

The PHANTOM DETECTIVE

MAR.

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A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

THE *Clue* OF THE SECOND MURDER

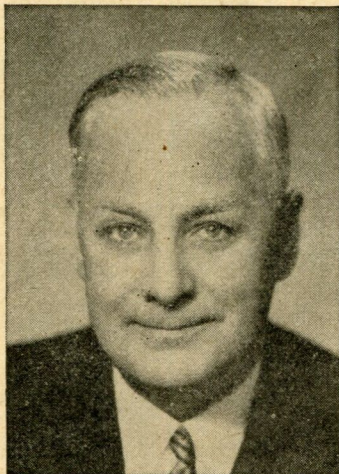
A Full-Length Mystery Novel
By ROBERT WALLACE

*Danforth
Belorshi*

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Some twenty years ago there came into my life a power so staggering that at first I could only wonder about it. The shackles which bound me for over forty years went a-shimmering. Up to that time, I had been one of the world's biggest failures. Then there came into my life a power the like of which I have never known. It was the power of God.

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fear, distress and all the allied things that may be holding you back. Discover for yourself what this wonderful power can do for you. Send only your name and address—no money. We are quite reliable and interested only in finding for you the same power that Dr. Frank B. Robinson has used to make his life successful.

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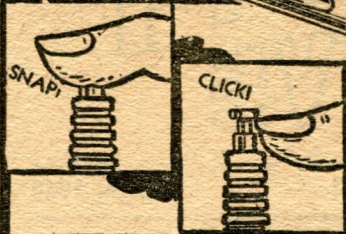
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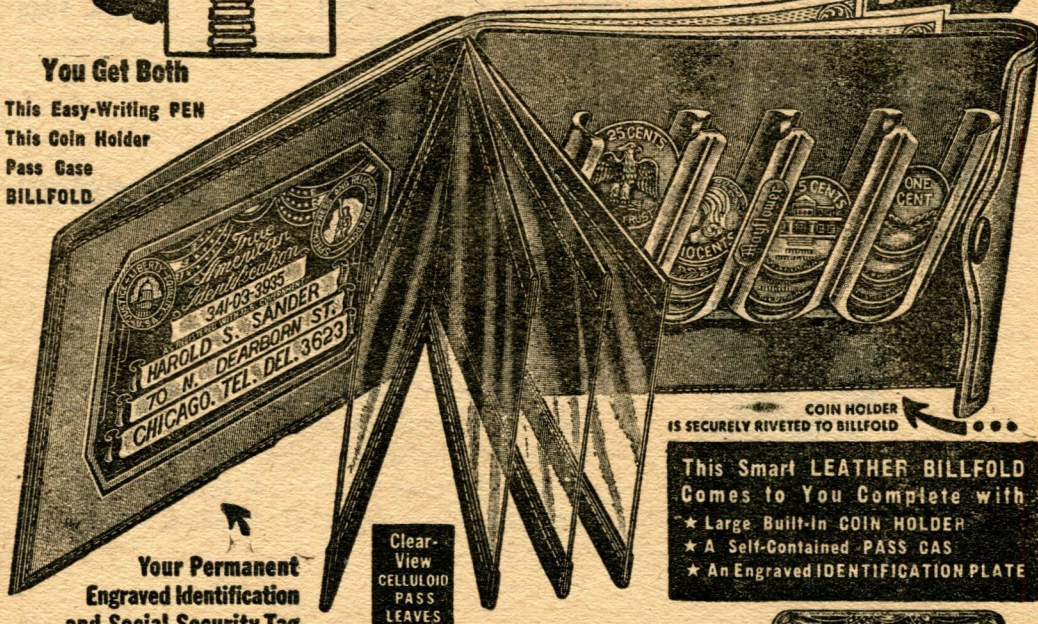
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Pass Case
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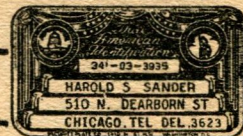
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The PHANTOM DETECTIVE

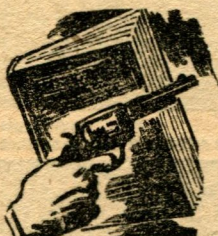
Vol. LI, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

March, 1948

A COMPLETE NOVEL

The Clue of the Second Murder



by Robert Wallace

Richard Curtis Van Loan battles to spike a scheme of empire that brings an evil wave of death in its wake! Follow the Phantom to a Nevada silver town that holds a grim and mysterious secret of diabolical crime! 13

SHORT STORIES

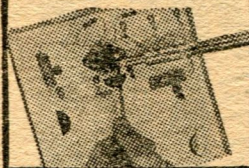
- CASH UNDER THE TABLE**.....Norman W. Hay 76
Jack Martin of the F. B. I. uses his domestic knowledge to solve a case
- THE CLUE OUTSIDE**.....Ray Cummings 82
A leaden pellet can sometimes point the finger at a guilty murderer
- NECK AND NECK**.....O. B. Myers 87
It was merely an author's pen name—but can a name commit a crime?
- IN THE BAG**.....Paul Prestowe 97
No matter how much it changes hands, blood money's still blood money

A DEPARTMENT

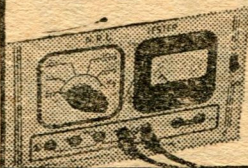
- THE PHANTOM SPEAKS**.....The Phantom 6
Announcements of coming features, club news and letters from readers

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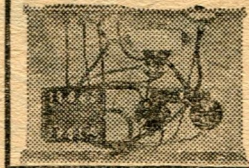
YOU PRACTICE Radio Servicing with this Tester built from parts I send. Also use it to help earn EXTRA MONEY fixing neighbors' Radios.



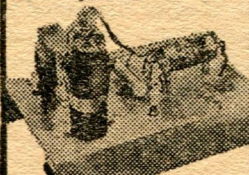
YOU PRACTICE "FM" Servicing on this Frequency Modulation (FM) Signal Generator, built with parts I supply; learn by repairing circuit defects.



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YOU BUILD THIS A. M. Signal Generator which provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments, gives you practical experience

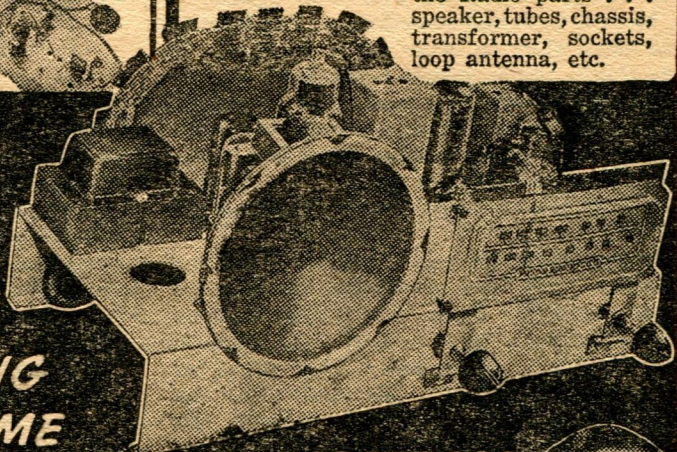


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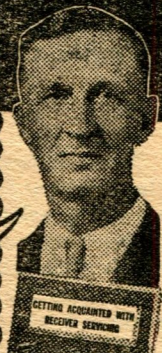
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The PHANTOM SPEAKS



THE United States Customs Service holds a position of respect in the minds of most Americans. We all know that it is through this branch of the Federal Government that a large proportion of our revenue is secured, and this means that the burden on our own pocketbooks is that much lighter.

Morton Orth had something of this kind in his mind when he made the appointment to see Daniel Rayle, special investigator for the Customs Bureau. The meeting at the ornate New York apartment of the millionaire importer was destined to be an important one in the life of international trade.

But it was destined to be postponed by death!

Morton Orth was punctilious about his appearance, and even a business appointment with a man like Rayle after a long airplane trip indicated a shower and clean clothes. Morton Orth's shower was the last act of his long and colorful life. He died while the pelting fluid needles caressed his body. His doctor called it heart failure. But his daughter called it murder!

Foul Play!

Steve Huston happened to be working on the Customs Service activities for a series of special articles in the New York *Clarion*. His interest was enough to bring him into close touch with Daniel Rayle. This gave me one entry into the case. But a much more intimate one was developed when Morton Orth's daughter, who suspected foul play, proved to be a close friend of Muriel Havens.

There were a number of fascinating angles connected with the case, and when I finally took part in the investigation, I sensed that they were being developed by an accomplished criminal genius. I hoped that Daniel Rayle might be able to tell me something about his proposed visit with the millionaire Orth, but by a callous coincidence at almost the same moment that Morton Orth slumped to the floor in his shower, Rayle lost his life under the grinding wheels of a subway train.

Some people might have called it accidental, but there was at least one witness who swore that the Customs Agent had been pushed under the train. Huston happened to be close by at the moment and was able to give me this segment of the jumbled picture that revolved around the killing.

A Pattern of Crime

These two killings were a sinister introduction to the pattern of crime that forms the basis of the story "The Diamond Killers," which Robert Wallace is bringing you from the case book of Richard Curtis Van Loan in the next issue. The importance of the diamonds came to my attention when I got in touch with Dan Rayle's boss at the Customs House in New York.

Boats arriving in New York were bringing in a fortune in diamonds. Some of them were newly mined from South Africa. Others were cut stones that had once graced the tiaras and coronets of dukes, princes and kings. Still others represented the hard-won gems of the middle class people of Europe who were forced to sell them in order to secure the ordinary needs of life. American dealers were being bilked because these undercover operators were able to import the stones through their own devious channels without paying the Customs duties.

As I delved into the deeper fastnesses of this fascinating criminal puzzle, it became obvious that there were several different channels through which the gems were being funneled. I managed to uncover one of them that promptly led to other sources of supply. But this was not accomplished without constantly bucking the tycoon of terror who thought nothing of human life when it was possible for him to make his millions on sparkling baubles.

You'll be thrilled by the sharp conflict that is developed in this crime chase. You'll like the cleverness of the criminal adversary who thought he could flout the law and dis-

(Continued on page 8)

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*Thousands Now Play Popular Songs
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You, too, can learn your favorite instrument at home, without a teacher, this quick, easy, money-saving way

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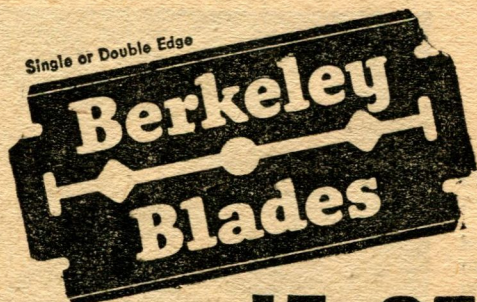
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THE PHANTOM SPEAKS

(Continued from page 6)

covered, too late, that he was not bigger or stronger than organized society.

"The Diamond Killers" was a dramatic case, and I got a big kick out of it while I was working on it. I certainly hope that you will be equally delighted with it when you are given the opportunity to follow the clues that stemmed from the strange murder of Morton Orth to the final showdown when the entire smuggling plot was laid bare. It's all told entertainingly in "The Diamond Killers."

Be a FRIEND OF THE PHANTOM

HAVING friends is one of the most stimulating of human experiences. Being a friend goes a long way toward attracting others to this relationship. That's why I'm glad to see the constantly growing ring which makes up the FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM. They're special kinds of friends, and they're valuable citizens of this great nation of ours. They are linked to The Phantom Detective not only by the usual bonds of friendship, but by a mutual regard for law and order and a respect for constituted authority. I think this is one of the most effective of human relationships.

Some of you who are newcomers to our reading circle may not be familiar with the FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM. If you'd like to be a member, by all means let us know about it. Just send me a letter of application. Include your name, address, age and sex. This information should be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope so I can forward your membership card to you.

There are quite a few of our members who have indicated a desire to have some evidence of their membership besides the card. For these people we have prepared miniature Phantom emblems which are available to anyone who would care to have them. These emblems are not a requirement of membership. But if you would like to have one, you may ask for it at the time you mail your application, and enclose fifteen cents in stamps or coin to help defray the cost of mailing and handling this attractive bronzed emblem.

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(Continued on page 10)



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THE PHANTOM SPEAKS

(Continued from page 8)

your interest in helping local, State and Federal law enforcement authorities. It must be understood, however, that this membership does NOT confer upon you any special rights or privileges with respect to these agencies. Some of our members mistakenly believe that they are entitled to exercise police powers. This is not the case. We are merely banding together as a strong moral force to help in expressing ourselves as right-thinking, law-abiding readers who regularly follow the exploits of The Phantom Detective.

Sign up if you are not already a member. We're glad to welcome you.

THE MAIL BAG

THIS month we have received a number of interesting letters, and I've selected three typical missives to pass along to you. First of all we hear from a correspondent who asks a question that has already been answered to some extent in the last few Phantom Detective stories.

Dear Phantom: Before I begin to tell you what a hit your stories make, let me ask you a question. Whatever happened to Chip Dorlan, the Phantom's protegee? I think he added color to the magazine and would like to see him in future stories. Otherwise your magazine is swell and a real work of art in the writing field.—Edward Rohlin, 10459 - 90th Avenue, Richmond Hill, New York.

Thanks for the kind words, Edward. If you've been reading the past few issues of THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE, you'll know that Chip Dorlan is back from World War II, and is again working with his old friends Steve Huston, Muriel Havens and the Phantom himself. But here's another note, from out in the Middle West:

Dear Phantom: I've just finished reading your latest PHANTOM DETECTIVE Magazine, and I thought the story, "The Case of the Burning Rocks" was a real humdinger. I was really puzzled as to how those rocks could burn, but when I found out just how it was accomplished, I wondered why I hadn't thought of it myself. That's one thing that makes me read your stories, the information is so clear and the situations are so novel. Here's to bigger and better Phantom stories.—Arthur Kingsley, South Chicago, Indiana.

(Concluded on page 113)

LAW

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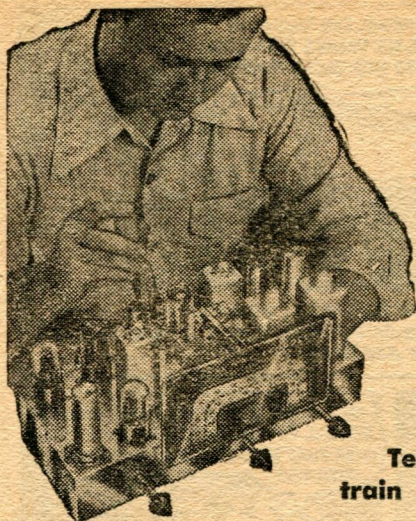
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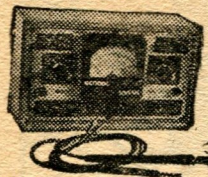
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RADIO FROM THE "OLD MAN" HIMSELF. HE WANTS THIS CREW SENT TO HIS YACHT PRONTO!

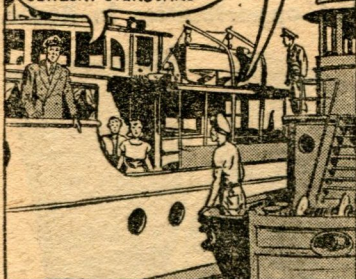
WONDER WHAT'S UP?



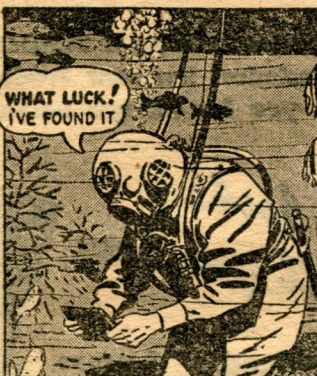
CHIEF DIVER BILL ROBB, EX-NAVY SALVAGE OFFICER, IS RESTING BETWEEN DIVES TO A SUNKEN SHIP IN HOLLISTER BAY WHEN...

I HATE TO ASK THIS, ROBB, BUT MY NIECE LOST HER PURSE AND SOME VALUABLE JEWELRY OVERBOARD

I'LL HAVE A GO AT IT, MR. BAKER

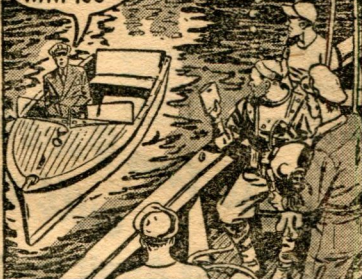


WHAT LUCK! I'VE FOUND IT



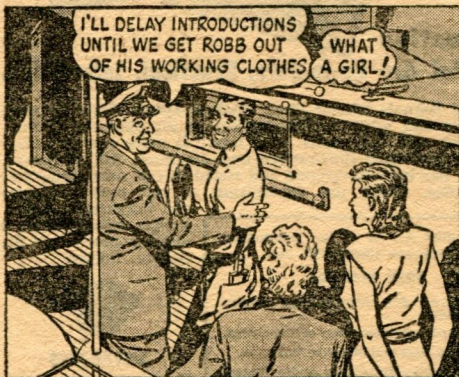
NICE WORK, ROBB. COME ABOARD, I'D LIKE TO TALK OVER THAT "AURORA" JOB WITH YOU

AND ME WITH TWO DAYS' WHISKERS



I'LL DELAY INTRODUCTIONS UNTIL WE GET ROBB OUT OF HIS WORKING CLOTHES

WHAT A GIRL!



HERE'S SHAVING TACKLE AND SOME CLEAN WHITES

THANK YOU, SIR



WHAT A SLICK-SHAVING BLADE! SOMETHING SPECIAL, SIR?

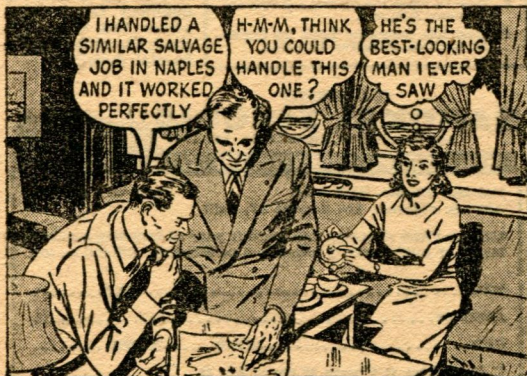
WELL, YOU COULD SAY SO... THIN GILLETTES ARE EXTRA KEEN AND LONG-LASTING



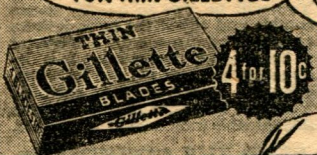
I HANDLED A SIMILAR SALVAGE JOB IN NAPLES AND IT WORKED PERFECTLY

H-M-M, THINK YOU COULD HANDLE THIS ONE?

HE'S THE BEST-LOOKING MAN I EVER SAW



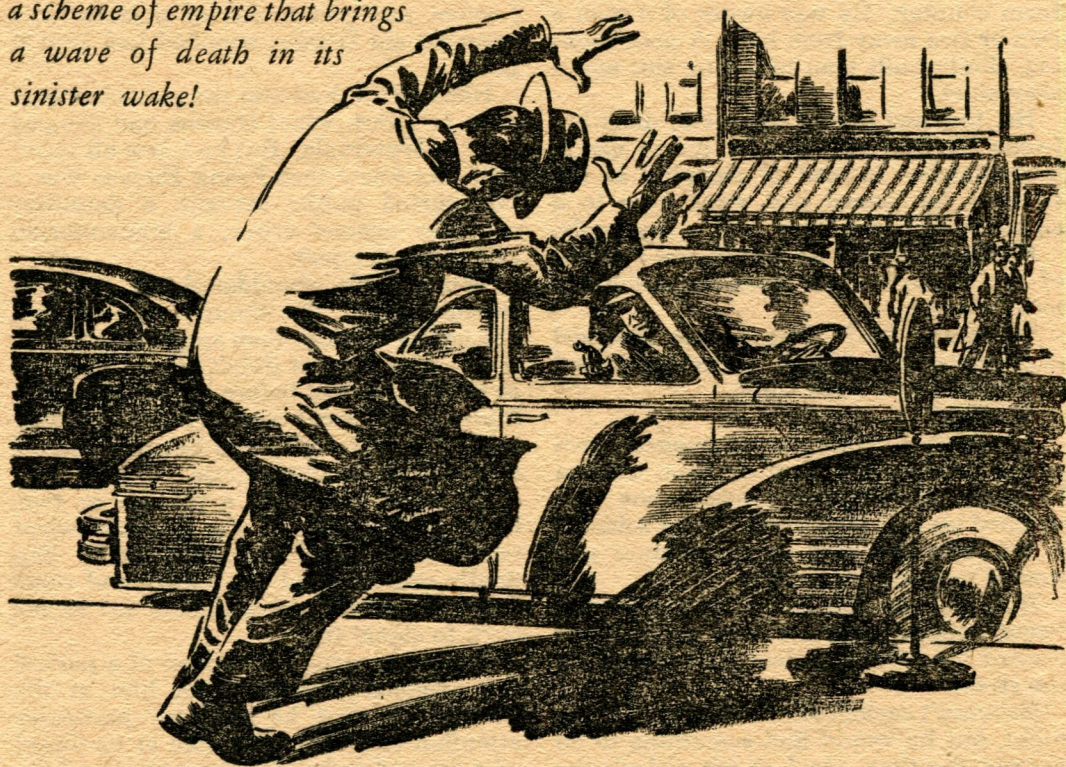
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A COMPLETE MYSTERY NOVEL

by ROBERT WALLACE

*The Phantom Detective battles to spike
a scheme of empire that brings
a wave of death in its
sinister wake!*



The Clue of the SECOND MURDER

CHAPTER I

THREE SHOTS

IT WAS a few minutes after eight by the clock over the rustic bar in Myler's Chop House on West Forty-seventh Street.

The place was crowded. It was the peak of the dinner hour, people were waiting for tables. A brassy-haired coat check girl was busy in her nook at the end of the foyer. The bar had them lined up three deep.

Harley Holt, at a table in the corner,

finished his demitasse. Holt, young, attractive, and from out of town, got a kick out of the vibrant night life of the glittering city. It was so different from Watervale, Ohio, where he hailed from.

A waiter tore Holt's dinner check from a pad. He laid it beside the customer, face down. Holt saw the head waiter looking in his direction and knew he was expected to get up and let some of the waiting patrons have his table.

He fished a tip out of his pocket, took the check and headed toward the cashier's desk.

A Nevada Silver Town Holds the Fearsome

Holt had left his topcoat and hat in the custody of the brassy-haired blonde. He fumbled around in his vest pockets until he located the numbered metal disc she had given him. With that in hand he pushed his way politely toward the check room counter. He was aware of a man a step or two away from him. A good-looking, slimly built man in a blue suit and a gray shirt.

He, too, had one of the metal discs between his fingers. But he didn't use it immediately. Instead of stopping at the counter, he turned and went over to a cigarette girl who gave him a coy smile.

Harley Holt laid his disc down in front of the brassy-haired blonde and dug up more change.

"Coat and hat?" The blonde fluttered mascara-treated lashes, vermilion-tinted lips curved in a fixed smile.

"Please."

He watched while she rummaged down a long line of coats dangling from wooden hangers. Finally she dragged one out, reached up to a shelf above it and selected a hat. She laid both on the counter and turned to a new customer.

Holt put on the hat, draped the tan tweed topcoat over his arm and walked toward the revolving door that opened on the street.

He wasn't certain about his plans for the night, but he would find something to do to pass the time. And at ten o'clock the next morning, he had an appointment with Frank Havens, the wealthy owner and publisher of the *Clarion*. That newspaper was one of the most important dailies in the country. Havens, too, was important. All the way east on the plane that had brought Holt from Columbus, Ohio, to LaGuardia Field, he had been thinking about his date with Havens.

DURHAM HOLT, his father, had published the Watervale *Leader* for years. But that was only a limited circulation sheet, a twice-a-week job specializing in local affairs. It did run a UP column on national events, but the paper was strictly small-town in every other detail.

Nothing, of course, to be compared with the roaring presses of the *Clarion*. Nothing with hot news wires pouring in destiny-shaking stories. That was what Harley Holt was so interested in, since he had

finished his course in journalism, a short time before. He had wanted to start his career on a paper like the *Clarion*.

Holt's father had known Frank Havens for years. When the depression of the early '30's had threatened to swamp the *Leader*, and put it out of business, the financial aid Havens supplied had kept it going.

Harley Holt had met the publisher only once or twice, when Havens had stopped over in Watervale. But he knew all about him. He knew that Frank Havens was a big-hearted public servant, a dauntless crusader against crime, a humanitarian and philanthropist.

Young Holt shouldered on the tan tweed topcoat. The thought that his dinner had been more than ample crossed his mind. The topcoat didn't seem to button as easily as it had before he had gone into Myler's. He went around with the door and came out under the brightly lighted marquee of the chop house.

He stood there for a minute or two, looking for a taxi. It was the hour when most of the cabs were in demand. But finally one rounded the corner and came down the street. Holt moved out to the curb to signal it.

He had a vague impression of a parked car diagonally across from him at the other curb, but he paid no particular attention to it or to the man at its wheel who seemed to be staring at him intently. Instead, Holt hurried up to the taxi which, catching his signal, was applying its brakes.

"Hotel Victor." Holt climbed in.

He made himself comfortable on the worn leather upholstery. His mind promptly went back to the next day's appointment with Havens at the *Clarion*. He wondered if he would get a break, if Havens would give him a job on the sheet. He wondered if he was about to launch his career in the most exciting city in the world.

The cab wove in and out of the traffic stream. Holt marveled at the way his driver slid through openings that seemed no larger than a pocket. The man appeared to take constant chances. Yet somehow no fenders were dented—the taxi skimmed through safely.

They went up Broadway a few blocks, then east on a one-way street. Halfway

Secret of an Evil Conspiracy of Crime!

along it Holt's hackie twisted his head around and spoke over his shoulder.

"We're being tailed, mister."

Holt straightened up on the seat. "Tailed?" He had often read that word in stories published in his favorite detective magazine.

"That's right," the taximan said. A gray coop started after us when you got aboard in front of Myler's. It's been



THE PHANTOM

sticking closer than sunburn ever since. I thought you ought to know."

Frowning, Holt looked back through the window behind him. It didn't make sense. His taxi followed? He couldn't tell. The street was full of traffic. He couldn't distinguish any one particular car in the mass of motors hanging in their wake.

He shook his head. Maybe his driver was the imaginative type. Or maybe he figured his passenger was from out of town, and was wide open for any kind of a gap.

"You must be wrong," he said.

The driver shrugged. "Look mister. I know when I'm being shagged. Take another gander. On the left side. That gray crate, next to the blue Chevvy."

Holt glanced back again. This time he found the car mentioned. It was between the Chevrolet and the street curb, hanging slightly back.

Holt couldn't see its driver or those in the car.

"How about me giving it the shake?" the hackie said. "Or maybe you want to be trailed up to the Victor."

"Use your own judgment," Holt laughed and settled back on the seat.

The idea of being followed seemed ridiculous. He didn't know even the name of anyone in New York except the Mr. Havens he was to meet in the morning. Why in the world should anyone want to follow him?

As he pushed himself back, the tan tweed topcoat seemed to tighten about him. Holt unbuttoned it. He slipped a hand in the right side pocket. He kept his gloves there, neatly folded. But there weren't any gloves and his fingers touched a crumpled piece of paper and came in contact with a cellophane-wrapped package of cigarettes.

HE SAT up quickly. He held the sleeve of the coat to the light. Close inspection told him immediately that this wasn't his coat.

The brassy-haired blonde had given him the wrong garment.

He felt annoyed. How had that happened? He took off his hat and looked at it.

The hat was all right, it belonged to him, but the coat most certainly did not.

This meant he had to go back to the restaurant and return the coat. But would his still be there? If the girl had handed him the coat he was wearing, it was more than likely she had given his coat to someone else. Probably to the man who owned this tight-fitting job.

Holt looked up and found they were on Lexington Avenue. The Hotel Victor, where he had a room, was no more than three streets away now. He noticed the fare on the clock and began to get out some money, glad he hadn't left his wallet in his missing coat.

"Still with us. Slowing now." The taximan shifted his eyes from the windshield mirror. "They stuck as close as your next breath all the way."

The cab stopped some short distance

away from the bronze canopy over the Victor's main entrance. Other taxis were in front of the hotel, people getting in or out of them. A bellhop in livery was piling up baggage on the sidewalk. Holt paid his driver and watched the vehicle drift away.

He had started toward the hotel's battery of lobby doors when he stopped. Someone was calling to him. Holt had the impression of a gray coupé, almost at the same spot where his taxi had discharged him.

He saw a man peering out through its open window, gesturing to him.

Holt turned and took a couple of steps forward, puzzled.

"You want to speak to me?"

"That's right. Just a minute."

The coupé's engine was turning over rapidly. Harley Holt couldn't clearly see the face of the man who had called to him. He could see only the blur of his features, shaded by the brim of a felt hat. He kept on walking toward the coupé.

Then suddenly he stopped, freezing where he stood.

FOR A fantastic instant, Holt thought his eyes were playing tricks with him. A hand had come up to the lowered sill of the window. Fingers were clamped around a gun. A gun that was leveled and pointed directly at him!

An intuitive sense of self-preservation prompted swift action. But Holt's legs didn't respond to the urging of his brain. He wanted to turn and duck, but there was nothing to duck behind.

There was nothing at all here but the open pavement, where he was a perfect target.

The gun came up an inch higher. Holt tried to cry out, to call for help.

Before he could frame words or get them past his stiff lips, the finger over the gun's trigger squeezed hard. Three shots, spaced so closely together they made one staccato echo, snapped like a whip through the grind of the traffic on the street.

Harley Holt threw out his arms. He clawed vainly, desperately, at the empty air around him as if trying to find support. He managed to stagger one step to the left before he crashed face-down on the hard cement of the pavement.

The gray coupé, gears meshing, darted out into the center of the street and disappeared swiftly up Lexington Avenue.

CHAPTER II

Dinner Date



NONE of the card rooms at the exclusive Mayfair Club, Richard Curtis Van Loan mashed out his cigarette, glanced at his watch, and smothered a yawn.

"That's my last rubber," he announced to the three men with whom he had played bridge for the past two hours. "I have a dinner appointment."

Joel Sanderson, Van's last partner, added up the score. Sanderson had heard a lot about Van Loan's cleverness at cards, but he hadn't entirely believed it until, playing with him now, he had witnessed some amazing bidding and defense play on Van's part.

Sanderson was slightly puzzled. Like so many others who didn't know Dick Van Loan intimately, he had had an idea Van was a bored playboy without any particular intelligence. What he had seen at the bridge table had convinced him that behind the Van Loan charm and indolence was a sharp, shrewd mind.

"Looks like we clean up," Sanderson said to Van Loan, putting a pencil ring about their combined plus score. "Thanks to you I'm in the black."

"Don't thank me." Van began to get up. "The cards happened to be running well, that's all."

Sanderson was about to shake his head and add something else when Van pocketed his share of the winnings, said good-by, and headed for the outside corridor.

"And they say," Sanderson murmured to the other two men at the table, "he doesn't know his way around! How do you like that?"

"We don't—thirty dollars' worth," one of the two drawled. "What a strategist! Culbertson, in his top trick days couldn't have played any better. That shows brains—and plenty of them. Looks like a shame for such cerebral facility to go to waste as it does with a young fellow like Dick Van Loan—a complete waste."

"He's just as good at other things as he is at bridge," remarked another player, as he put the cards in their case. "Why, out on Long Island I've seen him take on the best available at golf and tennis—and beat them without breathing hard. Goes in

pretty heavily for sports, I've heard, though personally I'd have said he's too lazy for strenuous exercise."

Sanderson sighed. "Must be that he likes such things then," he said. "The only exercise I've ever heard of that young dilettante going in for is the effort required to lift a cocktail glass or guide a pretty deb around a dance floor."

"You're wrong about the cocktail glass, though, Sanderson," said one of his companions. "That is not one of Dick's failings—drink. He usually takes some sort of an innocuous lime concoction."

Outside the Club, the man of whom they were speaking was smiling as he hurried homeward. He had a pretty fair idea of what was being said about him by those three men he had left behind him. It amused him—but it pleased him, too. He would not have had it otherwise, and for good reason.

Richard Curtis Van Loan had an apartment on top of a Park Avenue building that rose in layers of masonry above the aristocratic street on which it stood. With his lofty suite went two things. One was a private entrance for his use alone, the other a small express elevator with no stops between the street floor and the front door of his rooms.

Van didn't linger long when he reached his suite, which was furnished in the simple luxurious taste of a man who enjoyed a large income. Which, indeed, Van did, since his father had been a man of large wealth who had left all he owned to his son.

A quick shower, and Van dressed rapidly. His dinner clothes were faultless. Made by a master tailor who knew his customer's measurements to the last fraction of an inch, the fit was flawless. Van knotted his black tie, slid into a top-coat, and reached for a hat.

A few minutes later he was down on the Avenue, bound for his dinner date.

This happened to be at the home of Frank Havens. Muriel, the publisher's pretty daughter, had extended the invitation to Van several days before. She knew how greatly Dick Van Loan was in demand at social functions. So she had invited him well in advance for dinner, and had been delighted when he had accepted with alacrity.

It was only a short walk to Havens' house. Across Lexington Avenue, down a quiet side street. The evening air was cool and fresh. A sprinkle of stars were

scattered across the sky, high above the skyscrapers. Van, who loved exercise in any form, swung along at a leisurely pace.

NEARING Lexington Avenue, he heard a police car's siren. It seemed to be coming closer. Then another. That was broken by the banshee wail of a racing ambulance. At the corner Van saw that a crowd had gathered on the sidewalk near the Hotel Victor's main entrance.

In the shine of the street lights he glimpsed police uniforms. A couple of patrolmen were keeping the crowd back, trying to make room for a brisk young doctor in a white coat who scrambled down from the ambulance that had just arrived. On the Avenue, cars were slowing so their occupants could see what was going on.

Van, with idle curiosity, spoke to a boy who wore the livery of one of the Victor's bellhops.

"What's happened?"

"Guy got himself shot." The bellboy shrugged, as if a shooting was an every night occurrence. "Looks like they wrapped him up. He's dead."

"Did they get the one who did it?"

"No. Some lug in a car. Gunned the guy through the window. The heap got away. Nobody knows how it happened."

The bellboy shrugged again and faded back into the hotel. Van Loan eyed the crowd being jostled by the patrolmen. People had quickly appeared, as always in such cases, although shooting was no distinct novelty. Crime stalked the crowded city. When there was big money there was always vice. And where there was vice, violence was present in all its ugly aspects.

Van turned, waiting for the traffic lights to change so he could cross the Avenue. While he stood there a big Police Department sedan, marked by the official emblem, nosed into the curb. Inspector Gregg, the head of Homicide, climbed out to take charge. Van looked up to find the light green and went on.

Only a few minutes later Gibbs, the Havens' butler, was ushering him into a first-floor reception room in the publisher's home. Logs glowed in the fireplace. The lights were shaded and in their reflection Van saw Frank Havens, Muriel and several guests.

As Gibbs announced him, Muriel jumped up quickly and came over to

greet him, her eyes starry and her hands outstretched.

She was small, dark as a gypsy, with a clear, lovely complexion and the look of a thoroughbred. Her black hair glistened in the lamplight. Long lashes made shadows on her smooth cheeks. She looked as lovely as always, and Van smiled approvingly at her, a light in his own eyes.

Muriel had known Van a long time. Secretly he occupied a niche in her heart of which no one knew—except herself. But not even she guessed what Van thought of her. For the truth was that Dick Van Loan was more than fond of the daughter of his old friend. In Muriel he had found all the attributes of the perfect girl. But never had he spoken of what was in his heart. He never would, as things were with him now. Because there were reasons—good reasons—why he must ask no woman to share his life.

He took her hands in his, tingling at their warmth and the invisible current which seemed to flow between them. But he only smiled, giving no hint of his awareness.

"It's so nice of you to come," Muriel whispered.

"It's so nice to be here," Van told her.

Frank Havens, the typical business executive in appearance, came up to them then, and introduced Van to his other guests.

Among them was James Callen, Assistant District Attorney on the D. A.'s staff. Callen, fresh from law school, was a serious, reserved, and good-looking young man. When they went in to dinner, as they did at once, Callen sat across from Van, and spoke about a murder case on which he had been working. Listening absently, Van gathered that it concerned the killing of a dock worker in an East River waterfront brawl.

"I feel," Callen said, "that the *Clarion* played a major part in bringing the existence of this gang to light. The paper uncovered its activities and gave us material assistance all along the line."

"You can thank Steve Huston for that," Havens broke in. "Steve's efforts were responsible for showing up the gang."

For a time the conversation seemed entirely taken up by a discussion of crime and criminals. Van took no part in it. He made no comments until Muriel leaned to him and, lowering her voice, said:

"Bored, Dick?"

"Should I be?" he smiled at her.

"With all this talk of crime?" Muriel wrinkled her tiptilted nose. "It's so far removed from your world, isn't it?"

"I'm not so sure." Van's smile faded out. "Sometimes it seems to follow me around. On the way over here tonight I passed an X marks the spot. Shooting in front of the Hotel Victor. The killer got away."

CalLEN caught what Van was saying and turned to him.

"Gregg will get him," he said positively. "The Inspector's the most efficient man who ever headed Homicide. Some of his police work is brilliant."

Muriel's head went up. "But how much," she asked, "is really the Inspector's, and not the Phantom Detective's brilliance?"

Before Callen could reply Gibbs, coming into the dining room, leaned over and said something to Frank Havens. Muriel's father laid down his napkin and got up.

"Pardon me for a moment. You were speaking of the Inspector. Oddly, he's on the telephone now."

Havens went out to answer the call and through the wavering candles along the table, Van studied Muriel. She wore white tonight, a simple little gown that was a foil for her dark beauty. Her only jewelry was an old-fashioned diamond pin that had belonged to her mother. The gems caught and reflected the yellow gleam of the candles, the happy glow in her shadowed eyes.

He looked up as Frank Havens came back into the room. And all other thoughts fled from Van's mind, for that one glance at the publisher was enough to tell that the man had received a shock of some kind. Van had never seen his old friend more disturbed. Havens' strong, rugged face had gone gray. His eyes had a quenched look in them. The hands that reached for the back of his chair weren't entirely steady.

"I'm sorry," he said, trying to keep his voice even. "I'll have to be excused."

"What's happened?" Muriel jumped up.

"That call, as I said, was from the Inspector." Havens drew a deep breath. "He wants me to come down to Headquarters immediately. A young man, a Harley Holt, the son of a friend of mine, was killed tonight! Shot in front of the Hotel Victor!"

"The Hotel Victor?" Muriel's red lips



Someone lunged forward, gun
uplifted, a foot lashed out and
the Phantom reeled backward
(CHAPTER X)

parted as she looked at Van whose eyes met hers, as he nodded.

"Please go on with your dinner," Havens said. "I'll try to get back as soon as possible."

He hurried out, leaving Muriel staring after him.

Sitting in his own chair, Dick Van Loan's face seemed to harden. He laid his napkin down and touched Muriel's arm with his fingers.

"I think I'll go with your father," he murmured. "Maybe there's something I can do to help him. Drive his car. I've never seen him more distressed."

"Would you?" Relief showed in Muriel's piquant face.

Van's answer was to push his chair back and get quickly to his feet.

CHAPTER III

The Phantom



REGG'S office at Headquarters presented a busy scene when Havens and Dick Van Loan reached it. All the way downtown Van, driving the publisher's Cadillac, had listened to what the man beside him had said about this Harley Holt, the son of his old friend.

Young Holt, it seemed, had had an appointment with Havens at the *Clarion* the following morning. Holt had finished a course in journalism and had been about to embark upon a career. Havens told Van that he had been meaning to offer the young man a job on his paper.

"This is terrible!" the publisher had said, in a flat, dull tone. "Harley was Durham Holt's only son. He was everything to his father. The boy went through the war without a scratch. To have him murdered now, almost on the eve of his arrival in town is unthinkable!"

Van felt a wave of sympathy for his friend. It was obvious to him that Havens was so shaken he was able to talk only with great effort.

Now, in the busy building on Center Street, Dick Van Loan, making himself as unobtrusive as possible, listened while Gregg explained to Frank Havens. The Inspector, a grizzled veteran of years in the Department, turned directly to the publisher of the *Clarion*.

"Sorry I had to call you away from dinner, Mr. Havens, but I need you for

an identification. We found your name, and a note from you in Holt's wallet."

"How did it happen?" Havens' voice still shook.

Gregg glanced over in Van's direction. He knew that Richard Curtis Van Loan was a close friend of the publisher, that Havens had known him since Van's childhood, and was deeply attached to the young man, the son of Havens' best friend. Personally, the Inspector didn't have too much use for gilded young men of Van Loan's type. He looked upon them as playboys who contributed little or nothing to the scheme of life. But this one, Gregg had to admit, had a lot of good looks and personality to balance the debit.

Gregg repeated the question Havens had asked him.

"Before I answer that," the Inspector said, "you can tell me how well you knew Holt."

Havens explained in the same flat, colorless voice with which he had spoken in the car coming downtown to Headquarters. The Inspector's expression changed. He began to understand and some of the gruffness of his tone of authority disappeared.

He gave Havens a resumé of the shooting, pieced scantily together from what his men had picked up at the scene of the crime. Listening, Van Loan realized that not much was given to the police as a basis from which to work. No one apparently had obtained a good description of the killer in the car. No one had noticed the license plate numbers of the murder car. No one had supplied any direct facts on exactly how Harley Holt had been shot to death.

In fact, Van saw, the Inspector had been given a confused picture of the affair. Someone had said the death car was a yellow sedan. Somebody else had insisted it was a dark blue convertible. One report was that the murderer had shot Holt from the sidewalk, jumped into the car and been driven off. A bellboy, at the hotel, had stated that he had seen the gun fired through the car's window while he had been bringing in some baggage from a taxi.

"Do you know anything about a man named Clyde Caldwell, from Sonajo, Nevada," Gregg asked Havens.

The publisher looked surprised, but shook his head. "No, I never heard of him. Who is he?"

"I asked," the Inspector went on,

"because Holt had a garage bill in the pocket of his topcoat made out to this Clyde Caldwell. Another odd thing is the label in the coat. It was that of a shop in Sonajo, Nevada. From Holt's driving license, found in an inside coat pocket, he was a resident of Watervale, Ohio. Do you know if he came here from Nevada?"

Frank Havens shook his head again. "Young Holt came here directly from Watervale. I know that. Whether he was in Nevada recently, I couldn't say."

"We're stopped so far on this one," the Inspector admitted slowly. "I've got an alarm call out for any cab driver who might have driven Holt tonight. He's been staying at the Victor and was evidently returning there when he was killed. One witness claims that he saw Holt get out of a taxi. But that, like the other stories turned in, might be purely imagination. Now," he added, "I'd like you to take a look at the body."

Havens got up, went over to Van. "Thanks, Dick," he said. "Go back to the house. I'll get in touch with you later."

VAN NODDED. His handsome face was serious. The usual casual, care-free Van Loan smile had gone. In its place was a grim, strange new expression that made it look almost like the face of another man.

"I," he said, with a significance that only Havens could understand, "will get in touch with you!"

He nodded to Gregg and left. Outside, he hailed a taxi and gave his Park Avenue address.

Back in his own sky-high suite, Dick Van Loan got busy. He had a good reason for not following out Havens' instructions to return to the interrupted dinner party. What he had told the newspaperman became even more significant when Van, in his bedroom, touched a hidden button concealed behind the Napoleonic headboard of his bed.

The pressure of his finger over the pearl circle of the button did strange and it would have seemed to others, incredible things.

It set in motion an electrical current that slid the wall paneling back. Revealed behind it was a small, windowless room equipped as a miniature laboratory, private arsenal and wardrobe room.

Quickly getting out of his dinner clothes, Van turned to what looked like a complete wardrobe which took up the left

side of the secret room. But the clothes hanging there were not the well-tailored, expensive garments that he invariably wore. What was here could have been selected from the wardrobes of many and varied walks of life.

Selecting a stone-gray, conservatively cut suit, Van put it on. With it went a pair of tan shoes, a white shirt, and a green tie. Then he turned to the three-mirrored table which was placed in the center of the little room, and sat down before it. He opened a drawer, disclosing a variety of small bottles, vials, jars and tubes containing the makeup he used, when assuming his different rôles, makeup which might have been the property of a famous character actor, or the stock in trade of a Hollywood makeup man.

Any of his friends who could have watched then would have been amazed at what followed. In a few short minutes Van Loan, with the aid of crayons and pencils, and with some of the contents of the jars and tubes, had changed his appearance so completely that no one in the world would have recognized him.

His face was now square, with high cheek-bones, a slightly spreading nose with a flare to the nostrils, and a wide-lipped mouth. He brushed his hair back with a color comb, darkening it slightly.

The attractive Richard Curtis Van Loan had vanished. The man who got up from the triple-mirrored table was the reason for the private entrance to the building, for the private elevator and the secret laboratory.

For this man was the Phantom Detective! A secret known to no other man on earth except Frank Havens, the publisher.

As the Phantom, Van wasted little time. He selected a hat which went with the staid gray suit. He took an automatic from that gun arsenal of his in the private room, an arsenal containing every kind of weapon made intended for one man's use, and slipped the gun into his shoulder holster. He made sure he had his accessories—his tiny jeweled badge in the form of a domino mask, his keys, money, and other necessities.

That badge was of fabulous worth, and was equally fabulous as the identification mark of the Phantom Detective. And it was known and feared by criminals, and respected by upholders of the law wherever crime raised its ugly head.

Ready for whatever might eventuate, he left his penthouse, and took his private

elevator to the street.

The killing of young Harley Holt, which had so greatly disturbed Havens, interested the Phantom. When he had been in the Inspector's office in his rightful identity of Richard Van Loan, the details of the young man's death had struck him sharply. Holt's murder was no ordinary Manhattan crime. Van was sure of that. His analytical mind sensed something strange behind it—something cloaked in mystery.

A large part of Van Loan's interest in the shooting of Holt was due in no small measure to Havens' mental agitation, the fact that Holt's father was an old friend of the publisher. Van had tried to make plain his interest when he had left Frank Havens at Headquarters, had given him to understand that the Phantom would take a hand.

He looked at his watch when he reached the street. He saw that not too much time had elapsed since he had said good-bye to the owner of the *Clarion*, and to Gregg. At a reasonable distance from his Park Avenue home he hailed a taxi and went directly to the busy building on Centre Street that stood as a symbol of law and order in the crowded city.

HAVENS, he found, had gone on home after identifying Holt at the morgue. But the Inspector was still at his desk.

Van had always admired Gregg's tenacity and persistence. What the Inspector lacked in brilliant deduction he more than made up for by his bulldog drive. Gregg stayed with a case to the bitter end. He wasn't always successful, but had a balance of solved crimes to his credit. Time and again though, he had ended up nowhere, but he had never been accused of not exerting every ounce of his power to crack his cases.

He glanced up as Van followed one of Homicide's plain-clothes men into the office. The detective's name was Shevlin—Lieutenant Michael Shevlin—and he was one of Gregg's best aides.

"This man wants to see you, Inspector," Shevlin said. "Says it's private and personal."

Gregg's worried face turned to the Phantom, who took a step forward. The little jeweled insignia was cupped in the palm of his hand. He held it so the desk light fell on it.

Gregg's head jerked up. Something replaced the weary look in his eyes. As if

galvanized into fresh action, he got quickly out of his swivel chair. He pushed that back and gripped his visitor's hand.

"Phantom!" A husky note of surprise spiked his exclamation. "What are you doing down here?"

Van pulled a chair around and dropped into it. Across the room Lieutenant Shevlin peered at Van in quick curiosity. Once or twice, on other cases, the Lieutenant had had fleeting glimpses of the world renowned detective. To see him close up, only a few feet distant, where he could be studied closely, made Shevlin as expectant and anticipative as the head of Homicide.

"I want to talk to you about young Holt, who was killed up at the Hotel Victor," the Phantom said. "I understand that Mr. Havens, of the *Clarion*, is deeply interested in that death, feels it personally. We've got to find that killer—not only because the law demands it, but because Frank Havens won't rest until he is found!"

"We'll certainly do our best, Phantom," Gregg said earnestly. "What's your first move?"

"The body," the Phantom said promptly. "You'll come along with me?"

Twenty minutes later, he stood beside the slab in the morgue on which lay the body of Harley Holt.

The gunman's three slugs had ripped into Holt's chest. One had burrowed in above the heart. The second bullet had driven straight in at a point between the ribs, and the third, at a slight angle, had left its ominous, tearing wound on the right breast. Any of the shots, alone, could have been fatal. In combination, the Phantom saw, they had killed young Holt instantly.

"Probably a forty-five gun," he remarked to the Inspector beside him. Bagby will do a p.m. as soon as he gets down. I should have the report in a couple of hours." He shook his grizzled head. "Too bad. Nice-looking lad."

Young Holt had been. The Phantom's mouth tightened. He felt he could understand some of Havens' concern and distress.

Harley Holt had been cut down in the flower of his youth.

The Phantom nodded to the morgue custodian waiting to slide the slab back into its ice-cooled vault.

"I'd like to see his clothing," he said, tersely.

THE SECOND MURDER



HOLT'S garments, tagged and numbered, were on a table in the personal property room. The Phantom went over them carefully. He noticed the label in the jacket Holt had worn. He examined the pockets, tossed the coat aside and, after a glance at the trousers and bloodstained vest, picked up the tweed topcoat. He noticed the label in that, too.

The garage bill the Inspector had mentioned to Frank Havens, and made out to Clyde Caldwell, was, as Gregg had said, on the bill form of a Sonajo, Nevada, garage repair shop. It was for changing a tire, greasing and oiling a car, and for ten gallons of gasoline. The date was a week previous.

"The only other thing in that topcoat was a package of cigarettes with matches," the Inspector explained.

The Phantom made no reply. He held the coat up by its shoulders, eyeing it speculatively. Finally he laid it flat down on the table and picked up the jacket. He placed that over the topcoat, using the seam of one shoulder as a measure. The other shoulder of the jacket overlapped the topcoat by an inch or more.

"This topcoat," the Phantom said, "didn't fit Holt. Too small. I don't believe it was his coat."

"Then what's the idea?" asked Gregg.

"He might have borrowed it." The Phantom shrugged. "Or he might have got hold of it by mistake. It wasn't too small for him to wear it, and it might have resembled his own coat. It's a conventional type of tweed, conventional cut and tailoring. Have you checked on this Clyde Caldwell?"

Gregg nodded. "There's no Clyde Caldwell in the city directory. I've got a hotel cast out. Nothing's come in on it yet."

"How about Holt's room at the Hotel Victor?" asked the Phantom.

"I have a man up there now," Gregg answered.

Thanking the morgue keeper, the Phantom left with Gregg.

Back in the Inspector's office at Headquarters, they found Shevlin waiting.

"A break, Chief," the Lieutenant said eagerly, as they went in. "The taxi driver who picked Holt up—or at least thinks he



FRANK HAVENS

was his fare—is outside."

"Send him in," ordered the Inspector.

The man who entered, carrying his driver's cap, was about thirty years old. He was slender, sharp-faced, wise-eyed. He had carrotty hair and a prominent nose. He looked smart, the type of man the Phantom liked to question.

"I'm pretty sure the dead guy was my passenger," he began at once.

"Just a minute," Gregg said. "What's your name?"

"Matthew Brady. I'm with the Purple Cab Company. On the seven to three shift. I live at East One Hundred and Ninth Street, near Madison, and I've been working for this outfit since I got my discharge from the Army. If you'd like to see my papers, I've got 'em here, honorable discharge and all."

"Describe the passenger you left at the Hotel Victor," the Inspector directed.

As Brady spoke, the Phantom saw that the taximan had a good memory and a photographic mind. There was no need to take him to the morgue. He remembered every detail about the man who had ridden in his cab. His description was complete, down to Harley Holt's black shoes.

"I picked him up in front of Myler's Chop House," Brady stated, in answer to the Phantom's question. "I hadn't gone more than a couple of streets before I knew we were being shagged. A gray coop, two guys in it. The party I was driving thought it was a joke. I could have

lost the gray heap any time, but I wasn't told to. My fare said use my own judgment, and maybe I should have, instead of driving on to the hotel."

"Did you get the license number of the gray coupe?" the Phantom put in.

Brady shook his head. "Didn't get it."

"Did you see the car behind you when you stopped to let your fare get out?" the Phantom inquired.

Brady shook his head again. "I didn't notice. After the young guy didn't seem interested, I didn't pay any more attention. I got worries of my own. Why take on new ones?"

A few more questions and Inspector Gregg told Brady he could go. The Phantom glanced at his watch as the man left. More than an hour had passed since he had said good night to Frank Havens in this same office. He got up, his face shadowed and his mouth serious. Nothing to tell Havens—yet.

"Well," Gregg said, expelling a breath, "that cab driver didn't add much. A gray coupe, two men. There must be hundreds of gray coupes in the city."

FOR the first time the Phantom smiled faintly.

"On the contrary," he said, "Brady supplied a highly valuable lead."

"Yes? What kind of a lead?" Gregg looked puzzled.

"The name of a restaurant. Myler's Chop House." The Phantom started toward the door. "You'll hear from me again—later. I'll be interested to learn if you find out anything about this Clyde Caldwell."

"You figure he's important?" Gregg's perplexity widened his eyes.

"I figure," the Phantom answered cryptically, "that if you don't get to Caldwell soon, somebody else will!"

With that he left, hurrying out. As the door shut behind him, Inspector Gregg's heavy brows drew together in a deep-cut frown. Then his face began to clear. The Phantom was on the case and at the thought the weight of his worry began to lift magically. The Phantom never failed. Before long, Gregg told himself, there would be an arrest. He would do the best he could of course, but the Phantom was certainly a great help to a hard-working policeman. . . .

Uptown, Van approached Myler's Chop House. He saw that the place was the usual kind of tavern-restaurant. Not a

high-class eating establishment exactly, but one several notches above the average. It was still open, its bar business in excess now of its dining trade.

The Phantom, inside, headed for the coat check counter. A brassy-haired, blue-eyed young lady sat on a stool, the crossword puzzle page of a tabloid open before her.

She held her pencil stub poised in one hand and was scowling at the checker-board pattern of empty spaces.

Reluctantly she pushed the paper aside as the Phantom stopped at the counter. She reached for one of her brass discs.

"I want some information," the Phantom said abruptly. "I think you can supply it."

The girl gave him an icy stare.

"What do you mean, information? If it's my phone number, I'm dated up solid."

"This has to do with a topcoat."

The Phantom slipped a hand into his pocket. When it came out it held a regulation Detective Bureau badge. He had found it worth while to carry that around with him.

It often persuaded taciturn individuals to talk, and talk freely.

"Cop!" The lashes swept up from the blue eyes. "Pardon my error. What do you want to know?"

He explained rapidly.

The girl listened attentively, nodding once or twice.

"Yeah, that's right," she admitted, a little uneasily. "There was a mixup tonight. I don't know how it happened, but the minute that guy walked out I knew I'd given him the wrong coat. He hadn't been gone more than a couple of minutes before the other guy popped up. He knew it wasn't his flogger I handed over. He left it here, hoping the other party would bring his coat back."

The Phantom leaned forward. "Then you've got the name and address of the man who refused to take the coat?"

"Sure I have. Right here."

She opened a drawer in the counter. He caught a glimpse of a stack of coins—her tips—and a true confession magazine. She pulled that out and turned it over. On the back cover was jotted down a name and number in a round, girlish scrawl.

"'Clyde Caldwell,'" the Phantom read aloud. "'Room Six twenty-three. Hotel Pilgrim.'"

"I got the reefer right here if you want to give it a gander," the girl said helpfully.

SHE pointed to a solitary topcoat hanging limply from a wire hanger in the rear of her cubicle.

The Phantom held out a hand for it. A glance was enough to identify it as Harley Holt's coat. The label stitched under its inside pocket said, "The Hamilton Men's Shop, Watervale, Ohio." A pocket contained a folded pair of nearly new pigskin gloves.

The Phantom returned the coat to the brassy-haired girl, thanked her, and then left.

* * * * *

The man seated in the mauve velour chair in the small, cheap hotel bedroom finished what he had been writing on a pad on his knee, and tossed the pad on the nearby desk. Later he could have what he had written typed. Pencil scribbles would be all right for the man who would get those notes, but when they were put in shape for a high-class firm such as he had in mind, only neat typing would do. A lot might be at stake by the impression he made.

"And being right on the job won't hurt any, either," he told himself. "'Come to New York in the near future,' that fellow wrote to me. Well, I'm here—and none too soon to suit me."

He was a good-looking young fellow, and would have seemed well-pleased with himself and the world if it had not been for his eyes. There was something there—was it fear? Or could it be merely anxiety? Or something deeply calculating? That he was primed for and determined on some kind of action in the near future of which he thought, however, was plain.

It was there—in his eyes.

He yawned and stretched, and was just getting up from the chair when a sound at his window—just a slight sound—whisked him around.

His jaw dropped and his breath came raspingly.

Framed in the window was the upper part of a man's body, the face in shadow, but one arm extended, and in the hand the light glittered on an ugly small gun, equipped with a silencer which was menacingly outlined.

For just that breath the man in the room stood paralyzed.

"You!" he snapped. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Surprised?" the man in the window shadows drawled beneath the handkerchief which hid his features. "You don't know the half of it."

With the last word the young man in the room came to life. He leaped—not toward the window, but toward the bed. His automatic! Under the pillow! He should never have left it so far from his hand.

That one leap, his last, took him to the bed. There was a low laugh from the window, and a sharp little pop. The man beside the bed threw up both hands, as though to balance himself, then fell sprawling across the bed, arms beneath him, one foot dangling floorward.

A foot and a leg came across the window sill, followed by a man's body and the other leg. Quick, silent steps took the man to the bed where he stood looking down. He grinned.

"Dead center," he muttered. "Well, that's that."

A hand slid under the pillow, removed the automatic there, dropped it in a pocket. The man straightened, looked around. Now where would he be likely to have that stuff cached? He hoped the lug hadn't been so scared he'd put it somewhere else.

Hastily he began a search. Almost at once he found what he wanted, hidden beneath the lining of a traveling bag. He had straightened again, was stuffing papers in his pocket, and had started for the closet to see if there was anything more—though he was sure there was not—when a knock sounded on the door. It was like thunder in the silence of death in that room.

He whirled toward the window as the knock sounded again, and he heard a voice. He could not hear what was said. Scooping up the tablet on the desk as he passed—it had writing on it and probably was notes just finished—he was out the window in a flash.

He was too far down the fire-escape to hear the next knock, and a voice:

"Maid, sir! Can I make up your room?"

There came the rattle of a key, just for an instant. It stopped abruptly, as a woman's voice down the hall called sharply:

"Maid! Maid! Come here, will you? I've

got to have my room done right away. Company!"

Retreating footsteps down the hall; unheard footsteps scurrying down the fire-escape—retreating from a silent room.

* * * * *

Some of the early curtain shows were beginning to let their audience out when the Phantom stepped through the door of Myler's Chop House and headed down the street. People were thronging the streets adjacent to Broadway. Overhead the glare of Longacre Square made a rainbow of light. A new moon rode above it, like a piece of bent silver.

Van walked as far as the corner and stopped a cruising cab.

"The Hotel Pilgrim," he swiftly directed the driver.

"Right, boss."

It was located on Twenty-sixth Street, a few doors in from Fourth Avenue. Before long it loomed up, a dreary ten-story, dirty brick structure, with a modern loft building on one side and a three-story garage on the other. The Phantom knew its kind. Completely outmoded, and almost forgotten by the uptown march of business progress, the Pilgrim had had a second blooming due to the acute housing shortage that had spread across the entire nation.

Refurbished and modernized somewhat, the hostelry, like so many others that had degenerated into nothing better than flop houses, once again enjoyed a brisk transient trade.

IN THE small and overdecorated lobby, the Phantom made his way to the desk. A sleepy-eyed night clerk was doing something with a nail file. He laid it aside with a yawn and looked at the new arrival without much interest.

"Full up, mister. If it's a room you want, you're out of luck here."

"Where will I find a Mr. Caldwell, Clyde Caldwell?" the Phantom asked bluntly.

"Room Six twenty-three. He's in. Been home all evening. Expecting you, or should I give him a buzz?"

"I'll go right up," said the Phantom. "He's expecting me."

"Take this gentleman up to the sixth, Joe," the clerk called over to another somnolent character who was parked on the end of an imitation leather lounge near some potted plants.

CHAPTER V

CLUES



THE elevator in the Hotel Pilgrim remained as a monument to the past. It was the kind operated by a steel cable. A jerky, slow-rising lift, but it finally got the passengers to the proper floor.

"Straight ahead, then left," the operator yawned, closed the door, and the lift whined downward.

The Phantom went down a half-wain-scoted hall. A green carpet on which sprays of tired flowers bloomed was under his feet. The doors were painted white, numbered in black. Most of the transoms along the way were dark. When he reached number 623 a subdued glow of light showed against the frosted rectangle of glass above its door.

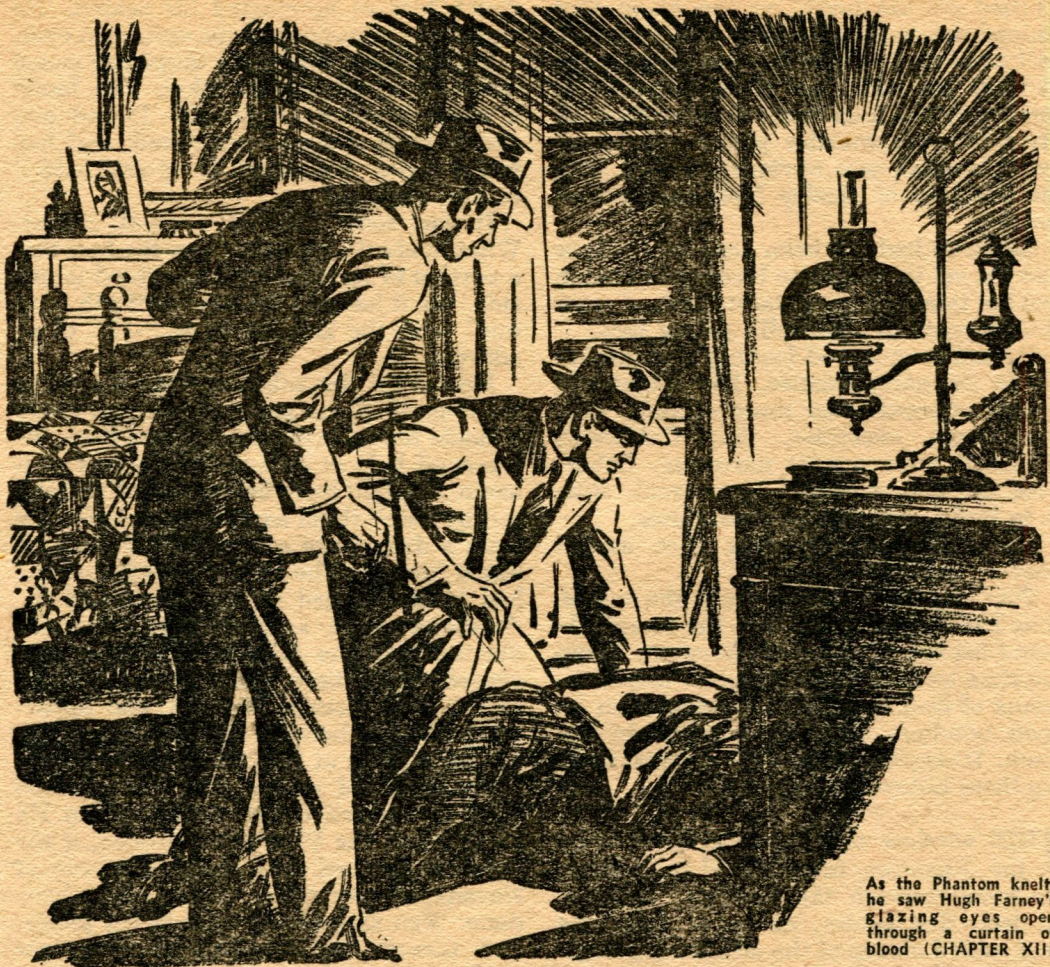
The Phantom knocked. There was no answer. He knocked again, listening. The elevator was still making its creaking descent. Somewhere at the other end of the corridor someone was coughing. Closer, the springs in a bed twanged as a sleeper turned over wearily.

The Phantom's visit to the Hotel Pilgrim was strictly on an off chance. The fact that Harley Holt had been given Caldwell's coat by mistake didn't necessarily mean too much. Errors like that were made everyday by brassy-haired check girls. Yet, in the back of his keen mind, the Phantom believed that this Clyde Caldwell might come up with some kind of an answer. He had believed that so strongly that he had remarked on it to Inspector Gregg.

The Phantom knocked again. Still no reply. The clerk had told him the man was in his room, that he hadn't gone out all evening. And the glow of light substantiated the statement.

Van's face hardened. He tried the knob of the door. It was locked. An eye to the keyhole showed him the key was in place. He straightened, reaching for his own keys.

From them he took one particular key. It was odd-shaped, long-shanked, and had some sort of delicate mechanism at either end. This was his master-key, the invention of a Viennese locksmith, one which he had obtained in Europe before the war. It was a key so ingeniously



As the Phantom knelt, he saw Hugh Farney's glazing eyes open through a curtain of blood (CHAPTER XII)

designed that no lock was proof against it.

He slipped it into the lock of the door of number 623. An adjustment on its oval handle forced the inner key out. Van heard it drop on the other side of the door. Another adjustment spread the flanges of the master-key; a turn, and the latch clicked.

The Phantom opened the door and stepped into the room.

It was a typical small, cheap hotel room. The walls were painted instead of papered. Perhaps for sanitary reasons. The color scheme was a thin green, a shade lighter than that of the corridor carpeting. One chair, upholstered in mauve velour, stood between a little walnut writing desk and the night stand next to the bed. That was double-shelved.

The top shelf held a plain brass-and-glass electric lamp with a scorched paper shade. The shelf below it supported the

telephone. That stood on top of a much thumbled directory. To the left a door opened into a small bath that had a stall shower instead of a tub. A shallow closet was between the bathroom door and the brown metal bed on which the room's occupant lay, fully dressed.

He might have been sleeping. He was half on his right side, his left arm crooked on the candlewick counterpane. His other arm was under him and one foot dangled over the edge of the bed.

But it was a deep sleep—one, the Phantom knew as he moved closer to the bed, from which Clyde Caldwell, if this were Caldwell, wouldn't awake!

The man had been shot through the throat.

Caldwell was dead! For that the man was Clyde Caldwell there could be small doubt.

The Phantom's eyes narrowed as they

focused on the body, on the blood that stained the man's blue shirt. The Phantom half nodded to himself. The idea in the back of his mind had been correct. In some way the man from Sonajo, Nevada, fitted into the murder picture. In some way his death was obviously linked with the shooting of Harley Holt earlier that evening.

Caldwell had not been dead long. Rigor had not set in, complete blood coagulation had not taken place. A faint touch of color still lingered in Caldwell's paling face.

He had been a good-looking man, probably in the early thirties. His height and weight approximated those of Holt, with the single exception that Caldwell's shoulders were a trifle narrower. Otherwise the two men had been much alike as to build and general appearance.

The Phantom's brooding eyes moved over to the door.

That had been locked from the inside. How had the killer got into the room? He found his answer the next moment. From the time he had entered he had been conscious of cool, fresh air. It came from an open window, the only window in the room. It rippled past dusty curtains, making them billow and sag.

THE window told its own story when the Phantom investigated it, putting his head through the opening. Outside, an iron fire ladder, dropping from the roof, ended on top of the adjoining garage. Anyone who wanted to enter this room without bothering to use the archaic elevator could go through the garage to its roof and help himself to the fire ladder.

Leaning out, Van looked the vicinity over, his pencil torch playing over the sill of the window and the rungs of the ladder. In its light he saw caked mud or grease on the rung nearest the window. On the sill was a smear that might have been left by the palms of hands holding it for support while feet found security on the ladder.

The Phantom closed the window and started a systematic investigation of the room. A murderer always left clues. No matter how careful, and with what finesse a killer operated, there was always some telltale bit of evidence unwittingly left behind. The Phantom's specialty was finding these slight leads, using them as a basis to make a pattern, a blueprint from which he could work.

The dead man on the bed seemed to

watch him as he started his search. He was easily conscious of the still-open eyes.

On the floor, where the taupe rug ended behind a metal waste basket, Van found a small aluminum cylinder. It had evidently been dropped unnoticed, and had rolled there. He picked it up and held it to the lamplight.

It was some kind of a nasal inhaler. What made it significant was the fact that a portion of its label still was glued to one side. On it he read the words "Sixth Avenue" with the last numbers, "-17", of an address.

He sniffed the tube, turning it over in his fingers. Some pungent odor, so sharp it made his nostrils sting, issued from the screened hole at its end. He looked at it again. It might have belonged to Caldwell, but he didn't think so. The tube had come from a drug store or apothecary shop on Sixth Avenue. The name of Sixth Avenue had been changed to the Avenue of the Americas quite a while ago. That indicated that the inhaler had been purchased some time past. And Caldwell hailed from Sonajo, Nevada, and apparently had not been in the city long, since he was a guest at this "last resort" hotel.

He could, of course, have bought the thing on a previous visit to Manhattan. He could have, the Phantom reasoned, if the man on the bed was really a native of Nevada, as any other visitor could have done. Van slipped the tube in his pocket and turned his attention to a narrow chiffonier in a corner. Enough haberdashery to fill a traveling bag was in the top and second drawers. Van looked at some shirts and handkerchiefs for some time before he finally closed the drawers and tried the closet.

A pair of rubber overshoes, an umbrella and a few suits of clothes. A cowhide traveling bag stood on the floor not far from the closet door. He picked it up and set it on the writing desk.

It looked empty, then he found double pockets in its rayon lining. Slipped into them was a thin, paper-covered volume with the title "Practical Engineering." The author's name was under that, in smaller type—"John H. Whitlock."

Van put the book down and dipped his fingers into the pockets again. They touched paper. He brought out two letters. He held them to the lamplight so he could decipher the typing made by a ribbon that had long since outlived its usefulness.

Both were addressed to Mr. Clyde Cald-

well, Frontier House, Sonajo, Nevada. And both, the Phantom saw, were from the same person. One was dated the seventeenth of the previous month. The second letter's date line was two weeks ago.

The first note read:

Dear Mr. Caldwell:

Received your letter and appreciate the fact that Harry Langley recommended you to me. Right now I am open to a proposition of your kind. If you will forward the 'data' you mention, so I can get an idea of what it is all about, I'll be glad to look it over and tell you how much I would charge to do the job. Thanking you for your inquiry, I am,

Very truly—

The signature in ink was that of a man who signed himself "Hugh Farney."

The Phantom read the second letter. Also from Farney that said:

Dear Mr. Caldwell:

Your material arrived safely and is very interesting. I should like to handle it for you. My terms would be two hundred dollars down, in advance, two hundred and fifty more when I am finished. If this is okay I would suggest you send me a check or money order so I can get to work. I also would suggest that you come to New York in the near future to go over the stuff as it shapes up.

VAN glanced at the address. It was that of a place on West Sixteenth Street. A number, Van knew, close to Ninth Avenue. He put both letters in his pocket and went on with his search.

There was apparently nothing more in the way of clues, not even in the pockets of the corpse which were surprisingly empty—no letters, no personal junk. There was nothing here for Van except a telephone number jotted down in pencil on a torn piece of paper and shoved half under the telephone on the lower shelf of the night table. Van drew it out and saw that it was the notation of a number in the Rhinelander Exchange. Under it was scribbled a name—Leslie Post.

Van helped himself to the much thumbed directory. Leslie Post appeared twice in its listings. Once, with a Fifth Avenue address and the name of his business, "The Modern Press." The other listing was Leslie Post's home, in the middle East Sixties. The Phantom added the slip of paper to what he had already found, and noted the time.

The second murder had to be reported to Homicide. Another headache for the Inspector. He unpronged the telephone,

put the call through as quickly as possible, and left the room.

The ancient elevator took him down. The sleepy desk clerk had finished with his nails and was reading a magazine. There were a couple of people in the lobby now. A flaxen-haired girl in a short fur jacket, smoking a cigarette. A man, with his back turned to the door, held a newspaper open. Van hastened through the lobby to the street.

He turned west, knowing that in a few minutes Gregg's detail would take over. Van's tight-lipped mouth relaxed a trifle. Ringing in his ears was what he had told Gregg at Headquarters, earlier: "If you don't get to Caldwell soon, somebody else will!"

Someone had!

Another block and Van's nerves telegraphed a warning. He was being tailed. Instinct, sharpened on the whetstone of long experience, told him someone was following along behind him. He had seen no one in the street when he had left the Pilgrim. His mind flashed to the man who had stood reading the paper with his back to the lobby entrance.

Whoever was dogging his steps now was no amateur in the art of shadowing. The Phantom, an expert himself, used a couple of ruses to bring his pursuer closer. Both failed. The shadower, realizing what the man ahead of him was up to, broke it off. Instead of coming on, he cut rapidly across Fourth Avenue and disappeared in the gloom of a side street out of which a taxi presently appeared, moving at slow speed.

The cab made a U turn and pulled in beside the pavement where the Phantom stood trying to decide whether to go on after his recent tail or continue according to his own plans.

"Taxi?"

The driver leaned out, half opening the cab's door. The Phantom nodded and got aboard.

He supplied the home address of the Leslie Post he had found in the telephone directory in Room 623 of the Hotel Pilgrim. The hackie pulled down the meter flag and shifted gears.

"I've got a message for you," he said over his shoulder. "From a pal of yours."

"Yes?" Van said. "What pal and what message?"

"Little guy stopped me near the corner. He pointed you out and said you'd be wanting a ride. He told me to tell you

this." The driver stopped, screwing his forehead into thought corrugations. When he went on he spaced his words slowly. "He said, 'tell him for me that he'd better stay away from this one if he wants to keep his record clean.'" Whatever that means! Maybe you know—I don't."

A thin, taut smile touched the Phantom's lips. So someone knew he was on the case! Someone knew he had been in Room 263 at the Hotel Pilgrim! Someone knew that he had found Clyde Caldwell!

CHAPTER VI

PHANTOM'S ORDERS



VAN'S brows drew together as the cab went on up the Avenue. They worked fast, this murder outfit! First, Holt in front of the Victor and then, no more than two hours later, Caldwell. But how had they figured that the Phantom had

been drawn in on it?

They might, of course, have picked the information up at the scene of the first crime. They might have heard one of the patrolmen, going through Holt's clothing, tell Inspector Gregg that Holt had Frank Havens' note in his wallet. Or they might somehow have known about Holt's appointment with the publisher for the next day. Hearing Havens' name—or even knowing about the date—would be an answer. It didn't take such an active brain to realize that Frank Havens would more than likely summon the Phantom Detective after the first shooting. It was well-known that Havens was the Phantom's only contact. And this killing was a personal matter now with Havens.

The man in the lobby of the Pilgrim had probably been a lookout for the killer, staked there to see who went up to Room Number 623, and with the idea that the Phantom *would* show up. Van could see it plainly now, glancing out of the window to see where they were.

The house before which they stopped was a private dwelling. It had a brown-stone front, old-fashioned bay windows, a smug air of respectability and wealth, not newly acquired. Van let the cab go and went up wide, well-swept front steps. He pressed a bell in a bronze plate. He opened glimmering vestibule doors to face a stout inner door that presently was unlatched by a thin, gray-haired little man

in butler's livery.

"Mr. Post," the Phantom said. "Mr. Leslie Post?"

The little man blinked. "Yes sir. But I—I'm not sure if he will see anyone at this time of night. If you will let me have your name—"

He stopped, coughing apologetically. The Phantom used the same badge he had flashed on the girl at the chop house.

"Detective Wilson from Headquarters." he said briefly.

"Yes, sir. Come in."

The butler made a light in a small reception room on the right side of the entry foyer and went up a flight of deeply carpeted stairs. The Phantom, admiring the room's appointments, heard voices upstairs. Then a door closing. Then descending footsteps.

Another minute and the man he had come to see entered the reception room.

Leslie Post was a large man. He carried his weight well, so well that it gave him the somewhat distinguished look of a prosperous, solid citizen. His brown hair was parted in the middle, brushed carefully over a thinning spot at the back of his head. He wore a blue velvet smoking jacket with long, moire lapels, striped gray trousers and black Morocco slippers. He had removed his tie for comfort and had opened his shirt at the throat. Half a cigar decorated one corner of his wide-lipped mouth. In his expression were blended surprise and annoyance.

"From Headquarters?" he said. "What can I do for you?"

"You can give me some information." Van said crisply. "About a man named Clyde Caldwell."

Post shook his head. "Never heard of him."

"He evidently heard of you." The Phantom took the torn slip of paper with Post's telephone number on it from his pocket and handed it over. "Didn't he call you tonight—or today? Or yesterday?"

The big man frowned. "This is my number," he admitted. "But I don't understand. Who is this person you're talking about, and why should he call me?"

"That," the Phantom said mildly, "is exactly what I'm here to find out. Your number on that paper was under a telephone in a room in a hotel downtown. Caldwell is in the room—dead. He was murdered a short time ago."

Post shifted the cigar. The Phantom could see that he was thinking hard. Sud-

denly his face cleared.

"Caldwell," he said. "I remember now. He telephoned my secretary this morning. He said he wanted to come and see me on what he said was an important matter that would be of extreme interest to me. Yes, that was the name all right—this Clyde Caldwell."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told my secretary to ask him to write me a letter and state his business. That I'd make an appointment—if I thought the matter warranted it. I'm a book publisher, and a busy man. That's all I know about this Clyde Caldwell."

The Phantom believed Post was telling the truth. He was satisfied the man was not holding back. With nothing more to be gained, he thanked Post and the butler let him out.

The side street into which he stepped was quiet and shadowed under the swing of the new moon overhead.

He searched the street with his eyes from corner to corner. But the man who had passed the warning to the taxi driver had not followed him to the middle Sixties.

VAN made sure of that as he went down the brownstone steps and headed toward the avenue to the west, on the lookout for the nearest telephone. He found it in a corner drugstore a block away, and a call to Frank Havens brought the publisher's Cadillac to the curb a short time later, with Havens himself at the wheel. The Phantom climbed in. Havens headed for the Park and its shadowed drives.

"What is the news?" he asked Van when they were out of the traffic and into the quiet of the Park.

Van gave him the facts concerning Clyde Caldwell. Havens turned his head quickly.

"You think young Holt's murder had something to do with Caldwell's death—or vice versa?"

"I'm sure of it," Van said positively. "They make a pattern. Caldwell came to New York from Nevada on some business he had with a man named Hugh Farney. This business in some way concerned the publishing house of Leslie Post, the Modern Press. That much is clear. Then things began to happen, things that drew young Holt in, innocently, I believe."

"You don't know what Caldwell's business was?"

"Not yet," said Van. "I expect to find out shortly. Now to go on. Caldwell had dinner at Myler's Chop House, at the same time Holt was there. The check room girl made a mistake when Holt left. She gave him the right hat but the wrong topcoat."

He stopped for a moment. Frank Havens turned his head again inquiringly.

"Holt put on the coat," he said. "The killers saw him in it and thought he was Caldwell?"

"Exactly. They were trailing Caldwell in a gray coupe. They must have been planted outside the restaurant—waiting for him to come out. They got a glimpse of Holt, who was the same size and build—the two men were much alike, even in looks, to some extent—mistook him for Caldwell, followed his taxi and shot him when he got out of it."

"What about their real victim?"

"Realizing their mistake, though just how they did it is impossible to say, since they left in such a hurry," the Phantom told Havens, "they went out after their original target. Caldwell was shot a short time after Holt was downed. That would indicate that someone must have been in the crowd in front of the Hotel Victor. Someone who had a contact with the killer and who also was present later when Holt was identified."

Havens nodded. "The contact then got in touch with the murderer," he said.

"Who went to Caldwell's room at the Pilgrim Hotel. The man must have been marked since he arrived in New York. The killer gang knew the number of his room as well as an easy means of getting in and out of it. That was via a fire ladder from the roof of the adjoining garage to the top floor of the hotel. Evidently, though, they did not intend to kill him in his room, unless the safer way on the street failed. They even had a front man in the Pilgrim's lobby. He spotted me, got suspicious, and warned me to stay clear."

Havens' heavy brows drew together. "It looks like a well-organized outfit," he said slowly.

"I believe," Van told him, "this double murder case has hidden possibilities. There's something behind it. Some motive strong and important. Unless I'm mistaken, when it's finally cracked, the clue of the second murder is going to produce some interesting disclosures which may involve others than a professional killer gang."

The Cadillac had reached the upper end of the Park. Havens turned the car, retracing their course on the West Drive.

"I talked with Durham Holt on long distance," the publisher said, after a silent moment, and his voice was flat and strained again. "It wasn't pleasant. I promised Holt that nothing would be left undone—to find his son's murderer."

"Nothing will," Van promised finally. "Caldwell's the key to the riddle. I'm sure of it. I've got to find out more about him—everything it's possible to learn. That means a quick trip out to Sonajo, Nevada. Will you get me a plane reservation for tomorrow?"

Havens said he would. He stopped the car at Columbus Circle, Van shook hands with him and, alighting near the Maine monument at 59th Street, melted into the night's shadows. . . .

AT TEN the next morning Van was in Bryant Park, in the rear of the Public library, waiting for "Chip" Dorlan and Steve Huston to put in an appearance. Both his assistants had been telephoned for two hours earlier. Both arrived at the rendezvous within a few minutes of each other.

Huston, who was a special protégé of Frank Havens, came along first. The red-headed *Clarion* reporter scanned the faces of the men sitting on the benches, as he went along. He looked at the lounging Phantom without recognition, and was about to pass when the Phantom pushed out a foot and touched his leg.

Casually, the Phantom's right hand moved up to his left ear. That registered with Huston immediately, accustomed as he was to the Phantom's many and varied disguises. And touching that ear lobe was the great detective's identification signal.

With a smothered exclamation Huston gave a reasonable facsimile of a man who had found a shady bench and had a few minutes to spare. He sat down, pulled a cigarette out of his pocket, and turned to the man sitting beside him.

"Match?"

It was a neat bit of by-play, staged for anyone who might have tailed Steve, in the hope of being led to the Phantom, and who might be watching. But the Phantom was sure that no one had them under surveillance. His sharp eyes had carefully scrutinized everyone in the Park.

Huston lighted his cigarette, shook the

match out, and opened his newspaper. Many times the Phantom had used Steve to good advantage, and Huston was eager now to know what it was this time. The reporter was valuable to the Phantom, for he had an agile mind, plenty of courage, and a lot of imagination.

"There's a matter you can check for me, Steve," the Phantom said in a low voice. "Undoubtedly you've guessed what it concerns."

"Holt's murder last night?"

Steve, Van already knew, had covered the shooting last night on the sidewalk fronting the hotel on Lexington Avenue. Steve knew all about his boss' friendship with Holt's father, that the young man from Ohio had had an appointment with Havens for that morning. He hadn't known, till now, that the Phantom was already on the case.

When the Phantom nodded, Steve felt a thrill tingle through him. The red-headed reporter always got a kick out of a chance to help the Phantom in any of his cases, and he had an added reason to be eager now—Frank Havens. Still, all the Phantom's cases promised excitement, danger and, best of all, an opportunity to come up with a front page story for the *Clarion*.

Quickly, concisely, the Phantom explained about the murder in Room 623 at the Pilgrim Hotel. Huston, of course, had already seen the flash which had been sent out from Headquarters on that killing. But he looked startled when the Phantom told him that the second of the night's murders had a straight connection with the death of Harley Holt.

The Phantom took something from his pocket, handed it over, and Steve gave it a puzzled glance. He saw that it was an aluminum cylinder, open at one end.

"What does it look like?" the Phantom asked.

"It's an inhaler." Steve glanced from the perforations at its tip to the remains of the label on its side.

"Smell it," said the Phantom.

The tube's chemical content was sharply pungent. Steve felt the lining of his nose contract when he drew in its fumes. They seemed to catch in his throat. He gulped in some fresh air quickly.

"Hot as pepper!"

"It's not an ordinary benzedrene or menthol inhaler," the Phantom said. Its principle chemical is pareolic. That is made from the bark of an aromatic Afri-

can shrub. It's used medicinally, in vapor form, for certain respiratory afflictions. I want you to find out the drug store that sold this particular tube. It must have been ordered on prescription. Not one person in a thousand would ordinarily use it.

"The drug store," Steve pointed out, "must have sold this quite a while back."

"Because of the change from Sixth Avenue to the Avenue of the Americas, yes," said the Phantom. "As well as from the fact the label is practically obliterated." He inclined his head. "But it has been filled recently, Steve. Freshly. Paracolic lasts no longer than thirty days. Circulate among the manufacturing chemists. Find out what apothecaries ordered this stuff recently. Then check with the druggist who ordered it, get all the particulars you can concerning the person who had the tube filled."

Huston said he would get busy immediately. After a few more words he got up from the bench, discarded his newspaper and walked away. He was hardly out on Forty-second Street before Chip Dorlan, swinging off a bus, came in sight.

CHAPTER VII

SONAJO

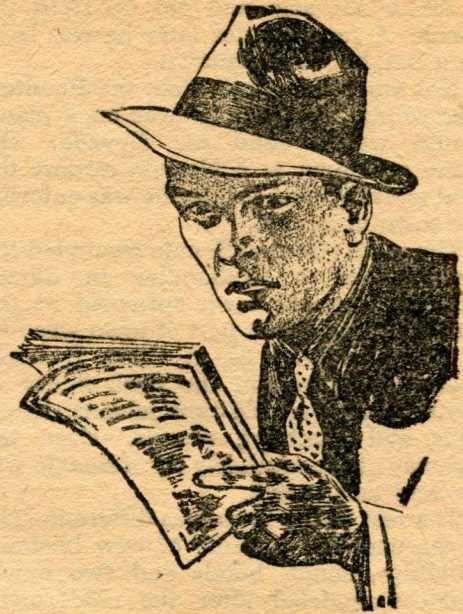


STEVE HUSTON gave Dorlan a hasty word concerning the Phantom's disguise and location of the bench where he sat. Young Dorlan nodded and headed toward it.

The other young fellow whom the Phantom used as an assistant when occasions arose was small, wiry, smart. San Francisco-born, Chip's early days in the City of the Golden Gate had been a constant battle for survival. Reared in the slums he had, at an early age, learned how to take care of himself. The fight for existence had given him a tough hide, an ability to cope with whatever problems faced him. He had a certain brand of shrewdness that was admirably adapted to the Phantom's methods of crime detection.

During the war Chip Dorlan had been with Army Intelligence. That training had left its mark. He emerged from the conflict with poise and a mind keenly tutored in the subtle art of strategy.

Chip's bright blue eyes focused on the Phantom. Like Steve, he was careful



STEVE HUSTON

about the manner of his meeting the great detective. He picked up Huston's discarded newspaper, spread it out in front of him and began to turn its pages.

"All clear?" he murmured, from behind the paper.

"So far." The Phantom put an arm on the back of the bench and watched some pigeons strut along the sunny walk. "I've got a job for you, Chip."

"Fine. What is it?"

"I want you to locate a man named Hugh Farney. His address is on Sixth Street." The Phantom supplied the number. "See Farney. Find out from him what connection he had with a man named Clyde Caldwell. Get all information possible on this Farney."

Dorlan spoke without moving his glance from the newspaper.

"There's an item right here about a murder in a hotel on Twenty-sixth Street. The victim was named Caldwell."

The Phantom made no comment to that. Instead, he said: "I'll be away for a day or two. I'd like all the information ready when I return."

"I'll have it," Dorlan promised.

Glancing at his watch, the Phantom got up. Without any further words he turned and strolled away.

Chip Dorlan watched him until he was lost in the crowd on the busy street paralleling Bryant Park.

Then Chip, folding the paper, shoved

it under his arm and got up from the bench. A few minutes later he was back on a bus, bound downtown.

Not much later than that, the Phantom was riding, also, but he was on a plane, bound west—bound for Nevada. His plane set down at a Nevada airport the next morning, and shortly he was entering the town of Sonajo.

The main street of Sonajo reminded the Phantom of a panhandler in dinner clothes. The old town sprawled at the southerly end. That part of town was like a Hollywood set for a Class B horse opera. Clustered in the drab finery of another day, were old-time saloons, dance-halls and gambling resorts. Even the highway at the southerly tip of Sonajo was cracked and rutted.

The rest of the town was different. The upper end had a quota of new business buildings, shops, hotels and two movie theaters modeled after the modernistic film palaces in the cinema's capital. That section of Sonajo, the Phantom saw, was a replica of Reno and Las Vegas.

The station wagon-bus that brought him from the airport had the words "*Delafield Inn*" gold leafed on its front door panels. There was one other passenger. A small man in a pin-striped suit and a gray felt hat. He carried two salesman's grips and from his lack of interest in the scenery had evidently been to Sonajo before.

Van Loan felt hopeful. It was from this place that Clyde Caldwell had come to Manhattan and—death. Here, unless all his calculations were in error, Van had a feeling he was to learn much. It was more than probable that Sonajo might reveal the motive for Caldwell's murder.

He had acquainted himself with the background and history of the Nevada town. Like so many other places of the kind in that state, Sonajo's claim to fame lay in its silver mines. Out of them had come some of the world's best ore. The Sonajo Rosebud and the former Crescent Silver Mine were nationally known for the fortunes that had been taken from them through the years.

TWO MEN had figured prominently in the development of Sonajo. Two brothers, Van learned, had been instrumental in rebuilding the community. Rowley and Grover Delafield, in combination with the Delafield Associates, a powerful and wealthy business combine,

had tried to give the town dignity and respect.

Owners of the Delafield Associates, the brothers had grown tremendously in power during the past decade. Their company owned mines, ranches, miles of real estate, traction companies and public utilities both in Nevada and neighboring states. From his first glance at Sonajo, Van concluded it was one of those million-dollar outfits that had put some of its money back to work for the benefit of Sonajo citizens.

The station wagon-bus deposited him in front of a sprawling building built of white cement and glass. The Inn named for the celebrated Delafield brothers, was the final word in luxury and comfort. Van, following the liveried bellboy who took his traveling bag, went across an air-conditioned lobby to a black oak desk where a clerk was waiting to greet him.

The reservation Frank Havens had made for Van, in the name of "Gray" was on the second floor, a room and bath, so new and well appointed, it might have been prepared exclusively for visiting royalty. Van tipped the bellboy and looked around approvingly. The furnishings, the view of a distant mountain range, and the cool air being pumped in met with his complete satisfaction.

Once established, he wasted no time. Leaving the hotel, his first stop was the Frontier House. It was from there that the dead Caldwell had written Hugh Farney. That hotel was off the main street, midway along the route of the old Pony Express.

It was a wooden edifice with the usual wide front porch, rocking chairs and sleepy air of leisure. Van went up the broad front steps, crossed the porch and entered a dim lobby. There was no air-conditioning plant there. Instead a couple of electric fans stirred the hot current of air. From a bar, to the left, came the sound of voices, someone chipping ice, the rattle of glassware.

Parked at the ink-stained desk, sorting a recent mail delivery, was a little white-haired man whose silver-rimmed spectacles had slipped halfway down his thin-bridged, long nose. He wore a collar a size too large, a stringy tie, and a seersucker coat that needed a laundry's attention. Van waited until he had finished riffling through the letters.

"I'd like to see the manager," he said then.

"I'm the manager," the little man told him. "Name's Bagby, Jackson Bagby. Want a room?" Rheumy eyes came up over the silver rims of the spectacles to look at Van.

"I want some information, Mr. Bagby," the Phantom said.

"Concerning what?"

"A man named Clyde Caldwell."

The rheumy eyes dropped. Bagby coughed, reached for a handkerchief, and drew it across his mouth. After a minute he said:

"Who are you, that you want information? According to what I hear, Caldwell's dead. Murdered in New York." He shook his white head.

The Phantom used the Detective Bureau badge. It had worked all right on the hat check girl at Myler's Chop House, but that had been in New York, and out here in Nevada, Jackson Bagby was not duly impressed. The rheumy eyes narrowed.

"Policeman?" He seemed to tighten up. "Sorry, I can't give you any information. Caldwell had a room here for awhile. That's about all I know of him."

"If he lived here," the Phantom said quietly, "you're able to answer a few questions."

"Such as what?" The little man sounded cagey.

"What did Caldwell do?" said the Phantom. "I mean, what was his work?"

"Didn't do nothin'—while he was here."

"How long was that?"

"Couple of months. Maybe three."

It was like pulling teeth or trying to lead a mule. But the Phantom kept at it, holding his temper carefully in leash. Past experience with stubborn, reticent witnesses had given him the knack of pounding away until he had acquired what he had set out to learn.

He changed his tactics. "I've purposely kept the name of the Frontier House out of the murder reports published in the papers," the Phantom said smoothly. "I did that because I didn't want to drag your hotel into dubious limelight."

"Meaning?" snapped Bagby.

"I didn't think it advisable to air the fact that possibly Clyde Caldwell's murder was hatched up in this hotel." The Phantom said firmly. "I'll continue to keep it out of print if you'll cooperate."

BAGBY pushed his glasses back in place. He gave the man from New York a searching stare. For a minute he

seemed to debate. Then, abruptly, he beckoned with his head and led the way past the desk and into an office.

"Sit down," he said shortly. "Take the leather chair. Springs are better."

Bagby shut the door and pulled the rod on the transom that closed it. He seemed nervous and ill at ease.

"Look, mister," he said, before the Phantom could ask another question. "I'm a law abiding citizen. I've been here in Sonajo for more than twenty years. I've seen the place grow up. I've minded my business and I've gotten along. I'm going to keep on minding it."

The Phantom said nothing. He watched Bagby shove his thin hands deep into the pockets of his seersucker coat. Gradually, Van began to get the picture. Bagby hadn't called him into his office to hand out information at all. The man had something different in mind.

"You're a policeman." Bagby tilted his head forward. "If you weren't I wouldn't have asked you in here. I'd have sent you on your way—quick. But you're the Law, and so I've got to tell you something."

"What?" the Phantom asked casually.

"I wouldn't try to get any information around here, that's what. Folks in Sonajo are tight-mouthed. This Caldwell—he goes to New York, and that's the end of him. If I was you, I'd stay in New York and do my investigating there."

The Phantom nodded. The switch was not entirely unexpected. Jackson Bagby was frightened. The man, obviously, was afraid to talk.

The Phantom got up. "In other words," he said quietly, "you can give me information, but you won't."

"I ain't saying whether I can or not."

The Phantom moved his shoulders. Bagby's nervousness gave a twitch to his lips now. He hurried to open the office door.

The Phantom's stare was cold and direct, but he said nothing further as he went past the manager of the Frontier House and on out into the hot Nevada sun.

Two more attempts at getting a line on Clyde Caldwell met with the same results. A man in the post-office froze at the mention of Caldwell's name. The desk clerk at the Delafield Inn, when he went back there a half-hour later, acted in the same manner.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, his smile growing suddenly forced and mechanical.

"But I don't know anything about a Mr. Caldwell."

"How about a man named Harry Langley?" asked the Phantom.

Langley was the name mentioned in one of the two letters the Phantom had found in Caldwell's room at the Pilgrim. Harry Langley had been the man who had recommended that Caldwell write to Hugh Farney. At the mention of the name the hotel clerk tried to look blank.

"Langley?" he said, in a puzzled tone.

The Phantom shrugged. "Citizen of this town. You must know him. Or know of him."

The clerk drew an uneven breath. "I'd suggest that you stop at the office of the *Bugle*, sir. It's possible that Mr. Thayer there might be able to help you. However, I'd consider it a favor if you didn't mention that I sent you. You—er—perhaps know how it is in a position like mine."

The Phantom nodded shortly and stalked away.

The *Sonajo Bugle* was three streets north of the Inn. It occupied another of the new white, glass-tiled buildings. Its presses rumbled rhythmically. Its outer office was well furnished in red leather, and honey-colored maple. An attractive, medium-blond girl in a cool mint-green dress gave the flicker of a smile as the Phantom stopped at her desk.

"I'd like to see Mr. Thayer," he said.

"Appointment?" She flipped back the pages in a date book and looked up at him with two smoky gray eyes.

"Police business."

Van supplied the name of Gray and watched the long-lashed eyes widen. The girl pressed a button and spoke into an audio box. Immediately she opened a rear door and the Phantom went down a wide corridor past frosted-glass enclosures where the editorial staff of the paper labored.

The last door in line was stenciled with the words:

LAWSON THAYER, EDITOR, PRIVATE.

The Phantom opened the door and stepped into a cool, square room. Chromium slatted Venetian blinds held the western sun in check. The carpet was a deep moss-maroon, matching the color of the walls, the drapes at the windows.

A man sat at a low, long desk, looking at the Phantom as he closed the door and went across to him.

CHAPTER VIII

MYSTERY—AND TERROR



LAWSON THAYER, in the late thirties, had all the appearance of a prosperous New York business man. His black hair was shot with gray at the temples. His tan linen suit was immaculate, his white shirt fresh, and his tie expensive.

He had rather close-set eyes and an enigmatic expression. His hands were well-cared for, but strong. On the smallest finger of his left hand was a star sapphire in a carved silver setting.

"Mr. Gray?" Lawson Thayer's voice was well-modulated, pleasant. "Police business?"

"In connection with the murder of Clyde Caldwell," said the Phantom.

"Oh, that. Sit down, Mr. Gray. You have credentials, naturally?"

The Phantom, always prepared for any emergency, displayed them. Thayer nodded and waited.

"For some reason," Van began, "the people in this town are hesitant about answering questions. Questions concerning Caldwell. Would you know why?"

Thayer smiled. "Native caution, probably. They don't like strangers, especially those connected with police departments of any other place."

"Who was Clyde Caldwell?" the Phantom asked bluntly.

Thayer did not answer at once, seemed to be considering his reply. He picked up an ivory cigarette holder. He rubbed his fingers along it, tipping back in his noiseless swivel chair. He brushed a speck of dust from the sleeve of his linen jacket.

Finally he lifted his eyes to the Phantom Detective.

"Caldwell was an engineer," he said. "He was with the Delafield Associates. Personally, I never knew much about him, though I work for the Delafield interests, too. They own this paper. All I know about Caldwell is that he was rather a colorless individual. I met him once or twice at anniversary banquets the company put on at the Inn."

"You don't know why he left *Sonajo*?" probed the Phantom.

"I haven't the remotest idea."

"What about a man named Langley, Harry Langley?" the Phantom asked, abruptly.

He looked for a change in Thayer's face. But except for a slight narrowing of his close-set eyes Thayer's expression did not change. The man reached for a cigarette, wedged it into the ivory holder he still held and pressed down on a silver table lighter.

"Odd that you should mention Langley," he remarked. "How did you happen to run across his name?"

"I'm asking the questions," the Phantom told him.

Thayer shrugged. "Harry Langley was one of our rewrite men," he said. "He came from Chicago, several years ago. A good newspaperman. He could have been a feature writer if he had let liquor alone."

Thayer moved his shoulders again.

The Phantom's brows drew together. "Langley still in your employ?" he asked, and Thayer shook his head.

"No. I don't know where he is. Nobody knows, exactly. He left town a couple of weeks ago." For the first time since the Phantom's arrival the newspaper editor smiled. "Disappeared without leaving any forwarding address."

The Phantom began to get up. For all of Lawson Thayer's apparent willingness to talk, Van saw he was getting nowhere. Behind the man's cooperative manner, the detective sensed some secret antagonism. The man was not nervous as Jackson Bagby had been, nor frozen like the post-office and hotel clerks, but the Phantom could plainly see that there was nothing further to be gained here by more questions.

Thanking Thayer, he let himself out of the private office and his footsteps faded down the corridor.

When the door closed behind the visitor from New York, Thayer snapped quickly into action. Reaching for one of the three telephones on his desk he dialed a number. A glance through the slats of the Venetian blind showed him that the man who had been in his office had left the building and was crossing the street.

Thayer drew a quick, sharp breath and spoke guardedly into the telephone when his call was answered.

"He just left!" he said. "He wanted information about Caldwell and—Langley!"

DESPITE the unsatisfactory talk the Phantom had had with the editor of the *Sonajo Bugle*, he had gained two slight leads. One was that Clyde Caldwell had formerly been employed by the powerful



Swiftly the Phantom grabbed Burke by the collar and eased him out of the booth
(CHAPTER XIV)

Delafield Associates. The other was, that Harry Langley, whoever he might be, and whatever he might have to do with the case, had disappeared.

In that latter bit of information, the Phantom found something that quickened his thoughts. He didn't like the news. It savored too much of Langley being paid to get out of Sonajo, or of something else that was much more cryptically sinister.

Van decided to follow his first lead. That idea took him to the large building on the corner of Imperial Avenue and Range Street, on the westerly fringe of town. There, done in the same architectural mood as the Inn, the structure that housed the vast activities of the Delafield Associates reared in the center of irrigated green lawns and banks of lush, brilliant flowers.

A crystal fountain tossed a silver ball into the air, contemptuous of the waste of water. Plate glass windows glimmered, and over the arched main entrance, done in bronze, were the words:

SUCCESS IS WORK

Marble, imported at a great expense from the hills of Vermont, was cold and hard under the Phantom's feet as he went down an immense foyer to an information window. Distantly he could hear the clatter of typewriters, other sounds of activity indicative of the wheels of business turning majestically, efficiently.

He might have been in some New York banking institution. Any place except in this rejuvenated oasis in the sun-baked silverlands of the West.

A girl looked out at him through the bronze bars of the information window. The Phantom asked for either of the Delafield brothers. He never wasted time with subordinates. It was his custom to start directly at the top.

"Which Mr. Delafield?" the girl asked. She wanted specific details. "Mr. Grover Delafield is in Europe. Mr. Rowley Delafield is in his office, but he never sees anyone without an appointment."

"Tell him that a representative of the New York Police Department is here to talk with him," the Phantom requested.

The girl looked at him with a new interest. Instead of an audio box she used a telephone. She spoke into the phone, listened a moment, then said, "Yes, Mr. Delafield. Immediately," before she hung up and pressed a button for a page.

"Show this gentleman to Mr. Delafield's

office," she directed.

A velvet-quiet elevator took the Phantom to the top floor. He stepped into an anteroom where the four walls were decorated with a panoramic map of Nevada. The Delafield holdings were pictured in scarlet paint. Mines dotted the landscape. The chimneys of industry belched smoke. The ranch lands they controlled and directed studded the plains in quantity.

A single glance at the mural map was sufficient to show the Phantom that this building he had entered was the capital of a huge empire.

The page turned him over to another employee, spoke in whispers, and Van was conducted from the anteroom to the private sanctum of one of the two men responsible for the financial kingdom he had penetrated.

Rowley Delafield's office was severely plain in comparison with the magnificence of the rest of the building. He sat slumped in a padded chair, a gross, florid-faced man with his collar open and his gray-green tropical suit spattered with cigar ashes. He had an unruly shock of coarse graying hair, a weathered, leathery-skinned face and heavy-lidded, smoldering eyes.

At some time in his career his nose had been broken. It was still a trifle off center. His mouth was small and thin-lipped. A half-smoked cigar was between his square, white teeth. He gave the impression of suppressed energy, of brains and ability housed in a tremendous body.

He got up and shook hands with the Phantom who got to the point immediately as both men sat down. This time there was no evasion. Rowley Delafield shifted his cigar and linked his hands behind his head as he listened. In answer to the Phantom's crisp question he said:

"Yes, Caldwell worked for us. For a year and eight months. He was a metallurgic engineer. At first he was all right. He did a job. Then he began to slack off. He was fired in March."

"But he continued to stay on here at Sonajo?" asked the Phantom.

"I believe so. I think I heard something to that effect. I never knew much about the man's personal life." The smoldering eyes moved around to meet the Phantom's. "Got himself killed, eh? What do you expect to find out here? A connection?"

"Yes." The Phantom spoke firmly.

"I doubt it. I doubt it very much." Delafield took a drag on his cigar. "If

Caldwell was due to be killed because of something that happened in or around Sonajo, why would he have to go to New York? If he had enemies here they would have taken care of him out here."

The Phantom shrugged. "That's all the information you can give me?" he suggested.

"Yes."

"You don't know of anyone who could supply more?"

"No." Delafield was monosyllabic.

THE Phantom thanked him, got up and left.

As he left the ornate building and passed through the landscaped grounds, the idea of the sheriff or the chief of police passed through Van's mind. He let it go. As the Phantom, he rarely made use of local police unless the matter was vitally urgent. Besides, he was reasonably certain that neither would be of much assistance to him. If anything, they would probably resent a New York detective's intrusion into their bailiwick.

Van's face hardened as he thought the matter over. Again the mystery behind the two murders reached out and touched his imagination. Now it was accented by the investigations he had made that day. He became positive that some hidden terror stalked behind the double killings. Terror that had kept Bagby silent. That had frozen the tongue of the post-office clerk, and made the clerk at the desk in the Delafield Inn hesitant and constantly cautious.

What was it? What could it be? What unknown influence had woven its sinister net around all these people? Around the whole town of Sonajo, for that matter? Why were they afraid to talk about Clyde Caldwell or Harry Langley?

The Phantom was two blocks away from the hotel when he caught a flash of color in an open sidewalk shop. He slowed, attracted by the merchandise on display. Indian handiwork, blankets, leather goods, and trays full of hand-wrought silver jewelry.

He thought of Muriel Havens. She would like a souvenir of the Phantom's Nevada trip. Muriel, of course, being Frank Havens' daughter, knew the Phantom in many of his disguises which had earned for him the sobriquet of the "Man With a Thousand Faces." She admired him tremendously but, like the rest of the world—with the exception of her own

father—she had no idea that the Phantom and Dick Van Loan were one and the same person. It would have been too fantastic.

Van smiled, with a mental vision of Muriel's bright eyes when she should receive a memento from the Phantom Detective.

He walked over to the open counters. An Indian boy with a bright, intelligent face and shining black eyes was in charge. The Phantom spoke to him pleasantly and began to look over the jewelry.

Indian lore had not been neglected when Dick Van Loan, in preparing himself for his career, had acquired his amazing store of knowledge on subjects with a world-wide range. In fact, he had spent much time in delving into the legends and facts concerning the redman.

The history of the first Americans had always fascinated him. He knew at once that this Indian boy was no Digger or flat-headed descendant of the old tribes who once had preyed on the California trail. This youth was a Piute Indian, a member of a tribe that had made rapid strides in culture and education. He was probably from the Pyramid Lake Reservation which was some twenty miles or so north of Virginia City.

While Van looked over the assortment of heavily carved bracelets other people stopped beside the counter. From the corner of his eye Van saw three shabby young men who looked like the kind of tourists who got places by thumbing rides. Two of them loitered at the end of the counter. The third stood a short distance back on the sidewalk. The Phantom's attention, apparently, was being directed toward the young Indian.

"What's your name?" Van asked the boy.

The dark eyes flashed. "White man's name Joseph Jones. Indian name, White Horse."

"I like this bracelet," the Phantom said. "I'll buy it. Please put it in a box."

"Yes, sir."

The boy reached under the counter. As he did, the Phantom's quick gaze caught a glimpse of what Chip Dorlan called a "Fagan sleight." One of the two men at the counter had picked up a silver cigarette case. Hardly moving, he passed it to his confederate who, in turn, shuffled it back to the third man on the sidewalk, the one who stood a little distance away from them.

It was an old shoplifter's trick.

CHAPTER IX

RINGED IN



HEELING around suddenly, the Phantom grabbed the third member of the trio before he could get moving. The Phantom got a wrist hold and put pressure into his grip.

The youth yelped painfully.

The Indian boy came up from behind the counter, his black eyes wide with surprise. The other two men crowded in on the Phantom.

"Hand over that cigarette case!" he demanded. "Or pay for it!"

His other hand dropped significantly in under the front of his coat. That was enough for the pair who were about to rescue their comrade. They dropped back. Another bone-cracking twist on the wrist and the would-be crook shelled out the cigarette case in a hurry.

"Get moving before I call the police!" ordered the Phantom.

The trio scrambled away and the Phantom returned the silver case to the tray from which it had been lifted. The Indian boy smiled.

"You take the bracelet," he said eagerly. "A present from me—to you!"

The Phantom laughed and shook his head.

"That isn't good business, son. Here, keep the change."

He handed over a bill and dropped the package in his pocket. With a smile for the young Indian, he sauntered on to the Inn.

In his room, a long-distance call to Inspector Gregg came up with no results. The Phantom spoke briefly with Gregg. He learned that the New York police had made no progress, no arrests. He did learn one thing. A plainclothes man had found the murder gun in a gutter on the roof of the garage adjoining the Hotel Pilgrim.

A .38 Smith and Wesson with a silencer attached.

The Phantom completed his call and, with the dinner hour approaching, began to lay his plans for that night. He wasn't through with Jackson Bagby. He believed that if he could get Bagby to talk he could learn a lot. The difficulty was in loosening the man's tongue. How could that be done?

He pulled the telephone around in front of him again. This time he called the Fron-

tier House. When he got the number it took a few minutes to have Bagby located.

"Yes?" the hotel manager's voice finally said.

"This is Gray," the Phantom said. "I spoke to you this morning—regarding Caldwell."

A pause. Van heard Bagby clear his throat. Then the man said:

"I told you I had nothing more to say, Mr. Gray. I thought that was understood."

"There's just one other matter," the Phantom told him. "I think it might be worth your while to see me tonight. What time?"

Another pause lengthened to a full minute or more.

"Make it nine o'clock." Jackson Bagby spoke slowly. "I've got a bunkhouse back of the hotel. You can't miss it. It's beyond the garages. I'll be there at nine. But don't get too hopeful. As I said, I ain't got nothing more to talk about. . . ."

After dark, Sonajo put on its incandescent glitter. The main street glowed with multi-colored lights. The heat of the day evaporated. Cool air from the mountain ranges drifted down.

Lines of customers were at the movie houses' ticket windows. Cafés and restaurants began to blossom. All kinds of vehicles, from ranch buckboards to convertible coupés of expensive make, were on the streets. Sonajo, awakening from a hot and humid afternoon, rubbed its eyes and made ready for a night of pleasure.

The Phantom, in the throng on the sidewalk, was looking forward to his appointment with Bagby. It still lacked a few minutes of nine, so there was no particular hurry. He moved along leisurely, considering his conversation with Gregg in New York. No results, no clues, no suspects. Only the gun that had killed Harley Holt and Clyde Caldwell. Gregg said he was trying to trace its ownership, but to the Phantom that meant a long and devious course.

When he reached the Frontier House he found the driveway that led to the garages and let the shadows swallow him up. It was quiet there, with the bustle and noise of the main thoroughfare only an echo. Cinders crunched under the Phantom's feet. The moon hadn't come up, a few misty stars filled the sky.

The dark, bulky outline of the garages Bagby had mentioned loomed ahead. No one was around them. The driveway ended at a cement apron, but a stumble-

stone path led off to the left, to a low, one-story building where there was a dimly lighted window.

The Phantom headed for that, appreciating the cool air in his face. There were greasewood trees on either side of the path that cast shadows. Halfway to the building the Phantom slowed.

VAGUELY he felt the crawl of his nerves. At the same moment some sensitive intuition began to telegraph a warning. In times of danger that urge, faint but persistent, had always warned him of impending peril. Eyes narrowed, the Phantom stopped altogether as he glimpsed the night-blurred figure of a man coming toward him.

"Mr. Gray?" The voice that spoke was unfamiliar. It was slow, sibilant, with a husky asthmatic slur to it.

The man came closer as the Phantom said:

"I'm Gray. Who are you?"

"Friend of Bagby," said the husky voice. "He was called back to the hotel. He asked me to meet you and keep you company until he gets back. This way." He nodded toward the shadowy bunk-house.

The Phantom didn't move.

The danger warning was ringing in his ears like a bell now. His hand slid in under his coat, reaching for his holstered gun. The man in front of him kept coming on.

The Phantom thought he was prepared for anything—but the gun he drew was not to be used. His fingers had hardly closed over its polished butt before he heard steps behind him, to the right and to the left. Faint, grass-muffled footsteps, but they were swift and certain.

"All right! Stand still, and don't make no noise! Unless you want to be riddled!"

The voice that spoke came from a point behind his left shoulder—close to the center of his back where the sudden jolt of a gun prodded him. In an instant the Phantom saw that four men had been waiting for him—four men with handkerchiefs over the lower parts of their faces and sombreros pulled low. Four armed men ringed him in!

His gun arm dropped to his side, the automatic leaving his fingers. One of the men picked it up. The gun in the Phantom's back bored harder. He was shoved forward and headed down the path toward what he now could see was a parked car in a cleared space that led out to a road beyond.

So Jackson Bagby had doublecrossed him.

The Phantom smiled grimly. Fear had struck again at the man with the white hair and the rheumy eyes. This time the fear was so complete that instead of keeping the date he had made, Bagby had communicated with the forces that had inspired his terror.

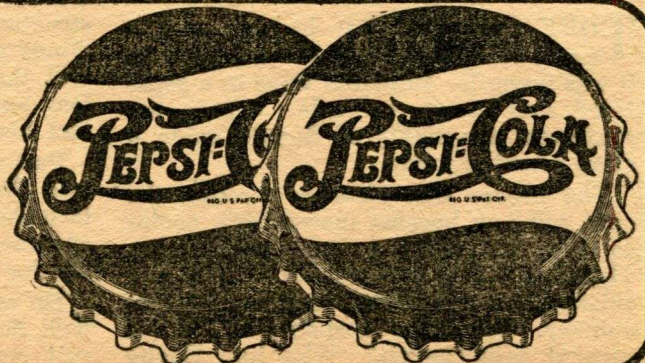
The neat way he had been trapped irritated the Phantom. A child, he scoffed to himself, would have used more caution.

It was too dark to see his captors with any clearness. He had an idea they were all characters he had not before encountered. Likely they were men who had been quickly summoned to take care of him, to check his investigation before it got under way, to clamp the lid down on whatever he had expected to learn about Caldwell in the Nevada town.

The trap told the Phantom one thing. He had not been wrong about the importance of Sonajo in the double murder plot. Here, behind the gloss of the new city and the squalor of the old, the reasons for Clyde Caldwell's death lurked in

[Turn page]

**TOPS
FOR
QUALITY!**



hiding. Here had been the beginnings of the death drama in which Caldwell had played a featured role. Here also was hidden the reason that had pointed a mistaken finger at young Harley Holt before it had leveled accurately at the man in Room 623 at the Hotel Pilgrim in New York!

The Phantom and his captors reached the car.

The man with the asthmatic voice who had spoken to the Phantom on the path climbed in under the wheel. As if rehearsed, the others did their jobs without comment or question. The Phantom was pushed through a rear door which was opened by one of the men and planted in the center of the back seat. He had hardly been pushed down on it before he had a guard on either side of him.

The doors clicked shut. The driver ground his foot down on the starter. The engine kicked over, caught, hummed. The brake slipped off and the car went forward, out on the road where it turned right.

"Feel around and see if he's got any more guns," the man at the wheel said. "Watch him. He's supposed to be tricky."

"So am I," the man on the left side of the Phantom drawled. "Specially when I've got a six-shooter handy."

Rough fingers fumbled unprofessionally around the Phantom's pockets and under his armpits. They came away empty.

"Nothin' further, Jed."

"Keep him covered," the man called Jed directed, with an odd, gasping cough.

The road was badly surfaced, full of holes. Jed had to drive slowly. The car jounced and rattled. The springs groaned in protest. Twice Jed shifted gears while the Phantom, motionless between the men beside him, watched the landscape moving by.

THEY were on what he saw was a narrow, unused road. For a mile or so it was upgrade. Boulders were in a separated line along one side. Off to the southwest the lights of Sonajo made a glare over the town.

The breeze that blew in through the open window became increasingly cooler as the car climbed, in second gear. Though the Phantom was unresistant and relaxed, his mind was working like machinery. Who was responsible for his present predicament? Who had Bagby contacted? Who had ordered him picked

up? More important, where was he being taken, and what was to happen when he arrived at his unknown destination?

The Phantom was sure of one thing. Whatever faced him would not be pleasant. The bloodstained trail of murder that had led from the Hotel Victor on Lexington Avenue to Room 623 in a Manhattan hotel on Twenty-sixth Street had crawled across the country to enmesh him in its gory coils in the West!

The road leveled off and then went downhill.

Finally the Phantom saw an accumulation of shacks in the distance. The edge of the moon was over the eastern mountain range now, flooding the landscape with a silvery glow. Shacks and abandoned pieces of machinery and rusty wire fencing began to show the Phantom where he was being taken. Ahead was one of the worked-out mines of the vicinity, a place that had yielded its wealth in ore and then, milked dry, had been abandoned for more productive property.

An ancient sign that said "Sonajo Rosebud" defied the weather atop a stake near a cleared space. Rocks lay around in quantity. The shacks, with open windows and sagging doors, emphasized the desolation of the place.

The car rolled up to one of the larger shanties and stopped. The man in the front seat next to Jed climbed out, ducked into the building, and came out with a lantern. But that was not needed. The full moon had risen higher. Its light was sufficient to show the way past the boulders and into a cavern, planked and shored up with beams.

That, the Phantom noticed, when he was ushered out of the car and gun-prodded forward, was some twenty yards or more from one of the mine's old shafts. Over the hole in the ground was the structure where an elevator had functioned at one time. Dangling steel cables told their own story. The elevator had long since been removed. Probably they had been removed to a new enterprise.

Past the adit, the prisoner was herded into the cavern. The man with the lantern hung it on a spike in from the entrance. Another man was there, waiting for them. He came toward them.

He was also masked, his big hat drawn well down over his forehead. His dark suit nondescript and unrevealing. He stood back from the lantern's shine, one

shoulder against the cavern's wall, his attitude that of slight boredom.

"Got him without trouble, Jed?" he drawled.

Jed nodded. "Walked right into it. No fuss at all."

The Phantom's glance centered on the masked man who had been waiting. Here was the man who had been responsible for the trap. His voice did not strike any responsive chord in the Phantom's mind, but it was obviously disguised. Van tried to determine from the man's build and the way he held himself if he had ever seen the fellow before. But nothing registered with him.

What did register with the Phantom was Jed himself, when the man who had driven the car moved closer to the lantern.

In the light, the Phantom recognized him immediately, in spite of the mask he wore. His build, the way he carried himself, were unmistakable. He was the man in the pin-striped suit, the man with the salesman's sample cases who had been on the station wagon-bus.

The Phantom's mouth tightened. He got the picture without trouble now, all right. This Jed had traveled with him from LaGuardia Airport to Nevada. The metropolitan branch of Killers, Ltd., must have figured out that the Phantom, after investigating Clyde Caldwell's room, would hit for Sonajo to learn there what he could. It had been easy for them to keep the New York airport under observation, to have a man ready to grab a ticket and ride west with the Phantom when he put in an appearance.

CHAPTER X

DARK HOLE



FOR THE completeness of the plot, the Phantom had a grudging approval. As he had told Frank Havens, this case promised to provide thrilling moments and interesting angles before it was cracked.

That this was one of those moments he was certain.

He didn't discount the danger of his position. He hadn't been followed almost from Coast to Coast to be dealt with gently. These men were out for blood—his blood. With the Phantom working against them they realized the odds were

in his favor. There never could be a pay-off, or a chance to escape the electric chair, with that famous detective at their heels. There was only one answer—to eliminate him.

The masked man in charge took a cigarette out of his pocket. He lifted his hand to put it through the mouth slit in his mask. For an instant his mouth was in the lamplight. Somebody struck a match for him. He inhaled deeply.

The eyes looked at the prisoner through the holes in the mask. The Phantom stared back steadily. Finally the masked man laughed under his breath.

"You were warned—in New York," he said, in that disguised voice. "You didn't take the warning. You kept on mixing in what didn't concern you."

"The murder of an innocent man concerns me deeply," the Phantom said.

"That was an accident—the Holt matter. I'm talking about Caldwell. He was also warned. Not once, but several times. He had an idea he could get away with what he planned. He didn't have a chance. Neither have you!"

The Phantom let his glance move around the faces of the men who had picked him up at the Frontier House. Their masks did not veil the types of men they were. Armed ruffians, paid to obey orders. Tough hombres who did what they were told. Swiftly the Phantom's mind grappled with the situation as he felt the jaws of the trap close tighter about him.

A minute passed. Sixty tense, dramatic seconds.

Jed drew a long, rasping asthmatic breath. His three companions, motionless as stone, waited.

The cigarette bobbed in the mask slit of the man who was in command. He was taking his time about giving the death order. Probably, the Phantom thought, he was getting some sadistic pleasure out of the delay. Some inhuman enjoyment at watching his victim sweat.

But the Phantom was not sweating. Every nerve on edge, his mind was a kaleidoscope of fast, fluent thoughts. Uncounted times he had been in situations equally as peril-filled. He had miraculously escaped them by the sheer margin of an ability to outthink and outact those attempting to finish him.

Yet he had always realized that there might come a time when someone would match his strategy. When someone would

strike fast and hard, and luck would not hold. For all of his brilliance, he was only human. He was subject to the same mistakes, the same errors that any normal person was apt to make.

Was this that time?

As he asked himself the question, the masked leader stepped away from the lantern light. His voice was low and vibrant as he whipped out his command:

"All right, get rid of him!"

The Phantom's side lunge spun him around like a revolving top. He realized that his salvation lay in quick, desperate action. The delay of a breath-take meant disaster—death for him.

He hurled out of his way the man with whom he collided. The fellow tried to get his gun hand up and shoot, but the Phantom, power-driving him off balance, made the double shots go wild.

He counted on confusion. Men trying to get at him and making it impossible for any one of them to have an open target. Another man fired at him point blank. Lead whined past the Phantom's head as he jerked it aside. It was close, but not close enough.

He struggled on, fighting off the hands that clawed at him. For one dizzy instant he thought he could make it, could break clear and get away.

The third of the quartet, a gangling individual, nipped that idea by circling around the others and coming in on him from the open side of the rocky terrain. The Phantom was struck by what felt like a brick wall. Arms went around his neck. Hands clutched at his throat. The others piled in for the kill. Blows rained down on the Phantom's head and shoulders. The white moonlight danced before his pain-stung eyes, the misty stars zigzagged.

UNDER the weight of numbers the Phantom was forced back and across the ground. The bell was ringing in his ears again. The warning bell. He sensed their intentions as he tried vainly to break loose. They were herding him toward the open mine shaft where the steel cables dangled!

Some rough wood, piled up as a protection, crashed down as they went through it. The Phantom, gripping the hands that were throttling him, fought with all of his superb strength and courage. But the effort was useless. The blows had numbed him. The preponderance of poundage, the inequality of odds,

more than any one person could have coped with successfully, were about to defeat him.

Suddenly he was on the lip of the adit. The paralyzing, gripping hands let go. Like voices in a nightmare he heard their snarled oaths, their triumphant shouts. They faced him like a pack of wolves. Under his feet, inches away, oblivion waited.

Someone lunged forward, gun lifted. It came down in a sweeping arc. A foot lashed out at the same time and the Phantom reeled backwards—into the dark hole.

Then, to make it complete, a fusillade of shots poured lead down the mine's shaft—after him!

Semi-conscious, he felt himself dropping. Feet and shoulders scraped against the concreted sides of the shaft. Through his hazy mind the last-minute impressions of one drowning whirled fantastically in review.

The killing of Harley Holt . . . the murder of Caldwell . . . Frank Haven's grief and distress . . . the warning passed along by the taxi driver . . . the man in the pinstriped blue suit . . . the fear that gripped those he had talked with about Clyde Caldwell . . . Rowley Delafield, hands linked behind his huge head, cigar between his large, square teeth.

Recollections blotted out. . . .

A long time passed. Then life began to return, with the Phantom's waking brain. He lay still, acutely conscious of the cold that seemed to draw a damp, clammy blanket up and over him, but conscious of little else.

He felt like ice. He moved slowly, drawing up a stiff left arm. The arm functioned, but a stab of pain went through it at the shoulder. He moved his other hand and found that the padding of his jacket was wet with a sticky substance he knew was blood. He probed around with his fingers. A bullet must have seared him. That wound had not been made by scraping his shoulder along the concrete lining of the shaft. And the material of his coat above the wound hadn't been rubbed away.

His throat was dry and parched. There was a taste in his mouth as if he had swallowed dust. Some of the thick layer of rock dust into which he had plummeted and which undoubtedly had saved his life. Feet deep, the accumulation of years, the heavy dust lay piled in soft,

snowlike drifts.

His next thought was the condition of his legs. One at a time he bent them at the knee, pushed them up and out. They were not broken; they were not injured. Relief whipped through him when he finished the test. It was something to know that at least he could walk.

Slowly, but surely, his mind cleared completely. The last of the painful fog clouding it lifted. The Phantom sat up. He searched his pockets. His pencil torch was intact and worked. A touch of the button switched on the beam and the light, sweeping around, showed him the place into which he had tumbled.

Rusty, single-gauge tracks were a little



CHIP DORLAN

distance away, curving off and losing themselves in the total black of a tunnel beyond. Rotting timbers shored up the tunnel's roof. The sides glistened with mold and ran wet with the water of hidden springs. It was this moisture, combined with the chill of the underground passage, that brought the dank, clammy cold to the dark hole.

The Phantom pulled off his coat and examined his shoulder. Lead had furrowed it, as he had suspected. Fortunately, the slug had not lodged there. It had made a groove and gone on out. He had bled a lot, and scarlet ooze was still

seeping from the wound. Van made a compress of his handkerchief, put on his coat and stared up the shaft.

Far above he saw the night blue of the sky.

He marveled at the luck that had dropped him that distance without leaving him bruised and battered, if not dead. But logic told him that death still stood grinning at his elbow. Here, far below the surface of the earth in an abandoned, worked-out mine, there seemed little chance of escape.

He drew a deep breath, the cold air like a tonic in his lungs. The odds remained against him, but he was alive! He had a chance for survival, no matter how small. And all the Phantom ever asked was a chance.

THE tunnel faced him, stretching into velvety blackness. He took two steps forward, the beam of his flash directed at the ground. Then he stopped abruptly, something tingling along the length of his spine. A chill, inspired by what he saw, rather than by the ice-cold of the mine's maw, lanced through him.

He was not alone!

A dozen yards away, a man lay sprawled face-down, half across the rusting rails. A man, the Phantom saw when he went closer, who had been dead for some time. The temperature of the place, like that in a morgue, had kept the body in a state of good preservation. Though death had come days, or weeks, before, the man lay there as if he had been struck down only minutes past.

The Phantom's torch moved slowly over the dead body.

Brown hair, a tanned face, even with the pallor of death on it, a wrinkled linen suit and black shoes. There was no stain of blood on the linen anywhere. The Phantom investigated further. The lolling position of the head was significant. He made his post mortem in the next elapsing seconds.

This man had died of a broken neck and a fractured skull. Marks along the side of his jacket and trousers told the Phantom that they had been scraped and torn on the sides of the shaft. This man had taken the downward plunge, missing the blanketing dust layers by a few scant feet. He had died instantly.

Grimly, the Phantom studied the tanned face. Who had this man been? Van's mind, working like machinery

again, began to find an answer. To verify it he searched the pockets of the linen coat. A bunch of keys, a box of cigarettes, matches. He tried the inside pocket. That held only an advertising circular for one of the Sonajo movie houses, supplying the dates and titles of coming attractions. The dates, the Phantom read, were two weeks past.

He had better luck with the left hip pocket in the trousers. That produced a pigskin wallet. The wallet was faced with cellophane inside, a window over the man's driving license. In the light of the flash the Phantom read his name and address:

HARRY LANGLEY
10 Trail Avenue
Sonajo, Nev.

The missing Langley!

Van had suspected as much. His eyes narrowed. Langley had been taken care of because of his contact with Caldwell. That much was apparent. Langley knew something and had had to be silenced.

What? Just what had he known?

The Phantom stared down at the still, dead body. For one thing, Langley had known why Clyde Caldwell had gone to New York. Langley had suggested that Caldwell write to a man named Hugh Farney who lived on Sixteenth Street in New York. Langley must have known the secret that was the cause of the double murders in Manhattan.

But Harry Langley would never reveal it now!

There was nothing more about Langley's person to interest the Phantom. He put the man's pigskin wallet in his own pocket and straightened. A sardonic thought that Langley was better off than he was himself crossed his mind. Langley had died immediately, without knowing the lingering despair brought on by slow starvation. He had known nothing of the madness and terror of passing hours that brought nothing except the drip of water, the fresh currents of the icy underground air.

The Phantom started down the tunnel.

CHAPTER XI

PIUTE CODE



EXPLAINING pick pockmarks in the walls, further in where the shaft leveled off and a vein had been followed, were heaps of ore. A miner's rusty lunch box, corroded, held half a loaf of green-molded bread. Even rats, Van thought, shunned the cold confines of the place.

He kept walking, dodging the stones and pools of water along the way. Once or twice he stopped and examined his shoulder wound. The compress had stopped the bleeding, and he was getting coagulation.

The wound worried him, however, though he didn't know why it should, with more important matters facing him. His knowledge of ballistics, therapy and medicine, told him it might become infected unless cauterized, naturally. But that was hardly as vital as the problem he must solve. The way out—the way back to the surface of the earth.

Was there a way?

The hope he had felt when he had first returned to consciousness and found himself alive began to dwindle as he walked on and on. The masked leader who had arranged the trap would hardly have been satisfied to have him pitched down the shaft and left, had he thought there was the slightest chance of the Phantom surviving. If he had thought that for a minute, the Phantom would have been killed up above.

The tunnel ended at a rock ledge, after twisting and sloping sharply left. Some of the timber shoring there had buckled. It wouldn't be long before the roof caved in, the walls collapsed. Van found himself face to face with rock. It was all around him on three sides, making a prison he could never hope to leave. He let the torch beam play over the stone enclosure, his heart sinking. This, at last, he told himself, must be the final chapter in his case book!

He was turning away when he heard something which brought him to a sharp halt.

It came as a faint, faraway echo—a voice calling eerily off to the right. The Phantom swung around, a rush of blood pounding in his temples. He shouted back. His voice sounded husky and

Next Issue's Novel

THE PHANTOM in THE DIAMOND KILLERS

By Robert Wallace

cracked. He tried again. This time he had control of his vocal cords, and his voice was full and clear, filling the tunnel with its echoes.

Minutes passed. No further sounds broke the somber silence. It was absolute. Then somewhere down the tunnel, Van heard a pounding. He put himself in motion. He stumbled back along the tunnel's twisting trail, the rusty tracks guiding him in the dance of his flash.

A hundred yards away from where Harry Langley lay, he saw an opening begin to appear in the tunnel's wall. A heavy board door, which had been made so it looked like part of the siding, was beginning to swing in. Two hands gripped its edges, tugging at it.

To the Phantom the hands and the opening being made was a sight more gratifying than any he had ever beheld!

He put his good shoulder to work and the opening widened. Another clamorous pulse beat and in the torchlight he saw a familiar face. A brown, Indian face set with shining black eyes that looked at him with relief and wonder. The wonder was there, the Phantom knew, because he was still alive, was standing on his feet, helping to make the aperture.

It was the Indian boy of the street shop. Joseph Jones, to give him his white man's name. White Horse as the Piutes called him!

His hand gripped the Phantom's arm as if to make sure he was seeing no ghost. The boy shivered in the cold rush of air pouring through the opening he had made.

"You all right?" he said hastily, eagerly. "You follow me. I know the way out."

The Phantom needed no second invitation. He handed his flashlight to the boy and hastened along after him and through a narrow cut that rose steeply to another level in the mine. They reached that via a shaky wooden ladder, young White Horse explaining as he went along.

His story was brief. He had gone to the Frontier House to deliver a pair of blankets to a purchaser staying there. While he waited his quick ears had heard Jackson Bagby talking in the office back of the desk. Bagby had been describing the Phantom in detail to some man. The description, Van's guide said, was so exact that he remembered his customer of that afternoon. He had heard other things, too, while he had listened. He had caught a mention of the plot to pick up the

Phantom at the bunkhouse, and the hour the Phantom would be there.

"So," White Horse concluded, "I came, too. I left my car down the road. I gave them lots of time. They passed me when they took you away, but they didn't see me. I knew they were going to the mine. I went along—to see, what they would do. I thought you were dead."

"I had a notion I was going to be—soon," said the Phantom.

THE level shelved off in a rising series of stages. Midway along the last of them the Phantom saw the night sky again. This time it came through an oblong opening, past rocks and underbrush and decaying wood through which the Indian had burrowed.

Van squeezed out of the opening and found himself among thick trees on the side of one of the hills. Down below an ancient flivver, without a top, stood parked in a clearing.

"Tonight," he said to the young Indian, as he stood beside White Horse, "you have earned yourself a college course—anything you want!"

The shining eyes lifted to his. White Horse laughed under his breath.

"Tonight I have repaid a debt," he answered. "You helped me. A Piute does not forget. My father would not call me his son if I did not help *you* in your trouble!"

With the Phantom beside him in the flivver, he started the car and headed back for Sonajo. . . .

At the Delafield Inn, the hotel doctor took a look at the Phantom's shoulder wound. He cleaned, dressed and bandaged it, frankly curious.

"How did this happen?" he asked, when he was half through his work.

The Phantom smiled thinly. "Some of your citizens—at target practise," he drawled. "My shoulder just happened to get in the way."

The doctor frowned, but didn't ask any more questions. The Phantom could see that he was a man who knew when to stop.

When the doctor was gone, Van stretched out on the bed, the furrow in his arm aching dully. The closeness of his escape from the cold dark of the mine seemed more a miracle now than when he had first heard the Indian boy's signal.

Lying there in the dark, with stars painting his windows with silver, Van

went back over the events of the evening. He checked them in order, his mind crossing them off one by one. After all, he decided, his air trip to Nevada had not been entirely wasted. In spite of the fear that gripped those who had known Clyde Caldwell, and the wall of silence they had built, he had learned one or two things of paramount importance to this case. They were filed neatly in his mind before he dropped off to sleep. . . .

Eleven o'clock the next morning found the Phantom back at the office of the Sonajo Bugle. The blond girl with the smoky gray eyes gave him a look of surprise as he went in. But the Phantom didn't request an audience with Lawson Thayer this time. Instead of stopping at her desk, he kept on going.

"Just a minute, please!" The girl jumped up. "Mr. Thayer's busy—on long distance!"

The Phantom, without turning his head, and as if he had not heard, opened the door and went down the aisle of glassed-in offices. The blonde went as far as the first office before she stopped and, with a helpless shrug, watched the caller enter the editor's office.

As she had said, Lawson Thayer was engaged in a telephone conversation. He was twisted half around, his back to the door. The Phantom closed that quietly.

Thayer was saying, "—all taken care of. Definitely! I can give you a guarantee he won't trouble you again. He—"

"Maybe you'd better be careful about what kind of guarantee you give," the Phantom said slowly.

Lawson Thayer's head jerked up. The swivel chair creaked as he swung around in it. He held the telephone rigid, peering at the man in his office with blank, astonished eyes. Out of the telephone, a faint voice crackled:

"Are you there? I can't hear you. Talk louder!"

The Phantom stood motionless. A minute passed. Sixty tense, silent seconds. Unsteadily, the man in the swivel chair dropped the telephone back on its cradle.

With an effort he forced what was intended for a smile. Color began to return to his face. He made a show of covering his surprise and dismay with the attitude of a man slightly annoyed by a visitor who had not been announced.

"I'm not accustomed to having people barge in here, Mr. Gray," he said coldly. "How did you get past Miss Sawyer? She

has definite instructions about callers."

The Phantom walked over to the desk. "Just what kind of a guarantee were you giving when I interrupted your call, Thayer?"

"I don't understand what you mean," Thayer said curtly.

"Would it have to do with a person thrown down a shaft in an abandoned mine?" The Phantom spoke slowly, spacing his words carefully.

LAWSON THAYER drew back in his chair. He reached for a cigarette, making an attempt to keep his hands steady and his manner nonchalant.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he repeated. "What do you want? What's the idea of forcing your way in here?"

"I want to show you something, Thayer. This!"

The Phantom reached in his pocket. He laid a pigskin wallet on the desk in front of the man who peered at it, brows drawn together.

"What's that?" snapped the editor.

"Harry Langley's billfold," the Phantom said coldly. "If you'll open it you'll see his driver's license. I got it last night from Langley—at the bottom of the shaft in the Rosebud mine!"

Thayer's fingers dropped the cigarette. He coughed nervously in the back of his throat, as he reached to pick up the cigarette. When his gaze lifted, the Phantom saw that the man was going to try to bluff it out.

"This is fantastic!" Thayer said angrily. "I don't get any part of it. You talking about Langley in a mine shaft. It's absurd. Why do you come here and tell me? Why not tell the police? I have nothing to do with this. I gave you all the information I have."

"You gave me something else." The Phantom's voice was like polished steel. "The order for my death—last night!"

"Ridiculous! You must be crazy. What proof have you of such a libelous charge?"

"That ring you're wearing. The mask covered your face, you disguised your voice perfectly, but you made one serious mistake, Thayer. You should have worn gloves. When you put that cigarette in your mouth you lifted your hand. I saw the ring in the lantern light—your ring!"

The hunted look that crept into Lawson Thayer's expression quickly gave way to

CHAPTER XII

WEB OF MURDER

one of furtive cunning. Suddenly the tension seemed to go out of him. He relaxed in his desk chair. He began to laugh, under his breath.

"Do you suppose anyone would believe a story like that?" he taunted. "There are hundreds of rings like this in Nevada. You say that I was masked, that I gave an order for your death. This happened last night. For your information, I happen to have an alibi for every hour from the time I left this office until I went to bed."

"You would," the Phantom said coldly. He retrieved Langley's wallet from the desk and slipped it carefully back in his pocket.

"I could take this to the State Attorney," he remarked. "But I don't do business that way. I handle my cases in my own unorthodox manner. So far, Mr. Thayer, the score is one up—for you. It has been your round. But don't take too much satisfaction from it. I'm a difficult person to get rid of. I know you're involved in Langley's murder, which means you have a tie-in with the two killings in New York. Before this case is closed you're going to find yourself being held on suspicion of murder! You're going to be ready for the gas chamber!"

The Phantom turned and went to the office door. He left Thayer bent forward peering after him.

When the door closed, the editor of the *Sonajo Bugle* pressed a trembling hand across his face. The color was ebbing again, leaving it chalky, drawn and terror-filled.

It took him a long two minutes to get enough control to pick up the telephone beside him.

"Clara," he said, slurring his voice to cover his nervousness and agitation, "has—has that man—that Mr. Gray gone?"

"Yes, sir. He just left."

"Then get me New York again. The same number I had. I—I was cut off."

Out in the foyer, where he had stopped, the Phantom listened while the blonde girl in the mint green dress got the local operator and through her gave long distance a telephone call number in faraway Manhattan. The Phantom memorized the number before he quietly let himself out of the building and crossed the hot, sunny street.

He had done all he could here, at least for the time being, he decided. Next stop—New York again.



BACK in New York, Van Loan's first objective was Frank Havens' office in the Clarion Building. There he learned that there were no new developments in the Holt-Caldwell slayings. Homicide, so Havens explained, admitted it

had drawn a blank so far.

"Gregg was unable to trace the murder gun." The publisher shook his gray head. "He's frank in saying that he's got nowhere, that maybe he won't get anywhere until you put him on the right track."

Dick Van Loan, rested after his flight east from Sonajo, crossed his long legs. The flesh crease made by the bullet had lost its ache, but his shoulder was still stiff. He frowned as he met Havens' glance.

"This," he also admitted frankly, "is one of the most difficult cases I've yet tackled, Mr. Havens. From the first I suspected that the mystery behind it was different, more subtle and sinister than the usual run of such puzzles. Now I know. Someone with brains is directing a powerful force. A force of paid killers. There is a ruthlessness to it that smacks of desperation. Whatever the motive, it is so strong that to keep it hidden is worth any risk, any gamble."

"You don't know what that motive is?" asked the publisher.

Van shook his head. "Not yet. I'm sure, though, that Hugh Farney represents part of the answer. The New York part."

"When do you expect to see this Farney?" Havens asked.

"Immediately. I had Chip check on him. By this time, the results must be in. I want both Steve and Dorlan at the Green Spot within the next hour."

"I'll speak to Huston at once," Havens told him.

In an hour meant eleven-thirty.

The Green Spot, a Times Square tavern, used frequently by Van as a meeting place with his assistants, held its quota of before-noon tipplers when he stepped in. The place offered the advantage of a rear, table-filled room where conversation was possible without risking the danger of listening ears.

The back room was seldom used before

late afternoon or evening by anyone except bookmakers, busy in a rear telephone booth. And they were so concerned with their own financial operations that they paid little or no attention to Van's presence.

He had hardly seated himself and ordered his usual innocuous lime and soda, before the red-headed Steve Huston glided in.

Huston shook hands with him and pulled a chair around beside the Phantom.

"I've got some news—on the inhaler," he informed. "It was quite a tussle, digging up a lead. I finally got it from the Belmont Chemical Works. They have an office on Lafayette Street. They are one of two concerns that import the pareolic bark. They compound it and sell it to druggists and hospitals."

The Phantom nodded. "What's it used for when contained in an inhaler?"

"Principally as a relief for asthma. It's used by those whose asthmatic condition is in an advanced state. I followed through and found the drug store the tube you gave me came from, after the chemical outfit supplied me with addresses. It's the Richardson Drug Store on Forty-ninth, on the corner of what was formerly Sixth Avenue. Now the Avenue of the Americas."

"What did you find out there?" asked the Phantom.

"The tube's an oldie. Sold sometime ago to a party named J. C. Burke, Hotel Glenmore, Forty-third, near Broadway. Right around the corner from here. Burke hasn't lived there for more than a year. But I got a description of him from a porter who remembered him."

Steve rattled it off. As the Phantom had expected, from the moment the reporter had mentioned the word "asthma," the word picture furnished was a perfect fit for the man in the pin-striped blue suit he had seen in Nevada, the man called "Jed".

"Good work." The Phantom spoke approvingly. "I know Mr. Burke. I've already met him." While Huston stared, the Phantom added: "One further thing, Steve. A telephone number this time. Write it down and find out whose it is and where it is. Do this as soon as possible. It's of the utmost importance."

Huston scribbled the number and left for the telephone company offices. Chip Dorlan came along a few minutes later.

Van had spaced the time so he could take Steve and Chip in turn.

YOUNG DORLAN shook hands with the Phantom and dropped into the same seat Steve had vacated.

"I've got the dope on Farney," he said at once. "He's a middle-aged man. Hack writer, doing mostly ghost stuff. Strictly down on his luck and hard up. Room rent in arrears four weeks, according to the dame who runs the Sixteenth Street lodging house."

"You saw Farney?" asked the Phantom.

"Yes. I had a talk with him. Told him I knew somebody who might give him a writing job. I didn't know exactly when you'd be back, so I couldn't make a definite appointment. However, Farney told me he's in his room every night at nine o'clock."

"We'll see him tonight," the Phantom said promptly.

A few more words and they left the Green Spot together. The Phantom dropped Chip off at Columbus Circle and let the taxi take him to Park Avenue. He alighted two streets away from his apartment, made sure the coast was clear and, going around to the rear of the building, went up to his sky-high suite, via his private entrance and elevator.

The silver bracelet he had bought for Muriel Havens was in his kit bag. He took it out and laid it on an old cherry desk in his living room. A mental picture of White Horse, the Indian boy, came to his mind. He made a note to have Havens communicate with the authorities at the Pyramid Lake Reservation and arrange a suitable reward for the lad with the shining black eyes.

He found a plain card in the desk. On that he wrote "For Muriel" and signed it with a symbol. That symbol was a miniature domino mask, blacked in with ink. Later, a messenger would deliver the box to Muriel. There was no possible way for her to know that it was really Dick Van Loan, in his other rôle, who had sent her the gift.

Van threw himself down in an easy chair to rest and think and plan. The idea of seeing Farney that night gave him something to look forward to. As he had told Havens, the man he now knew to be a hack writer was a key piece in the jumbled riddle he was unraveling. Van had been certain from the first that when

Farney talked, he would reveal what was needed in order for the Phantom to delve deeper into the web of murder.

Van was sure he now had the diagram laid out accurately. Clyde Caldwell had come to New York to see Farney on a secret matter. That matter concerned some literary endeavor on Caldwell's part. In other words, Caldwell had been about to hire Hugh Farney to do some writing for him. And that writing, whatever it was, had been aimed at the Modern Press, belonging to Leslie Post.

Hidden forces, knowing of Caldwell's plans, had struck before he could put them into effect. To the Phantom, since his visit to Nevada and the general knowledge he had gained of the general setup of the conspirators, this was more than apparent. The unfortunate Harry Langley undoubtedly had let drop the reason for Caldwell's trip across the continent. Probably Langley had been taken out to the Rosebud, pumped dry of all the information he had, and then tossed down the shaft.

Somewhere in the same twisted maze, Lawson Thayer played a principal part. The fact the editor of the Sonajo Bugle was mixed in, and to such an extent that he had used a mask and a disguised voice, hinted that an important group of people were behind the killings. This case was no gang feud. No shoot-and-run affair with underworld characters doing the top work.

From the first the Phantom had been struck by the care with which the plot had been prepared and carried out. The bungle of Harley Holt's murder had been rectified almost immediately, and with swift finesse. The manner in which Van had been followed almost continually, and the fact that it had been quickly learned that the Phantom was interested in the

killings, hinted of well-organized leadership. And the blanket of fear muffling those he had tried to interview in the mining town more than substantiated the idea of secret, relentless forces.

The long afternoon turned to twilight as Van Loan took the opportunity for relaxing rest. At eight-thirty the Phantom was ready to begin his night's adventures. Leaving his suite, he walked to the garage where he kept his cars. These super-powered beauties, built and engineered to his own specifications, were always kept ready for immediate use. The garage owner was of the private opinion that they were the property of a secret service man, but he was well-paid for servicing the cars and caring for them, and asked no questions.

Van selected a club coupé, and touched the starter button. In moments he was on the street, gliding through traffic.

Under the long hood of the coupe, multi-cylinders whispered. Bullet-proof steel and glass enclosed him. He was well-prepared to fend off attack as he turned east in the middle Forties and eased over to the curb.

CHIP DORLAN, waiting on a corner there, opened the door and got in beside him.

They continued south for a dozen or more streets, then headed west, crossing avenues until they reached Twenty-third Street. There the Phantom turned into Fifth Avenue for a few blocks and finally pulled into Sixteenth Street almost exactly as the illuminated hands on the dashboard clock pointed to nine.

"Middle of the block," Chip Dorlan murmured.

"I'll park around the corner," the Phantom said, and the big black car began to

[Turn page]



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slow. "Drop off here, Chip. Make sure the street's clear. We weren't followed, but they might have a plant on hand here."

Dorlan nodded and followed orders. The Phantom found space on Ninth Avenue, parked, locked the car and, with watchful eyes, went back to where Chip Dorlan was waiting.

"Nobody on deck," Chip informed.

The house to which he led the Phantom was on the north side of the street. It was a four-story red brick building with long Victorian windows on the first floor. Ivy, growing up from the areaway, reached above the front door, clinging to the bricks below the second-floor windows. An iron hand-rail was on either side of steep brownstone steps. The sign "Vacancy" which before the war had been so prominent in lodging houses of the kind, was no longer on display. Rooms, like apartments in the crowded city, were at a premium.

Chip thumbed the front door bell. A minute or two passed. Then in the blue-glass glow of an entry hall lamp, a stout, apple-cheeked woman smiled out at them.

"Oh, it's Mr. Dorlan," she greeted.

"With a friend, Mrs. Symond." Chip made the introduction smoothly. "This is Mr. Gray. Mrs. Symond runs this place, Gray. Does a mighty nice job, too. Neat as a pin."

The apple cheeks dimpled. The woman smiled broadly, pleased by Chip's stamp of approval.

"I always try to make my guests comfortable," she admitted modestly. "Won't you come in? I suppose it's Mr. Farney you've come to see."

"Right. He's in?"

Mrs. Symond nodded. "He's been in since seven. You can go right up."

Dorlan thanked her and started up the stairs, the Phantom behind him.

"Long climb," Chip said over his shoulder. "Top floor—rear. Three flights."

Some of the rooms on the landings they passed were occupied by the lodgers. But most of them, Van observed, were empty. People were out trying to snatch a little pleasure after a long day in office or factory.

The stairs were carpeted to the second landing. From there to the top and last floor, the steps were covered with rubber treads. Overhead in the center of the last landing, Van saw a skylight. A narrow, slender-barred iron ladder was attached

to the wall below it, evidently a Fire Department regulation for rooming houses. Or, possibly this was Mrs. Symond's own way of making the roof available to her tenants when summer nights were hot.

The Phantom gave the skylight and ladder a sharp second glance as Chip Dorlan stopped before a door where a pencilling of light showed at the sills. It was the only one of four doors along the landing that showed illumination.

Chip knocked quietly. The Phantom, beside him, felt the quickening beat of his pulses. A few feet away now was a man who could, with a few words, clear up the motive for the murders that had so completely baffled Gregg and Homicide.

Chip knocked again when there was no answer.

"Funny," he said. "I don't hear a sound inside, and—" He stopped, cutting off what he was about to add.

The Phantom was reaching around him. Van's hand closed over the china knob. He turned it and pushed. The door opened, light gushed from a green-shaded student's lamp on a writing table and momentarily dazzled them.

Though one window was opened a trifle at the top, the room was warm and the Phantom was conscious of a stuffy smell. Closing the door behind him, he stiffened to stone. He heard Chip's sibilant breath intake, saw the light shining on a neatly made bed with a patchwork quilt covering it from headboard to footboard, saw Farney's typewriter on the table, a couple of chairs, a pine chest of drawers with a mirror over it, a wardrobe closet and a washstand behind a five-foot tapestry screen.

THOSE things impressed themselves on the Phantom as his gaze riveted on Hugh Farney, thin, gray-haired, shabbily dressed in a worn brown suit.

The man was crumpled near a corner. He had evidently tried to crawl to the door, had found the effort too much and had collapsed when he was a few feet away from it. The man the Phantom had come to see had been brutally sapped!

His face was a welter of blood. His collar, shirt and coat were stained with crimson. Whoever had attacked him had done a thorough job. So complete, the Phantom saw instantly, that Hugh Farney had been left for dead.

But he wasn't quite dead. As the Phantom hurried to him he saw the spasmodic

twitch of thin, nicotine-stained fingers. He heard a choking, gulping gasp. He saw glazing eyes open through the crimson curtain of blood around them.

"Farney!" the Phantom said quickly. "Who did this? *Why!*"

Bending over the man, he peered into Farney's unseeing eyes. For a watch tick he thought he was too late. He feared that this man had already reached the end of the road, that from him he was never to learn what he had come to hear, and that the man's own death would go unavenged.

Then Farney's lips moved. With what the Phantom knew was a great effort, snatched out of the few fleeting heartbeats left to him, he choked out agonized words:

"Get—Loro! Rex—Ford! She knows—"

A tremor shook him. The words ended in a gurgle. The cigarette-yellowed fingers stopped their slow-twitching and relaxed.

The web of murder had claimed another victim!

CHAPTER XIII

THE PALMS



CHIP DORLAN, tense and silent, seemed stunned by the new turn of events. He watched the Phantom straighten and step away from Farney's lifeless figure. He saw the Phantom's face, grim and serious, in the shine of the student's lamp.

Chip pulled himself together. "Too late?" he said softly.

"Almost." The Phantom shook his head. "You heard what he said. 'Loro. Rex. Ford.'"

"He was trying to name the ones responsible." Dorlan drew a hard breath. "Looks like a blackjack job. The devils!"

"It was. A sap handled by somebody with plenty of power. Not a neat, but an effective application. Let's see how the murderer got in here."

The Phantom opened the door. No use to cover the knob. His own prints, when he had shut it, had overlaid any that had been left on it by the blackjack specialist if he had not worn gloves—or taken the precaution of wiping them away.

The roof's scuttle ladder claimed the Phantom's attention. He examined the

rungs and side pieces with his pencil flash. He went up the rungs one at a time, finding nothing until he reached the skylight. There, close to the hand supports that raised the ladder, he found a telltale red smear. He tipped the scuttle. It opened easily, on counter-weighted springs.

The eye of the torch moved over the graveled expanse of the rooftop. Iron poles, that held awnings, were set at each corner. The chimney was toward the rear and brick walls separated the roof of Mrs. Symond's house from those on either side of it.

It was impossible to tell which way the killer had made his exit—by the east or the west wall. The Phantom examined both walls without result. Farney had been taken care of and the sap artist had got away safely.

A search of the roof produced nothing, and the Phantom went back to the room where the student's lamp glowed. Dorlan had been examining the room, using his wartime training in a search for clues. He shook his head as his companion joined him.

"Not a thing."

"We'll have to hand this to the Inspector," the Phantom said. "One more puzzler for him to worry about. Will you call him? And see that Steve gets an advance tip-off on this killing. I want to talk to Mrs. Symond."

The Phantom found Mrs. Symond in her quarters on the first floor. He broke the news as gently as he could. She seemed unable to grasp it, to realize exactly what he was saying.

"Mr. Farney—killed—*murdered!*" she choked.

The Phantom thought she was about to faint. Instead, she slumped into a chair and sat there apathetically twisting her plump hands together. Under her breath she kept mumbling:

"My good name! My reputation! Twenty-eight years with no trouble! I'll have to sell and move! No one will want to rent a room in a house where there's been a murder!"

He tried to question her, but with little success. She shook her head when he spoke, dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief. Chip Dorlan came down the stairs after a few more minutes and the Phantom turned the handling of Mrs. Symond over to him.

"See if you can get her to tell you if

Farney had any other visitors tonight," he said. "Or yesterday. If so, try and get her to describe them."

Dorlan nodded. "I called headquarters," he explained. "The Inspector and a detail are on their way up. Gregg wants me to stick around."

The Phantom backed to the door that led out to the entrance hall. Farney's last words were still ringing in his mind: "Loro—Rex—Ford!" With a final word to Chip he turned away. Another minute and he was down the brownstone front steps, bound for 9th Avenue and his parked car.

But he didn't reach the car—not right away.

He had hardly turned east on the sidewalk before he realized a man, idling along the opposite pavement some distance below Mrs. Symond's house, had put himself in motion and was following him.

The Phantom's eyes narrowed. He kept his gaze straight ahead, his stride neither slackening nor quickening. For the first time since the Phantom had interested himself in this murder mess he welcomed the idea of a tail. He rounded the corner and put a quick idea into operation.

BETWEEN a stationery store and a dry cleaning shop was the entrance to one of the tenements along Ninth Avenue. The Phantom looked back over his shoulder. The man who had been staked out to watch Mrs. Symond's place had not reached the corner. Van opened the door he sighted and slipped through it.

It had a center oval of glass, half-covered by a faded ruffle of cretonne. A dim light was turned on in the rear of the passage into which he had stepped, enough to show him stairs that rose on the left side of the entry, and the doors of apartments opposite.

He stood close to the front door, using the glass oval as a peep-hole. A minute ticked away. Then the man who had followed him came into view.

He walked slowly, uncertainly. In front of the dry cleaner's he stopped and looked back. He turned around and stared in all directions, trying to figure out where his quarry had vanished. Van saw him shove back his hat and rub his chin.

He walked back to the corner. Cautiously opening the door, Van saw him standing still, peering down the shadowy

street. Finally, as if the disappearance was too much for him to cope with, he started across the Avenue, whistling for a northbound cruising taxi.

Quickly, Van came out from his concealment. His shag was on the other side of the cab, getting in. In the few seconds it took for the man to enter the vehicle, Van had glided up to his own car.

A twist of the key in the lock and he was under the wheel. The engine hummed. He let off the brake, watched the taxi in the side mirror, swung the car and started after it.

Behind him he heard the siren of a police radio cruiser. Then another. Gregg's men, probably, bound for Mrs. Symond's!

At Twenty-third Street the taxi made a left turn. The Phantom pulled his black car down to a crawl. He gave the hack driver plenty of time to straighten out and scuttle off before he went after him.

Again Van brooded over the names Farney had mumbled. He understood well that they were so vital that on their meaning and identification depended the success or failure of running the killers to earth.

"Loro." Who was she? Farney had said, "She knows." The Phantom pondered. So a feminine character had been projected into the dark currents of the killings which now were quadruples.

Van had counted heavily on finding Hugh Farney, on getting his story. And all he had obtained was a jumble of names. Instead of clarifying the case, Farney's last statement had added to the mystery and confusion bulking behind the puzzle.

Van Loan whipped to attention when he saw that the cab he followed was cutting its speed. It had turned into a broad avenue and was drawing in before a building splashed with a neon sign that read:

THE PALMS

The taxi stopped and the passenger got out. The Phantom rolled on past, getting a glimpse of the man who was paying the driver. In the panoramic windshield mirror he saw the man pocket his change, walk under an awning stretched from entrance to curb, and disappear into the building.

Close to the corner was room enough for the big black car. Van backed it into position and in short order was going

through the same revolving door his late shadow had entered. He pulled his hat to a slant so its brim was well down over his eyes. He had to take what precautions he could, for there was imminent danger in working close to the enemy. They knew him by sight. The advantage was theirs. The Phantom knew only Jed Burke, Thayer and the Nevada crowd of gunmen by sight, and outside of them he was working in the dark.

But that handicap did not stop him. Leisurely, his alert gaze sharp and watchful, he went along a pillared lobby. At its rear was a circular bar. Pyramids of glassware, bathed in the rosy glow of the pink lights behind them, rose on glass shelves to the ornate frescoes of the mirror paving the wall.

A dozen or more people were at the bar or seated at the small tables flanking it. Piped-in organ music made a murmurous background.

The lobby ended in a corridor that ran to the end of the building. Down there were public telephone booths, a flight of marble stairs, and the door to a washroom.

The Phantom picked out the table farthest from the bar and sat down. His gaze, crossing the lobby to the other side, to a room there, focused on the man whose taxi he had trailed from Sixteenth Street.

THE fellow had a characterless, wedge-shaped face, carrot-colored hair and small ears that hugged the sides of his narrow head. He wore a gray-green suit with a long roll to the lapels of his jacket. About five-feet-ten, he was the type of person who had nothing outstanding about him to arouse any particular interest.

But to the Phantom he was important.

This man was an agent of the forces with which he was grappling. The man was a direct contact with the hidden elusive enemy. A sheer stroke of luck had given Van this lead, and he didn't intend to let it get away from him.

The room across the lobby was furnished as a smoking-waiting alcove. It was lined with leather-tufted, built-in benches with tables fronting them. The wedge-faced man crossed to one of them and, as the Phantom watched, leaned to speak to someone who sat in the shadows of a corner table.

Jed!

The Phantom's nerves tightened. There was no mistaking the rasping wheeze of Jed's cough, his dead-pan face, the pin-striped blue suit with which Van was too familiar. The Phantom drew back, but there was no need for concealment. Whatever it was that the man whom Van had followed said to Jed, the effect of it reacted rapidly.

Jed Burke pushed his beer glass aside and got up. He seemed disturbed, annoyed. With a curt word he started down the corridor. The other man followed. From the corner of his eye Van saw both go up the stairs beyond the telephone booths.

Van finished the lime drink he had ordered, as his mind worked fast. He wanted the asthmatic Jed Burke. But how to get him?

From the layout of the place, Van had an idea it wouldn't be any easy matter to walk upstairs and take Burke. The man probably had plenty of aides handy. The Palms was the type of place where Burke could hang out and feel reasonably safe. He wouldn't have patronized the place if he'd had any suspicion it was being watched—or investigated. And that fact, to the Phantom, meant trouble.

CHAPTER XIV

TOO LATE



AYING his check, Van wandered down the corridor. No one evinced any interest in him. He passed the washroom door and went on to the stairs. He had taken two steps up them when he suddenly stopped.

Below, at the end of the corridor, he glimpsed a hooked-back door. The dark of an alley was broken at one end by the lights of the avenue. There, Van spotted a narrow cut that led to the street, at a point not too far from where he had parked his car.

He shifted his gaze abruptly. It fell on the three public telephone booths. The next minute he stepped into the center one, slipped a nickel into its slot and dialed the number of the *Clarion*.

The luck that had played along with him stayed good. A minute after the connection went through he had Steve Huston on the wire. Steve had been just about to leave the rooming house on Six-

teenth Street, on Chip's tip-off, when the Phantom got him.

"Listen," the Phantom said hurriedly. "I've only a minute or so, Steve. You know my club coupé, don't you?"

"Perfectly," said Steve.

The Phantom told him where he was and where the car was parked.

"Get a taxi and get here as fast as you can," he added. "I need you. Something's about to break and you can be a big help. Don't waste a second's time! Meet me at the car!"

"Right!"

The connection clicked off. The Phantom hung up. His coin rattled down the chute in the box. He kneeed the door of the booth slightly open as he saw a waiter coming along the passage.

The Phantom reached for the receiver again. He lifted it off the hook, holding it in one hand while he pushed the door open and hailed the waiter.

"Just a minute, please!" he called. The man stopped, turned and went over to him. "Know anybody named Burke?"

"Yes," said the waiter. "Why?"

"There's a call here for him. I had been talking and had hung up when the phone rang. I thought I was being called back, and answered. This call was for a man named Burke."

"Tell them to hang on," said the waiter. "I'll get Burke."

The Phantom nodded and set the receiver down beside the coin box. The waiter went on to the stairs. The Phantom left the booth door half ajar and ducked into the cubicle next to it.

He waited there, his face shadowed. Would it work?

He got his answer in the next few minutes. The waiter came down the stairs, with the man in the pin-striped blue suit following him. Burke coughed and spun a coin over to the waiter.

"Much obliged, Joe."

The waiter faded down the corridor and Burke stepped into the booth and pushed the door shut. The Phantom tensed himself. His timing had to be perfect. Quietly he used his knee again to fold back the door of the booth where he was waiting.

Through the thin metal partition he heard Jed Burke saying, "Hello, Burke speaking." Then a pause and the up-and-down click of the receiver hook as he jiggled it irritably. "Hello! Hello!"

The Phantom shot a glance along the

corridor. No one was in sight. The organ music rose and fell majestically. In a breath of time he was out of his booth and at the door of the one next to it.

His left hand opened that while his right, crossing it, leveled the automatic he had drawn directly into the startled face of the man who peered out at him.

"All right, Burke! You can hang up and keep your conversation for me!"

Burke's widening eyes looked at the Phantom as if he were seeing an apparition. His mouth opened. His breathing, thick and labored, hissed between his stiffening lips.

The Phantom got him by the collar and eased him out of the booth. Another minute and he had Burke through the rear door, into the shadowed alley, and was pushing him along onto the street, and then on to where the coupé was parked. The Phantom reached it without a sound having come from the man he had captured.

Jed Burke seemed in a daze. Limp and unresisting, he allowed himself to be pushed into the rear seat of the Phantom's coupé. He half-collapsed on the whipcord upholstery when his captor dropped down beside him.

The Phantom frisked Burke deftly. The man was doubly armed. He had a holstered gun, worn low on his left side, almost at belt level. The Phantom tossed that on the front seat and went on with a search that produced a small leg pistol, ingeniously sheathed in a narrow strap around the calf of Burke's right leg. That followed the automatic to the front seat.

THE Phantom drew a deep breath and glanced out the window of the car. No one was in sight, but then no one had observed his escorting Burke out of the alley. The wedge-faced shag who had gone upstairs with Burke had not come down to investigate. Evidently he thought Burke's phone call was keeping him.

Traffic moved along, a few pedestrians passed, and five minutes lengthened to ten. Then a taxi circled in and the Phantom saw the red-headed Huston climb out and hurry across to his parked car.

"Get in front, Steve," the Phantom ordered. "I need a chauffeur."

Huston, with a curious glance into the gloom of the rear seat, obeyed without question. The Phantom slipped him the ignition keys, the engine turned over, and the reporter shifted gears and headed out

on the avenue.

"Uptown," said the Phantom. "Take it easy. I want to talk to Mr. Burke."

Steve's head jerked up. "*Burke?*"

"J.C. Formerly of the Hotel Glenmore, and recently back from Nevada. The man who was in Caldwell's room at the Hotel Pilgrim. The one who left his pareolic inhaler there. The one," the Phantom added brittlely, "who either killed both Holt and Caldwell or engineered the murders on orders from a higher-up!"

"Nice work!" Huston exclaimed.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Burke growled, and promptly had a coughing spell, and ran out of breath. When he regained it, he started again. "You've got the wrong man! I've never been in Nevada! I don't know anything about the Hotel Glenmore!"

The Phantom smiled thinly. "We'll see how much you know. I'm giving you a chance. Answer my questions and you'll be locked up without the police working over you. You know what that means. Stay uncooperative and I'll get what I'm after anyway. Take your choice."

Jed Burke looked sullenly into the Phantom's face. He shook his head, wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his coat.

"The cops can't make me talk," he snarled. "I've got nothing to say."

"Turn around, Steve," ordered the Phantom. "We'll ride down to Center Street."

The Phantom waited for Burke to crack. But the man didn't. He sat slumped on the seat, his shoulders sagging and his hands nervously picking at the buttons of his coat. The Phantom was puzzled by the man's attitude. Burke was evidently playing an angle of his own. He had something in mind, some concealed trick with which he believed he could block a third degree.

He had another coughing spasm. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and held it over his mouth. The Phantom wound the window beside him down a few inches to let in more air.

"You should have stayed in Nevada, Burke," he said. "The climate's better for you there."

Burke coughed into the handkerchief.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

Van shifted his gaze to the red-headed reporter. "Any news on that phone number, Steve?"

"Yes, I've got it in my pocket. It's a

listing in the name of a Miss Loro Ayre. Some address on Central Park West."

The Phantom sensed rather than saw Burke's sudden drawing into himself. The name had hit him with the same impact it struck the Phantom.

Loro! One of the gasped out words Farney had mumbled! A wave of satisfaction made the Phantom's pulses pound. Swiftly and suddenly, out of the tangled crisscross of the dark-patterned murder mystery, two shafts of light had penetrated.

One was the capture of Jed Burke. The other was the name and address of the woman the dead Farney had said knew those who had killed him! And her number was the same one that had been called by Lawson Thayer, out in Sonajo, Nevada!

Burke had the handkerchief over his mouth again. The first shock of hearing what Huston had said had given away to a dull apathy that seemed to crush him. He sat there, his chin on his chest. Finally the handkerchief moved away from his lips and his hand fell heavily to the seat.

"Stop the car, Steve!" the Phantom said sharply.

He switched on the interior lights with a flick of the switch. He bent forward, grabbing at Burke's right hand. It was limp when he bent the fingers back—limp and empty.

"What's happened?" Steve Huston asked worriedly.

HE BRAKED the car to a stop at the curb and turned around. The Phantom had pried Burke's mouth open and was running a finger in under the man's tongue.

"He's taken a way-out!" the Phantom said. "Some kind of a pill or a capsule reserved for an emergency! The name you mentioned told him what he was up against, what we knew! He couldn't face it!"

Burke was still alive. The large artery in his neck throbbed fitfully under the feel of the Phantom's hand. His gusty breathing, irregular and almost panting, came through a mouth that sagged, lips that twitched.

"Drive on!" the Phantom spoke quickly again. "Make it the nearest hospital, Steve!"

A half-hour later, in the white-tiled reception room of the Manhattan General Hospital, Huston watched while the

Phantom got out of an elevator and came toward him. From the way he walked the *Clarion* reporter figured what had happened. "No good?" he asked.

The Phantom shook his head. "He passed out ten minutes ago. Cyanide—from the speed with which it worked, and the smell. They'll autopsy later, of course."

Thoughtfully, with Huston beside him, he returned to the car. Jed Burke's two guns were where he had left them on the front seat. He pushed them aside and indicated that Steve was to continue to drive. "Where to now?" Huston asked.

"Back to The Palms," the Phantom said.

Steve turned north at the next corner and they started uptown.

The Phantom felt as if the door had closed in his face. Trapping Jed Burke had promised a payoff. He had been confident he could make the man talk. To have Burke take a lethal dose, under his watchful eyes, had been a serious setback.

The same clammy hand of fear of which the Phantom had seen samples in Nevada had fastened around Burke. The man had taken the quick way out for one of two reasons. First, he must have known that the Phantom could prove his part in the murder conspiracy. The Phantom knew he had been present when an attempt to kill the Phantom had been made in Nevada. He knew the penalty he would have to pay. He knew he didn't have a chance to beat the rap.

Either that, Van reasoned, or Burke had been in deadly fear of whoever it was who had used him to carry out the details of his sinister plot. That shadowy, unknown character wouldn't tolerate failure. Burke had been caught in the middle of a bad situation. The law on one side ready to exact its toll, his boss on the other, waiting with a similar fate. It had meant death for Jed Burke either way the dice fell.

Perhaps, by taking his own life, the man had had the last laugh.



YOUNG HUSTON parked the black coupé around the corner from The Palms. Over an hour had passed since the Phantom had left the place. Naturally Burke had not returned to his cronies. They might or might not be sus-

picious of his absence. And they might or might not still be in the restaurant.

The Phantom determined to learn if they were.

When he entered now the place was more crowded. The audience of a first-run movie house across the avenue had been dismissed. Part of it had flowed into The Palms. The bar was doing a good business. The tables were nearly all occupied, and the murmurous organ music had been replaced by the raucous blare of a juke box.

The Phantom went down the corridor. He had left Steve in the car with instructions to follow if he didn't communicate with him within twenty minutes.

This time Van did not pause on the second step. He went up the stairs. On the floor above another broad corridor bisected the building from one end to the other. Doors lined it, the doors of what he assumed were private dining rooms.

From behind them came a blend of voices, clink of glasses, and rattle of crockery. The Phantom stopped near the head of the stairway and let his glance roam speculatively about. He was particularly interested in the man who had been staked out to watch Mrs. Symond's house, with orders to follow him if he showed up there. The Phantom wanted a crack at that character—and soon.

But was the wedge-faced man still in the building? Or had he pulled out? If he were here, where was he to be found? And how?

To these and other questions the Phantom had an immediate answer. The stairs continued on up to the floor above at a point close to the avenue end of the corridor. Glass-globed ceiling lights supplied a clear illumination, enough for Van to catch a glimpse of a man coming down the other stairway.

There was something familiar in the way the fellow walked, in his pushed back

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hat, his build and the set of his shoulders. Then Van caught a glimpse of the wedge-shaped face and pegged him as the same individual who had tailed him from the 16th Street rooming house. He was the man whose taxi Van had followed up-town!

What appeared as a stroke of sheer good fortune was nullified almost before the Phantom had recognized it. There was no place he could use for a cover-up. No jutting wall or empty room to glide into. So before the Phantom could move the man coming down the stairs saw him, at the same instant Van spotted him.

The Phantom's tail acted with quick decision. Swinging around he started up the steps, taking them two at a time. But the Phantom put himself in motion, too. He also climbed the stairway fast.

He reached the landing above just in time to see a door closing. It was on the left side of the hall, in between two other doors. The Phantom headed for it. He caught the knob before the latch clicked over. He tore the door wide open with one hand, making one of his lightning-fast gun draws with the other.

Over the threshold, he was momentarily dazzled by white walls beyond, with the shine of fluorescent lighting against them. He caught the heavy smell of cigar smoke, was conscious that the room was occupied by two men.

His recent tail was one of them. The other, partially blocked from view by the wearer of the push-back felt hat, had evidently just got up from the lounge chair. The man who had hastily come back to the room was babbling a warning.

The Phantom's gun swept up. But before he could speak or act, the light in the room he faced plunged out. Blackness, like a suddenly lowered curtain, dropped before the Phantom's strained gaze.

In the darkness he heard the grate of a chair on the floor, the sound of a door opening. Then the muffled slam of it, the rasp of a key and the snarl of a low, venomous laugh.

The Phantom backed to the door through which he had entered. His object was to get out into the corridor and cover the adjoining doors before they could be used by the escaping men. Sharp in mind was one paramount thought. The man his late shadow had come back to warn must be the big shot of the murder picture!

Intuition told the Phantom a rich prize was only a few feet distant! A man who knew how to cope with a situation which had become dangerous for him. A man who acted swiftly and with certainty.

AS THE Phantom grasped the knob to throw the door open, something thudded against it. He turned the knob. The door would not open, but he knew the key he had heard had not been used in that door. The sound had come from another direction. As he tugged, a low, sardonic laugh came from a few feet away, on the other side of the door.

"Batter your brains out!" a voice, harsh and gravelly, suggested. "It will save me the trouble of having it done, later—Phantom!"

Rapid footsteps followed, diminishing, then dying out on the corridor floor.

The Phantom found the light switch, and when the light came on he saw the other door in the white-walled room, the door through which his prey had slithered. He used his master key on it. That opened the door and he saw that it led into an adjoining supper room. The Phantom went through it and on into the hall. He realized now that the key he had heard rasp had both unlocked and locked that second door.

In the hall, he saw that under the knob of the door he had been tugging at a chair had been propped.

The Phantom hurried down the stairs. But he knew, before he reached the pillared passage and the lobby, that the men he sought had slipped away. They had had sufficient time.

Steve Huston, waiting expectantly, watched the Phantom come out of The Palms and approach the car. For the second time that night the reporter had the impression that the Phantom was not entirely pleased or satisfied with the results he had obtained.

Van climbed in. Huston started the car and the Phantom said:

"We'll try Central Park West, the Loro Ayre you dug up for me."

Steve nodded. "No luck?" He meant at The Palms.

"Plenty—all bad." The Phantom stretched out his legs. "I was yards away from the man I'm sure heads our murder puzzle. He slipped me."

Huston stole a sidelong glance at the man beside him. He had never seen the Phantom so cynically willing to admit

defeat, even though it undoubtedly was only momentary. Steve knew that didn't mean too much. Setbacks, if anything, only seemed to give the Phantom an added impetus to smash through to final and brilliant victory.

He listened while the detective explained what had happened.

"You didn't search the place?" Huston asked.

"They left in a hurry. So much of a rush to get out they didn't even bother to try to cut me down." The Phantom looked in the panoramic mirror, adding, "Or to post a plant to do the usual tailing."

"You think this Loro Ayre is a link, an important one?" asked Steve.

"She knows the identity of the top man." The Phantom wound the window lower beside him. The night air swept in, cool and sharp. "She can fill in the chinks. With Hugh Farney out of the picture, this woman, whoever she is, is now the key piece to the puzzle."

"Maybe she was a friend of Farney," suggested the reporter.

"I doubt it. Lawson Thayer telephoned her from Sonajo. That definitely ties her in with the Nevada crowd."

Huston, familiar with the Phantom's visit to the mining town, didn't say anything for a minute or two. He turned, when they stopped for a red light, and asked:

"Why did they want Farney out of the way? After all, he was only a down and out hack writer. You've hinted that the plot behind the murders involves something of tremendous power and importance. Where does Farney fit in?"

"Take it step by step," the Phantom told him. "Caldwell communicated with Farney at the suggestion of Langley, an employee of the Sonajo Bugle. Caldwell wanted Farney to do some writing for him. What does that suggest?"

Steve frowned. "I've had the idea of blackmail," he said. "Caldwell using Farney to prepare his material to gouge money from someone."

"Blackmail," the Phantom pointed out, "is usually a private matter between two people. This is bigger than that. This death drama has nothing secretive about it—behind its mystery. I mean, any number of people in Sonajo have been intimidated. That doesn't play up the blackmail angle. No, it's something else."

"You never located what material

Clyde Caldwell brought east with him?" asked Steve.

"That must have been taken out of his room at the Pilgrim—after he was permanently silenced. Another thing that nullifies the idea of blackmail is the fact that Caldwell communicated with Leslie Post, of the *Modern Press*. Post is a reputable publisher. He wouldn't touch anything that had a phony look to it."

STEVE'S eyes narrowed, as a thought came to him.

"Wait a minute!" he said. "Take it this way, Caldwell had the material for a book. Farney was to be hired to write it, or to collaborate with him. Caldwell, losing no time, was trying to interest a publisher in it before it was written. He wouldn't tell Post what it was all about. He wanted to see Post personally and explain it. Right?"

The Phantom smiled faintly. "Correct, so far."

"But what kind of a book?" Steve's frown cut deeper into his face.

"Something sensational, certainly," said the Phantom. "So sensational, and so revealing that the people it concerned had to stop it before it got in the hands of the publishers, or even written, beyond the note stage. What would that hint of, Steve?"

"I don't know," the reporter confessed slowly.

"Wouldn't it be some sort of an exposé? Some information that would reveal in detail a crime, or crimes? It would have to be a document containing vital statistics to bring murder out of hiding to prevent its publication."

Steve began to grasp it. His eyes widened. "Sure. That must be it. Something that the killers couldn't allow to be made public! Something that would toss them into the clink and keep them there—if a jury didn't bring in a stiffer recommendation!"

"Exactly," the Phantom agreed. "But crime has a quaint way of leaking out. Say, for instance, the warped-brained murderer thinks he's achieved a perfect crime. He's made it airtight, fool-proof. He's studied angles and clues—or at least how to eliminate them. He's confident he hasn't overlooked a bet. And yet the very perfection of his plotting is often his undoing. He has planned too carefully. Something trivial, something to which he hasn't given a second thought,

too unimportant to fit into the complex machinery of his scheme comes along to trip him up. In this case it was an ordinary overcoat."

"You mean—" Steve glanced around inquiringly.

The Phantom nodded. "The topcoat young Holt got by mistake. If Holt hadn't been killed, if Mr. Havens hadn't been so unnerved by the murder, Caldwell would have been taken care of quietly and the whole thing would have been a routine police matter—with the chances all on the side of the killer that no one ever would know who killed Caldwell."

"One of those unsolved things," Steve agreed.

The car had crossed Columbus Circle and was going north on the broad street that paralleled the dark blur of the Park. Lofty apartment buildings stared out over the oasis of green. Except for the usual number of taxis returning passengers from downtown night clubs, no commercial vehicles were on the street. A few pedestrians were on the pavement. The majority of windows along the way were unlighted.

"Monterey Arms," Steve said. "The next block."

"Park beyond, around the corner," instructed the Phantom.

The reporter nodded. He knew the Phantom's methods. One of his unbreakable rules was never to leave a vehicle that might have been followed, or was known, in plain view of a destination.

Steve drew in around the corner and the Phantom motioned for him to get out.

"Rather late for a call on a lady," Huston murmured.

"Crime," the Phantom said, "keeps no hours."

The Monterey Arms, the apartment building they entered, twelve stories of tessellated yellow brick and glass, had a lobby that would have done credit to Hollywood. The furniture, medieval English, was set against a background of dark oak and a floor done in heavy stone flagging. The lights along the walls were in the form of iron candle-brackets behind mica shades.

A couple of liveried hall men, conversing together, glanced up as Steve and the Phantom steered a straight course toward an elevator in the rear. He had no intention of being stopped, although he knew that the rule in such apartment houses was for callers to be announced. He kept

going, Steve following him into the elevator. His manner was so assured that neither of the hall men made a move.

A colored boy slid the metal door shut. "Floor, please?" he asked laconically.

Attached to the smooth steel wall of the elevator was a framed, typed directory of the tenants arranged in alphabetical order. The Phantom spotted "Ayre" at the top of the A's.

"Nine," he said.

Steve gave him a puzzled glance, then saw the listings and nodded. The cage went up, the floors clicking away.

"Ninth," the boy drawled.

Another minute and they were out on a tiled hall. Still with the same air of assurance, the Phantom started briskly away, down the passage to the right. The operator, looking after them, closed the elevator door and went down.

"Nine-D," the Phantom said. "Around the bend."

Steve Huston's pulses began to quicken. He understood how important Loro Ayre was to the Phantom. All of his news-gathering instincts stirred. He sensed a front page story for the *Clarion*, a break at last in the series of murders he had been handling for the paper.

CHAPTER XVI

ROOKERY PRESS



ON THE left side of the hall the Phantom saw the door of 9D. There was no name slot over the pearl circle of the bell. A brass knocker decorated the door under a square of glass that reminded Huston of the gander-peek in a gambling house.

The Phantom's thumb pressed the pearl circle. Far away they could hear the bell ringing, but not the usual harsh jangle. This bell tinkled with the pleasant refinement that bells would have in a place like the Monterey Arms.

No one came to answer it. Twice more the Phantom rang. Steve Huston could feel breath backing up in his lungs. Were they too late again?

The Phantom reached for his master key. Many times, on other cases the reporter had seen the miracles that key could accomplish, but had never stopped marveling at the way it had of opening the most formidable of locked entrances.

Now it was a matter of seconds for the Phantom to make the proper adjustments. He turned the key, the lock clicked, the door opened.

Darkness, thick and bulking, made a screen around them when they entered. The Phantom shut the door quietly. The eye of his pencil flash slashed the black as it went wandering over the drape of double portieres in front of them, the delicate coral-tinted walls around them. It stopped at the glass plate of a light switch. But the Phantom did not press that.

Instead, he noiselessly parted the portieres and slipped between them. A minute or two passed before Huston heard a soft sound which indicated that window draperies were being pulled.

The Phantom came back. This time he switched on lights that came up like rising suns in a battery of lamps.

The room disclosed was large, square, and high-ceilinged, decorated with both taste and expense. Here, the Phantom saw immediately, was the handiwork of a decorator who knew his business. The *motif* was early American. The antiques, probably gathered from New England, were charming in their simplicity. He glanced at them with the eye of a connoisseur, the approving gaze of Dick Van Loan who collected such things.

But his glance was brief. He had to investigate the apartment, had to find the tenant.

Leaving Steve, he hurried down a passage that led out of the room to the other rooms of the apartment. From the moment he had entered, he had had the feeling that Loro Ayre was not at home, that no one, except Steve and himself were in the suite. He verified that within the next few minutes, and returned to the reporter.

"Nobody in, Steve," he said. "It's all ours. Let's see what we can find here—if anything."

Adjoining the large room was a smaller one. That was done as a miniature library. Tiers of books rose from floor to ceiling. Books with rich bindings. The Phantom stepped in closer to them, once the lights were on.

Swiftly he ran an eye over the titles. He reached up and pulled out a book. Steve heard his quiet exclamation, saw the gleam of interest in his eyes.

"Our old friend W. Shakespeare in morocco." The Phantom tapped the vol-

ume. "Published by the Rookery Press with an address on Waverly Place, the address of the Rexford Building!"

Steve Huston's head went up. "Rexford? That was—"

"Part of Farney's final words!" the Phantom said with satisfaction. "Loro Ayre. Rexford Building. He was trying to give me both her name and address at the same time. We've come to the right place!"

He stopped abruptly. Steve saw his face harden.

Sliding the book back in place, he motioned for Steve to follow him. Down the passage, on the opposite side from the library, a door stood half-ajar. The Phantom glided into the room. Twin lamps, on either side of a canopied bed, burst into pink light at the touch of a switch button.

Breathing in the subtle delicacy of perfume lingering on the warm air, Huston looked at Phantom. He was standing in front of an open closet. An empty closet, the reporter noticed. That seemed surprising.

With a quick gesture, the Phantom turned away from the closet and went to a cherry bureau with a bulge front. A Continental mirror with carved birds at its top trapped his reflection. But it was not the mirror that interested him. He opened one or two of the drawers before he turned.

"I don't believe Loro Ayre will be back," he said slowly. "The closet is empty, this bureau likewise. Something frightened her away. She evidently left in a hurry and"—he reached into an ash-tray and picked up a fresh lavender-tipped cigarette stub—"not too many hours ago!"

Before Steve could speak, a telephone somewhere in the room whirled, loud in the quiet.

THE Phantom let the lavender-tipped cigarette stub drop back into the crystal ash dish. His face turned to one of the tables holding a lamp. On the shelf beneath was a white plastic telephone. The bell continued to ring insistently.

The Phantom unpronged the instrument. The voice in which he answered the call was cleverly disguised, for among other things Van was a past master of phonetics, even versed in ventriloquism. His voice now could have been the drowsy, uncertain tones of either a man or a

woman, suddenly awakened and still sleep-drugged.

"Yes?" said his blurred voice.

The connection was perfect. Far away, in the distance, the Phantom's quick ear heard movement, a rustle that might have been made by a moving foot or an arm. He could even catch the sound of breathing.

Then, abruptly, a click told him the connection had been broken, that whoever was at the other end of the line had hung up. The clearness of the wire was disturbed by a metallic hum.

He put the telephone back on its base.

"Gone. Didn't like my voice." He shrugged. "Could have been a check."

He went out of the bedroom and back to the library, followed by the red-headed reporter. That library seemed to intrigue the Phantom. This time he didn't bother with the books on the shelves, but directed his attention toward a knee-hole desk in the foreground.

He began to go through it with rapid, probing fingers. He talked while he sifted through a litter of bills, canceled checks and other miscellany, giving Steve the benefit of his deductions from what he was finding.

"This apartment was subleased, furnished. No more than a month ago. From a Mrs. Conklin Courtwright. Here are some cleaning bills, over a year old, with a different address on them. Loro Ayre lived on Sullivan Street at that time. Quite a step up in neighborhood."

He went on delving into the desk drawers. Finally he pulled out a checkbook. A gleam of interest showed in his gaze.

"Left in such a hurry she didn't bother to take some of her personal possessions." He opened the checkbook and rifled through its stubs. "Merchants Central. Broadway and Tenth Street branch. Four-thousand-dollar balance as of today."

He put the checkbook in his pocket for a more careful examination later and turned his attention to a metal wastebasket that stood beside the desk. Sorting through its contents, he began to pull out the torn pieces of a telegram.

Huston watched him gather them and lay them on the blotter before him. When the Phantom had them all, he began to piece them together. As he read, his face became shadowed, but Steve couldn't tell whether or not his find was important. The Phantom seldom let facial expressions

indicate his emotion.

He reached for an envelope in a rack across the desk, dropped the pieces of the telegram into it, sealed it. Then he picked up a pen and wrote Frank Havens' name and address before he turned the envelope over and, on its flap, printed the words, "Don't Open."

He stamped the envelope and looked at his watch.

"Let's clear out of here, Steve."

Close to the elevator shaft was a glass-faced mail-chute. The Phantom dropped the envelope into it and rang for the elevator.

"That telegram," Huston murmured, "must be top bracket stuff."

The Phantom's answer was a thin smile, as the elevator door opened for them. . . .

He dropped Steve at the reporter's address and drove the black car up to the Bronx. There, close to the Westchester line, the Phantom had a complete laboratory-workshop and library, housed in a small brick building which once had been a storage place. It was in this lab that he made most of his scientific deductions and experiments, unless haste was required. In such instances he made use of his smaller laboratory in the secret room in his Park Avenue penthouse.

The Bronx place was supposed to be the property of an eccentric old scientist named Bendix, and what few neighbors there were let the old man come and go as he pleased, without curiosity or interference. The place was fastened by elaborate locks, and a system of lighting which went on as the front door was opened had been installed.

Tonight, however, the Phantom was not interested in laboratory experiments. As soon as he entered the place his attention was centered on several books in his well-stocked library which contained volumes for research on any subject. What he reached for now were old volumes that had to do with the silver mines of Nevada, the beginnings of great wealth.

Sitting down at a table, he began to read. . . .

IT WAS close to ten the next morning when the Phantom got out of a cab on Waverly Place. The Rexford Building, located there, was one of the early landmarks of the neighborhood, a shabby structure, grimy and weather-beaten.

Inside was no marble-lined lobby or

brilliantly lighted entrance. A decrepit, cable-operated lift faced the street door. The names of the concerns doing business were painted on a plaster wall.

The Phantom consulted them and read:

THE ROOKERY PRESS
FOURTH FLOOR

The elevator operator sat on a stool, watching him. He was small, gray-faced, old. A blackened pipe hung from one corner of his mouth. When he removed it, it could be seen that most of his teeth were gone.

There were two ways for the Phantom to learn what he wanted to know. One was to flash his Detective Bureau badge and shake the information loose. The other was to oil this old-timer.

The Phantom decided on the second course.

Eyes under wispy brows watched closely while he took a bill out of his wallet.

"I'll make you a trade," the Phantom said. "This much just for some information."

The old man got up from his stool. He stuffed the pipe in a pocket, all attention. A gleam came into his furtive eyes.

"That's a deal, mister," he said huskily. "What do you want to know?"

"This Rookery Press. Who owns it?"

"Dame by the name of Ayre. She's been here for the past three years now. Flossy lady. Every time she gets in my car I can smell her perfumery for a couple of days."

"She's upstairs now?" asked the Phantom.

The old fellow shook his head. "Ain't come in yet. She usually shows up around eleven. Stays till three or four. The guy who works for her is up there now. Party named Petrie, Alfred Petrie. He's been with her for quite a long while. I guess he runs the business."

The eager eyes stayed glued to the bill in the Phantom's hand. The old man moved uneasily, as if his fingers itched for the feel of that money.

"Did you ever hear of a man named Farney?" asked the Phantom.

"Can't say I remember that name. Who's he?"

The Phantom handed over the money and got in the elevator.

"It's not important," he said. "Take me up to the fourth floor."



ALL THE way up, as the lift rose creakily, the Phantom had to listen to the old man's profuse thanks. They seemed to follow him down the dusty passage where little sunshine penetrated. He passed a number of offices before he stopped at the door of the place he wanted.

The same lack of light, making an opaque gray-gloom, filled the room the Phantom entered. It was fairly large and furnished in the old-fashioned mood of the building. Here was none of the modern streamlining of a skyscraper office. Two rolltop desks were on either side of a door in a partition that separated the front room from the one behind it.

A telephone stood on a stand to the left, beside a low series of bookcases containing the firm's publications. For the rest there were a few heavy wooden chairs and a niche behind a water-cooler which probably was used for a coat closet.

Sounds of movement on the other side of the door to the inner room raised the Phantom's hand. He knocked.

"Come in," a voice called.

The inner room was office and workshop. Some of the morning sun managed to get under the half-raised sash of a single window. It slanted across a flat-top desk and the man who sat before it. He twisted around to see who his caller was.

The Phantom had the impression of raking eyes, of an angular face, thick, dark hair brushed back from a slightly bulging forehead. The man was young. He was in his shirtsleeves, busy with a sheaf of galleys.

He put those down, his gaze centered on the caller.

"Miss Ayre?" the Phantom asked politely. "The elevator man said she hadn't come in yet. Expect her soon?"

Petrie's angular face remained blankly expressionless.

"I don't believe she'll be in today." His voice was as smooth as his look. "My name's Petrie. I'm a partner in the business. What can I do for you?"

"I want to see Miss Ayre personally. It's about a fashion publication. It concerns a client of mine who is doing the

book. A practical work on style and dress designing."

"You're a literary agent?" Petrie's gaze moved more thoroughly over the Phantom.

"Not exactly. I just happen to be interested in the author and told her I'd see what I could do."

Petrie shook his head. "You'd better try some other publisher. We specialize more or less on standard classics. Bring them out in illuminated print and artistic bindings. Once in a while, if we see something we think is promising, we're open to propositions. But not often. Suppose I speak to Miss Ayre and let you know."

The Phantom nodded. He gave the name of Gray and a Thirty-fourth Street hotel as his address. Petrie wrote it down and, as his caller let himself out, turned back to the galleys.

The Phantom walked through the front office. He opened the door leading out to the hall. But he didn't go through it. Instead, he shut it loudly and on quick, silent feet glided across and into the niche behind the water-cooler.

No more than a minute passed before the door in the partition opened. Petrie looked through it. Then the door closed and Van heard the clicks as a number was dialed. The telephone he had noticed when he had first gone into the place was a couple of yards away. He had it off its base and to his ear before Petrie had finished dialing.

The dial tone had changed to a series of automatic rings. They lasted a full minute or more. Then they stopped with a click and a woman's voice replaced them.

"Yes?"

"Loro . . . Al."

"What is it?"

"I've just had a caller. He was looking for you. I'll describe him."

Petrie's word picture was pretty good. The Phantom saw that the man had not missed a detail. The woman made no comment until he had finished. Then her voice came again, cool, modulated, neither hurried nor excited.

"I'm afraid," she said, "that description fits a certain person who was in my apartment last night. You'd better close the office and disappear for a time. This gentleman has been very annoying and will probably be more so before he's taken care of."

"You don't think—"

"I'm quite sure you can be taken and held as a witness, Al. You know how the papers have played up Farney's unfortunate death. The man you mention is busily engaged in trying to solve it. You haven't too much time and—"

VAN eased the telephone back to its cradle. On the same noiseless feet he sidled across to the outer door. A minute later he was outside, and on twisting stairs, going down.

The elevator yawned emptily on the ground floor. The aged operator was not in sight.

As Van was leaving the building, a taxi, coasting down Waverly Place, drew to a stop in front of the Rexford Building. A man got out, pausing to pay the meter toll. Busy with that financial transaction, he did not see the Phantom pass him. But Van had a glimpse of him and knew the quickening jolt of his nerves.

For the face he had just seen was more than familiar. It was the face of Lawson Thayer, editor of the *Sonajo Bugle*, the man who had given his death order!

Thayer turned away from the taxi and went into the Rexford Building. The Phantom cut across the street. In the window of a stationery store was a telephone company emblem. There was a booth in the rear of the shop. Van entered it, dropped a nickel in the slot, and got Chip Dorlan at the first try. His instructions were brief and concise.

Leaving the stationery store he walked to the corner and entered a tavern, plastered with brewers' advertisements. From inside the tavern he had an unobstructed view of the main entrance to the Rexford Building. He bought a lime and soda and kept the entrance covered with watchful eyes.

Chip, he was thinking, had been in his Forty-third Street boarding house. Rapidly, Van computed time. Too much was not available, if he had correctly interpreted Loro Ayre's warning to the man in the back office of the Rookery Press.

Minutes ticked away.

The bartender glanced curiously at the motionless customer at the end of the damp mahogany. The Phantom ordered a second lime and soda and dropped a dollar on the bar.

"Keep the change," he said.

"Thanks, skipper," murmured the bartender.

The Phantom's thoughts ticked like the

passing minutes. Lawson Thayer in New York. That was even better than he had hoped for. In the Nevada mining town he had told Thayer he intended to nail him. With the man in Manhattan, the promise was that much closer to a fulfillment.

What had brought him East? The Phantom had a pretty good idea. Burke had disappeared. Burke had been a sort of field manager and second-in-command. The master of murder, who wove the death plots, needed new brains to cope with a situation rapidly getting out of hand and beyond control.

Thayer had undoubtedly been hastily sent for to come to Manhattan and bolster up a crumbling, desperate situation.

He, too, must be using the mysterious Loro Ayres as his contact. At that moment, the Phantom thought, Thayer was probably talking to her over the telephone in the back office.

His gaze stayed riveted on the Rexford Building. The satisfaction of knowing that Lawson Thayer was in there, grew. Now the Phantom began to see the final pieces of the murder puzzle making a definite pattern. Now, unless all his calculations were faulty, it wouldn't be too long before the case would be cracked wide open and handed to Inspector Gregg on a silver platter.

Another cab came around the corner. Chip Dorlan got out of it in a hurry. The Phantom, in the doorway of the tavern, motioned with a hand. Young Dorlan joined him.

"I made it as fast as I could. No shave." Chip rubbed his chin ruefully.

In a few terse words the Phantom told Chip what he wanted him to do. He had hardly finished when Lawson Thayer, with Alfred Petrie beside him, emerged from the dingy building. Both headed up the street.

"There's your man, Chip," the Phantom said. "The one on the outside. Don't let him slip you. The success or failure of this case depends on where he goes—what he does!"

"He won't shake me!" Dorlan promised, and swung into action.

From the window of the tavern the Phantom saw Thayer and Petrie separate when they reached the corner. Petrie walked on up Waverly Place. The man from Nevada turned east, with Chip Dorlan following him.

The Phantom sighed with satisfaction,

nodded to the bartender, and went out and caught a cab.

His next stop was Headquarters. With the end of the case in sight, he had plans to lay out, strategy to talk over with Inspector Gregg.

He was with Gregg in the Inspector's private office for a half-hour. When he left he went back to his apartment in a roundabout way. . . .

TWO hours later Richard Curtis Van Loan stepped out on Park Avenue, arranged the blue cornflower in the lapel of his well-cut tweed jacket and, with all of the usual Van Loan nonchalance, went down the Avenue toward the Belfair, where he was having lunch with Frank Havens.

That exclusive rendezvous was across the courtyard of a palatial apartment building. It was a dining spot that never advertised, that did most of its business by telephone reservation.

The doorman greeted Van with a broad smile.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Van Loan. Mr. Havens has been here for a few minutes, with his daughter."

Van went on inside. A moss-deep carpet stretched from one end of the Louis XIV foyer to the other. Several people, waiting for friends, greeted Van.

He went on through, leaving his hat with the austere Russian girl who presided over the coat check room. Olga wouldn't make any mistakes or give him the wrong headgear. The fleeting thought of the brassy-haired blonde at Myler's went through his memory briefly.

Then he heard his name called and the next moment Muriel's small, soft hand was in his.

"Where on earth have you been?" she demanded gaily. Her eyes held a happy glow.

He smiled at her. "Nowhere in particular. Why?"

"I've called your apartment half a dozen times in the last few days," she chided. "No answer."

"Oh, I've been around," Van said. "Up in Connecticut, playing house guest. Say!" He lifted her hand and looked at the carved silver bracelet on her slender wrist. "New?"

A deep tide of color tinted Muriel's smooth cheeks. She looked away, and then back at him again.

"A present. From a—a friend." She

broke off, changing the subject. "I'm not lunching with you and Dad. A previous date. Can't break it."

"Then why—" Van began.

"You mean, did I come here?" She laughed. "Because I wanted to see if you were still alive. And to see if you'd like to take me to a supper dance Saturday night at the Andy Hubbells'."

Van told her the idea was decidedly interesting and Muriel dashed away. He stood watching her cross the courtyard, a girl slender and vivacious, young and charming. A girl who could be all things to Dick Van Loan—but not for the Phantom Detective.

Her father had a chair ready for Van when he went over to a table in a bay between banks of potted shrubs. It was private enough to allow conversation that would not be overheard by others in the room. Havens had selected it for that reason.

"I mailed you a letter last night," Van said, as he sat down.

"I received it," Havens told him. "It's in the safe. What's the idea?"

"I want you to keep it," Van said soberly. "I consider it important. It's a direct lead to the brains behind the murders."

Havens stared. Through long association with the Phantom Detective he was aware that Van never revealed the progress of his plans until they were ready to unfold into realities. Yet Havens was never left completely in the dark. He was not now.

CHAPTER XVIII

URGENT



QUICKLY, Van Loan sketched a word picture of what happened last night, bringing Frank Havens up to date on the case.

"I had the hospital and Homicide keep Jed Burke's suicide out of the papers," he said. "Not that it will do much good. By this time the men behind this nefarious business have a pretty good idea Burke's been taken."

"He was one of the higher-ups?" Havens asked.

"One, but not *the* one! Not the man I'm trying to get through to, the murder master! But Burke managed the plot. His sudden withdrawal has managed to

stop them temporarily."

"Where does this Ayre woman fit in?" the owner of the *Clarion* inquired.

"To explain," Van told him, "it's necessary to go back to Nevada. Whatever Clyde Caldwell uncovered there, in the form of material for a story, article or book, he didn't feel qualified to write himself. On the advice of Harry Langley, he contacted Farney. Langley must have known Farney for some time, kept up a friendship with him. Langley knew where Farney lived in New York and that Farney was open for ghost writing jobs."

The Phantom paused thoughtfully. Havens said, "What else?"

"After Caldwell got in touch with him, and Farney learned the nature of the work, he must have taken the matter to this Loro Ayre. She is the owner, or part owner, of the Rookery Press, a two-room affair on Waverly Place. I believe that when Loro Ayre heard what Farney had to say about Caldwell's subject matter she saw an immediate chance to improve her finances."

"How?"

"By stalling Farney along and getting into communication with the person about whom the book was to be written. I base that assumption on a checkbook I took from her apartment last night. She made a deposit of twenty-five hundred dollars in her personal account at a date several days after Farney's second letter to Caldwell. Yesterday, she deposited another twenty-five hundred. This deposit ties in with a certain telegram I dug up in her apartment last night."

For a minute Frank Havens stared. The publisher was beginning to see the highlights of the crime picture Van Loan painted.

"Then Farney," Havens murmured, "must have been honest."

"I'm sure he was," said Van. "He took the idea of Caldwell's contemplated *opus* to Loro Ayre in good faith. Probably he thought it was so sensational that the Rookery Press would publish it. Caldwell had been trying to get in touch with Leslie Post for the same reason, trying to get an appointment to discuss the publication of the book. But Farney was not bought off. The fact he owed back room rent, and was known to be broke, is proof enough of that. He was killed to keep him quiet. He knew too much."

In the moments of silence that followed, Frank Havens turned the particulars of

what Van had said over in his mind. There were spaces to be filled in, but he knew they would come later.

"What's your next move?" he asked, after a moment.

"I have briefed Inspector Gregg and everything is ready for the final curtain," Van Loan replied. "All I need now is word from Chip Dorlan. When that comes I'll close in!"

Across the room, Havens caught sight of the manager of the Belfair. The man stood at the head of the main aisle, a memo slip between his fingers, his gaze wandering over the luncheon crowd. Suddenly he came down the aisle to their table.

"Mr. Havens, I thought you had left," he said suavely. "Sorry to break in on your luncheon, but there is a call for you on my office telephone."

"For me?" Havens began to rise.

"From a Mr. Dorlan," the manager added. "He says it is urgent. . . ."

THE sun, circling into the west, was round and red when the Phantom's black car moved across the Whitestone Bridge, heading for Long Island.

He drove at legal speed, satisfied no gray coupé or other car hung behind him. Expectancy ran like quicksilver through his veins. As he had told Havens at lunch, he believed the last scene in the final act of the dark drama of death was about to be played and the curtain lowered. He believed it more than ever, since that phone call from Chip Dorlan.

With a whisper of multi-cylinders, the car sped along. The whirr of the tires was like the tempo of Van's shifting thoughts.

Far down the parkway, he turned off onto a macadam road and followed that for some twelve miles over an expanse of flat, uninteresting terrain. The sun was down now. Blue twilight made shadows along the highway. Lights were in the windows of the buildings he passed. He watched the road signs as he went along.

Finally, at a junction, he saw a marker that said, "Silver Harbor, 6 m." He took that road.

It ran northeast and the flat lowlands began to turn into hills. He was approaching the aristocratic North Shore of the Island, that part of it well down its harbor-dented length. He went on through small, sleepy towns and before long sighted water from the top of a hill.

In the distance spread the Sound, melting away to the far Connecticut shore. It lay dark and calm, a black mirror under a sprinkle of misty stars beginning to dot the sky.

Following Chip's directions, Van drove past a garage that had suspended operations for the day. The road narrowed to single car width. He rounded a thick grove of trees, found a cleared space beyond and took the car into it. A screen of shrubbery hid the black car. He locked it after switching off the lights, and started down the road.

A quarter of a mile further on the lights of a small inn made pinpoints of fire. Van approached it slowly. The green of a lawn came down to meet him. A stone wall loomed up, ivy-grown.

He paused there, waiting. Then, from out of the gloom on the opposite side of the wall, he saw a figure move toward him. The voice of Chip Dorlan came through the shadows.

"Right on time."

Dorlan sat down on the wall. The Phantom dropped down beside him.

"Nice work, Chip," he said. "Any trouble?"

"Shagging the party you put me on?" Chip Dorlan laughed under his breath. "Plenty! He was as hard to tag as one of the fleas in a Broadway circus. All he did in town was to drop in at different taverns and make phone calls. I don't know who he is, but one thing's a sure bet. He hasn't been in Manhattan for a long time—if he ever was before. The place had him spellbound."

"He hails from Nevada," the Phantom told him. "How about the phone calls? Did you get in on any of them?"

"Only one. The last he made. That was to some woman, a dame named Ayre. He had evidently been trying to get word to her, get instructions from her. I was in the booth next to his at the Picadilly on Forty-third. I mopped up most of his conversation."

"Let's have it."

"Evidently," Dorlan said, "there's to be a council of war tonight. Plans for future operations. From what I overheard I gathered the head man of this outfit is going to decide whether to bow out and scam for Rio, or some place, or stick around and try to put a permanent muffler on—you!"

The Phantom's smile was grimly sardonic. "The council meets down here?"

he asked.

"Yes. At a place called Silver Sand. I cased that place when I arrived. It's a couple of miles up the shore from here. A big, elaborate set-up behind stone walls. English-type mansion with a private beach and all the trimmings. Must belong to a millionaire, at least."

"Thayer's there now?" asked the Phantom. "You didn't know his name of course, but he's the one you've been tailing."

"No, he's not to go until nine. He's hanging out in the bar yonder." Chip nodded toward the inn.

The Phantom's eyes narrowed. "Has he seen anyone since he arrived? Made any more phone calls?"

Dorlan shook his head. "No. I've covered him like a plaster."

"Then," the Phantom told him, "you can relax. Is there another hotel around here where we can get dinner? I want to do some telephoning of my own."

"There's a small place called the Red Gate House, that's not far—over toward the public beach."

"We'll try it."

The Phantom slid off the wall, and the two started off for the car.

An old-fashioned hostelry, the Red Gate House was of the type found at the shore and tenanted, season after season, by the same vacationists. Now that the season was over, there were only one or two guests in its glass-enclosed porch dining room. The Phantom looked them over carefully before he went in with Dorlan. If the crime clan were gathering for that night there was a good chance that some of the others in the murder ring would be around, waiting for nine o'clock and the big boss. But he saw no one who aroused his suspicions.

Their meal over, the Phantom closeted himself in a telephone booth, a stack of coins on the shelf. He was busy for some ten or fifteen minutes, issuing directions, giving orders.

When he hung up and came out of the booth he was satisfied that the machinery of the law was in motion. It was ready, at last, to function swiftly and efficiently.

With Dorlan beside him he went up the beach. The tide was low, lipping along the sand flats. In the distance a motorboat chugged along, its engine sending back rhythmic echoes. A frail moon had joined the misty stars, but it was too new to supply any amount of light. The beach was filled with the same opaque gray-

ness, a shade darker, than had been in the front office of the Rookery Press. A breeze from the water began to blow inland, salt-tanged and cold.

The Phantom watched the illuminated hands on his watch dial mark off the crawling minutes. He explained what he wanted Chip to do as they walked along the hard-packed sand. Chip listened attentively, not missing a word.

The beach ended at a rocky, curving arm of land. There weather-beaten steps led up to higher ground.

"I'm leaving you here," the Phantom said, as he consulted his watch again. "It's forty-five minutes before the deadline hour. I'll be one of the first to arrive at Silver Sand."

Another minute and he went on alone, across the main road and into a lane that twisted off to the southwest.

Shrubbery brushed him. Once the branch of a low-growing tree struck against his left shoulder to remind him that while it had healed it was not altogether right yet. He had Lawson Thayer to thank for that. Thayer, and the brain of the man who had directed the editor's midnight activities in Sonajo.

With luck, the Phantom told himself, that score would be settled soon!

The lane ended at a high stone wall. The bronze gates were shut. Through their ornate bars Van had a night-obscured glimpse of lawns and terraces, of gardens, and the white shine of what he took to be a swimming pool somewhere in the middle distance.

But he was more interested in the wall and the gates. He closed in, feeling for alarm wires. His pencil torch, its lens adjusted so that its beam was pin-thin, stabbed around the bronze barricade. There was no wiring visible and the locks were such that, for the first time, he could remember, his master-key would be useless. For these locks were electrically beamed from the house.

The Phantom went along beside the wall. As Chip had told him, the estate covered plenty of ground. The wall ran almost a third of a mile before it cut off in another direction. The Phantom saw he would have to scale it.

He walked on until he found the means for doing that. Just ahead was an elm tree. Its stout, spreading branches grew up and over the wall. Van climbed the tree nimbly. The branch along which he inched himself swayed perilously under

his weight. He heard a warning snap and let go before it broke. He dropped loosely onto the closely cropped lawn on the inside of the wall. The branch of the elm snapped back into place with a shower of leaves.

CHAPTER XIX

HOOR OF NINE



KEEPING to the shadows, the the Phantom pressed on toward his goal.

That, he saw after another interval, was a many-chimneyed, winged building, built majestically on a knoll that gave its hundred windows an unobstructed view of the sea.

There was a light in a room on the second floor. A dim glow came from several windows on the first floor. A portecochere jutted out from a pillared front entrance and on its blue-stone drive the Phantom saw a parked car.

Closer to it, he determined its color and type. A gray coupé! The murder car—the same vehicle from whose wound-down window a gun had emptied slugs into Harley Holt!

The hood was still warm. The coupé had not been there long.

The Phantom stepped away from it, his eyes following the curve of the driveway until it lost itself in the gloom. The twin gates before which he had stopped, he realized then, were not the main entrance to Silver Sand. The drive went in a different direction. He moved his shoulders and, still deep in shadow, turned to face the house.

Getting into it would offer no problem. He had the choice of a number of doors. There were doorways for service deliveries, side exits, doors to sunrooms, and long French doors opening into what was probably a dining room. The Phantom checked them off in turn. He decided to use a door in the north wing.

Reaching the place he selected, again he felt around for alarm wiring. This time he located it on the knob side of the door in the form of an insulated cable going down to the ground and through the masonry at loam level.

He had come prepared for emergencies. So a small steel tool took care of the alarm system. The Phantom shorted it deftly, and made use of his master-key. He

entered the house—into Stygian blackness.

His flash showed him he was in a playroom of tremendous proportions. Pool and pingpong tables, an immense fireplace, lounge chairs and brightly covered wicker divans were grouped around on the stone floor. He made his way between them, through a door, and out into a passage that took him to the central unit of the huge house.

Silver Sand, he saw, had been built with a lavish hand, but the builder had not possessed taste and culture. This place had been done in the grand manner, but with no regard for period or decorative values. It was as over elaborate as the crowded movie set of a millionaire's home. A wide, circular entrance hall, with a gigantic chandelier dripping crystal prisms, with mounted armor and brass-bound spiral stairs, showed that.

A wall of mirrors on one side held the glimmer of the Phantom's reflection. Fortunately the incandescence of the chandelier was turned off. The only light entering came in through the transom over the immense front door.

The Phantom listened.

Whoever had parked the gray coupé was somewhere in the house, but no sound came to strained ears. Only the sigh of the freshening breeze outside.

He decided to climb the staircase, after a glance at his watch. As an uninvited guest, it was necessary for him to determine where he would secrete himself, and not too much time remained.

On quick silent feet he went up the spiral stairs, the brass bannister like ice to his touch. The last step, broader than the others, was level with a corridor so wide and deep that a small apartment might have been built within it.

The Phantom stiffened. The lighted window that had caught his attention from the grounds outside was in a room to the left of where he stood. The door was slightly ajar and from it came a sweetish, aromatic smell of cigarette smoke. The aroma drew the Phantom's brows together. It sent his mind back to the apartment in the Monterey Arms, to the lavender-tipped stub of the cigarette he had found in a crystal dish. The tobacco he smelled was the scented variety that only a woman would use.

Loro Ayre?

The Phantom breathed in the perfumed scent as he moved across the wide hall.

He peered in through the half-open door. From where he stood he had a diagonal view of a small lounge or sitting room. It was a colorful, overdecorated retreat with tapestry-covered walls. Glass and silver shimmered in the mellow glow of two gold-shaded lamps.

The room was empty.

Silently the Phantom glided into it. On his left was an arched door, hung with a Chinese drapery. The lazy air currents carried the perfumed cigarette smoke through it.

QUICKLY the Phantom's gaze ranged the room. Opposite him was a lacquered cabinet. On its flat top was an immense silver bowl in which hothouse roses made a flash of yellow.

The Phantom went over to the cabinet. He took something out of his pocket and shoved it behind the silver bowl. As he stepped away, the Chinese drapery fluttered and a woman came into the room.

She stood framed in the archway. Slender, vividly blond, her gray-green eyes darted swiftly to the man before her. She made no move as a faint, enigmatic smile touched her lipsticked mouth.

In the voice the Phantom had heard answering Alfred Petrie's call at the Rookery Press, she said:

"Aren't you a trifle early?"

The Phantom met the cool regard of her level gaze. He knew that she had recognized him. Burke had supplied her with his description, and undoubtedly she had verified it that morning when Petrie had called her. For he was still in his Mr. Gray disguise.

Yet no shadow of fear was on her bland face. The mahogany-tipped fingers holding her cigarette were steady, unmoving. The Phantom felt a tingle of admiration for her cool poise.

If Loro Ayre was frightened, she was doing a perfect job of concealing it.

"Mr. Delafield hasn't arrived yet?" the Phantom asked, and his tone was quiet and even. He spoke as if he were an invited guest to the murder convention.

"Mr. Delafield?" Loro Ayre's delicately arched brows rose inquiringly.

"Mr. Rowley Delafield," the Phantom said. "The man responsible for your presence here tonight—and mine!"

The gray-green eyes narrowed slightly. A smile touched the corners of the blond woman's curved, red lips.

"So you know?" she drawled.

"It had to be someone as powerful and as rich as the Delafield brothers!" he said, his tone positive, but also challenging. "It had to be men like them, who could intimidate the citizens of the town they own! Someone who could issue murder orders and have them carried out with quick efficiency! But it also had to be someone who had to hide behind the black veil of mystery! I think the deduction is plain."

Loro Ayre's smile faded. She dropped the cigarette in a dish on the table beside her and sank down into the cushions of a small brocaded sofa. Her gray-green eyes never left Van.

"Your investigation is complete to the last detail, isn't it?" she said. "I wonder how you decided upon Mr. Delafield."

He might as well tell her now as any time, he decided.

"Caldwell's expose—the book he was hiring Hugh Farney to write with material Caldwell furnished, had to be sensational," the Phantom said. "It had to bring out into the light certain facts concerning corruption and crime and those responsible for it. It—"

She laughed, low in her throat.

"It had to turn the searchlight of publicity on the Delafield Associates," she said. "Is that what you're trying to say? Naturally, neither Rowley nor Grover Delafield could permit that." Her blond head tilted back against the upholstery. "So something had to be done . . . How did you learn all this?"

Across the room, the hands of an electric clock moved slowly toward the hour of nine. The Phantom, confronting her, smiled for the first time since he had entered the room. He had to give her more grudging admiration. As an actress she was superb.

"What was the title of Caldwell's book to be?" he asked her.

She frowned, then her lips twisted, "The Hidden Empire," she said. "The fool! Even with all his documented facts, the months of investigation Caldwell made in Nevada, his own experiences with the Delafields, and a brief case full of data! And all for what? For ashes! And death!"

She broke off abruptly and the Phantom caught her swift glance at the door, which she as quickly tried to hide. His smile disappeared. His lips tightened.

"Clever, Miss Ayre," he drawled. "Revealing facts to me just to stall along. Who is it you expect?"

The door through which the Phantom had come began to open. Loro Ayre straightened on the brocaded couch. The look in her eyes was warning enough for the Phantom. But he made no move to draw his holstered gun when a step sounded on the rug and a man entered.

He was a gross, florid-faced man with a shock of coarse, graying hair, a leathery skin and smoldering eyes. A gun was in his right hand, a long-barreled Colt. Rowley Delafield of course, as the Phantom had expected, complete down to the cigar ashes on his half-buttoned vest, as he had been when Van had seen him in Nevada.

THE Colt in the man's hand covered the Phantom. Without moving his huge head, or shifting the stub of the cigar in his flaccid mouth, Delafield said:

"Come in, Max!"

The Phantom's arms moved out from his sides. Delafield took a few more steps closer. Behind him, another man entered the room—a man familiar to the Phantom, a wedge-faced character with a pushed-back felt hat on his head and an automatic between his fingers.

Max's mouth was a thin streak. Something danced in his slitlike eyes—glints of expectancy. He took a position close to the hulking Rowley Delafield, the lamp-light gleaming on his gun.

"So we meet again, Mr. Gray?" Delafield's tone was harshly suppressed. "I made a mistake that day I saw you in Sonajo. You should never have got out of my office alive!"

"Mistakes," Loro Ayre murmured from the little sofa, "can be rectified!"

Delafield grunted. "What has he been saying to you?" he asked the Ayre woman, still without turning his head. "I heard you two talking."

"He knows everything!" she said flatly.

Delafield's smoldering eyes were half-masked by the lids that came down over them. The wedge-faced man beside him twisted his mouth nervously. Like a rock, the uncrowned king of Nevada's silver mines stood there, thrusting his head forward.

"It's a worked-out vein!" he admitted. "What if he does know that—now? It's too late for him to do anything about it. Nobody crosses a Delafield and gets away with it!"

There was a rasp in his voice as he made his statement. As it ended, the Phantom's listening ears caught the throb

of a car stopping on the blue-stone drive outside. The motor was shut off. Doors were opened and closed.

Delafield's heavy-lidded eyes flickered in Max's direction.

"Bring 'em up!" he ordered, talking around his cigar.

Max let himself out of the room. From the sofa Loro Ayre said:

"What are you going to do with him? You can kill him, but that won't help you—or me—much. You don't think for a minute he'd come down here unprepared, do you? Or that he is the only one who knows what he has discovered? He can shut them up."

The Phantom glanced in her direction. The blood was backing up in his outstretched arms. He lifted them to start circulation, keenly interested in Delafield's reply.

It came with a snarl.

"I'll kill him and we'll take our chances! The idea was to get undercover, anyway! If Burke talked—and he must have—the fat's in the fire!"

"Why don't you try buying him off? You—with your millions!" Loro Ayre bent forward. "Caldwell didn't fall for money, but maybe Mr. Gray will be different."

Delafield's expression changed. A look of cunning crept into his leathery face. The cigar bobbed as he chewed on it. What the blond woman said had evidently given him an idea.

"Sure!" he finally said. "How much can a detective collect—even a top one like this hombre? What does he get out of throwing me into jail? A lot of fame, but what can you buy with that?"

The Phantom heard the tread of approaching feet out in the wide corridor. The hands of the electric clock in the shadows marked the hour of nine exactly. He smiled thinly. Delafield's murder merchants were prompt in keeping their appointment.

"Make him an offer!" Loro Ayre sounded impatient. "And while you're doing it you'd better have Max look him over for weapons."

The door opened and three men came in. One of them was, as the Phantom had expected, Lawson Thayer.

In the light of the gold-shaded lamps Thayer's face wore a startled look. He shot a searching stare at the Phantom and glanced hastily away. He was as well-groomed and as dapper as he had been

in the air-conditioned office of the Sonajo Bugle. The Phantom noticed his well-cared-for hands. But he also noticed that the star-sapphire ring was missing from the finger it had previously adorned.

CHAPTER XX

EMPTY KINGDOM



NOT unfamiliar to the Phantom was the other man who had trailed in. Tall, wearing his city clothes awkwardly, the Phantom pegged him as one of the night crowd that had picked him up back of the Frontier House and taken him out to the abandoned Rosebud Mine. He was the gangling individual who had circled around the others at the mouth of the shaft and grabbed for Van's throat, just at the moment the Phantom had thought he might get away.

"Frisk him!" Delafield said to Max, nodding toward the Phantom.

The wedge-faced man obeyed. He tossed the automatic in the Phantom's shoulder holster over to Thayer who caught it, looked at it, and handed it to Delafield who stuffed it in his pocket.

"That's all," Max said, as he turned around.

"I'm going to make this hombre a cash offer," Delafield said to Thayer. "What do you think of the idea?"

"Offer?" Thayer said hastily. "Don't do it! He'll trick you! I've had a sample of the way he works!"

He was referring to the bottom of the mine shaft where the Phantom had been tossed. Van's smile was quick and genuine as he thought of it.

Rowley Delafield drew in a deep breath of air.

"Then let's get it over with!" he growled.

He raised his left hand to motion to Max and to the tall, gangling Westerner who stood waiting and watching. The Phantom looked at the eyes fastened on him.

"Just a minute, Mr. Delafield," he said coolly. "Before you satisfy your murder lust further, I think there's something you ought to know."

He stopped, conscious that Loro Ayre was studying him intently, that Thayer's close-set eyes had come back to center on him again.

"What ought I to know?" Delafield demanded curtly.

"Shall I tell him, Thayer?" the Phantom asked quietly.

Lawson Thayer took a step back. "Tell him—what?"

"About your deal with me?"

A rush of color poured into Thayer's face. He whirled around to meet Rowley Delafield's quick stare. Thayer choked.

"He's trying to trick you!" he cried thinly.

"Shall I tell him," the Phantom went on, his voice quickening, "how you were promised immunity to throw in on the law's side? About my 'miraculous' escape from the mine, or that telegram you sent Miss Ayre?"

"Telegram?" The word burnt simultaneously from Delafield and Loro Ayre, though with different intonations.

"He's lying!" Thayer's eyes blazed. "He's trying to talk his way out of this! Trying to pin something on me that doesn't exist—to save himself!"

"A telegram," the Phantom went on relentlessly, as though Thayer had not interrupted to protest, "stating that Delafield had left Sonajo for New York, and that he had sent a check as a final payment to Loro Ayre for her part in the plot! A telegram that advised me I could move in on Delafield, that he was close at hand! How else would I have known about this place, or about your nine o'clock rendezvous? Thayer supplied all the information!"

The red flush faded out of Thayer's face. It was left white and chalky. For in the Phantom's statement had been the ring of conviction and Thayer had been quick to note that. For the Phantom had used all of his ability to get it over.

For just an instant he was not sure whether or not his accusation had registered with the impact he wanted. Then, in the next breath-take, he saw that Rowley Delafield believed him.

Delafield swung around on Thayer with an oath.

"You double-crossing skunk!" he roared. "I might have known this fellow couldn't have got out of that mine without help! So you sold out to save your own hide!"

"Listen!" Thayer was pleading. "I swear—"

Delafield's big left hand smashed across Thayer's pale face. The heel of it cracked

against Thayer's nose. He yelped with pain while the enraged Delafield used a foot to crash down on Thayer's well-creased trouser leg.

With a smothered scream of pain, Lawson Thayer reeled backwards. Max grabbed him by the shoulder. At the same moment Loro Ayre jumped up from the sofa.

"Wait!" she cried. "Maybe this man is lying! That telegram—I tore it up! It was in the library! This—this Phantom was there last night!"

DELAFIELD had half turned away from the Phantom. The stab of blind rage had made him focus his full attention on Thayer. While Max held Thayer, Delafield, infuriated, cracked the butt of the Colt down on the carefully brushed black hair. The Phantom saw his chance and seized it.

He was close to the lacquered cabinet on which stood the silver bowl filled with yellow roses. What he had hidden there, when he had first entered the room, was a small but deadly automatic. An emergency gun, stashed conveniently for a climactic moment such as this one.

His strong fingers clamped over it. He pulled the gun clear. Three steps carried him swiftly up to Rowley Delafield. He stuck the nose of his weapon into the man's fat back.

In the same move his left arm clamped around Delafield's bull-like neck. To make it complete he wedged a knee under the man's spine and jammed it down hard.

"All right, Delafield!" His voice held the ring of steel. "Drop your gun!"

As he gave the order he snugged in closer behind the fleshy shield of the Nevada silver king's body. This time the gangling Westerner would not be able to cut in from the side. Max couldn't use the glinting gun he held. The Phantom had suddenly snatched command of the situation.

He heard Loro Ayre's sibilant outcry. Max pushed Thayer away from him. The editor of the *Sonajo Bugle* fell face-down a stream of scarlet gushing from the wound made by the pistol butt which Delafield had wielded above one ear.

"Quick!" the blond woman shrilled. "Cars—outside!"

Delafield writhed in the inexorable grasp that held him, viselike. The Phantom had the impression of hanging on to a whale. Twice the man tried to use his

boot heels to break his captor's shins, but futilely. A torrent of oaths poured out of his open mouth, gasped with what little breath was left in the throat the Phantom's arms held in paralyzing grip.

Max made a spurt toward the door. He tore it open, sent a glance down the hall and slammed the door shut.

"Cops!" he shouted.

In a frenzy of terror he jammed a chair under the knob of the door and made a dash for the windows. The draperies split under his forward rush. He had a window open in a flash and had started squirming across the sill when the Phantom eased the gun out of Rowley Delafield's back long enough to snap-shoot over the man's shoulder. The wedge-faced Max screamed and toppled back into the room. Instantly the gun was jammed in Delafield's back again.

A pounding on the door followed the echoes of the Phantom's shot.

"Open up!" a bull voice roared. "The place is surrounded!"

Loro Ayre ran toward the arched entrance where the Chinese drapery hung. For a fleeting instant the Phantom saw her poised there, her gray-green eyes wide with terror. She disappeared as Delafield's struggles diminished.

The gun the Phantom held drew a bead on the gangling Westerner. He seemed to be in a dazed trance. The six-gun in his hand drooped. He was waiting for orders from the man who had brought him here from Nevada, but they didn't come.

Instead, the Phantom's voice issued a command: "Get that chair away and open the door!"

* * * * *

The combined forces of the New York Police Department, represented by Inspector Gregg and the men he had brought with him to Long Island, together with half a dozen constables headed by the county's Sheriff, took over a pine-paneled smoking room on the main floor of Silver Sand where they lined up the prisoners and gave first aid to the dapper Thayer and to Max.

The Phantom's shot, purposely fired low, had caught the hoodlum with the wedge-shaped face in the thigh. A doctor from a nearby hospital had taken care of the wound. Then the Phantom, after lingering for a few further words with Gregg, had gone out. There were other matters which claimed his attention.

Now the huge chandelier in the mas-

sive circular entry was a fountain of light. The Phantom passed the mounted armor and went into a card room. There, Frank Havens, Steve Huston and Chip Dorlan were waiting for him. He closed the door behind him and smiled.

"So," he said, "ends the saga of death, to which the second murder was the main clue. The Inspector and the sheriff have written *finis* to it. All of the Croesus wealth of the infamous Delafield brothers isn't enough to save them from the penalty the law will exact!"

HAVENS nodded. "Good work, Phantom! Now can you tell me what's in that envelope you mailed me with instructions not to open it?"

"A telegram," the Phantom said, "that did a lot toward saving my life. It was sent by Lawson Thayer to Loro Ayre. It read, 'D. has left for New York. Final check for twenty-five hundred has been mailed you.' It was signed, 'Lawson Thayer.'"

"Right under my eyes," Steve Huston murmured, "and I didn't see it. But I knew it was top bracket stuff."

"You suspected Delafield even before you found the torn telegram?" Chip Dorlan asked.

The Phantom dropped into a chair.

"Rowley Delafield," he said, "was the only person I talked to in Sonajo who didn't close up and refuse information when I mentioned the name of Clyde Caldwell. That fact, in itself, was a suspicion breeder. Then, too, who was important enough to be featured in whatever Caldwell wanted Farney to write?"

Frank Havens leaned slightly forward. "Would the book, muck-raking and sensational, really have led to the fall of the Delafields?" he asked.

"It would have done more than that." The Phantom's face became shadowed. "It traced the beginning of the Delafield's concealed empire. It told how the brothers, unscrupulous and clever, used every trick available to get started. Loro Ayre's statement to Gregg reveals that. Black-mail, bribery, force and intimidation—these were just a few of the methods Rowley and Grover Delafield, who is in Europe, used to raise themselves to wealth and power. Caldwell had the facts cold, and the Delafields knew that if the book ever came out they were sure to face a Federal investigation." He smiled slightly. "Grover may be more fortunate

than his brother. He will never return to this country."

"No wonder Caldwell had to be stopped before any publisher had a hint of what he contemplated authorizing through Farney," Steve put in. "Which reminds me. Farney had done some business before with the Ayre woman, hadn't he?"

"Odd jobs, now and then. Rewrites and ghost stuff. An intelligent young lady," the Phantom added. "Too bad she let Delafield's money get her into this. It'll be a long time before she does any more publishing, unless it's a prison paper."

The Cadillac belonging to the men of the *Clarion* was outside. Huston was in a hurry to get back to New York and make the first edition of the next day's paper with his story. This would be a story, he enthused, so sensational that everybody in the metropolis the paper served would read it wonderingly.

The red-headed reporter hurried out to the car. The Phantom said good night to Chip Dorlan, adding the same thanks he had bestowed upon Steve.

Alone with Havens, he said: "I've got my car cached a couple of miles from here. The walk down the beach to get it will do me good. Clear my head."

The publisher's hand closed over Van's. "I'll telephone Durham Holt the minute I get back to town. Burke was the actual killer, Phantom?" As close as Havens was to Dick Van Loan, never did he call Van by his real name when on a case.

"But Rowley Delafield's hand pulled the trigger," the Phantom said soberly.

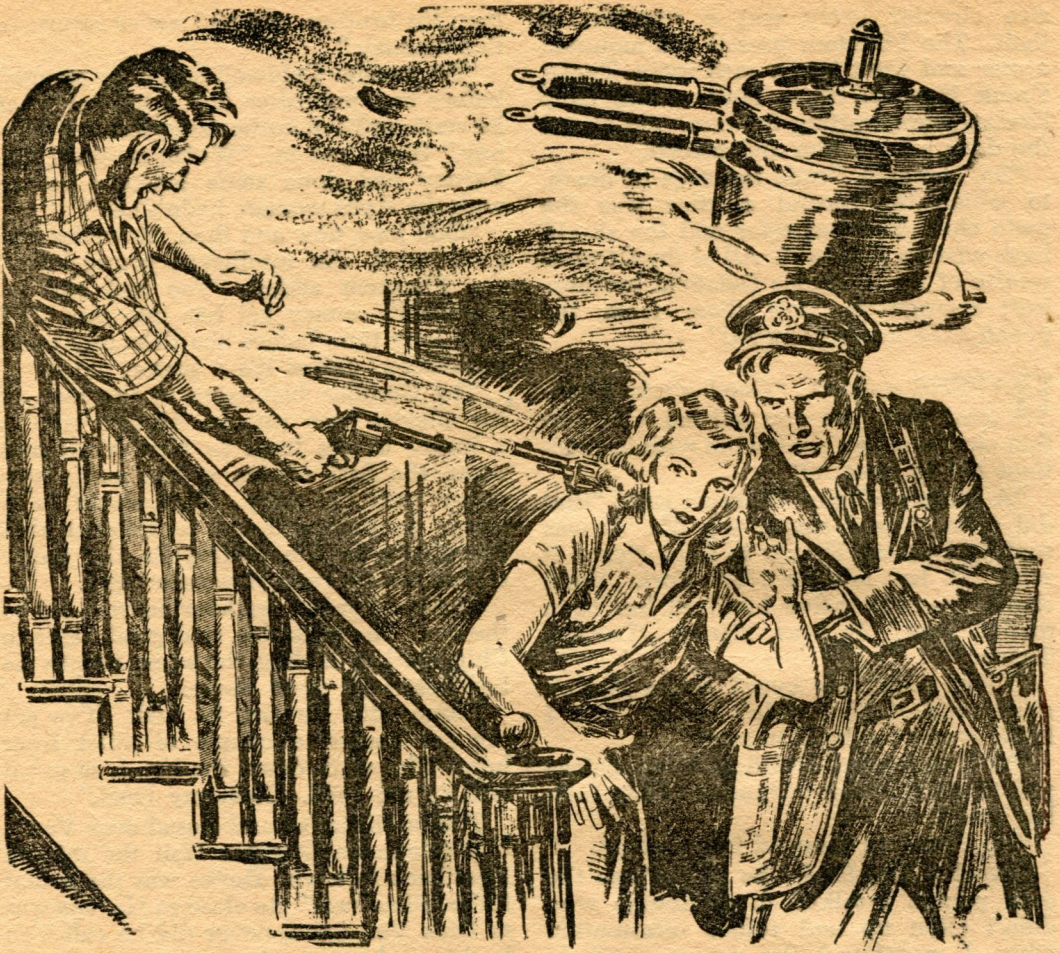
The Cadillac sped off.

The Phantom went through the open gates at the end of the driveway at Silver Sand. The case was over, closed and finished. Tomorrow Dick Van Loan would be back in circulation. On Saturday he would take dark-eyed Muriel to the Andy Hubbell's supper dance as he promised. Murder, for the moment, had slunk back into its subterranean lair.

But the Phantom knew it would reappear and that he would be called upon again to solve some new and difficult case.

The sea breeze blew in his face, cool and invigorating. Just before he went between the gates and out to the road that led to the beach, he turned for a last glance at the bulking expanse of the palace that the crimes of the Delafield brothers had purchased.

An empty palace now, Van thought. One without a king!



A hard-faced thug, in a loud sport shirt, jumped into view, his gun flaming

CASH UNDER THE TABLE

By NORMAN W. HAY

Jack Martin of the F. B. I. uses a bit of domestic knowledge to help him solve the odd case of the hot car and the knife murder!

WITH his very best girl beside him, Tom Bartlet carefully braked his new, cream-colored convertible to a halt before the toll gate of the Hendrik Hudson Bridge, which spans the Harlem River from the tip of Manhattan Island to the choice Riverdale suburb.

A uniformed toll collector took a shiny quarter from young Bartlet and returned

fifteen cents in change. Then a gray-eyed man in dark civilian clothes stepped out of the toll booth.

"Would you mind pulling off the road there," this man said.

Bartlet's eyes fastened on the gold F.B.I. badge that the speaker revealed in the palm of his hand. "But I haven't done anything," the owner of the convertible protested.

"I just want to check your engine number," the G-man said, and he smiled pleasantly at the pretty brunette beside Bartlet.

Driving off the road behind the toll booth, Bartlet watched the F.B.I. agent take a small black book from his pocket and lift up the engine hood of the convertible.

A very guilty feeling suddenly possessed Tom Bartlet, who was a quite-ordinary-looking youth dressed in gabardine slacks and sleeveless tan shirt open at the neck. A commercial artist by trade, he had his up's and down's. But a flood of work for the American Cracker Company was now bringing him in enough money to support a wife. And Bartlet had planned to pop the question to Miss Madge Holt this very afternoon up in the lovely Westchester hills.

"Everything is all right, honey," Bartlet whispered to her. "Don't get worried. He's most likely just checking up on stolen cars. Sometimes they're transported across state lines and that makes it a federal case."

"I'm not worried, Tom," Madge Holt said. "But I wish he would hurry. He's got a large magnifying glass in his hand now."

JACK MARTIN, the Government man, was comparing the engine number of the convertible with the numbers listed in his little black book, and the magnifying glass revealed to his trained eyes that an expert job had been done in changing two of the numerals stamped on the engine block. But the remainder of the series told him that this was one of the cream-colored convertibles that had been high-jacked from a truck only last week in New Jersey.

Putting the engine hood down, Martin dropped the black book and magnifying glass into the pocket of his blue suit and walked over to the running board beside the steering wheel.

"Are you the owner?" Martin asked with a poker face.

"Yes, here's the registration certificate," Bartlet said defensively, extracting a greenish-yellow document from his wallet. "I only bought the car this morning."

Martin could see that the certificate was counterfeit. "How much did you pay for the car?" he asked casually.

"Sixteen hundred dollars," said the

commercial artist uneasily. "That's the list price."

"And how much under the table?" asked Martin, glancing at the pretty brunette.

Bartlet also glanced at the girl. He took his time in answering.

"This car had been driven one hundred miles," the artist explained. "That made it second hand. I don't know why it's any of your business, but if you've got to know, I did give five hundred dollars extra."

So far so good, Jack Martin thought. Sometimes it was difficult to get car owners to admit their duplicity. The Government man was pretty sure that Tom Bartlet was not a thief. But Martin, seasoned operative that he was, knew that he must ignore his own sentiments in the case and guide his actions by the evidence alone.

"Well, prepare yourself for a shock, young man," Martin said. "You are out twenty-one hundred dollars. This is a stolen car."

"What!" Bartlet exclaimed, his eyes wide and staring. "A stolen car? That can't be true! I can't afford to lose all that money. You must have made a mistake."

"Who did you buy it from?" Martin asked quickly.

"A man by the name of Harry Hanson," Bartlet replied, wiping perspiration from his brow. "He lives in a rooming house on Twentieth Street. I found his ad in the morning paper. After talking with him, we went down to a parking lot and looked at the car, and then I went to the bank and drew my money out. I can prove all that."

"Turn the car around to go back to New York," Jack Martin instructed. "Then wait for me."

The F.B.I. man went into the toll booth and called his headquarters in Manhattan. He was ordered to proceed to Hanson's rooming house with Tom Bartlet, make an arrest upon identification, and hold Bartlet as a witness. Martin then walked out and got into the club seat of the convertible.

On the way down the express highway along the landscaped bank of the Hudson River, Martin asked questions and got more of the story from Bartlet. It was convincing in its simplicity. It was also the tale of a man swindled out of his savings by a crude trick. Yet Jack Mar-

tin could easily understand how badly Bartlet wanted a handsome automobile with which to impress his girl.

However, the case would not stop with the arrest and conviction of Hanson, the man who had duped Bartlet. Theft of new and used automobiles had the Federal Bureau of Investigation working overtime these days, all because the public was desperate to get cars and didn't take the necessary pains to determine ownership. The passage of money above the list price of cars made every deal a bit shady, so that each new purchaser felt guilty—just as guilty as Tom Bartlet now looked as he sat beside his girl.

"Right after paying Hanson," Bartlet tried to explain, "I went downtown for the license plates. Then I called Madge to take a drive. I'm no crook. I can prove everything. I'm a commercial artist and work hard for my money."

"There are times when we could use an artist's eye in our business," Jack Martin remarked. "This could be one of them."

LEAVING the highway by the ramp at Eighteenth Street, Bartlet drove up Tenth Avenue and into Twentieth. As soon as they started up the block, it was obvious that something was amiss in front of Hanson's rooming house. A police car stood before the stoop and two uniformed men were ordering the curious to walk on.

Martin got out of the convertible first and flashed his badge on one of the police officers.

"What's the matter?" the G-man asked.

"Murder upstairs, second-floor front," the cop replied. "Man by the name of Hanson was stabbed in the chest. The landlady found him and she's having hysterics on the third floor."

As Martin turned with a shudder, he saw a large black sedan pull up behind the cream-colored convertible. Four G-men colleagues got out of the sedan. Martin whispered to one of them to remain with the girl. Then he motioned for Tom Bartlet to follow him into the rooming house.

The unexpected turn of the case made Jack Martin sorry for young Bartlet—and also suspicious of him. For no man likes to pay five hundred dollars more than the list price of an automobile. Hot words often follow such a deal, and

hot words often lead to blows. As an artist, Bartlet could very well prove to be temperamental. In the eyes of the New York police, the artist would be the first suspect.

At the head of the stairs, Martin led Bartlet to the front room, where a uniformed patrolman stepped away from the door. Inside, the G-man saw the body in the middle of the room, stretched on the floor without any clothing, chest splashed with crimson, eyes rolled back—a ghastly sight for anyone to behold.

But this was not the time for squeamishness nor regard for a suspect's feelings.

Martin stepped aside as Bartlet entered the room.

"Is that the man you killed after paying for the car?" Martin asked flatly.

Bartlet's reaction was a throaty gasp and he stepped quickly back, hands out in front to blind the view of the dead man.

"No-o-o!" he suddenly cried. "I didn't kill anybody!"

The police sergeant in charge got up from a chair. "Who is this prisoner, Jack?" the officer asked, recognizing Martin from previous old cases.

"Cover up the body, sergeant," Martin replied. Then, to Bartlet, "Sit down and collect your wits. When you're ready, tell us if that's the man you called Harry Hanson."

Every policeman's eye was upon Bartlet as he slumped into a chair, wiping his damp forehead with a handkerchief.

"It's Hanson, all right," the artist said. "But I didn't kill him. I left him in this room, after paying him when I came back from the bank. I told you everything before. Perhaps I did buy a stolen car, but I didn't know it." His head lifted quickly. "Madge had nothing to do with the car. You can put me in jail, but please leave her out of this."

The gray-haired police sergeant made a signal to Martin, then turned to Bartlet. "What did you do with all of Hanson's clothes?" he asked. "You took his suitcase. You didn't leave anything in the room except the naked corpse. Did you think we wouldn't be able to identify him?"

"I tell you I didn't do it!" Bartlet said wildly. "When I left him, he had his clothes on. His suitcase was right there on the bed."

Jack Martin's eyes sharpened. "How

do you know it was on the bed?" he asked.

Bartlet ran his hands through his hair. "I notice things like that," he tried to explain. "The sun was shining through the window and it hit the bureau mirror, and then it was reflected on a pressure cooker on the bed. The suitcase was open beside it, but stuffed full of clothes."

Martin bit his lips. He could understand how an artist would be concerned with sunlight, particularly if it was reflected from a mirror upon a stainless steel object like a pressure cooker. But there was no pressure cooker in the room now, as Martin looked about, and no suitcase. Perhaps Bartlet had been getting ready to pack the cooker and was trying to figure out how to get such a large object into his suitcase.

"Sergeant," Martin said to the police official, "the dead man was part of a ring of car thieves operating in New Jersey. He could have been murdered by Bartlet. He also could have been killed by the gang, who didn't want him identified. Fingerprints might show who he was. I don't think his name was Harry Hanson. What does the landlady say about it?"

THE police sergeant revealed that a man answering Bartlet's description had called at the rooming house at nine o'clock and asked to see Hanson, who had taken the room the day before. Bartlet and Hanson then went out, and Hanson came back alone. Four other men called, but Hanson had told the landlady that he didn't want to see them. Then Bartlet appeared, went up to the room, and came down not long afterward. Bartlet had been in a hurry. Other men began to call, until the landlady got tired of sending them away.

She went upstairs to complain to Hanson, but he didn't answer her knock. With her passkey, she went into his room, and there he was on the floor with a knife in his chest. So she had a fit. Rushing out to the street, she screamed for the police, and soon a squad car turned up. Then the sergeant came from the station house.

Jack Martin turned to Bartlet. "Look around the room and see if you can notice anything missing or added since you last saw it," he instructed.

Bartlet's frightened eyes searched the

room carefully.

"I think there was a photograph on the bureau," he soon said. "That was all—no, there was a corrugated cardboard box and some brown wrapping paper on the desk. The box was about the size of the pressure cooker."

"Just a moment," the F.B.I. man said, getting up.

He went outside to the hall where two colleagues waited, and he told them to search the house from top to bottom for a pressure cooker and a suitcase. Asking where the landlady was, Martin went up a flight of stairs to a bedroom with an open door. There was a man with glasses and a goatee sitting beside a woman who lay in bed.

"I'm from the Federal Bureau of Investigation," Martin told the doctor. "I'd like to ask this woman a few questions."

"Well, not too many," advised the medico.

"It was simply dreadful," the landlady started to moan. "Nothing like it has ever happened in my house before. I don't want to talk about it."

"Well, there are times when we do have to talk about those things," Martin said politely. "I wanted to know if you own a pressure cooker."

"No, I wouldn't have one in the house," the landlady said, sitting up. "A friend of mine was burned by one."

"But they are very good things," Martin said easily. "You only have to learn to regulate them, and then there is no danger. They're pretty hard to get these days, so many women are asking for them. Do you know if Mr. Hanson had one?"

"You can't cook in my rooms," the landlady snapped. "It's against the Fire Regulations. Young women are always cooking in their rooms. That's why I won't have them."

"Did Hanson have any callers besides the young man you described?" Martin inquired. "Did anybody else go up to his room after that young man left?"

"No, he must have killed him," the landlady said. "But I can't watch the front door all the time, and it's possible someone else could have come in and left while I was busy in the back."

"Did you talk with Hanson this morning?" asked the F.B.I. man.

"Only when he came back from breakfast," said the landlady. "He tipped his

hat. He was a nice man. He said I was looking well this morning."

"Was that all?"

"Yes, but when I was going through the hall a little later, he opened his door and asked me where the post office was, so I told him on Tenth between Twenty-third and Twenty-fourth Streets."

Martin swiftly got to his feet, his eyes sharp. He turned and went out of the room, running down the stairs quickly. On the floor below, he called his confederates. They ran out to the big sedan, piled in, and sped off.

Here was a possible break in the case—a much more important clue than Martin had hoped for. It was more important than the arrest of Tom Bartlet and the murder of the so-called Harry Hanson. It could lead to the hide-out of the automobile thieves in New Jersey.

Turning the corner of Twentieth Street and Ninth Avenue, the G-men sped north to Twenty-third Street, then west to Tenth Avenue, and around the corner to pull up in front of the branch post office. Martin leaped out of the car and dashed inside. He was gone for about half an hour, and when he came back to the sedan, he ordered the driver to proceed to the Lincoln Tunnel under the Hudson River.

IT WAS late afternoon when Jack Martin and his colleagues met a mail truck on the outskirts of Nutley by appointment. Jack donned a uniform coat and a mail cap, then got into the truck with a package. He drove toward the poor section of town, followed by the sedan. Wheeling into an undeveloped side street, Martin drew up to a bungalow set back in the trees.

Package in hand, he went up the walk, whistling to himself. He knew that the men from the sedan were skirting through a back alley. Martin mounted the steps and crossed the veranda to ring the bell. He didn't have to wait.

A young woman with peroxide hair and too much lipstick opened the door.

"Something for me?" she asked.

"You'll have to sign for it," said Jack Martin casually, offering a book. "It feels like a pressure cooker. My wife's got one," he added, as the bogus blonde signed the book. "You want to be careful to remove the indicator on the top before you try to open the cover. That will let all the steam out. Then you

can't get a burn. They're wonderful things."

"I've wanted one for months," the blonde said. "I'll watch out about the indicator."

"I'll show you what I mean if you want to open it," said Jack Martin.

Alarm sprang into the woman's face. "No," she said quickly. "I'll manage it."

"It won't take a minute," said Jack Martin, pressing into the house.

"Get out of here!" the blonde shouted.

Martin caught her wrist and whirled her around in front of him with one hand. With the other hand, he drew a .45 caliber automatic from his shoulder holster. At once he heard someone running down the stairs just ahead of him.

"Bill!" shouted the blonde. "It's a trap! Look out!"

With a twist, Martin sent the blonde staggering into a side room. His automatic whipped up into aim as a hard-faced thug in a loud sport shirt jumped the remaining steps and came into view with a revolver in his hand. Martin ducked as the man's weapon crashed flame and thunder. Then the F.B.I. man fired, straight and fast, right into the thug's chest. With a horrible yell, the man fell forward.

Then there was the rush of feet in the back of the house. Men were trying to escape by another door. But the crash of shots, the shrill of whistles, and the cry of G-men drove the fugitives back.

Martin sprang through the hall. Out of a side room, a figure leaped at him, trying to grab the G-man's gun, and getting a grip on the barrel. Martin's left fist swung to the thug's jaw, knocking the man spinning backwards. He followed the man into the room, where the man grabbed up a knife from a table and sprang at him, screaming curses.

Martin's .45 drilled the thug in the shoulder.

He could hear the blonde yelling from the front of the house, where she had evidently been caught by fast-arriving G-men as she tried to escape. Martin looked at the wounded thug.

"You're a knife killer," said Martin. "Most likely you're the one who murdered Hanson on Twentieth Street. Delegated by the gang to watch him and make sure he didn't take a powder with the proceeds of the stolen car, you saw him slip out and mail the pressure cooker to the blond girl. You knew it was a

pressure cooker, because she had long wanted one. So, because you were jealous of him over the girl, you blew your top when you saw him mail the cooker, sneaked into the house after him, and stabbed him. Then you told the gang you rubbed him out because he was taking off with the car money."

The thug looked at him in amazement. "You was tailin' me," he accused.

Martin shook his head, snapped handcuffs on the man. "No," he said, "it was just a matter of deduction. The woman in the case wanted a pressure cooker. As simple as that, and because of it, another hot car ring bites the dust."

TWO months later, Tom Bartlet was driving a cream-colored convertible up the express highway along the landscaped shore of the Hudson River. A pretty brunette was beside him.

"Yes, this is the same car, honey," he said, smiling. "I got it at list price from the company from which it was stolen. Jack Martin found my money in that house in New Jersey, along with the photograph of the girl I'd seen on Hanson's bureau, and also the suitcase with his clothes. He sure is a great fellow."

"Here's the toll bridge, darling," Madge Holt warned. "I hope nothing else happens."

"It won't," Bartlet chuckled.

When the cream-colored convertible halted, a uniformed toll collector took a shiny quarter from young Bartlet and returned fifteen cents in change. Then a gray-eyed man in dark civilian clothes stepped out of the toll booth. "Would you mind pulling off the road there," said Jack Martin, grinning at the pretty brunette.

"Not again!" Tom Bartlet exploded.

"I just want to give you something," the F.B.I. man said.

Driving off the road behind the toll booth, Bartlet watched the G-man come from the booth with a large square box.

"It's a present for the future Mrs. Bartlet, whomever she might be," said Jack Martin, with a broad wink. "She might take it on her honeymoon."

"Oh, I know what it is!" cried Madge Holt. "It looks just like a pressure cooker. It's something I've wanted for a long time."

"But you won't be able to get it into a suitcase," Martin remarked. "You'll have to mail it, the way Hanson did his."

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THE CLUE OUTSIDE

By RAY CUMMINGS

A leaden pellet can sometimes point the finger at a killer if a crafty policeman knows how to make it tell the tale!

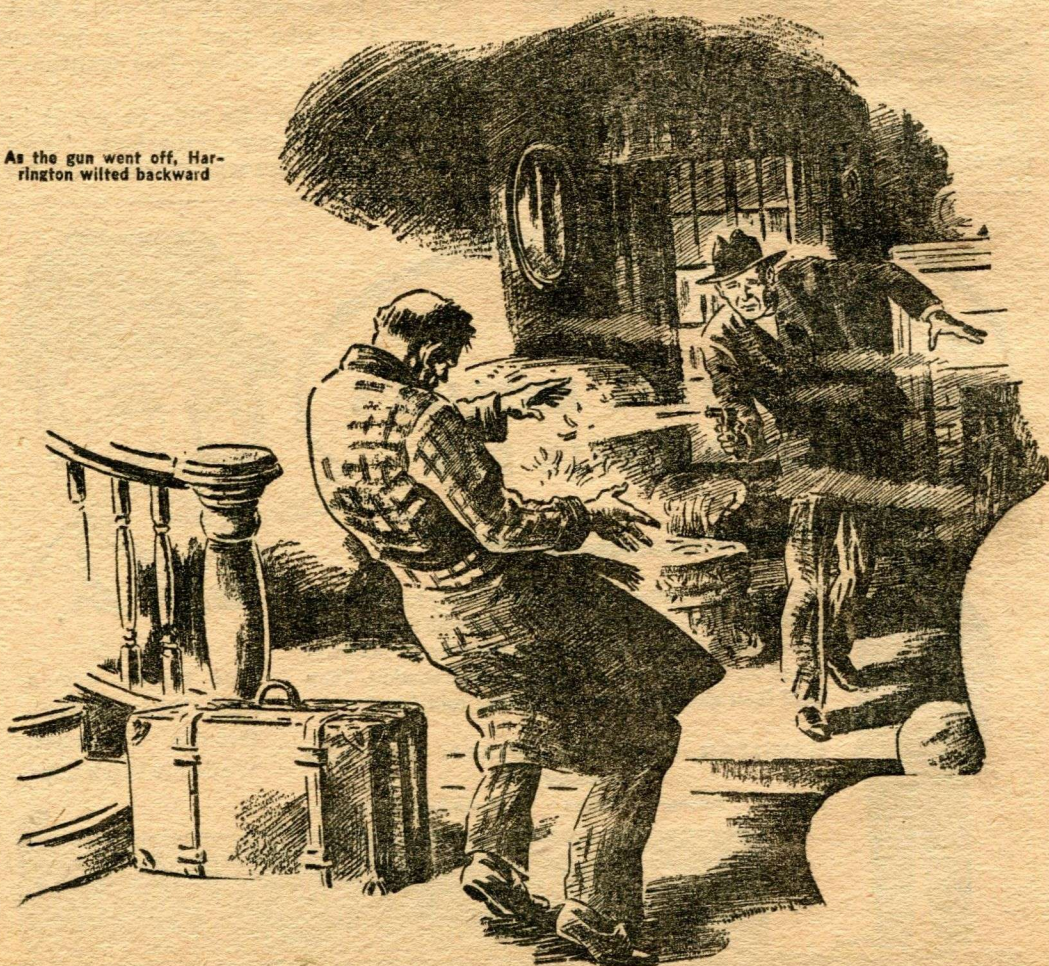
THE bus was on time. As it rounded the curve and the crossroads came in sight, with the white sign-posts shining in the summer moonlight, Tom Benz picked up his big suitcase and lugged it to the door. Benz glanced at his watch.

"Five minutes of ten," he said to the driver. "Right on time, eh, Mac?"

The driver would remember this, of course. Then Benz stood in the moon-

light of the road. The driver waved as the bus rolled on around the curve, and Benz picked up the heavy suitcase and started up the hill. It was a lonely neighborhood, wooded hills here and the only light was from the house up there among the trees at the brow of the ascent, where Benz lived with John Harrington. And Harrington was alone there now. Benz knew it for he had telephoned just before his train left Thomasville.

As the gun went off, Harrington wilted backward



The big suitcase was heavy. Benz was salesman for the Harrington woolen mill. Besides the clothes needed for his week's trip from which he was just returning, the case was packed with his samples of woolen goods. The short ascent here was steep, he was presently panting, with the sweat breaking out all over him. Benz was a young fellow, slim and smallish, dark-haired, well dressed and snappy looking. You have to be that, to be a salesman. Half way up the little hill he put down the suitcase and rested. His right arm ached and was trembling. That was from lugging the suitcase. He wasn't frightened. Or maybe he was. Queer, now that the time had come, he dreaded this thing he had to do.

The feel of the little revolver, sleek and cool in his jacket pocket, seemed to reassure him. It was a pearl-handled revolver; the very look of it would suggest a woman's weapon. And he had the tube of lipstick and a woman's left hand glove. Everything was so carefully planned, because Benz had calmly used his wits for a week, planning it. And now—in five minutes it would be over. Just a shot. No preliminary argument. No chance for anything to go wrong.

Despite himself, Benz was trembling. The thing had seemed so simple. You can't let your whole life be wrecked, when you can see a way to fix it, all in five minutes. But suddenly as the breathless Benz neared the small two-story cottage standing here alone in the rugged, wooded hills, those five minutes, so close now, had become a thing of horror.

A LIGHT was gleaming in the den behind the living room. Perhaps Harrington was there. But more likely he was upstairs. His bedroom windows up there were yellow rectangles behind the tree branches. Quietly Benz mounted the verandah steps.

The front door was unlocked. It creaked a little as he opened it. The big, rustic style living room was dim, with only a glow of light from the upper hall at the head of the curving staircase, and light from the den doorway, which was open. Harrington wasn't in the den. The house was heavy with silence.

Crossing the living room, his footsteps silent on its rug, Benz with his suitcase started up the stairs. He'd go to his room, first.

His planning thoughts fled. He stif-

ened. Harrington's tread was sounding in the upper hall. He was coming downstairs. Benz darted back, stood panting in the center of the dim living room. The little pearl-handled revolver was in his sweating right hand. He raised it. His arm, aching from the heavy burden he had carried, was trembling. Could he do it now?

Then Benz was backing further toward the shadows against the wall. And up at the head of the stairs, John Harrington's figure loomed. He started down the stairs—a big powerful man of forty. His plaid dressing gown was a blob almost in silhouette with the upper hall light behind it.

Suddenly the shaking Benz seemed horribly afraid of Harrington. Don't let him get wise! Don't let him try to jump you! Maybe you're too frightened? Maybe you don't dare do it? Horrible thoughts. Benz flung them away. He had to do it.

Vivian wouldn't wait. Vivian had said she'd had a swell offer of marriage from a rich guy who wanted her to quit the show right away.

A third of the stock in the Harrington woolen mill. It had belonged to Benz' mother. Harrington was her cousin. She had died, leaving it to him because at that time Benz was only eighteen. And with Harrington dead now, Benz would get it. And he had to have it, right now. He was a rotten salesman; he knew it. His commissions hadn't been a quarter what he needed for Vivian—that diamond engagement ring, for instance—to say nothing of his own needs. Sometimes his customers, the smaller ones, had paid their previous bill direct to him, instead of sending it to the Mill. Cash. And Benz hadn't reported the payments. Not much money, a few hundred, but it would be found out before very long. Those payments had to be reported, and the cash turned in.

A third interest. You could sell that stock for fifteen or twenty thousand dollars. How could a man let himself get wrecked, just because he didn't have the nerve to pull the trigger of a little pearl-handled revolver? To Benz crouching there in the shadows, it was an instant of rushing thoughts, as though here at the last, all the reasons he had marshaled to help him plan this thing burst forth to urge him on.

And now the burly figure of Harrington

ton was at the bottom of the stairs. Now—

The little revolver spat its cracking burst of flame. Missed! The horror that Harrington was still there on his feet, swinging around with a startled oath, blurred everything for Benz. But there was light on Harrington's head and face now. The revolver cracked again and through the smoke of the shots came a glimpse of Harrington wilting, falling, to become a dead thing, lying there on the rug.

In a moment the scene clarified for Benz. Done! Finished! A thing that had been so horrible, but now it was in the past. Like melting mist the horror was gone, as Benz' triumphant thoughts flung ahead. In a week he'd be a rich man, buying steamship and railroad tickets for himself and Vivian!

He kept his wits. There were just a few things he must do here, and he did them methodically. From his pocket he took a small, gray-suede woman's glove. He wiped his possible fingerprints off the little revolver with the glove and he dropped the revolver on the floor near where he had been standing when he fired. He laid the glove on the living room table, and a small lipstick tube with it. He had gotten all these things on his trip and he was sure they could never be identified or traced to him. Yesterday, in a Bar and Grill he had picked up a cigarette butt from an ashtray—a butt a woman had been smoking—and it was smeared with the red of her lipstick. He placed the butt here in an ashtray on the table.

IT WAS all only a minute's work. His mind was clear with what he would tell the police about his discovery of the murder. He would have discovered it the moment he reached the porch door threshold, of course, and so nothing of his own must be in the living room. He took his big suitcase now and put it on the verandah by the door, with his gray felt hat on top of it.

For a moment he stood pondering, to be sure he had forgotten nothing. From the verandah doorway, the grim figure on the floor with the bullet in its head showed plainly. A shaft of moonlight from a nearby open window was on it and a dim sheen of light from the head of the staircase.

The telephone stood on a taboret in the living room quite near the verandah door.

It was barely five minutes after ten when Benz breathlessly called the local police, telling them what he had found.

This police lieutenant was named Saunders. He was a quiet, intelligent looking fellow. His questions were crisp. He had a way of asking the same thing over again, but the details were so simple there was no possibility of Benz making any errors.

"I came over by the bus," Benz was saying. "I carried my suitcase up the hill—not far."

"What time?" Saunders said.

"Well it happens, I can tell you that," Benz said quietly. "I take that bus quite often. Maybe you know MacWilliams, the driver? I remember I complimented him for being right on time. Five minutes of ten."

Saunders nodded. "You called us about four minutes after ten."

"Did I? Well, that suitcase of mine is heavy—I rested half way up the hill. Then I opened the verandah door, which wasn't locked, and I saw Mr. Harrington lying there."

"You didn't go into the living room?"

"No. I grabbed the phone here by the door and called you at once. Then I waited out on the verandah for you to come. I've always heard at the scene of a crime nobody must touch anything."

"So when you arrived and found the verandah door open—"

"I didn't," Benz said. "It was closed, but not locked. I put down my suitcase and hat, was taking my key out. When I pushed at the door, it opened. Then I called you."

The living room was brightly lighted now. Half a dozen of Saunders' uniformed men were here, looking around. Saunders and Benz stood in a corner of the room. The body lay where it had fallen, on the rug near the foot of the staircase. A sheet had been thrown over it. The County Medical Examiner was expected soon. Benz was standing quietly smoking. Outwardly he was calm, grim, shocked by the tragedy. But inside, somehow he felt a queer, breathless terror. Strange! He had not expected anything like this. He realized that the guilty terror itself was his only danger. At all costs, he must master it.

"Sure looks like a woman did this," one of the policemen said.

They hadn't missed the clues, of course. The pearl-handled revolver had made one

of them suggest a woman right away. Now Saunders was over at the table, again examining the lipstick, the glove and the cigarette butt.

"Left hand glove," another of the policemen said. "She was wearin' the right hand one. That's why there's no fingerprints on the gun."

Fair enough! But the silent lieutenant didn't seem impressed. Suddenly he said, "Wonder why she left her lipstick here."

"She took it out of her pocketbook to use it," somebody suggested. "Then the argument started an' she forgot it."

"Sure," Saunders agreed. "She took it out to use it. But that isn't the same color lipstick as the smear on the cigarette butt. It's much darker. No woman puts a different color on her lips, on top of what's already there."

Phony clues! They all realized it now. But so what? Benz held himself steady. He murmured, "Why, that's mighty interesting. This was a foxy killer, wasn't he?"

Now they were examining the little pearl-handled revolver. "Two shots were fired, evidently," Saunders said. "The first one missed him—the second did the business."

BUT if that was so, where was the bullet that had missed its mark? One was in Harrington's brain. The other one should have hit the room somewhere, but there was no sign of it.

"Could have gone out this window," one of the men suggested. "See, if the killer stood there where we found the gun, this window here near the body is open at the bottom—no screen or anything."

"He was a darn poor shot, if it went out that window," Saunders commented.

So the first shot went out the window. Benz remembered his aching, trembling arm.

Some of the men were outside now. Saunders went out presently and joined them. Benz sat quietly smoking in the living room. He had decided to say as little as possible, just sit and watch. Still like a premonition, the terror inside him persisted. But soon that would pass and this ordeal would be over. His logical reasoning told him that he was in no danger whatever. Nothing would ever be found that could connect him with this thing.

Suddenly outside, there was a commo-

tion. Benz heard one of the men exclaim, "Well, I'll be blistered!" Then there was a sort of whispering silence. Were they whispering so that Benz wouldn't hear them? Presently Saunders came back into the living room. He was grimmer than before. He flashed Benz a look, and then he headed for the telephone.

One of the policemen said, "Cowardly killer. We sure got him!"

"Take it easy, Pete," Saunders said. "Let's finish first."

"What—what is it? Something interesting?" Benz stammered. "Tell me what you know."

"Oh, we'll sure tell you all right!" the policeman rasped.

"Wait!" Saunders said. He was calling back to the police station, ordering them to bring something here, some ballistics paraphernalia. "We found that other bullet," Saunders said to Benz, as he turned back from the phone. He displayed the little bullet which he was holding in his hand.

A chance in a million that they would find that bullet outside, but here it was! It hadn't hit a tree or anything. It was uninjured, unmarked, as Saunders now explained, except by the markings the gun it was fired from had put upon it. Benz' inward terror was receding. This might, or might not be a bullet fired from the murder weapon. Maybe it was just a bullet that happened to be lying out there in the woods. But in any case, what difference did it make?

"We've got to identify it," Saunders was saying.

And then what? Benz felt sure if this was the bullet which had gone out the window, that wouldn't connect *him* with it. By no chance could it do that.

"And you can prove this gun fired it?" Benz said quietly.

"If it came from this revolver, we can prove it," Saunders said. "As it happens, I've always been especially interested in ballistics. I spent quite a while in Washington where the F.B.I. showed me just how they work. We use their methods, here in Valley Stream. Got quite a bit of the same equipment."

Interesting stuff. Benz leaned forward in his chair, listening as Saunders explained it.

"Inside the barrel of that revolver," Saunders said, "there's a series of ridges which are known as 'lands.' And the intervening furrows are called 'grooves.'

This 'rifling' follows a spiral course and gives the bullet a spinning motion. And the rifling marks the bullet—brands it as having come from one particular gun and no other. So all we have to do is compare this bullet with another one that we know has been fired from this revolver."

"There's a bullet in—in the corpse?" Benz asked.

"Yes. In his brain. The autopsy will produce it. But it might be injured, having penetrated the skull. And we can get one much quicker. Just fire one from the gun now." Saunders was grimly smiling. "We can't just fire it into the wall here. It would be smashed. So we have a special apparatus."

A POLICE car presently arrived. The apparatus was an elongated box, about a foot square and a few feet in length. The foot square end was open. Saunders explained that the box was packed with cotton batting. Then with Benz and the policemen silently watching, Saunders set up the box, backed away, leveled the little murder gun and fired into the open end of the box. The box jolted slightly under the impact, as the bullet slammed into the fluffy target.

"There you are," Saunders said.

They opened the box. The bullet, unmarred by the soft target, was ready for comparison with the one they had found outside. The men crowded around Saunders. "It sure is the same," one of the men said. "Perfect evidence!"

"Got him!" somebody else exclaimed.

"Got—got who?" Benz murmured. "This is certainly interesting, Lieutenant."

"Got you, you sneaking killer!" one of the policemen blurted out.

Then here was Saunders, with his eyes blazing and a grim, ironic smile on his thin lips. "We don't have to question you," he said. "Keep your mouth shut, Benz. It's your legal privilege!"

What was this? Steady now! They're only trying to bluff you! Benz tried to tell himself they were bluffing. He heard himself stammering,

"I—I don't understand. That bullet is the one you found outside."

"You want to see where we found it?" Saunders cut in. "Okay. Come on, I'll show you."

Now they were all pushing him out to the verandah. It was bright out here now, with the overhead light turned on.

"When you arrived you went into the living room," Saunders was saying. "Maybe you had an argument with Harrington, maybe you just heard him coming downstairs and backed away. The first shot missed him. Did it go out the window? It sure didn't. Take a look now and you'll see where it went!"

Benz looked, following Saunders' ironic gesture. And Benz' horrified mind swept back. He had started up the staircase with his big suitcase, had left it there at the bottom of the steps. Harrington had passed it. Perhaps he had noticed it. But an instant later the shots had come. And the first one, missing its target—

Numbly Benz stared at the little bullet hole in the side of his big suitcase! And then Saunders was opening the suitcase, showing him how the bullet had buried itself, unmarked, in his samples of woolen goods!

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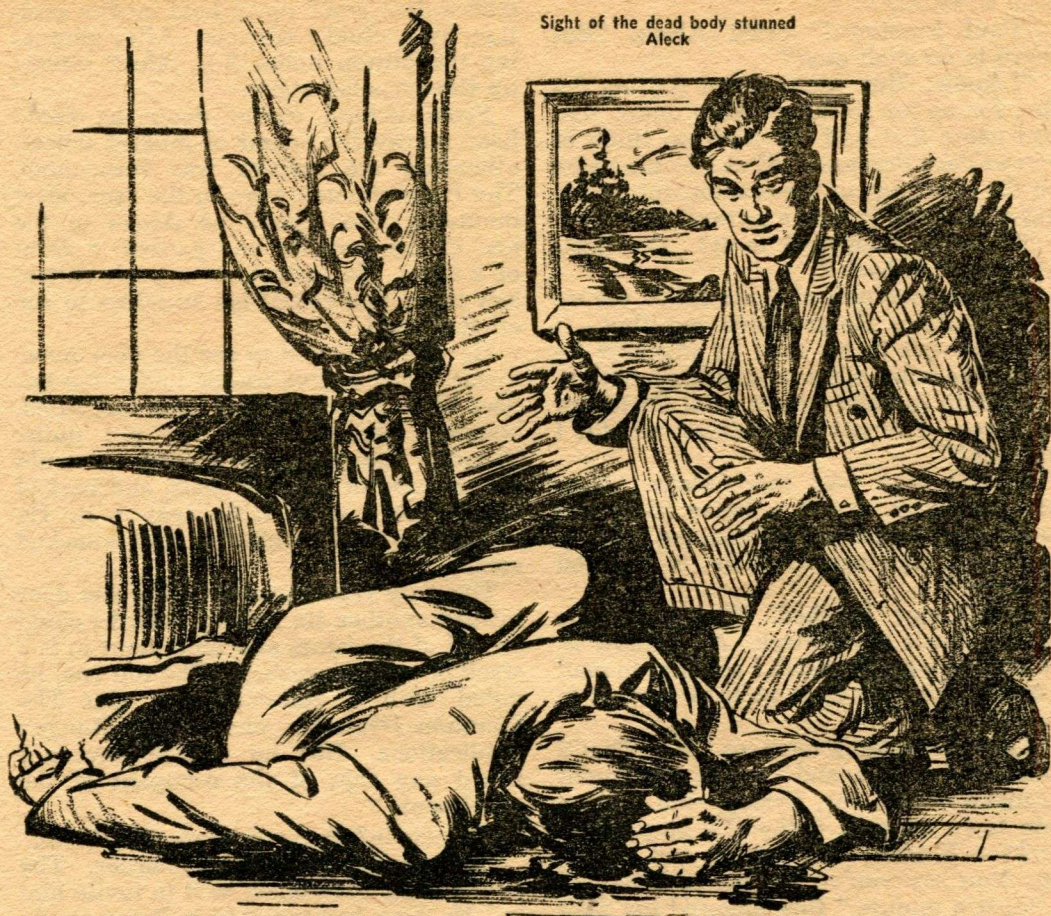
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Sight of the dead body stunned
Aleck



NECK AND NECK

By O. B. MYERS

It was merely an author's pen name, but can a name on a piece of paper come to life—and commit murder?

ROY RUNGE looked up when his secretary's blonde head appeared in the door. "Mr. Ziemander is calling you," she said.

"Ziemander? Yes; put him on."

He carefully laid a paper-weight on page twenty-five of the typewritten manuscript in which he had been absorbed. Reaching across a stack of other manuscripts, still unread, he picked up the phone.

"Hello, Aleck? How goes it?"

"It goes in reverse. Look, Roy, I thought you were going to send me a check for that short story you bought."

The magazine editor leaned far back in his swivel chair and chuckled easily. "This will slay you, Aleck—but here's what happened. We mailed you the check last Friday, just as I told you. We've got a new girl out in the cashier's office; she made out the check to you, all right, and got the street address straight, but inadvertently she addressed the envelope to

Paul Prestowe."

"Paul Prestowe!" cried Aleck. "But there is no such guy!"

"I know. But you've been writing fiction for us for so many years under that pen name that half the time we think of you as Paul Prestowe. That was the name on the title page of the manuscript; you'll have to admit it was a natural mistake."

"So what happened to it? The post-office send it back?"

"No. A man named Gode called me up from Jackson Heights this morning. It somehow got in his mail by mistake; he wanted to know what he should do with it. I told him to hang onto it until I'd talked with you. I've got his address; what'll I tell him?"

Aleck's tone was incredulous. "Now how the heck would a letter addressed to Paul Prestowe, in Flushing, get into the mail of a man named Gode, in Jackson Heights?"

Roy Runge laughed. "Don't ask me riddles about how, Aleck. All I know is, he says he's got it. Shall I ask him to mail it back here, and then we'll forward it to you?"

Aleck hesitated a moment. "No. That'll take several days, and I've got a payment to make on the car, Friday. I'm coming into town anyway today; I'll stop off in Jackson Heights on my way, and pick it up. You say you've got his address?"

"Just a minute." Roy fingered his desk pad. "Here it is: 34-72 Eighty-first Street. Gode; I think he spells it G-O-D-E."

"Thanks; I'll find him. And tell the girl that addressed that envelope that the next time I come in, I am not taking her to lunch."

"That will break her heart, but I'll tell her."

Aleck Ziemander hung up, and called upstairs to his wife.

"There was a mix-up about the check, but I'm going to pick it up. See you this afternoon some time."

He backed his car out of the garage, stopped at a service station on Kissena Boulevard for gas and oil, and turned toward New York on Roosevelt Avenue. After about three miles he turned right, and found the address on 81st Street without much trouble.

It was a small, four-story apartment house, not new but with a well-preserved look. In the foyer were a dozen letter slots with cards above them; on one was lettered, HARRY GODE—3-B. The en-

trance door stood open, held in that position by a child's tricycle. After thumbing the button under 3-B, Aleck started up the carpeted stairs.

From behind closed doors he could hear faintly the sound of muffled voices; otherwise the interior was very quiet. The B apartments were in the rear; after mounting two flights, he strode to the end of the corridor and paused in front of a door. He looked for a push-button, saw none, and raised his knuckles to rap on the panel.

He was surprised to see the door move inward four or five inches under the impact of his knock. It had been unlatched, standing almost closed but not quite. Through the gap now opened he could see the arm of an easy chair, and part of a lamp on a small table next to it. He waited for half a minute, then knocked again.

The only result was to swing the door inward another six inches. Now he could see all of the lamp, and lying next to it a stack of pulp magazines. The top one, he noted with a quizzical grin, was *The Phantom Detective*, one of Roy Runge's publications. But he neither saw nor heard any sign of the occupant of the apartment.

"Mr. Gode? Are you there, Mr. Gode!"

He knocked once more, harder. The door swung wide open, as if to invite him in. He was looking into a living room, comfortably if not expensively furnished in a male fashion; deep, overstuffed furniture but no drapes, plenty of ash-trays but no flowers, few books but a lot of magazines, scattered carelessly.

Cigarette butts cluttered the ash-trays, a corner of a rug was kicked over, on the floor next to the easy chair a newspaper lay in a crumpled heap. Everything gave the room that used look, as of momentarily suspended animation, as if the owner had just stepped out to do a brief errand and would be back any instant.

Aleck took one step over the threshold, and hesitated. He had no wish to intrude; yet now that he was there, he wanted to get what he had come after. This man Gode, whoever he was, had his check. It was no good to Gode, and Aleck needed it himself. The fellow would undoubtedly appear any moment. He might even be in his own bathroom, down that inner corridor. Aleck opened his mouth to call again; then closed it without uttering a sound.

The corridor, passing a couple of doors on the right, ended in an open door. From where he stood, Aleck saw through the door the foot of a bed, with blankets and sheets thrown over it. But on the floor, between the door and the bed, he saw a foot. The foot was clad in a man's shoe, but the shoe was not sole to the floor. It lay on its side, instep down, showing that its wearer was in a horizontal position, and there was something about the way it hugged the floor that registered a grotesque wrongness.

Aleck moved down the corridor. Without realizing it, he moved on tip-toe; the silence had suddenly become ominous. Just inside the bedroom he stopped and stared.

His business was devising and writing murder mysteries. In them his characters made a practice of stumbling over corpses. Yet Aleck himself had never seen a dead body, particularly one from which the life had been brutally and bloodily beaten. The sight stunned him. The gory shirt, the battered head, the blank, white eyeballs, pulled his stomach up into his throat.

After perhaps a full minute he forced himself to squat and reach toward one of the out-flung hands. It was not quite as warm as his own, yet it was not icy cold. This man was not long dead.

He rose and went back to the living room, steadying his nerves. There was a phone on a small stand; he picked it up, dialed the operator, and said, "I want police headquarters." When a male voice answered, he said, "There's a man been killed, here. A man named Gode." He gave the address, and the apartment number; when the voice asked, "Who are you?" he simply replied, "I'll be waiting here for you," and hung up.

He stood by the table, knowing that he was tense and partially numb from the shock of what he had seen in the bedroom. Through the open door of the apartment he could hear distant voices, probably down in the foyer. He wished the police would come. This being alone with a body was decidedly unpleasant.

His gaze rested purposelessly on the stack of magazines by the lamp. The lurid cover of the top one looked familiar. There was one of his own stories in that issue—or was there? He flipped it open to the title page. It opened easily and naturally at that point, because there lay a letter in a plain, white envelope.

His eye read the typed inscription with-

out his willing it. "Mr. Paul Prestowe." The thought immediately flashed across his mind—my check. It was followed by other thoughts. This would shortly be a scene of great confusion. There would be questioning, investigation, legal technicalities. The police, he knew, had a way of hanging on to every scrap of material evidence for a long time. Even though he himself had nothing to do with the crime, it might be months before they released that check. Meanwhile, murder or no murder, he needed it. He picked up the envelope and put it in his pocket.

There was another envelope underneath it, but Aleck closed the magazine without paying any attention to that one.

Hardly a minute later heavy footsteps came rapidly up the carpeted stairs. Two men in uniform entered; the crew of a prowler car. They looked in the bedroom, told Aleck not to leave, and got busy on the telephone. They were followed, over a period of twenty minutes to half an hour, by the whole machinery of the law; a lieutenant in uniform, detectives in plain clothes, photographers, doctors, morgue attendants, and fingerprint experts. A detective in a wrinkled blue suit, whose name was Wagner, gradually took charge.

He wore a stubby red moustache, which he caressed frequently with the little finger of one hand, and he lighted one cigarette from the stub of its predecessor. He established the identity of the corpse by calling in the superintendent and a neighbor from the floor below. The latter, a middle-aged woman weighing close to two hundred pounds, fainted in the doorway as she was leaving, and there was some delay while she was carried back to her apartment.

It was nearly noon when the detective faced Aleck across the kitchen table. "Now just who are you?"

Aleck told him.

"Where do you live?"

"In Flushing. 616 Minniver Street."

Wagner jerked his head. "You know this man?"

"I never saw him before in my life."

The detective had excellent control over his reactions; his eyes did not narrow appreciably. "You reported over the phone that a man named Gode had been killed. How did you know it was Gode?"

Aleck's control was not quite so good.

He flushed, and stammered. "Why, I—I just assumed, I guess—this was Gode's apartment—"

Wagner did not press the point. "What were you doing here?"

Aleck's flush deepened. He tried to tell the story in straight and simple fashion, but he knew that it sounded fantastic, improbable. At the reference to his occupation, Wagner blinked, lighted a fresh cigarette, and allowed a faint overtone of sarcastic amusement to creep into his voice.

"You know any people around here who can verify you?"

Aleck gave him some names. Wagner wrote them down, tore the page from his notebook, and handed it to a short man in a derby hat. While Wagner's questions continued, the other detective went out to the telephone. He called up Roy Runge, Aleck's wife, his bank, his brother-in-law in Westchester, and the Columbia Club. When he came back, he nodded at Wagner, and said simply, "Check."

Wagner fiddled thoughtfully with his moustache. "I'm going to let you go along about your business, Mr. Ziemander. But I'll ask you to stay within reach. I don't mean sit home by the phone twenty-four hours a day. I mean don't leave town, and leave word where we can get hold of you, in case we want to ask you some more questions."

Aleck said, "I'll be only too glad if I can help."

Wagner's lip twitched. "I have no doubt. But don't get detectivitis, and get in our way. If we need your help, we'll ask."

Aleck went downstairs, through a gaping group of curious bystanders in the foyer, and climbed into his sedan. He could tell at once, from the position of the raincoat on the back seat and the rearranged disorder of the articles in the glove compartment, that the car had been given a thorough search.

He drove into New York over the Queensborough Bridge, turned south, and left the car in a parking lot just off Lexington Avenue. He walked across 42nd Street toward the public library; he had planned to read up a little background on Alaska, having an idea about laying the scene of his next thriller in the Yukon. But it was going to be hard to get his mind off the real-life crime to which he had come so close. He congratulated himself on being rather smart about the check; he had probably saved himself an

interminable delay. Thinking of it, he pulled it out to look at it.

The seal of the envelope had been broken; he slipped his fingers inside. He pulled out, not the kind of a check he had expected, but a numbered stub on heavy cardboard, showing that an article had been checked at the parcel room on the lower level in Grand Central station. Standing on the sidewalk, he stared at it.

Now, examining the envelope, he saw what he had not noticed before. Under the name, Paul Prestowe, was typed, not his address, 616 Minniver Street. Instead it read, *P.O. Box 616, Flushing, Long Island, N. Y.* It was postmarked Poughkeepsie, June 23rd, 1947.

He realized at once that this envelope had not come from Roy Runge's office. Then someone else was addressing letters to Paul Prestowe, in Flushing, and the letters were getting into the hands of a man named Harry Gode, who lived in Jackson Heights. He shook his head; it made no sense. Paul Prestowe was a name that he had invented, straight out of his imagination, years ago, merely because his own was too long to fit neatly on a title page, and didn't sound exactly literary. As far as he knew, no such person existed.

He looked up. He was standing directly in front of the entrance to the Grand Central that led into the main waiting room. He moved through the doors; slowly at first, then walking faster. He told himself that by picking up a morsel of information, he would save Wagner some time. Actually it was his own curiosity that impelled him.

Descending to the lower level, he tossed the parcel check across a sheet-brass counter. The attendant disappeared behind racks of bags and valises, returned holding a small, flat package.

"Over twenty-four hours; ten cents extra," he said.

Aleck gave him a dime and tucked the package casually under his arm. He headed for the waiting room, where there were benches; then some instinct of concealment—after all, this was connected with a murder—made him go on to the men's room, enter a pay toilet, and wait until the door had clicked shut behind him. He was shortly glad of that impulse.

The parcel was flat, about eight by ten inches, and half an inch thick; it suggested a mailing pack for a photograph. A crazy thought crossed his mind: "Maybe it's a

picture of Paul Prestowe!" It was wrapped in brown paper, and tied securely with white cord. There was neither writing nor printing on the outside.

He snapped the cord, tore open the paper. He pulled out two sections of corrugated board. Between them lay a couple of sheafs of bright green currency. He counted with trembling fingers. Twenty-five twenty-dollar bills—five hundred dollars! Nothing else.

If he had been puzzled before, he was now completely nonplussed. He couldn't make head or tail out of this. Harry Gode, he reasoned, had received in the mail a parcel check addressed to Paul Prestowe, who did not exist. The check was good for a package containing five hundred dollars in unidentifiable cash. Then Harry Gode had been murdered. For that stub? It hardly seemed likely. Five hundred dollars was a tidy sum, but it didn't seem large enough to motivate a cold-blooded murder. Then what. . . .

WHEN he got home in the middle of the afternoon, his wife told him, "A man named Wagner telephoned. He wants you to call him. Here's his number. . . . Did you forget the oranges, Aleck?"

Aleck dialed the number she had written down.

"Ziemander? Oh, yes. That story of yours sounded a little fantastic, but I guess it's okay. We found your check."

Aleck gulped. "You—you found my check?"

"Yes. It was in an envelope addressed to Paul Prestowe, at 616 Minniver Street, just like you said."

"But why—how did it get to Harry Gode?"

"We haven't doped that out yet. But the check is made out to you, so you might as well have it. We'll hang onto the envelope for a while; just in case. If you want to come over, I'll give you the check, any time."

Dumfounded, Aleck murmured, "That's fine."

"I'm at the precinct, in Jackson Heights. We're working this case out of here." He gave Aleck the address, and hung up.

Aleck told his wife, "I'm going out again. To get my check."

"But I thought you got it this morning?"

He decided against telling her the whole

story—yet. It would only upset her, make her nervous. Or else infect her, too, with detectivitis, entailing endless discussions and speculations.

"No, I didn't," he said slowly.

"Now Aleck; this time please remember—a dozen oranges."

At the precinct headquarters Aleck found Wagner in a small room that gave an impression of being bare and impersonal, though it held a desk, half a dozen straight chairs, and a number of framed pictures of former precinct captains. On the desk lay a flashlight, a telephone, two pencils with exceedingly sharp points, and a copy of the March issue of *The Phantom Detective*; evidently the one that had earlier been lying on Harry Gode's living-room table.

"You write this story?" the detective asked. "The one that says, by Paul Prestowe?"

Aleck admitted authorship.

"Don't you know a dick seldom wears his shield pinned to his vest? He's more apt to carry it loose in his pocket—like this."

Aleck nodded seriously. "I'll remember that next time."

Wagner opened the desk drawer. "Here's your check."

Aleck said, "Thanks," and put it in his inner pocket. Sitting down in one of the straight-backed chairs, he laid on the desk a flat, brown-paper parcel. Then he described how he came to have it.

The detective did not quite exhibit reawakened suspicion, but he showed unmistakable signs of displeasure. His little finger clawed at his moustache, though he listened without interrupting.

"Detectivitis," he sneered softly, when Aleck finished.

"No, it wasn't that! I picked up the envelope, because I was afraid my check would get tangled up in a lot of delay, and I needed it. And then I was right in front of Grand Central. . . ."

Wagner shrugged expressively. He drew out the corrugated sheets, and splayed the bills on the desk before him. Then he completely unfolded the brown paper, turned it over, and turned it over again. He ran the string through his fingers. When he was through, he knew just what he had known before. It was a package done up in plain brown paper tied with white string.

The telephone rang. The detective picked it up, said, "Wagner," and lis-

tened. "What's that number?" He picked up the envelope Aleck had given him, the one that had held the parcel check, and nodded his head. "Yes, I've got something else here that checks that. . . . Yes. . . . No, not yet. Take a couple of them over to the morgue, and see if they can give us an identification. . . . Yes, later."

He hung up and regarded Aleck stonily. "Ziemander, did you ever use the name Prestowe for anything besides writing under it?"

"Why, no."

"Did you ever call yourself Prestowe? Did you ever buy anything under that name? Sign any papers? Use it for a bank account? Receive mail under the name of Prestowe?"

"Not until this—this happened."

The detective lighted another cigarette. "Well, somebody took a postoffice box in Flushing under the name of Paul Prestowe, last December. It happened to be Box Number 616. Whoever it was paid a year's box rent in advance. Nobody in the postoffice remembers what he looked like. After all, Flushing is a big postoffice, and December is six months ago. I'd like to know who that was."

"I assure you it wasn't me," Aleck told him. He frowned. "Do you think it could have been Harry Gode?"

Wagner was not a man to jump to conclusions. "Well, Gode seems to have come into possession of mail addressed to that name and address. We'll know more about that, maybe, after a couple of postal employees look at what's left of his face. And after we learn more about Gode himself."

He ground out the cigarette and stood up. "Ziemander, I don't believe, right now, that you're involved in this killing. I'd advise you not to let your instinct to be a sleuth get you involved, either. I appreciate what help you've given us. If you come across any more packets containing five hundred dollars, I hope you'll let us know." He extended his hand. "Drop in again in a couple of days, anyway."

When Aleck got home he told his wife, "I got the check."

"But the oranges—where are they? Oh, Aleck, what have you been thinking about?"

Again he considered telling her; again he decided against it.

"A plot," he replied briefly. "Never mind, darling; we'll go out to the movies

tonight, and pick up some at the del."

Aleck was never very keen about movies. His knowledge of plot technique was a handicap to his enjoyment. He always guessed the ending by the middle of the second reel, which made the rest of it stereotyped claptrap. Sometimes he dozed; tonight his thoughts were engrossed with the sanguinary circumstances suddenly clustered about the name of Paul Prestowe, his alter ego.

His wife nudged him. "Aleck! The crew races!"

He sat up. The news reel short was showing shots of the Poughkeepsie regatta, the previous Saturday. First a couple of closeups of the eight-oared shells at the start; then some long shots of the varsity race in progress, taken from an airplane with a telefolens. The announcer described the setting, and named the crews, pointing out that because of the war this was the first time the regatta had been held since 1941. The final shot showed the finish.

"The Cornell crew made a terrific attempt, but here you see Navy winning in a whirlwind finish, by less than a length."

The din of whistles and the roar of the crowd came off the sound track in full volume, filling the theatre for a moment with all the feeling of tension and excitement of a close finish. Then the news film switched to a different subject; a diplomat stepped down from an airplane. Aleck relaxed in his chair.

For the next couple of days he found it unusually difficult to get any work done. Instead of inventing details of his Yukon mystery, his mind kept inventing and discarding imaginative and far-fetched explanations for the death of Harry Gode. The fact that he had nobody to talk them over with made it even harder to forget them; on Thursday he went to the precinct to see Wagner, the detective.

Wagner was willing enough to talk. "We've found out some things about Gode, but they don't lead anywhere. He was a bachelor, lived alone. No family east of Chicago, and apparently very few friends. We found a union card; he was a motion picture projectionist. But he didn't seem to work at it. According to the union records, the last time he had a job was in July, 1941—six years ago."

"But how did he support himself?"

Wagner confessed bafflement. "He told people he sold life insurance, but none of the insurance agencies ever heard of him,

and we can't locate anyone who ever bought a policy from him. Yet he had an income. We examined his bank account; every month, toward the end of the month, he made a cash deposit. Sometimes as much as \$500; never more.

"It looks as if he received five hundred bucks every month. He'd put some of it in his pocket, for current expenses, and the rest in the bank. When he was flush, it all went in. That had been going on for almost six years; he opened the account in August, 1941. But we can't find anything about the source of that income."

Aleck frowned. "How about that post-office box?"

"The clerks couldn't give us a positive identification. I hardly expected it. Anyone can walk in and sign up for a post-office box, you know; why should they remember a face? I've got a man posted there, watching Box 616, to pick up anyone who tries to open it. If Paul Prestowe in the flesh comes in to get his mail, maybe we'll find out something more about him than you can tell us."

Aleck flushed. "I've told you all I know. Paul Prestowe is not a person; it's nothing but a name on a title page."

"Well, it took more than a name on a piece of paper to kill Harry Gode. His head and his body were savagely beaten; many blows after he was already dead. Whoever did it hated him like poison. There's a powerful motive here somewhere; we'll uncover it yet."

Aleck went back to Flushing more puzzled than ever. He knew well enough the importance of motive. He had invented motives often enough, but to discover a real one was a different matter. Harry Gode had apparently been a man of mystery in life as well as in death. For six years he had apparently received a sizable sum of cash every month. From whom? From Paul Prestowe? But that was ridiculous. If Paul Prestowe was anyone, he was Aleck himself.

He was brooding blankly in front of his typewriter when his wife came into the room. "What's the matter with you, Aleck? For the last two days you've acted as if you were in a trance."

Aleck shrugged, and muttered, "I'm stuck for an idea."

"Why don't you poke through your scrap book? You know that often gives you a story idea. Here, I'll get it for you."

Over his feeble protests she brought in

the big flat volume and opened it on the table. "I'm going downtown to shop. Maybe by dinner time, you'll have a story all doped out."

She closed the door softly behind her.

Aleck thumbed the pages listlessly. The first ones were covered with photographs and clippings from his college days. He had been an oarsman, had rowed on his varsity crew in '40 and '41. That was why his wife had called his attention to the news reel the other night. He came to the section covering his senior year.

On the final page was pasted the whole front sheet of a New York newspaper, plus other pieces from the sports page, describing the Poughkeepsie regatta of 1941. He eyed the paragraphs listlessly. The story of the varsity race was more than familiar to him; he had lived through it himself, would never forget it. Then his eye was caught by a smaller headline that he had never noticed before.

DEATH AT REGATTA it said. *Springfield Man Drowned at Poughkeepsie.* He continued reading the few short paragraphs that followed.

Carl Tooling, wealthy real estate broker from Springfield, Mass., lost his life in an accident yesterday beneath the waters of the Hudson River. A rowing enthusiast, he was watching the regatta from a rowboat near the finish line, accompanied by his nephew, Adam Breck, a Poughkeepsie business man. As the varsity race was ending, Mr. Tooling, overcome by excitement, stood up in the little boat, and fell into the river.

Breck, knowing that his uncle was unable to swim, immediately shouted and gestured for help. In the excitement and din of the finish, however, he was unable to attract any attention; Breck himself plunged into the water. By the time he was able to locate his uncle and attract notice from nearby craft, it was too late. The two men were lifted aboard a motorboat, where artificial respiration was continued for an hour, but Mr. Tooling could not be revived.

Mr. Tooling was a bachelor, prominent in Springfield civic affairs, and is survived only by his nephew, Adam Breck, proprietor of a haberdashery in Poughkeepsie.

Aleck read it a second time, then a third. Dates kept running through his mind. 1941—six years ago. No regatta for six years. Harry Gode had had an income, but no job, for six years. A rowing enthusiast had been accidentally drowned; a man named Tooling, not Prestowe. Of course not Prestowe. Aleck hadn't even invented that pen name until some time in '44 or '45.

He got to his feet, closing the book. He moved slowly, absorbed in thought, cross-

ing the lawn to the garage. But once in the car, he drove fast—over the Triboro Bridge and across town to Morningside Heights. He parked his car and walked into the Columbia alumni office on the campus. An assistant secretary recognized his name.

"Ziemander? Oh, yes; you rowed on the crew in '40, or '41?"

"Both '40 and '41," Aleck nodded. "Tell me; what happens to old news reel films of the races, after they're out of date?"

"There are film exchanges that keep them on file. We have a few ourselves, for showing to alumni gatherings, smokers, and Varsity C Club meetings. The years when Columbia won, mostly."

"Would you have the one of Poughkeepsie, 1941?"

The secretary shook his head. "The crew wasn't so hot, that year."

"Hotter than this year," growled Aleck. "How could I get it?"

"I'm not sure the film exchange would let you take it out. You have to have a theatre or hall, a screen, a 32mm. projector, and a licensed union projectionist to show it, you know."

"Could you get it for me?"

"They'd let us have it, of course. If we said—"

"Say it's for the athletic association," prompted Aleck. "And I'll save you the trip downtown. Give me a slip, and the address, and I'll pick it up myself. I promise to return it in good order."

The secretary looked doubtful, but Aleck's status as a former crew man and member of the Varsity C Club, carried just enough weight.

It was dinner time when Aleck got home to Flushing with the flat tin film case under his arm. After dinner he sent his wife out to the movies alone; he took the film down cellar, where there was plenty of room to work on the ping-pong table, and put a strong bulb in the extension light. Then he opened the can and foot by foot unrolled the celluloid strip, holding it between him and the light.

THE next afternoon Aleck and Detective Wagner drove up to Poughkeepsie in Aleck's car. They reached the city before five, and separated. The detective hunted up headquarters and had a talk with the local police chief. Aleck strolled along the main street, gazing at the store fronts. He studied a telephone directory intently; after a time he dropped in at

the Nelson House bar for a drink. Wagner rejoined him there. It was after six when Aleck stepped into a telephone booth and asked for a number in Pleasant Valley.

"Hello, Mr. Breck? Mr. Adam Breck? My name is Ziemander. I'm a lawyer, from Springfield, Massachusetts; I'm connected with the surrogate's court there." He paused a moment, to let that sink in. Then he continued in a smooth, even tone. "If I have the right Mr. Breck, you were the residuary legatee and sole heir of one Carl Tooling, formerly of Springfield. Is that correct?"

There was a silence that lasted several seconds. Aleck could almost feel the man at the other end of the wire stiffen himself against surprise. But when his voice came, it was steady, but low.

"That is correct. What about it?"

"Good news about it, Mr. Breck. It has been discovered that Mr. Tooling had a safe deposit box in Holyoke, which no one knew about. It was overlooked when his will was probated, though it contains between sixty and seventy thousand dollars in negotiable bonds. The estate will have to be reopened, of course, but only briefly; there will be some papers to be signed. But since you were, and still are, his sole heir, it will be a simple matter."

"But I—I don't understand. It is six years since he died—"

"It is surprising, isn't it? However, I can explain to you how it happened, when I see you. And a surprise that makes you that much richer is not unwelcome, eh, Mr. Breck?"

The voice at the other end held a note almost of awe. "Sixty thousand dollars! What must I do about it, Mr. Ziemander?"

Aleck spoke briskly. "You live out in the suburbs, don't you? But I noticed your store on Main Street; that's how I located you. That would be a convenient place for us to sit down and go over papers. Could you drive in and meet me there, say about eight?"

Mr. Breck assented, as Aleck had been sure he would. What man wouldn't drive six miles for sixty thousand dollars?

Aleck and Wagner ate dinner together in the Nelson House; then they separated again. Aleck was waiting alone in the doorway of the haberdashery on Main Street when, at a few minutes before eight, an ancient coupe drove up to the curb and stopped.

The man who crossed the sidewalk wore gray slacks, a clean white shirt with

no tie, no hat, and carried an alpaca coat over his arm in a peculiar awkward manner. Though not old, his sharp features were deeply lined, he was half bald, and his smallish eyes, pink about the rims, were keen and restive.

"Mr. Ziemander? A pleasure for me, I assure you." He drew out a bunch of keys and started to unlock the door.

"I must apologize, Mr. Breck," said Aleck. "My partner has all the papers in his brief-case. He has been detained in New York by other business; he just phoned me at the Nelson House. He can't get here until about ten minutes of nine. I'm terribly sorry."

He could see that Breck was slightly disappointed, though not suspicious. Aleck went on quickly. "There's not a thing we can do. But I see you have a movie across the street. Why not sit in there while we're waiting? It's air-conditioned, anyway."

Breck returned the keys to his pocket. "I suppose we might as well. I haven't seen the picture. Been rather busy lately."

Aleck bought the tickets, and led the way across the foyer. Just inside the entrance he caught sight of Wagner, standing near the head of the aisle. Wagner's face was blank and impassive; he gave no sign whatsoever of having seen Aleck before in his life. Aleck went on down the aisle, found a couple of seats. Breck insisted that Aleck go in first. Breck sat on the aisle.

Aleck did not turn his head, but he knew that Wagner had taken a seat a couple of rows behind them.

The feature dragged through its last two reels. Aleck scarcely looked at it, though the audience seemed to get a thrill; there was a spattering of applause when it ended in the usual clinch. A news reel followed. They watched war brides disembark, listened to a politician, and saw midget auto racers whirl around an oval. There was a finale, with music; then a brief blank screen; then more news.

"The Poughkeepsie regatta; climax rowing event of the year," said the announcer. His voice was faintly scratchy.

Aleck felt, rather than saw, his companion shift in his seat.

There was a close-up shot of a crew pushing off from a float. Aleck recognized himself on the screen. There was a short shot of two coaches shaking hands, smiling.

The succeeding shots, of the varsity race, were long ones taken from an airplane flying over the course.

The start; the two-mile mark; the bridge. Aleck could feel again the acute fatigue and despair that gripped him at the bridge. The announcer's voice rose in pitch, against a background of din.

"They're nearing the finish! Washington and California, fighting it out neck and neck! Look at that stroke! It's the last dozen! Washington sprints—faster! Faster! . . . Washington wins!"

There were a few murmurs from the audience; from those who realized that they were seeing, not shots of last week's regatta, but a news film that was six years old.

Aleck, engrossed in what he saw on the screen, heard a sound at his side. A deep-throated exclamation of horror and despair, torn from a guilty throat. Aleck grabbed, but not quick enough. The figure at his side was up and out of the seat, rushing up the aisle.

Aleck scrambled after him. In the semi-darkness there was a short tussle, half-way to the foyer. Breck was a powerful man, but Wagner knew his rough stuff. The detective shortly dragged a limp form up to where the light was better, and nodded to a plump police captain who came forward.

"He's nicely broken down," said Wagner. "Let's rush him over to your office, and get a complete confession before he recovers his nerve. Look at this blackjack in his coat pocket, will you! It's probably what he used on Gode; we'll check it for hairs, and blood. Stand back now, folks, please! Go back and watch the picture!"

SOME time later, in headquarters, Aleck did some explaining.

"The film shows it, plain as day—if you look for it. You can see Breck sitting alone in the rowboat, and motionless. He said that when his uncle fell in, he immediately shouted and gestured for help, and then dove in. And he said it happened just as the race finished. The film shows that he lied. He must have pushed his uncle into the river, at least two minutes before the finish."

"How can you prove that two minutes, Ziemander?"

"Because in that shot, California is leading Washington; you can tell from the oar markings, as well as the lane positions. Yet Washington won the race."

"It's amazing that no one ever noticed that," growled the chief.

"Not so amazing," smiled Aleck. "Thousands of people saw that news reel, but every one of them was focused on the crews, not on a dinky little rowboat on the fringe of all the others. Just as every eye in the crowd that day was on the crews, not on their neighbors. A perfect chance to do a murder without being seen. Breck sat there without moving, and then fished his victim out after he had drowned."

"Yet Gode saw what had happened," said Wagner.

"Gode ran the motion picture projector in a small theatre in Brooklyn. The job bored him. He never looked at the feature films, but read pulp magazines in the booth most of the time. Only a news reel might interest him. Remember that he must have run that reel a dozen times during its showing. He read the papers, and by sheer chance he put two and two together."

"And blackmailed Breck," added Wagner.

"He probably did it by phone. Simply called up, told Breck what he knew, and demanded five hundred dollars a month. To keep Breck from ever seeing his face, his instructions were to check the cash in a parcel and mail the check stub to a phony name and address. Gode changed the name and address frequently; he had been using that box in Flushing, under the name of Paul Prestowe, for six months."

"But Breck finally caught up with him," nodded Wagner.

"His uncle's estate was being drained; he was desperate. He must have waited in the Flushing postoffice until he saw someone open Box Number 616. He then followed Gode home, got in on some pretext, and murdered him. He didn't have time to find the last stub and pocket it before I pushed the bell downstairs and scared him out. He probably went up one flight, waited in the hall until I was inside Gode's apartment, and then walked out before the police arrived."

"IT WAS a perfect blackmail set-up," mused Wagner. "There was nothing Gode had to keep hold of; nothing but his knowledge. There was the incriminating evidence tucked away in the corner of a film, always available for anyone to see who wanted to look at it." He eyed Aleck sharply. "But it was odd he should pick the name of Paul Prestowe."

Aleck grinned. "Not so odd. He read pulp magazines all the time. He was a little short on inventive genius, so when he wanted a pseudonym, he simply picked one off the title page of a magazine. My public!" His grin broadened. "Remind me, when we get back to Flushing, to invent me a new pen name. I think Paul Prestowe has got himself too much tangled up in real life."

"How about Cornelius Wagner?" suggested the detective eagerly.

Aleck shrugged, smiling. "I'll think about it."

THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE AT HIS SLEUTHING BEST IN

THE DIAMOND KILLERS

By ROBERT WALLACE

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL!

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign Of Tired Kidneys

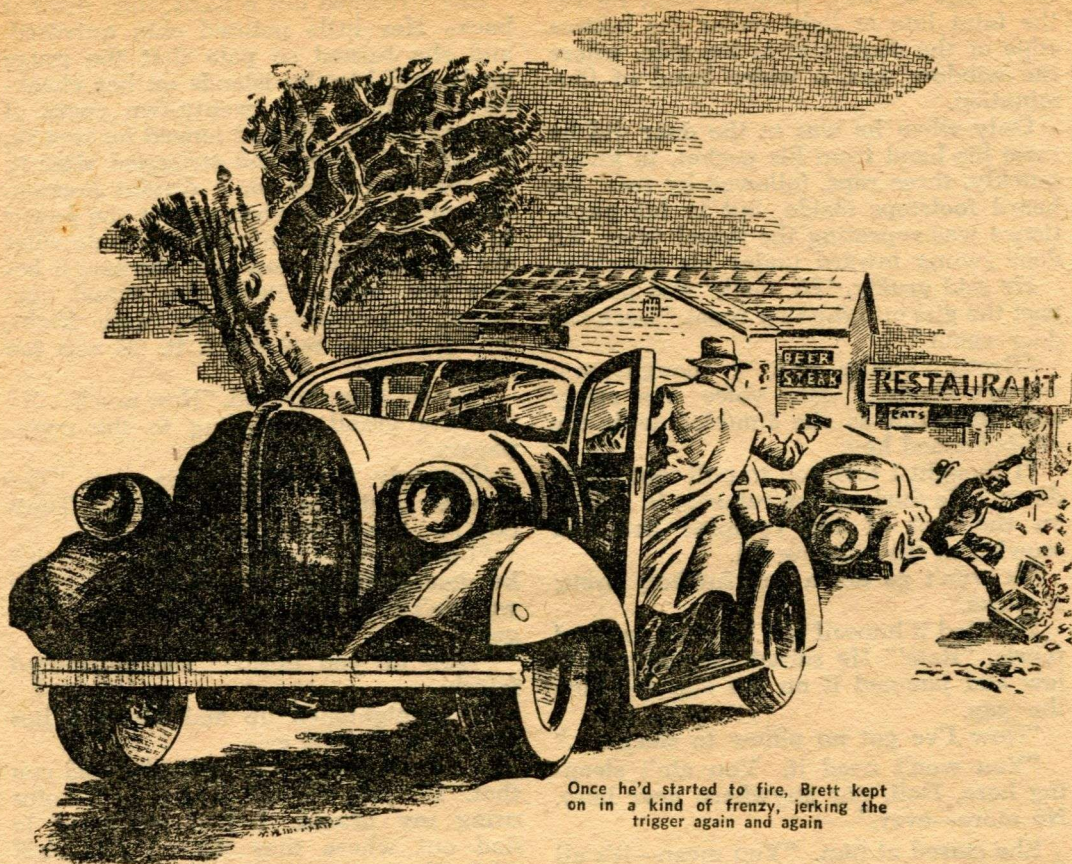
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Once he'd started to fire, Brett kept on in a kind of frenzy, jerking the trigger again and again

*No matter how often it changes hands,
blood money is never—*

IN THE BAG

By PAUL PRESTOWE

THE tourist cabins were ranged in a rough semi-circle around two sides of an open field. Those nearest the road stood out bleak and pale in the watery moonlight, showing every patch of peeling paint and every missing shingle. Along the back edge of the field a row of tall trees cast a thick blot of shadow in which the last three or four shacks were no more than blurred grayish shapes, like mouldy stains on the dark blanket of foliage.

Brett swung the car in a quick circle and parked. When he shut off the engine it was abruptly very quiet; he could hear little crackles of heat from under

the hood, and the distant grind of gears from a truck on a steep hill. He waited for several moments, listening; then he reached over the back of the front seat. When he stepped out, he had a raincoat thrown over his left arm; his right hand was in his jacket pocket.

Instead of following the rutted tracks that curved past the row of cabins, he cut straight across the middle of the field. Lights showed in several of the windows, and somewhere a radio bleated a slow dance tune, but he could see no one outdoors. Still he moved with furtive haste, keeping his eyes fixed on the next to the last cabin. Only after he had stepped into

the fringe of inky shadow could he see the faint line of light under the bottom edge of the door, and at the side, where the window was, a wider band of illumination.

Only when he was at the door did he raise his hand from his pocket, to knock quickly, three raps, followed by two. He heard footsteps inside, but in his impatience was repeating the signal when the door swung inward under his knuckles.

He said gruffly, "Hi, Doll," and pushed past the girl into the tiny room. "Lock the door again."

"Brett! You're late; I thought you weren't coming." Her voice was reedy and uncertain as she fumbled with the old-fashioned key.

"I thought I told you to pull that shade down." He dumped the raincoat in a heap on the foot of the rumpled bed and scowled at the window sill.

"It won't go down any further, Brett; it sticks."

He tried it himself and tore the parched fabric. "Rats!" He seized the lumpy pillow and jammed it on the sill, covering the gap.

"Now I've got no pillow to sleep on."

"You won't need it. You ain't sleeping here, Doll, nor anywhere near here. No more—ever."

She stared at him. "You mean—it's all fixed?"

He flung out his arm in a gesture of careless confidence. "I said I'd fix it, didn't I?"

SHE would have thrown her arms around his neck, but he moved to the bed and tossed the raincoat aside. Under it stood a small satchel of heavy gray canvas reinforced with leather bindings. The shiny steel latch at the top was fitted with a small but very substantial looking padlock, which was locked. There was no key, but just alongside of the frame, canvas and leather had been cleanly slit by a razor blade end to end. Brett thrust his fingers into this slit, spread it wide, and commanded, "Look!"

She leaned past his shoulder, wide-eyed. The bag was literally filled with money, bills of various denominations neatly bound into packets, tens in one packet, twenties in another, and these packets rammed in close together. It was impossible to estimate how many thousands were there, but at a first glance it looked like all the money in the world.

She stretched out a hand, then drew it back. Her little pointed chin quivered, and she turned so pale that the rouge made dull blotchy islands on her cheekbones. All of her twenty-two years, it seemed to her, she had longed for money, fought and slaved and struggled after it, as after a mirage on a distant horizon. For money in the abstract, for the power to buy, the power to have and to do what she pleased. But now that she saw it before her, money itself, the actual currency, it overpowered her with fright, and she could not touch it. It was too much.

"Brett!" She shivered. "How much...?"

"Fifty grand, according to the newspapers."

Suddenly she gripped his arm. "The papers! Brett, the Lincoln National, Tuesday... the cashier was shot—"

"I had nothing to do with it, I tell you," he denied harshly. "Chuck's mob, they wouldn't cut me in; well, this is what they get."

"How do you mean?" she murmured faintly.

He straightened up and his thin lips parted in a toothy grin.

"I'm not big-time crook, Doll; I told you that. It's just the old Hagen luck—plus using my brains. I just happened to find out where they stowed this stuff while they were waiting for the coppers to cool down. I didn't even steal it. I found it. And finders is keepers, ain't it?"

Her eyes remained riveted to the satchel. "There's a killing on that money, Brett. I wish—"

"Rats! What's the matter, Doll? Scared?"

Her shoulders made an impatient movement. "Brett, why don't you use my name—Amy? Why do you always call me Doll?"

"You're my doll, ain't you? Don't be fussy; they'll be callin' you duchess, in the rags this'll buy you."

The implied promise did not seem to register with her. She could not take her eyes off the satchel. "I didn't know, Brett. You just told me you had some money coming to you, and that we could go away and get married. I didn't know that you—you—"

"Well, we're gonna get married!"

He opened her suitcase on top of the bed and lifted out the flimsy garments, dresses, underwear, and stockings. Then

he began to transfer the packets from the satchel. When he had stowed half a dozen, a thought struck him. The bills, as such, were used, and quite anonymous; the only possible clue to their identity lay in the printed paper wrappers, with which they were bound, on which figures and initials were pencilled in blue. So he tore off all the wrappers, packing the currency loose in the suitcase like so much paper.

On the bottom of the satchel he came finally to a sack of coins. He held it up doubtfully; the tag said \$200. Then he shrugged, and snorted scornfully through his nose.

"What are you doing with that?" asked the girl.

He stuffed the wrappers back into the satchel, and dropped the sack in on top. "I'm ditching this in the first creek we cross, and that'll just make it sink nice."

"But Brett—two hundred dollars?"

He grinned at her. He was at the peak of his triumphant confidence. "What's two hundred bucks, to us, Dolly? We're in the dough—we ain't cheap skates now."

The term, even on his own lips, made him wince. For it had fitted him—up to now—too closely. For years he had been piddling around with cheap jobs, cheap companions, and cheap knavery, deathly afraid of an honest day's work, living always with a vague and undefined hope in what he called the old Hagen luck. Well, that luck had finally turned for him, at 4:40 on Tuesday afternoon.

He had been loafing, at 4:35, in Eddie's Windmill, a second rate bar and grill on Cliff Street—playing pool. The counters had stuck and he'd got up on the table to free them. It was this that brought his eyes up just over the sill of the single tiny, high window. The pane was of wire-glass, opaque, but the sash was raised three or four inches, and he could see out into the back alley.

TWO men stood there, and although their backs were toward him he recognized at once the thick shoulders and sloping neck of Chuck Bianco. The other he saw a moment later, was Larry Cradd. Larry held a raincoat draped over something in his hand, and he kept glancing furtively about him. That furtiveness in

[Turn page]

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itself was enough to rivet Brett in silent attention.

There were no other windows facing on this alley. On the far side was the blank outer wall of the garage, at the back end a high board fence. The entrance from the street was hidden by a jog in the wall. They were evidently sure of being unobserved.

Chuck bent over. Seizing an iron ring, he lifted aside a manhole cover set in the concrete close to the garage wall. Then both of them hunkered on their heels. Brett could not see exactly what they were doing, but within a dozen seconds the manhole cover settled back into place with a faint, metallic clang, and the two figures straightened up. Larry Cradd slung the raincoat limply over his shoulder, grinned crookedly, and said something in a low tone.

Brett heard Chuck's reply: "You and me; nobody else." Then the two disappeared quickly toward the street.

Brett stepped down, went out to the bar, and ordered another beer. He was mildly curious, nothing more, until at ten o'clock that night he saw a copy of the Middletown evening paper. The shooting of the cashier on the steps of the Lincoln National was blazoned in letters four inches high; the cashier's locked satchel, holding over \$50,000 in currency, had disappeared in the hands of two masked thugs.

Brett's shrewd, suspicious mind leaped at once to guess what he had seen. As a hanger-on of Chuck's crowd, he had known that the two leaders were planning something, but he had been given no inkling of what it was. He had verified his guess sometime after midnight, slipping into the dark and silent alley with shaking knees, holding his breath while he struggled with the manhole cover. The bag, suspended from a boss on the under side by a loop of wire, matched the newspaper description exactly.

Then, with an incredible fortune tossed practically into his lap, he was faced with the necessity for thinking, and thinking fast. To stay in Middletown and start spending a roll like that would attract instant curiosity. To depart without an explanation would likewise rouse suspicion, not so much on the part of the police as among Chuck's mob.

Chuck and Larry, finding their loot vanished, would of course first suspect each other of a double-cross. They could not possibly imagine that their cache had been observed; still, it was just as well not to start them imagining.

To leave town alone, without an obvious motive, was too dangerous. Suddenly it struck him; to leave with a frail, with the announced intention of marrying her—that was something anyone might do. This avenue had led him direct to Amy Sheppard. By dint of some fast double talk, it had worked out all right so far, though as they stumbled across the moonlit field toward the car he abruptly remembered something.

"Did you call your brother, like I told you?"

"Yes. I telephoned him about ten o'clock, Brett."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him we were going off to get married. I said you had a little money; enough for a week's honeymoon, and that we'd return his car when we got back."

Brett nodded in satisfaction as he slid the suitcase carefully into the rear of the sedan. That report would get spread around, and would explain his absence. When they didn't return at the end of a week; well, they'd be across the Canadian border and a long way off by that time. As for the car, he'd send her brother five hundred bucks from some place, and tell him to keep his mouth shut. No, he was no cheap skate; he'd send a grand!

He gunned the Plymouth out onto the asphalt, and glanced at her out of the corners of his eyes. Instead of eagerness, gay anticipation, she was the picture of frightened dejection where she slumped in the seat, her fingers twisted into a tight knot, her eyes wide and staring on the road.

"S'matter, Doll?" he asked curtly. "You tired?"

She shook her head listlessly. "I'm scared, Brett. That money—I didn't know what it was. It's dangerous—"

"Aw, can it, will you!" he sneered. "I'm telling you nobody can hook me up with this dough. I had nothin' to do with the bank job, and I can prove it if I have to. All we got to worry about is how to spend it. Ain't that tough?"

[Turn page]

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She nodded silently; his eyes went back to the road, which snaked into and under the glare of the headlights as it climbed a long hill.

"Women!" he thought rather bitterly. "You never know what they want, because they don't know themselves. Maybe I'm crazy, to drag this doll with me. Wonder what she's figurin' there, so quiet?"

HER silence annoyed him, gradually wore on his nerves. It was based on fear, and because he knew that, it worked on his own apprehensions. All the risks, the unknown perils of his adventure, loomed in his mind; in vain he tried to shrug them off, scowling in savage concentration at the ribbon of the road.

On the far side of the second town he saw a gas station with flood-lights still on, but no other customers; he pulled in with squealing tires. The attendant was a short, thick-set man with a shock of stringy red hair; he frowned wearily as he came out of his shack, eyeing Brett alertly.

"High-test," said Brett. "Fill her up. And some oil."

He slid out of the door, closing it behind him, and stood watching silently while the gas gurgled into the tank. Then he moved to the front of the car where he could continue to watch while the stocky man checked the oil, poured in two quarts, and checked the gauge again before dropping the hood. The attendant went into the office for a moment, and came out wiping his hands on what looked like an old shirt.

"That'll be three-sixty, mister," he said in a flat voice.

Brett thrust his right hand in his pocket, and suddenly felt a cold lump forming in the pit of his stomach. His fingers closed on a single bill, and he knew without looking that it was a one-dollar bill. It was all he had in his clothes; he cursed his stupidity in forgetting that fact. But it was too late to do now what he had meant to do earlier, behind locked doors and drawn shades.

He stepped to the right hand window. "Doll," he said, in a half whisper. "You got two, three bucks in your handbag?"

She shook her head at him. "No; only small change. I meant to ask you." Her voice trailed off before his glare.

"Three dollars and sixty cents," repeated the attendant, with stressed distinctness.

"Yeah, okay," muttered Brett. "Just a minute, eh?"

He jerked open the door of the car and leaned in behind the front seat. The suitcase lay on the floor in back, as he had dropped it, wrong side up. He reversed it awkwardly, and tugged at the frail straps.

Footsteps on the gravel of the apron told him that the attendant was standing directly behind him; Brett tried to make his body fill the door opening. But one of the flood-lights streamed in the opposite window at just the right angle to illuminate what he was doing, or trying to do, on the floor. His hands shook violently.

He raised the lid just enough to slip a hand underneath. His fingers fumbled anxiously in the layers of clothing, tangling blindly in their haste. Finally he burrowed through to what he sought. He seized a thick sheaf, then realized that that wouldn't do, and nervously separated one bill from the rest.

"Here," he croaked, straightening up and turning.

The blood froze in his veins and his eyes bulged in their sockets. The red-haired man had let the greasy shirt drop to his side, and his hand held out a big, ugly revolver.

"Take it easy, mister," he grumbled. He peered from beneath shaggy brows. "What you got there? A twenty? Oh-h-h!"

Brett stood pale and speechless, breathing hard.

"Excuse me, pal!" The stocky man belched a short, mirthless laugh, and gestured with the heavy gun. "I been stuck up here a couple of times, this time of night, and I ain't takin' no chances. It's the first time I ever see a customer go into his suitcase after his money. I thought—but never mind. Come inside, mister, and I'll give you your change."

BRETT swallowed, and followed the other man across the gravel. He had to grip the door frame until his knees stiffened. The short man dropped the re-

[Turn page]



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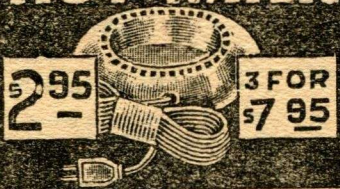
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volver into the drawer beneath the cash register, and counted out bills and silver.

"Hope I didn't frighten you, son," he grinned at Brett. "You know how it is; got to be on the sharp for the rough guys in this business, 'specially late at night. How would I know? You might be diggin' in there after a rod. Well, nobody hurt, and everybody happy now, heh? Come again, mister; come again!"

"Yeah," grunted Brett, with a smile that was more like a snarl.

His cheeks were stiff, his legs felt like jointed boards. He was in such a hurry to get away from that station that he stumbled over his own feet, getting into the car, and then drove a hundred yards before remembering to unlock the parking brake. His thoughts were in such a panic that the girl had to repeat her question twice before he heard it.

"Aw, the crazy dope thought I was goin' to stick him up!" He cackled harshly. "Imagine—if he only knew! I suppose he thinks he's smart; he'll be tellin' all his friends."

He realized, but did not express, the next step; that the incident would be enough to make the red-headed man remember very clearly the customers he had served just before closing that night. Brett clenched his teeth on a bitter curse. "We won't have that trouble again, anyhow," he growled, jamming the accelerator to the floor.

As soon as he was out in the open country he picked a narrow lane that angled off under a clump of trees, and drove fifty yards off the main road before stopping. He climbed in the back and fished around in the suitcase, stuffing fives in one pocket and tens in another. But when he offered her a thickish wad to put in her pocketbook, she recoiled.

"No, no, Brett! I'd rather not. You take care of that."

He grunted, slammed the suitcase shut, and buckled the straps. When he had climbed into the front seat again, she spoke plaintively.

"Brett, are we going to stop somewhere to sleep? I'm terribly tired. I didn't sleep very much last night—you know, after you told me. And all—all this."

"We ain't stoppin' anywhere till we get out of the state." He frowned into the

surrounding blackness. He knew no sympathy for her feelings whatsoever. Consideration for others was something he had never felt; his reasoning started and ended with himself. But suddenly he was deathly tired. The fiasco at the gas station had stretched his taut nerves to the breaking point, and his rage at his own stupidity had burned up the last of his emotional reserves. His hand trembled where it gripped the wheel; he felt as if all the strength had drained out of his limbs.

"We could knock off a nap right here," he said gruffly. "I'll get in the back, and you curl up here in front." He turned his head toward her, but actually spoke to reassure himself. "After all, there's no rush. It ain't as if anybody was followin' us."

He flicked off the lights; the night seemed to descend on them like a blanket. Shortly after he had crawled into the rear seat she heard him fumbling in the suitcase again, and knew that he was after the bottle, but she said nothing.

She slept fitfully and in discomfort, and did a good deal of confused thinking during the wakeful periods. Brett, once sprawled on the rear seat with a foot jammed on the lid of the suitcase, slept like an over-tired animal.

THE morning sun, streaming into the Paramount Grill, showed up the dust on the leaves of the potted palms, and the glint of grease on the forks laid out on the counter. Chuck Bianco—one of the men whose cache Brett had robbed—hunched over his third cup of coffee at the far end, his heavy-set features impassive, his small eyes bright and alert despite a sleepless night.

A tall young man with sandy hair came back toward the door that led to the kitchen, and asked for Nick. The Greek appeared from the steamy rear, wiping his hands on his apron.

"I came to let you know that Amy won't be coming to work today," said the young fellow. "She's getting married."

Nick's frown exploded into amazement. "She gets married!"

"That's right. I'm her brother, and she only told me last night. Called me up.

[Turn page]

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Nick sputtered astonished ejaculations in Greek. "But I owe her three, four days! Why she not tell me? Come, I give it you, for her. And some more for present, too. Yes, yes, come!"

He moved along behind the counter toward the cash register. The blond young man followed in front, protesting.

Chuck's expression was like granite. He rose, slid a half-dollar onto the counter, and emerged into the street. He saw that he had been right in guessing the Paramount Grill—only a little late. He had known that Larry Cradd frequently ate breakfast in this joint; now he knew why. Larry, the double-crossing skunk, had been making a play for that blonde; now, with the bag of dough under one arm and the girl under the other, he was making a getaway to Montreal. A getaway—that's what he thought!

At the curb Chuck slid behind the wheel of a green Chrysler coupe with a long, sleek hood. He drove with furious intentness and utter disregard of speed limits. His unshaven jaw was locked and rigid; his eyes flicked cars as he overtook and passed them, and then returned to the road ahead.

It was beyond Kingston that he came up behind the Plymouth. The flash of sun on the golden blonde head in the right-hand seat made him slam on his brakes. He could not be sure, and the rear view of the man at the wheel did not look quite right; for a couple of miles he followed at a slower pace. Then abruptly the sedan turned off in front of a roadside diner. Chuck rolled on past.

At the next cross-roads he turned around, waited for a couple of minutes, and then drove slowly back. He parked next to the Plymouth and stepped out, loosening his coat.

They were in a booth, the only couple in the diner. Chuck stepped softly down the aisle. The girl was facing him. She looked up; he saw her eyes begin to widen. He took two more steps.

"Well, pal—you seem to be in a hurry!"

Brett's head jerked up, and his mouth fell open. He made an instinctive move toward the suitcase between his feet, but then his muscles froze in dismay and terror. He gurgled unintelligibly.

Chuck was equally surprised, only he did not show it. He kept his hand under his coat lapel, and snorted. "Brett! What are you doin' here?"

"Why, I—we—" Brett swallowed. "We're getting married."

"You! She's marryin' you?"

"Y-yes. We're goin' to Montreal—our honeymoon. Ain't we, Doll?"

The girl nodded silently. Chuck, who had been leaning over the table, straightened up slowly. His eyes glittered stonily. "I'll wait for you outside," he declared, and moved toward the door.

While waiting, with his eyes covering the exit, Chuck doped things out. Something was screwy, but that mackerel Larry couldn't fool him. He had gone on ahead with the loot, probably, leaving the frail to follow. To cool suspicion, she was using this dope, Brett, as a tool, to drive her to the rendezvous. Once in Montreal, she would ditch him and meet Larry, and start to spend that dough. Well, he, Chuck, knew how to gum that game.

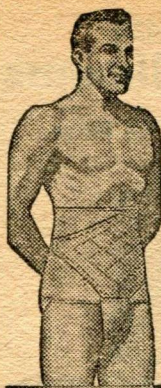
WHEN they emerged he stepped up to Brett. "You can help me out with a lift, kid. I'm on the road for Montreal myself, only my heap is on the bum; burned out a rod. I'll ride with you."

Brett, petrified with dismay, tried to think of some way to say no. But Chuck had him by the elbow, propelling him toward the sedan. He could think of nothing that would not arouse Chuck's suspicions, always near the surface. He would have preferred even a cop as passenger, but he was helpless. Chuck jerked open the door.

"Here, lots of room for that here in back." Chuck took the suitcase from Brett's nerveless fingers, leering as he climbed in.

As hour succeeded hour, Chuck made what little conversation there was. Brett was engrossed in his driving, and with his thoughts, which were crowded with terror and anxiety. He could not figure this out. Chuck had no idea of the contents of the suitcase; if he did, he would have acted before now. For some reason, he must suspect Larry of running to Montreal with the swag—but why switch to the Plymouth with them? Brett's puzzle-

[Turn page]



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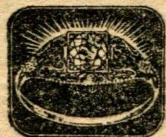
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ment increased his tension. The situation was fantastic. Chuck, the killer, on the trail of \$50,000—which lay back there between his feet in the battered old suitcase.

Brett's mind revolved endlessly about the problem; how get rid of his unwanted passenger before something happened. He could hit on no solution except to drive, and drive like fury, which he did. Even Chuck protested when he careened through an S-curve.

"Hey, kid, leave the wheels on this jalopy, huh!"

Brett scowled rigidly at the road, and drove on. He could feel the tension like a tightening band about his chest, and it seemed to him that the atmosphere in the car was electric with suspense. How could Chuck fail to notice it?

It was around Chestertown that Chuck first said something about eating lunch. "We're not hungry," said Brett curtly, and drove on. The question just added to his problems. He would never dare go into a restaurant and leave the suitcase, especially since the lock on the car door did not work. But to carry it in might arouse Chuck's curiosity about its contents.

Brett shrugged off the suggestion again in Elizabethtown, but as they neared Keeseville, toward four o'clock in the afternoon, Chuck became insistent.

"I started without breakfast, this morning," he growled. "And you'd better buy the little lady some food, kid." Amy took out her compact and powered her nose, which seemed to register assent.

They slowed to bump over a grade-crossing near the middle of town; Chuck pointed past Brett's shoulder. "There's a joint, kid. Pull in there; lots of room."

Brett could think of no further excuse. He wheeled the sedan into the almost vacant parking lot, and stopped. Amy stepped out, shaking out her dress. Chuck followed her, pausing in the open door to look back at Brett, slouched behind the wheel.

"I don't feel like eating," mumbled Brett. "You two go ahead; fill yourselves up. I'll wait for you here."

Chuck's little eyes narrowed over their surprise. He couldn't quite figure this, and anything he could not understand made him suspicious. He reached in and

jerked out the ignition key.

"I'll hold this for you, kid—just in case." His smile was thin, and faintly sarcastic.

He followed Amy into the diner. They sat in a booth near the end of the counter. The girl ordered a sandwich; Chuck asked for a hamburger roast with potatoes and vegetables. When the dishes came, he ploughed into his food with both elbows on the table. She nibbled at one half of her sandwich listlessly, her fingers trembling.

Suddenly, raising his head, he was astonished to see that her eyes were filled with tears.

"Whatsa matter, babe?" he asked gruffly.

She choked back a sob. "I can't do it," she murmured feebly.

"You can't do what?"

Amy had never been nearer the stage than the sixth row in the orchestra, but all women are born actresses. Her cheeks were pale, her eyes big and appealing. "I—I've changed my mind. Brett is—all right, but oh! Not this way! It's a mistake."

Chuck grunted, puzzled. "What're you goin' to do?"

She sat up straight, nodding toward the end door of the diner, out of sight from the front. "The railroad station is down that way. I'm going back. You tell him for me, will you, Chuck?"

Chuck frowned. Her evident sincerity nonplussed him. His theories and suspicions went overboard; this elopement must be on the up and up. If she was calling it off, going back, there was no further meaning left to Montreal.

"Okay; I'll give him the bad news. Suit yourself, baby."

SHE rose at once, her high heels tapping primly on the tiled floor. Leaving by the end door, she cut across the rear angle of the parking lot, which kept the bulk of the diner between her and the sedan, and then there were some billboards. Once on the cross street that paralleled the railroad tracks, she hurried; she almost ran. Her eyes searched the sidewalks ahead of her. Why was it, when you wanted a policeman, you could never find one?

[Turn page]

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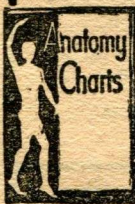
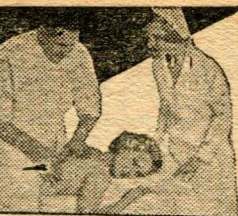
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On the main street, maybe. She'd have to turn left, and then left again. And she must get back in time; when Chuck would be in the back with the suitcase, and before Brett started to drive off. With Chuck already under a certain amount of suspicion—she knew that he had been questioned by the police, but had produced the usual perfect alibi—she might be able to make her story stick to him, not Brett. If only Brett would catch the cue.

Chuck finished his hamburger unhurriedly. He thought, "Women! You never can figure them . . . should never let them in on your business . . . a neat number, that one, though . . ."

He emerged from the front entrance of the diner and strolled across the parking area, picking his teeth. As he laid his hand on the door of the sedan, he could see Brett peering past his shoulder.

"Your babe has run out on yuh," said Chuck casually.

Brett stared at him blankly. Chuck opened the door.

"She took a powder. It's all off, she said. It ain't the first time a dame changed her mind; don't look so sour."

Brett managed to stammer, "Where—where is she?"

Chuck's head jerked. "Railroad station, goin' home."

He had started to climb into the back, but then realized that there was now room in front. In changing his mind, however, his eye lit on the suitcase, lying on the floor.

"Say, she ran off and forgot her satchel! The poor kid; she might need some of this stuff."

"Wait a minute!" croaked Brett, in a strained voice.

"Stay right there," commanded Chuck. "I'll amble over to the station and give it to her. Only be a minute."



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He picked up the suitcase, and backed out of the open door.

Brett's brain was bursting. He failed utterly to comprehend the meaning of Amy's actions, but his suspicions were on a hair-trigger now. Whether she was trying to run out on her own, or with the connivance of Chuck; it made no difference. She wasn't going to get hold of that bag. All of his nerve centers were focused on that bag; whatever else happened, he would not let it out of his sight. Sooner tear out his stomach with bale hooks.

"Leave it!" he cried hoarsely.

"Why, you cheap skate!" admonished Chuck. "Let the kid have her clothes. What kind of a heel—"

"Put that bag down!" yelled Brett, his voice cracking on the edge of hysteria.

Chuck, already moving off, gestured impatiently with his free hand without looking behind him.

Brett's rage and despair, keened by the long day of suspense, suddenly hurled him into action. His hand leaped to his jacket pocket, and leaped out holding an automatic. He did not know much about firing it. He was never quite sure about the safety. As it happened, now, it was off.

He rested his hand on the edge of the door, and squeezed the trigger. The concussion of the blast traveled up his arm and shoulder, and through his whole body, setting free forces which he had not known existed.

A dozen feet away Chuck stopped, and his head spun round. He saw Brett's rigid white face, and the smoking muzzle of the pistol! Nothing could have surprised him more. He had never even suspected that the kid had the nerve to

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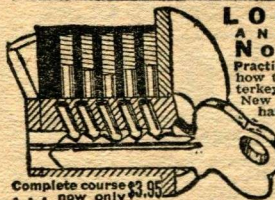
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carry a rod, much less shoot one. However, Chuck was not one to leave himself a stationary target any longer than necessary. His reflexes were in good order; he started off again at an angling run, moving to put the structure of the diner between him and the spitting firearm.

Having once started to fire, Brett kept on in a kind of frenzy, jerking the trigger again and again and again. His first shot hit nothing, but his second struck the top of the suitcase, smashing the lock. The lid dropped open, and the contents began to spew out in a trail. First a few flimsy feminine garments, a shoddy pair of evening slippers. Then a perfect shower of clean, green bills, that whisked and fluttered along the concrete like autumn leaves.

This last Chuck probably never saw. The third bullet, or perhaps the fourth, hit him squarely in the base of the spine. All of his senses flicked out like a light at the touch of the switch, and he sprawled, sliding, on his face. Currency drifted and eddied about him like snow.

Brett found the pistol clicking emptily in his hand. He pushed the door and stepped to the ground. He was staring in blank frustration at the swirling, dancing sheaves of notes, which it was useless to try to gather together now, when two figures appeared abruptly at the far corner of the diner. One was Amy, tiny and breathless at the side of a big, burly policeman.

The cop had heard the shooting, and was ready for action. He saw Brett with the gun in his hand. He had no way of being certain the magazine was empty, and he took no chances. His police positive spoke just once, and Brett folded up as if he had been kicked in the ribs by a mule. The automatic pistol bounced on the concrete with a metallic clang.

Amy screamed once, and ran toward him. Her quick little feet scuffed heedlessly through drifts of twenty-dollar bills.

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(Concluded from page 10)

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I have a number of neighbors who like THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE as much as I do, and we'd appreciate your giving some thought to this suggestion. Thanks for plenty of good reading.—*Mary Dillon, 2885 Hastings Street, Vancouver, British Columbia.*

I know plenty about the fine work being done by the boys up across our friendly Border, and I do agree with you that there would be plenty of interesting story backgrounds there. Perhaps we can work out something along these lines in the future. Greetings to your little reader group!

Thanks to all of you who have written us—and keep those letters and postcards coming in! Your opinions are helpful and even your severest criticisms have their place in our scheme of things. Please address all communications to The Editor, THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Let's all get together here again in the next issue.

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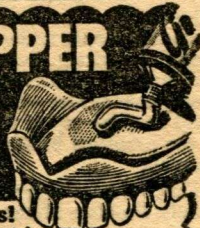
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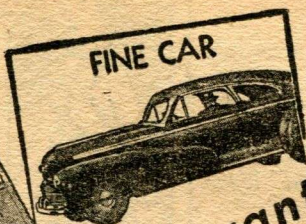
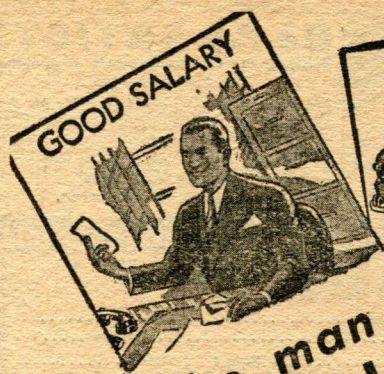
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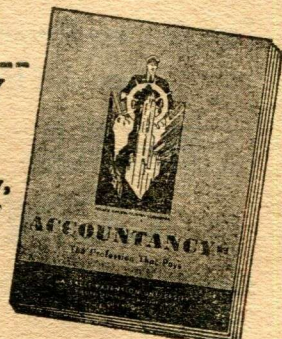
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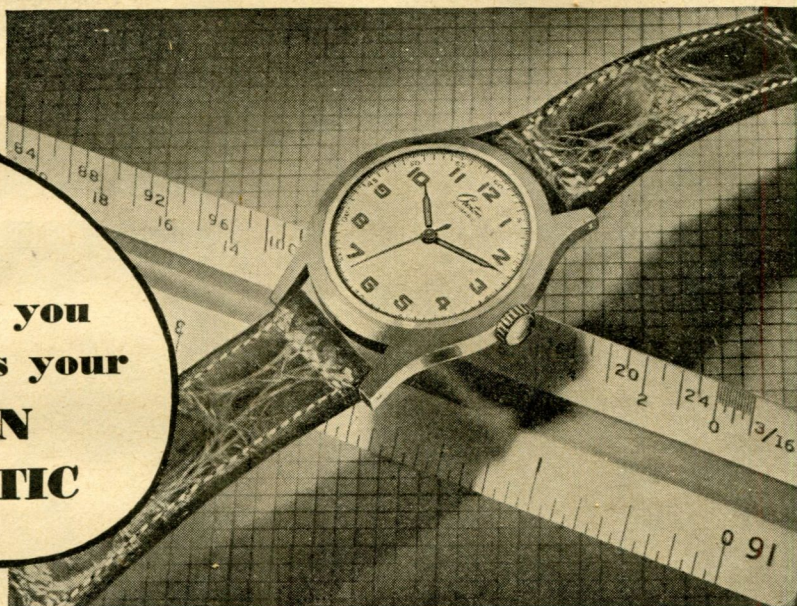
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THE WORLD'S MOST CAREFREE WATCH

Douse it! Drench it! Soak it!

Your handsome CROTON AQUAMATIC keeps telling you the right time in hot, cold, salt or fresh water. Even perspiration can't harm — because every CROTON AQUAMATIC is *certified waterproof* by the United States Testing Co., Inc., before it goes to your jeweler. All you need do is make sure only a Croton jeweler opens, closes, and services it. You'll revel in AQUAMATIC's other knock-about features, too — dust-proof, shock-resistant, radium dial, and a glass crystal that can't be shattered! Write for free booklet. CROTON WATCH CO., INC., 48 West 48th St., New York 19.

3 Aquamatics were tested against the average of 9 famous watches wound by hand, in a 30-day wearing test by a leading laboratory. *Aquamatic proved 13.5% more accurate!*

HOW TO CLEAN A GUN AT NIGHT!

IT'S NIGHT. You've just returned to camp with your "bag." You'll be shooting again tomorrow *but*... you know if you don't clean your gun *tonight*, it may become "pitted." Better have a flashlight handy to help. Better be sure your flashlight is powered with "Eveready" batteries... Powerful, dependable, *they outlast all other brands!**



PLACE A SMALL PIECE OF WHITE PAPER in the breech of your gun. Then direct the beam of your flashlight on the paper. Now you can see through the barrel clearly... to be sure the gun is thoroughly cleaned and ready for tomorrow's "shooting."

- Brighter light, longer life! That's what you want in a flashlight battery. And that's what you get with "Eveready" brand batteries. Laboratory tests prove it. And the best "laboratory" of all — *your own flashlight* — proves it! That's why "Eveready" batteries *outsell* all other brands — because they *outlast* all other brands!*

*According to the "General-Purpose 4-Ohm Intermittent Test" of the American Standards Association, which most closely approximates average use.

The registered trade-mark "Eveready" distinguishes products of

NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY, INC.

30 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

Unit of Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation



Proof!... in the laboratory... in your own flashlight..

**"EVEREADY" BATTERIES OUTLAST
ALL OTHER BRANDS!***

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