy" Leigh in a tone of satisfaction. "Only eight-twenty now. Mehary won't have a thing to beef about—for once."

But the Baron was wrong. Imperial's

massively built District Claims Manager was waiting for them in the building lobby. With Mehary as he paced restlessly back and forth, was Hawley Sears, the slender, dark-haired member of the engineering department who specialized in elevator inspection.

Mehary fixed the Baron with an impatient eye. "Well, *finally*. If you put as much effort into your work, Tolliver, as you do watching the clock, you'd be one of the company's coming young men instead of what you are."

An Insurance Sleuth Takes the Trail of a



GETS A CABLE

By CURTISS
T. GARDNER

The Baron's jaw dropped in genuine amazement. But he summoned a grin as he pointed to the clock over the lobby cigar stand.

"Aren't you out in left field this morning, boss? Although I'll admit I've got a mind like a fine chronometer. Why when I was with the railroad, the dispatcher used to start trains by observing my schedule."

Mehary's heavy features darkened. "Just because the boys call you Baron Munchausen, don't you dare give me any

of your tall tales this morning."

The Baron was eying the angry executive shrewdly. "What's upset you, boss? Don't tell me we have still another liquor theft at Johnson and Snyder's."

"Worse," Mehary snapped savagely. "We've got two death claims to start the day. An elevator crashed over at Four-Thirteen South Main Street. That's a building owned by Owen Bassett, the department store man and we cover it under his General Liability policy. Don't bother to go upstairs now, Tol-

Killer—and Gets a Bit Too Close for Comfort!

liver. I want you over there with Sears right away."

The scene of the accident was within walking distance. "I made my periodic inspection of that elevator only a couple of weeks ago," Sears mused as they went along the street. "An antiquated outfit; no car gate contacts and no automatic interlocks. But the cables were in good enough condition. I don't understand how the car could have dropped."

THEY walked in silence for a moment. Then, "I told Bassett I wouldn't okay it next time as passing city requirements unless it was equipped with modern safety devices. Bassett is one of these self-righteous, holier-than-thou birds. Know him?"

"It's a pleasure I could omit without pain," the Baron said glumly. "Sometimes I wonder if the Sales Department has been instructed to solicit only unpleasant people. We have so many on our books."

"In addition to being a stuffed shirt," Sears said, "Bassett must use solder to keep his checkbook shut, he's that tight. You never heard anyone cry so hard at the prospect of spending some money on an elevator. But I stuck to my guns. I pointed out how he was getting a break in having the elevator classified lower than a passenger type, although it's used mainly for passengers. By rights, I told him, I ought to insist that the freight elevator have car gate contacts, too. The freight elevator is in as bad shape as the other. I told Bassett either he'd do as I said or forfeit his city permit next time I made my inspection."

The Baron knew that an arrangement with the City Building Inspector's office gave Sears the status of a semi-municipal employee. This was nice for Sears, since it augmented his salary from the insurance company by part of the city permit fee; it cut the work load of the City Inspector's force; and was a service to policy holders by making one elevator inspection serve two purposes.

"For a guy as tight as Bassett," Sears went on thoughtfully, "and after the argument we had, I was amazed when he asked me to add elevator collision coverage to his policy with us. I told him it was hardly worth while in view of the condition of the elevator."

"Very few policy holders carry it," the Baron agreed. "They figure it's too

expensive considering that all it pays is damage to the elevator itself. Most people carry elevator public liability against the possibility of large accident claims and let it go at that."

"Just what I told Bassett," Sears nodded. "But he insisted, so, of course, I notified Underwriting and they put it on."

They reached 413 South Main Street, an old brick building on the crummy fringe of the business section. A blue-clad cop, stationed at the door, let them pass when the Baron explained that they represented the insurance company.

The open elevator shaft yawned some thirty feet back along a narrow, dirty hallway. Large sections of the old-fashioned ornamental iron work which had formerly enclosed it, edges blackened and melted from the heat of a cutting torch, were stacked against the wall.

A rough-looking, barrel-chested man in shabby clothes stood looking down toward basement level where a group of men were still working in the splintered wreckage of the elevator car. He turned as the Baron and Sears approached.

"We're from the insurance company," the Baron said. "Looking for Mr. Bassett."

"Bassett's not here," the man informed him. "I'm the night man and temporarily in charge. I saw the whole accident."

The Baron took out his pocket notebook. "Fine. Suppose you tell us all about it. What's your name?"

"Rue—Stinson K. Rue. I was just getting ready to go off duty when the accident occurred. The day man, Edgar Oglethorpe, had just come in. Then a salesman showed up wanting to go to the ninth floor. Ed started up with him in the elevator. They got to about the seventh floor when the cables broke. Ed and the other guy were both instantly killed." The man shuddered. "What a lucky break I got, that it didn't fall with me when I was making my rounds last night!"

"The bodies have already been removed?" the Baron asked.

"Yes, the fire department cut them loose. Morgue wagon carried them off just a few minutes ago."

The Baron was scribbling in his notebook. "Was the passenger identified? You said he was a salesman."

"Y e a h. Isaac Dooda. Worked for

Johnson and Snyder. That's why he was going to the ninth floor."

The Baron glanced up sharply. "What have Johnson and Snyder got to do with the ninth floor?"

"They rent the eighth and ninth for storage."

"I wonder if our people know that," the Baron remarked pointedly to Sears. Then to Rue, "What's the occupancy of the rest of the building?"

"There's a job printing outfit on the ground floor," Rue said, jerking his thumb toward the end of the dirty hallway. "The second floor to the seventh are overflow storage for Bassett's Department Stores. Tenth and eleventh are vacant just now."

GLUMPLY the Baron glanced at Sears. "We've got a long climb if we're going to look over the hoisting machinery."

"There's the freight elevator in back," Sears said. He turned to Rue. "How about running us up?"

"Think it's safe?" the Baron said, doubtfully.

"It's okay," Rue said positively. "Three-four tons of freight went up in it just yesterday afternoon. Otherwise, you wouldn't get me on the thing."

"Somebody's neck will be in a sling on account of this," Rue remarked ominously as he led them across the heavy plank flooring of the vacant eleventh story to a ladder which led through a hatch to the roof. "The cops were talking about criminal negligence."

He drew a bunch of keys from his pocket as they went across the flat tar-and-gravel roof toward the small penthouse covering the elevator mechanism, then halted in amazement. "Why this lock's been busted!"

The Yale lock which secured the penthouse door had, in fact, been smashed; splinters of wood from the jamb showed around the rim. The Baron pushed the door open, bent close to examine the lock from inside.

"How come you didn't notice this last night when you made your rounds?" he asked.

"I don't come up here," the watchman said in a sulky tone. "Haven't been on the roof for weeks. I'm only supposed to make general rounds of the building."

"How often?"

"Once an hour."

"Is there a connection with a central station?" the Baron demanded. "Do you ring in each hour?"

"No. I just walk through each floor."

The Baron straightened. "Talk about negligence!" he remarked to Hawley Sears. "How do you like that? Here we pay out thirteen grand for three separate burglary losses on Johnson and Snyder and they have stuff stored in a place without even the simplest protective devices. Underwriting has already been thinking about canceling that account. They'll fling a fit when they learn about this." He turned again to Rue. "Who else has keys to this penthouse?"

The man looked blank. "Ed Oglethorpe had one. I suppose Bassett has others. I never asked."

Sears followed the Baron inside the penthouse. From a bulky bag he had been carrying he took a suit of coveralls, started to pull them on over his business clothes.

"Better not mess around in here, Tolleriver," he warned the Baron. "You'd get yourself all over grease."

Taking a flashlight from the bag, Sears went forward to the edge of the shaft, got to his hands and knees and crawled under the mechanism, shining a beam up at the drum from which the broken cables drooped loosely. He stayed there a moment, playing the light about him curiously. Then he backed out.

"There is quite a lot of metal dust on the drum and on the floor underneath. Looks to me as if that cable had been deliberately filed or cut with a hacksaw! But who on earth would do such a thing? What would be the object?"

"That," the Baron announced grimly, "is what we're going to find out."

"There was a guy upstairs last evening," Rue announced hoarsely. "Supposed to be on the eleventh floor, but he could have got up here and busted that lock."

The Baron pounced. "Who was the man?"

"I don't know. He had a note from Bassett saying it was okay to let him in. Ed ran him upstairs just before going off duty. I let him out more'n an hour later."

A voice shouted up through the shaft, "Rue! You're wanted down here."

The watchman turned.

"I'll bring the freight elevator back

for you in a few minutes."

The Baron said: "Never mind, we'll walk down. We have to take a look at the broken ends of the cables on the way. And say, let me have your key to Johnson and Snyder's place. I want to look around in there for a minute, too."

RUE hesitated doubtfully, but finally picked a key from his key ring. "This is it. I suppose it's okay, if you insure Johnson and Snyder." He departed toward the ladder hatch.

The Baron started into the penthouse. "I'll take a look around for myself," he told Sears.

Sears was stripping off his coveralls. "Better take these, Bill. You'll ruin your clothes otherwise."

The Baron found that his friend's advice was good. The timbering around the motionless machinery was coated with grease dripped down over a period of time. He reached where Sears had been, lay flat on his stomach for several minutes peering around with the flashlight. He saw metal dust caught on the greasy strands of wire rope still circling the drum; saw where a little pile of the stuff had sifted down onto the grease-blackened timbering. Something on one of the roof joists caught the Baron's attention—a circular mark as if something round had been set on the greasy surface. The Baron inched nearer and shone the light steadily.

"You were right, Hawley," he said as he crawled back to rejoin Sears. "Someone cut that cable deliberately. What happened to the elevator this morning was no accident—it was planned."

"But why?" Sears persisted. Suddenly he snapped his fingers. "Maybe Bassett did the job himself! That would explain his sudden urge to have collision coverage. He could have figured he'd collect enough from the wreck of the old car to pay for a modern installation. He's just tight enough to do something like that."

"Sounds far-fetched to me," the Baron said lightly. "I can't imagine anyone willing to commit a double murder—and that's what it would amount to—just to save a few dollars."

"Elevators cost more than just a few dollars," Sears said obstinately. "And you don't know what a mean cuss Bassett is."

"Take a good look at this broken lock,

Hawley," the Baron said. "It wasn't smashed open from the outside. See the way these splinters point? And these hammer marks on the jamb? Someone broke this lock from the *inside*. Bassett wouldn't have been likely to do that, do you think?"

Sears bent to look where the Baron pointed. "You're right about the lock, Bill. But couldn't Bassett have done that to divert suspicion? He has a key and might have wanted it to appear that some prowler had broken in to sabotage his elevator. He must have known the broken ends of the cables would show signs of having been cut."

The floor space leased by Johnson and Snyder was stacked high with cases bearing the stenciled label, *Pride of the South Liqueur*. There were no offices in connection with the storage space. The firm, proprietors of the widely known trade name, owned and occupied a luxurious building at the extreme eastern edge of the city.

The Baron pointed to the cases and grinned.

"One of life's little jokes," he remarked to Sears. "*Pride of the South* was originated and is bottled by Yankees." His sharp, leathery features grew suddenly bleak. "Imperial could be stuck for another four or five thousand bucks by anyone who cared to kick down a couple of doors, walk in and cart this stuff away. I'll report to Mehary first thing."

But by the time the Baron reached a telephone, he had something even more disturbing to tell the District Claims Manager.

"You'd better get our company attorney on the job pronto, boss. We were just leaving the building when the cops grabbed Hawley Sears. Hawley's going to be charged with criminal negligence for passing that elevator in his report to the City Inspector's office. They didn't say so, but I gathered that the complaint originated in that office."

There was dead silence for a moment. Then the receiver began to crackle and roar.

"Why the dirty political buzzards," Mehary raged. "Sounds like Ingleby's doings."

"Who's Ingleby?"

"An elevator inspector for the city," Mehary told him. "He's been after us for months trying to get Sears' job. As a

matter of fact, the so-and-so phoned me again not more than fifteen minutes ago, reminding me he still wanted the connection. He must have known Sears was going to be involved." The Claims Manager went off again into a raging tirade.

WHEN the executive's fury had somewhat spent itself, the Baron told him about the Johnson and Snyder storage.

"Shall I come back to the office now, boss?"

Mehary's explosive "No" almost deafened the Baron. "I want you to drop everything and concentrate on this elevator claim. Don't you see that this can be the most dangerous situation we've had in this territory for years? Think what damage adverse newspaper publicity could do to us. Why, I'll see that city crowd fry before I'll let 'em get away with anything. Drop everything, do you understand?"

"I heard you the first time," the Baron said quietly. "You needn't shout, boss." He pronged the receiver, shutting off the bull voice which was still bellowing at the other end of the line.

He thumbed the directory, dropped another nickel and dialed the number of Bassett's Department Stores, asking to speak with Owen Bassett. The man's voice which finally answered was mild and friendly.

"I've just been over the scene of your elevator crash," the Baron said, after introducing himself. "We understand, Mr. Bassett, that you gave someone permission last evening to visit the top floor of your South Main Street building. Can you tell me who the man was?"

Bassett sounded surprised and questioning. "Why, yes. I had a prospective tenant. Charles Ingleby is his name and I think he is connected with one of the city bureaus. But I don't understand this."

"Neither do I—yet," the Baron said. "I'll call on you personally, later, to discuss the whole affair." He hung up, left the pay booth and started walking briskly toward City Hall.

The City Building Inspector's offices were a barren rookery on the fourth floor of the old antiquated City Hall building. Inquiry produced Charles Ingleby from an inner office without delay. The elevator inspector was a thin, partially bald, youngish man with a sal-

low complexion and a toothy smile which the Baron tagged as both obsequious and insincere.

But Ingleby admitted readily that he had been at 413 South Main Street the evening before.

"I've been trying hard to get a connection with your company, Mr. Tolliver," he said with disarming frankness. "I'm planning to be married and city salaries are small, you know. When I found I didn't have much chance of getting the insurance job, I thought about going into business for myself on the side, handling elevator supplies and equipment. The top floor of Mr. Bassett's building seems a likely place to rent for a starter. So after work yesterday, I went over to measure up the space and see if it would fit my needs."

"You stayed there about an hour?"

"Yes. I found I had a lot of figuring to do."

"Did you go up on the roof while you were there?" The Baron's sharp, black eyes were fixed intently on the other man's face as he shot the sudden question.

Ingleby seemed bewildered. "The roof? Certainly not." Then a gleam of comprehension lighted his sallow features. "Oh, I see. You're thinking about that accident this morning? We can't understand how that elevator ever passed Sears' recent inspection."

"You fellows certainly learn about things quickly," the Baron remarked acidly.

"We should." Ingleby's tone was cold. "Since the wife of one of the victims happens to work in this office."

The Baron was instantly alert. "She does? Which victim?"

"The operator. Clara Oglethorpe works on our files."

"She is one of the people I'll have to interview sooner or later," the Baron said quickly. "I don't suppose she's around here now?"

"She's here," Ingleby said. "Come with me."

Clara Oglethorpe was shuffling papers at a desk in one of the large barren adjoining rooms. She was a shapely girl, although a trifle too much on the buxom side for the Baron's taste. Her coarse hair was a shade of yellow obviously artificial, and her eyelashes were greasy black with mascara.

"My company is very sorry, Mrs.

Oglethorpe, about the terrible tragedy —" the Baron began sympathetically.

"Of course you're sorry," she interrupted him. Her eyes were a cold slate gray. "You'll have to pay out plenty on account of Eddie's death."

"I wasn't thinking about money." The woman's callousness nonplussed the Baron. "I meant—"

"Well I was thinking about the money," she cut him short again. "It was a tough way for Eddie to go out and I'm expecting a generous settlement."

"You don't seem very much upset over losing your husband," the Baron rebuked her sternly.

SHE seemed genuinely surprised. "Upset? Of course, I'm not upset. Eddie and I haven't been living together for months." Quickly she added, "But don't think that means you won't have to pay, though."

The Baron adopted the girl's own hard-boiled attitude. "Why is it going to cost so much? Was Eddie one of the Georgia Oglethorpes?"

"Eddie wasn't anything," she retorted. "No ability—no ambition. That's why we got through. But you're still going to pay plenty."

"I know, we'll have to pay plenty. I see that you, at least, Mrs. Oglethorpe, are not lacking in ambition."

Her hard, slate-colored eyes wavered beneath his steady stare and shifted involuntarily toward the city elevator inspector.

"I want to marry Charlie," she muttered.

The Baron glanced up quickly, just in time to see the warning frown the man was giving the girl.

"You mean you two are engaged?"

"I told you I was planning to be married, Tolliver," Ingleby answered. "Clara's husband had refused to give her the divorce she wanted, but—"

"But now," the Baron finished for him, "you won't have to wait any longer."

On a ground floor corridor of the old City Hall building, fifteen minutes later, the Baron found a public phone booth and put in a call to Johnson and Snyder. Isaac Dooda, he was informed by the general manager of the liquor firm, had been entirely an outside man, one of their best. They knew of no particular reason why Dooda should have visited

the South Main Street building that morning.

"Unless," the manager suggested, "he might have dug up some large prospect and wanted to check on the amount of our product available at that location."

"There seems to be plenty," the Baron observed. "And we noticed that there are absolutely no safeguards against another burglary loss."

"Your people won't need to worry," the manager assured him. "We only use those floors as a sort of emergency overflow storage when we have an unusual accumulation of stock. Within another week we expect the place to be emptied again."

"That's exactly what we're afraid of," the Baron said dryly. "It could be empty in less than a week and Imperial might have to pay for it all."

By this time the Baron's restless mind was buzzing with ideas. After leaving the pay station, he headed back whence he had come, to Bassett's South Main Street property. A car with the name of a nationally known elevator manufacturer was parked in front of the building.

When the Baron walked in, he found that the fire department squad had finished their work in the wreckage of the fallen car and had departed. A man whom he judged to be a representative of the elevator company was busy making measurements around the shaft, while the barrel-chested night man, Rue, leaned against the wall watching him with interest.

"I need another look around that elevator penthouse," the Baron said. "It's dark in there and my friend took his flashlight with him. Do you have one I can borrow?"

"I could get into trouble letting you poke around like this," Rue complained. He seemed to have lost some of his earlier spirit of cooperation. "The police want things left as they were."

"I could phone Mr. Bassett, if you'd like," the Baron offered. "My company is simply trying to protect his interests, as you know."

"I'll call him myself," the watchman grumbled. "Wait a minute."

He walked to the end of the hallway and through the door bearing the name of the job printing establishment. He was gone about three minutes. When he emerged, he opened the door of a

closet set in the wall, picked up something and rejoined the Baron, holding in his hand a large new-looking electric lantern.

"Bassett said it was okay," he said. "He's coming over here himself and wants to talk with you. I'll go up with you."

"Nice light you've got," the Baron remarked.

"It's a dandy," Rue agreed. "The kind the boys used during the war. I bought it for myself at a sale of excess army stuff."

LACKING the protection of Sears' coveralls, and mindful of the plentiful grease, the Baron did not attempt to crawl beneath the hoisting mechanism as he had done before. He walked across to the mouth of the shaft, stood there shining Rue's lantern about him as he peered intently into corners. Even so, when he emerged again to the flat roof surface, he had acquired a smudge of grease across one of the cuffs of his clean white shirt. Surprisingly, he grinned as he examined the damage.

"What do you think you've accomplished?" Rue demanded in a surly tone.

The Baron's grin became broader.

"More than I hoped," he answered, pleasantly. "I've convinced myself beyond reasonable doubt that what happened this morning was no accident but a deliberate scheme."

The watchman's new hostility was undisguised. "That's what I heard the other guy say. It's crazy! Why would anyone have wanted the elevator to drop? If you ask me, it's just a stall to cover your pal's punk inspection job."

"I didn't ask you," the Baron said sharply. "But I'm glad to know your attitude. And to answer your question: I'm going to find out *why* the car fell, if it's the last thing I ever do."

They went down together in the freight elevator. Just as the car creaked to a stop at the ground floor, a middle-aged man in an expensively tailored business suit came into the rear corridor. He had sandy hair, neatly brushed, and wore an engaging smile.

Rue nodded. "Good morning, Mr. Bassett."

Bassett stepped up to the Baron. "You're the insurance man? Come on

up to my office. I want to discuss the accident with you."

A door in the dingy rear hall of the seventh floor, near the freight elevator landing, gave access to a tiny cubbyhole of an office. At the other side of the room, another door opened into the space used as storage for the department stores.

The little room contained massive office furniture, evidently discarded when Bassett had enlarged and refurnished his private office at the store. Bassett sank into a swivel chair, waved the Baron to a seat beside the big flat-topped desk.

"You know, of course, that I carried collision insurance on that elevator?" he said. He slid open the deep bottom drawer, brought out a couple of glasses and a bottle with a fancy label. "Here, Tolliver, have a little liquid refreshment while you bring me up to date on what your company intends to do for me."

The Baron shook his head. "Thanks, but coffee is my strongest drink."

Bassett poured a glass and slid it across the desk top to the Baron.

"I never like to drink alone," he said with his pleasant smile. "One little pick-me-up won't hurt you, Tolliver. This isn't whisky—it's a harmless apricot liqueur." He pointed to the bottle label. "Good stuff: Pride of the South."

Rather than argue with the policy holder, the Baron accepted the glass. Sears' description of the department store owner, he was thinking, seemed decidedly off the beam. Bassett was as agreeable and assured as he had ever encountered. And the store owner was right about the liqueur, also. It was satin smooth, although to the Baron, unused to intoxicants in any form, its effects were as immediate and powerful as pure alcohol would have been. He could feel it going straight to his head.

"The two floors above this are piled high with this stuff," he remarked inanely.

"I learned to like Pride of the South while I was vacationing in Florida last winter." Bassett smiled at him. "But tell me, Tolliver, what your company proposes to do for me about this terrible accident."

"There was no accident," the Baron said flatly.

Bassett's smile faded. "You don't mean you're trying to get out of paying?"

"Certainly not. Two death claims will have to be settled. And you're entitled to damages on your elevator regardless."

"Then what do you mean?"

The one drink had effectively loosened the Baron's tongue. He told Bassett everything he had done toward investigating the claims. Bassett listened in frowning concentration, then reached for the Baron's glass.

THE Baron held up a restraining hand.

"No more, please," he said with a grin. "If I had another I might float right out the window."

Bassett refilled his own glass.

"Then you think the two deaths were—"

"Deliberate murder. And there's one point which seems very significant to me. If someone weakened that elevator cable intentionally, he couldn't have been sure just *when* it would let go. The car might still have made several trips up and down before falling. Therefore, the intended victim must have been someone the murderer was sure would be on the car regardless. Which means the elevator operator, Oglethorpe."

Deep grooves ridged Bassett's forehead. "Then you believe the salesman was an unintentional victim?"

"Right. I believe Dooda was simply the proverbial innocent bystander."

Bassett thought that over for a moment. He drained his glass again.

"It looks as if this city man you mentioned, Ingleby, might be responsible. He had plenty of motive and quite unwittingly I gave him ample opportunity."

The Baron said slowly, "There's still another consideration, Mr. Bassett. The mind which would rig a trap of that kind, heedless of the casual public who might be caught in it also, impresses me as a gangster type. I have more than a hunch that your elevator crash ties in with Johnson and Snyder's storage. In fact, I know—"

From outside at the elevator landing, the excited voice of the night man interrupted him.

"Quick, Mr. Tolliver," Rue called urgently. "There's something here in the

freight elevator that you ought to see."

The Baron got up quickly. On legs which wobbled a trifle unsteadily, he crossed to the office door, went out quickly into the dimly lighted hallway. The elevator door was open. Not until he had walked right into the opening did he realize that the car was not there.

It was too late for him to save himself from plunging into the yawning hole. But his hair-trigger mind, trained to emergencies, told him instantaneously the only way by which he could possibly save himself. Even as he realized the dreadful death which awaited him, the Baron kicked himself powerfully forward, straight out into the black shaft.

His clutching fingers sought for and grasped the cable of the car that stood at the bottom of the shaft. They slipped on the hardened grease which encrusted the cable, but he clung desperately, all his strength concentrated on that one strand of deliverance. Then, as he slid down, the weight of his lean body plummeting him toward destruction, he managed to swing a leg around the wire rope and tighten it to serve as a brake to stay his swift descent.

Above him he heard Bassett's cry of horror and a hoarse shout from the watchman. Then, as footsteps pounded down the stairwell, he slid to a stop on the roof of the elevator cage at the ground floor.

Except for a small rim of ironwork the freight elevator was open at the top. The Baron squirmed through the opening, dropping lightly to his feet inside the car. He shot one swift rueful glance at his grease covered clothes, then, as the footsteps hammered nearer down the stairs, his lean jaw tightened into a dangerous line.

Still a couple of floors above him the Baron could hear Bassett yammering excitedly.

"He's bound to be dead. No one could fall seven stories and live!"

A door banged at the end of the hallway and Bassett erupted onto the landing, Rue pounding down at his heels.

"Who'd have thought that he'd walk into an open shaft without looking?" the watchman wheezed.

Bassett reached the elevator, his eyes searching above the cage for the body he expected to see. The Baron launched himself through the open door, ducked

(Continued on page 109)



Samson hit the man and knocked him backward

SAMSON'S VULNERABLE HEEL

By ARTHUR T. HARRIS

This Veterans Protective League sure charged for service—but a visiting vet supplied a payoff that certainly surprised 'em!

SAM SAMSON went over to a little canteen next to the piano. A vet with a scar drawn through the corners of his mouth was dispensing coffee, at five cents a cup, and sandwiches at fifteen and twenty cents.

"Coffee?" said the vet, his grin lopsided but friendly.

"Sure," Samson replied. "I'll take a ham on rye, too. Kind of missed my breakfast this morning."

"Never miss breakfast," the counterman advised. "That's a bad habit. May give you

ulcers—and I should know."

Samson stirred sugar in his cup. "Gee, that's too bad."

"Well," said the vet, slapping lettuce against the bread, "Mr. Smythe let me have this concession when he opened up. Not a lot of dough, but steady. Better than France, anyway."

Samson nodded sympathetically, forked over twenty cents, and picked up a magazine. Minutes later a muted loudspeaker paged him. Samson got up and went back to the receptionist's desk. She handed him a typed

version of his registration card and told him to report to Room Five.

The sign on the door said:

MR. C. EDWARD SMYTHE
CHIEF CONSULTANT
VETERANS PROTECTIVE LEAGUE

"Good morning," came the greeting as Samson knocked somewhat timidly on the paneled door and went in.

Smythe got up with outstretched hand, shook Samson's warmly, closed the door, and pushed forward cigarettes and an ash-tray.

"Morning," Samson replied, accepting a light from the monogrammed match book. "I guess I should—"

"Right!" Smythe nodded crisply as he took the proffered registration card. He sat there then, studying the man before him.

Samson for all his apparent uncertainty, did not feel ill at ease under the other man's appraisal. C. Edward Smythe was a stocky, dapper executive, with a pin-stripe blue serge, white broadcloth shirt and a blue silk cravat. His gaze was shrewd but not prying, and the diamond ring on his right hand bespoke success but not ostentation.

"Just get out?" Smythe said presently, after glancing over the card.

Sam Samson flushed. "Well, I guess I've been through a bit in the last four years. Got a little money saved up, but don't know what I want to do."

"Of course, of course," Smythe said understandingly. "Well, let's see your discharge certificate. We deal only with bona fide veterans, you know." He fingered his own discharge button in his lapel as he spoke.

SAMSON got out his wallet and withdrew a photostat. Smythe studied it carefully, made a couple of notations on the registration card, and handed it back with a deprecating smile.

"Now then, old man," he began, "here's our proposition. If you need advice on your insurance, Army or civilian, we charge you five dollars and give you exact verbal instructions. If your mustering out pay hasn't come in, we write a letter of inquiry to the proper channels. If you wish to buy a business, we make a survey, report the potentialities, and charge a fee based on our time spent in investigation."

Samson nodded slowly.

"On the other hand," Smythe went on, puffing on his pipe, "if you're not interested

in a business, we give you psychological and manual dexterity tests, to determine your individual aptitude. We charge for everything we do—we're not in business for our health—but on the other hand, this is the sole agency in town fully equipped to help veterans find their way back into civilian life.

"Some cities do this service without cost. Bridgeport, Connecticut, for example. That's fine. But we're in business here—legitimate business. Everything about my organization"—Smythe pounded his desk for emphasis—"is strictly legal. We don't sell stock in blue-sky oil wells; we don't finance business enterprises; we don't even sell chicken farms. You come in for consultation, and we advise. We charge, yes. But if you feel this interview isn't helpful, all it cost you was one dollar, and that doesn't even begin to pay the rent here, confidentially."

Sam Samson shook his head apologetically.

"Oh no, sir. I didn't come here to waste your time."

Smythe offered him another cigarette.

"I didn't think so. Well, according to your card, you were a master machinist. Precision work on airplane parts. Maybe you don't feel quite up to precision stuff at this time?" Samson nodded. "Okay, well we'll put you through the mill, see what you're now adapted to do. The charge is ten dollars, and it's worth it. . . ."

For the next three hours that morning, Sam Samson went through so many manual and psychological tests that his head swam. Pencil in sweaty fingers, he raced a clock as he jotted down answers to a simplified version of the Army General Classification Test.

In another room, he forced dexterity into once-skilled fingers, as he worked with blocks and slots to complete a manual puzzle. There was a brief session with a personnel man, who elicited the information that Samson had been hospitalized three months with battle fatigue.

He was told to return the next day.

Sam Samson slept well that night in his room at the local "Y." The tests had been mentally tiring. Besides, he thought the next morning, as he showed up at the offices of the Veterans Protective League, being a civilian again was a certain strain on a fellow's mind.

Samson barely had time for a cup of coffee at the little canteen before the loudspeaker paged him. Once again he was summoned to Room Five.

"Hello, there," said C. Edward Smythe as Samson entered. "Sit down. Have a cigarette." Samson took one. "Ah . . . Well,

frankly, Mr. Samson, I don't quite know how to begin." Smythe seemed embarrassed.

Sam Samson blew out smoke slowly.

"The tests," he said. "Not so good?"

Smythe appraised him with his shrewd brown eyes, then glanced through a sheaf of reports, mentioning several percentage figures here and there.

"Well—yes and no. That old dexterity of yours—" He shrugged sympathetically and left the words unsaid. "As for the psychological tests, I don't think you should attempt anything at this time which would involve any great mental exertion. Of course you're intelligent—don't get me wrong. And that's what I'm driving at. What you want is a little business, started with a small capital. Something in which you can find yourself again. Open up at ten, take a leisurely lunch, stay open at nights only Friday and Saturday, and then not late."

Samson's forehead frowned in thought.

"I think I know what you mean. Something like a little gift shop—perhaps a small stationery and greeting card store. Maybe with a side line of books. Or phonograph records, classical and popular."

Smythe was so pleased that he bounced up from his chair and clapped Samson's rather stooped back with an enthusiastic hand.

"Man," he said, "you took the words right out of my mouth! Y'know, I thought maybe I'd have to send you over to the post office, to apply for a civil service job. Doorkeeper, janitor, something like that. After all, that Purple Heart also gives you ten points preference with Uncle Sam. Instead, I want you to hang around town a couple of days, while I see if I can put you in touch with a good thing. I won't promise anything, but confidentially"—Smythe smiled expansively—"the Veterans Protective League has some pretty good contacts in this little burg."

"If we can't find an interesting proposition, I'll let you know in two-three days. I guarantee we'll get you placed. Meanwhile, old man"—Smythe shook the applicant's hand cordially—"just sit tight and keep your fingers crossed. The Veterans Protective League never fails!"

TWENTY-FOUR hours passed, and then twenty-four more. Sam Samson was beginning to have visions of running an elevator in some Government office building when the buzzer in his Y.M.C.A. room sounded.

Samson went out into the hall, picked up the house phone. Presently he left the

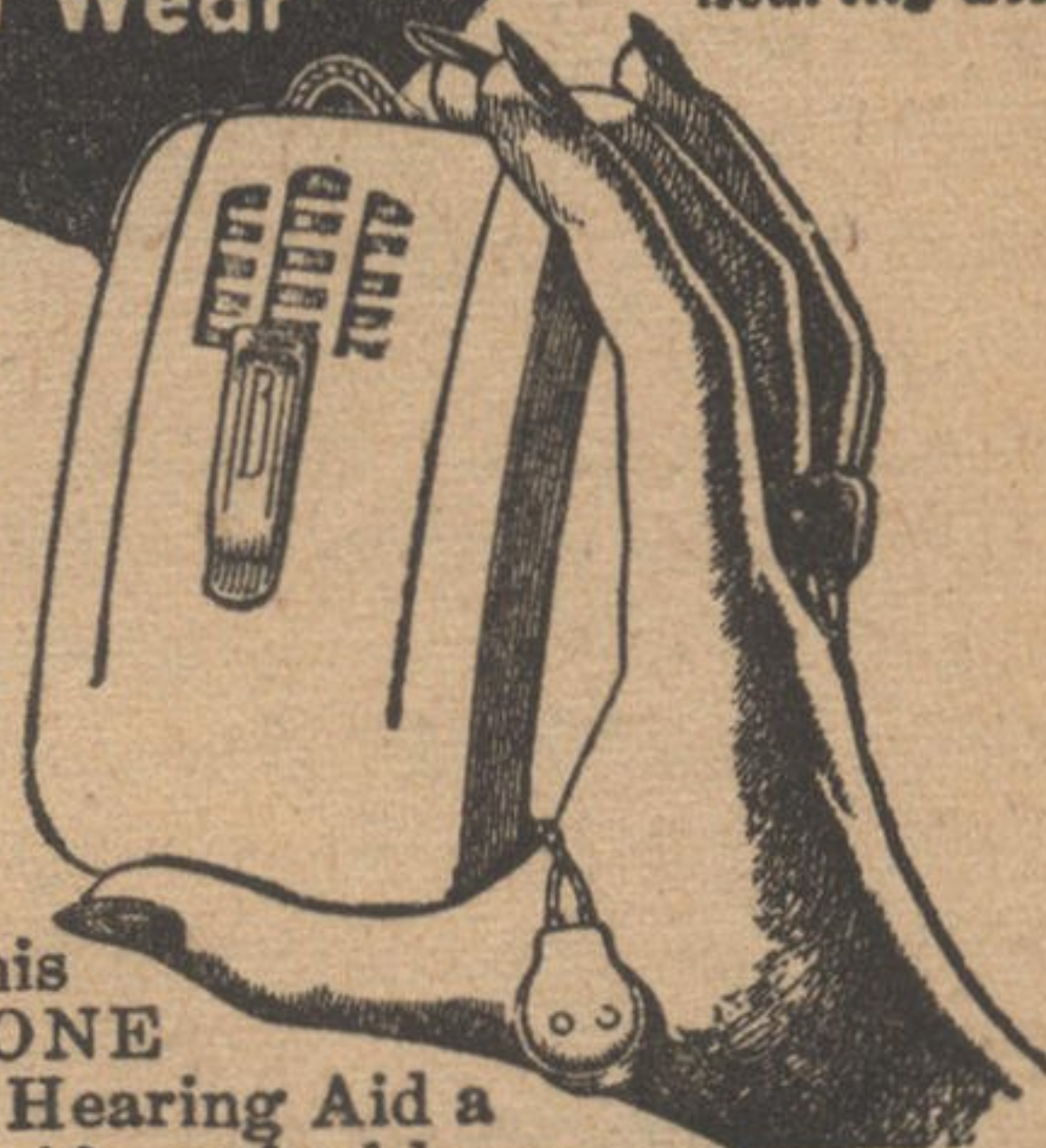
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Y.M.C.A., and in a short while was holding an animated conversation with an attorney in his private office two blocks down the street.

"As sure as I'm named Mike O'Hara," said the lawyer, nodding to his legal license on the wall, "I'm telling you this is really a buy. It's so good that you probably think I'm a liar and that I'm putting on an act."

Samson was the picture of discomfort.

"Not that," he protested nervously. "Certainly not that."

"Well," said O'Hara, mollified, "now that we understand each other, maybe we can do business."

He got up, went over to a filing cabinet, and came back with a sheaf of papers. Samson studied him with almost casual eyes. O'Hara was a big, husky man, but he carried his bulk well in gray tweeds. Probably a football man in his college days, Samson decided.

"This is it," O'Hara said, spreading out a portfolio of photographs.

They showed the exterior and inside appointments of a neat and attractively furnished stationery store in a suburban neighborhood. The stock on the tables seemed ample, the decorating scheme in surprisingly good taste.

"Cost you five grand," O'Hara declared, "and I hope you don't come out and look at it. My wife has time on her hands, and we were saying just last night that she might as well take it over herself. Belongs to a client of mine who bought a hotel in Florida and told me to sell the business for him."

Samson studied his fingertips.

"But I've only got fifteen hundred bucks saved up."

The attorney frowned, replaced the pictures in the portfolio.

"That's not so good. You'd have to finance. Ought to have more working capital to get by on. Well—" He got up, and put the file back in the cabinet. "Frankly, Mr. Samson, I feel a responsibility toward you. In fact, I feel the same way toward war vets in general."

"I don't doubt it." Sam Samson nodded.

"Right." O'Hara pursed his lips. "Well, of course, this store could be financed. On the other hand, there's no point in rushing into this proposition."

Samson sat there, not saying anything. It was apparent that he was weighing the deal from every angle. He got to his feet, then, with apparent decision in his manner.

"Let's take a look at the place," he said. . . .

The store was just as good as its photographs. A young woman of about twenty-five was waiting on several customers.

"This is the missus," O'Hara said, with a grin. "My dear, meet Mr. Samuel Samson. He's interested in the place. Think you'd like to work for him?"

The girl gave O'Hara an arch look.

"A friend of yours is a friend of mine, Mike," she retorted, and favored Sam Samson with a big smile.

Samson blushed. "Oh sure. Sure."

O'Hara showed him about. The store certainly looked like a good thing. Samson noted that the location seemed somewhat apart from the rather sprawling community, but from the people inside it was apparent that business was exceedingly good, almost booming.

"I guess I could raise a loan from a local bank," Samson said tentatively, as Attorney O'Hara drove him back to town.

O'Hara frowned. "Well—yes and no. If you're really interested, I think that my client might be willing to accept part in cash, part in a note, and the balance you could raise through a chattel mortgage. Once you get the banks on your head, mister, you've really got something."

They drove in silence that lasted several minutes.

"Tell you what I'll do," Samson said. "I'll think this proposition over carefully, and let you know in the morning. My savings are in bonds—I guess I'd have to cash them in. And I sure appreciate your generous terms, Mr. O'Hara. Believe me, I appreciate your time and advice."

"That's all right, old man." O'Hara nodded, with a grin. He parked by a corner bar. "Let's go in and have a quick one. Always a pleasure to treat a real war hero."

Next morning, after a sound sleep, Sam Samson had breakfast at the "Y" lunch counter, put on his gabardine coat and his battered fedora and strode purposefully down the street. But his visit was to the offices of the Veterans Protective League—not the law suite of Attorney Michael O'Hara.

"Like to see Mr. Smythe, if he can spare a moment," Samson told the receptionist.

Five minutes later he was knocking on the door of Office Number Five.

"Well, well," said C. Edward Smythe, a faint perplexity on his smooth face, as he extended his hand. "I thought you had an appointment with Mr. O'Hara. Want a little more advice, eh?"

"Not from you," declared Sam Samson.

SMYTHE started at the other's tone. This was no beat-up war veteran now, he saw quickly. Samson had straightened up. The light in his eyes was hard; the line of his mouth was tense, contemptuous.

Sam Samson extended his own hand—and slapped C. Edward Smythe hard across the face, once, twice, three times. Then he hit him and knocked him back.

"You dirty, miserable heel," Samson snapped. "I think I will beat you up."

Smythe backed away, snarling, and grabbed for something in his desk drawer. Sam Samson was much too quick for him. He leaped forward, smashed his fist down on the other man's fingers.

Smythe yelped with pain and rage, as his fingers were caught in the desk drawer. His face flushed purple, he began to pant, and his eyes took on the desperate coloration of a cornered rat's.

"Shut up!" Sam Samson ordered. With a great effort, he got a grip on his own inner rage, casually withdrew a nickel-plated .38 revolver and began turning it over in his hands. "Sit down, C. Edward Smythe—or whatever your name is. I'll do all the talking now."

Shaking with fear and frustration, the frightened promoter slumped into his desk chair, nervously fingering his smarting face. A small trickle of blood oozed over cut lips.

"You are a very smart apple," Sam Samson conceded, settling his tough, rangy body on the desk top.

The gun moved back and forth in his hand, pointing nowhere and everywhere. Smythe could not keep his eyes off the weapon.

"You are a smart boy," Samson repeated, "and you have the best racket in town. It is, as you said, almost foolproof. We might have a tough time getting a court conviction to stand up."

Smythe stared at him with enraged fascination.

[Turn page]

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Smythe swore a livid oath. Samson grinned.

"Okay. In case you're curious, I am a war veteran, I was wounded and hospitalized, and some years ago I was a master machinist. You see, rat, after I got out of the hospital they transferred me to noncombatant work. Ever hear of the C.I.D.—the Army's Criminal Investigation Division? They broke the Army black market in France. Remember?"

C. Edward Smythe's reaction was a profane work of art.

"However"—Samson fumbled with cigarette pack and his own lighter, never loosening the grip on his gun—"however, I find civilian investigations even more intriguing. In the first place, Smythe, your 'manual dexterity' test is a complete phony. My actual score is fifty-five points higher than what your stooges credited me with. My Army I.Q. was one-forty-five—not a genius, as I see it, but way above the average. You scored me one hundred three.

"As for that stationery store, it was a lovely plant, and so in particular is your side kick, Attorney Michael O'Hara. He isn't married to that girl in the store. She used to work at the Fourth National Bank here, until they found her fooling around with the books and a married teller."

C. Edward Smythe mopped his sweating face with a silk handkerchief. If looks could kill, Sam Samson was in a concentration camp for life.

"Now, then," Samson continued, "your husky friend O'Hara is an attorney, but he doesn't come from this state. He was admitted to practise on motion of another attorney upstate. Wonder how many deals you and O'Hara have been mixed up in, say in Texas—or California—or Tennessee."

"Wouldn't you like to know!" Smythe snarled, and then gasped at his stupid indiscretion.

Sam Samson grinned hugely. "Well, well—the truth will out, won't it? Now as for that store, it isn't worth a nickel. Took you two days to fix it up, didn't it? Ten bucks to a doughnut that O'Hara's 'client' is a dummy—the little man that wasn't there."

Smythe choked on his own curses.

"And such a location! You know, I have an idea I saw some of the 'customers' around

town before. Maybe in this very office. How about that?"

Smythe was now literally speechless. His hands opened and clenched, but did nothing. His mouth opened, his jaw flexed, but no words came forth. Sam Samson moved slowly toward the door, the gun still making slow arcs in his hand.

"So ends our little tableau," Samson was saying. "A minor tragedy in the history of sin."

His enemy's hand moved fast. Smythe snatched up a desk clock, threw it and ducked behind his desk, all in one motion, yelling frantically. Samson jerked his head aside as the clock went smashing through the glass door panel.

THERE was a scurry of feet outside. Excited shouts, confusion, and the scurry of nervous little feet. Like a bunch of rats deserting a foundered ship, or converging on a helpless victim.

"Get him! He's a blackmailer! He'll put us out of business!" Smythe was shrieking as his employes poured in.

Samson retreated against a far wall, his gun a threatening shield. One man got too close. Samson lashed out with the gun-butt, expertly shifting the weapon with a dexterous flick, and split the fellow's scalp from temple to temple.

Then he aimed at the ceiling fixture and fired three shots.

"Come and get it, boys and girls!" Sam Samson challenged.

No one took the dare. C. Edward Smythe, glancing at Samson's winged light bulbs and then at the writhing stooge with the bloody head, began to edge toward the shattered door.

Employes shuffled about uncertainly, looking for an out. And at that moment, the town's Racket Squad crashed into the offices of the Veterans Protective League.

"Where's your warrant?" Smythe began to screech.

He was drowned out in a frantic mill of slugging employes, slugging police arms, curses, kicks and bellows. The fight raged all over the place. When it was over, handcuffs had been clapped on shrinking wrists, several police were nursing sore knuckles, and C. Edward Smythe was stretched out flat on his desk top, eyes black, lips cut and nose decidedly askew.

Smythe himself was in somewhat of a mild coma.

[Turn page]

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On the way to the police station, Sam Samson, private investigator, delivered himself of a few choice nouns, verbs and adjectives.

"Your racket was lovely and almost legal," he told C. Edward Smythe. "Unfortunately, there is a little matter of fraud. Those 'psychological and manual dexterity tests' were phonies, as I've said. They were deliberately phony—and that's fraud. That stationery store you tried to palm off was also a fake. The figures in the ledger accounts were purely imaginary. You and that shyster lawyer, O'Hara, rigged that store up in forty-eight hours."

Smythe, mopping at his bleeding face with a silk handkerchief, mumbled something uncouth. Samson dug him sharply in the ribs. Smythe gasped, doubled over and subsided.

"I have an idea Brother O'Hara will turn State's evidence against you," Samson went on, a sardonic grin on his face as the police wagon clanged to a stop in front of Police Headquarters. "The gentle O'Hara and his girl friend are hardly on speaking terms now—so they tell me."

Smythe's face was a study in purple frustration.

"As for your employes, a little attempted assault and battery, perhaps one or two minor charges. But as for you, big boy, this time it's curtains."

After charges had been filed on the police blotter, Sam Samson told the police he was going out for a quick one. One snifter led to two or three more, and Samson was in a mellow mood as he headed back toward the station.

On the way he passed the late offices of the Veterans Protective League. There wasn't a light in the place. Someone—probably the janitor—had hung up a hastily scrawled sign in the window. It said:

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THE BARON GETS A CABLE

(Continued from page 100)

Bassett and hurled his body against the burly night man.

"You thought I'd walk into that shaft," he accused Rue, as he pounded the watchman, putting all the released tension of fright over his narrow escape and his smoldering rage into his slamming fists. "You must have listened at the keyhole and you knew I was beginning to see where the blame for that crash this morning belonged. You left the door into the shaft open and called me out, hoping I'd walk into it and be killed. It was another of your traps."

Surprised by the Baron's unexpected assault, Rue staggered backward. But the watchman was far heavier and more powerfully built than the slender Baron. Recovering, he pulled a blackjack from his hip pocket and lashed out viciously at the Baron's skull. The Baron ducked the blow; there seemed to be steel springs in his legs as he dived head first at the night man's legs, bringing Rue to the floor in a crashing confusion of

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struggling bodies.

Rue's head cracked sharply against the solid planking. He was half stunned by the blow. The sap dropped from his hand. Squirring like a captured wild-cat, the Baron reached the weapon, and got it. As Rue tried to twist upright again, the Baron hit him squarely across the head. The watchman fell down again and this time he lay still.

Bassett's eyes looked like apples on the end of a stick.

"You mean that my man is a killer?"

"Right. Everything pointed to Rue. He hasn't a very high mentality. He thought he could divert suspicion by smashing the lock on the penthouse door, thus making it look like an outside job. He wasn't bright enough to do his smashing act from outside. It was obvious that the door had been unlocked and the breaking done from inside. Another thing, he was very quickly at first trying to put suspicion on Charlie Ingleby. But later he couldn't conceal his fear that I was getting closer to him when I revisited the penthouse.

"Incidentally, I knew then he must be the criminal. When I handled that new electric lantern of his, I got grease on my shirt from its circular base. That circular edge left a matching mark where he'd stood it on the floor when he did his sawing last night. None of those things would have been enough evidence to prove my accusations, but he's given plenty to me now. You heard him lure me out into that empty elevator shaft. I'm going to call police headquarters right now and make my charges."

It was only mid-afternoon when the Baron walked into the Imperial offices with Hawley Sears. Mehary saw them come in and flagged them into his private cubbyhole.

"Where'd you come from, Sears?" he demanded, fixing the elevator inspector with his heavy-lidded stare.

"Bill Tolliver got me out," Sears said.

Mehary's eyes shifted to the Baron. "I thought I'd told you to drop everything and concentrate on that elevator claim?"

The Baron gave the Claims Manager a broad grin. "You did, boss. So I got the charges against Hawley dropped. I even dropped myself," he said with a flash of humor. "Seven stories. You

can relax about the whole case, boss. We've got to pay for two deaths and one smashed elevator car."

Mehary's little red rimmed eyes held a baleful glare. "You tell me to relax," he snarled. "Do you think it's anything to laugh about when we have a claim of that size to pay out?"

"Sure it is," the Baron said. "Since we can pay it out of what we're going to recover on the Johnson and Snyder liquor thefts and still have a lot left over."

Mehary's jaw sagged. "What?"

"Bassett's nightman was one of the gang," the Baron informed him. "They'd planned to take all the stuff stored at the South Main Street location sometime this week. Oglethorpe overheard one of the gang talking with Rue down in the basement of the building. Instead of telling what he knew to the police, he tried to get some money out of Rue for keeping quiet. Rue kept him quiet, all right—for good. Rue's cracked wide open under the grilling they gave

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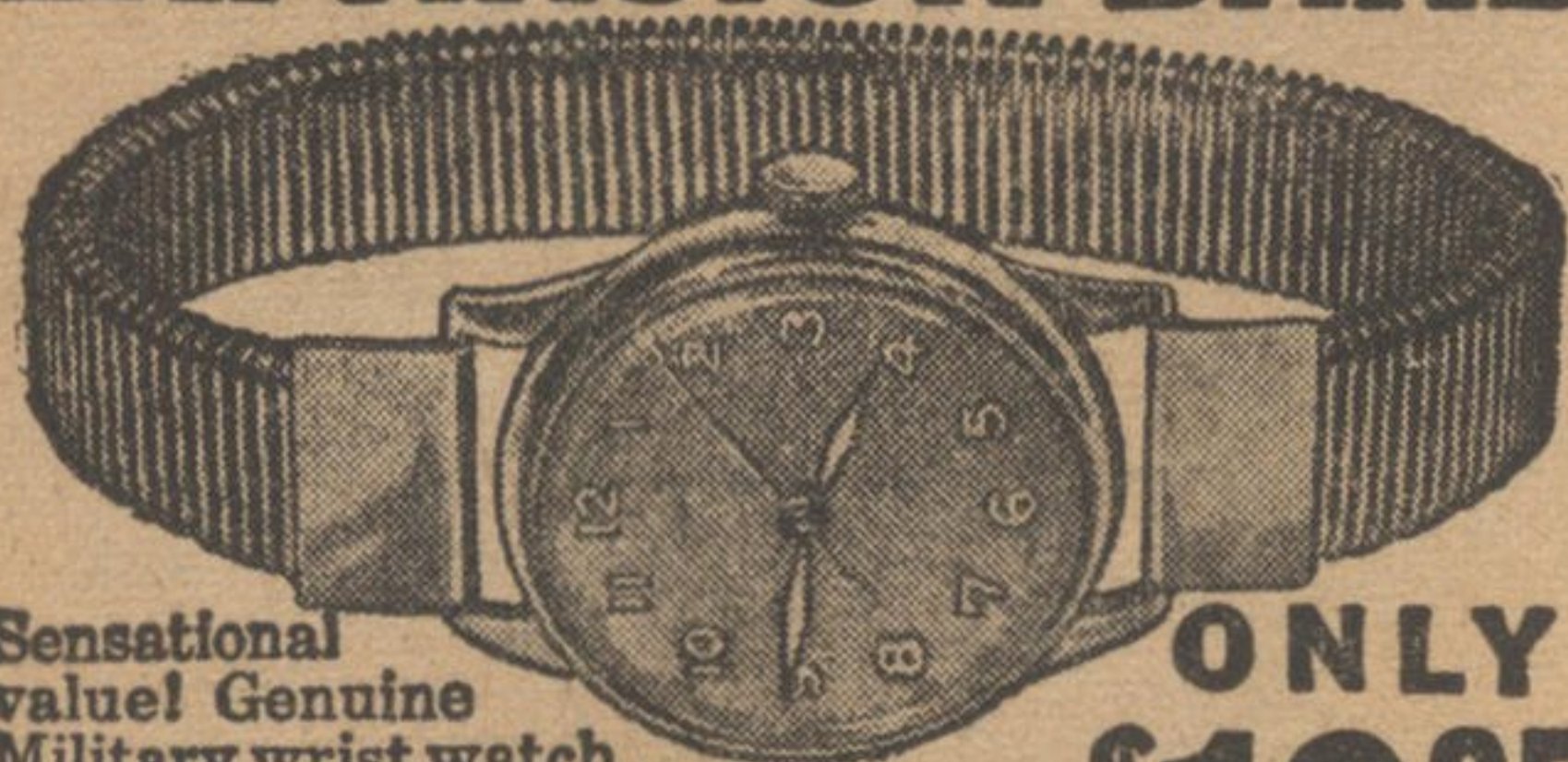
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him down at headquarters. He sang like an opera diva. From what he's said, the police will be able to nab the rest of the gang. And they'll recover the major portion of the stuff we've paid for already."

Mehary's heavy features lightened. "That helps."

"Of course," the Baron added slyly, watching the executive's expression narrowly, "there will be an item on my next swindle sheet for a new suit of clothes to replace these ruined in the course of duty." He pointed to his greasy clothing.

"You've got a terrific nerve," Mehary said promptly. "Do you really expect the company to pay for a thing like that? How did you manage to get into that mess? You must have been drunk."

"Drunk!" the Baron echoed. He broke into an open laugh. "Why, boss, if I couldn't hold alcohol like a Kentucky moonshine still, I'd never have been able to drop this case—into your lap."



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FEDERAL FLASHES

(Concluded from page 9)

and ACCIDENTALLY ON PURPOSE, by David X. Manners.—Tom Wuffe, Winter Park, Fla.

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Let's have more stories by Jean Francis Webb and Norman A. Daniels. I am a retired police detective and I like stories with a lot of action. I am 72 years young, and I think Sally Vane should play a bigger part in the Dan Fowler novels.—Newt Thorkleson, Cincinnati, O.

My opinion is I like the short stories, but Dan Fowler takes the prize. How about having a picture of him, suitable for framing, on the cover?—Mary Mae Lark, Beacon, N. Y.

That's all the letters we have room for this time, folks, but keep those letters and postcards rolling in! Tell us about yourselves, and what you think of Dan Fowler, Sally Vane, Larry Kendal, and of the stories and features in each issue. Do you like our cryptogram feature "The Black Chamber?" Do you like the longer stories better, or the shorter ones? A knock is as good as a boost, so tell us what you honestly think!

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Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, G-MEN DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y. See you next issue and thanks, everybody!

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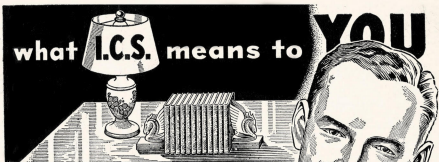


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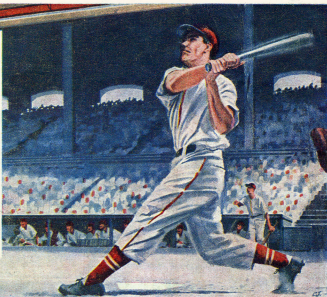
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