

STREET & SMITH'S

MYSTERY

MAGAZINE

UNUSUAL DETECTIVE STORIES

THE DEATH LADY

An uncanny mystery novel
complete in this issue



Novelettes Featuring

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FEB. 1940

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start
gargling
with
Listerine,
Mister!**



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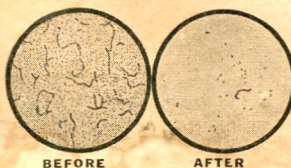
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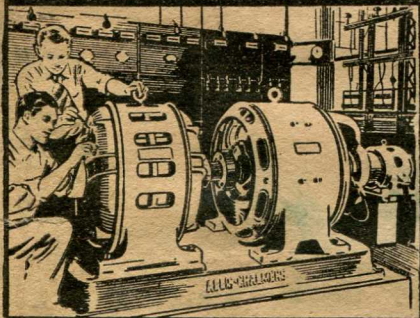
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NOTE HOW LISTERINE GARGLE REDUCED GERMS!

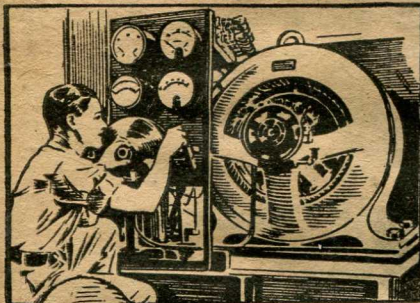


The two drawings at left illustrate height of range in germ reductions on mouth and throat surfaces in test cases before and after gargling Listerine Antiseptic. Fifteen minutes after gargling, germ reductions up to 96.7% were noted; and even one hour after, germs were still reduced as much as 80%.

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STREET & SMITH'S

MYSTERY

MAGAZINE

UNUSUAL DETECTIVE STORIES

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VOL. V NO. 4

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BEHIND THE CURTAIN 5

The background of mystery from our desk.

COVER BY GRAVES GLADNEY

ON SALE
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WEDNESDAY
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BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Although this is not the season of vacations, many of you will recall the pleasant summer spent at some beautiful country spot; and those of you who went to the mountains will recall every bit of your experiences if you read "The Death Lady," the complete novel which appears in this issue. The story is planted in a typical summer vacation spot—one with which the author, William Bogart, is quite familiar, because he lives there. All the scenes come pretty close to the exact locality, and many of the characters are made more real because they are patterned after local characters that have become familiar to Bogart through personal acquaintance.

Even the theme of the story, we might add, is close to reality, for some of the things mentioned in the story actually do exist in the valley in which Bogart lives. Of course, he has taken liberties necessary to make a good yarn, and we know you'll agree that it is a really fine story which will hold you from start to finish.

Frank Gruber gives us another Jim Strong story in this issue—"Jobs of Jeopardy," on page 40. Some of you probably have had plenty of experience with various kinds of job agencies, and may remember some of the flavor which appears in this tale. Most job agencies are sincere in their efforts, and serve a very useful purpose in being a connecting link between employer and employee. As is always the case, however, some that get into the business are interested only in their own profits, and do not hesitate to exploit the workers who come to them for help. The fact that these workers are the ones who can least afford to lose any money makes the crooked work of some of these agents all the more despicable, and every one of you will be pulling for Jim Strong in his close fight to overcome one case of such a racket.

We'll swing over into what's coming for the next issue, because we're eager to tell you something about "The Rolling Heads," the complete novel, by Mark

Harper. Harper does the Cass Manning novelettes which appear in our magazine at regular periods. This novel does not deal with Cass Manning; it's altogether different, and exceptionally fine.

For one thing, it's so unusual that the hero of the story appears not more than half a dozen times, yet he is tracking down one of the biggest crimes on record in San Francisco—and tracks it down all the way across the continent to New York City. For another thing, most of the action takes place in one spot, and there is very little physical action at that—yet it is one of the fastest-paced stories we've had here in a long time. You look at the events that take place pretty much as they appear to the eyes of the criminal gang, and it proves to be a very colorful and effective way of telling the story. Every bit of it is tense, nerve-racking. Over all continually hangs the menace of the smash-in by the hero, even though he seems to be ages away. And every move, every thought, of the crooks is reflected in the description, the keen analysis of the situation.

It's an unusual story from start to finish. In the editorial game, it would be referred to as an "off-trail" yarn, which means that it is quite different from the kind of stories that are usually printed, but so good that it cannot be passed up even though it may not follow the usual trend. In Mystery we've given you unusual stories as the general rule, and when we find one that is unusual even among the generally different yarns that we give you, you can be sure that it must have something. Be ready for "The Rolling Heads," and tell your friends to watch for the next issue if they want to read a story that they will never forget.

Norvell Page, author of the "Death Angel" stories that you've had many times before, gives us another good one, "Medal for Murder," which comes in the next issue. Angus St. Cloud, who does the most outlandish things in the gayest of ways, surpasses himself when he rides the marble horse in its fountain along upper Fifth Avenue—but, like The Lone Ranger, he rides it for a purpose. After you've read this yarn, you'll feel like offering a medal to Angus—or to Page—for excellent work.

Incidentally, we might as well record here, for all the world to see, that we have made a radical change in our opinion of the easy life authors lead. Having to come to the office every morning (rather, only five mornings a week, since Street & Smith is probably the first to have followed the five-day week) through the usual subway rush, and in all kinds of weather, we have always envied authors who call up around one or two o'clock with a cheery "good morning," and when we tell them it's afternoon, not morning, they casually add that they've just gotten out of bed. Of course, they write pretty late into the night, at times—but still, getting up at noon is worth staying up half the night for, isn't it?

So, at nine o'clock sharp the other morning, who comes in with a manuscript but Norvell Page. We didn't believe the receptionist when she announced the name; we knew it was someone in disguise. But there he was, big as life (and Page is quite big) in our doorway.

After the initial shock, secondary shock, and all other shocks passed off, Page told us, in easy stages, that this was nothing unusual; that every morning he gets up early enough to

Continued on page 129



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THE DEATH LADY

A Complete Novel

BY WILLIAM G. BOGART

**SPRING VALLEY BECAME A VALLEY OF HELL
WHEN THE CHURCH CLOCK STRUCK THIRTEEN!**

CHAPTER I. VALLEY OF HELL!

The sleepy little town was like any other of dozens that are strewn up

and down the Hudson River. A tree-shrouded little hamlet protected by the mountains which rose steeply all around it. And through the quiet, peaceful night there was the deep,

somber blast of a freighter's whistle moving slowly up the winding river.

Like great sounding boards, the surrounding mountains picked up the sound, magnified it, and sent it rolling back and forth across the water, across the huge old treetops that rose thickly over sleeping Spring Valley like a protective blanket. Slowly the sound faded in the distance, as though it might have been chased to a hiding place far up in the crags of Storm King Mountain, across the river.

Tony Kay, at the wheel of the roadster which he had just brought to a stop near the single traffic light, sat listening in the quiet, warm night. His pleasant brown eyes flickered and a smile brightened his lean face. It was good to be back!

He was a trifle weary after the drive up here from New York. It was already close to midnight, and Tony Kay had gone through a busy day cleaning up details in the city, so that he could get away on this well-earned vacation.

But he paused now, disregarding the changing light, thrilling to the utter quiet that was all around him in the dark night. This was different. This was swell, after the racket and confusion of New York.

He sat there where the through highway crossed Main Street, and he got a kick out of watching the light change from green to red, from red to green, when there wasn't a single car visible for a mile either way.

Thus he was slightly startled when the voice said near him, "Lost, mister?"

Tony Kay looked toward the side of the road. The man must have been sitting there on the low wall which bordered a house at this corner. Now he had stood up, walked out into the road and had his arms

resting on the right side door of the car.

He was a tall man, gaunt, with a scrub of gray-white beard, and his age must have been well over sixty. He might have been a farmer—or a tramp.

Tony Kay smiled. "No," he said, "I'm not lost. I was just getting a kick out of this."

He waved an arm to indicate his surroundings—the single general store closed just on his left; on the far corner the spreading grounds of the country church, the small white building almost lost in the many towering old elms that grew all around it. The church—its belfry half-hidden in inclosing foliage above—stood far back from the road, a deep woods pressing up close behind it. Down shadowy Main Street, at the next corner as you looked toward the river, a single street lamp flickered in the still night.

The gaunt, stern-faced man standing beside Tony Kay's car seemed to be staring at the young man strangely. He frowned.

"Kick?" he questioned. "Reckon I don't get you, stranger."

Tony Kay shrugged. "I mean, if you've ever lived in the city, then returned to a secure, peaceful little village like—"

"Secure?" the elderly man said sharply. He was shaking his head. "No, mister, nothing's secure here. Nothing's safe here!"

Something in the man's tone brought Tony Kay up tense behind the wheel of the car. He looked sharply at the gaunt fellow. There was something about the man's slightly bloodshot eyes—

Perhaps the poor devil was slightly cracked. Tony Kay decided to leave him alone. Besides, he was

tired and it was time he was getting a room.

He said briefly, "Well, I've got to be getting on. By the way, is old Henry Simms' hotel still down there by the river?"

The gaunt, elderly man nodded slowly. A peculiar wideness was in his eyes. "But you can't go there now!" he said suddenly.

"Why not?"

"Because old Henry Simms is dead. The inn is closed, and besides—"

He was interrupted by a new sound that shattered the vast silence of the night. It came from the half-hidden belfry of the little rural church set back in the broad common across the corner.

It was a bell, tolling out the hour of midnight, and the vibrant, richly resonant sounds floated across the little village, reaching out to the encircling mountains that crouched down so close to the town.

Tony Kay continued: "You were saying—"

He stopped, watching the elderly man's face. For the man was staring with a sort of fascinated horror toward the big green located across the street—toward the church belfry itself.

The bell was still tolling. *Seven—eight—nine—*

Tony Kay was abruptly getting impatient. He said again, "You were going to tell me—"

"Wait!" the grim-faced, gaunt man rapped. His bony hand had reached out to grip Tony Kay's arm. Pressure of his fingers showed that the man was trembling.

Ten—eleven—

The man's face was strained, as he nodded to each stroke of the tolling bell.

"Look—" Tony Kay started again.

"Listen!" insisted the man still gripping his arm.

Twelve. The church bell struck midnight.

Tony Kay sighed. Well, that was that. Perhaps now he could—

Thirteen!

Even Tony Kay gave a start. A funny little chill ran down his spine. The bell had struck thirteen, and as it did so the gaunt man beside the car gave a shrill gasp and jerked his wide-eyed gaze back to the young man behind the wheel.

He exclaimed, "There it is! It's happened again! For five nights I've waited, and now—"

Tony Kay was getting abruptly tired of this queer fellow's comments. Thirteen tolls of the bell or not, he wanted to learn about chances of staying some place for the night.

But the man spoke again before he could ask a question. "It's death!" he said in a half-hushed voice. "Death strikes at thirteen. It's happened before—"

"Good night!" Tony finished sharply, and jerked the car into speed. He'd had enough of this nonsense from a man who was obviously balmy. He started to let in the clutch—

And the blood-curdling, horrible scream drew him up short. It was a man's cry of terror, racketing up and down the steep hill that was Main Street.

It was immediately followed by something that was more spine-tingling.

A woman's laugh. A high-pitched and yet musical laugh that might have come from someone absolutely happy with glee. But in conjunction with the deathlike scream, it was a thing like laughter at a funeral.

Too, both sounds came from the spreading church grounds across the street!

CHAPTER II.

SUSAN.

Tony Kay had pulled his roadster over to the side of the road and his agile, tall figure was beside that of the elderly man in a moment. Suddenly he no longer felt an aversion to this stranger who had talked so oddly. Something of the man's fear-someness had touched himself, and now he realized that there was a thing horribly wrong here in Spring Valley.

Tony Kay led the way in a mad dash across the street. He reached the sidewalk that passed along the broad green lawn of the church square. His running steps made clattering sounds in the taut night.

Behind him came the big, gaunt fellow, gasping, "I figger it come from somewhere back beneath them elms!" He was pointing a long, bony finger across the sweep of lawn. The great gnarled trunks of the ageless trees interspersed that lawn, and beyond was the little white building that was the church.

A gravel walk curved through the grounds. Halfway to the white building it made a fork, one of the pathways leading toward a low cottage set almost in the woods beyond. It must be the manse, Tony Kay figured.

And, he, too, had the feeling that the outside had come from somewhere back here, though now that they had ceased, it was difficult to be exactly certain. He kept running.

Then he saw it.

Something that was writhing around on the ground, several yards off from the pathway, beneath the tall trees. He leaped that way.

In the next instant, Tony Kay

gasped. Because in the bit of white moonlight that filtered down through the elms, he saw the figure on the ground. It was a man. A man twisted in a grotesque knot of horrible pain.

He was lying on the soft grass, fighting and twisting as though he were trying to get out of the powerful grip of some unseen thing that held him. His hands flailed against the air; his eyes bulged like large pale marbles in his skull.

Tony Kay was already bending down at the stricken man's side. He asked solicitously, "What's wrong, partner?"

But even as he asked the question, he knew that his words were hopeless. For the man was beyond hearing. The pain that was making his tortured body a twisted knot was, apparently, so great that the poor fellow was beyond hearing.

While Tony Kay and the gaunt man watched helplessly, the man on the ground gave a sudden, violent shudder. His small thin form lengthened out. A part of the look of stark fear left his face. He went limp and lay still.

"Unconscious," Tony Kay said to the man standing beside him, and bent close to loosen the stricken man's collar. The man was about forty, dark-haired and slightly gray.

"It's Jim Warner, the druggist!" said the man with Tony. "He's always about the last one to close up down-street every night."

But Tony Kay hardly heard the announcement. For his quick fingers had felt for the stricken man's pulse, then go swiftly beneath the man's light suit coat. There was no pulse.

"Dead!" rapped Tony Kay. He got to his feet slowly. He frowned down at the now still features, at the open, bulging eyes. And he knew that some horrible form of death had

touched this victim in a fleeting, awful moment.

Because Tony Kay recalled the blood-curdling scream of terror he had heard in the night. And he had seen the way this poor devil was writhing on the ground.

But one thing puzzled him. One thing that did not tie in with a death which had struck ruthlessly and swiftly.

There was not a single mark on the victim's body!

The gaunt stranger standing beside Tony Kay said tensely, "Listen, young fellow, I guess you sorta thought I acted crazy a little while ago. Well, now you know. I'm Zeb Frasier. I got a farm up the valley, and it was only last week the death lady tried to get me. That was the night Pete Moshier died just like poor Jim Weaver died here just now!"

"The *death* lady?" Tony Kay stared. "I don't get you."

And then, abruptly, he remembered the high-pitched, musical laugh which had floated on the night a second after this stricken man had screamed with terror. A woman's laughter!

Zeb was continuing, "Yes. I saw her that night in the woods, an' I reckon as how I was too scared to do much about it. She's got a—"

He paused, his wide, bloodshot eyes sliding from Tony Kay's face. The young man followed the lanky farmer's gaze.

At first he saw nothing. And then, eyes adjusting themselves to the light, he saw what was holding Zeb transfixed.

Some distance away from them, just at the borderline of deep woods beyond, stood the figure of the woman. The woman in white!

A splotch of white moonlight

touched her tall, graceful figure, as though she might have been a beautiful statue bathed in a spotlight's revealing circle. Soft, blond hair lay in a tumbled mass around her smooth shoulders, and her face was a bloodless white of infinite beauty.

The white gown was some light material made like a toga, with a single thin cord encircling it at the figure's slender waist. Along with the woman's steady, unblinking stare, there was something ethereal about the way she stood there so silently.

But it was not this that caused Tony Kay to draw in his breath sharply.

It was the mark that appeared above the woman's breast which held him rigid. It was a wound made in blood, directly over the heart, and even from where he stood Tony Kay could tell that the wound had been made recently. At a quick guess, he would say that a knife had plunged there.

And yet he still remained rigid, staring, for there was something about the woman's sheer beauty that held him enthralled. He wanted to shout, to say something—

And then she spoke. Staring eyes still unwavering, her whole tall and graceful form motionless, the woman said in a strange, sort of whispering voice:

"I am Miss Death! There shall be more people die. You must keep away from me!"

Tony Kay gulped. This couldn't be happening to him. Maybe he was still in bed and just dreaming about that trip to Spring Valley. Maybe he—

The exclaiming voice beside him jerked him back to reality. For it was Zeb, the farmer, and he shouted suddenly: "That's her! That's the

death lady I told you about, mister!"

Zeb's outcry whipped Tony Kay into action. He jumped forward, yelling at the figure in white, "Hey, wait a minute!"

For this one who referred to herself as Miss Death, had abruptly vanished as though she might have been a wraith.

She had disappeared beneath the concealing trees that were a part of the nearby woods. Tony Kay went racing that way.

As he plunged into the woods, he had one brief glimpse of a fleeting vision in white. And then darkness, the gloom beneath the closely packed trees smashed down over him. He worked his way quickly forward mostly by feel, thorns ripping at his outstretched hands, briars tugging at his neat brown suit.

All the time he was conscious of an elusive, faint odor. Not perfume, but something more pungent. He could not place the smell, though Tony had been momentarily aware of it back near the dead druggist.

Ahead—perhaps it was imagination—he thought he saw the figure in white moving. For just a second, he turned around to see if gaunt Zeb was trailing him. But the farmer wasn't; apparently he was either too scared or he had gone for help.

So Tony Kay moved forward, remembering where he had last seen something that was white. But he never found it.

For, in the next moment, he went into a tumbling sprawl and almost buried his face in the earth. He cursed the darkness and the tree root that must have tripped him up.

He started to climb to his feet, suddenly paused, whipped sideways and flung out his hands in a clawing dive. For he had heard the imperceptible scuff of a foot in the grass. Someone had *tripped* him!

But it was not this one who called herself Miss Death, because there was no movement of white. Surely she would have been visible at such close range, but—

His jaw setting grimly, Tony Kay smashed through the undergrowth close to where he had fallen. He wished he had his flashlight from the roadster. But there was no time to go back for it. He worked his way as quickly as possible through the brush.

And next landed in the hole that must have been all of six feet deep.

He went in headfirst, but his hands were flung out in front of him, helping to break his fall as he landed in soft dirt at the base of the pit. Tony Kay struggled to his feet, felt around in his pockets for a pad of matches and struck one.

He cursed softly. The hole was some sort of secret room that kids must have been building in the woods. There was planking stacked up ready to form a roof for the thing.

Tony Kay finally managed to climb out of the pit. He stood listening. Faintly, back from the direction he had come, he heard voices talking. That would be, perhaps, town residents aroused by Zeb. Better to get back there and learn more about this weird thing that had hit Spring Valley, for Tony realized that it would be impossible to trail the one in white, now. He started back toward the source of the talking, excited voices.

When he got back on the church grounds, he saw the small group of people standing around the still form of the dead druggist. From startled words he caught as he moved up to the group, he knew that these townspeople had been aroused by the screams.



The flash picked out the body of the man who had died so mysteriously!

And someone was saying, "I heard it plainly! It struck thirteen instead of twelve—just like it did the last time!"

Heads turned and eyes widened worriedly as someone saw Tony Kay's disheveled appearance. He saw a woman with a shawl thrown around her shoulders. There were several men in pajamas and bath robes.

And there was the girl.

The girl was about twenty, with wavy dark hair and eyes that were a serious brown. She had a small, trim figure and sweet oval features. Apparently she had quickly slipped into a sweater and skirt, but even the hasty attire did not conceal the shapeliness of her form.

She stared at Tony Kay, then suddenly exclaimed, "Tony!"

He smiled, hurried forward. "Susan. I had hoped to see you, but

not"—the smile swept from his features as he nodded toward the still form on the grass—not under *these* conditions!"

The girl's deep eyes were suddenly wide with fear. "Yes," she murmured. "I heard you were coming up here for a visit. And Tony—" She was abruptly clutching at his arms, saying breathlessly, "And now maybe you can help us!"

Tony caught something of the urgency that was in Susan's words. He saw the fear that was mirrored in her serious eyes. What was this menace that had hit quiet little Spring Valley?

Tony Kay had known Susan Winters since gosh-knows-when. Though it had been five years now since he'd been back here for a real visit, he had met Susan from time to time in New York. They had taken in shows together. There had been the promise of a real romance.

And so now he was listening to her words, conscious that others in the small group of taut townspeople were watching him suspiciously. Susan was saying:

"It all started last week, Tony. Some little boy told about seeing this person known now as Miss Death, back near Indian Creek. Everyone thought it was just the story of a youngster with too vivid an imagination. But now—"

Susan broke off, cast a glance at the dead man on the ground. She had already told Tony Kay that they were awaiting the arrival of the coroner. "But now," the girl continued, "there has been the strange death of Pete Moshier, up in the valley last week. Someone saw Miss Death on that night, too, and now they say she was also here tonight!"

Tony Kay nodded, his brown eyes thoughtful. He looked around, re-

minded of something as Susan had spoken. But his question was interrupted by curious stares of the small group, still watching him suspiciously.

It was Susan who saw the questioning looks and explained, "This is Anthony Kay. None of you people were living around here when he was a native of Spring Valley."

A big man with sour-looking features put in, "Well?" He was taking in Tony Kay's disheveled appearance.

"Mr. Kay is a private detective from New York. He operates a well-known agency there." Susan spoke almost proudly of the fact. "If anyone can help us, *he* can!"

Tony Kay had been going to say nothing of his New York work. Crime was something he'd like to get away from for about two weeks. But now the information was out, and apparently there was nothing he could do about it. Already he noted that those who were watching him had relaxed a little.

Tony shrugged, said, "All right, I'll do what I can. But first, we might ask Zeb Frasier just how much else he knows about the lady known as Miss Death. In fact—"

He stopped, aware that everyone was looking at him queerly again. He stared around, and then swiftly he saw the reason for those puzzled glances.

Zeb was not there.

CHAPTER III.

DEATH MOUNTAIN.

Tony Kay questioned the few townspeople who had been awakened by the screams. They stated that they had arrived here scarcely five moments ago. But none had seen Zeb Frasier!

The private detective thought of

the person who had been close to him in the woods. It could have been Zeb. Queer that he had so abruptly disappeared! For that matter—

A small coupé had pulled up to the curb near the church grounds. A man was soon hurrying toward them. Susan looked quickly at Tony Kay and said, "It's Mr. Evans, the county coroner. He lives here, but he's only been in town about six months."

Evans, it appeared, was a wiry little man with alert, sharp eyes. The girl introduced him to Tony Kay, and then the young investigator was telling what had happened. He did this while Evans was bending down over the dead man, making a brief examination.

The coroner looked up, said, "It wasn't his heart. I remember hearing Jim tell someone just last week that he'd been examined for some additional insurance. And his heart was perfect."

Tony Kay said nothing to that. Instead, he prodded, "Any signs of poison?"

The coroner shook his head. "Not in his mouth, at least. But I've sent Zeb over to have my boy bring down the undertaker. We'll make an autopsy before morning."

"Zeb?" Tony put in quickly. "Then you saw him?"

Evans nodded, standing up. "Certainly. He's the one stopped by my place and told me to hurry down here."

Other villagers were arriving now. All stared in awe at the still figure on the grass. It was Susan who drew Tony to one side. She whispered, "There's something I want to tell you about. But first, where are you going to stay?"

He took the girl's arm, led her back to where his car was still parked near the light. He explained:

"I planned to stay down at the inn. But Zeb was telling me that old Henry Simms is dead, and that the place is closed."

They had paused beside the private detective's car, and Tony Kay was still aware of a fear that was deep in the girl's lovely eyes.

Susan said, "Yes, Henry Simms died before this . . . this trouble started. But I think you can get a room there. Remember old Henry's sister, Clara?"

Tony nodded.

"Well, she opened the place up for a couple of the survey engineers who are here in connection with the dam project. They're staying there now." Susan's serious brown eyes were suddenly bright in her pretty face.

"You know," she added quickly, it's odd, but all this trouble started right after those survey people came in here!"

Abruptly, Tony Kay was intensely interested. He had heard about this idea for a huge dam to be constructed between two mountains just a little south of the village. It was a reason why he had made the trip up here; because Tony Kay owned a little farm property in the deep valley that ran back between those mountains. He had received a letter from the company ready to finance the dam project, asking him what he would accept as a fair price to sell out.

He said, "By the way, where did this druggist—Jim Warner—live?"

Immediately the girl seemed to give a slight start. "Why, up there in the valley. In the past few years, that section beyond the old cannon works has been built up a bit."

"And this man Pete Moshier—the first one who died so strangely?"

This time, Susan stared fearfully. "Why, that hadn't occurred to me!

He lived in the valley, too!"

"Funny," Tony Kay murmured, half to himself.

Then he was helping the small, dark-haired girl into the car, adding, "Look, you said something about the old cannon foundry. That's the place which Harry Taylor changed over into an iron works, isn't it?"

The private detective had paused before starting up the car.

The girl nodded. "Yes. But now these men who are checking over the site for a dam have offered him a nice price to sell out. He's going to, because he says he can build a new plant now nearer the river and get cheaper power from the new dam. We've been working night and day getting everything ready for the change-over."

"We?" Tony asked.

"Yes," supplied Susan. "You see, Tony, I work there in the office at the iron works. We've been busy every night."

Tony Kay remembered Harry Taylor. For years the old cannon factory had been in the Taylor family. In the Civil War, the plant had supplied cannons for the army. Then, for a number of years, the plant had remained in disuse.

A few years before, Harry Taylor had rebuilt the factory as an iron works. Tony Kay recalled that they were still using a mountain somewhere around here as a source of iron ore. As a kid, Tony Kay had explored through some of the old drifts and shaftways that had been dug into the mountains, in order to bring out the ore. And now he knew that some of those old shafts had been reopened in order to supply Harry Taylor's plant.

He said, "Perhaps Taylor can give us some clue to this crazy menace thing."

"Let's run up to the factory," sug-

gested the girl. "He ought to be still there, because he said he would be working half the night."

They started up, but the detective had no sooner got beyond the corner when they saw the crowd of men starting out from the church grounds where a man had so queerly died. Some were armed.

Susan indicated a big, solid-looking man who appeared to be in charge of the grim-faced group of townsmen.

"That's the sheriff," she said quickly. "I wonder what they're going to do."

Tony Kay climbed hurriedly from the car and soon found out. For he learned that the sheriff was a man named Buck Smith, and the big man was leading what was apparently a posse.

"It's about Zeb Frasier," he explained to Tony Kay.

"Zeb? What about him?"

"He's headed up Breakneck Mountain. He's actin' damn queer, and we intend to find out why!"

A few cars had been driven up by various residents of the town. News of the new death had spread rapidly, and people had called others who had been in bed. It was into these cars that the men were climbing. A few of the machines had already started up.

Suddenly more interested in Zeb Frasier than anything else, Tony Kay suggested, "How about riding with us, sheriff? I'd like to talk to Zeb again, too!"

The big lawman agreed. He paused to give a few brief instructions to others who had not yet started, then climbed in with Tony and the girl. Susan briefly explained about Tony Kay's work in New York.

Big Buck Smith showed interest.

"Fine!" he said, as Tony Kay turned the car back Main Street hill and headed for a short-cut he well remembered to Breakneck Mountain. "These townspeople have got to be shown that this *must* be something that can be solved. It's not some supernatural menace that they insist on believing!"

For a moment, Tony Kay was silent. He had turned from Main Street, was following a narrow, winding road that slowly worked its way upward. They were shortly in deep woods, and the narrow byway became more torturous to follow. The private detective had to pay close attention to driving.

It was Susan who spoke up, saying, "But everyone believes in the legend, Buck!"

"Legend?" Tony asked. "What llegend?"

"Some years ago," explained the girl, "they say that a young, jealous husband pushed his bride from a cliff on top of the mountain. She was supposed to have been killed as she hit a ledge, and a piece of growing branch pierced her heart."

Tony cast a quick glimpse at Susan's pallid features. "And?" he prompted.

"But they never found her body. They were never sure that she *had* been killed. Some insist that she was driven insane by shock of the fall and by her husband's trickery. She is still supposed to roam through the mountains around here."

"Nonsense!" snapped Buck Smith.

"Certainly," agreed the girl. "But, nevertheless, there's this person they call Miss Death, and—"

Suddenly they were all thrown slightly forward as Tony's car stalled. The road was steep now, and further driving was impossible. They climbed out. Somewhere far

down the mountain behind them, they could hear another car laboring.

The sheriff had a flashlight. Tony got another from the car. Buck Smith said, "Someone said they saw a light moving up here on Breakneck. And Zeb was seen headed this way. This road is the only way up from this side. We ought to be able to catch up with Zeb."

Tony looked suddenly at the girl. "Say, I forgot, Susan!" he began. "Perhaps you should stay here. You really shouldn't be along on this thing. Besides—"

But the small, trimly built girl's eyes were bright. "Try and stop me!" she said determinedly. She gripped the detective's arm and urged him forward.

For an hour they climbed. The road dwindled out into a mere path-way. They appeared to be circling beneath the very topmost point of Breakneck. Tony Kay recalled how this mountaintop appeared from far down on the Hudson.

Steep cliffs rose sheer for hundreds of feet. It was almost impossible for even a skilled mountain climber to scale those cliffs. Several had been killed in the attempt.

But this roadway that circled around from beyond the village, gave access to an easier way up to almost the topmost point. And from there on was a narrow trail that could be followed to the peak.

They were close to the top when it started to rain. The storm had come up suddenly, as storms do in the mountains. Scurrying clouds had blotted out the moon. Thunder rumbled in the distance, across the river that was far below them.

The girl and two men plodded through the night, rain soaking them more now because there was a stiff

breeze up here near the mountaintop. Susan's wet skirt plastered against her trim legs; the wind tumbled her wavy dark hair about her smooth forehead.

It was Tony who suddenly drew up short, listening. He said, "Thought I heard something!"

Big Buck Smith shook his head. "It's the wind," he said.

But Tony Kay caught the slight nod from the girl. Obviously, she, too, had caught the faint sound. She pointed ahead, offered somewhat breathlessly, "We . . . we're just beneath the top. We can't go much farther—at least, not from this trail."

Tony Kay nodded, shooting his flashlight ray ahead. The light beam picked out the abrupt, straight rise of a rocky cliff that rose upward for at least seventy-five feet. The top of the cliff was the very top of the mountain itself. And he recalled that there was a route to that peak by way of a path about a quarter of a mile away from here, in a different direction from the route they had taken.

They had emerged into an open space that gave a view of the river hundreds of feet below them. But the river was only a black void now, almost invisible through the driving rain.

The private investigator, using his flash, sought footprints in the seldom-used trail. Big Buck Smith was doing the same. The light the sheriff carried was a more powerful one than Tony Kay's. It illuminated the wet night with almost a blinding brilliance.

Behind them, back down the mountainside, other lights flickered in the rainy night. That would be the other villagers climbing the longer trail. They should reach here shortly.

Tony Kay started to comment. "It looks as though—"

The man's scream of horror came from somewhere over their heads. A sudden crack of thunder chopped off the horrible cry as though a giant hand might have been clamped over the person's mouth.

Instantly Tony Kay and the sheriff had their flashlights pointed up the bleak, straight wall of the cliff. But a sudden flash of lightning made their lights seem insignificant as the rocky wall was swiftly bathed by the greater glare.

The girl's cry jerked them rigid. "Look!" Susan gasped.

But both men had already seen. The man's lean figure was on the very edge of the cliff top. It was already falling backward, outward, like some weird thing in slow-motion. Then it was tumbling through space, the man's hands clutching outward as though he might be reaching for something in this very last second before death.

And the brilliant lightning flash revealed who it was. Zeb Frasier! He was going to strike only a dozen feet away from them!

But no one moved. Another thing held each transfixed as each continued to stare upward at the other part of a gruesome tableau.

The woman was up there on the cliff top, too, standing so near the edge that it seemed she must fall.

The woman in white, with the gorgeous blond hair cascading over her smooth shoulders. Even from where he stood, Tony Kay could see a detail that was clear in the powerful beam of the sheriff's light.

It was the tall, slender figure with the blood-red wound just over the heart. It was the same woman of the weird, staring eyes.

It was—Miss Death!

Just as the thunderous crash of Zeb Frasier's striking body smashed through the night, the high-pitched, musical laugh floated down through the storm.

And then, as abruptly, the white-garbed figure was gone.

CHAPTER IV.

MYSTERY IN THE NIGHT.

Tony Kay, a little later, bent down over the crushed, broken form that had been gaunt Zeb Frasier. Buck Smith, the big sheriff, had already raced off into the night to intercept



It was Kane who was staggering toward the wide-eyed onlookers!

the villagers coming up the mountain. They would try to block off any retreat of the woman known as Miss Death!

As Tony Kay's jaw set firmly and he went through the dead man's clothing, the girl's small figure cringed back behind the private detective. Once she murmured:

"Oh, it's . . . horrible. Tony, whatever do you expect to find on him?"

Tony Kay, with the crook of his arm, wiped away the rain drops that were dribbling into his eyes. His hard brown face was tight, as he said, "It's just a hunch, Susan. I had Zeb all wrong. I thought, at first, that he might be mixed up in this mystery. But now I realize he must have been after something. And because of that, he—died. The question is: why?"

Susan, shuddering as she watched Tony Kay search the dead farmer, answered, "Zeb had a few acres up there in the valley, too. He was having a pretty tough time of it, and he would have been glad to sell out to the company figuring on the dam project."

The detective nodded. "Funny, but apparently everyone concerned in this thing so far lived down there in the valley that would be used if the dam was built. They—"

He paused, looking closely at something which he had taken from the hip pocket of the broken figure's clothing. Tony stood up and, holding his flash on the piece of paper, stepped toward the girl.

"Take a look at this" he said.

Partially shielding the paper with his coat, he showed the small sheet of paper to the girl.

Both could see that it was a page torn from a book, and the paper itself was old and yellowed. It was the words at the top of the sheet at

which they stared. A short paragraph read:

Two more men were lost in Drift No. 3 today. Both died after they had passed that same pocket halfway in, where the other man died a month ago. Unable to get to them so far.

Susan's serious dark eyes were puzzled. "What does it mean?" she asked.

The lean private detective's eyes were thoughtful. "I don't know—yet," he said. "But look at the *date* on this thing!"

Obviously the sheet had been torn from some sort of diary, and the page Tony Kay held was marked: "April 24, 1864."

Even more puzzling was some writing that appeared farther down the page. The girl, staring at it, exclaimed, "But it doesn't make sense! It's just a jumble!"

"Code, perhaps," said Tony briefly. He was abruptly folding up the yellowed sheet and tucking it into his trousers pocket. "If it gets any wetter," he exclaimed, "we might not be able to read it at all. We'll study it later."

Feet crashed through the woods nearby. Buck Smith, the sheriff, came hurrying up to them. He was breathing hard from what must have been a chase around to the other side of the cliff.

"She got away!" the sheriff announced. "There was no sign of her by the time the men got around to the other trail."

More men were arriving. They carried clubs and shotguns. Tony Kay recognized several who had been down at the church common in the village.

All stared grimly at the twisted, broken form of the gaunt farmer here on the ground below the high

cliff. Someone said tensely, "It's gosh-awful queer about this survey those fellers are makin' for the dam project. Every person livin' down there in the valley is thinkin' about gettin' out. This makes three of us who live there that have died!"

Tony looked at the speaker. He was a short, thin, but rugged-looking man. Another farmer, no doubt. He kept staring now with silent horror at the figure near his feet.

It was the sheriff who snorted, "This thing has nothing to do with the idea of building a dam down there. It's something else."

"Sure!" a man supplied. "It ain't nothin' human! It's something that is goin' to kill *all* of us!"

Susan was standing close beside Tony Kay. And he was aware of the slight shudder which she gave at the man's cryptic remark. He drew her quickly to one side, suggested, "There's nothing we can do here. We'd better get back. You're soaked!"

He referred to the trimly built girl's wet clothes. But as they started back the steep downtrail, Susan said, "Luckily, it's warm. I don't feel cold—at least, not from the rain."

As they hurried along, Tony abruptly remembered something they had been discussing earlier. He said, "You were going to tell me something just before we started up here?"

"Yes," the girl said. "Rather, it's something I want to show you in the morning. And—"

They almost bumped into the tall man coming up the narrow trail. The man was carrying a flashlight also, and his eyes widened as he saw the girl.

"Susan!" he exclaimed. "I didn't think *you* were up here!" He waved a hand indicating the section that

the girl and Tony had just left. "I just heard about . . . Zeb. It's pretty awful, isn't it?"

The girl said softly, "Yes." She started to add: "Harry, this is Tony Kay from—"

But the two men were already moving toward each other with outstretched hands. For Tony Kay vaguely remembered Harry Taylor, present owner of the ironworks which Susan had mentioned.

Tall, slightly gray, wearing a well-tailored suit, Harry Taylor had the appearance of the successful businessman. It had been a number of years since Tony Kay had seen this surviving member of an old family of Spring Valley.

After a brief exchange of greetings, Tony went on, "We were coming over to see you tonight, before this happened." He referred to the dead man back by the cliff. "I own a little property down there where they're figuring on building a dam. That explains my visit to the village. Since you're in the same spot"—the young detective smiled—"on a bigger scale, of course, I thought you might have some idea of about these strange deaths happening around the village?"

Harry Taylor nodded somberly. His quick, dark eyes were worried. He explained as they continued down the incline toward the private detective's parked roadster:

"I guess Susan's told you about our situation at the iron works. We've been made a nice offer, and we're moving out. With the price they'll give me, I can build a more modern place down on the river front."

Tony Kay nodded. "Yes. I know," he said.

Back at the parked car, Harry Taylor paused. He motioned the girl and Tony into the machine, saying,

"I'm going back up there. Perhaps there is something I can do to help."

The iron shop owner's dark, steady eyes were worried. "Perhaps if we all got together tomorrow, at the plant—"

Susan looked quickly at Tony Kay. "Yes," she suggested. "Let's do that. Besides, Tony has yet to get a room down at the inn tonight."

The detective and the girl were seated in the car, tall Harry Taylor standing outside in the rain. At the girl's remark, the factory owner said quickly, "By the way, two of the engineers who are checking over available property for site of the dam are stopping down there. You might have a talk with them, Kay, and see what—"

"Those are my plans," said Tony Kay. "Tonight, as soon as I get down there. Perhaps they'll have some explanation about this crazy mystery."

The young private investigator released the emergency brake, managed to back the roadster into a narrow space between two trees growing close to the steep road, and they eased down the bumpy, rocky roadway.

Fifteen minutes later, Tony and the girl were back in the small village. They again passed the church grounds, continued down Main Street toward the river. The village street was again deserted, for apparently any of those who had not gone up the mountain had returned to their homes.

The single lamp lighted on lower Main Street cast a saffron glow in the wet, dismal night. Windows of the few stores appeared like vacant, staring eyes.

Close beside Tony in the seat of the car, Susan breathed, "I use to

think it was so peaceful here, even in the rain. But now—"

She shuddered.

Tony smiled tightly. "Don't worry about it too much," he said. "Tomorrow we'll solve this thing."

But he was not encouraged by his own words. *Could* he solve it? Or was this some mysterious menace that could not be checked? Tonight, with his own eyes, he had seen two citizens of Spring Valley die horribly. Who might be next? How could he *tell* what person might be the next victim of—Miss Death?

He shrugged away the thought uneasily, looked at the girl and suddenly exclaimed, "Say! I forgot about you, Susan. Guess I'd better drop you off first."

But the girl shook her pretty head. Even with her dark hair still wet and a little stringy, Tony Kay realized that she was beautiful. He didn't like the thought of leaving her, for after all there was something damned queer happening here in the town.

Susan said, "No, I'm taking you to the hotel first. Then I can run along home. It's only a few houses away. Besides, I think it better to be with you when you see Clara."

Tony's eyes were puzzled. "Clara? Why?"

She's changed since you last saw her, Tony!"

"Changed?"

The dark-eyed girl nodded. Tony had pulled up beside a long, two-story building that was located at the very foot of the street. Ahead there was a wide dock that was the last thing before the river itself. To the right and left of the dock spread a small, parklike area that was dark and gloomy in the rainy night.

"Yes," Susan went on. "Clara's changed since her father's death here at the inn. That's why the

place has been closed up. She's just a little . . . well, you might say—odd! That's why I thought she might not let you get a room, seeing as it's so late."

Tony said: "I don't get this. If the inn is closed—"

"Officially, yes," the girl said. "But Clara opened up a couple of rooms for these two engineers who are in town for the survey work. And I thought I might talk her into giving you a room, too."

"Oh!" Tony followed the girl toward the wide veranda that formed an entire side of the old frame building. Double doors with curtained windows in them formed entrance to the old hotel.

Susan tried the right-hand door, found it unlatched, led the way inside an old-fashioned room that was apparently supposed to be a lobby. A dim, small bulb glowed from a side wall of the musty-smelling room.

Susan said, "Wait here. I know where her room is. I'll see if I can wake her up."

Tony Kay turned down his soaked coat collar, shook the rain from his hat. He lit a cigarette and waited. All of five minutes passed.

Suddenly impatient, Tony started toward a flight of creaky wooden stairs up which the girl had disappeared. And at the same moment he heard Susan's fear-filled voice cry out from upstairs.

"Tony!"

The word smashed up and down what must be a long hallway above. It echoed through the drab, silent inn and sent the wiry young detective up the stairs three steps at a stride.

At the top, his fist tight on the newel post, he yelled: "Where are you? What's wrong?"

And Susan's voice reached him

from somewhere in the front part of the long hallway.

"Here!" the girl cried. "Please . . . hurry!"

Something in the breathless tone of Susan's words sent the blood pounding through his veins. He leaped forward, located a room door that was open at the front of the hall, barged inside the room and saw Susan's small, trim figure standing there near the side of a four-poster bed.

She was standing there stiffly, one small hand jammed against her mouth, staring with wide brown eyes at the figure of the woman on the bed—the thin, obviously tall woman who was whimpering and cringing back from them in terrified frenzy.

CHAPTER V.

FACE IN THE WINDOW.

The small, dark-haired girl kept staring at the shaking, thin figure of the woman on the bed and gasped, "It . . . it's Clara. She looks almost . . . mad, Tony!"

But the quick-moving private investigator had taken a stride close to the bed, even though the wide-eyed woman lying there jerked back at his approach.

Tony noted the set stare of the white-faced woman's eyes. He saw the stringy blond hair that was mussed about her head. He observed the convulsive clenching of the woman's thin hands.

Tony said quickly, "It's shock, I'd say. Something has terrified her. She doesn't yet recognize you, and she's scared to death."

"Why?" the girl wanted to know.

Tony shrugged. "Talk to her. Try to get her to listen to you. But be careful."

He took one final look at the trembling, wide-eyed figure, then stepped

hurriedly back toward the threshold of the room. Damned strange, he thought, why the two engineers who were staying here had not heard Susan's yell—or had not heard whatever thing it was that must have affected Clara Simms.

Tony Kay started opening doors located up and down the long center hallway of the old inn. Some of them creaked on rusted hinges. Others were locked. But the last room at the opposite end of the hall was wide open.

He moved that way, saw even before he was completely into the room that a small desk lamp was turned on at an old, marble-topped table across the room. He barged inside. And drew up with a stiff halt as something like ice water trickled along his spine.

The man was seated in a chair behind the table. The opposite side of the improvised work board faced a window, and the sash was raised a little from the bottom. A damp breeze from outside in the night stirred the faded curtains at the window. But the dampness did not bother the man of about forty seated in the chair.

He was dead.

But it wasn't death that shocked young Tony Kay. He had seen death in various forms before. It was the expression on the man's contorted face that held him awed.

The eyes bulged. The mouth was twisted out of shape by an expression that must have been caused by great pain. The man's head was thrown back as though, in the moment before death struck, he had tried to jerk away from something quite horrible. Even the fingers of his hands, resting atop the marble slab of the table, were splayed out in such a way that it appeared he

must have been trying to push himself away from something.

Tony Kay stepped over to where the dead man with the bulging eyes was seated. His sharp gaze took in papers that were spread out beneath the lifeless, stiff hands.

They were blueprints, and from a quick glimpse the private detective saw that they were plans of the long valley just outside the village. Details of property situated there. And about half of the fifty-odd homesites and farms located in the valley had been checked off. Obviously these were the sites belonging to people who had already agreed to a sale in case the dam project should be started.

The largest piece of property, Tony Kay noted, was that taken up by Harry Taylor's ironworks. This was located farther out from town, a good mile back, and right in the steep cut between the two bordering mountains.

Something else caught the detective's quick attention.

It was a scratch pad, lying to one side, and on it were a number of figures and letters. They might have been some sort of formula, but Tony Kay was not certain.

Nevertheless, he tore off the top sheet of the pad and stuffed it in his pocket. Then he stared around the room. He was wondering about the partner of this dead engineer who was also supposed to be staying here at the inn.

He saw two handbags resting on the floor near one wall. He noted an old-fashioned, movable clothespress nearby. Tony opened the door of the press.

There were high-top boots piled on the floor of the closet, khaki pants and woolen shirts hanging from hooks. Also, there were two neatly pressed suits. It only took a mo-

ment's time for Tony Kay to learn that suits and field boots were for two men of vastly different sizes. Thus he knew that two men had been living here in this room.

But where was the second engineer?

Casting a final glance at the short, stocky form of the man seated lifelessly at the table, he hurried out of the room, closing the door behind him. He paused a moment, listening.

At the far end of the hall, Tony heard Susan's voice talking softly. He stepped that way.

At Clara's room door he saw Susan seated on the edge of the bed. She was holding a glass of water in her hand and talking quietly, soothingly, to the tall, thin woman in the bed.

She turned at sound of Tony's approach, put a finger to her lips and then stood up quietly.

The private detective saw that the woman was asleep. Relaxed as she was now, and though she was somewhat gaunt and past youth, her features were not unattractive. She had smooth white skin; her blond hair, which apparently she wore tied back in a knot behind her head, could be pretty if fixed the right way.

For a moment, Tony Kay stared thoughtfully. It was just possible that—

Susan was saying quietly, "I found some sleeping tablets on her dresser. I gave her a couple, so I guess she'll be all right until morning now. I wonder what—"

Tony interrupted with, "Could you get somebody to stay here with her?" He was thinking of the dead engineer down the hall, and what would yet have to be done tonight. He would have to call that coroner—Evans.

Susan had put down the glass of

water and was tiptoeing toward the doorway. "Yes," she said. "Come on. I can get Mrs. Holt. She lives next door to us, down the street."

The girl snapped out the room light and closed the door softly behind them. They started toward the stairs, and she asked: "You saw those two men from the survey company?"

Before answering, Tony took the girl's slender arm and led the way downstairs. He recalled seeing the wall phone in the musty old lobby of this place.

Downstairs, he turned to the girl and said, "Do you know either of those men connected with the survey for the dam?"

Susan nodded, giving Tony a curious look. "One was a Mr. Rex Kane, a tall, nice-looking man with gray hair and—"

"The other?"

"Bill Easton," said the girl. "They're both stopping here at—"

"Was this Easton fellow short and stocky, with close-clipped dark hair?"

Susan nodded her head with a jerk. Her serious dark eyes were swiftly wide, as she said, "Tony, you said was! What—"

"Bill Easton is dead!" he said quietly.

The girl stared in cold horror. She moved forward quickly and gripped Tony Kay's arm.

"Heavens!" Susan breathed. "Why, Tony? Why has death reached him, too?"

Tony was cranking the handle on the telephone call-box. He lifted the receiver and waiting, saying to the girl, "He was murdered, I'd say, but Lord knows how!"

He didn't explain about the gruesome appearance of the engineer's face and hands; he said nothing of any ideas he might have on the man's death.

When the operator answered, he said quickly, "Get me Mr. Evans, the coroner."

After a moment, when a man's sharp voice answered, the detective continued, "Evans?"

He got an affirmative answer and told about the newest death victim here at the country inn, and of the disappearance of the dead man's partner.

Evans stated that he would take charge, and would also try to locate the sheriff.

Tony Kay asked a final question. "Look," he said. "About that quick autopsy you were going to perform on Jim Warner, the druggist. Did you learn anything?"

Something like a weary sigh came from the man on the other end of the line.

"Nothing," he said. "Damnedest thing I ever saw! It's just as if Jim Warner's life was ended with a snip of some scissors. Every vital organ is normal. There's not a trace of injury. Apparently, in one sudden moment, he just stopped living."

"I see," said Tony Kay thoughtfully, and he hung up.

The girl was immediately tugging at his arm. "Look," she said worriedly. "You can't stay here. You can sleep downstairs on the couch at home. You *mustn't* stay here! And I'll have Mrs. Holt get her husband to carry Clara over to their house."

Tony tried to protest, but the girl led the way out into the rainy night and up Main Street. Not far away was her home, a small cottage set back beyond a neat, white picket fence. First, the girl called Mrs. Holt, told her about Clara.

Then they went inside.

Ten minutes later, Tony was sprawled out on the parlor divan, suddenly aware that he was weary

from the night's happenings. And he had to get a little sleep, thinking of something he had to do in the morning.

There was the torn page from the diary, for instance, the thing that Zeb, the farmer, had been carrying with him. What connection had it with death that struck strangely and quickly, or with a lovely, weird creature that he had seen twice tonight? A lady in white, with soft blond hair and a mark like a knife wound over her heart.

Miss Death, they called her. Perhaps they were right. Perhaps there was, after all, something to this legend.

Tony Kay moved restlessly on the divan, breathed an exasperated "Damn!" and tried to get to sleep. As a detective, he knew that such ideas were nonsense.

And yet—

He lay there listening to the silence that was in the house, aware that Susan was no longer moving around upstairs. She, too, must be utterly weary, he thought.

He heard the rain dribbling off the eaves of the house, and after a while even that stopped. As quickly as the rain had come, it was gone, and now moonlight was filtering through the clouds again.

He knew this because a ray of whiteness angled in through the front bay windows, touching his face, so that it kept him only the wider awake. Sleep simply wouldn't come.

Suddenly he was thinking of the thin woman named Clara, whom Susan had finally got to sleep at the inn just down the street. There was something about Clara's smooth features, about her blond hair that *could* be arranged differently. He didn't know why, but he started im-

aging her as that other person he had seen tonight.

Miss Death!

He shrugged away the thought, turned on his side and tried to concentrate on sleep.

But in turning, he saw the white face pressed against the bay window. The face of the woman who was dressed in white, with blond hair tumbling about her smooth shoulders. He saw the eyes that stared through the window unblinkingly.

Tony Kay leaped to his feet.

CHAPTER VI.

DEATH IN GLASS VIALS!

However, Tony Kay lost precious moments in getting to the front door of the house, because he had taken off his wet trousers and shirt, spreading them over a chair. He had been lying there on the divan with a light cover thrown over him.

He tumbled into his clothes now, moved silently through the small front hallway, whipped quietly outside into the now lighter night.

And he saw no one.

For a tense moment, he stood listening for any slightest sound in the night. Then he skirted the house as quietly as possible, only his shoes making the barest of squishing sounds in the sodden lawn. He circled the cottage once.

Nothing moved. There was no figure in white.

His jaw set grimly, Tony Kay stared up and down shadowy Main Street. The single street lamp still glowed weakly at the corner. Farther up the hill, where the main highway crossed, there was the intermittent change of the single traffic light.

He looked back down the deserted street in the direction of the river. There was another car parked before

the inn now, and he recognized it as the coupé belonging to Evans, the coroner. Apparently the man was there already, possibly with the big sheriff.

Tony Kay started to walk that way—and then he saw the vague, dark-clad figure streaking beneath the trees in the little park beside the dock. The detective was abruptly racing after the ghostlike form.

For it was someone dressed in black—wearing a cloak, perhaps—and it was almost impossible to be exactly certain where the figure had gone.

But the wiry private detective reached the riverside park, angled swiftly beneath low-hanging trees, and got another glimpse of something moving fleetingly ahead. He jumped forward with renewed speed.

Too late, he saw the blur of black almost on top of him. And Tony Kay had imagined, at first, that the one he was chasing was a girl. Possibly he got that idea from fast movement of the shadowy figure.

But when the hard body crashed into him he knew differently. He pitched forward in a sprawl, aware that something like a leaded weight had luckily missed smashing his skull. The object, instead, slapped across his well-muscle shoulder.

Wet grass slid beneath his outstretched hands. He slipped as he jerked to his feet.

Regaining his balance, he whirled in the direction from which the blow had come. There was no one near him. At least, he was almost certain of that fact.

But here beneath the trees, with his assailant clad in black, he couldn't be absolutely certain. Cautiously, he moved forward again.

However, he was a good hundred

feet away from the dock edge when he heard the speedboat motor sputter to life. A moment later it settled into a steady, throbbing roar and a sleek-lined craft was ripping out toward mid-Hudson.

Tony Kay cursed the fact that his flashlight was back in the car. Perhaps he could have seen who was in that speedboat. Perhaps—

But he shrugged resignedly. It was too late now. Within a few moments, as he stood there in the night, the motor sound had faded in the distance.

He returned to Susan's house, slipped quietly into the living room and again prepared to try and get a little sleep. He could have, he knew, gone back to the inn to hear the coroner's ideas about the newest, strange death.

But Tony Kay had a hunch that he would learn little. That death was as bizarre as the others. He doubted that the coroner would know what had caused it.

And so as dawn broke over the little village, Tony Kay was not asleep. He was seated with a light still burning, at a parlor table with the torn-out page of an old diary spread out before him. For the past hour he had been sweating to work out the code of the jumbled mass of closely written words that appeared on the lower half of the yellow page.

And then, finally, he thought he had it. There was a little trick used in the code, and he had completely missed it. The word "three" had appeared a couple of times in the first two lines. And so he tried starting with the third line of the writing and picking every third word from then on.

Suddenly, the jumbled mass of words took on new meaning! For he got this much out of the page which

he had taken from Zeb Frasier's pocket:

It is the greatest thing ever discovered. In time of war you could make a million with it. Funny I hadn't thought of it before, but it didn't come to me until we sent men down there in the drift to try and get out those miners. They died, too.

I'd say that, approximately, the stuff is—

That's all Tony had on the page in his hand. If he could only find the rest of that diary, work out the true words from the code!

And what had Zeb Frasier learned in addition to this?

Tony Kay was still trying to find an answer to that question late that same afternoon. He had talked to various villagers. But he had learned little. For most of the townspeople went around in a grim, trancelike state. They were either afraid to state their ideas, or else too stunned to talk.

They spoke in awed voices of the weird tolling of the church bell the previous night. Thirteen strokes. Thirteen tolls like it had done on the night the first victim had been found dead, hands twisted, clutching, and his features contorted.

In almost a whisper, each person mentioned a name.

Miss Death!

Miss Death was the cause of it, they said. She was the one who would have to be found. But who cared to question *her*!

Tony Kay had even gone to the little belfry atop the white church. He learned why the rector of the church had not put in appearance last night. He was away on a short vacation.

The belfry itself was just a small, partially open space supported by four columns. The deep-toned bell,

controlled by an electrically-timed knocker, was all that was up there. From up in the belfry you could look out on the two cross streets visible through the tall trees.

The young detective found nothing out of order with the timing device for ringing the bell hourly. But he did, after an inspection of the bell itself, stand for a long time staring off through the trees.

Later, he had met Susan and gone up to the ironworks. For he had reminded the dark-eyed girl about her comment of the night before. She had something to show him.

It was almost five o'clock when they drove through the gates leading to the iron works. Workmen were already heading home for the day. Some nodded at the trim, small girl.

Susan explained as they climbed out of the car before the office of the small factory, "I've been a book-keeper here for the last year or so. One of the other girls has this bottle of stuff. I've noticed that she keeps it hidden in her desk. It might mean something—and then again, it might not."

Susan had paused to speak to Tony on the office steps. She turned to continue inside.

Just then, good-looking, tall Harry Taylor came out. There was a sedan parked just beyond the office steps.

Taylor shook hands with Tony, said, "Have you heard the latest?"

Tony Kay shook his head.

"The mayor has formed a special committee of police," explained Taylor. "We have no regular police force in town, you know. And so tonight everyone has to be in off the streets by ten o'clock." He smiled at the girl. "I've got to be a special cop! Going down to see the sheriff

now. He's in charge of us."

Tony Kay asked, "Any trace of that other dam survey engineer yet—that fellow named Rex Kane?"

Well-dressed Harry Taylor shook his head. His dark, steady eyes were suddenly somber. "No," he said. "It's very strange, too, especially after his partner's death. I heard about that from the coroner this morning."

Taylor continued down the steps. "I'll try to be back before you leave," he called back.

Susan smiled. "He's swell," she said to her partner. "I called him this morning and he told me to take the day off."

Tony nodded, and they continued into the office of the plant.

Practically everyone had gone home. But one girl was still at her desk. She was just powdering her nose, preparing to quit for the day.

Susan whispered, "That's her! It's May Allison."

Tony gave Susan a puzzled, quick glance.

"I mean," continued Susan, "she's the one who has that bottle of stuff hidden in her desk. I've watched her a lot lately. She's been acting oddly. Perhaps I'm silly, but I wondered—"

The girl named May Allison had stood up and was walking across the office toward them.

And Tony Kay gave a slight start.

For there was something about May Allison that reminded him of someone else. Tall, gracefully slender, the girl had deep unfathomable eyes. And those eyes had the faintest of shadows beneath them. There was something about the tall, ash-blond-haired girl's entire attitude that made you think of a person absorbed in something that was miles away.

She smiled at Susan, and Tony was

introduced to the tall girl. He was conscious of her softly modulated, pleasant voice. As she spoke, a little sneeze overtook her, and she blushed a trifle and murmured, "Sorry."

And then she was going out. Tony Kay stared after her. Appearance of the girl's unsmiling, troubled eyes still stayed in his thoughts.

Then he was following Susan across the office. She murmured, "Wait a moment!"

She was back in a second with a small, plain bottle in her hand. "This," she said, "is what May has been keeping in her desk."

"Looks like plain, ordinary water," said the detective.

He uncorked the small bottle, raised it to his nose. The stuff was odorless. It was also colorless.

"It is water!" announced Tony.

Next, on a sudden inspiration, he asked, "Look, is there a chemist in town?" For he was abruptly thinking of some figures and stuff he had seen on a scratch pad last night. He pulled the sheet of paper from his pocket.

Susan was saying, "Yes, there's a young man who works down at the drugstore in town. I imagine he's sort of taken over since Jim Warner's death last night." Her eyes were wide. "Why, Tony?"

He gave the bottle back to the girl. Also the piece of scratch-pad paper. "Get down there, then," he suggested. "Tell him to make a quick analysis of this stuff. Then call me back—or, I might even call you there at the store. Use the car."

Susan's serious eyes were questioning. "But what about you?" She indicated the now deserted office.

"I heard today that Zeb Frasier used to work here at the ironworks once in a while. Is that right?"

Susan nodded.

"And he left just recently?"

"Yes."

"Well, I think Zeb was close to something." Tony did not explain his comment further. Instead, he walked with Susan to the door. He asked a final question.

"About this girl—May Allison. What else do you know about her?"

Susan's brown eyes were thoughtful. "No one knows anything much. She's a quiet sort. She only returned here from Europe last year. She's related in some way to Harry Taylor, and I guess that's how she holds her job. She's sort of a dreamer, I'd say."

Susan smiled. "But then, a lot of people in town are related to him. It's an old family, but he's about the last remaining one of the direct line."

Tony nodded, watched the girl climb into his car. He stood there in the gathering darkness as she headed the car back toward the village.

Then, alone, he slipped back into the office and headed for the desk of May Allison. He could understand, being originally from this small village himself, why Harry Taylor had gone into town and left the office unlocked. Seldom did anyone think of locking doors around this section. Besides, Taylor had said something about returning.

Tony worked swiftly, going through each drawer of the desk carefully, leaving each item just as he had found it. He found the old diary in the very bottom drawer, hidden beneath a stack of paper.

For the next fifteen minutes, he decoded the writing in the diary. It was a book from which a yellowed page had been torn. It was the diary that belonged with the page already in his pocket!

And as Tony Kay deciphered the writing, his eyes widened. Though what was in the diary had been written in the time of the Civil War, he well recalled location of the background mentioned. The spot was an old mine shaft on a mountain a few miles back of here. As a kid, Tony Kay had roamed through the woods near the boarded-up entrance to the old ore diggings.

But what had been discovered in that mine brought a wide stare to his eyes now. Perhaps it explained, in a way, those peculiar, contorted deaths that he had witnessed last night. Perhaps it—

He tucked the diary in his coat pocket and hurried out into the now dark night. He did not head back for the village.

Instead, the young detective prowled the yards of the small iron-works. For he was thinking of an engineer named Rex Kane, partner of the dead man at the inn, and of what could have happened to Rex Kane!

He was also thinking of something he had read in the old diary.

He passed darkened shops, a small metal foundry. Tucked back in the very rear of the plant grounds, he located the old shed. There was a chain and padlock on the door. An old garage, perhaps, Tony thought.

He had started to turn away when something drew him swiftly back. It was an imperceptible odor, pungent, evasive. And he knew that he had smelled that odor before, not only last night when death had struck in the churchyard, but once in a laboratory in New York.

Tony Kay moved swiftly. He searched around the littered storage yard until he found a length of pipe. He worked the heavy pipe behind the chain and heavy padlock, got a

purchase on the thing, then bore down with his weight.

The lock twisted, snapped—and a second later, holding a handkerchief over his nostrils, Tony Kay was going into the old shed.

He saw the tanks, like storage containers used for bottled gas in rural communities. And he observed something else. He was using the flashlight which he had this time kept in his hip pocket.

On a shelf above the tank containers was a small rack holding the small glass vials. Each tiny vial was sealed, but even in here there was the trace of that elusive, pungent odor. Tony Kay hurried quickly outside. For he knew that to stay in here might mean—death!

He moved outside and into the path of the club that was being swung at his head. He collapsed, dazed, to the ground.

CHAPTER VII.

SKYRIDE TO HELL!

Tony Kay did not lose consciousness. But for seconds he was unable to regain his feet. He got to his knees once, swayed, fell to his face again.

Somewhere just behind him a figured leaped forward to hit him again. He tried, with a mighty effort, to jerk to his feet.

And then there were footsteps racing. Another person who pounded this way through the night. A deep-toned man's voice yelled, "Hey!"

The one in shadows near Tony Kay whirled, leaped past the shed and quickly disappeared toward the direction of the road which angled into the plant grounds. A moment later, a car motor started up.

Through a haze, Tony watched the second figure pass close by him, the man still racing after the one who

had left in the car. Tony Kay, through bleared eyes, got a glimpse of this second man.

Tall, in high-topped boots and with partially gray hair. He recalled the description of Rex Kane, the missing survey engineer. It was the man!

Tony Kay staggered to his feet. A peculiar ringing was in his head. Trying to disregard it, he tried to walk. And he collapsed to his face.

He had no idea how much later it was when he became aware that something was touching his face. Something moist.

He opened his eyes, was first aware of moonlight high above him. And then he saw the sweet face that was framed in that moonglow.

Susan!

She was supporting his aching head, bathing his face with a damp handkerchief. She gasped:

"Tony! Thanks, heavens! I though maybe you were—"

He climbed slowly to his feet, forced a grin and said, "You can't kill me!"

He felt of the back of his head, learned that a neat bandage covered it. He looked at Susan and murmured, "Thanks."

The girl still looked worried. "You were bleeding, Tony. I thought, at first, that your skull might be fractured. You—"

He took her arm, asked, "You've got the car?"

The girl nodded.

"What time is it?"

"Close to midnight, Tony. I looked all over for you, and then I found you lying here and—"

He nodded quickly. "Listen," he prodded, "what did you learn in town. About that water, I mean?"

Susan said, "It contains mineral properties. It could be used for that kind of bottled mineral water they

sell in stores. But Joe—he's that chemist at the drugstore—thought there would not be enough money in it for anyone using whatever source from where that water came."

Tony nodded briefly. "Yes. This other scheme was far more profitable!"

"Other—" The girl started.

But Tony cut in with, "I've seen Rex Kane. He was here just before I passed out."

Susan nodded, her serious eyes bright. "Yes," she said. "He's in town now. He was looking for Sheriff Smith. It seems he's made a startling discovery, and he was looking all over—"

The young investigator was already urging the girl back to where she had parked his car in the roadway. He explained tensely, "Let's hope we're not too late. We've got to catch him."

"Catch who?" queried the girl, as she climbed into the roadster beside Tony Kay.

"Rex Kane!" supplied Tony.

"But—"

He said nothing as he gave all his attention to whipping the car through the shifts and getting started back toward the village at breakneck speed. They were a quarter of a mile from the traffic light at Main Street when the church bell started tolling the hour.

Midnight.

Susan's trembling hand touched his arm, as the full tones of the striking bell floated out over the sleepy-looking little town. She breathed:

"Tony! Every time I've heard that bell toll tonight, I've been frightened. Suppose the woman known as Miss Death appears!"

Tony Kay had his foot against the floorboards, on the gas peddle. He said tightly, "Let's hope that it doesn't—"

He broke off, for he was listening to the steady, ominous tolling. His head nodded slightly with each resounding strike of the church bell.

Eleven—Twelve—Thirteen!

The girl could not withhold the cry of horror which broke from her lips. Her fingers dug into her partner's tense arm.

She gasped, "You . . . heard? It was *thirteen!*"

Tony Kay nodded grimly. In the next moment, they had hurtled past the corner light and he was slamming on the brakes. Bringing the car to a skidding halt because of the men who were running across the road in order to intercept the big man staggering down the embankment toward them.

As Tony piled out of the car, he recognized Sheriff Smith and some of the men who had gone up the mountain last night. And he also recognized the man known as Rex Kane, the survey engineer.

It was Kane who was staggering down off the terrace toward the wide-eyed onlookers.

The terrace was opposite the church grounds. Back a way from the street, a big house set back in the trees. Apparently Rex Kane had started toward the house, had been seized with some sort of attack, and was now reeling back toward those watching.

He collapsed suddenly and came tumbling down the bank. His face was convulsed; his eyes bulging and staring horribly. His hands clawed at the ground as though he were fighting something that tore at his body.

And then, as swiftly, he stopped writhing and lay still. Tony Kay knew that the man was dead.

Other men were racing up to the spot, apparently arriving from vari-

ous sections where they had been posted about the village. But a man who had been one of the first to see Rex Kane, exclaimed:

"No one was near that church. I was watching. An' the bell struck thirteen!"

Someone else agreed with the speaker. A man was sent to locate Evans, the coroner, but Tony Kay knew that a coroner was going to do little good now.

Heads turned as someone came running down from the big house on the small hill.

It was good-looking Harry Taylor. He was without a coat. He saw the dead man on the ground, then stared at the girl and Tony Kay. He said in awe, "Another! I heard the bell, and then the noise—"

Tony Kay was not watching Harry Taylor. He had turned as some slight movement caught his eye. And then, unobserved, he had moved to the big sheriff's side.

Saying nothing, Tony Kay pulled the big lawman to one side. Everyone else was grouped about the still form on the ground, and they were all talking at once.

Tony Kay pointed, said to the sheriff, "Look!"

The shadowy, cloaked figure of the girl was running silently toward a big car parked well down the street, beneath half-concealing trees. And as she ran, a bit of the black cloak whipped back and a touch of white was revealed. A long white gown that could have been made like a toga!

It was the sheriff who exclaimed softly, "Miss Death!"

Tony rapped out, "Come on!"

But Susan was suddenly beside them, and she said determinedly, "I'm going, too!"

Tony Kay did not protest, for he knew now that he dared not leave the

girl behind. There was a reason. But first, he wanted to trail the girl in the dark cloak.

No one had noticed their movements. All the others were too busy talking about the dead man on the ground. But Tony Kay touched a villager's arm, said quietly, "We might need you." He motioned for the man to follow.

By the time they piled into his car, one man standing on the running board, the big car that had been parked up the road had disappeared. And the girl in the black cloak was in that car!

Tony Kay had sent his own car hurtling past a side street, when he realized that he'd been almost tricked. The bigger machine must have turned off here—for ahead was a stretch of open highway and there wasn't a car in sight in the bright night.

He backed up, shot around the corner, picked out the big car ahead. It was just turning left at another corner. Then it shot across Main Street, a block below where a man had just died, turned left again at the next side street and returned to the main road.

The car driver was heading back in the direction of the ironworks! And, shortly, the faster car was out of sight, a fleeting dark phantom in the night.

At the road which swung into the plant grounds, Tony Kay saw the spiral of dust still floating in the air. He swung left also. The dust still floating in the air gave him something to follow.

There was a fork in the road. It led to another, wider thoroughfare that wound back through the long valley between two mountains.

The man on the running board stuck his head inside the car as Tony

sent his roadster careening through the night. The sheriff himself was crowded in beside Susan. He said once, "Wonder where that person's headed?"

Tony rapped, "We'll soon know." He had a hunch. He was remembering the location of the old mine mentioned in the diary, and of a quick way of getting up to that mine.

Two miles farther on, he saw the side road leading up to the incline, cable railway. For years, the incline railway had been used to take sightseers to the top of the mountain. Rising a good thousand feet, the cable cars passed up the steep slope of the mountainside. There were two cars, connected by the cable. And one was at the top of the incline while the other was down at the bottom.

Tony brought his car to a fast stop beside a small waiting room at the base of the incline. Already, the big car was parked there.

And just as everyone leaped from the roadster, they heard the slap of a car which had just descended empty. It had just touched the bumpers at the base of the rails!

Sheriff Smith was leaping up the steps that led to a platform where the car could be boarded. He indicated an electric switch box on the wall nearby.

"She's up there now!" he exclaimed. "She could have thrown the power on, then leaped into the car before it left the platform."

The sheriff illustrated what he meant. He motioned them into the empty, open cable car that was now at the foot of the incline. The car contained seats for about fifty people, and had no covering.

When Tony, the girl and the man they had picked up were seated, the sheriff threw the switch in an opposite direction and jumped toward

the car. They were already moving away from the platform.

It was a weird sensation, rising swiftly and steeply through the night. Trees crowded in close on either side of the tracks. The valley floor fell away behind them and became an empty, dark pit. Once Susan looked back and shuddered. She clung to the young detective's arm.

Halfway up, they passed the other car that was going down.

It was empty.

And then, in a few more moments, they were at the top and climbing out of the big car. Wind whipped around their heads. The stars above seemed unusually bright in the night. There was only vast emptiness up here, and the wind.

Tony said, "It's been a long time, but I think I remember the trail us kids used to follow. Come on!"

He was using his flash, and he led the way through deep woods, Susan close by his side.

A half hour later—they were all breathless from running part of the way—they emerged at a spot that was a small clearing on the rolling mountainside. The old, heavy wooden door was built into the side of the steep grade, and the cloaked girl was tugging at the door.

She apparently did not hear their approach. It was the big sheriff who seized the girl in the black cape, swung her around.

Susan gasped with dismay.

"It . . . it's May Allison, from the office!"

The tall, blond girl said nothing. Her eyes stared at them in a fixed, unblinking way. It was the villager who had been brought along that cried, "Why . . . why, she's *Miss Death*!"

The tall blond girl made no effort

to resist them. Her lips moved and words came queerly from her throat:

"—told me to come to mine, to wait inside—"

Susan stared. "What does she mean? What's wrong with her?" she asked breathlessly.

Tony Kay had touched the tall, slender girl's arm. He gripped May Allison's arm firmly, led her away from the locked doorway to the mine drift. The girl made no effort to resist.

He said to the others, "Come. We've got to hurry."

Susan repeated, "But what's wrong with her?"

"Hypnotized!" Tony said briefly.

Later, they approached the top of the incline. They were just coming out of the woods, reaching the picnic area that surrounded the waiting room at the top of the mountain, when the quick-thinking investigator raised his hand and said softly, "Wait!"

The others stared.

"Watch the girl!" Tony Kay ordered, and moved quietly forward. He had seen the movement of someone down beneath the cable car platform. Tony was suddenly leaping that way.

And the tall, sharp black-eyed man bounded up from the opposite of the car and made a lunge at the wiry detective. From somewhere behind Tony, Susan let out a scream.

"It's Harry Taylor!" she cried.

Tony Kay slammed into the good-looking ironworks owner. He ducked a swinging blow aimed at his jaw. Harry Taylor leaped across a seat in the open cable car, picked up a heavy wrench and let it fly at the wiry detective's head.

Tony Kay ducked, and at the same time he felt the slightest jerky kind of movement beneath his feet. But

Taylor was already leaping toward him again.

Moving with smoother speed, his fist a thing hard to follow, Tony Kay caught the bigger man on the point of the jaw. Harry Taylor swayed dazedly. The car beneath them jerked again. In that very last instant, the young investigator leaped over the side rail of the already moving car.

And then the heavy cable car released completely and went rocketing down the steep grade with a screech of wheels on the iron rails. In the car, Harry Taylor lay sprawled across a seat.

Tony Kay climbed back to where the others stood with wide eyes and taut forms. Each gazed in awe down the steep rails that disappeared through the woods growing up the mountainside. Each listened for that horrible moment when the big car would smash to bits a thousand feet down below.

Tony Kay indicated the slack end of the heavy steel cable that ordinarily held the car. He said tightly, "Taylor loosened the heavy bolts that locked the cable beneath the car. He must have figured we'd climb in later and be sent to our deaths! But we got back too soon. I caught him unexpectedly, and—"

He stopped. Something that was like a great blast rolled up from far below. It echoed through the woods, and then, after a moment, there was silence again.

And as abruptly, something like a sigh came from the tall blond girl still held by the sheriff. A little of the stare went out of her deep eyes, and her hand brushed wearily across her forehead.

She murmured, "He's gone now. I don't have to do what he tells me. I don't have to throw the little glass bulbs. I don't have to—" She

swayed, fainted into the big sheriff's arms.

Hours later that night, Tony Kay cleared up the explanations of the mystery back in the village. It had taken them an hour to climb down the mountain. Another half hour to call for someone to remove what was left of a man in the wreckage of the cable car, and then to get back to Spring Valley.

Tony Kay had even taken Sheriff Smith up into the church belfry to show him a mark in the bell located there. The indentation was on the side facing the big house over on the terrace.

As the young detective explained, "A rifle slug made this mark. You'll probably find that the rifle was silenced. But it accounts for the—"

"The thirteenth toll of the bell?" put in the sheriff.

Tony nodded. "Harry Taylor could sit right up there in an upstairs window and work the trick."

A little later, to others who were gathered in the church yard below, he explained, "Harry Taylor's great-grandfather discovered the poisonous gas back in one of his old ore mines near here. I've deciphered some of the mystery from an old diary which he kept. And I've also learned, from May Allison, that she was sent to a certain foreign country last year to make arrangements for sale of that poisonous gas."

"You mean," someone asked, "Taylor sent her?"

"She was in love with him, though they were cousins. He had learned about this gas pocket up there in the mountains, from the old diary. He had May Allison working for him, because he saw a chance to clean up millions."

A villager queried: "But the weird deaths? How—"

From his pocket, Tony Kay carefully removed a small glass vial. He held it gingerly in the palm of his hand. He went on:

"The most deadly kind of stuff. And when Taylor saw that this dam project was going to take in the whole valley, he had to stop people from selling out. He had to cause enough trouble to have the project *stopped*. Because source of this gas was back there in the mountain, where the lake behind the dam would back up."

"But the girl—" another man started to say.

"She was hypnotized by Taylor to do his bidding. Did you ever notice the man's eyes? Black and steady and a little uncanny! To make the deaths more fantastic, he impressed on her mind that she was to hurl one of the glass vials at someone when the church bell tolled thirteen. He'd select someone who was ready to sell out to the survey people, someone from the valley. Having the girl do his bidding, left him free to be clear of any implication in the deaths. I've learned that he was one of the first to build up the idea of Miss Death!"

Susan was there beside Tony Kay, and she put in, "The moment Harry Taylor was killed tonight, the power he had over May Allison was broken. She collapsed. She's in the hospital now, and later they'll be able to get more of the facts from her.

A man stared out of still wide eyes. "You mean, like her getting Zeb up there on the mountain?"

It was Tony who answered the question.

"Yes," he said. "Zeb was not so dumb. He was getting close to a solution of the mystery, and Taylor must have ordered May—his hypnotized subject—to lead Zeb up there to that mountain ledge on

Breakneck. You'll recall that Taylor arrived up there on the mountain, too, and very conveniently—though later I could find no one who had brought him up in a car!"

There were a few other points which Tony Kay cleared up. He explained about the bottled gas back in the locked shed at the iron works. Apparently Taylor had been smuggling the stuff through to a foreign country. Though he had appeared satisfied with the offer made him by the survey people for the dam, he dared not lose his hold in the valley.

The two survey engineers had suspected something of the truth. At first, apparently, they had thought Taylor planned to use the mineral water which was in a stream that flowed through that same valley. But then, from the old diary, he had discovered a greater source of income.

They must have learned about this—and for that, they were murdered.

It was the following night before all details were cleared up in the village. Tony Kay sat with serious-eyed Susan in his car. They were parked down by the river, and for a while they silently watched moonlight playing a ribbon of silver across the rippling water.

Tony said, "Peaceful, isn't it?"

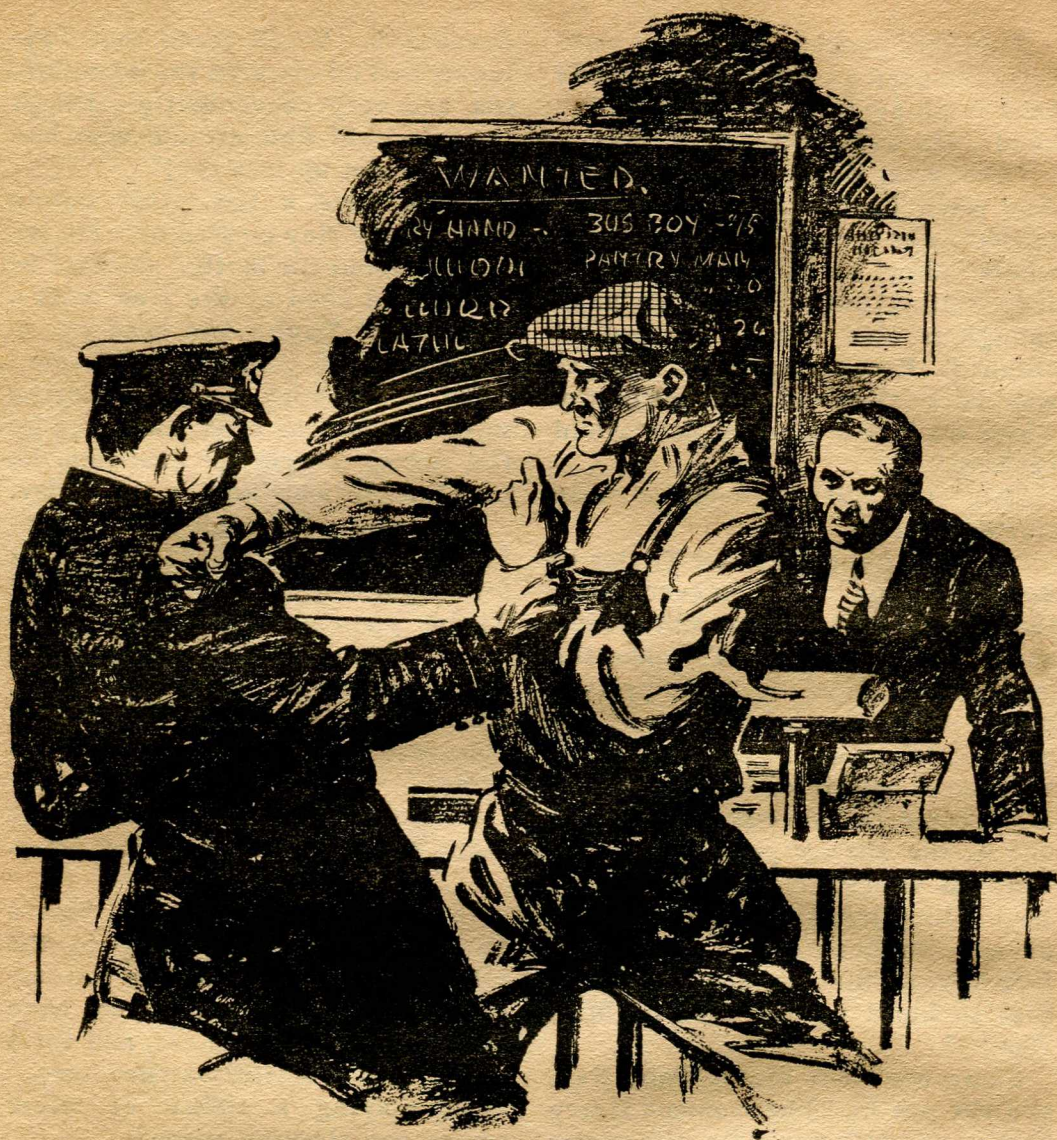
The girl moved close to him and gave a little shiver. "I always *thought* it was, but now—"

The detective smiled. "How would you like New York instead of this?"

The girl's eyes brightened. Her small hand slipped into his. She murmured, "You mean that—"

"How about marrying this guy, honey?" Tony Kay said with a grin.

The girl sighed. "Darling," she breathed, "I waited so long to hear you ask that!"



Jim Strong, the Rackets Man, tackles the toughest of

JOBS OF JEOPARDY

by **FRANK GRUBER**

CHAPTER I PAPER DEATH!

"The foreman's coming!" Eddie Moeller whispered. "Ditch the cigarette!"

Guiltily, Jim Strong dropped the

cigarette butt to the floor and ground it with his heel. Then he caught up a bundle of flat, corrugated-paper cartons and tossed it upon the dolly truck he and the other men were supposed to be loading.

The foreman, Floyd Conroy, came

up behind Jim Strong and sniffed the air. "Someone's been smoking here," he snapped. "And I'm warnin' you fellows for the last time. I catch you smoking on the job and you get your pay!"

Jim Strong picked up another bundle of cartons. "How about chewing tobacco, boss? Can we do that?"

The foreman scowled. "A wise guy, huh! I think you need cooling off, and I've got just the job for you. It's outside—unloading the freight car. Go out and report to Julius Welk. Maybe after you work with him for a few hours, you'll appreciate the soft job you had."

Jim Strong winced. He turned away and headed for the shipping department. As he left, he heard the foreman say to one of the other workers: "Eddie, someone wants to see you outside."

In the shipping room, Jim Strong headed for the doors which opened upon the railroad siding. There was a freight car standing just outside, its open doors matching the doors of the shipping room, although on a higher level. A runway ran from the freight car down to the shipping-room floor.

Strong approached the doors and looked into the freight car. It was still more than half filled with huge rolls of paper; rolls six feet in length and almost four in diameter.

"Hey, Julius!" he called. "Floyd Conroy said he smelled some tobacco smoke—"

Julius Welk grunted. "Well, you can smoke on *this* job. That's something. But—you any idee how much one of these rolls of paper weighs?"

"They look pretty heavy. I'd guess around four or five hundred pounds."

"Uh-uh," said Welk, "you missed by half. They weigh eight and nine

hundred pounds. And we got to unload them. Well, come on, get busy."

"The two of us, alone?" Strong asked, looking dubiously at the rolls of paper.

"Yeah, sure! We can roll them into the shipping room by ourselves, all right. The fun starts when we begin stacking them up. Then we'll need a couple more strong fellows. Floyd'll send them out."

It took two hours to roll the huge rolls of paper from the freight car into the shipping room. Then Julius Welk went to the foreman for additional help and returned with Eddie Moeller and the other man who had shared Jim Strong's work in the other department. The last man's name was Chuck Purcell.

"Hell!" Chuck exclaimed, when he saw the rolls of paper. "We got to stack them babies up?"

"You said it!" retorted Julius Welk. "And if you don't watch out you're going to get a couple of smashed toes or fingers. These rolls are heavy!"

Eddie Moeller said, angrily: "I got a good notion to call for a show-down right now."

Jim Strong moved over to Eddie's side. "What do you mean, Eddie?"

"I mean Floyd Conroy. He's trying to make me quit, that's what. I've been gettin' every dirty job around here. He's been jumpin' on me every time I turn around. I know I can't stand it much longer—"

"Nix, Eddie!" exclaimed Chuck Purcell.

Eddie scowled at Chuck for a moment, then shrugged. "Let's get to work. What do I do, Julius?"

The straw boss, Julius, said: "You and Chuck grab hold of one side and me and Jim'll take the other. That's

all. We lift them one on top of the other."

The job was simple. All it required was a strong back. The rolls of paper weighed from eight to nine hundred pounds. Two men lifting on one side and two on the other distributed the weight so that each man lifted approximately two hundred and twenty-five pounds, from the floor to a height about four feet. Not an impossible lifting job—if you only had to do it once. But if there were forty rolls of paper—

After they had lifted the third roll of paper, Jim Strong exclaimed angrily: "You'd think they'd use a block and tackle for this job!"

"What for?" retorted Eddie Moeller. "Then they couldn't make any one quit—"

"Hey—" yelled Chuck Purcell.

It happened so suddenly then, that Jim Strong didn't understand just how it could have occurred. They were lifting a roll of paper, had it practically even with the level of the roll underneath and then—then the other end of the roll slewed forward and plummeted to the floor.

Eddie Moeller's scream of horror was smothered in his lungs as the roll crashed on his back with a sickening crunch of flesh and bones.

"Oh—" gasped Julius Welk.

"Geez!" said Chuck Purcell in a tone of awe. "He fell . . . right under it!"

"Grab hold!" cried Strong. "Lift it off—"

Frantically he tugged at the roll of paper. He couldn't budge it until Julius Welk recovered and gave him a hand. Then they moved their end of the roll off the crushed body of Eddie Moeller. But one glance was enough for Jim Strong.

The life was gone from Eddie Moeller.

CHAPTER II.

THE HEART OF THE RACKET.

Dumbly, Jim Strong stared at Chuck Purcell. Then he shook his head and took a step forward. "Chuck," he began, "how did it happen?"

Chuck's eyes widened. "Why . . . uh, he stumbled and fell forward. I . . . the roll slipped out of my hands. Uh . . . you couldn't expect me to hold up the whole end myself—"

"No," said Jim Strong. "But—are you sure, you didn't *push* Eddie?"

Chuck Purcell gasped. "Why, you dirty—"

He took a step forward, then pivoted suddenly and started to run. Instantly, Jim Strong was dashing after him.

"Floyd!" yelled Julius Welk. "Floyd Conroy!"

Chuck was heading for the wide-open doors of the freight car on the siding. The doors at the far end were also open, and he was evidently counting on making his escape from the box factory through the shipping room and the freight car.

He made his escape, too—with a little outside help. Jim Strong was hard on his heels, but when he leaped from the freight car to the ground on the far side, from the factory, Chuck Purcell was plunging into a black sedan that had been parked nearby. The motor of the car was already running and as Strong rushed forward the car leaped away.

Strong came to an abrupt halt and stared after the vanishing car. He memorized the license, of course, but even as he did, guessed that it would be futile. The whole thing smelled to high heaven of a put-up job. When it came down to tracing

the license number, it would turn out to be a stolen plate.

He turned back to the factory, just as Floyd Conroy, the foreman, appeared in the open doorway of the freight car.

"Hey, you!" the foreman yelled. "Jim Burch, come back here."

Jim Burch was the name Jim Strong had given when he had started work at the plant of the Central Fiber Box Co., only that morning.

He walked slowly back to the freight car and remaining on the ground looked up at the foreman. "Conroy," he said, "I don't like your job. I quit!"

"What?" cried the foreman. "You can't quit. Not now—that fellow's dead. The cops'll be here in a few minutes—"

"Tell them to write me a letter." Strong turned away.

"Come back here!" yelled Floyd Conroy. "Come back here, I say!"

Strong walked swiftly to the street, half a block away. There he turned right and headed for Clybourne Avenue. He was turning into it when he heard the scream of an ambulance siren. He saw the machine turn in toward the box factory as a streetcar approached.

He got into the streetcar and paid his seven-cents fare. Then he plumped down into a seat. He shuddered as the full implication of the last few minutes swept over him.

Poor Eddie Moeller had been murdered. Of that he was sure.

Chuck Purcell's precipitate flight, the waiting car, was proof enough. Why, even the time must have been figured out beforehand!

And Jim Strong, sergeant of detectives assigned to the district attorney's office, had been present through it all—and had not only failed to prevent the murder, but

had let the guilty man make his getaway!

Of course, he hadn't expected a murder. Nor had he counted on things at the fiber-box factory breaking as quickly as they had. He had gone there that morning to investigate an angle of a racket that had come to the attention of the district attorney's office. For that matter, he hadn't actually known that a racket was being operated. He'd had suspicions, yes, and to verify those suspicions he had gone to the Pace Employment Agency on Washington Street, had paid them the requested fee and obtained the laborer's job at the Central Fiber Box Co.

The streetcar was slowing for its stop at North Avenue. Jim Strong got up suddenly and stepped off the car. He crossed to the sidewalk and entered a drugstore. In a telephone booth he dialed the number of the district attorney's office.

"Mr. Murdock," he told the switchboard operator. "Sergeant Strong speaking."

A moment later the crisp voice of the D. A. said: "Hello, Strong. Glad you called. I just got something that sounds like it might be up your alley—"

"A murder in a paper-box factory?" Strong cut in.

The D. A. gasped. "Yes, how did you get it?"

"Four men were lifting a nine-hundred-pound roll of paper. It fell on one of the men and two of them ran away. I was one of the two."

"For the love of Mike!" the D. A. cried. "What sort of business have you been up to?"

"That employment-agency stuff," Strong replied. "I couldn't get any evidence, so I thought I'd get a job myself and see how they worked. I

didn't have any trouble getting the job—only it cost me twenty dollars, which is plenty stiff for a job paying only twenty-five a week."

"But where's the racket, Strong? Employment agencies operate under State licenses. They've got to guarantee a job to last a month."

"Yes, that's right, and most of the employment agencies live up to their guarantees. If the worker loses the job inside of a month, through no fault of his own, the agency gets him another job without charge—"

"There's nothing wrong with that, Strong."

"Ordinarily not. But keep in mind that guarantee. *Through no fault of the employee.* Suppose the employee quits—or is fired for just cause—what then? He loses the agency fee."

"Of course, but—" The D. A. inhaled sharply. "I get it—the employer is in cahoots with the agency! They get a split of the workman's fee. You've got the proof of that, Strong?"

"Not yet. But I'm going to get it. This bunch is vicious. They killed a man today, and we had a report last week—the reason I got on this job—that a man who had worked at this plant just disappeared— You'll hear from me later, Mr. Murdock."

"Good, Strong!" snapped the D. A. "If that racket's been operating in this city without our being aware of it, it's time we wiped it out. And you're the man to do it!"

Strong hung up and left the drugstore. Then he approached a taxicab and opened the door.

The cabby jerked around in his seat. "Hey! What d'you want?"

"A ride," Strong said, "if you're not too busy."

The cab driver looked pointedly at Strong's clothes, battered shoes, grimy overalls and khaki woolen

shirt which had a rip up one sleeve. Strong pulled out a dollar bill. "I've got money to pay for it."

That was all the driver needed. "Hop in, buddy!"

Strong got in and gave the cabby directions. Fifteen minutes later, at the corner of Washington and Wells, he climbed out of the cab and gave the driver the dollar bill. "Keep the change," he said loftily. The meter read ninety-five cents.

He walked swiftly eastward on Washington. After a few minutes, he turned in at a dingy office building and climbed the stairs to the second floor. He opened a door on which was lettered: "Pace Employment Agency."

It was a typical metropolitan employment agency office. At one side of a large room was a blackboard on which were listed "offerings." "Bus boy, fifteen dollars; pantryman, twenty dollars up— Lathe worker—factory hand—couples for farm work—"

Before the blackboard were three rows of folding chairs. About half the seats were occupied by men apparently waiting for jobs. Facing the door were four mahogany desks. Women sat behind two. One of the others was occupied by a pimply man of about thirty, the fourth by a beetle-browed, swarthy man in his early forties.

Strong went up to the swarthy man's desk. "Mr. Pace?" he said.

Pace scowled at a sheet of paper on his desk. He said, "Just a minute" and ran a stubby finger down the lines of writing on the paper. Then he looked up.

"Oh, you!" he said. "Didn't I place you just this morning?"

"Yes," Strong replied. "But I didn't like the job."

Pace leaned back suddenly in his

chair. He bared his teeth. "Oh, you didn't like the job, eh? So you just up and quit."

"That's right. And I want my money back."

"Umm, you want your money back? Well, well, *Mister Burch*. And just why should I give you your money back?"

"Because I didn't like the work or the foreman. He's a slave driver. Makes you work too hard. And besides—"

A strong hand gripped Jim Strong's left wrist and a harsh voice said in his ear: "Got you, Jim Burch!"

Pace, the employment agency man, kicked back his chair. "That's him, officer!" he cried. "The man who let a fellow worker be crushed to death—"

Jim Strong pivoted and brought his right fist up to the policeman's jaw. He didn't put much weight behind the blow, as he counted on the surprise punch to break the policeman's grip on his wrist. But the policeman was a tough customer. He rolled with the punch and brought his own free fist smashing at Jim Strong, the while he retained his grip on the latter's wrist.

Strong tried to duck, but the fist hit him high on the forehead. Angered and stung by the blow he lowered his head and shoved violently against his adversary. He carried the policeman a half dozen feet across the floor, then threw his free hand about the man's body and gave a desperate forward heave.

As they crashed to the floor, Strong hissed into the cop's ear: "Let me go, you fool! I'm Jim Strong."

The policeman either didn't understand or had never heard of Jim Strong. He kicked upward with his knee and followed through with a

butt of the head that caught Strong full in the face and drove him up.

"So you're strong, huh?" the cop snorted. "Well, so am I?"

He rose up suddenly and spilled Strong sideward to the floor. Then he reached for his hip pocket. Strong saw the movement and cold perspiration broke on his forehead. Frantically, he kicked at the cop's shins. He landed solidly and the policeman yelped and jumped back.

Strong came up to his feet, then, and lunged for the door.

"Stop!" cried the policeman. "Stop, or I'll shoot!"

But Strong knew it was too late to stop, now. He hit the door with his shoulder and it burst open, spilling him out into the corridor. He took the stairs to the street four at a time expecting any moment that a bullet would strike him in the back.

CHAPTER III.

CONROY STRIKES BACK.

He made the street safely, however, and popped into a cigar store next door. As calmly as he could he bought a package of cigarettes. When he left the store a moment later, he saw people staring down the street where a blue-coated cop was charging after a phantom fugitive.

"He's a darn good cop, just the same," Strong said to himself. "I'll have to put in a word with his captain to make up for what I handed him. I had to do it, to convince Pace that I was a desperate character. Well, it's apparent that Pace is pretty sure of himself. I'll have to try from another angle."

He took a dollar watch from his pocket and saw that it was twenty minutes to five. He nodded and walked briskly in the opposite direction from that taken by the po-

liceman. After a few minutes, he flagged a cruising taxi and at one minute to five paid the meter charge on Clybourne Avenue, a block and a half from the fiber-box factory.

He stepped into the doorway of a poolroom and looked toward the entrance of the factory. He did not have to wait long. Workers began to stream out of the factory. All came toward Clybourne Avenue, for beyond the factory were only railroad tracks and more factories.

Less than a dozen workmen had passed when Strong saw Julius Welk. He stepped out of the doorway and fell in beside the straw boss of the shipping department.

"Hello, Julius!" he said casually.

"You!" exclaimed Julius Welk. "What are you doing around here?"

"Waiting for you. What happened after I left?"

"The cops came and . . . and they're looking for you!"

"Why me?"

Welk flushed. "Why, because— Well, because you ran away."

"So did Chuck Purcell. He pushed Eddie Moeller under that roll of paper and let it fall on him."

"Hey!" protested Julius Welk. "You can't say that. Why, that's just the same as accusing him of murder."

"Well, it was murder, wasn't it, Julius?"

"Gosh, no! Why . . . why would anyone want to kill Eddie? He was new on the job, worked there less than a week."

"How long have you worked for the Central Fiber Box Factory?"

"Me? Oh, I've been there a long time. Six months."

"Then why are you still in the doghouse?"

Julius Welk shot a sharp glance at Strong. "Whatdya mean, dog-

house? Why, I'm an assistant foreman."

"Straw boss, Julius. But you called it a doghouse yourself, when I reported for work in the shipping room."

"Well, it's the toughest job in the factory. But I don't mind it myself. I get pretty good wages—"

"How much?"

Welk exclaimed: "Say, what business is that of yours? What's the idea of all this questioning, anyway?"

"Ever hear of Vic Striker?"

The shot registered. Julius Welk's mouth fell open and his eyes rolled. "Striker— Why, he was a fella worked at the factory. Just a couple of days. He— I guess he quit."

"He quit his family, too, Julius. He never showed up at home after he quit his job at the paper-box factory."

Perspiration rolled down Welk's face. "You . . . you're a cop. I'll bet—"

"You win, Julius," said Strong. He slipped a hand under Julius' arm. "I'd like to have you walk down Willow Street, here. To Vic Striker's home—"

Julius tried suddenly to pull away from Strong's grip. "No . . . no! I don't want to go there."

"Why not? Your conscience, Julius? Because you had something to do with Striker's disappearance?"

"I didn't!" cried Welk. "I didn't! It wasn't me. I haven't got anything to say at the factory. I'm just a straw boss. I— Come to my house, up Bissell here. I'll show you something."

"Now you're being sensible, Julius. I'll see that you don't lose by it. It's Conroy, isn't it? He gets a split from the Pace Employment Agency."

Julius Welk shook his head. "I'll



As the gun blasted, Welk's body jerked, and a scream of anguish was torn from his throat.

show you. There's my house, right there. Come in and you'll see."

It was a dingy two-story building, set back from the street about twenty feet and with a yard ten feet below the street level, in front of the house. They descended a flight of stairs into the yard and approached the house.

Jim Strong fell in behind Welk. "I'm right behind you," he reminded the straw boss.

"It's all right," Welk said. "I'm a bachelor. I live alone."

He unlocked the front door and stepped into a gloomy living room. Strong followed him warily. It was a two-flat house, like most of the houses on the street, but the entrance to the second-floor flat was by way of a staircase on the outside of the house. However, he followed Julius into the living room and passing the straw boss poked his head into a dingy kitchen and a bedroom off the kitchen.

There was no one else in the flat. Strong turned back to Welk, who had switched on the electric lights and was pulling down the shades. Welk was frightened, Strong could see that in his face.

"All right, Julius, tell me about it. The Pace Employment Agency furnishes the box factory with employees. Under the State law, it must guarantee thirty days employment. However, if the worker is discharged with cause or he quits of his own volition, the guarantee is voided. Well, almost all the employees quit or are fired before their thirty days are up—so the agency sends new employees, each of whom pays his fee to the agency and on each of these someone at the box factory gets a split—Floyd Conroy, the foreman!"

A three-foot section of the ceiling

suddenly slid to one side and the face of Floyd Conroy appeared in the opening—the face of Floyd Conroy and a hand holding an automatic pointed down at Jim Strong.

"Stick 'em up, copper!" snarled Floyd Conroy.

Strong was chagrined. He had come into Welk's flat warily, had looked in the various rooms to make sure he was not walking into a trap—but he had not examined the ceilings.

He raised his hands slowly to shoulder height. He did not think Conroy would shoot, because the houses on both sides were close and the sound of the shot would certainly be heard; yet, at least one man had been murdered, and if Floyd Conroy had not done the actual killing, he was, at least, an accessory after the fact. He could not let Jim Strong get the upper hand, now.

Conroy said: "Frisk him, Julius. I'm coming down."

Julius Welk approached Strong from the rear. He patted Strong's hip pockets, then reached forward to search under his armpits. His hands came within a few inches of Jim Strong's, raised.

Strong suddenly gripped Julius' right and with one tremendous heave jerked the factory straw boss around in front of him. Welk cried out in terror and struggled, but he was considerably older than Strong and much weaker. Strong held him in a grip of iron and crouching to conceal himself better behind Welk, backed to the front door.

"Stop!" roared Floyd Conroy, his head coming down farther into the room.

"Don't, Floyd!" bleated Julius Welk. "Don't shoot—you'll hit me."

"Let him go!" Conroy snarled.

"Let him go, or I'll shoot right through him—"

"Better not," Strong warned.

Strong estimated that he was less than six feet from the door and tensed himself to let go of Julius Welk and make a desperate leap to the door. He did not quite trust Conroy.

And then Conroy's gun roared.

Welk's body jerked and a scream of anguish was torn from his throat. Horrified, Strong let go of Welk and leaped backward. Conroy's gun thundered again and a red-hot iron seemed to sear the skin on his shoulder. But then he had the door open and was plunging out into the little front yard.

He bolted for the short flight of stairs leading up to the street level as if a pack of bloodhounds were at his heels. He expected any instant that Conroy would be at the front window, shooting after him.

CHAPTER IV.

ANYONE CAN BE TRICKED!

Conroy, however, was too intent on making his escape from the house. He knew that police would be swarming around in a few minutes, that even if he shot Strong now, his own complicity was exposed. The best thing he could do would be to put as much distance as he could between himself and the house on Bissell Street.

Strong gained the street and saw people popping out of houses. He made a desperate effort to calm himself and, mingling with the crowd, observed loudly: "Someone ought to call the police; that sounded like shooting in that house!"

And then he slipped quietly away.

He left Bissell Street, but he could not leave behind his thoughts. Two men killed in a single day by a des-

perate band of murderers, and Strong had lost his last contact with them! It was too much to expect that Floyd Conroy and Pace of the employment agency would be at their various places of business the next day.

Wearily, Jim Strong went downtown to the district attorney's office. There he found a message from the D. A. to see him at once upon his return.

It was after six, but he found Murdock still in his office, filing his fingernails and glowering. "Ah, sergeant," he said, when Strong entered the room. "I've been waiting for you. I had a report fifteen minutes ago that a man named Welk, who worked in a paper-box factory, was killed on Bissell Street. I suppose—you had something to do with that?"

Strong nodded. "Welk was killed by one of his own gang. I was there—"

Murdock threw his nail file on his desk. "But what about the arrest! None was made!"

Strong shook his head. "I got away myself by the skin of my teeth. They're—"

The D. A. snarled: "You got away! You were at it single-handed again! How many times have I told you that we've got twenty detectives on this staff, and if those aren't enough we have access to the entire police force of the city. Which reminds me—I got a report of some trouble at the Pace Employment Agency this afternoon. A man named Jim Burch—"

"Yes," said Strong, "that was me, too!"

"And you fought with the policeman instead of identifying yourself and having him arrest this Pace? What the—"

Strong bared his teeth. "Because we haven't got a shred of evidence against Pace," he said, heatedly. "If I'd arrested him at that time he'd have been out inside of a half hour under a writ of *habeas corpus*. My only chance was to make Julius Welk talk. He was a direct witness to the killing of Eddie Moeller. If he'd turned State's evidence—"

"But he's dead now, and Pace is at large."

"So is Floyd Conroy, his accomplice at the paper-box factory. Their racket's finished, even though they're still at large. But I'll get them—"

The D. A. got up from his chair. "I hope so," he said, ominously. "Because you're going to have to answer some embarrassing questions tomorrow— Good night!"

Murdock brushed past Strong and went out of his office. Strong followed and returned to his own little room at the far end of the corridor. Just as he opened the door, his telephone rang.

Annoyed, Strong crossed to his desk and scooped it up. "Yes?" he barked into the mouthpiece.

"Sergeant Jim Strong?" a voice asked.

Strong scowled. He was in no mood for further work tonight. He snapped into the phone: "No, Strong's gone."

The voice on the wire went on: "Do you expect him back at the office tonight?"

A little ripple of excitement shot suddenly through Strong. He had heard this voice before. He dropped his own voice to a lower pitch and said gruffly: "Yeah, he's expected back in a little while. Who's calling?"

"Mr. Smith," the voice on the

other end of the phone said, "Tell Sergeant Strong to wait in his office for an important message."

There was a click and the phone went dead.

Strong put the instrument back on his desk. A gleam came into his eyes. The voice on the telephone had belonged to none other than Mr. Pace, the employment-agency racketeer. Which was strange, indeed.

On a sudden impulse, Strong walked out to the reception room and found the clerk plugging the switchboard with the night connections. "Say, Joe," Strong said, "have any calls other than the one I just had, come in for me recently?"

"Yeah, sure, sergeant," the switchboard operator replied. "They were comin' in every three-four minutes for you the last half hour. Same voice always, but he wouldn't leave his name."

"I see," Strong said thoughtfully.

"O. K. if I go home, now?"

"Of course, Joe. It's after six. I've got a little work to do here myself. Good night."

Strong returned to his own office. Taking a small key from his pocket he stepped to a narrow door at the far end of the room. Unlocking it, he switched on an electric light inside.

A soft smile played over his lips as he looked into the room. It contained visible results of his twelve years in the district attorney's office. Hundreds of crooks, swindlers and racketeers had contributed to the vast amount of merchandise in this little room. There were shelves and bins, loaded with mechanical contrivances of all sorts; perpetual-motion machines, potato peelers, vacuum cleaners, dishwashing machines, office appliances; some that

worked and some that didn't. All had at one time been the basis for a swindle or fraud. It was Strong's custom when arresting a racketeer to take a sample of the crook's knavery and put it here in this room. As a memento. To reassure him, when things appeared as black as they did right now, that he did not usually fail.

He had been victorious often enough in the past. The things in this room were proof of that. He rummaged about now, touching an object here, frowning or smiling in turn at an object there, as memories connected with them flooded his mind.

He was still in the room, when he heard a noise in the main office. He leaped quickly to the door. He had never permitted anyone to look into his private "gadget room."

But it was only the scrubwoman, bundled up in a voluminous black skirt and waist. She carried a broom and galvanized pail.

"Oh, it's you," said Strong. He turned to close the door of the gadget room. "All right, you might as well clean up."

"You bet," said an unfeminine voice.

Strong whirled—and saw an automatic in the scrubwoman's hand. Only it wasn't the scrubwoman.

It was Chuck Purcell, the killer from the paper-box factory, wearing a scrubwoman's clothes!

Strong's nostrils flared. "You, Chuck!"

"Uh-huh. And ain't it funny that my old fellow worker's here in the D. A.'s office? Hey . . . Floyd!"

Floyd Conroy slipped quietly into the room. "You didn't think we'd meet again so soon, did you, cop-per?"

Strong said, steadily: "You can't get away with anything here. There are police all through this building—"

"We know that, buddy," said Chuck Purcell. "But they didn't bother us none so far—"

"I could yell," said Strong.

"Or we could shoot," said Floyd Conroy. "But we're not going to do either. In fact—we're not even going to hurt you—here."

"Here?" Strong said, suspiciously. "Certainly you don't think you can take me out of this building?"

"We can try," said Conroy.

Strong nodded grimly. Let them try. He knew this building better than they. The night elevator operators—

"All right, Chuck," said Conroy. "But watch out—he grabbed Welk that way, today."

Chuck Purcell lifted up his black skirt, fumbled a moment on his leg and produced a coil of heavy cord. He nodded at Conroy and stepped behind Strong. Strong relaxed.

And then the room seemed to fall on his head. The treacherous Chuck Purcell, displaying the rope had stepped behind Strong as if to bind him. Instead, he had clubbed Strong with his automatic.

Strong went down to his knees, gasping in agony. In that position Chuck Purcell struck him again. Blackness swooped over Strong.

CHAPTER V.

TUNNEL TERROR.

Pain shrieked through Strong's head. For a while he was conscious of nothing else, but as the pain receded he became aware of movement. Hands gripped his arms and ankles and were carrying him through seeming darkness. It was only, how-

ever, because his eyes were tightly closed, because of the pain in his head. He forced them open, but for a moment saw only shadows and gloom. He heard voices.

Floyd Conroy was saying: "The dope thought we'd carry him out of the building in the regular way. He figured some cop would grab us. He didn't know about this tunnel and I'll bet he's been in that building five years."

Chuck Purcell's voice answered: "I been in this town twenty years, and I never knew there were any tunnels under the Loop."

Floyd Conroy chuckled. "Well, to tell you the truth, I didn't know about them either. Well, not exactly. Seems I heard something about them once or twice, but never took it in. Pace worked in them, once, so he got this idea."

Strong groaned inwardly. In common with many Chicagoans he had known only vaguely that the entire downtown section was honeycombed with tunnels, through which ran little trains that delivered fuel, merchandise and supplies to the various buildings throughout the city and in turn collected ashes, refuse and freight shipments. Few Chicagoans are aware of the tunnels; they take for granted the fact that, unlike other large cities, the Loop is comparatively free of delivery trucks, ash and garbage trucks.

Strong twisted his head and caught a glimpse of damp glistening walls. The movements of his head, however, apprised his captors of his consciousness.

Conroy said: "Hi, copper! Know where you are?"

"In the tunnel," Strong replied.

"Yep," Conroy admitted. "You're in the tunnel. We took you down in the freight elevator and in a min-

ute we're gonna dump you on a train and drive you right out to the lake shore, about ten miles—"

"Why didn't you finish the job in my office?"

Conroy made a clucking sound with his mouth. "Couldn't. On account of you caught Dick Pace by surprise. All his dough's in the bank. He can't get it out until tomorrow morning and on account we got to hold you until then. Just in case—"

"Just in case the cops grab him when he goes to the bank," cut in Chuck Purcell. "We hold you as a hors . . . horstage!"

"There's Dick now," said Floyd Conroy.

A voice ahead called, cautiously: "Floyd? Chuck?"

"O. K., Dick," replied Conroy. "We got him."

Strong had already become aware that his ankles were bound as were his wrists, behind his back. Conroy and Chuck swung his body back and forth a time or two, then with concerted grunts tossed him bodily into the air. He landed heavily on a flatcar loaded with large, hard chunks. The odor told his nostrils that it was a carload of coal.

"What'd you do with the engineer, Dick?" Conroy asked as he clambered up on the little car.

"Right there by your feet," replied Pace. "I got him tied up like a silkworm."

"Can you handle the train yourself?"

"I drove one of them for two years before I got smart," Pace said crisply.

"You weren't smart when you went in for murder, Pace," Jim Strong said evenly.

Pace cursed. He flicked on a flashlight and played it on Strong's face.

"The copper who tried to pass himself as a sucker!" he sneered. "Well, you were a sucker, all right, you—" He emphasized his epithet by kicking Strong in the ribs.

A grunt of pain was forced from Jim Strong. He bit his lips until he tasted fresh blood. Heavy shoes scuffed around him as the three conspirators moved forward to the little engine. He heard the hum of a motor and in a moment the car jerked and began moving over smooth rails.

Strong raised his bound ankles then and groped cautiously about. Almost instantly he touched something yielding. The engineer of the train, no doubt, bound as well as gagged.

Strong nodded in satisfaction; that would make it two to three. He twisted around until his heels were touching his hands behind his back. With a thumb and forefinger he gripped one of the heels and twisted it. It moved, and a sharp edge grazed his thumb. It was a razor blade that he habitually carried in his right false heels; the left contained a tiny key that could unlock almost any handcuff lock made.

He gripped the sharp blade between his thumb and forefinger and moved it cautiously to the cords that bound his ankles. They parted instantly under the razor. He stretched his feet and flexed his muscles to restore circulation.

After a minute or so he brought his feet under him again and forced the razor blade into the thick sole of his shoe. Then he placed his bound wrists gently against the outer edge and began sawing carefully.

Two minutes later he was rubbing his wrists in front of him. He was still doing that when he was startled by Dick Pace's exclamation in the engine up front.

"Say, that copper isn't gagged! We're going to reach a crossing in a couple of minutes. Better go back there and see that he doesn't squawk."

"I'll stuff his mouth with a lump of coal," Chuck Purcell said derisively.

Strong flattened himself on his stomach and reached out for the bound engineer. He located his wrists and swiftly cut the rope that bound them. The engineer immediately reached up and ripped the gag from his face. Evidently he had been fully conscious and heard everything that had been said. Strong caught the man's hand and pressed into it the razor blade. Then he picked up a lump of coal half the size of his head.

Chuck Purcell's feet crunched over the coal, approaching. He mumbled something then called out: "Hey, Floyd, throw a light here. I can't see a—"

Strong rose to his knees in the gloom and lunged forward with the bludgeon in his hands. Chuck Purcell saw the apparition rise in front of him, yelped and tried to leap back. But he was too slow. The lump of coal in Strong's hand smashed him squarely on the forehead and toppled him backward.

In the engine, up front, Floyd Conroy cried out in alarm. "They're loose, Dick!"

Strong winced and stooping low, scrambled toward the front of the train. It was now or never, he knew. If only the engineer got his feet free in time to come to his assistance. The odds were even—except for the guns in Conroy and Pace's hands.

Orange flame lanced the darkness and the little tunnel rocked to the explosion of an automatic. It thundered again. Coal dust puffed into

Strong's eyes. Desperately, he heaved the chunk of coal and stooping, caught up another.

Behind him, the engineer cried out hoarsely: "I'm with you, pal!"

Coal swished past Strong. The killers, ahead, ducked out of sight. But only for an instant. The moment Strong and the engineer of the train had thrown their chunks of coal, the men up front were up again and shooting.

A bullet smashed into a lump of coal Strong was in the act of picking up. It splintered into a dozen chunks, one of which was knocked up into his face. He gasped with the pain and reaching for another lump of coal, found that it weighed at least twenty pounds; but in his desperation he raised it high and catapulted it forward.

A gun exploded at almost the same instant and then there were two cries of pain, one from the engine and one from beside Strong. The engineer cried out: "My arm!"

Then a flashlight shone fully on Jim Strong and Dick Pace's cold voice said: "Got you now, copper—" Strong braced himself for the shock of the bullet and knew that he had lost. He leaned forward—

And then he was hurled violently to his face. The air was suddenly

filled with a deafening crash of steel against steel, wood against wood and coal. Instinctively, Strong covered his head with his arms. He fought desperately against threatening oblivion, but lost. For the second time inside of an hour he passed out.

When he revived this time, he was lying on a canvas cot. There was a light over him and a circle of strange faces.

"What happened?" Strong asked weakly.

A begrimed face came out of the circle. "We bumped into a train on a crossing," he said.

Strong's eyes fell to the man's arm, saw that it had been rudely bandaged with a towel. "You're . . . the engineer, who was with me?"

The man nodded. "Yes. That fellow who was running the train—"

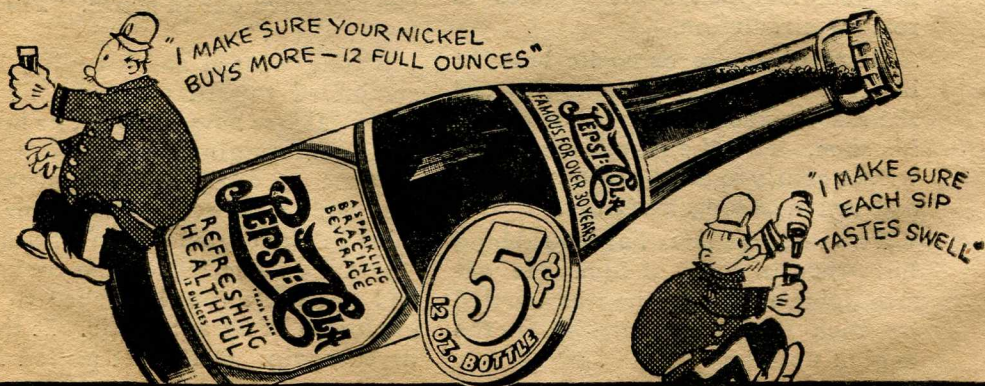
"He's dead?"

"About half the coal in the car piled up on him."

"And the others?"

"One of them got killed, too, but the third one, fella who says his name's Purcell, he's alive."

Strong sighed and relaxed. Purcell would talk. Even if he didn't, the engineer of the freight train would be a creditable witness.



CARRIE CASHIN AND ALECK MEET THEMSELVES RUNNING INTO

DOUBLE TROUBLE

BY THEODORE TINSLEY



DOUBLE TROUBLE

by THEODORE TINSLEY

CHAPTER I.

ALECK MEETS HIMSELF!

Aleck frowned with superior male disgust as he rode up in the elevator toward the office of the "Cash and Carry" detective agency. Women were all alike, including Carrie Cashin! They loved to make a man run a silly errand at the last minute.

For instance, this darned skiing hood!

Carrie had forgotten it. Right this minute she was sitting calmly in Grand Central Station, surrounded by luggage and porters, while Aleck raced madly back to the office to find the hood—and train time drew dangerously near! They had been invited for a week end of winter sports in the Berkshires.

In the freezing darkness outside, a feathery blur of snowflakes promised perfect weather. A hell of a time to risk missing the only train that made proper connection!

Feeling very abused, Aleck left the elevator and walked toward the angle of the corridor, beyond which was the Cash and Carry office. His mind was on his errand. But the detective instinct in him was strongly ingrained. He halted suddenly. Beyond the angle of the corridor wall the reflection of light looked peculiar. It was too dim to be normal.

Aleck edged forward and peered cautiously.

Two of the three ceiling lights were out. A man was crouched in front of a locked door, using what looked like a skeleton key. He was

a big man. From the rear his shoulders matched Aleck's.

He was opening the door of the Cash and Carry office!

There was a click as the key turned. The big guy straightened. He threw a furtive glance backward. He didn't see Aleck, but Aleck saw him.

It was something to see!

The man's face was an exact duplicate of Aleck's! Nose and eyebrows and mouth; color of hair; even the self-confident forward jut of the jaw—the guy was like Aleck's twin brother! The only trouble was that Aleck never had a brother.

An instant later the strange double stepped coolly into the office. He didn't even trouble to lock the door on the inside. Evidently he was aware that Carrie and Aleck had already departed for Grand Central for a week end of winter sports in the Berkshires.

Aleck's big hands clenched into fists. His first thought was to jump the guy and batter an explanation of this strange masquerade out of him. But he resisted the foolish impulse. A well-planned criminal deception was going on. Aleck could find out more by brains than by brawn.

He tiptoed down the corridor to a rear hallway and a flight of metal-enclosed fire stairs.

Carrie and Aleck often used this route when the need of secrecy was urgent. Their office was a duplex suite. The rear room contained criminal records, case histories and laboratory equipment.

Aleck slid his key into the well-

oiled lock. The door wouldn't open. It was jammed on the inside!

Aleck was not a fast thinker, but he remembered suddenly about the window. It was not a very big one. It would be a dangerous spot to reach and a tight squeeze to get through. But that little window opened into the rear room of the Cash and Carry suite!

There was also a window at the end of this corridor.

A blast of wind knifed at Aleck's face as he clambered over the sill. Snowflakes blew up his nostrils and powdered his shoulders. He peered into a black abyss twelve stories deep. Snow covered the window sill, and a narrow stone ledge below it.

Aleck gritted his teeth and turned his back. He lowered himself carefully until his broad-toed shoes touched the stone ledge.

He began to edge slowly along the ledge, cupping his gloved hands against the icy brickwork. Across the narrow airshaft were the windows of a big office building. But no one yelled with horror or telephoned the police to report a madman intent on suicide. It was long past five o'clock. Office workers had all gone home.

Inch by inch, Aleck shuffled along his desperate perch. Once his left foot slipped, but he checked the skid and bellied the wall tremulously until he got his balance back. The wind was terrific. But he was warm enough under the armpits—sweating plenty!

The tiny rear-office window was open. Aleck and Carrie had forgotten to shut it in the haste of their earlier departure. They had stopped off briefly to study a few business reports on the way to the train. Carrie had taken her confounded skiing hood out of a suitcase, and had donned it for a moment to show

Aleck how cute she looked. She had put it in a desk drawer while she signed some papers.

Aleck could afford to fume about it now. He was lying across the sill of the little window. His rear end was humped outside like a camel; but he was safe from the danger of splashing to bloody pulp in the courtyard far below.

The door that connected the front and rear rooms of the agency was closed. Aleck could see why he had been unable to get in the back way in a normal manner. A steel chair had been jammed under the knob!

Aleck couldn't turn in the airshaft window. He had to squirm headfirst to a table and then lower his legs. Unluckily, Carrie Cashin had left a vase of flowers near the edge of the table. Aleck missed overturning it with his massive legs, but he was so intent on avoiding the crash of glass that he landed awkwardly on the floor.

From the front office came the startled growl of a man's voice.

"What the devil was that!"

Aleck was already on his feet. He grabbed the flower vase and dashed it to the floor. The jangle of broken glass came a split second after the faint thump.

Instantly Aleck darted toward a massive safe in the corner. There was a space of about six inches between the dark bulk of the safe and the wall. Aleck jammed himself out of sight as the connecting door to the front office flew open.

Aleck's amazing double peered in. He had a big, blue gun in his grasp. His gaze flashed toward the chair that was still jammed under the knob of the back door.

The fact that the chair hadn't been moved reassured him. He chuckled as he saw the smashed flower vase.

From the open window above it, wind was blowing like a gale. A picture on the opposite wall rattled.

Aleck's double put his gun away. He walked over and closed the window.

"What was it, Martin?" a woman's voice called.

"The wind blew over a vase."

There was a brisk click of heels, and a girl appeared. Martin had bent to pick up the broken pieces of glass. The girl's quick voice restrained him.

"The heck with it! Let the junk lay there. Dunker isn't going to come back here. And he'll arrive any minute. You're acting stupidly, Martin!"

They were both tense. The man's face flushed.

"I told you to cut out that Martin stuff!"

From his cramped hiding place in the dark corner alongside the safe, Aleck was able to move a cautious inch and bring the girl's face within view. The sight of her nearly drew a cry from his startled lips.

The girl was Carrie Cashin!

At least she looked the part to an astounding degree. Her voice was the only thing that made Aleck realize that he was staring at a masquerade act that was better than anything he had ever seen on a stage.

The girl was wearing a mannish jacket and a short tweed skirt. Her eyes were brown, her hair a lovely chestnut color. It was curled in an exact imitation of Carrie's natural wave.

"Forget that Martin stuff!" her companion repeated. "My name is Aleck! And you're not Pearl. From now on you're Carrie Cashin!"

"O. K."

She swished gracefully into the front office. She even walked like Carrie!

Aleck remained stunned for a moment after Martin followed the girl and closed the connecting door. The pair must be professional actors! No one else could have done so extraordinary a job in deception.

But neither of these two theatrical crooks was much good as a detective. They hadn't noticed that the coating of snow on the window sill had been scraped away by Aleck's squirming body. They were too tense about somebody named Dunker.

Aleck had never heard of anyone named Dunker. He decided to find out.

CHAPTER II.

CARRIE GETS GOING.

He tiptoed to the back door and released the chair that was jammed under the knob. He might need a quick getaway to save himself from a skinful of bullets!

Through the inner wall he could hear the mumble of voices. Pearl and Martin were conferring hastily. Their words were indistinct. But Aleck had a neat device to take care of that.

He moved a panel in the wall. A rectangular niche was disclosed. It had been built to order for Carrie Cashin herself. Most clients had a silly prejudice against women detectives. It would never do for them to realize that a pretty girl was actually the head of the Cash and Carry agency. So most times Carrie retired to this room to observe and listen, while Aleck played the big masculine rôle of boss out front.

An electric bulb on a desk behind the client enabled Carrie to signal Aleck whether she wanted to accept a particular case or not.

Aleck crouched into the niche. Nothing more substantial than a layer of heavy wallpaper separated him from the front office. A pin-

point opening enabled Aleck to see as well as to hear.

Martin was seated at Aleck's desk, looking every inch the massive detective. Pearl sat nearby with a stenographer's notebook, as demurely inconspicuous as Carrie Cashin had ever been.

"Shall I leave when Dunker comes?" Pearl asked her partner.

"No. But let me do all the talking. As soon as he mentions the letter, I'll cut in fast and—"

Martin's voice broke off suddenly. He raised a warning hand and listened. So did Aleck behind the wall-paper screen. Heavy footfalls were audible in the corridor.

A moment later the door opened and a man entered. He was a big man in a big overcoat. His broad-brimmed hat suggested the West, but that might have been an affectation. When he spoke, his voice was curiously soft, almost like a woman's.

"I'm Mr. James Dunker. I'm sorry to have kept you so late, but my letter explained the impossibility of—"

"Of course," Aleck's double said with a genial smile. "Have a seat, Mr. Dunker. This is my secretary, Miss Cashin. Ordinarily she would take notes of our conversation, but in this case it won't be necessary. Your letter made everything clear."

"I wasn't sure about your retaining fee," Dunker said nervously. "Was a thousand dollars satisfactory?"

"Quite," Martin replied.

Listening indignantly, Aleck felt like busting in on the crooks then and there. They had not only intercepted an important letter and were hoodwinking a client—they had also calmly pocketed a thousand bucks of easy money!

A moment later Aleck heard news even more disturbing.

"The person I suspect," Dunker continued in a low voice, "are an actor and actress. They—"

Martin interrupted hastily.

"Suppose we discuss the matter more fully at your home, Mr. Dunker. You wish us to come tonight, do you not?"

"Yes. I want you to stay as my guests until you have cleared up a criminal threat that seems aimed at me."

Martin rose to his feet. He was obviously eager to get rid of the deluded client. "Miss Cashin and I will start at once. Are you . . . er . . . planning to come with us?"

"No. I've got one or two things to attend to in town. I don't drive in very often. Johnson will admit you to the grounds. He's my watchman. I've also notified Kendall, my butler, to make you comfortable."

Martin began to edge Dunker toward the door. But Dunker seemed nervously eager to talk.

"About this theatrical couple. I'm not sure of their real game, but I believe—"

Aleck pressed his ear against the thin partition, but he never heard the rest of the sentence. A more distant sound had penetrated his consciousness. It was the *click-click* of a woman's high heels. The sound was advancing along the corridor from the direction of the elevator shaft.

Aleck recognized the brisk echo. It was Carrie Cashin—the real Carrie Cashin—hurrying back from Grand Central to give Aleck a piece of her mind for making her miss the train!

Aleck whirled. For Carrie to barge in now and confront Carrie No. 2 would ruin everything. There'd be a fight, a double arrest—

and no answer to anything. The two crooks would shut their mouths. The only sure way was to trail them to Dunker's home—and to go into action later.

In a flash Aleck was out the back door and along the corridor. His feet made no sound. Carrie Cashin's back was toward Aleck. Her hand was lifting toward the knob when Aleck grabbed her.

His palm tightened over her astonished mouth, choking off her cry of alarm. With a heave Aleck lifted her and dragged her noiselessly around the dark angle of the rear hall.

Carrie Cashin wasn't idle during this maneuver. Her heel cracked hard against Aleck's shin, doubling him up. Carrie's freed hands moved like lightning. She had mastered jujitsu from the ablest Japanese instructor in New York. She clamped one hand on Aleck's collarbone and the other on his elbow before she recognized his contorted face.

Her eyes stared in wonder. Aleck's whisper tried desperately to make her understand the amazing masquerade that was going on in the Cash and Carry office.

Carrie was quick-witted. She got the idea instantly. She was helped by the sound of voices around the corner of the dim hall.

"Good-by, Mr. Dunker. Miss Cashin and I will join you at your home as soon as we finish a few details here at the office."

"Thank you. I'll feel a lot safer with detectives in my house."

Carrie peeked guardedly. The only indication that she was stunned by the uncanny resemblance of Martin and Pearl to Aleck and herself was the swift sucking in of her lower lip and the tautness of her slim body.

She saw James Dunker walk down the main hall to the elevator. As

soon as the car sank from sight with the deluded client, the two crooks in the Cash and Carry doorway exchanged a swift whisper.

"Grab your coat and hat!" Pearl cried. "We've got to reach Dunker's home before he returns!"

"We'll use the rear exit," Martin said. "I don't want him to see us on the way out."

They went back into the office. Aleck grinned as he noted the direction of Carrie's prompt gesture. She was pointing toward the fire stairs down which the camouflaged crooks intended to flee. That meant a noiseless attack and a double capture. It suited Aleck fine!

He opened the steel door that closed off the staircase. He and Carrie descended to the intermediate landing. Carrie lifted the hem of her wool sports skirt, exposing briefly the silken sheen of shapely legs. From a garter holster she drew a small-calibered automatic pistol. It looked more like a toy than a real weapon. But at close quarters it could shoot fast and accurately.

Aleck was not wearing his armpit gun. But from the tight smile on his lips as he clenched his big hands into massive fists, it was plain that Aleck wasn't worried about the absence of his gun.

They waited, flattened against the wall of the dim landing. Presently the fire door above opened and closed. There was a rush of descending feet.

The crooks recoiled with a gasp of dismay as they ran headlong into the reception committee.

Martin found himself staring at the grim face of his flesh-and-blood counterpart. The slim, chestnut-haired Pearl was confronted by the slim, chestnut-haired Carrie. The

muzzle of Carrie's automatic made a bruising pressure against Pearl's stomach.

At the same instant Martin grunted. The grunt was accompanied by a sound like a man taking a healthy drive at a golf ball. Martin staggered backward across the landing. His head struck the bottom of the steps. The double impact had dazed him, but he was still tough. He started to get up. Aleck leaned quickly and discouraged that.

Meanwhile Carrie had gone into action as purposeful as Aleck's. She didn't do any shooting. Her gun was merely insurance to hold Pearl motionless for an instant. In that brief instant Carrie spun her terrified double around.

She was behind Pearl's back. She took a double grip that involved Pearl's throat and Pearl's spine. The grip tightened just enough to show what would happen if it tightened some more. Pearl squealed. She doubled up like a hinge and Carrie dropped to the floor with her. When Carrie rose finally, Pearl was chalk-white and quite willing to obey orders.

So was Martin. Aleck's only casualty was a skinned knuckle, at which he sucked cheerfully.

The pair were forced back up the stairs. The closed steel fire door had covered the sounds of the brief battle. No one was in sight in the corridor. The crooked masqueraders were shoved into the Cash and Carry office and Aleck shut the door.

There was no talk until the captured pair had been securely tied in a couple of chairs. Even after that the talk was one-sided.

Carrie and Aleck took turns with questions. Pearl tightened her pale lips and said nothing. Martin had a monotonous reply that didn't help much.

"Go to hell!" Martin reiterated.

Carrie did better with Pearl's handbag. She had picked it up on the stairs after the battle was over. Inside the bag was a check for one thousand dollars drawn to the order of the Cash and Carry agency. There was also a letter. It proved to be the one that James Dunker had written.

Carrie frowned as she read it. She showed it to Aleck.

Dunker referred to a mysterious series of attempted burglaries. He also reported an attempt on his life. He seemed to think that the persons responsible were a theatrical pair—a couple named Martin and Pearl Vernon. Dunker wanted Aleck and Carrie to come to his home to solve the mystery. He didn't seem to know what was back of the attempted burglaries, or the shot that had been fired at him in the grounds of his estate. He had hired a watchman named Johnson to patrol the grounds.

That was all, except that the note gave Dunker's address. He lived in Westchester, on the outskirts of Scarsdale.

"What do we do now?" Aleck asked harshly. "I can't make this ham actor talk—but I can turn his face into strawberry jam!"

Aleck was sore at the whole situation. The crooked pair had obviously intercepted James Dunker's letter, had found out that Carrie and Aleck were leaving for a week end, had calmly impersonated the detectives. They intended to walk coolly into Dunker's home and steal whatever it was they had already vainly tried to get away with.

But Carrie Cashin shook her head at Aleck's primitive suggestion. Third-degree methods wouldn't do. It would only produce a tissue of lies. Besides, Carrie was eager to

talk to Dunker. Shrewd questioning might bring to light something that seemed trivial to Dunker. Most clients were like that. They had to be pinned down on a thousand details before truth began to emerge.

Carrie's brown eyes sparkled. Unlike Aleck, she was amused and excited by the strange masquerade which had been accidentally exposed by her forgetting about her skiing hood.

"We'll try a little disguised stuff ourselves," Carrie giggled. "We'll be Aleck and Carrie Cashin twice removed! We'll impersonate the impersonators!"

The trussed captives were gagged. Carrie telephoned her garage and had her car brought around.

It was snowing very hard now, but the flakes were dry. The wind was whipping them in high spirals. It would be quite a while before roads were too clogged for safe driving.

CHAPTER III.

A RICH MAN—DEAD!

James Dunker's home was like many others on the outskirts of Scarsdale. It stood in parklike grounds, separated from the road by a high stone wall. There was a gate and a driveway. But the gate was closed and locked.

Carrie halted her car with its bright headlights glaring through the barred gate. The grounds inside looked unkempt and neglected. Shaggy bushes whipped in the wind. The blur of falling snow made vision difficult. A turn in the driveway concealed the house.

Carrie and Aleck got out of their car, looking for some sort of bell to summon the watchman whom James Dunker had spoken about. There was no bell.

Aleck was beginning to get impatient when a voice growled: "What do you want?"

A man stepped from the bushes into the glare of the car's lamps through the gate. He was tall and angular, with a long jaw and hard, pinpoint eyes. The way that his coat pocket bulged suggested that his hidden hand was wrapped around a gun.

Aleck explained who they were. The man shook his head.

"No use. You can't come in! Those are my orders."

"But—"

Aleck was spluttering into annoyed profanity when Carrie interrupted in her calmest tone.

"Isn't your name Johnson? Aren't you the watchman Mr. Dunker hired to patrol the grounds at night?"

"Yeah. What of it?"

"We're the detectives he told you were coming here tonight."

"Mr. Dunker told me nothing of the sort," Johnson rasped. "He ordered me to keep out *everybody*! I don't believe that detective stuff! I think you're a couple of fakers. Scram—or I'll take a shot at you!"

Aleck was in a rage at this crazy turn of events. But Carrie pinched his hand warningly and he subsided. Carrie sounded as if she were the sweetest and most timid girl on earth.

"If those are your orders, I don't blame you for carrying them out, Mr. Johnson. There must be some mistake. But it's too cold a night to stand here arguing. Tell Mr. Dunker when he returns that we'll telephone him from New York in the morning, and try to straighten out this misunderstanding."

She got back in the car. So did the mystified Aleck. The car van-

ished along the road in the direction of New York. When it was a half mile away, Carrie halted it.

"Are we going back?" Aleck asked hopefully.

"Of course!"

"I don't like that guy Johnson. He was lying."

"If he wasn't," Carrie said, "then Dunker himself is a liar! In any event, we're going to find out."

They conferred briefly. Aleck nodded. The car turned around and headed back. Carrie switched from bright lamps to her small parking lights. She drove slowly, with her engine throttled to a faint murmur. When the wall of Dunker's estate came into view again, she darkened her car completely.

The gate where the surly Johnson had rebuffed their attempt to get in was hidden beyond a bend in the road.

It was easy enough to make the climb. Aleck boosted Carrie to the stone coping, then hauled himself up alongside her after she had squirmed flat on the top. The branch of an enormous oak lay athwart the wall. It screened the pair from the ground.

There were thick bushes inside the wall, but Aleck avoided jumping into them and making a noise that might be heard at the gate. He swung his body hand over hand along the branch of the oak. When he was close to the trunk, only a few inches separated his dangling feet from the ground. He let go without a sound.

An instant later Carrie Cashin was beside him.

"Let's have a look at the house," she whispered.

"Better unpack a little artillery first," Aleck warned. "I don't like the looks of this joint."

He had brought his armpit gun from the office. He was reaching for it when he decided not to. The muzzle of a menacing weapon was projecting from the tangle of bushes over which Carrie and Aleck had made their aerial entrance.

"Stick 'em up!" a familiar voice warned. "Or I'll blast the two of you!"

It was the foggy-voiced Johnson. He emerged with a cautious wriggle that didn't disturb his aim. A grin of contempt creased his lantern jaw as he surveyed his prisoners.

"I thought so! A couple of wise monkeys. You didn't fool me at all. You were too damned prompt about leaving. Now it's going to be just too bad!"

He looked dangerous. His finger was tremulous on the trigger. He seemed nerving himself to fire.

"You're making a mistake," Carrie said quietly. "You can easily check on our identity by telephoning for the police."

"Police, hell! You're a couple of crooks and I'm taking no chances. I was hired to keep out burglars. I got a perfect right to plug you both! I—"

His voice squealed in sudden warning.

"Straighten up, mister—or I'll shoot! Keep them hands away from your pockets!"

He mistook Aleck's purpose completely. Aleck had crouched slightly. His upraised hands had lowered a little. Johnson thought that Aleck was trying for a quick downward gun clutch. But Aleck's interest was up—not down.

His crouch hinged his knees and gave him leverage. He leaped straight upward. His big hands clutched at the branch of the oak

above his head. At the same instant he kicked out in a giant pinwheel swing.

It was done with terrific speed. Before the startled Johnson could squeeze the trigger on his gun, Aleck kicked him in the stomach. He tried to drop on top of the watchman, but fell wide. Carrie's dive, however, took care of the gasping Johnson until Aleck ended his desperate squirming with a hard left hook to the jaw.

Carrie was panting as she rose to her feet and dusted off loose snow. But her voice was composed.

"The war's over. I don't think anybody heard it."

The two investigators shoved the unconscious watchman under a bush, protected from the lash of the storm. They approached the house. It seemed like a perfectly normal house. But all the windows were heavily shuttered. It was impossible to tell whether anyone was inside or not.

"How do we do it?" Aleck asked.

"Let's try the front door," Carrie said unexpectedly.

"It's dangerous! The guy Kendall—the butler—may be another one like Johnson. The place seems to be lousy with tough guys."

"If Kendall is tough, I want to know it right off the bat," Carrie said, a frown puckering her lovely eyebrows. "Have your gun a little handier this time. Keep it out of sight, but don't park it in your holster."

She turned and tugged at her wind-blown skirt. She slipped her garter gun into the pocket of her furred jacket. Her ungloved right hand remained inside the pocket.

Aleck rang the bell. It was answered promptly.

Kendall looked quite young for a butler. There was nothing sour or menacing in his greeting. He gave them a polite-servant smile and raised his black eyebrows inquiringly. Aleck told him who they were.

Kendall beamed. He was really quite a handsome lad.

"Of course! Come in, please! Mr. Dunker has returned. He's waiting for you in the study. We of the household have been worried, too. Strange things have been happening."

"For instance?" Aleck asked gruffly.

"It's not my place to discuss that, sir," Kendall said with his smooth smile. "Your coat, sir?"

He took their outer garments and hung them neatly in the foyer. He conducted them with soft-footed ease toward the door of the study where James Dunker was waiting unsuspectingly to confer with a couple of actors disguised as detectives. Carrie and Aleck had taken care of the masqueraders, but the mystery was more puzzling than ever.

"What's the name of that caretaker out in the grounds who let us in?" Aleck inquired blandly as they approached the study door.

"Johnson, sir," the butler replied. "He's on duty every night. If Mr. Dunker hadn't described your appearance and given Johnson orders to admit you, I'm afraid you'd have had difficulty getting past him."

He was as bland as Aleck. Carrie, who was watching him keenly, was unable to tell whether Kendall's innocence of events outside was real or assumed.

The butler knocked deferentially. "The private detective whom you hired is here, Mr. Dunker. Also a Miss Carrie Cashin, his assistant."

He opened the door and bowed



The pair of attic burglars were doubles of Aleck and Carrie!

them inside. But before they could pass the threshold they heard a strange gasp from the butler. He was no longer a trained servant, but a terrified man. His shaking finger pointed deeper into the room.

"My God! Look!"

From where Aleck stood it was impossible to see anything to justify the butler's terror. The room seemed to be empty. But when Aleck shoved Kendall aside and peered to the left of the threshold, he saw the man.

The man was on the floor, hidden by a desk, except for part of an arm and a hand. The hand was cupped, its fingers stiffly clawed.

Aleck dashed into the room and raced around the desk. One glance and he saw that help had arrived too late for the unfortunate James Dunker. Dunker lay flat on his back. His chest and the rug on which he lay were soaked with blood. He had been stabbed to death with a single, terrific blow.

There was no sign of the knife. It had been withdrawn swiftly and taken away by the killer. The blade had plunged into Dunker's left breast, had ripped deeply into the dead man's lungs in a downward slant to the right. Dunker had probably died instantly.

His contorted features were screwed into an almost ludicrous expression of surprise.

Aleck noted all these things as he dropped to one knee beside the corpse. Meanwhile, Carrie Cashin was far from idle. She had entered the room on the heels of Aleck. She noted swiftly that the killer could not have escaped by the window. The window was locked on the inside. Outside the window a steel shutter was tightly barred.

To make assurance doubly certain,

Carrie unlocked the window and examined the shutter. It was barred with a tough-looking bolt that fitted into a patent slot. It would have been impossible for an escaping murderer to have rebolted that massive shutter from outside the house.

The killer must have fled through the door of the dead man's study!

Carrie had just decided this, when her glance swept past Dunker's corpse and the kneeling figure of Aleck. She uttered a quick cry. The butler was no longer standing at the open threshold of the room. Kendall had pulled a fast sneak!

The door of the study was swiftly closing!

CHAPTER IV.

THE MISSING KILLER.

At Carrie's warning cry Aleck bounded to his feet. He was closer to the threshold than Carrie. A swift leap brought him to the slamming door. His hand clutched at the knob.

He was too late. The slam of the door was followed by a click. Kendall had turned a key in the lock, imprisoning the two investigators in the murder room!

Aleck growled with rage at the shrewd manner in which he and Carrie had been tricked. He flung himself fiercely at the door. Twice he bounced backward, bruised and shaken, before he gave up the hopeless attempt to break down the barrier. Aleck's shoulders were powerful, but the door was solid oak.

The lock fixture, too, was massive. An attempt to shoot it away would waste considerable time. And time was precious, with Kendall probably racing like a deer for the front door!

Carrie Cashin darted back to the sealed window. In a trice she released the inner bolt on the shutters

and flung them open. She scaled the window sill in a reckless blur of silken legs. Aleck dived headfirst after her.

Luckily the drop from the ground-floor window was not very far. In a moment Carrie and Aleck were on their feet, smeared-grotesquely with snow. The storm seemed to be getting worse. Flakes whirled through the darkness in a milky haze, driven by an icy north wind.

To Aleck, the storm was a nuisance that made breathing difficult and vision uncertain. But to Carrie this snow was a gift from Heaven. It meant footprints! Now Kendall couldn't get away from the house without leaving a trail to follow.

Whipped by the gale, Carrie raced around the shuttered house to the front door. Her tiny automatic was steady in her cold hand. She was ready to pursue Kendall's floundering tracks through the snow, prepared to bring him down with a scientifically placed shot if he ignored a command to halt.

But Carrie received a stunning surprise when she reached the front door. There weren't any prints leading away from the house!

All that was visible were the double marks which had been left by

Carrie and Aleck when they had first advanced to ring the bell. The storm had already almost filled these earlier footprints. The rest of the snow was an unbroken white level.

Whatever the foxy Kendall was up to, he was still indoors!

He could not have escaped from a window. All of them were shuttered and bolted on the inside like the window of the study where the murder had taken place. Even the cellar windows were blocked. The place was barred like a fortress.

A clue to the mystery became apparent when Carrie Cashin raced like a slim, snow-covered dryad to the rear of the house. A scuffed line of footprints made a telltale trail in the white blanket on the ground. The trail led straight to the back door.

But again Carrie Cashin received an unpleasant shock. Her gesture drew Aleck close to the ground alongside her. His jaw gaped foolishly as he realized the thing which Carrie had already noted.

The prints were not those of an escaping fugitive. The wind had blurred them badly, but the position of the toe marks was reasonably clear. They pointed *toward* the kitchen door. Nobody had fled by

QUESTION ANSWER

Which are the
only cough drops
containing
Vitamin A?
(CAROTENE)



the back exit. *Someone had entered!*

It was the craziest mix-up of clues that Carrie and Aleck had ever encountered in their busy career. And more was to come. When Aleck tried the kitchen door cautiously, he found no trouble opening it. The door wasn't locked!

Not a sound came from the dimly lit house as Aleck led the way back toward the murdered Dunker's study. Aleck always went first when physical danger threatened. But he found nothing to fight against. The key, whose swift turning had imprisoned them in the study, was still in the lock on the hall side of the door. Aleck turned it.

He was opening the door when the quick pressure of Carrie's hand on his wrist pulled him around. Aleck heard the sound, too! It was a faint groan. It came from a flight of stairs that led upward toward shadowy dimness. But the groan didn't come from aloft. Somebody was on the floor, hidden by the dark overhang of the slanting staircase.

It turned out to be Kendall.

The butler's face was gory. There was a ragged cut on the left side of his head, just above the temple. He acted like a man badly dazed. But he seemed to recover his wits after Aleck hauled him to his feet and shot questions at him.

Kendall's story was a queer one. He denied any intent to flee or to imprison the two detectives. He had, he declared weakly, backed hastily from the study because he was shocked by the sight of his murdered employer. The moment he stepped out in horror to the hallway—he had been clutched by the throat from behind! He was dragged noiselessly backward, something struck him a vicious blow on the temple—and that was all Kendall

remembered until Aleck had hauled him to his tremulous feet in the shadow of the staircase.

Proof of the butler's story lay on the floor nearby. Aleck picked the thing up. It was a bar of corrugated steel, tapering to a point at one end, and fitted with a wooden handle at the other.

"What is it?" Aleck asked.

"A steel knife-sharpener, sir," Kendall faltered. "I use it to sharpen the cutlery. Whoever struck me down with it must have stolen it from my pantry drawer."

"Are you sure?" Carrie Cashin said suddenly. There was a peculiar tone in her voice, a note of satisfaction. "Look it over and make sure it's the same sharpener, please!"

Kendall took it from Aleck. He stared at it, then nodded.

"Thank you," Carrie said. "Now let me have it."

Aleck, who had sensed Carrie's elation, realized suddenly what she was up to. Kendall had accepted the knife-sharpener and had handed it back *with his left hand*. The blow that had felled him was on the left side of his head. If the blow had been a self-inflicted one, the left side of Kendall's head would be the logical side to strike. To have hit himself in the right temple hard enough to gash the skin would have been awkward, if not downright impossible!

Aleck restrained the exclamation that came to his lips. Carrie's frown warned him to keep silent.

She went back into Dunker's study. Aleck herded the butler along, too. Carrie went straight to the safe. It stood in a dark corner on the opposite side of the room. With a peculiar smile, Carrie examined the steel safe. She looked at

the front. She also seemed interested in the floor on either side of the massive strong box.

"I thought so!" she said quietly. "Take a look, Aleck."

Aleck sucked in his breath with astonishment as he came closer to the shadowy safe.

"Holy cats! The murderer meant to blow it open after he knifed Dunker. All the cracks have been sealed with soap. There's a hole bored in the front for nitro."

"If you'll look behind that stuffed chair," Carrie murmured, "you'll see further evidence. There's a small portable drill, a bottle of nitroglycerin, a cake of soap, and some putty. Our unknown killer shoved it out of sight when something scared him away right after the murder."

Her eyes glinted.

"What would you need to finish this job, Aleck?"

"A funnel and a bunch of heavy quilts to deaden the shot."

"Go get them," Carrie said. "Kendall will undoubtedly know where to find a funnel and some quilts."

"Quite so," the butler said huskily.

He and Carrie waited outside while Aleck prepared the "shot." Aleck had tangled with enough professional safeblowers to know how. He came out presently and shut the door.

There was a muffled *broooooooooomp!* Windows rattled. The house swayed slightly. Aleck jumped inside again. The room was full of smoke. Some of the blankets and quilts were full of sparks. Aleck stamped them out.

The door of the safe had been blown halfway across the room. But Carrie didn't care about that. She was peering into the open safe.

It seemed to be empty except for a rather extraordinary object. Aleck looked very silly and said "Huh?"

in a queer tone when Carrie showed it to him. It was a child's picture book with linen pages and highly colored illustrations.

The title was "Goldilocks and the Three Bears."

Aleck was completely fuddled by this insane climax to the blowing of a safe in the study of a dead man. But Carrie seemed delighted. There was eager excitement in her brown eyes. The madder the mystery, the better she liked it!

The butler's cry increased her eagerness. Kendall was obviously frightened at sight of the book.

"That's what Mr. Dunker was afraid might be stolen," he whispered. "He told me burglars were after it. He suspected a theatrical couple named Martin and Pearl Vernon."

"Did he say why?"

"No."

"Where did this book come from?"

"From the attic. It's full of books like this one. Toys, too, sir."

"Who do they belong to?"

"I couldn't say. They were here when Mr. Dunker moved in."

Carrie Cashin had already examined the book. She couldn't find anything unusual about it, except the obvious fact that "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" had received hard treatment. One picture was almost completely obliterated by a stain of spilled milk.

"How does one get to the attic?" Carrie asked Kendall.

"Up those rear stairs where I . . . I was attacked," the butler said hesitantly.

"All right. Show us the way."

Kendall's pallor increased.

"The killer may have gone up those stairs, madam. If you don't mind, I'd rather not risk—"

"Persuade him, Aleck!"

Aleck didn't have to. A gesture

was all that was needed. The butler cringed and obeyed. But his fright was such that he seemed barely able to walk to the foot of the dark staircase that led to the sinister quiet of the regions above.

Just as Kendall reached the foot of the stairs he moaned. Suddenly, he crumpled. He fell in a limp huddle at the bottom step.

Aleck suspected that the faint was not a real one. He leaned and shook the butler roughly. Kendall's head wobbled. But his eyes remained closed.

"I don't like this," Aleck whispered uneasily at Carrie's ear. "The guy may be putting on an act. He wants to stay behind while we look around in the attic. It seems to me like some sort of a trap."

"If it is a trap," Carrie rejoined under her breath, "I intend to walk into it! Be ready for fireworks—but don't shoot unless *I* do. And for gosh sake, don't make the slightest sound. Don't even breathe!"

CHAPTER V.

MURDER MIX-UP.

They linked hands as they mounted cautiously in the darkness, in order to avoid getting separated from each other. No lights were burning on the second floor. None on the third. The house was colder up here. It was like tiptoeing through the chilly blackness of a tomb.

The attic door was closed. Nothing could be heard beyond it. But when Carrie pressed her ear to the thin panel, she could hear a strange rustling and thumping. It sounded as if someone was busily pawing through books and then tossing them to the floor.

Dim yellow light showed under the casing of the door.

"O. K.?" Carrie asked.

She asked it in the Morse Code with the jab of her forefinger against Aleck's wrist. He repeated O. K. in the same manner.

Carrie flung open the door. In an instant she and Aleck were inside the attic, crouched on opposite sides of the doorway. Their guns were rocklike.

"Stick 'em up, or I'll shoot!" Carrie cried.

There was a single droplight burning in the chilly attic room. It threw a ghastly yellow circle of light.

Carrie didn't fire. She had been prepared for something like this. But Aleck's paralyzed finger on his trigger was caused by overwhelming amazement.

The pair of attic burglars were Martin and Pearl Vernon! In spite of their fear, they still looked as much like Carrie and Aleck as peas from the same pod. Aleck wondered how this spry pair had managed to get away so promptly from their roped chairs in the Cash and Carry office back in New York. But his first wonder was whipped away by a grim discovery.

He saw the stain of blood on the cuffs and sleeves of Martin's upraised arms!

"Caught 'em both red-handed!" he growled at Carrie, without moving his gaze or his gun. "It was a double kill! The girl grabbed Dunker from behind after they got into the study from the kitchen door. The guy stabbed him before Dunker could get Pearl's hand off his mouth to yell for help."

Pearl's face was ashen.

"It's a lie!" she cried. "He was dead when we got into the house. We came straight up to the attic. All we wanted was the book."

"What book?" Carrie asked.

Pearl didn't answer. Carrie's left hand had remained out of sight behind her back. Now it suddenly appeared with the copy of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears."

"What is this?"

At sight of the book Pearl and Martin uttered a quick exclamation. They lowered their arms and lunged forward. But Carrie's gun halted them in their tracks.

"Whose book is this?"

"Mine," Pearl whispered.

"Can you prove it, sight unseen?"

"Yes! It was mine when I was a little girl. Some of the pictures are marked up with black pencil. On page 3 there's a big white stain where I spilled my baby mug of milk years ago."

Carrie's smile was hard to fathom. She lowered her gun. Aleck uttered a startled, "Hey!" but she ignored his alarm.

"The truth, please," she said.

"Don't talk!" Martin cried hoarsely to the girl at his side. "It's a trick to pin a murder on us!"

Pearl hesitated. Carrie shocked her into speech by a deliberately hard-boiled query.

"Who's the stiff downstairs with the knife wound in his belly? Your own father?"

"No, no!" Horror glazed Pearl's eyes. "My father . . . died . . . peacefully, thank God! That devil downstairs was my . . . my uncle. He was a sly thief, maybe a murderer! Whoever stabbed him to death handed him what he deserved."

Breathlessly she began to talk. Carrie listened intently.

Martin and Pearl were brother and sister. Vernon was only a stage name. Their real name was Dunker. They had been born in this house. Their mother was an actress. The marriage of their parents had been an unhappy one. Howard Dunker,

their father, hated the stage. He had disinherited his two children when they defied him and joined a theatrical company after the death of their mother.

"Most of the trouble was caused by Uncle James," Pearl continued. "He seemed to have an evil influence over father. After we left home, uncle took almost complete charge of father's affairs. He claimed that he had loaned father large sums of money and showed papers to prove it. Finally, father became ill. According to the medical report, he died of stomach ulcers. But Martin and I believe that Uncle James poisoned him."

"To get hold of his money?" Carrie asked.

"No. To get hold of this book."

She faltered. Her brother spoke harshly.

"We were in Australia when father died. We didn't see the will until we returned. Father's fortune had vanished. His only remaining asset was this house. Uncle claimed it for a debt and moved in. He did so to keep us from getting hold of the picture book."

Martin explained what he meant. There had been a queer clause in the will. Howard Dunker expressed sorrow for the trouble he had caused his dead wife and missing children. The clause ended with a strange sentence: "Therefore, I leave to my beloved children Martin and Pearl, the most precious gift of all, the story of 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears,' which I used to read aloud to them when Pearl was a little girl and sat on my knee in the attic play-room."

Pearl's eyes were brimmed with tears. With a sudden gesture she pulled off her chestnut wig that made her look so much like Carrie.

Her own hair beneath it was the color of spun gold.

"Dad always called me Goldilocks," she said brokenly. "I don't believe he ever lost his fortune. I think he feared Uncle James and hid it. He meant it to go to Martin and me. He left some clue in this old baby book of mine."

Carrie Cashin nodded. She knew now the reason for the strange masquerade of herself and Aleck. Martin and Pearl had demanded of their uncle the book to which the will entitled them. He handed them one—a fake one bought in some secondhand store. He refused to let them in the house. They tried burglary unsuccessfully. Then, by intercepting a letter, they discovered that James Dunker was planning to call in private detectives to trap them and send them to jail. They learned that Carrie and Aleck were leaving for a week end. Their theatrical experience made a double impersonation easy. It gave them a perfect chance to get into the house and get hold of a book that was rightfully theirs.

But what was the hidden clue? Pearl and her brother examined the book vainly. Carrie Cashin took it. She studied the page with the milk

stain for a long time. Suddenly she began swiftly turning the pages. She turned back to page 3 and verified something. Then she asked an excited question of Pearl.

"Did your father always sit in a particular chair in this attic?"

"Yes." Pearl pointed to an old rocking chair in the corner. "He always sat in that one, close to the window. I liked to look out and watch the birds in the tree outside while he read to me."

"Get it, Martin! Place it exactly where you remember."

Martin looked queer, but he obeyed. Carrie walked over, stared downward for a moment, then uttered a brief exclamation.

"I think I know the answer!"

Her voice hardened.

"Aleck, let me have those handcuffs you brought along."

Aleck looked mystified. But he obeyed.

"Before I unearth a fortune," Carrie said, "I've got to arrest a murderer. Hands up, Martin! Back up toward the wall!"

Pearl's brother gasped, but he had no chance to disobey. Carrie's gun forced him to retreat toward a large dusty box in the corner. Suddenly

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Carrie shoved Martin aside. She dived over the closed lid of the box into the dark space between box and wall.

There was a hoarse cry. Carrie's weapon clubbed downward against an unseen skull. Handcuffs clicked. Then Carrie became aware that her upended legs were considerably exposed. She righted herself with a flush.

"I'm sorry I had to mislead you, Martin," she said, "but it was necessary to catch the real killer off guard. Haul him out, Aleck!"

"The damned butler, eh?" Aleck guessed. "I knew that faint of his downstairs was a fake. That left-handed blow on the head gave him away."

"It gave the killer away," Carrie said tonelessly, "but the killer is *not* Kendall. I was aware of the truth before we came to the attic. See if our man isn't Johnson, the watchman."

It was! He was dazed, but he fought like a maniac, even with cuffed hands. Aleck got a split lip and a gory eye before he persuaded Johnson that the jig was up.

"The fact that the butler was left-handed proved that he was innocent," Carrie said calmly. "You forget that the killer of James Dunker was right-handed! The knife slanted into Dunker's chest from left to right. A left-handed murderer would have to stand on his head to deliver such a blow! A glance at the safe downstairs confirmed that opinion. There was a mark on the floor where the burglar had laid down his drill. It was on the *right* side. Had the criminal been the butler, he'd have laid it on the *left*."

Carrie smiled.

"The same situation cleared Martin and Pearl. The murderer knew the nursery book was in the safe.

But Martin and his sister sneaked straight to the attic for a useless search. Therefore, they had *not* killed their thieving uncle and tried to blow the safe!"

Carrie's gaze returned to the nursery book.

"Now to explain the cipher. The key number is 3. The milk stain is on page 3. There are three bears, three tables and three bowls of porridge."

Carrie showed her listeners something else they hadn't noticed. One of the feet of each of the bears was circled lightly with lead pencil. It was the left foot in each case.

"Again three," Carrie said. "But this time we have *foot* and *left*. Three feet left of—what? The chair in the picture, of course! Page 3 is the only one in which the bears stand to the left of the chair. I looked at all the rest to make sure. In every other picture the bears are on the right side."

Carrie's voice was eager.

"Your father made a chair the clue because he knew that only his children would remember exactly where the old rocker used to stand in this attic. Let me show you something!"

She crossed to where Martin had carefully placed the chair. On the floor in front of it was a small blob of white paint, too tiny to be noticed. It was the exact shape of the stain of milk in the nursery book!

Carrie measured three feet to the left. It brought her to the papered wall of the playroom. It was Aleck who was eager now! He rapped at the wall—and growled with disappointment. The wall was solid!

Carrie, however, didn't seem worried. Again she measured, this time upward. Her tape touched another white mark three feet above the floor.

"What good does that do?" Aleck asked. "It's the same area I already tested."

"You forget. The key number is three."

Three feet to the left of the second marker brought Carrie to a brick of the chimney. There was a white smear on the brick. The brick was loose. Carrie had no trouble prying it out.

In a small hollow behind it, Carrie found the end of a wire with a rusted handle. It looked like an old-fashioned bell pull. Carrie yanked it.

Instantly Aleck yelped with excitement. He darted around the brick chimney. On the other side the wallpaper was bulging a little. Something was pressing against the paper from within, making a long vertical hump.

Aleck slashed through the hump with his knife.

A covered door that had been released behind the wallpaper by Carrie's jerk at the chimney wire swung open. A secret compartment was disclosed. Aleck squeezed in. He wrenched open the lid of an ancient trunk.

The trunk was crammed with cash!

There were hundreds of packages. The money was in small denominations, mostly fives and tens. But the total was enormous. Howard Dunker had left a fortune for his children!

"He probably did it gradually," Carrie said, "so as not to let his crooked brother realize that he was liquidating his entire estate for the benefit of his children."

Pearl was weeping. Martin was unable to speak. Alec drew Carrie Cashin aside.

"How did the damned watchman get wind of the treasure?" he asked.

"James Dunker may have been

stupid enough to tell Johnson too much about the shrunken estate and the queer nursery-book clause in the will. Johnson was not only a crook, but an expert safecracker. He got in the kitchen door and killed Dunker. He was scared away before he could blow the safe.

"Then we arrived. Johnson lied to us so he could sneak back and finish the job. But while he was battling us, Martin and Pearl scaled the wall, entering the house by the kitchen door which Johnson had forgotten to lock. When Johnson returned, he was just in time to slug Kendall, imprison us in the study and sneak to the attic to spy on Martin and Pearl."

"Then Kendall told the truth?"

Carrie nodded. She turned toward Martin Dunker.

"There's one thing I *can't* understand," she admitted. "How did you and Pearl escape from the Cash and Carry office—and how did you get this guilty blood-smear on your sleeve?"

"I can answer both questions with one reply," Martin said with a wan smile, as he showed her his wrists.

Carrie gasped. They had been horribly burned. Blood still oozed from his maimed flesh.

"You tied me pretty tight, but I managed to hop my chair into your laboratory. There was a bottle of nitric acid on your shelf. I upset and smashed it. I let the acid eat through my bonds. I . . . I love my sister. I couldn't bear to think of her being robbed while I sat helpless!"

Carrie Cashin's voice was very gentle.

"I like you, Martin."

But, being a woman, she slipped her fingers illogically into the big, comfortable hand of Aleck!



YOU CAN'T FIGURE WOMEN

Nor smugglers—nor murderers—as Cy English learns!

by NED O'DOHERTY

CHAPTER I.

ONE HEAD—SMUGGLED!

It was one of the big ocean liners. The docking time was ten p. m. As usual, a group of us customs agents was assigned to duty on the pier. Our job was to mingle with the pas-

sengers and keep our eyes open. People insist on trying to pull fast ones on the government. We managed to trip most of them.

This particular night, your own Cy English was one of the on-duty agents. I nosed around, trying to look like anything but a sleuth. It

was tough, because I'm a big ox, and people invariably put bigness and sleuth together.

I moved down the pier, stepping over strewn baggage, and getting an eyeful and an earful here and there. I saw a few things being pulled, but it was all petty stuff. It had to be big to interest yours truly.

Then I saw it, but it wasn't big. In fact, it was small and petite. She had golden blond hair that fell in soft curls about her shoulders. The eyes were the nicest blue I'd ever seen. She had most of herself hidden behind a steamer trunk. I circled around and discovered that her form would have been tops in anybody's Aquacade.

A flunky opened baggage which a customs inspector stood waiting to examine. A big bulk of a man seemed annoyed at the delay. A muscle-bound gent with a busted nose and a cauliflower ear stood conversing with a rat-eyed individual off to one side. They seemed intensely interested in this particular baggage examination. I immediately put them down for a couple of sharpshooters.

I thought the blonde flashed me the ghost of a smile, but before I could be certain she had turned and was talking to her mountainlike companion.

I'm almost six feet in my socks, but this lad had it on me by a good three inches. Height was all he had. He had a face that would frighten a horse from his feed bag. The talk seemed to be all on the girl's side. The man's interest was centered on the examination his baggage was receiving.

The inspector looked up from his work. "You have two steamer trunks here, but they are empty. How come?"

"Damn it!" snapped ugly-face. "I

take things to poor relatives in Europe. I give the stuff away and bring back the empty trunks. There's no silly law against that. Very well, then attach your customs labels so I can get the hell off this pier."

The empty-trunk business had me thinking. Particularly, because those trunks were very crumby. To my mind, they weren't worth carrying across the street, not to mention the ocean. The big fellow's attitude must have annoyed the inspector. He nodded at a wooden case which, from the outside markings, should have contained a dozen bottles of Scotch whiskey.

"That'll have to be opened, too."

"What is this!" yelled the passenger. "Are you blind? It's a case of Scotch which I haven't touched since it was delivered to my stateroom on the other side."

"Yeah? Then how do you account for the cut wire bands?"

The ugly one was startled. He bent quickly and studied the bands closely. When he straightened, there wasn't much color left in his face.

"Cut, all right," he mumbled, and motioned for the flunky to open the case. Then he turned and made a beeline for the ship's gangplank. The blonde didn't waste any time getting after him. I looked around for the two sharpshooters. They, too, had ducked.

The inspector said: "Have a look here, Mr. English?"

I did, and got a surprise. There were no bottles in the case. A square tin took up all the available space. The flunky removed the pressed-in cover. I took a look. The tin contained a sort of reddish liquid which gave off a strong odor of alcohol.

"Wine, maybe" said the inspector, "but it's odd-looking."

I bent down, and felt strange just

being near the liquid. I inserted my finger, and a chill shot up my backbone. I had had such chills before and they usually added up to something. I stared at the liquid that had adhered to my finger. It was sticky.

I pushed my whole hand into the stuff and struck something just below the surface. My fingers closed on what might have been rope—only it was of a softer texture. Perspiration oozed from my brow.

I gripped the thing and pulled upward. It was heavy. It came part way out of the liquid. The inspector gasped. I began to shake all over. I let the thing drop back into the thick liquid.

It was a human head!

In that brief moment, I had seen the face. It was that of a young fellow of about twenty-six or -seven. The hair was thick and black. The face was exceptionally handsome; or it had been in life. I pushed the tin cover back on top and looked around. Everybody seemed pretty well occupied with their own business and had not seen the head. I was grateful for that. I started to straighten and found there wasn't much strength left in my legs.

I grabbed hold of the inspector's arm. "It's murder, you understand? I want you to put all this stuff under seal and keep your mouth shut. I'm going aboard."

A name-tag on one of the suitcases read: James Bowler. I wanted to see that ugly gent; also his pretty blond girl friend.

I raced down a passageway in the direction of the purser's office. A man came around a corner and almost floored me. He was Doc Walton, ship's physician. I had met the doc once or twice before. He was an amiable chap, tall, with a

head of wavy brown hair, a movie actor's face, and a smile that must have raised hell with the ladies. He grabbed hold of my hand.

"Cy English! Glad to see you indeed. Look, come to my quarters. Have a drink. Anything you want, my boy. And perhaps you'll tell me some interesting smuggling stories."

"Sorry, doc," I said. "This is business. See you later."

I started away, and Walton called me back. The cheerful smile had gone from his face and there were thin lines between his brows. "That was too bad about young Fred Greene. I suppose that's what you're investigating?"

"No. But what about him?"

"Oh, I thought you knew, English. Greene was a bit of a mystery to all of us. About all we ever learned was his name. Handsome devil, too, and young. Can't understand why he'd want to go over the side, but he did—two days out from Southampton."

"He left a note that he was ending it all, doc?"

"No. But what else could it be but suicide? It's not a rare occurrence, you know. We went through his things, but couldn't find a thing that might hint at who he was or where he came from. It appears he had it pretty well planned out."

I thanked the doctor and went on my way. I hadn't asked for a description of the man who was supposed to have gone over the side. The description "young and handsome" was sufficient to convince me that it was the supposed suicide's head that I had seen in the tin on the pier.

At the purser's office, I learned that James Bowler had occupied Stateroom 410 on B deck. I went below and turned into a dimly

lighted passageway. Room 410 was about halfway down.

I started to reach for the knob, but hesitated. I don't know why. Perhaps it was the heavy unnatural silence that envelops a big liner when passengers and stewards are busy on the pier. I stood there, listening, for a full minute. No sound came from the other side of the door. I reached inside my coat and got my automatic. I felt much better.

My hand closed over the knob and I started to turn it, slowly. The yell from the other side burst like thunder in the heavy silence.

"Come in, damn you! No need to sneak now!"

I went in, kicked the door closed, and rested my back against it. I kept the automatic in sight. Bowler was slumped down in a chair beside a small table. He was leaning forward so that his long arms hung loosely between his legs. The face was pale and there was moisture on his brow, but he managed a smile.

"Saw you on the pier, didn't I?"

I nodded. I'm Cy English, customs agent. That case of Scotch—"

He waved impatiently. "I know. I know. You found a human head in there. I'm sorry about that. Must have been quite upsetting. At the time, I thought it was nothing more than an innocent case of liquor. But when the inspector mentioned those cut bands—"

He broke off and his mouth tightened. Something came into his eyes, like pain, but I wasn't sure. He closed the eyes tight and held them thus for a long minute. When he finally opened them, they were bloodshot. He said:

"There are things I should like to tell you, English, but I won't have time." He grinned at me, a humor-

less stretching of the lips. "I have an appointment."

Maybe the guy was nuts. He was acting that way and beginning to look it, too. "You won't be keeping any appointment," I told him.

He gripped the chair arms and pushed himself to his feet. "This is a very important appointment. I'll keep it, all right. And you nor anyone else can't stop me!"

I flipped the gun into my left hand and balled the right. "Look, Bowler, you're getting on my nerves. Get back into that chair, before I throw this fist at your thick jaw!"

"Go to hell, Mr. English," he told me very politely, turned, and walked toward the bed.

I made a jump to follow, but came up short. The wooden handle of a bread knife was protruding from just below Bowler's left shoulder blade. He stood looking down at the bed. Then he sighed and crumpled in a heap on the floor.

His eyes were closed when I reached him. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came forth. Crimson did, though, thick stuff that ran down the side of his cheek to form a small pool on the floor. A moment later he was dead, and I wondered how the man had lasted that long. Judging from the position of that knife handle, the blade must have been just below the heart.

CHAPTER II.

FROM THE DARK.

In my fighting days the papers always wrote me up as one pug who had guts. Well, maybe I had, in the ring, but this was different. Finding that head hadn't done me any good—and now this! Damn it, my knees were beginning to work the wrong way. I got mad thinking how this murder business got me. I should

have been accustomed to it by now. I stood there growling, cursing, and feeling like anything but a hero.

I went through Bowler's pockets and found nothing of importance. I opened dresser drawers. Empty. There was a connecting door which led to the next stateroom. It was locked. I went around kicking things from my path. Mad? Not exactly. The fact is, I was a bit scared and trying to cover it up with forced anger.

I had overlooked the single clothes closet. I yanked open the door. The girl inside blinked at the sudden light. She was the blonde I'd seen on the pier.

She was trying hard to press herself through the back wall. Her beauty didn't faze me now. I reached in, grabbed her wrist, and wasn't gentle in bringing her out.

She saw Bowler on the floor near the bed, and swung away, covering her face with her hands. I turned the chair so that its back was to the corpse. She was glad to sit down.

Here was one of those woman situations. I didn't like it. I'm a sap, I guess. I simply hate to get tough with women. It was times like this when I regretted quitting the fight racket for this customs business. And in the plug-ugly game, you deal with men. These women! Usually pretty ones, too. Why couldn't they stick to their knitting and leave smuggling and killing to men? Well, they couldn't. All right. Then yours truly would treat them in the manner which they deserved.

"You talk!" I told her. "You tell me all about this mess, or so help me, I'll bat that blond head clear off your shoulders!"

She started to cry. Her shoulders shook. I restrained myself from

the sappy inclination of putting my arm around those shoulders.

"Turn 'em off!" I snapped. "I'm English, the customs agent. That stuff doesn't go with me. Turn it off."

She cried more. She was working herself up into a nice state of hysterics. I'd have to stop that. I knew how, but it wasn't a nice way. I put my knuckle under her chin and pushed up her head. She kept right on bawling. I said: "What the hell!" and gave her my open palm flat across the cheek.

It was a lousy cure, but it worked. She stopped crying. It wasn't fright, mind you, it was anger. She called me a bad name and kicked me in the shin. When I bent over to nurse it, she pasted me one in the face. That evened things, and I felt better.

Those light-blue eyes held plenty of fire now. I figured there was a drop of Irish to her make-up. "I'll talk, you big ox!" she yelled. "You want to know who killed Bowler? I did. You hear me! I stuck that knife in his back!"

The admission kind of threw me. It didn't seem logical. I just couldn't conceive of her as a murderer.

"Why should you want to kill a man?"

"Why does any woman kill? I met him in France. We were supposed to marry. He had changed his mind by the time the ship arrived in New York. When he left the pier, I followed him aboard to discuss the situation. The beast insulted me. He had used the knife in packing. I grabbed it up from the table and—"

She broke off, and I stood there staring at her. I figured she was lying. That line she had handed me

was so old it had whiskers. It would go over big with a jury, though. I could visualize her on the stand with a tear in her eye and a yard of shapely leg showing. I went to the wall phone, reported what had happened, and asked to have Doc Walton sent to 410 in a hurry.

When I turned around, the girl was slumped down in the chair. Her back was toward me. On the way across the room I scooped up her handbag from the floor. The catch was unfastened. There was a small roll of papers inside. They were bills from some of the most exclusive shops in Paris. I pushed the bills into my pocket and dropped the handbag on the table.

The door opened and Walton came in with the purser crowding his heels. The doc went directly to the body of Bowler, took a quick professional look, and turned to face us.

"Well?"

The girl came out of her chair and stared at Walton. Color seemed to recede from the handsome face of the doctor. He separated dry lips with his tongue.

"What are you doing here, Miss Kay? Bowler's been murdered. I don't understand—"

Watching the girl, I could have sworn I saw a vague smile lift the corners of her mouth. Then it was gone, and I wasn't sure. She said:

"I killed him, doctor. In self-defense. He made advances which I found impossible to repulse."

She was brazen now. The tears and hysterics had vanished. There were no witnesses to contradict her story. No jury in the world would convict her, and she knew it. A minx, if ever there was one, and me, as usual, had been taken in by her sweet smile and those china-blue eyes.

I began to see things in a different light. Undoubtedly, this hardened little blonde had in some manner connived to lure Bowler to his death. Those bills that I had lifted from her handbag led me to believe that at the bottom of all this was a gown-smuggling racket. If this were the case, those bills would be essential to the selling of such valuable contraband. The buyer would require proof that the goods were legitimate. Those empty trunks which Bowler had brought back with him certainly held some significance. Just what, I did not know at the moment. But I did know that if he had found himself a smart method of smuggling, there would be plenty of sharpshooters ready to take it away from him. I had an idea that it was something of this nature that caused his death.

Murder was no business of the U. S. customs, so I didn't object when the purser asked Doc Walton to hold the girl in his office until the police were notified. I mentioned that there were some questions I'd want to ask her, and Walton agreed to keep her in his office until I got there.

When they had gone I dug out those bills and added up plenty of francs. I converted the figure into American money and got a distinct surprise. Some place, somewhere, there were some ten thousand dollars' worth of French dresses knocking around. It was a smuggling racket, all right; a racket that was plenty big.

I hadn't seen the girl's luggage on the pier, and figure it must still be in her room. I called the office, got her room number, and went out.

I cut across a smoking lounge, and went almost to the end of a long passageway. I tried the knob. It turned, and I stepped in upon a lot

of darkness. I closed the door and reached for the light switch. I didn't make it. A light sound at my back had me jerking quickly to one side. A sap that had been aimed for my head missed and crashed down on my shoulder instead. Numbness leaped to my finger tips. My left arm was still good. I let go with a hook and felt pain to my elbow, as my fist crashed against a hard skull. The man swore and tried again with the jack. He missed and took a hard left to his mid-section for his carelessness.

The sap hadn't worked, so he tried another idea. I sensed that he was digging for a gun, and I jumped forward. My shoulder caught him low and threw him against the wall. His gun exploded, but the shot was wasted. This game was strictly no fooling, which was why I didn't waste time getting to my own gun. I let go at the point from which the flash had come. There was a deep groan, a thud—and silence.

CHAPTER III.

ONE-PUNCH GETS TOUGH.

It could be a game. I waited, heard no breathing, and glided across the room to the light switch. The man was on his back over against the wall. I went over and took a look. Lucky shot for me, but not for him. The slug had gone dead-center through his left ear and out the other side of the skull. There was a lot of gore splashed about.

I went to the door and looked out. The passageway was deserted. I came back and knelt down beside this young pasty-faced lad whom I had never seen before. In his inside coat pocket I found more bills for French gowns.

There was a steamer trunk and two valises in the room. The con-

tents of same had been pulled out and dumped on the floor. There was some nice silk underwear, but no expensive gowns. Helen Kay was the name on the baggage tags. The way I summed up, the blond minx had stolen some of Bowler's bills before the ship docked. She must have hidden them in her baggage. In some way, this pasty-faced helper of hers must have learned she was in the murder jam, and decided to get the bills before somebody found them. This was all guesswork on my part, but the way things were shaping up, guessing was about all I had to go on.

There was an automatic lock on the door. I snapped it and went out into the passageway. I was getting a brainstorm from trying to figure some logic into this crazy business. One thing was certain. The game was too big for Helen Kay to handle alone. Those two sharpshooters I had seen hanging around on the pier could be part of her organization; ditto the lad who had taken my slug through the ear. Talk with the girl might throw some light on the subject.

I climbed stairs and traveled along a corridor to the doctor's office. The door was closed. I turned the knob and walked in upon rows of bottles and a nauseating odor of medicine. That was all. There was no girl and no Doc Walton.

Letting them out of my sight had been a dumb move. The doc was strictly a ladies' man, and the blond baby was first-class man-bait. He could have gone overboard for her. In which case he may have attempted to spirit her out of reach of that murder rap.

If they had gone ashore, the watchman at the gangplank would know. I almost broke my neck getting down there, but it was a waste

of energy. There was no watchman around.

I looked up and down the pier. It was cleared of all passengers now, and most of the lights had been turned out. Directly across the wharf was the huge pile of unclaimed baggage that had been gathered up by the inspectors. I stood there, squinting across the piled trunks, and trying to connect some links of an idea that was suddenly clicking in my brain. The links finally bounced together and shaped up into something fairly logical.

I started across to the pile. It was darker over here. My heels sounded like pistol shots on the cement flooring. I shifted to the balls of my feet. The silence was intense. I stopped a few feet this side of the baggage and looked it over. What I had in mind was a couple of steamer trunks bearing no identification tags. They weren't on this side. I skirted around to the back.

The two men were waiting for me. So were their guns. They were the gents whom I had seen near Bowler's baggage earlier in the evening. They had been busily engaged in tying up into bundles some very fancy gowns which they had removed from two steamer trunks. The expressions on their faces weren't meant to be friendly. The thickset man with the flattened nose said:

"Still sneakin' around, eh, English? Well, here's one time you stuck your big porker into somethin' that ain't gonna to it no good."

"I see you know my name," I told him. "Funny, because I know yours, too."

He blinked. "What is it?"

"Mud! For being so sappy to get mixed in smuggling and murder. Or maybe it was your rat-faced pal there

who led you into more trouble than you ever thought existed."

The stumblebum turned to the other. "The guy's a wise-cracker, Mickey. What say I dish him some stuff!"

I said: "You couldn't dish out the right time, minus that rod."

It got him. He flipped the gun to the other and started for me. Mickey yelled:

"Hold it, One-punch! Hold it, you damn fool!"

One-punch wasn't holding anything but plenty of temper. He threw a slggish left hook at my jaw and I went under it. He tried a right uppercut that had whiskers on it, which I had no trouble stepping back from. Maybe this guy had been a fair ham-and-egger in his day, but it seemed to me that day was long past. Besides, he was mad, and mad fellows are my special meat.

I stepped lightly around him and pushed four or five fast jabs into his ugly puss. Mickey took a swipe at me with a gun barrel and missed by a mile. One-punch faked a left and fooled me. I ducked the blow that was supposed to be, and ran into a beautiful right cross for being so dopy. One-punch was well named. That right put me on my ear on the floor.

One-punch ran over to one side and shadow boxed around, waiting for me to get up. He must have been a bit punch-drunk and thought he was back in a ring fight. But not Mickey. If there were any brains between the pair, Mickey had them. He didn't rush things. I was half-way to my feet when he brought the gun barrel down.

I heard the sharp crack and saw a streak of blinding lightning. That was all. No pain after that, no feel-

ing of any kind in my body. Consciousness hadn't left me, but every ounce of strength had. I lay there unable to move, an inert heap of numbed flesh. One-punch was saying:

"All right, you spoiled my work-out, so I'm gonna finish 'em. I'll wrap a lot of these dresses round the gun muzzle and shove it up against his ear. A pal was tellin' me you hardly hear the explosion—"

"You're a dope!" barked the rat-faced one. "Not only do you want to ruin a gang of expensive French gowns, but you want to leave a dead G-punk laying around for somebody to find. You sure are an awful dumb One-punch, which I suppose comes from using your face and head as a catcher's mitt. So, my heel-walking friend, you take orders from me. Get the bum's rod."

One-punch didn't like Mickey's tone. He was grumbling a lot of cuss words when he came over to get my gun. He appeased his anger by booting me one in the head. That settled me. I went off the earth.

When I came out of it, I was back in one of the staterooms on board. There were two big bundles of gowns over in one corner. One-punch and Mickey had found a bottle of brandy and were looking quite happy about it. Helen Kay didn't look so happy. She was making fast laps up and down the room and casting looks of apprehension in my direction. She seemed worried, but I couldn't be sure. I studied her without opening my eyes too far.

She stopped suddenly and swung on the hoodlum twins. "If you lugs killed English, it's going to be too bad. Murdering a government agent is a very stupid move."

Mickey stood up and braced his

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arms on the table edge. He leaned forward. "Tell me, beautiful, is it us you're worried about or the G-punk? I don't like your actions. In fact, I never liked the idea of you moving in on the racket. First, you're a dame, and dames can't be trusted. Second, we don't know a damn thing about you or where you came from. I think the boss was a sap for not listening to me."

The girl smiled, a hard little smile. "If the boss listened to you too much, Mickey, he wouldn't be the boss. Besides, you're a sap for getting wrong ideas about me. I'm in this game for what's in it, and I don't want things ruined by the dumb play of a couple of rod men. Like knocking off that bum there. If you'd waited, we could have made it look like an accident."

"Forget it," Mickey snapped. "The guy ain't dead. Look—I'll prove it."

He had been lighting a cigarette. He came over and stood looking down at me. Suddenly he bent and pressed the lighted match against my cheek. I yelled and bounced up to a sitting position in the bed.

CHAPTER IV. THE TOP MAN.

It was a huge joke to flat-nose. He burst out into a roar of laughter. I glanced at the girl. I could have sworn she was happy that I was alive. Or was it just another of my dumb ideas about women? I suffered from a complex. I had a dopy idea that all women were little mothers at heart.

"How did you get away from Doc Walton?" I asked.

"Stop worrying about things that don't concern you."

"You fixed him as you did Bowler?"

She said: "Shut up, simp. You won't be around long enough for it to make any difference."

That statement was a bit screwy. Only a moment before she had been worried that I had stopped living. Or maybe she was on the level about having it appear like an accident. The contradiction to that was that she hadn't bothered to have Bowler's death appear that way. I had an idea this girl was playing some kind of a crazy game. To attempt to figure it out was too much for my already overtaxed brain.

"What happens now?" I wanted to know.

"You go bye-bye," she said. "For keeps."

"That's nice. Then you won't mind telling me your real reason for killing Bowler. I'd like to have things straight before I go."

"Bowler had been smuggling in gowns and making a fortune. I learned about it and gained his confidence in order to learn his method. The scheme he had was perfect for beating the U. S. customs, practically foolproof. I saw a chance to clean up in a short time if Bowler would agree to go into the thing in a big way. But he was petty at heart. He wanted to continue to operate as he had been doing."

"And you killed him because of that?"

"I killed him," she said, "because I was fortunate enough to connect up with a guy who thought big. Bowler had to go then, to prevent his squawking when we began to bring in real shipments."

"And the smuggling method that you consider so foolproof?"

"Better pipe down, beautiful," Mickey warned. "Even if the guy is as good as dead, there's nothing gained by talkin' too much."

I said: "I suppose that other fel-

low got in beautiful's way, too. I mean the poor guy whose head we found in Bowler's case of liquor."

Helen Kay ceased being beautiful all of a sudden. I never saw such a look of horror come into a woman's face. Her eyes got big and round and seemed about to fall out of her head. Her mouth fell open, sagged at the corners. She was affected deeply, there was no mistaking that. But exactly in what manner, I didn't know.

"What is the dopy guy talking about?" Mickey started, and was interrupted by the ringing of the wall phone. He put the receiver to his ear and began nodding his head.

"O. K.," he said finally, and hung up. "The punk here goes on ice for the time being. We gotta move fast because the searching squad are expected aboard to nose around for unmanifested goods. It wouldn't do for them to find English."

"Let me sap the guy," One-punch said. "And heave what's left of him over the side."

"Them were orders came over the phone," Mickey barked. "You're taking 'em, One-punch. We tie up English and take him up forward to the anchor-chain locker. The searchers don't look in there. Later, the boss has some scheme for getting rid of him."

One-punch came over and jerked me to my feet. I was still weak from the pounding I had taken about the head, and I stood there swaying. He showed me his gun that was held inside his pocket.

"Get goin', punk. And if you're thinkin' of tryin' any funny business out there in the passageway, just do, because I'm dyin' to put a hole in your back."

"Wait, One-punch." It was the girl. Mickey spun on her.



*The released chain rushed out with terrific speed—
and anyone in the locker would be mangled . . .*

"What's eating you now? We gotta move fast before them searchers come aboard."

"Sure you do," she agreed. "But how about these dresses? They are expensive, you know, worth more than ten thousand. You going to let the searchers pick them up?"

"No." Mickey sounded worried. "But the boss didn't mention them."

"He could have forgotten about

them," the girl said. "Or perhaps he expects you to think for yourself once in a while. My advice is that if the searchers don't look in the anchor-chain locker, why not put the gowns in there, too? There's nobody around the ship at this hour. You and One-punch could carry them up there and come back for English. I could hold a gun on him while you're gone."

Mickey grinned. "Your idea is good—all except the last part, beautiful. The gowns ain't heavy. One-punch can run them up there, and I'll stick around to watch Mr. English. Get it?"

The girl got it, but she didn't answer. It was clear that Mickey didn't trust her. After some of the things she had done, I didn't see how anybody could trust her. Yet there was keen disappointment in her face when Mickey decided to remain behind. Why? Was it because she had some plan which she would have put into effect if the two of us had been left alone? I didn't know, and with all that had happened, I was still trying to create some logical answers in favor of this pretty girl.

One-punch had a bundle of dresses under each arm. Mickey opened the door, glanced out into the deserted corridor, and motioned to the other to get going. Mickey came back and sat down at the table. At no time did the rod in his hand get out of line with my stomach. Even in lighting a cigarette, he managed the whole operation with one hand.

I was thinking of that anchor-chain locker. It wasn't a nice place. It was a closed-in space in the extreme forward part of the ship in which the huge anchor-chain was piled when the anchor was held tight against the ship's side. The gear room was on the deck above, and was operated from that point when the order was given to let go anchor. This idea about the searchers not looking in the chain locker was dead wrong. Customs searchers search every vessel that enters the Port of New York, and they do a real job. I knew for a fact that the chain locker was one place that they never missed. It was there that members

of the crew often hid articles which they intended smuggling ashore. Knowing these facts had me wondering just what the real reason was for my being ordered locked in the chain locker.

Helen Kay had been walking nervously up and down the floor. Mickey was drumming his fingers on the table-top and following her with his eyes. Finally he lost patience.

"Will you stop running up and down! You get on my nerves. Have a drink of brandy and sit down some place."

The girl stopped and smiled at him. "Thanks, Mickey. Think I will."

She picked up bottle and glass and started toward the washbasin over in one corner.

"What's the idea?" Mickey demanded.

"No idea, my friend. It's only that I usually need a chaser with this stuff."

Mickey settled back in his chair. I was watching the girl. There was something about the look in her eyes, something which I just couldn't dope out. She turned on the water in the basin, and while it ran, poured herself a short drink. Once she glanced over her shoulder at Mickey's narrow back. She had her chaser, turned off the water, and started back to the table with the bottle and glass. Not once did she glance in my direction. Her eyes were on the back of Mickey's head, riveted there. Mickey started to turn, and although I didn't want a drink, I said:

"Look, rat-eyes. I've been cuffed around. A rap out of that bottle wouldn't do me any harm."

I had spoken simply to keep Mickey's attention from the girl. Why, I don't know. I sensed that she had something in mind—that something

was about to happen. Mickey was saying:

"Who wants to do you any good, English? I wouldn't give you a drink if your tongue was a yard out of your thick head."

The girl was directly behind Mickey. She stood there for what seemed a long time. A sudden intuitive fear came into the little gangster's eyes. He started to swing around in his chair. The girl moved now, like a streak of lightning.

She swung the bottle. Mickey saw it coming and ducked. It caught him a glancing blow and sent him off balance. He was bringing his gun around on the girl. I dived headlong from my position on the bed. My shoulders struck him low and flung him against the wall. I caught him on the rebound with a right hook to the jaw that flattened him like a pancake. I reached for the gun that Mickey had dropped.

"Let it lay, English!" It was a masculine voice, a voice I recognized. I turned slowly. Doc Walton stood just inside the door with his right fist wrapped around a .38 Police Special.

CHAPTER V.

THE DAME IN THE RACKET.

One-punch came in, took a look around, and had trouble keeping his eyes in their sockets. Walton was grinning, exposing two rows of perfectly matched teeth. There was no humor in the grin. It was wolfish, inhuman.

"Hello, doc," I said.

He didn't answer. He had the gun lined on me, but his eyes were on the girl. "Sweet game you played, Helen. I'd considered myself a good judge of human nature, but you showed me how wrong I could be. You're smart. You and

I could have gone a long way together. I'm awfully sorry to lose you like this—awfully sorry."

The girl shivered. I didn't blame her. There was ice in the man's tone. Ice and death. I said:

"You must have blown your top, Walton. Respectable ship's physicians don't go nuts like this."

He turned that grin on me. "Not nuts, English. Just smart. Ship's physicians don't receive much money. If I were a fool, I could rot here for the rest of my life, watching other people with the means to enjoy themselves. I saw a chance to clean up and I took it. And when I start a thing I usually finish it."

"Like murdering that poor fellow, decapitating him, and putting the head in Bowler's liquor case."

Walton chuckled. "I didn't murder the unfortunate fellow. Bowler did. You see, that poor lad was a private detective employed by an organization of New York businessmen to learn how all those French gowns were getting into the country. It was ruining their trade, and the customs seemed helpless about the whole thing. Bowler learned Fred Greene's true identity and was forced to put him out of the way. I was aware that Bowler had a clever smuggling scheme, and had been watching him. Which was how I happened to see him kill the detective. I offered to help him get rid of the body. The idea was to prevent him doing it himself. If he had just thrown the body overboard, that would have been the end of it. I wanted Bowler to get what was coming to him for that murder, so as to get him out of my way. I thought as good a method as any was to remove the murdered Greene's head and plant it in Bowler's liquor case. Smart idea, only it didn't materialize exactly as I had planned."

"You mean Bowler knew how you had framed him?"

"He may have suspected, but he wasn't sure. Discovering those cut wires convinced him that the head was in there. He came aboard in search of me. Luckily, I saw him coming and had time to get to his room before he did. There was no doubt I was slated for a fate similar to Fred Greene's."

"Only you beat him to it—with the knife."

"It could be that way, English, couldn't it? That is, if the blond lady here hadn't already confessed to doing that." He swung to the girl. "I never was sure of you, Helen. You gave the impression that you were all for throwing in with us, but I never was certain. So I sent one of my boys to your room to search your things just as a sort of check. As yet, he hasn't reported back. Perhaps you can explain his disappearance, Miss Kay?"

"Say, boss," interrupted One-punch, "didn't you say something about them searchers comin' aboard? Maybe we better get a move on."

"You're getting smart," Walton told him. "I believe I'll let you be number-one man in future—after the way Mickey allowed himself to be taken."

A light knock sounded on the door. Everybody swung to face it. Doc Walton seemed to have been expecting some one. He opened the door a crack and spoke to a white-uniformed sailor on the other side:

"Get up to the gear room. In twenty minutes, you understand?" He glanced at his wrist. "It is now ten minutes past twelve. At exactly twelve thirty, let go! You got that straight? At exactly twelve thirty." He closed the door.

One-punch had looked at his own

wrist watch. He started to say something, but was cut short by Walton.

"We must move fast now. There is no time to waste." He motioned with his gun. "All right, you two. Get going. Forward we go to the anchor-chain locker. And remember, English, One-punch and I will be right behind you. One phony move, and we blast you and the blond broad!"

We went out into the passageway and started forward. The ship seemed like a ghost ship at this hour. Even if someone had put in an appearance, it wouldn't have done any good. The two behind us had their guns concealed in their coat pockets. I glanced once at Helen Kay and saw stark terror in her face. She took hold of my arm, and I felt the nails go into my flesh.

"English! This is the end. Do you realize what this fiend intends to do?"

"Take it easy," I told her. "I know for a fact the searchers never fail to look in the chain locker."

"You fool!" she shot back. "That sailor he spoke to outside the room. He ordered him to the gear room. At exactly twelve thirty—"

Walton had heard the whispering. "Cut it!" he snapped. "One more yap out of either one of you and it's curtains here and now."

Our shoes made loud sounds on the polished floor. All of us had unconsciously fallen into step. There was a rhythm about it; a rhythm that struck a familiar chord. Once before I had heard that same rhythm. It was in Sing Sing. A man was going to his death. That was it. I had it now! I knew what the girl meant. We, too, were going to our death! The chain locker. The man in the gear room. Exactly twelve thirty! I suddenly knew the answers to all that.

We were in a narrow, steel bulk-headed passageway. Directly ahead was the water-tight door that opened into the anchor-chain locker. Already I could see the huge links of chain that lay like a monstrous snake in the locker, occupying all space but a few feet just inside the door.

A gun-barrel prodded my back. The girl moaned at my side. Death lay a few feet before us. A horrible death. I didn't want to die that way. I didn't want Helen Kay to meet such a terrible death. I did a crazy thing.

I raised my arms to a point where I figured my elbow would be in line with the gun that was pressing into my back. Then I pivoted fast. My elbow struck One-punch's gun and threw it out of line with my back. I was off balance from the turn, but I managed to throw a right at One-punch's jaw. It was a clumsy try. One-punch went under it with ease. His bullet head popped up quickly and the gun barrel crashed against my cheek.

Blood gushed out. I fell back against the wall, fighting with every fiber of my being to retain consciousness. I succeeded, but it didn't do much good. Both men had the hammers back on their guns.

"A brave try," said Walton. "But what did it win you?"

I took the girl's arm and started to step through the opening.

"Wait." It was One-punch. "You think them fancy gowns will be O. K. in there, boss?"

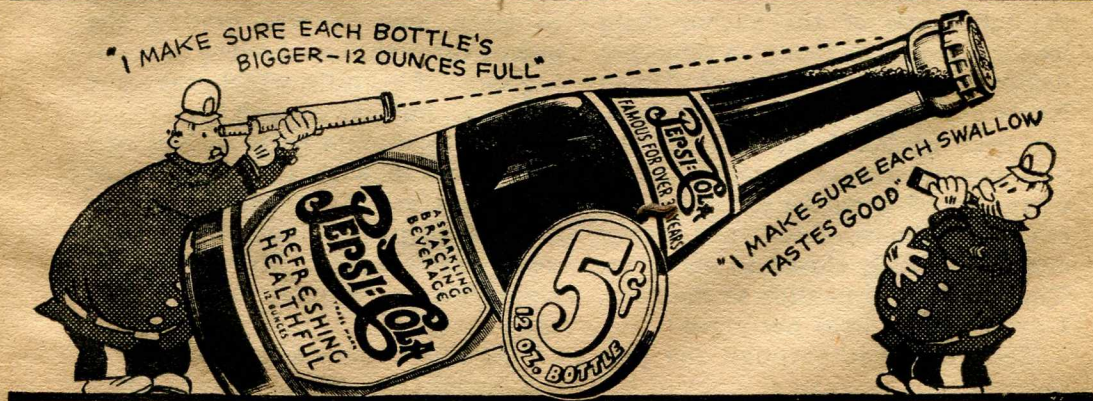
"What!" from Walton.

"Them gowns, boss. We had them in the stateroom. When you called and said the searchers were expected aboard, we wondered about them finding the gowns. The broad here suggested that we hide them up here in the locker. That's what I was doing when Mickey got bopped."

"You damn idiot!" There was murder in Walton's eyes. "The searchers aren't expected aboard until tomorrow. I just said that so that the G-punk wouldn't know he was going to his death and start a rumpus. You punch-drunk fool. It was a trick of the smart blonde. We have to get those gowns out, or we stand to lose plenty!"

He threw his gun to One-punch and glanced at his watch. "You keep these two covered. It's only twenty-five minutes past twelve. We have five minutes yet. I'm going to get those gowns."

Walton turned and disappeared inside the chain locker. One-punch glanced at his own watch and a look of horror came into his eyes.



"Boss! Wait! For heavens' sake, wait—"

One-punch started toward the chain-locker door. He had completely forgotten the girl and myself. It was too good a chance to miss. I clipped him with a left hook as he sprang past me. Helen Kay banged the water-tight door closed and sealed it by throwing into place the heavy steel fastening. One of One-punch's guns left his hand. I dived, got it, and swung around.

One-punch was bringing his remaining gun up into line. "Drop it!" I yelled. "Drop it, or by heavens—"

I don't believe One-punch heard. His eyes were clouded over from that left hook he had stopped. He started to pull back the hammer of his revolver. It left me no alternative. I shot him through the left eye.

Helen Kay started a scream that was never finished. One-punch was still on his feet. He pointed at the sealed door. "The boss. His watch was five minutes fast—" He fell forward on his face.

A sudden thought had caused the girl to scream. She was tearing at the steel door-fastening now, trying to get it open. I rushed forward to help. Then it came.

A deafening roar as of thunder. It shook the steel plates under our feet; the bulkheads of the anchor-chain locker vibrated as though a thousand demons were at war in there. Helen Kay's eyes bulged in their sockets, the back of her hand was pressed hard against her white teeth. After what seemed ages, the terrible noise ceased. Silence, thick, and heavy and suffocating, closed in about us. The girl started to slide to the floor. I grabbed her, held her close.

Men rushed in through the passageway, and stopped at sight of the

dead One-punch. A big sailor in the lead pointed at the sealed chain locker. "Some one in the gear room released the anchor. That chain in there. When the anchor is dropped, the chain rushes out at terrific speed. Any one in there would be mangled!"

I nodded, and let him see my agent's shield. "We know that now. It was intended for us. One of the sailors was bribed to drop the anchor at exactly twelve thirty. You'll find what's left of Doc Walton in there. He thought he had time. It seems his watch was five minutes fast."

Later, in the captain's quarters, I said to Helen Kay: "If you feel like talking, I'm a good listener."

She flashed one of those smiles in my direction. "There isn't much, English. That young fellow whose head you found was my partner. Private detectives, you know. After they killed him, I was more determined than ever to see the thing through. You see, I had no proof of the murder. Fred Greene had disappeared at sea, and it was put down as suicide. I knew differently, but I had no proof. Also, I had yet to learn the smuggling method used by Bowler. I made a play for the man and managed to gain his confidence to some extent. But not sufficiently to learn how he was getting the goods through. I succeeded in stealing some of his bills, which was some evidence, but not enough."

"So you stuck a knife in his back and threw in with Doc Walton, as your next best bet. Later, when he decided to put me out of the way, you got frightened. Murder was all right, but not when it came to government men."

"Do I look like a killer, English?"

I shook my head. "You don't.

But I never could figure women, anyway. If you hadn't confessed murdering Bowler, I still wouldn't believe it."

"Look," she said. "This is what actually happened: Doc Walton had just finished that little job when I walked in on him. Mickey and One-punch also were in the stateroom, and I had to think fast to save my own life. I pretended to be glad that Bowler was out of the way; even agreed to take the rap and plead self-defense. Walton left then, saying he had better get back to his office. Bowler was in the chair with the knife in his back. We thought he was dead. Then you knocked on the door. Mickey and One-punch went through the connecting door to the next stateroom. Mickey didn't trust me. He told me to stand by and go through with that self-defense yarn. When you pulled me out of the closet, I had no alternative but to hand you that line for the benefit of those two on the other side of that door."

"I figured it was something like that," I told her. "But I wanted to hear it in your own words. You see, when I thought of it later, I realized that it would take a fairly powerful man to drive that knife hilt-deep in Bowler's back. And you're not exactly powerful. Of course, you finally discovered how those gowns were being smuggled in?"

"No, English. That was the job I was hired to do, but I failed miserably. Now, if you were a real smart customs agent, you'd know the answer to that one."

I grinned. "The answer is simplicity itself. Bowler always carried *four* trunks. Two were empty the other two contained the gowns. The two empty ones were declared by Bowler for customs examination. When the inspector had affixed labels and gone on his way. Bowler simply removed the still-wet labels from the empty trunks and transferred them to those containing the gowns. He would then march through the barrier with the labeled trunks and leave the empties behind on the pier to be picked up as unclaimed. This last time he hadn't time to transfer the labels, and the dress-packed trunks were placed in the unclaimed pile. Walton knew this and sent his two henchmen to steal the gowns. I caught them at it—and the rest was plain addition."

There were storm clouds gathering in Helen Kay's eyes. Maybe she felt that I had held out on her. I had had one experience with that temper of hers and I didn't want another. To take her mind off things, I said:

"Look, beautiful. How about you and I having dinner tomorrow?"

She said yes so quickly that it had me wondering. Maybe I wasn't so smart, after all.

THE ROLLING HEADS

A most unusual complete novel by Mark Harper, will appear in the March issue of Street & Smith's MYSTERY Magazine, on sale in February. Along with this great novel, another Carrie Cashin novelette, a Death Angel novelette, Norgil the Magician, and other great yarns. Make sure you get the next issue of Street & Smith's

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DEATH ON SILVERY WINGS

by NORMAN A. DANIELS

A flying cop trails killers over trackless airpaths!

CHAPTER I. IN A PUFF OF WIND.

Neil Morrison's open pursuit plane boasted "New York Aërial Police" on its lower wing. Neil Morrison wore the blue of the police department, too, but as he flew his neat, fast job through a summer sky, he felt like a millionaire. For the most part his job consisted of scouting the harbor for signs of smugglers and laying down the law to rash pilots who tried stunt flying over the city. It wasn't a very exciting job, but Neil Morrison liked it. He enjoyed being a policeman and he also liked being a pilot. When those two likes were welded into one, he figured he'd reached the peak of contentment.

He was returning from a trip four hundred miles west, a slight journey during which he had delivered a detective who was after a murderer. Sometimes Neil envied those men—who dealt with death and crime.

He suddenly blinked his eyes and hastily drew up his goggles. Unless he was going completely mad, there was a parachute wafting down from a cloud bank. A chute with a man's body dangling from it. Neil looked around for signs of a plane on its final descent to oblivion. There was none! Yet this man must have bailed out of some flying craft!

Neil sent his ship skyrocketing toward the heavens. He wanted to bank sharply, circle the descending man and follow his course to the

ground. For perhaps two minutes he lost sight of the chute, but Neil didn't worry about that. A chute can't vanish in midair.

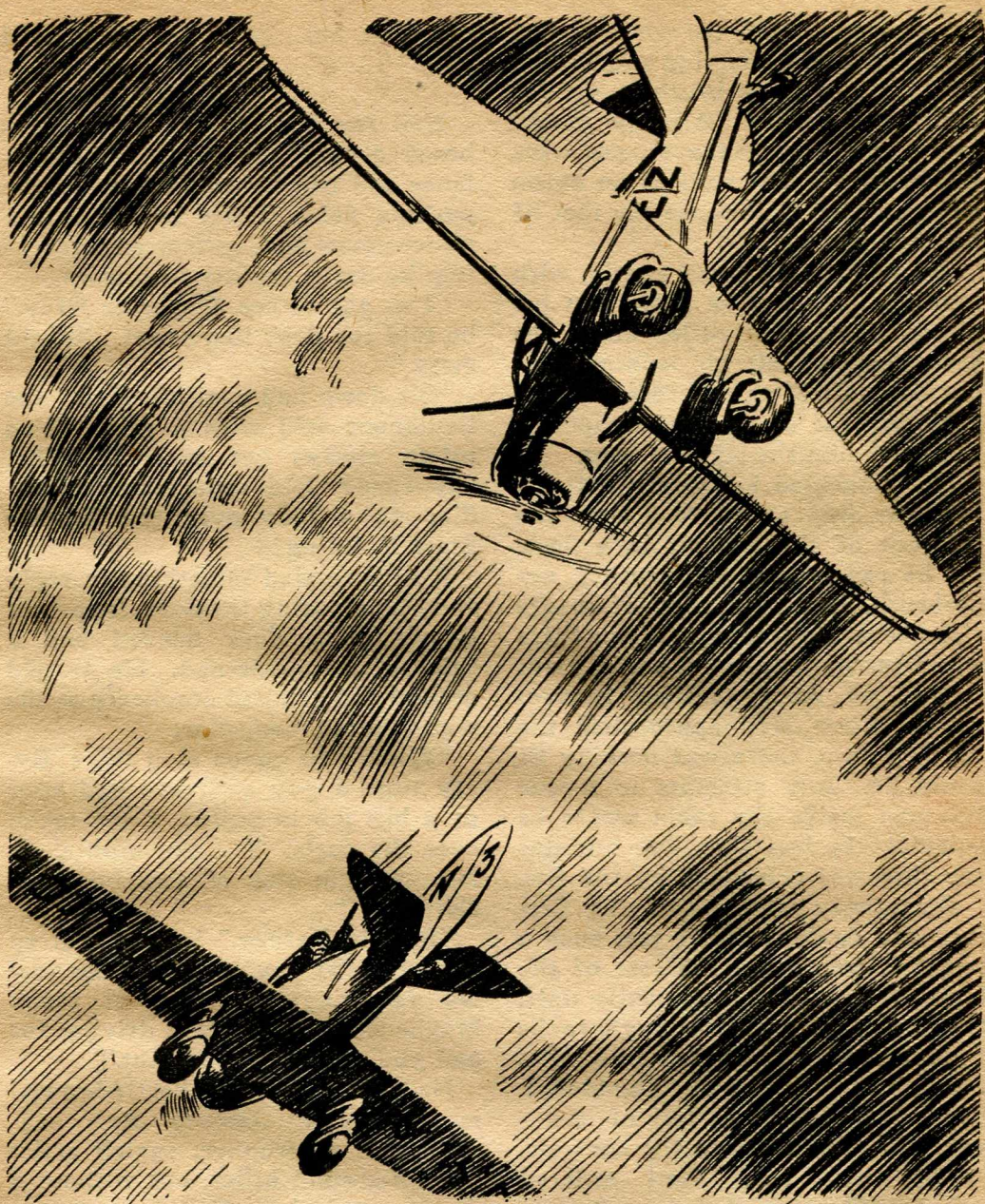
Yet it did vanish! Two thousand feet up, in clear flying weather, with the sun beating down, the chute had simply disappeared as though it had never existed.

Neil nosed down in a power dive. Maybe the chute had collapsed and hurtled the man to swift death. Below him was open farming country. The chute couldn't possibly be hidden from sight. But there was no sign of it. No sign except—Neil gasped; a tiny piece of white silk was fluttering down, wafted by a capricious breeze.

"I don't know what happened to that guy," Neil mused, "but he must have dropped out of some ship."

He gained altitude again, shot through cloud banks and rose until the atmosphere made breathing difficult. Still there was no sign of a plane. He gave up after a half-hour's search of the sky and turned his path back to the airport.

The level, whitewashed runway loomed up and Neil banked, circled the field twice and headed down. As he came around the last lap of the circle, he saw a second ship riding fast toward the ground. There was no preliminary circling by the pilot. He was in a hurry and showed it. Neil eyed the plane suspiciously, glanced up at her license numbers and grinned. This was Hugh Gil-



lian's plane. Gillian was a wealthy man who lived three hundred miles west. There was no telling what these millionaires would do. So long as the flier broke no laws, Neil didn't care. Then he recalled that Gillian must have flown nearly the same route. Perhaps he had spotted the mystery plane.

The silvery-winged cabin job hurtled by him. He heard the ignition cut off and the roar of the twin motors ceased. Somehow Neil didn't like that. He saw the ship strike the runway, bound into the air as though the pilot had misjudged his speed. Then it struck the ground once more and kept on racing along

the runway. It left the whitewashed path, kept right on going and headed straight into thick brush at the far end of the field. Already ambulances and emergency trucks were following it. The wail of an alarm siren reached Neil above the roar of his own motor.

He set his ship down gently, with hardly a jar. But he didn't cut his motor. Instead he rolled along the same runway, felt his landing gear cut into soft earth and race on, outstripping the emergency equipment that gave him the right of way.

He unbuckled his safety belt before the ship rolled to a stop and was out of the cockpit in a flash. As he ran toward the crushed underbrush, he saw a wisp of smoke rise above the treetops. Then there was a terrific explosion and a giant tongue of flame reached heavenward. When Neil approached the doomed ship, there was nothing he could do. Any attempts to rescue the man inside the cabin would be suicidal. In less than five minutes the ship was consumed by the fire.

Emergency trucks, carrying firemen and equipment for just such a purpose, smothered the rest of the blaze. Neil waited impatiently until the wreckage cooled enough to be approached. He glanced into what was left of the cabin and shuddered. The pilot—what was left of him—was still seated before the controls.

"Get him out," Neil ordered crisply. "Be careful, too—and wrap him in a piece of clean canvas. Hold the body right here until the coroner comes."

"Coroner?" one of the emergency crew gasped. "Say, the coroner will be satisfied to see this—this mess—in the morgue. What's the idea, Morrison?"

Neil bristled. "The idea is you follow my orders. I'll have the coro-

ner sent out. Now get busy, will you?"

Neil ran back to the field, clambered aboard the returning ambulance and had himself driven to the parking field. There he got into a police coupé and, with siren screeching, he drove rapidly into town.

"I've got to see Inspector Grey," he told the desk lieutenant. "Right away."

"Sit down and cool off, Neil," the lieutenant said with a grin. "You pilots always get excited. What happened? Did some crazy stunt-flier do a loop over the Empire State Building?"

Neil grumbled something in reply and began pacing the floor. Inspector Grey's office door opened and a thickset man emerged. He turned around and grinned crookedly at the white-haired inspector.

"When you gonna stop this? Every time a guy gets knocked over or a big job is pulled, I get taken over the coals. You got nothin' on me, and I'm sick of this business. Get me?"

"Beat it, Barney," Inspector Grey snapped. "If you don't like the way we do things, get out of town. Maybe that's what we're driving for and you can't take the hint."

Neil recognized the beetle-browed ape. He was Barney Barr, ex-smuggler, rumrunner, snatch artist and all-around killer, but without a single conviction. Neil remembered that, too, for it made something like history in the annals of headquarters. Here was a man known to be a criminal of the worst type, yet he had never served a day in jail or even paid a parking fine.

Neil entered the office, closed the door and saluted. "I just came from the airport, inspector. There was an accident down there. Hugh Gil-

lian, that rich manufacturer from Queenstown, crashed. But even though it looked like an accident, I think there's more to it and I want the job of finding out what really happened."

"Go on, Morrison," Inspector Grey nodded. "You're no fool, and when you suspect things—I'll suspect 'em, too."

"Well—Gillian landed just before I did. I heard him cut his ignition. He hit the runway nice—a little rough, maybe—but he came down right on the mark. Instead of stopping, he let the plane rush right off the field, into some underbrush, and she crashed. That part sounds O. K. Maybe he lost his head or fainted. But the ship caught fire. She burned to a crisp with him in it."

"Signifying just what, Morrison?"

"How could she catch fire after he cut the ignition, sir? I think somebody forced him to ride into the brush and then conked him. To make things seem right, this same killer set the ship on fire. I—"

Neil paused and sniffed. He raised his arms and smelled of his sleeves. Then he frowned.

"I could swear I smell gasoline, sir."

Inspector Grey chuckled. "That's because your veins are filled with gasoline instead of blood. Now, about your story—it does sound logical. Go ahead, Morrison. You have blanket permission to do all the investigating you wish. That's what you wear a badge for."

"Thank you, sir," Neil said happily. "There's another thing. I was flying back from Ohio. About a hundred and fifty miles west of here, I saw a man drop out of a cloud bank in a chute. Two thousand feet above the ground, he disappeared. Just like he'd been a puff of smoke and a tail wind blew him away. I'd

like to investigate that, too."

Inspector Grey looked startled and only nodded assent. After Neil had gone, he tapped his fingertips together thoughtfully and frowned.

"I wonder if there's something about flying that makes all pilots a little crazy?" he asked himself.

CHAPTER II.

MURDER ON HIGH.

Neil returned to the airport to find the coroner piling into his car. Dr. Norton wasn't positive about anything.

"There wasn't much left for me to examine," he said. "I'll have to do an autopsy, but it does look very peculiar, officer. Phone me late this afternoon and I'll have a complete report."

Neil hurried to where his plane was parked. He had her gassed and oiled while two mechanics swarmed over her, making a rigid inspection. Twenty minutes later Neil was racing her at nearly top speed, heading toward the west.

He landed at a private airport in a small town, taxied to the single hangar and climbed out. Two greasy mechanics met him.

"When did Hugh Gillian take off?" he asked.

One of the pilots shrugged. "You got me, brother. We don't come to work unless there's somethin' special for us to do. Gillian never had any work. He hired a grease monkey by the week to take care of his ship."

Neil had himself driven into town. He talked briefly with the saddened widow of Hugh Gillian.

"We're not sure it was an accident," he told her. "Your husband was a good pilot, not careless at all. Just why did he fly to New York this morning?"

Mrs. Gillian didn't know that. "He

usually told me if he was going to fly, but early this morning he went out to inspect the ship. He never returned. Neither did Hank Harrigan, the mechanic. Harrigan's wife says she hasn't heard from him, either."

Neil taxied to the small police station and found it bustling with excitement.

"So you're an air policeman," the elderly chief said as he shook hands. "Glad to know you. About Gillian, now—I don't know a thing. He minded his own business and never had any trouble. Neither did Harrigan, his mechanic. Furthermore, unless there's something pretty specific you want to know, I'll have to excuse myself. Crime runs rampant in this town today. A bunch of mugs stuck up the Fairview Bank and got away with two hundred and some-odd grand in cash. Left two men dead for souvenirs."

Neil realized his flight west had been in vain. Maybe he was a little crazy. That disappearing chute bothered him. It smacked of the eerie, the impossible. If Gillian hadn't met a horrible death only a short time later, Neil might have forgotten the whole weird incident. But somehow he tied that vanishing chute to Gillian's death.

Suddenly his brain clicked. The man who had been accompanying that chute—who was he? There seemed but one answer—Gillian's mechanic, Hank Harrigan. But in Heaven's name why should such a deed be perpetrated? Gillian wasn't the type to throw a man overside and then commit suicide. From all reports, Gillian and Harrigan were more friends than employer and employee. Neil returned to the airport.

He climbed into his ship, waved

to the mechanics who stood just outside the hangar watching, and turned over the motor. He poised for a second to watch the air direction indicator, taxied to the extreme end of the field and gave her the gun. He realized that the answer to this problem lay back in New York and he groaned at the thought. Any investigating at that point would be carried on by the homicide squad—if the coroner's report indicated murder.

Neil held a straight course for home. He flashed over several airports, and as he passed above the one at Beverly, he saw a neat monoplane job taking off. He nosed up and rose above the cloud banks. Neil liked it there; liked the calmness. Behind him the sun was setting and the air grew crisp. He pulled the fur-lined collar of his flying jacket around his neck and shoved himself deeper into the cockpit.

Then Neil caught the glint of the sun's slanted rays on the wings of another ship about five hundred feet above him. It looked like the cabin job he'd seen taking off at Beverly. Somehow, Neil sensed danger. Purely instinctive, it gripped him as closely as the real thing. He banked slightly and plunged down through the layers of clouds. The cabin ship followed, in what was almost a power dive. The plane flashed by Neil. Something hammered against the fuselage of his plane. He rolled sharply, glanced overside and saw a column of holes drilled through the rear of the plane.

The cabin model was gaining altitude again. It nosed over and plunged again until it flew directly on Neil's tail. Again Neil felt his small craft shudder slightly. He turned his head. Someone aboard

that cabin job was emptying a machine gun at him.

Neil turned his props down and gave her the gun. At two thousand feet he did a complete loop and came out of it directly behind the silver-winged ship. He unstrapped a rapid-fire rifle from deep within the cockpit, rested the barrel of the weapon against the side of the plane and turned gradually until he had a clear path for shooting. He sighted the gun and blasted away. Instantly the cabin job dropped, but her pilot knew his business too. Within five minutes Neil had the murder ship on his tail once more.

By turning himself almost completely around, he could shoot back at it. If only his rifle held tracer bullets, so he might get the range! Now all he could do was shoot blindly and hope for the best. He didn't have time to wonder just what all this should mean. All his attention was devoted to saving his own skin.

He zoomed up, getting a good look at the license numbers on the plane. He recognized them—just as he had recognized Gillian's. This ship belonged to an aviation enthusiast. A man named Leroy Prince who hailed from Beverly, where the plane had taken off. But why did Leroy Prince want to shoot him out of the sky?

Neil fired a long burst, sweeping the sky with lead. He sensed the fact that he must have hit the pursuing ship several times, but she came rushing on. Her speed was greater than the open job Neil flew. He had to get out of this death trap some way, before the killer ship got too close and the fusillade of lead ripped through Neil's motor and sent it down.

He banked once more and let the cabin ship hurtle by him. It turned also and came back, nosing up

slightly to prepare for a dive straight at Neil's tail. He gave the controls a yank, intent on gaining more altitude than his pursuer. Something snapped. His plane rolled to the left until the left wing pointed straight at the ground. He fought her every foot of the way down. Something had gone wrong. Perhaps he'd overtaxed the construction of the ship by all this stunt flying.

The ground, fortunately just pasture field, loomed up at terrific speed. Neil didn't cut his switch. He needed all the power he could summon from the motor. At five hundred feet he succeeded in leveling off, but at a sickening angle. Then, just as it seemed the left wing would rip a furrow in the earth, Neil righted her and came down to a fairly good landing.

He cut the switch and, as his motors grew silent, he heard the buzz of the cabin job. It was coming down to finish the job. Neil leaped out of the cockpit and scurried like a rabbit across the field toward the shelter of a clump of small trees.

The earth danced just ahead of him; danced as though suddenly gone berserk. Bullets slapped against small stones, thudded into the ground. Neil threw himself into a dive, sailed through tall grass and squirmed deep into a thicket.

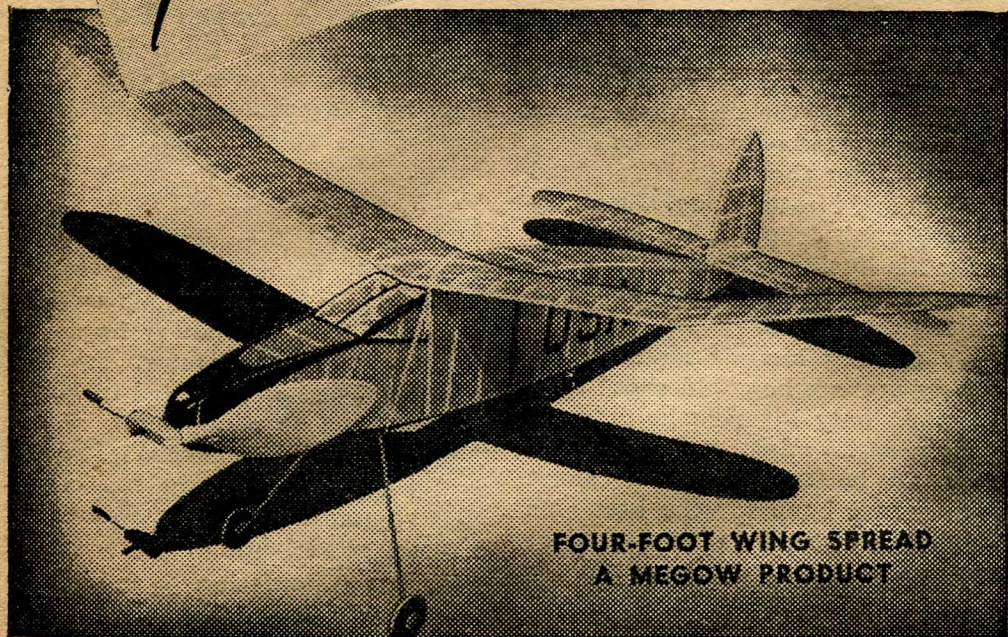
The silver cabin job came back, almost dusting the top of the trees in a search for him. The pilot swerved, circled and dropped low over Neil's plane. The guns cut loose again and bullets pounded into the grounded ship. Neil groaned. He was miles from nowhere and if one of those slugs smashed through any of the controls, it would take

Continued on page 100

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Continued from page 97

hours to get necessary assistance.

At last the killer ship seemed satisfied. It flew directly above the spot where Neil lay prone and he watched it vanish into a darkening sky. He arose, opened his flying coat and then removed his helmet. He was sweating profusely and his hands shook a trifle. Neil had survived many close calls, but nothing like this.

And to make things worse, none of it made sense. Why should they try to gun him out of the sky? He'd discovered nothing. Or had he—and didn't even know it? Neil set his jaws grimly and strode back toward his own ship.

Luck was with him. None of the bullets had caused any great amount of damage. He inspected his control wires and pursed his lips in a whistle of surprise. Someone had cut a wire, filed it almost through until any violent pulling of that control would part it. No wonder he'd come down in such a hurry.

It took him more than an hour to mend the damage. Then he climbed back into the ship and made a clumsy take-off, almost nosing over twice. At nine thirty he rolled along the runway at the flying field—his home port.

"Did Leroy Prince's plane land yet?" he asked a mechanic. Morrison looked around the field. "No more accidents like this morning, eh?"

The mechanic grimaced. "One of those a day is enough. Didn't see Prince land so far."

CHAPTER III.

THE PURPLE MASKS.

Neil changed to civilian clothes, climbed into his own secondhand coupé and sent it rolling toward the

city. At nine thirty he was parked in front of a night club, not yet in full swing. As each person emerged, Neil eyed him sharply. At ten thirty he saw two men come out, walk briskly across the sidewalk and enter a sleek-looking sedan. It rolled away and Neil went after it.

For more than two hours he followed the sedan at a respectful distance, wondering if he happened to be the greatest fool in existence. He had long since crossed the State line and his course was maintained due west. Apparently he was in for a long drive.

Headlights in his rear-view mirror bothered him for a moment and he eliminated the irritating reflection by turning the mirror away from the rear window. A car started to pass him and Neil pulled far over to give it plenty of room. He was intent on the sedan he chased. It was far ahead now—fully half a mile, but the twin taillights were bright beacons which he couldn't lose.

But the car that started to pass him slowed as it drew alongside. He could see dim forms within. Neil felt sweat burst out all over his body. He had also seen the glint of guns.

A window rolled down and the snout of a submachine gun menaced him. At the same time a harsh voice yelled an order for him to pull over. Neil gulped. His hunch hadn't been wrong, then, except that he hadn't figured on two cars. He stopped, opened the door and climbed out with his hands in the air. This was a time for bluffing.

"I . . . I haven't got much money," he quavered. "My car isn't worth swiping."

Two men came toward him warily. Both were masked with purple silk cloths that covered their whole faces

and had slits cut for the eyes, nose and mouth.

"Get in!" One of the men jabbed him with the barrel of his rifle. "The back seat, you sap. For fifty-five miles you been tailing that bus ahead of us. What's the big idea?"

"Trailing a car?" Neil gaped. "You must be wrong. I'm heading for Cincinnati. If there was a car ahead of me all the way, I never noticed it."

"Keep your mitts high!" one of the men snapped. "Now sit down in the seat and be a good guy or we'll bust you in half with hot lead. Let's see what's in your pockets."

Neil's hopes reached a new low. There was plenty in his pockets, including his pilot's license, his badge and his service pistol. Suddenly he brought down both hands, seized the barrel of the rifle and deflected it. He smashed a hard right to the masked man's chin, connected, and had the satisfaction of hearing teeth come together with a grinding snap. But the satisfaction ended there. Neil didn't have a chance. The man on the other side of him wrapped an arm around his throat, pulled him back and then used the butt of a revolver on his skull. Morrison slumped weakly, slid off the seat and fell into a limp heap on the floor.

He was yanked back on the seat, struck half a dozen times by the masked man, who had raised the mask a trifle and was wiping blood away from the corners of his mouth. The search started.

"A copper!" the masked man snarled as he hefted Neil's gun and badge. "Our hunch was right. Lucky we were following the boys close tonight. This bird musta tumbled to something."

"Let's gun him out and toss his

carcass into the bushes," one of the men suggested eagerly.

"No—we'll let the chief take a look at his pan. Say—we gotta be careful. If the cops are this close, there's no tellin' what we're in for. Step on it—catch up with the other car and we'll see what's what."

Neil was hardly aware of the speed by which the car was overtaking that one ahead. A blare of the horn, in a peculiar tattoo, stopped the first car. One of the thugs climbed out, walked up to the stalled sedan and had a conference. Then two more masked men approached. One of them, chunky and strong-looking, raised Neil's head and took a good look at him.

"This guy," he grumbled, "looks familiar, but I ain't sure. So he's a lousy copper, huh? O. K. Watch him. Maybe he wanted to find out what this is all about and maybe he will, too—only he'll never tell anybody. No time to waste here. Let's go!"

There was no way out for Neil. With a gun pressed against his side and evil eyes watching him from behind the purple masks, he could do nothing but hope. Miles slipped away. About eight o'clock in the morning they rolled to a stop outside a small hangar on some kind of private field far away from any city limits.

Two mechanics rushed up. Neil recognized them instantly. They were the grease monkeys who had met him at Hugh Gillian's hangar.

The masked leader of the mob yanked Neil out of the car and hurled him into the arms of the mechanics.

"This guy," he grated, "is going to stay with us for a while. He's a sneaking copper, so watch him."

"Hey—wait!" one of the mechanics cried. "I know this guy. It's that

air cop who landed at Gillian's place yesterday. The one we phoned you about. I thought you gunned him out of the sky."

"Yeah—and I thought you monkeys fixed things so he'd crash," the masked leader snapped. "Anyway, I'm glad it's him. Nobody else is onto us, and *he* won't talk. Take him into the hangar, and if he tries any fancy stunts load him with bullets."

Neil watched the six masked men clamber into the sedan and roll toward the highway, a thousand feet away. The mechanics alternately pushed and pulled him into the hangar. Neil was taken aback slightly by the sight of two men gagged and strapped to crude chairs. A fast Waco cabin plane was housed within the hangar. At a curt command from one of the mechanics, Neil sat down and was quickly tied up.

At nine twenty the two men rolled the ship onto the field. Then, one by one, they thrust their three prisoners inside, binding them carefully with huge strips of adhesive. Neil rolled over until he lay against the wall of the cabin and sought to find some projection with which he might saw at his bonds. There was none.

Finally he heard the roar of motors and two cars shot across the field. Men leaped out—only four now, for the drivers remained at the wheels. Sacks of currency were hastily transferred to the plane. Two masked men hopped in.

One of the prisoners was untied and escorted to the pilot's chair. The chunky leader occupied the co-pilot's place and he kept a gun trained on the prisoner.

"We take off," he snarled. "Turn her over. We keep flying until dusk and land in New York just before

it gets dark. Then nobody will be apt to spot us. Toledo, you watch those two mugs, especially the cop."

The man at the controls sighed deeply. Motors hummed smoothly. The mechanics pulled the blocks and the ship raced across the field. As it rose and banked, Neil pulled himself up into one of the seats. He could see the two mechanics piling into the cars as they rolled toward the highway. Before police could sweep down that road, the cars would be hidden or destroyed and no trace of the bandits ever found again.

The masked crook called Toledo kicked Neil's foot and grinned unpleasantly. Then he approached the other bound man. Working deftly, he peeled off the adhesive.

"O. K.," he told this man. "You're a flight mechanic, ain't you? Then a little thing like bailing out shouldn't make you scared. You been O. K., see? Now you get your reward. Put on that chute."

The mechanic obeyed hurriedly. All he saw was a chance to get clear of this death ship. He strapped the chute on securely. Toledo shoved his gun against the mechanic's back.

"O. K.—now just to be sure you don't try any tricks, I'm tying your hands. Oh, don't worry, this chute has an extra long rip cord on her. You can pull the ring easy."

He applied adhesive to the mechanic's wrists, inserted the forefinger of his right hand through the rip-cord ring and pushed the mechanic toward the door.

"Stand right there a minute," he said with a chuckle. "Soon as we're over the right spot of country, you can jump. O. K.?"

"Th-thanks," the mechanic said through lips gone perfectly dry. Toledo stepped close to him until the

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smaller man was entirely obscured to Neil's vision.

"O. K. for the jump?" Toledo called out.

"Let him go!" the mob's leader called back. "Happy landings—sucker!"

Toledo forced the door open, gave the mechanic a thump on the back and then a hard shove. The man went catapulting out the door and Toledo let it slam back in place. Under the masked leader's orders the plane dipped and circled until Neil could see the mechanic's descent checked as the chute ballooned out.

It didn't make sense. Why should they permit this man to escape—to live and carry tales? Then Neil thought of another man he'd seen dangling from the end of a chute. A man who had vanished, chute and all, like a puff of smoke.

Toledo looked at Neil and laughed harshly. "The chief says you take a jump, too, copper. His heart is softer than mine, see? If I was boss, you'd jump without a chute. O. K., stand up and I'll peel off the adhesive. Then climb into a chute and take off."

Neil arose and tensed as the bindings were torn free. The last one came away and Toledo's hands were occupied momentarily, for some of the adhesive stuck to him. Like a flash, Neil spun around and struck with terrific force. It was a glancing blow, sent by an arm half paralyzed from its former cramped position. But it knocked Toledo down, and before he could scramble to his feet Neil was at the tiny baggage-compartment door. He squirmed through and slammed the door. Toledo fired two shots through it, but Neil had been prepared for this. He had drawn out of range.

"Listen, you sap!" Toledo raged. "You was gonna get a break, and now you don't. I'm giving it to you slow. You can't get outa there, and I can get in. Hey, chief! Throw me back some tools."

But apparently the masked leader wanted his own way. It was his voice that coaxed Neil. "Listen! Don't be a fool. You come out and we'll give you a chance to jump—just like we did the mechanic."

"O. K.," Neil agreed suddenly. "I'm licked, I guess. If I don't come out, I'll crash with the ship. It's better to take my chances on a chute."

He opened the door and crawled back into the cabin of the plane. Toledo was seated in the co-pilot's chair, gun trained on the pilot. The chunky crook kept a gun on Neil.

"Now just stand up," he said. "I'll tie your hands in back after you get the chute harnessed on. Then all you got to do is push open the door and step out."

Neil climbed into the chute harness without a word. They were flying through a cloud bank now, and visibility was poor both inside and outside the ship. He turned obediently and the masked man affixed adhesive around his wrists. He walked with Neil to the cabin door. Neil shoved it open far enough to squeeze through. The leader's hand rested casually on Neil's back.

"Remember this break if the cops nail me," he said with a chuckle.

Neil forced a smile. "I'll remember—don't worry."

Neil was given a tremendous shove. He went catapulting out of the plane. He did about six long somersaults in the air before he pulled the rip cord. The chute blossomed out and checked his descent with a violent jerk. For Neil had

worked his bound hands, tugging at them and slowly the adhesive had been forced back. Working feverishly, he took a firm grip on the chute strings and with his other hand unbuckled the strap around his waist. As it came free, the chute dipped dangerously and threatened to buckle under. Only Neil's violent pulling saved him.

The chute harness dangled beside him now. Attached to the strap that passed across his shoulders was a black tin box, about seven inches long and two inches thick. It was held in place by a snap buckle. Neil fumbled with it clumsily. The strain on his right arm was growing until he could barely stand it. His arm felt as though it was being pulled completely out of its socket.

Then he had that black box free. He hurled it away, used his left hand to help cling to the chute and watched the atmosphere below. He saw a slight puff of smoke and heard the reverberations of an explosion. That was all, but Neil knew now what had happened to that first man he saw descending on a chute. He knew also just what had happened to the mechanic who had jumped a few moments before. That black box contained enough explosive, timed to let go before the chute reached the ground, to blast the chute and its human cargo into tiny pieces.

CHAPTER IV.

DESCENT TO VICTORY.

Neil landed with a terrific bump that knocked the wind out of him. A gust of wind ripped the chute away, but he didn't care about that. He arose and surveyed his surroundings. He was in some kind of swamp, luckily unencumbered by any trees. Grimly, he began hiking until he reached a knoll. From there

he could see a State highway ribboning out two miles from where he stood. Neil began running toward it.

An hour later he was dropped off by a motorist near an army aviation field. A sentry challenged him and Neil fumed while phone calls were put through to the commandant. Then a motorcycle sidecar whisked him to the administration building.

"You can verify my identity by phoning the New York police," Neil said. "And will you have a pursuit ship tuned up? One with a nice shiny machine gun mounted on her?"

Confirmation came through very quickly, and Neil drew on a borrowed helmet and goggles. He listened to a young second lieutenant's instructions on how to operate the machine gun, waved to the mechanics and sent the military fighting plane skidding across the field. He took to the air and let her out to the limit of her smooth, powerful motor.

Below him, towns slid by and a grin of satisfaction crossed his lips. Then he frowned deeply. How could he save the pilot who was forced to land the plane? It looked bad.

The sun was a flaming ball behind him when Neil picked out the stolen ship. It was flying a thousand feet below him, and he climbed rapidly. He couldn't afford to be spotted now. An aerial battle here would mean either Neil's destruction or the crashing of the cabin job. The pilot was no part of Purple Mask's murderous racket. He deserved to live, and Neil was determined to give him that chance.

He nosed down slightly and cut off his speed. The cabin plane headed straight for the airport, gradually losing altitude. The pilot knew his business, even though a gun directed his every move. He'd

sit down easy, taxi fast toward the underbrush and let the plane crash into it. There would be no great danger for those inside the ship.

Neil came down, too, but only slightly. He watched the cabin ship dip suddenly. Her landing gear hit the runway, she bounded into the air twice and then really settled down. Tiny figures of mechanics and pilots rushed to get out of the way as the ship continued its mad dash off the runway, across the softer dirt of the field and finally vanished in the high underbrush.

Neil nosed down and his hands curled around the firing control of his machine gun. It was dusk, and visibility was only fair. He could see a low-slung sedan parked beneath overhanging branches of trees. Unless the car was actually looked for, no pilot would have noticed it. Neil banked sharply, pointed his ship's props toward the ground and came down in a power dive.

He spotted the cabin plane, one wing battered and prop broken into a dozen pieces. Toledo and his masked leader were climbing out of the plane. They tossed the sacks of money toward two other men who appeared. Then the chunky leader stepped back and raised an object, the identity of which Neil couldn't make out. At that instant Neil closed the firing buttons of his machine gun. The blast of tracers ripped through the brush and smacked into the ground all around the man. He looked up, startled. He raised the object in his hand once more and Neil sprayed lead again. The masked man suddenly spun crazily. His right hand clutched at his left shoulder. He shook a fist at the plane as it climbed for altitude, but he was no fool. He was wounded—not badly, but he knew that this plane would come

down once more and next time a dozen of the bullets might rip through his body.

He began running madly, crashing through the underbrush until he reached the concealed sedan. Toledo was throwing sacks of currency into the back seat. He helped the leader in, shouted orders to the driver and jumped aboard himself. The sedan nosed slowly out of the brush, hit a winding rutted road and roared away.

Neil dived again, circled the crippled plane twice and made sure there were no signs of fire. He saw an ambulance stop and men rush toward the wreckage. Then Neil turned his ship due north and gave her the gun.

For ten minutes he circled about, like a hawk ready to pounce. He picked out the narrow lane running behind the airport, saw the ribbon of concrete into which it led, and then his eyes lighted up. The shiny, low-slung sedan was just turning into the highway.

He went in swift pursuit, flying low. As he roared above the car, he saw flashing orange flames emanating from it. The two masked men were firing, but their target was only a shadow that flashed by overhead.

Neil considered letting go with a blast of tracers, but he gave up the idea. They might set fire to the car and destroy the stolen loot. Furthermore, he wanted both crooks alive. Instead of firing, Neil studied the highway. Little traffic was rolling over it and he saw that the engineers had laid it out in a straight line that covered more than two miles. A few narrow lanes led off it, but the bandit car was tearing along at terrific speed, far too fast to negotiate any kind of turn.

Neil dipped, flew about twenty feet above the road and noticed that it was wide enough for his purposes. He gained altitude at a sharp angle, banked and came back. He could see the headlights of the car more than a mile away. Neil slipped slowly down until his wings barely missed treetops. Then the trees lining the road broke and there were none as far as he could see. He felt the landing gear hit the smooth concrete. There was just enough room to clear the highway fences. His wing tips missed them by inches.

The sedan rolled up a slight incline. The headlights dipped and flooded the road. The driver gave a shout of horror and slammed down on the brakes. The big car veered crazily. Directly ahead of it loomed up an army fighting plane. From its cockpit a machine gun spat tracers that created a brilliant line of luminosity. They whizzed two feet above the sedan. Then the fire lowered a trifle and the windshield vanished. The driver gave a moan and collapsed. The sedan, zigzagging madly, left the road, ripped through a fence and plunged off a two-foot incline. It sent a geyser of dirt upward, turned over twice and then lay on its side with the upraised wheels spinning slowly.

Neil rolled his plane up the road cautiously. Behind him several cars had stopped. Others, approaching, had their brakes squealing. Two men wriggled out of the wrecked car and started to run. Neil fired a burst of tracers above their heads. They stopped abruptly and elevated their hands.

"Come on back," Neil called out gleefully, "and see the sucker you shoved out of your plane."

They came, slowly. The chunky leader's coat was blood-smeared, but he was most careful to keep even his wounded arm high. Those tracer bullets spelled swift, sudden doom and he wanted no part of them. The thug called Toledo was muttering sour curses.

A police car threaded its way through the stalled traffic. Inspector Grey jumped out, gun in hand.

"The moment we got the call from the army airport," he told Neil, "we started things rolling. You've got them, I see."

"Two of them," Neil amended. "But they're rats, and Barney will talk. He'll tell where the others are holed up."

"Barney?" Inspector Grey scruti-

Continued on page 127

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(yes, I did—actually and literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 8, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 8, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.



MURDERS AREN'T NICE

by W. T. BALLARD

*Red Drake dodges bullets and
cops to rescue a snatch victim!*

CHAPTER I. SNATCH CHASE.

I had my picture in the paper, and it wasn't a bad likeness. It made me look a little thin and very tough. I

had to look tough to go with the caption. The caption read: "Wanted For Murder."

It was one of those sheets that calls itself a newspaper but is really a collection of smudged pictures

with long captions. From the caption that was under the picture I learned that I had killed a Los Angeles gambler named Shultz and then taken it on the lam.

I'd purchased the paper just outside the racetrack gate and I read it as I walked up the long gravel driveway toward the main entrance to the stands. I was a little late, and I heard the bugle sound the post for the first race as I mounted the concrete steps.

But I was more interested in finding something in the paper than I was in the race. I went through it carefully and had no luck. The story wasn't there, and I felt easier.

I paused at the top of the steps and looked around. There, in a box to the right, were the men I was looking for. I knew Steve Dixon by sight. He wasn't very big, and his clothes were on the flashy side. He'd made a lot of money, mostly in running handbooks, slot machines and night clubs around town. He was the kind of guy who figured that a nickel chiseled was worth two nickels earned, and a hell of a sight easier to get.

Up until a couple of months ago he had owned a big stable of horses, but the racing commission hadn't liked the way he ran them, so they'd grabbed his owner's license and ruled that none of his horses could run on any racetrack in the State.

Dixon wasn't the kind to take a slap like that lying down. He'd brought all the pressure he could on the politicians, but it hadn't bought him a thing, because as long as Judge Austin was head of the racing commission he kept the sport entirely out of politics.

That was swell until the judge's niece disappeared. The kid was about eight, and the old guy was

going nuts. The cops and G-men were running around in circles, falling all over themselves but not turning up a thing. There hadn't been any ransom notes or anything else. That is, there hadn't been until the night before; then the judge got a phone call on his private wire.

The cops hadn't tapped that wire because they didn't know anything about it. I did, and I'd had it tapped. I heard the man say, "Judge, this is Steve Dixon. No, listen. A man in my line of business hears things. I heard something about your niece this afternoon. Maybe I could help get her back for you."

I could tell by the judge's voice that he was having a hard time holding himself. He said, "If you get her back, I'll pay you anything you ask."

Dixon said, "It's not a question of money, but don't tell the cops I called, or the deal is off. I just don't like snatchers, and I'll help you if I can. If you should want to do me a favor any time that would be O. K. by me."

I knew what favor he meant. He wanted his license back. As long as he had his stable he could make plenty, running his horses hot and cold. It had put a crimp in his bankroll when they grabbed his license.

The judge said: "Go ahead. I'll not call the police about this."

That was the story I'd looked for in the paper. I wanted to see if the news had leaked out. Evidently, it hadn't.

I took a look toward Dixon's box. There were three people in it—Dixon, his bodyguard Lopez and a dark-haired lad that I didn't know. The boy had just come in and was talking fast. I could hear Dixon raise his voice, more than he intended. "You fool! What in the hell are you doing here? Get on

back out there and watch yourself!"

The boy didn't like it. I could tell by the way he acted, but there wasn't much else he could do. He turned around and left the box. I played a hunch and trailed after him.

He wasn't so hard to follow. I was surprised that he wasn't more careful, and I began to think I'd made a mistake. He acted too much like an amateur to be the guy I was looking for, but it seemed the only chance I had.

He got a sedan out of the parking lot and turned westward. My cab dogged him, and my driver knew his stuff. We got out in the west end of the city, high above the river, and finally he turned into a long, dead-end street. It dead-ended at the cliff above the river, and there wasn't any doubt where he was headed, because there was only one house at the end of the street.

I told my driver to pull up alongside the sedan. I had the door unlatched, and I swung across to the running board as we pulled abreast.

The kid gave me one scared look. He'd seen the taxi trailing him, but I guess he figured that as long as he wasn't close to the house, he was safe enough.

I shoved my gun into his side as my cab stopped and backed around. The driver had his orders and I'd paid him plenty, so I didn't worry about that end of it.

The kid was sputtering, "What the hell! What the hell!"

I grunted, reached across and got the gun from his pocket. "O. K., kidnaper. Drive 'er on."

His face got white as a sheet. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Save it!" I snarled at him as I swung open the rear door. Now listen. You've got one chance.

Drive on up to that house like nothing had happened, see? Take me, and tell whoever is there that I'm a friend of yours. Don't do it, and I'll crack your spine with a soft-nosed bullet!"

His hands on the wheel were shaking a little, but he managed to turn the car into the driveway without bumping into any trees and pulled around back. I followed him to the ground. He hesitated for a moment, looking at me.

My hand was in my pocket, on my gun, but it was plenty obvious that it was ready to use. We went up the back steps and he gave a peculiar knock on the door. A short, squat man looked out. When he saw me, he started plenty and tried to reach for his gun, but mine was already in my hand.

"Save it." I prayed that there wasn't anyone else in the house—that is, besides the little girl. If there was I'd pulled a boner right, but there evidently wasn't.

I backed them along the hall and through a door into a front room. The short man was licking his lips nervously, the kid was white as a sheet. I looked at them, snarling. "A fine bunch of kidnapers you turned out to be! Where's the little girl?"

The short man jerked his thumb toward the door on the far side. I backed to it, found it locked. "Where's the key?"

He started to reach for a pocket and I swore at him. "Do that again and I'll blast a canal through your belly! Get over and face that wall. Keep the hands high!"

They both obeyed, and I got the key; then I again backed to the door, fitted the key into the lock, pushed it open and stole one look across my shoulder.

The kid was tied up on the bed. I could see her eyes move above the gag, so I knew she was alive. I told the short man and the boy I had followed, "Come over here. One of you drop your hands and untie this child, but be damned careful how you do it."

They obeyed sullenly. I said, when I saw the gag come off. "Can you walk, kid?"

She was a game little thing. She'd been through a lot, but she wasn't ready to quit. She slid her feet off the bed and tried.

I was paying too much attention to her. I thought I had everything under control. That's where I made my mistake. I never heard Lopez until he moved in through the door behind me and had the gun jammed in between my shoulders.

"Let it slide, punk, and don't turn!"

CHAPTER II.

THE GIRL IN THE CAR.

I obeyed. There wasn't anything else that I could do. Dixon must have come in behind the big body-guard, for I heard his voice: "What the hell goes on?"

Lopez rumbled, "Some guy was freeing the kid. Turn around so we can have a look at your mug, you two-bit heel."

I turned around to face them. Dixon said: "Who the hell is it, a copper? I've never seen him before."

Lopez was staring at me. "If his hair was red I'd say that it was that Los Angeles killer that the cops are scouring the country for." He

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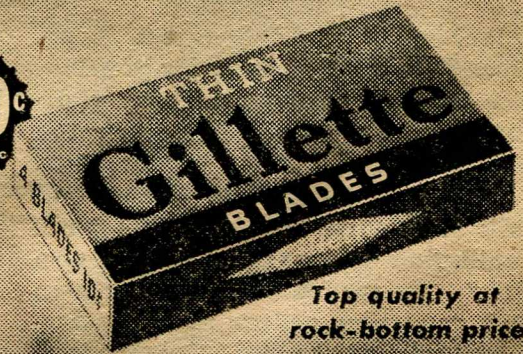
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was watching me, his eyes narrow. What are you doing, punk, muscling in?"

I snarled at him. "You guessed it."

Dixon stepped in and drove his big fist directly against my mouth. I had no warning until I saw it in front of my face. I tried to roll with the blow, partly succeeded, but it caught me off balance and sent me crashing downward to the floor.

The little bookmaker stepped in, his foot starting to swing. I knew that he was going to kick my ribs and that I had no chance to get away, but help came from an unexpected source, for Lopez caught him and dragged him back.

"Wait a minute."

Dixon was swearing at him, but Lopez paid no attention. He snarled to the squat man, "Watch the punk," and hauled Dixon through into the next room. I could hear them arguing, although I couldn't hear what was being said. Then they came back and Dixon was smiling.

"So you're Bill Lund." Lund was the name under the picture of me in the paper.

I let my lip curl. "What's it to you?"

Dixon said, "Maybe we could use a guy like you."

I made my eyes suspicious. "How?"

He said: "As contact man. There's five grand in it for you."

I laughed, sharply. I was stalling, but the stall didn't work too well, because Lopez was nervous. "Come on, let's get out of here and talk somewhere else. If this punk could find the place, someone else can." He turned to the squat man and gave him orders in an undertone. I heard the word "speedboat," saw the squat man nod, stoop and pick up the little girl. The boy I

had trailed went with him and they disappeared toward the rear of the house.

I knew that they were going to climb down the cliff to where a boat must be moored below. We waited perhaps five minutes, then there was a sound from the river and Lopez jerked his gun. "O. K., let's get going." He pushed me toward the front door.

I went with them. There was nothing else I could do. They had a big black convertible and shoved me into the back seat with Dixon. Lopez slid under the wheel, backed the car out into the street and started back toward the intersection with the Boulevard.

We had just reached it and stopped for the corner when a big police car slid up from the direction of town. Its brakes squealed and men were piling out onto the street. Lopez was swearing, but Dixon was perfectly calm.

"Hello, lieutenant. You just showed up in time. We were bringing a man in for you."

I swore, and Dixon cuffed me alongside the head, then shoved me out into the lieutenant's arms. "Meet Bill Lund, the L. A. killer. We just caught him back at that house."

The cops were suspicious. "What's the gag?"

Dixon told him, "We've been working on that Austin kidnaping. If you don't believe it, check with Judge Austin. They had the kid back at that house. Two of them escaped in a boat, but Lund didn't get away soon enough."

The cops were still suspicious and looked toward me, but I was keeping my mouth shut at the moment. They loaded me into the squad car, put a couple of cops to ride with Dixon and Lopez, and we went back and had a look at the

house, then we turned downtown.

I sensed that there was a car following us in the wide Boulevard. Don't ask me how I knew, but I turned my head and saw this light coupé.

The cop at my side didn't appear to notice. We pulled on down, stopped in the alleyway beside the police station. I saw the coupé pull up across it, heard a voice say, not too loud, "You get your hands up!"

The cops who had me between them were so surprised that they obeyed without thought. That was all I needed. I turned and jumped forward. The coupé was already in motion as I made the running board and the motor roared as it was gunned down the street. We took the corner on two wheels, as I wrenched open the door and almost rolled inside.

They didn't even shoot after us. It had all happened so fast that I guess they didn't have time. I'd known from the voice that it was a girl in the coupé, but I didn't get a good look at her until I was inside.

She wasn't looking at me. Her whole attention was held by her driving, and she was making a plenty good job of it. She missed a truck by inches, went around a street car on the wrong side and swung south on Market. I'll give her this: she could drive and she had nerve. What I couldn't understand was why she was pulling a rescue act for me.

I'd recognized her as soon as I'd gotten into the car. She was a dancer out at the Joy Inn, a hot-spot joint which Dixon operated across the road from the racetrack. Her name was Dela Armstrong, and she wasn't hard to look at.

I twisted around to make sure that we were no longer being followed,

then I said, "Thanks for the rescue."

Her head jerked around as she heard my voice and I saw her blue-gray eyes film for an instant with surprise. "Say, who—" She looked back at the street in time to throw the wheel over and miss a big car turning from a side street. "Who the devil are you?"

I told her, "The guy you just rescued."

She started to say something at that, then she clamped her mouth shut as if she were afraid to say the wrong thing. I sat there wondering for a minute what it was all about, then I had a hunch. The guy I had followed from the racetrack, the guy who had taken Judge Austin's niece away in the motorboat, was about my size and build.

I was betting that the girl had rescued me, thinking that she was saving him. I said, "Thanks anyhow."

"For what?" She had slowed the car until we were only doing twenty or twenty-five. Where she got it I don't know, but suddenly there was a gun in her right hand and she had it pressed against my side. She wheeled the car toward the curb, stopping it, and her voice was tight. "Don't try anything or I'll shoot."

I didn't move. I might have grabbed the wheel or the gun. She didn't seem to know a lot about handling it, but there were people across the street and I didn't want to attract their attention.

"What do you think you're going to do now?"

She said: "Take you back to where I got you and turn you over to the cops."

I shook my head. "I don't think that you will."

The gun was still pressed against my side, and she looked plenty grim.

"And what makes you think that?"

I told her, "Because you'd have too much explaining to do. The cops wouldn't quite understand why you grabbed me in the first place, and if you told them that a pal of yours was in on the Austin kidnaping—"

Her mouth whitened around the crimson of her lips. I said, "Look, Dela. Let's you and me find a nice quiet place where we can talk this thing out. You can't just shoot me, and unless you do, that gun is plenty useless, so put it away and drive somewhere where I can get a drink. I need one at the moment."

CHAPTER III.

ON THE LAM—FOR MURDER!

She was a fast-thinking kid and she made up her mind quick. After an instant she put the gun away, put the car into gear and started west.

She was all tied up in a knot and it took her awhile to relax. In fact she didn't relax for nearly half an hour, but the second drink helped.

We were sitting in a little cocktail bar on West Sixty-fourth and I was trying to get her to talk. She was just about ready when an announcement came over the little radio behind the bar which brought both of us to attention.

The bartender had it turned to police calls and we heard:

"Attention all cars! Calling all cars! Watch for Bill Lund. Wanted for murder. Lund is five feet nine, about one hundred and sixty pounds, twenty-nine. This man is dangerous, and escaped from Central police station less than an hour ago in a blue coupé, license number 1-8458. This coupé is registered to Dela Armstrong, a night-club dancer, and it is thought that the girl was driv-

ing at the time of the escape. She is five two or three, blond, about one hundred and five pounds.

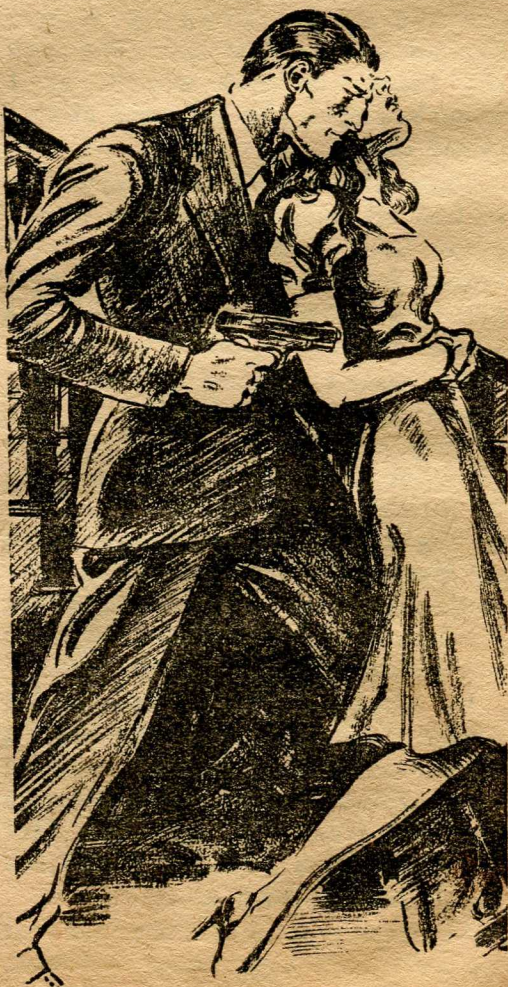
Lund's hair, which is ordinarily red, has either been dyed or he was wearing a wig at the time of his arrest."

The girl had pressed the back of her hand tightly against her lips and was staring at me with widened eyes. "So . . . so you're Bill Lund!"

I snarled at her, "Relax. Here comes the suds salesman."

She tried to, but she didn't make a very good try at it. The bartender came up with full glasses and paused beside the table.

"This guy Lund must be a tough



ape. Every cop in town is looking for him."

I grinned. "Yeah, I'd be out looking for him myself if it wasn't for my wife. She's timid. Aren't you, darling?"

The girl didn't trust herself to speak until the bartender had gone away, then she said, savagely, "I've had enough of this."

I nodded. "O. K., so have I, but I don't know what you're going to do about this. One thing's sure—we can't go back to your car. It's plenty hot, after that broadcast. One of the cops must have had sense enough

left to get your number. Come on. Let's get out of here."

She didn't argue and I led the way. We didn't go near where she had parked the coupé, and I didn't know where to go. It was almost five, but it would be a couple of hours until it got dark and I wanted to be under cover as much as possible till then.

She decided it for me. She still had her gun, had been carrying it in her purse. She opened it now, slid it out and let me see it. "Listen, Bill Lund. You're going up to see

*Lopez swung the girl
in front of him for a
shield!*



a friend of mine. I'm going to decide what to do with you, and I need help."

I still could have taken the gun away from her, but I didn't want any trouble there. I said: "O. K., but listen, toots. I'd rather find the guy that ran out this morning, the one you thought I was."

She started and her eyes darkened. "Forget that."

I told her, "Kidnaping isn't a nice racket, and if this punk means anything to you, you'd better do something about it."

She looked at me sharply. "What are you talking about?"

I told her, "Unless I'm wrong, Dixon and Lopez are getting ready to slip out from under and leave your boy friend holding the sack." She didn't answer, but she was thoughtful as we went along the street.

There was no name on the door, and if I hadn't seen a picture I wouldn't have known the man who swung around when we walked in.

I'd expected to see some friend of Dixon's. This guy wasn't. He and Dixon had been fighting each other for several years, each trying to control the bookmaking in that end of the State.

The guy's name was Sharpe—Al Sharpe—and he's served a couple of stretches for gambling. The last one had ended less than a month before, and while he was the guest of the State, Dixon had moved in and taken over his books.

I stared from him to the girl, not getting the answer, wondering what a dancer who was working in a Dixon club would have to do with Sharpe.

I didn't get the answer. I heard him say with surprise, "Dela, what are you doing? I just heard the

news a little while ago. The cops are looking for you."

She said, "You're telling me! This is Lund!"

He was looking at me, a funny little smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. "So this is Lund." Then the smile went away and the eyes got hard. "What's the idea of bringing him here?"

She said: "He horned in on the game. Someway he found that Dixon has the little Austin girl. I didn't know what else to do with him."

Sharpe was staring at me thoughtfully. "So you horned in on the game, huh? Well, where's the girl?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Ask Dela. She seems to know a lot more about this than I do."

He looked back at the girl. "What the devil did you pick him up for?"

She said, defensively, "I thought it was Pete. I was watching when the cops closed in on the house. I saw them get Dixon, this punk and Lopez. I thought it was Pete."

He pulled thoughtfully at his lip with his thumb and forefinger. "So that's the way it is. Well, we've got to get that kid, and we've got to keep Pete in the clear."

I railed at him, "If that's all you want to do, why don't you go to the cops?"

He looked at me. "You're a funny guy, Lund. A bird that's wanted in forty States and you talk about going to the cops?"

I shrugged. "I'm not talking about going to the cops. I just said that if that was what you wanted, the easiest way to do it was to go to them. I'm chiseling, and I need dough. The quickest way I know to get it is to cut into Dixon's snatch racket, and I'm cutting in."

He mocked me. "You don't seem to be doing a very good job."

I shrugged. "I'm just waiting for dark, mister. I'll cut in all right then, and I'll get my share."

He looked at me oddly. "I believe you will, but if you can get to Dixon you're a wonder. He's up in his penthouse and there's a million cops and G-men strung around. They'll pick you up the first time you show."

I just grunted at that. "Not me, pal, and another thing, I don't know where you cut into this game, but I'm telling you this: Crack wise to the cops about having seen me and I'll come back from hell to even things." I reached out toward the girl suddenly. She hadn't been paying much attention to me, and before she realized what I was after I had her gun.

CHAPTER IV.

DAISY HILL FARMS.

I told Sharpe and the astonished girl, "I'll just take Dela down with me to make sure that you don't yell for a copper the minute that I leave. Come on, Dela."

She surprised me by coming without argument. We rode down in the elevator together, neither speaking although there were a lot of questions I'd have liked to have asked her about Sharpe.

"When we got outside I said. "Nice to have known you, kid. Now scram."

She didn't move. "I'm coming with you."

I stared at her, startled. "Ixnay on that!"

She said, "If you don't let me, I'll

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scream for the police."

I looked at her, and knew that she wasn't lying, that she would. I didn't have time to argue about it. It was already dark and I wanted to get moving. Without a word I turned and walked to the line of cabs on the corner. I chose the third one because the driver was about my size, helped the girl in and told the cabby to take us to the corner of Fifty-ninth and River Road.

When we got there I shoved my gun within an inch of his ear, made him get out, walk over behind a signboard and strip. I tore his shorts and used them to bind him, then stripped and dressed in his uniform. It wasn't a bad fit. I'd picked pretty good. I doubled my own clothes up and carried them back to the cab, touching my cap as I came up.

"Where to, miss?"

She gasped. "Red! I'd never recognize you!"

I told her, "I hope the cops don't, either, and swinging under the wheel, tramped on the starter. The cab motor caught and I turned the hack downtown.

The apartment where Dixon's penthouse rested on the roof was a fourteen-story building with a grilled door, expensive lobby and an all-night clerk.

The girl didn't like it as I parked the cab at the corner and opened the door. "You'll never make it." Her voice sounded strained.

I had doubts myself, but I *had* to make it. I looked around, saw an all-night drugstore across the street, crossed it and went inside. When I came out I was carrying a square package. I went into the apartment house and over to the desk.

The clerk looked up, and he didn't look friendly. "What do you want?"

I told him in an undertone, "I've got a package for Dixon. My orders

are to give it to him personally."

The clerk said, "Not tonight."

I looked around. There was a big man parked on the far side of the lobby, reading a newspaper. I knew he was a cop without being told and I guessed that the police were watching Dixon, just in case his story about not knowing me wasn't correct. I said to the clerk in an undertone, "The dame is in my cab out front. If you don't believe me, take a look, and if you don't want to get into trouble with Dixon you'll let me go up."

He leaned past me to take a look through the wide doorway. I guess he saw the blonde. Anyway he hesitated a moment, then nodded and I moved quickly toward the elevator.

I was taking a chance that he would tell the cop where I was headed, but it was a chance I had to take. The elevator was the kind you work yourself, and I thanked my luck for that.

I knew that stepping into it was like stepping into a trap, and there was sweat on my forehead. The man that tells you that he's never been scared, is either a liar or nuts.

I stepped out on the terrace before the penthouse and saw that there was still lights showing. I crossed and pushed the buzzer. I didn't wait long, and it was Lopez who stuck his ugly mug out. I didn't know whether there were cops inside, and I had to find out before I made my play.

I said: "Package for Mr. Dixon. I'm supposed to give it to him personal."

Lopez stared at me, then at the box. Maybe he thought it was a bomb. I suppose guys in Dixon's spot have to be careful. He put his hand under it, weighed it and found it light. He didn't want to let me

in, but I guess it didn't seem worth while arguing about. Anyway, he led me down a short hall and into a big square room. There was a flat desk in the center. Dixon was at the desk. He had a copy of the racing form spread out and a lot of ruled sheets with plenty of figures on them. I guessed that he was figuring up the play his books had handled that afternoon.

He didn't even look up when we came in, just growled, "Who the hell was it?"

I said: "Me," and took my gun out of my pocket, letting the empty package slide.

Lopez made a lunge for me and I slammed the knuckles of my free hand against his jaw. He folded up like an accordion.

Dixon kicked his chair back and came up, only to stop when he got half unfolded, his eyes bulging slightly as he stared at the gun.

"What the devil do you want?"

I said: "What do you think? I cut myself a slice of this game and I'm around to see that it doesn't go away."

He settled slowly back into his seat. "You've got your nerve."

I told him, "In my business I need it."

"But there's cops downstairs, Lund. You shouldn't have come here. They're watching us already."

I grinned sourly. "They're watching for me, but they haven't found me yet. Now listen, Dixon. I know that you're a rat, that you've welched on every bet you could, but a deal with me is different, and it's one that you aren't going to welch on—"

Lopez interrupted me by getting slowly off the floor. He stood there, rubbing his long jaws and staring at me with hate-filled eyes. I could

read his thoughts and I told him, "Forget it. You aren't going to do a thing. You're going through with the plan we made this afternoon. I'll make contact with the right folks, and I get five grand for doing it, but first I want to see the kid, to make sure that she's all right. Tell me where you've got her hidden and I'll take care of the rest."

Lopez said: "That wouldn't do you any good. The guys we got watching wouldn't let you in."

I grinned at him. "Oh, yes, they would, because you're going with me, you and Dixon both."

The man behind the desk jerked upward. "You fool! We couldn't stir out of this joint without the cops riding our tails. They're all around the place. We can't all go out dressed as taxi drivers."

I said: "Let me take care of that. Is there a rear stairs from this joint?"

Lopez said: "There's a freight elevator."

I told him. "Swell! You get it up here, ready. I pulled a metal wastebasket into the middle of the floor, threw newspapers into it and struck a match.

Dixon swore at me. "What the hell do you think that you're doing?"

I grinned. I still held the gun and I was still the boss. "Fixing it so that the cops will be too busy worrying about the fire to think of you." I applied the match to the paper, caught up a bottle of water from the corner of the desk and sloshed a little of its contents onto the fire. Smoke billowed up. I crossed and opened a window, letting it pour out, then I told Dixon to pick up the phone and yell "Fire!" when the clerk answered. He hesitated, and I moved the gun suggestively.

I'll say this for him. He made it sound real. I could picture the ex-

citement in the lobby, the clerk yelling, the cops all starting toward the elevator. I turned another basket into the fire and the blaze leaped higher, then Lopez was in the door saying that the freight elevator was there, waiting. We didn't waste any more time.

There was a lot of excitement in front of the apartment. I went around and got the cab. No one paid any attention to me. The hook-and-ladder boys were pulling up, and a big cop told me to get the cab out of the way.

I didn't argue. I moved out as quickly as I could. I drive around the block, the girl leaning forward, asking me what the hell had happened, but I didn't stop to tell her.

Dixon and Lopez were waiting in the mouth of the alley. They were as nervous as cats. They jerked the cab door open and started in. Not until then did they realize that the girl was in the rear seat. They stopped.

I snarled, "Come on, you know Dela. You ought to. She worked for you long enough."

The girl was as upset as Dixon and Lopez. As for them, they'd have packed out if they had dared, but there were firemen all around the joint and the best thing they could do was to get away. They piled in and I sent the cab ahead with a jerk.

Not until I was several blocks away from the apartment did I slow and turn my head. "Now where?"

Dixon's face was red with rage. "What's the idea of dragging this dame into this?"

I told him, "Dela and I are in on this play together."

He snarled, "So that's it! So that's where you found out about it in the first place!"

I didn't bother to tell him that

he was wrong. If he wanted to figure it out that way, it was all right with me. "I said, 'You can skip that. Go ahead and tell me where the kid is hidden.'"

He was still muttering to himself. "I don't like it."

Lopez cut in. "It's probably straight. Remember the radio broadcast which said that Lund had broken free. Dela was mentioned in that. Maybe it's better—"

He chopped off his words as if he knew that he had said too much, but I let it pass as if I hadn't heard. It was no part of my plan to put them on their guard.

"Come on! Where to?"

Lopez didn't wait for his chief's agreement. He leaned forward and told me where to go. I was surprised when I heard, so surprised that I had to grip the wheel to keep from betraying myself. He told me to go to the Daisy Hill Farms, and the Daisy Hill Farms belonged to Sharpe. This was getting more mixed up as it went along.

CHAPTER V.

ONE HUNDRED G'S.

I stole a glance at the girl's reflection in the rear-view mirror, but it was too dark in the back of the cab for me to be able to tell whether she was surprised or not. If she was she gave no indication by any sound that she made.

I pretended that I didn't know anything about the country and asked how to get there. Dixon gave me directions. I drove out to the river road and turned north following the winding course of the street. The Daisy Hill Farms were a show place and they had been famous for horses once, before Al Sharpe had lost his money and turned to gam-

bling for a living instead of for pleasure.

The Sharpes had been an important family then, but when Al lost all the dough and went to making book in competition with Dixon, they had lost their place in local society.

I stepped the cab up to sixty-five, which was about all the old motor would do, but my mind was turning faster than the motor, trying to figure out the angles. I was frank. I didn't get them all, and I didn't seem to know much more when I finally turned the hack in between the stone gateposts and went sliding around the curving drive toward the old white house.

There was no light in the lower story, but one burned for an instant in a second-floor window. Then it was killed, as if the watchers had suddenly heard us coming.

I pulled the cab up to the porch, saw Lopez get out, swing across the wide porch. He pressed the bell and I could hear three long rings, then one short one. We waited in silence. Then the door opened and a voice murmured inquiringly in the darkness.

I heard the big man say, "Lopez," and a light came on in the hall.

I'd already slid out of the cab and was waiting for Dixon to get out. He did so, slowly, the girl fol-

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lowing, and we all mounted the steps together. As we stepped into the hall I saw the young fellow I'd followed from the racetrack that afternoon. I saw his eyes change as he spotted Dela Armstrong, then his face was a mask and I decided that I wouldn't care to play poker with him.

The short squat man was standing on the stairs, a gun in his hand. He looked hard at me and I saw him smile as he brought the gun up.

Lopez spoke to him sharply. There was a look of disappointment on his face, but he lowered the gun. Dixon turned to me.

"All right. There's a phone in the other room. Call Judge Austin and make any arrangement you want to about collecting the ransom. Call Morton 9191."

I didn't show that I already knew the number. I went into the other room and called Morton 9191. It was the number to the judge's private line.

I kept my tone even, because I knew both Dixon and Lopez were listening. I said, "Austin, we have the goods and we'll deliver. The price is one hundred G. You get into your car, make sure that you aren't followed and take River Boulevard north to Townsend Road, turn west across the river and keep driving at about thirty. If you aren't followed, we'll make contact."

His voice was staken, but he stayed in character. "How will I know that if I hand over the money you'll deliver?"

I said: "You won't. That's a chance you have to take, but you'd better take it, because if you don't, you won't have another chance to get the goods."

His voice sounded like a taut string. I could imagine what a tremendous strain he was laboring

under. He said: "I'll be there," and broke the connection.

I hung up also, turned around to find both Dixon and Lopez watching me. I grinned at them as I came to my feet. "O. K., punks, that is that. Now, if you'll give me the little girl, I'll go for a ride."

Dixon said: "How are you going to work it?"

I said: "Simple. No one will think of looking in a taxicab. I'll put the kid on the floor in back, chase down Austin's car, get the dough, give him the kid, then cut directly down toward the river at the old stone-bridge crossing. You have a boat waiting for me. I'll run the cab into the river and it will take the cops at least twenty-four hours to find it. We'll slide down-river with the boat's motor dead and land anywhere you say."

There was a hint of admiration in Lopez's eyes. "You think of everything, don't you, Lund?"

I nodded. "That way you can be sure that I don't run out with all the dough. I'm in a crack. I've got to meet that boat and ditch that cab. If I don't, I'll be stopped before I can get out of the valley at the other end. Of course, if you think I'm going to try and run out, you can send Lopez with me."

They exchanged glances. I knew if they were on the level with this snatch they would send someone, but I also was sure that they weren't. They'd grabbed that kid for one purpose and one only, to turn it back to the judge and put him under such obligation to Dixon that he would have to let the bookmaker get back his license to race horses. They needed a fall guy, and I was a perfect one.

Dixon said, hurriedly, "That won't be necessary. We'll trust you. I'm

that kind of a trusting guy."

That was a laugh. I knew that he wouldn't trust his own grandmother, but I didn't show it in my face. I said, "Come on then, let's get moving. Bring down the kid, then take the speedboat and head upriver. Don't forget to be there, because my getaway depends on that."

Lopez nodded to the flat-faced man. "Bring that kid down."

The mug didn't like it. I guess he thought that the kidnaping was on the level. He started to object. So did the young fellow named Pete, but the girl cut in.

"Hurry up, bring her down."

Lopez started up the stairs and after a moment the flat-faced one went with him. Pete followed, then the girl, and finally me.

Dixon watched until I was halfway upstairs, then he went back into the room from which I had phoned and closed the door. I glanced sharply at the others. They were already in the upper hall, not paying any attention to me. I turned and ran lightly down the stairs, moved soundlessly to the door, pressed my ear against it and listened.

Dixon was speaking in a guarded tone. "Listen, Austin—Dixon. Just got word through my underworld connections that Bill Lund, the L. A. murderer, is the man who kidnaped your niece. I tried to tell the cops that this afternoon. Now listen, Lund is going to make contact with you, deliver your niece and get the money, is that right? Well, from there he's headed for Old Stone Bridge where he thinks he's to be met with a speedboat. You have a police boat there instead. He'll never know the difference until it's too late for him to do anything—"

I faded away from the door, having heard enough, and raced back

up the stairs. I arrived at the top just as the crowd came out of the end bedroom. Dela had the little girl in her arms and was speaking to her soothingly. I went forward and extended my hands.

She gave me a look that I won't forget for a long time. For a moment I thought she was going to refuse to pass her over, then she did, and without a word moved toward the stairs.

In the lower hall, Dixon came out of the room to join us, and I grinned at him. "The next time I see you we'll have a hundred grand." I turned toward the door, but the girl stopped me.

She had a gun in her hand. I don't know where she got it, but I guessed that it came from the young fellow called Pete.

Dixon, Lopez, and Flatface were staring at him, their hands coming up slowly. She said to Pete. "Get their guns. You, Lund, stand perfectly still. Don't move!"

Pete started to obey her, but he didn't know his business very well. He got too close and Flatface chopped down on him with one hand. Pete was between Flatface and the girl and she couldn't shoot. Pete was trying to hold Flatface, but he didn't have any luck. The girl moved in to help and she shouldn't have done that, because Lopez jumped at her from the side.

I couldn't do anything. The kid was in my arms and I had no chance to reach for a gun. I started to back out of the door. If I could get outside the child would be fairly safe, but I didn't make it, because Dixon had a gun in his hand and was covering me.

He didn't know what was going on and he didn't want anyone moving around until he found out. I didn't know, either. I was cursing under

my breath. I'd been so close to success and now—

If it had just been me I'd have ducked out of the door anyway and taken a chance that he would miss, but with the kid in my arms I couldn't do it.

I came away from the door, turned toward the corner of the hall and put her down so that her little body was partly sheltered by a heavy stand, then I walked four steps sideways and turned.

"What the hell is the idea?"

Lopez held the struggling girl. Flatface had Pete on the floor and was pounding his head against the hard surface. I stood there, biting my lip. There were cops on the highway. A shot would bring them. I had to force that shot. I measured the distance between myself and Dixon, then I said. "Hey, you'd better stop Flatface before he kills that boy."

It worked. Dixon threw a glance toward them and in that instant I sprang. I didn't try and jerk my gun. I knew that there was no time for that. I jumped for him, knowing that he was going to swing about and shoot. That's just what he did, but I was crouched low. His first bullet tore through the back of my coat, almost ripping it in half. His next one missed me entirely. He never had a chance to throw a third one because my shoulder struck him directly in the belly and we went down together.

The fall knocked the wind out of him and the gun spun from his grasp. I dived for it, came up with it, but I was stopped, for Lopez had swung the girl in front of him for a shield and his heavy automatic sent a bullet crashing through my shoulder.

I thought I was done. I couldn't

shoot because of the girl, and then a voice from the rear door of the hall said, tightly, "Drop that gun!"

I thought it was the cops, then I saw it was Al Sharpe. He came forward slowly, backing Lopez and Flatface against the wall. Pete climbed to his feet and got their guns. His face was pretty battered, but he seemed to be able to move O. K.

I had to sit down. The hole in my shoulder made me dizzy. Sharpe was saying: "I saw cops out on the road. They should be here any minute."

The girl came over to me. She said in an undertone: "Listen Bill Lund, come out into the kitchen. I'll pretend that I'm fixing your shoulder, but you can slip out the back door. There's a speedboat at the foot of the cliffs."

I looked at her and managed a grin. "Don't forget I'm a killer."

Her face got a funny look. "I don't give a damn who you are. You jumped Dixon in there, and that's worth a chance."

I shook my head. "Thanks, kid, but the cops are the people I want to see. My name isn't Lund. It's Drake, Red Drake, and I'm an undercover officer for the State Racing Commission."

She was staring at me. "Then what—"

I said: "We got a tip that Dixon had Judge Austin's niece. It didn't seem like a straight kidnaping. We thought he was going to pretend that he was helping get the child back. In order to do that, he needed a fall guy. What better fall guy than a wanted killer? So we had the newspapers run that picture and publicity on me, then I hung around waiting to make contact with Dixon."

"I had cops trail me to that house that afternoon, but they got there too late. Flatface and Pete had already gone with the kid, so I had to

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make them bring me out here tonight. If I'd gotten out to the road with the kid, everything would have been O. K., but you butted in."

She said: "I'm sorry," and looked as if she really meant it. "I was just trying to help."

I shook my head. "I don't get it. Why were you trying to help? Who are you, anyhow?"

She told me. "My name is Sharpe. Al is my oldest brother, Pete is next. When Al lost all our money he tried to get it back gambling, but Dixon didn't want him in the way, so he had him pinched and framed him for prison. Pete and I changed our names and got jobs with Dixon, me as a dancer, Pete running one of his handbooks. Last week Pete came to me and told me that Dixon had offered him a lot of dough to help in a snatch. We talked it over and he agreed to help, the idea being that in that way we could help break it up. Kidnaping is a lousy racket. Pete helped them, and I tipped off Judge Austin."

I stared at her. The tip I'd been working on had come from her. I said: "There's one thing more I can't understand. Why did you rescue me from jail this afternoon?"

She said: "I'd been watching the house. I saw the cops come. I thought it was Pete they had caught and I knew that we would never have been able to convince them that he wasn't really part of the mob. It was a crazy thing to do, but I had to do something." She was silent as we heard the cops run up onto the porch, then she said:

"I'm glad that you aren't a murderer."

I looked at her, forgetting my shoulder. "Why?"

She wouldn't meet my eyes as she said, "Because, murders aren't nice, either." It didn't seem to make sense, but when I saw her eyes, it did.

DEATH ON SILVERY WINGS

Continued from page 107

nized the masked man carefully. "Is that—Barney Barr?"

"It is," Neil said with a grin. "I guessed it the day I came into your office as he went out. I smelled gasoline, remember? Maybe I'm sensitive to that odor, but it was there. Barney was the killer who hopped out of Hugh Gillian's plane and set it afire. He broke the gas line and shot a flare into the fuel. But some of the gas got on his clothes."

Inspector Grey ripped the mask off the squat leader. Barney Barr grimaced at him. Toledo proved to be a scar-faced, evil-looking thug.

"I wonder," Grey turned to Neil, "if they had anything to do with another plane crash yesterday. At the Fairlawn Airport—about a hundred miles from here, a ship landed, raced across the field and ripped a hole through the brush at the far end of it. That plane burned up, too—so did its pilot."

"His name," Neil said grimly, "was Leroy Prince. His ship, with Toledo and Barney aboard, tried to gun me out of the air yesterday. I figured they'd land and crash at the airport where I work, but they must have been afraid to repeat the act so soon. It threw me off a bit, but I had a hunch Barney was behind it all. He either allowed himself to be picked up, or came voluntarily, to see you as quickly as he could after the crash. In that way he established an alibi for himself."

"An alibi for what?" Inspector Grey asked.

"Barney stole Gillian's plane to make a getaway. You see, Barney and his mob would do a stick-up job, take the plane and fly east. Before the news of the job was flashed around, he'd have the loot secreted or even disposed of before it got really hot. He stuck up a bank in Gillian's town. You'll find loot in

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that wrecked car as evidence of another hold-up he pulled this morning."

Grey nodded. "And Leroy Prince came from Brookville—another job was staged there yesterday."

"And I'm betting Barney came to see you right after he reached town. He always worked that way—established a seemingly unbreakable alibi whenever he committed a crime. In these last three cases, he forced the pilot-owners of the planes, and their mechanics, to fly him. He killed the pilot and made it look like an accident."

"And the mechanics?" Grey queried.

"Those men were killed differently. You'll hardly be able to pin the murders on Barney's shoulders because there is no corpus delicti. Barney would pretend to give the mechanic a chance to jump with a chute. But tied to the mechanic's back was enough explosive to blow him into little pieces and scatter his remains over a lot of territory. That's what happened yesterday—when I saw a man dropping from the clouds in a chute. One minute he was there, the next he wasn't. The roar of my motor prevented me from hearing the explosion. And I'm sure of those facts, inspector, because Barney tried the same trick with me. He tied my hands behind my back and made me jump. I wasn't supposed to know the explosive was

hanging from the harness around my shoulders. But I did."

"Then if your hands were tied," Grey asked, "how did you ever get yourself free?"

"I made a break for it—in the plane," Neil explained. "I hid in the baggage compartment for a couple of minutes and I found a can of oil there. I raised my hands high, poured plenty of the oil down my sleeves and then let Barney tie me. He didn't notice that the oil seeped down around my wrists and the adhesive he used to bind me with didn't stick. I pulled myself free, got rid of the explosive and made a nice two-legged landing."

"Really excellent!" Inspector Grey nodded in high satisfaction. "We might have suspected Barney of those jobs but, as you say, he framed some neat alibis for himself. Now, Morrison, you can ride back with us—"

"I can't do that," Neil answered happily. "This plane is blocking the highway and besides I only borrowed it. Uncle Sam might get sore if I didn't return this job. Just have all those cars turn around and clear the road."

Fifteen minutes later the army plane rolled at a dizzy speed along the concrete highway. Neil nosed her up, cleared the treetops and then dipped twice in a salute to Inspector Grey.

Coming in the next issue: "The Rolling Heads," complete novel, by Mark Harper—"Crime in Crystal," featuring Norgil the Magician—"Terror Below," another Carrie Cashin novelette—"Medal for Murder," with the Death Angel—and others—all good—all complete in the March issue of Street & Smith's

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BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Continued from page 6

drive his son, Mac, twelve years old, to a school at the upper end of Manhattan—a distance of fifteen miles through city traffic—and be there at nine o'clock or before. Every evening he brings him back again.

There go all our dreams of the easy life an author leads. And also misgivings, for the youngster who graces our own homestead has five more years to go (that is, we suppose children start going to school at six or thereabouts) before we, perhaps, will have to get up early enough to take him to school. Or else move next door to P. S. No. 152. The only consolation we can see in that is that by that time, the baby probably will not be calling for his morning bottle at seven o'clock, a. m.!

Next issue will have another Norgil story, by Maxwell Grant, the creator of The Shadow. "Crime in the Crystal" is the title, and in it you'll find some explanation of the various methods used by "mind readers," and other performers of such stunts. There will also be a Carrie Cashin story, another Doc Trouble yarn by Blackmon, and, of course, additional stories.

"You Can't Figure Women," by Ned O'Doherty, in this issue, is a darn good customs yarn. We all admit it's pretty hard to figure women; it's pretty hard to figure crime, too. When the two of them come to-

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gether, you can understand what a puzzle they present. Cy English, one of Uncle Sam's boys to check up on people coming in from other shores, meets up with that situation, and it gives him plenty to do. We've told you before that the author is himself a customs inspector, so he knows what he writes about.

Carrie Cashin, always ready for trouble when it sticks up its head, gets her share in "Double Trouble," the novelette which stars her in this issue. Carrie and Aleck practically see double, for as they live and breathe, there before them stand another Carrie and Aleck, practically fool-proof imitations. But you can't fool with Carrie when she gets worked up, and through the pages of this story, you'll find there's plenty of fight and excitement.

Some years ago, police departments in the larger cities rushed to add an air force to their staffs. Acquiring some secondhand plane, they painted police identification on the wings and started "traffic" control over their communities. Most of them found that the action was rather foolish. One plane couldn't do anything against plane traffic violations; and you can't tell a pilot to pull over to the curb. So many of them dropped the idea altogether, and left the patrol of the air lines to the proper authority. Whatever violation affected the city could be plainly seen from the ground, anyway, so there was no sense in it.

Later, however, the use of planes for traffic control and other purposes became necessary, and the cities went into the air-policing business with cooler heads. Now, quite a few cities have one or two planes which they use for various purposes, and with great success. "Death on Silvery Wings" is a story of this branch of the police.

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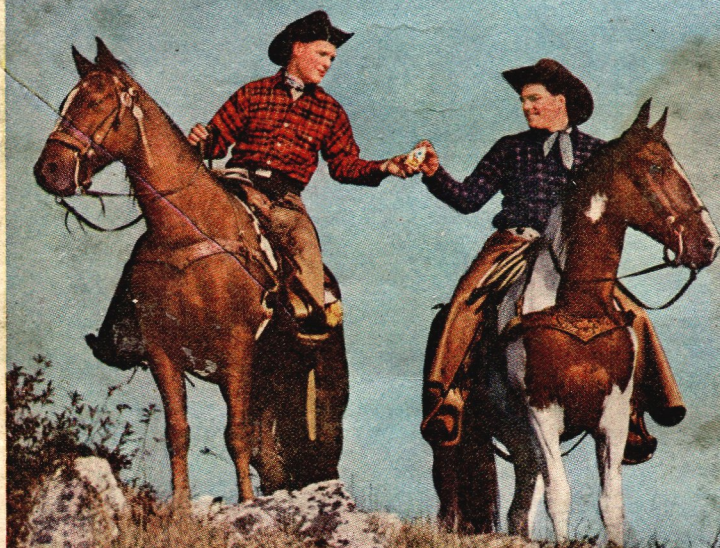
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**5 EXTRA SMOKES
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