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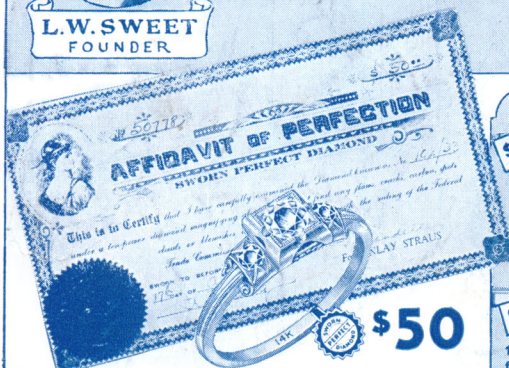
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WHAT I'LL DO—

I'll open a 10-month charge account for you and send your selection for approval and 10-day free trial. If it isn't all I say about it and more—send it back and your dollar will be refunded immediately. If satisfied, you pay balance in 10 small monthly payments—simply your loose change.

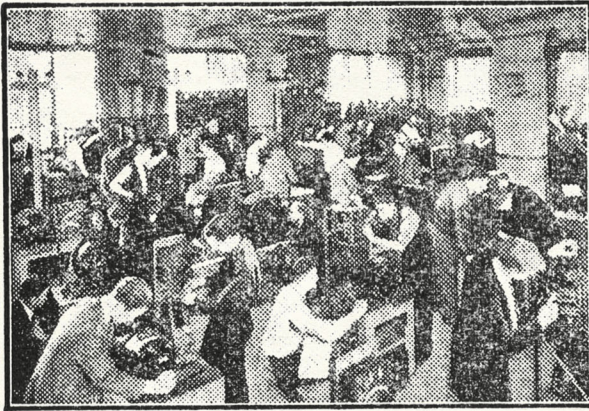


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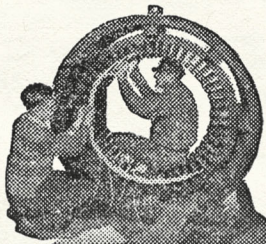
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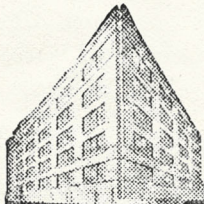
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POPULAR DETECTIVE

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**J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 5J09
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

**J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 5J09
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me send your book which points out the spare time and full time job opportunities, in Radio and your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts.
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"Smiling, the boss handed me a letter. It was from LaSalle to him, announcing my enrollment and my good work on the first lesson. 'We are keeping you,' he said, 'because we like your spirit.'



"Naturally, I had more work to do, with the smaller force, but my training made it easier. I learned quickly, and when the Department Manager left, the boss moved me up.



"I have since been promoted twice, and now carry the title of Chief Accountant—at a salary several times greater. The future looks bright. If it had not been for LaSalle, I would be looking for a job right now."

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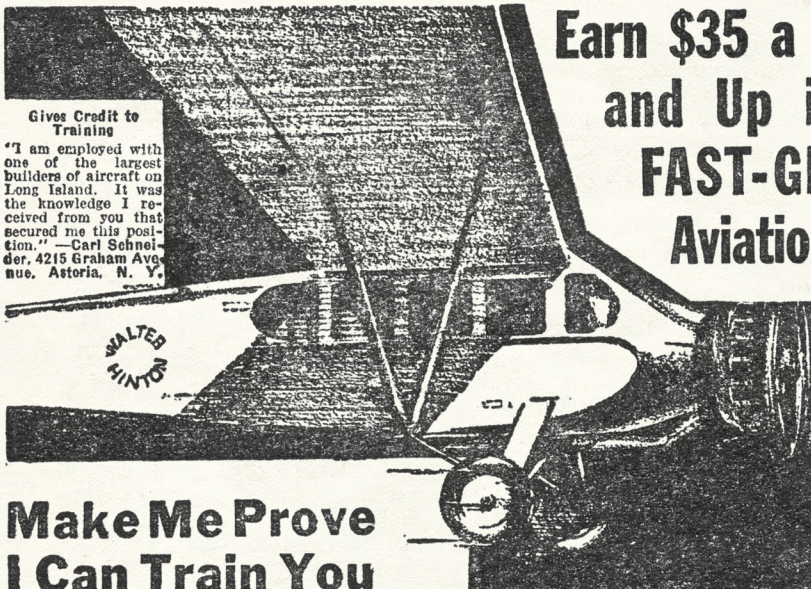
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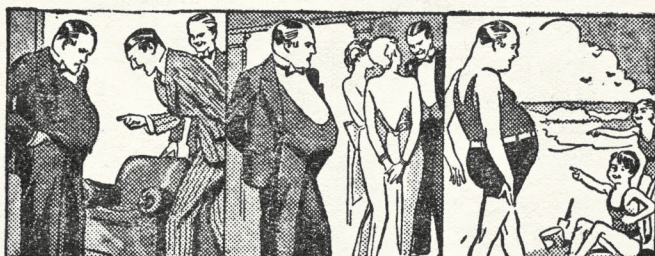
IT IS THE MESSAGE-LIKE ACTION THAT DOES IT!

■ Now there is an easy way to reduce without exercise, diet or drugs. The Weil Health Belt exerts a massage-like action that removes fat with every move you make.

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NO DRUGS, NO DIETS, NO EXERCISES

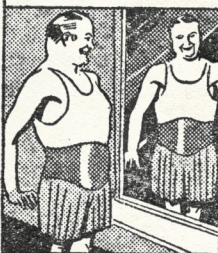
■ For 12 years the Weil Belt has been accepted as ideal for reducing by men in all walks of life...from business men and office workers who find that it removes cumbersome fat with every movement...to active outdoor men who like the feeling of protection it gives.



"I suddenly realized that I had become a fat man". The boys kidded me about my big "paunch".

At parties I learned that I had become a "wall flower". Nobody wanted to dance with me.

In a bathing suit...I was immense. The day I heard some children laugh at me I decided to get a Weil Belt.



What a change! I looked 3 inches slimmer at once and soon I had actually taken EIGHT INCHES off my waist...and 20 pounds off my weight!

It seemed to support the abdominal walls and keep the digestive organs in place...and best of all, I became acceptable for insurance!

I have a new feeling of energy and pep...work better, eat better, play better...I didn't realize how much I was missing!



DON'T WAIT... FAT IS DANGEROUS!

Fat is not only unbecoming, but it also endangers your health. Insurance companies know the danger of fat accumulations. The best medical authorities warn against obesity, so don't wait any longer.

■ Remember this...either you take off 3 inches of fat in 10 days or it won't cost one penny! Even the postage you pay to return the package will be refunded!

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CHAPTER I

After Five Years

THE first words Peter Gardiner heard as he stepped over the threshold into the musty hallway of the old mansion he had once called home were the words of death:

"I'll kill Philip Gardiner with my own hands, I tell you, before I'll let him have my girl!"

Peter knew that voice, though it was a voice he had rarely heard raised in anger. Fred Ellis was one of the kindest and best-beloved of Eastfield's old-timers. He wondered what his scapegrace brother had done to thus arouse good-natured "Old Man" Ellis. Something about a girl—but surely Ellis wasn't talking about that skinny-legged, pigtailed daughter of his. She was only a child.

Peter smiled grimly. He mustn't forget that five years was a long time. Even skinny-legged female brats change a lot in five years.

Martha, the old maid-servant who had admitted him, was hovering at his elbow, staring in wonder at the bronzed, square-shouldered young



He Came Too Late to

man whose grey eyes looked out so confidently, so commandingly, on the house of his childhood.

"Why, Master Peter!" she whispered. "You—you've grown up! I'd never have known you!"

"How's Aunt Belle, Martha?" he asked softly.

Again the servant shook her head. "She's bad, Master Peter. Very

Follow Peter Gardiner, of the Mounted, as

MURDER



*"Get back, buddy if
you do' wanna get
plugged!" growled
a thick voice*

Prevent Crime—but Not Too Late to Avenge It!

bad. The doctor's with her now. I'll tell her you're here."

Peter pushed the portieres aside and entered the "front parlor."

Three men and a girl turned as the rattle of brass rings announced his entrance. Nearest to the door was Fred Ellis, red-faced now with anger, even the bald crown of his head shining ruddily within its ring of grey

hair. But the anger faded swiftly from his face and eyes, to be replaced by a genial smile of welcome. He thrust out a spadelike hand.

"Pete Gardiner, by all that's holy! Pete, I'm glad to see you!"

Gardiner shook that hand heartily, turned next to the sparse precision of Lawyer Adams, his aunt's "man of affairs," whose rock-ribbed New

He Tracks Down a Fiendish, Elusive Killer!

England conservatism had endeared him to the circumspect spinster for twenty years.

His leonine mop of grey, his rusty black suit, his cold, calm voice were all just the same—the years had made little change in Randolph Adams.

"What brings you here, Peter Gardiner?" the lawyer was asking. His tone was neither friendly nor hostile.

"Just homesickness, I guess," said Peter, making no mention of the letter from his brother, calling for help, which had brought him. "Where's Phil?"

"Out at the river house, I imagine. He has been living there lately," the lawyer answered. "You know Miss Ellis, I think—"

PETER gazed at soft golden hair, great brown eyes wide-spaced in a face that was saved from too much gravity by a tip-tilted nose, a generous mouth, a firm little chin—a trimly tailored figure which supported itself on two ridiculously small feet.

This was what Elaine Ellis had become in those five years!

"I'm so glad to see you, Peter! It's been a long time," she was saying in her husky voice. And Peter Gardiner was holding her hand and staring like a fool—till the blond, petulant-mouthed young man who sulked by the crackling fire stirred uneasily, and came forward to place his left hand in proprietary fashion on Elaine's shoulder.

"By George, old Pete Gardiner!" Ray Barlow said loudly and too heartily. "Haven't seen you since we played hockey on the high school team!"

Peter greeted his former schoolmate with more politeness than pleasure.

"I hope, now you're here, you'll take that brother of yours in hand, Peter," Fred Ellis rumbled. "He has been running with the toughest crowd in town, hanging around

Sarko's night club, boozing and God knows what else. I didn't say anything when he was keeping my secretary up till three every morning and sending her to work half dead for sleep; but when he started after my daughter, I drew the line. He says he wants to marry her. I won't have it. I'll see him in hell first, and I mean—just—exactly—that."

The old man's eyes were blazing. There could be no doubt of his utter sincerity.

"I'll see what Phil has to say, Mr. Ellis," Peter observed noncommittally.

"If I don't see him first," growled Ellis, plainly unsatisfied.

"Or if I don't get my hands on him," snapped Barlow. "I'll knock his head off!"

"You all make me sick!" flamed Elaine. "Suppose Phil does drink a little? Suppose he does run with a tough crowd? Boys have done those things before and turned out all right. Come on, Father. Let's go home. Good evening, Mr. Adams. Peter, you will come and see me, won't you?"

"I will indeed," promised Peter, his eyes on that flushed and lovely face.

She was urging her father toward the door. He went, grumbling, half-apologizing for his outburst: his exit marked by the solemn tolling of the hall clock, which just then struck seven.

Ray Barlow went with them.

"Whew!" breathed Adams. "I was afraid your aunt might hear that. She's promised to cut Philip out of her will if he brings one other breath of scandal on the family, and she means to do it— Oh, I beg your pardon, Peter."

Peter's cheeks were rather red.

His aunt, to whom had fallen the full control of the Gardiner family fortune, had cut Peter out of her will five years before, because he declined to stay at home and study for a "respectable profession," but in-

stead betrayed symptoms of the wandering foot.

His adventurous and pugnacious character had antagonized the old lady ever since he, with his brother, had been left to her charge at the death of his parents in his babyhood.

Philip, always her favorite, had stayed at home. Peter, the independent, had launched out for himself—and found a place in the world which suited him very well indeed. Sergeant Peter Gardiner, of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, was a very different man from the Peter Gardiner who had left Eastfield with a defiant word and high-held head five years ago.

Just then the servant, Martha, came in. She did not meet Peter's eyes as she delivered her message:

"Miss Belle says she doesn't want to see you, Master Peter. She says—she tells me to say—that if she wasn't a sick woman you wouldn't dare—set foot—"

Suddenly the faithful old soul burst into tears and ran out of the room.

"Well, I'm off anyway," Peter shrugged. "Got to look up Phil. He isn't in any serious trouble, is he, Mr. Adams?" he added, halfway to the door.

The lawyer shook his head.

"Not that I know of," he answered cautiously. "There are rumors—but then, there are always rumors. He's set to lose a cool half-million if he doesn't mend his ways, and that's serious enough trouble for anyone, I should say. Your aunt, you know, has made him her sole heir."

"I see," said Peter, as they came out of the house. "I'll go down to the U-Drive-It and get a car to go out to see him."

The lawyer got into his black sedan and drove off. Peter Gardiner, almost as smart in his new grey tweeds and dark overcoat as in the scarlet and blue of his famous corps, gave one glance at the Gardiner

mansion, looming dark and silent in the night, shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

Half an hour later Peter Gardiner, in his hired roadster, flashed past the filling station on the outskirts of the city and heard the concrete of the North Road zipping beneath his tires.

The river lay on the left. Beyond it, parallel with the road he was traveling, lay the River Road, reached by bridges from the city; there was another bridge half a mile beyond the house, or rather cabin, to which he was going. Also, to his right, was a third road called the Old Turnpike, which joined the North Road just on the city side of the cabin. There were therefore three routes by which the cabin could be reached from the city of Eastfield.

THE headlights of his car were not very good; they barely served to show him a sharp curve, which he took on screaming wheels. Ahead, he saw a red light—bobbing—why, it was a car going off the road! He heard a crash, the jingle of broken glass, even through the roar of his motor, and now a black bulk showed up in the road—another car, with no tail light, a car which had unquestionably forced the lighter car into the ditch.

He kicked his brake hard; the hired roadster slid to a tire-howling stop, and Gardiner was out and running across the road. He was unarmed, save for a pair of pliers found in the side-pocket, but the sound of a woman's high-pitched scream spurred him on.

The car in the ditch was a roadster much like the one he was driving. A heavy black sedan had pocketed it, driven it off the road. He could see two figures, struggling; now the heavier figure detached itself as his hammering footsteps gave warning.

The side-lights of the ditched car glinted on metal.

"Get back, buddy, if you do' wanna get plugged!" growled a very thick voice.

For answer Gardiner hurled the pliers with such accuracy that a howl of surprised agony rose from that rough voice. The man staggered back, dropping his gun as his hands flew involuntarily to his bruised face.

Gardiner pounced on the gun where it glittered in the faint light, but the man was already in his big car.

Gears clashed, the car backed in a short curve, then roared ahead, turning back toward the city and gaining speed with every yard.

As it flashed past Gardiner he caught a glimpse of a swarthy, hard-jawed profile bent over the wheel, a profile that seemed for a moment to touch a chord of memory in his disciplined mind.

A girl was picking herself up from the ground where she had fallen or been hurled. The side-light shone on the face of Elaine Ellis.

"It's all right, Elaine," said Gardiner quickly. "I'm Pete Gardiner. What happened?"

"**H**E forced me off the road and tried to drag me into the car. That's all I know," she answered in a voice which masked a struggle for composure.

"Do you know who he was?" Gardiner asked.

"No. It was so dark—I didn't get a good look at him. Oh, Pete, I was never so glad to see anybody as I was to see you a minute ago! I was terribly frightened—"

"Steady," advised Peter, patting her arm. "All over now. Say—we're only a mile from Phil's cabin; maybe we can phone the cops and have that bird headed off. Hop in here with me. We'll 'tend to your car later."

His car was in motion before the girl had settled on the seat beside him.

"You on your way to see Phil?" he asked as the speedometer revolved past forty-five.

"Yes," admitted Elaine. "I wanted to tell him to be careful. I've never seen Dad so upset before; I was really afraid of what he might do. I suppose it's silly, but—well, I thought I'd better have a talk with Phil."

They flashed by the junction of the Old Turnpike.

"Cabin's right ahead," Peter thought.

HE knew the place—a small house built in rustic style—one huge living room, with an attached kitchen and scullery; a place where Gardiners of a past generation had been wont to spend summer week-ends.

He slowed, swinging the car into a gravel drive; the faint glow of the headlight swung across the dark face of the cabin.

"Doesn't seem to be anybody home," Peter remarked, bringing the car to a stop in front of the door.

Together they strode across the wide porch and Peter flung open the door.

"Hey, Phil!" he shouted into the warm darkness of the interior.

There was no reply. Silence. Then there was a sudden clatter at the far side of the great room; a window shrieked in its guides, there was a scuffling noise—

Peter dashed across the cabin, reached the open window, stuck out his head just in time to see somebody scrambling into a small coupe that was standing behind the house.

The lights in the cabin snapped on as Elaine found the switch; they glinted on red hair, on the swirl of a skirt as the door of the coupe slammed, the starter whined. The car was gone before Peter got a leg through the window.

"A girl," said he, swinging back into the room. "I didn't see her face. Holy cow! What's been going on here?"

The great room was a wreck.

CHAPTER II

Dripping—Dripping!

PETER stared in astonishment and growing apprehension at overturned furniture, a smashed chair, a mess of broken crockery and spilled food, at the fragments of bottles and glasses—and at two dark stains, one on the floor, the other on the wall near the window. Bloodstains!

He dashed into the kitchen; no sign of Phil. Nor in the storeroom, the only other room the cabin owned. In a shed which served as a garage was a somewhat battered roadster. But no Phil. The car Elaine identified as Phil's property.

"There's certainly been a nice little scrap here," Peter remarked, coming with the girl back into the cabin's main room.

His trained eyes were busy now; they settled on a golden glitter. He stooped, picked up a fraternity pin.

"This Phil's?" he asked.

Elaine shook her head; her eyes were a trifle wider.

"No," she denied sharply. "He don't belong—" Her voice trailed off into firm-lipped silence. Then, "It's Ray Barlow's," Elaine told him, having made up her mind, apparently, that the truth would be best.

"I see," Peter muttered. "Barlow wasn't kidding when he said he was going to take a poke at Phil. But where's Phil now? And who was that woman who scrambled out of here when we arrived? What kind of a car has Barlow got? Small coupe?"

"No. One of those convertible sedans with a khaki top."

"Then it wasn't Barlow's car. Good Lord, I'm forgetting we were going to phone the cops about that bird who tried to snatch you! He may be in the clear by now."

Peter stepped to the telephone on the wall and put through a call to Eastfield Police Headquarters, and reported the attempted kidnaping. The desk sergeant promised to "take steps" at once.

Peter went into the kitchen, Elaine following. There was a tin wash basin on a shelf, half-full of bloody water. A roll of gauze bandage lay beside it, one ripped end hanging loose, also a bottle of antiseptic. Peter removed the cork; it was still damp. A wet, bloodstained towel lay crumpled on the floor.

"Phil washed up after the fight, Elaine. Bandaged himself. That probably means he didn't leave with Barlow."

"Could he have left with the girl you saw?"

Peter shook his head.

"The way she dived across the seat of that car and started it up, no one else could have been in it. She might have picked him up some place down the road, though. Can't tell. I'm beginning to feel a little funny about all this, Elaine. I'd like to find Phil. Just to be sure he's—all right."

Elaine's brown eyes grew wider still.

A search of the garage yielded nothing, except the fact that the motor of Phil's car was stone-cold. Peter came back toward the house, flicking the ray of his flashlight over the ground. Again his eyes caught the glint of metal, on the driveway in front of the house.

He stopped; his hand closed on something small, heavy—a cartridge for a .45 automatic, unfired.

Elaine stood on the porch watching him.

"Know anybody who owns a forty-five Colt automatic, Elaine?" he asked.

"Why, yes. Father does. Oh!" She stopped short, her hand at her throat.

"Peter—you don't suppose—" The words seemed to choke her. "You don't suppose father's been—here?"

She was staring now at the grim,

fat-bulleted cartridge in Peter's palm under the flashlight's ray.

"I don't know," said Peter slowly. "Best thing we can do is to go inside and wait a little while. Phil may show up any minute."

"I'd rather wait outside, on the porch here." Elaine sat down on the step.

"Did Phil have a gun, Elaine?"

"No. He was always afraid of firearms."

"Did he have any—enemies that you know of?"

There was a long pause before the girl answered:

"He was in trouble of some sort. Money trouble. I think that he'd been borrowing from some of his shady acquaintances against what he hopes to inherit from Miss Belle, and that they were pressing him for repayment. I do know that he has tried to get Mr. Adams to advance him money and was very angry when Mr. Adams refused."

Peter's face grew even graver.

"I wish to Heaven he'd show up," he muttered. "Elaine, I'm beginning to think that the man who tried to snatch you may have wanted to use you to bring pressure to bear on Phil. It's pretty well known—it would be, in this town—that you and Phil have been going together?"

"Yes."

"Did Phil ask you to marry him?"

"Many times."

"Did he tell anyone—"

"He told everyone!" the girl interrupted sharply. "He has the whole town thinking that we're engaged, that our marriage is a matter of days. And he has no right—it's just his supreme self-confidence."

"That simplifies matters. For a guess, the man who was after you wanted to have the whiphand over Phil; wanted to force Phil to go to Aunt Belle and ask for money to pay off—either a straight snatch for ransom, or these debts he's incurred."

The wail of a siren sounded on the North Road. The lights of a car

appeared suddenly on the road perhaps a quarter of a mile south of the cabin. *That* car, Peter realized, must have come out of the Old Turnpike. It was coming fast, too. The lights of the police car hadn't showed yet around the distant curve.

The car from the Turnpike slowed as it neared the drive, turned in.

"It's Dad's car!" cried Elaine in a tone of alarm.

Tires crunched on the gravel as the brakes locked them. Fred Ellis, grim-lipped, stepped out of the car—a powerful, dark-red convertible coupe.

"What are you doing here, Elaine?" he asked in a low, taut voice.

"I came out to find Phil and tell him to keep out of your way!" the girl answered, head high, eyes defiant.

"Is he here?"

"No."

"Then I'll— Hello! That sounds like the police!" Ellis turned to look down the highway, where now the wailing siren, bright headlights and a high-carried green light denoted the approach of the constabulary.

The police car swung into the drive and stopped behind Ellis' coupe. A uniformed patrolman and two detectives got out. All three were burly men, with heavy, unimaginative faces.

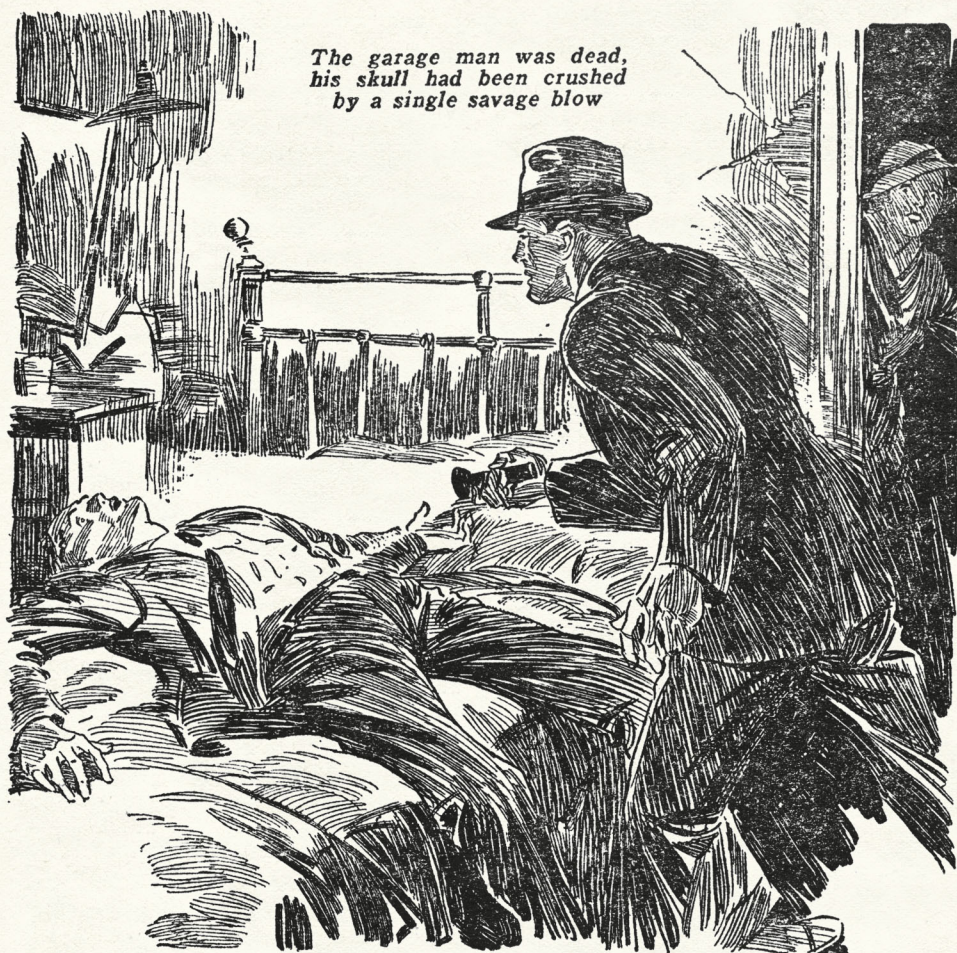
"I'm Halloran, detective-sergeant," said one to Pete. "You the guy who phoned in?"

"Yes. Gardiner's my name. This is Miss Elaine Ellis, and her father, Fred Ellis."

"Yeah. I know Mr. Ellis. We've got an alarm out for the guy who tried to snatch you, miss, but we ain't found him yet. Tell us the particulars." Halloran produced a fat notebook, wet a stub of pencil between his lips, and made voluminous notes.

Suddenly his side-kick, who had wandered up on the porch, let out a yell:

"Hey, Mike! Looka this joint!



There's been a whale of a scrap here!"

Peter groaned.

"Gawd!" said Halloran, when he surveyed the cabin. "What's happened here, mister? What'd you say yer name was? Gardiner? Any kin to Phil Gardiner?"

"Brother."

"And you and your brother had trouble, eh? Where's he now?"

"We didn't have any trouble. I don't know where he is. Haven't seen him."

The detective turned to face Fred Ellis.

"Seems to me," he said shrewdly, "that I've heard you've been goin' around makin' some threats what you'd do to Phil Gardiner 'f he didn't give up any idea o' marryin'

yer daughter. You seen him tonight, Mr. Ellis?"

"No. I came out here to see him, though," Fred Ellis answered.

The three policemen began looking around the cabin, inside and outside. They noted the blood on wall and floor, the bloodstained towel, the wash basin. They nodded sage heads over the fact that Phil's car was still in the garage. The frat pin and the cartridge seemed to burn in Peter's pocket—but he delayed showing them, hoping Phil would turn up.

"Somep'n mighty funny about all this," Halloran grunted, running a flashlight ray along the front of the porch. "Mighty funny," he repeated, sweeping the ray over the gravel of the drive, over the wheels of Ellis' coupe. "Quite an oil-leak

ya got there, Mr. Ellis." He indicated a splotch of dark viscosity on the differential and rear axle of the coupe.

Then—

"O'Brien! Flannery!" His words rang sharp with sudden command. "C'mere! Watch all these people!"

He and Peter Gardiner had noticed at the same moment that the dark splotches glinted crimson, not black, in the flashlight's ray.

Halloran flung back the rumble seat; his flashlight probed the interior, came to rest upon the white, dead face of Philip Gardiner, whose crumpled body lay doubled up on the floor of the narrow space within.

CHAPTER III

Charged With Murder



IMMEDIATELY Peter sprang forward, thrusting the uniformed Flannery aside. With his own hands he lifted his brother's body out of the rumble seat and laid it tenderly on the ground beside the driveway.

Philip was dead. His clothes were a sodden mass of blood; he had been shot through the body, not once but five or six times.

His head was swathed in gauze bandages.

"Jammed a gun right agin his belly and let him have it—automatic, that was. Search the car, Flannery!" ordered Halloran, whose big hand was already closed in a relentless vise on Ellis' wrist.

"Here's the gun!" yelled the harness-cop a moment later. He had found a big blue Colt automatic in the side-pocket; he sniffed at the barrel, nodded. "Fired lately. She's empty now."

"Better come clean with us, Ellis," Halloran gloated. "We got you dead to rights."

"But—I swear I didn't—why, man, I don't even know how that body got there!" Ellis stammered.

Elaine Ellis was clinging to her father, burying her face in his coat, sobbing in great, racking gulps.

"Better tell us just where you've been and what you did tonight, Mr. Ellis," Peter urged.

Ellis swallowed and nodded.

"I'll tell you," he said. "After I left your aunt's house, I went home. But I was nervous, couldn't sit still. I was worrying about Elaine and Phil Gardiner. I was all worked up—couldn't get it off my mind. I went for a walk, to try to cool off. But still I couldn't shake off the idea that I ought to have a talk with Phil, to tell him to keep away from Elaine—"

"And you did—and one word led to another—and you shot him!" cut in Halloran. "That's the truth, isn't it?"

"A little less of that third-degree stuff, Halloran!" barked Peter Gardiner in a tone he'd found effective in addressing unruly recruits. Halloran's mouth gaped open with astonishment.

"Continue, please, Mr. Ellis," Peter invited.

"So I went to the garage and got my car," Ellis resumed. "I intended to come to this cabin. I thought I'd just stop by Miss Belle Gardiner's house and make sure Phil hadn't turned up there. Driving along Mitchell Avenue, I saw Ray Barlow and Royall Morland, his chum, standing on the curb. I hailed Barlow, told him where I was going, and he said he would go with me. I opened the door; Morland got inside, but Barlow said he wanted the fresh air, and he opened the rumble seat and got into it."

"He opened the rumble seat?" demanded Halloran.

"Yes. We drove to Miss Gardiner's. All of us got out and went in. Doctor Yancey was in the parlor; we spoke to him. Martha said Phil wasn't there. Barlow sat down; his face was bruised and he looked to be in bad shape. He said he guessed he wouldn't go with me after all. I went out, got into my car and started out here."

"Did you come straight out?" Gardiner asked.

"No. I couldn't seem to make up my mind. I turned around once and started back. But then I decided to go through with it and have it over."

"I see. You came out the Old Turnpike?"

"Yes."

"I guess you think you got an alibi, with this guy Barlow sittin' in yer rumble seat, don'cha?" Halloran broke in. "Couldn't 'a' been any *body* there, you'll say. Maybe not. But what you done, you met up with this poor feller on the road, or some'eres, bumped him off, stuffed him into the rumble seat and come out here to dump the body an' fix things up so's nobody'd guess who done it."

Slowly Ellis shook his head.

"I didn't shoot him," he denied. "I haven't seen him today—till now," he added with a shudder. "I just don't understand it. That body couldn't have been in my rumble seat when I left the garage, because Barlow sat there. He couldn't have gotten his feet inside at all if it had been. And I haven't been out of my car since, except at Miss Belle's."

"**H**OW long were you in my aunt's house?" asked Peter.

"Not more than a minute or two. Just long enough to find out Phil wasn't there."

Peter shook his head.

"I don't see how, possibly, anyone could have come along and put the body into your car in that length of time, on a public street, with an arc light at the corner."

"And a cop," put in Halloran. "That's Mitchell and Twenty-fourth, isn't it? Flannery, get Headquarters and have 'em flash the light for the traffic cop at Mitchell and Twenty-fourth. But first send for the coroner."

Meanwhile O'Brien had completed a cursory examination of Philip's body.

"Six bullet wounds, all in the body," he reported. "Cut on his forehead, too, over the right eye.

Bled a lot. Musta been done 'fore he was killed."

Halloran nodded.

"This your gun?" he asked Ellis.

Ellis looked at the weapon in the detective's gloved hand and nodded.

"Yes, it's mine."

"Do you carry it loaded?" cut in Peter.

"Say, you—" blustered Halloran, but Ellis had already answered:

"Yes."

"With a cartridge in the chamber and the safety-catch locked?" suggested Peter.

Ellis stared.

"Yes, that's right. But how'd you know?"

"You carry it in the side-pocket of your car, habitually?"

"Yes."

"Anybody know that?"

"Most everybody in town, I guess. I've made no bones about it since the time a couple of fellows tried to stick me up a year ago."

"Did Ray Barlow know it?"

"Yes. I've spoken to him about it several times."

"What are you gettin' at, young feller?" snarled Halloran. "Now let me ask a few questions. Ellis, what time'd you leave yer house for this walk you tell about?"

"A little after seven, I'd say. Maybe seven-fifteen."

"Where'd ya go?"

"Out into Hillside Park."

"Meet anybody you knew?"

"No. I passed quite a few people, but I didn't speak to anybody."

"How long did you walk?"

"I don't know. Maybe an hour."

"And then you went to the garage and got your car?"

"That's right."

"That'd be maybe eight o'clock or eight-fifteen?"

"Yes, I think so."

"You didn't meet Philip Gardiner on that walk, kill him and hide the body, did ya?"

"No!"

"Never mind yellin'. So ya went to the Gardiner house an' asked fer him. For a blind, hey?"

"I wanted to see him."

"Oh, ya did? What time'd ya leave the Gardiner house?"

"I'd put it at about twenty minutes past eight."

"And you got here at nine, almost to the dot. Forty minutes to drive five miles."

"I turned back. I told you that."

"A likely story," sneered Halloran. Flannery came out of the cabin just then.

"Coroner's on the way—and Patrolman Schmidt's on the wire, Sergeant."

Halloran jumped to the phone.

"Hey, Smitty! This is Sarge Halloran. You on duty at Twenty-fourth and Mitchell tonight? Yeah. D'ja see a car stop in front o' the Gardiner house 'bout eight-fifteen? Big Marlac coupe? Ya did? How long was it there? 'Bout two-three minutes, hey? See anybody monkey-in' with it while it was standin'? No? Oh, that so? Yeah. Okay, Smitty. Thanks."

He came out, smiling proudly.

"Patrolman Schmidt, on traffic duty at Twenty-fourth an' Mitchell," he announced, "kinda put a hole in yer last hope, Ellis. He says he seen yer car stop. An' he saw you go in the house. Now, Smitty was thinkin' it was a bad night t' be out, an' noticed partickler at that time that nobody was in sight on the sidewalk along the whole block. Now if Barlow says there was no body in that car when he was in it, an' you say you never left the car from the time ya left the Gardiner house, why it sorta looks to me like it's up to you to explain how that body got there."

"I—I can't explain it," faltered Ellis.

"I guess ya can't," crowed Halloran. "Ellis, you're under arrest for the murder of Philip Gardiner."

"No!" screamed Elaine, tightening the grip of her arms about her father. "No! Daddy—dear Daddy—tell them you didn't do it!"

"I didn't do it, honey," said Fred Ellis. "But—it looks bad for me."

"I'll say it looks bad for you," Halloran remarked grimly. "Put the cuffs on him, Flannery. O'Brien,

you stay here by the body till the coroner comes. Flannery and I'll take Ellis to the station."

Peter Gardiner touched Halloran on the shoulder.

"Better take these along," he suggested, handing over the frat pin and the .45 cartridge.

He explained where he'd found them, and Elaine identified the pin as being the property of Ray Barlow. Peter also related the story of the mysterious girl who'd fled from the cabin on his arrival.

"That all don't mean nothin'," Halloran decided. "The girl might be any o' yer brother's flames. As fer Barlow bein' here, we'll look into it. We've got a few questions to ask that guy anyhow. An' the cartridge ain't the only .45 cartridge in these parts. When I find a guy with the body in his car, with the murder gun in his possession, a guy that can't 'count for his movements and besides had a good an' sufficient motive for the killin', why, Mike Halloran's satisfied he's got his cuffs on a murderer's wrists. An' that's that."

ELAINE wailed. She would have held her father back by main force, but Peter restrained her gently.

"Get in the car, Ellis," Halloran ordered. "We'll be goin'. You two—Miss Ellis an' Gardiner—you're material witnesses. Come round to Headquarters at ten o'clock tomorrow mornin'. The district attorney'll wanta see ya both."

"We'll be there," promised Peter. He walked up to the police car and held out his hand to Ellis. "Keep a stiff upper lip, Mr. Ellis," he said. "I'm Philip Gardiner's brother—and I don't believe you killed him. The truth will come out."

Halloran snorted.

"Why—why, thanks, Pete!" Ellis choked.

But Peter Gardiner found his real thanks in Elaine Ellis' shining eyes, while the police car backed out of the drive.

"That was sweet of you, Peter," she said in a low voice.

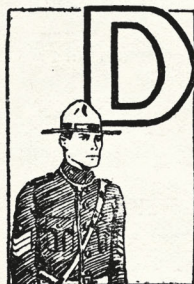
Then he walked over to his

brother's body and looked long into the dead face.

"Sorry, Phil," he murmured at last. "I was too late to save you. But—I'll get the man that killed you, old fellow. I'll get him."

CHAPTER IV

A New Deputy Sheriff



DETECTIVE O'BRIEN went into the cabin and started making notes of what he saw there.

"We've three things to run down," Peter checked on his fingers, when Elaine insisted on staying with him. "There's the lad who stuck

you up—somehow I can't get out of my head that I've seen that hard map somewhere. Then there's the girl who scrambled out of the window. And finally, there's your pal Barlow. We'll take Barlow first. Know where he lives?"

"Yes, of course. In the Northern Hotel."

"Fine. Maybe we'll get to him before the cops do," he added in a lower voice. He stepped up on the porch. "We're going, Officer. Good night."

"G'night. See you're on hand in the morning," the detective answered.

As the roadster sped cityward, Peter turned to the girl. "Elaine, do you know what my work is now? What I'm doing for a living, I mean?"

"No."

"I've spent the last five years," said Peter in a low tense voice, "in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. I'm a sergeant now. Maybe you've heard that the Mounted has a certain reputation—they get their man, as the movies have it. And I'm going to get my brother's murderer, Elaine, no matter who he is. You hear me? No matter who he is."

Elaine shivered at the cold determination in his voice.

At the Northern Hotel, they didn't find themselves ahead of the police; two obvious detectives were in the lobby, listening with all the power of their oversized ears as Peter asked for Ray Barlow.

"Not in, sir," the clerk reported. "Has he been in tonight?"

"Yes, sir. He came in at seven-thirty. But he went out again about ten minutes later, with Mr. Morland, and hasn't been back."

"You're sure of the time?" Peter's police instinct prompted him to ask.

"Positive, sir. It's the time I come on duty, and I'd just taken the desk when I saw Mr. Barlow cross the lobby to the bar."

Elaine and Peter went out to the car, followed by the interested gaze of the detectives, who were obviously waiting for Barlow.

"Any idea where he can be, Elaine?" Peter asked.

"Maybe at the Y.M.C.A. He is there a good deal," Elaine suggested.

Peter started to the car. A frown creased his forehead—then he emitted a sharp exclamation.

"Peter! What is it?" cried Elaine.

"I've just connected up the face I saw in that car—you know, the face of the man who tried to snatch you. Guess my subconscious mind's been working on that face all the time," Peter told her. "It's a face that's been on police circulars in Canada. Can't think of the name, but he's wanted for forgery and false pretenses in a stock deal in Winnipeg. Con man."

He saw a Western Union sign ahead and swung the roadster to the curb. There was a telephone booth inside, and he called the local telephone company.

"You have any telephoto equipment here?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, sir," said the operator.

"If anything comes in by telephoto for Sergeant Peter Gardiner, hold it," Gardiner requested. "I'll call you back in an hour."

At the desk he quickly wrote out a wire:

Officer Commanding R.C.M.P., Smith St. Barracks, Winnipeg, Man. Please put pho-

tograph man wanted connection Canada Development Company stock frauds on telephoto wire to me care Northwestern Telephone Company this city. Wire me full details care Western Union.

P. Gardiner, Sgt.,
X Division.

"Get that right off, will you? Straight telegram—rush," he asked the clerk, and went back to the car.

Barlow was sitting in the reading room at the Y, talking nervously with a plump young man whom Peter recognized as Royall Morland. A purpling bruise disfigured Barlow's right cheek. He jumped when Gardiner spoke to him.

"Come outside a minute, Barlow. I want to talk to you."

He obeyed. On the curb beside the car, Elaine waited.

"Barlow," said Peter when all three stood close together beside the car, "you went out to my brother's cabin tonight. There was a fight. Right?"

"Right," admitted Barlow with some truculence. "So what?"

"Was Philip all right when you left him?"

"He was bunged up quite a bit," Barlow admitted.

"Barlow, do you carry a gun?"

"No. Never owned one in my life," Barlow denied. "Say, what's all this getting at?"

"Get in the car, Barlow. I'm going to drive you around to Police Headquarters. Philip's been murdered," was Peter's grim reply.

"Murdered! Why—why—" Barlow was white, gasping.

Meekly he got into the car. Elaine got in beside him, Peter took the wheel. But he was not yet through with Barlow.

"Did you meet Elaine's father tonight?" he asked as he guided the car through Eastfield's downtown traffic.

"Yes, yes, I—met him on the street. Royall was with me. But what—"

"Answer my questions. Did you tell him you'd had a fight with Phil?"

"No. I was afraid he'd tell Elaine, and she'd be sore."

"Did you get into the rumble seat of his car?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you get inside? It's cold."

"My head was aching. I wanted to stay out in the air."

"I see. Where'd you go with Mr. Ellis?"

"To your aunt's house. Peter, tell me—"

"Did you close the rumble seat when you got out of the car?"

"Yes."

"How long'd you stay at my aunt's house?"

"Maybe ten minutes, talking to Royall and Doc Yancey."

"Did Mr. Ellis stay that long?"

"No. He only stayed about a minute. He—he was looking for Phil."

"When you were in the rumble seat of the Ellis car, did you notice anything strange?"

"Strange? Why, no."

"Was there a body in the space where you put your feet when sitting in the rumble seat?"

"A body? My God, no! There couldn't have been. The space is so small."

THE green lights of Police Headquarters showed up at the corner ahead. Peter brought the car to the curb and got out.

"Stay here, Elaine. Back in a minute," he said. "Come on, Barlow."

Together the two men went into the station. An inquiry for Sergeant Halloran caused them to be ushered into a smoke-filled room where Fred Ellis sat beneath a strong light, surrounded by half a dozen detectives.

"Here's Barlow, Halloran," Peter announced. "Thought you'd want to see him."

"You bet I want to see him!" exclaimed the detective, jumping to his feet. "Thanks, young feller. I'm sure obliged to ya. An' jest fer that, I'm goin' to show ya the latest developm't. It may not mean anythin'—but here's a note we found in yer brother's pocket."

He handed Peter a bloodstained

slip of paper. On it was printed, in pencil:

You've got till Thursday, three o'clock, to come across. If you don't, you'll wish you had. You know who.

"An' today's Thursday," Halloran pointed out.

Peter nodded, his face very stern.

"We found out some more things, too," the detective went on. "We can say fer sure that yer brother was alive at exactly seven-thirty. That maid of yer aunt's, Martha, called him then. She c'n swear to the time, 'cause she had to stop talkin' while the old clock chimed for the half-hour. She was worried 'bout him, wanted to tell him you was in town. He said he was all right, jest had a little trouble—then he said he'd have to hang up, as a car was jest drivin' up outside."

"That couldn't have been Ellis' car, if he took it from the garage around eight. Did you check that?" Peter flashed.

"Smart, ain't ya? Yeah, we checked it. He keeps his car at Butler's Garage. Garage man, Tony Ostrow, says he ain't sure o' the time Ellis called fer his car, but it was about eight. My theery ain't changed much; Ellis met yer brother before—mebbe in the park—an' killed him. Hid the body. Got his car, went for the body, was goin' to hide it or leave it at the cabin. That's easy."

"Then why'd he go to Aunt Belle's, for a bluff?"

"Sure! Oh, hello, Lawyer Adams!"

The old attorney had just entered the station.

"I understand from Sheriff Crane," he said, "that my old friend, Fred Ellis, is here charged with a serious crime. I have come to offer my services for his defense."

"He's under questionin' at present; ya can't see him," denied Halloran.

"You have no right to question him save in the presence of his attorney!" said Adams firmly. "You are invading his constitutional rights. I demand to see my client at once. If you refuse, I will have an order from the circuit judge here in ten minutes."

Halloran shrugged his shoulders.

"As you like," he yielded.

Peter Gardiner impulsively thrust out his hand to the lawyer. He found himself warming to "Old Dry-as-Dust."

"Mr. Adams," said he, "I'm with you. I don't believe Ellis did this killing. And—I'm going to find out who did!"

"You will do well, Mr. Gardiner, to leave such matters to the properly constituted authorities," Adams said coldly. "I will protect the interests of my client, and I think I am quite capable of doing so efficiently. Now, if you please, Sergeant Halloran—"

GARDINER, feeling as though a bucket of cold water had been thrown over him, went out of the police station. The dark bulk of the courthouse on the next corner, and Adams' mention of Sheriff Crane, combined to give him a suggestion.

He got Elaine out of the car and together they went into the courthouse. There was a light in the sheriff's office; the leathery-faced old sheriff sat at his battered desk.

"Hi-yah, Pete Gardiner!" he exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "Heard yuh got back to town! Glad to see yuh, son!"

He shook hands with Peter, greeted Elaine with a touch of embarrassment.

Peter handed over his leave papers for the sheriff's inspection.

"Royal Canadian Mountie, hey? A fine outfit, son."

"Sheriff, will you swear me in as a special deputy? I want some sort of official standing for a day or two," was Peter's request.

"Sure I will, sure." The sheriff eyed Peter shrewdly. "You figgerin' on lookin' into this here murder?"

"A little, yes. I'm not at all sure the police have the right man."

"Neither'm I, son. Neither'm I. Hold up yore right hand."

And so Peter Gardiner became a deputy sheriff of Eastfield County, and acquired a silver badge and a long-barreled .38.

He called the telephone company. A telephoto picture had just come in for Sergeant Gardiner; he ordered it sent around to the sheriff's office, and by telephoning the Western Union, got a message which gave some description of the wanted man:

"David Girard, alias Bromberg, alias Siegel, medium height, medium figure, dark hair, sallow complexion, no fingerprints on record. Thousand dollars reward."

The picture, when it arrived, showed a hard, squarish face, with hooked nose, thin lips and small, deep-set eyes.

"That's Ben Sarko, runs the Red Bird night club down on Itasca Street," the sheriff volunteered. "He's a mighty tough *hombre*."

"And my brother spent a good deal of time there," Gardiner nodded. "I think I'll just go have a little talk with Mr. Sarko."

"Watch yourself, son," the sheriff advised. "He keeps a hard lot around that club o' his."

COULD this man Sarko, or Girard, be the key to the mystery? Could he—

Peter shot round a corner, skidding—and the nose of the little car crashed against the stones of the street. The rear end skidded on around and brought up against a lamppost. Half-stunned, showered by broken glass, Peter managed to kick the door open and to drag Elaine to the sidewalk.

"I'm all right," she said feebly. "Not hurt. You, Peter—"

"No bones broken, I guess. What happened? Oh, I see. Front wheel came off."

Peter bent over the hub from which the wheel had come off.

"Now that's funny. Not one of the threads on these bolts has been stripped. Looks as if—"

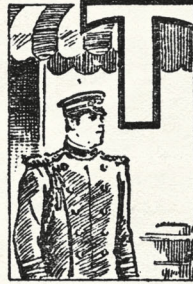
He struck a match, under its light examined the asphalt surface of the street.

"Not a lug nut to be found! Somebody took 'em all off—somebody that wanted to get me out of the way and didn't care if he killed me trying.

I'd sure like to know who that somebody was. We're making that call at the Red Bird—and just *maybe* we won't be expected."

CHAPTER V

Boss of the Red Bird



HE Red Bird night club boasted a gaudy canopy and a doorman in something resembling a major-general's full dress uniform. The doorman opened the door with a flourish.

"Where," asked Gardiner, "can I find Mr. Ben Sarko?"

"The boss is upstairs, with some friends. Private room," the doorman said.

"Who shall I say—"

"Never mind," said Peter, spotting the stairway behind the hat-check counter. "We'll go right up."

"Jussa second!" began the doorman. Then he stopped, Peter being halfway up the staircase. With a muttered oath the doorman reached behind him and pressed a button hidden under a wall hanging.

An open door, laying a fan of light across a corridor, and the sounds of tinkling glassware and harsh voices, told Peter where to find Sarko and his friends. He swung the door wide open, keeping Elaine behind him.

Four men sat at a round, beer-stained table. They were all looking at him expectantly—Sarko, and three rat-eyed, over-dressed youths with "gunman" and "hophead" written all over their pasty faces. Every right hand was out of sight beneath an open coat.

"Well, mister?" growled Sarko.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police teaches its constables but one method of dealing with situations like this.

"Keep back, Elaine," Peter muttered. Then he started toward the table.

"Stay where y'are, mister! Stay

back!" warned Sarko, between compressed, wicked lips.

Peter kept on coming, his eyes never shifting the grip in which they held Sarko's gaze. A blue-steel automatic slid out from under Sarko's coat.

"You wanna get killed? Stand back!" he snarled.

Peter reached the table in another stride. The round black muzzle of the automatic was pointed directly at his stomach. The others watched, fascinated.

"You won't shoot anybody, Sarko. You haven't got the nerve," said Peter Gardiner coolly.

Unhurried, he reached across the table, took the gun, wrenched it from Sarko's hand—a hand that was trembling now.

"Sarko—or, rather, David Girard," he said evenly, "you are under arrest as a fugitive from justice. Get up and come with me!"

"God!" breathed one of the three gunmen, eyes glassy with tension.

The night club proprietor pushed back his chair and rose very slowly to his feet.

"Whatcha mean?" he stammered. "Whatcha mean, a fugitive from justice?"

"You'll find out. Turn around." Expertly Gardiner searched him, found no more weapons. "Outside!" he commanded, prodding Sarko with the captured weapon.

"You gonna let him take me like this, boys?" Sarko appealed to his henchmen.

There was no answer. The chill-steel nerve of Peter Gardiner had awed those hoods as perhaps nothing else could have awed their twisted souls.

On them Gardiner did not even waste a threat. He shoved Sarko toward the door, following close behind.

Once in the hall, he slammed the door shut. He heard a chair scrape on the floor within, knew the spell was broken.

But it didn't matter, now that Elaine was running down the stairs to warn the taxi driver to be ready,

now that Peter was dragging the cursing Sarko down, stumbling across the lobby and out into the street.

"Courthouse," Peter snapped to the taxi driver as he flung Sarko into the cab after Elaine.

"Peter," said Elaine, with shining eyes, "I think that was the bravest thing I ever saw."

"It's done every day, up yonder," Peter answered with a wave of his hand toward the North. "The Mounted found out long ago that mighty few rats like this have the nerve to shoot a man who just walks quietly up to them."

"Mounted!" choked out Sarko—or Girard.

AND he said no more till he was ushered into the sheriff's office.

"You can't do this to me, Sheriff!" he stormed, then. "Where's your warrants?"

"We can charge this man with the attempted kidnaping, tonight, of Miss Elaine Ellis," Peter said quietly. "That'll hold him."

Girard's face had turned even paler than its wont.

"So you're the one—" he began, then stopped short, compressing his lips.

"Yes. I'm the one who chased you away from Miss Ellis' car out on the North Road tonight. You oughta have a mark on you somewhere—" he swept back the loose hair from the prisoner's forehead, revealing a neatly plastered cut—"where my pliers hit you. Attempted kidnapin'll do for a start, Sheriff. Maybe it'll be murder before we're done."

"Murder!" gasped Girard.

"Yes, murder. The murder of Philip Gardiner, found tonight with six bullet-holes in him and a threatening note from you in his pocket!" snapped out Gardiner, taking a long shot.

Girard sank into a chair.

"I never did it!" he protested weakly. "I ain't no killer."

"Maybe you didn't do it. Maybe you had it done by one of your thugs," retorted Gardiner.

"No! I swear I didn't. What good would it've done me to kill Phil? He owed me money. Killin' him would lose me that jack."

"Oh, he owed you money, did he?" demanded the sheriff. "How much?"

"Twenty - two thousand bucks, that's how much! And I can prove it!" Girard pulled a wallet from his pocket, and one after another laid out on the sheriff's desk Philip Gardiner's notes of hand and IOUs to the aggregate amount of \$22,560. On some the signatures were shaky and imperfect, as though signed when intoxicated, but Peter was satisfied that they were in his brother's handwriting.

"**N**OW I ask you, Sheriff," Girard pleaded, "would I kill a guy who owed me twenty-two grand?"

"Mebbe ya got in an argument with him about the money, an' got so sore ya plugged him," suggested the sheriff in his even voice.

"I never get so sore I lose sight o' that much jack," replied Girard. "It was all to my interest to keep Phil Gardiner alive, 'specially now that they say his aunt's sick. If she dies first, he gets all her prop'ty, and that's a-plenty. And what's more, smart guy," Girard went on, becoming a little more at ease, "I got somep'n else in my safe that'll interest Miss Belle Gardiner. Phil paid me somep'n on account, twicet when I had him in a tight spot. He paid me with rubber checks, mister. I don't guess Miss Gardiner's goin' to be too anxious to have a lotta publicity 'bout her nephew cashin' in with a lotta bad checks left behind."

"Where were you at seven-thirty tonight?" asked Gardiner suddenly.

"Try and find out," Girard retorted.

"Girard," said Gardiner quietly, "the last moment, so far as we now know, that Philip Gardiner was known to be alive, was seven-thirty this evening. Later than that—about seven-fifty, I'd say—I'm prepared to swear that you were on the North Road near his cabin, engaged in the attempted commission of a

felony, to wit, the kidnaping of a young lady he is known to have been interested in. Now you have just two choices. If you're guilty of this murder, you can keep your mouth shut, and you'll be charged with the attempted kidnaping, which will keep you here while the murder's being investigated and'll give you a nice long term in the pen before you go back to Canada to answer the indictment against you there. If you're not guilty, you can come clean, help us all you can by giving us an exact account of your movements—and unless Miss Ellis wants to press the charge, I'll make no move in the matter; which means that you've only got the Canadian charge to face—possibly five years. Make up your mind, Girard. My time's valuable."

"I'm pressing no charges—unless you say so, Peter," Elaine put in.

Girard shrugged his plump shoulders.

"You're a straight-talkin' cop," he growled. "That's good enough fer me. I started followin' this lady early this afternoon. A little after seven o'clock I followed her from Miss Belle Gardiner's house to her own house—"

The tale droned on. He'd trailed Elaine in his car, when she left her house to go to the cabin. But she'd stopped at a filling station on the outskirts of the built-up part of the city, on the North Road, to have a flat fixed. He had stalled around at a garage near the station until she started again.

"What time was that?" Gardiner asked.

"Around seven-thirty, I guess."

"What garage were you at?"

"Butler's, on Olsen Boulevard."

"And then you followed Miss Ellis, overtook her and forced her car off the road. You'd planned to snatch Miss Ellis to make Phil Gardiner come across? How'd you think he could get the money?"

"He could get it from his aunt if he wanted. He was jest afraid to brace the old girl."

"Didn't you know he'd be disinherited if he did?"

"So he said. But she'd forgiven him before, and might again; and, anyway, with those rubber checks out, she'd've paid off this time, and I'd 'a' had my twenty-two grand."

"All right, Sarko," the sheriff decided. "I'm locking you up as a suspicious character overnight. We'll see to your case in the morning—or do I hear any more squawking about a warrant?"

The sheriff paused, heard nothing but muttered curses, and summoned a jailer to take Girard-Sarko to a cell.

"What you goin' to do now, Dep'ty?" the sheriff asked Peter, grinning. "You can take a county car, if you want one."

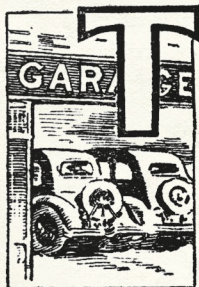
"I'm going around to see this garage man, just for luck," Peter answered, rising. "But—see here, Sheriff, there's one point I'm becoming more and more interested in: the exact provisions of my aunt's will, especially just what happens to her fortune if Phil pre-deceases her. D'you suppose you could find out?"

"Lawyer Adams'd know," the sheriff remarked. "But he's a close-mouthed old cuss."

"He's over at the police station offering to defend Mr. Ellis," Peter observed. "How's chances for you to go over there and use a little official pressure to get him to open up? I'll call you back here in maybe half an hour."

CHAPTER VI

The Trail of a Marlac Coupe



HE garage man was a well-built, dark-haired youth with the appearance and general air of a small-town Lothario, marred by rather shifty light-brown eyes.

He remembered "Ben Sarko" coming that evening.

Yep. Stayed around five 'r six minutes. No, he didn't know exactly what time that had been. He was too

busy. His name, he said, was Tony Ostrow. Yeah, he'd been on duty all night.

Suddenly Peter Gardiner, in the act of turning away, asked another question:

"Does Mr. Fred Ellis keep his car here?"

Ostrow's eyes bulged, his face whitened. He had to swallow twice before he could answer, with a strange truculence:

"Yes! So what about it?"

"Nothing about it. Nothing at all," soothed Peter. "You happen to remember what time he took his car out tonight?"

"No, I don't. The cops've been around here a'ready askin'. I told 'em I didn't know. Maybe it was eight o'clock, maybe later."

"But it was after Sarko came in?" Peter pursued.

"Yes, it was after that. Now I'm busy, mister, I got things to do 'sides standin' here answerin' fool questions. So—"

"All right, all right," Peter agreed, then turned to Elaine. "Now, we've got to do some thinking. Let's drive over in Hillside and park. Here's the problem as I see it. We'll assume, to begin with, that your father is telling the exact truth."

"Of course!" cried loyal Elaine.

"And also that Barlow is telling the truth," Peter went on. "In which case, the body was not in your dad's car when it left the garage. But if that is the case, how could it have been put in the rumble seat of the car between the time the car left the garage and the time it was found there out by the cabin?"

"I—I don't know," Elaine muttered.

"The only time your father was out of the car was when he went into Aunt Belle's house. It must have been done then. And yet—that seems impossible, in the length of time—and with that cop on the corner. It is impossible. Hm—think we'll see that cop."

He started the motor, threw the car into gear. Quickly he drove to the corner on which his aunt's house

stood. The traffic patrolman, Schmidt, was still on duty. He nodded at sight of Gardiner's badge. Yes, he remembered the car stopping.

"Were there any other cars in the block? Did any pass through the block while that car was standing there?" Peter asked.

"Yeah!" the patrolman said suddenly. "I remember seein' one. It came along real slow."

"Did it stop anywhere in the block?"

"No."

"You're sure? You didn't take your eyes off it?"

"Course I took my eyes off it! I got my duty to do. But I seen it pass the light at the corner o' Twenty-fifth, an' I seen it pass me. Don't guess it coulda had time to stop in between. But it was runnin' awful slow."

"Was it a Marlac coupe, like Mr. Ellis'?" asked Peter—and time seemed to stand still while he waited for the answer.

"Yeah! I'm pretty sure it was, come to think of it! Now, that's funny, too, ain't it?" Patrolman Schmidt's dull mind was working slowly.

"Peter thanked him and stepped on the gas.

"Elaine," Peter said as they drove away, "I think we've got the answer. I'm almost sure. One more call. Here's a drug store."

THE call was to Halloran.

"Halloran, have you checked the license number of the car in which the body was found to be sure that it really is Ellis' car?" Peter asked.

"Of course I have!" cried the detective. "Think I'm a dumbbell?"

"Have you checked the engine and serial numbers, too?"

"Surest thing you know. They're okay."

"Any sign of those numbers having been tampered with?"

"Not a sign, young feller. I took partic'lar notice."

"Thanks, Halloran."

Gardiner hung up, ignoring Halloran's bellowed demand for more information.

"Elaine," said he, stepping out of the booth, his eyes shining with the lust of the hot trail, "I think we've got a start! Now listen. That body was in your father's car when it got to the cabin. It wasn't in there when your father drove up in front of Aunt Belle's. There simply wasn't time for anybody to've put it there during the minute or so that your father was out of sight of the car in Aunt Belle's house. And after leaving there, he wasn't out of the car at all, he says, till he got out to the cabin. You follow the reasoning, don't you?"

"Yes, but—" a puzzled frown creased Elaine's white forehead.

"So—still allowing your father's story is exact—but one thing remains, which must be the truth. Your father drove away from Aunt Belle's in his own car, with the body in it. The car which he drove up to Aunt Belle's front door was *not his*, but another exactly like it!"

"That's silly, Peter. Father'd know—"

"Your father's a trifle absent-minded, isn't he?"

"Ye—yes."

"And a trifle far-sighted, if I remember?"

"Yes."

"His car's new—the fall model of Marlac convertible. One new car of a given model is very much like another; not old enough to acquire an individuality. If the man at the garage drove out a new Marlac just like his own and said, 'Here you are, Mr. Ellis', wouldn't your dad be very likely to get in and drive away without giving the car any close examination?"

"I guess he would," Elaine admitted.

"Five men out of six would do the same, if the license plates were about the same and he had no special fixings or gadgets inside his own car that he'd miss."

"Father's never gone in for gadgets," Elaine supplied. "Then you think—it was a mistake at the garage?"

"Not a mistake—intent. The killer

found the car in front of my aunt's house, drove quickly up to the curb, hopped out and into the other car and drove away, leaving your father's car standing there with the body in it! That's how it was done, Elaine. That *must* be how it was done. It couldn't have happened any other way."

"The policeman—"

"He says he wasn't watching the car that moved through the block the whole time it was in sight. There was time for a quick shift—and I'll bet your dad is a man who always leaves his key in the switch when he gets out of his car?"

"He sure is."

"Looks as if the killer knew it. He took a chance it was so, at any rate."

"But—the time—"

Gardiner's eyes narrowed.

"Let's see," he muttered. "We have the period between seven-thirty, when Phil was alive, and about eight-thirty, when your father drove away from here in a car which *must* have contained the body. Plenty of time for a lot of dirty work. Somebody's trying mighty hard to hang this crime on your dad, Elaine. Somebody deliberately planted another Marlac in that garage. The garage man must have been in on it; doubtless only to the extent of being bribed to hand your dad the phony car. But wait—why do that if—"

"No. The substitute car was only planted there for the period during which the murderer was out in your dad's car—out to kill Phil, to put his body in the rumble seat, to bring the car back and leave it with its damning evidence, which the murderer would then take good care was found. The substitute car was just an anchor to windward, on the chance that your father might call for his car while the murderer was out with it. Yes. That's the only theory that'll hold water. The killer comes back with the murder car, he finds that your dad has left the garage in the substitute. He catches up with him. How?"

"Follows him, maybe," suggested

Elaine. "Maybe he drove up just as Dad was leaving."

"No. Because then he'd have seen Ray Barlow get into that rumble seat, and he'd have waited till some other time to make his switch. It must have been made at my aunt's house; no other opportunity. Elaine, whoever that killer was, he had a pretty good idea of where your dad was going, or might go. He tried Aunt Belle's house on a strong hunch, figuring your dad'd go back there to ask if Phil had returned."

"**Y**OU mean—it's somebody we *know*?" asked the girl, horrified.

"It must be, Elaine. The pieces of this puzzle won't fit together any other way. I wonder where the red-head comes into it?"

"Redhead! What redhead?"

"The red-headed girl who dropped out the window at the cabin when we got there and beat it so fast," Peter explained.

"Why didn't you tell me before that her hair was red?" asked Elaine sharply. "That would be Mae Churchill, who used to be Dad's secretary. She and Phil were—well—pretty thick, till Phil started to take an interest in me. Then he tried to break off with her, and she made things so unpleasant Dad had to let her go. She blamed me, of course."

"Oh-oh," muttered Peter. "Jealous girl, sore at you and your dad. Sore at Phil, too. Sore enough to kill him, maybe?"

"I don't know. She has a terrible temper."

"So-o. Now we're getting somewhere. Where's she live? Northern Hotel? Same as Barlow, huh? Let's get over there."

But Miss Churchill wasn't in. Hadn't been in all evening, the clerk said. A display of Peter's badge was rewarded with an inspection of the girl's room. Clothes on their hangers, an empty suitcase in the closet, a scattering of feminine trifles on the dresser seemed to indicate that Miss Churchill hadn't flown town.

"Maybe she's out with her new boy friend?" suggested the clerk.

"Who's that?" asked Elaine.

"That slick Tony Ostrow—works over at Butler's Garage."

"Oh, yeah?" murmured Peter softly.

The pieces of the puzzle were slipping into place. Mae could have taken Ellis' car, killed Phil with Ellis' gun, hidden the body in the rumble seat. It was possible. She even had a motive for trying to get Ellis blamed for it. And she doubtless knew Ellis' attitude toward Phil's attentions to Elaine; knew that he'd have a motive which would readily permit the police to accept him as a likely suspect.

THEN suddenly Peter's thought shifted to that unexploded .45 cartridge. If somebody had shot Phil with Ellis' gun, somebody who didn't know a cartridge was carried in the chamber, the killer might have pulled back the slide to load the weapon, which would have thrown out that chamber-carried shell.

Then—that fixed the place of the murder—or at least of the loading of the murder-gun, right in front of the cabin.

Another point—the Churchill girl had not come to the cabin in Fred Ellis' car, but in another and much smaller car, the one in which she had fled. Her presence alone there, in the dark, would indicate that she was waiting for somebody. For whom, if not for Phil?

It was all getting more and more involved. There were too many threads to follow.

"The central point now," said Peter, "if we're right, is that other Marlac coupe. It must be a new one; and I'd say it must have been procured for the particular purpose of this crime. It ought to be easy to check up on that."

The sheriff, of course, would have a list of all cars for which licenses had been issued in the county. Elaine and Peter went back to the courthouse; the sheriff wasn't in the

office, but the jail deputy found the thick black loose-leaf book for them in which the licenses were recorded. It yielded no information on new model Marlac licenses, except Ellis'.

"The State Motor Vehicle Bureau at the capital will be closed now, of course," Peter remarked wearily.

"No," the deputy corrected. "They keep a man on duty all night, account of these motor bandits that've been runnin' around the past year."

Peter was already reaching for the telephone. Finally he got a report on licenses issued for new Marlac convertible coupes within the past week or ten days.

"Got two," the voice from the bureau reported. "One in Duluth. Woman, name o' Jessica Jennings. Wife o' State Senator Jennings. The other's a guy named King, Thomas King, in River Falls. Funny thing about King—he wanted a particular license number, 111-365. He got 111-395, which was the best we could do."

"Give me the engine and serial numbers on King's car, will you?"

Peter recorded the information.

"Where purchased? Marlac agency in River Falls — Goerke - Marlac Motors, eh? Date? November 28th. Thanks, old man."

Peter fired a quick question at Elaine as he hung up:

"What's the license number of your father's car?"

"One, one, one, two, six, five," she replied.

"We're going to River Falls," Peter announced. "It's only a fifty-mile drive—hundred there and back."

At that moment the sheriff entered.

"I got that dope, Pete," he said, avoiding Elaine's eyes. "About the will. Adams told me—didn't want to much, I guess. Since your brother died before Miss Belle, the whole estate goes to a foundation to erect a dog and cat hospital. And the trustees, with full power, are—well—Fred Ellis and Lawyer Adams."

There was a moment of silence in the dingy office.

"So—my father comes into joint

control of half a million dollars—by Philip Gardiner dying before his aunt?" asked Elaine bravely.

"That's right, Miss Ellis," said the sheriff with reluctance. It was obvious that his belief in Ellis' innocence had received a rude shock.

"Everything we find out makes it look blacker for Dad," Elaine said in a low bitter voice.

"Come on, then," snapped Peter Gardiner. "Let's try to find out something that won't look quite so bad."

"We'll need some pictures," he added, outside. "I picked up this snapshot in Mae Churchill's room—shows her and Ostrow together. I've still got the one of Sarko. I want one of Barlow and one of your father."

"I've got both of those at the house."

"And we'd better get one of Phil. We'll stop by Aunt Belle's for that."

Martha was awake. She got the family album readily enough, and Peter took the whole book. At the Ellis house Elaine collected a photograph of her father and a snap of Barlow.

It was after two o'clock when they rattled into River Falls. The only sign of life was an all-night lunch cart, which was provided not only with a telephone, but with a chatty counterman who knew the name of the manager of the Marlac company.

That gentleman, routed from his bed, was inclined to be indignant. But he admitted having made the sale of the Marlac car to one Thomas King, a complete stranger to him, who had paid cash in hand.

After some argument, he agreed to come down and open his front door, and to look at photographs with a view to identifying the purchaser if possible.

He was still grouchy when Peter and Elaine reached his house.

"Getting a man up in the middle o' the night for nonsense like this! Well, let's see the pictures. Yes! That's the man. The young fellow there with the girl."

"Ostrow," muttered Peter. "He was alone when he bought this car?"

"Yes."

"Did he give you any address?"

"River Hotel, this city. Now can I go back to bed? I need sleep. I've told you all I know, and it's near three o'clock."

"Go ahead," said Peter. "Elaine," he went on, as the door slammed at their departing heels, "where did Ostrow—a garage helper—ever get the dough to pay cash for a new Marlac?"

"Or Mae either—at twenty dollars a week? She has no people, no way to get money that I know of."

"And Mae used to be your father's secretary," Peter observed.

Elaine whirled on him.

"You, too!" she flashed. "You're turning—"

Peter grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her till her teeth rattled.

"Snap out of it!" he ordered. "No going hysterical on me now. All I'm doing is thinking out loud. If Ostrow didn't get the jack from Mae, where did he get it? From Phil? Possibly. From my aunt? I doubt it. From Girard? It's quite likely. We've got to consider all the possibilities. All of 'em. We're going back to Eastfield to have a little talk with Ostrow."

CHAPTER VII

The End of a Chase



DARK and mysterious as an echoing cavern was Butler's Garage when, in that hour of deepest darkness just before the dawn, Peter Gardiner and Elaine Ellis stopped their car in front of it and entered through the small door set into the big one guarding the exit ramp.

A weary looking youth came out from behind a big limousine close to the door.

"Ostrow? Went off duty 'bout ten

minutes ago. Home, I guess," he said.

Somewhere in the gloom a woman's querulous voice bade him, "Hurry up!"

"All right, lady. All right. I gotta move two more cars to get yours out."

"Where does Ostrow live?" Peter wanted to know.

"Across the street. Sixteen-o-five Olsen—third floor." He moved off to obey the hurry up order, grumbling.

PETER and Elaine crossed the street, found 1605 to be a typical boarding house with a worn sign "Rooms to Let." The door was unlocked. Within was a dark, musty hallway, smelling of stale onions and cabbage. They ascended a creaking stairway, Peter in advance, feeling more and more the necessity for caution with each step. Suppose Ostrow were waiting up there, nervous, suspicious, finger on trigger?

On the third floor landing Peter stopped. He could hear nothing save the quick breathing of Elaine, on the step behind him. He took out his flashlight, let its ray probe the narrow hall. There were two doors. One was shut, the other ajar. Toward this one Peter moved. Very cautiously he pushed it farther open. Nothing happened. No sound came from the darkness within.

Peter's thumb pressed the button of his flashlight. The ray leaped across the room, came to rest on the face of Tony Ostrow. A white face, marred by a dark trickle of blood. The eyes were open. They did not blink in the fierce light.

"Keep back, Elaine," snapped Peter.

In two strides he was across the room, bending over the bed on which Ostrow lay. The garage man was dead; his skull had been crushed by a single savage blow with some heavy weapon. Peter's light ranged the room. There was the usual tawdry furniture; a closet. He threw that open. Pillows on the floor. Funny. He bent over suddenly. Those pillows were mashed down,

as though somebody had been sitting on them. And here, on a worn bathrobe, was a long hair that glistened red-gold in the light.

The woman, in such a hurry for her car—

Fool that he'd been! He jumped for the door. Elaine was there, gasping in suspense and horror.

"Come on! Quick!" Peter shouted.

He pelted down the narrow staircase with clattering speed. Just as he reached the street door, the door of the garage opposite rolled back. A small coupe—not a Marlac, by any means—roared out, swung toward the North Road and clashed into high gear, picking up speed.

Peter hurled himself into the seat of his roadster, his foot jamming on the starter. Elaine was scrambling in beside him as the car began to move.

"We've got to catch her!" grunted Peter.

The red light of the fugitive car was swinging into the North Road. From the corner of his eye Peter caught a hint of movement—a slinking shadow—in the alley alongside the garage. Instinct sounded a sharp alarm.

He flung Elaine down into the bottom of the car, threw himself sideways on the seat—just as the dark silence was shattered by the blast of a machine-gun. Bullets ripped through the top of the car, smashed the glass of windows and windshield into shards which stung Peter's face. The car, moving slowly in first gear, wobbled down the street.

Peter, gun in hand, cautiously lifted his head and fired twice. There was no reply.

"Stay down, Elaine!" Peter ordered, as he reached for the gear-shift. There was no point in pursuing a machine-gunner in the darkness. The girl in the car—the North Road—there lay the trail now.

The sheriff's car made the corner into the North Road and straightened out, gaining speed.

BRIGHT sunlight lay like a benediction over the Minnesota woods when Peter and Elaine, with a

sullen, red-haired girl between them, whizzed past the cabin where Philip Gardiner had once lived. She winced at sight of it.

It had been a long chase—a chase which had ended when, in panic at the sight of the relentless pursuit creeping ever nearer, Mae Churchill had tried to make a left-hand turn a thought too quickly and had landed in a ditch. That had been two hours and almost a hundred miles from Eastfield.

Now she was coming back, a bitterly silent prisoner who would not answer the simplest question.

Elaine looked at the bullet holes in the top of the car and shuddered.

"So close, Peter—so very close," she muttered.

"But not close enough."

"No—thank God." Elaine's eyes shone for an instant with a light which had nothing to do with her father's troubles. "It was one of Sarko's gunmen, of course?"

"I doubt it," Peter answered. "Those shots were fired by somebody who'd never used a tommy gun before. They're all high. He didn't know how to hold the gun down, I guess."

Mae Churchill stirred uneasily. Her pale-blue eyes flickered from Elaine to Peter and back again.

They were driving into Eastfield now, and from sidewalks and passing cars startled glances were centering on those bullet-holes, on the dried blood on Peter's face. Rather to Elaine's surprise, Peter went past the courthouse and drew up in a side street beside the post office.

"What—"

"Wait," Peter ordered.

They went in, ascended to the third floor, entered an office bearing the legend: "Collector of Internal Revenue."

"Mr. Underwood in?" Peter asked the clerk at the grill.

A thin young man wearing a pince-nez appeared.

"I'm Sergeant Gardiner, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Mr. Underwood," Peter introduced himself. "Remember the Kratz case?"

Underwood's face lighted with a quick smile.

"Yes! Yes, of course!"

"We were some help to you in tracing those frauds, despite the fact that income-tax evasion is not an extraditable offense?"

"You sure were. And we appreciate it. I remember your name in connection with the matter, Sergeant. Anything we can do for you?"

"Yes. Can we—sit down somewhere?" For several clerks were gaping and buzzing by this time.

Underwood took them into a private office.

"This is not an official matter for the Mounted," Peter explained. "It has to do with the murder of my brother last night. This young lady is Miss Elaine Ellis, whose father is under arrest charged with the murder, as no doubt you've read in the morning paper. I want to see his last three income-tax returns, and also the last three returns of my aunt, Miss Belle Gardiner."

Underwood stared.

"You're sure this isn't just—curiosity, Mr. Gardiner?"

"No, sir! I think I can show you very good reasons for asking."

"Very well."

Underwood pressed a button, a clerk came in, took orders, went out for the papers. Mae Churchill sat, silent and sullen, in a chair in one corner of the office. But her eyes never left Peter Gardiner's face.

THE returns were brought in. Hastily Peter leafed through them, aided by Underwood.

"Just as I thought," he said. "Your father, Elaine, is in no financial difficulties at all. The money motive wouldn't matter to him. But these—whew!"

His fist slammed down on the Gardiner returns.

"Got him!" he cried. "Look here—capital losses running into the hundreds of thousands! Transfers of securities—why, the estate's been looted almost to the last nickle! And, Underwood, these signatures are not my aunt's—they're forgeries."

The returns my aunt really signed showed different figures from these, I'll bet. Dummy returns—for her deception. We've got the answer, Elaine. Here's the motive—the only motive I could figure out, when everything else had been eliminated."

"What do you mean, Peter?" gasped Elaine.

"Can't you see? Sarko wouldn't kill Philip when Philip, alive, was his one hope of getting his money. Barlow's eliminated by the time factor. Ostrow had no opportunity. Miss Churchill, here, might have done it—but I think it was fairly obvious that whoever planned this murder had bribed Ostrow to switch cars on your dad, and then had killed Ostrow on the well known principle that dead men tell no tales. Miss Churchill didn't kill Ostrow; no woman's arm could have struck a blow that would crush a man's skull as his was crushed.

"If both murders were committed by the same person—and they must have been, in all common sense—then Miss Churchill is out. Which leaves—your father, or some person as yet unsuspected. Now, from the date of the purchase of that new Marlac, we have a hint. It was the same date, I discover, that my aunt became ill. If she died before Philip did, Philip's creditors would be down on him like a pack of hungry wolves. If Philip died first, then his creditors could whistle for their money. Who would then have control of the estate? Your father and Lawyer Adams.

"But—suppose Adams, with full control of my aunt's financial affairs, and fully trusted by her, had been speculating? Had lost her money? Then who would have a motive for killing Philip before my aunt died, and thus avoiding exposure as an embezzler? And—at the same time—would have a motive for laying the crime on your father, so as to dispose of an embarrassing co-trustee?"

"Adams!" It was not Elaine or Underwood who snapped out that reply. It was Mae Churchill.

"Adams!" she repeated. "That's

who! I never thought you were smart enough to get the goods on him, that's why I kept my mouth shut. I was afraid, if I talked, I'd go the way Tony went last night. But now—now I'll tell you. I'll be glad to tell you. Glad to send that murdering old devil to the gallows! Listen—I saw Tony killed!"

"**B**EGIN at the beginning, Miss Churchill. You went out to Philip's cabin last night. Why?"

"To warn him. Tony'd told me about Adams bribing him to hide another Marlac in the garage and let him have the Ellis car; the other one was to give to Fred Ellis if he called for his car while Adams was out with it. I knew then something was wrong. I knew Adams—he is a devil. I guess I got there too late; Phil was gone. Dead then, probably. I saw the tail-light of a car pulling away as I drove up, heading for the bridge to the river road. That must have been Adams in the Ellis car, with Phil's dead body."

Peter nodded.

"Go on," he begged.

"I waited. But when you came, I scrambled—I didn't want to be seen there. I went back to town, afraid you might have recognized me. So I hid in Tony's room. I had—a key. When Tony came in, I hid in the closet. I didn't want him to see me. He looked so—so afraid, and sort of fierce. He was a killer, too—Tony. He might have thought I was spying on him."

"A killer?"

"Yes. That was why Adams wasn't afraid to trust him. You see, Adams had defended him once on a charge of murder, down in Iowa. Tony was sent up for life. He broke out of prison, came here—not knowing Adams was here now. And he'd been doing dirty work for Adams ever since, because he couldn't help himself. But lately he'd been—well—queer. And he'd been acting like a fool because I'd been going some with Phil Gardiner."

She stopped her outpouring of

words, looking defiantly at Peter, her breath coming quickly.

"Go on," said Peter in a soft voice.

"So I hid in the closet. I heard a board creak after Tony came in. I heard the door open. I saw somebody sneak in. Before I could yell, before I could even move, I saw a blow struck— Ughhh! I can hear that awful, crunching noise now! I guess I fainted. When I came to again, the man was gone, and Tony was lying there dead."

"Who was the killer, Miss Churchill?"

Mae Churchill leaped to her feet, just as the door of the office swung open under an urgent hand. Terror gleamed in her eyes; her pointing finger trembled. High and hysterical rang her accusing cry:

"There he is! Adams! Randolph Adams!"

THE old lawyer came slowly into the room. There was a baleful glitter in the eyes he fixed on Peter's face.

"Peter Gardiner," said he, "there are strange rumors in this town how you have arrived in a bullet-riddled car; how you with these women came rushing into this building.

Why are you here, Peter Gardiner?"

Gardiner's hand fell heavily upon the lawyer's shoulder.

"To arrest you, Randolph Adams, for the murder of my brother and of Tony Ostrow!"

The lawyer nodded. Already his quick eyes had seen the spread-out tax returns. He knew that this was the end.

"I was right," he said. "You were the one to fear. Well. I did my best to put you out of the way. Twice. Now—only *this* remains."

He leaped back suddenly; there was a quick flash of metal and of fire, a stunning report.

Randolph Adams swayed, collapsed on the office floor. There was a round black hole in his right temple.

Gently Peter Gardiner took Elaine by the arm.

"We have good news for your father, Elaine," he said. "Let's go tell him."

He was looking into her eyes—eyes which had lost every hint of pain and suffering, which were now deep brown pools of wonder and of a great new joy.

Elaine nodded.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, Peter. We have so much to tell him."

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LUCKY BREAK



*Death Was
the Uninvited
Passenger on
that Ride Which
John Cotton Knew
Would Be His Last!*

The cold muzzle of a gun jabbed into him

By ED LYBECK

Author of "Coins of Murder," "Cold Frame," etc.

JOHN COTTON tramped on the brake for a red light, felt the door beside him start to open, and growled between his teeth. He took his left hand off the wheel, slammed the door hard, hooked his left elbow over it savagely and slapped his hand back on the wheel again. He was in a vile humor.

Vile humors were unusual for John Cotton. A loving husband and a fond father, he was generally the most even-tempered of men. But now the door on the driver's side refused to close.

Inspection had revealed a tiny cog

from an old alarm-clock jamming the action of the catch. Twenty minutes in a broiling sun had failed to dislodge it. John Cotton was soaked with perspiration; his knuckles were bruised and sore.

He foresaw a drive to Long Island in his wet, sticky clothing, sitting in the cramped position necessary to hold the door closed with his elbow. He foresaw a session with a wrench and screw-driver to remove the lock and repair it. And—grimly—he foresaw a sound spanking for Junior Cotton!

Junior Cotton was six and a bud-

ding mechanic. His interest ran to wheels and pulleys. Only that morning, he'd begged for a steam-engine.

"A real one, with belts an' a whistle, huh, Pop?" he coaxed.

Which was all right as far as it went, but he'd been told never to touch the car. And last night, he'd been taking an old alarm-clock apart—John Cotton writhed in his sticky clothing.

"I'll steam-engine him!" he muttered.

HE shook drops of perspiration out of his eyes, shoved the car in gear as the light changed—and whirled in surprise as a man stepped in beside him.

The man was thin and dark, with a grey fedora pulled low on his head. He slammed the door, dropped into the seat and grunted:

"Get goin', pal; get goin'. Whatcha waitin' for?"

John Cotton's eyes were wide. He drew away.

"See here—" he began.

The thin man's left hand came out of his coat pocket. A snub-nosed, blued-steel gun jammed into Cotton's chest. A harsh voice growled in his ear:

"I said get goin', guy—an' what I say, I mean!"

John Cotton's heart pounded in his chest. His mouth was suddenly dry. He gulped, let in the clutch with a jerk, and the car bounded forward.

"Easy does it, guy," the thin man snarled. "I ain't hankerin' to have you picked up for speedin'!"

Cotton gulped again and eased the car into traffic obediently. His tongue passed over his parched lips.

"But look here," he said in a voice that he tried in vain to make natural. "You must have the wrong man. I'm not worth kidnaping. I haven't the money to pay a ransom—"

"Aw right; aw right." The thin man's voice was cold. "Who said anythin' about kidnagin'?"

"Oh!" Relief flooded John Cotton's brain. His eyes flicked sidewise to his seat-mate. "Then you're just—"

He choked. The words died in his throat. On the thin man's grey-clad knee was a reddish-brown spot the size of a dime; on the cuff of his trousers, another. Blood! And, unmistakably, fresh blood! John Cotton's eyes bulged; he stared at the spots, fascinated.

A snarl in his ear brought him back. The gun jabbed into him savagely.

"Lay off the rubberin', sap! You'll wreck us!"

He whirled in time to evade a truck that had stopped for a light.

Foot pressing the brake, he struggled desperately to control his jangled nerves. The man beside him was not wounded, yet he held a gun and his clothing was spotted with blood. The inference was plain. He was a ruthless killer, fleeing a kill; a man who had murdered once and had nothing to lose by murdering again.

Cars came up on both sides, stopping for the light. People crossed in hordes in front of them. A half block away, a sauntering patrolman swung his stick. John Cotton parted his dry lips—felt the gun in his side nudge him sharply—and swallowed the cry for help that was welling up within him. The light changed and they rode on.

Block after block passed by. Another stop for a light and on again. John Cotton, shaking sweat from his eyes, said hoarsely:

"Listen. Listen, mister. I'm nothing you want. I got a few bucks in my pants' pocket. Take that an' the car an' let me get out. I'm a man with a family, and—"

The thin man chuckled sneeringly.

"An' you wanta scam for the cops!" he finished. "Wouldn't that be lovely? You get out an' run for a cop. You tell 'im the car an' the license-number an' they pick me up at the Yonkers line!" The sneering chuckle cut off short; the voice went harsh and cold.

"Nix, guy; nix. You been lookin' me over too careful, as it is. I can't afford to have a guy runnin' around loose that could give out as

good a description as you could. I'll just have to carry you along—for a while."

John Cotton's heart hammered dully. Those carelessly added words brought him face to face with reality. He was going for a ride!

He drew a deep breath and shook his head, like a swimmer in deep waters, tightened his elbow instinctively as the faulty door began to open—and grasped at a desperate plan—

A half dozen blocks further up, they would come to a busy intersection. With sweaty hands clenched on the wheel, he forced himself to bide his time.

When the lights changed he was a trifle slow; he got himself blanketed in the rush of cars and lost time in the ebb of the traffic.

"C'mon; c'mon," the gunman rasped. "We don't wanta have supper here!"

John Cotton nodded dumbly, swung to the left and was blocked by a truck. He cut back, slowed for a street car, and glanced at the green lights. He mustn't go past that sixth block!

It was looming ahead already. In the midst of a swirl of traffic, a white-gloved hand was beckoning drivers on. The light was still green. John Cotton slowed a little more and prayed.

He was almost there when it changed. The tail end of the north-bound traffic slid through. The traffic officer's whistle shrilled. Cars stopped with squealing brakes; the crosstown traffic went into gear. For an instant, the space in front of the cop was clear.

Into it slid John Cotton. His face was white and drawn, his eyes almost unseeing. His foot jabbed the gas pedal once—then his wildly-plunging body slammed open the unlocked door. He bounced on the running board, heard a bullet chip cement beside him, and screamed:

"Officer! Officer! Get—"

THEN his head slammed the concrete roadway hard, and the street spun dizzily round him.

When he got straightened out

again, he sat on the curb with his back to a fire-box standard. His car was drawn up beside him and the thin man's body hung limply over the edge of the door. The gunman's eyes were open and glazed, and the front of his shirt was crimson. The cop, his smoking service gun still in his hand, was leaning against the car.

John Cotton heard himself addressed and turned his head a little. Directly in front of him was a radio car. A uniformed sergeant was asking him questions. As well as he could, he answered.

When he had finished, the sergeant nodded approvingly.

"A good job," he said, "and one that'll pay you dividends. This guy"—he jerked a thumb at the dead man—"is Slim Devine. He just killed a jeweler downtown and raked a tray of stones. There was a radio alarm out, but nobody knew where to look for him. Workin' it this way, it's a cinch he'd got clean away if you hadn't acted as you did."

His weather-reddened face creased in a huge smile.

"An' you won't be regrettin' it either, Mr. Cotton. He had the stones in his pocket an' the Jewelers' Protective is always good for a reward. You an' Hennessey, here"—he nodded toward the traffic cop—"can whack it up between you!"

Hennessey, holstering his gun, came forward, grinning.

"An' you earned it, too," he said. "By golly, I can't understand yet how you got out o' that car. It was the fastest move ever I saw."

Cotton smiled back unsteadily.

"It was just a break," he said. "The door was defective. My kid jammed the lock and it wouldn't—" He broke off and jerked to his feet. "Say! What time is it?" he cried.

Hennessey looked at him, puzzled.

"Why, half-past four, or so. Why? Hey! Where you goin'?"

"Got to make the stores before they close," said John Cotton, over his shoulder. "I've got to buy a steam-engine — with belts an' a whistle an' things!"

MURDER A-WING



He turned his flash full on the face of a dead man

Disaster Sat at the Controls of the Huge Passenger Plane as a Taloned, Ghostly Hand of Death Stretched Forth Eagerly for its Prey!

A Complete Mystery Novelette

By MADELEINE SHARPS BUCHANAN

Author of "The Subway Murders," etc.

CHAPTER I ***The Ghost Ship***

THEY were flying in darkness when Paul Bolton felt the thing touch his cheek. Snow was drifting past the windows, settling on the huge wings of the plane,

and on such nights the pilots forbade any lights in the cabin.

Bolton was annoyed by the dark. Accustomed though he was to flying, he had never ceased to feel helpless in an unlighted cabin, and upon this particular night he could not even see the woman he was trail-

ing. The knowledge that he was a passenger on the notorious ghost ship did not help.

And so he almost sprang to his feet when the cold little hand swept his cheek.

There were six people in the plane, not counting the two pilots in their compartment shut off ahead. Bolton, however, was concerned with only two of them: the woman whose husband had paid him to trail her, and the man she was running away with. It was like Ena Raleigh, he thought bitterly, to choose the ghost ship on which to elope.

In his resigned mood he was conscious of but little surprise when one of the motors stopped, but he found his hands gripping the soft arms of his chair. Up in a blizzard, with only two motors functioning!

"No danger. Keep your seats!" The second pilot's voice sliced the tense air in the cabin. "The other motors are carrying on."

Bolton had been in plenty of tight places before without losing his nerve. He was, however, painfully aware that they were dropping. A slow, gentle, dreamlike sensation, like coasting down an impossible hill, possessed the plane.

This would be the final adventure of this cursed ship. She was going to crash. In darkness. With Philip Raleigh's beautiful wife and his business partner, Edson Kent, on board!

Headlines. Disgrace. Well known people and an age-old story. But maybe he, Bolton, wouldn't be around to know about it.

AND then suddenly there came a choking scream, a strangled sound, the aura of unexpected violence which Bolton had often sensed at the scene of a crime. As he sprang up, forgetting the falling ship, he felt again that cold, withered touch on his face. Shuddering horror swept through him.

Murder had been committed in the cabin of that falling ship, Paul Bolton knew. A murder that could not wait for the death that was speeding up to meet them!

Pushing his way forward down the slant of the plane, the detective knew only subconsciously when the second motor stopped. He was bending over the body of a man which had partly fallen from the chair, and his flash played on the face of Edson Kent!

Kent had been stabbed! In that chaotic moment, there could be no hope of finding the deadly weapon.

Bolton shrugged. Flashing his light about, he saw the pallid face of Ena Raleigh. The beam traveled on to another woman, two gaping men.

"Who sat behind this man?" said Bolton.

Even as he spoke somewhere, the impression persisted in his mind that this was systematic falling; that the great ship was not dropping unguided through space.

"I sat behind him," said a man's cultured voice. "I am Barry Gray, a lawyer, from Baltimore."

"Put out the light in there!" The extra pilot's voice, with a hint of impatience in the soothing tones, again penetrated the cabin. "There's nothing to be alarmed about. We won't crash, and we've radioed our position."

"There's been a murder committed here!" With an effort, Bolton controlled his anger. "There's—"

"I don't care," snapped the pilot. "Douse your light!"

They continued to fall, in darkness again. Smoothly, deceitfully they dropped, heading for the relentless waiting arms of utter destruction below. Yet, in the midst of hysteria and pandemonium, Bolton persisted, shaking limp shoulders, forcing words from quivering lips. He learned only that Ena Raleigh had been seated in front of Kent, Barry Gray behind, and the other two passengers—Mrs. Winstay and Peter de Wynne—on the opposite aisle, when the crash came.

There was a terrific bounce, another, a sound of smashing wood and glass mingling with screams. Bolton and the four passengers, with the body of the murdered man, catapulted forward in a helpless jumble. More screams, groans—

Miraculously, the detective realized, they were not to be killed. Had the killer known this, somehow? Could he have known? Bolton filed away the thought for future reference.

The calm voice of the extra pilot broke into the chaos.

"Everybody all right? Come out this way. Be careful of matches; there's gasoline everywhere."

About the splintered plane, the gale continued to howl. The scent of damp ground, of woodland nearby, the odor of raw whiskey which had probably come from broken flasks, mingled with gasoline, made Bolton rather sick. He dropped into the wet snow with a sickening shock.

"Anybody hurt?" the pilot was calling. "A doctor among you?"

"I am a doctor," said a quiet voice, and a tall form took shape at Bolton's side. "My name is de Wynne. Anyone need my services?" When no one answered, he went on: "What about this murdered man?"

"Beyond help," said Bolton shortly.

"Who are you?" The physician peered at him.

"Paul Bolton. Detective."

"Following anybody on this ship?"

"Yes. The murdered man."

"I see. Anybody with him?"

"This woman." Bolton jerked his head toward Ena Raleigh who, huddled in her rich brown furs, was whimpering softly.

The pilot spoke again briskly.

"Just now we'd better take a look at the guy. My name is Tom Burns—my extra pilot here is Jim Harvard. Jim, you get a fire going if you can. I'll see how much the ship is damaged."

As they watched, he climbed over the slippery fuselage, shaking his head.

"Hope this is her damn finish," he muttered.

"Funny way for a pilot to talk," observed the physician who, with Bolton, was close on the pilot's heels.

"It's a hell of a funny ship," said Burns.

As they climbed into the cabin, Bolton suddenly recalled the feel of

the small cold hand on his face.

"Hullo!" called the pilot sharply. "The murdered man's moving about!"

CHAPTER II

Who Had Screamed?

IT could not have been the murdered man whose form the pilot had seen in the intermittent light of the flash he was using, for when they reached him his body was cold in death, prone upon the tilted floor.

"*Something* moved in here, sure," growled Burns. "But I guess I've got past being surprised. When did this happen?"

"After the first motor failed," said Bolton. "And," he added sharply, "this crime was committed by someone who *did not expect to crash!* Get that!"

While de Wynne made a brief examination of the body, the detective looked at the gasoline-soaked suit and overcoat of the dead man, and picked up what had apparently been the contents of his pockets. A leather wallet containing two thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills, a handful of change, a platinum cigarette case, a keyring and, under the body, several letters, a driver's and owner's license and a pair of gloves. The man's bag Bolton had seen stowed away in the small baggage compartment.

"His ring and scarf pin are diamonds," the pilot panted out. "Nobody frisked him for money or jewelry."

"Someone knew where to strike in the darkness," said the physician. "He died at once."

"What are our chances?" Bolton asked Burns, and the pilot shrugged.

"Can't say. We gave our position, but there's no saying when we'll be spotted in this storm. I expected to turn over in a drift and break her nose."

In the eerie light Bolton took a look at the pilot. Well, why hadn't he? It seemed a bit too miraculous. And in any case it had been fine work, and he said so.

And then another thought struck him and he stopped where he was. Why had that woman screamed? The cabin had been in pitch darkness when the blow was struck. There had been only two women aboard.

As he jumped to the ground Barry Gray touched his arm.

"There is a dog barking off to the left," he said. "These women can't stay here. We've got to find shelter."

"All right," said Bolton, and shrank into his coat collar. "Let's go."

The barking dog guided them and in a short time Gray seized Bolton's arm.

"Watch yourself," he advised. "Here's a light!"

The men ascended a rather long flight of steps to what seemed a wide porch and Bolton's flash showed them a door with a brass knocker. Lights shone from side windows, but no one came in response to the knocking and the detective laid his hand on the door. To his astonishment it came open and admitted them to the dark cavern of what seemed to be a large apartment.

As both men stepped over the threshold a voice spoke quietly out of the surrounding gloom.

"Throw up your hands!"

ENA RALEIGH crept, shivering, toward the rear section of the fallen airplane. Ahead of her she could see the flare of the blaze lighted by the pilot, and before it was silhouetted the forms of her fellow passengers.

There had been a detective hired to follow her and she must act swiftly. He had looked to her like a ruthless animal. Philip would find one like that!

She must rid herself of the thing she held against her shuddering body among her furs. The night and the storm were her friends. She had been very careful how she touched the thing and now, lifting her hand, she bent her head and stared with terror-stricken eyes at the knife which was stained with Edson Kent's blood.

With a gasp she flung it as far as possible into the snow.

Feeling a noiseless way along the plane the girl crept into the cabin. It was not badly wrecked, this devil ship with its evil reputation. After slow and painful effort in total darkness, Ena Raleigh reached what seemed to be its interior.

She was deadly afraid, for there was something in that cabin which she could sense. Her hands slid along the backs of the tufted chairs and the scent of the gasoline and the raw whiskey nauseated her.

She had reached the body. Her foot and now her hand touched it. How could she? Still she must do it. A vision of a courtroom, of many men like that detective, spurred her on.

She would have to feel about in the gasoline. Perhaps in blood.

And as she knelt there, searching, something touched her on the cheek, something cold and small and *old*. And *dead*. Like a little hand. And Ena Raleigh became still, frozen with horror, but knowing that she dare not stop looking.

She had to save herself from that detective.

But as she stooped again to the floor in that despairing search, the cold fingers swept her cheek for a second time, pressing her toward the exit from the ship. Suddenly she could not bear it any longer there in that crime-infested cabin, and she sprang to her feet with a choking scream and stumbled along the narrow little aisle until she found herself half consciously at the place where she had entered.

"What's wrong?" asked a strong voice close to her as she crept from the plane, slipping and sliding perilously. "Did anyone scream?"

"I did," said Mrs. Raleigh wearily. "I went in to see Mr. Kent, and I was frightened."

Arms reached up and lifted her to the ground.

"You shouldn't have done that," said the extra pilot, Havvard. "That guy Bolton won't like it."

Ena Raleigh said nothing. Shiver-

ing with fear, she went with him back to the fire, but her eyes strained over her shoulder toward the fallen plane. Who had found the vital thing she had gone to seek?

If it was still there she must find out.

CHAPTER III

Murder!

GRAY and Bolton, upon hearing the command to throw up their hands, obeyed immediately.

"We are looking for shelter," explained Bolton. "Our passenger plane crashed a short distance from here and there are two women in the party. Your barking dog led us over here."

"Put on the lights, Whimple," sneered the voice.

Instantly Bolton and Gray saw the lobby of what was apparently a shabby country hotel. They saw a man with a red beard leaning on the desk, a gun in his hand trained upon them. They saw a slim girl in blue at his side, and another man—probably the Whimple who had been told to turn on the lights. He was leaning under a sign which said in crude letters "Wayside Inn."

This man was a hatchet-faced fellow who looked like a prize fighter of the lowest type.

Doors which led into the lighted rooms on either side of the lobby were closed.

"Is there a phone here?" asked Bolton.

"Won't work," said the man with the beard. "Who are you guys?"

"I'm Paul Bolton, from New York, and this is Mr. Gray, another passenger on the plane," said Bolton.

"What happened to the plane?"

"The motors gave out."

"I don't believe a word of it," sneered the other. "But you can bring your people here. Nobody is with us tonight. I'd better see you all in the light."

Bolton turned at once to the door, but as he reached it the girl sped to his side.

"Did you lie about that airplane?" she asked, her eyes like living fire in her pallid face.

"No!" flared Bolton. "Say, what ails you people? What's wrong with this red-bearded guy? What's he expect to happen here tonight?"

"Murder," said the girl bluntly.

Before he could answer, Bolton and Gray were both bundled out into the storm and the door slammed behind them.

"Gosh!" said Gray feelingly. "Do you think it's wise to take the women in there?"

"What else can we do?" demanded Bolton.

Burns, the pilot, stumbled up to the detective as the men neared the great fire not far from the plane.

"We're about froze to death," he said. "You people got to get in somewhere. The ship's got a curse on her, all right. But Havvard and I will stick by her. That's our job."

Bolton drew the pilot into the slight shelter afforded by the side of the plane.

"What do you mean, a curse on her?" he snapped.

"Things happened every flight. She's never had a normal one."

"Anybody but you ever fly her?"

"No. I got ashamed to throw up the job."

"After a while we'll have a talk," frowned Bolton. "You boys find the weapon?"

"No chance to look much."

"Don't know where you are?"

"No, but I figure we're not so far from a town called Burlington."

As he spoke the extra pilot, carrying his flash and something else, joined the two men. The something else proved to be a small dagger which he handed to Bolton.

"Found this not far off just now," he told the astounded detective. "Been looking for it. It was pitched out in the snow."

"There may be prints on it," advised Bolton sharply. "Careful how you handle it."

"Prints of the devil!" grunted Havvard. "That pretty little dame killed him all right. I heard her yell in

here a while ago, and fished her out scared to death."

"What made her yell?" asked Bolton.

"She never told me," grinned Harvard. "She's a card, all right."

"What was she doing in the plane?"

"I wouldn't know," shrugged Harvard. "You ask her."

"We'll have to have lanterns out here, and eats, and some stuff to drink," said Burns in a surly tone. "All night in this devil ship with a corpse!"

"We'll arrange all that," said Bolton impatiently. "About your first flight, Burns: a girl died in this plane, didn't she?"

"Yeah," said Burns grimly. "She was the daughter of one of the owners, Margery Kiel. She had heart trouble but she insisted on going up when this ship first took the air. She was a spoiled brat and they didn't dare cross her. The family doctor told me just to fly around a little and bring her right down. She was sitting in Jim's seat and I figured she was okay and was getting ready to land, when I felt her fingers on my face. When I looked at her she slumped right over on me, dead. Talk about a forced landing! Wow!"

A cold hand on the pilot's cheek. Fingers. The dying girl telling him to land! Holy smackers! There were no such things.

"And after that, what?" Bolton asked.

"Everything," grunted Burns. "On the next trip, a fellow ran off with the cash from his bank and got aboard one jump ahead of the cops; another time a girl lost a bag of family jewels, up in the air, and the time after that, an old guy got hysterical one foggy night when he said a little cold hand touched him and swiped a couple of bonds he was carrying."

"The radio goes dead on me for no reason at all; and if there is any caper an airship can cut, this lady sure does it. She's possessed, I tell you. She ought to be scrapped. Haven't you heard of ships on the

water acting this way? Well, they got nothing on this plane."

"What happened to the fellow with the bank's cash?" asked Bolton.

"They got him when we landed, but the cash was gone. He swore he didn't have it. But everybody knows he had, and figured he threw it overboard. Nobody ever found it. Thirty grand."

"So money and gems vanished aboard," mused the detective.

"Plenty of times. That's why I can't quit."

"Jim and you tell anybody about this girl touching your cheek?"

"Nope."

"Well, you boys come along to the hotel now and get thawed out and eat," advised Bolton briskly. "You can bring back what you want. I'm staying here off and on, too. Bear to the left. I still hear the dog barking."

IT was not so pleasant in that be-deviled plane after the two pilots were gone, although Bolton possessed steel nerves. He decided to get his hands on Kent's bag and see what it could tell him. He remembered it, all right: A fat brown bag. He should have examined it before.

Since everyone else had taken their luggage to the hotel, Kent's valise looked desolate there in the little baggage compartment. While Bolton stood there looking at it, his flashlight propped on a nearby chair, the eerie sensation crept over him that he was not alone.

Taking Kent's keys from his pocket he found one which fitted the bag, and as he stooped to turn it he knew definitely there was someone with him in the plane.

Beyond the ring of light created by the flash he could not see anything. In the velvet darkness beyond lay the rest of the aisle, the pilots' compartment, the body of the murdered man—and the howling gale.

But—*something else was there, too!*

The moment the definite alarm sent its message from his nerves to his brain, something flung itself upon

Bolton. The light went out, and he was involved in a desperate fight for his life.

Paul Bolton was a born scrapper. He fought now with a grim kind of delight, glad to get his hands on something alive and tangible. Back and forth the two swayed, and Bolton was so busy that he did not know what he held. Was it one of the pilots? One of the passengers? Or somebody from that crazy isolated inn? Hands about his neck were choking him.

He managed to break loose, and then he tripped and fell headlong in the aisle, hitting his head on something which blotted out the world for the time being.

The voices of the returning pilots roused him and he awakened to a splitting headache and a vile temper. He struck a match, he located the flashlight, turned it on. Oblivious of the two men who were climbing in with lighted lanterns, Bolton looked for Kent's bag.

It was gone!

CHAPTER IV

Prints

BOLTON plodded back to the inn through a storm that seemed to be increasing in violence. He was ascending the steps, when the door burst open and a tall, slight woman carrying a fur coat ran toward him. An arm reached from the house and jerked her back, and Bolton recognized the hatchet-faced Whimple.

"What's going on here?" he demanded, stepping inside and slamming the door.

"We are prisoners here!" gasped the woman. "I prefer the plane to this wretched place."

Bolton turned on the impassive Whimple.

"What did you grab hold of this lady for?"

"She was running out in the storm," said the man sulkily.

"None of us can get out," moaned the woman whom now Bolton recognized as the plane's other female

passenger, Mrs. Winstay. "They mean to keep us here."

As she spoke Bolton's eyes traveled to the group about the fire.

Ena Raleigh was still bundled up in her brown furs, with Barry Gray hovering about her. Doctor de Wynne, a tall, closely knit figure with a neatly trimmed goatee, stood with his back to the fire. Their host was beside de Wynne; and the girl sat upright on a chair nearby, her bright eyes studying them all.

There was a tenseness in the atmosphere, as though everyone waited to spring at everyone else's throat.

Mrs. Winstay plucked at Bolton's arm.

"I am afraid," she whispered.

Bolton did not reply. He was wondering which of these people had recently been at his throat.

The woman still clung to his sleeve. She was a handsome, dark-eyed creature, not yet thirty.

"The man is Sid Lampson," she whispered, "and the girl is his niece Nell. The servant is Whimple. We shan't dare go to bed here."

"We're lucky to find shelter," said Bolton trying to keep his voice normal, and then was silent in amazement, for their host was speaking.

"One of you is plotting to kill me," he was saying, looking about. "I know it! I do not believe there was any accident to the plane."

"What is it you're afraid of?" asked de Wynne steadily.

"For four months now an enemy has been writing me that I shall die before midnight tonight," replied Lampson.

"But surely you know him?"

"No. I know why someone would want to kill me, but I do not know who it would be."

"You're crazy, man!" said the doctor sharply.

"At any rate, there are no beds for you tonight," said Lampson, staring about. "We stay here in bright light by the fire—together. Whimple, prepare food and coffee at once. My cook, ladies and gentlemen, left us this morning; but Whimple does very well."

"I'll attend to it," said Nell, and rose and followed Whimple from the room.

Bolton walked to a distant corner where a small table and chair stood under a bright light. From his pocket he took the soggy letters he had found on the floor of the plane near Kent's body.

There were three of them and a small memorandum book which proved of no interest whatever. He was examining this when Ena Raleigh came to his side.

She had put off her furs and appeared in a smart little blue-tailored gown which set off her beauty distractingly. She was smoking a cigarette, and coming close to Bolton she rested a gemmed hand on the chair back.

"So my husband paid you to trail me," she said emotionlessly.

"And you changed your mind in the air," said Bolton.

"I never change my mind," said Mrs. Raleigh. "I did not kill him. I would have been too smart to do it like that."

"What were you looking for in the plane?" asked Bolton steadily.

"In the — plane?" Mrs. Raleigh lifted her brows. "Horrors! What sort of a woman do you think I am?"

"I'm damned if I know!" said Bolton.

And just then he got the odor of burning paper. While holding him with her strange eyes, Ena Raleigh had dropped her lighted cigarette into the little pile of gasoline-soaked letters Bolton had laid on the table!

With a muttered oath he crushed out the fire and turned upon her.

"So it was these," he said grimly. "Thanks for telling me. Well, I've got the dagger, too! Found it in the snow where you threw it."

"You're fortunate," said Mrs. Raleigh.

"See here," snapped Bolton, suddenly furious. "What was in Kent's valise? What did he have that anybody would kill to get, huh?"

"I don't know," said Ena Raleigh;

and suddenly she looked very faint.

"Was it you who screamed just before the murder?" persisted Bolton, his chin thrust forward close to her lovely face.

"Yes." Stark terror came into her eyes then. "I felt something touch me in the dark, like the ends of little clawlike fingers."

Bolton said nothing. She had told him the truth there, he felt sure.

"I don't expect you to believe me," shrugged Mrs. Raleigh then, and returned to the fire.

THE detective took up the letters he wished to examine. There were several. One, a note from a first-class hotel on the Coast, saying that rooms had been reserved for Mr. and Mrs. Kent. Another was a business communication from Philip Raleigh, many weeks old. Several bills. And there was the note which Ena Raleigh had sought to destroy—a note from herself to Kent:

Dear Ed:

I will go with you only on my own conditions. If you do not adhere to them you know what I shall do. I have warned you.
Ena.

Well, it looked as if he had her cold. This was his chance to make good. If a rescue plane came along or the cops got hold of this matter before he had it lined up—

Taking the dagger from his pocket he laid it on its enveloping handkerchief on the table. He hardly hoped for prints. However, he always hoped, and stepping to the corner where his bag was piled with the other luggage, he took from it a small box of powder and a magnifying glass.

He sprinkled the powder on the dagger without much expectation, and at once straightened excitedly. For there were prints, yes, so firmly impressed upon that dagger that it seemed nothing would rub them off! The prints of a *small hand*!

As he stared in amazement, he seemed to see the deathly cold fingers which had swept his cheek. The story told him by the print came

back and knocked tormentingly at his dazed brain.

Yet, if this dagger had been in the snow, and Havvard had picked it up—how could these prints, so startlingly clear—so devilish—

Bolton got his flask out of his bag and took a long swig of liquor.

PAUL BOLTON sat beside his table in a corner of the lobby and ate eggs and bacon and drank steaming coffee. He stared straight ahead of him at a dirty map which hung upon the wall but he did not see it. He was trying to piece together this bewildering muddle.

Somewhere in the air money and gems had vanished from this devil plane. And he believed that landing tonight could not have been accomplished safely without the two pilots being very familiar with the locality.

Suddenly his shrewd little eyes became fixed upon something they had been staring at for some time. A simple thing it was: a little pin stuck in the black line which wavered across the map and signified the passenger air line route.

Here was something.

Long since Lampson had told them where they were, and according to this map they had drifted a surprisingly short way off their course. Here was a pin stuck in the map at what was apparently this very isolated country inn!

Mighty funny.

The man or the woman who had killed Kent had known, of course, there would be no fatal accident.

Mentally Bolton began to see pictures. He saw the plane brought low over this hotel time and again, saw the money or gems dropped from it. Then the pilot—Burns, anyway—

By gosh! *That was it!*

But what was that noise? Bolton brought swiftly about, hand on his gun. Feet were rushing along the porch, stumbling, and the dog was barking furiously. Bolton was halfway to the front door when it burst open and the snow-covered figure of Havvard, the extra pilot, fell in, half frozen and inarticulate.

While Whimple hastened to him with a flask, the detective seized his arm.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

"Burns. He's sick," blurted Havvard as he crouched before the fire. "I thought I'd never make it. He's bad sick."

Doctor de Wynne was getting into his coat without a word to anyone and Bolton followed his example. There was only one thing to do, and that was to return to the plane at once.

"Keep Havvard here, Lampson," ordered Bolton from the door. "He's all in."

As he and the doctor trudged back to the plane, Bolton thought about Havvard's anxiety. Yes, he was devoted to his fellow pilot. Anyone could see that.

Something bumped against him and he turned to see Lampson's face in the fog of snow and wind.

"Why the devil did you come?" he barked.

"Whimple and I came along to bring this man into shelter," snapped the innkeeper. "It's high time I got a glimpse of this wrecked plane."

Tom Burns lay in the narrow aisle of the ship, two seat cushions under his head. He seemed to be exhausted with sickness, and Havvard had evidently laid Kent's big overcoat over him. All of this Bolton took in at a glance in the dim glow of the lanterns.

De Wynne knelt at once beside Burns, and when Bolton reached his side had flung off the overcoat and was making a rapid examination.

"Man," he then said quietly, "this chap is dead! Look at this!"

Sticking out of Burn's left breast was the handle of what resembled an ordinary bread knife!

CHAPTER V

The Knife Strikes Again

THE kitchen of the Wayside Hotel was a cheery place. It was warmed by a huge coal stove and lighted by several electric lamps. Clean, white-topped tables

and painted chairs added to its inviting appearance.

Bolton walked up and down it, his hands thrust in his pockets.

Had Havvard killed his fellow pilot? If so, why—when the deed could so plainly be laid at his door? He had been alone in the night with the murdered man.

However, he could not believe Havvard had done this thing. Yet was he, a hard-boiled detective, expected to believe that the little ghost of the plane had struck again? Bosh! Anyway, there were no prints at all on this second knife.

There had been great excitement upon the discovery of Kent's body, and there had been an inquest of sorts, conducted by himself, in the lobby. There had been more hot coffee and hysterics on the part of Mrs. Winstay, an almost complete collapse on the part of Havvard, who swore that Burns had called after him to hasten as he left the plane.

There was no further attempt to mount guard on the murder ship. Out there in the driving storm she kept her secrets for the remainder of that scarlet night. Bolton was through with her—or so he thought.

How could anyone have killed Burns when they were all together about the fire?

The man had been very sick before he was stabbed. But whatever he had taken had not killed him. It had been the knife that had done that.

In this kitchen the two pilots had eaten and drunk. If Burns had been given something to make him ill, it had been there he had gotten it. Havvard said Burns had not touched the thermos of hot coffee which they had taken back to the plane, since almost at once he had been taken sick.

Walking about the kitchen, Bolton examined the closets and shelves. There was no poison in evidence. But had there been the knife would not have been necessary.

Here Burns had eaten ham and cheese sandwiches, drunk hot coffee

and a glass of whiskey, eaten pie.

The whiskey—

Many things could be disguised in that.

Now, what was handy in this homely kitchen which could have been put into the pilot's drink? If he discovered such a thing it would not be easy to learn who had used it, since as far as he could learn, all of them at times had been in the kitchen talking with the pilots.

HE had about given up when he discovered a small can of white powder labeled "Tartar Emetic" and took it carefully in his hand, mindful of prints. What was this stuff? On the can it said it killed ants, insects and bugs. But what was that back in his mind regarding it?

Oh, yes. "Shoo Fly," they used to call it. It was used by women now and then to cure husbands of the habit of drink. They put it in their coffee and whiskey. It made them deathly sick. Well, here was something. A can of tartar emetic on a kitchen shelf!

The autopsy would tell them whether or not Burns had been given a dose of this stuff.

Wrapping the can in his handkerchief, Bolton put it in his pocket. Then he thrust his head into the pantry and yelled for Mrs. Raleigh. There was no need being polite with this bunch.

Ena Raleigh came to him, walking gracefully as was her wont, a lighted cigarette in her fingers.

"Surely," she said, "you cannot accuse me—"

"You gotta give me the straight dope on this note you wrote Kent," blurted Bolton, drawing her letter from his pocket. "What's it mean, huh?"

For a moment there was heavy, sinister silence. Then Ena Raleigh spoke wearily:

"Like a fool my husband kept two hundred thousand dollars in negotiable securities in his office safe. Edson had the combination, of course. He had lost heavily several times since the start of the depression, and

the last time was in that July when the market took an upward trend. I meant in my note that if he took my husband's money when he went away with me, I should leave him and expose him.

"I have my own money. Edson said those bonds belonged to him as well as to Philip, but that was not true. I don't know whether he took them or not. He denied it and laughed. Said he was drunk and worried when he even thought of such a thing."

"I could thrash you if you were a man," grated the detective, glaring at her beautiful, indifferent face. "How much more are you keeping from me?"

"Nothing," shrugged Mrs. Raleigh. "I didn't kill Edson Kent or the pilot, Mr. Bolton. You waste your time with me."

Bolton stared at her, worrying his under lip with thumb and finger.

"I threw that dagger into the snow," went on Mrs. Raleigh. Possibly that may be of interest to you. I fell over it when the plane crashed, and found it in my hand. I've been ridiculously fair now. But a clever detective will know I did not kill Edson. The pilot's death has exonerated me."

Bolton gasped. His eyes slipped over her serene face like a lash and left it untouched.

"You're *some* dame," he said with grudging admiration. "Send Havvard in here, will you?"

HAVVARD came into the kitchen looking like a very sick man. Without a glance at Bolton he fell into a chair by the stove.

"Now, you listen to me and talk straight," said the detective, his voice striving to get a hold on the extra pilot's sagging control. "You can be held for Burns' murder, see? And then for the Kent affair. Now, I can't get a line on anybody who left here tonight while you two fellows ate and drank here. Everybody was wandering around. Dolling up and taking baths. But somebody left this hotel and near did me in out in that plane. I don't figure it was

you or Burns. Did you ever get onto the fact that Burns was a crook?"

Havvard sprang up then, fists clenched

"Say, you rotten—" he began, but Bolton pushed him back with the flat of his hand.

"Keep your shirt on," he sneered. "He was a crook, all right, and it's going to make a lot of difference to you."

"There was nothing wrong with Tom," said Havvard in a white fury.

"No? Then why did you think he took his ship off its course now and then on some bad night so as to fly low, close to this place? Huh? Every pilot I ever heard of sticks strictly to business."

"Burns was a fine pilot," said Havvard.

"That's no answer," growled Bolton. "He couldn't have pulled this landing if he wasn't a fine pilot—assisted by luck. Well, every time your ship got off its course, cutting up her devilish capers, you see, the gems and cash and bonds swiped on the plane went over the side. See? That plane *had* to get a bad name. Now you better come across with all you know. You're in a spot."

Havvard was staring at the detective with bulging eyes.

"And another thing," went on Bolton. "Who left this hotel to stab Burns? Nobody! You were out there alone with him. We all know that. Did Burns give you control at any time last night?"

"No. He never did," stammered Havvard.

"Look here," said Bolton in sudden confidence. "I got to clean up this thing tonight. That killer is getting away with around a half a million if I don't. He hasn't got it all. Lampson held out on him, though I can swear Lampson don't know the man. He suspects us all. He picked up something he didn't turn in. Gems, or cash, or bonds."

"I never saw these men, Gray or de Wynne, before," protested Havvard.

"One of the men here you've seen, brother, plenty of times," said Bol-

ton. "Now you get this, Havvard—"

As he spoke Whimple, walking heavily, entered the kitchen and glanced suspiciously at the two men.

"Come out for more logs," he growled. "And coffee. Fire's out in there and you got to have lots of coffee. They're afraid to go to sleep."

Bolton turned to look after the man as he stepped to the outer kitchen door when, without warning, every light in the hotel went out, and a darkness as thick as syrup descended upon it, through which the gale whined like a banshee.

BOLTON lost no time.

Flashlight in hand he plunged through the pantry door into the lobby which was now lighted only by a mere spark in the fireplace. The darkness was all the more profound because it had come so quickly. Wires were down, of course, and it was a strange thing that they had not been without lights earlier in the night.

The detective threw his gleam about the lobby, picking out the shadowy figures as they lounged near the fire. Ena Raleigh's beautiful eyes glittered like a cat's in the sudden beam he threw upon her; but her attitude was relaxed and graceful. Mrs. Winstay, screaming shrilly, was crouched behind a chair. De Wynne was poking at the smoldering logs with the poker; and Gray and the girl Nell were seated not far apart on a stiff-looking bench.

But where was Lampson?

It happened quickly then. It seemed to Bolton that only a second or so elapsed after he missed the man before he found him on the floor not far from the desk. He lay face downward, and something protruded from his back.

A primitive rage took possession of Bolton. What kind of wholesale carnage was this? As he knelt beside the body, shouting for lights, Whimple appeared suddenly with two lanterns which he set upon the floor.

With a scream Nell was on her

knees beside her uncle, her horrified eyes staring at the ring of white, shocked faces.

"I let you in and he didn't want me to!" she cried. "Now you've killed him!"

De Wynne was there again, kneeling, examining, removing the knife from the man's back. It was an ordinary kitchen knife like the one which had ended Burns' life. The doctor's face was grave and finely chiseled in the lantern light.

"He has been killed like the others," he said simply.

"So one of you pulled this while you sat here in darkness!" roared Bolton. His eyes searched faces, and his brain worked overtime.

Finally Nell sprang away from Mrs. Winstay and stepped forward, her young face haggard and hysterical.

"He was all I had in the world," she sobbed. "One of you killed him. But you won't get away with it, not alive! If it was the thing my uncle picked up one night out in the cornfield that you want, you won't get it. He put it in his safe deposit box. So you killed him for nothing!"

Her voice rose on a scream of hysteria.

Bolton was across the lobby and had her arm in a tight grip.

"What was it, Nell?" he begged.

"A black box. I drove uncle in the Ford and he said he found it."

"When was this?"

"Just before the letters began to come, several months ago."

"Where are the letters?"

"He always burned them."

Bolton stood looking at the girl. He wondered what it was about her which was so different. And then he saw it. The smock she wore. She had put the smock on after the murder of her uncle!

Striding across the lobby he flung back the thin smock from the girl's blue dress. The dress was splotted with blood.

"You put on this smock to cover these stains," he accused her.

Nell looked down, shuddering, at her dress.

"Yes, when I got up after he was hurt I saw the blood," she sobbed. "The smock was on the wall nearby. I just slipped it on to cover it up."

As she spoke, a great light dawned upon Bolton. Great heavens, could *that* be it? The girl's smock, sure, put on *after* the stabbing of her uncle—covering bloodstains—

"You people stay where you are!" he told them sharply. "I gotta see Havvard in the kitchen."

Carrying a lantern, the flashlight and his gun, Bolton spoke quickly to the extra pilot at the kitchen door.

"You stick here, see? Keep them herded in there if you can until I get back. I got to trust somebody. It all depends on one thing whether you're innocent or not, Havvard."

"I'll stick," said Havvard grimly.

CHAPTER VI

Evidence

TWO lights had been left burning in the cabin of the plane, but there was no saying whether they still burned or not. Bolton trusted to luck to guide him, but saw to his satisfaction that one of the lanterns was lit.

As he climbed to the cabin, things seemed just as he had left them. Staggering a bit from the plunge through the abating storm, Bolton's foot struck against something as he made his way toward the body of the pilot. He stooped, picked up a small, oddly shaped thermos bottle. But it was not at the thermos he gaped like a crazy man. It was at the thing which had fallen from the bottle's wide mouth.

A withered hand!

Kneeling, the detective trained his flash upon the gruesome thing. It was, he decided, the mummified hand of some sort of small ape. So this was the "ghost" of the unlucky plane—carried in a thermos bottle!

Knowing how precious was each passing moment, he dropped the thing gingerly back into the thermos and put the bottle in his overcoat pocket. The plane had, of course,

seemed the safest place to hide the little hand. And then the gale, tearing at the fallen bird and knocking it about, had loosened the thermos from its hiding place.

Moving forward carefully, Bolton lifted Edson Kent's overcoat from the body of the dead pilot and examined it with shaking hands and eager eyes.

He had been right, by golly! That girl's smock— The case was in the bag, now! If he could manage to get off alive until morning—

Burdened with the overcoat and the thermos, lantern in hand, Bolton slipped and slid from the snow-covered plane. His work there was surely done now. The last act would be played at the inn, no saying how!

He was exhausted when he reached the kitchen, and he sank down beside the stove, Kent's overcoat on his knees, his gun in his hand, and his ears alive to the faintest sound.

The thing to do seemed to be to ride herd on this evidence until a rescue plane came along or someone got through to them from the nearest town. And it was some risk he ran. Having silenced three men who stood in his way, the killer would not hesitate to finish off a detective who had discovered damaging evidence.

And then, with no warning, some one kicked over the lantern which stood upon the floor, and Bolton felt strong hands upon his throat, the same hands which had attacked him earlier.

He had no breath with which to call out as he felt himself being forced toward the kitchen door. He was too busy trying to breathe. He knew that his assailant intended to throw him into that blizzard and make away with the evidence.

Fierce anger took possession of Bolton as he fought to make some sort of noise which would call aid.

Beside the sink there was a small table which held a few plates and cups and saucers. If he could manage to kick that over—

Relaxing suddenly, he permitted

himself to be forced closer to the kitchen door, and at the right moment he gave a kick toward the place where the table stood. It went over with a crash of shattering china, followed by a faint scream from the lobby. The hands at his throat were removed at once. In the thick darkness Bolton made a dash for the spot where he had dropped Kent's coat and fell prone upon it, yelling for help at the top of his lungs.

Help came. Two lanterns were lighted, and Bolton stood erect and glared at everybody in turn.

"This is the showdown!" he snarled, still shaking with fury. We are gonna sit in judgment, all of us. Three people have been murdered tonight, and I came near being the fourth because I've got Edson Kent's overcoat which Havvard laid over poor Burns when he came here for help."

THE three women sat huddled together beside the stove into which the impassive Whimple heaped more coal. Gray and de Wynne and Havvard, still looking sick, drew chairs not far from the detective, who stood now, overcoat in hand, and stared at them all with bloodshot eyes.

"Thefts of money and gems took place on this passenger plane," he began. "She got a bad name. Because a girl died on her on her first flight and touched a pilot's cheek to ask to be taken down, this pilot and this crook got the idea of working this cold little 'ghost's' hand stuff. Lots of people have felt it, I guess. Well, I've got the hand in my pocket in a thermos bottle.

"But the only 'ghost' on this plane was a crooked pilot and his pal! What was stolen was simply dropped overboard when Burns flew low over this inn. Lampson picked up the loot. And he held out on the two in the plane. This man made a haul tonight with the two hundred thousand in negotiable securities which Kent had in his bag, and he decided to get rid of his two accomplices, one of whom he could no longer trust. Tonight Burns was made sick

here in this kitchen, and Havvard came running in for help. When Doctor de Wynne examined Burns he had a knife in his breast. When we got to him Havvard had covered him with Kent's heavy overcoat. The doctor lifted it off him because I saw it on him as I climbed into the aisle of the plane.

"Now look at this overcoat, all of you. Burns was stabbed through his left breast, and instantly killed. Yet there is no slit, no tear in his heavy overcoat which was over his body! How do you all figure that out, huh?"

The wailing storm filled in the silence. Then Havvard's voice, brittle with fear:

"I put that coat on him. He was all right then. He was talking to me."

"Sure," nodded Bolton. "Well, here is the coat. Silent evidence, all right. Not a mark on it. Kent had it off when he was killed. We know that. Now the matter is this: Havvard either stabbed Burns *before he laid the overcoat over him*, or Doctor de Wynne stabbed him *after he took it off*. I'll leave it to you for the moment."

De Wynne was on his feet.

"Why, you ass!" he snapped.

"I didn't!" cried Havvard sharply. "We were in France together! We were buddies—I—"

"Sure," said Bolton again. "But *one* of you did it. This coat yells it out loud to any cop. Somebody gave Burns a dose of tartar emetic in his whiskey or coffee. I found the can on that shelf up there. Burns went out to the plane and got sick, and Havvard came rushing in for help. The doctor went to see the patient. He lifted off the overcoat and stabbed him. Almost under my nose."

"Mighty clever of you," cried Gray excitedly. "One of these is our man."

"Come on, de Wynne, out with it," said Bolton grimly. "What did you do with Kent's bag?"

"You're out of your mind!" flared the doctor.

Then suddenly Ena Raleigh spoke.

"How would this man know that

Edson had bonds in his bag?" she asked. "Unless he knew Edson? Knew Philip? I am remembering something now. As we went aboard the plane, this man de Wynne was speaking to Burns; and as Edson passed him he looked back at him with a puzzled sort of expression. As though he recognized him but was not sure."

"We can find out about that," said Bolton. "Now, if de Wynne will hold out his hands, you will see a man-sized bite on one of them. I did my best to mark the bird that jumped me."

De Wynne sprang to his feet then, reaching for his pocket. But Whimple moved more swiftly. Seizing the physician's arms he swung him about to face Bolton, his lips drawn back in a mirthless grin.

"Take a look," he snarled. "If he killed Sid, by God, I'll give him the works myself! If Sid was a crook I didn't know it. He was square with me."

Bolton pushed back the sleeves on de Wynne's writhing wrists. On the left were marks of strong teeth which had bitten in deeply.

Staring into the man's eyes, Bolton shot his question.

"Why did you kill Kent?"

De Wynne sank back into his chair.

"He kicked me out of his office three years ago," he muttered. "He was as crooked as they come, and I knew I had only to wait to get even. Burns was a pal of mine. We worked this up together. Havvard wasn't in it. He was so nutty about Burns he never suspected anything. We decided to give the ship a bad name, weave a mystery about her. The girl's death gave us the idea."

"Lampson I knew well out West years ago, and I knew I could get him in on this. He didn't know me, or

who was operating with him. He picked up the stuff and left it where we told him, and he got a nice haul until he doublecrossed us with that girl's jewelry. We wrote him then, but he wouldn't give up. So we told him he was to die tonight."

"Burns brought the plane down for me, but he balked at killing Lampson. He didn't believe in killing, and so he had to be rubbed out. I knew Kent had the securities, I'd been watching him like a hawk for months, and I knew his plans. I wrote him not to take this plane, but this only spurred him on. Anonymous letters and threats were things he laughed at. Well, I was pretty good at disguise. But I knew with this night's work ahead of me I'd be recognized by Kent before it was over, and so he had to get the knife in him. I wasn't going to pass up two hundred grand."

"AND where is the money, de Wynne?" asked Bolton.

"In my valise," shrugged de Wynne. "You're pretty clever, Bolton."

"And how the devil did the prints of that little hand get on the knife that killed Kent?" asked the detective.

"I put them there," said de Wynne grimly. "While you were unconscious in the plane, after I got the bag. Then I put the dagger back in your pocket. I thought I'd throw a scare into you, you were so cocky about it all."

Mrs. Winstay began to scream thinly, but Ena Raleigh shook her.

"Listen!" she said sharply. "Is that a plane?"

Through the diminishing wail of the storm there sounded the unmistakable whir of wings, wings which circled over the isolated inn, lower and lower!

Next Month: MURDER AT TIMES SQUARE — An Action-Packed Novelette by ARTHUR J. BURKS—and Fourteen Other Novels, Novelettes and Stories!

***On the Prowl for the Band of Stick-up Artists
Who Rubbed Out His Buddy, Dan Millard
Stares Death Square in the Face!***



He lurched forward, roaring "Take it, you damned killers!"

LIVE BAIT

By DWIGHT V. BABCOCK

Author of "Jumbled Justice," "The Case of the Gold Monkey," etc.

A FULL moon rode high in a cloudless sky. Its pale glow made a weird pattern of silvery brightness and black shadow about the homes along Victoria Avenue. The soft purr of a powerful motor grew out of the quiet, and twin headlight beams swung around a corner, drifted along the deserted residential street. A police prowler making its rounds.

Behind the wheel, Walt Redman slouched against the door with his cap on the back of his head.

"What a night!" he yawned. "Nothing's come over the short wave for the last twenty minutes."

"I know it. It's quiet. It's too quiet."

Millard, the other cop in the radio patrol car, was thick-chested, broad-shouldered. His face was rugged,

goodnatured, and he had a solid, clean-cut jaw. He sat straight in the seat beside Redman, and his restless grey eyes raked both sides of the street, probed into black patches of shadow.

"It suits me," Redman drawled. "I get fed up on the routine stuff."

Millard leaned forward, peering ahead. "What's that?"

"What?"

"That—up there—in the shadow of those trees. It's a car."

"Sure it is," Redman yawned. "And what of it? There's no law against parking a car under a tree, is there?"

"No. Only it wasn't parked there when we went by here last. And it's three A. M. now."

WALT REDMAN sat up a little, chuckled easily.

"What's eating on you, Dan? You're a bundle of nerves. It's probably old man Bryan's car. He lives right about there."

"Maybe you're right." Millard tried to relax, to shake off the tautness that had fallen over him. But the tingling under his scalp and along his spine would not go. He had a hunch. He had smelled danger, trouble, the moment they had turned into Victoria.

"You've heard of this Bryan guy," Redman was rambling on in his lazy voice. "You know—R. Norcross Bryan, the photographer."

"The Bryan that collects guns?"

"Yeah. He has about every type of heater that was ever made. I read a piece in the paper the other day about him getting a tommy gun. Had to go through a lot of red tape, get a special permit and everything. He claims he's got the most complete collection in this country."

Millard wasn't listening. The idling police car was approaching the sedan that was parked in a dark splotch of shadow before the Bryan home. It was a light car of a very popular make. As their headlights swept slowly over and along it, he made a mental note of the license number,

peered closely into the tonneau. It seemed to be empty.

Then they were past it, and Redman was saying:

"Still worrying about that heap, huh? For the love of mud, snap out of it!"

"Okay," Millard answered and turned in the seat, sent a long, stabbing scrutiny back through the rear window.

Darkness obscured the sedan now, but as he looked, he saw or sensed movement behind its windshield. He could not be certain. Chances were that his keyed-up imagination was playing tricks on him. He swung around, held the "hot car" sheet in the glow of the dashlight, ran a finger down the list.

Halfway down, his finger stopped.

"And who's crazy now, wise guy?" he said. "That sedan happens to be on the list."

"Yeah?" Drowsiness dropped from Redman as he straightened behind the wheel, yanked his cap down over one eye, swung the car close to the curb preliminary to making a U turn.

"Wait a minute?" Millard clipped. "Keep going."

"Why?"

"I got a hunch. There's someone in that car—a lookout, probably. Some monkey's prowling one of those houses back there."

"Nerts! Even if they was, why shouldn't we go back and sneeze the guy in the car?"

"We will. Go around the block and park just before we get to Victoria again. If we turn around here and go back, whoever's in that sedan is going to use the horn to warn his pal, or pals. We'll sneak up on him from behind."

Redman wheeled the car right into a cross street, toed down a little on the accelerator.

"We hadn't ought to leave the car. Supposing a call should come through for us."

"We'll only be gone a few minutes. We can phone in as soon as we find out what's what."

A ripple of excitement swept

through Millard as they swung round another corner, raced along the street that paralleled Victoria. He unfastened the flap on his hip holster, loosened his gun as Redman braked, and the car rocked around the third corner. The right front tire squealed against the curbing and they came to a stop midway in the block.

Boiling out of the car, Millard said tensely:

"We'll keep in the shadow close to the house fronts. When we get to that hedge this side of Bryan's, we'll crawl along it to the sidewalk. Then we can sneak up on it from the rear—you take the right side, I'll take the left."

Guns out, they trotted silently to the corner. Hugging the blackness close against the houses, they moved swiftly toward the Bryan home in the middle of the block. They flitted like dark ghosts through patches of bright moonlight between one home and the next, Millard in the lead. As they neared the hedge, Millard became conscious of an increasing tension within himself, of the quicker pumping of his heart. But outwardly he was cool, sure of himself, every nerve alert.

He came to the hedge, Redman following; he dropped to the ground and crawled along it to where it ended at the sidewalk. Peering cautiously around the edge, he could see the sedan not twenty feet from them.

To reach it they would have to pass through another splotch of silvery brightness. It came to him suddenly how foolish he would feel, what a riding he'd have to take from his partner, if, after such an absurdly cautious approach, the car should prove to be empty.

Pushing the thought from his mind, he beckoned to Redman, slipped out into the open, shot silently through brightness to the shadow at the rear of the car. Redman followed, soft-shoeing to the right side. Crouching, each slid along his side of the car, reached the front door and, as if at a given

signal, both straightened, thrusting guns through open door windows, menacing the interior of the sedan.

"Freeze!" Millard bit out.

The man sitting behind the wheel jerked, and his sucked-in breath made a sharp, surprised sound. His features were lost in the shadow within the car, but, in silhouette, he was a small man wearing a cap whose vizor was pulled down low.

After a moment he got his breath back and yammered hoarsely:

"What's the big idea—scaring a guy to death?"

Millard opened the door, prodded the man's left side with his gun.

"Move over away from that horn," he said, "and watch your hands. Let him out on your side, Walt."

AS the little man slid across the seat, Millard followed, keeping his gun jabbed into the other's side. They got out on the parking beneath the sycamore tree that grew there and he said:

"Reach high, squirt. Frisk him, Walt."

The small fellow lifted his hands, stood silent and sullen, his face still obscured by shadow. Redman patted pockets, searched quickly, sent a hand in under the man's coat, and brought forth a huge automatic which he passed to Millard.

"That," he drawled, "is an awful big hunk of artillery for such a little twerp."

"Yeah?" the other croaked. "Well, it's for protection. I got a permit for it."

"What are you doing parked out here alone this time of night?"

"What's the matter with that? Can't I park where I want?"

"And you're going to park in the can for a long time. Crack wise to that. This car is hot, and unless I'm squirrely you're a lookout for a pal who's prowling one of these joints around here."

"Boloney!" A whine came into the man's hoarse voice. "Lissen, you guys got me wrong. I—"

He cut off abruptly as a shot roared within the darkened Bryan

home. Commotion, the thumping of feet, sounded in the house, and gun thunder crashed twice more.

A man yelled: "Help! Police! Help!"

The front door burst open and three men shot out into bright moonlight. Two of them held automatics, one a sub-machine-gun.

"Get going, Sammy!" the first one barked.

They were all headed toward the car, evidently not seeing the trio in the deep shadow beneath the tree.

SECONDS had passed since the first sound from within the house. Millard and Redman, rigid for that short length of time, suddenly snapped out of it, as did Sammy.

The small man jumped for the protection of the tree trunk, shouting, "Beat it! The cops!" to the three gunmen.

Redman lunged after him.

"Drop it, you mutts!" Millard thundered. He squeezed trigger, sent a slug roaring over the heads of the approaching ones.

The three men skidded to a halt in the center of a bright splash of moonlight, were frozen there for a moment. And in that moment they were indelibly photographed in Millard's mind.

The first one—tall, lean, with a thin-lipped, cruel mouth and long, hooked nose. The one at his right—short, stocky, the pink flesh of his hands and face spotted with dark freckles. The one that held the tommy gun was big, bulky, with a heavy, jutting jaw.

Redman, to the left of Millard, had caught the little man and was holding him by the back of the neck with his left hand. His right held blue steel focused on the three gunmen. Millard, crouching before the car, had his own gun gripped in his right hand and the small man's huge automatic in his left. Tense silence lay between the two groups as the report from Millard's gun echoed off into the distance.

Then the tableau abruptly dissolved in a flurry of sudden move-

ment and an ear-splitting salvo of gun thunder.

The three men moved as one, hurtled sideward out of the moonlight into darkness. Millard's right-hand gun jumped, a crimson stutter of flame spewing from the barrel. Flashes of orange light roared at his left where Redman stood. Moving diagonally across the lawn toward one corner of the house, vicious streaks repeatedly slashed the darkness in their direction.

A murderous tattoo of lead sieved the metal side of the sedan behind Millard. He dropped to one knee, both hands contracting, and a stream of shrieking lead vomited from automatic and police positive. He was suddenly conscious that his partner's gun was silent. Sliding a glance that way, his hands relaxed, dropped to his sides, and he moved quickly toward the tree.

Both Redman and the little man were down, lying very still on the ground, two huddled figures.

Gunfire echoes chased themselves away into darkness, and again quiet dropped over the street. No sound, no movement, came from the corner of the house where the three gunmen last stood. Millard went to one knee beside his partner.

"You all right, Walt?" he whispered.

There was no answer. Something icy, something paralyzing, seized at his heart. Dropping his guns, he groped with both hands over Redman's face, his chest. Blood! His partner's tunic was warm and wet and sticky with it. He was dead!

Millard's brain throbbed crazily. Hot, bitter, insane fury boiled up within him, overflowed in a sobbed string of violent curses. He snatched up his guns, weaved erect, lurched forward, roaring:

"Take it, you damned killers!"

His guns nosed up, kicked his palms, crashed. No answering shot came from the darkness. He surged ahead, driven on by an unreasoning desire for vengeance. He plunged through moonlight into blackness again at the corner of the house,

went forward, running now, along the side of the house toward the rear. He skidded to a sudden stop before plunging out into the back yard.

There was movement near the fence at the rear of the lot. He braced himself, lifted his right gun, jerked the trigger. The hammer clicked on an empty shell! He raised the automatic.

With a crashing roar, an orange stab sprang at him from the darkness ahead. A smashing, white-hot slug of fire ripped into his brain, slammed him backward. He fell down and blackness swept over him like a smothering wave.

TWO weeks later, Millard entered the office of his superior, Captain McKinnie. His black hair, shaved off in the hospital, was short and bristly now, and a white strip of tape decorated his scalp. His face was thin and drawn and there was a grimness about his mouth, a strange smokiness in his grey eyes.

Grey-haired Captain McKinnie, a worldly-wise man with strong, intelligent features, came around his desk, pumped Millard's hand enthusiastically. "I'm glad to see you up and around, Dan. You had a close call. How do you feel?"

"Fine. Doc says I'm ready to report for duty again."

McKinnie pulled him to a chair, pushed him into it.

"Sit down. Sure you feel fit?"

"I'm fit enough. But I don't want to go back into uniform yet. I want a leave of absence."

"Why?" The police captain moved around behind his desk, sat down, eyeing Millard shrewdly.

"I'm going after the guys that got Walt." Millard's lips were thinned against his teeth and his jaw was tight.

"I had an idea you'd be wanting to do that." McKinnie smiled kindly, shook his grey head slowly. "But think it over, Dan. What can you hope to do? Leave it to the detective force. They have contacts in the underworld—informants—sources

of information to which you have no access."

"The detective force," Millard breathed bitterly. "It's been two weeks, and what have they done?"

"They've established the fact that the young hoodlum that was shot down along with Redman is the same one who has been the driver and lookout for the gang of four that were pulling these recent bank stick-ups. They don't know who he is—he had absolutely no identification on him. But there's no doubt that the other three are what's left of that h'ist gang. They deliberately murdered their pal so that he wouldn't have a chance to rat on them."

Millard leaned forward, placed a loose fist on the edge of the desk.

"Yes," he said, "and that's all they have found out. Those four have stuck up eleven banks in the past five months, killed two tellers and got away with over forty thousand bucks. And nobody has any idea who they are. Identifying that punk as one of them doesn't mean a thing. As a lookout in the getaway car, he had to be unmasked to keep from attracting attention outside the banks, and a number of people saw him. But the others were always masked as soon as they entered a bank and kept the masks on until after they made a getaway. No one has ever been able to describe them."

"But you saw them unmasked that night," McKinnie pointed out.

"Sure. And they're not in the mug books. They haven't a record. They read about Bryan's tommy gun in the paper and decided to get it. That's the only thing they were after. Before, they only had automatics. Now they've got a chopper. They're killers and have nothing to lose, so they won't hesitate to use it. They've ironed four—and one was Walt. He was a swell guy. I'm going after them."

"Be reasonable, Dan. Where would you start?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you don't." The police captain leaned forward, his voice low, earnest. "Take my advice: don't

go rushing into things that are over your depth. Do you realize that you are the only person that can identify those three men? Bryan didn't see them. He heard them downstairs and came down to the landing and shot at them in the dark. They shot back and got him in the leg and ran outside. You may be a marked man to them. They'd probably give plenty to have you out of the way."

A thoughtful gleam was growing in Millard's eyes.

"They wouldn't know me if they saw me," he scoffed. "I've got to at least try to get them, Captain. I'll resign if I have to."

McKinnie sighed, raised his hands, shook his head. "I ought to order a special guard for you instead of letting you do a fool stunt like this. You'll be damn careful?"

"Do I get the leave of absence?"

"As long as you threaten to quit if I don't arrange it—yes."

Millard stood, a grin revealing his strong white teeth.

"Thanks, Captain McKinnie."

"Don't thank me. Frankly, I don't see what you can hope to accomplish. But if you *should* bring about the capture of this gang, I'll recommend a promotion to the detective force for you. And, as you know, there's a standing reward of a thousand dollars posted by the Bankers Association for the capture of bank bandits." The captain got to his feet, came around the desk, grasped the younger man's hand firmly. "Good luck, son."

"I'll probably need it, sir." Millard turned and strode from the room.

MIDNIGHT, two nights later, found Millard in a dive off North Main, one of the toughest sections of the city. His tweed suit was rumpled, stained. His cheeks were flushed, and there was an unnatural glitter in his eyes. He smelled like a distillery. He appeared to be very drunk. His voice was loud, belligerent.

Ostensibly, he was confiding in the bartender, but he was actually telling the world how he, Daniel S.

Millard, had shot it out with members of a notorious stick-up gang. How he had seen them and would recognize them the first time he saw them again. Yes, sir, Mrs. Millard's little boy, Dan, was going to capture the three wanted killers single-handed and collect the reward put up by the Bankers Association.

The bartender tried to tone him down, casting worried glances at the riffraff that filled the place. Raised eyebrows, crooked smiles, winks, guffaws traveled back and forth between the amused onlookers. Nothing else happened. No one came out of the crowd to lead the bragging drunk gently outside. No one followed him when he left the place.

The next night, after gargling part of a half-pint bottle of cheap whiskey and dousing the front of his clothes with the rest, Millard visited another cheap night spot in another section of the city's underworld.

He repeated his performance of the night before, striking up an acquaintance with anyone that would listen to him, loudly proclaiming to all that he was the only man living who could recognize and identify the three stick-up artists wanted for four murders.

There was a method in his madness. Or so it seemed to him. He could not go to the murderers of his friend, so he would get them to come to him. He was live bait that would bring them out into the open. They would hear of him if he visited enough places and talked long enough and loud enough. Someone would tell them that he was running around loose, a helpless souse, a pushover. It would be simple to lead him down a dark alley and give him the works.

They would come and he would be waiting for them, for under his apparently blurry-eyed, loud-mouthed stupor, he was alert, mentally on his toes, missing nothing that went on about him.

The fifth night he got results. Long past midnight he was leaving the Hole In The Wall, a saloon of the lowest class on a dark side street that was little more than an alley.

He staggered a little as he walked, but, below drooping lids, his eyes were two chips of live steel.

Across the street a figure stepped out of a dark doorway, kept pace with his shambling, lurching progress. Millard did not look around, but he knew that another one was following directly behind on his side of the street. That left the third member of the group to be accounted for.

Millard's blood was tingling. He found it hard to keep up his pretense of drunkenness. They had come! Here was his chance—and he had no plan of action.

They were out in the open and, though three to one, he had the advantage of surprise on his side. They would not expect him to be cold sober, prepared for them. His right hand cautiously snaked under his coat lapel, drew out a flat ten-shot automatic which he held concealed. His left hand rammed into his coat pocket, touched cold metal—brass knuckles which he slipped over his fingers.

The man on the opposite side of the street had increased his pace and now started to cross at an angle so that he would be ahead of Millard. Stumbling, Millard flashed a glance backward. A figure behind him was closing in fast. The street was uncannily quiet. In the crisp night air, from far off, came the clatter of a late street car.

A dark entryway yawned ahead and he moved toward it, planning to make a stand there. He came even with it, and a man that had been concealed in its blackness stepped out, said pleasantly:

"Hi, pal."

It was the other member of the trio, the bulky one that Millard had last seen holding a tommy gun. His hands were empty and he wore a good-natured, friendly smile on his broad, heavy-jawed face.

Millard lurched toward him, peering owlishly.

"Huh?" he muttered. "Wha' say?"

The other two were approaching with silent swiftness from opposite

directions. The bulky man put a friendly hand on Millard's right shoulder.

"You remember me, don't you, pal?"

"Yes, damn you!" Millard snapped erect, his left fist lashing upward. Brass knuckles smashed against the other's thick jaw. His head jerked and he churned backward, lost his balance and fell, half in, half out of the gutter.

TO Millard's left a gun cracked and bullets whined past his ear. He whirled in a crouch, automatic roaring. The short, stocky man, not fifty feet away, whirled around and slammed to the sidewalk. Millard lunged into the dark entryway as the other one opened fire.

From his dark point of vantage he could see the man he had knocked out lying on his back in the street, his feet cocked up on the curbing. Light from a street lamp almost a block away reflected from some hard, greyish-white stuff that stained the man's left shoe. Its mate was dark, polished.

Millard went to one knee, peered warily out in the direction from which the last shot had come. A lean face showed momentarily at the side of a telephone pole. Millard's automatic jerked, belched lead and thunder. The face ducked from sight as splinters flew from the pole.

A gun barked twice in quick succession from the other direction. Glass in the show window above him shattered, rained down around him in jagged splinters. He threw himself back into the entryway, returned on the opposite side, risked a quick look up the street in the other direction. The stocky man was up again, had taken refuge behind two large garbage cans that stood near the curbing.

The rest of the street was as empty as when the first shot had been fired. People in this neighborhood had learned from experience to stay behind closed doors when gunfire sounded without.

Millard took careful aim, squeezed

trigger again and again, saw the garbage cans jump, heard the metallic clanging as slugs bit into them. The other man behind the pole got his gun into action once more, and Millard drew back, eyes sliding to the street before him, staying there.

The feet that had been cocked up on the curbing had disappeared and there was no sign of the bulky man.

Something moved along the edge of the curb. The man had regained consciousness, rolled flat in the gutter and now was sliding along it on his belly like a snake.

Millard gritted, "Lie still, you louse!" and sent a bullet roaring toward the street. It chipped cement from the edge of the sidewalk and, as far as was possible to tell, the one in the gutter became motionless. Guns in either direction exploded in a fusillade and bullets swarmed past Millard's refuge, pocking into wood, crashing through glass. He leaned back in the entryway, waiting. Then both guns were abruptly silent, and there sang on the night air the high-pitched wail of a siren.

Millard clipped an oath through his teeth, jumped forward, sent a look up and down the street. The one that had been behind the pole was gone, and he was just in time to see the stocky man disappear around a corner at the other end of the block.

He leaped out into the street. A hundred feet away, the bulky one surged up from the gutter, shot across the sidewalk. Millard's automatic crashed as an alley mouth swallowed him. He ran to the alley, listened, heard nothing. Fury twisting his mouth, he started forward, paused as his better judgment asserted itself.

It would be suicide to go bungling into that tunnel of pitch blackness. He could be picked off by one waiting there and not even know what had happened.

The siren, getting closer, had risen to an ear-rending crescendo. He holstered his gun, removed the brass knuckles, returned to the street, stood there, a deep sense of bitter

disappointment crushing him. He was tired, infinitely weary. He had failed utterly in his purpose. He had not taken even one of the gang.

He had learned nothing. He knew no more now about them than he had before. They would go back into hiding, wary of any other scheme to entice them out in the open. His plan had backfired.

He laughed suddenly — a harsh, bitter, rasping sound. His face felt wooden, immovable. His mouth was tight, thin-lipped. He turned eyes that were hard and grim toward the headlights that were racing down the street toward him. The siren cut out, started to run down as the car's wheels locked and tires squealed on pavement. The police prowler car slewed toward Millard, stopped.

INSIDE, a voice rapped: "We got a call for here. A gunfight. Where's the show?"

"It's all over," Millard said.

"By cripes, it's Dan Millard!" The car door opened and an elongated figure of a man jackknifed to the pavement. "What the devil, Dan?"

"Hello, Buttons," Millard muttered glumly. "Some guys jumped me is all."

A second copper, broad and rolling, came from the car. Buttons said:

"You know Pete Fraley. Why'd they jump you, Dan? What you doing in this rotten part of town anyway?"

The street was coming alive as people ventured out, stood staring toward the police car. Some approached slowly.

"Slumming, maybe. You guys can breeze. A couple of stick-up artists tried to gang me in a doorway. I didn't like the idea. Nobody got hurt. They took it on the lam when they heard your siren."

Millard turned away.

"Hey," Buttons called. "Wait a minute, now—"

"I told you all I know about it," Millard threw over his shoulder, and kept going.

He strode away, hard-heeled, head

down on his chest and ignoring the curious glances others gave him. He came to the place where the short, stocky one had been standing when a slug from Millard's gun had knocked him down. There was a splotch of blood on the sidewalk and a trail of red drops led to the garbage cans against the curb. The wounded one must have staunched the flow of blood there as no blood trail led to the corner where Millard had last seen him disappear.

He continued down the street to the corner, turned, walked a block and went into a small all-night lunch room, sat at the counter and ordered coffee.

When it came, he sipped, scalded his tongue, dug out a cigarette and lit it as he waited for the coffee to cool. He inhaled, blew a stream of smoke to one side, took the cigarette away from his lips as an idea formed in the back of his mind. An idea that tormented him because he could not pin it down.

Forgetting his coffee, he carefully recalled the night's happenings, pictured every detail. Suddenly a hopeful gleam snapped into his grey eyes. He beckoned to the old man behind the counter, asked:

"Do you know if they've been paving any street around here in the last week?"

The man was bald and wrinkled and wore a filthy apron that had once been white.

"No, they ain't," he declared. "Not that I know of."

A faint, crooked grin lifted one corner of Millard's mouth. He knocked ash from the tip of his cigarette into his saucer.

"Thanks. It was just a dumb idea."

The waiter moved away.

"Wait a minute!" Millard looked up, eyes squinted. "How about a sidewalk? They been putting any of those in nearby?"

"Yeah. They put one in today over on Albion."

Millard stood up. "Well, why didn't you tell me?"

"Why should I of? You never asked me."

He fished out a quarter, tossed it on the counter, said. "Okay, Pop," swiveled, and banged outside, leaving his coffee untouched.

A SQUALID neighborhood of tumble-down, weatherbeaten shacks, Albion Street was going through a cleaning process at the hands of the present city administration. Its short two blocks, hidden away in a combined tenement and manufacturing district, had never sported a cement sidewalk till now.

Millard, walking along the outer edge of the new walk, kept his eyes lowered, following the cement surface that, though hard by now, was not yet entirely dried out. He went the length of the two short blocks, crossed, returned on the other side. He came to a sudden halt four houses from the corner, and his pulses leaped.

For there, in the new sidewalk, was a man's footprint. It was as though someone had come from this house before which Millard was standing, stepped in fresh cement before he realized what he had done, then hurriedly jerked his foot back.

Millard had been grasping at straws when he asked the waiter if there had been any paving in that neighborhood recently. It had come to him that he had seen something hard and greyish-white that clung to one shoe of the man he had knocked in the gutter. And that something might have been cement.

The three killers had separated and run off in different directions and he had not heard the motor of a getaway car. That pointed to the fact that they were hiding out in the vicinity. This footprint *might* have been made by the heavy-set one.

His eyes were speculative as they scanned the front of the hovel before which he stood. It was a dirty-brown frame shack of one story, close to the street. Windows in the front part were dark.

He went back along the walk, looked down the side of the house. An oblong of brightness marked a window near the rear. He slipped

across a patch of weeds, crept in shadow along the aisle between the shack and the one next to it.

The house had no foundation, was set low to the ground; the bottom edge of its windows was even with Millard's hips. He paused at one side of the window through which light streamed, hugged the side of the house. A sharp, nasal voice from inside carried plainly to him.

"Nothing doing! We can't take the chance."

"There's no chance," a lower voice answered. "We can bring a sawbones here blindfolded. Pinky's gotta have a doctor. Look at him!"

"He's okay. He'll pull through."

Removing his hat, Millard risked a wary glimpse into the room. The window, open three inches at the bottom, had no screen, and was bare of curtains. Its shade was only partially drawn. The short, stocky man, referred to as Pinky, lay on a bed whose foot was directly before the window. Asleep or unconscious, his formerly pink face was deathly white. His coat had been removed and, around his left shoulder, his shirt was dark with dried blood.

The bulky man stood beside the bed, scowling down, chewing on his lower lip. His clothes were streaked with gutter grime, and he held a handkerchief against his heavy jaw where brass knuckles had bit through flesh. He swung around, blurted:

"By cripes, Slats, Pinky's gonna have a sawbones if I have to bring one here and then croak him."

The lean one pulled a cigarette away from his thin, cruel lips, snapped it away across the room.

"You're crazy! You're not gonna do it!" he said.

"And who's gonna stop me?"

Millard was suddenly calm and sure of himself. Smiling grimly, he slid his automatic loose, ducked low directly beneath the window.

Slats snarled: "I been running this show and I'm gonna keep on running it, see!"

Millard reached up, got his left hand under the window. He surged erect, shooting the window to the

top, thrusting his gun into the room.

"Hold everything!" he clipped.

The two whirled toward the window. Slats bobbed sideward, one hand streaking for his armpit. He didn't complete the motion. His hand jerked still just outside his coat lapel and remained poised there. His eyes were slits of burning fury. The bulky man's face went blank and expressionless. He spread his feet a little, stolidly raised his hands.

"You too, Skinny," Millard rapped. "Get your mitts up!"

STATS' thin lips twitched. He straightened, his hands slowly raised. On the bed, Pinky had not moved; his eyes were closed. Millard placed his left hand on the window sill, sat sidewise, swung his feet into the room and onto the bed. He stood, walked across the bed, stepped down on the floor.

"Turn around, you mutts, and dig your noses into the wall!"

The two turned, stepped close to the wall, their hands still elevated.

"Don't be in a rush," the bulky one said. "Can't we fix this up some way?"

"You killed a friend of mine," Millard rasped bitterly. "Try and fix that up some way."

He crossed to them, searched quickly with his left hand, took an automatic from each of them, backed off a little, tossed the guns through the window behind him.

"Lissen, copper," Slats pleaded in his nasal voice, "we got plenty of cush. You don't make so much—"

"You haven't got enough to buy me, sweetheart, so shut that big trap of yours before I shut it for you." Millard fished handcuffs from a hip pocket. "Turn around and we'll see how you look in bracelets."

The two pivoted, their hands coming down. The heavy-set man's face was still blank, but his eyes were alive, watchful. Slats was boiling with impotent anger, lips writhing.

"Hold out your left hand," Millard ordered.

"Drop it, you big hooligan!" a voice croaked, behind him.

His muscles jerked tight. One burning fact flashed through his brain. If he let go of his gun, he was lost. It was now or never. He took a swift step sideward, spun about.

Pinky was propped up on one elbow, his eyes bright and feverish. The gun in his hand exploded. Millard's automatic bucked, its roar blending with the first report. Pinky's head jumped crazily and dropped to the pillow, a small dark hole in his temple. The bullet from his gun had lodged in the wall.

Millard kept on spinning, saw Slat and the bulky one directly before him. His gun crashed as a huge hand grabbed his wrist, wrenched it aside. Then they were both on top of him, rushing him backward across the room. Sharp, lancing pain twisted from his wrist all the way up his arm, and the automatic dropped from his hand.

He was shoved, sent flying through the air. The back of his knees hit the bed and he sat down on limp Pinky, rocked back. He came forward again, dug his toes into the floor and lunged at the bulky one who stood before him. He bobbed his head, letting a punch go past him, drove his clenched left fist square into the big man's mouth. The bruiser staggered away, spitting teeth and blood.

Slat was going for the gun on the floor. The bulky one growled a hoarse curse, put his head down, charged. Millard sidestepped, kicked Slat in the side of the head just as the thin one got his hand on the gun. Slat flopped on his face and Millard swerved, took a vicious blow that glanced off his cheekbone, rocked him up against the bed.

His eyes caught the glitter of the gun still clutched in Pinky's hand and he dived for it. The bruiser saw it a split second sooner and beat him to it. He flung Millard away, whirled, the gun coming up. Millard swooped in under it, straightened as the gun went off by his ear, the concussion deafening him, scorching powder particles

burning the side of his neck. As he snapped erect, he put everything he had in a terrific uppercut that smashed home under the other's jaw.

The big man's head rocked back. His body followed. He stood on his toes for a moment, then went straight over backward, jarred the whole house as he slammed down. Dazed, shaking his head, Slat was pushing his hands against the floor, trying to force himself up. Millard's mouth dipped at the corners and there was black murder in his eyes. He took two steps, kicked the lean one in the head. Slat went cold.

MILLARD'S head was ringing so that he did not hear the siren until it was very close, less than half a square away. He scooped up his automatic, clipped it in its holster, crossed to the foot of the bed, stuck his head out the window.

The siren had stopped and feet were pounding on cement toward the house. He yelled:

"Here, at the side of the house!"

Radio patrol coppers—Buttons Hagarty and Pete Fraley—loped around the corner into sight, came to the window.

"Judas H. Priest!" Fraley breathed softly.

Buttons surveyed the room with wide, startled eyes. He glanced up at Millard, then looked the room over again slowly and his eyes narrowed.

"What is this, Dan, your birthday or something? What the devil?"

Millard leaned against the bed.

"These are the mutts that've been pulling those recent daylight bank stick-ups—and the ones that ironed Walt Redman—that's all."

"No foolin'!" whispered Fraley.

Buttons swung his elongated body through the window.

"Am I glad to see them!" he said menacingly. He clapped Dan Millard on the back. "And that means you get a thousand bucks reward, Dan."

"Call me sergeant, you clucks." Millard felt very weak, tired, but a certain grim satisfaction warmed his heart. "It's plainclothes for me—if McKinnie wasn't kiddin'."

GUILTY—NOT as CHARGED



She fought furiously as she saw death staring her in the face

***Once Arch Tarrant Got Started on the Crime
Road the Wheels Began Turning Faster
and Faster, Until—***

By EDWARD CHURCHILL

Author of "Murder in the Dark Canyon," "Accusing Eyes," etc.

THE moon splashed silver over the battered car in which sat Hilda Gunderson, the titian-haired waitress from the Star restaurant, and Arch Tarrant who,

until two days before, had been one of the social problems of the city of Cannonville. But the moon got no attention from the pair, for they were arguing.

Angered, frustrated, Arch had practically forced the frightened Hilda to take the drive with him. He had handled the car like a drunken racing pilot. Then he had pulled off the highway into a glade about five miles from the outskirts of his home town.

"You've got to marry me!" Arch was desperate. "I've turned over a new leaf. Haven't I been working in Bostwick's bank? Didn't I talk the old codger into givin' me a job as assistant teller?"

His manner frightened Hilda—but she had red hair.

"Yeah!" she scoffed. "Bostwick was your dad's best friend. Sure he gave you a job, because of him and your ma—both dead. And how long have you been workin'? Two days. People don't reform that quick. You have loafed all your life!"

The words lashed and whipped at rawness beneath Arch's skin.

"That's a devil of a way to talk!" he growled.

"I don't care. For the last time, I don't love you. I never have an' I never will, Arch—"

The flat finality of her tone whipped into flame the fire which had been smoldering in his brain.

"You'd rather have that wise guy, George Marshall, because he's cashier in the bank," he accused, jealously.

"That," she blurted, heedlessly, "is none of your business!"

"It is my business!" His voice rose angrily, jarring the stillness of the night. "I'm goin' to give you one more chance. Either you marry me, or—" His voice carried a threat as it chilled. "I'm not takin' no for an answer, Hilda."

She sensed the deadliness of his tone, but wrath numbed her caution.

"Stop this silly talk and drive me home!" she ordered.

"It's Marshall, that stuck-up fool, that's makin' you talk this way." He spoke slowly, deliberately, a threat in every word he uttered. "Well, if I can't have you, nobody else will."

His hand darted to the pocket in the door next to him. When Hilda saw what he held as he withdrew it,

she stifled a scream by placing her hand over her mouth. It was a .38 caliber revolver with a silencer on its muzzle.

Fright convulsed her. She threw herself forward wildly, grabbed at the weapon and tried to jerk it from his trembling hand. She fought, bit and clawed, beside herself as she saw death staring at her through the moonlight.

The battle lasted only a few seconds. It was ended by what sounded like the pop of a champagne cork. The girl released her grip on the barrel of the weapon, and slumped forward in her seat.

Horror froze Arch Tarrant.

He sat dumbly, his head cocked to one side as he stared down at the body. Then he lifted a shaking hand to his forehead and rubbed. It came away clammy with perspiration.

"Hilda!" he rasped. He'd only meant to threaten and frighten. He hadn't meant to hurt her. He'd—

Fear of being caught prodded him into action. If he didn't get her out of the car, she'd bleed all over it. He climbed out, walked around the machine, and grasped her beneath the armpits. He dragged her from the car, pulled her into some bushes and dropped her. Not waiting to see if she was alive or dead, he staggered back to the car.

His knees shook beneath him. He lit a match and the flickering flame revealed blood on the seat, the floor mat and the dashboard. He got a greasy rag from beneath the seat and wiped as much as he could from the machine. He threw the rag away.

He drove around for the rest of the night, scheming desperately. Finally, inspiration came to him. There was only one way out—to lose himself in the anonymity of a large city, such as St. Louis, Chicago or even New York.

He developed a plan—

AT five minutes after eight Arch Tarrant drove his car in front of the Bostwick Bank and Trust Company, on Main Street. He peered intently into the building. Just as

he had anticipated, George Marshall, the cashier, had arrived and was working alone.

Tarrant had learned, during his brief employment, that Marshall got the currency and coin from the safe shortly after eight and made ready for the arrival of the others at nine. Arch didn't know much about the bank or banking, but he did know that much.

He summoned courage to steady his quaking body and to quiet his raw nerves. He felt a shaky elation and satisfaction in the thought that he'd triumph over the dapper, high-hat Marshall this morning—even if he'd lost to him in such a gruesome way the night previous.

He'd fool Marshall by coming in at this time. The cashier would think that he was ambitious and interested in his job. He was interested in his job—but not the one that paid him twelve dollars a week. Not any more. How he hated Marshall—the lean, cynical, smiling fellow who'd taken Hilda away from him by showering her with gifts and taking her to shows and dinners and parties!

Arch got out of his car and walked across the sidewalk, patting the revolver which was resting in his right-hand trouser pocket. He rapped on the plate glass of the front doors with his knuckles and saw the sleek Marshall look up, surprised. He motioned that he wanted to come in.

Marshall, his eyebrows raised with curious interest, strode briskly across the tile floor. When he reached the doors, he shot back the heavy bolt and swung one open.

"So the enterprising captain of finance arrives early, eh?" he said, his expression midway between smiling condescension and a sneer. "Where'd you go after you got the shave?"

Arch cringed under the words, wanted to bash him one. But he glanced at the cashier's cage and saw the neat piles of currency there, ready for sorting and distribution. They were the reason he'd come to the bank—not to sock Marshall. He'd

fix Marshall later. Marshall was easy—not half as smart as he thought he was.

He allowed Marshall to precede him across the floor toward the cage. It was evident to him that Marshall didn't suspect him. The cashier went around the counter and walked into the grilled booth.

ARCH made a false start for his own desk; then just as Marshall closed the grated door to his cage, he whirled around. His revolver, with the silencer attached, was in his right hand, which he tried to hold steady.

The cashier looked up, found himself staring into the muzzle of the weapon, and surprised Arch by grinning. The would-be thief became both suspicious and bewildered. What was the tricky fool up to? he wondered.

"So that's the game, eh?" Marshall asked easily. "Well, you might as well put that gun up. You haven't got the nerve to use it."

"Shut up! Get them hands in the air!" snarled Arch. "I'll do the talkin'. I've been wantin' to get you for a long time, Marshall. You think you're so damned clever. Runnin' around in fine clothes, salvin' people with slick talk and givin' presents to girls—"

Marshall's suave smile widened. His hands went up.

"You aren't by any chance referring to Miss Gunderson?" he drawled evenly.

"Shut up!" repeated the goaded Arch. He reached under the wicket with his left hand and began pulling the stacked currency to him. His hand shook and he was clumsy. The narrow space between the bottom of the wicket and the marble base hampered him. Marshall continued giving him the benefit of his cynical, superior smile—and the cashier's mind was working with the speed of a bullet.

"Wipe that grin off your face!" ordered Arch, harassed.

Marshall saw that he was getting the other's goat.

"I can't—when I think what a sap you are!" he retorted. A quick thought leaped to his lips. He literally poured acid on Arch's tortured nerves when he added:

"You're too dumb to've noticed the button on the floor in my cage. I've got my foot on it right now. It sounds an alarm at the police station. Wilson or Bennings or any of the dicks'll be up here in a jiffy!"

Arch's mouth fell open. He stared at the cashier.

"If you were bright," said Marshall, "you'd have found that out. You'd better run along."

Arch's answer was to cram bills into his pocket faster than he had before. Panic was rapidly overtaking him. He felt weak all over—as if possessed by the lethargy of a nightmare, with someone attacking him while he was unable to move a muscle.

"If you do get away," grinned Marshall, following up his advantage, "they'll pick you up sooner or later. We've got a list of serial numbers of every bill in the batch. We'll send 'em all over the world, those numbers. That's the way they caught Hauptmann. Remember?"

Arch struggled frantically to get the last of the currency. His face was white now, its muscles twitching. He shoved the remaining bundle into his pocket. Marshall saw that he was through, and ready to go.

"Better step on it, dumbbell," he urged, still smiling. "Have your fun while you can. You won't last long. When I tell the cops who did this job—"

The final crack goaded Arch Tarrant to an unexpected frenzy. His finger contracted on the trigger of his aimed weapon. There was a deep-throated, hollow pop from the muzzle of the revolver, and a black hole appeared as if from nowhere in Marshall's forehead. He plunged forward, the cynical superior smile still etched on his face even in death.

Arch, completely unnerved, shoved his revolver into a pocket and raced madly across the floor to the door.

He ran from the bank, shot across the sidewalk and leaped into his seven-year-old sedan.

He looked both ways for a police car as he jammed his foot convulsively on the starter. Then, as the motor whirled into life, he realized for the first time that he had cruised for hours and that his gas tank must be almost empty. If he was going places, he'd have to have some—and the only money he had were the bills Marshall had said were marked! Nevertheless, he'd have to chance it.

HE imagined the police arriving at the bank as he raced down Main Street and pulled into Buddy Minter's station. As he drew up in front of the pumps, he noticed that he'd missed quite a bit of the blood and that the seat was stained darkly.

Just to be active—he had to move about to keep from jumping out of his skin—he put water in the car's radiator and looked at his tires while Minter removed the gas cap and inserted the nozzle of the gas hose.

"How much?" asked Minter.

"Fill 'er up!" snapped Arch.

Minter's eyebrows raised with surprise and curiosity. The order was unusual. Arch usually bought only one or two gallons or, if he'd been lucky in the pool hall, which was seldom, five gallons. And then he tried to charge it.

Minter started the gas flowing.

"Got cash?" he asked.

"Sure I got cash. And snap into it. I'm in a hurry."

Minter resented his tone.

"Money, eh? You musta robbed old Bostwick's bank!"

Arch fought to suppress a cold shudder. He eyed Minter. The gasoline man pulled the hose nozzle from the tank, screwed on the top.

Arch handed him a five dollar bill—crisp and new. Minter took it, held it up to the light, studied the engraving while Arch watched him, trembling with a frightened ague.

"What's the idea?" growled the robber.

"Jest wanted t' see if you made it

yourself," said Minter, eyeing him with what Arch thought was a knowing expression. "Workin' for Bestwick now, eh?"

"Stop yammerin' and get me change!" Arch's voice was hoarse.

Minter eyed him belligerently, then slumped into the office. Arch heard the clang of the cash register bell and thought the man was making change with deliberate slowness. Fear drove deeper and deeper into his being, like a sharp knife. The gasoline man finally reappeared and gave him some paper money and silver.

"This paper ain't nice and new, like you got from the bank," observed Minter. "But it'll do."

Arch's heart skipped a beat. He jammed the money into his packed pockets and leaped into the front seat. Minter came close and peered into the car. Arch, fearful that he might see and detect the bloodstains, let his clutch in with a jerk that sent his wheels slashing into the gravel driveway.

As the old crate careened from the station, he looked out of the corners of his eyes. He saw Minter go into the glass office and lift the receiver of his telephone.

His mind was racing like an unbalanced dynamo. He became aware of the fact that to get on the highway to St. Louis he'd have to cut through Cannonville's business section again.

He jammed his foot down on the throttle.

He began cursing himself. Why hadn't he known about that alarm from the bank to the police station? Why hadn't he learned about the bills being listed? Why had he been so unstrung in front of Minter? Why hadn't he remembered that he didn't have much gas and not driven so much?

Had the detectives—Wilson or Benning—discovered Marshall's body? Had he really killed Hilda, or had she dragged herself to the road and gotten help? Why hadn't he seen if she was dead?

His car shot down Main Street.

Detective-sergeant Charles "Killer" Wilson, burly and beefy and red of face, was in a dour mood. The night before, the chief had issued immediate and drastic orders to the entire police force, including detectives, to concentrate on capturing traffic violators. Motorists committing the slightest violations, such as illegal parking, were to be picked up. No one was to be spared, even in Cannonville, where everybody knew the chief of police and all his men.

"AND here I am," moaned Wilson, as he sat in his car, parked on First Street near Main, "sitting in a brand new police car that'll make eighty miles an hour, waiting for some old lady to run through a stop light, while burglaries and robberies can go hang."

He was talking to himself, and when he did that he was mad clean through.

"If the chief thinks—" he began. He was interrupted, not by a nervous matron making a forbidden left-hand turn, but by the sight of Arch Tarrant's car, ploughing through the intersection with a red light against it. He recognized Tarrant, whom he didn't like.

"Well I'll be hanged!" he exclaimed, as the car flashed past, narrowly missing a large sedan and sending pedestrians scurrying back against the safety of the curbsings. His starter whipped his warm motor to life and the car screamed away from its post of vantage.

"I've got that blamed idiot dead to rights."

Tires whined as the police car leaned into Main Street, taking the turn on two wheels. Wilson pressed the siren button and it wailed a screaming warning. The pedestrians whom Tarrant had cowered looked after the sleek car gratefully.

Arch Tarrant heard the wail of the police siren behind him. They were after him, then! His heart pounded against his ribs, and he felt all gone inside. It was as if some invisible hands were choking him. He gave the old car everything she had.

Risking a fleeting glance behind him, his worst fears were realized. It was a police car, and Detective Wilson was at the wheel! If it had been a traffic cop, that meant he'd only been going too fast or something, and he'd get a ticket. But Wilson!

His weather-beaten hack was no match for the trim police car.

Wilson, getting angrier and angrier as Arch Tarrant crashed through red lights, swore heatedly that he'd give the fool a fright that he'd always remember. He pulled alongside of Art Tarrant, motioned him to the curb. Tarrant paid no attention. The detective whipped out his revolver, waited a split second until he was sure that his bullet would do no harm, and fired ahead of the pounding old sedan. Tarrant still paid no attention.

Wilson pulled ahead, wheeled sharply to the right. There was the grate and crunch of fender against fender. Tarrant crashed against the curb and was almost unseated.

His first thought was to get out his revolver. As he tugged and pulled, Wilson leaped from the police sedan and, with drawn revolver, advanced on him. Tarrant saw that he didn't have a chance.

White and trembling, he slumped over his steering wheel. Wilson jumped on his running board.

"I've got you this time!" roared the detective. "You weren't satisfied with one. You had to make it two! There's been too many killings lately. And I've got the goods on you—"

Arch looked at him dumbly.

"Thought you could get away with 'em, eh? Get out of that car!"

Arch still eyed him wearily.

"You're going right to the chief," said Wilson.

"Okay—okay—" said Arch. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his revolver. The detective stiffened with surprise. Long experience told him to withhold an exclamation. Intuition warned him that something had gone wrong—that Arch Tarrant, who had always been on the borderline of crime, a town no-good, had stepped across.

Then his quick eye noted the bloodstains in the car and Tarrant's bulging pockets. Tarrant had been working at the Bostwick bank—

"We know all about it," Wilson said cagily, as he slipped handcuffs on Arch's wrists. "You might as well come clean; may get you off easier—"

He pulled his prisoner from the car, stuck the revolver with its silencer in a pocket. Then he frisked him. The neat bills, still in their wrappers, told one story; the blood, the other.

DETECTIVE WILSON and Detective Benning lounged in the Cannonville police station a few weeks later. Wilson tossed aside a newspaper which displayed in bold headlines:

ARCH TARRANT SENTENCED TO HANG!

"Funniest breaking case I ever handled," said the detective. "Think it's a traffic case, and it turns out to be a double murder. Thing that gets me is how he was so ripe to confess—sure I had the goods on him."

"Another funny thing," said Benning, "was that we found Marshall with a grin a yard wide on his mug—looked like he'd enjoyed getting killed."

"He should've been smiling," observed Wilson. "He'd embezzled more than two grand from Bostwick to spend on the Gunderson girl. At the time he was unexpectedly drilled by Arch, he was figuring to boost Arch's loot two thousand and cover himself on the books."

"Oh," said Benning.

Wilson reached over and picked up the newspaper again.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "I see where Bostwick's finally going to put in a signal button at the bank that'll ring a gong here in the station if anything's wrong. He should have done that years ago."

"That's right," agreed Benning. "And another thing—banks ought to keep the serial numbers of the bills they handle. Us cops'd have a better chance to pick up the robbers."

LID OF DEATH

THE MYSTERY OF A STOLEN BROOCH

By BARRY BRANDON

Author of "The Speed Demon," "Murder at Margot's," etc.



TWO A.M. Dr. Michael Collins strode briskly through the sixth floor corridor of the West-side Hotel. Without knocking, he entered 612, passed through the empty living room to the lighted bedroom beyond.

He nodded pleasantly to John Ryan, the Homicide Squad detective, glanced briefly at the disheveled figure in pajamas and the agitated night manager of the hotel. He walked over to one of the two beds, opened his medical kit, and began an examination of the dead body lying there.

Ryan turned to the pajama-clad man.

"Now, Mr. Tanner, let's have it from the beginning," he said quietly. "You say that you and your partner returned to your suite about twelve o'clock and went to sleep?"

Frank Tanner gulped nervously and nodded.

"That's right. Henderson and I had been trying to sell a valuable diamond brooch to one of our clients. You—you can check up on that. We were at his house most of the evening. We were unsuccessful, and so had to keep the brooch with us overnight."

Tanner paused and brushed his hand across his brow. Collins had finished his examination, and was standing by, listening intently.

"Well, we went to bed," Tanner continued. "I didn't hear a thing until I suddenly awoke and saw two figures in the room. Before I could do anything, one of them leaped toward me and began choking me. I fought with all my strength, and heard a struggle over at Henderson's bed.

"Suddenly I heard a shot, and the other

man cursed and said: 'I had to give it to him, Curly; he was getting the best of me.' Then I got a terrific wallop on the head, and the next I remember I was alone in the room, and Henderson was lying there dead. I called the manager immediately."

Tanner fingered the lump on the side of his head tenderly. Ryan looked across the room, noticed the overturned chairs and the table lamp and the disarrayed bed.

"Did they get the brooch?" he asked Tanner.

The other nodded, and pointed to an empty, satin-lined purple case lying on the top of the ransacked bureau.

"Looks pretty clear, Ryan," the manager said. "A couple of hotel crooks who must have received a tip on that diamond brooch, planned a steal and met with more opposition than they expected."

Ryan grunted his agreement.

COLLINS walked over to the dead body again.

He peered down for a moment, and straightened abruptly.

"Crooks, eh, Ryan?" he asked softly. He whirled on the pajama-clad Tanner. "There's your man—Tanner!"

"Where do you—how do you—" Tanner started stuttering, face pale and tense.

"You said that there were noises over at Henderson's bed, and that one of the men said that Henderson was getting the best of him," the doctor pointed out. "That means that your partner was awake and fighting. But how could he have been, Tanner, when he was shot through the eye—right through the eyelid!"

"He was sleeping—his eyes were closed—when you shot him, and then you faked all the rest. Thought you would grab the brooch for yourself, as well as the jewelry business. All you will get now is the hot seat."

Chinaman's Chance

*With Three Posses After
Him, Jud Cardigan,
Killer, Had to
Move Fast!*

By FRANK TRIEM

Author of "Death March," etc.

IN the beginning, Jud Cardigan hadn't meant to work for Pete Elliot. With three Arizona posses closing in upon him, however, he had remembered the remote foothill cabin where he had spent his boyhood. It was only when he found it occupied that the subterfuge of asking for employment presented itself to his quick brain.

From across the canyon, he studied the place half a day before he made up his mind to approach. A man in a green shirt had disappeared into the redwoods a little after sunrise, returning at noon. Another had spent the morning in a rocking-chair just outside the open door.

This individual scarcely moved; and, across the half mile separating them, Cardigan had formed one definite impression about this particular stranger. Cardigan knew before he crossed over that the man in the rocker, with the bright red blanket around his legs, was either sick, or old.

When at last the fugitive neared the cabin, his wary approach was soundless. Once, through a gap in the trees, he saw the big fellow in the green shirt leave the building,



The revolver barked, but Marsten dived

carrying a water bucket. Minutes later, before the sleeping figure in the rocker, the newcomer halted.

An aged Chinaman! The close-set, shifty eyes of Cardigan narrowed. Advancing, he closed a massive hand on the old man's shoulder and shook him into wakefulness.

"You, chink!" he rasped. "What name you savvy by?"

He glowered down into the brown face turned up toward his. No glint of recognition could he detect; only startled wonder, a trace, perhaps, of fear.

"Me called Lee Wun. You let go, please!" Cardigan's fingers tightened,

and Lee Wun lifted a shrill cry.
"Missah Elliot! Missah Elliot!"

That shout silenced the blue-jays in the willows down on the canyon floor; and it brought Pete Elliot, a second later, on the run from the spring back among the redwoods.

JUD CARDIGAN was respectful; almost servile, as he stood, hat in hand, the sunlight falling on his lean, predatory face.

"I'm looking for a job," he told Elliot. "I'm strong, and I'll work cheap."

Pete scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"I'm working a little placer, down the canyon a piece, and I could use a man," he admitted. "What do you call cheap?"

The heavy-lidded eyes of the newcomer studied briefly the cabin; the tall timber, behind and above; and, finally, Pete Elliot's hard competent features.

"Twenty dollars and board," he suggested.

Elliot laughed shortly.

"I'll give ten, board and blankets."

Cardigan pretended to hesitate.

"Okay," he said, at last. "Mister, you've hired you a man."

As Elliot led new employee toward the open door, Cardigan looked, with a trace of his former suspicion, at old Lee Wun. It had been a Chinaman, he recalled, who—but that was past and done with. This could be only a coincidence.

"What about him?" Cardigan rasped, with a jerk of his thumb toward the figure in the chair.

Elliot glanced that way, and his face softened.

"Lee saved my Dad's life, half a century ago, in Boomtown," he explained. "I look out for him, now that he's old."

So Cardigan went to work for Pete Elliot, and before the spring was over they had settled into a comfortable routine. Every morning a little after dawn, Elliot arose, started a fire and cooked breakfast. Jud it was who washed the dishes, while his employer carried Lee

Wun's wicker rocking chair into the first brassy sunlight, and gently led the old fellow out and tucked the blanket around his skinny knees.

"Okay, Missah Elliot," Lee always said. "Okay, okay."

The affection and the gentleness Elliot displayed toward his aged charge would have touched any heart less hard than that of Cardigan.

Once, and once only, the latter spoke his thoughts.

"If I was you," he said, "I'd send the old boy to the glue works!"

But next instant, at sight of the red anger which kindled in Pete's eyes, Jud turned hastily away.

It amused Cardigan to devil the old man in small ways—ways which, he believed, Elliot never saw. There was, for example, the matter of the salt in Lee Wun's coffee. At sight of Lee's face as he tasted the weird beverage, Jud laughed uproariously.

But the big man didn't laugh when, returning with Elliot at sundown, he found the blankets of his bunk folded neatly in a pile, just outside the door, with the water bucket standing upon them, upside-down. Every blanket was soaked. With a hoarse yell of rage, Cardigan advanced upon Lee Wun, who sat, blandly unconscious, at the table.

Elliot stepped between them.

"You asked for it," Pete said grimly. "I been watching, fellow. Mebbe I should have butted in sooner. Now you take your medicine—and like it!"

For a moment, Jud held his ground. Then, muttering, he turned away.

LATE one afternoon in August, Cardigan, who had returned ahead of Elliot to start supper, had a visitor. Jud's crafty eyes widened, then narrowed to slits, as, turning from the stove, he beheld the short squat man who stood in the open door.

The newcomer's scarred face was twisted in a dark, evil smile.

"Marsten!" Cardigan muttered. He wet his lips, then glanced fearfully

through the little window beside him. "What—how—"

"Keep your hair on, Jud! Don't say you ain't glad to see me?"

The new arrival laughed silently, and Jud Cardigan drew a hairy forearm across his face, which had suddenly begun to ooze drops of perspiration.

"It ain't that," he said. "But Elliot'll be in any minute—"

"Yeah? Who's Elliot? No matter—let him come." Marsten looked approvingly around him. "You got a nice place, Jud," he murmured.

Cardigan ignored this. He crossed to the open door and glanced out at the wicker rocking-chair of Lee Wun, a dozen paces away. The old Chinaman was strolling up the path from the canyon floor; but he was still far beyond ear-shot. Jud returned to the stove.

"How's things down to Ojai?" he asked.

Marsten shrugged powerful shoulders. His thick brown fingers busied themselves with cigarette papers and tobacco.

"They're still looking for us," he said calmly.

A LONG moment of silence was broken by the newcomer. "Them beans is burning," he observed.

Hastily Cardigan shoved the skillet to the back of the stove. He set down his fork, wiped massive hands on thighs.

"If only that fellow had put 'em up, like we told him to, we wouldn't never have let daylight through him," he growled. Again he peered through the window toward the distant redwoods where Elliot was apparently lingering over his work.

In the ensuing silence, Jud Cardigan heard Lee Wun's rocker creak as the old man lowered himself into it.

During the half hour that followed, the two shifty-eyed men talked in undertones, chiefly of the evil deed that had brought them both here. It was growing dark when Cardigan glanced once more through the window at his elbow.

"It's queer what's keeping Elliot," he muttered.

A strangled shout, vibrant with surprise and anger, brought him around. It was Marsten who had cried out. In stunned silence the two men faced the open door, where stood Pete Elliot, a short-barreled revolver in his hand.

"He heard us!" Cardigan chattered. "He knows—"

Elliot glanced briefly at his employee, and in that split second Marsten got busy.

The revolver barked, but Marsten ducked under the path of the bullet in a headlong dive. He struck Pete's knees; and Elliot, his gun flying through the air, crashed to the floor.

The fight that followed was bloody but brief. In the end, Elliot was down, his face battered to a pulp. Marsten had wielded his chunk of firewood to good effect.

Cardigan placed a shaking hand upon the victim's heart.

"Dead!" he muttered.

Marsten shrugged.

"Then let's haul him out in the underbrush. If th' coyotes pass him up, we'll plant him later."

One at each end of Elliot's body, the two men filed from the cabin door. And then old Lee Wun awoke and lifted his shrill voice.

"Missah Elliot! You sick? You mebbe hurt?"

Cardigan scowled. Marsten looked curiously over his shoulder at the frail figure huddled in the chair.

"Who's the old boy?" he wanted to know.

"This'll do—here at the edge of the trees," Jud said. "Him? Just some old coot Elliot's been keeping pensioned out. I'll have some fun with him, later."

When they came back, Jud stopped above Lee Wun, who slowly lifted a brown, wrinkled hand to his chin.

Cardigan hit him with his open palm. Lee's head snapped to one side, and he cowered down in his chair.

"I'm leaving you outside for th' coyotes tonight," the big fellow said loudly.

Supper was a silent meal, with each man covertly observing the other. After they had shoved back their chairs, Cardigan called for a showdown.

"Well?" he growled. "What was the idea?"

Marsten raised black, bushy brows.

"Idea?"

"In follering me here," said Cardigan. He was breathing, suddenly, as if he had been running.

"I come because I hadn't no other place to go," Marsten explained. "They was right after me, every minute. Then I remembered you talking about this dump, where you was drug up. I figured after we split you might have come here." He was silent a moment, studying with appraising eyes the sullen face of his companion. "If you wanted things to yourself, you should a kep' your yap shut," he added.

"I see that now," Cardigan muttered. "Well—what's next?"

Marsten lifted massive shoulders in a shrug.

"You tell me," he said shortly. "But remember one thing: I'll talk and talk plenty if the law catches up with me. You better see it don't!"

MOONLIGHT slanted in at the east window when Cardigan sat cautiously up.

Without noise he threw back the blankets, swung his massive legs over the edge of the bunk, gained his feet. Marsten might be playing 'possum—but that was a chance he had to take. He drifted silently across to the stove. His hot fingers closed on the cold, smooth handle of the ax.

Confused and rather horrible sounds filled the dark. Thirty seconds later, Jud returned to his bunk, alone.

"Marsten said it was up to me to keep him from the law—or it from him!" Cardigan reminded himself, with a twisted grin. "Come daylight, I'll finish the chink!"

The sun was shining in the east window when next the killer awoke. He yawned, stretched; then sat up and pulled on his boots. Avoiding

with his eyes the blood-spattered bunk across the room, he crossed to the door, flung it open, and stood looking out.

The cruel smile was gone in an instant from his face. He stood, staring vacantly at an empty wicker rocking chair.

Cardigan licked his lips.

"It's a cinch he can't have went far," he said aloud.

He looked aimlessly around the canyon wall. The earth was covered with weeds, yellow as gold and brittle as glass. No chance of tracking the missing Chinaman. Driven, now, by something stronger than intuition, Jud Cardigan headed at a shambling run toward the place in the trees where he and Marsten had left the body of Elliot.

At the edge of the redwoods, he stumbled to a halt. A livid flush mounted into his ugly face.

"That damned chink!" he whispered. "Stronger than I thought! He's hid the corpse—for evidence against me—and gone for the law!"

At a run, Cardigan returned to the cabin.

He wasted no time looking for the old Chinaman, or for the body of Elliot. There was only one thing for him to do now—get away.

It took him less than twenty minutes to throw a saddle on Elliot's mule, to pack a little food and fill the only canteen he could discover. Mounting, then, he rode swiftly away.

BY evening the hills were behind him and he was well out in the desert. That same night, the mule pulled its picket stake and departed.

Next morning, Cardigan continued south, on foot. The water in his canteen was almost gone; he hoped, however, to reach Box Springs before noon.

But when, at last, thirsty and exhausted, he stood looking down into the water hole, his blistered face mirrored sudden panic. The bottom of the spring contained only dust; dust and the half-decayed body of a luckless coyote.

Cardigan dropped down upon the sand, in the scant shade of a smoke-tree, and tried to think of a way out. It was twenty-seven miles to Stovepipe Canyon, the next possible source of water. And if that turned out to be dry—

"I got to risk it!" the killer whispered.

Sundown.

The sky in the west was lemon-yellow, shading by degrees into green, lavender, and the blue of a polished rifle barrel. Jud Cardigan, standing at a bend in the faint trail, uttered a despairing croak. There was a sign tacked to the trunk of a nearby mesquite.

**NO WATER AT STOVEPIPE CANYON!
PROSPECTOR, TURN BACK!**

Foam flecked the murderer's twitching lips. He clawed at his throat.

"I'll go back," he said thickly. "That spring of—Elliot's—only water in eighty mile? Mebbe—I kin—make it!"

HE was a sorry sight when thirty-six hours later, he staggered over the canyon rim and zigzagged down toward the rear of the cabin. His shoes were ripped open, his shirt fluttered in ribbons about his sunburned shoulders; and he had long ago thrown away his gun. Cardigan had made it, but only by the narrowest of margins.

There had been a bucket of water in the cabin when he left. It was nearer than the spring. With a hoarse cry, Jud weaved around to the front of the building—and straight into what seemed a fantastic dream.

As he stood swaying, there came to him the conviction that a cog in the great machine of time had slipped. The sun was shining, as it had on that morning when first he came here; blue-jays were shrieking in the chaparral, down on the canyon floor—and there; in the wicker rocking-chair before the open door, a red blanket about his skinny knees, sat Lee Wun.

Cardigan's bulging eyes rolled. Ten feet away, under a live-oak stood a saddled horse!

Jud looked again at the Chinaman. Lee's dull eyes were turned upon the killer.

"Missah Elliot velly smart man," Lee Wun observed. "Long ago, him think mebbe you bad man. So, he have hoss hidden up canyon." One of Lee's frail hands gestured significantly. "He strong man, too," the old fellow added, with childish pride. "You think you kill him? All-same wrong!"

Cardigan, by a prodigious effort, steadied himself.

"It's queer Pete didn't ride for help," he muttered, more to himself than to the old man in the rocking chair.

"Him not need help," Lee Wun said complacently. "Him follow you on hoss; make mule run away while you sleep. After you get velly tired, him put up this!"

Leaning over, Lee Wun closed a skinny hand on something—a bit of weathered board—that lay on the ground beside the chair. He held it triumphantly up, and for the last time Cardigan beheld the words that had defeated him:

**NO WATER AT STOVEPIPE CANYON!
PROSPECTOR, TURN BACK!**

Later, Cardigan saw his mistake. He should have made a rush for the saddled horse, ten steps away. Once aboard, he would have stood a chance of escape. With the body of Marsten still somewhere about, he was certainly due to hang.

But at that time, his seething brain thought only of revenge.

"I'll kill you!" Cardigan muttered. "I'll kill everybody! I'll—"

He took a step toward the Chinaman; and again, as on that morning so long ago, the old man's voice rose shrilly.

"Missah Elliot! Missah Elliot!"

And again Pete Elliot came running. But this time he wasted no words on the murderer he had trapped. He merely swung from the hip.

The Flying SKULL

*Greer, the Swindler,
Didn't Know the Grim
Hand that Fate Was
Dealing Him!*

By J. ALLAN DUNN

*Author of "Dead Man's Tale," "The Voice
from Center Street," etc.*

GABRIEL GREER sat at his scarred desk and regarded his visitor with eyes that held all the humanity of a squid.

The room was on the ground floor of the house he owned in the middle West Twenties, and used as both office and residence. The brownstone front was scaly, the whole place needed paint and cleaning. The furniture was shabby.

Greer was not. His attire was expensive and carefully chosen. It was the wardrobe of a banker. Clean-shaven, hale, florid and slightly portly, Greer, save for the baleful expression in his eyes, masked by tinted glasses, appeared a man of wealth and good taste. He might have been a philanthropist.

The man across the desk looked what he was—a fairly prosperous and successful accountant of an up-state town. A competent person whose business had become restricted by the depression. To him, at this moment, Greer was still the kindly man of affairs who had offered him a mortgage on a business block that John Clay, the accountant, had bought when times were booming.

Clay had a hobby. He had prob-



Murder had been done!

ably the finest private collection of moths and beetles and butterflies in America. It had considerable scientific value but, as a financial asset, would be represented by Clay himself in red ink. He had spent a good deal of the mortgage money on properly housing his specimens. Now he wanted Greer to renew that mortgage.

Greer listened to Clay's request with hidden amusement and contempt. He was not a handsome man, for all his grooming. But he was intensely vain. He had been born with poor teeth, his metabolism was faulty. He wore top and bottom plates of teeth as false as the smile they effected.

Because he had a parrot jaw, with a soft palate of unusual characteristics; it had been impossible for him to be fitted with an upper plate that retained perfect suction.

Greer had developed a habit of adjusting it with the edge of his thumbnail when it slipped. It was a habit of which he had become almost unconscious, but not quite. His pride was always tender when he was reminded of his imperfect teeth.

To grant Clay the request would be to pass up a rich and calculated profit. Perfunctorily, he glanced over the papers in the case. He meant to make this small-town accountant humiliate himself, beg for the renewal, before he refused him. Greer knew all about Clay's financial affairs, all about the expensive hobby.

Greer made a slight clucking noise with his tongue. The upper plate slipped. Automatically, he set the edge of his thumbnail beneath the teeth.

The process fascinated Clay. He had noticed it several times with sympathy. He himself had false teeth, and because his local dentist had sent none too excellent casts to a dental factory for the finished job, Clay had experienced much the same trouble as Greer.

He had found a remedy for it. He was naturally a man of good nature, and he was desirous of standing in well with Greer.

He fished in his wallet, took out a card and offered it to Greer.

"You might be interested," said Clay.

Greer glanced carelessly at the card. His face flushed crimson. It looked apoplectic as his rage mounted.

Five minutes later, Clay was in the street, slightly dazed, knowing he was not only close to ruin but that he had been tricked by Greer. The foreclosure of the mortgage would be the beginning of the end of Clay's credit.

For Greer, however, Clay's ruin meant gain.

There was a Government project in connection with relief, that would make the property of Clay not merely saleable but send its price soaring many times beyond its value. And, in dismissing Clay, Greer took care that Clay knew what wealth he had lost.

Left alone, Greer chuckled. He set the edge of his thumb beneath his teeth and clicked them into place. Then he picked up the card Clay had left. He read it:

TOOTH-EASE

Speak and eat in perfect comfort
as well as you did with your own teeth.

Forms a comfort cushion that holds
your plate secure without ROCKING,
or CHAFING. No DROPPING. No
FIDGETING.

25c & 50c boxes at all good Drug Stores
GRIPPO COMFORT CORPORATION
Big Falls New York

GABRIEL GREER sat in his drawing room on the Albany Flier. Once again he was prepared to bring off a coup. He had caused to be inserted in a local newspaper of the town in which he was interested, an attractive advertisement offering mortgages on liberal and easy terms to the inhabitants.

Let the mortgagee beware! That was Greer's motto.

He gloated as he looked over the documents. He was beginning to

feel hungry. The afternoon was hot, and he had taken off coat and vest, collar and tie. He took out his teeth, and placed them in a cleansing lotion in the little private lavatory.

He began to make his toilet with precision. He took from his pig-skin suitcase a clean shirt, and laid it out. His dressing case was open, with its array of toilet articles.

Greer took from its niche a silver-capped tube an inch and a half in diameter, five inches in length. He had it almost filled with white powder. This was "Tooth-ease." He had become angry at Clay's daring to suggest there was any deficiency about him; but he had tried it; and even felt grateful to Clay—though not to the extent of renewing his mortgage.

Clay—to use the vernacular—had lost his shirt.

Greer changed his shirt, arranged his tie, took out his teeth from the glass that held the cleansing lotion, rinsed them off. He let them dry, and then powdered the top plate with the Tooth-ease.

Then he put in his lower plate, attached to his few remaining teeth with a gold clip, slid in his now snugly fitting upper plate, and started to smile at his reflection in the mirror.

As he did so, the porter knocked on the drawing-room door, called:

"First call fo' the dinin' cah."

But Greer barely heard him. He was seized with dizziness. The mucous membranes of palate and cheeks burned. His heart seemed clutched by a giant hand. He fell to the floor, and went into violent convulsions.

The Pullman porter, coming in for his brush-up tip, found the body. At Albany, police took charge. The body of Gabriel Greer was taken to the morgue. An autopsy was performed.

"Hydrocyanic acid, administered as cyanide of potassium by the deceased, believing he was using a plate-powder for his artificial teeth. The characteristic post-mortem appearances were present. The fingernails show purple

patches. The blood was coagulated, and hemorrhages existed in both the pleura and pericardium. The mucous membranes of the mouth show corrosion, and the odor of hydrocyanic acid was plain in the cavities of the body."

GARRITY, the detective in charge of the Homicide Squad, read the report of the medical examiner.

"Must have been pulled by somebody who was close to him, Tim. We'll get a check-up on this Greer. I've got a line on him. Seems to have been some sort of a realty shark, lined up with a slick bunch right here in Albany. He kept that tube of tooth powder, or whatever you'd call it, in that dressing-case. We'll see what the fingerprinters have to say about it."

That report was not yet ready, but Garrity took the case they had powdered and photographed, and looked it over with his magnifying glass.

"I'll be darned," he said softly. "Look here, Tim, and see if you see what I do."

To Garrity's experienced eye, the loops and whorls and islands shown up by the powdering seemed to belong to one individual, undoubtedly the dead man.

But there was something else. On the inside of the leather flap that closed the dressing case.

"The guy who switched the stuff in the tube, or put it back after he had dosed it, used a cloth, or gloves," he said. "But take a look at this!"

There was the imprint of a skull, distinct enough. It was no larger than half the space of Garrity's little fingernail. It was brown. A ghastly thing, the token of sudden death.

"I never saw the beat of it," said Mahoney.

"Rush those prints up here," said Garrity. "Get the Bureau chief to bring them."

"We spotted it, sure," said the fingerprinter. "It's not in our line. The regular prints are all those of the deceased. But it's sure a good picture of a skull, however it came there."

"You're a lot of use," said Garrity. "Just the same, before we hop to New York, I'm goin' to have Doc Lawson take a squint at this."

Lawson was in charge of the new department of Criminal Investigation, with its modern laboratory.

His interest was immediate. There was already a photographic record of the curious emblem. Lawson picked up the dressing case.

"There's a distinct residue here," he said after his profound examination through his own powerful apparatus. "I'll make an immediate analysis. I could make a guess at it, but guessing has nothing to do with scientific findings. I'll give you one thing to chew on, Garrity. That skull once flew."

He left Garrity and Mahoney looking at each other.

"Now, what the devil an' all does he mean, with his talk of flyin' skulls?" Mahoney scratched his head.

"He'll be tellin' us before we leave," Garrity was certain.

Before Lawson came with his discovery, Garrity had found out just how Greer made his money.

But he shook his head dubiously over Lawson's "finding." It left him baffled. Yet he was sure it was a lead, and Lawson had given him a valuable clue as to how that sign of a skull, the emblem used by chemists and druggists on their labels, might tie up with the murder of Gabriel Greer.

IT tied up with vengeance, within the first minute of his arrival with Mahoney at the house of Gabriel Greer. The man who answered the door was the sole occupant. He was, he said, clerk to Mr. Greer.

Garrity, official, efficient and imperative, towered over the man as he sat, by the detective's orders, at the deal table in the basement room that was part of his living quarters. Mahoney stood by the door, stolid and vigilant.

"So, your name is Clay? You handle Greer's accounts and do general chores. He gave you the job after he had taken over your prop-

erty on a mortgage. Sorry for you, perhaps?"

"He gave me the job," said Clay, "because he wanted a good man at figures, who would work for next to nothing, over and above his board and room. He wanted a man-of-all-work. He got one."

"All right. And you collect butterflies?"

There could be no denial to that. A shallow box lay on the table, lined with cork strips upon which were displayed various specimens, their wings skilfully outstretched. The table top was cluttered with jars, with a cheap microscope and mounting materials.

"Where is Mr. Greer?" demanded Garrity.

Clay's face revealed nothing under Garrity's scrutiny.

"He should be in Albany. He went there on business."

"He's there all right. *Dead!* Found murdered on the train! Does that surprise you?"

"You mean—he was shot, killed—"

Clay's face was still impassive. Too much so, Garrity decided. He tried another tack, still rapping out his questions, watching the other's face and eyes intently. The detective had picked up one of the jars. He pulled the tray of specimens toward him.

His eyes narrowed, then widened. He pointed at one of the specimens.

"What kind of a moth is that?" he demanded. Mahoney sauntered over to the table. He betrayed his interest in a low whistle. Clay did not appear in the least perturbed.

The moth was a brown one, of fair size, with shapely, narrow wings, suggestive of swift flight. And on the back of the thorax, against a purplish ground, there showed distinctly in dull orange the design of a skull.

"It is the death's-head hawk moth," said Clay. "*Acherentia atropos.*"

Garrity nodded, his eyes cold.

"Here is Greer's dressing-case," he said. "How did that mark get there? We've had it microphotographed, analyzed. Scales, or feathers, from the back of one of those moths."

Clay was startled now. He glared at the emblem, held his tongue as Garrity persisted.

"You wear false teeth, don't you?"

Clay nodded an assent.

"Use this 'Tooth-ease' to keep the plates in place? Recommended it to Greer. And mixed *his* with cyanide of potassium. That's what killed him. The same stuff you use in these jars, underneath plaster-of-paris, so that, while you keep the jar corked, the hydrocyanic gas will fill the container and kill the butterflies so quickly they won't flutter and spoil their wings."

Clay smiled thinly.

"I had no idea the police knew anything of entomological research," he said. "Your facts are correct. But—"

"You murdered Greer," said Garrity. "You were smart enough not to leave prints on the tube, but you left your trademark just the same, the mark of the flying skull. You might have got away with it, at that, if the cyanide had not made him retch, eject the plate, call attention to it. *You murdered Greer.*"

CLAY smiled his thin smile again. Then the cunning gleam in his eyes burst into a flame. His smile expanded to a laugh.

"You are clever," he said. "But it does not much matter. Only, you are wrong in one thing. I did not murder Greer. I *executed* him. The mark of *Acherentia atropos* surprised me. I overlooked it. I was in the yard when Greer called me, as if I were his dog. He was suave to most people; to me, his slave, he was a tyrant. He set me to any menial task. But it was a place where I could have some hours alone, to prepare a few poor specimens—and to find out all about Greer's chicanery, to expose him."

His voice was shrill, almost hysterical.

"He told me he had got a telegram and must go to Albany. He ordered me to pack some things for

him while he got together some papers. He had barely time to make the train. When he shouted at me, I had my hand upon a moth, a death's-head hawk moth. I—I am not so well as I have been—a little nervous. I am not used to being bullied. It was dark. I had only a flashlight with a weak battery. No doubt I jabbed my thumb down on the moth. I left it there. I found



Acherentia Atropos

the next morning that a bird had pecked away the body.

"So, no doubt, I left that print on the inside of the flap. I handled the tube carefully, with a cloth, and I changed the contents for what I had already prepared. I knew why he went to Albany. It was because he was ready to pull off another of his infernal tricks, to ruin others as he had ruined me, to laugh over their downfall. He reveled in the misfortunes he brought about, in the despair of his victims. And he was bound to arrange for more deviltry. But I had made up my mind there should be no more of it!"

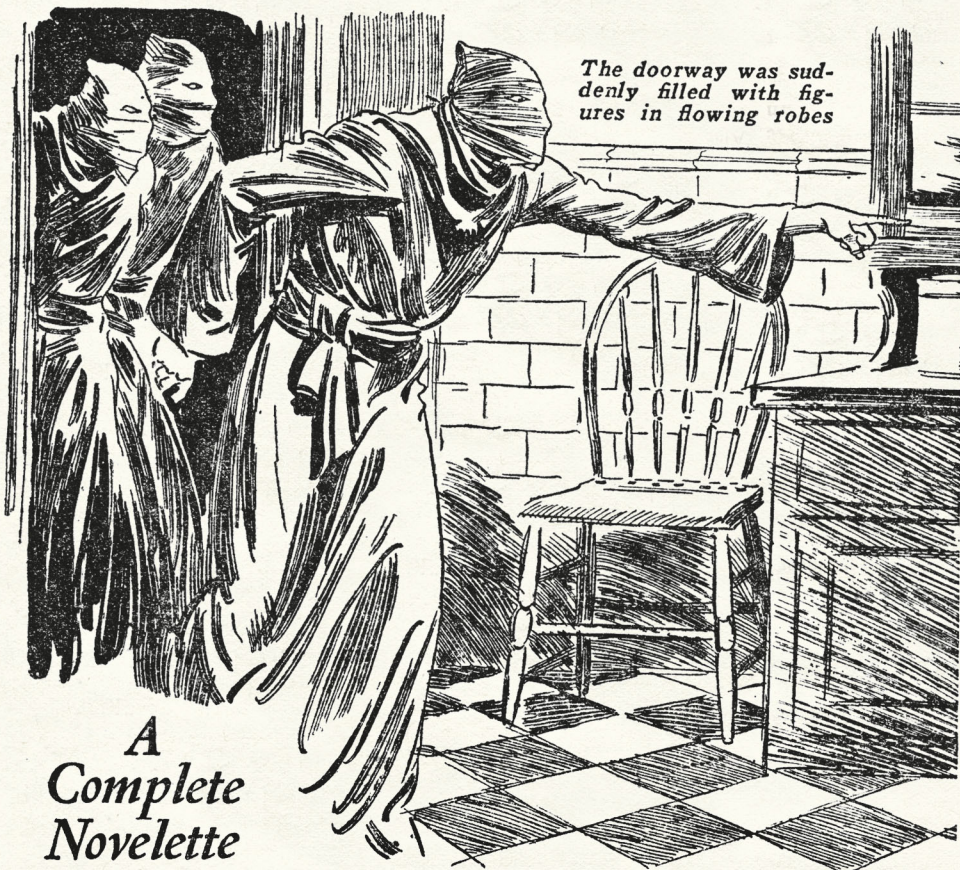
Clay's eyes were bloodshot now. He snatched at a tin, took off its lid, tilted white crystals to the palm of his hand.

"I made sure," he cried. "I put this much into the plate powder—"

Garrity swooped, clutched the man's wrist, and spilled the cyanide in time.

"You don't want to do that," he chided. "You'll never get the chair for this. Maybe they'll send you upstate a while, and if you behave yourself they'll let you chase butterflies to your heart's content."

CRUCIBLES OF



A Complete Novelette

CHAPTER I

The Walking Corpse

THE mournful sounding chimes of St. Patrick's struck midnight with cold, measured grace. Seated before the window of the unlighted room, Vilma Manquist listened and shuddered. She had been sitting thus in the dark for hours, and the tinkle of the bells seemed to speak to her of the death which had invaded this house.

Upstairs lay the corpse of her

father. A day or two ago he had been hearty and strong, pursuing his work in research chemistry, on the very heels of his great discovery. Then he had complained of a slight headache. An hour later he had cried out in great pain. A few moments later, he was dead. Heart failure, the doctors had said.

Vilma could scarcely believe it. So sudden had the end been that not yet had she been able to give vent to her pent-up emotions. An icy weight dragged at her heart, her brain was inactive, dulled as though drugged.

Walking Corpses—and Hooded Fiends—Do

DOOM

By JAMES
DUNCAN

*Author of "The Scourge of India,"
"The Dynamo Horror," etc.*



And now, as she heard the somber chiming of the bells, a growing sense of uneasiness took possession of her.

She stared at the hall doorway. A sound, stealthy and insidious, had invaded the house as the last chime died. It was the sound of a door somewhere upstairs, opening. She hesitated no more, but moved to the hall door, opened it. She listened. The house was silent again, unnaturally so.

The spacious front hall was dimly lighted, sinister with dark areas

where the bracket light did not quite reach. Tall blot of shadow reared up in eerie shapes on the walls, invaded the high, white ceiling. Vilma waited, trembling. Then she bit her lower lip, the back of her hand pressed against her teeth to prevent a scream.

Something—a whir of light—flickered down the steps—and disappeared! Immediately, whispering voices sounded from overhead and footsteps began to descend the carpeted stairs.

The muffled tread was slow, de-

the Bidding of a Sinister Super-Criminal!

liberate. But not at all stealthy. For a second, Vilma listened. Then something choked in a lump in her throat, her breathing momentarily ceased and her eyes widened unnaturally. There was something familiar, terribly familiar, about the sound of the descending footsteps; something haunting as though recalled in a dream.

She took a step toward the balustrade, but she never reached it. Horror stopped her, held her in thrall.

The sound of other footsteps impinged on her hearing, but she scarcely paid them any attention. She lifted her head slowly, looked up over the heavy balustrade.

A tall, white-haired figure of a man clad in a white shroud was coming down the stairs. His face was white as death. He moved very slowly, almost reluctantly. His mouth was loose, expressionless; his eyes were closed.

"Father! Father!"

Vilma's cry was a jangling scream of terror, of unutterable amazement. A feeling of loathsome dread possessed her. Her father, dead, was walking! He had left his coffin. He had—

She took stumbling steps forward, blindly staggering until the foot of the stairs stopped her advance. Then she stood still, her slim, young body rigid with horror, her eyes wide. The white-shrouded figure had not heard her outcry, nor paused in its descent. Incoherent words tumbled from Vilma's lips, filling the house with jarring echoes.

She jerked about suddenly, pivoting on one foot, choking back a scream of terror. Too late! Something wet slapped against her mouth, held in place by strong, sinewy fingers.

She could not hold out long. Slowly, she sank to the floor. Night flowed through her tortured mind. She fought to retain consciousness.

She was dimly aware of voices, talking close at her ears, but she could distinguish little of the words. She heard one name repeated several times.

"Be careful—only Dr. Gorton—no one—Dr. Gorton—she's safe, now—"

A dull murmur followed. She had the curious notion that the front door had been flung open, that a revolver shot had been fired.

HER eyes opened after a time, and she found she was not alone, but looking up into the eyes of a pleasant-faced young man who was bending over her.

"I've just come to, myself," the young man was saying. "And I've phoned for the chief and for a doctor, too."

She noticed the gun in his hand. She recalled the sound of the shot. She tottered to her feet, shivering violently.

"Bill! Wh-what happened?"

First-grade Detective Bill Corby looked at her quizzically.

"Search me, Vilma," he said. "I've been worried about you ever since that attempt was made to steal your father's invention. Knowing you were alone this evening I thought I'd run over. I was just coming up the walk when I heard you scream. I barged in and found a mess of trouble. A dozen men or more, wearing hoods over their faces, were standing around you. There was another chap dressed like a—like a corpse. Honest, he gave me a start. He—he looked like your— Hey, where are you going?"

But she did not answer. Clinging to the balustrade, she went upstairs. Bill Corby stared after her a moment, then bounded up beside her. She was too weak to make the last few steps, and he helped her by placing an arm about her shoulders. She went straight to a door in the middle of the hall, flung it open. Her hand probed the wall, found the switch and clicked on the light.

A shuddering breath eased past her slightly parted lips. There was a weakness in her legs, a cold, empty feeling in the pit of her stomach. Bill Corby followed the direction of her eyes.

There was a coffin in the middle of the room, supported on two chairs.

And the coffin was yawningly empty. The corpse was gone!

Vilma pointed a wavering finger at it.

"He walked out of it! He *walked!*" She took a tottering step forward. "I can't—"

Corby's arms reached out and caught the girl as she collapsed in a dead faint.

"Poor kid!" he muttered. "You've been through hell."

CHAPTER II

Golden Ghouls

CHIEF INSPECTOR MARCH strode up and down the library of the Manquist home with his hands clasped behind his back, his head sunk almost to his chest. Every once in a while he shot a glance at young Bill Corby as though he were weighing some momentous decision in his mind. There was a close friendship and understanding between these two men that bridged their difference in age and rank.

The chief had listened to everything Vilma and Corby could tell him of the night's happenings. He had asked some questions, nodded his grey head sagely at the answers. Now he was striding up and down, saying nothing. Corby watched him with a quizzical eye. He knew something important was coming. Suddenly the chief stopped in front of him.

"I'm going to tell you something, Corby," he said. "This sort of thing has happened before, within the past two months."

Corby gave no indication of surprise. There had been rumors circulating through Headquarters for a month or more, about a strange, new kind of crime—robbing coffins of their dead.

"Dr. Ancil Manquist is the third victim of these ghouls," March went on. "We've kept the details quiet, because this is the kind of case that stampedes popular imagination. Dr. Manquist was a scientist. I happen to know that the Government was

subsidizing him to discover the potentialities of the Sigma ray for use in military science. This, of course, makes his sudden death and the disappearance of his body so much more important."

There was an eager gleam in Bill Corby's eyes which March noted with satisfaction. Corby perhaps did not know it, but the chief had long ago picked him as one of the best in the department. Corby, square-shouldered, two-fisted, was young and amazingly efficient.

"The other two similar cases," March went on, "also concern scientists. One was John Meyer, the aviation engineer. The other was Dr. Horace Moore, the medical research authority." His voice dropped low. "Corby, I'm going to put you in full charge of this investigation. You've been in contact with it, to a certain extent. You must have some notions of your own—"

"I think," Corby put in, "I've got something of a lead in what Vilma Manquist has told us. Just before she fell unconscious she heard the name of Dr. Gorton mentioned several times. Vilma, you know, has helped her father in his work. A couple of years ago, after an accident, Dr. Manquist's hands became almost paralyzed. Since then Vilma has assisted in all of his experiments. Vilma's therefore quite familiar with her father's work. And Dr. Hugh Gorton, she tells me, is engaged in the same field of science. Gorton is hot on the trail of the Sigma ray. Dr. Manquist was much farther along. I'd better get after Dr. Gorton."

"Look over the records first," March suggested. "Get all the facts on the disappearance of John Meyer and Dr. Moore. That will give you a starting point."

"Right," Corby said.

He started to leave.

But Vilma Manquist followed him out to the door.

"Mr. Corby—I wish I could help in some way," she said.

He smiled, took her hand. "Maybe you can. I'll see what develops first."

But—are you going to ‘mister’ me? You called me Bill one time.”

“Then—I’ll do it again—Bill,” she smiled back at him.

The records told Bill Corby little beyond the fact that John Meyer and Dr. Horace Moore had died suddenly of what doctors called heart failure, and that their bodies had been stolen the night before burial.

In the morning he rang Dr. Hugh Gorton’s bell. Dr. Gorton was a man of about fifty, completely white-haired, handsome and distinguished looking. He received Corby in his laboratory, excusing the lack of ceremony by the fact that he was very busy. Another man was at work over a table near the window. He stood up as Dr. Gorton and Corby entered. The man was introduced as George Duck, the scientist’s Chinese assistant.

George Duck spoke perfect English. He looked at Corby with expressionless, enigmatic eyes as the latter identified himself, and then asked bluntly:

“Why should the police want to annoy Dr. Gorton?”

“To answer a few simple questions,” Corby replied. “Where were you last night, Dr. Gorton?”

“Why—at home. I turn in pretty early, you know. Mine is a rather simple life. Only my work occupies my time. I bother with very little else.”

“Can you prove the time you went to bed? Can you prove you did not leave the house?”

Dr. Gorton looked as if he did not quite understand.

“I don’t know what right you have to ask such questions,” he said. “If you want proof, the servants—I have three of them—can vouch for me; and George, here, knows what time I turned in. What time was it, George?”

“About ten-thirty, sir. Your usual time.”

“Thank you. Now, Mr. Corby, tell me the reason for this visit?”

“What does your work consist of, Dr. Gorton?” Corby asked, ignoring the question.

“It’s no secret,” Dr. Gorton said. “George and I are studying the Sigma ray. We have advanced pretty far into it. Reasonably soon, I hope to give the world the results of my research.”

“H’m. And do you know anyone else occupied with the same problem?”

“Yes. Dr. Ancil Manquist. He was working along similar lines. Unfortunately, Dr. Manquist died just the other day—”

“Is there any reason why Dr. Manquist should have disliked you, or you him?”

Gorton stared.

“Why, we were the very best of friends!” he exclaimed. “Rivals in science, of course, but—”

“Dr. Manquist’s death leaves you alone in the Sigma ray field, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, but—”

“I’d like to talk to your servants.”

Corby interviewed them separately. There was a cook, a maid and a valet-chauffeur. All answered questions readily and all corroborated their master’s statements. When Corby stepped out into the hall after dismissing them, Dr. Gorton was waiting for him.

“I have a right to know the meaning of this inquisition,” he said.

“Simply this,” Corby told him. “Last night, the dead body of Dr. Manquist rose from its coffin and walked out of the house.”

Gorton looked incredulous.

“You don’t actually mean he walked! You’re joking!”

“I’m not joking at all,” Corby said. “In fact, I was there when it happened.”

CORBY phoned Headquarters after he left, and gave instructions to post a couple of plainclothes men at Dr. Gorton’s house. Then he went on to Long Island, to the home of John Meyer.

It was Meyer’s widow who received him. She was a sweet-faced, tired-looking little woman; she answered his questions readily, but her store of information was hardly worth the

time Corby had taken to come and see her. All she knew she had already told the police, and that was very little, indeed.

Meyer had been brilliant in his field. His health had been excellent. One night, three weeks ago, he had come home complaining of a headache. He had made an attempt to eat his evening meal. In the midst of it, he collapsed in his chair—dead. Relatives had arranged matters and burial was set for the next day.

That night, Mrs. Meyer heard some slight noises in the house. Two brothers of her husband were in the house with her. They, too, had heard noises but had not troubled to investigate. In the morning, the body of John Meyer was missing.

The third victim, Dr. Horace Moore, had been a bachelor. He had lived in the heart of the city, his menage superintended by a housekeeper. Upon inquiry Corby learned that the man had no living relatives in the world.

He found the housekeeper—a garrulous, talkative, superstitious old woman. As it happened, she had seen the corpse of Dr. Moore move out of its coffin and had fled from the house screaming. Police had discredited her story. Now, however, in the light of what had happened to Dr. Manquist, Corby listened to her statement with interest. But she added nothing to what was already known.

Somewhat dispirited over the meager results of his day's work, Corby took a taxi, decided that he would talk it over with Vilma once more.

She led him to the library and Corby found himself plunging right into a discussion of the case.

His excuse was that she might help him in the solving of the riddle; but he admitted to himself also, that Vilma was very pretty, and that seeing her and talking with her had a palpitant effect on his heart.

They chatted together for an hour or so, and then Vilma decided to prepare a bit of supper for the two. A minute after she had disappeared

in the kitchen, Corby heard her terrified scream.

He raced to the kitchen. The girl was standing against the wall, one hand against her mouth. She pointed to the window.

"Faces in golden hoods!" she gasped. "I saw them!"

Corby's hand jerked up to his shoulder holster and came out with a .38.

"Grab the phone," he cried. "Call Headquarters."

Vilma rushed to the hallway. Corby heard her frantically jiggling the hook.

"The phone's dead!" she called out to him.

With a muttered curse he sent two shots into the window. "We've got to get help," he said. "That noise ought to fetch the cop on the beat."

Vilma had rejoined him, and then both stood galvanized at the sound of a snarling voice. It came from beyond the hall, somewhere.

"You are in our way, Corby," the voice said. "We need the girl. We need her brain."

Corby knew instantly that he had heard that voice before. But he was given no time to wonder further.

The doorway was suddenly filled with figures in flowing robes. One, a step ahead of the others, suddenly raised his arm and pointed at Vilma. Corby gasped in horror as a puff of smoke shot from the outstretched finger. The smoke exploded into a large cloud and enveloped the girl.

She screamed—a terrifying, soul-wracking scream. With a hoarse cry, Corby charged the golden-hooded devils. His fist, gripping his gun, flailed out, struck something soft and yielding—and then a heavy object crashed down upon his head.

As he went down, he fired. Someone cried out. And a million lights exploded in his brain and he knew no more.

WHEN he opened his eyes, he found that he was lying on a divan. A figure was leaning over him. It took some time before his eyes distinguished the figure as that

of a policeman. There were many more in the room. Corby sat up abruptly, shuddered.

Vilma was gone!

"Where is she?" he jerked out. "The girl!"

Blank faces stared back at him. He tried to get up, but fell back with a groan.

"We heard a woman scream," the policeman told him, "and we heard shots. When we broke down the front door, we found only you here. Two windows were open and Mason, here, found tracks outside. I guess we scared 'em off or they would've finished you, too. You got one of 'em, though. There he is on the floor, bullet got him dead center."

Corby saw a huddled, inert figure on the run. He remembered that last shot he had fired. Strength returned to him. He got up, knelt over the dead man.

A hood, golden in color, and made of some soft, satiny stuff, covered the man's head. Corby's fingers moved swiftly, lifted the hood back. He gasped aloud.

That agonized face, those sightless eyes staring up into his own, belonged to George Duck, Gorton's Chinese assistant.

CHAPTER III

Murder Trail

HE peered at the slanted eyes, the expression of incredulity indelibly imprinted on the man's face. Then he stood up, went to the telephone. Abruptly, he remembered the wire was dead. He grabbed his hat and walked out of the house. It was two blocks to the nearest phone. When he got into the booth and asked for the number, his voice was peculiarly husky and eager.

"This is Corby," he told the desk man. "I want Chief March in a hurry. Gone to Dr. Gorton's house! How long ago? Thanks."

He came out of the booth, stood puzzled for a moment. Then he consulted the directory, found Dr. Gorton's number and called it. The

voice that answered him was March's. March was excited.

"Corby, I've been wondering where you were. What's happened?—plenty! Those two men you planted outside Gorton's house called about half an hour ago. Gorton had just had a heart attack, and had dropped dead! That Chinese assistant, George Duck, is gone—"

"He's dead," Corby interjected, and gave his chief a brief account of his adventure. "I'll take a run back, look over Duck's things," Corby decided.

There was only a grunt for a reply from March. Corby went out of the booth and back to the Manquist home. He knelt down and emptied the dead man's pockets.

There was a pile of junk of no value. A bunch of keys, a penknife, some cards, a pen and pencil set. Nothing more.

Corby's scowl deepened. What he sought was a clue to the golden-hooded ghouls. The stuff he had found helped him not at all.

He was about to give it up, when he noted the ring that encircled the Oriental's middle finger. He slipped it off the dead man's finger and examined it more closely.

The ring was made of heavy, green gold, cleverly hammered into a dragon design. But it was not the design that caught and held Corby's attention; it was the eyes. They glowed into his own as if from the head of a living thing. And as he continued to gaze, a feeling akin to fear went racing up and down his spine. For the eyes were green gold, flecked with purplish particles, alive with dancing lights. As if a fire glowed back of them, they winked with a hard malignity, a vivid and consuming hate.

Abruptly Corby thrust the ring into his pocket. He issued orders that nothing was to be touched in his absence, and left the house. He hailed a taxi, sped across the city westward to the home of Dr. Gorton.

There was no police guard at the front door of Gorton's house. Lights, however, blazed in nearly every window.

He pulled the bell-cord, heard the bell jangle. But there was no response. He pulled it impatiently again and then tried the door. It yielded to his touch, swung open.

On the other side of the threshold lay a bluecoat, sprawled out on his face. Corby was about to bend down over him when he heard the sounds of movement from the room to the left.

Drawing his gun, he tiptoed over, peered in just in time to see Chief Inspector March picking himself up and rubbing his chin dazedly as he glanced around. There were two more plainclothes men stretched out on the rug.

They stirred, uttered low groans as Corby entered.

"What the devil's happened?" he demanded.

"Oh—you, Corby," March groaned. "Just after you called, we heard a noise in the back of the house. Then—I don't know what happened. A figure wearing a robe and a golden hood appeared, pointed at me, and smoke burst right out from his fingertips! It hit me in the face and it was—horrible. I felt as though I'd been plunged into a red-hot furnace. It doesn't seem possible—"

"It seems it is, though," Corby said. "I've seen that smoke shoot out from a finger at Vilma."

"What can it be?" March cried. "Good Lord, I never in all my years on the force—" Words cluttered up his throat, choked him.

"It's a gas of some sort," said Corby. "Probably a bit of mustard or ether in it. It burns—but evidently doesn't have any after effects. You seem all right now. It seems to affect only those it hits directly. I was in the same room with Vilma, but I didn't feel it. But Vilma got it right in the face."

March nodded. "So did I. I felt—" He stopped abruptly, mouth agape. "Dr. Gorton's body!" he gasped. "Where is it?"

"What?"

"It was right here on the divan. The medical examiner had just got finished."

"Let's search the house!" snapped Corby.

Search they did, from cellar to roof; but the body of Dr. Hugh Gorton was not in the house. The ghouls in the golden hoods had their fifth victim.

Corby thought of Vilma. The girl was the only victim taken alive. There was a feeling of constriction, of suppressed horror, in his heart when he thought of what these strange fiends might do to her. What was their purpose? Who were they? He thrust his hands in his pockets. His fingers came in contact with the ring he had taken from the hand of George Duck.

He stared into the malignant eyes of the dragon, cupping the ring in his palm. The light of dancing, flickering hell was still in the green-gold eyes. A sudden thought crossed Corby's mind.

Suddenly he snapped: "Will you be at Headquarters, Chief?"

"I suppose so."

"You'll hear from me there."

"What are you thinking of?"

"I've got me an idea," said Corby. "Ever hear of a corpse cult. A Chinese corpse cult?"

March squinted, eyebrows drawn sharply together.

"A what?" he demanded.

Corby smiled, waved a deprecating hand.

"Never mind. This idea may be goofy. If you don't hear from me by morning"—his hand was on the door now—"call out the riot squad and pick Chinatown apart!"

CHAPTER IV

Eyes of the Dragon

FOR two hours Corby wandered from dive to dive in the narrow streets of the Chinese quarter. In no one place did he stay very long, but in each he made it a point to display the dragon ring he now wore on his finger. In every instance, the effect was the same.

A waiter would approach him, face calmly impassive. Then, glancing at the ring on Corby's finger, the man

would stare in speechless amazement, as near an expression of fear and servility upon his face as it is possible for a Chinese to show.

It was a slow, roundabout approach, undoubtedly. But Corby knew his Chinatown and he knew Chinese psychology. He hadn't the slightest doubt in the world that, sooner or later, he would be approached.

If that dragon ring meant anything, the news that a white man wore one would seep through Chinatown.

AND this was what finally happened. He was leaving a particularly miserable dive when a one-eyed Chinese bumped into him as if accidentally. Corby's heart gave a great thump of anticipation.

"Sorry," he said in English.

The one-eyed man replied in the singsong dialect of the Cantonese. When Corby shook his head, the Chinese suddenly spoke in perfect English.

"You wish to see someone?"

For answer, Corby extended his hand with the ring on it.

The Chinese bent over, closely inspected the eyes of the dragon. Corby shuddered involuntarily, almost jerked his hand away when the one eye of the Chinese met his own.

For the man's eye was green-gold, flecked with purplish particles, as were the dragon's, and in contrast to the pallor of his sallow skin, was alive with ghostly, dancing lights.

Corby brought himself to with an effort, grinned apologetically, conquered that strange feeling of dread. The Chinese crooked a finger, said solemnly:

"Come!" And he shuffled through the narrow streets with Corby following close behind.

Before the door of a laundry, the one-eyed man paused. He pushed the door open, stood aside for Corby to enter, and following within, closed the door. A tiny bell tinkled musically somewhere in the rear. A spectacled Chinese came forth from behind a curtain, held it aside for

Corby to enter. The one-eyed man made a low bow and went out to the street.

Corby walked resolutely behind the curtain, found himself in a narrow little room, lit by a smoking oil lamp. The spectacled man eyed him solemnly. Corby extended his hand, showed the ring.

"The Master," he said.

The man blinked his eyes, then nodded. He moved toward the light, and when he did, Corby started violently. For this man's eyes, too, were green-gold! They were alive with malignity.

But there was no turning back now. The man knocked upon a section of wall which seemed to be solid. A second later it swung inward at a touch of the hand. Beady eyes slithered over Corby's face from the dark passageway that now stood revealed before him. Corby took a deep breath, stepped through the wall. The opening slowly closed behind him. There was no ray of light in the pit of gloom before him, no sound save the hoarse whisper of his own breathing.

He stood motionless against the closed section of the wall, vainly endeavoring to pierce the sinister barrier of blackness. Out of the utter dark, a hand reached forth, closed over his wrist. Slowly, Corby advanced into the vault of Stygian night, led by his unseen guide.

He didn't know what awaited him, what he might expect, but he was taking no chances. The guide had hold of his left hand. Corby's right slipped inside his coat, drew forth his gun. His fingers tightened on the butt. Suddenly, as though his guide were aware of his action, he whirled with a venomous cry. Corby's right hand lashed out into the dark, struck something soft. He felt a long-clawed hand scratch at his throat. He brought up the gun, struck again.

This time the gun found a better target. There was a choked cry, then a long, gurgling sigh from the unseen man. A body slumped against Corby. Gently, he eased it to the

ground and then stepped over it. He went on alone.

The corridor was endless. Its ceiling hung low, suggesting black vaults and bats' roosting places. Corby advanced slowly, cautiously. He was not minimizing the danger he was facing. He had finally gotten into the secret abode of the dragon brotherhood; but he was alone. He had been a fool, he told himself, not to have established contact with March before he came into this place.

He stopped abruptly. Ahead lay a pale streak of light. It took him a second to realize that it was apparently a reflection of light from a chamber at the end of the passage. He approached even more slowly, came at last to a room that seemed empty.

It was with something of a gasp that he noted the richness of the furnishings. There were heavy Oriental rugs, teakwood furniture, massively carved; chandeliers of crystal, walls inlaid with choice pearl.

Four doors faced him. He opened two, found as richly furnished sleeping chambers. But when he opened the third, he froze. For, stretched out on a bed, tied hand and foot, was Vilma!

It was the work of a second to cut her loose. In a moment he held her in his arms.

"You've got to get out of here, Vilma," he said. "Get to a phone, call Headquarters. Get in touch with March. Tell him to come down here with every man he can get hold of. Hurry!"

"But you?"

"I'm staying here. Do as I say. It's our only chance."

"But I can't leave you!" the girl protested.

"Do as I say," he whispered furiously. "Vilma, please!"

She gazed into his eyes, long and steadily, saw the grim resolve imprinted there.

She agreed at last.

"Now, listen," he said. "There's a corridor that leads straight to a little laundry shop. It's guarded only by one man." His eyes roved the

central room, saw a dagger encased in a jeweled scabbard. He snatched it up, handed it to her. "This will help you get past him. You must get past him. Understand? Get to a telephone and call Police Headquarters. Tell March I sent you."

He watched her start into the low, dark corridor through which he had come. He strained his eyes until he could see her no more, then he turned and inspected the fourth door.

It led into another corridor. He listened intently for a moment, and then ventured into it. Cautiously, he inched his way along, in darkness once more. Then he came to a wall where the corridor made a sharp turn. He was walking up a steep grade now.

He came to a flight of shallow steps. As he climbed these, his fingers found a firm grip on his gun. A few moments later, after he had advanced a way on level ground, he came to a door.

Faint sounds reached him as he put his ear to the panels. His groping hand found a knob. He twisted it and the door opened noiselessly. The sounds became stronger. Dim light showed just ahead, cutting through the gloom like a beacon.

He moved toward it on tiptoe, discovered suddenly that he was standing on an eminence of natural rock that formed a sort of balcony, looking down into a pit.

It was from here that the sounds and the illumination came. Corby crouched, moved closer until he could look over the edge. He set his teeth hard, caught a sharp breath, restrained himself from exclaiming aloud. For what he saw was madness, hideous.

CHAPTER V

The Living Dead

SLOWLY Corby's gaze concentrated on the scene below him, and he got possession of his nerves. His flesh ceased to writhe beneath his skin. He was calm, expectant.

He noted first the illumination. Its color a weird golden-yellow. Then he saw that it came from a strange source, pouring almost from the mouths of two huge dragons, like the one designed in the ring. But, more striking than the dragons or the light, was the figure of the man who sat between them.

He looked ageless. He was clad in flowing silks and brocades; but their brilliance and splendor could not change the look of death that was upon him. His face was totally expressionless, his yellow skin corrugated with endless wrinkles. His mouth was an evil gash in his yellow face; but it was his eyes that were most striking. They were a brilliant yellow, the pupils mere pin-points—dots of horror.

Surrounding this figure were four men with heads uncovered and closely shaven. In a wider circle sat twenty men or more, faces hidden in golden hoods. George Duck had worn such a hood, and Corby recognized it now as the insignia of this strange company.

CORBY forgot his dread as one of the inner circle of Chinese rose from his squatting position, bowed to the ground before the ageless one.

"O, Great Father, High Priest of the Almighty Dragon, there is work for us tonight. We have brought into our fold a new convert. He is no longer of this world. He sleeps in peace. We beg of you to awaken him, to make him one of us. He will be of great help in our mighty undertakings."

This speech was in English. For a moment this fact did not strike Corby as particularly strange. He was too absorbed in the proceedings to pay any attention to that. The ageless one rose, nodded in answer to his disciple's supplication. He lifted his hands, solemnly clapped his palms together. There was a short pause. Then two hooded men appeared, bearing a silken stretcher between them. This they placed before the old man and withdrew.

A huge coverlet of silk was thrown

back by the old man. And on the stretcher lay revealed the body of Dr. Hugh Gorton!

Wild, unreasoning terror overcame Corby. He could feel his scalp tighten, the hair bristle at the nape of his neck.

Dragon worship! That was it—that weird, underground cult of old China, long since supposed vanished from the face of the earth. Now the disappearance of Manquist, Gorton, Meyer, Moore was accounted for. The bodies of white men are needed in dragon worship. The cult had its origins in the bloody Boxer rebellion of the middle Nineteenth Century when it swept all China in an attempt to rid that vast land of the dominance of the white man.

However, there was a further circumstance that made this business extraordinary. The stolen bodies were those of scientists, research experts, engineers. Outstanding men. Their death, their disappearance, would naturally, even under ordinary circumstances, arouse conjecture. Why had the members of this cult chosen these particular men for their devilish rites?

The ageless one had clapped his hands again. This time a tray was brought to him upon which lay assorted, gleaming things which glowed in the soft light. Corby stared with increasing horror. He recognized those gleaming things—surgical instruments, hypodermic needles.

The ageless one intoned a long, singsong chant in Chinese that was directed to the twin dragons. A moaning sounded from the throats of the hooded men as they lay prostrate on the ground. This ended, the old man bent over Dr. Gorton's body like a vulture. One of his hands stretched forth, took a keen-edged instrument from the tray, ran it cruelly over the dead man's flesh.

Corby turned his eyes away. From the hooded watchers a low, whispering murmur arose. When Corby looked again, he understood.

No blood poured from the horrible incision. This was the ageless one's way of showing that Dr. Gorton was

indeed dead. Next, the old man took a silver hypodermic from the tray. Again he intoned a long supplication, and then he leaned over the stretcher, plied the needle into Gorton's body.

A long, breathless silence followed. At last the old man straightened, spread his arms above his head in worship to the dragons.

A shiver passed through Corby's body. His eyes strained in their sockets, and he held back his breath as though his life depended on it. For almost a full second he did not quite realize what it was he was actually viewing. It was too overwhelming, too catastrophic, too unspeakably horrible.

For the body—the dead body of Dr. Hugh Gorton—*moved!*

"Good Lord!" Corby gasped. He saw, with horrified eyes, how the incision grew pink, then red. And blood began to gush from the wound as from a body that was alive!

Dr. Gorton was alive. There was no doubt of that. But there was a strange, dull expression in his eyes, a looseness about his features, which was horribly unnatural.

The ageless one passed hands before Gorton's eyes, took a handful of powder from the tray and scattered it over the wound.

There was a bubbling, a hissing as of escaping gas, and the flow of blood ceased.

One of the four bareheaded men now came forward, intoned:

"Rise, Dr. Gorton, who was dead, and go forth alive, reborn. Your name shall be Lo Sui Foo. You are part of us, one of us. Your brain is now our brain, working for our mighty cause. If you show sign of rebellion you will go back to the land of the dead once more."

Corby watched with drained face. He saw the bareheaded Chinese help Dr. Gorton stand up and walk. In a second the scientist had passed beyond Corby's line of vision. Back of Corby's mind still persisted the thought that this was a nightmare. His body was rigid, the fingers of his left hand clenched so savagely

the nails bit into the skin of his palm.

What did it mean? What did these men want?

With their hellish power to kill men, then make them rise again to a life of slavish subjection, they possessed a weapon that was corrupt, abominable. What was their purpose? The thought left Corby with a feeling of puny helplessness. Four men had already succumbed to their vicious practises. How many more were doomed?

His brain clicked abruptly signals of warning. He whirled about, let a long, sobbing breath escape his lips. Terror, unreasoning and blind, was stenciled on his face. Facing him were two hooded men. He was trapped.

A voice droned in his ears, a voice that came from the pit below. Now he understood why these Chinese had spoken English. It had been for his benefit. They had wanted him to understand what was going on. They had been aware all the time that he was watching them!

"Come down, Mr. Corby. You have seen enough to satisfy you. Now, you, too, will experience the supreme pleasure of dying and rising into a new life!"

CHAPTER VI

The Dragon Worshipers

EVERY nerve in Corby's body shrieked to act while there was yet time. But his muscles would not respond. This was the finish. They could write the name of Bill Corby off the slate.

But it wasn't just dying—he wasn't afraid of that. He had faced danger before without qualm. But this was not to be death. He had seen what had happened to Dr. Gorton. He could imagine what had happened to the other white men who had fallen into the hands of these dragon-worshippers. It was this he dreaded—this hellish rite of resurrection.

Abruptly he remembered that he still held a gun in his hand. The

realization broke the semi-hypnotic influence under which he was laboring. If he were going under, he would go fighting. He would carry as many of these devils as he could along with him.

He brought the gun up sharply, and at that instant one of the hooded men raised his arm. A puff of smoke shot from the extended forefinger, burst into Corby's face. The gun fell from his fingers. A cry tore from his throat. He suddenly knew the meaning of pain. His body felt as if it were on fire. His brain, his lungs were being consumed. All at once the pit was an inferno of screams jangling from Corby's distended mouth.

He screamed and twisted in ghastly convulsions, only dimly aware of what was happening to him. If he had been ripped open and filled with salt, the agony could not have been worse. This was death. This was the end. He stood alone in an abyss of horror, looking up through miles of blackness to faces that grinned and jeered at him.

Wave after wave of pain swept through him, surged through his blood, wringing torment from his foam-flecked mouth. He was mad with the intolerable agony of it.

This was the end. And the end was welcome if only for the surcease of the unendurable. A blackness descended upon him. He clawed blindly, groaned. Then a long sigh came from his lips. His pain-wracked body collapsed in a limp heap.

HOURS later, it seemed, a voice intoned something into Corby's ear, and he regained consciousness with the thought that he was too sick and too weak to wonder where he was or why he was not dead. He was lying on the silken stretcher just quitted by Dr. Gorton. Silken cords bound his legs, his arms.

A bareheaded Chinese was standing above him, peering down at him. When Corby's gaze could concentrate on the man's face, he gave way to a slight shiver. Like all these

creatures, this man's eyes were awash with golden lights, the fanatic gleam of hell dancing in them. The man was saying:

"No, honored guest, you are not dead—yet. Your time is fast approaching, however. Your turn is coming."

The words were spoken slowly, tinged with an evil gloating in which hatred predominated. Bill Corby stared up at the owner of the voice, and could not prevent the surges of panic that swept icy blasts through his being.

He thought suddenly of Vilma. Perhaps she had got through safely to the outside.

There was a chance, better odds, perhaps, than he could hope for. If these fiends had not stopped her, if they did not yet know she was released, March and his men might yet sweep down on this place in time to save him.

A second later his hopes soared as the man again addressed him.

"Very soon, we will bring forth the girl whose cause you have championed, the one for whom you braved death to venture here. Vilma Manquist. Ah, there is a gleam in your eye! Perhaps you did not know she was a prisoner here? She, too, will be transfused with a new life, given the touch of immortality. We need her hands to work with the brain of her father."

Corby hardly heard the last part of the man's words. All he could think of was that his hopes were confirmed. Vilma was safe. These creatures still thought she was a prisoner where they had left her. He didn't care what they attempted now.

If he could only stall them off for a time. His tongue flicked out, wetted his lips.

"Why do you do this?" he asked suddenly, playing for time. "What is your purpose in making men rise to life after death?"

The Chinese permitted himself a chuckle.

"I will introduce to you," he said, "the man who will explain our holy

mission. He is our spiritual leader. We call him Master."

Corby stared mutely as the ageless one then came forward.

Master? Yes, this quiet man was all of that. His very glance inspired silence. His English was tinged slightly with an accent, but otherwise was faultless. Like a supreme priest of some ancient cult he stood before Corby majestically; and the high walls of the pit reverberated to the mechanical drone of his words.

"Humble white man, you have asked for light. I, Han Yen Sun, will shed it before you to dazzle your eyes, benumb your brain. Know then, that the Order of the Golden Dragon will bring unto the world the true millenium when the yellow man will crush the white and be dominant. Once, all science, all learning was in the East; today it is in the West. To the West we must come to find the men who can further our cause. Here are to be found the men of science who can fashion toys to destroy whole cities, fabricate guns, airplanes, death-rays.

"All these men, leaders among your people, we have snatched from your midst. To your uninformed minds, they died. To us, they merely slept. They are alive again, brought back to ageless life. They are nothing but automatons; no longer are they men. They eat, they sleep, but they have no will. Their brains, their heaven-inspired genius, is still intact; but their souls are playthings in the hands of the Master."

A droning, muttering assent came from a dozen or more throats as the old man completed his speech. Corby lay motionless, barely breathing, strangely fascinated by what he had heard. The thing was fantastic, unreal. Dragon worship! Millenium! Each man's body snatched by these devils was a scientist who could help their cause. They had been poisoned by a slight dose in their food or drink, and then stolen before burial would make death certain. Before that, these victims had not been dead at all—merely held in a state of cataplexy, like enough to death to fool

medical men. The evidence was all in place!

Foul black magic out of ancient China! And those searing, burning pillars of golden light. What about them? Corby was brought back sharply by the younger man who had first spoken.

"Now your turn has come, honored guest. First you will pass from life as they did. You will sleep for a little while. But when you are brought back, you will be transformed into a soul-slave like these others."

THE golden eyes danced like myriad suns before Corby's eyes. Something solid came up in a lump to his throat, threatened to choke him. His sweat-drenched hair masked his horror-filled, protruding eyes. A throbbing pain began to wrack the back of his head.

He was hardly aware that the old man, Han Yen Sun, had clapped his hands together. He did not see the golden goblet brought on a silk pillow which the old man took into his hands with a flourish. Only when hands were placed on his shoulders did he look up with a startled glance; and then cold, stark fear possessed him. He caught sight of the dread goblet.

"No! No! Don't force me to drink that stuff! Don't—"

His head twisted convulsively until it was caught in the grip of powerful hands. Like a madman he sought to escape the descent of the goblet to his lips. Gasping, sobbing, his bared teeth snapped at the clutching fingers, but they eluded him. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead; his face was a glistening mask of horror.

If only March would come in time to save him! If only—

A scream rose to his lips and died there unuttered. Strong fingers pried his jaws open.

A cold liquid foamed down into his throat, forcing him against his will to swallow violently, filling his mouth with a horrible taste and his nostrils with sickening odor. Then

the restraining hands withdrew and he heard a voice intone:

"That was an exceptionally heavy dose, Mr. Corby, but we have no time to waste on you at the present. Ah, you begin to feel—"

But Corby was not listening. He was thinking of March. It wasn't too late. If they smashed in now, perhaps they could force these devils to administer an antidote which would prevent this stuff from taking effect.

A commotion at the head of the pit disturbed his train of thought. A group of hooded devils came forward, and in their midst—Corby caught a sharp, sobbing breath—in their midst was Vilma! Vilma, white-faced, clothes torn to rags!

His last hope had fled from him. She had not escaped after all. They were doomed, both of them. Corby could not think consecutively any longer. His brain was a mad gyroscope whirling within the enclosure of his skull.

His blood had turned to ice. It was solid in his veins. The cold crept up from his toes and down from his head to meet at the region of his heart. Light was fading before his eyes. Faintly he heard a triumphant laugh close to his ear. A voice spoke to him:

"You imagined you had released the girl, sent her to safety. Fool! She could not escape. The passageway had been closed by a blank wall that appeared from nowhere and blocked her path. She wandered back to be caught again."

Then the voice became too low for Corby to hear. A shroud of blackness was stealing over him. A long, shuddering sigh welled out of his twisted lips. His tormented body gave one convulsive shudder, lay perfectly still.

CHAPTER VII

The Dead Awaken

VERY slowly, the black void began to fill in. First it was a soft, faint infiltration of light to which his eyes slowly

trained themselves. Then it was sound, dim and low, but gradually growing louder until it could be distinguished as the hum of voices. At last, into his range of vision came the triumphant, leering face of the Chinese, staring down at him and holding Vilma captive by both arms.

"See, he has returned to life," the Chinese was saying to Vilma. "You have seen it with your own eyes. Soon he will sit up, do our bidding at but a word of command. He has no more will, no soul. He will eat, drink, even think, but not unless we tell him to. His transformation is not yet complete, for this is but the first stage. Later you will see a genuine miracle and you will believe."

Corby was barely listening to the man's words, nor was Vilma. They were staring unbelievably at each other, her horror-filled eyes brimming with pity, desperate appeal. Corby saw her lips move, but he could not hear the words. He wanted to tell her not to feel bad because she had failed. There were a lot of things he wanted to say. His eyes alone spoke for him.

Then the Chinese and Vilma disappeared from his line of vision. He saw the Master place something on his chest. It was a bowl of incense. Vaguely he could distinguish the thin coil of smoke that rose from it. A thin, high, querulous voice began a slow chant in a meaningless tongue. It was some time before Corby realized that it was Chinese. With that came the understanding that a ceremony had been begun.

He could guess its purpose. The dragon gods were being invoked for help in transforming his living tissue into that formless cloud of light.

Corby's dazed faculties were reviving under the impetus of that realization. This could not go on—it must not be permitted to go on.

Though he could not move a limb, he became aware that his feet and hands were no longer tied. His mind sent forth flashes to his muscles, but they could not obey. They were rigid, useless. He felt hands grop-

ing over his body, and then he saw a hypodermic being plunged into his arm. Minutes passed. It seemed hours to him. Very slowly, a sense of warmth crept over his flesh. It increased by slow degrees until it reached his heart.

A thump sounded in his chest like the beating of a drum. It was his heart beating. Another thump. Another. The bowl of incense was removed. Suddenly, Corby found that he was able to sit up.

"You are now ready for the second stage of your initiation," a voice said in English. "Be prepared!"

Corby had listened to enough. As the warmth poured into his body, he jerked violently. Immediately two hooded men grabbed his arms.

"So you still think to escape your fate!" the Chinese screamed. "You do not know our power, thrice-acursed fool! If you could get loose for a moment—is that what you want? How you would like to close those fingers of yours about my throat! I know what is going on in your muddled brain. The Master will know how to deal with you."

Corby could not move his head. He could only stare blankly in front of him. But in the direct line of his vision was a table, and on the table was a knife—a long, pointed, razor-edged knife. It was the one with which the Master had slit the skin of Dr. Gorton. It loomed before him.

Never in all his life had Corby hungered for anything as much as for that weapon. His eyes left it as the Master appeared before him. There was another goblet in his hand.

"This will ease your rebellion," said a voice mockingly. "It is the second stage. If you endured anything before, it will be nothing to what you now will know. Be prepared!"

The Master drew closer, closer, face as expressionless, as coldly impassive as before. Corby squirmed, but the hands that held him were too powerful. Slowly, the Master came nearer. Corby was borne back upon

the stretcher by main force. It was not very difficult to pry his jaws open this time.

He could not fight back. The goblet was an inch from his lips now. It was tilted, and slowly a drop cascaded over the edge, into Corby's mouth. Vitriol could be rated sweet in comparison with this stuff. That single drop made a raging inferno of Corby's mouth. It seemed to curdle his blood, sear the soft inner skin of his cheek.

The Master tilted the goblet further and then suddenly it dropped out of his hands, its contents spilling on the floor. It was the knife which had done this work. Vilma! It was she who had snatched it up, thrust it with all her power into the back of the Master!

CORBY, quick to grasp an advantage, rolled off the stretcher onto the floor. He saw Vilma, flashed her a look of gratitude before he leaped at the Master.

They went down in a squirming, twisting mass until at last Corby came out on top, the thin, puny body of the Master pinned beneath him. Corby's hands sought that wrinkled, baggy throat, closed like a vise about it. He retrieved the knife and pressed it to the Master's heart.

"Tell your men to fall back," he commanded. "Now—or I'll push this knife through your rotten heart."

Gold-spotted eyes glared into Corby's. Corby released some of the pressure from the Master's throat. But the Chinese remained silent. A wave of dread shot up Corby's spine. Suppose the man refused—suppose he were willing to sacrifice his life for his insane cause?

Corby would kill him, but he, too, would die. And Vilma—Corby looked at the circle of golden hoods creeping closer. They were drawing closer, cautiously. One had a hand stretched out toward Corby. Corby looked at it. At any moment the gas—the terrible lung-searing gas—would shoot out.

Vilma, too, was staring at the circle of golden hoods. She clung

against Corby, sobbing. Corby pressed the knife harder, and the point buried itself.

"Back!" the Master screamed in agony. "Back, fools! He'll kill me!"

Then came a dull boom. It shook the floor on which Corby was standing. For a second he was puzzled. Then he knew. Only one thing could make such a sound.

Dynamite!

"I didn't get through," Vilma sobbed. "But—before they captured me again, I discovered a phone, hidden in the wall. I got a call through to Headquarters. We're safe!"

"Safe!" echoed Corby.

It seemed unbelievable that they had actually escaped the doom of the golden hooded fiend, until Corby heard the bellow of March's voice.

INSPECTOR MARCH would listen to no nonsense.

"You'll stay in bed, young man," he said authoritatively to Corby, "until the medicos put the okay stamp on you. You can't be getting up when you please, you know."

"Sick, nothing," Corby growled. "Just—a little tired." He broke off, smiled good-humoredly. "How are the rest of the patients? Nurse tells me they were all brought to this hospital."

March nodded.

"Funny thing about them," he said. "The four of them were perfectly well when we found them. Looked as sane and normal as you or me. But the medical men said they'd been suffering hallucinations, extreme fatigue, and were all under hypnotic influences. Can you beat that?"

Corby looked grim. "I know what those men have been through. I—and they—are lucky to be alive." He counted them off on his fingers. "John Meyer, Dr. Horace Moore, Dr.

Ancil Manquist and Dr. Hugh Gorton. Those crazy Chinks were bad actors. If they had carried on to their own ends, Lord alone knows what might have happened. I told you they had ideas of world domination. What a program!"

"They're wiped out now, and those still alive are behind bars," March said reassuringly. "So much for their world domination."

Corby was silent for a minute or two, looking steadfastly out of the window. Then he turned to his superior again.

"I've been wanting to ask you," he said a little shamefacedly. "That gas—how did they shoot it out?"

Inspector March smacked his lips with satisfaction. "Those golden hoods had little tanks under their robes, with a sort of compressed air contraption. A thin hose ran down their arms into their hands. You couldn't see it, but by squeezing their arms against their sides they were able to shoot the gas for a distance of ten feet or more. Our chemist analyzed some of the gas. It's potent stuff, burns like the devil, but has no bad after-effects."

"I can testify to its burning," Corby said, frowning at the memory of the searing pains the gas had created. "And Vilma—how is she, Chief?"

March grinned. "You're permitted only one visitor at a time. I believe the young lady is down below, waiting—"

"What!" Corby exploded. "Get out!"

"I was just going," said March, chuckling, as he scurried for the door.

Corby lay back quietly. A few moments later, the door inched open. Corby looked, grinned. Incredibly sweet and lovely, Vilma Manquist was standing there. She came toward him with a happy smile.

Turn to OFFICIAL BUSINESS on Page 134 for Important Announcements About Next Month's Issue!

FRESH PAINT



"Don't move! I've got you covered!" he said softly

Frank Previtt Put His Alibi on with Broad Brush Strokes—and Waited for Exoneration!

By JOHN CLEMONS

Author of "Catch a Thief," "Ghost Pearls," etc.

"EVERYONE knows you've been up here in the country the past few weeks," said Detective Healy, "getting the house in shape."

Sure, everyone knew, Frank Previtt reflected. Everyone knew; his alibi was perfect.

"Just the routine questions," Healy apologized.

Frank Previtt felt relieved, even

though he had expected the cops. He wiped the paint off his hands and faced the big detective, trying to appear not too cool, not too frightened. Just a little bit worried, as an innocent man should look upon being informed of his rich old uncle's death.

After all, there was nothing to worry about, really. It had been raining steadily for two days and the little village was dead as a salted

mackerel. No one had seen Previtt board a train for the city, early yesterday; of that he was certain. He'd walked three miles across farm lands to a neighboring town where no one knew him, and had taken the train there.

"If it helps to soften the blow any," Healy was saying, "I don't mind telling you that you're the only beneficiary."

"He's telling me," Previtt thought. His hard, set face never changed. He looked like a man too broken to be thinking of material benefits. In reality he was thinking what fools people were, what a sap Healy was, never to suspect.

The detective changed the subject out of respect to the man's apparent grief, delaying the questions that were routine to the Department.

"Been doin' a lot of painting, lately, haven't you?" he asked.

Previtt nodded absently.

"Say, I painted my own house last month," said Healy. "Did it all myself, too. Cost me a sight more than if I'd contracted it, though. Made an awful mess of the job—but I learned a devil of a lot about paint."

PREVITT made no reply, just stared morosely at the rain-drenched world without. Now all this land was his, he reflected. This house, in the city. All the money in the bank. The insurance.

The twin oaks he'd cut down the week before still lay out there on the sodden lawn. The old man would not have liked that. Previtt often wondered if that had been too bold a move, chopping those shade trees down when the old man had so often expressed his delight in them. Chopping them down even before he'd killed the old man, as if the land had been his already.

"If the old man had not been planning to marry, killing would not have been necessary," he thought. "He was pretty old and sick. If he married that nurse, I'd have been left out in the cold. I *had* to kill him." It was thus he eased an aching conscience.

The realization that he had a conscience made him worry about Healy. The detective must be got rid of.

"I want to be alone," said Previtt solemnly. "You understand. Ask me whatever you want to. Let's get it over with."

Healy nodded. He lit a cigarette, offered Previtt one. Previtt declined.

"Very simple," said Healy. "Just account for your time between the hours of nine and five, yesterday."

"I was here," said Previtt, "alone. I was painting." He was pretty sure of himself now, unafraid. Healy wasn't over-bright, he decided. That was a break, even if his alibi was air-tight.

"Painting?" the detective said matter-of-factly. "Show me."

Previtt led the way into the large, old-fashioned kitchen. There was a good day's work there, what with the walls and shelves and cupboards.

"I enameled the kitchen," he said.

The enamel was so bright, it was like a mirror. Healy could see his reflection everywhere. He touched the walls and woodwork gingerly. The enamel was dry. Dry as a bone.

Previtt thought he saw the detective's jaws tighten, his nostrils flare, but he attributed it to the paint. Some fellows simply didn't like paint.

"Let's see the can this stuff came in," Healy said suddenly.

Previtt walked through the kitchen, into an enclosed porch. He came back a moment later, carrying a paint-covered pot in his hand.

Healy took a rag and washed the outside of the can with turpentine. Not much. Just a little. Just enough to see the name of the brand.

The detective straightened, one hand in his pocket.

"Previtt, I think you killed your uncle!" he said. "Don't move! I've got you covered!"

"Are you crazy, Healy?" Previtt was panic-stricken. His eyes popped out like a spent rabbit's. His face was drained of blood. Standing all hunched with fright, his mouth agape and his bony nose high, he looked like a vulture.

"Almost any enamel takes a day

or two to dry, Previtt," Healy said sharply. "But in this rainy weather, it would take twice as long. I thought you might have some special brand I'd never heard of, so I looked over the can. You haven't."

"I thinned it down!" Previtt shouted desperately. "I thinned it down like the devil! It was half turpentine and dryers!"

"Yeah?" said Healy, interestedly. "Well, that would dry it over-night, like you say. It would be dry as the sands of the desert, the next morning."

Previtt brightened. Close shave. Mighty close. He mopped his dripping brow.

Healy looked a long moment at his reflection in the glossy kitchen walls. He adjusted his tie; it was like looking in a mirror.

"Pretty high gloss," he observed. "Yes. Yes, it is." Previtt choked a little, tried to smile. His heart was pounding wildly.

"Yeah. Pretty high gloss," mused the detective softly. Then he whirled suddenly, facing Previtt.

"Too damned high!" he shouted stridently, as he pulled out a pair of manacles. "All that turp and dryers would *kill* the gloss! It would be flatter than yesterday's beer! Tell me? I know! Didn't I try it, too!"

Previtt, suddenly crazed, hoarsed an inarticulate curse, dove blindly at Healy. He didn't see the detective's quickly drawn gun. He didn't even feel the slap-slap of the heavy weapon as it crashed down on his skull. His staggering rush was halted in a moan of anguish as he fell at Healy's feet.

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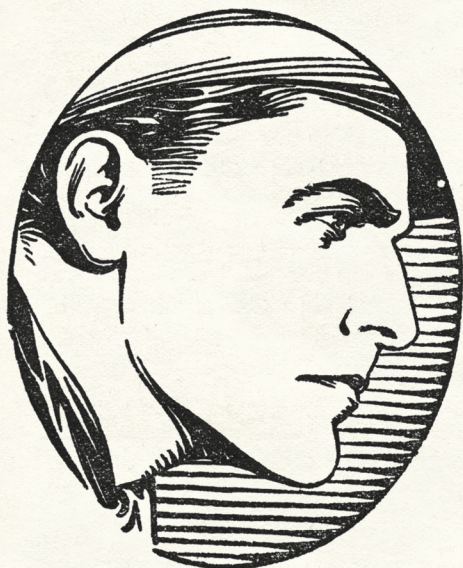
One Way Out

Redbird Linster Escapes from the Thongs Put on Him by the Law in Order to Do a Little Investigating of His Own!

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Author of "The Ghost Rider of Red Rock," "Royal Straight," etc.

SHERIFF DAN BODINE took his job seriously, but he was old enough to be absent-minded. More than once he had left his Johnsboro office to make an arrest and had had to ride back after his gun. This time he'd ridden clean to



Redbird Linster

the lumbering operations on Kill-sunday Mountain without handcuffs, and had substituted rawhide thongs taken from his saddle. Rawhide, as anybody knows, stretches easily when wet.

The mountain road along the top of a cliff line, and below to the left lay a little river, which now was muddy and somewhat swollen from recent rains. Redbird Linster—his

hair was brown, rather than red, but lumberjacks must have their nicknames—kept watching the stream as he marched ahead of the mounted sheriff. Bodine guessed something of his thoughts.

"That water's not deep enough for a dive, Redbird," the officer said. "If you was to jump, you'd likely break your neck."

"The big trouble is," the young mountain man drawled, as though to himself, "I been sorta wild. Fightin', gamblin' some, drinkin' some. No co'te would believe me when I tell 'em I been clean as a pin in hit all."

Dan Bodine said nothing. Linster noted that the water looked deeper here. He switched his gaze suddenly up the rugged steep to his right, and out of the tail of his eye saw that Bodine was lighting a cigar.

The next second Redbird Linster jumped.

He timed it well. He struck the water feet first, went under, struck bottom and kicked himself at a slant with the current, and came up beneath a bushy willow twenty feet downstream. A pebble dropped with a tiny splash, and he knew that the officer had dismounted and was kneeling on the brink of the cliff above, gun ready, watching.

"Come out from under that willow, Redbird," Dan Bodine called, "or I'll start shootin' into it!"

Linster braced his feet against the bottom, with his back sung against the bank and only his head above water. Bodine fired down through the low-hanging tree. There was a quick

rattle of hoofs; the shot had frightened the sheriff's horse, and the animal had bolted. Redbird grinned.

"Whoa, there!" cried the grizzled officer. "Whoa, you fool!"

He ran after the animal. Linster kept straining at the wet rawhide bonds which held his wrists crossed at his back, and they were stretching fast. When Bodine returned with his horse, Redbird had cast off the rawhide and was hidden under another willow rod up the stream. The sheriff then spied Linster's broad black hat lodged in a drift a hundred yards below, and rode toward it.

Again Redbird grinned. Fate had given him a poor deal lately, but she was making up for it now. He swam the narrow river undetected, gained the thick cover of a laurel sea.

At nightfall he was rapping on the door of a small, ramshackle cabin near the foot of Killsunday Mountain. A lone, stooped, white-haired old crone answered the summons promptly. Firelight from within showed her the visitor's lean, tanned face.

"La, la, la—ef hit ain't Reddy Linster!" she creaked. "Now you don't haf to tell me what happened, Reddy. I know whut happened. So you got away from Dan Bodine, heh?"

Kate Orton was Killsunday Mountain's herb doctor and fortune-teller. She had an uncanny way of finding out things; she judged the future by the past; she knew human nature. Small wonder that the illiterate folk thereabouts believed her possessed of supernatural powers.

Linster stepped inside. She closed the door after him.

"Yeah," he admitted, "you allus know, Kate. That's ezactly why I come to you now. I want you to tell me who hit war that killed and robbed the loggin' comp'ny's payroll messenger half a mile below the camp yiste'day, Kate."

This was a facer. But she wasn't going to admit it. Slowly she puffed at her clay pipe.

Then:

"I cain't tell you that, Reddy"—very solemnly—"ontel the zodiac sign

changes and the moon fulls. Hit'll be a week."

Redbird slumped an inch in his disappointment.

"Kate, I'm shore in a tight fix. Only way out fer me is to l'arn who did kill and rob the messenger. Y'see, I'd boughten me a new blue suit o' clo'es, only blue suit anywhar 'round here. Left hit hangin' in the camp boardin' house whilst I war out cruisin' timber by myself.

"Nobody much at the camp in the daytime, and hit war easy fer this feller to sneak my suit out, wear hit durin' the robbin', and sneak hit back. Plum' puffleck disguise, y'see, with a bandanner over his face. And—whoever done hit shore don't like me none!"

"C'rect," agreed the crone.

"The messenger had enough life left in him to tell," Linster pursued, "and they found the tracks o' spiked boots my size. Well, they's three fellers in the crew which don't like me. In fac', they hates me. Sam Seevers, Ab Greer, and Bill Kinchelow. They cain't prove alibis, nuther, 'cause they war a-workin' by theirselves yiste'day the same as me.

"Well, I'll slip down to the camp now, and have a talk with the super. Y'see, I war his star logger, and I think he'll he'p me if he kin."

EXCEPT for Superintendent Fanning's little office, logging headquarters was all dark when Linster arrived. Redbird stole up to an open office window. Fanning, a heavily-built lowlander of forty, sat poring over a sheaf of tally sheets.

"Hi, Super!" whispered Linster, grinning.

Super George sat up with a jerk, saw, and smiled. He'd liked the young mountain man, did not believe him guilty. Redbird crawled through the window and sank into a convenient straightback chair.

"Got away, did you?" Fanning said in low tones. "Maybe you shouldn't have done that, Red. Mostly, you know, it's crooks that escape."

"Yeah, I know." The newcomer was sober enough now. "But I had

to be free, so's to prove I never done that, which is my one way out. I been a-studyin' and a-studyin', Super, and I think I see a chanst. Mind goin' into the boardin' house and sneakin' my clo'es here to me, Super?"

"They're there in your duffle-bag." Fanning pointed to a shadowy corner. "Meant to send 'em down to jail on a log train. Thought you'd need 'em."

Redbird went to the bag, picked it up and dumped the contents on a small table.

"Whoever wore this here new suit o' mine fer a disguise," he drawled, "might 'a' left some sign in hit."

"Bill Kinchelow, Ab Greer, or Sam Seevers," muttered Fanning.

"So you been a-studyin' 'bout hit too!" Linster said.

Super George nodded. He turned the wick of the desk lamp up a trifle. Redbird went painstakingly through the pockets of the blue coat, and found nothing. In the pockets of the trousers there was nothing to give him a clue. Then he noted a narrow reddish smudge on one of the trouser legs.

"Blood?" asked the closely watching superintendent.

Linster seemed not to have heard. For a long, still minute he stood there staring at the smudge, his mind busy. Then he turned to Fanning.

"Sa-a-ay! If that ain't the beatin'-est thing! But a co'te might not see hit my way. No, I reckon not. So I got to git the proper goods on him. Super George, would you—would you be my witness in this here?"

"You bet," Fanning said. His eyes twinkled. "Mind telling me just what you're talking about?"

Redbird told him—

AB GREER, tall, wiry bully of the outfit until Linster's joining it some months before, did not go into the woods to work on the next morning. He was half sick, he said, and he seemed pleased when Super George suggested that he remain in camp as helper to the one-eyed old cook.

About the middle of the morning, a barefoot boy who lived not far from Kate Orton's ramshackle cabin appeared in camp and at once sought audience with Greer.

"Ole Kate," whispered the boy, "sent me to tell you she wants to see you dern quick."

Before Ab could ask questions, the lad was gone.

"Quick—" Greer echoed, to himself. "Now, I winner—"

The fortune-teller and herb doctor always knew things. Greer left the camp clearing in leisurely fashion, but once in the screening laurel he walked rapidly. When he reached his destination, he found the wizened old crone sitting in the doorway, smoking her clay pipe and staring off at nothing.

"Well," he growled, halting squarely before her, "here I am."

"I had a bad dream 'bouten you last night, Ab," she creaked.

"Don't mean nothin', dreams don't," Greer said. But he spoke without conviction. Kate Orton had "dreamed" too much that had come to pass, and he was aware of that fact.

"Ab," she said, "I dre'mp o' muddy water, and fire, and blood. And I seed you in hit. You had on a new blue suit o' clo'es, and you had money, heaps o' money. Hit plum' skeered me, Ab! I seed you with cold iron handcuffs on yore wrists. Somebody tuck them handcuffs off, and put a rope around yore neck. Ab, I sont fer you bekase I thought you ort to know!"

Greer's countenance had been dark with scowling. Now he was turning pale. Old Kate was quick to note the change. She reached out, grasped his left hand and riveted her gaze upon its palm. Then, round-eyed, she dropped the hand and went to her feet, panting. Her acting was perfect.

"Ef you air on Killsunday when this day's sun goes down, Ab Greer," she whispered jerkily, "you'll be dead. Better go quick—right now—whilst they air time. Think I air a-tellin' you this to git money? No. I don't want nary cent fer hit. Blood,

and fire, and muddy water. Handcuffs, and a rope. Ab, I can see 'em yit. You better hurry!"

Greer blinked at her, swore under his breath, wheeled and hurried off. Kate Orton *did* know something. Otherwise, she wouldn't have mentioned the blue suit and heaps of money. If this day's sunset caught him on Killsunday he'd be dead, eh? Well, this day's sunset wasn't going to find him still on Killsunday. He'd leave at once, and that without even going past the camp for his duffle-bag.

He struck out through the woods at a fast walk. Half an hour, and Ab Greer was entering a long-deserted, mildewed moonshiner cabin near the head of a rocky cove. He dropped to his knees and with nervous fingers pried a loose stone out of the blackened old furnace. From the hole he drew a canvas bag stuffed with greenback and silver.

He rose, thrusting the bag inside his shirt, turned to go—and faced Redbird Linster and Superintendent Fanning on the threshold.

"Ketched with the proper goods! We've got the deadwood on you now, feller!" said Redbird triumphantly. "You led us a chase, all right. I thought we'd never keep up with you, without you a-seein' us. Give that money to Super George, Ab. Hustle!"

The erstwhile bully of the Killsunday Mountain logging outfit went a pasty white. His eyes glowed with hate beyond ordinary human understanding, hate born of Linster's whipping and dethroning him. It hadn't

been entirely for a disguise that he had worn the new blue clothing. He'd intended evening the fancied score and gaining a small fortune besides, thereby killing two birds with one stone.

Abner Greer reached inside his shirt and brought out, not the canvas bag, but the bulldog-type revolver he had used in the holdup. George Fanning's bigger revolver appeared as though by magic in Redbird's hand—he pulled the trigger.

Greer, his right shoulder broken, dropped through the swirling powder-smoke. Redbird Linster sprang and snatched up the short-barreled weapon, took the payroll from Greer's shirt and tossed it to Fanning.

"Lucky that old Kate's a friend o' mine, mebbe," jubilated Redbird. "But I had to do some slick work, 'sides givin' her the dream tale she told you, Ab. Hit jist had to be either you, Kinchelow, or Seevers, but fer to decide which one war a puzzle. And then I discovered a little mark on one leg o' my purty new blue britches, and that satisfied me hit'd been you!"

Greer struggled up to a sitting position, and swore the most futile of oaths. George Fanning laughed.

"You see, Ab," he said, "Seevers and Kinchelow chew tobacco, but they don't smoke, and you do, and Red knew it. That one match you scratched on Red's trousers was a costly match! On your feet now, Ab. We're going down to the Johnsboro jail on a logging locomotive running special."

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G-MAN'S GUNS

*Braden of the Department of Justice Speeds to
the Rescue of a Kidnaped Child—and
Comes Face to Face with a Crew of
Cold-Blooded Killers*

A Duff Braden Novelette

By ARTHUR J. BURKS

Author of "The Golden Mask Murderers," "The Crimson Blight," etc.

CHAPTER I

Punishment

DUFF BRADEN, on his first real assignment as a G-man, acting practically alone, sat in his new office in downtown Seattle. His blue eyes were thoughtful. Now and again his tight lips shaped one word, that was like an oath of soul-felt fury.

"Rats!"

He meant the men whom it was his task to bring to the end of a noose, or to put behind the bars, like animals in a cage, for the period of their natural lives.

His chief in Washington had de-

livered orders with characteristic brevity:

"Get the kidnapers of Gloria Pardee!"

Duff Braden had just interviewed the parents of Gloria. The girl was seven years old, and beautiful as the dawn. Had he been a father he would have wished for a daughter like Gloria. The haunting terror of the girl's parents, seen in the deep wells of their eyes, would go with him until the day he died.

He sat there, planning a course of action, and living over again that interview with the parents. Their voices had been so low, their words lacking even a hint of hysteria. They had been like people who had suffered the limit, and could suffer no more—a man and a woman who had wept all their tears away.

They hadn't the slightest idea who had stolen the child, beyond hearing the words of a man who called himself "the Voice" over the telephone. The Voice had struck terror into their hearts. They had no enemies. There had been no demand for ransom. To Duff's way of thinking, this was an ominous circumstance. He thought of that beautiful child, buried in some dank place, far from the sound of men, where her parents would never see her again.

There was a knock on his door. He sat bolt upright. Who could possi-



Duff Braden



As the man turned to
shout, Braden leaped
across the intervening
space

bly find him here? Save for the Pardees, none knew he was in Seattle. His hands dropped to his belt. Under his coat, with their butts pointing in opposite directions, so that his hands could reach them both at once, were his Colts .45s. They were thrust into his belt.

"Come in," he said.

A man pushed the door open. He smiled. Duff Braden did not smile back.

"Mr. Braden?" he asked.

Braden nodded.

"I'm a reporter," the man began. "I got the tip from our Washington correspondent that you were here on the Pardee case, and I'd like a little chat with you."

Braden didn't say anything. The man turned to the door.

"Come in, Joe," he said.

A second man came in.

"I'm Luke Hawcom," said the first. "This is my cameraman. If you would let us have a picture— Set, Joe?"

The second man nodded in surly fashion. He set up his camera on its tripod, while Braden studied both men with deepest interest, fixing their faces in his memory.

Joe shut the door. "Bad light," he explained.

"Yes," said Braden, "but you didn't really need to lock it, did you?"

The smiles had vanished from the faces of both men. The front of the camera slid open, and Braden found himself staring into the muzzle of a tommy gun.

"I thought," he said grimly, "that that camera looked big for a camera. Well?"

The "reporter" leaned over the desk. His face was suffused with blood, his eyes murderous.

"Just this, copper," said he; "us boys out here don't take kindly to G-men, see? You're getting set to mess into our business, and this is the first warning. Pack your kit and get out, or—"

"Or what?"

The man did a wild thing, and did it so swiftly that Braden was taken by surprise. He reached suddenly across the desk and slapped Braden

across the face. Braden's head was twisted aside by the fury of the blow, and before he could recover the man had him covered.

"Just in case," he said, "you don't believe the tommy in the camera is the real thing! Set, Joe?"

"Yeah."

"Then we deliver the rest of our message. Search him, Joe."

Joe went over Braden swiftly. Braden was quite calm. He knew these men for hoods. He also knew that in themselves they were unimportant, merely tools who did the bidding of smarter—and even more murderous—men.

Joe got the two gats, tossed them contemptuously into the waste basket.

"The Government oughtn't to give gats to men who don't know how to use 'em, eh, Hawcom?" he said. Hawcom didn't answer.

"Hold this gat on the buzzard, Joe," he said.

JOE took Hawcom's automatic. Hawcom stepped behind the desk. Braden's hands were still up. His mind was working with the speed of light. He could, he knew, have thrown both of these men out of his office so quickly and efficiently they would scarcely have realized what he was doing. But that wasn't part of his plan.

He must plan for the future. If he showed them that he wasn't afraid, that he could handle himself, and most of the ordinary brand of hoods sent against him, then Gloria Pardee would be in real danger if she were still alive.

Hawcom's left hand went to Braden's shirt front. He yanked Braden to his feet. Hawcom kept his body out of line of fire, so that Joe could burn Braden down if Braden got tough.

Then Hawcom drove his fist into Braden's face. He smashed Braden's nose. Tears came to Braden's eyes. Tears would come to the eyes of anyone whose nose was so quickly and expeditiously broken.

"Keep 'em up!" snapped Joe, as Braden automatically lowered his arms to defend himself. Braden shot

his arms shoulder high again. He remained in that position while Hawcom did his work. He didn't say anything, but his brain seethed with the urge to tear Hawcom limb from limb. Only superhuman self-restraint kept him from lashing out.

He could have tied both men in knots, but a beating wasn't a high price to pay for a chance at the men who might know where Gloria Pardee was.

Honest men didn't attack Government agents in their offices. Honest men didn't even know he had such an office—and he wasn't looking for honest men.

Hawcom, his eyes alight with cruelty, drove Braden back with savage rights and lefts. Braden went down, stumbling over the waste basket. His automatics rolled out onto the floor. He might have retrieved them, but Hawcom kicked them aside. He started to put his hands under him, to rise to his feet.

"Don't do it!" snapped Joe. "Hawcom will help you up."

HAWCOM did, with his left hand. No sooner had Braden been yanked erect than Hawcom again drove his fist into the G-man's face.

Braden didn't say a word. He was beginning, now, to allow a hint of terror to creep into his eyes. He was beginning—when all his soul commanded a direct, savage attack—to cringe from the blows of Hawcom. It was the hardest part he had ever called upon himself to play. To stand and take blows rained upon him by hoodlums.

But he thought of Gloria Pardee in the hands of savages like these, and could have taken many times the number of blows for her sake.

He groaned. Hawcom began to laugh.

"The G-man can't take it," he said. "When will the Government learn that it has to send *men* to get its criminals, its public enemies?"

Braden answered with another groan, though he had to fight to keep from stepping out of his chosen role to batter the two of them to a pulp. He started to put his hands over his

bruised and battered face. Then he remembered Joe, and allowed a look of fright to pass over his face for both Joe and Hawcom to see. He elevated his arms again. The hoods laughed.

Back and forth across the room, hammering away, Hawcom drove Duff Braden. Braden was bleeding from split lips and broken nose. His hands and arms trembled from holding them up. He doubted if Joe would have pumped lead into him had he lowered them, for if that had been the plan they'd have shot him on sight.

They didn't quite have nerve enough to kill a G-man. They didn't know yet what sort of machine the Government might be able to get together to run them down. They were taking no chances—as witness the gat that covered Braden, and the fact that Hawcom didn't shoot.

Hawcom ended with Braden against the wall. He hammered Braden's head back with stabbing, darting rights and lefts. Then, as though possessed of a fury of desire to hurt, he grabbed Braden by the head and banged it savagely against the wall. In spite of himself, Braden's legs began to buckle.

"Here's where I have to pretend a knockout," he thought, "before it becomes a real one. If I go out on my feet, and begin to fight back—"

He let his legs become rubbery. His eyes closed. His arms sank to his sides.

"Cut it, Hawcom," said Joe. "The guy's out. I guess he couldn't take it the way we dish it out. Let's scram before someone comes. And Dike will give you the devil for going so far."

Braden heard every word. His breathing was raucous. He used extreme care to make it so.

"This mug," said Hawcom, "will leave town within two hours, I'll bet you money. Want to take me?"

"Naw. I'd leave town myself, after a going-over like that."

They went to the door, peered out. They mentioned, with satisfaction, the lack of witnesses. Then they slipped out.

In a second Braden himself was at the door. But he didn't wait for elevators. It was three flights of stairs to the street. Braden was down and outside, his hat pulled low over his head, his gats back in his belt, when Joe and Hawcom came out, laughing as at a good joke. Braden's eyes were almost swollen shut, but his split lips were grinning.

A taxi dragged to a halt. The driver looked oddly at Braden. Braden said:

"Follow that brown sedan. Ten bucks if you keep them from getting wise!"

CHAPTER II

G-Man's Trail

"**O**KAY," said the driver. "You the law?"

"I'm ten bucks, fellow," said Braden savagely. "Take it or leave it."

"Show me!"

Braden showed the money. The cabby grinned. He meshed gears, got under way, closed in on the car in which Hawcom and Joe rode. He bumped their tail light. Braden dropped out of sight in the tonneau. The cabby snapped profanity at Hawcom and Joe.

"Don't you mugs know how to drive?" he railed.

"Scram, cabby," said Joe. "You don't know you're monkeying with a buzz-saw."

"Nerts," said the cabby. "For two cents I'd pull you two petunias out of that scroggle-buggy and smack your heads together!"

"Aw, dry up!"

The Hawcom car was traveling north on Third. The cabby kept close beside it, never ceasing his tirade of the men who had made the mistake of being smacked by his cab.

Braden was grinning. He had half expected the cabby to give him away, but the fellow, instantly snapping into his adopted part, had decided that the best way to keep those two from knowing that he deliberately followed, was to follow openly, shouting abuse.

Finally Hawcom stuck his head out.

"Ever hear of Dike Likat?" he shouted.

"Sure—that rat! Why?"

"This is his car, see? If you have any squawk coming, look him up some time, when you don't care whether you're healthy."

The cabby instantly dropped back, with a look of apology on his face. But he chuckled.

"How'd I do, copper?" he asked.

"Fine."

"But if Dike Likat is in this it's worth more than a sawbuck."

"You married?"

"Yeah."

"Any kids?"

"Three."

"Girls?"

"Yeah, two of 'em."

"Suppose one or both of 'em, right now, were Gloria Pardee?"

No need to explain further to the cabby, or to anyone else who read the newspapers. The cabby's face paled.

"I'm taking in the flag, copper," he said grimly. "Why'n't you tell me you were on the Pardee case?"

"I meant to fool you—and the ten bucks still goes, cabby. Let's get going."

Once more they closed with the Hawcom car. The signal was against them at an intersection. Hawcom started through. A copper signaled, came to him, his face savage. Hawcom leaned from the window.

"This is Dike Likat's car, copper," he said.

The copper, to Braden's disgust, touched his hat, stepped back to his job of directing traffic. The cabby, when Hawcom's car had gone through, and Braden had sat back in the seat again, looked over his shoulder at Braden.

"See how it is?" he asked.

"Yeah, but Dike Likat can't do anything like that to me." The cabby's face broke into an expression of comprehension. "G-man, eh?"

Braden nodded.

"I'll stick, then, fella, until the cows come home. That crack about

one of my young 'uns being in Gloria Pardee's place— Well, there are some decent people left in the world—even cab drivers."

Braden nodded. The cabby was studying his face in the rear-vision mirror.

"Run into a door?" he asked.

"No, met those two mugs up there in my office. Surprise visit. They think—"

"I get it. I hope you know what you're doing now."

"I think I do. There may be bullets before the end, cabby, and there is nothing in it but what I can slip you, out of my own pay."

"Another crack like that," said the cabby, "and I'll soak you one myself. Now watch me keep on the tails of these two buzzards. What if they go out into the country, where a taxicab will stand out like a sore thumb?"

"Easy. Steal the first car you find, leave your cab, and all subsequent explanations, to me."

"Right! And don't worry about bullets. I was in the war, and I got used to 'em."

THE Hawcom car kept traveling north. Braden was beginning to visualize a hideout somewhere in the woods along Puget Sound. He didn't know the country any too well, but the cabby seemed to. Now and again he looked back over his shoulder at Braden.

"Houses thinning out," he explained. "I think I could lose a little time and still keep in touch with 'em. I'll watch for a good car."

Braden wrote a note, addressed "to whom it may concern."

The cabby finally pulled up behind a long, grey touring car at the curb.

"Okay, copper," he said. "The key is in the lock and there's oodles of gasoline. What next?"

Braden fastened his note to the wheel of the taxicab. It said:

Owners of the Stutz:

Car will be returned in good condition. If you were the parents or relatives of Gloria Pardee you wouldn't report a stolen car to the coppers. Take care of the cab until we trade back.

Braden.

If things didn't turn out as Braden expected, that note would fall into the hands of police, and from there filter to the newspapers. Braden's name would then have meaning, and other G-men would start tracing him. He grinned. It was a neat twist to the chase, he thought.

He got into the car beside the cabby.

"Let's change headgear and coats," he said. "Maybe that will be disguise enough, especially when they are not expecting pursuit. Now, step on it."

The car sped away. Braden looked back. Two men were running out of the house before which they had found the car. He looked back until the two men reached the cab. He saw them stare at the note. Then one of them waved, and his gesture seemed to say:

"Good luck, whoever you are."

"If my luck's in," thought Braden, "they'll find out who I am one of these days."

It wasn't egotistical. It was merely the voice of a ruthless, determined service, manned by hard-hitting, straight-shooting young fellows who believed in the right of things for human beings—in the extermination of all rats.

The cars sped on.

Hawcom and Joe looked back occasionally. The cabby, whose name was Jones, stepped on the gas. Braden looked straight ahead, the cabby's hat pulled low over the right side of his face. The Hawcom car gave them a brief race. Jones pulled ahead with a superb exhibition of driving. Then, for half an hour, he kept just ahead of Hawcom's car.

"That's just another way of following," he explained to Braden.

Braden now kept his eyes glued to the rear-vision mirror. The cars sped on.

Finally Braden explained:

"They've turned off, to the right. But keep on going. It may be a trick to see whether we're watching them. Those two men are not careless fools. Look, do you know a way to circle back?"

"Yeah."

"Then do it. Remember where they cut off. Don't follow in—"

"It's not a regular road," said the cabby; "I know these roads. Something in there."

"Okay. Just speed past when you come along again, and I'll drop off. When I've had fifteen minutes' start, follow me as slowly as you can. No, maybe you'd better not. Just wait off the road until I show up again. If it isn't before midnight—"

"I'll be coming in after you," said Jones grimly.

"You won't be able to help me any by that time, Jones," said Braden. "But I'm grateful, just the same. Obey orders. Maybe there'll be some more money, or newspaper publicity."

"Wouldn't a cabby look swell with his picture in the papers, and the friends of Dike Likat looking for everybody who helped the G-man? No, thanks, copper. I'm still looking out for myself the best way I can, until you G-men get things safe."

Jones circled the locality on a network of roads that seemed to go off in all directions. He never seemed to be at a loss.

"There it is," he said. "How fast can you take off?"

"Slow her to twenty, for a few yards," said Braden grimly.

The car slid past the road where Hawcom had turned off. Braden noticed no returning traces of tires. He nodded to Jones.

"See you in the cemetery, Jones," he said. "Here's your ten."

"See you in hell before I take it," retorted Jones.

BRADEN hit the dirt, his body bunched. He catapulted into the underbrush so quickly that an observer would have had to be watching the car with the utmost care to have seen him. He leaped, hit the road, vanished in a flash.

Jones went on. His face was grim. He started back around the road by which he had brought Braden to this dim aisle through the woods.

Braden slid into the underbrush. He sprawled out on the leaves and earth for five minutes, listening. He

heard the rapidly diminishing roar of the car driven by Jones. He nodded to himself with satisfaction. After that the silence was ominously oppressive. Nobody, it appeared, had seen him jump from the car.

He rose to his feet finally, moved cautiously to the road. For all he knew some gunman might be waiting for him, to pot him when he came out of shelter. Or, worse still, this road might merely be a short-cut, with nothing at the end of it worth seeing.

He pushed the brush aside, looked at the dirt road. The tire treads led more deeply into the shadowed aisle. Braden, keeping out of sight in the woods, paralleled the tracks. His guns were comfortably set in his belt. He had forgotten the pain of his broken nose, his smashed face, his bleeding lips.

For he had found where the Hawcom car had again turned off, this time into a trail that was just that—a deserted trail.

A thought occurred to him: "What if Gloria Pardee were here, crying, all the time she has been missing? Who'd hear her, besides Joe and Hawcom?" His jaws set firmly. His eyes were wells of fury.

CHAPTER III

Woods Trap

HE followed the trail through the woods with extreme care, yet with all the speed he could manage. Somehow, he was sure he would find little Gloria at the end of the road. In the ear of his mind he could hear her sobbing. Either she was in the hands of men like Hawcom and Joe, who knew nothing of the treatment of children, or some slatternly woman was probably misusing her.

It was a trick of fancy, of course, but the further he advanced along the trail the surer he was that he could hear the sobbing of a girl. Now it was clear in his ears, and now he wasn't sure that he heard it at all, except in his imagination.

But the mere thought of her,

handled by men who had manhandled him so savagely, drove him to a cold frenzy. If he could get his hands on them, or see them over the sights of his Colts.

He went on faster. The Hawcom car had kept close to the trail, where there was scarcely room for it. There was no mistaking the fact that, here, it was headed for some definite destination, a secret one, judging from the care which had been taken in selecting it.

Dike Likat—who, what was he?

He wished he had asked Jones. He wished he had found out things of that nature before taking on his present job. But there hadn't been time, and the rats of Seattle had got to him too quickly. How had they received word from Washington? Who, there, was a rat, perhaps in the guise of a G-man? Braden's lips twisted with the thought:

"No rats in our mob, I'd bet my bottom dollar on that!" he decided. "They've got spies near us, somewhere, though. I hope they give 'em to me as my next job—if I ever get through this one."

He lifted his eyes to a steep incline, where the car ahead of him had been forced to climb in low gear. This Braden judged from the distinct impression of the rear wheels in the ridged soil.

Braden looked—and jumped out of sight into the scrub.

A man was coming down the trail. By pure chance the man hadn't seen Braden. At least he seemed not to have seen him.

The approaching man might be Joe, or Hawcom. There was the same stamp of the rat upon him. Braden had scarcely slipped into the woods, holding his breath in expectation of hearing a shout of warning, when the man was abreast of him. It would never do for the fellow to get behind him and encounter Jones.

Braden started to jump forward, ready to fell the man with a blow, when the fellow suddenly swung toward him, and Braden knew that he had been seen from the beginning. The muzzle of the man's gun looked as big as a cannon.

"Hello, copper," said the newcomer. There was a harsh edge to his voice, and murder was in his eyes. "My gat will bring help. You can't trade shots with me, because the sound—"

Braden settled back. The fellow regarded him for a moment. Braden knew that he was set to shout a warning to someone further up among the trees at the far top of the rise.

"You're probably the G-man Hawcom and Joe just told the boss they had driven out of town. They didn't believe me when I said it was an act. I came back to prove it."

Now Braden knew for certain that the warning shout was coming. He dared the chance of a shot as the man turned his head slightly to shout. He leaped across the intervening space, his left hand reaching for the man's gat, his right shooting to the point of the man's chin.

BOTH hands went true to their mark. The left hand caught the automatic. The forefinger slid back of the trigger before the fellow could pull. The other fingers flicked the automatic out of the man's hand as Braden's fist crashed to his jaw.

The man went down, his warning shout unuttered. His gat was lost in the leaves. Braden fought in grim silence. The man opened his mouth to scream. Braden's toe caught him in the face. He felt teeth give before the savage drive of his shoe.

The man was no coward. He didn't give up easily. In spite of the fact that Braden was on top of him, he managed to get to his feet, lower his head and charge. He couldn't yell now, for his mouth was a mess. Braden fought him furiously, intent on putting him down and out, planning how, even as he fought, to bind and gag him. He glanced once up the trail to see whether anyone else might have followed.

None had, so far.

Braden set himself for the task of finishing the fight the quickest way he knew how. His fists were filled with all the fury he had withheld in his one-sided encounter with Haw-

com and Joe. His left was a stinging wasp, his right a terrific bludgeon.

The man's head went back with each savage drive of that right fist. He gasped for breath when the left sank into his stomach. Braden pushed him hard, forcing him back into the woods, where the battle could not be seen from the hill ahead, or along the road.

The man went down again and again. He seemed unconquerable. Braden marveled at the way he took it. He decided to steam it up. His fists increased their speed at command of his brain. Every second of delay was added torture for the Pardee youngster and for her parents. Their suffering was Braden's suffering, and he was passing it on to this man with all the interest he could add.

Finally the man went down, his head twisted under him. But as though his neck had been toughened by many sessions on the wrestling mat, he straightened out, sprawled supine, the neck unbroken. Braden had thought his last blow a killing one. For anyone but the man he had struck, perhaps it would have been.

Quickly he bound the man with his own belt, feet drawn up behind the fellow's back to secure them with his wrists. Then, using his own handkerchief and that of his victim, he gagged him until he could scarcely breathe. After that he fumbled in the leaves until he found the discarded automatic.

Again he faced the road.

He took a tentative step forward, after fixing landmarks in his mind so that he could find his prisoner when he returned.

"That'll be about all, copper!" a grim voice said.

He whirled. Hawcom and Joe advanced on him. Their gats were leveled at his stomach. Hawcom's face was a mask of fury. Joe's showed a growing terror, not of Braden—but of something else.

"Midge was right, then," he said. "If Dike knew that we had fumbled this—if the hideout is surrounded by G-men—"

"Hell, Joe," said Hawcom, "how is Dike to know if we do the job right this time? And quit sniveling. There ain't any more G-men. Well, Braden," he said.

Braden didn't grin now. His blue eyes were cold as ice.

He started to advance on Joe and Hawcom. The latter said:

"I don't know how you managed it, copper, but you're not going any further. Joe and me don't care to get in dutch with Dike Likat. If you knew him you'd understand—"

"I expect to know him," said Braden grimly. "And I gather that since you're so quiet about it, you wouldn't really risk shooting off gats here, and bring pals to find out that you'd messed up a simple job. If you've got the nerve, start shooting."

"Our hands were good enough before," said Hawcom, "and you don't dare shoot because you know that whatever he does to Joe and me afterward, Dike won't be going easy with no G-men."

"Then that makes it easy," said Braden. "Now I get a chance to pay you rats up for what you did to me this morning. Hands it is!"

BRADEN moved forward. He knew he had called the turn. Joe's face was white. Hawcom said:

"We smashed hell out of him this morning. We can do it again."

"I took it this morning, Hawcom," said Braden, "so you'd think you'd done your job, and would end by leading me to the place I wanted to go—the hideout of Gloria Pardee."

He snapped out the last five words, and a deep sense of peace came to him when the expressions on their faces told him that he had struck home. Up ahead he would find the girl, or—

He walked slowly toward Hawcom and Joe. They held their gats steadily on him. Joe was licking his lips, backing away.

"You don't dare shoot, you know," said Braden conversationally. "And I do."

The muzzles of their weapons started to lower. Hawcom snapped:

"Get set, Joe; use the butt of your gat. We'll rip his brains out for him!"

The words had scarcely left his mouth than Braden struck. His muzzle raked the side of Joe's face. Joe went down. He aimed his gun to fire, in a last desperate attempt to escape the vengeance he saw in the eyes of the G-man.

Braden kicked him, hard. The gun tumbled out of Joe's hand. He started up. Braden brought the muzzle of his weapon down on Joe's head. Joe sighed and relaxed as Hawcom leaped to Braden's back. Braden fell to his knees under the hammering drive of Hawcom's fists. Almost too late, Hawcom realized that this G-man was not a child to be played with. He brought his weapon down hard, toward Braden's skull. Braden saw it coming in the nick of time, and he jerked his head aside. The muzzle almost numbed his shoulder.

Braden caught the left leg of Hawcom under his arm, twisted his own body to the left, and Hawcom's body crashed hard against the ground. But Hawcom was tough. He was rising even as Braden came up.

He socked Hawcom three times in a row, stinging blows to the jaw.

Hawcom's eyes glazed; his knees buckled. He fell, scuffing his broken face on the ground. Braden seemed preoccupied as he made up his mind what to do with his prisoners. He was hurried in his task by one all-important consideration—a queer, strangled cry that had come down the road-trail.

It sounded like the weeping of a child.

It spurred Braden to superhuman effort. But first, lest he fail in the end, he must secure his prisoners. He grinned as the perfect solution came to him. He pulled all three of the men together so that they faced one another, and bound them tightly with their own belts, their own clothing—gagged them with their own handkerchiefs and the ripped-off ends of their shirt-tails.

"I can't think of fitter punishment," he told himself, "than to have

them rub cheeks with one another until I'm ready to separate them."

His task accomplished, Braden dragged them several feet from the road, and started again on the trace left by the car he had followed from Seattle.

And now, as he advanced, came the unmistakable sound:

A girl was crying, bitterly. The sound of a slap, and a man's savage voice, sent Braden on the run.

CHAPTER IV

Rats' Nest

BRADEN believed now that there was nothing he couldn't do. What man, with that to guide him which had sent Braden racing up the hill, could have failed to feel himself invincible, able to move mountains for someone who needed help?

If there were any other guards, they were not in evidence. Braden broke from the woods into a clearing—and stopped short.

There was a huge car before a closed door, beside the car in which Hawcom and Joe had traveled out of the city. Braden's heart jumped with excitement. Was the big car that of Dike Likat? It must be, or else Joe and Hawcom would have smoked it out with him in the beginning.

Again the girl screamed. Again the man's savage voice, coming forth plainly in the still, motionless air, and the sound of a hand slapping flesh.

No woman, even the worst, could have abused a girl like that. Only a man, short-tempered, perhaps sick of the bargain he had made, would do such a thing.

"Rats!" snapped Braden. He didn't pause now to seek cover. Those in the log house would not be worried about interference, knowing that three of their men were out somewhere guarding in the woods.

Braden walked to the nearest window, removed his hat, peered through.

There were four men in the room

—and a girl. No mistaking her. Gloria Pardee, after five days of hell, had been found!

But if Braden died trying to release her, she might never be found by anyone else—unless Jones came back, perhaps to die in his turn.

Braden studied the men. One, a furtive man, might be the Voice. The Voice! Over the telephone, whenever Dike Likat got ready, that voice would tell the parents of Gloria Pardee how much money must be paid for her return.

The other two men were ordinary gunmen. One wore the uniform of a chauffeur. Probably drove that huge car outside.

The fourth was Dike Likat, of that Braden felt sure. The man wore an abundance of jewelry on his fingers. His paunch was big, his jowls fat and porcine. His eyes were beady, like those of a snake. He smoked a fat cigar.

Braden listened. Likat was waving his hand, the hand in which he held the cigar.

"You buzzards stick to Dike Likat and you'll wear diamonds like these. Duck out on me and you'll wear wings. I'm not fooling—"

"But this brat, Dike," said the man Braden had decided was the Voice. "She's seen all of our faces. When we get the dough, if we do, she'll be able to pick most of us out of the gallery; except you, of course."

"She won't pick anything out of anywhere," said the fat man. "Think I'm a fool? I didn't buy this ice, get automobiles and servants and fat bank accounts by being a fool. Who said this brat would ever—"

Dike broke off significantly. Braden saw the faces of the others whiten. He knew, and they knew, what Dike Likat meant. Gloria Pardee, if Dike had his way, would never return to her people.

Cold, insane rage possessed Braden. His nerve was perfect; he had never been surer of himself.

"You," Dike Likat was saying to the Voice, "will telephone the Pardees tomorrow at eleven. They'll want to hear the kid's voice. You'll

let her talk to them, to prove that she is alive. That will suit them. They'll pawn the family jewels to raise the hundred grand, especially when they're assured that she's alive. After that—"

No wonder that Gloria Pardee was whimpering. The Voice slapped her.

"For that the Voice dies first," said Braden to himself.

"I'm leaving now," said Dike Likat, "but if you birds let anything slip up—"

"You'll what, Dike?" asked Braden quietly. He had moved to the door, stepped through it. His fists gripped the butts of his automatics. His whole body was responsive to his slightest whim.

THE four men stared at him. They were frozen in their places. Dike Likat grinned.

"Hello, copper," he said. "I suppose you've heard everything? Well, every man has his price. What's yours? I know you must have one, or you would have come with a mob."

Braden's voice was very low. His eyes missed no move that was made. The little, bedraggled, woebegone girl stopped weeping. A light of hope shone in her eyes, perhaps for the first time. She sat very still.

"Listen, Dike Likat," said Braden. "There isn't a streak of decency in you or any of your rats. Send the kid into the next room—now!"

Dike Likat smiled.

"Why? If she sees what happens to you, she'll be able to give her folks some idea of what they can expect if they don't come through. I gather from your answer that you haven't a price. Or maybe I didn't mention a figure. Shall we say ten grand?"

"Send the kid into the other room," said Braden.

Nobody moved.

Finally Dike spoke.

"All right, Streeter," nodding at the man Braden had decided was the Voice, "take the kid into the next room. After all, I *do* have a soft streak in me, and he's got the drop on us."

Braden watched like a hawk as Streeter moved to obey. The other three men made almost imperceptible movements toward hidden weapons.

Braden snapped at Streeter: "Not so fast, Streeter," he said. "I can't see you getting behind the kid and using her as a shield against me, while your friends do me in. Nothing doing. Gloria, go into the next room and wait."

The child dropped off the chair in which she had been sitting.

Streeter made a move to stop her, then saw that the muzzle of Braden's right-hand automatic was covering his forehead. Instead of moving then, he licked his lips. He looked at Dike Likat, as though for instructions.

Likat grinned again.

"I never even thought of it, copper," he said.

"No?" said Braden. "Listen, Likat: I've got a hunch you know how to fix a jury, you won't get the chance to, this time. I start shooting when the kid closes that door, understand?"

"So," said Likat, "do my men. Midge, Joe and Hawcom are probably closing in on the house right now, to get you from behind."

"Not, unless they came back from hell," said Braden grimly.

Likat's mouth hung open. He was just beginning to realize that here was one man he couldn't bulldoze. But he shrugged.

Of all the rats of the underworld he had encountered in his time, Braden recognized the fact that Dike Likat was the most dangerous. He was like still water, in whose depths slimy creatures crawled where the eye could not see them. The chances, even now, were all against Braden.

"You won't kill me until you're sure I won't raise the ante any higher, copper," said Likat. "I know you underpaid officials—"

"Bribes don't go in my office," said Braden.

"A G-man can be bought," began Likat—and Braden noticed his almost imperceptible nod toward the chauffeur. The man streaked for a weapon under his left arm. The

Voice, his face writhing like that of a hophead long denied his dope, grabbed for his belt.

Braden's right-hand automatic spoke.

The Voice crashed to the floor. His right hand gripped the butt of an ugly revolver, half drawn from his belt.

Dike didn't move, scarcely seemed to bat an eyelash.

"That proves you mean business," he said, as the chauffeur's hand stopped moving in mid-reach for his weapon, "and it also kites the ante, just as you planned. Fifteen grand."

Braden stared at the chauffeur.

"Grab-your gat if you feel lucky, man," he challenged. "Fifteen grand or fifty, or a million, it's all the same to me. I'll give you till I count three to grab and fire. One! Two—"

It was the fourth man who moved. He leaped aside, clawing for a weapon. He got it out. He sped two bullets through the floor, because Braden never gave him a chance to lift the weapon. His forehead was a crimson blur.

"You understand why I couldn't let the kid see that, don't you, Likat?" said Braden grimly. "I'll count three in a second. Better grab and start smoking."

The chauffeur screamed like an animal in the throes of terror, and his hand came streaking out. And, as the chauffeur went for his weapon, Likat's right hand was lifting. There was no weapon in it, but Braden knew there soon would be. He guessed there was a derringer up Likat's sleeve. Likat would go in for neatness, even in his instruments of murder. He must down the chauffeur and get Likat before Likat could fire.

His left gat spoke. The right hand of Likat seemed to bend double at the wrist. From the sleeve dangled a snubnosed derringer. But Braden's eyes were on the chauffeur. Braden fired with calm, deadly aim.

The chauffeur backed against the wall, his gun falling from his relaxing fingers, a look of amazement on his face, his eyes already glazing.

Braden did not look at him again. He knew that the chauffeur would be harmless hereafter and forever more.

Braden had eyes only for Likat. He stared at the man.

"I don't care whether you use that derringer you have up your left sleeve, Likat," he said. "But if you make a play for it—"

Likat screamed. His face was now a mask of terror. He knew, at last, that this lone G-man, coming out of nowhere, had written *finis* to his murky destiny. It had been hard to realize. He flung his left hand over his body. Braden saw the derringer in that sleeve, instantly responsive to the ingenious rubber contrivance Likat used—like the kind crooked gamblers have used to hide a card.

It pleased Braden to let the killer grasp the weapon.

Then, with deep satisfaction in his heart, he emptied his weapons, both of them, into the gross body of Dike Likat.

He slipped his gats into his belt. He went to the door through which Gloria had gone, closing it carefully behind him, so that she might not see the shambles he had made of the room—hoping as he went that she wouldn't, the rest of her life, hear the exploding of automatics in her dreams. And then grabbed for his guns again.

A man had his arms about Gloria Pardee!

But when the man turned he was grinning. It was Jones!

"I didn't see as you needed any help in there, copper," he said. "Besides, I'm only a cab driver."

"You're a G-man if you want to be, Jones," said Braden. "How'd you get back?"

"Walked," said Jones. "Let's get this kid home. And on the way, maybe, I'll figure out which pays better—being a cabby or a G-man."

"If it's only the pay," said Braden, whose face looked very tired, "you'd better stick to cabs."

"I dunno," said Jones, his voice shaking a little, "whether the money matters so much after all. I got the darndest feeling, when this kid came to me, as though she knew very well I wasn't a kidnaper."

"I want to go home," said Gloria.

"You take her," said Braden. "I'm going in Likat's car, with three prisoners." Braden grinned a little. "Nice gag, riding in Likat's car. We'll have right of way everywhere, until the newspapers put the law wise to the fact that the gag isn't the least bit funny. Maybe, Jones, I can wangle the Likat car out of the mess, to sort of pay you—"

Jones winced visibly.

"I'd get the horrors every time I saw it," he said. "Besides, how many times must I tell you that I'm not here for dough? Well, maybe it *would* be all right to take that ten dollars you promised me."

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The WILL

*A Cold-Blooded Murder
Perpetrated for
Gain—and the
Aftermath!*

By
RICHARD B. SALE

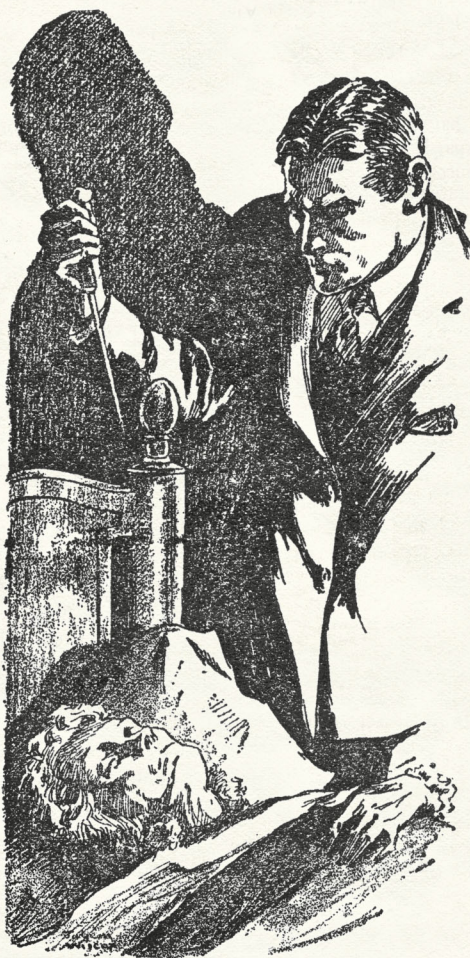
Author of "The Reptile Murders," etc.

IN the gloomy house on the hill, John Ames had waited two interminable years for his grandmother to die. The doctors had said so many times that she had no chance, that it was only a matter of days.

But it was like Victoria Ames to contradict them. She fought off death with the same grim tenacity that she fought life.

With growing impatience, John Ames had waited, kind and gentle with Vicki, wary of Willie Foster who also lived in the house. Willie was the son of Vicki's sister, long dead. He bothered John, not because he would come in for a share of the huge estate at Vicki's death, but because he was an idiot. Willie spoke with difficulty, moved slowly and awkwardly, and never seemed to understand.

Vicki Ames might have lingered for another year or two if she had not suddenly changed her will. John heard about it from her own lips one night as he read to her. She refused, however, to divulge just what the change was. Frightened, he went to see Lon Macaulay, her lawyer, the next day.



*She was asleep in that strange coma
that often claimed her*

"No, John," said Macaulay, shaking his head. "I'm afraid I can't help you out. There's been a change, as she told you. And she was sane when she made it."

"But who gets the estate?" John begged him. "God knows, Macaulay, I've given up two years of my life to make her last days comfortable. I deserve something from it. And there's no telling what she's done in the condition she's in!"

Macaulay shrugged. "I wish I could help you, John. What you say is perfectly true, but as a lawyer, I can't tell you anything like that. It's confidential."

"You could give me a hint," said John. "Just to let me know where I stand."

"But I don't know where you or

any one else stands," said Macaulay, scowling. "That's the whole flaw. I can tell you this. Of any one in the world, either you or Willie Foster stand to inherit the entire fortune. And perhaps it might be both of you."

"Do you mean," asked John with a budding sense of horror, "that Willie might inherit the whole thing?"

"Yes, he might. Or you might, for that matter. Or anyone. But you two have the best chance. I'll give you a hint, John. Stay close to her."

"But I've stayed close to her for two years!" said John.

Macaulay nodded. "Keep doing it. It's your best chance."

Sighing, John Ames left the lawyer's office, resigned to another long vigil by Vicki's side. But at the house, the sight of Willie Foster's vacant, grinning face changed his mind. The idea of Willie falling heir to such an estate appalled him. The idiot wouldn't know what to do with the money after he had it—and John had planned for so many things.

THERE was one way of beating the will and solving the whole intricate mess. If Vicki were dead, the will would be probated. And if the fortune were left to Willie and he was to die—it was safe to hazard that it would come to John Ames. There was, of course, the possibility that the money would be left to him anyway; but at this point, John was taking no chances, despite any risks he might incur.

He left Willie downstairs and went up to see Vicki. She was asleep. He stared down at her for several minutes, conscious of bunched muscles in his cheeks, and a throbbing vein on his left temple which hurt.

Retiring to his room, he began to write a plan. It had to be a perfect plan. Everything depended upon its flawlessness. He worked on it steadily until late in the afternoon. Then, he laid aside his pencil and reread his efforts, aware of the complete conciseness of the thing.

At seven that evening, John Ames

put his plan into operation. After a light supper, he selected an ice-pick from the drawer of kitchen utensils. He handed it to Willie Foster and said:

"This is getting dull. You'd better sharpen it tonight."

Willie took it, nodding and grinning.

Disturbed by that vague expression which always hovered over Willie's face, John Ames shuddered, put on his topcoat, although the night was warm, and went downtown.

At the local cinema house, he bought a ticket for the show, giving a word of greeting to the girl at the ticket office who recognized him. He went in and handed the ticket to the ticket-taker, a young fellow, who spoke nicely to him, inquired about Vicki's health, and then let him pass into the theater.

Inside, he removed his topcoat and bunched it into a ball which he hid beneath the low sofa in the men's smoking room. This done, John went out of the theater through one of the side doors, jamming a long pencil in at the base to keep the exit door from locking.

Nobody saw him on the way home. When he reached the gloomy house on the hill, it was dark. He breathed more easily.

He entered the house through the rear door with his own keys, after putting on the pair of gloves he had carried with him. In the kitchen he opened the utensil drawer and took out the ice-pick which Willie had sharpened. Cold sweat drenched his body as he stealthily stole up the stairs. Willie was not in his room.

That didn't bother John. Willie never went out. He was in the house somewhere, and that was the only thing necessary.

In Vicki's room, he took hold of himself and strode to the side of her bed. She was asleep in that strange, heavy coma which often claimed her, but from which—he gritted his teeth—she always managed to awaken.

Gripping the ice-pick tightly, and steadying himself, he plunged it down into her left side. Vicki stiffened as

he struck her, but made no sound. Her lips moved silently, her eyes remaining closed. She began to bleed copiously, spotting the white sheets. In a few seconds, she relaxed. He could see she was dead.

Her blood was all over the gloves which he wore. He removed them, took hold of her left arm where she wore a small wrist-watch, and banged the arm against the backboard of the bed, splintering the crystal of the watch and stopping the hands at ten minutes of eight.

THIS done, he took the gloves and went to Willie's room. He wiped one glove over the knob of Willie's door, then went downstairs, out the back door, and headed towards town again, discarding the gloves in an ashcan along the route.

He reached the theater safely, pried the exit door open and slipped in. Retrieving his topcoat in the smoking room, he took a seat and thereafter sat through the entire show until he had seen it all.

When John Ames returned to the house again—after the cinema had finished and the ticket-taker had seen him leave—Lon Macaulay was there waiting for him. The rest of the house was deserted. Macaulay swiftly related what had happened.

"They took her body away," he said, "after they arrested Willie. His fingerprints were all over the ice-pick, and there was blood on his door."

John Ames looked horrified. "Who would have suspected," he said in a hollow voice, "that Willie would—"

"Now, listen, John," Macaulay said, pointing a finger, "you don't have to act with me. I know Willie Foster didn't kill his grandmother. On the contrary, I know *you* did. I see you've got an alibi that can't be broken—and how you managed it I don't know."

"You're mad!" John interrupted.

"Boloney!" said Macaulay. "Oh, I can't do anything to you, John. Your plan, whatever it was, has worked like a clock. You're in the clear. But, by God, you'll regret this! You

have cut off your nose to spite your face!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," John said.

It rested that way. Macaulay saw to it that Willie had a speedy trial, and until the trial was over, he absolutely refused to read John Ames the terms of Vicki's will. During the trial, as the prosecuting attorney built up the case against Willie Foster, John gloated. The ring of evidence was too strong to be broken. Willie was doomed to hang. And through it all, the idiot grinned without understanding what it was he faced.

At the end of the trial, John became uneasy. Macaulay defended Willie and did not seem at all perturbed by the net of evidence. Just before the prosecuting attorney summed up the case for the jury, Macaulay introduced a surprise witness in the person of Dr. Cobb, the town medico who had attended Vicki Ames throughout her illness.

Dr. Cobb testified that from a quarter of eight to eight o'clock, he had talked with Willie Foster at the Ames house on the telephone!

John felt his world tumbling. That was why Willie had not been in sight. The telephone was in the front hall. John had ascended the stairs to kill Vicki in the rear of the house. And all during the crime, Willie had talked with Cobb. The broken wrist-watch on Vicki's wrist set the time of the murder while Willie was on the phone.

It was a slim fact, but the jury-men knew and respected Dr. Cobb's word. And in twenty minutes after their charge, they returned a verdict of not guilty.

In his office later, Lon Macaulay smiled mysteriously at John Ames.

"You've failed," he said. "You've failed all around, John. And while they can never get you for murder, Vicki herself has punished you. Sit down."

John sat down with a sense of dread. Willie Foster was there, too, grinning stupidly at Macaulay and entirely unaware of what was going on.

Macauly went to his files and brought out Vicki's will. He broke the seals and opened it. He read aloud:

I, Victoria Ames, being of sound mind and body, do hereby bequeath my entire estate to either John Ames, or Willie Foster—whichever one who was present at my bedside at the moment of my death.

The blood drained from John Ames' face as Macauly set the will on the desk.

"How about that, John? Would you claim the fortune? Were you with her when she died?"

"It—it would make me a murderer," John said, gasping.

"I told you that you had destroyed yourself," said Macauly, drumming his fingers on the desk. "I am asking you an official question. Do you claim it? Were you with her?"

"No!" said John, rising. "But no one else can claim it either, Macauly!

At least I'll have the satisfaction of knowing that!"

Macauly looked at him with pity.

"You are wrong there," he said softly. "Some one can claim it. I am going to see that he does claim it. Willie Foster will inherit Vicki's wealth."

"He can't!" John shrilled. "It would brand him a killer!"

MACAULY shrugged. "Outwardly, yes. But he can claim it, John. He can say he was with her at the moment of her death."

John Ames' face broke into a crafty smile. "Let him. They'll hang him if he does, the fool!"

"No, they won't," said Macauly. "You see, John, in this country a man cannot be tried for the same crime twice. Willie has already been tried for her death. And he has been acquitted!"



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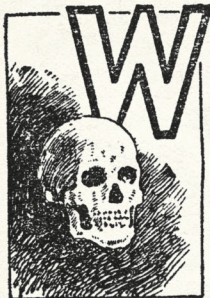
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FOOTPRINTS

A CRIME THAT WAS A WEIGHTY MATTER

By C. K. M. SCANLON

Author of "Stolen Diamonds," "Death on the Wire," etc.



WITH grim eyes Sheriff Walt Bixby faced the two men seated in his office. Dixon, his deputy, stood near the door.

"Bart Tyson," the sheriff announced, "has been found dead—shot in the back by some yellow-livered skunk!"

"Dude" Cantrell, Allentown's dapper little cabaret owner, leaned back, the picture of horrified amazement. Jim Sutton, the garage owner, said nothing, but his body tensed.

"Everybody in town," Bixby continued, "knows that Tyson didn't have an enemy in the world except you two men. The three of you have been courting Judy White for the past year, and we all know there was a bitter feeling between you. There's no doubt in my mind that one of you two men had something to do with the shooting of Tyson last night!"

Sutton sprang up, his square face flushed, and his great fists clenched. Dude Cantrell calmly crossed one sharply pressed trouser leg over the other, his face white and strained.

The sheriff curtly waved Sutton back to his seat, and continued:

"I found a pair of muddy hiking boots and a gun with one empty shell, in that tool shack in back of Jim's garage. They belong to him. The gun's been wiped clean, and Jim says he knows nothing about it. So we're all going over to Tyson's place and have a look around. Dixon, I want you to take those boots along."

They climbed into the sheriff's car, and drove about a mile out of town, along a smooth paved highway. Bixby stopped the car near a dirt lane that led from the road to Tyson's one-man farm.

"The ground's pretty soft from the heavy rain we've been getting lately, and there are a number of footprints on this road," the sheriff said, as they got out. "But

there's only one set of prints not made by me or old man Carr, who found Bart, or by Bart himself. Those prints were made by the murderer." Bixby pointed down. "There they are—those big ones. Dixon, see if those boots you have there fit these footprints."

The deputy bent down with one of the muddy hiking boots.

"Yep, Walt," he nodded, straightening up. "Fits exactly."

The sheriff grunted, and turned to Sutton.

"All right, Jim," he said quietly. "Put those boots on, and walk on this clear spot."

The huge man looked at him wondering-ly, but complied.

Bixby then turned to the dapper little cabaret owner.

"And now, Cantrell," he said softly, "you try them on."

Cantrell stared at him, pasty-faced for a moment. Then, without a word, he took the boots and laced them on. He walked a few steps and looked at the sheriff defiantly.

Bixby peered down at the two new sets of footprints. Then he walked over to Sutton.

"What struck me so queer this morning, Jim," he said, "was when I saw how deep my shoes sank into the ground, and compared it with the slight impression left by the murderer's big boots. And you're even heavier than I am!"

He turned to the uneasy little cabaret owner.

"Only a lightweight like you, Cantrell," he thundered, "could have made such a slight impression! Look at the marks you just made! Not at all like the heavy prints Jim made—but exactly like the ones made by the murderer! You tried to frame Jim for Bart's murder by wearing his boots and using his gun. You sneaked them out last night and hid them afterwards in the tool shack where you knew I'd find them. "It was perfect, you rotten little snake, perfect—but you just didn't have enough weight!"

DEATH FLIGHT

Surging Thousands Saw the Great Pilot as He Completed His Non-Stop Flight. And Then They Saw Him—Murdered!

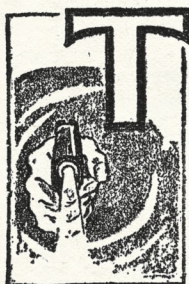
A Complete Novelette

By ROBERT WALLACE

Author of "Written in Blood," "The Prince of Murder," etc.

CHAPTER I

Murder of a Hero



HE glaring white floodlights mounted on top of the great hangar building lit up the airport like day. They illuminated brilliantly the long main runways of the landing field, the low rope barriers that had been stretched on posts around the field, and the solid sea of humanity surging against those ropes.

Scores of policemen struggled to keep the excited crowd from bursting through the ropes. From a myriad throats came a deafening buzz and hum of voices, and in them one name was repeated over and over.

"Lucky James!"

A policeman turned toward a cool-eyed, craggy-faced man of wiry build who was passing along the line inside the ropes.

"Captain McCord, we'll never hold this crowd back when Lucky James' plane gets in!" the policeman panted.

Detective-Captain Thomas McCord told the officer crisply:

"You'll have to hold them somehow. If this mob is on the field when James' plane lands, some of them will be hurt."

McCord went rapidly down the

field, his wiry form striding toward the floodlighted hangar building. A group of about twenty-five or thirty men were gathered in front of the hangar, including airport officials, pilots, and newspaper men who had been allowed inside the ropes.

One of the group saw McCord and gripped the detective-captain's arm. He was a blond, good-looking young man whom McCord recognized as Blair James, pilot of a passenger airliner and cousin of Lucky James, the flier they were all awaiting.

Blair James cried to McCord:

"Lucky's plane was sighted over Bayshore ten minutes ago! He'll be here any moment! I guess *this* proves Lucky is the best flier of them all. A non-stop solo flight from Cairo to New York—and a fifty-thousand-dollar cash prize!"

"I've done a little flying," McCord said dryly, "and I wouldn't try a flight like that for fifty million."

He added, "I've got to see Stangland a moment."

He pushed past the excited Blair James toward Robert Stangland, the superintendent of Gotham Airport.

"Don't you have any way of putting up more barriers?" McCord asked the superintendent. "That crowd is going to—"

McCord stopped speaking. He and the superintendent and the others became suddenly rigid, staring up into the northeastern sky, from out



"Stand back!" yelled
McCord,

of which, now, was coming a distant, deep-toned droning.

The crowd was staring too, and a hush had fallen over it. A dead silence in which the only sound was that humming drone that grew louder each moment, waxing into a roar.

Down into the glare of the airport lights came a big silver monoplane that roared low across the field, and then banked around and came back, dipping toward the runway.

McCord heard over the thundering motor, the frantic yelling of the crowd, and felt his own pulse hammer with emotion. Tow-headed, reckless young Lucky James had spanned a hemisphere and was dropping out of the stars to fortune and fame and a crowd gone mad.

The great monoplane's wheels touched the runway in a perfect landing and it rolled down the field, coming to a stop a few hundred yards from the floodlighted hangar.

McCord found himself running with Stangland and Blair James and the others toward the silver ship. They reached the monoplane as its

motor was cut off, and a reporter pounded on its side.

McCord saw the door of the little enclosed cockpit open. And there in the opening stooped a rangy youngster with a grinning, tired white face, his blue eyes blinking at the flare of the photographers' popping flashlights. He raised his oil-smeared leather-clothed arm in greeting.

"Well, fellows, it looks like I've made me fifty thousand bucks."

Thuck! That brief, sinister sound cut through the din of popping flashlights and yelling voices around the monoplane.

Then McCord and the others, abruptly frozen in rigid, horrified silence, stared at the flier in the open cockpit door. Lucky James' grin had taken on a sudden surprised quality. His hand went uncertainly to a little hole that had appeared in the left breast of his leather jacket. Then he crumpled stiffly forward.

McCord and the men around him stared incredulously at Lucky James' body lying sprawled half out of the cockpit. Then Blair James, his face

white and frantic, darted to the stricken flier.

McCord was close after him and helped him lift the limp body to the ground. Lucky James' wide blue eyes stared up at them unwinkingly, unseeingly.

"Lucky!" cried Blair frenziedly. "For God's sake—"

"It's no use, Blair!" rasped McCord. "He's dead—murdered."

McCord's eyes gleamed like crumbs of ice in his craggy face, sweeping dangerously over the staring, horrified group.

"Someone in this group around the plane shot Lucky James with a silenced pistol!" the detective-captain exclaimed.

A reporter turned to push his way out of the group, a wild yell coming from the other newspapermen as they, too, suddenly realized that they had witnessed the scene of a century. But McCord, his pistol flashing into his hand, sprang before them and halted them.

"Not one of you leaves here!" he grated. "Someone in this group is the killer and he's not going to escape."

"But you've got to let us break this story!" cried a reporter.

"Get back there, everyone of you," McCord menaced them. "You're going to be searched right here and now for the gun."

Frenziedly protesting, the newspapermen fell back toward the monoplane. As they did so, Stangland, the airport superintendent, cried out and pointed to the ground near the ship.

"There's a pistol, McCord!" he exclaimed.

McCord leaped and picked it up by its muzzle tip. It was a stubby automatic whose butt, trigger and trigger-guard had been wrapped with soft cloth. It had a silencer on it.

"The killer wrapped this so it would show no fingerprints, and dropped it right after he shot Lucky," McCord said. "He must have shot from under his coat, standing right here among us."

There came to McCord's ears a

vastly increased roar of voices from the great crowd around the field. A police lieutenant, coat torn and ruddy face pale, burst through the group toward the detective.

"McCord, the crowd's gone crazy!" he cried. "They know Lucky James was just murdered and they're wild with rage—they'll tear to pieces anyone they suspect of being the killer!"

MCCORD whirled, saw that the crowds were now struggling to get through the rope barriers to the monoplane. The policemen along the lines were trying desperately to restrain them.

The idol of this crowd, the tow-headed youngster it worshiped, had been murdered, and the crowd wanted blood.

McCord's voice crackled to the pale group around him. "We can't stay out here—we'll have to continue this investigation inside the hangar until that crazy mob gets calmed down considerably."

"Stangland, you and Blair James carry Lucky's body," he ordered, and then spoke to the disheveled police lieutenant: "Davidson, you post your men outside the hangar's doors once we're inside."

The stunned Blair James and the airport superintendent picked up the dead flier's body and started with it toward the hangar. The others followed without need of urging, glancing nervously toward the raging mob outside the ropes. McCord followed last, gun in hand, watching to see that none of them slipped away.

When they reached the hangar, McCord waited outside a moment. Lieutenant Davidson and his torn, bruised officers were running toward the building, the vast crowd surging after them.

Davidson panted as he ran up.

"McCord, if you find the killer don't let this mob know it. They'll tear the place down to get him."

"You've got to hold them back!" rasped McCord. "Use your guns to scare them, and meanwhile I'll phone for reserves. Someone of that group

is the killer, all right," he continued swiftly, "and they're going to stay here until I find out who."

Davidson yelled to his officers, and they spread out around the hangar, posting themselves at the doors with drawn pistols.

The mob rolled up to the building and halted with a menacing growl at sight of the glinting weapons. McCord saw that the guns would hold them back, and he strode swiftly into the hangar.

The interior of the hangar was a vast, dark space more than two hundred feet square, its floor of smooth concrete and with a spidery network of steel beams and girders under its low roof. A few suspended lights fought the darkness and showed the dim shapes of several large airplanes parked along the side.

The group of men gathered beside the body of Lucky James were listening with pale faces to the menacing voices outside. McCord singled out Stangland and said to the airport superintendent:

"There's a telephone in your office, isn't there? Then phone Headquarters to rush reserves here at once."

Stangland hastened across the shadowy hangar to the door leading to his offices. In a few moments he was back.

THE reserves will be out here as soon as they can make it," he reported.

"They'll take care of the crowd when they come," McCord said. "Meanwhile, we're going to learn who killed Lucky."

He turned toward the silent body on the floor. Someone had thrown a tarpaulin motor cover over it, and now Blair James stood gazing dazedly down at the unmoving, shrouded form of his cousin.

Blair's face was working, and he choked through trembling lips:

"To think that Lucky flew all those hours, across half the world, and all the time he wasn't flying to fame and fortune as he thought, but to death—flying to death!"

McCord nodded somberly. He asked:

"You and your cousin were pretty close, weren't you?"

Blair James nodded, his face still quivering. "He was more like an older brother than a cousin, I guess, because I was his closest relative. He taught me flying, got me my job, and was always lecturing me about wasting my money and gambling. We lived together, you know."

"Then maybe," McCord asked him keenly, "you can tell me if you ever heard anyone threaten his life, or heard him mention any such threats?"

Blair shook his head.

"Lucky was everybody's friend and nobody would—"

He stopped suddenly, his face changing as though expressive of an abrupt inward revelation.

McCord, watching him intently, saw the change and instantly fastened on it.

"You *did* hear of threats of some kind against him, then?"

"I just remembered something," Blair James said slowly. "You know, Lucky's flight was backed financially by Gotham Airlines, the company both he and I were pilots for. They thought it would be good advertising for them if one of their pilots won the prize, and to the pilot it would mean fifty thousand dollars."

"Several other of the pilots tried to get the company to choose them to back for the flight. Tuss McLiney and Wallace Jandron and Leigh Bushell were the others who applied, and they were pretty sore when the company turned them down and chose Lucky. It was rumored around the airports that some of the three had declared that Lucky James would never live to spend that fifty thousand dollars, even if he succeeded in making the flight."

"I heard talk like that around the field too!" exclaimed a mechanic beside Blair James.

McCord asked tautly of Blair, "Were any of those three pilots in this group that was around the plane when Lucky landed?"

"Yes! They're all three of them here!" Blair exclaimed.

Out of the group there stepped quickly a stout, strong young fellow with chubby face and slightly protruding blue eyes.

"I'm Wally Jandron, one of the three you're talking about," he told McCord. "But I want to deny right here that I ever made any threats against Lucky James' life."

A SHARP-FACED, nervous young man behind him spoke up rather hastily.

"Neither did I ever threaten him—I'm Leigh Bushell," he said. "I was rather angry, but I wouldn't threaten a man's life." He added: "But I want to suggest that we slip out of here by a back window or something and continue this investigation elsewhere. That mob might do anything if it breaks in here!"

"That's right!" seconded a reporter. "If the crowd fastened on one of us as the murderer, it'd kill him right here."

"No one is going to leave here!" rasped McCord. "The murderer of Lucky James is going to be found before any of you get out. What about the third pilot, McLiney?" he demanded.

A tall, browned, hard-bitten man with a short mustache, thin hair, and a hard mouth and eyes, stepped forward.

"I'm Tuss McLiney," he said truculently, "and I hate lying and liars. I *did* make threats against Lucky James and so did Jandron and Bushell, though they deny it now. We were all three burned up because the company turned us all down to back Lucky, and I admit I talked wild and made angry threats. But it was just talk. No matter how resentful I was, I wouldn't kill Lucky or any other man."

"Why did you come here tonight to be on hand when he landed?" McCord demanded.

"Simply because I wanted to see if he made it," McLiney answered defiantly. "Naturally I was interested in the flight. I admit, mean as it

sounds, that I hoped he'd never make it."

"And you admit you had threatened his life?" rapped McCord.

"I've told you that those threats were just angry talk," retorted McLiney.

McCord spoke to Blair James.

"Blair, you were nearer the plane than I was when the shot was fired. Were any of these three pilots near Lucky?"

"Yes," Blair said slowly. "Bushell and McLiney were at my right and Wally Jandron was just in front of me."

McLiney, his hard face unmoved, said to the detective-captain.

"But that doesn't prove that one of us killed Lucky. Anybody in the whole group around the plane could have done it."

"Yes, but who else in the group had a motive to do it?" McCord demanded. "Who else had made threats against Lucky's life? You three hated Lucky bitterly for edging you out and getting the chance to make the flight. And in this group, only you and Jandron and Bushell—"

McCord suddenly stopped, his craggy face tightening.

"Where is Bushell?" he demanded suddenly.

They stared around their own group, then around the dim, dark hangar; but the nervous young pilot with the sharp face was nowhere in sight.

"Bushell wanted me to let him and the others slip out a back window!" the detective-captain cried. "If he's done that—"

McCord sprang toward the door of the hangar, and tore it open and leaped out into the glare of the floodlights.

He collided squarely with Davidson, the police lieutenant, who had been about to enter the hangar.

The lieutenant's face was pale and his words poured forth in an excited flood.

"McCord, the crowd's got hold of somebody who tried to slip out the back of the hangar! They're yelling that it's the killer of Lucky James

trying to escape, and they're going to lynch him!"

CHAPTER II

Mad Vengeance

THE scene that met McCord's eyes on the floodlighted field outside the hangar was an appalling one. The immense crowd was pouring away from the building, giving voice like a great, baying beast.

In the lights flashed a sea of contorted, vengeance-lusting faces. Some one was being carried along on the shoulders of the crazed mob, struggling vainly to free himself, his face terror-stricken.

"String him up! He murdered Lucky James and then tried to get away!" roared the crowd.

"Hang him on this pole over here!" voices were yelling.

The mob was bearing the struggling victim toward the tall steel tower of a beacon light, yanking down ropes from the barriers around the field to use for the hanging.

"That's Leigh Bushell they've got!" McCord yelled to Davidson. "They must have got him as he tried to escape from the hangar. We've got to take him away from them—it may be a wholly innocent man they're lynching!"

He raised his voice and the police outside the hangar came running to him. McCord swiftly ordered two of them to remain and see that no one inside the hangar left.

Then with the other officers massed compactly behind him, McCord plunged into and through the mob that was bearing the terrified Leigh Bushell to his doom.

The officers' clubs bounced off heads right and left as they smashed through. The little phalanx of police drove through the formless mob like a spearhead, and in a few moments reached the beacon pole where a rope was being tied around the neck of the struggling Bushell.

McCord and Davidson knocked back the would-be lynchers with

quick blows, and jerked the stunned pilot in among the officers.

"Back out with him now, Davidson!" yelled the detective-captain "Quick!"

"They—they think I killed Lucky!" the livid pilot was gasping.

McCord did not heed him, he and his fellow-officers fighting now to get Bushell out through the mob.

The crowd was yelling in redoubled fury as it comprehended that its victim was being snatched from its grasp. It surged around the little group of officers, struggling to recapture Bushell.

The advance of the police phalanx was slowed, then halted. McCord jerked his pistol from his pocket and fired a stream of shots over the heads of the crowd. The members of the mob nearest him retreated in sudden alarm, and the police group crashed ahead toward the hangar.

As they neared the building there was a screaming of sirens, and police cars and motorcycles came speeding onto the field. The crowd, that had started in pursuit of McCord and his group, fell back before this unexpected onset.

"Thank God the reserves got here!" panted Davidson. "They're not any too soon."

The captain in charge of the newly-arrived forces approached. "What's been going on here, McCord?" he wanted to know. "We heard that Lucky James was murdered when he landed."

McCord nodded grimly.

"He was, and the crowd thought this man was the murderer. Can you clear them off the field?"

"We'll disperse them," the other promised briefly. "And the Homicide Squad will be out before long."

The fleet of police cars and motorcycles soon was scattering the thousands of people still on the field, dashing among them in repeated charges.

The crowd, its mob anger cooling rapidly now, dispersed in all directions.

McCord turned and found that

Leigh Bushell had slumped to the ground, half conscious, his white face bruised by blows. He and Davidson picked up the limp pilot and carried him back across the flood-lighted field to the door of the hangar.

They set the pilot down inside and Davidson went back out to post his scattered guard around the building. Blair James and Stangland and the others came running across the dim interior of the hangar toward McCord.

"God, I thought you were all done for out there!" cried Blair James. "Did they kill Bushell?"

"He'll come around all right, I think," McCord said.

Stangland was clawing at the detective-captain's sleeve.

"McCord, while you were out there I remembered something that I think is a straight clue. It's a letter that—"

"Wait just a minute," McCord told the airport superintendent. "Bushell is coming around now."

Leigh Bushell had opened his eyes. As the detective-captain helped him to his feet, an expression of terror crossed his face.

"They nearly hanged me!" he cried. "Because they caught me escaping from here, they thought I was the murderer of Lucky."

"Well, aren't you the murderer?" McCord demanded grimly. "If you aren't, why did you try to get away?"

Bushell's face quivered with fear.

"I'm not the one who killed Lucky!" he cried. "I only tried to escape because I was afraid that the mob would break in here and maybe lynch us all. I told you I was afraid of that."

"It looks bad for you, Bushell," McCord said. "It may be that that mob had the right man." He swung toward Stangland. "Maybe you can clinch it, Stangland. You said you had a clue."

The airport superintendent nodded, his keen face alive with excitement. "Yes, and it makes me sure Bushell isn't the killer," he said. "It's a

letter Lucky wrote me several weeks ago, in which he told me confidentially that he'd had trouble—"

Click!

The dim lights of the interior of the hangar suddenly went out, interrupting his words. They were plunged instantly into a Stygian obscurity relieved only by the faint glimmer from the small, high windows at the back of the hangar.

McCord's voice rasped through the thick darkness.

"Don't any one of you move! I'll shoot anybody I hear trying to escape! Stangland, you know where the switch of these lights is?"

"Yes, right by the door," came the voice of the airport superintendent through the dark, followed by his steps. "I'll—"

His words were abruptly punctuated by a dull, thudding sound. Then came the muffled impact of a body striking the concrete floor.

"Stangland!" yelled McCord in the dark. "What's happened?"

There was no answer from the superintendent.

"Everybody stay put! I'll fire if I hear other footsteps!" McCord cried, and darted forward in the darkness in the direction of the door.

In a few strides he stumbled over something lying on the floor. He knelt and struck a match.

And there Robert Stangland lay, on his side upon the floor, his face lax and unmoving. His skull had been fractured by a terrific blow from the side. Beside him, lay a short wrench whose end was smeared with blood.

The match went out, and in the dark someone screamed.

CHAPTER III

The Trap of Flame

IT was the voice of one of the reporters and he shrilled:

"The murderer has killed Stangland, too, to silence him!"

"Stay where you are, everybody!" thundered McCord.

He struck another match. In its

glow he found the light switch beside the door, but discovered that instead of being turned off, one of the exposed wires of the switch had been torn out by a quick pull. The lights could not be turned on again.

McCord stooped with the lighted match and examined the bloodsmear wrench. There were no fingerprints on its handle. The killer had evidently wrapped it with a handkerchief before using it.

McCord looked up. Before him stood the chubby Wally Jandron, and beyond him Tuss McLiney and Blair James and the others.

"You two were both near the switch!" he said to Jandron and McLiney. "And since Stangland, just before he was killed, said he was sure Bushell wasn't the killer, he must have been about to name one of you two as the murderer. Which one of you took that wrench out of your pocket and killed him to keep him from telling what he knew?"

"It wasn't me!" bleated Wally Jandron hastily. "But I thought I heard someone moving in the dark beside me."

"Well, you didn't hear me, because I didn't move from my tracks," declared McLiney.

THE match went out at that moment, leaving them all again in darkness.

McCord jerked the door open and yelled out through it.

"Davidson!"

Davidson's voice came from close at hand. "What's the matter? I saw the lights in there go out."

"Some one turned them off," McCord told him swiftly, "and then killed Stangland. You get some kind of lantern quick, and I'll prevent any of 'em escaping."

As Davidson raced off on the errand, McCord turned back into the dark interior of the hangar.

Holding his gun leveled in the rayless obscurity, the detective-captain was fumbling in his pocket for another match when a sound, hitherto unheard, arrested his attention.

It was a liquid, gurgling sound

that appeared to come from the side of the dark hangar where the line of airplanes was parked.

"What's that sound?" McCord cried.

Blair James exclaimed in the dark: "It sounds like one of the planes leaking gasoline—"

His words were abruptly interrupted. Someone in the dark struck a match and then quickly tossed it, as soon as it flamed, through the darkness toward the parked airplanes.

The flaming match described a little arc of fire in the darkness and then flipped down into a gleaming pool of liquid that lay on the concrete floor beneath one of the airplanes.

Instantly that pool burst upward a great puff of flame that enveloped the ship above it in a fraction of a second.

Blair James yelled:

"Some one slipped over in the dark and opened the dump valve of that plane's tank, then flipped a match into the pool!"

"Let us out of here!" cried a photographer in alarm. "This whole hangar will go now!"

With a soft, loud roar, the flames spread to the next airplane, a small biplane.

Burning gasoline splattered the walls—patches of living fire that were swiftly spreading over the sides of the roof of the hangar.

"I'm not going to stay here and burn to death!" cried a reporter, bolting for the door.

"Wait a minute!" yelled McCord.

But with wild shouts of terror, the whole group was stampeding for the door. They charged past McCord before he could prevent them, and rushed outside in mad haste to escape the blazing inferno which the hangar was rapidly becoming.

Blair James had stopped to clutch McCord's arm. He yelled over the soft roar of the flames.

"You'll have to get out of here too, McCord! Nothing can save the hangar now!"

"We've got to get the bodies of
(Continued on page 136)

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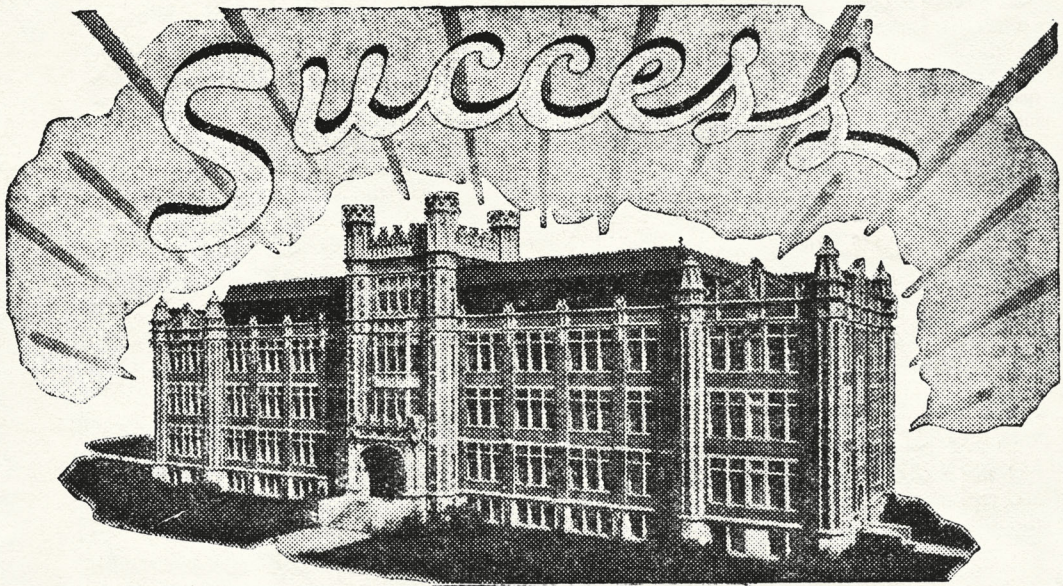
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DEATH FLIGHT

(Continued from page 133)

Lucky and Stangland out!" McCord told him.

He reached down for the still form of Stangland, while Blair James seized the body of his cousin.

As they dragged the two bodies toward the door, the fires were roaring terrifyingly, all along one side of the hangar, enveloping the airplanes there in sheets of bursting flame.

They got outside with the bodies. The floodlights on the roof had gone out, and the darkness was relieved only by the flickering glow from within the burning hangar.

Davidson ran up to McCord. He said: "I was getting a flashlight from the car when I saw the fire. Where's the group you were holding inside?"

"They stampeded out and now they've all escaped," McCord told him. "You and Blair get the officers together and try to round them up. Find McLiney and Jandron!"

Davidson nodded in understanding and raced along the side of the burning hangars, shouting for the policemen who had been posted around it.

Automatic alarm bells were now ringing wildly inside the squat, great building, and the roaring flames seemed spreading swiftly to that side of the building, that held the administrative offices and machine shops.

Blair James remained behind Davidson a moment to cry a question to the detective-captain, who had whipped a handkerchief from his pocket and was rapidly tying it around his mouth and nose.

"McCord, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going back into that building, to Stangland's office," McCord told him.

"Stangland said that a letter Lucky wrote him gave a direct clue to the killer. That letter must be in his office file. The killer fired the hangar to destroy that letter, and I'm going to get it before—"

Blair held him back.

"McCord, for God's sake don't try it! That building is a death trap now!"

"You go and help Davidson find McLiney and Jandron," McCord told him, pushing him after the police lieutenant. "I'll find that letter and be out in a couple of minutes."

With the words, McCord ran along the front of the burning hangar and around the corner to a side of the building not yet burning so fiercely.

He tore open a door and plunged into a dark hall, from whose ceiling smoke was curling ominously. He ran down it, bumping around a turn and into another corridor at whose end bursting flames were rapidly advancing with a steady, crackling roar.

McCord looked tensely ahead. There were a few doors down at the burning end of the hallway and he darted toward them. The heat of the flames just ahead scorched his hands and masked face, and the heavy smoke made him cough and choke.

Through tear-dimmed eyes he saw that one of the doors had on its glass panel the legend:

AIRPORT SUPERINTENDENT

He darted into a little office whose one wall was burning, filling the room with quivering light. The shifting glow showed beside a desk a letter file of green steel. McCord tore open the file, rapidly rummaged the mass of papers in its drawers, examining them with smarting, blinking eyes by the light of the flames.

His desperate search failed to discover the letter he sought. Heedless of the creeping fires, he continued to ransack the contents of the file. Choking from the stifling smoke, he suddenly uttered a hoarse, exultant exclamation as he found a carelessly scrawled letter with the signature, "Lucky," and a date of a few weeks back.

A swift glance through it told McCord that it was the letter he sought.

Stuffing the letter into his pocket, he darted through the now burning door frame and raced down the cor-

(Continued on page 138)

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(Continued from page 137)

ridor away from the advancing fires.

McCord rounded the turn in the hall and was running down the dark section of the corridors when out of the blackness at the side of the hall a foot suddenly projected to trip him.

McCord sprawled headlong, and pinwheels of light spun in his brain as he struck the floor. Out of the darkness leaped the shadowy form of a man who hammered McCord with swift, deadly blows as he sought to rise.

McCord, already half-dazed by his fall, felt his attacker's savage blows swiftly beating him into unconsciousness.

His numbed brain apprehended what had happened. The murderer of Lucky James and Stangland, seeing the detective-captain enter the burning building in search of the damning letter, had also entered the flaming hangar to see that McCord and the letter both perished in the flames.

McCord made a supreme effort of will and body to save himself from the horrible fate that awaited him if he allowed himself to be beaten into unconsciousness. He reached out desperately, plucked at his attacker's ankles, jerked them hard. The assailant fell to the floor.

In the moment of respite this allowed him, McCord dug frantically in his pockets for his gun. He got it out, thrust it forward and squeezed the trigger.

The gun only clicked. Too late McCord remembered that he had fired all its shots in his effort to save Bushell from the mob.

He dropped it, clawed in another pocket for the stubby, cloth-wrapped automatic with which Lucky James had been shot, and which the detective-captain had been carrying ever since.

He got it out, but before he could use it, the killer had grasped his wrist and was trying to wrench the gun out of his hand. They struggled there in the dark corridor, the noises of their combat drowned by the roar

(Continued on page 140)



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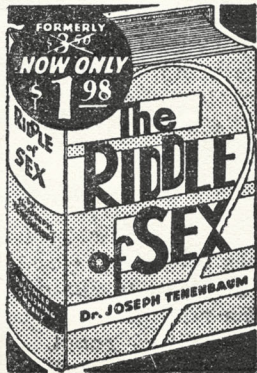
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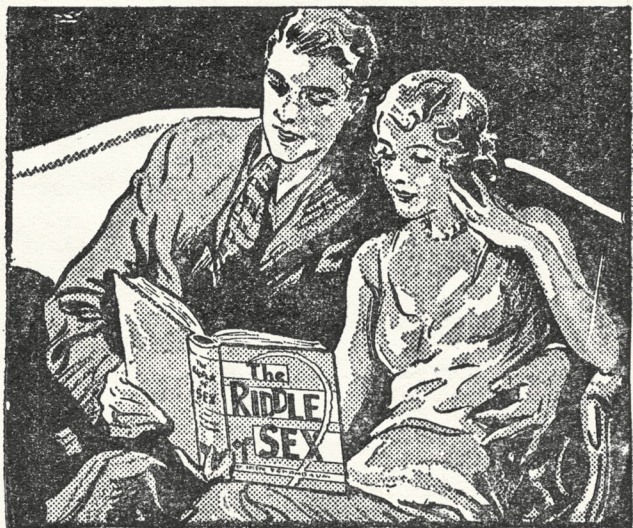
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(Continued from page 138)

of flames now advancing around the turn of the hall.

McCord swung his left fist hard. He felt a crunching shock as it struck the other's face. The man uttered a cry of pain, recoiling a little, and McCord seized the opportunity to wrench his gun-hand free.

He fired instantly, the crimson streak of the shot blazing across the corridor, but the murderer had thrown himself aside, and now his feet were pounding down the corridor as he ran down it toward the outside.

McCord, still on his knees, fired down the hall again as he heard the outside door slam. Then he was on his feet, plunging down the corridor after the fleeing criminal.

But before he had made two strides, there was a cracking crash ahead and a mass of burning wood broke down through the corridor ceiling ahead of him, blocking his way with a barrier of flame!

McCord spun around. The way behind him, too, was still blocked by the fires that were swiftly creeping around the corner of the hall toward him.

He was caught in a horrible trap whose jaws of flame were rapidly closing upon him. He glanced swiftly about, his craggy face and cool eyes showing no sign of fear, but tensely weighing every possible chance of escape.

CHAPTER IV

Struggle in the Sky

A QUIVERING glow of the advancing fires, now illuminating the corridor brightly, showed McCord a door a few feet from him. He ran to it and ripped it open.

A mass of flames filled the office or room inside, almost as terrifying as the fires at the ends of the hall.

But McCord's smoke-dimmed eyes glimpsed a window on the other side of the flame-filled room.

McCord knew that to dash across that burning room was to take tre-

mendous risks. Yet to stay in the corridor meant meeting a horrible death without even an attempt at escape.

Rapidly he stripped off his coat and wound it around his head and face. With one swift glance he gauged accurately the position of the window, then pulled the coat across his eyes and threw himself blindly like a human projectile across the flaming room.

He felt tongues of fire scorch his arms and legs, and then with an impact and crash of shattering glass he burst through the window and fell to the ground outside.

McCord unwrapped the coat and got to his feet, heedless of his singed limbs and the slight lacerations which the glass had inflicted on his body. He ran around the corner of the flaming hangar.

In front of the burning structure, fire trucks were dashing up with bells clanging, and a crowd of firemen and policemen were already toiling frantically to connect hoses with fire mains.

Davidson ran out of the group toward the scorched, disheveled detective-captain.

He cried:

"McCord, what in God's name happened to you in there?"

McCord, disregarding the other's excited question, asked swiftly:

"Did you see anyone else come out of the building?"

The police lieutenant shook his head:

"I just got back here from rounding up your group of suspects. We found the reporters at the nearest telephones, but haven't found McLiney and Jandron yet."

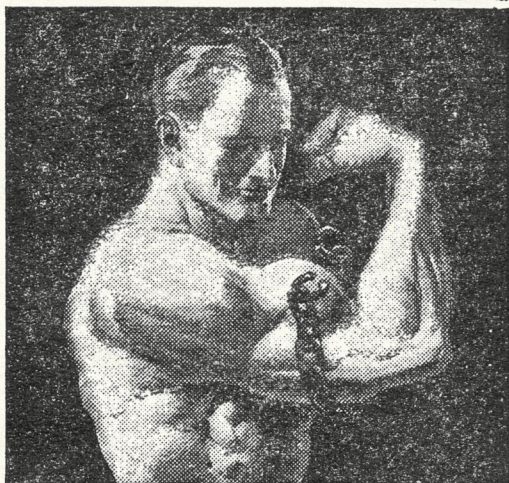
"McLiney and Jandron still at large?"

Then McCord suddenly cried, "By heaven, I know where the killer has made for, now that he knows I have the letter. Lucky James' plane!"

Before the astounded Davidson could comprehend him, McCord had turned and was racing down the runway into the darkness, away from the flaming hangar.

(Continued on page 142)

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(Continued from page 141)

From the dark ahead there came to McCord's ears the sudden clatter of an airplane motor starting.

He sprinted forward frantically, Davidson and others coming yelling after him a few hundred feet behind.

Now the detective-captain descried in the dark ahead of him the big silver shape of Lucky James' great monoplane being taxied around to point down the runway. The silver ship started to roll forward, its motor roaring. McCord was abreast of it and dove for its side.

He got the handle of the cockpit door in his grasp and clung to it, trying desperately to open the door as he was dragged along with quickly increasing speed.

The door suddenly opened under McCord's frantic efforts. He reached in and got a hold inside, and with a convulsive effort drew his body partly in through the little door.

His legs still hung out of the door, and cinders flying up from the runway stung them. Then the cinders ceased to sting, and McCord knew that the roaring monoplane was rising into the air.

The wind tore viciously at the detective-captain's legs as he sought to climb completely inside the cockpit. Then, with a surge of desperate strength, McCord pulled himself up into the cramped little space.

A black figure, sitting at the controls in the front of the dark, crowded little cockpit, whirled in his seat. McCord jammed his pistol into the other's back and yelled over the roar of the motor:

"Take this plane back down and land or I'll kill you right here!"

The man, his face invisible in the dark, laughed wildly.

"You don't dare kill me, because if you do the plane will crash and you'll die, too!" he cried.

"Don't fool yourself!" snarled McCord. "I worked with the police plane division two years and I've done a little flying. If you don't turn—"

Before he could finish the sentence the man, whose hands had been busy

a moment swiftly adjusting something at the controls, turned and struck suddenly at McCord with a gleaming tool.

McCord was knocked back against one of the big tanks at the rear of the little cockpit, and the shock sent his gun flying from his hand. The killer scrambled over his seat to strike at him again.

The monoplane was roaring along at an unvarying altitude on a straight course. McCord, squirming desperately to avoid those deadly blows, knew that the killer had made use of the automatic pilot device which Lucky James had had installed for his lengthy flight.

He knew, too, that the murderer meant to knock him out and then heave his body out of the open cockpit door.

McCord grasped the other's hand and they squirmed and struggled, on top of the parachute pack and thermos bottles and other objects on the cockpit floor. The killer fought to use his gleaming weapon.

Suddenly the roar of the thundering motor faltered. Almost instantly it faltered again, then abruptly died.

The monoplane's interior was filled with the screaming of the wind outside, shrill and keen. The cockpit in which the two men struggled tilted crazily this way and that.

McCord knew instantly what had happened. The gasoline in Lucky James' ship had been almost completely exhausted by his long flight, and now had given out altogether. The ship was drifting downward with its motor dead!

The murderer abruptly tore loose from McCord and clawed beneath him for the parachute pack, trying to struggle hastily into the harness.

He scrambled with it toward the open door of the cockpit. But McCord had scooped up the metal tool the other had dropped, and struck quickly with it.

The *thunk* of the blow on the killer's head was followed by his limp collapse on the cockpit floor.

McCord scrambled into the seat to the controls of the ship. He tore off

(Continued on page 144)

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(Continued from page 143)

the automatic pilot device and got the monoplane under control, then banked around in the darkness.

Down there below in the dark, some distance away, the big hangar of Gotham Airport was like a vast, red torch, flaming high.

He headed the monoplane straight down toward the field in front of the burning building.

A few minutes later the silver ship swooped silently down and made a ragged and bumpy deadstick landing near the flaming hangar.

When it rolled to a stop, McCord salvaged his stubby pistol and then was climbing out of the cockpit when, from the burning hanger, a group of shouting men ran toward him.

Davidson was the first to reach him, with Bushell and McLiney and the others behind him.

"McCord, you're all right?" cried the lieutenant.

McCord nodded. "I'm okay, and so is the murderer, though he's not conscious right now."

"You got him, then?" cried Davidson.

For answer McCord reached into the cockpit and pulled out the unconscious form of the murderer.

Lying there in the red glow of the burning hangar, sprawled half out of the little cockpit door just as his first victim had sprawled a few hours before, lay—

"Blair James!" yelled Davidson in utter amazement.

They stared unbelievably.

"But it can't be that Blair killed Lucky James, his own cousin!" cried the police lieutenant.

"He did, though," said McCord somberly, "and he did it for the same reason that many a closer relative has been killed; for money. Lucky James, by completing his flight from Cairo to New York, automatically became worth fifty thousand dollars as soon as his plane landed tonight. Blair, as he told us, was Lucky's only near relative. As such, he was Lucky's heir, and would inherit the fifty thousand."

McCord took from his pocket a

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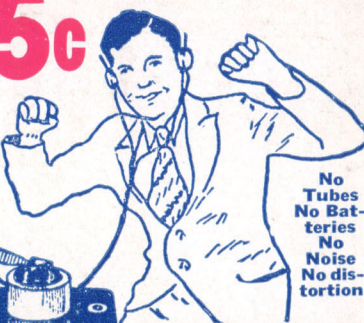
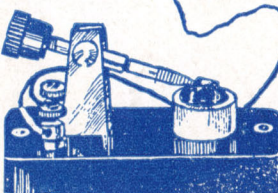
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