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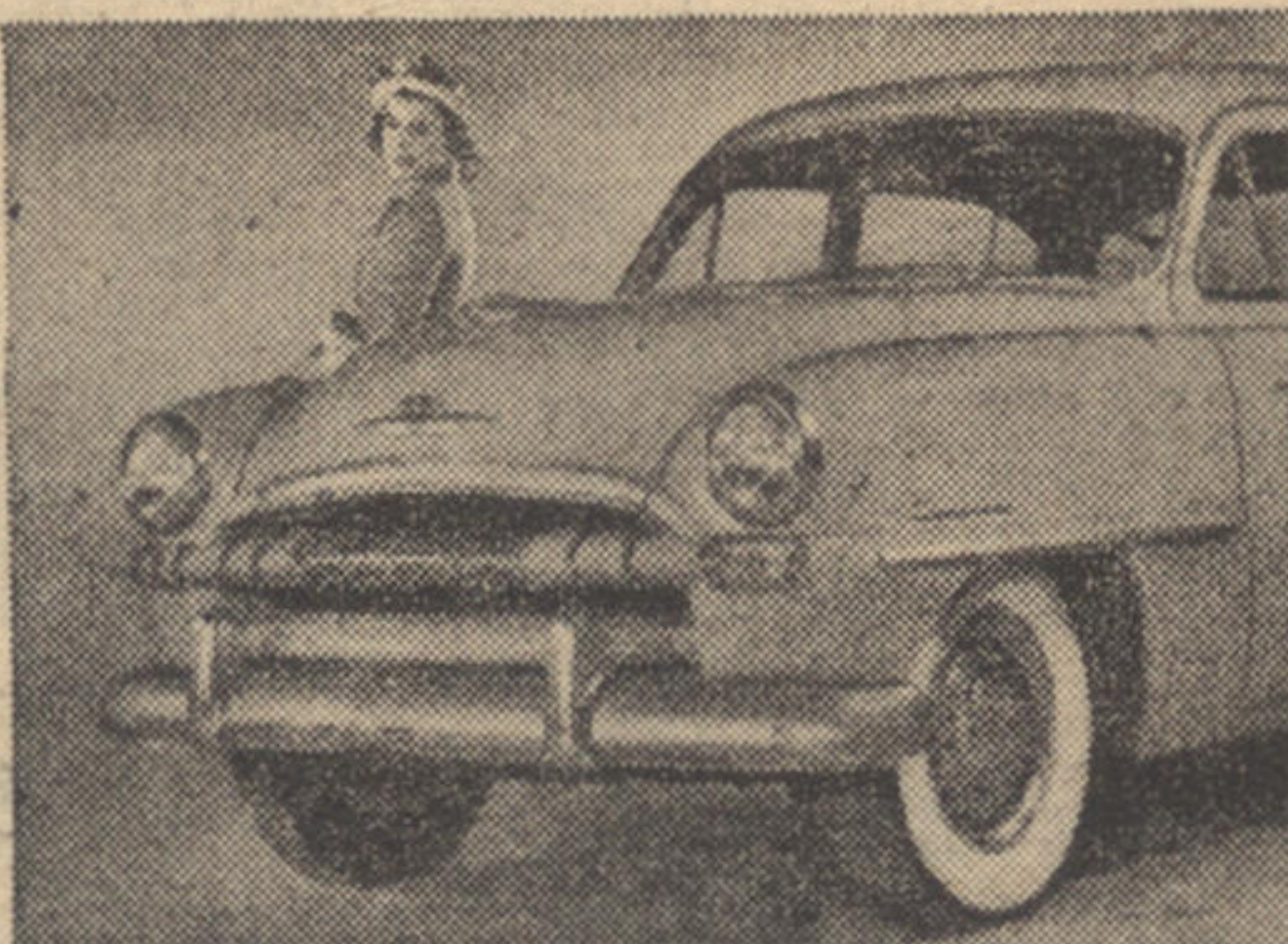


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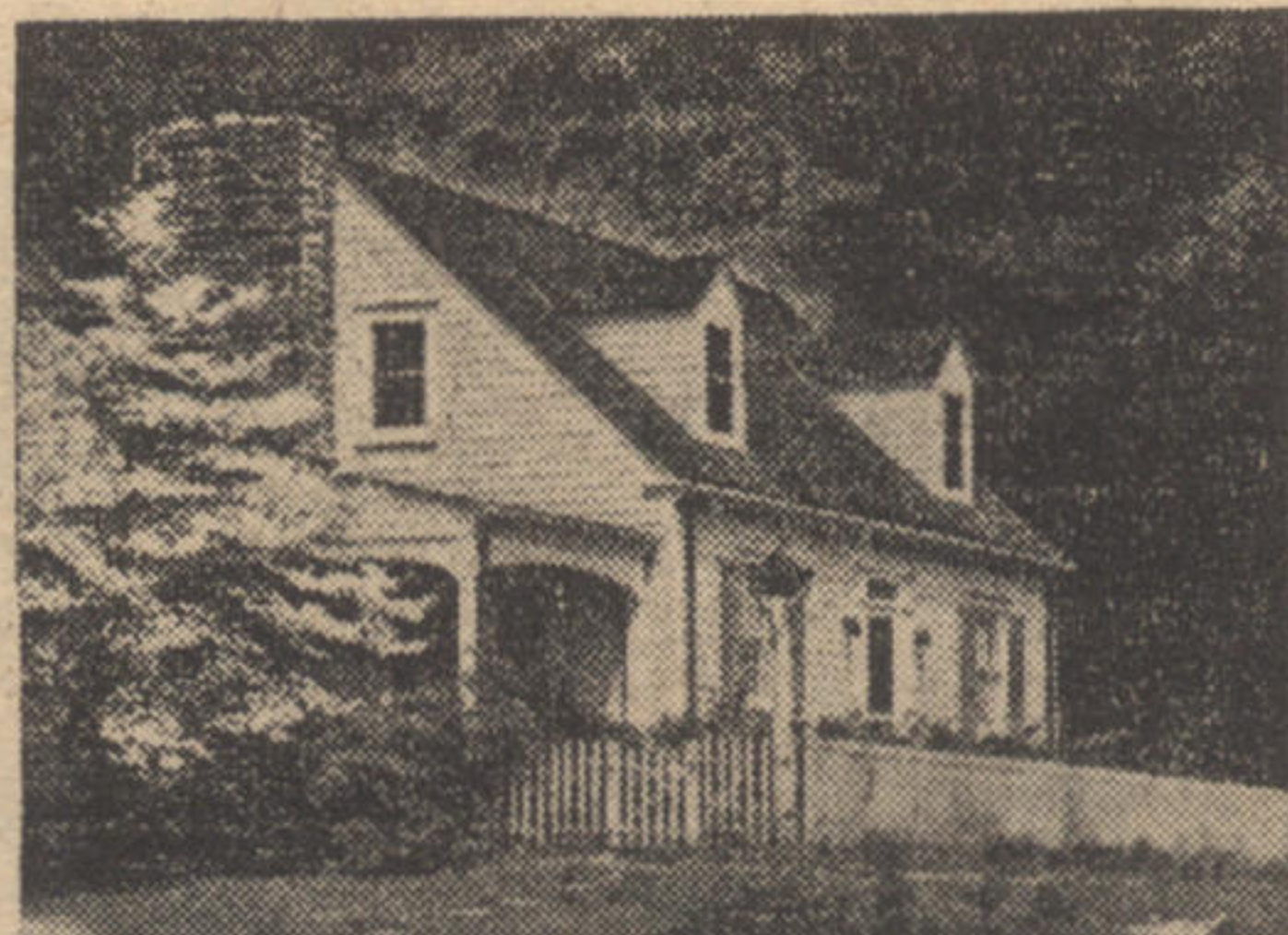
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The PHANTOM **detective**

Vol. LIX, No. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION Summer Issue

FULL-LENGTH
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FOUR
SHORT STORIES



FEATURES



MURDER'S AGENT Robert Wallace 10

The girl was blameless—but she had to be slain because she once knew a hood. It was part of the business-as-usual policy of the underworld—a policy pursued in spite of the fact that their leaders had vanished!

YOU TAKE THE RAP Philip Morgan 93

He was not guilty, but he was a good suspect

THE HAMBURGER AND THE BLONDE . . . J. L. Benton 100

Why one juror held out against conviction

BREAD UPON THE WATERS Morris Cooper 103

The cop thought that he was seeing things!

AS GOOD AS A CORPSE Robert Zacks 106

The big swindle was based on flying saucers

THE PHANTOM SPEAKS The Phantom 6

LAW AND DISORDER Harold Helfer 9

SEEING WAS BELIEVING Joseph C. Stacey 43

FOOTPRINTS ON THE CEILING Andrew Meredith 63

CHARACTER PARTS Adrian Anderson 73

CRIMINALS AROUND THE WORLD A Quiz 102

EVERY STORY IN THIS MAGAZINE BRAND NEW

THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE. Published quarterly and copyright 1953 by Standard Magazines, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Entered as second-class matter March 15, 1949, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Subscription (12 issues), \$3.00; single copies, \$.25; foreign postage extra. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. In corresponding with this publication please include postal zone number, if any. Summer, 1953, Issue. **PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.**

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the PHANTOM speaks

IT WAS A TUNE such as might be whistled idly in the darkness of night . . . or heard issuing from the speaker of a garish, flashing juke box . . . a melody ordinarily gay and lilting, but now bearing a message of death and mystery, setting the pace for a macabre dance executed by the minions of a modern empire of crime!

It was—The Merry Widow Waltz. And it became the theme song of the case known as **THE MERRY WIDOW MURDERS**—next issue's suspense-packed novel taken from the strange annals of one of the most exciting manhunts in my entire career!

THE MERRY WIDOW MURDERS, as fictionalized by Robert Wallace, is a smashing novel that plunges you into a new kind of racket of blaring juke boxes, blazing guns and sinister death. From teeming Chicago's crime-controlled underworld to the lonely reaches of sprawling Cook County, you'll have a table right next to the dance floor as death waltzes past!

It's a novel of gambling—with busy slot machines pouring out blood instead of jangling quarters. First—a top reporter vanishes, is found slain. Then a dance spot owner is killed, a cop is almost beaten to death, and a beautiful blond vocalist is mercilessly strangled.

They seemed like disconnected crimes—but they had one thing in common. All those who were slain were suspicious of the new juke boxes that were being used around town—and had expressed their suspicions openly. In fact, the blond songstress had a definite hunch and had called the newspapers—but she was a corpse before she could be reached. And corpses don't talk.

Because Frank Havens had received fragments of private information and was eager to get to the bottom of it, Muriel Havens and myself were suddenly drawn into this sinister web of crime. We knew that or-

dinarily the trail to a new gang lord is marked by spewing lead and a big-money fix. Without a doubt an all-powerful syndicate was behind it all, dealing out murder to those who wouldn't pay off. But WHO was the Mr. Big nobody could isolate?

You'll think twice before whistling in the dark again after you read **THE MERRY WIDOW MURDERS**. You'll thrill to this timely novel of a million-dollar shakedown—packed with action, novelty, surprises and suspense from start to finish.

In addition, the next issue will also bring you several short stories of outstanding quality. We have received innumerable comments in praise of our shorter yarns, and here's one we're happy to pass on to you:

THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE is a triple-threat magazine. In addition to the best detective novels being written today, it also contains some excellent short stories that keep your eyes glued to the page, plus a fine assortment of features. Keep up the good work and I'll be reading this magazine regularly from now on.

—Edward Learson Jammes, Detroit.

Here's a note from a romantic soul:

Why doesn't Richard Curtis Van Loan finally pop the question and ask Muriel Havens to be his wife? Seems to me it would not handicap his career as a detective. And his life would be much sweeter and happier all around.

—Blanche W. Brownson, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

Everybody else—write us a letter or postcard! We'll print excerpts from some of them from time to time. Tell us what you think of the yarns we publish—or write about anything you have in mind. We're interested in all our readers and friends.

Please address all communications to The Editor, **THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE**, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Remember, criticism of the magazine is as welcome as praise and all suggestions are welcomed. Thanks, everybody—see you in the next issue!

—THE PHANTOM



THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

*You Can Influence Others
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TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

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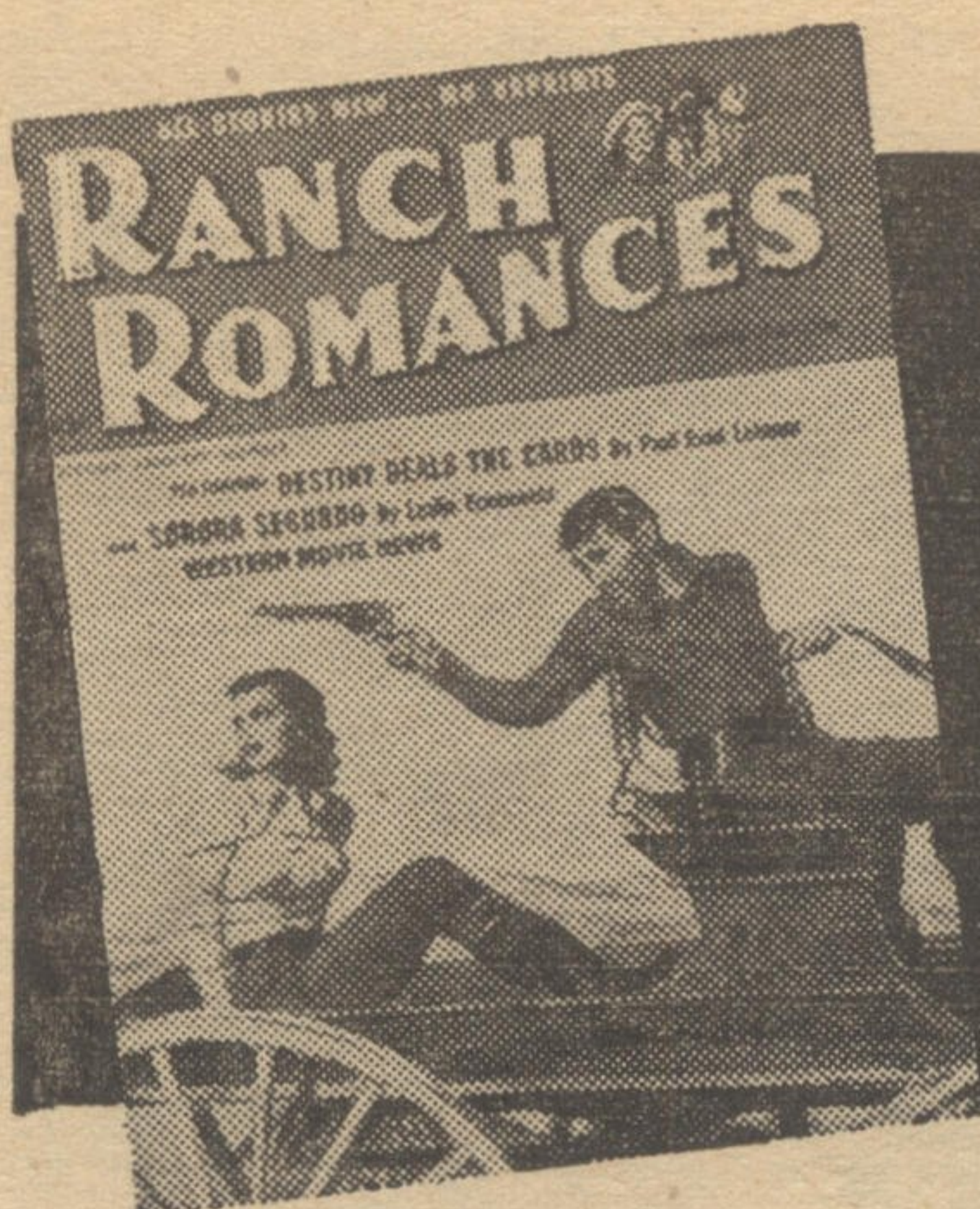
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LAW and DISORDER

By HAROLD HELFER

ILLINOIS PENITENTIARY inmates published their newspaper recently with a front-page picture of the prison entrance. It was headed, "This Is Where We Came In."

PICKED UP FOR vagrancy, a man staunchly informed authorities: "I do so have visible means of support—I'm a thief."

IN LOS ANGELES, an armless midget, who learned to write with a pencil held between his chin and shoulder, was sentenced to San Quentin for writing a worthless check . . . and a handless man, who threatened a market clerk with a revolver through a hole in his coat pocket, was arrested as a holdup man.

IN MADERA, CALIF., after being robbed of \$60 on the street, a man came home to go to bed and forget about it—and discovered that somebody had stolen his bed.

QUESTIONED AFTER he was discovered atop the roof of an Indianapolis hotel, a man declared he'd gone up there to wait for a space ship.

A WOMAN RAN UP against a new example of red tape when she walked into a police station in Brussels, Belgium, recently, and complained that her wallet and identity card had been stolen. A policeman said: "Let me have your identity card," and when the woman repeated that it had been stolen, the officer shrugged and said, "Then I can't take your complaint."

A CITIZEN OF PHOENIX, Ariz., complained bitterly to police that a burglar not only walked away with his best hat but had taken a bath in his house and had left a ring in the tub.

A CONVICTED MURDERER escaped from a Michigan institution during a frigid spell but gave himself up shortly thereafter. "The weather just wasn't any fun," he explained.

OFFICERS RECENTLY ARRESTED three women carrying babies at Madras, India. When crowds threatened them for taking the women into custody, the officers had to explain. Strapped to each baby was a feeding bottle full of illicit liquor.

ARRESTED FOR FAILING to report to his Dallas, Tex., draft board, a young man gave this reason for his action: "Too many people getting killed in the Army. I don't like violence."

IN OAKLAND, CALIF., police arrested a burglar confined to a wheelchair who was caught rifling a house. Officers said he carried "the most complete set of burglar tools we've ever seen," hanging in a case under his chair.

NABBED WITH HER bank robber husband, a woman admitted to Denver police she'd gone along with him on the job, because "I figured he was old enough to know what he was doing."

MURDER'S AGENT

A Novel by ROBERT WALLACE

I

THE pale blue hard-top club coupe slid to the curb on a side street just off Fifth Avenue. Behind the wheel sat lovely, dark-haired Muriel Havens, daughter of one of the country's wealthiest and most influential men—Frank Havens, publisher of a Coast-to-Coast string of newspapers.

In Muriel's dark eyes was usually a hint of laughter,





*Van Loan fired before the
killer could pull trigger*

*When underworld leaders
vanish but underworld business goes
on as usual, the Phantom
must tilt at shadows in the night. . . .*

The Girl Was Guiltless—but She Had to

but they were serious now. So were the eyes of the girl sitting beside her, attractive Nancy Arnold, who had been Muriel's close friend since before their deb days. The names of both girls were familiar ones to readers of the society columns.

Nancy's nervousness was plainly evident in the way she kept clasping and unclasping her hands, and shifting her glance as if she expected someone to come sneaking up on her. She said anxiously, "Muriel, will you try to reach the Phantom again? Please!"

"It won't be any use," Muriel told her. "I've tried four times already. When he goes out for an evening he usually stays out later than this."

Nancy glanced at her watch. "It'll be eleven in only thirty minutes, Muriel. Half an hour, and I'm scared stiff."

"Well, I'm not exactly overcome with joy, Nan. Give me that story again. Just when did your sister go away?"

"Why, Muriel! You surely know that Cathy went abroad a year ago!"

"Abroad? I knew she went somewhere, and that you never mention it. But you've never said where she'd gone before."

"Haven't I? I—must have forgotten. Anyway, I know she got a passport and that she was supposed to have sailed for Europe. I didn't know what day she was planning to sail—because I never knew anything about her after that day. Muriel, that's the last I heard of my sister Cathy until tonight!"

"It's not difficult to check on an American citizen traveling abroad," Muriel said. "Why didn't you try that?"

"I did! I went to every foreign legation in New York, but not one had granted her a visé. None of our legations all over the world knew a single thing about her, and I couldn't even find her name on any steamship or plane passenger list."

"Then she couldn't have gone," Muriel said promptly.

"I don't believe she did, either," Nancy declared. "And for a still better reason.

She carried a letter of credit, but she's never drawn on it."

"And you're sure it was Cathy who phoned you at nine?" Muriel insisted.

"I'm positive! It couldn't have been anyone else. I made her tell me little things that only Cathy and I could possibly know. Muriel—she didn't sound like Cathy, and I wanted to be sure."

Muriel said thoughtfully, "Your sister, missing a year, phones at nine and wants to meet you in Bryant Park at eleven. Two hours later. That hardly gives you much time to make any plans about what to do when you do meet her. Maybe that's just what she had in mind."

"What do you mean?"

MURIEL shrugged slightly. "I'm not sure myself. What bothers me is why Cathy didn't go home to your apartment. Nan, listen! Before she went away like that, wasn't there some kind of unpleasant talk—something about her being involved somehow with some notorious character?"

"You mean Walter Bowden, I suppose. Yes, she insisted she was in love with him, and he *was* a crook. A gangster, I heard people say."

Muriel said, "And now she's back, and calling you mysteriously—Nan, I don't like the looks of this at all. Stay here while I try to reach the Phantom again."

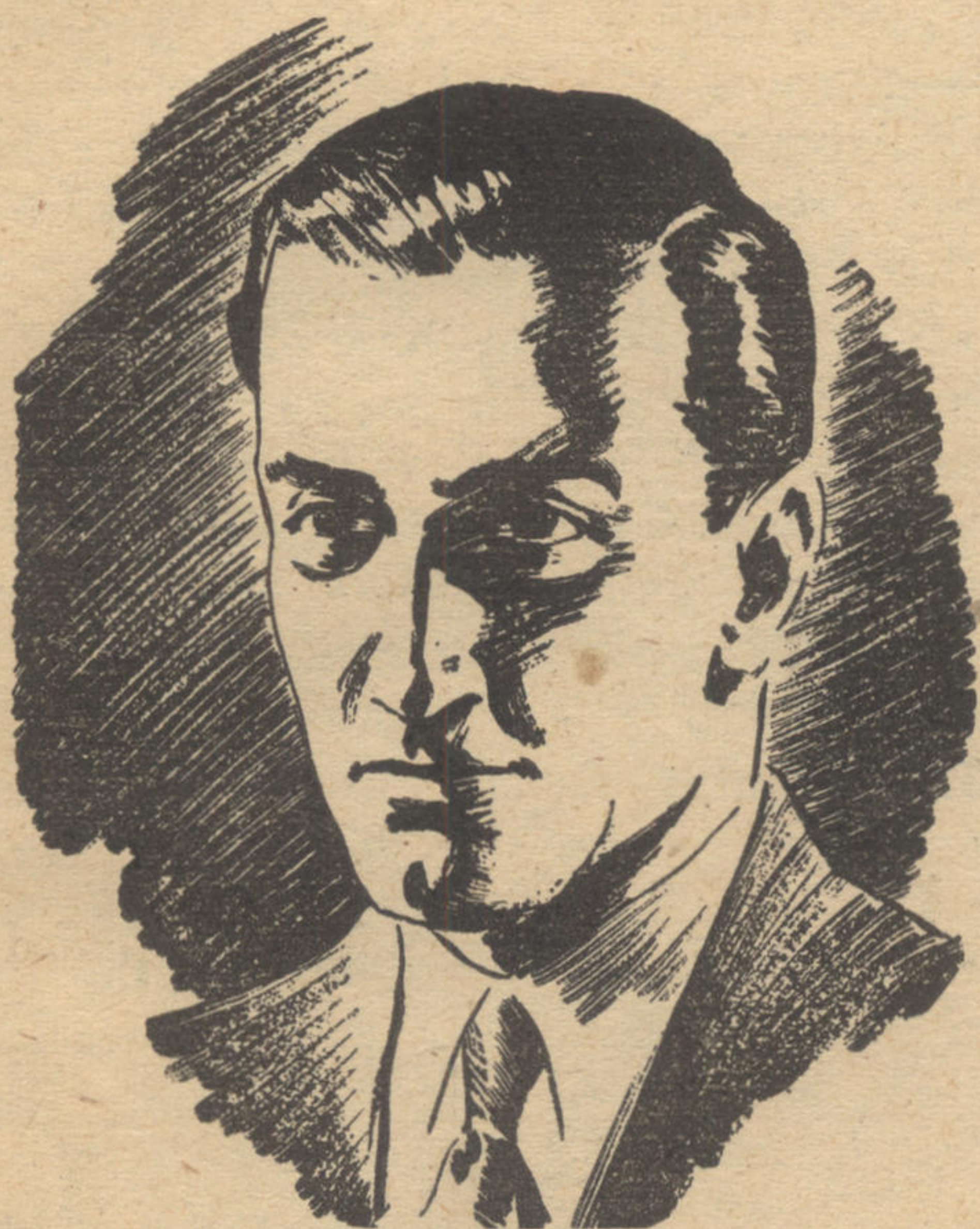
Muriel hurried across the street. She had to walk almost a block before she reached a chain tobacco store and a telephone. She called Richard Curtis Van Loan's penthouse apartment, heard the phone buzz, but there was no answer. She said, "Damn!" under her breath and hung up. Richard Curtis Van Loan, or the Phantom Detective as Muriel was among the few to know, was not available—and never had she wanted him as badly.

Muriel wanted desperately to help Nancy Arnold. They'd been friends since they'd been in their teens, and Muriel supposed she was closer to the girl than any-

Be Killed Because She Once Knew a Hood!

one else, now that Nancy's parents were dead and her sister had disappeared. But Cathy was back—or so that strange phone call had led Nancy to believe.

Only it didn't ring true. A girl who had been gone for a year would rush straight to the apartment she'd shared with a sister she'd loved devotedly. There would be no question of a phone call to make a mysterious date near midnight in a shadowy public park that was completely deserted at that hour. To Muriel's



RICHARD CURTIS VAN LOAN
(The Phantom)

mind the whole thing had danger written all over it.

She returned to the car where Nancy was waiting. And as she lighted a cigarette she studied the park directly across the street. Nancy hadn't even asked if she'd reached the Phantom. The somber look on Muriel's face was mute evidence of her failure.

Finally Muriel said, "There are three streets from which the park can be entered. We can't cover them all. Nan, do you want my advice? Stay out of the

park. Make Cathy call again."

"She said it was a miracle she'd been able to call me this time, Muriel. I can't risk not seeing her. I have a feeling that if I don't keep this appointment with her, I may never see her again."

"All right then. But we've got to work out something. Where, in the park, were you supposed to meet her?"

"She said she'd be sitting on a bench at the lower end."

"It gets worse," Muriel said musingly. "That exit is kept closed after nine. You'll be in a nice trap if anything goes wrong. But of course, you're going ahead with it. And since I've worked with the Phantom pretty often, I know a few tricks myself, Nan. So we'll handle it this way. I'll slip into the park now, and find a place to hide as close to where Cathy will be as possible. I'll keep hidden until you need me. If we've worked ourselves into this stew for nothing, I'll just quietly fade out of the picture."

"Thank you," Nancy said. "It will certainly help, knowing you're close by, but I do wish you could have found the Phantom."

"So do I," Muriel said fervently, "but we'll do the best we can. All set?"

Nancy nodded. "I'll wait until two or three minutes before eleven, just as Cathy told me to. Then I'll go straight to the further end of the park. If—if anything happens, what'll I do, Muriel?"

"Yell! Scream your head off, and so will I. Between us, we ought to raise a cop. There are enough of them around this downtown area. —I'll move along now and hide myself before Cathy gets here. Hold onto your nerve, Nan. Everything's sure to be fine, and Cathy will have some simple explanation to make us laugh at being so afraid of nothing."

MURIEL longed for the Phantom's presence even more as the darkness of the park swallowed her up. She walked on the grass, to make no sound, and by

the time she had reached the far end of the park she had decided there was no place on earth darker than this. She made out the dim forms of a couple of benches, but they were unoccupied, and the only shrubbery sufficiently thick to hide anyone was a good thirty feet from either bench. As she crouched down behind a bush she was thinking that if there were any such thing as mental telepathy, the Phantom must certainly be in touch with her now.

Fifteen minutes went by. Muriel couldn't see whether the benches were occupied or not. She stood up and, on tip-toe, craned her head above the bush. A rough branch caught onto one of her nylons, tearing it. Feelingly she murmured a cuss word to fit the case, then forgot the stocking. The click of high heels grew closer. It was Nancy. Muriel could tell by her hat, though it was only in shadowy silhouette.

She heard Nancy say, "Cathy! Oh, Cathy!"

Cathy Arnold must have quietly reached one of the benches while Muriel had been waiting and listening. Muriel could hear their voices, though they were too muted for her to distinguish many words. Nancy's voice sounded joyous and happy. Cathy's voice, however, was drab, listless.

They had talked for about three or four minutes and Muriel was relaxing, because nothing unusual had happened, when she saw the twin shadows of two men moving softly toward the girls. As Muriel opened her mouth to yell a warning, the pair broke into a run. One of the girls ran, too—ran like the wind. The other apparently never got off the bench, held there by one of the men.

Muriel couldn't see which one had got away, but she could see a girl running toward the nearest gate, with a man gaining on her every couple of steps. The girl must have glanced over her shoulder, for suddenly she screamed:

"Rocky! Rocky Spaull!"

That was all she managed to say—just that name—as her pursuer caught up with

her. Muriel lost sight of them for a moment. She heard another short, sharp scream and that was all. Muriel was running in the direction of the scream when she suddenly dived for the shelter of a small bush. A man came striding by. In the gloom, Muriel judged him to be of medium size.

She tried to think whose voice had called out that odd name, but the voice had been too shrill for her to tell. But something must have happened to whichever girl had called the name, because now there was nothing but a lot of silence ahead.

Then Muriel stumbled over somebody on the ground and almost fell headlong. It was a girl who lay just off the cement walk about midway up the park. Her arms were outflung, her face was buried in the dew-moist grass.

Muriel opened her handbag, fumbled for her lighter and snapped it on. In the light of the tiny flare, she saw instantly that this was not Nancy. She turned the recumbent figure over—and almost screamed herself. The girl's throat had been slashed!

It was Cathy, Nan's long missing sister. She'd changed in the year she'd been gone, but Muriel knew her. Then Muriel was quickly up and running for the far end of the park again. She had to find Nancy, and she must not be sick. Her stomach bounced dangerously with every step, though, and memory of the dead girl stayed with her and try as she might she couldn't blot it out of her mind.

Muriel searched all through that end of the park, but found nothing except a gate which was wide open, and which had been closed not long before. Apparently Nancy had been whisked through this gate, maybe to a waiting car. Muriel went through the gate also.

It would be wiser, she quickly realized, if she kept her presence here where a murder had been committed, a secret for the time being. Those two men could have no inkling that they had been observed. It would be better to leave it that way until she could talk to the Phantom.

AS she reached her car and got in, she saw a cop draw his flashlight and walk into the park. Perhaps he'd heard that short scream of Cathy's before her murderer had caught up with her!

Muriel started her car, pulled away from the curb and drove into the avenue. She had a grip on her nerves now, but the sickening feeling remained in her throat. She was worried about Nancy, too. Why had she been spirited away? Cathy had been ruthlessly murdered, but the killer had taken Nancy with them. There had to be some reason for this, but what it could possibly be was beyond Muriel.

She drove over to Park Avenue and parked her car near the towering building where Richard Curtis Van Loan maintained his penthouse apartment. It was reached by a private entrance and a private elevator, and Muriel was familiar with both. She had a key for the street door, and inside she stepped into the elevator and pushed the single button. The car shot upward.

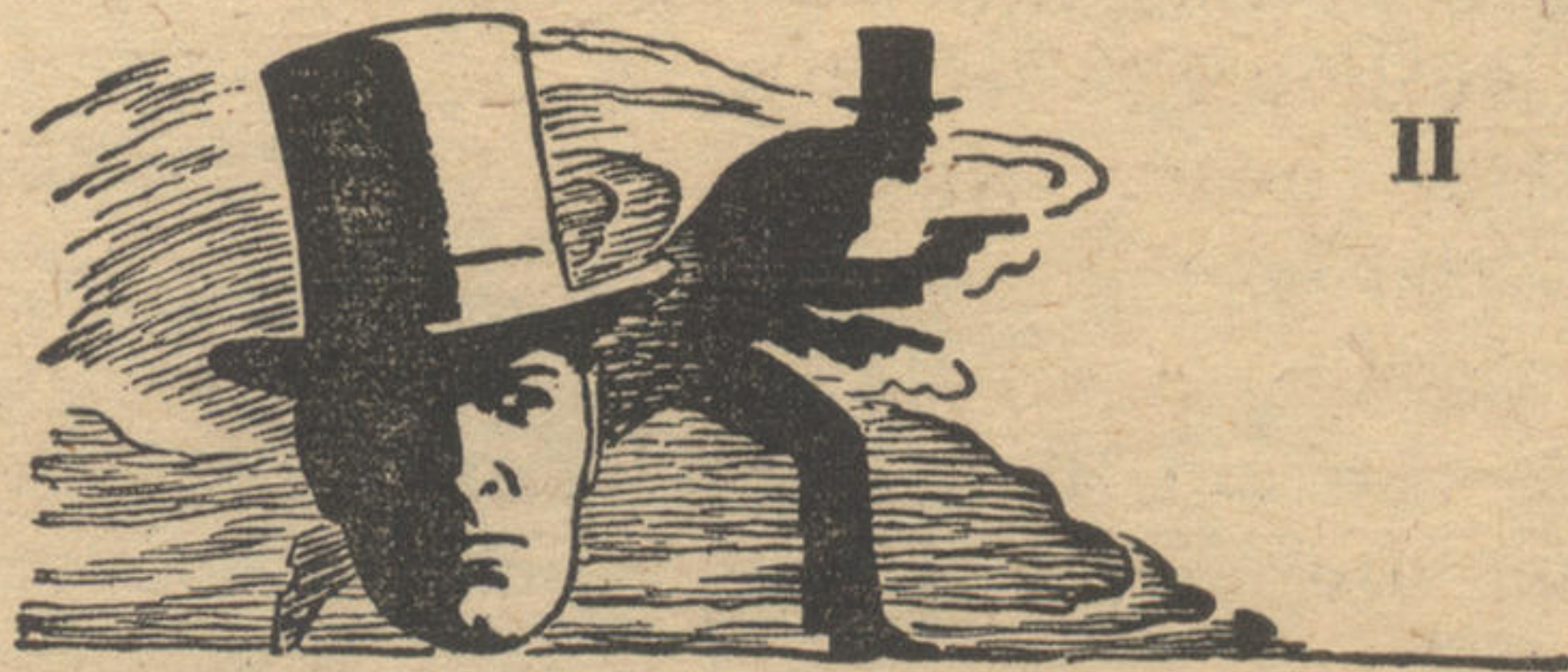
Muriel forced herself to think only about Van. She had to, to keep from seeing again a girl with a slit throat. She recalled how her father had induced him to enter this dangerous business of tracking down criminals. Van, who had inherited great wealth, had shown himself a natural in this profession, and it was through some of his amazing exploits that he had become known as the Phantom Detective. It was a fitting name, because he appeared with the stealth of a ghost, and slipped away from trouble with about as much ease.

Muriel thought then about him as a man—the most attractive man she had ever known in her short span of life. He was tall—slightly over six feet—and he was dark and handsome. He could play polo with the best of them, could hunt deadly animals in a jungle, or deadly men in a teeming city. For a long time Muriel had been deeply in love with him, making her all the more eager to help him whenever she could. But this was something new to her—actually bringing a case to him.

Her mind was still absorbed with Van Loan when she stepped out of the elevator and entered a beautifully furnished living room. She turned on the lights, fixed herself a drink, lit a cigarette, and snuggled her lithe, trim young body down in a big chair to wait.

It was quiet here. The bustling city seemed miles away although its millions of lights winked at her through the panoramic window. Certainly the city looked peaceful—and yet a girl who'd been missing for a year was now lying dead in a public park, and her sister had taken her place among the missing.

Muriel grew more and more angry at men who could prey on women like this. She admitted to herself that she was somewhat homicidally inclined by the time the Phantom let himself into his penthouse home.



II

DICK VAN LOAN listened to Muriel without interruption as she poured out her story to him.

When she finished he said, "I think I've got it straight. Nancy came to you. Her sister, who had vanished a year ago, had phoned, wanting to meet her in Bryant Park. You went there with Nancy. You saw the sisters meet. Now are you sure about that?"

"Dick, I'm positive. I knew Cathy, too, you know. How could I be wrong?"

"All right. A couple of minutes after the sisters met, two men appeared. One grabbed Nancy and held onto her while the other went after Cathy who was trying to run away. He caught up with her. Did she scream and struggle?"

Muriel shook her head. "Not until she knew what he intended to do to her, Dick. I don't think there was much of a fight at all, and she had time only for those two

screams I heard. That louse must have just held her and used the knife so quickly she had no idea what was about to happen."

"I see. Then the murder of Cathy was deliberate. That's what the men came to the park for. But why the devil did they kidnap Nancy when it would have been just as easy to kill her too?"

Muriel crushed out the last of the many cigarettes she had smoked chain fashion. "Damn it, Dick, I don't know. I did my best. It wasn't much, but I didn't let those murderers know that someone had seen them at their terrible work. They must be feeling pretty smug about now, thinking how they got away with it so cleverly."

Van Loan nodded. "You used your head that time. Now—just before Cathy was murdered, you say she screamed a name. I know you told me what it was, but tell it again. I want to be sure."

"Rocky Spaul. It was as clear as a bell."

"Who was she screaming the name at? Nancy?"

"I thought she was screaming at the man himself, at Rocky Spaul, whoever he is."

"No, Muriel, she couldn't have thought the man was Rocky Spaul, for the obvious reason that Rocky has been in prison for the past four years, and if she knew anything about him at all, she must have known that."

Muriel slumped deeper in the oversized chair. "I'll be damned," she said slowly.

Van Loan said, "My idea is that Cathy was calling out that name for Nancy's benefit. She couldn't have known that Nancy was in danger, too, and the name must have meant something."

"I'll concede that," Muriel said, "if Rocky has been in prison that long. Who is he, anyway?"

"An ex-pimp and panderer. He operated a lot of bawdy houses, made himself rich, but forgot that money can't buy everything. Rocky killed a man. It wasn't murder—at least wilful homicide couldn't be proved, but it was manslaughter, so Rocky got four to seven. Now here's the

strange part of this. Remember I checked with Inspector Gregg, the moment you gave me Rocky's name? Well, Rocky is due to be released tomorrow."

"Perhaps he was let out today," suggested Muriel.

"As of right now, he's locked in a cell. Gregg called the prison for me. Now let's take this other man whom Cathy was supposed to have been fooling around with before she vanished a year ago. His name was Walter Bowden, you say?"

"That's what Nancy told me. Bowden was no good, and Nancy wanted Cathy to break it off."

"Nancy was right about him. Bowden is, or was, also a racketeer. This case is full of odd coincidences. Have another. Bowden also disappeared about a year ago—around the time Cathy Arnold was supposed to have left for Europe."

"Then maybe he took her to Europe with him! She could have traveled under another name."

"I doubt it," Van said. "You see, when Bowden vanished, it was voluntary. The immigration authorities wanted to deport him and Bowden didn't want to go back to his homeland, so it's doubtful he took Cathy abroad with him."

Muriel said, "All right, Dick. Bowden vanished, Rocky Spaul is in prison, and Cathy is dead. But Nancy was snatched. She must be in terrible danger. We've got to find her!"

Van said, "I agree. He went over to the small bar and poured a stiff drink of straight brandy, carried it to Muriel and she took it with a puzzled expression."

"Drink it," he said. "You'll need it. We're going to the morgue."

WHILE he drove, Muriel told him all she knew about Nancy. The death of Nancy's parents, Muriel said, had left her and Cathy decidedly well-off. Nancy was the quiet type, a voluntary social worker, a credit to her inherited position in society, and much sought after by her men friends. Cathy also had been happy and carefree until she had met Walter Bowden and fallen in love with him.



*"Rocky! Rocky Spaul,"
she suddenly screamed*

Van said, "This man Bowden was a member of a gambling syndicate. Handsome, well-built, intelligent and, I suppose, amusing. Also a cheap, lousy, grafting and double-crossing heel who got away with murder until the immigration people caught up with him. He disappeared fast enough then, but maybe we'll find him. I hope so."

Van pulled to the curb before the red brick morgue building, helped Muriel out and led her inside. He wasn't known here, so he phoned Inspector Gregg and had him give an okay. With that requirement attended to Van and Muriel were taken to the cold room.

The attendant rolled out the cabinet in which Cathy's body lay. It was half-cov-

ered with a white cloth. Muriel bit her lip, dug fingernails into her palms and fought that battle with her rebellious stomach again. Van led her to the other side of the room.

"Is that Cathy? Are you sure?"

"Of course I am, Dick."

"Did you notice her skin? Oh, I know it has the pallor of death, but it's more than that. She looks like someone who hasn't been out in the sun for months."

"Cathy never locked herself in—if she was," Muriel said. "Dick, I want to look at her again."

"Can you take it?"

"Just stand right behind me," she said with a weak smile. "And then take me right out of here."

They walked up to the body again. Muriel looked down, finally picked up a strand of Cathy's brown hair and ran it through her fingers. She suddenly grasped Van Loan's arm and he quickly piloted her out of there. They sat down on a bench in the corridor and he gave her a lighted cigarette.

Muriel said, "Van, that girl is Cathy without the slightest question, but she's changed. Her hair hasn't been waved in a long, long time, nor even taken care of. And Cathy used to be so proud of her hair, never letting more than three or four months go by without getting a permanent. And her nails—did you notice them?"

He nodded. "I noticed."

"They were gnawed right down to the quick. Cathy wouldn't have done that under ordinary conditions. Also, she'd put on a lot of weight. She was almost sloppy. Dick, that wasn't like Cathy. Not like her at all."

Van said, "Okay, we've established a few things. Cathy stayed indoors during the year she was missing. She lost interest in her appearance, which meant she met no one. She chewed her nails, indicating nervousness and perhaps fear. It all points to one thing. Cathy ran off with Walter Bowden and went into hiding with him."

"But Bowden is still missing," Muriel cried. "Where do we go from here? What can we do? Remember, Nancy is in the hands of men who had no compunctions about killing Cathy."

"We have one lead," Van told her. "It goes under the name of Rocky Spaul. Cathy must have called his name for some important reason. Spaul goes free tomorrow. He isn't the type who'd cooperate with us in any way, so we'll have to see where Spaul leads us. I'll have more dope on him by morning. You get some rest, meet me at seven in the morning, and we'll make a fast trip upstate to the prison."

Muriel took his hand, holding it tightly. "Call me a soft-hearted, soft-headed idiot if you want to, but I'm worried about Nancy. I don't want anything to happen

to her."

"What can we do? he asked. "There isn't a clue, not even a motive. We have to play it this way. Trust me, Muriel."

She nodded. "I always have. Just don't try to kid me, Dick. You do think it's bad, don't you? For Nancy?"

"They didn't kill her on the spot," he said. "They accepted certain risks in forcing her to go with them. That doesn't show they intend to slit her throat and toss her out of the car."

Muriel nodded. There was absolute trust in her eyes, a quiet and calm in her voice. "All right, Dick. Yours is the best way, but I wish I didn't keep seeing Cathy. . . ."

IN THE morning, on a road far upstate, a heavy, black sedan pulled up behind a small two-door light model car. Muriel got out of the smaller vehicle and walked back to where Van Loan waited in the sedan. She climbed in beside him.

He said, "You know our usual set-up in cases of this kind. You park here. It's a couple of miles from the prison and you watch for me to come by. When I do, I'll be following the car Rocky Spaul is in and you are to follow me."

"Okay, darling. Then I'll trail you and if you turn off, I close on Rocky's car and keep after it while you double back and start following me."

"In that way they won't get as suspicious as they would if one car followed them continuously," Van said. "We may have to play tag all the way back to town. One thing is in our favor. Rocky won't be expecting a tail."

Muriel said, "If we have time, light me a cigarette, Dick, I didn't sleep well. Cathy kept coming back, and I thought about Nancy too much. I kept wishing you were with me."

Van grinned, gave her one of the two cigarettes he lit and put an arm around her to draw her closer. "Rocky isn't due to be released until ten. That's when they let them out."

"If we miss him," Muriel observed, "we'll have lost the trail completely. If

those awful killers even guess that someone is waiting for Rocky to come out—”

“How can they?” Van asked. “I told no one, neither did you. And this is our idea, nobody else’s. Not even your two killers can have any suspicion that the name of Rocky Spauld was heard by anybody in the park when Cathy called it out. This will be a breeze.”

She moved closer to him, curled her legs up on the seat, not bothering to pull down the skirt which had hiked up a good distance. Van Loan took advantage of the opportunity to admire those perfect legs. She laid her head against his shoulder and sighed deeply.

Van said, “I phoned Inspector Gregg again and identified Cathy Arnold for him. It’s made quite a mystery, now that they can’t find Nancy.”

“Do you really believe Rocky Spauld will lead us to Nancy, Van?”

“I hope so. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but he must have had some connection with Cathy or Bowden. We’re playing a long shot, but that’s all we have to work on. We must watch Rocky from now on, day and night. If it gets beyond us to do that, we’ll have to ask Inspector Gregg for help.”

Muriel said, “Dick, please get closer to the prison just in case Rocky is released early. If anything happens to Nancy, I’ll consider it my fault. I told her to go on and meet her sister. I should have known better.”

Van bent down and kissed her lightly. “Nancy would have gone anyway. It isn’t your fault, but all right, I’ll head up there. Keep your eyes open for me and when I signal, close in on Rocky’s car. As I told you we may change places two or three times.”

She threw away the cigarette, got out and returned to her own car while Van Loan drove the sedan a couple of miles further and parked close by the prison gates. There was the normal amount of traffic going in and out of the prison, but mostly trucks. While he was there, no prisoners were released. They’d come out of the warden’s office and down a

flight of steps before reaching the parking space.

After fifteen minutes, a big sedan, driven by a man in some sort of uniform, pulled up. From the back climbed a slight, gray-haired man who walked up the steps and spoke to a guard at the office gate. He was instantly admitted. Van kept watching the half-dozen other cars parked nearby, but they were all empty and nobody seemed to be waiting for Rocky.

THEN the office gate opened again and the small, gray-haired man came out. handcuffed to him was a slim, pale man with a worried expression on his face. Van Loan had seen Rocky Spauld before he’d been sent to prison and he’d studied several photos of the man in the past dozen hours. This was Rocky Spauld without the slightest question, but Van hardly expected him to leave prison shackled to a man who seemed to be an officer.

They got into the car and it pulled away immediately. Van gave them a moment and took up the chase. Soon he rolled past the spot where he’d left Muriel waiting, and in the rear view mirror he saw her pull out. The chase was on now, but an odd one, with Rocky under arrest and probably destined for another lockup. The marker plates on the car ahead gave no indication that it was an official car and there was nothing printed on its sides. The gray-haired man hadn’t looked like a cop, and the chauffeur wasn’t uniformed as a policeman, though he was wearing a uniform of some sort.

It wasn’t going to be a difficult chase, but nevertheless Van didn’t want Rocky to have any knowledge that he was being followed, so after five or six miles he signalled Muriel to take over. He turned a corner and Muriel rapidly closed on the car in which Rocky was riding. Van turned quickly down a side road, but soon returned to the highway and stayed far behind. Sometimes he lost sight of Muriel’s car altogether, and rarely saw Rocky’s.

He wasn’t worried. Muriel could keep a car in sight even though its occupants

might suspect they were being trailed. With this one, she should have no trouble at all. A few more miles were covered. They were beginning to make time now. Van pressed harder on the gas pedal. He was climbing a steep hill. When he topped it, he had a sudden clear view of the valley below and especially the highway. He pulled over fast and hit the brake.

There weren't many cars on the highway and he could see Muriel's about half a mile ahead—but he couldn't see the car which was transporting Rocky. There was a long bend at the bottom of the hill and apparently Muriel hadn't yet realized she'd lost her man.

It seemed incredible that that car should have disappeared as it appeared to have done. Van scanned the countryside, looking for side roads. Finally he saw a small cloud of dust from a dirt road, then he spotted Rocky's car, moving fast and appearing only when there was a break in the trees and shrubbery lining the road.

Van pulled out, tramped hard on the gas and went roaring down the incline. He made the turn onto the dirt road, gripped the wheel hard and kept going as fast as he dared. This was nothing more than a lane, well-rutted, dry and narrow. The dust from Rocky's car hadn't settled in it yet and Van drove into clouds of it. The other car a good start, but he estimated that he must be gaining fast, and one thing in his favor was that there were no side roads down which the sedan could escape.

He gave a light touch of the brakes as he neared a bad curve, the car rocketed around it, and Van tramped harder on the pedal. The big sedan was parked in the middle of the lane about a quarter of a mile ahead. A man got out of the back of it and began running down a driveway to an old farmhouse. The big sedan started up again, but not until another man jumped into the front seat beside the driver. He'd come from the lane down which Rocky was now moving fast and as he slammed the door of the black sedan, it started off again.

Van was interested only in Rocky

Spaull and since Rocky had left the car Van quit chasing it. Muriel might pick it up again, but he wanted Rocky. He crashed down some brush worried the car off the lane, and got out. Then he drew a .45 automatic from a shoulder clip, checked the safety, pulled his belt buckle a little to the left and reached down behind the belt to where another gun nestled snugly in a crotch holster.

He moved on out to the edge of the lane then and began walking toward the driveway to the farmhouse. This whole thing was, so far, a nightmare of conflicting events. Rocky leaving prison in chains. Rocky leaping out of a car, no longer hand-cuffed, another man taking his place. It all added up to some sort of scheme, but what it was Van had no idea.

He intended to find out, however, and as he moved closer to the farmhouse, he grew more tense. He could almost feel danger closing in around him. He was no longer Richard Curtis Van Loan now, but the Phantom Detective on the prowl, expecting trouble and prepared for it. Fighting for the safety or perhaps even the life of a girl he didn't know.



MURIEL realized she'd lost the Rocky Spaull car about three miles beyond the lane where it had turned off, while her view of it had been completely blocked. She felt like crying, but said some cuss words instead, and stopped trying to overtake a car she was now convinced couldn't be ahead of her. She slowed down, kept well over and tried to figure out just what to do. In a few minutes, Van would catch up with her. Maybe he'd have an answer. Certainly he'd have something to say about a dumb girl who let a car get away from her.

She watched the rear view mirror, look-

ing for Van. She'd have to wave him down and they'd have to make all new plans now. Exactly how they'd go about locating Rocky was something beyond her capacity.

Where was Van? He couldn't be too far in back of her.

Then she saw a big, black sedan overtaking her, and recognized it. The car she'd been following and had lost was now pulling over to pass her. Muriel looked straight ahead, presumably paying no attention to it at all, but she saw enough as the sedan went by to know that things had changed where its passengers were concerned.

Originally, the chauffeur had been alone in front while two men sat in back. Now there were two men in front and nobody in back. Muriel let the car get well ahead before she speeded up a little. Van hadn't appeared yet. Something must have gone wrong, but Muriel decided her job was to trail this car. She set about that, trying her level best not to let the occupants of the sedan realize that they were being tailed.

It wasn't too difficult. Apparently the driver of the sedan took no chances on breaking speed laws and being stopped, although keeping that car in constant sight became more difficult as it crossed the city line and finally reached the West Side Speedway. As usual, it was crowded almost to capacity.

The sedan stayed over on the right, apparently because it was the intention of the driver to turn down one of the ramps. Muriel made certain she stayed over, too. Finally, the sedan did make the turn. Muriel reached the stop street just as the sedan started up again after stopping in obedience to the sign. This was far uptown, along a side street that wasn't used a great deal. The sedan turned at the next corner and Muriel had to close with it or take a chance on losing it. She saw the driver look up in the rear view mirror. She'd been spotted.

Muriel opened her purse with one hand, fumbled around in it and took out a small, pearl-handled automatic. She let go of the



MURIEL HAVENS

wheel long enough to pump a slug into the firing chamber and snap the safety to the off position.

She had decided to take firmer measures. They knew they were being followed now. They'd try to get away from her and that mustn't happen. The only thing to do was stop the sedan somehow and hold the passengers at the point of a gun. She hated to take such a chance, but she had to think about Nancy, and one of those men in the sedan was somehow connected with her disappearance.

Muriel was more than mildly surprised when the sedan whipped sharply off the avenue and into another side street. She started gaining on it, intending to begin to pass, then force it to the curb. Suddenly the brake lights of the sedan flashed and Muriel had to jam on her brakes also. The sedan didn't stop, but it slowed down enough for the front right-hand door to open. A man leaped out.

The sedan rolled on erratically. The man in the road had a gun in his fist and he raised it. Muriel slid down as low as she dared, stepped on the gas and drove straight toward the gunman. He fired twice. The windshield of her car shattered, but she was unhit and unhurt and she

kept the car in a straight line with the killer.

He gave a yell of alarm and leaped aside barely in time. As he flashed past, he fired again, then wheeled and raced for the nearest alley.

Muriel braked as hard as she could. The car climbed the curb, but she stopped it before it crossed the sidewalk. The sedan she'd been following hadn't fared quite as well. It had kept on going, rolled onto the sidewalk and crashed head-on into a brick wall.

MURIEL, holding her gun, stepped out and looked for signs of the gunman. She began running toward the sedan. If Rocky Spaul was still in it, the day might be saved at that.

Someone yelled, "Stop right where you are, lady!"

She looked around. A patrolman was drawing his gun. Muriel stopped short, dropped her small automatic and raised her hands. The cop advanced quickly.

Muriel said, "Never mind me. There's somebody in that car. Hurry, he may be hurt."

The cop picked up her gun, took her arm and both walked over to the wrecked sedan. The cop held her wrist, opened the door beside the driver and stepped back quickly. Apparently the door alone had been holding the driver up. As it opened, his body tumbled out until it hung head-down. The arms were on the sidewalk, and head lolled drunkenly just above them. Half the driver's face was gone, wiped away by a heavy slug fired at point-blank range.

The cop said, "Take it easy, sister. There's somebody else in the back of the car. Got to see. You make a break for it and I'll shoot, even if you do happen to be prettier than any girl has a right to be."

"I won't move," Muriel said. "You have my word."

The cop, holding her by the wrist while he reached into the back of the car with his other hand, gripped a limp form. Lifting it, he turned it around until the corpse was wedged between the front and rear

seats. The cop withdrew from the car, turned, and looked at Muriel with deep suspicion.

"Let's have it," he said.

"We'll save it," Muriel told him, "for Inspector Gregg."

The cop said, "Yeah, I guess it'll take an inspector to handle this. Also the F.B.I. The man inside that car happens to be a United States marshal. So his badge says. . . ."

Back in the lane along which the Phantom was plodding, he made his way cautiously. Someone could have heard his car, and the farmhouse must be occupied, judging by the way Rocky Spaul had headed for it in such a rush. The Phantom, crouched, moved slowly behind some bushes, stopping now and then to listen. There wasn't a sound except the faint hum of traffic on the highway about half a mile away.

Then he knelt on the ground and pushed aside the branches of a bush. The sound of a car starter had attracted his attention. In a moment a gray sedan came around from behind the barn, rolled into the driveway and up along it to within about thirty feet of where the Phantom was hidden. The driver got out, leaving the car door open. He stuck his hands in his pockets, whistled a little too nonchalantly and strolled back toward the farmhouse.

The Phantom didn't move. Things were set up just a trifle too well. He'd be expected to examine that car, or perhaps remove enough parts so Rocky couldn't escape.

The temptation was there, as great as any the Phantom had known in a long time, but he stayed where he was for awhile, though he realized he couldn't outsit them. Rocky was somewhere in that farmhouse, quite comfortable perhaps. He could stay there until dark, then slip out and get away. The Phantom couldn't cover all the escape avenues in this territory alone.

They were trying to draw him out from cover by the use of the car. Well, if he pretended to fall for it, he might get the drop on whoever awaited his next move.

As it was, someone from the house could have slipped out the back way, entered the thick grove which surrounded the place, moved toward the road and be in position right now to take action once the Phantom showed where he was. But instead of falling for such an obvious trap, he thought he might duplicate their possible technique and reach the farmhouse himself.

QUIETLY he made his way through the uncleared ground around and behind the farmhouse until he was where he could reach the back door in a fast sprint. He'd have to depend on surprise and the fact that they might not be expecting him from that direction, but chances were nothing novel in the Phantom's career. He gripped the gun a little harder, took a long breath, straightened up and began running.

No shots came banging out to greet him, nobody manned the farmhouse windows or doors. He even found the back door unlocked. It creaked dismally as he kicked it open. He stepped into an empty, dust-covered musty-smelling kitchen. It contained only an old fashioned iron stove so badly rusted that it couldn't have been used in months.

The Phantom made his way from the kitchen to the living room which was equally dirty and rundown, and without a stick of furniture in it. He went up the stairs to the second floor. There was nothing. Rocky Spauld may have run toward this deserted farmhouse, but he certainly wasn't inside it now.

The Phantom looked out of the windows toward the big red barn in back, and there he saw something of interest. Tire tracks in the dirt seemed to show that a vehicle had entered the barn. And the barn door was wide enough to accommodate a car as large as a trailer, or a truck.

The Phantom went downstairs again, again passed through the living room and into the kitchen. Two men were lined up on either side of the door so that he couldn't see them until it was too late. Guns prodded his ribs.

One man said, "Drop the cannon, sport."

The Phantom let go of his automatic. One of the men picked it up, hefted the weapon and grinned. He was a nasty-looking runt with yellowish, unhealthy skin. The Phantom guessed him to be around thirty. The other man was younger, not more than twenty-four or five, but much bigger. Powerfully built, too, and while a wide mouth with thick lips, an overhanging forehead and dull eyes set in receded sockets gave him the appearance of being a near moron, he was highly dangerous.

The runt stuck the automatic into his pocket, shoved his own gun behind his belt and signaled to his companion. The bigger man immediately slithered behind the Phantom, grabbed him around the neck and drove a knee against his spine, pulling him back until his body was as taut as a bow.

The runt was laughing as he went through the Phantom's pockets. He was either in a hurry or much too sure of himself because he didn't find the crotch gun, and at last seemed satisfied that the automatic was the Phantom's only weapon.

He said, "Ease up a little, Bert, so the jerk can talk." And he growled at the Phantom, "Listen you—this is private property. What are you doing around here?"

"I'm considering buying the place," the Phantom managed to say.

The runt laughed again, shrilly. "Yeah, you were just looking it over with a big gun in your fist. Who are you? There's nothing in your pockets to tell me."

The Phantom remained silent. The runt swaggered up to him and belted him in the stomach. It wasn't much of a blow, but the Phantom wheezed as if it was absolute torture. The runt liked that. But he didn't hit the Phantom in the stomach again. Instead, he drew his nickel-plated pistol and put the muzzle of it squarely between the Phantom's eyes.

"I like my questions answered," he said. "I want to know who you are and why you came here."

Bluffing this pair was impossible. They

wouldn't even believe the truth so the Phantom decided to give them some of it anyway. He said, "I'm looking for Rocky."

The runt's expression never changed. "Who is Rocky?" he asked. "Bert, kinda bust his back a little, but be careful you don't do a complete job."

The Phantom screamed with the agony of being bent backward until his spine threatened to crack. It was like being held in a gigantic vise while it was slowly turned up to a point where death was not more than a fraction of an inch away.

THE big man released some of the pressure. Air rushed into the Phantom's lungs. He couldn't take this much longer, but he was almost helpless. He lifted a foot and aimed a kick at the big man's ankle, connected neatly and the big man let out a yowl of pain, relaxing his grip. The Phantom used his elbows then to drive twin blows just under the ribs of the big man. Now the hold was entirely broken, but the effort was wasted. The runt stood three feet away, a gun aimed at the Phantom's heart.

The runt said, "I think he's some kind of a cop. And we don't like cops, do we, Bert?"

"Lemme bust him in half!" Bert begged. "Lemme just twist his neck!"

"Nix, Bert. Too many cops would recognize your work. I don't think the jerk is going to tell us who he is and it don't matter much anyway. Grab his arm and take him out to the car."

"He kicked me in the shins," Bert said. "I want a crack at him."

"Do like I say!" the runt shouted. "Am I running things or ain't I? Take him out to the car."

The Phantom considered going for his crotch gun, but decided against it for the moment. The big man held his wrist and the runt marched so close behind that the fellow's gun time and again touched the Phantom's back. He might get one of them, he knew, but hardly both.

The big man grabbed him around the waist when they reached the car which had been parked near the lane, and hurled

him inside. Then he got behind the wheel while the runt got in with the Phantom and ordered him to untangle himself and get on the seat. He drove his gun into his prisoner's ribs and held it there.

The car was backed out of the driveway onto the dirt road and headed west. Nobody said anything. The car had rocked over the rutted road for about a mile when, at a command from the runt, the big driver pulled over.

The runt said to the Phantom, "Okay, this is where you take a walk."

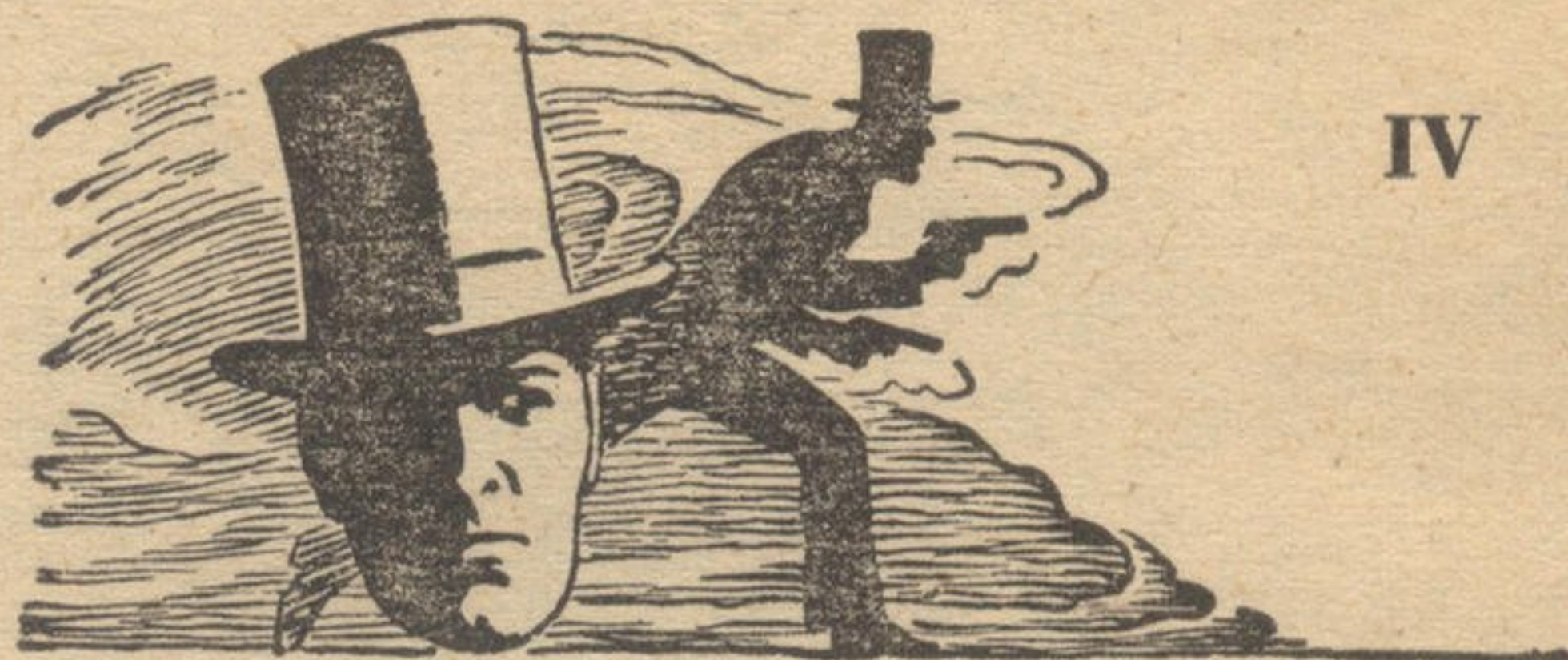
Van knew what that meant. They'd cut him down before he could take a dozen steps. They'd taunt him first, enjoy themselves, get all the pleasure possible out of killing him. Let him run a bit, perhaps, before he died.

Van said, "I notice Rocky is as yellow as ever. He made sure he didn't come along."

"We don't even know anybody named Rocky," the thug said, and laughed. "You getting out or do I give it to you here?"

The Phantom reached for the door handle with his left hand. His right moved down toward his belt buckle. He threw the door open, let himself go into a somersault and put a lot of power behind the crazy dive. He hit the ground, rolled like a ball, drew the gun while he was rolling.

And when he straightened out, he was pulling trigger!



HALF out of the car, the runt didn't have time to fire a shot. His gun was ready for fast shooting but his target was too elusive. For a moment he was motionless, then he pitched forward. The Phantom's slug had hit him full in the face. He died much faster than he deserved to die.

The big man had more of an opportunity to fight back. He had the front door of

the car open and had been getting out, but suddenly threw himself backwards. He fired twice. But the Phantom was already on the move and both slugs missed.

Doubled up and sprinting wildly, the Phantom hurled himself around the back of the car and crouched there, the short-barreled pistol gripped in a steady hand. They were more or less stalemated now—the man inside the car and the Phantom at the back of it. Neither could make much of a move, except one. The big crook was no mental wizard, but it was bound to dawn on him soon that he could release the brake and drive off, leaving the Phantom high and dry.

That was exactly what the Phantom banked on. To encourage the thug, he reached up and fired a bullet through the back window. He dropped to his knees quickly because a couple of answering slugs ripped through the rear of the car.

Then he heard the motor revved up and knew the man behind the wheel was getting the sedan started. The fellow might have one hand free, but not both. The Phantom slid around to the left of the car. The driver must have glimpsed him in the outside mirror because he suddenly leaned out of the open window and tried to bring his gun to bear.

The Phantom had to shoot him. He had no choice, even though it was the last thing he wanted to do. For besides his natural aversion to taking life—even that of a man as low as this—there was the important fact that a dead man couldn't talk, and the Phantom needed someone who could.

His slug tore through the driver's neck. The man must have died instantly, like his runty companion. One arm hung out of the window as the car, with its brake released and no foot on the brake pedal any longer, began rolling slowly. The Phantom let it go and within ten feet or so it came to rest against a tree trunk.

The Phantom searched both men, but found nothing on them of special interest to him. Each carried a lot of money, and several reefers were in a tin box on the body of the runt.

The Phantom pushed the driver away from behind the wheel, got in himself, taking care to avoid the blood-stains, and drove the car back to the vicinity of the farmhouse. He left it in the middle of the road, ran briskly down the lane and up to the barn which was in a little better shape than the house. The doors weren't locked so he pulled one of them open. Afternoon sunshine explored the confines of the old place. It was as empty as the house.

One thing interesting caught the Phantom's eye. Those deep tire marks in the dust of the driveway leading from the barn showed that some vehicle had been driven in and out recently, and that it had been heavy. The lane was so hard-caked that only a great deal of weight would have made tire tracks that deep.

What was more to the point with the Phantom right now was that Rocky Spaul had made a clean escape. The Phantom was no nearer to learning what he wanted to know than when Spaul had walked out of prison.

Van walked back to where he had parked his own car, drove to the highway and stopped at the first gas station he saw. He called Inspector Gregg's office in the city. Gregg promised to come right out, and said he would notify the State Police at once. Van agreed to go back to the farmhouse and wait, but before he did he phoned Muriel at her home.

"What in the world happened to you?" she asked promptly. "I've been sitting by the phone aging rapidly, waiting to hear from you."

"I had a bit of trouble," he told her. "Gregg tells me you had some, too."

"Yes, there was a United States marshal in that car I was following. They were both killed, and a third man who was with them in the car got away, but he wasn't Spaul."

"I know that. Spaul got away from me, damn it! I'll drop in to see you as soon as they let me go up here, Muriel. The State Police might be a little stuffy. I had to kill two men. Gregg is on his way out to help, so maybe you can expect me around dinnertime."

"I'll be here waiting," Muriel said.

THE Phantom drove back to the farm where the police arrived in twenty minutes. It took Gregg forty-five to make the trip from the city. But when the Inspector arrived it took him only a moment's study of the two dead men to recognize them.

"Sure I know them," he said. "Their names escape me at the moment, but they were both Rocky Spaul's boys. Both had long records and it was in the books that they were to die by violence—from the time they were kids and first went crooked."

Inspector Gregg had a lot of influence in police circles, and not only in his own bailiwick. So he soon had matters arranged to satisfy the State Police, who allowed the Phantom to go on his way. Gregg sent his own car and chauffeur ahead, and rode back to the city with Van Loan.

Gregg was a big man, a shrewd detective, and a fine police officer. He was one of the small coterie who were in on the top secret that Richard Curtis Van Loan was the Phantom. Long before he knew that, he had come to depend greatly on the acumen and prowess of the famous crime Nemesis. His respect had now reached the point where he unquestioningly approved of anything the Phantom did, whether it violated the letter of the law or not. He had come firmly to believe that, in the Phantom's case at least, the end justified the means.

He was curious now to know much of what he and the Phantom had not openly discussed in the presence of the State Police.

Rolling back to town, the Inspector asked, "What's it all about, Van? I mean the murder of that girl last night and this trouble today. It strikes me that you have an idea the two are related. That so?"

Van said, "Yes, Inspector. Before Cathy Arnold was killed last night she shouted Rocky Spaul's name—the last words she ever spoke."

"Now how could she know Rocky? With

him being in prison for the past four years?"

"I don't know, Inspector, but I have pretty good reason to believe that during the months Cathy Arnold hadn't been heard from that she was shacking up with Walter Bowden."

"A girl like Cathy Arnold!" Inspector Gregg was shocked. "With her family background, living with that punk? Why—"

"It's true all right. I'm firmly convinced of that, though of course I have no positive proof of that—yet. It certainly explains how Cathy could have heard about Rocky, through Bowden. Why she shouted his name is a mystery, but even more of an enigma is why and how Rocky Spaul had everything all set this morning for a get-away. The whole business had been neatly arranged. I think whoever did the arranging was suspicious, too, that someone might come snooping around. Someone like me."

Gregg said, "Well, Rocky sure knocked himself off this morning, Van. He murdered a United States marshal, so of course the F.B.I. is moving in. From the condition of the marshal's body when it was found in a wrecked car here on an uptown street, the M.E. declared the man had been dead some time. That makes it that he was popped off just a little while after he left the prison with Rocky. And that puts the marshal's driver smack in the middle. How else could Rocky have got a gun?" The Inspector sighed. "Well, we'll never know for sure. That driver paid for his doublecross by getting bumped himself."

"Why should Rocky be arrested by a marshal?" Van asked.

"Van, Spaul has been in the country illegally for years. He was going to be sent back to his not so happy homeland."

"I see. —Inspector has anything been heard about Nancy Arnold?"

"Nothing. She's gone all right. We made sure of that, but there isn't a clue as to where—or who is responsible, or why."

Van asked, "Do you happen to remember who Walter Bowden's lawyer was?"

"Sure. Alan Foster—represents just about every important mobster in town."

"I think," said Van. "I'll drop in on Foster."

Gergg said, "Foster also represented Rocky Spaul, Van."

"Now I know I'll see him," said the Phantom. "Keep the lookout for Nancy Arnold hot, Inspector, and of course I don't have to tell you that finding Rocky is important, too."

"We'll do our best," Gregg promised. "Don't expect quick results in either case, though."

VAN dropped the Inspector at Headquarters, then drove to a midtown office building where Alan Foster maintained a lavish suite of law offices. He walked into a waiting room well-filled with a motley array of crooks, high and low, and stepped up to the receptionist.

"I'm sorry," she said, before he could speak, "but Mr. Foster sees clients only by appointment."

"Want to make a little bet on that?" Van asked. "Tell him it's Dick Van Loan."

The receptionist apparently had read enough about the much publicized millionaire sportsman for her attitude to change abruptly. So did her chilly manner. She put through the call, fluffed up her blonde hair, and dimpled as she gave him permission to go right in.

Foster was the well-built, Apollolike, white-haired gentleman of distinction type. He had a resonant voice, useful in swaying juries, and a firm, warm handclasp which went well with the gracious yet humble attitude he affected. He looked and acted like a man who could be trusted implicitly.

Foster wasn't a crook. He didn't have to be—but he lived on the proceeds of crime, and his fees were staggeringly high. Because of him some potential murderers were on the loose, and because of his ability to rip an accusation to shreds, many men who should have been behind bars were hatching more and better crimes.

"Now what can I do for you, Mr. Van Loan?" Foster asked, after they were

seated. "Frankly, I'd enjoy having you for a client."

"Don't give me that," Van said. "I know that many of the men you represent are aware that I'm in a position to turn the Phantom loose on them if I choose, that I've made it my business in the interests of justice to back that legendary crime Nemesis to the limit, in whatever he elects to do—and no questions asked. I think you know that, too, because it's your business to know who you might have to fight. Your only disadvantage, of course, is that all you do know about the Phantom is who is backing him. You don't know his identity. I do. But I'm not telling. I only follow his orders when I can help him find out something he needs to know. As now."

Foster smiled, a benign smile. "So you are backing the Phantom Detective," he said. "Interesting. Decidedly interesting. I had an idea—as did everyone else, I believe—that Frank Havens, the *Clarion* publisher, was the elusive Phantom's only contact."

"It isn't as though you don't know," Van said shortly, "but he was, for a long time. Recently, knowing what a deep interest I have always taken in the Phantom's work, Mr. Havens and the Phantom himself have taken me into their confidence. Mr. Havens, who has known me all my life, has turned over to me what you might call the more active contacts with the Phantom."

Foster lifted his eyebrows. "And I take it you are in action now?"

Van answered that by asking crisply, "You used to represent Walter Bowden?"

"Yes, I did. What about him?"

"Have you seen him lately, Foster?"

Foster said, "Now let's stop playing games, Van Loan. Bowden is wanted. We both know it. If I'd seen him since he vanished a year ago, I certainly wouldn't tell you—for you to pass it on to your distinguished Phantom."

"Did you know that Cathy Arnold was murdered last night?"

"Yes, I read about it."

"You know that Cathy disappeared about the same time Bowden went on the

lam? The Phantom believes she went with him. Do you know?"

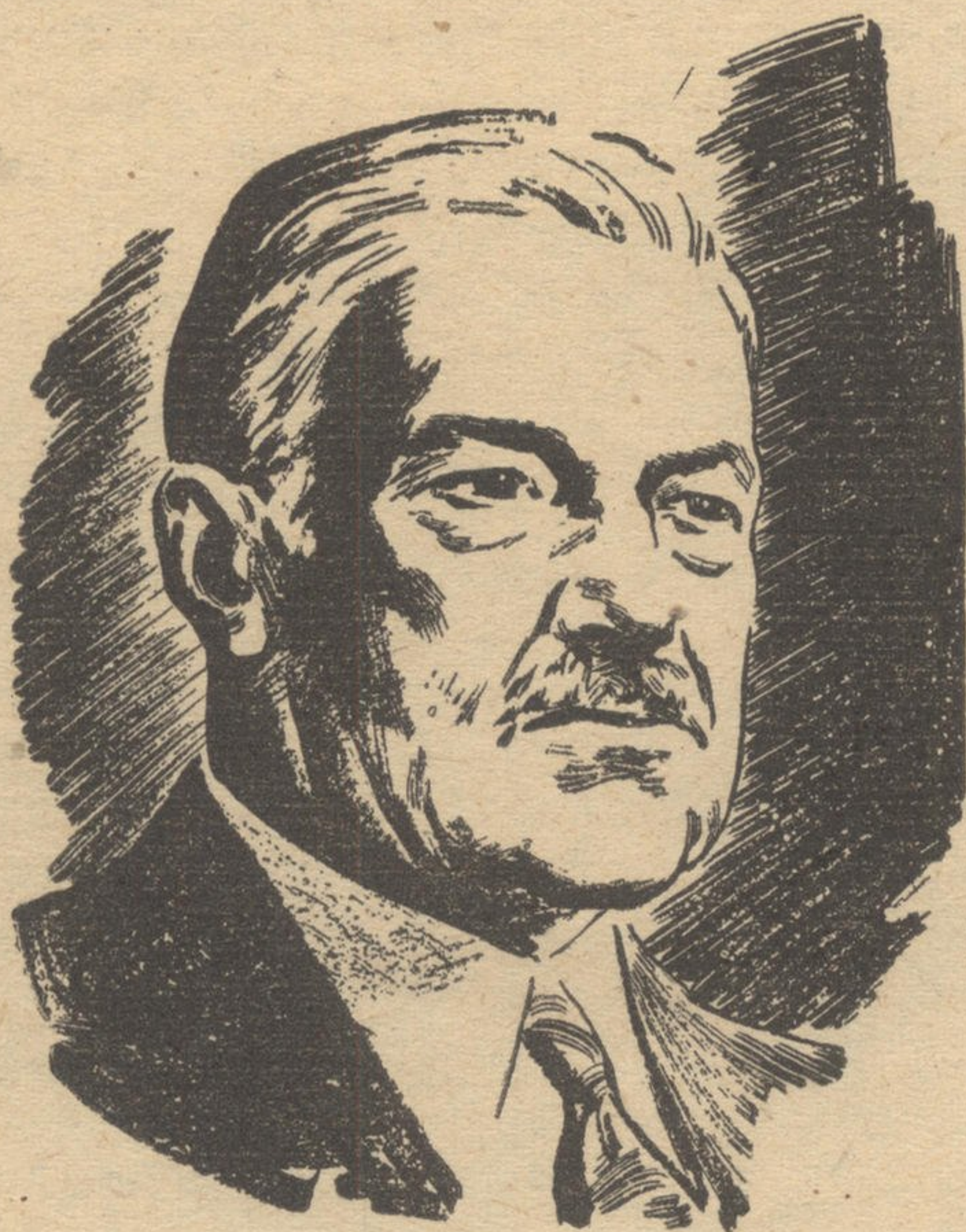
"I know nothing about that. I handled Bowden's legal troubles, but not his love life."

"What about Rocky Spaul?"

"Rocky? How does he fit into all this questioning? Rocky is in prison."

QUIETLY Van said, "Rocky was released this morning, Foster. He didn't stay free long, though. But of course you know all about that."

"About what? Don't try to get me to



FRANK HAVENS
(Publisher of the *Clarion*)

make incriminating statements Van Loan."

"Didn't Rocky send you word he was to be rearrested by a United States marshal on his release from prison and taken before a court for a hearing?"

"On what charge?" Alan Foster demanded.

"A serious one, so far as Rocky was concerned. He'd have wanted the best available legal talent on tap. The authorities were going to take away Rocky's citizenship."

Foster picked up a pencil, bent it almost

to the breaking point, realized he was showing too much concern and dropped the pencil.

He said, quietly, "This is the truth, Van Loan. Rocky did not ask me to defend him. I had no idea any such action against him was contemplated. I won't make a move until he asks for me and when he does, I'll soak him five times my normal fee. I practically had a contract to handle that heel."

"Don't lose any sleep over him—or over the money you might make from him," Van said. "Inspector Gregg tells me that he murdered a United States marshal as soon as he got out of prison, and got away. Even your talents couldn't keep him from making a quick trip to the electric chair now."

FOSTER said slowly, "I don't generally handle cases which I can't win. Rocky and I are finished. Thanks for telling me about him."

Van said, "Understand this, Foster. Last night a girl was murdered, and her sister was kidnaped. Those crimes are somehow connected with Bowden, and possibly with Rocky Spaul. You represented both men. If you know anything at all, this is the time to tell it, so that the Phantom can take over the job."

"I can't help you, Van Loan—or the Phantom."

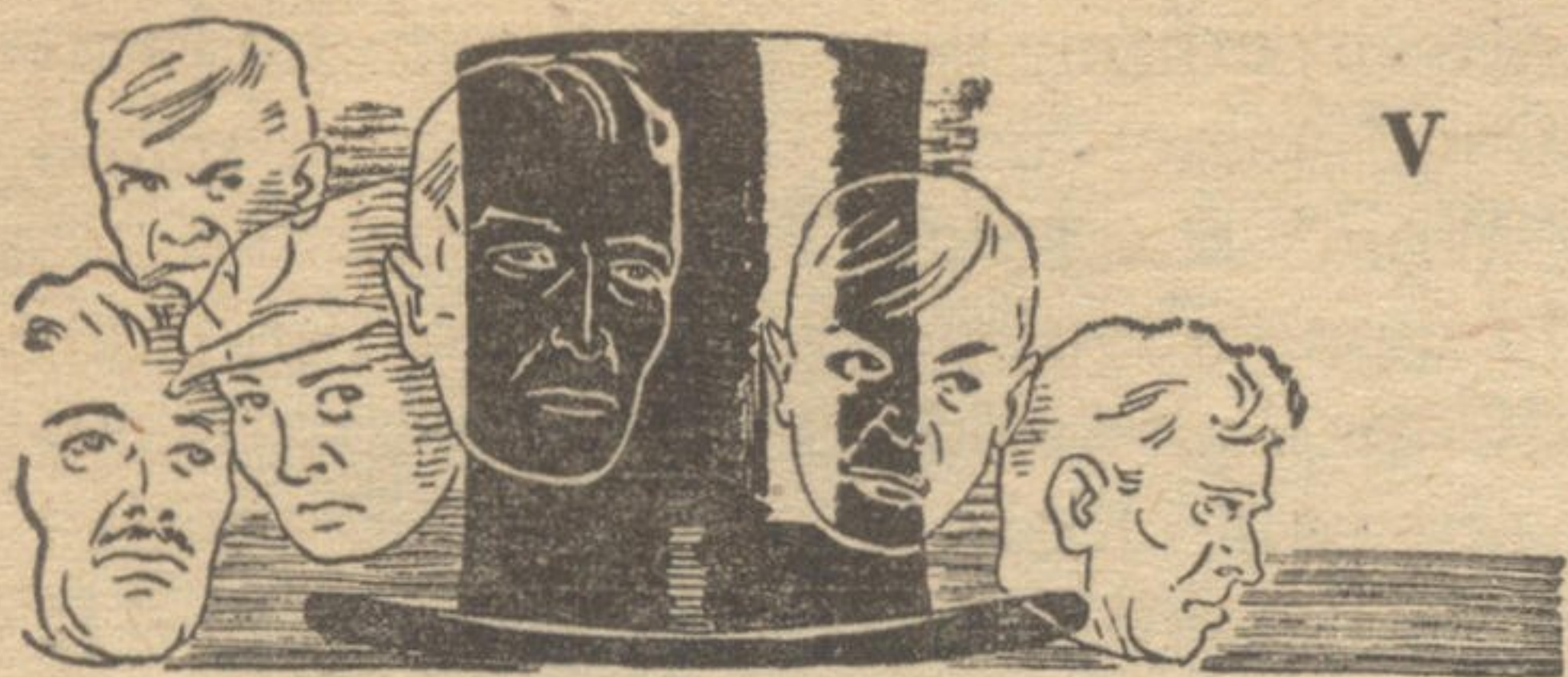
"It will be too late after he has run them down, Foster. Even a lawyer can't hold out when murder and kidnaping are involved."

"I tell you I haven't heard from Bowden in a year, or from Rocky in four years! That's all I have to say, and I'm not afraid of your threats or your Phantom!"

Van stood up.

"In case you change your mind, Inspector Gregg is handling the police end of this, Foster, and as usual he is working *with* the Phantom."

Van slammed the door on his way out, glanced at the receptionist without really seeing her and went out to where his car was parked.



V

OVER cocktails, Van told Muriel all he knew. As soon as their drinks were before them he said:

"Rocky Spauld was set up to get away and to protect himself after his escape. By the looks of it and from what Gregg says, the marshal's driver must have been paid to help Rocky, and passed him a gun. The marshal probably was killed shortly after he left the prison with Rocky, likely during one of those times when both you and I lost sight of them. That driver *must* have been in it, for he certainly drove the car where Rocky wanted him to."

"But why didn't Rocky let him keep on driving to town after the marshal was dead? It was the fastest way for Rocky to reach a hideout. Why stop at that farm at all? Or do you think he intended to use it and something happened to change his mind?"

"No, the farm was abandoned. It was just a convenient place for him to meet some of his men and give them some quick instructions, and also a spot where a get-away truck could be hidden until Rocky arrived—if he should need it. I'm sure a truck was in the barn because the tire marks were plain enough."

"Why in the world a truck?" Muriel asked. "A cumbersome thing if he wanted to get some place in a hurry."

"I wish I knew," Van sighed. "There must have been some reason for it, but I haven't a glimmer of an idea yet."

"Well," Muriel said, "the driver of the marshal's car was in on the deal all right. You've convinced me of that."

"Yes, and he was killed because any investigator would realize in a minute that he *was* in it. The man who rode back to town in the car after Rocky left it was expressly assigned to kill the driver and maybe try to make it seem as though

Spauld had escaped after he reached town and that the driver was killed because he tried to help the marshal."

"It would have looked exactly like that," Muriel said, "if I hadn't been following them all the way. I knew that killer I saw wasn't the Rocky Spauld who drove away from the prison with the marshal. When I told Inspector Gregg that, he saw a great light, even before he saw you and you told him about Rocky getting out of the car at the farm."

Van finished his martini, chewed reflectively on the olive and nodded in answer to a greeting from a state senator who passed by. Then he said, "That driver may be a lead. In fact, he has to be, because we've nothing else to go on. Did you get his name and address?"

Muriel opened her handbag, took out a small card and passed it to Van. He read:

Fred Finch, 2303 West 86th Street

"Who was he employed by, Muriel?" Van asked.

"The Justice Department. He'd been with them about seven years. He was forty-one, married, no children. He had a couple of black marks on his record. Arrested for drunkenness twice and once for frequenting a gambling place. Not enough for dismissal, but one more slip and he'd have been bounced."

"A weak character," Van said slowly. "Just the kind who'd take a wad of money for a sure thing and never even think he might get paid off in bullets, too."

Van had already given their dinner order, and now as their appetizers arrived they switched to general conversation as they began to eat. They didn't again refer to crime and sudden death until they were having their coffee and ponies of fine brandy.

Then Van said, "Muriel, I'd like for you to come with me while I talk to Fred Finch's widow. If she's taking it hard, you might do more with her than I can."

"All right, Dick," she said without hesitation. "But you didn't have to ask me. You don't get rid of me as easily as that."

I've seen enough of this case to want to be there when you finish it."

"Or it finishes me," Van said, with a short laugh. "We've hardly made any progress at all, and already I've been shot at and taken for a ride. That's just an indication of how important this business is. Somebody will gladly kill us to keep us off their backs."

"Let's get going," Muriel said anxiously, "before somebody gets the same idea we have and sees Finch's widow first."

VAN called for his check, signed it and added a substantial tip for which he received a low bow. Then he led Muriel to the street where the doorman hailed a taxi for them.

Finch's address was in one of those West Side neighborhoods where the old houses are all of the same pattern. They'd originally been built as one-family homes, but now each housed at least twenty families in one- and two-room apartments. The red brick steps were broken, the brass banister so clouded with grime it was difficult to recognize the kind of metal of which it was made. Dirty window shades with dirtier curtains indicated something about the type of people who occupied the apartments.

Van Loan and Muriel entered a small foyer and checked the mail-boxes. Finch had lived in Number 23. They walked up the stairs to the second floor, Muriel narrowly avoiding a bad fall when she stepped on an empty pint whisky bottle on the poorly lighted stairs. Somewhere down the end of the hall a woman's strident voice was arguing with some man whose voice was well-muted.

Van knocked on the door of Apartment 23. They heard the shuffle of feet in soft slippers. A key turned, the door was opened a crack, then wider, to the full extent of the burglar chain. The woman who peered out at them was thirty-five or thirty-eight, a too-thin type, with hollow cheeks and unkempt hair. She was wearing too much lipstick and her rouge had been applied in twin blobs, giving her the appearance of a cheaply made doll. Her

scrawny, crepey neck poked out of a loose-fitting blouse.

"Well," she said, "whaddya want?"

"I came about your husband," Van said.

"Cops," she said. "I've had enough cops in my hair. Beat it."

"No cops," Van spoke up hastily. "It's about money."

She opened the door to the allowance of the chain again. "What money?"

"Maybe Fred had some coming," Van said. "At any rate, it won't cost you a dime to let us in."

She closed the door, slipped the chain off and opened it wide.

It wasn't much of a place—a two-room affair. The foot of a white enameled bed in the bedroom projected beyond the doorway. The bed wasn't made. In the middle of the living room floor was an old trunk. Feminine attire was draped over chairs. Mrs. Finch uncovered two chairs for her guests.

She said, "Sit down. Now what's this about money?"

Van said, "I want some information about your husband and I'll pay for it."

"Who are you?" She picked up a cigarette and tapped it nervously on the back of her hand.

"A detective—private."

She said, "I don't like any kind of cops."

"I'm different. I pay off to people who give me the right kind of information."

An avaricious gleam came into her eyes. "You tell it, mister. I'm listening. Fred didn't leave me a dime and I could use some money."

"I take it you and Fred weren't so close that you're grieving your heart out over his death," Muriel said.

"You're right, honey," Mrs. Finch said. "We used to be, but that was a long time and a few thousand bottles ago. Fred couldn't stop drinking. How he ever kept his job as long as he did was plain luck. The drinking I minded, but not half as much as when he took up with this red-head who'd been leading him around by the nose."

"Ah," Van said. "Another woman. How long had he been seeing her?"

MRS. FINCH studied the glowing tip of her freshly lit cigarette. "Something tells me Fred and this dame got plenty to do with whatever you're after, so that means you pay for it, mister. I want to get out of this lousy town and go back home. I'd feel better if I was heeled."

"A hundred dollars to start with," the Phantom said.

"That's better. Well—Fred met this woman about a month ago. He thought I didn't know about her. What a laugh! I saw them together three or four times."

"Do you know who she is?"

"I never was curious enough to ask. Maybe I didn't care enough."

"But could you tell me where to find her?"

"I might."

"Good. We'll discuss the price of that information in a moment. Had Fred been in possession of any extra money lately?"

"How'd you know that?" she demanded.

"Call it a guess. How much?"

"Well, he gave me fifty bucks last week. Said he won it in a crap game. I know better. Fred never won a dime gambling in his whole life. Then I knew he had three hundred bucks hidden in the closet. I got that as soon as they told me Fred was dead. And I'm keeping it."

"Why not? It's yours. I've already promised you another hundred and I'll double that for a small favor."

"You're talking," she said.

"Help me find this red-headed woman your husband took up with."

"Let's see the money."

Van took out his wallet, counted two hundred in twenties and placed them on the table. Mrs. Finch didn't touch them, but she ran a bright red tongue around a bright red mouth.

"She hangs around a bar where Fred used to go," she said. "They know her there."

Van said, "Do you know how often she hits that bar?"

"Every night. She picks up men there. She picked up Fred and he kept going back."

"Would you go down to that bar, spot

the woman for me and tear out some of her red hair?"

Mrs. Finch looked extremely interested. "I might—if I didn't get pinched for it."

"I'll guarantee no trouble for you."

"And another—say—hundred?"

"You're a pirate, but okay, if you put on a good show. And after it's over, you're to leave town. That means right away—tonight. Because if anything should go wrong, there's a good chance somebody might want to murder you."

She backed away a couple of steps. "Murder! Say, what is this?"

"Will you do it?" Van took out his wallet again.

"I need the dough. Yes, I'll do it. And I'll be ready to leave town in an hour or so."

"Good." Van turned to Muriel. "You stay with her. When she's ready, take her to the bar. Stay outside and when Mrs. Finch has done her part, put her in a cab and take her to the railroad station. See her on the train, then go home and wait until you hear from me."

Muriel gave him a sharp glance. "Are you trying to get rid of me by any chance, Dick?"

"Sure," he said agreeably. "I'm going to make a redhead tonight."

When Van left, Mrs. Finch was busily packing her trunk and suitcases. Muriel stood by, still doubtful, and wondering if Van was getting into something so dangerous he wouldn't let her share the risks.

Outside the apartment Van ran lightly down the stairs, let himself out and made his way two blocks east to the bar and grill which Mrs. Finch had described. He didn't expect it to be much of a place and he wasn't disappointed, though its size surprised him. There was a long bar with three men behind it, rows of booths on either side, and plenty of tables. It was nine-thirty in the evening and the place wasn't humming yet.

Van looked around for a red-headed girl. If she was here, she must be in one of the darker booths because there didn't seem to be a redhead in sight. He drifted over to the bar and ordered rve. The bar-

keep served him and moved away at once, as if any stranger was pure poison. The whiskey was cheap, obviously potent and Van merely toyed with the glass, killing time.

IN A SHORT while Mrs. Finch would show up, and if there was no redhead, the show would be off. Van put his back against the bar and kept watching the entrance. A great deal could depend on this plan of his, and such a chance might never appear again.

He was watching the wrong door. The red-headed girl was suddenly at the bar and close beside him, swallowing a jigger of whisky straight. Obviously she'd either come from a back room or from the alley.

Van got set for trouble as he looked the redhead over. She wasn't bad. Small enough to be called cute, with a pert little nose, curly dark red hair and mischievous blue eyes, all spoiled by a sullen mouth and a to-hell-with-it attitude toward everything in general.

She wanted another drink, wanted it in a strident, unpleasant voice. It was promptly forthcoming and as promptly dispatched. Van thought that Mrs. Finch had better arrive soon or the redhead might be too loaded to do her unwitting share in completing the Phantom's plans.

It was shortly after ten when Mrs. Finch came in. She wore a dark suit and a small hat with a veil that came halfway down over her face. She carried a heavy handbag, swinging it angrily with each step she took. She never even glanced toward the Phantom, but made her way straight to the redhead.

She said in a tone of defiance, "Well, I hope you're satisfied now."

The redhead put down her glass slowly. She said, "Sister, what's this all about?"

"You know, you rotten husband-stealer! You got Fred into such a mess that look what's happened to him now. He's dead! Do you hear me—he's dead, and it's all your fault!"

The redhead backed away fast, eying the heavy handbag. Suddenly Mrs. Finch

swung it. The redhead ducked, but not fast enough. It struck her only a glancing blow along the jaw, but it threw her off-balance.

All activity in the café stopped abruptly. Every eye watched. Fights weren't unusual here, apparently, but this one looked like a real grudge match and it might be interesting.

Mrs. Finch advanced again, the redhead retreated, and Van thought it time to move in. He suddenly seized Mrs. Finch by the arm, whirled her around and shoved her against the bar. Then, before the startled woman could scream, he wrapped an arm around the redhead, lifted her completely off her feet and carried her to the alley door.

He pushed it open, passed through, kicked it shut and put the girl down. Grabbing her wrist, he dragged her along as he broke into a run. He didn't stop for two blocks. The redhead was badly winded by that time and tugging to free herself.

The Phantom shoved her against a building wall, thrust his face close to hers. "You damned little idiot, don't you know who that was?"

"Sure I know who she was. She told me, didn't she? So what? And who the hell are you, anyway? What's the idea dragging me outa there like you owned me?"

"I don't want any part of a dumb cluck like you," Van said harshly. "Sure that was Fred Finch's widow. So she started to make trouble. Well, what would have happened? Go ahead and tell me—what would have happened?"

"I'da crowned her with something. Nobody pushes me around."

"Sure, you'd have crowned her. You'd have wound up telling it all to a desk sergeant who'd be plenty interested when he hears the widow of a murdered man has a fight with a doll who might be mixed up in the kill."

The redhead gasped in horror. "I never thought of that! So help me, it never entered my thick skull. Honest, I guess I'm dumb."

Van looked back in the direction of the café. "We've got to go somewhere," he said quickly. "That may have been some sort of a trick and we can't take chances."

"My apartment is just around the corner," the redhead panted. "That dame has no idea where I live."

"Good. We'll go there at once. And listen—if anything happens, you just start running and don't stop. I'll take care of matters. Good care."

He patted the gun under his armpit and a new respect lit up the girl's blue eyes.



VI

AS VAN and the redhead walked rapidly away, with him glancing behind him every few steps, he saw that the girl was piloting him to a five-story apartment house. It wasn't Fifth Avenue, he saw when they reached it, but it was clean, and the lobby was pleasant enough. They stepped into a self-service elevator and she punched the fourth floor button. As the car rose slowly, in the way automatic elevators do, the girl eyed Van openly and frankly.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"In this business names don't mean anything," he answered. "The fewer you know, the better."

"Yeah, you could be right. But I'm betting you're a big shot. A real big boy. On account of the way you acted so fast."

"It was lucky I happened to be around checking up," Van said. "If I hadn't, about now you'd be wondering what to say when the cops asked you what you knew about Fred Finch's murder."

They left the elevator and she opened her bag, took out a key and unlocked the door. The name card under the doorbell read "Janine Sims." Van stepped into a modestly furnished three-room apartment. The living room was in maple,

there were some cheap prints on the walls; a thin rug on the floor. He'd seen many better and many, many worse places. He assumed a swagger as he crossed the room and dropped into the largest chair.

"Just like home, Janine," he said.

"You sure act like it was. Well, what do we do now?"

"How much did you tell Fred?"

She took off her jacket, threw it over the back of a chair, lit a cigarette and sat down opposite Van. She pulled one leg under her, stretched out the other one. It was a nice leg.

"What do you mean, how much did I tell him?"

"Oh, hell!" Van said disgustedly. "Stop parrying with me. I know the score. What I want from you are facts. How much did you tell Fred?"

"Nothing. Just that if he wanted to hang around me, he needed more dough than the United States Marshal's office pays its drivers. I had him wound around my finger and he was easy to handle. When I had him where he'd listen, I told him what I was supposed to tell him."

"The question is," Van said, "did Fred tell his wife any part of this? Anything she might have passed on to the cops."

"I know he didn't."

"You're sure, huh?"

"Listen, I kept him with me all the time except for maybe fifteen minutes when he went home to get some fresh clothes. He left this apartment to meet the marshal and drive him to the prison. Now he's dead. He ain't talking now, and he didn't talk before."

"We hope," Van said. "You wouldn't like it if he did, baby."

She crushed the cigarette out as if it had been two inches in diameter. "I did my part and I don't see why there's any kick coming. Go back and tell them that."

Van smiled and shook his head. "I don't have to tell anybody anything. I make the decisions."

She leaned forward slightly and there was fresh respect in her voice.

"You musta come to attend the meeting. Yeah, that's it."

Van said, "Are you going?"

"Certainly. I got orders to be there."

Van said, "We'll go together. It might give you some kind of a break to be seen with me."

She promptly arose, came over and sat down on his lap, put her arms around his neck. "You mean that? Sure, I know you do. I been wanting to meet somebody like you for a long time."

Van ruffled her hair, grinned suddenly, and she kissed him hard and thoroughly. Then she slid off his lap, got up and turned out the lights. She came back to him, settling down on his lap again, her cheek against his. . . .

THE next evening Muriel Havens stepped into Van Loan's apartment, walked around him twice, studied him carefully, and wagged her head.

"Sharp," she said. "Real sharp. On you, it looks like a devil."

Van grinned. He knew what he looked like in that chalk-striped blue suit and hand-painted necktie depicting a nude. His shoes had cost forty dollars, were a light brown, and went with a blue suit, even as garish a one as this, about as well as white shoes went with a tuxedo.

He said, "Last night our little trick worked better than I could have hoped for. The redhead thinks I'm an important member of some mob. Tonight we're attending a meeting."

"What sort of meeting?" Muriel asked.

"I wish I knew. Janine—that's the redhead—thinks I came to town purposely to attend it, and she's taking me. I wouldn't miss it."

Muriel said, "Dick, that could be dangerous. Too many crooks are after the Phantom's scalp, and you show up, a stranger. I wouldn't know you myself with that smooth bit of disguising you did on the way to Mrs. Finch's house, for her benefit—and the redhead's, as it turned out. With these boys, though, Dick, any stranger is suspect. You ought to know that. If some wise lad should happen to get an idea that the Phantom was in their midst, why—"

Van nodded. "That's why the fancy dress. I figure that if I look like a successful and important hoodlum, the chances of any of them believing the Phantom would ever stoop that low will be less. The last time I wore this outfit, posing as a crook, I got away with it."

"And where do I fit in while you're romancing this readhead?"

"I don't know where she's taking me, Muriel. You'll have to trail us, and wait around in case of trouble. If anything happens, get in touch with Inspector Gregg as fast as you can."

Muriel lit a cigarette, shook out the match, and deposited it in an ash-tray before she sat down. "Why didn't you call me today, Dick? I've been worried."

"There wasn't any need to be," he said.

She took a deep breath. "And the last time I saw you, there was a redhead practically on your back! No need to worry, eh?"

"The fact is," Van said, "I spent the day doing plain, boring leg work. I walked a hundred miles and asked a thousand questions, all to try and find a slim lead to where Walter Bowden or Rocky Spaul might be holing up. Of course I didn't get far with that angle, but I developed something of an interest in a situation that's rather strange to me."

"Did you find out anything about Nancy? That's what worries me the most."

"No—nothing directly. But listen to this. Bowden used to have a bookmaking business, complete with graft, cheating, violence and murder. He ran away a year or so ago because he was facing a deportation order and that was something he couldn't cope with. But his racket has kept right on going, just as if he were sitting in the driver's seat. Nobody seems to have taken it over. The same stooges are there, but no boss."

"Then Bowden can't be far away," Muriel decided at once.

"Not if he is actually running the racket. There's another point. Apparently he intends to come back some day and just take up where he left off. When I found

out about this, I checked on Rocky Spaul—
—and he has identical plans. Exactly the
same except that Rocky hasn't been on the
lam like Bowden. Rocky has been in
prison, but his lousy racket has gone right
on. It's even grown bigger in the four
years Rocky has been away."

"But what his this to do with Cathy
Arnold's murder and Nancy's kidnap-
ing?"

"I don't know, except that it's clear the
people mixed up in the matter haven't
pulled up stakes and run far away. Bow-
den and Rocky didn't even sell out."

"Then perhaps Nancy isn't so far away,
either—if she's still alive."

"We can hope," Van said. He looked
at his watch. "It's time to get started.
Now remember, don't show yourself or
interfere unless you're sure I'm in trouble.
And I don't mean red-headed trouble."

"I'll be close by," Muriel assured him.
"I'll even stay out of it if you start neck-
ing the redhead. I'll do anything that'll
help us reach Nancy."

VAN hailed a taxi for them, but dis-
missed it a couple of blocks from
Janine's place. The Phantom strode
briskly down the street. Muriel followed
him at a discreet distance, and when she
saw him enter the apartment building, she
went into a coffee shop across the street,
climbed on a counter stool near the win-
dow and ordered coffee. While she drank
it she kept her eyes glued on the door
through which the Phantom had disap-
peared.

Across the street, as he left the elevator
and rang Janine's door buzzer, he got set
for the onslaught he knew was coming.
It did. Flinging her arms around his neck,
she kissed him half a dozen times, dragged
him inside and kissed him some more.

"I hoped you'd get here early," she
said, when she got her breath. "So we
could have a little time together. I've
been as patient as I could be, waiting for
you."

"I've been busy," he said gruffly.

[Turn page]

Carhartt

BROWN DUCKS . . .

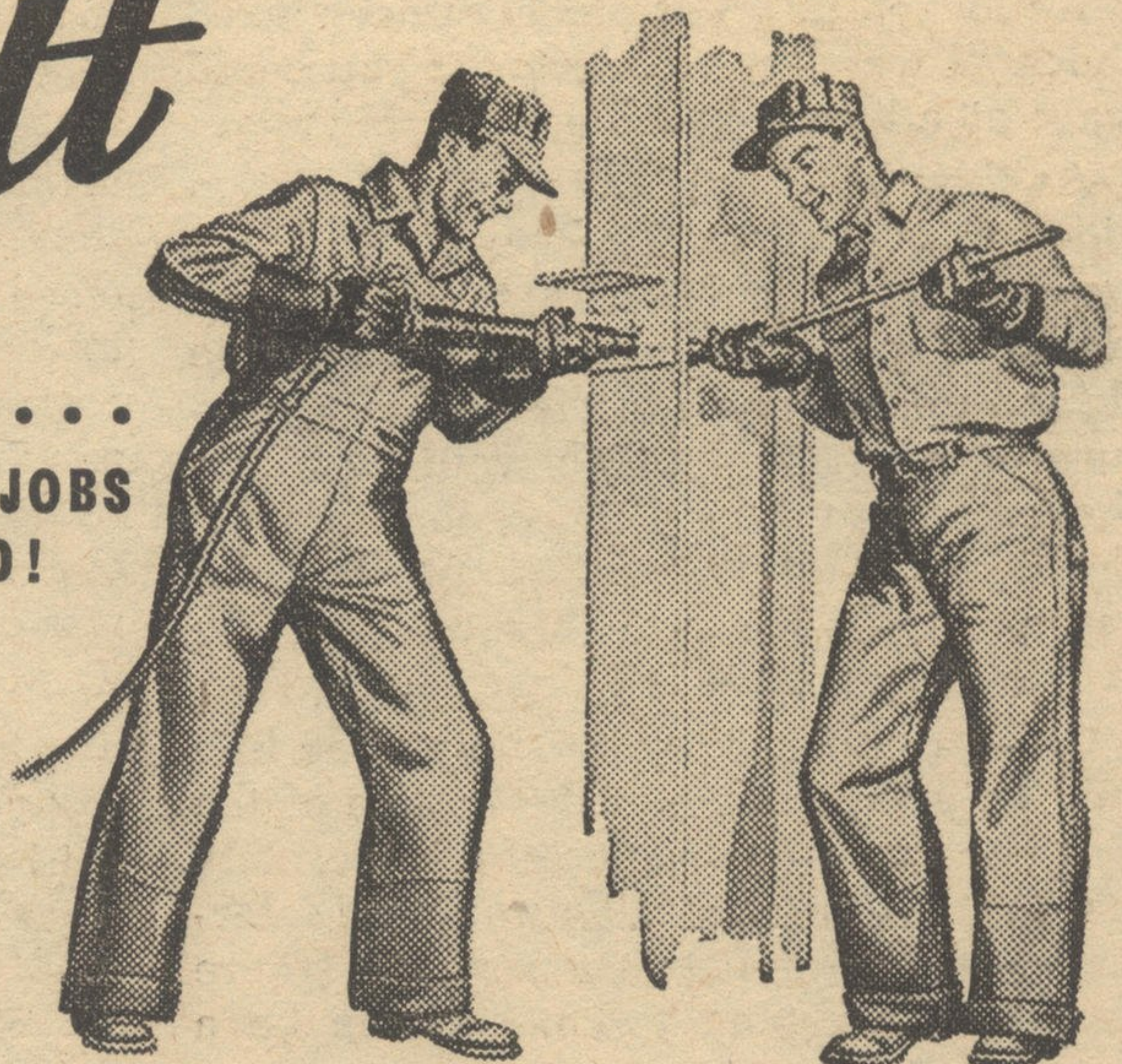
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She stepped away from him and struck a pose. He looked her up and down as he knew she expected him to. She was wearing a red and white dress and hosiery studded with rhinestones sewed to the nylon near the ankles. She'd doused on so much perfume it almost masked the aroma of straight whisky on her breath.

She said, "Like me?"

"Yeah—swell. Let's save it for later."

"I guess we'd better not be late at that," she agreed. "Say, I don't even know what your name is. What am I gonna tell them at the meeting?"

"Tell nobody a thing. Those who should know me won't need an introduction. Those who don't count, I won't talk to anyhow. Come on, we've wasted enough time."

"Don't rush me," she said. Her study of him was more appraising. "Say, *are* you the big shot? The one they're always talking about in whispers?"

"Drop it, will you? What'll we do—walk or use a taxi?"

"Why waste the dough?" she said. "It ain't so far."

He looked down at her high-heeled red shoes. "I was just wondering if you could walk at all in those things."

As they left the building, the Phantom didn't miss a trick. She knew where they were going, but he hadn't the faintest idea. When they approached a corner he slowed up, waiting for the slightest pressure from her arm which would tell him she meant to turn the corner. Finally she did make a turn and he kept pace with her so easily she probably believed she was the one who was being led.

Quite as unconsciously she guided him onto an avenue, and in the middle of the block he saw the marquee of a moderately priced apartment hotel. One of those catering principally to permanent guests. There would be a dining room, and maybe a banquet hall.

Apparently this was the meeting place, because Janine slowed as they neared the entrance. The Phantom had almost piloted her to the door when at the last moment she made no move to head for it.

When they reached the next corner, she turned down the side street, and he saw the side entrance to the hotel, the so-called banquet hall entrance.

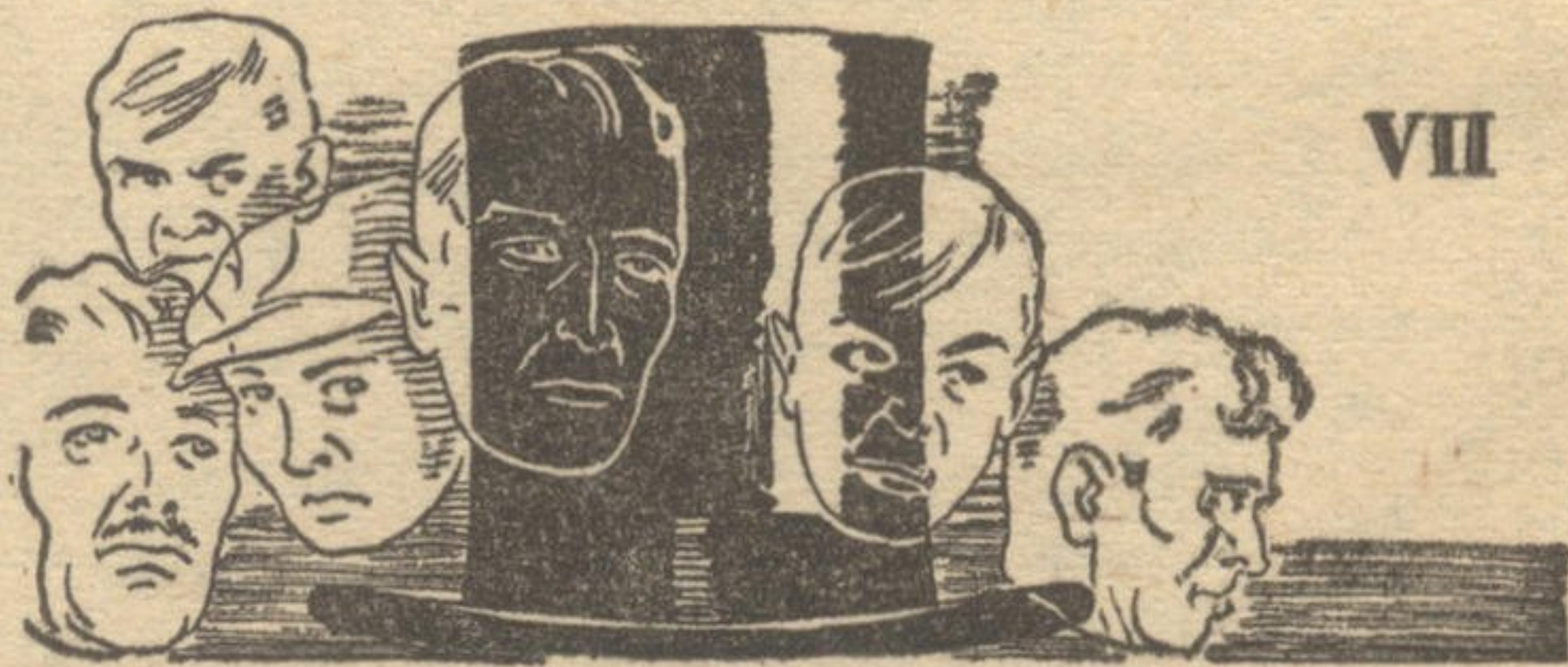
A man in a trench coat and slouch hat who was leaning against the wall beside the door, looked harmless. It would be easy to get by him on the way in. But going out would be something else again, especially if he'd been alerted against the departure of any certain person.

The fellow looked up, nodded to Janine, scrutinized the Phantom carefully, but made no move to stop him. The Phantom let Janine enter the revolving door first, gave it a push, and followed her. A short corridor led directly to the private dining room.

The place was well-filled. The Phantom looked the people present over rather indolently. They were mostly men. It would not have been possible to pick out any one of them and say, "Here is a gangster." They looked like well-behaved business men, perhaps even a trifle more serious than most business men.

But the fact which impressed the Phantom more than anything else was that there wasn't a real big-shot gangster in the crowd! He recognized a few of these men, but knew them to be hardly more than first lieutenants in the army of criminals. The boys who did the rough work took what they could get in the way of compensation and lived in the shadow of whatever big shot they worked for.

The mystery of this meeting, and of everything which had happened so far, was only deepening as far as the Phantom was concerned.



THE PHANTOM checked his hat, stuck a hand in his trousers pocket, assumed a slight swagger and moved in among the

guests. Janine had gone to the powder room, and he noticed that on her way back she stopped to chat with several people. Each time she did, whoever she had spoken to would seek out the Phantom, nod briefly, and pass the word along. Janine was doing exactly as Van had figured she would. Being with a big shot was worth bragging about, and Janine was doing plenty of it.

This served the Phantom's purpose very well indeed, because having someone establish him as an accredited member of this group was decidedly helpful. No one would suspect him. Yet he was alert and ready for trouble. He might come face to face with some man who knew all the big shots in this organization—whatever the mob was—and who would immediately jump to the conclusion that he might be the much-feared Phantom, for whom mobsters were ever on the lookout.

That was a situation against which Van had always to be on guard. Too many in the underworld had taken a vow to put the Phantom underground. The man who could do that—if anyone—would inevitably be acclaimed the kingpin of the big shots. Every gangster who carried a gun had the secret hope that some day *his* lead would find the Phantom. It was a never-ending deadly game, with vigilance the watchword on both sides.

Van noticed that a bar at one end of the hall was doing a good business, although no one showed any evidence of having drunk too much. Here and there he spotted more men in trench coats who circulated among the guests. They were patterned from the same mold as the gunman who was guardian of the door.

Van sat down in one of the empty chairs lined up against the wall. He smoked a cigarette, looking as if he preferred not to bother with anyone. Every few minutes someone would hesitate before him, smile and bow slightly. No one knew exactly who he was, but by now all knew he was brass of some kind, and were polishing their little apples.

It was like holding court. They'd smile. The Phantom would smile back—coldly.

He spoke to no one.

Janine was at the bar, and he knew she was talking about him, probably claiming him as her private property. Finally he arose, strolled toward the end of the room and drifted out into the hotel lobby. A bulletin board before the lobby entrance to the dining room told him where he was and what kind of meeting he was attending. He was a little surprised to read:

WEST SIDE NUMISMATISTS SOCIETY

The Phantom's lips twisted in a silent laugh. These "numismatists" were interested in coins all right, but not old or rare ones. He would lay long odds that the hotel management hadn't the foggiest idea that their private dining room had been rented to a meeting of gangsters.

One of the trench coat men smiled nervously when the Phantom reentered the private dining room. Apparently the fellow had heard the word going round, and accepted the Phantom as an important member of the organization. So far, everything was serene, but the Phantom wondered a little impatiently just why this meeting had been called, who would speak, and what would be said. It was beginning to look as if whoever called the turns was waiting until his clans were gathered before making a grandstand entrance himself.

It wouldn't be long, though. The room now held about sixty-odd people and the Phantom could tell by the expectant looks on their faces that something was going to happen soon.

Janine was still hanging around the bar, and he faded back into the crowd so she wouldn't spot him. He wasn't looking forward with joy, either, to that moment when the VIP would show. Someone might tell him there was another Very Important Person present, and the Phantom wanted no part of a meeting with whoever had called these people together.

He finally found a spot for himself—a dark corner of the room where a few fake potted palms had been moved into one group. There was some bunting draped

above them, probably a relic from another party which someone had considered too artistic to be removed, and it helped to shadow the corner. There was a table back in the gloom, too, but the Phantom didn't notice it was occupied until he was so close to it that it was too late to retreat.

THE girl sitting at the table was rotating a highball glass in a black-gloved hand. She looked up at him and smiled warmly.

"Won't you please join me?" she said. "I've been wondering how I could go about meeting you, and now you have settled my problem yourself."

The Phantom pulled out a chair and sat down. "You look lonesome," he said.

She sat up straighter. "Frankly I've been bored silly. I came because I thought some real important people might show up, but everyone here is second run. All except you, of course."

"And the man we are waiting for?" the Phantom said.

"Tambo? Well, yes, he's important, I suppose. But I've got an idea you're even more important."

"What gives you that impression?" the Phantom asked, with an easy smile.

"The way you carry yourself, hold yourself aloof from riffraff."

"It's easy to see that you're not riffraff," he said lightly, though he didn't feel any particular lightness at the moment.

The name she'd mentioned—Tambo—could only be Nick Tambo, a well-known gang leader and gambler. He was a man who long ago had vowed that he would get the Phantom some day, and since he was aware of the Phantom's cleverness at disguise, he was more suspicious than most men of every stranger who showed up in his orbit. And here, where he undoubtedly knew everyone—

The Phantom wasn't crazy about the picture.

The girl said, "Is this going to be a really important meeting?"

"Shall we say, medium important?" he murmured.

"Are you going to speak?"

"Not if I can avoid it. I'm here purely as an observer. To see if Tambo controls the boys as well as he claims he does."

"They jump when he snaps his fingers," the girl assured. "Are you going to talk to him after he's through speaking?"

"I think not. I intended merely to check on him, and I've already seen enough. To tell you the truth, I don't even know why this meeting has been called. Do you?"

"Nobody knows, until the speaker tells us. How'd you meet that red-headed bum you came in with?"

"Janine? We've been worried about her. That's all you need to know."

"She's telling everyone she's got you wound around her finger. That kind of talk won't do you any good."

The Phantom shrugged. "Those who believe it are entitled to. It doesn't matter. Do you believe it?"

"I know quality when I see it. Having been raised with the kind of people who are of my background, I can spot it every time. Whoever you are, whatever you are, you're not an ill-bred, gutter-raised crook. I think you're perhaps a lawyer for the combine."

Suddenly the voices in the dining room became muted, then all talk ceased. A broad-shouldered man of about forty, with thick black eyebrows and a jutting chin, paraded in solitary grandeur down the middle of the room, moving toward the small platform at the speaker's table. He took his place there. Everyone sat down.

Nick Tambo surveyed the assembled group as regally as a dictator. This cheap, heartless, conniving punk lording it over people exactly like him! The Phantom stirred uneasily. Men were approaching Tambo and whispering to him. At any second, one of them might mention the presence of another important man who had been brought here by Janine.

The Phantom said, "Who wants to listen to the tripe he'll spout? Let's get out of here."

The girl gave him a startled glance. "Do you think we dare?"

"I'd like to see anybody try to stop us."

She got up quickly. "All right. I'm ready."

BUT Tambo was on his feet now. Using a water glass for a gavel, he pounded the table with it. Slowly he looked over his audience from one end of the room to the other. The Phontom noticed that both doors now were closed. If they were locked, he was in a mess. He moved out of the protective gloom of the corner and the girl followed him.

Suddenly he grasped her wrist and brought her to a halt. They sank into chairs in the last row. Dangerous as it might be, he wanted to hear what Tambo had to say.

Tambo waited another moment for the buzz to die down, then he began to speak.

"What I have to say won't take long, boys. Everything is going along fine. All of you are doing a good job. It'll pay off in the end. It'll pay off another way if you stub your toes. Above all, remember that this is to be kept secret. In another few months, some of the responsibility will be taken from your shoulders. I think you all know what I mean."

"I figured it would be a couple of more years before they came back," someone said from the front of the room.

"Nobody asked you to figure anything," Tambo growled. "What you've done is appreciated. I want you to know that. Now, in one week all books are to be ready for an audit. Yeah, I know they were done over a month ago, but you have them ready. There may be new rules pretty soon, too. We're not standing still for anybody. And now I want to talk to each group leader, and to anyone else who's got a problem."

His eyes roved over the crowd, and the Phantom wanted to slide down closer to the floor. Instead, as the men got up from their chairs, he seized the girl's wrist again and pulled her toward the door. At any moment now somebody was sure to inform Tambo that he was present. Even if Tambo should for once forego his suspicions and accept him as an ally, there would inevitably be questions and talk in

which the Phontom couldn't join because he didn't know what the whole thing was all about.

He looked closer at the girl whose wrist he held and almost showed his surprise. She was startlingly beautiful. Her hair had been done by a master at the hair-dressing art. Her absurd little hat, set atop blonde curls, was a Fifty-ninth Street masterpiece, and had cost more than most women paid for a complete ensemble. The stole she wore carelessly draped over one shoulder was blue mink, a rare breed. Whoever this girl was, she couldn't be a cheap gangster moll.

The room was a confused babble of sound, voice, chairs being pushed back, shuffling steps. The Phantom craned his neck a little. He'd caught the flash of a red and white dress moving toward Tambo, and now Janine was tugging at Tambo's sleeve. She was about to tell him of the visitor she'd brought!

The next ten seconds could be among the most dangerous the Phantom had ever encountered in his career!

He was standing now with his back against the door. Reaching behind him, he twisted the knob and gave the door a push. There was some resistance. It felt as if someone who had been leaning against it had moved away in surprise. He managed to open it sufficiently for the girl to pass through. Then he pivoted, slipped through himself, and came face to face with one of the characters in a trench coat.

The Phantom said sharply, "Pay attention to your job. If the wrong people get in there—"

Trench Coat muttered something and stepped aside. Van caught up with the girl as she crossed the lobby. He took her arm, and she moved close to him, looking up at him with big eyes.

And seated primly in one of the lobby chairs was Muriel Havens! She looked straight at Van, got up and flounced out. But outside he noticed that she kept him covered until he and his new girl friend reached her car. It turned out to be a fireman red Cadillac.

HE OBSERVED, "You travel in class—and color."

"If this is too ostentatious," she suggested, "we can stop and pick up a black sedan or a Jaguar, if you go for that sort of thing."

"You're not, then, a simple little girl who slaves over a hot sewing machine?"

"You really don't know who I am, do you?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," the Phantom said.

"That's why I think I could believe anything you told me. The others—they like me because my father has money. But you, without the slightest idea of who I am or what I possess, actually got me out of that boring meeting."

"Why did you go in the first place?" he asked.

She unlocked the door and got in, not moving behind the wheel. That meant she expected him to drive. He walked around the front of the car and she held the door open for him. He slammed it, turned the ignition key and started the motor. It purred like a dream.

He said, "About that meeting—why did you go if you knew it would be so boring?"

"Why did you?" she countered.

He shrugged slightly. "I do what I'm told. I had certain instructions and I carried them out. They did not include listening to Nick Tambo making what he fondly believes is a speech. That settles my reason, but not yours."

"I thought a friend of mine might show up. I should have known better."

"One of those?" Van asked significantly.

She nodded. "Bill Murray."

"The bookie?"

She pouted. "He's more than just a bookie. You know that. Also he's a handsome guy, almost a ringer for Alan Ladd. I used to go for Bill."

"Until?"

"Until a little while ago when you came along."

He patted her hand. "We won't break up this friendship too fast. Where am I to take you now?"

"We could go to our apartment and have some drinks," she said, with partly lidded eyes, "but Dad would probably be there. Also, there's a little place of ours a few miles north of the George Washington Bridge—a lakeside cabin."

"That," the Phantom said, "is for me."

He pulled away from the curb, took the next right and headed across town until he reached the speedway ramp. He went up that, glancing in the rear view mirror, wondering if Muriel was following him. There was no sign of her.

He sighed silently, and compressed his lips. Women! Did anyone ever understand them?



VIII

REACHING the other side of the river, Van opened up the Caddy somewhat and after they had driven a few miles, under the girl's directions he found a narrow dirt road running alongside a big lake. Most of the cabins and cottages had not yet been opened for the season and the entire vicinity seemed painfully quiet. Van's blonde companion indicated a driveway to him. He drove up it and stopped in front of a rambling ranch house and shut off the motor and lights.

He turned and looked at her.

"This," he declared, "is as far as I go without learning your name."

She laughed. "I wondered when you'd get to that. It's Elise. Elise Watson."

Van murmured something and got out of the car. She joined him quickly, clinging to his arm, looking up at him. He wondered how many men had been taken in by that coy, too-innocent look.

"Doesn't my name mean anything to you?" she asked, looking a little hurt.

He said, "Yeah, I like it. Elise is a nice name."

"I mean the Watson part. My father

is Milford Watson."

"Do I curtsy now?" Van asked.

She laughed again. "You must have flown in from Siberia or something. My father owns one of the biggest mills in the state."

"Good," he told her. "I hope they make millions."

"You're not even impressed." She pouted.

"Why should I be?—Have you a key to this bungalow?" She gave it to him. "Thanks," he said, inserted the key and turned it. "A few million bucks is nice to have. I intend to have more than a few million."

"You must be way up," she observed. "Bill Murray brags, too, but never in the millions—and he's no slouch when it comes to making a fast buck, either."

"He's a piker."

Van fumbled for the light switch inside the door, found it, and a large living room sprang into view. In the double-sized fireplace preparations for a fire was all laid, ready to light, and a white bearskin rug was in front of it. The furniture was oversize, too, and luxurious. Van, staying in character, made no comment.

He walked around the room, pausing beside a huge ash-tray in which lay half a dozen cigar butts and a couple of cigar bands. He picked up one of the bands, examined it, squeezed a couple of the butts. Elise turned around in time to see him. She gave a quick start of apprehension.

"I guess I forgot to empty the ash-trays the last time Dad and I were here," she said hastily.

"When was that?" the Phantom asked.

"Oh—a week or two ago."

He walked up to her and seized her by both shoulders. "A week or two hell," he growled. "Those things were smoked within the last twenty-four hours."

"Let go of me," she demanded. "Who do you think you are?"

The situation called for plain bluff. The Phantom released her. "We're all playing a dangerous game," he said. "I want to know who was here."

"All right!" she flared at him defiantly. "So what if he did break the rules? A man can't stay cooped up all his life, can he? Not Bill Murray, anyway."

"So Bill was here," the Phantom said slowly. "That would have been last night."

"So what? Bill paid to get away for a couple of hours. There wasn't any danger of his being seen here. Those damned rules are too strict, anyway. Bill might as well be in solitary in prison!"

"Did he tell you where he has been all this time?" the Phantom asked—a dangerous long shot.

"You know he didn't. Bill isn't built that way. He may take chances on his own skin, but he doesn't risk the safety of the others."

IT WAS still a mystery, although some of the things Elise spoke of began to tie in. The Phantom wanted to know more, even though it was risky asking Elise.

He said, "Bill told you everything, didn't he?"

"He did not! He refused to tell me who arranged all this, even though I asked him. He wouldn't say where he and the others have been staying."

"Just the same, he talked too much."

She had turned away from him, but she whirled back sharply. "Bill is okay. He has as much at stake as any of the others and he isn't fool enough to risk losing it. He was here not quite two hours. That's all the time they gave him before he was to be picked up. Look, I didn't bring you here to argue. Not even to talk about Bill."

"I still don't like it," the Phantom persisted.

"Drop it, will you?" she begged. "Look, make me a drink. There are glasses and stuff in the kitchen. Here, let me take your coat. You might as well be comfortable."

He surrendered his coat because there was no reason he could think of quickly for keeping it on. The lodge was warm enough, he was going to mix drinks which could spill on a man's coat. Van watched

her throw it carelessly over a chair. He picked it up again, folded it neatly and doubled up one lapel so that if the coat was touched, the lapel would promptly fly out. She went into the kitchen with him, showed him where to find the ingredients for a highball.

She said, "I'll get some better glasses than those. Just a second. You pry out the ice cube trays. They've been in there so long they're stuck."

It took her about four minutes to fetch the glasses, and by that time he had made the drinks. In the living room he set his drink down, went over and picked up his coat. The lapel was no longer doubled over. He slipped into the coat, settled himself comfortable in a chair and grinned at her.

"I don't blame Bill Murray much, baby. I don't blame him at all."

She said, "You haven't told me your name."

"Mac," he said. "That's all you need to know."

"So Janine Sims brought you to the meeting tonight," she said slowly.

"That's right. I had a little private business with her first."

Elise suddenly put glass down. "Mac, I've decided we're making a mistake. If anyone saw us leave that meeting together and Bill Murray finds it out—"

"Who is worried about Bill Murray?"

"I am, and you ought to be. Big shots die as fast as little people when the bullets fly, and Bill is handy with a gun. We'd better go. Please!"

"If you say so." He put down his untasted highball. "But you're a changeable sort of girl, dragging me all the way out here and not even giving me time to have a drink."

She hurriedly slipped on her coat and stole, pulled on the hat without looking in the mirror, and even beat him to the door. Van switched off the lights and locked up. She was waiting behind the wheel of the big car when he got outside.

She had little to say all the way back to town, and she dropped him in the upper Fifties along Broadway. Van stood at the

curb and watched the car dart into traffic and finally vanish.

He slowly put his hand into his inside pocket. It contained no papers, nothing by which she could have identified him. He sampled the other coat pockets, though already knowing that there was nothing in them to identify him. He wondered what had upset her so much.

He wandered around for about forty minutes, then found a phone booth and called the number listed under the name of Milford Watson. A woman answered, but it wasn't Elise. He asked for her and was told to wait. Then Elise came on the wire.

VAN said, "You were in such a hurry we forgot to make another date. When can I see you again?"

She hesitated for about five seconds. "Mac, will you get in touch with me tomorrow about dinnertime? Say around seven o'clock? I'm going to be busy most of the day, I'm afraid. I'll be waiting for your call, and we'll meet somewhere. You know I want to."

"Sure," he said. "I'll call."

He hung up, with a dark frown. She was setting the stage for something. He hailed a cab when he reached the street and went home to his penthouse apartment.

Muriel was there waiting for him again. She showed considerable surprise because he was so early.

"Look," he said, "no lipstick. I never got that far. Something scared her off, and after we drove all the way to a ranch house on a lake over in Jersey, too."

"From a redhead to a blonde," Muriel said grimly. "This case I don't like. And did you, by any remote chance, happen to know who that girl was?"

"Yes—Elise Watson. How did you find out?"

"I couldn't follow you so I did the next best thing. I took her marker numbers. The car is registered in her father's name. Dick, what is a crazy kid like that Elise doing hanging around with a gang of killers? Where does she fit in?"

Van said, "I confess I don't know. Janine passed the word that I was a big shot and Elise seems to like big shots. Her boy friend is a guy named Bill Murray."

"Murray? Who is he?"

"A bookie and a gambler. Not a cheap-skate by any means. He operates a gambling syndicate that does business running into the millions each year."

"Maybe, working through this Bill Murray, you might get somewhere," Muriel suggested.

"From the way Elise spoke, Murray has been hiding out for a long time. Wherever he is, there are rules for him and whoever else is around to follow, rules so strict that Murray had to bribe his way out so he

on the maker's label. Probably a dry cleaner or tailor. At any rate, there was his name, and the masquerade was over. Elise Watson traveled in the same social stratum as Dick Van Loan, and while they had never met before, she would know about him. She would have no idea, of course, that he was the Phantom, but she would probably jump to the conclusion—and rightly—that he was a spy of some kind.

If she made a few inquiries, her gangster friends would be certain to tell her what kind of a spy he was. For the whole underworld knew by now that Richard Curtis Van Loan was the money man behind the fabulous Phantom, and who often gathered

SEEING WAS BELIEVING



IN A Detroit courtroom, Hazel, a fortune teller, gazed into her crystal ball and received a shock. For once, she actually saw something in it! The other times (when she'd soaked her clients up to \$15 for gazing into, and seeing their futures in that ball) were just so much hooey.

But, now, after the Recorder's Judge returned Hazel her crystal ball during the trial, and asked what she saw in it, Hazel gazed—and really saw something. She saw the exact sentence the judge was to mete out.

"Why," gasped she, "it says \$90 or 100 days!"

Nope, she wasn't psychic after all. The judge had given her a direct assist—by lettering the sentence on a piece of paper and pasting it onto the ball.

—Joseph C. Stacey

could see Elise for less than two hours. It sounds crazy, but that's the gist of what Elise told me. Naturally, I couldn't get too inquisitive."

"I'm surprised you didn't stay longer," Muriel said. "Or does Elise make it a habit of never letting her men friends hang around long?"

"I told you something scared her off. I wish I knew what it was. She searched my coat—now hold on—it was hanging on a chair at the time. But you know how careful I always am about such things. There was nothing in the coat to give me away."

As if to prove the point he peeled off the coat and searched the pockets again. And gave a sharp exclamation. Someone had printed "R.C. Van Loan" in indelible ink

information for him. Or so they thought. It was naturally a pretty dangerous position for Dick Van Loan—but a lot better than having the truth known, that Richard Curtis Van Loan *was* the Phantom.

Then abruptly he forgot any peril that might be facing him personally, as a blood-tingling idea flashed through his mind. He leaped to his feet and flung on his coat. Muriel gave him a startled look.

"Let's go!" he said. "We've got to reach Janine before someone else does. They'll blame her for letting me get into that meeting, and this mob doesn't pay off such mistakes in posies!"

WHEN they reached the street they hailed a cab, and neither said much as they drove away. Van was worried.

That fool Elise was sure by now to have told someone that Dick Van Loan had wangled his way into a meeting of the gang, and everyone knew he'd come with Janine. He had used her to get in with the mob, but what he had really done was to put her life in danger.

He dismissed the cab a block from Janine's home, took Muriel's elbow and moved with her toward the building line shadows. They walked briskly to the apartment house. Looking up, he saw that the windows of Janine's rooms were illuminated. That eased his mind somewhat. In the lobby he stopped Muriel.

"Janine lives on the fourth floor," he told her. "You get off at the third, find the stairway and be where you can run for help for me if there's any trouble."

Muriel nodded, not realizing that his real reason was to keep her out of the line of fire if anything did happen. He sent the elevator to the fourth floor after letting her off, but before he stepped out into the corridor he transferred the snub-nosed revolver from his crotch holster to his side pocket, and kept a finger on the trigger.

The fourth floor corridor was empty and quiet. Van moved on catlike feet toward the door to Janine's apartment. Nearing it, he heard a radio or television set inside. He pushed the bell, braced himself to move fast, but nothing at all happened. He didn't ring the buzzer again, but made a quick examination of the door instead. He took a wallet out of his pocket, extracted a thick, flexible piece of clear plastic from the identification flap and used this to insert between the framework of the door and the trim.

He contacted the tongue of the lock, manipulated the plastic expertly, felt the tongue slide back, and in about three minutes he had worked it so far back that all he had to do was double his fist, club it against the door and he had it open.

He stepped into the lighted living room. The television set was on and an old Western filled the screen. Hardly the sort of thing to interest Janine.

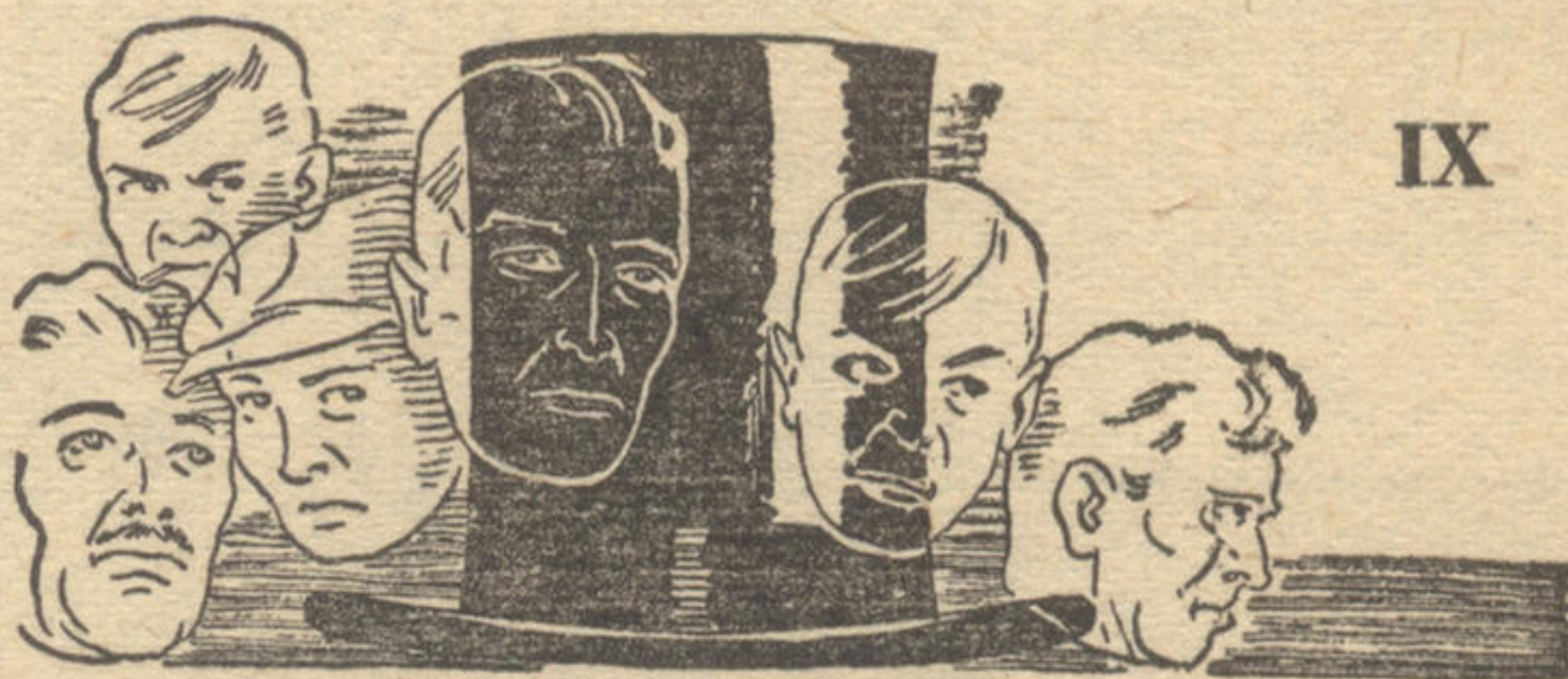
Van moved toward the bedroom. It

was in darkness, so he reached inside the door and snapped on the light switch.

He said, "The lousy, murdering sons of hell!" in a soft, bitter voice.

Janine's body lay on the floor beside the bed. Apparently she'd been getting ready to go out, or had just returned home and had been changing. All she wore was a pink slip.

That was, it had been pink. Now it was mostly a dark, deep red. Whoever had used the knife on her had slashed right through the slip.



QUICKLY Van dropped to one knee beside Janine, but he knew it was no use. There wasn't a sign of pulse. He rose, went to the door and on into the corridor. He called Muriel and she came hurrying from the service doorway. He took her inside the apartment and closed the door.

"Look if you want to," he said. "In the bedroom. But it's nothing you'd like to remember. Whoever did it used a knife, and he was no artist with a blade. She's hacked up badly."

Muriel's mouth tightened into a thin line. "Dick, the few swear words I know are insufficient now. I need a lot of good strong ones."

"She was just a little bum," Van said, "but she lived and breathed, and people liked her as she liked people. She had a right to go on living, but somebody lower than a louse didn't think so. In a way, I'm responsible for this, Muriel, but I can tell you right now that I mean to be directly responsible for what happens to the man who did this to Janine—and what happens to the man who ordered him to do it."

Muriel walked into the bedroom and came out quickly, looking sick. She sat down and grasped her handbag so tightly

her knuckles shone white.

She said grimly, "The responsibility for this terrible thing is heavier on Elise Watson's shoulders than it is on yours, Dick. She must nearly have broken her lousy neck passing the word along that Janine brought you to that meeting. But she couldn't possibly guess that you are the Phantom, could she?"

"I don't believe so," Van said. "Though it's not impossible she knows I'm supposed to be the Phantom's backer. But someone else may have done some quick guessing, after Elise found my name in my coat. That name could irrevocably have tied up Richard Curtis Van Loan as the Phantom himself, in somebody's mind."

"You ought to have her arrested," Muriel snapped. "Dick, she's no tough moll. A night in jail might loosen her tongue."

"It might, if she had anything to tell, which I doubt. Besides, her father has enough influence to get her out. No, we'll get further if we let Elise believe she got away with this, because from now on I intend to use her."

"But she knows you!" Muriel protested. "She'll help them set a trap to find out if you *are* the Phantom!"

Van nodded. "But you forget one thing, Muriel. Elise doesn't know what Richard Curtis Van Loan actually looks like, though I suppose she could find out easily enough if she suspects I may have been in disguise. It may be as well, from now on, for me to be Van Loan, when I see her. But that can wait—maybe until she gives herself away." He sighed. "Besides, Muriel, a man who knows a trap is set can avoid it, and sometimes spring it on whoever set the thing up. There's nothing else to do now except make a frontal attack through Nick Tambo, and that wouldn't work. Tambo is rough and tough. He wouldn't talk—he never has. And remember, we're still miles up in the air as to what this mess is all about."

Muriel said, "Dick, somebody murdered Cathy, and now this girl. What chance could Nancy have? Tell me the truth—do you think she's dead?"

"I couldn't even give you an opinion," Van said, "but I wouldn't hold on to too much hope. We'd better bring the police in—"

There was a definite clicking sound from the door. Muriel and Van froze. The knob was turning slowly. Someone pushed against the door, but the lock held. Then they heard the soft contact of metal against metal. Someone had a key.

Van pointed toward the bedroom door where Janine lay dead on the floor. Muriel nodded, but as she retreated to the bedroom and closed the door behind her, she opened her handbag and took out a small gun.

The Phantom tiptoed over to the wall beside the front door, put his back against the wall, and held his automatic ready.

THE door opened a crack, then a little wider. Van's finger tightened on the trigger. So it had been guessed he would rush to protect Janine, and somebody had been waiting for him. He wouldn't have minded so much if Muriel hadn't been in danger. Maybe he could take whoever had been sent to get him, though with an attacker all set to kill he'd have to shoot fast.

The room was not too brightly illuminated, by only a table lamp with a rather dark shade, but Van would have liked it better if the whole place could have suddenly been plunged into darkness. Then, through a window directly opposite him, came the beam of a powerful flashlight. It zipped past him, stopped, returned and held him in its glare. The beam shot between the draperies and through the window glass.

Apparently this was some sort of signal. A man in the hallway spoke outside the door. He kept his voice low, as if to avoid arousing anyone else on the floor.

"You in there," he said, "you're covered. Behind that flashlight a gun is trained right on you. Do like I say or you get chopped to pieces."

"Come on in and get me!" the Phantom challenged.

"I won't have to, chum. In twenty seconds my pal in an apartment across the court starts shooting. If you move, he'll wing you. Throw your gun into the middle of the room where I can see it. Maybe we can talk things over."

The Phantom estimated his chances. The ray of light stayed on him, not moving at all. He had no doubt a gun was behind it, and he was a wide-open target. If he surrendered, there might be a chance of getting clear later. At least he might keep them away from Muriel.

"Five seconds," the man outside the door warned.

The Phantom threw his automatic into the middle of the floor. The door opened wider, but not enough to hide him from that unwavering beam of light. Two men came in. He'd never seen them before, but he knew their type. Paid killers, men who knew how to use a gun and weren't afraid to. Both were young; one was thin and tall, the other shorter and huskier. The tall one kicked the automatic into a corner.

He said, "Okay, chump, stay just like you are. Where's the dame?"

"She left a few minutes ago to fetch the police," Van said.

"The hell she did. We been watching the joint from across the court. Where is she?"

"I tell you she left—by the back door. I was afraid somebody might be waiting for me."

The tall man said, "Petey, look in the bedroom. If she's in there, blast her. The one on the floor is dead already."

The burlier man moved toward the bedroom door. The Phantom braced himself. He'd have to leap aside fast and avoid the tall man's gun, and also the gun probably aimed at him by the killer across the court who was keeping the flashlight trained on him. His chances were practically nil, but if Muriel could get clear during the mêlée, it was worth the chance.

The burly man opened the bedroom door. The lights had been on, but it was dark now. Holding his gun ready, the fellow snapped on the bedside light. There

was no gunshot to end the Phantom's torture, no sickening laugh when the burly man discovered Muriel. The Phantom heard him open a closet door, slam it shut. He came out alone.

"Nobody in there," he reported. "The guy must be telling the truth. She got away while we were getting over here."

"Well, maybe the dame did get clear. That means she'll bring the police. We better get outa here. Signal at the window. We don't need the light on this jerk any more."

The burly thug went to the window and waved his hand. The light winked out. The tall man backed away a few steps, his gun level. The burly man moved toward the door.

SLOWLY the Phantom came forward until he was practically teetering on his toes. His brain was spinning wildly. If Muriel wasn't in the bedroom, where could she have gone? There was no other door, the apartment was high up, and there were no outside fire-escapes. She *had* to be in that room, and yet the burly man had searched it.

The tall one said, "So long, chump."

A gun blazed, but it was not the tall man's. The bullet was aimed at that man, and aimed well, for it hit him in the back of the head. He was thrown forward by the impact and his gun fell out of his hand almost at Van's feet.

The Phantom scooped it up fast. The burly man near the door was ready to shoot, but his gun was aimed at the bedroom. The Phantom fired a fraction of a second before the killer could pull trigger. This was no game they were playing, so he shot to kill. If the man were only wounded he still might have strength enough to do some shooting himself.

As the man slumped to the floor, somebody down the hall began screaming. Van rushed into the bedroom.

Muriel, her small gun clutched hard, stood there. Her face was slightly green. She was clad only in a slip, part of which was pink, but the front section was darker, smeared with blood from neckline to

hem. The Phantom's heart stopped beating for a moment. He expected her to crumple.

"I—I'm all right," she said. "I—I'm a little rocky, but—okay, I guess."

"That blood!" he cried.

"Janine's," Muriel said, shuddering. "I knew those men had come to kill us so I pushed Janine's body under the bed and lay down in her place, with my gun under me. My dress is under the bedspread. Janine wore a slip—I had to look like her. I hoped that in the dim light he wouldn't see that my hair wasn't dark red. I guess he didn't, because he looked at me before he searched the closet. He never thought about looking under the bed. If he had, I'd have shot him then."

"Grab your dress and come into the living room," Van said. "The police will be here shortly and we'll turn this matter over to Inspector Gregg. I want to frisk those two men before the police get here."

He put Muriel in a chair, then searched the tall man, but found nothing at all. He had the same luck with the shorter thug. He came back to look down at Muriel. She had pulled on her dress.

"Neither of those punks carried a knife," he said. "They may have been here when Janine was murdered, but they didn't do it. Maybe the man posted across the court did it. We may never know. By now he's as far away from here as he can get."

The police did arrive promptly, and Van and Muriel were held until Gregg appeared. Van caught the Inspector's eye at once, and his hand went to the lobe of his ear which he pulled thoughtfully—a long-time signal used by Van to tell the police official his Phantom identity when he was in disguise. He gave a name for himself and, for the benefit of the other officers, told how he and Muriel had come here to see Janine in whom Muriel was interested through some social welfare work, that they had found the door open and the girl dead, then about the fight that had followed.

It was a mystery to him, he said, why the men had wanted to kill him and

Muriel—they must have been mistaken for someone else.

Gregg nodded, apparently satisfied, but he was more satisfied when Van privately told him a little more, and promised to meet him in the morning. Van was allowed to take Muriel home.

There they stopped only long enough for her to change her clothes and get rid of the blood-smeared slip, then went on to Van's penthouse. Muriel got busy at once. They had only Elise to work through, so Muriel got on the telephone and called a number of friends. Through Van's coaching she had become proficient in extracting information without appearing to do so, and she got it now. After about an hour she abandoned the phone and curled up in a big chair beside Van's chair.

"Elise," she reported to him, "has been a harum-scarum since she was old enough to know the difference between boys and girls. She was kicked out of two private schools and was finally sent to Europe to a school which apparently wasn't so fussy about the characters of the girls who were accepted as students, so long as the Yankee buck paid the damage. While she was over there, at the ripe old age of seventeen, she married a man who said he was a count. Turned out he was a Riviera bum, and Daddy Watson paid for and got an annulment. Did that tame Elise down? On the contrary, it seemed only to have whetted her appetite."

VAN asked, "Did you hear anything about her connection with gangsters?"

"No, she's been too cagey for that, but when I put together what different people who know her and her father told me, I get a good picture. Elise is thrill crazy. In Spain, she had to see every bull fight and when the bloody part came, she stood up and *olé'd* her silly head off. I think she'd have got quite a bang out of seeing Janine slashed to death."

"What about Elise's father?"

"A respectable and astonishingly patient man. Most fathers would have seen to it that a girl like Elise would never

come back from Europe. Watson made his money the hard way and he's piled up quite a lot of it. There was a time once when his finances were considered shaky, but he came through because he had the guts to fight his way clear. He should have passed on some of that courage to his daughter."

"But I wonder how Elise ever met such men as Bill Murray. He's a good-looking punk, but his character reeks, he's known to be pretty brutal, and generally no damned good."

"She'd like him if he was brutal," Muriel observed. "She'd enjoy being beaten up by someone like Bill Murray."

"Speaking of Murray," Van said, "I found a band off one of his cigars at Elise's lake place. An expensive cigar, not handled by many retailers. It's worth following up—in case Murray sends someone to buy his cigars and that messenger can be identified."

"You ought to turn that over to Inspector Gregg," Muriel said. "Sounds like too much leg work to me."

"I might, at that," Van said. "But first things first, and if Elise is going to lead me into a trap I want to know it."

Muriel said, "I'm in on that, too, Dick. Don't forget that."

"Of course," he said, but he was telling himself he'd make sure she was as far away from any action as possible.

"I'll meet you tomorrow afternoon," she said. "About four."

"So early?" he asked.

"So you won't have a chance to give me the slip and go off with that bloodthirsty blonde maniac. I'm going to be on hand when you keep your date with her."

He said, "Suits me. I may need you to handle Elise. Which means both of us had better get some sleep."

Muriel gathered up her gloves and handbag and he reached for his coat.

"No, no need for you to take me home, Dick," she said hastily. "I'll be all right. Go on and get your sleep. You'll need it." She sighed. "I don't know if I'll be able to sleep myself. I'll keep seeing that girl. Dick, don't let anything happen to you!

Get the man who killed Janine, but don't throw away your own life doing it."

He kissed her lightly and went to the door with her.



VAN waited about three minutes after Muriel was gone, then yanked the door open and saw that the elevator was already on its way down. He went straight to the telephone and called Elise Watson. It was one in the morning.

A man answered, in a sleepy, annoyed voice. But when he called Elise to the phone she didn't sound as if she'd been sleeping.

Van said, "This is Mac, Elise. I know I'm not supposed to see you until tomorrow, but something has turned up. I have to reach Bill Murray."

"Well, you know where he is, don't you?" she parried.

"I'll need you along to convince Murray I'm to be trusted. How about it? I'll pick you up in half an hour."

"But it's so late—"

"Okay," he said, "Forget it. Maybe the idea wasn't so good anyhow."

"Wait, Mac. I'll go with you. I'll be in front of this apartment house in thirty minutes."

"That's great. This won't take long. I'll get you home early."

"Who cares?" she asked airily. "See you in half an hour."

Van hung up, sat there staring at the phone for a moment or two, then called the Watson number again. The line was busy. He smiled a little, went into his bedroom and changed clothes.

He put on a dark blue suit, a dark blue shirt, and a somber tie. He slipped into crepe-soled black shoes and found a black hat in his disguise costume wardrobe that suited his purpose, and touched up his

still disguised face a little.

He surveyed himself in a full-length mirror for a moment then, and finally put out all the lights in the bedroom, closed the door tightly, and walked back and forth in front of the tall mirror until he was satisfied that in the clothes he was wearing he could not be seen in the dark.

One .38 automatic went into his hip pocket then, and another into the side pocket of his coat. He left his apartment with about fifteen minutes in which to reach Elise.

When he reached her apartment house, Elise was standing near the curb, waiting, but following instructions his cabby drove on by. She could have arranged a trap here as easily as anywhere else. All that was required was a bullet fired by a gunman who could be hiding anywhere.

He dismissed the cab around the corner, walked back and made as certain as he could that Elise was alone. She seemed to be growing impatient. He walked up to her.

"I thought you weren't coming," she said. "Why is it so important for you to see Bill Murray tonight?"

"I'm not in the habit of answering questions like that," he said, his voice hard. "What I have to tell Murray is private—and vital. And you and I are not going together."

"But you wanted me to meet you!"

"You take the first cab that comes along, and I'll follow in the next. If you're trailed, I'll know it, and if anyone follows me, I can break it off before we lead some cop to the hideout. I'll drift off now, and you hail a cab. There'll be plenty of them along now, on their way downtown after driving the theatre crowd home. I'll meet you just inside the place."

He was setting it up in such a way that she could lead him into trouble without actually being in danger herself. And the way she snapped up the offer was a good indication that she expected something to happen. Van hailed another cab as hers drove off. He told his driver to follow her taxi.

She headed uptown, was driven all the

way through Harlem and the Bronx until they were close to the outskirts of the city. Her taxi left the avenue then, moved along a dismal side street and finally came to a stop before what seemed to be a shabby office building.

ELISE got out of the cab, paid the driver and stood at the curb until the taxi disappeared. Then she walked swiftly into the building. The door appeared to have been unlocked.

Van saw all this from two blocks away where he left his own taxi. He walked slowly along until he reached the street, and took a good look at the building. It was in total darkness. He couldn't make out the names lettered on the windows, but it looked as though it housed the small offices of neighborhood doctors and dentists.

He knew he was supposed to walk straight into the place as Elise had done, but he had other ideas. At the rear of all such buildings were service entrances, and he ducked down the alley beside the structure, looking for the door. He didn't find it, mainly because he came upon something even more interesting.

The building was so old that there was a fire-escape leading to the roof. He took a running jump, and grabbed the lower rung of the fire-escape ladder. It was rusty and it creaked dismally as he pulled it down. He held it there for a moment, then let go and the counter-weight pulled it up again, just as noisily. While it was creaking into place he raced around the corner of the building to the street and hurried to the main entrance.

If any gunmen were in ambush anywhere near they'd hear the rusty grinding and grating of that fire-escape and rush to intercept whoever might be trying to enter through a window or the roof hatch.

There was a notice pasted on the glass door of the main entrance. The large letters read:

THIS STRUCTURE TO BE TORN DOWN

There was more in smaller print, but

he didn't take time to study it. He went on through, found himself faced with a wooden stairway and nothing else.

He went up this two steps at a time, but staying close to the wall where the risers were firmest and less apt to squeak under his weight. The crepe soles on his shoes enabled him to move soundlessly. And the automatic was out of his pocket and held tightly in a steady hand.

The second floor landing was only gaping darkness. He flattened himself against the wall, held his breath and just listened. There wasn't a sound. If he hadn't known that Elise had entered this building and that killers must be hidden here, he would have sworn the place was deserted.

The wrong step on a creaky board might be the last act of his life. In this fairly narrow corridor, he'd be like a clay pigeon in a shooting gallery. Gunmen could hardly miss if they swept the corridor with slugs.

Yet he couldn't simply stand there and wait for somebody to act. Though no one had to stalk him. All an ambusher had to do was sit tight and let him show himself. It was not a situation that Van enjoyed. He pointed his gun down the corridor, gave a Rebel yell, fired twice and went crashing at a dead run toward an office door in the middle of the corridor.

Before he reached it, the door was swung open by somebody who held a small flashlight. It swept in his direction and his finger tightened on the trigger.

"Where are you?" asked the holder of the flashlight. Elise's voice! "Did you—get him?"

He ran straight toward the light. She heard him, saw him when she shifted the beam of the flash, and did her best to dodge back into the office. He gave a flying jump, wound an arm around her and carried her back into the office with the momentum of his speed. She fell to the floor and he fell beside her, but he was up in a flash and slammed the door shut. Then he took away the pencil flash she still held, pulled her to her feet, and shoved her against the wall.

"It didn't quite work, did it, Elise?" he asked.

SHE cursed him in language no European finishing school had ever taught her. He clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Just listen, baby," he said. "And listen well, because the boys will reach this room sooner or later and when they do, they'll come in shooting. They won't care much who is hit. That puts you in precisely the same spot I'm in. How do you like it?"

He took his hand away from her mouth. She said, "I didn't know anybody was waiting here to kill you."

"The hell you didn't! Ten seconds after I called you, you telephoned somebody for instructions as to where to bring me. Murray isn't here. He never has been, nor have any of his friends. This old building was selected as a good spot in which to get rid of me."

"But why should—"

"Don't give me that," he snapped. "You know who I am. You found out when you examined my coat up at the lake house. You know Dick Van Loan is back of the Phantom Detective, works for and with him when necessary. And your friends know the Phantom is on their trail and means to put an end to their schemes."

"The way you tricked me!" she said, knowing further lies were useless. "Anyway you won't get out of here. There are enough men in the building to make sure of that."

"Too bad," he said. "I doubt you'll see the fun, though. That's why you came, isn't it? To see me get killed? You'd like to see someone die."

"I hope they take you alive!" she said between her teeth. "I hope they have a chance to kill you slowly!"

"Just what I thought," he said. "You're pathetically in need of a psychiatrist."

She tried to edge past him in the darkness, but he caught her. The flash showed her opening her mouth to yell and he clapped his hand over her lips again. She bit him viciously. He drew back the hand and stopped her rising scream with a hard slap. She whimpered. The pain seemed to do something to her.

Van snapped off the flash suddenly.

Someone was moving along the corridor outside. Whoever it was took his time. He heard a door out there open and close. The search had started. The killers finally had realized that the creaky fire-escape had been a ruse to draw them away from the front door.

Van put his lips close to Elise's ear. "Now listen to me, you little fool. I'll get you out of this if I can, but you'll have to do exactly as I say."

She gave him a taunting laugh.

"All right," he said. "Why should I worry if they get you? And they will if they hear you move around."

In the darkness he couldn't see more than an outline of her, but her voice told him she was suddenly worried.

She said, "You're going to use me for a shield. You'll let them kill me first!"

Suddenly she broke away from him, and before he could stop her, she scampered toward the door. The building, old, dusty, and empty, carried sounds well and the clatter of her high heels must have been heard from the first to the top floor.

The room door was flung wide just before she reached it. A gun roared almost in her face. Two bullets whizzed by her head in that fraction of a second, each from a different direction. For when the door opened, the Phantom had started shooting first.

The man in the doorway screamed, did a half spin from the power of that slug which ripped into him, and slid away from the doorway, leaving a swathe of blood against the bare wall which supported

him. A little further on he stopped moving in any direction except down. Three of his pals came running up and he managed to gasp out that the man the bosses thought might be the Phantom was in the office halfway down the corridor.

IN THAT office Elise stood in the darkness, chewing the knuckles of her right hand. "He—tried to—to shoot me!"

"Find yourself a corner," the Phantom advised. "Crouch down and stay there. Pray hard these shots will be heard and that someone will call the police. Though why I should worry about a conniving little hell-cat like you is more than I can understand."

She came up to him, seizing his left shoulder with both hands, with fingers that bit deeply into his flesh.

"I'm scared! They don't know I'm here. Over the phone I said I'd make you go in alone, but I had to—to see! These men will kill me! They don't know who I am. They'll think I'm that girl Dick Van Loan is engaged to, the one who is always around with you. They'll shoot me!"

"Quite likely they will," Van said coldly. "But if you don't let go of me, I can just about guarantee it."

"You won't let them? Promise me you won't let them!"

"I'll promise nothing," he said. "I see no reason at all why I should move a muscle to save your miserable skin. You're so responsible for Janine's murder that you might as well have wielded the knife."

[Turn page]

AMAZING THING! *By Cooper*

SENSATIONAL NEW **TING**
CREAM FOR
FOOT ITCH
(ATHLETE'S FOOT)

- REGULAR USE HELPS
RELIEVE ITCHING - SOOTHES
BURNING BETWEEN CRACKED
PEELING TOES -
AIDS HEALING
AMAZINGLY!



FIRST
USED
IN HOSPITALS
NOW
RELEASED TO
DRUGGISTS
GUARANTEED

TING MUST
SATISFY YOU IN
A WEEK - OR
MONEY BACK!



EVEN IF OTHER PRODUCTS
HAVE FAILED TRY AMAZING
TING CREAM TODAY!
GREASELESS, STAINLESS
ALL DRUGGISTS ONLY 60¢ A TUBE



"Janine! Knife! But—but I swear I didn't have anything to do with it! I swear—"

He pulled her to him roughly and covered her mouth. The door he'd slammed shut was being opened. He leveled his gun. He was standing against the wall in which the doorway was set so if there was going to be any shooting, whoever used a gun would have to show some part of himself.

A man's voice said, "Come out, Phantom! You're not fooling us with that Van Loan name! You don't even look like that millionaire, Van Loan, and he won't be doing any more of your dirty work from now on. What's the use stalling? We'll get you anyway."

Elise shuddered so violently Van would have sworn he could feel the wall tremble. He didn't reply.

The same voice said, "We know there's a girl with you! We don't want to knock off any broads, but if we have to come in after you, she gets it, too!"

Van answered him with more silence, and mentally damned Elise. Handicapped with her made his predicament twice as dangerous. The killers couldn't afford to wait much longer. He doubted the shooting so far had been heard on the street, but there was always that chance, and such men as these couldn't risk staying around too long. He wondered how many of them there were.

"So you're gonna be a big hero," the hoodlum taunted. "That's okay with us. Now we knock off the girl, too. You had your chance. Let's go get him, boys!"

There was a general scampering, the thud of feet, but nobody came rushing into the room, and the Phantom didn't do any shooting. That trick was much too old to deceive him, although he had to admit it almost did, and he almost wasted the bullets they hoped he would. Suddenly he realized that the gun he held was shaking.

He thought, Damn it, why should I be afraid? I never trembled before, but now I am and I can't help it.

It must be Elise who had given him the shakes. He could take a tough situation

for himself, but she was with him and while she was as bad as any of the goons outside, while she had lured him into this mess and probably deserved being shot as much as any of those pals of hers outside the room, he couldn't see it that way. To him she was a girl—a pretty girl, too. Though she was quite capable of shooting him in the back, that made no difference. Elise was his responsibility.

He steadied the gun with an effort and wondered what he was going to do. There was one door, one window which he couldn't possibly reach nor use if he did. There were two, three, or maybe four armed men in the hall daring him to come out.

He'd have to do something pretty soon because if he didn't, they would!



XI

ELISE was clawing at Van's hand over her mouth, and he finally let go. Apparently she couldn't breathe in enough oxygen through her nostrils because she gulped air when he removed his hand.

A loose ball of crumpled newspaper came flying into the room. It landed on the floor, smoke and a small flame began curling upward. It grew until it gave enough light to illuminate the room in a gory color. But the dry paper didn't last long and the flames died down. However, smoke was filling the room, and if they kept this up, sooner or later they were going to start a big enough blaze to set the old building afire.

Elise whispered, "They'll burn us to death! The smoke—"

"Shut up," Van ordered harshly. "Save your wind. You may need it."

Another ball of burning paper was tossed in and like the other, it flamed up and quickly died. He heard another being prepared, let go of Elise, took three long,

careful steps and aimed his gun in a slanted line with the doorway. The thug hadn't waited for all the fire to burn out or he might have been safe. But he was in too much of a hurry. In the flickering remains of the second ball of paper, he was faintly visible as he moved into the doorway to light another fire ball and hurl it into the room.

The Phantom shot him high in the chest. The lighted match flickered out on its way to the floor, but the thug was on the dusty boards only a breath later. As he fired, the Phantom leaped back toward the protection of the wall. The other gunmen threw a lot of lead into the room, but none of it even came close to Van or Elise.

She was shivering in the protection of Van's arm. She started to whimper again and he tightened his grasp roughly to make her stop the sound. Outside, he heard the wounded man being dragged away, heard his pals return. There were at least two coming back and they must have left one man at the door, so that meant there could be no less than three out there now.

It wouldn't have been so bad, Van thought, if this crazy blonde hadn't been in his way. Sure, she was one of the mob, just as much as if she drew some of their rotten profits. There was no earthly or moral reason why he should worry whether or not they'd shoot her down—but he did. Even to the extent of pondering the idea of trying to reason with the killers, to try to make them understand that Elise was not his friend, but one of their own kind.

To try to argue with a trio of gunmen, however, would be a waste of breath and energy. They'd never believe him, and probably wouldn't care much anyway. He wished his gun hand would stop shaking. At least they wouldn't again try that fool trick of lighting papers and throwing them into the room. There'd be something else, though, something more dangerous and effective.

Why hadn't someone heard that shooting? Where were all the cops? Nearly twenty thousand of them and not one

within earshot. The Phantom cursed softly and felt a hundred years old.

Elise was making small noises deep in her throat. It was so dark he couldn't be certain, but he believed she was wild-eyed with terror and about ready to break. Maybe those punks outside were banking on just that. Muriel would have been different, though he thanked God she wasn't with him. Muriel would have offered suggestions or shot it out by his side if necessary. It bothered him, this concern he had for Elise.

Somewhere far back in his mind, though, he knew why. The fact that he couldn't permit her to be killed was what made him different from the mugs in the corridor, or other men who killed. Even if this girl causing his worry was worth it, even if she'd engineered the whole affair and had fallen into her own trap because of her vicious, sadistic nature, he still would fight for her. Such moral principles were what brought people out of the jungles and made them civilized.

ELISE suddenly spoke up. There'd been nothing but intense silence for such a long period now that the sound of her voice startled the Phantom.

"Have they gone? I don't hear them. They must have gone."

"Gone, hell!" the Phantom said. "They're going to wait us out."

"I don't believe you. They've run away. I know they've gone! Take me out of here—take me out!"

He reached for her blindly, sensing what she was going to do. In the darkness his hand missed her, then she was running across the floor before he could stop her. The Phantom lunged toward the door. He touched her dress as he grabbed in the general direction of the doorway, but the fabric slipped through his fingers, she was gone, and running madly down the corridor.

The Phantom went after her. When, or if he caught up, he would slug her, and he wouldn't hold back much strength in the punch, either.

Someone popped out of one of the office

doors and fired twice. The Phantom snapped a shot, and the gunman hastily pulled back.

In the flash of the guns, the Phantom saw Elise huddled against a wall an inch or two from another office door. He sprinted toward her, hooked an arm around her and without pausing in the rush, dragged her through the open door into that other office.

"Of all the damn fools!" he said tightly. "Here—take this." He pressed the gun into her hand and she gasped. "Maybe that will give you enough nerve to stand tight. All you have to do is pull the trigger. I'm going out after those boys. Anyone who enters this room without telling you about it first, will be one of those killers. They're fair game, so go ahead and shoot."

"You're trusting me not to—to shoot you?" she marveled.

"Oh, hell!" he said. "You haven't got the nerve. I'm the only person here who can help you. Remember, shoot if anybody comes in."

He approached the door cautiously. There were about a dozen offices on this floor and any of them could be an ambush spot for the killers. In his favor lay only the fact that darkness benefited him as much as it did them. Long ago he'd learned how to walk on cat-feet, cover ground and not make a sound. Here the situation called for slow, careful steps until he was close to one of the doors and then two or three long fast steps until he cleared the doorway. He passed three of them and discovered that same measure of hope was returning.

Then somebody switched on a flashlight. He hadn't even known the men had one. It shattered the darkness and he whirled swiftly. If the beam hit him full in the face he'd be blinded, and he had to shoot fast and straight. He did—and the light clattered to the floor and went out. But he didn't know whether or not he'd wounded the man who held it.

Another eerie silence settled down. Now it was known that he was in the corridor, that he and the girl were separated.

The thugs wouldn't wait much longer.

There was a sudden rush of feet. The Phantom fired at shadows and kept on the move so he wouldn't be an easy target. In front of him two guns blazed simultaneously. Their glare showed him one gunman backing into the room where he'd left Elise.

He could do nothing for her now. He plunged into one dark office, came out quickly, and tried another. From the opposite side of the corridor he heard the beat of running feet. Then a muffled gun explosion—from the office where Elise was hiding and into which a gunman had backed. The running feet receded, turned into footsteps clattering downstairs.

The Phantom raced to the room where he had left Elise. He called out before he entered because if she was still alive, her trigger finger might be nervous. There was no reply to his hail. He took a chance and ducked into the room. Still nothing. He came to a dead stop, listening, head cocked to one side. Someone was breathing hard. Sounds that were almost gasps were coming from the further end of the room.

GUN leveled, he started forward, and almost fell over a body sprawled on the floor. With a solid oath he bent and explored the corpse with his hands. It was a man. He straightened up.

"Elise!" he called. "Damn it, answer me!"

Just that breathing.

He fumbled for a match, struck it. She stood with her back against the wall. She still held the gun. Its muzzle was slanted down. Her eyes were big and bright. They looked like those of a person who'd been on drugs a long, long time. They threw back the light of the match like a cat's eyes.

She said, "I—killed—him!"

The Phantom moved toward her. She dropped the gun, gave an unearthly shriek and rushed past him. She must have bumped into the doorway, judging by the thud he heard, and the cry of pain. But it did not stop her. The next moment

she was in the corridor, running madly, foolishly.

The Phantom reached the office doorway just as guns cut loose. Those men who had faked a running departure had sneaked back, as he'd expected they might. They'd fired down the hallway at the fleeing figure, and they could hardly miss. The Phantom heard the slap of the bullet that hit her. He couldn't open fire himself for fear of also hitting her, but he ran toward the stairway near where she lay.

Elise moaned. He skidded to a stop. Downstairs, the lobby door slammed shut. He felt reasonably sure it was safe to light another match. In the glare of it he spotted the flashlight which had been dropped by one of the gunmen. He picked it up, pushed the switch and it worked.

Elise lay on her side, as if she'd just drifted off to sleep. She was conscious, although a lot of blood was staining the whiteness of her blouse. He whipped off his coat, made a pillow of it, raised her head and cushioned it gently.

Elise had changed. The hardness was gone. In her eyes was just a plea for pity and help. The Phantom opened her blouse. The wound was ugly and dangerous, though not necessarily fatal. He gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

"They've all gone," he said. "I'll find someone on the street to phone for an ambulance. Can you hang on until I get back?"

"Yes—hang on—yes. What for, I don't know, but I can do it."

He hurried downstairs. On the street he realized why all the shooting hadn't been heard. For a distance of two blocks every building was abandoned and waiting for the wrecking crews. A huge building project was going up on this site.

He located a cruising cab on the avenue, told the driver what to do and raced back to the building. Elise's eyes were closed when he knelt beside her again. For a sickening instant, he thought she was dead.

He touched her face and she smiled before she opened her eyes. "You did come

back," she said. "I'm not worth it."

"Let me be the judge of that," he said. "An ambulance ought to be here soon."

"That man—I killed him, didn't I?"

"He'd have killed you, Elise."

"He came into the room. I couldn't see him, but I knew he was there and he heard me. I think I cried out a little. He said in a whisper that he was going to shoot me. I couldn't get away from him. He moved around searching for me and he—he backed right into the gun I was holding. I—pulled the trigger. I killed a man!"

"Does that bother you so much?"

"You'd be surprised. Van Loan, you accused me of arranging a murder. Of that red-headed girl. I didn't. I swear I didn't! This trap for you, yes. The people I've been playing around with had filled me so full of their propaganda I thought you were legitimate game—like a deer in season. It seemed like sport to me, setting up Richard Curtis Van Loan whose money and energy were backing the Phantom, their most mortal enemy, so he could be killed."

HE SAID, "You'd better stop talking so much. Save it for later."

"I'm all right. I won't die. I'm too tough and too rotten for that. But I *didn't* tell anyone that the red-headed girl brought you to that meeting. On my honor—or whatever honor there's left in me."

"She was knifed," he said. "I was sore about it. I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

"Go see Dad, will you? For me? I've been wrong about so many things and he's tried so often to straighten me out. Tell him I'm all right now. From here on, I'll change. I've had the supreme thrill. I—killed a man, God help me, I killed him! And it's no thrill. It's a nightmare!"

The Phantom knelt there, holding her hand, glad when she finally lapsed into unconsciousness. An ambulance and a horde of radio police arrived at the same time. The Phantom stood up, raised his hands and faced the battery of flashlights

trained on him. He was glad now that he had not shed his facial disguise in favor of being just Dick Van Loan—yet. None of these men would know Van Loan, even in his rightful identity. With these official servants of the people he could be just who he was—the Phantom Detective.

He said, "I'm the phantom. My badge is in my pocket if you'll let me reach for it. Take care of the girl, please. Right away."

One young cop stuck his gun in the small of the Phantom's back and told him to produce the badge. He did, and all guns were quickly lowered when the famous jewel-studded badge that was known nationally and internationally threw a million colored lights around the corridor as it reflected the flashlight rays.

The Phantom quickly explained what had happened, and police tramped away to hunt the wounded and dead. A reporter stormed in, wanting to know what had happened.

The Phantom said, "That girl they're taking out—her name is Elise Watson. Yes, *that* Elise. She has been helping me in an investigation and we were jumped by three or four hoods. She did her share of the fighting, believe me. More than her share. I might be dead if she hadn't been here to help."

The police asked the Phantom a few more questions, then told him he could go. He borrowed a ride in a radio car which set him down in front of the apartment house where Elise lived. He announced himself at the switchboard as Richard Curtis Van Loan, and Milford Watson asked him to come up.

Watson was a man of striking appearance. He was almost bald, but he was big, aggressive-looking, and he had deep, steady blue eyes. His handclasp was firm and told of muscular strength.

He said, "I'm delighted to meet you, Mr. Van Loan. You mentioned that it was something about my daughter?"

"She's been hurt, Mr. Watson. Now hold it—she isn't going to die. I was with her when it happened."

Watson sat down slowly. "What in the world happened. Van Loan? Was it a

holdup? A mugging?"

"I'm afraid it was more than that, Mr. Watson. To begin with, you've done me the honor of saying you've heard of Dick Van Loan—good, I hope—but did you know I'm also now the principal financial backer, and main contact of the Phantom Detective, since Frank Havens has retired from taking an active hand in the Phantom's work?"

"Why, no," Watson said. "The Phantom—ah, yes, I'm getting an inkling of what is coming. Elise got into trouble. Important trouble if the Phantom was brought into it."

"You're wrong again. Elise was helping me while I was doing some investigative work to which the Phantom had assigned me. We were both in grave danger and she stood by my side and fought back. A bullet hit her high in the chest. She'll be laid up for some time, I'm afraid, but I think that hell-roaring temperament of hers will probably never show up again."

WATSON said positively, "Never! Nothing can change that. Not even bullets."

"Something did tonight. She killed a man, Mr. Watson. It was a matter of killing him or being killed. There'll be no trouble about it, but the apex of excitement in her life was reached when she pulled that trigger. You won't have any more trouble with her."

Watson said hurriedly, "I'd better go see her right away. Honestly, I've spared nothing to make that crazy girl change. She used to laugh at me and go looking for trouble."

"She found that, too. Your daughter has been seeing a man who is wanted by the police and has been hiding out for a long time. Mr. Watson, how was it possible for her to meet characters like that?"

Watson wagged his head solemnly. "I wish I knew. I wish I could put my finger on the moment when she changed from being a spunky little kid into a woman who liked violence and bloodshed and crummy, evil companions. She just—well, liked that sort of thing."

Van Loan said, "I've covered up for her. There'll be no bad publicity if she keeps quiet. —Yes, go see her now. I think she'll want you. They took her to Grace Hospital."

Watson offered his hand. "Thanks. You know how much. I want to see you again—soon. Please call on me."

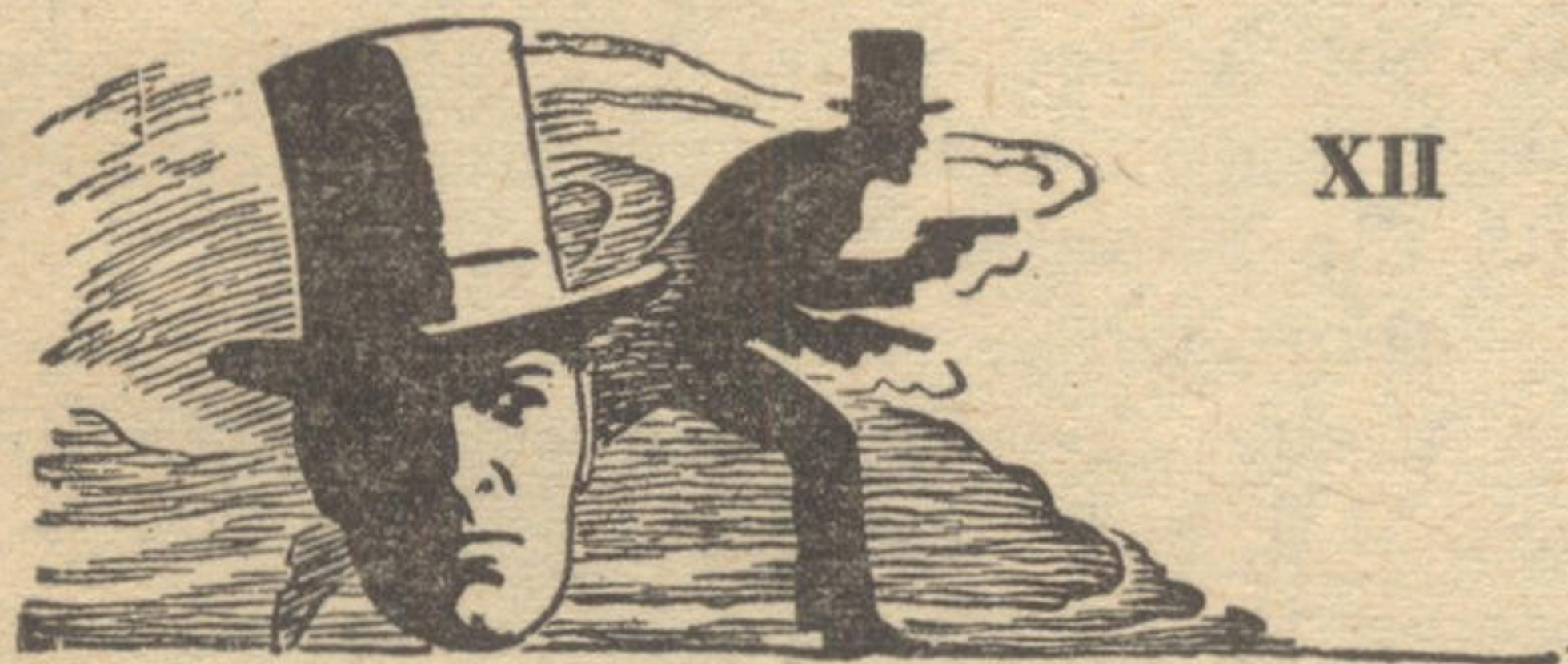
"I'll do that." Van glanced around the large, beautifully furnished room. "Is anyone else living here in this apartment, Mr. Watson, besides you and your daughter?"

"Only a maid and the cook. Why?"

"Someone arranged this trouble tonight. I wondered if it could have been anyone in your household."

"I'm sure not, Van Loan. The maid is about sixty, the cook even older. They have no interests or friends beyond my home. And there were no visitors."

"I could be wrong," Van admitted. "Good night, Mr. Watson. Try to assure Elise that things aren't as black as they seem to be."



XII

IN THE street, the Phantom was hailing a cab when Milford Watson joined him again. He let Watson have the first cab. Another took him home, and the first thing he did was to mix a highball, half whisky, half soda. He drank it quickly, felt the warmth of the liquor flow through him and taut nerves relaxed somewhat.

Spread out before him, through that thermopane window, were the millions of lights. To some people they were fascinating, intriguing. To Van Loan they were soothing. He could watch their winking and ponder problems like the one before him now.

A problem that had become spattered with blood. A problem which began with the unmotivated murder of a girl who apparently had gone off with a mobster and

stayed out of sight for a year. Then the kidnaping of this girl's sister which was still without a single clue. So far, Nancy Arnold's name hadn't even been mentioned by any of the people with whose affairs the Phantom had become involved. Van had avoided speaking to Muriel about Nancy as much as possible, but he had little hope that the girl was alive. This gang—and there was no doubt in his mind that all the people with whom he had come in contact were in the same mob—killed too ruthlessly for them to take any chances on her escape.

He summed up. A United States marshal had died so that a particularly low breed of crook could escape deportation. A doublecrossing driver for the marshal had been killed to keep him from talking. Janine had been mixed up with that driver, and she had died because she had broken gang rules. Now another girl had entered the scene—the daughter of a wealthy man. A girl who should have known better.

There also was Tambo, a known racketeer, but never a particularly brilliant one nor a great organizer, and yet he seemed to control a meeting of many crooks. Small-time mugs, perhaps, but plenty of them. Tambo and whatever racket it was that he and these men ran was still a mystery, although Van had caught a glimmer of light here and there.

The most significant thing of all, in his opinion, was the involvement somehow of Walter Bowden, Rocky Spaul and Bill Murray. Here were three men who were known gangsters, leaders who were smart and capable. Their rackets had never been connected, nor had the three men been particularly close friends, and yet now they had one thing in common—the earnest desire to stay under cover so the law couldn't reach them. Bowden and Spaul because they were due to be deported. Van wasn't so sure about deportation facing Bill Murray or what was the man's reason, but it was going to be interesting to learn the truth about him.

He did know one thing for sure—Attorney Alan Foster had represented all

three of these men. Van was beginning to develop a line of thought which might have far-reaching effects. If he found that still other men who were wanted for deportation or even trial for a serious offense had vanished, and that their rackets still rolled on, he'd have something. If he discovered that Alan Foster was attorney for all or most of these men, Foster would have some questions to answer.

Van drained the drink he'd made, spent a few minutes cleaning and reloading his guns, and was getting ready for bed when the phone rang.

A woman's voice said, "Mr. Van Loan's apartment? This is Grace Hospital. Miss Elise has taken a turn for the worse and she had been asking for the Phantom—says you will know where to find him, sir."

"I'll have him there in fifteen minutes," Van said.

He dropped the phone, dressed in less than two minutes, and was at the door when he remembered he'd left his guns behind. He took time to get both of them. The private elevator seemed to float down in a bed of thick, resisting clouds. He thought it would never reach the ground floor.

When it did, he tore out of the side door and looked up and down the street for a cab. At this hour they were not numerous. He thought of walking the few blocks to the garage where he kept his cars, but decided he didn't want to waste even that much time, so began walking toward the avenue corner.

WHAT happened then no man would ever have got away with under ordinary circumstances. But distraught, tired and badly worried as Van was, he didn't at first even see the car which swept around the corner and came to a grinding stop just beyond him. A slim, wiry-looking man jumped out. And Van did notice then, for the man was holding a gun!

He called, "Phantom—this way!"

Van Loan was careful to keep his hands away from his own guns. Two pistols in-

side the car also were covering him, and he had an idea those gunmen would like nothing better than to cut him down. He was somewhat surprised that they hadn't already opened fire.

In answer to the signaling of the man who had alighted, Van walked up to the car. The man stepped behind him and pushed the gun against his ribs, jabbed with it, an unmistakable order for Van to get into the car.

There was a pimply-faced punk in the back seat, a dumb-looking hood behind the wheel, and this little man who'd climbed in behind the Phantom. They probably shared little brain matter between them, but they were all the more dangerous for that, because the fewer the brains, the more likelihood those guns would go off.

The wiry man promptly searched the Phantom. His exploring hands found the automatic nestling under Van's armpit and took it away. The Phantom held himself tense. Sometimes such men as these were satisfied when they discovered one gun, and looked no further. But this one didn't happen to be that type. He started with the Phantom's ankles and searched him thoroughly. His hand touched the gun under the Phantom's belt, actually pressed it, but must have been less weapon-wise than he looked to be, for he said nothing, and went on with his search. Finally he leaned back.

"He's clean," he said.

The Phantom said, "Tell me something. The phone call from the hospital was just a gag, wasn't it?"

"Dunno what you're talking about," the pimply-faced man growled.

The wiry one said, "Yeah, we had a dame do the calling, Phantom. It's no secret these days that your filthy rich playboy pal can put a hand on you whenever he's a-mind to. Didn't think he'd take a chance on phoning, so we was waiting to tail him wherever he went, when who should walk out of his place but *you*? Knew you right off. Seen you at the meeting, and you ain't disguised none now. Luck, huh?"

"Depends," murmured the Phantom, "on whose luck you mean. Maybe, maybe not."

"Yeah? Well, anyway, if it'll ease your mind, far as we know that kid in the hospital is okay."

"What you gotta tell him that for?" the pimply-faced punk demanded irately. "We ain't doing this guy no favors."

"We might be doing ourselves one," the wiry man said curtly. "Remember, the Phantom ain't like no ordinary cop. He's been on spots before—lots of 'em—and he's still alive. I ain't asking to shoot it out with him, and if he really wants to see this girl in the hospital, what I mean he might decide to sort of walk away from us."

"Yeah, I'd like to see how far he'd get. —Kip, what's eating on you, going soft? It'll get you a slug in the head if you ain't careful."

The wiry little man called Kip laughed drily. "Maybe you'd like to take care of that little matter now, huh?"

"I'm just saying what I been hearing, that's all. I got no grudge."

The Phantom said, "Look, fight your lousy battles some other time. Where am I going and why?"

"You'll find out, you damn—"

Kip broke in, "Certain party want to see you, Phantom. This ain't no ride—just a business date. Give me your word you won't make any trouble and we'll all take it easy."

The Phantom nodded. "All right. I'm interested enough to go along. You can put your guns away."

THE wiry man shoved his weapon in his pocket, crossed his legs, and leaned back comfortably. But Pimple-face kept his gun ready for action and never took his eyes off the Phantom.

The car headed across town, going east on wide Fifty-ninth. At Third Avenue it turned uptown, but didn't go far. When it slid to the curb, they were before a private house, one of those uninspired-looking brick fronts with brick steps, a brass rail, grilled outer door, and maybe

twenty rooms inside. A town house in the best tradition.

But if the Phantom expected to meet anyone of prime importance, the name plate on the door told him differently. It read:

NICHOLAS TAMBO

The quick thought came to Van that below the name should have been added, "Punk, ex-pimp, cheat, panderer and murderer."

They were expected, for the door opened as they neared it. The Phantom was in the lead, with Kip and his gunman companion following close at his heels.

Van entered the large reception hall. And here the incongruity of a cheap gangster living in a place like this began to be seen. Ordinarily in the reception hall would have been several comfortable chairs, a table or two, a lamp, a deep-piled solid color rug, and perhaps a few selected oils on the walls. This one was crowded with silver and gold upholstered furniture. The rug was deep-piled enough, but it was a violent mauve in hue. Illumination was from fluorescent lamps, and the four paintings decorating the walls were all nudes and not in the full artistic sense of this form of art, either.

Kip nudged him. "In here," he said, and they went on to the end of the hall where Kip opened a closed door.

Apparently Tambo considered this room a combination office and library. He sat behind a massive limed oak desk, swept clear of everything except one framed photograph, an ash-tray in the form of a skull, and a blue-black automatic lying directly in front of Tambo. The gun was meant to impress.

"I'm glad you came, Phantom," Tambo said.

"I didn't have much choice in the matter, Tambo. Well, I'm here. I have to listen, so go ahead and tell it."

"Sit down," Tambo said. "Don't be a sorehead. Kip, what're you standing there for? Bring us a drink. The best stuff."

Kip drifted over to a small bar and mixed drinks which he placed on the desk. The Phantom tasted his. It was excellent. He nodded his thanks at Kip and thought the undersized gangster knew what he meant.

Tambo said, "You been getting in the hair of me and some friends of mine—business friends, Phantom. We could brush you out any time at all, but that ain't the way we do business. I've got a proposition."

The Phantom was thinking fast. Tambo could have no possible idea about how much or how little knowledge had been obtained about his racket. But, properly handled, he might tell more than he realized. It was an opportunity the Phantom didn't intend to let slip by.

He said, "I'm a reasonable man, Tambo. I'll listen to anything so long as it comes from the top guy."

Tambo beamed. "Yeah—yeah, that's right. Well, here's the angle. If you step outa this, in three months there'll be less crime in this city than in any other big town in the country. How does that sound?"

"Like a pipe dream, Tambo."

"I guess maybe it does, at that. But it's true. The rackets will be under one head, one syndicate. There'll be no more gang wars, no trouble. Sure the suckers will get clipped as usual, but hell, they ask for it. We'll make sure no crooks come into town and if any do, we boys will help you and the cops run them out."

The Phantom nodded slowly. "A question of live and let live, is that it?"

"Exactly. How does it sound now?"

"What about the boys who have been running the rackets? Can you take care of them?"

"It's already been done."

"Nice work, Tambo. You'll wield a lot of power if you pull this one off. Maybe too much."

"I'll be on your side," Tambo offered.

VAN said, "For how long, I wonder? How many rackets have you taken over? Twenty—fifteen—ten? You've got

to have them all, Tambo, every last one of them, because so long as a single rival exists, he'll be out to slit your throat. There'll be no peace."

Tambo rubbed his fat hands. "I told you—no trouble. I got enough of the rackets. There's no competition, Phantom. It's all ours. You can't fight us, so why not work with us?"

The Phantom shook his head. "I'm thinking of too many dead people, especially two women. Girls who didn't deserve to die, who had no chance to fight back."

"It's like that?" Tambo asked sadly.

"Just like that."

Tambo rubbed his chin, glanced at his men as if to alert them. Then he said, "One more try, Phantom. Cooperate and I'll guarantee there won't be a third girl knocked off."

"Nancy Arnold," the Phantom said softly. This was the first intimation that she was still alive.

"I never heard of Nancy Arnold," Tambo said with a leer, "but a girl with a name like that ought to be a mighty good-looking broad, if you know what I mean."

The Phantom arose calmly, suddenly leaned over the desk and hammered knuckles against Tambo's nose. He made no attempt to touch the gun on the desk and Tambo scooped it up quickly. Tambo dabbed at his nose with his handkerchief while his eyes went cold and hard.

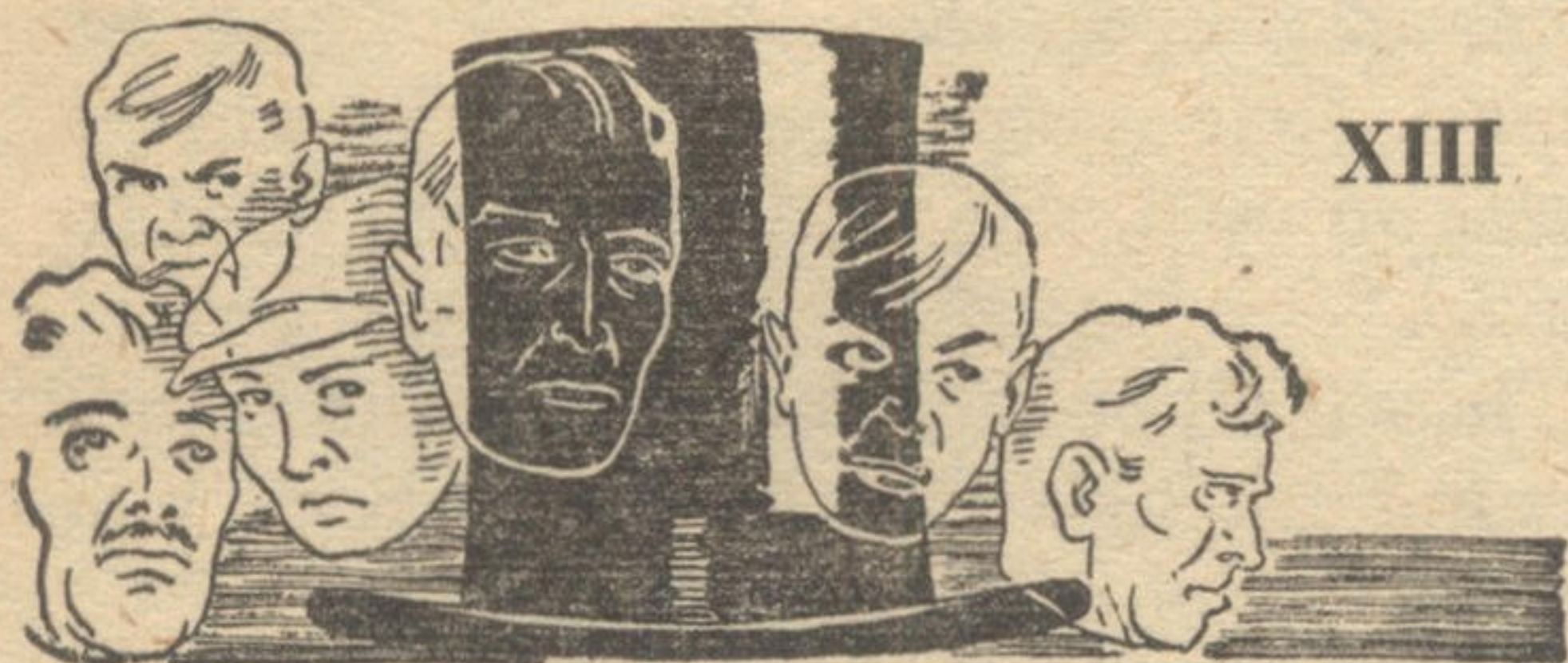
"Take him, Kip," he said.

The Phantom's right hand was touching his belt buckle. And in that moment he realized that Kip *did* know about the gun he had there, and Kip knew what was coming, for he moved away! The other gunman was too elated by Tambo's order for gun action to think. He reversed his gun in order to grab it by the barrel and use it as a club. Tambo, having trouble with his bleeding nose, had laid his gun down on the desk again, so that at the moment no weapon menaced the Phantom unless Kip should suddenly turn on him to go into action.

Van had to take a chance, with this one moment of grace he had, and he had to work fast. Seeming to have made no

move at all, suddenly that snub-nosed gun was in his hand. The thug who was getting set to brain him let out a yelp of alarm. Tambo's hand moved toward his automatic—and stopped. With both of them covered, the Phantom backed away.

He said, "Kip, get those guns!"



XIII

KIP came forward. He yanked the gun out of the hand of the gunman who had been with him in the car, then went around the desk and picked up Tambo's. Suddenly, and without warning, he smashed the muzzle of the heavy automatic down over Tambo's face. It made a deep gouge from the bridge of the gambler's nose, across one cheek to the corner of his mouth which was ripped open.

The very viciousness of that blow was enough to prove to the Phantom that whatever wrong, whether fancied or real, was goading Kip, that it was a matter of long-standing. He had probably waited a long time, too, for this chance at Tambo.

Blood began to flow faster than before. Tambo turned deathly pale.

Kip said, "I wanted out and I knew better than to just pull away from this mob. Now I see my chance I'm going to take it! And maybe pay off a few scores at the same time."

"Kip Graham, you're crazy!" Tambo moaned, mopping blood. "You needn't be expecting any help from the Phantom. Don't you know he'll turn you over to the cops?"

"That's okay with me. That's better than dying, and my number was up. I knew I was slated to be next the minute I found Bill Murray's body a little while ago. Didn't know that, did you, Nick? Didn't even guess it, or you'd never have sent me for the Phantom. You worked Bill

over with a knife. You're good with a knife, Nick. I wish you had one in your hand right now. I'd sure know what to do!"

"This guys is nuts, Phantom," Tambo said pleadingly. He's playing us off because he thinks we're licked. Well, we're a long way—"

The library door opened unexpectedly and one of Tambo's men started to come in. He sized up the situation at a glance, slammed the door, and they heard him running. Instantly Kip smashed his gun down on Tambo's head again, knocking the bleeding gambler to the floor where he lay without moving. Kip backed hurriedly to the door.

"We got maybe two minutes, Phantom," he warned. "Tambo has four more boys living here and they'll be down fast."

"Let's go, Kip!"

They backed out of the room, fled along the reception hall. Kip fired a shot up the stairway and stopped one man who was on his way down. Flinging open the front door, they streaked down the outside steps, and didn't stop until they were around the corner.

The Phantom dragged Kip into a doorway.

"Thanks," he panted. "I didn't really know why, until you told about Murray. He's been murdered, is that it?"

Kip muttered grimly, "I worked for Bill Murray. We were pals for years. Oh, I was only small fry, but I liked Bill and he treated me okay. Now Tambo's killed him, and I don't like that. There wasn't much I could do about it until you were ordered brought in and then I knew I had a chance, and could play my hand."

The Phantom whistled at a passing taxi. They got in and he told the driver to take them to a four o'clock closing spot he knew about a score of blocks away—a small, quiet café where they could talk and be safe. No question but what Kip knew a great deal to talk about.

Seated in a booth in the café, the Phantom ordered straight whisky for both of them. Kip drank his gratefully, offered the Phantom a cigarette, and heaved a

long sigh of relief after he took the first drag off his own, and began to talk at once in a low voice.

"Bill Murray's body is buried somewhere by now, and I would have been next because Tambo knew I wouldn't sit still for that."

"Tambo said he had most of the rackets under his thumb," the Phantom said. "Is that true?"

"It sure is. This took a long time, but he worked it out. A guy gets indicted and he's going to prison for a long time. Tambo offers to hide him, run his racket, turn over all the profits except a small percentage and to keep all the poor sap's regular guys working as usual. When the heat goes off, he gets it all back, Tambo tells him."

THE PHANTOM pressed, "And in some cases Tambo takes over when a racketeer hears he is going to be deported?"

"There's been a lot of that lately. The Immigration boys have cracked down on a lot of aliens who never expected such a thing to happen. Tambo saw it coming and got set. All told, I guess he's got twenty-three or -four men hidden out."

"Let's have it all," the Phantom said. "Where are these men hiding?"

Kip shook his head slowly. "I swear I don't know. That's the one thing nobody can find out. It's not far away, because the boys can be reached fast if it's necessary. Sometimes they let one of them run loose for a few hours. Murray was out last Friday, to see some doll."

"So Tambo has been running Murray's racket all this while since Murray dropped out of sight. Are you sure about that, Kip?"

"Look, I oughta be. Murray was tipped they were going to arrest him and send him back to Europe. I think there was an old rap waiting for him over there. Anyway, he'd have done anything to stay here. He figured Tambo was on the level and when Tambo made him this proposition, Murray took him up on it. But I been watching Tambo wangle his way further and further into the racket until

I think he's set to take it over."

"That's about how it would work," the Phantom said. "All Murray knew was that his business seemed to be doing fine without him, and that the profits rolled in as usual. He figured he was safe until the heat died down."

"I told Bill what was happening when he called me up the other day," Kip explained. "He nearly ate the telephone up, he was so mad. He said he'd been double-crossed."

"They'll all be doublecrossed, and they'll all wind up like Bill Murray. Kip, who runs the whole shebang?"

"Tambo."

"Who is behind Tambo?"

"It's just Tambo, far as I ever heard. He gives all the orders, he takes all the dough. He's the one who fixed it so those suckers could get away from the deportation warrants."

"Are you sure nobody is behind him?"

"Could be," admitted, "though I doubt it. He might get an assist from somebody like Alan Foster, his lawyer."

"They're close?"

"They're thicker than blood. Foster knows his way around, too."

The Phantom waited until the fresh drinks were served. Then he leaned across and dropped his voice still lower.

"Kip, all those men who ran away like Bill Murray did, are going to be killed! It has to be that way, don't you see? The police and immigration authorities figure they're hiding somewhere. Nobody is looking for their bodies. Kill them, conceal what's left and that's all there'll be to it, except that Tambo will be the biggest racketeer in the business when it's all over."

"He's aiming that high, too," Kip said. "I heard him say so a couple of times. What are you going to do about it, Phantom?"

"I'd like to locate those men he has hidden out."

"I wish I could help you. If Murray was still alive, I'd tell you to go to hell, but them others don't mean anything to me. I just don't know where they are."

"I can't have Tambo arrested," the Phantom said. "We haven't enough on him to hold him. Sure, he probably killed Bill Murray, but try and prove it. Try and find the body."

KIP said defiantly. "Tambo ain't going to sit back and laugh at us! I'll fix that!"

"No, wait, Kip. Killing him isn't the answer, either, because someone else would just take over. We must find those

can take it from me, Kip, he never knows any more than I want him to know. But you can phone him, and he'll know where to find me. Keep in touch with me through him. And remember, it's more important to learn where Tambo has those men hidden than it is to knock him off."

"Yeah, I guess you're right, at that," Kip sighed. "Okay—I'll do my best. Thanks for getting me clear of that lousy mob, and saving my skin, if that's worth anything."

FOOTPRINTS ON THE CEILING



troupe and rented a room for three nights. On their last night, at about five o'clock in the morning, according to the landlady, "they let oot sic yells an' skirls" that she was frightened half out of her wits. She rushed to investigate the disturbance. "Wad ye credit it, sir," the woman related, "but they swore somebody was walking on the ceiling upside doon."

The woman demanded to know if they were drunk or daft, but when they had lighted a candle and escorted her into their room, she found the ceiling covered with foot-prints! instantly she was struck with the horrifying thought that she had received a visitation from the devil because she had permitted play-actors to abide in her house. "Get oot! Get oot!" she shrieked at her quaking guests, and they vanished with eager alacrity.

The visitor listening to this story, being lodged in the same room in which this frightening episode had occurred, got very little sleep. A little later he related the experience to an old theatrical acquaintance.

The friend laughed, and explained, "Oh, that's an old trick of the traveling acrobats in Scotland for getting free lodging. One of the men blackens his feet in the fireplace and then gets on his companion's shoulders upside down and covers the ceiling with footprints. Then, after a good night's sleep, they scream down the house, and in the excitement which follows escape without paying."

—Andrew Meredith

missing men and break up their rackets, so Tambo will have nothing left. Then we can take him, and make it stick."

"I think he's too smart, but I'll see what I can do. If I get anything, what you want me to do? How will I get in touch with you? Phone your playboy pal? I sure hope you keep that guy guessing about a few things, Phantom. That kind love to blab, think it makes 'em big shots to know things."

The phantom smiled reassuringly. "You

"And thanks for passing up the gun you let me keep," the Phantom said. "I owe you a great deal for that."

Kip finished his drink, gave a covert look around the café, nodded birdlike at the Phantom, got up and left in a great hurry. He had just sacrificed his life, and he knew it.

The Phantom took his time over the last drink. Kip was an interesting character. He might be decidedly useful, but could he be trusted? That was a problem.

The Phantom, knowing the logic of the underworld, and the blind loyalty of some of its members, could see why Kip had turned on his old pals the way he had. Bill Murray had meant a great deal to him.

And this same Murray was the crook on the lam who had slipped away from his hiding place to keep a date with Elise Watson at the lake-side house. Van wondered just how deep were Elise's feelings for the man, and whether she should be told he was dead. He couldn't make up his mind about that, and he was too tired to do any more thinking.

He went out in the early morning and took a subway to the station nearest his Park Avenue home. . . .

Late the next morning, Dick Van Loan was seated before Inspector Gregg's desk at Headquarters. Gregg had listened in surprise that was almost awe as Van had outlined what he had discovered.

Gregg said, "Damn it, Van, that sounds fantastic, but I know it's true. So many wanted racketeers have vanished lately the police are going nuts, and the Immigration boys have combed the town for those they want. So it's all going to be one nice big racket headed by Tambo, huh?"

"So far," Van said, "it looks like Tambo."

"We've got to stop them," Gregg said flatly.

"Agreed, but the way to do that is to find the missing men. I suppose you have a dossier on most of them?"

"We have—right on tap. Do you want to look at them?"

"Just one," Van said. "I'll let you choose it. I want that of a married man who has a jealous wife. Yet a wife who can be approached, if you know what I mean."

Gregg said, "Just what are you up to, Van?"

"You want those missing punks rounded up, don't you?"

"Naturally."

"And you'd like the lousy killer who knifed Janine Sims and Cathy Arnold lined up for burning?"

"Of course. But damn it, I have to—"

VAN SIGHED. "I know. Obey the rules. You're overwhelmed with rules, Inspector. They're holding you down, but Tambo and his like make and follow their own rules. You signal your punch because the law says you must, and Tambo either ducks it entirely or rolls with it and busts a gut laughing at you. He didn't laugh last night when I got the drop on him, and Kip got through with him. I don't think Tambo will laugh for a long time."

There was a tired smile on Gregg's face. "All right, Van. I've heard it before and it's all true, but we must have the rules. The Department would run hog wild without them."

"That's true, Inspector, and it's why the Phantom works alone," Van said. "Now about these wives—"

"What do you want to know?" Gregg asked, with a sigh.

"Is there one among them who is married to a racketeer with something of a reputation for philandering? Maybe one of those listed with two women."

Gregg looked over the list, pulled a folder out of a drawer file and handed it to Van.

"The Thelma Norris in that one is married to Bennie Norris," he said. "He ran a racing news service, killed a few people in his day and raised hell generally. He was the seventh man to vanish after the Immigration Department started hunting him. His wife is a handsome dish—see for yourself. There's a photo attached."

Van looked at a color enlargement of a girl of about twenty-five. It was a full-length shot and showed her as slim, lithe and shapely, with poodle-cut light brown hair and eyes that looked smoke-gray in the photo.

Van whistled softly. "A dish is right. Do you mean that Bennie Norris has a wife like this and keeps a girl friend on the side?"

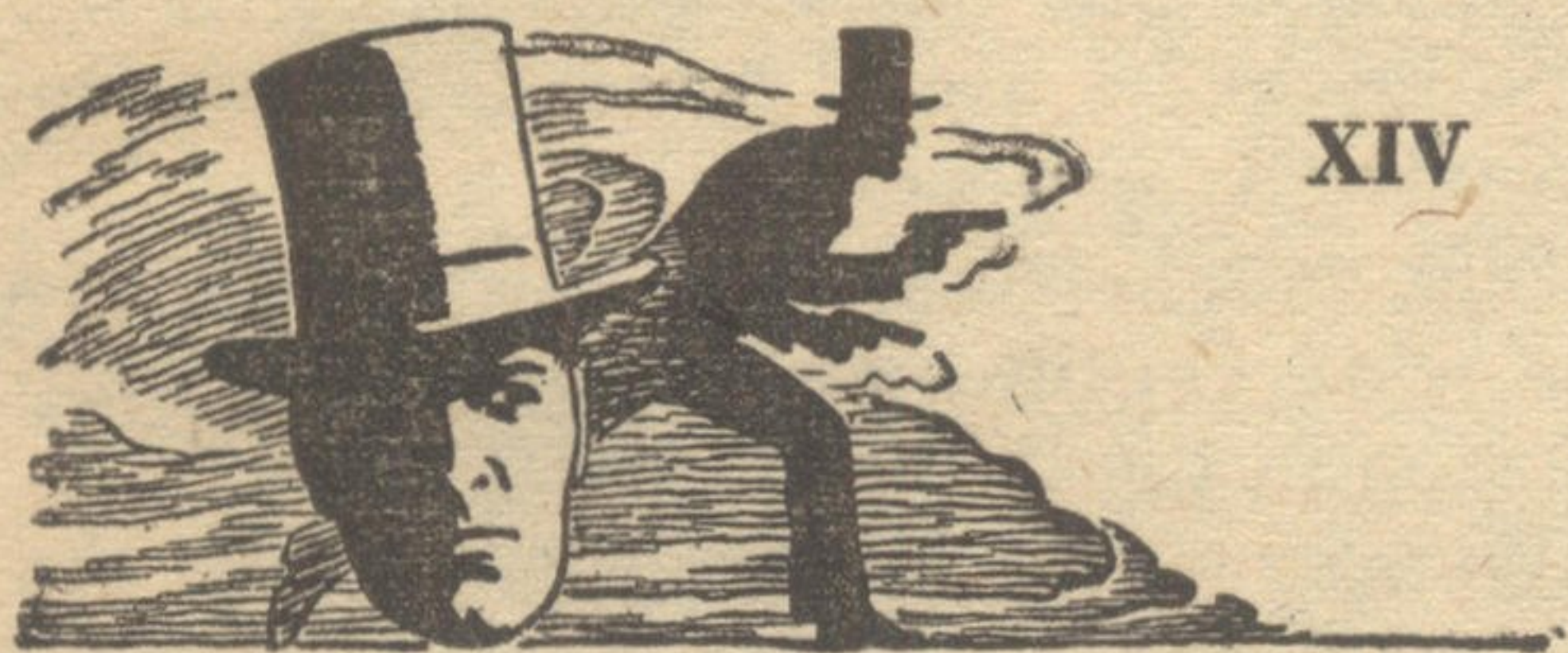
"Bennie has always been that way, Van. One of those sleek guys who thinks he is irresistible to women. There's another interesting bit about his Thelma, too. You'll find it in the file. While she was

under observation, she disappeared twice. The first time was about two months after Bennie lammed, then again about two and a half months ago. She gave my man a complete slip coming and going. Each time she was gone for a full day and night before turning up mysteriously."

The Phantor read the entire file with intense interest. From it he gathered that Thelma Norris had no clear-cut scruples about being in the company of other men, but that the jealousy she showed toward her husband under the same conditions was violent.

He handed the file back. "You did much better than I'd hoped for, Inspector. With luck, Thelma might be the answer to our problems."

Gregg chuckled. "I know what you mean about red tape, Van. Now me, in the course of my investigation, I couldn't try to make that doll. You—well, there is something to being a private investigator. And luck to you."



XIV

NEXT stop for Van was Grace Hospital, and Elise greeted him with a smile. He kissed her lightly, then sat down on the chair beside the bed. She held onto his hands tightly.

"It's not too bad, I hope," he said.

"I'm fine, Van. And I'm so glad you talked to Dad. I think he understands me now. Better than that, I know I understand myself for the first time in my life."

"Fine, Elise. I'm most pleased."

"I—get the heebies when I think that I—killed a man, but—"

"That will pass," Van assured. "It's different when you must kill to save your own life. If it wasn't, what would happen after a great war? When you plugged that hoodlum you were on a battlefield, too."

"Yes," she agreed, "I believe, too, that it will pass now. It must, because I feel as though I've been sick a long time and have just got well. I have so much to make up for."

"You could start now," he said in a kindly voice. "I'm not asking you to be a stool pigeon, but there are things you must know that would be of vital importance to the Phantom if I knew what to tell him."

"Surprisingly little, but I'll tell you all I know, Van. Just ask me your questions."

"How bad is it with you and Bill Murray?"

"I think I could live without him. He attracted me because he is so good-looking, but mainly because he represented danger."

"The last time you saw him—at the lake house—tell me about that."

"He telephoned me to be there—two days before he came. It was all so intriguing. I met him—he showed up about seven in the evening and stayed until just after ten."

"Did he drive up, Elise?"

"No, he walked. He told me he'd been dropped at the cross roads. And when he left, that was where he was to be picked up."

"I wonder why he wasn't driven right up to the place."

"Bill said something about not risking it over that narrow road. It is narrow."

Van nodded. "But any passenger car would have no trouble. I wonder if Bill's pals could have transported him in a truck."

"It is possible. I wouldn't know, but Bill hated the idea of being made to walk to and from the cross roads."

"And he was at the house only a little more than three hours. Elise, did he meet anyone else there, or phone anyone?"

"There is no phone up there, Van, and the whole affair was very hush-hush because Bill had slipped away. He wasn't supposed to, though I didn't know all the circumstances."

"You can forget him," Van said. "Concentrate on getting well."

"I wish there was more I could tell you," she said, "but the racketeers I got to know didn't trust me too much. I was accepted, but that was about all. I think they liked the way I threw money around."

"Why did you leave the meeting with me that night?"

She laughed, mostly at herself. "I thought you were a big shot. You'd be surprised how much important crooks impressed me. Janine passed the word along that you might even be the big boy of the mob himself, and they couldn't come too important for me."

"Do you remember about Janine being murdered?"

HER smile died away. "I remember. You also suspected that I might have had something to do with it."

"I had a right to suspect that, Elise. Apparently the gang boss doesn't tolerate the kind of carelessness which would cause someone to bring a spy into an important meeting. Janine brought me, but what I can't understand is how it was discovered I was Dick Van Loan, whom all of them knew was the Phantom's contact, and sometime helper. You knew, because you saw my name in my coat."

"I thought I was so smart," she chided herself.

"Did you pass on that information to anyone?"

"I swear I didn't! The name Van Loan didn't mean anything to me at first, except that I knew your social position, wealth, and all that. Then all at once I remembered where I had heard that name last. We'd been talking about rich young men and the idle lives they led, Dad and I. He mentioned your name and said you were to be commended because you were one rich young man who wasn't like that. You'd gone in for reform, he said, and were doing a good job, even backing the Phantom Detective. I hadn't thought of it again until I saw your name, and to tell you the truth, all I thought of then was

that you were not one of the mob. I mentioned it to Dad, when I got home, but that's all. He wasn't even interested."

"All right," he said musingly, "so you didn't tell anybody. But still the mob knew. Well, there must be an answer somewhere. Not important anyway. Just to clean up one more thing. When I phoned you, the trap was set for me. You called someone and said I'd phoned you for a date. Is that right?"

"Yes—Tambo."

"And he told you what to do?"

"He gave me the address of that place we went to. I was supposed to lead you there, but get away from the neighborhood myself. I didn't follow orders because I was all hopped up with the idea that little me had actually set a trap for the one man whose death might bring the long-wanted Phantom into the hands of the gang. I wanted to see the fireworks. I did."

He questioned her rather adroitly for another ten minutes, but it was surprising how little Elise actually knew. She'd been in the mob, but only as an onlooker, a sap who might be useful some day, but who was strictly expendable.

She was getting tired and he insisted she rest. On the way out, he met Milford Watson in the hospital corridor.

Watson wrung his hand heartily. "I'm glad you came to see her. She was so afraid you wouldn't."

"Elise is a changed girl, Mr. Watson."

"She's my daughter again. I lost her for so long, but now she's back with me. You can't know how much I appreciate what you've done."

"She helped me," Van said. "She may have saved my life by killing that goon. At any rate, let her think she did. It will help her erase worrying memories."

"Just as soon as she's fit again, we're both going to take a long vacation. She'll forget. I'll see to that."

Van said, "This crook she fell for—Bill Murray—you won't have to worry about him any more. He's dead."

"Oh? Well, I can't say I'm sorry. Was it in the papers?"

"No, and likely it won't be for some time to come. Elise doesn't know about it. I don't think she should be told right now."

"Good idea. And remember, Mr. Van Loan, there isn't anything I wouldn't do for Elise. Or you, for that matter. Call on me for anything at all." He smiled. "Maybe I might even some day give a helping hand to your protégé, the Phantom."

They shook hands and Van went out to the street, feeling as if he had accomplished something, even though killers ran loose and a score of wanted criminals still had their freedom.

THE rest of the day, right up to early evening, he kept busy. Around five, he took Muriel for cocktails to an exclusive lounge and told her his plans. They also involved the services of the maître d'hôtel and one of the waiters. Having known Richard Curtis Van Loan well for over a period of years, they were glad to help, especially after they saw the size of the bill he slipped them.

Muriel was smoldering slightly because he'd made it impossible for her to take part in the gun fight in that abandoned office building, but the prospects of the plan he now outlined were so good she forgot her indignation. She concentrated on the important role she was to play in the new scheme. They talked earnestly for over an hour before he took her home.

At seven-fifteen, Van walked into the West Ninetieth Street apartment house where Thelma Norris lived in the suite she'd shared with her husband when he had been a successful racketeer and not a fugitive from a deportation order. It was an expensive, luxurious apartment house, one to uphold Bennie Norris's reputation for making a lot of money.

There was a small lobby desk with a clerk behind it and a couple of house phones. Van passed them up and stepped into an elevator. The operator glanced at him, but made no attempt to close the door and take the car up.

"Mrs. Norris's floor," Van said.

"Get wise," the operator said. "You gotta be announced first."

Van stepped close to him. "I'd like to surprise Mrs. Norris. Like just knocking on her door and when she opens it, there I am. I want that so much I might even blow your damned head off if you don't take me up."

He permitted his coat to fall open enough so that the butt of his gun could be plainly seen. The operator slammed the doors, started the car and aged a couple of years. He glanced at Van over his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, pal. I kinda figured you for an insurance salesman or something. You must be one of Bennie's old pals, huh?"

"What's the Norris apartment number?" Van asked roughly.

"Six twenty-one. Like I said, we got orders and we gotta—"

Van paid no attention to him, got off as soon as the door slid back and walked along the corridor to the right door. He rang the buzzer. The elevator operator was standing in the doorway of his car. He stepped back and dropped the car fast when Van glared at him.

The apartment door opened and Van had his first look at Thelma Norris. The color photo he'd seen in Inspector Gregg's office had been a good one, but it didn't go quite far enough. In the picture her eyes had looked to be gray. They were actually almost a deep purple and in them was flinty hardness and calculating shrewdness. Here was no woman to be easily tricked.

She was as shapely as the photo indicated, attractive, and knew it. She was wearing a blue hostess coat and matching slippers.

Her appraisal of Van Loan was frank, and apparently she liked what she saw. She said, "Good evening. Did you want to see me?"

"Yeah, if you're Bennie Norris's wife."

"I'm Thelma Norris. What's this all about? Are you a friend of Bennie's?"

"Not exactly. It's a business deal. Can I come in?"

"I guess so," she said, and opened the door wider. "Who are you?"

"Since when did names make any difference in our line? Close the door, and you better lock it, too."

She closed it, but disregarded his suggestion about throwing the bolt. She preceded him into a comfortable living room, sat down and motioned him to a chair.

"Maybe names don't mean much," she said, "but I have to call you something."

"Dick—make it Dick," he said. "Where's Bennie?"

She frowned. "Bennie? Where have you been for the past year?"

"I don't get it."

"Bennie hasn't been around for months. Who are you, anyway?"

"I been sent here," Van said, "by certain parties in Chicago. We know all about Bennie's nice little racing information service and we like it so much we want to buy him out."

SHE threw back her head and laughed. "Brother, how dumb can you coppers get? This is some approach. It's about as tactful as a punch on the nose. So long, my friend. Get lost some place."

Van didn't move. "If I look like a copper, I gotta do something about my face. This is no gag. You heard of the S and G?"

"Who hasn't? But you're not from the S and G and don't try to tell me you are."

"Why wouldn't I be?" Van demanded.

"Because everybody in it knows Bennie isn't around. Now beat it before I get mad."

Van said, "You're either nuts or you need a good slapping around. I asked you once, and I'll ask again—where's Bennie?"

"And I told you, only Bennie knows. He's on the lam."

Van professed surprise. "Again? I thought he just fixed one rap."

Thelma showed sudden interest. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, it must be a new rap on account of Bennie was around last week, wasn't he? And the week before, a couple of times."

"Who saw him?" Thelma demanded. There was sharpness in her eyes to match that in her voice.

"I did. Some of my friends did, too. That's why we figured he was squared away and we could maybe talk a little business on account of Bennie would probably like a lot of cash dumped in his lap."

Thelma appeared to be entirely unaffected by this suggestion, except for her hands. They were clasped so tightly the interlaced fingers went white from the pressure exerted on them.

"You—saw Bennie," she said slowly. "Last week and the week before. I think you're lying."

Van said, "Well, if that's how you feel and if Bennie didn't tell you he was back, I guess I'd better pull out. But if you see Bennie, tell him he had his chance. We're going to move in anyway."

"Never mind that. Where did you see Bennie?"

"At a place downtown."

"Are you certain it was Bennie?"

"Now look, baby, I talked to Bennie before. I knew him and he knew me. He even waved, and the doll—"

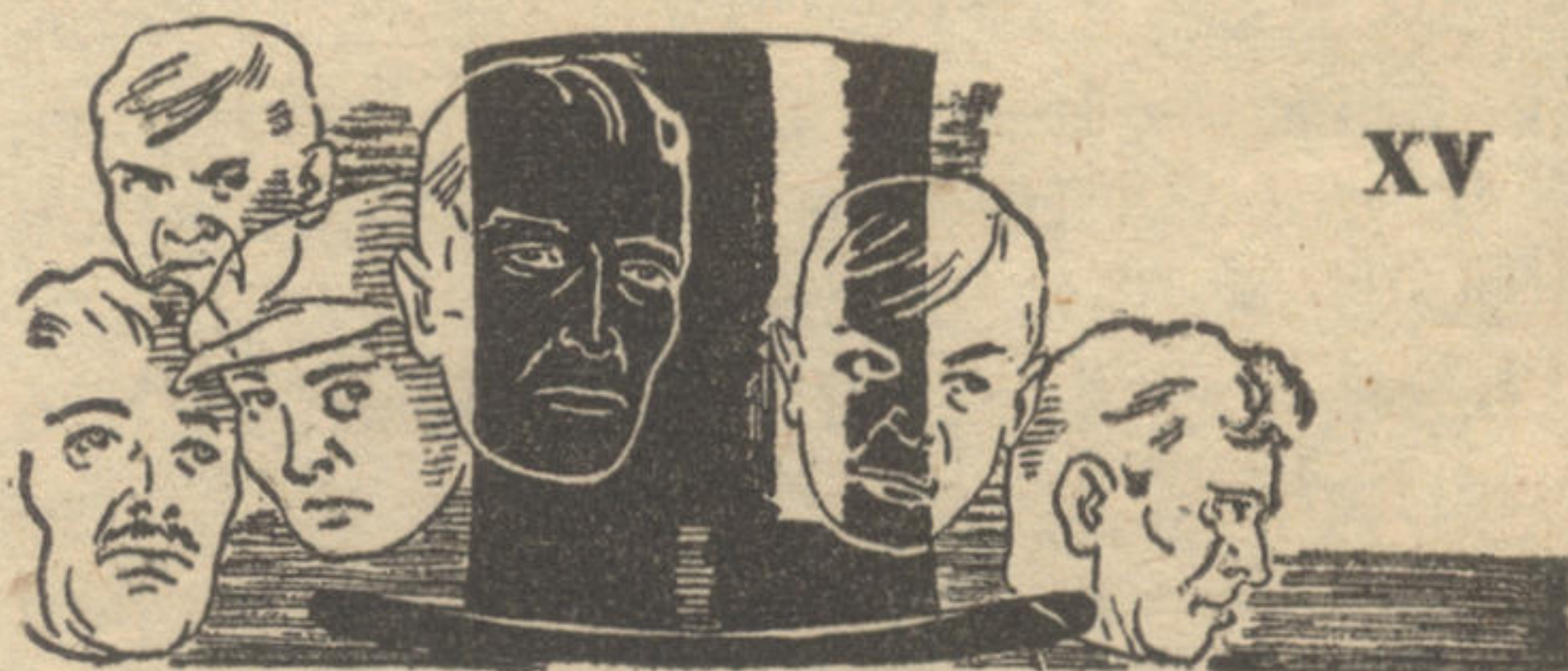
"He was with a woman?"

"Sure. Is that against the law?"

She leaned back and unclasped her hands. "No," she said. "No, damn it, I don't believe it. You're pulling some kind of a gag. It *has* to be a gag!"

Van arose, took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, shook one free and lit it. He put the match in an ash tray.

"I figured maybe you knew about the doll. My mistake, but then I don't owe Bennie anything. Be seeing you, Mrs. Norris."



XV

BEFORE Van could reach the door, Thelma Norris stopped him.

"Wait a minute!" she said hastily. "If

this isn't a gag you're pulling then you can show me where you saw Bennie. Maybe you can prove it."

"Why should I? All I wanted from Bennie was that racket he built up. It's worth a lot of dough, and the syndicate is willing to pay a fair price. If Bennie won't sell, we take it anyhow. That's all there is to it."

"Listen! I told you Bennie has been on the lam for a year. It's for the kind of a rap you don't square. It's an immigration case, and if Bennie is found he'll be sent back to the poverty-stricken dump he came from."

Van shrugged. "He certainly wasn't hiding when I saw him."

"They'll get him in the end!" she declared. "They always do. Now listen to me. Ever since Bennie has been hiding out, I've been actively helping to run his racket. You know, helping the people Bennie turned it over to."

"Wait a minute," Van said quickly. "If Bennie has already handed it to somebody else, the deal is off. We do business only with somebody we know. Or can you tell me who is running it for Bennie?"

"A man named Tambo—Nicholas Tambo. He's a rat, but I can handle him. Listen—if you can prove you saw Bennie with another woman, I'll guarantee to turn his business over to you for a fair price. I know where all the books are, and I have the records! Now, do we have a deal?"

Van rubbed his chin and grinned. "Who are you really after, baby? Your husband or the doll he's taking around?"

"All I want is proof of what he's trying to pull on me. For a year I've sat here chewing my knuckles, being the patient, faithful wife. Sure I've always known Bennie liked girls, but I thought he'd changed. I've kept things going for him and I won't stand for any two-timing."

"I'm staying out of this." Van shied off hurriedly. "All I wanted from Bennie was—"

"I'm telling you the heat isn't off Bennie! I'll sell you the business as soon as I'm sure about him. I'm damned if I'll

sit like a stick of wood while he tomcats around. You take me to that place where you saw him! How many times was he there?"

"I saw him once. Some friends of mine saw him twice before that. I don't know if he had the same doll, of course, but she was certainly no stranger in the joint. The headwaiter knew her."

"Will you take me there, Dick?"

"Okay—on condition you talk business as soon as you're sure. That means tonight."

"A deal," she said. "Fix yourself a drink while I get dressed. There's stuff in that cabinet."

He prepared a rye highball, found ice in the refrigerator and soda in the kitchen cabinet. Holding the drink, he returned to the living room. Thelma, wearing only a brassiere and panties, popped into the doorway. Her face was a mask of rage.

"I don't think you're stringing me! I should have expected this of that rat. 'Wait for me, baby,' he says the last time I saw him. 'Wait for me—it won't be long and we'll go somewhere and be safe.' 'Wait for me'—and he plays around. What is she—a blonde?"

"Brunette." Van studied her figure over the rim of his glass. If all this had been true, Bennie would have been an idiot to have taken a chance on losing a girl as attractive as Thelma.

She disappeared from view again, but now and then he saw her move past the bedroom door. Each time she was wearing a little more, and finally, as he downed the last of his drink, she came out.

Van stood up quickly and whistled. It was purely involuntary. Full make-up, a stunning dress of a satiny, clinging material, the sheerest of nylons and just the right amount of jewelry made Thelma an exceptionally beautiful woman.

BENNIE," Van said, "is plain nuts. Whatever happens to him, he deserves."

"Pour me a drink—straight," she said. "I'll need bottled courage for this."

He gave her the drink and she tossed it down like an old hand. Then she grabbed his arm and hurried him out of the apartment. . . .

The Crystal Cafe was all that its name implied. In the ornate room into which Van ushered Thelma Norris crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, and many mirrors made the big room seem even larger than it was. Excellent food was served in this dining room, and only the best of liquors, though for those who preferred to linger over drinks alone there was the cocktail lounge, other intimate rooms, and the large and noisy one with a floor show.

In this dining spot there was plenty of room around the tables, and the chairs were overstuffed armchairs in pastel leather. At this hour, the place was crowded.

Thelma said, "Yes, Bennie *would* pick a place like this. Look around. Do you see the girl he was with?"

Van shook his head. "I'd know her in a second. Not flashy, but mighty, mighty pretty."

"Do you have to rub it in?" Thelma demanded.

The maître d'hôtel approached and bowed, murmuring a conventional greeting. He escorted them to a corner table, summoned a waiter, and was about to turn away when Van called him back.

He said, "You remember me, huh?"

The man nodded. "Yes, of course, sir."

"When was I here last? It's okay. The lady wants to know."

"Why—let me see. It was—yes, it was last Thursday."

"Over at that table." Van indicated the table with a nod. "There was a man and a girl who wanted to speak to me, but I didn't notice them until you called my attention to them. Remember? They were trying to catch my eye."

"Yes. Quite so."

"The man—did you know him?"

"I am sorry. He has been here before several times, but I do not know who—"

Van said sharply, "When you told me he was trying to attract my attention you

knew his name all right. You mentioned it to me. Try again."

The maître d'hôtel gave up with a shrug. "He was Mr. Norris, sir."

"What was his first name?" Thelma demanded. "Do you know?"

"The young lady with him called him Bennie, madame."

Van slipped him a folded bill. "That's all—unless you know who the dame was."

"Why, sir, she eats here quite regularly, but her name—I'm sorry."

"What time does she usually drop in?"

"Late, sir. She comes in when the dinner hour is almost over and stays a long time. I think she waits here—where it's quiet for ladies alone—for Mr. Norris. But he is not always sure he can come. You know how it is."

Thelma said, "I know. Yes, I know all right. Thanks."

They were served cocktails. Van lifted his. Thelma just stared into space with cold, hard eyes.

"When'll we get down to business, baby?" Van asked.

She shook herself back to reality. "Soon. I want to be positive, and once I am—"

In a mildly casual voice Van asked, "When did you see Bennie last?"

Perhaps she never would have answered that if she had given it any thought. Perhaps the disinterest in the Phantom's voice deceived her, or the unexpectedness of the question. Whatever it was, Thelma slipped.

"I saw him two months ago. He begged me to believe in him. The dirty little rat—and him slipping out to meet some other woman! I could kill him!"

VAN said, "That's your problem, Thelma. Mine is to get control of the books and the business Bennie had. Suppose you and Bennie have a fight. If he gets sore, how can you sell the wire service he ran?"

"I can sell it," she said. "Bennie was afraid of something, maybe suspicious of someone when he went on the lam. So he turned the whole thing over to me."

Nobody can stop me, including Bennie."

"Then what's the matter with settling the whole thing now. Maybe later on the syndicate won't feel so generous."

She picked up her glass and drank the cocktail in two swallows. She slapped the glass back on the table. "I'll do business all right, just as soon as I'm positive."

"Whatever you say."

Van ordered more drinks. Thelma put away the second one as quickly as the first. But she drank her third more slowly. Van talked steadily, but made no mention of a racing news service or Bennie Norris.

"Sure," he rambled on, "I've worked for the syndicate a long time. When you read about that organization being busted, just laugh it off, baby. Nobody can break the syndicate. We're too big and we own too many people. A lot of important characters owe us plenty and we keep reminding them. So every time—"

He stopped short, reached across the table and took both of Thelma's hands in his own. She gave him a startled glance.

He said, "Sit still and just listen. The dame walked in a couple of seconds ago."

"Bennie's—?"

"Yeah, and there's no mistake. Are you leveling when you say you want to find out the truth?"

"I've got to know!" she said vehemently.

"Maybe we can swing it, but this dame mustn't have the slightest idea of who you are. You'll have to sit there and maybe listen to her brag about Bennie and never let on."

"I can do it! She probably doesn't even know Bennie is married. That's the kind of a rat he'd be."

Van pushed his chair back. "Bennie introduced me to her the other night. If she remembers me, I'll try to get her over to this table."

Thelma's eyes suddenly grew wide. "What if Bennie should walk in?"

Van shrugged. "Then you'd have your proof."

"All right—go through with it."

Muriel, wearing a shimmering satin evening gown, a chinchilla coat and an armful of glittering diamonds, had just been seated across the room. Van approached her and bowed slightly.

"It's working," he said. "Thelma is naturally a jealous woman. Bennie, it seems, has been urging her to be faithful to him and I guess she has been in her own way. Police records say she steps, but that's her affair."

"She just doesn't want Bennie to step, is that it?" Muriel asked with a sunny smile, as if she were pleased with something Van had told her.

"You don't know who she is," Van said. "Bennie is your boy friend and he often meets you here. You have no idea he's on the lam, think he's just a busy little guy who can't always keep his dates. All set?"

"I'll put it over," Muriel said. "And we'll build up to the finale."

"Good. Let's go over to my table."

At the table, Van pulled out a chair for Muriel. He said, "Mrs. Allington, this is Miss Donier."

Thelma got it at once. The Allington name was her cover up. She took Muriel's hand gracefully, murmured something and kept most of the hatred out of her eyes.

Van ordered more drinks. "Miss Donier comes here often," he explained to Thelma. "Her fiancé likes the atmosphere here."

THELMA said, "It is a nice place. Is your fiancé one of the celebrities who so often are seen here, Miss Donier?"

"Oh, no!" There was just a trace of brassiness in Muriel's voice. "Bennie is such a busy man he would never have time for such posturing. He never gets around much at all. I guess he misses two out of three dates he makes with me, but he always calls me up."

"Bennie Norris," Van said, "is an important man, even if he isn't quite a celebrity."

"He certainly is," Muriel agreed.

Thelma finished her drink and wanted another. Van had purposely held off

ordering dinner. He wanted things to develop.

Thelma said, "I'd love to meet your Bennie Norris some time. He sounds interesting. Is he going to be here tonight?"

"You got me," said Muriel. "Sometimes he shows up, sometimes he don't. Like I said, he made this date night before last."

"You saw him night before last?" Thelma demanded. She made an obvious effort to control her fury.

Muriel nodded. "He meets me as often as possible these days. We got a lot to talk over. Bennie wants to hit Frisco, but I never did care much for the West Coast—"

Their waiter, the man who already had been primed and paid, came over and spoke softly to Muriel. "You're wanted on the phone, Miss Donier."

Muriel jumped up before Van could move to help her. "Is it Bennie?" she asked eagerly.

The waiter smiled. "I believe it is the same gentleman who so often calls you here, Miss Donier."

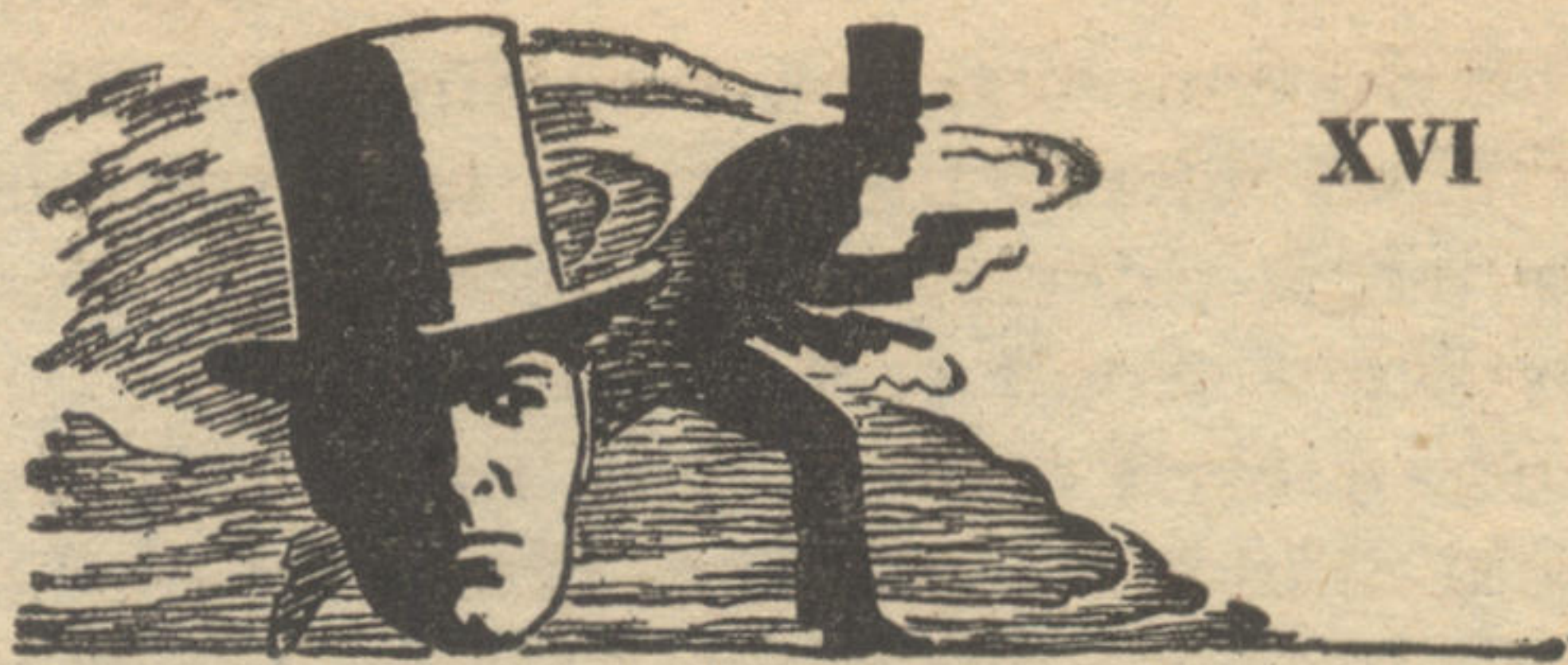
Muriel walked across the room toward the coat room where the phones were located, swaying her hips in the manner of a girl of the type she was pretending to be. Thelma reached across the table, picked up Muriel's untouched glass and downed the drink.

"Let's get out of here," she said. "I've heard enough."

Van got up quickly, pulled her chair back, helped her with her stole she had worn to the table, and signaled the waiter. He paid the check, got their coats and escorted Thelma out to the street where the doorman summoned a taxi. Van helped Thelma in, then got in himself and closed the door as he settled down beside her. Thelma was breathing heavily and was close to the exploding point.

"Where to, baby?"

"Home," Thelma said shortly. "My apartment. We'll talk business all right, all the business you want."



XVI

WISELY Van remained silent and let Thelma Norris stew during the short ride. When they left the cab and went up in the elevator he took the key she offered him, unlocked her door and they went in. He fixed two stiff highballs while she changed into a negligée. When she came sweeping out into the living room, it was quite clear that she was dressed for his benefit. The negligée was revealingly thin.

He gave her a drink, lit cigarettes, and handed her one. Then he frowned and leaned forward in his chair.

"Look, baby, this may be none of my business, but how come Bennie's been getting away with this? You see him, don't you?"

"I've seen Bennie twice in a year. Two times, and he told me he didn't even dare put his head outside."

"He's been holed up for an entire year?" Van asked. "Baby, I doubt it. This is all new to me, but I doubt it. I've known Bennie for a long time. He'd go stir nuts. Besides, he can't stand cheap traps. He's got to have class."

"Class?" She sniffed contemptuously. "Oh, he's got class all right. The biggest and grandest damn house you ever saw."

Thelma drank too much highball too fast. The drinks were beginning to tell on her. Her usual shrewdness was being dulled.

Van said, "What are you trying to give me? If he lives in a joint like that, why didn't he take you along with him?"

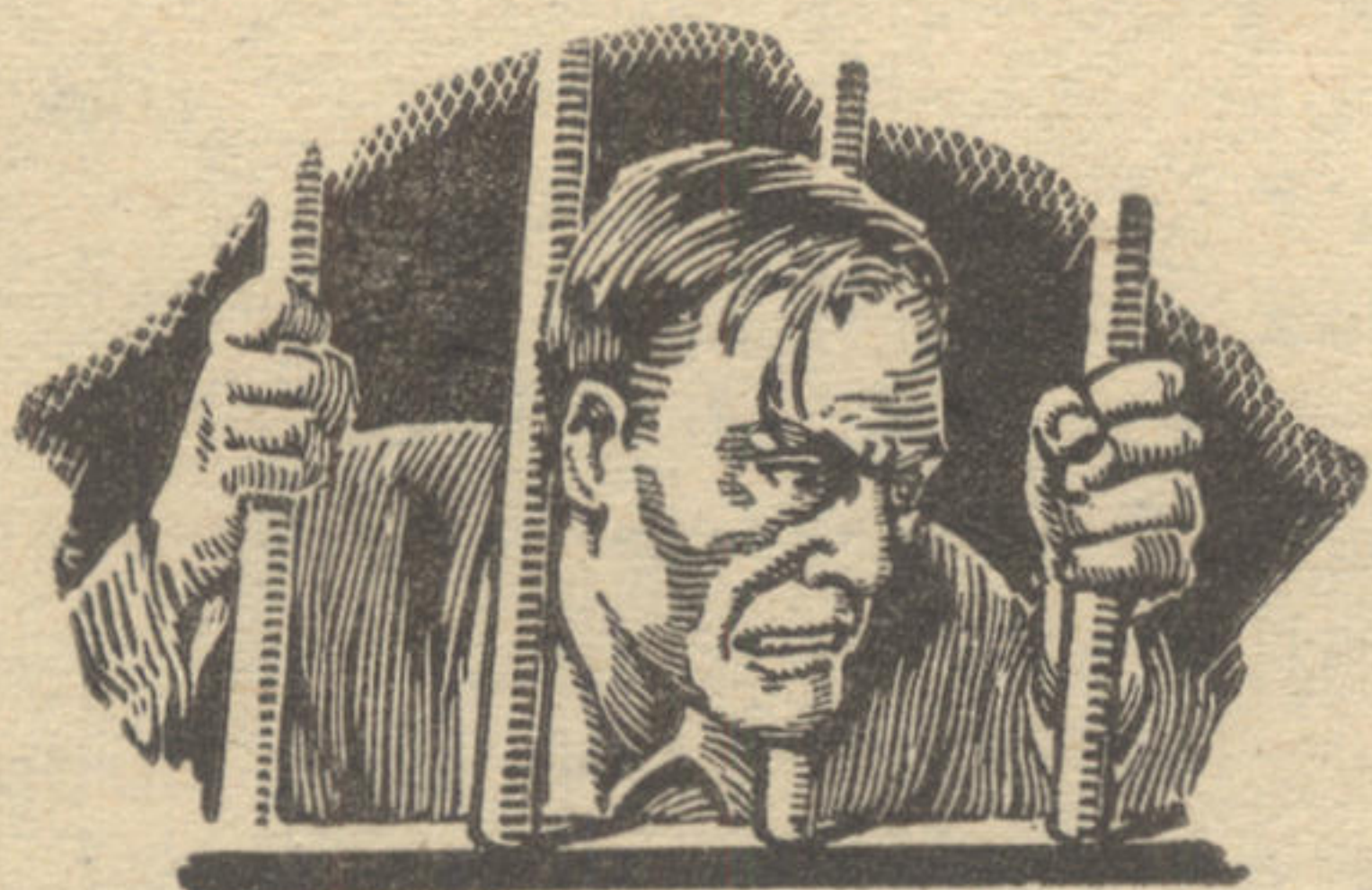
"You're asking me that? Now?"

Van said, "Guys on the lam don't live in big, grand houses. It costs enough for a wanted man to get a dump of a room in some dive."

"He lives in a place so big it'd take in the whole damn floor of this apartment building. Living room is as big as my whole apartment. There are two grand pianos in it, and at least fifty big chairs and divans. It's air-conditioned, it's got thick rugs, and a big bar. You never saw anything like it!"

"All for Bennie? Where is this place?"

"I don't know," she said. "That's all I'll say. I don't know. Nobody could



CHARACTER PARTS

REALISM to the nth degree was the mania of a theatrical producer out in Australia. Faced with the task of producing a play of convict life out there, he advertised for extras, calling for "a hundred men, those used to jail life preferred."

—Adrian Anderson

make me tell because I haven't got the faintest idea. Let's forget about Bennie. Who the hell cares about him? C'mere—sit beside me. You ask too damn many questions, but I like you anyway. To hell with Bennie! I'll take care of him tomorrow, but tonight—"

She fell into Van's arms, seized him in a tight embrace, heedless of the fact that her glass of liquor fell to the floor, tipped over and rolled under the couch. She plastered a moist kiss against his lips, and he had to play along with her.

She had more stamina than he thought. It took her half an hour to fall asleep. Van made her comfortable on the couch, covered her with a blanket he found in

the bedroom. She would be all right in an hour or two, maybe less, when the drinks wore off. When Van crept out of there he knew all that a jealous woman could tell him, and he also knew that Thelma Norris would lead him straight to Bennie, and soon.

Van made sure he wasn't smeared with lipstick before he let himself into his own penthouse a little later. Muriel would be there, waiting for him.

They did not stay long in the penthouse after he had outlined his new scheme to Muriel. There were preparations to be made and not much time. Van was certain that Thelma would go into action as soon as she woke up, and he wanted to be ready for her.

At the end of the two hours he had given her to sleep off her drinks, he and Muriel were parked half a block down the street from Thelma's apartment house, in a dark, four-year-old light model sedan which wouldn't draw the slightest amount of attention anywhere. Muriel was behind the wheel so that when the chase started, Van could dive for the floor if they came so close to Thelma she might recognize him.

MURIEL said, "A great big house, a regular palace. Dick, it sounds like a hophead's nightmare."

"It's so damned crazy," Van said, "that I think it's true. At any rate, we've got Thelma so steamed up she'll already have got in touch with Bennie through whatever means she uses. She wouldn't tell me that, no matter how hard I coaxed her."

"A jealous woman is a careless woman," Muriel observed. "See that you keep me well-informed on your progress with all the ladies—and in this case, I use the word doubtfully."

"A huge room," Van murmuringly repeated. "Fifty big chairs or couches. Miles of carpeting. What does that sound like to you?"

Muriel gave him a sidelong glance. "I think you're evading a subject I just

brought up, but such a room doesn't remind me of anything real. Unless it's—Dick, a theatre! A stage!"

"No," he said. "No stage is that big. Let's consider a few little things. When Rocky Spaul got away, he headed for an abandoned farm. Later I found tire marks showing that a heavy vehicle had been hidden in the barn there. All right, that in itself doesn't mean much. But now we come to Bill Murray who vanished a year or so ago, but managed to get back into circulation long enough to play around with Elise."

"And to wind up in a nameless grave, carved up by a knife artist," Muriel said.

"Murray bought his way out of wherever he was being kept—an indication that these wanted men are held under some sort of guard. Well, Murray was driven to that lake in Jersey where Elise was waiting for him in that house of hers. But Murray wasn't driven right up to the place. He was dropped at the crossroads because, as Murray said, the road wasn't good the rest of the way."

"You were there," Muriel reminded him. "You ought to know about the road."

"There's nothing the matter with it except that it's narrow, and has soft shoulders. Any passenger car could travel it with ease, but a good-sized truck—"

Muriel gave him a sharp glance. "You're back on the truck motif. What has that to do with this big room or castle where the crooks are hidden?"

"Suppose the truck should be a moving van."

"A furniture warehouse!" Muriel exclaimed. "Why, Dick, they might even have Nancy there!"

"It adds," Van said. "These deportees and wanted crooks could be set up on a warehouse floor. Where else would you find a room of such vast proportions? And furnishing the place would be easy, in a dump that has nothing else but. Also the large quantities of food and supplies needed for twenty men could be safely transported in such a truck. The more I think of it, the more I think Thelma is going to lead us to a warehouse."

"But she swears she doesn't know where it is," Muriel said. "Maybe they blindfolded her."

"Or locked her in the back of a truck. Muriel, if this lead pans out, we'll turn a lot of unsavory characters over to the Immigration Department and make the United States smell a bit sweeter."

"I hope the top guy who engineered it all is an alien. He's the one I'd like to see kicked out."

"I'd rather he paid up for the killings that have been done," Van said. "But most of all, I want that combine of rackets broken up. It's unbelievably dangerous, having one man in control of so much crime."

Almost an hour elapsed before Thelma came out of her apartment house and walked north rapidly. Muriel promptly hopped out of the car and trailed her on foot while Van kept the car in motion and watched.

Muriel rejoined him shortly, sure that Thelma was on the way to the garage for her car. When Thelma drove out, the chase really began. She seemed to have no suspicion that she was being followed. Possibly she was so angry she didn't care much.

SHE drove west, and Van figured she was heading for the George Washington Bridge and Jersey, but instead she took the speedway downtown, which puzzled both Muriel and Van.

The puzzle was intensified when Thelma suddenly stopped at the curb a block from the waterfront and stayed there about ten minutes while she smoked a cigarette. Was she waiting for someone? She was not for, like most puzzles, this one resolved itself in a simple manner. Thelma had merely been waiting until a ferry entered its slip. Just before it was ready to pull out, she rolled aboard.

Van and Muriel had to follow her, and Van slid down out of sight. Muriel stopped with her front bumper touching the back of Thelma's car. This was too close for comfort.

Thelma got out and walked forward

after the ferry left the slip. Van raised himself onto the seat again. He and Muriel saw Thelma light a cigarette and stand watching the lighted skyline fading. Then she threw the cigarette into the water and suddenly vanished from sight.

Van said, "Stay here." He got out quickly, ducked behind a row of cars and made his way forward. There were four trucks aboard the ferry. Two were moving vans, but neither had any company name on the sides. The drivers were in their cabs and nothing seemed to be unusual.

Van returned to Muriel. He slipped into the car and kept down out of sight. Muriel, apparently relaxed and bored, seemed to be half asleep, but nothing moved on that ferry that she didn't notice.

"She's coming back," Muriel said. "Keep your head down."

The next moment Van heard her give a gasp of astonishment. She touched him on the shoulder. "You can come up now. The girl who just got into Thelma's car isn't Thelma!"

"So this is where the switch is made," Van said. "Thelma must be in one of those trucks. The trouble is, there are two of them and they may go in different directions just as an extra precaution. Then what do we do?"

"Toss a coin," Muriel said. "Let's worry about it when that happens. Dick, this is pretty slick. If you hadn't been suspicious about moving vans to begin with, they might have got away with this and we'd be chasing some woman decoy."

The ferry was easing into its Jersey slip now. Car motors started up, headlights were turned on. Thelma's car was driven off the ramp and made a right turn. The two trucks turned left. Muriel headed in that direction also. Van sat beside her now. There was no further need for him to conceal himself. If Thelma was inside one of those trucks, she wouldn't be able to spot him.

Then what Van had feared, actually happened. One truck pulled up rather abruptly while the other kept on going. Muriel passed the parked truck, but two

blocks further on she turned off, drove all the way around two blocks and came back onto the highway, all under Van's direction. The truck that had stopped was just getting under way again.

"How are you sure Thelma is on this one?" Muriel asked.

"By theory alone. I doubt she could have got into the back of one of those trucks while they were on the ferry. Someone would have noticed and maybe wondered. I think she climbed up into the cab, but now she's been transferred to the back. That's why the truck stopped. At least, that theory gives us a slight motive for following this truck and not the other."

"You must be right," Muriel said. "We'll soon know."

The truck passed through two of the heavily populated industrial towns on the Jersey side of the Hudson River, but instead of bypassing the third city, the truck drove straight into the center of it. Far across town, it turned onto a rather narrow side street where there were nothing but small factories and lofts—and warehouses. The driver blinked his lights twice, sounded his horn briefly and pulled up with the radiator almost touching the huge door of a warehouse.

THE door rose silently and the truck rolled in. The door slid down into place.

Muriel shut off the motor of her car after she parked.

"Now what?" she asked.

"I'm going to try and get inside."

"Dick, you're crazy! Suppose we're right and all twenty-odd desperados are hiding in there! What chance will you have against all of those men, to say nothing of the guards who must be posted? It's insane!"

"But necessary," Van said. "Stay here while I have a look around. And I mean stay here—in the car."

Van slipped into an alley two buildings away from the warehouse, made his way across littered courtyards and over two wooden fences. Then he was able to

study the rear of the towering brick structure where it was possible that twenty or more notorious crooks were hidden. The windows were covered with steel shutters, ruling out any possibility of making an entrance through them. The rear door was narrow, for employee use and not for trucks. A small window was set high up in it, and small though the window was, it was blocked with bars. This place was practically a fortress.

Van went around to the front, never moving too close to the building, and keeping his eyes and ears open in case guards were posted outside! He only had to glance at the office door at the front to know he'd never get in that way. The rising door through which the trucks passed was also an impossibility.

He thought about calling the nearest F.B.I. office and instituting a raid in force on the place, but gave that up. He was reasonably sure, but not positive this must be the hideout. Finally he returned to the car where Muriel was waiting.

She exhaled in sheer relief at the sight of him. "I thought you'd found a way in, and I was waiting for the shooting to commence."

"I'd need an acetylene torch to get in that place. It's just about impregnable. And that means we'll have to use trickery. Now let's see. This is a one-way street. Any trucks heading for the warehouse will drive along the avenue two blocks away. There's a traffic light on the corner. Muriel, let's go to that corner and wait around awhile."

"Anything," she said, "to get you away from the temptation that warehouse represents. Dick, you *can't* go in there! You wouldn't stand any chance at all."

He didn't reply. When they were parked at the avenue corner two blocks away, he kept his eyes glued on the traffic. Thirty minutes went by. Then down the street that truck they had followed rolled out of the warehouse.

"Thelma must have finished her interview with her husband," Muriel said. "I hope she didn't give anything away."

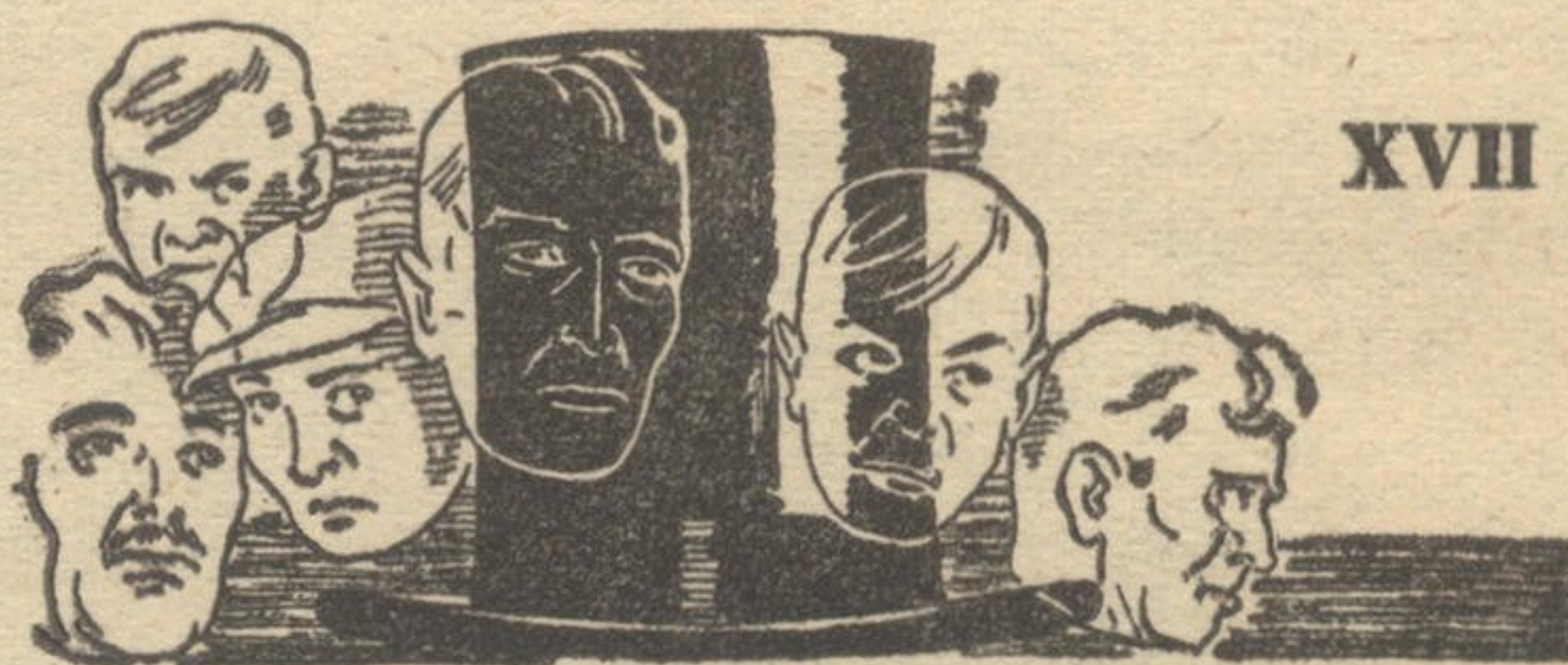
"If she did, she wouldn't be leaving," Van said. "No, Thelma merely wanted to ask him if he'd been free lately. When he denied it, she'd simply hurry through with whatever trumped-up business she'd used for an excuse to see him, get out of there as fast as possible, and get set to doublecross him."

"Aren't you going to follow her?" Muriel asked.

"Why? I'm no longer interested in Thelma."

"Well, that's some consolation," Muriel said. "I'd like it better if you weren't turning your attention to that warehouse. Dick, you might as well make up your mind you can't get in that place. You either have to suggest a raid or drop the whole thing for now."

Van didn't reply, but he kept watching the avenue traffic.



SLOWLY, to the impatient watchers in the parked car, another quarter of an hour went by. Then suddenly Van raised his hand and pointed.

"That truck—it's the one that turned in the other direction after it left the ferry. I thought it would come back here eventually. Now listen carefully. If the traffic light stops it, good. I'm getting aboard. If the light stays green, I want you to cut that truck off. Even at the risk of having it ram us."

Muriel started the car. "You're nuts, but I know better than to argue with you."

Van had the car door open. He watched the traffic light and the big truck. The light turned red. He leaped out of the car, ran down the street and crossed over to where the truck was waiting for the light to change.

He swung up onto the cab, yanked the

door open. The man inside picked up a tire iron, but put it down again quickly. The snout of the Phantom's automatic was a vast influence in helping him make up his mind.

The Phantom said, "Pull into the curb. Don't even ask me what's the idea. I'm in no mood to make explanations."

The driver obeyed. The Phantom made him climb down out of the cab, led him over to the sedan where Muriel waited, and told him to get in the back. As the driver obeyed again, the Phantom glanced around, felt sure he was unobserved and used the butt of his heavy automatic as a club. The driver tumbled into the back of the sedan. Five minutes later, he was securely tied and gagged.

The Phantom said, "If he gets loose, Muriel, slug him again. Otherwise, stay with him and the car. Park as close to the warehouse as you dare. If you hear shots or if a lot of men come running out, get the cops in a hurry."

She said, "Dick, watch it, please! And don't try to march twenty men out even if you think you can do it."

He grinned and patted her head. "All I want is confirmation of the fact that those hoods are hiding in there. I'm not going to try to arrest anyone or shoot it out with anyone. I merely want to slip in and out and the more quietly I do this, the better I'll like it. I'll see you in a few minutes."

He had already taken the driver's battered hat and leather jacket. These he hurriedly donned, ran over to where the rig waited and swung aboard. He released the brake and eased the heavy vehicle down the street.

Nearing the warehouse he blinked his lights as he'd seen the other driver do and when he came to a stop just outside the big door, he blew his horn once. The door began sliding upward. The Phantom eased the truck through the entrance and found himself inside a vast room. There were two similar trucks over on the far side of the big space and he kept going until he lined his up with the others.

Nobody came near him. The man who operated the door controls had brought the door down into place and was ambling off toward a small office just to one side of a heavy black-painted door which probably led to the upper floors.

The Phantom stuck his automatic into the side pocket of the leather jacket, pulled the hat brim down, and walked casually toward the office. Three men inside were gathered around a table playing cards as if thoroughly bored. A pot of coffee gurgled on a hot plate. Neither of the three paid the slightest attention to the Phantom.

Strolling over to that black door, he stood there in the semi-gloom and glanced at the big freight elevator at the floor above. He eased the door open, saw nothing but a lot of darkness and stepped inside. He struck a match and saw that he was in a stairway. As he crept up the steps, his gun was in his fist now.

At the second floor he pushed open a similar door and looked out into a corridor lined with small doors, all padlocked—storage spaces. The Phantom climbed on to the third floor. Here also were storage rooms, but going on he found that the fourth apparently was used mainly as a workshop where goods were crated.

THE fifth floor he estimated as probably being at the top of the building and, approaching it, he displayed even more caution. The door was tightly closed and what lay behind it was a complete mystery. He grasped the handle and tugged. It opened quietly. On this floor were a few lights. They weren't bright, but they gave sufficient illumination for him to see where he was.

Ten feet from the stairway door was a wall. Just a solid wooden wall running the full length of the enormous floor space and broken only by a door far down the corridor. Outside that door stood a man, smoking a cigarette and leaning against the wall. The Phantom would have bet that two inches from this guard's folded arms was a gun.

The Phantom's palms were moist. He

breathed lightly, there was a tight smile on his face. This was the hunt! This was what he liked—stalking his prey against odds. Not knowing what the next moment would bring. The blood pounded fast in his veins, and every sense was acutely alive as he realized he couldn't waste time. Before long somebody downstairs would begin to wonder what had happened to the driver who had just pulled in. If he couldn't be found, they'd start hunting for him.

The Phantom ran down a few stairs lightly, puckered his lips and began whistling. He made a normal amount of noise climbing back up the stairs. Yanking the heavy door open, he passed through and headed toward the guard who was instantly on the alert.

Behind the Phantom that heavy door closed with a soft thump, an indication that it was an exceptionally tight door and probably part of a sound-proofing arrangement for this floor. The guard stood facing him, waiting for him. The Phantom kept moving forward without the slightest hesitation. So far the weak light, combined with his borrowed truck driver's hat and jacket, had enabled him to get away with it, but he knew it would be time for him to act when he got a dozen feet from the guard.

Without warning, the Phantom suddenly went into a sprint, and at the same time he drew his heavy automatic and raised it high. The guard's gun came out. He was fast with it—deadly fast—but the Phantom had acted too swiftly this time for even that man's speed. As the guard raised the gun to shoot, the Phantom's weapon crashed down on the fellow's forehead. It was a raking blow that split the skull open. There was lethal force behind it, too, because the Phantom knew nothing else would do under the circumstances. These men he was challenging were playing a deadly game, and he had to match their best efforts.

The guard's gun clattered to the floor. The Phantom faced the door, his automatic level. Nothing happened. All that noise seemed not to have been heard in-

side. He tried the door. It was locked. Bending over the guard he searched the unconscious man rapidly. In one pocket was a single key. He thrust this into the lock, turned it softly, and felt the bolts give.

Now there wasn't a moment to lose. Taking the utmost care in opening the door, he stepped into what seemed to be the reception hall of a large mansion. Deep rugs covered the floor, pictures hid the bare walls, heavy chairs were placed tastefully about, all softly lighted by a torchier in a corner.

The Phantom could hear voices now, and music. He stole forward to the nearest door. This wasn't locked. Music and laughter came from behind it. As he opened it a crack, the beat of his heart increased.

Inside the room were two pool tables, and four men were playing. Four men the Phantom knew. The Immigration people knew them also. Carefully he eased the door shut, though every instinct was urging him to barge into that room and take that quartet.

Outside, he stepped over the unconscious guard, hurried to the stairway and went down the steps quickly. On the ground floor he drew his second gun.

Now came the dangerous and violent phase of his flight!

WHEN he opened the ground floor door, he felt a cool breeze that indicated the big door was open. He saw a man out on the sidewalk looking up and down. They were wondering now all right what had happened to that truck driver. The man came back inside, touched a button, and the door slid back into place. Then he walked briskly toward the office.

He passed by the door behind which the Phantom was waiting. He had taken a couple of more steps when an arm curled around his throat, cutting off the cry that started in his throat. A knee pushed with terrific force into the small of his back and he was bent over like a bow until his feet actually left the floor

before they could move and scrape.

The Phantom increased the pressure. Hands clawed at him until bone snapped, and the man he held went limp. Another wise guy who liked to play a big game had been taken care of. The Phantom eased him down, ran the dozen yards to the office and barged inside with his guns ready. The two men still at the card table let out simultaneous yells and one went for his gun. That was his mistake. A bad mistake. One second later, he was dead.

The remaining hoodlum did his best to touch the ceiling and stayed that way while the Phantom took away his gun. He ordered the man to turn around and clouted him on the back of the head. This was no time to coddle such men. They'd have killed him in an instant if they'd had the chance.

The Phantom picked up the telephone, heard the buzz, and dialed Operator. He asked to be connected with the nearest F.B.I. Field Office. In a moment or two he was telling someone where to send a raiding party.

The next thirty minutes were torture. He had no idea how many guards were patrolling the premises, how many trucks would roll in, or if there was ever a change of guard. He sat in that office with his guns lying on the table in front of him and tried to play solitaire. Once the man he'd slugged woke up and groaned. The Phantom hit him again. The one he'd shot was dead. The man near the stairway door still had a heartbeat, but he didn't look good, and he hadn't regained consciousness.

Muriel must be half crazy waiting outside and wondering what had happened. He, with death at his shoulder, was probably easier in mind than she was.

He threw the cards on the table and leaned back. It was amazing what these low crooks had got away with. Here, within the limits of a city and not more than fifteen miles from New York, was a hideout in which more than twenty dangerous and notorious criminals were living like princes while they waited for the heat to die down. Here they isolated

themselves so they couldn't be found and deported. In that maze of cleverly constructed rooms upstairs, they had the acme in luxury and comfort. They could loll around while they laughed at the law.

The Phantom might have been able to slip out and return later with the raiding party, but he didn't want it that way. He wanted to be here to admit them, to lead them to the top floor and watch while those rats were hauled handcuffed and thrown into cars. The Phantom hated crime and criminals with a violence often matched by his methods.

A car horn sounded and he hurried to the door and pushed the switch. The door rose slowly and four cars swooped inside. In each were five men armed with sub-machine-guns and rifles. The Phantom identified himself quickly, gave a few facts, posted men to guard the two unconscious prisoners on the ground floor, then he led the others to the top floor.

The guard he'd slugged was still out, not stirring or even moaning. The Phantom opened the door with the key he had taken from the guard, and the men quietly filed in.

Shots were fired by only one F.B.I. agent. A hoodlum who elected to try and shoot it out was almost chopped in half by a burst from a tommy-gun. The others surrendered meekly enough, even those in their own rooms. They were all lined up, searched, cuffed, and marched downstairs.

AS THE Phantom went through the place, he marveled at the thoroughness with which it had been constructed. He found one securely sealed door and had to use an axe on it. When he finally cut through and unlocked it, he saw a girl backed into a corner. There was terror in her eyes.

"Keep away from me!" she warned. "Keep away!"

The room was hardly bigger than a cell and with only a cot and a chair in it. Illumination came from an unshielded bulb overhead. The girl's clothes were torn, her face scratched.

He said, "You're Nancy Arnold."

"I'm warning you—" she said tensely.

"They must have given you a bad time. I'm the Phantom. You're quite safe now, Nancy."

"The Phantom! You're not lying? Or is this a trick?"

"I can bring in a dozen or more F.B.I. men to prove it. We've just raided the place and everyone here has been taken prisoner."

She sat down slowly on the cot. "Thank God! I didn't think it could happen."

"Why did they keep you here?" he asked. "And why did they kidnap you in the first place?"

Nancy disregarded his questions to ask one of her own. "Cathy is dead, isn't she?"

"Yes. I think you must have known that."

"I saw her—go down. That was just before one of the two men struck me. They carried me to a car outside the park. I don't know where I am now. But they wanted me because they knew Cathy had talked to me on the phone and they demanded I tell them what she talked about."

"I suspected that," the Phantom said grimly.

"And then Cathy screamed that name just before they killed her. She had been telling me that she couldn't take that life any longer, that she realized what those men were like when she heard them planning to get Rocky Spaul as he got out of prison and hide him. She knew what Rocky was, but she hadn't had time to tell me his name. She shouted it just before they killed her."

"Are you all right, Nancy?"

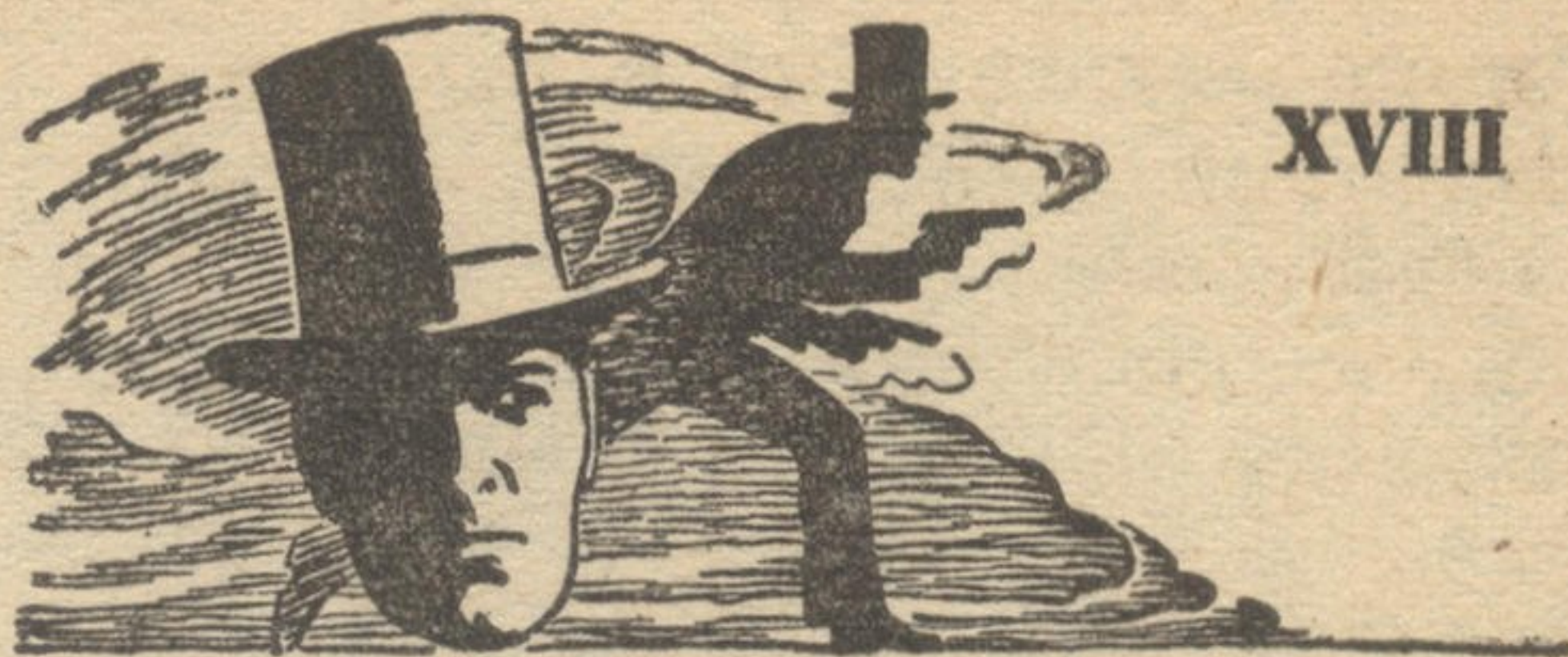
"Yes, but I don't know how much longer I would have been. Those men are beasts."

"Did you see the man who killed your sister?"

"No, I did not. I couldn't possibly identify him."

"Too bad. But at least you're okay."

She said, "I'm—fine—" and slid off the cot into a curled-up heap on the floor.



XVIII

GENTLY the Phantom and two agents helped Nancy Arnold downstairs. There she was put into one of the F.B.I. cars and told that they'd have a doctor for her as soon as they'd reached their offices.

The Phantom was one of the last to leave the warehouse, except for the F.B.I. men who had been planted inside, in case any more crooks showed up, or any of this gang returned. That could be, for the raid had been pulled off so quietly that not even anyone in the near neighborhood had any knowledge of it.

Muriel was waiting impatiently when the Phantom returned to the car, but she was no longer worried about him, for she knew what had happened. The two agents who had come to arrest the man who was tied and gagged in the back of her car hadn't said much, but they hadn't needed to.

Without a word Muriel lighted a cigarette and handed it to Van.

He said, "We were in luck, Muriel. Nancy was in there—and unharmed."

"Nancy?" Muriel gripped his arm, clinging to it. "Oh, Dick! I've got to see her! Where is she?"

"Take it easy, Muriel," he said. "She's all right, but she was in need of medical attention. Shock. She's being well cared for. You can see her later."

"But do you know why—"

"They snatched her? So she couldn't tell about her sister shouting Rocky Spaul's name, and spoil Rocky's scheme to get away from the marshal and go into hiding. Also, before they finished her off, they wanted to find out just how much, if anything, Cathy had told her over the phone, and if she had told anyone else."

Muriel took an angry puff at her cig-

arette. "Dick, who is back of all this business? Who—well, you might say, stagemanaged it?"

Van said, "I'll get him. He has no inkling that this raid has been pulled, so he won't be worried."

"You know who he is?"

Van said, "I've known for some time."

"When are you going to get him?"

"Tonight, I hope."

Muriel put out a feeler.

"Tambo isn't the type to come easily, Dick," she said.

"Tambo will keep. Now before I go after the top guy, let's go see Elise at the hospital. You can never tell about gunshot cases. I want to see how she's getting along."

Muriel looked surprised. "Why, Dick! It's way after midnight! And a hospital! Will they let us in?"

He grinned at her. "I just broke into a building as well-constructed as a jail. Do you think a hospital can keep me out?"

Muriel started the car, but didn't pull away from the curb at once. She turned her head and looked at him directly. "There's a more important reason for your seeing Elise than just to see how she is getting along. You know she is okay. Out with it, Dick."

"Oh—all right. It's this way. Elise knows a great deal. She'll be an important witness. When I close in on the big boys, there might be a slip, and the minute they know they're finished, they'll try to silence Elise. I want to arrange for her to be taken to a safe place."

Muriel said, "She shouldn't be moved, or they'd let her go home. Dick, I'll stay with her. I swear nobody will get near her."

He shook his head. "Too dangerous. I couldn't risk it."

"You'll let me do this or I won't date you again for a month! I've been left out of so much, Dick. Let me do something important, will you?"

"Have you got a gun?"

"Of course."

"Well—all right. But don't let Elise

know we're worried. She has troubles enough without that."

THERE wasn't too much objection even to an after midnight visit by Richard Curtis Van Loan. Hospital officials are appreciative of past financial favors and particularly hopeful of future ones. Van and Muriel were passed through the office by the night superintendent.

Elise, of course, had to be awakened gently, but instead of being disturbed, she was surprised and delighted to see them. Though she was really no longer surprised at anything Dick Van Loan might do—not since he had first appeared here in the hospital to see her without the disguise he had worn during their first meetings, but as the real Dick Van Loan. The disguise, he had told her, had been the work of the clever fingers of his friend, the Phantom Detective. She had believed him implicitly, as she would have believed anything Van said.

Tonight, she was especially glad to meet his fiancée, Muriel Havens. If she wondered about the peculiar timing of their visit she didn't mention it.

Muriel told her, "Dick has told me everything, Elise, and I am so glad it has all turned out for you as it has."

"I don't know what I'd have turned out to be if Mr. Van Loan hadn't been around to help me," Elise said. Her eyes were as full of gratitude as her voice. "I killed a man and he made it seem as though it was my simple duty, and that I should have no remorse. I think I'd have gone crazy if I didn't have such fine moral support."

"Everything will be fine soon," Muriel said. "You ought to be getting out of here in a few days."

"A week perhaps. That's what the doctor told me today."

Van said, "You suffered more than a wound shock, Elise. More than what a bullet did to you. There was an emotional shock as well—when you suddenly woke up and realized where you had been headed with those crooks."

Elise shuddered. "It was so easy to

drift into that way of life. Even with all the money Dad gave me, I couldn't find any fun or excitement anywhere unless I was with those—those hoodlums. That's all they were and I realize it now."

Van said casually, "You never did tell me how you happened to get in with them, Elise. You had to meet one of them somehow."

She said, "Oh, I remember how it started all right. The first gangster I met was a character named Longman."

"He's dead," Van said quickly. "He was taken for a ride two years ago."

"I know. Some of the boys in the mob told me he'd been a doublecrosser. Dad said he was, too. Longman and Dad had some business dealings. I think he was trying to hook Dad into something, but it didn't work. Dad's too clever not to have seen what Longman was. Longman liked me, though, and asked me for a date."

"Didn't you know what he was then?" Muriel inquired.

"No—and that's the truth. But when I met his friends, after he took me to places I had no idea even existed, I became fascinated with him, his way of life, and with other men of his type. They lived fast, died young, and thought it was all worthwhile. Making a dollar without work means more to them than making a million by working."

"Your father knew about your associations?" Van asked.

"He found out. Too many people saw me around with this weird assortment of mobsters. Dad did everything possible to break it up, but he couldn't. Not until I—shot that man, did I realize what I'd got myself into."

"You're okay now," Van said.

She looked at him seriously. "If anything happened to send me back to that life, I think I'd die. That's how I know I'm cured of gangsters."

Muriel said, "Look, let me stay here with you awhile. There's so much to talk about, so many plans to make. Maybe I can help."

"I'd love to have you," Elise said promptly.

MURIEL waved at Van. "Go home, darling. From now until dawn this will be no place for you."

Van smiled and nodded. "All right. I am tired. Just don't tire Elise too much. Remember, she's still a sick girl."

He left them, feeling considerably relieved. Not so much because he had been worried about Elise. It was Muriel he had been most concerned about. But there were things to be done. Important and dangerous things. He hadn't wanted to expose Muriel to this. Now she'd be safe, and sure she was doing her full share to help, and he could go ahead.

He went home first, but as he stepped from the cab, a man moved out of the shadows and glided toward him. Van's gun arm tensed until he saw that it was Kip Graham.

"You're a hard man to find, Phantom," Kip said. "I've been parked here for hours. Thought you'd show up here at the Van Loan shack, though, if I waited long enough."

"I'm sorry, Kip, I've been pretty busy. Was just going to drop in on Van for a nightcap and a little talk. What's up?"

"Tambo."

"What about Tambo?"

"He's getting set to take a nice long trip. The boys tell me he's so scared and nervous he's winding things up in a big hurry. I have good dope that he has two suitcases full of dough that travel with him. It ain't right. That dough belongs to those suckers who let him run their rackets."

"Now that's interesting," the Phantom said. "What does Attorney Foster think about it?"

"Foster? Oh—yeah. I dunno. Foster stays in the background, but I'm laying odds he never had a finger in this one and won't even know about it until Tambo has pulled out with all the dough."

"And what happens to the suckers, as you call them, the men Tambo has been hiding out?"

"You think he cares? Maybe they'll rot, wherever they are. What are you going to do about Tambo, Phantom?"

"He certainly shouldn't be allowed to get away with it, Kip. What do you suggest?"

"Hell, if we don't nail him fast, nobody ever will. I tell you he's ready to go."

"All right, Kip. Let's get him."

"That's talking. For a minute I thought you were going soft. Tambo is probably home still packing. We got no time to lose."

The Phantom hailed a taxi and gave Tambo's address. He settled back to enjoy a cigarette while Kip displayed some odd nervousness by cracking his knuckles. Just before the taxi pulled up before the town house where Tambo lived, Kip moved a .48 nickle-plated revolver from a hip pocket holster to his coat pocket.

"Tambo ain't gonna take this as a joke," he said. "He's handy with a rod, and I'm taking no chances."

The Phantom said, "Kip, who murdered Janine Sims?"

"Tambo. He done it personal, because he likes to see people die. Especially women."

"How did he find out Janine had mistakenly brought me to a meeting of the gang lieutenants?"

"I think Tambo saw you there, Phantom, and knew you didn't belong, maybe even guessed who you were. Or maybe somebody told him. Anyway, he said Janine had to go and he'd take care of it himself. He likes to use a knife."

"I take it you no longer like Tambo."

"It ain't a question of liking or disliking him, Phantom. I slugged the guy and I let you get away from him. He don't forget those things. It's me or him now, and if I have my way, it won't be me."

"Just take it easy with that gun," the Phantom warned. "We want Tambo alive, if possible."

THE PHANTOM dismissed the taxi and walked up to the house and up the brick steps, trailed by Kip. Sliding his own gun out of holster, Van stepped up to Tambo's door and motioned Kip to one side. He placed the side of the automatic against the door and knocked with it.

Almost at once the door was opened about two inches. A man peered out. His eyes were lidded as if with boredom, but when through that partly opened door he saw the muzzle of a big gun aimed straight at his face, the eyes opened wide. He inhaled sharply and opened the door all the way.

The Phantom moved in, stuck the gun into the pit of the man's stomach and asked for Tambo.

The man said, "He ain't here. Honest—he blew a little while ago."

"Too late," Kip groaned from the doorway. "He beat us to it." Kip moved forward and waved his gun at Tambo's man. "Listen, joker, you know where he went. Spill it!"

"Tambo never tells me nothing. You know that, Kip. Tambo never tells nobody nothing."

Kip said, "Who did he go with?"

"He went alone. I think Mickey Hayden called him, and Tambo got all excited and told Mickey he'd see him as soon as he could."

Van said, "Did Tambo take anything with him?"

"Yeah, a couple of suitcases."

Kip said, "Let's go. We'll never find him now."

Kip tugged at the Phantom's sleeve like a dog trying to lead a reluctant master. The Phantom followed him away from the house.

Kip said, "That joker don't have to know, but if Mickey Hayden called Tambo, then I know where Tambo is! Mickey has a hideout. It's been fixed for months, just in case anything busted loose. Like somebody putting the boys wise to how Tambo has been gypping them. I was in with that bunch and I know plenty."

"This hideout—where is it, Kip?"

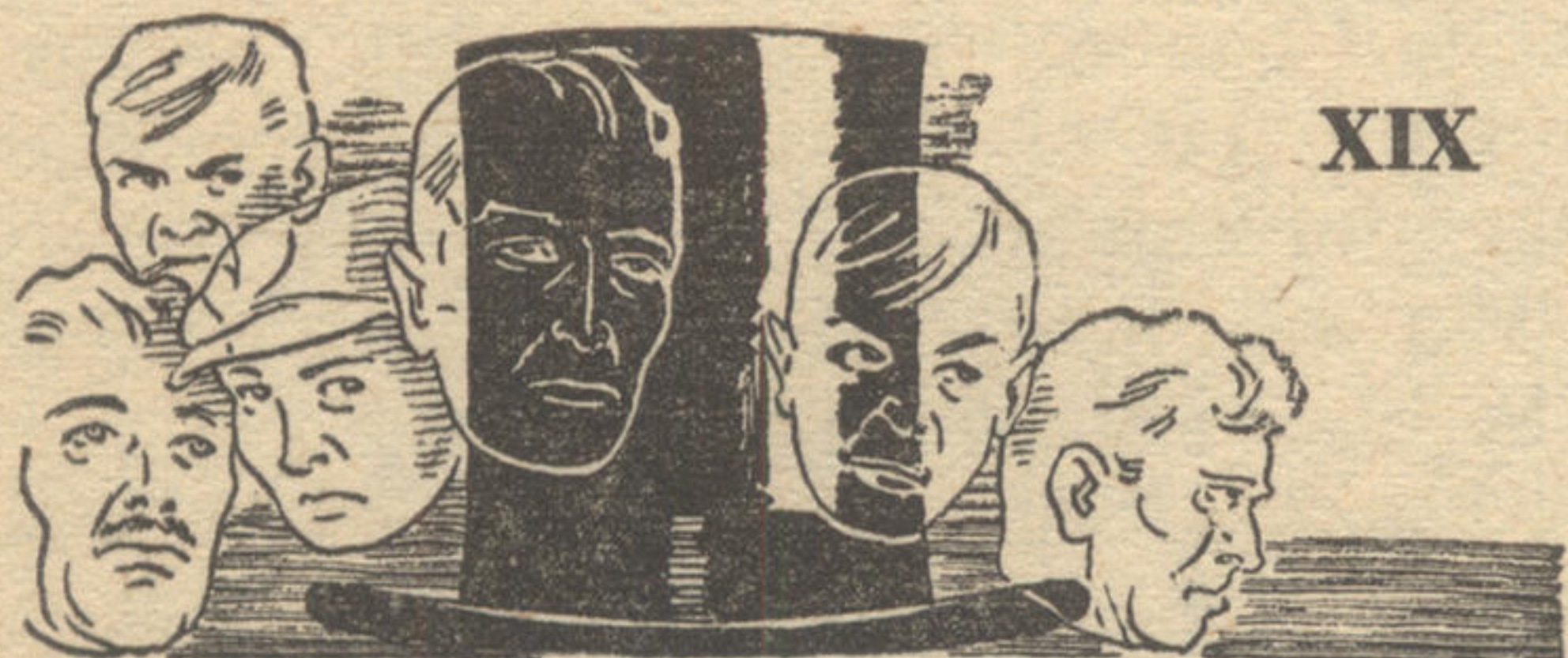
"Downtown. Way downtown, but we oughta be able to take Tambo. He won't be expecting us. I know he went there because that was the way he always had it planned. To lay low for awhile if the heat went on. Mickey was to furnish the place."

"Maybe," Van said, making his tone

casual, "the men who are wanted for deportation are there, too."

"Not so you could notice it, Phantom. Tambo wants nothing more to do with them. Well, do we go after him or don't we?"

"We go," Van said.



XIX

CLOSE by the waterfront, the address Kip gave was not in a savory section. Along its dark, narrow, twisting streets anything could happen, and often did. It was a haven for muggers by night and bums by day. The taximan refused to go beyond the avenue, so the Phantom and Kip left the cab and walked briskly along the street.

"It's the second floor in that building," Kip said, pointing out a two-story building.

It was one of those hundred-year-old places which should have been torn down long ago, but which stood in idle squalor because the houses didn't occupy enough space to make demolition profitable. When the adjoining structures began to tumble down then the whole section would be razed.

"Tambo, holed up in a dump like that?" the Phantom asked doubtfully.

"A guy ain't fussy when he's on the lam," Kip said. "That's where Tambo is. They got a couple of rooms fitted out up there."

The Phantom studied the place thoughtfully. "Maybe this should be a one-man job, Kip. Tambo may start shooting."

"I'm going with you, Phantom. I got an interest in seeing that Tambo gets what's coming to him."

"All right," the Phantom agreed. "But stay behind me, and don't shoot unless it's absolutely necessary."

Kip nodded, and in his eyes was a hard

expression the Phantom hadn't noticed before.

The ground floor door was not locked. They entered the building and faced a high, narrow staircase so steep there was room on it for only one person at a time. To be caught here would be fatal. Tambo could stand at the top of the stairs, shoot down and not miss, even if he suddenly went blind.

A stair squeaked and the Phantom stopped so short that Kip bumped into him. Nothing happened, though, and they went on up. At the top was a landing, no more than four feet square, and facing them, a closed door with a pencil of yellow light beneath it.

Kip nudged the Phantom to one side, winked at him, stepped up to the door and knocked smartly. Tambo's voice, nervous and frightened, came from inside.

Kip said, "Open up, Tambo. I got a message for you."

Footsteps approached the door. Kip quickly moved aside and let the Phantom take over. The door swung open. Tambo took a quick look, tried to slam the door, realized he couldn't succeed, and fell backward a step or two, trying to free a gun from his hip pocket.

"Don't do it, Tambo," the Phantom warned.

Tambo was looking over the Phantom's shoulder. His eyes were terror-filled, his mouth slack. He did his best to say something. A gun exploded almost in the Phantom's ear. He felt flecks of powder burn his neck and cheek and the roar of the explosion deafened him temporarily.

He swung around. Kip quickly lowered his gun.

Tambo went down first on one knee, then the other. He looked like a man in prayer and it was a time for it. Then he toppled sideward and lay still. A small dark spot on his shirt began to widen and spread.

"What the hell did you do that for?" the Phantom demanded of Kip.

"Didn't you see him? The louse was going to shoot! He had another gun in his coat pocket. Wait—I'll show you."

Kip dropped to his knees beside Tambo, pulled the corpse over on its back. He dug his hand into Tambo's coat pocket, looked surprised.

"He always carried a gun in that pocket," Kip said. "When he put his hand in there, I figured he was going to sneak one. Anyway," he added defensively, "he sure carried a gun in his *hip* pocket."

The Phantom said, "I had the drop on him, Kip. This isn't so good."

"I was only trying to save you from taking a slug, Phantom. I knew Tambo. He was a great guy to pull a fast one and he did carry a small rod in that pocket."

"All right," the Phantom said. "I'll back you up. Now we'd better look for that money he's supposed to have run away with."

"It'll be here," Kip said. "It's got to be."

THEY turned the room upside down, though, without finding a trace of it. The Phantom was interested in an ash tray. It held two cigarette butts, both still wet, both the same brand Tambo had been smoking. Tambo could not have been here long.

The Phantom searched Tambo's body, but found nothing of interest or importance. Kip had gone into the next room and when he returned, he looked puzzled.

"The dough ain't there, either. What do you suppose could have happened to it, Phantom?"

"Maybe he gave it to the character who supplied this hideout."

"Maybe." Kip frowned darkly. "Do you want me to go see him?"

"Perhaps that would be a good idea. Does he trust you?"

"He'd better," Kip said, "or he gets what Tambo got."

"Kip, I want to be certain Tambo is the man who knifed Janine to death. Are you *sure* it was Tambo?"

"I'm positive, Phantom. I told you before, didn't I?"

"If Tambo was carrying a knife on him, that would be conclusive proof to me. I just looked over his body, but not too thoroughly. Do you know where he would

be apt to pack a knife?"

"In his sock or strapped to his leg. That's where he always carried it. I'll take a look."

Kip knelt beside the body again, his back to the Phantom. He pulled up the dead man's trouser leg, grunted, then pulled up the other trouser leg. He got up quickly, with an exclamation of triumph, and in his hand was a small dagger-type knife with a five-inch, two-edged, glistening blade.

"This could be it," he said.

The Phantom examined the knife. "It looks as if it might be. Thanks, Kip. Now I'm going to cover up this kill for you. The best way is for you to leave here. I'll say I came alone, and that I shot Tambo when he tried to shoot me. Your name won't even be mentioned."

Kip said, "You're a white guy, Phantom. Maybe I did shoot a little too fast, but hell, I saved everybody a lot of trouble. Tambo would have gone to the chair anyway."

"I'll clean things up here," the Phantom said. "If I can't find the money, I'll stick around and keep looking for it even after the police leave. You might drop in on this friend of his, this Mickey Hayden, but I doubt he has it. Tambo liked his cash too much to trust anyone else with it."

"I'll let you know," Kip said.

"You'll probably find me right here. I intend to take the place apart if I have to spend all night doing it. After the police go, it will be safe for you to return."

"I'll be seeing you," Kip said.

He clattered down the narrow stairs and the outer door below slammed after him as he went out. The Phantom pulled over a chair beside the plain wooden table, sat down and looked at Tambo's body for a moment.

"You may have had it coming," he said slowly, "but not that way, Tambo."

Ten minutes later the Phantom was out of the place and had found a telephone a block down the street. He called Inspector Gregg at his home. After a short, crisp conversation he hung up and waited around until the first radio car showed up.

Then the Phantom walked rapidly north. . . .

MILFORD WATSON had the natural ability to look like an executive, even when he wore wrinkled pajamas under a robe, run-down slippers, and a sleepy expression. He blinked a couple of times as he himself answered an imperative summons to the front door of his apartment.

"Mr. Van Loan!" he exclaimed. "What—Is it Elise?"

"No, Mr. Watson, nothing like that. Elise is fine. I saw her only a few hours ago."

"But it's around three or four in the morning! What brought you here like this?"

"I thought you might like to know that the gang Elise was running around with has been destroyed."

"Good heavens! Come in, Mr. Van Loan—come in. I'm delighted to hear that!"

Van stepped into the reception hall. Watson closed the door, padded ahead of him into the living room and motioned to a chair while he turned on more lights. Then Watson sat down and wanted to know what had happened.

"I have most of my information from the Phantom, Mr. Watson," Van said. "But it is authentic, as the F. B. I. can testify. After an intensive investigation the Phantom finally located the hideout where a number of criminals wanted on deportation warrants, or for other reasons, were living. It was quite a place. A warehouse across the river in Jersey. There was a gun battle after he called the F. B. I. and some of the guards were killed, but every last crook was taken prisoner. It's to be expected that some of them will try to bargain."

Watson said, "Then the whole gang must be broken up."

"They had a leader. A man named Tambo, who was not taken with them. But he was killed only a little while ago. The man Elise was seen with most was murdered some days ago. There'll be no

mob for her to go back to even if she were so inclined."

"She isn't," Watson said. "She's completely cured of all that."

"I hope so. Because, you see, the Phantom is not entirely satisfied that the entire gang has been cleaned up. The police believe so, but the Phantom Detective doubts it—and what he believes, I believe."

Watson didn't say anything for a moment. Then he sighed. "Are such gangs ever really broken up, Van Loan? I doubt it when men like Tambo can live in the utmost luxury and exert all the power they do."

"You should see where he died," Van said. "I wish Elise could see it, so she'd know where his kind end up. It's almost unbelievable, after seeing how luxuriously he lived for so long that he could have died amidst such squalor."

"I can imagine," Watson said.

Van seemed to have a sudden thought. "Look here, Mr. Watson, perhaps you ought to see that place so you can tell Elise. I think it would be a powerful weapon in keeping her straight. Would you like to go down there with me? Right now? I think perhaps the Phantom may be there, or is coming back there. He said something about it."

Watson hesitated. "I—why, yes. Yes, I think that's a great idea. It won't take me long to dress. Mix yourself a drink. I'll be with you just as soon as I get dressed—in five minutes."

Watson hurried out of the room. He closed the door behind him and as he did, the Phantom quickly rose and went over to a table on which a telephone rested. He picked up the instrument and held it to his ear, not dialing. He held it that way for three long minutes, then replaced it and went over and mixed half a drink at the small bar.

He was just finishing the drink when Watson hurried back, swinging into his coat as he approached. He hadn't bothered to put on a tie. They hurried out to the street and finally found a taxi after walking some distance.

ON THE way downtown, Watson said, "I heard nothing on the radio about the capture of all those criminals, Van Loan."

"As I told you, the F.B.I. took over after the Phantom called them. It's possible they haven't released any information at all."

"But why not—when it's all over?"

"It may be that the Phantom has talked them into believing, as he does, that there is someone besides Tambo back of this scheme."

"Have you any ideas yourself?"

"Well, the Phantom tells me there are a few who suspect Alan Foster, a lawyer for crooks. He's certainly in a wonderful position to handle a deal like this, and he's smart enough to work it, too. But there are doubts about him."

Watson said, "I think you know more than you are telling, Van Loan."

"It's a good practice not to talk too much without absolute proof," Van said.

"And no hearsay is proof."

They were silent then, until they neared the squalid section where Tambo had died. Watson took out a cigarette and put it between his lips. He didn't light it.

When the taxi pulled up before the ramshackle building, Van got out first. He was paying the driver while Watson stood in the middle of the sidewalk lighting his cigarette. They entered the building, climbed the narrow, steep stairs, and at the top Watson shuddered as he saw the dark stain on the bare floor where Tambo had fallen.

Inside the room, he sat down in one of the chairs at the round table. Van Loan took the other one.

A sixty-watt electric light bulb hanging from the middle of the ceiling cast cold, glaring light around the room. Watson shuddered again.

"What a place to die in," he said. "Elise ought to be brought here."

"I believe it would be better for her if

[Turn page]



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she never saw or heard of this place, Mr. Watson."

"But you said it would do her a lot of good."

Van said, suddenly accusing, stern, "Why did you let her get mixed up with those sons of hell?"

"But I didn't know they were—I had no idea—"

"Plain tripe," Van said. "You knew all about it."

WATSON stared at him. "But I tell you—"

"Oh, cut it! That line of bull might get you somewhere with the police, because they don't suspect you. But it only gives me a laugh because I know you're the man who bossed Tambo. You're the one who set up this whole stinking layout. You snatched twenty lousy crooks who were about to be deported or indicted and hid them so you could take over their rackets."

Watson crushed out the cigarette he'd lighted on the sidewalk. "Van Loan," he said slowly, "do you know I've had a gnawing sensation ever since you entered this mess that you knew that about me all the time? So now, I suppose we can dispense with all this Van Loan masquerade. You're the Phantom yourself, aren't you? You're the one who has been doing all the investigating—"

Van shrugged. "Can you prove that? If you try, if you make a single accusation like that, the laughs that would be handed



you will hurt worse than any bullets. I can bring a thousand witnesses, including the F.B.I. and the police, to prove that Richard Curtis Van Loan is *not* the Phantom."

Watson said, "My intuition, which tells me you are, is good enough for me. However, Phantom or not, I won't insult your intelligence by trying to deny what you already probably have proof of about me.

I'll admit it, and we'll go on from there. Is that satisfactory?"

"Put both hands on the table—as far as the elbows, Watson. Keep them there as long as we're talking. If you don't, I'll kill you."

"I realize that. I don't intend to make any kind of fuss. I think that we ought to talk it over, though, mainly because of Elise."

THE PHANTOM corrected, "Only because of Elise. So far as you're concerned, you're a lousy heel like the rest of those punks who worked for you. Yes, I've known for quite awhile. Since right after Elise was shot, in fact."

"Where did I slip?" Watson had both arms stretched across the table top. "For academic reasons, just how did I fail?"

"Elise found out I wasn't a notorious gangster who had attended a meeting Tambo had set up. She discovered my name was Richard Curtis Van Loan, and she got scared because I was *not* a gangster. Oh, she never for a moment suspected that I was the Phantom, as you did." He grinned coldly. "Shall I do some admitting, too, just for the moment, and say you're right? But don't get me wrong. I'm not admitting that to anyone else, and it would be your word against mine—not such good odds for you. But just so we can get things a bit clearer, right now—"

He shrugged again and went on, "Well, anyway, Elise broke up our little date at the lake and went home. She told you she had just met the Dick Van Loan you two had once spoken about, when you had praised the 'playboy,' Van Loan, because he had taken up reform and was backing the Phantom. You, apparently, weren't interested when she told you she'd met this Van Loan at a gangster meeting. Yet right after that, though Elise swears she didn't tip anybody about Janine Sims's careless mistake in accepting me as a gangster, Janine's death was ordered, and carried out. Those orders had to come from you, because no one else knew of Janine's mistake!"



XX

LOOKING like a man who suddenly found the weather had turned ice-cold while he was wearing only a bathing suit, Milford Watson's lips were blue, his face pinched.

The Phantom enjoyed this. It was a pleasure, telling an agent of murder just where he'd fallen down. It was going to be an even greater pleasure to see him get what was due him.

The Phantom said, "Elise met her first gangster through you. I have not tried to find out just how you came to be tied up with them, but I have an idea your business went on the rocks, you couldn't raise legitimate capital, so you sought it in the underworld where there was hot money and to spare. Gangsters have been doing their best to find investments for their blood dough for several years."

"All right," Watson admitted, "that's true, too. But I swear to you I'd have given up the entire mill and everything it represented to me if Elise hadn't become mixed up with those people. I couldn't stop her. It was like dope. She had to be with them."

"And there is another reason why you figured so prominently in my ideas about who backed this racket," the Phantom went on inexorably. "Any father could have broken his daughter of associating with crooks. You did make half-hearted attempts, but you couldn't make demands because the boys liked Elise, and they knew too much about you."

"If Elise finds out I was one of them, all the good you've done for her will count for nothing, Phantom," Watson said dully.

"Don't you suppose I've thought about that, too? It's a hell of a mess, thanks to your damned greed and lust for power."

"We could—ah—make arrangements.

Tambo is dead and he openly acted as the leader. What difference would it make if he took the blame, now that he is dead?"

"Just this difference—that you'd get away with murder. I can't forget what happened to Janine Sims and Cathy Arnold."

"Janine was a cheap, little round-heeled bum," Watson growled. "Cathy was a fool—What do they count for?"

"As much as you, Watson. Far more. The Phantom never makes deals, and if I did, I wouldn't with a rat like you."

"What of Elise then, when she hears the truth?"

"Perhaps it can be arranged," the Phantom said. "There's one way. But you're not getting away with it, and neither is Kip Graham."

"Kip? You know about him, too?"

"A lot more than you or Kip realize. He murdered Tambo in cold blood—on orders from you. Tambo had outlived his usefulness and he made an excellent man to take the rap for this whole scheme. Kip set him up that way for my benefit. He intended to use me to get rid of Tambo, and began by letting me keep my gun when he was taking me to see Tambo."

"You were supposed to kill Tambo then," Watson said. "I'd decided to make Kip my first lieutenant, because Tambo was becoming too greedy."

"I suppose I have you to thank because he didn't kill me the first chance he got—or let his pals do the job," the Phantom said. "I understand that the little matter of who gets the Phantom is regarded highly in underworld circles. But you wanted me kept alive so I could kill Tambo, maybe had another job or so for my gun, and since Kip wanted to be your lieutenant he didn't dare disobey you, probably figuring his chance would come later, because he fondly believes he knows what the Phantom looks like."

"I can't but admire your deductive ability, Phantom," Watson murmured. "And I wouldn't have been so fatuous myself, knowing your vaunted skill at dis-

guise, as to believe I would know you from one day to the next, if you so chose."

"Kip is a fool," the Phantom said. "He was waiting for me outside my apartment house to take me to see Tambo. He recognized me right away—although he thought I was the Phantom who had just been visiting at the Van Loan apartment—and yet he'd never seen me before, so far as I knew. I knew he must have seen me before, though—in this disguise—and there was only one way that could have happened. He must have been hidden across the court facing the window of Janine's apartment and saw me there when I found her dead."

"I wouldn't know too much about Kip's activities," Watson said. "I only knew he was doing good work, and might make a better assistant than Tambo."

"You know plenty. You know, for instance, that Kip murdered Bill Murray because Murray met Elise at the lake against your orders. Murray paid for that when Kip used a knife on him. The same knife he used on Janine—because Kip handled that kill, too. And I suspect he slit Cathy Arnold's throat with the same blade."

WATSON asked, "Does anything escape you?"

"Not when I'm dealing with idiots like Kip. I nailed him tonight in the easiest way known to a detective. I searched Tambo's body while Kip wasn't present. Then I told Kip that if Tambo carried the weapon which had killed Janine we could close the case tight. So Kip searched him and pretended to find the knife on him. He was too eager to have that case closed."

"Kip is a fool," Watson admitted. "But I'll wager he's a long way off by now."

"He'll keep," the Phantom said. "Tell me, what was to have happened when these crooks you hid were finally captured? They were bound to be, unless you intended to murder each one, which would have been too risky."

"I didn't care what happened to them," Watson said, gloating now, proud, unlike a man who had just been brought down to

bitter defeat. "I had control of their rackets for more than a year. There were twenty rackets, Phantom. I bled them dry. I made millions. If you'd stayed out of this, I might even have tipped off the Immigration people and the police where to find those men. None of them knew I was the one who had taken over. They believed it was Tambo, so I was safe even if they were caught."

"So long as Tambo was dead."

"I arranged that, too. You said so yourself."

"Now what?" the Phantom asked.

"You said, a moment ago, that you had one solution. I confess I don't see any."

"Have you got a gun, Watson?"

"It's in my coat pocket. I thought about killing you as we climbed the stairs, but I figured I might still fool you. That was my mistake."

"Stand up." The Phantom got to his feet also. "Lift your hands and keep them high. Remember that it would be no painful duty for me to have to put a slug through your back. In fact, I'd enjoy it."

Watson offered no argument when his gun was taken from him. The Phantom examined the blue-black revolver, broke the breech and took out all the bullets. He rolled one of them between his thumb and forefinger, looked keenly at Watson, then stuck the bullet into the firing chamber. He closed the gun and laid it on the table. "That's your way out," he said, in a voice like ice.

Watson bit his lip. "I didn't think—you had—exactly that—in mind."

"Can you think of another way? And consider Elise's future at the same time?"

"I—suppose not. What will you tell her?"

"That you died fighting the devils who had almost ruined her life. Oh, I'll make a hero of you."

Watson allowed a pathetic smile to spread over his face. "I rather like that, Phantom. I don't relish the idea, but the outcome—yes. Yes, my dying as a hero under gangland guns would just about insure Elise against ever going back to their kind."

"In any event," the Phantom said, "you have little choice. If you don't die here, you'll wind up in the electric chair. I can promise you that."

Watson ran his tongue around lips that had gone bone-dry. He was shaking slightly, touching the edge of the table with his fingertips for support. He looked down at the ugly gun, looked up at the Phantom's impassive face.

"As you say," he said hoarsely, "I have no choice. Under the circumstances, I must think of Elise. Will you see that she comes through this?"

"You have my word."

"Thank you. That's enough for me. How long will you give me?"

"Not long."

"Minutes? Hours?"

"I'll walk out now. I'll wait at the foot of the stairs on the floor below. If there

"Tambo was an idiot, too. I had all the money. It will make Elise wealthy, and be of some service after all. I simply told Tambo you were on his tail and sent him here to hide."

The Phantom, his gun level, backed toward the door. "Well, I guess there is nothing else. Walk toward me, Watson."

Watson obeyed, shuffling his feet, letting his shoulders droop. He was suddenly an old and defeated man. He put out his hand. "Would you shake hands with me, Phantom?"

The Phantom nodded, moved up to Watson and suddenly brought up his left fist. It hit Watson a glancing blow, serving only to stun the man with surprise, rather than physically. The Phantom got behind him and clapped a hand over his mouth. He forced Watson over beneath the single light and smashed the bulb with his gun

NEXT
ISSUE

THE MERRY WIDOW MURDERS

is no shot in two minutes, I'll come back. If I do, I'll kill you."

Watson said, "I'm all caught up. Funny, I always knew it would end this way. I used to have nightmares about it. They'd scare the hell out of me and when I woke up, I'd tell myself I was finished. Then it would be daylight and nobody is afraid by day. There was all that beautiful money, just for the taking. I couldn't stop."

THE PHANTOM said nothing. Watson suddenly reached for the gun. The Phantom grabbed his wrist and twisted it cruelly, throwing the man back a step.

"What kind of a gap do you think I am, Watson? It only takes one slug to blow your brains out—or mine. The gun stays on the table. You walk to the door with me. You stand there until I'm at the bottom of the steps. Then you walk back and do what you have to do."

"I don't blame you," Watson sighed.

"About the money Tambo was supposed to have. He never really had it, did he?"

muzzle. Then he propelled Watson to the door.

"Right to the bitter end, you're a louse," he whispered. "Kip is at the foot of the stairs. You signaled him by lighting a cigarette when we arrived here. You phoned him from your apartment. He knows you were going to pull some stunt to get me to walk out alone. The moment I do, Kip starts shooting. But there's a little change in plans, Watson. I'm staying here. You're going down the stairs."

Watson tried to struggle, but he was no match for the Phantom's strength. The Phantom opened the door, gave Watson a shove. The man went toppling off the top step. Before he could yell, Kip started shooting. He fired three times and each slug smacked into Watson's body. It lurched crazily against the wall, slid over to the other side, crumpled, and started rolling down the stairs. Halfway down, it got stuck and stayed there, a gruesome, bleeding hulk.

At the head of the stairs, the Phantom could see Kip at the bottom. Street light

made the killer visible. "Are you okay, Boss?" Kip called up.

"I'm fine, Kip. Good-by, Kip."

The Phantom fired twice. Kip managed to stagger out to the sidewalk, but when he fell, he was motionless from then on. The Phantom walked down the steps slowly. He couldn't get past Watson's wedged corpse so he kicked it free, let it roll soddenly down, made his way past it and on to the street where the air smelled cleaner.

Somewhere in the vicinity, a woman was yelling. The shots must have wakened her. A radio car swung around the corner. The Phantom stood at the curb, waiting.

Soon he'd have to go to the hospital and tell Elise that her father had died at the hands of a crook. That much the Phantom meant to grant Watson, but not for the dead man's sake. It was only because of Elise.

Muriel would guess the truth. Nobody fooled Muriel for long. She'd bawl him

out in her own sweet way, then kiss him and call him a sentimental fool. He wasn't. What he'd done had been deliberate. There'd been only a vague sort of plan in his mind when he'd called on Watson. However, when he'd heard Watson phone Kip and set the stage for murder, the answer came.

There wasn't any sentiment to it at all. The whole thing had been cold-blooded. He had fought Watson and his killers exactly the way they fought, and he'd go on conducting this everlasting war against crooks as long as he could.

But he was glad that Elise would never have to know. Affairs like this always had bitter endings, but there was a grim satisfaction about it if someone was helped.

By the time the Phantom reached the hospital, he was whistling softly. He was looking forward to taking Muriel home. It would be dawn soon. They liked being out in the dawn. The air is clean then, and wholesome. He felt as if he'd never have enough clean air. ● ● ●

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"Get out, you lousy cop!"



YOU take the rap

By PHILIP MORGAN

He wasn't guilty—but he was a satisfactory suspect!

IT IS tough enough being a cop, but when your friends get involved in the dirt you have to take, that makes it worse. And Frankie Shapiro was a friend. Sure, he worked along the fringes of the underworld and maybe the bucks he turned weren't quite honest, but he was still a nice guy and a good friend. He

wasn't the kind who would lay in wait for a man and then cut him down with a shotgun blast in the chest.

That was the way Duke O'Neill got it and everyone was sure Frankie did the job. There had been a long-standing feud between Frankie and the Duke, and Captain Shane was sure it had culminated in

the killing. Commissioner Torrance and Ed Paulson, the D. A., were sure, too. The trouble was, Frankie couldn't account for his time the previous evening, when the shooting had occurred. Then, when they picked him up and told him, he didn't shed any tears over the Duke's sudden demise.

But I knew Frankie Shapiro and I knew he wasn't a killer. He and Duke had both wanted Doris Lang, but neither of them had wanted her that bad. If Frankie had wanted to shoot anyone to get a clear field with Doris, he would have drilled Tony Romero. It was well known that Tony had cut both Frankie and Duke out with the tall, blonde singer. Tony had the dough and that was what interested Doris. Tony ran the books on the south side of town and maybe he ran a few other things, although we had never been able to prove anything on him. Anyhow, he was number one with Doris.

So now, as I waited for the jailer to let me into the cell block, I was wondering how I was ever going to convince anyone that Frankie was the wrong boy. Offhand it didn't look very promising. Frankie had never won any medals for civic improvement and no one was going to be very interested in saving his skinny frame from the chair. The commissioner figured the quick arrest would give him a boost in the papers and the D. A. was always anxious to rack up a murder conviction. Captain Shane wouldn't frame him, but Shane really figured Frankie had done the job. So the way it added up, it was find the real killer, or watch a man die for a crime he didn't commit. No good cop likes that.

Frankie was sitting on the edge of the cot when I came into the cell. He was reading the morning paper and trying to appear unconcerned, but when he looked up I saw the fear in his eyes. Frankie had always been small-time and this rap was way out of his class. He was scared.

"Howdy, kid," I said, and sat down and offered him a cigarette.

He took it and bent forward while I held the lighter.

"Come down to view the cold-blooded killer?" he asked wryly.

"Something like that. Maybe you better tell me about it."

"What's to tell? I was out last night and can't prove where, so they've got me."

"Didn't you see anyone? What the hell were you doing?"

"Doris called and asked me to meet her after her last show. I walked around and ended up outside the Blue Angel about one. Duke got it at twelve, while I was still out walkin'. I had time to do the job."

"What did Doris want?"

"Nothin' important. She just hadn't seen me for a while—been busy, she said. Last night she was free, so she gave me a ring."

"Busy with Tony Romero. Did she know you wouldn't come to the club before one?"

"I guess so. I always wait around outside for her. It's Nick Fargo's joint and we don't waste any love on each other."

"Has it penetrated your thick skull that she might have been framing you?" He didn't like it at all and for a minute I thought he was going to take a punch at me, but he finally relaxed.

"You're off your rocker. Doris is a nice kid."

"Sure, I'm nuts. Is there any reason you can think of why Tony Romero would want Duke dead?"

"No." He thought about it for a second. "He might want *me* dead, but not Duke. I never paid Tony any protection and he collects from every other book on the south side. But Duke paid his dues like a good little boy."

THAT was enough for now. I advised him to stay cool and then I left. When I got back to my office upstairs, I put my feet on the desk and thought for awhile. It was plain enough what had happened, or it seemed plain to me, but the proof was something else again. Frankie had hit it when he said that Tony might want him dead. Tony knew all about the bad blood between Frankie and Duke O'Neill

and he had capitalized on it. He had Duke bumped, or did the job himself, knowing Frankie would be blamed. It was a neat way of getting rid of a troublesome character.

From here, it looked like the key figure to start working on was Doris Lang. She had pulled Frankie clear out in left field while the job was done, so she had known all about it. An idea began to take shape and before long I had worked out an outline. Maybe, if I could scare her, it would work. It was something to try, anyhow. I pulled my feet off the desk and left headquarters.

Outside, the sun was bright and cheerful, but it was late fall and there was a sharp bite to the air. It felt good and the city looked clean and peaceful, which was deceiving. Under that peaceful exterior, men and women argued and fought and sometimes killed. They killed for a lot of reasons, but mainly, they killed for money. I could sometimes forgive the passion killers, but the others, the cold-blooded babies, got no sympathy from me. My job was to get them. Tony Romero was that kind of killer and I was going to get him.

Doris Lang lived in a new apartment building on the south side. It was nice, but not so nice that they made you take off your shoes before entering the lobby. It had all the conveniences and quite a few of the luxuries, but nothing glared. The place smelled like dough, more dough than Doris made singing at the Blue Angel.

I found the apartment number in the directory and took the elevator up to four. It was one of those do-it-yourself numbers that glided up swiftly and silently. It gave me the creeps, as those things always do. I was glad to get out of it and into the hall. I went along the hall, letting my feet sink about three feet down into the carpet, and knocked at the door of 405. I didn't get an answer, so I tried again, really laying it on this time. Pretty soon a sleepy voice called, "Who is it?"

"Lieutenant Boyle, Homicide," I said.

I heard hurrying sounds before she opened the door. She had evidently been

hunting for a robe, because she didn't have it all the way on when she opened the door. The view wasn't bad at all. I decided that maybe Frankie wasn't quite as daffy as I'd figured.

"What do you want?" she asked, after taking a look at the badge.

I pushed past her and she stood by the door uncertainly for a moment before she closed it and followed me into the living room. I sat down in an easy chair and laid my hat on the floor beside me. She stood there while I stared at her. Finally she got nervous, turned away and took another chair near mine.

"I hear you called Frankie Shapiro last night and asked him to drop around and see you after your last show. That right?"

"Yes," she replied and gave a very convincing shudder. "And to think he shot a man on his way to see me! It's horrible."

"It sure is," I agreed. "You seem pretty sure he shot him. I thought you liked Frankie."

"I do like him," she said and crossed her legs. They were good legs and she showed plenty of them, but I had other things on my mind right then. "I thought it was open and shut. You know Frankie and Duke never got along."

"Everyone keeps reminding me of it. I couldn't forget it if I tried. Everyone seems to think because they had a few run-ins that Frankie's the boy. I'm not convinced. If I shot every guy I took a punch at, the morgue would be full. The whole deal is a little too pat for me."

"Of course Frankie was a friend of yours," she said sweetly. "Maybe that makes a difference."

"If you were a man, I'd bat you for that. Now trot out your reasons for calling him last night and we'll look 'em over. It's general knowledge that you haven't given him the right time for the last six months. Ever since you started going around with Tony Romero."

She had been expecting that and didn't bat an eye.

"I just wanted to talk to him," she said, shrugging her beautiful shoulders. "Is that a sin, Lieutenant?"

"Not necessarily. It could be, if you were calling him so he'd be sure to be out when they lowered the boom on Duke O'Neill."

"Are you accusing me of having something to do with that?" she shrilled. "You've got a nerve, coming in here and giving me a hard time when the case is all wrapped up. Why would I put the finger on Frankie? He's a friend of mine."

"You don't want to believe everything you read in the papers," I said. "And you'd put the finger on your mother if Tony told you to. But it isn't going to take. I think I know what happened, and when I get the proof, you'll be out of society for a long time. Think about it and if you get worried, give me a ring." I got to my feet and started for the door, letting the words kind of drift back at her. "If you turned state's evidence on Tony I might be able to get you a suspended sentence."

She squealed like a rat in a trap.

"Get out, you lousy cop! I didn't have anything to do with anything! Frankie killed Duke O'Neill and that's the end of it. Leave me alone!"

I let myself out and went down the hall, making as much noise as was possible on the deep carpet. Then I moved swiftly and silently back to her door and put my ear against it. The sound of a phone being dialed was barely audible. This time I went away and kept going. I had her worried and that was what I wanted.

I WENT to see Tony Romero. He had his office in the back half of a new one-story building. The front half was occupied by a real estate office, or that's what it said. The place was a known book, but it was never raided. There was no getting around it, Tony knew the right people on the vice squad.

I went in, pushed past the counter and rapped on the door to the back room. After a little talk with the hard-faced kid who opened the door, I was let in. It was the usual big room with the radio and the

telephones and the big board showing odds and race results. The tough kid led me through the room to a smaller room on one side. I went in and found Romero sitting in a big chair while a barber shaved him. He nodded and that was all.

Tony Romero was a thin, medium-tall Italian, with the olive skin and black eyes of his race. His features were all small and even, and his teeth were as white as polished ivory. It wasn't too hard to imagine Tony as a boy serving Mass. But there was no mercy in Tony Romero, no heart, just a cold driving ambition.

Tony loved clothes and women and money and he knew how to get them. Ruthlessness had begun to leave its stamp on him, in the curve of his thin-lipped mouth. He had come a long way, Tony had, from the days when he was pushing marihuana and bringing in customers for the neighborhood girls. He had gotten to the top by outsmarting most of his competitors and killing off the rest. Some of the big shots had never touched a gun, but Tony wasn't one of them. He was a killer.

"What brings you around here, Lieutenant?" he asked mockingly. "I thought you were a homicide dick?"

I noticed that the thin-faced kid stayed right behind me.

"I'm still in Homicide, Tony," I said. "You heard about Duke O'Neill getting it. I'm working on the case."

"I thought they salted Frankie Shapiro."

"For the press. Now I've got to find out who really did the job. I thought you might be able to give me a little help."

He smiled softly. "You tryin' to say you think I might've had somethin' to do with it?" I knew he had talked to Doris Lang, so he knew what I thought.

"I wouldn't exactly say that, Tony. I was just passing by and thought you might have an idea."

"I don't. As far as I'm concerned you've got the right man. It doesn't make any difference to me one way or another. I didn't hardly know O'Neill."

"I didn't really think you'd be much help," I said and turned to go. Then I turned back and said, "Oh, by the way, is it true you were having a little trouble with Frankie Shapiro because he wouldn't pay protection on his book?"

That hit him where it hurt. He grabbed the towel out of the barber's hand and angrily scrubbed off the remaining soap as he came to his feet. He stood in front of me with the towel in his hand and shook it at me.

"Leave me alone, copper!" he said with an ugly look on his face. "You got nothin' on me and you never will have. But don't needle. I won't stand for it."

Something broke inside me then. Maybe it was thinking of all the lousy deals he'd pulled that we hadn't been able to tap him for. Maybe it was the idea that a punk like that guy could bribe some cops into leaving him alone. But having him stand there and threaten me didn't help matters any, either.

I brought the right up from my hip and hit him flush on the jaw. He back-pedaled until he struck the chair and then took it over with him in a huge fall. I sidestepped and wheeled, catching the kid behind me just as his hand was coming out from under his coat with a gun. I lashed out with my foot and took him on the shin and he dropped the gun and grabbed his leg, yelling bloody murder. I spun back and this time my gun was out. But Tony was out cold and the barber cowered against the wall, his hands high. I turned back to the kid, shoved him aside and got out of there.

I drove back to Headquarters, giving myself hell all the way for acting like such a dope.

I spent the rest of the day working on some papers, but my mind was on Frankie Shapiro, Tony Romero, and Doris Lang, the girl with the million dollar shape and the bedroom eyes. She had fingered Frankie, I was sure of that, so she deserved to be used as bait in my trap for Romero.

But I couldn't quite get my conscience

to leave me alone. Maybe Doris wasn't so bad, just a poor kid who had seen a chance to get next to a lot of easy money. The temptation had been too much for her . . . Then I remembered that she intended to keep quiet and let Frankie die in the chair and I didn't feel so bad. He had always treated her fine and this was her way of saying thanks.

AT SIX O'CLOCK I went out and ate, and was back in my office at seven. I called Art Talbot, the jailer, and told him to have someone bring Frankie down to my office. When Frankie came I told the uniformed boy who was with him to leave, that I had a long bout of questioning with Frankie and wouldn't need him. Frankie looked puzzled, but he kept his mouth shut. In his racket you learned to keep quiet when in doubt. When the cop had gone, I got up and paced the room a few times wondering how to put it to him. Finally I went behind the desk and sat down.

"Kid, you were framed. You know that, or should by this time. I'm pretty sure Doris Lang framed you for Tony Romero. I've got an idea and I need your help on it. You don't have to go along unless you want to."

"What're you driving at, John?"

"I want you to call Doris and ask her to meet you. Tell her we've released you and you have the straight, ungarbled word on the killing."

"I won't do it," he replied flatly.

"Why not? If she's innocent, it won't hurt her. If she isn't, you better be finding it out."

He thought about that for a long time and I saw it begin to take hold. He finally nodded.

"Okay, if you'll tell me the rest of it."

"After you talk to her, I'm going to call Tony Romero and tell him you're meeting Doris and she's giving you the low-down on the Duke O'Neill killing. If she doesn't know anything, Tony'll laugh and forget it. If she does, he'll come running. Then I can get a crack at him. It's

dangerous, because I can't get any help. As far as the Department is concerned, you're it. I'm asking you to stick your neck out and you have every right to refuse. I might be making a clay pidgeon out of you."

"What other chance have I got? Sure, I'll do it. I don't like involving Doris, but I'll give odds she's clean. Like you said, if she doesn't know anything, nobody gets hurt."

"Fine. What times does she go to work?"

"Ten."

"All right, we'll wait until just before nine and call her. Tell her to meet you at the circle at Fifth and Canal at nine-thirty. Then I'll call Romero."

So we waited and the slow minutes dragged by and I had time to figure about four thousand things wrong with the plan. But I couldn't see any other chance. Finally Frankie called her. He got her at the apartment and told her to meet him, and he had just the right touch of excitement in his voice. She was surprised that he was free, and that was the clincher. She agreed to come.

Then I put in a call to Romero. I disguised my voice and gave the story that Doris was meeting Frankie to put the finger on him, Tony. He was suspicious but I hung up while he was still asking questions, and I dialed another number at once so he couldn't trace the call. I knew he would come; he couldn't afford not to.

Frankie was white and plainly scared now, as much in fear of learning Doris had helped frame him as anything. We left Headquarters, getting out without being seen. We took my car and I raced for Fifth and Canal. It wasn't far and I knew we would be there before either of the other two could make it. My fears and doubts were gone now. We were committed and it was way too late to be worrying.

Six streets come together at Fifth and Canal and form a sizeable circle. It is a section of small businesses and no residences, and it was quiet now. There was a cold, miserable mist falling and the few

street lights cut faint swaths through the night. It was the perfect setting for a Lon Chaney thriller, with the streets shining wetly, and eerie shadows falling on every building.

We parked a half block from the circle and went ahead on foot. I stopped in the first doorway and Frankie went on down the sidewalk and leaned against a mail box, in plain sight. I had warned him to hit the deck and take Doris with him at the first sign of trouble. Stepping well back in the doorway, I drew my gun and waited. It was nine twenty-five.

We didn't wait long. A cab pulled into the circle almost at once. Doris Lang got out, paid the cabbie, and hurried across the street to Frankie, her high heels beating a sharp tattoo in the night's silence. She pulled up beside him and they began to talk, the sound of their voices coming faintly through the mist. I was thirty yards from them and they were only indistinct shapes in the poor light. We waited again and I had an idea of what Frankie must be going through, trying to hide his nervousness. The back of my neck prickled and my muscles ached with the strain.

THE car came fast. It came off Canal with its motor humming and its tires whining thinly on the wet pavement. It was a small, blue coupe and it made a straight pass at the two on the curb. Frankie and I yelled at the same time and he tried to pull Doris down behind the mail box. But she got frightened and yanked away just as the shotgun roared. She screamed and fell and then the coupe pulled up, while the man with the shotgun tried for a shot at Frankie.

I fired then, but missed in the uncertain light. There was a shouted command and the car started forward. I swung the gun on the driver and this time I didn't miss. The coupe tore forward and crashed into the side of a building and went over on its side. I ran for it as a man climbed out and jumped down to the street. It was Tony Romero.

Romero snapped a shot at me and then cut and ran. He was a fast-vanishing target, so I held my fire and chased him. We pounded through the circle and ran down Canal and I wasn't gaining much. I was afraid he would lose me, but a block down, he made a bad mistake. He crossed the street and ran dead up against the circle of light from a street lamp. If he crossed that circle, he was safe enough, but I would have a perfect target as long as he was in the light.

I had come up to thirty yards now and I halted against a wall, hoping he would try it. He was standing there against the wall ahead of me, his raspy breathing carrying back clearly. He was cornered now and it was either fight or give up. He wasn't going to step out into that light.

"Throw down the gun and come this way with your hands up, Tony," I ordered. "You don't have a chance."

His answer came in a jet of orange flame and the slug slapped the wall near me and fled screaming into the night. I laced three fast shots at that gun flame and heard him cough as one struck home. It jarred him loose from the wall and drove him staggering back. He emerged into the wet circle of light, one arm raised, trying to shield his eyes, the other holding his gun high. As he dropped the gun to fire I chopped down and fired again.

That was all. The gun fell from his hand and clattered along the pavement. He sighed, took one ballet step forward, and went down with one arm shoved out protestingly. He hit soddenly, but he never felt it.

When I got back to the circle, Frankie was down on his knees, cradling Doris in his arms. There was a gradually increasing knot of people standing around and I heard the wail of police sirens, coming fast. I stood above them and Frankie looked up at me, despair written all across his face.

"Ask her who killed Duke O'Neill," I said.

He shook his head, but she heard me and said clearly, "Tony Romero shot him. I helped frame you, Frankie. I'm sorry now."

"It's all right—forget it," he said and it was the thing to say, because she died a minute later.

I took the names of several of the people standing around who had heard her, and then the wagon came. They took the three of them away, Doris and Tony and the young punk who had been driving. It was the same kid who had tried to pull a gun on me in Tony's office.

Afterwards, we walked wearily back to the car and drove toward Headquarters.

"It'll be all right now, Frankie," I told him. "They'll drop the charge against you when I tell them about it."

"It doesn't matter," he replied and his voice was lifeless. "You know something, John? If I'd known it was going to turn out like this, I'd never have done it. I was positive you were wrong about Doris and just went along to prove it to you. Isn't that a laugh?"

But neither of us laughed. We rode through the dark, wet, cold streets and we both felt rotten.

Leo Todd was a master detective on television . . . but he had to ad lib without a script when he suddenly ran head on into a real crime situation in
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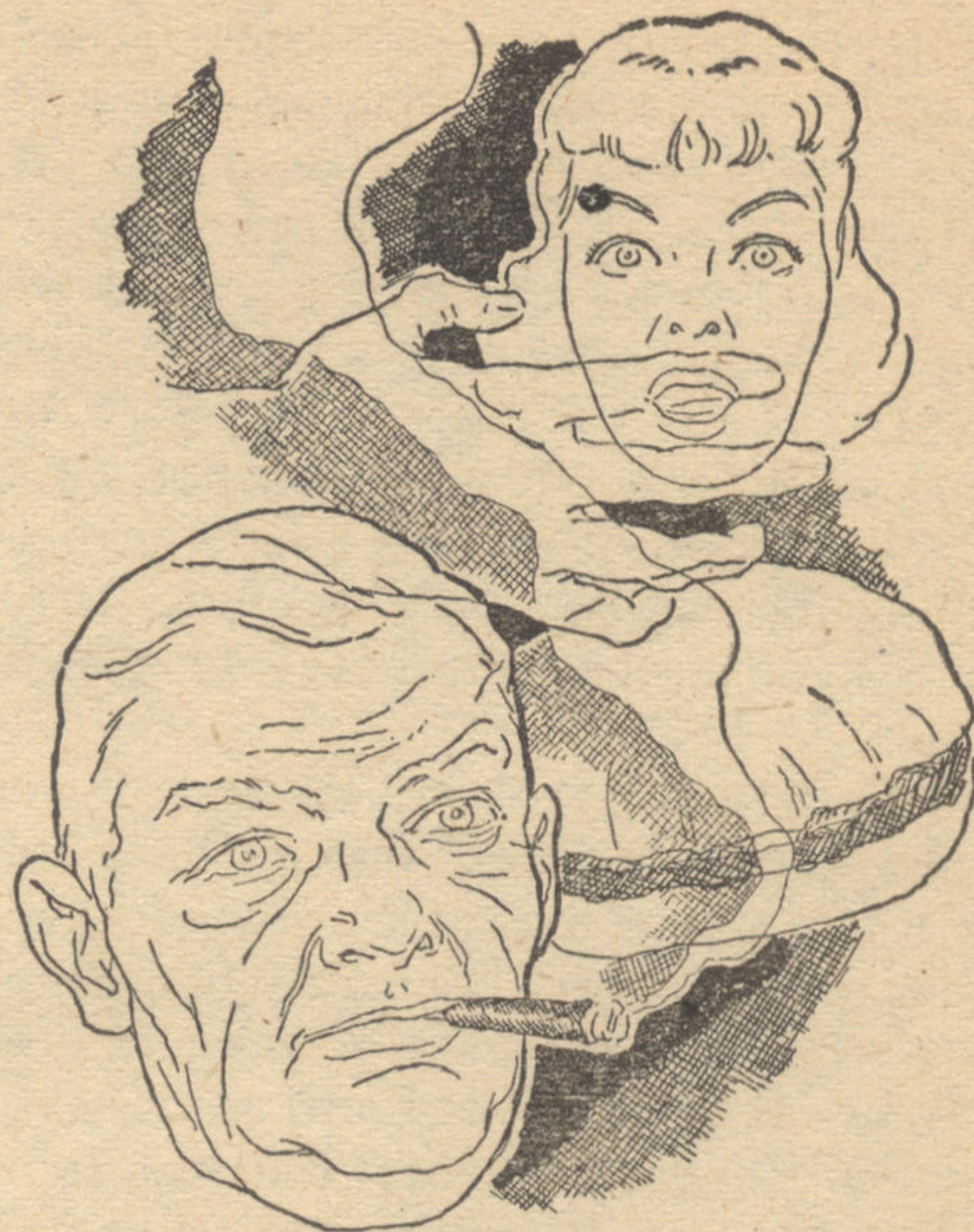
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THE HAMBURGER AND THE BLONDE

Why wouldn't the twelfth juror vote for conviction?

By JOHN L. BENTON



THE other eleven people in the room were plainly becoming peeved at the twelfth, Joe Morris. They'd been discussing the case for quite a few hours and were getting a little weary of it and wanted to get on home. Furthermore, there seemed to be absolutely no doubt whatever about the way the case should be disposed of.

"Look, Mr. Morris," said Albert Finch, the tall insurance man with the long face and graying temples. "You don't really have any serious doubt that this Max Whitson killed this blonde, do you?"

"If I didn't have the doubt," stubbornly grumbled Mr. Morris, "I wouldn't be voting the way I've been voting." He was a short, compactly-built restaurant man with a short, compact cigar stuck in his face.

"But look at the facts in the case," argued Sam Gibson, the chubby tailor. "Here's this good-looking blonde he's fallen for, head over heels, and he's given up his wife and family and lost the respect of his friends and even suffered in business because he's been carrying on with this blonde, and then he finds that she's about to dump him over for somebody else, this Henry Curry, a fellow who

comes along with a lot more money. I ask you, Mr. Morris, wouldn't you feel burned-up at this blonde?"

"And don't forget," chimed in Mrs. Henrietta Dawson, the rather pert housewife, "he was seen in the neighborhood of the blonde's apartment the night she was killed. Of course, he says he was just strolling up and down the streets, trying to think things over, that he never saw her that night, and remember, it was a chilly, drizzling night. People usually don't go just 'strolling' about on nights like that."

"And another thing," spoke up Fred Chinoski, the school teacher, "Whitson admits he was going to call on this blonde one last time to try to win her over again, to get her to stop seeing this Henry Curry. So why is it so hard to believe that he called on her that night? Everything seems to indicate, I grant you, that he still hoped to recapture her affections that night, so he probably took it all the harder when he finally realized she really was through with him."

"And did you notice his hands?" came in George Franklin, the construction man. "How big and strong they looked! They wouldn't have had any trouble choking the life out of someone."

All the eyes around the table were now steadily glowering at Joe Morris. He shifted his stub of a cigar to the other side of his face before grumbling, "If you're asking me to tell you how I vote now, I still vote no. I'm still not at all convinced he did it."

It was at this point that Mrs. Henrietta Dawson asked the question that was in the minds of the others too. "Mr. Morris," she said, "you didn't know Max Whitson personally, did you?"

Joe Morris's florid face showed annoyance. He shifted his cigar again. "Would I be sitting on the jury if I did?" he demanded in a scathing tone. "When the lawyers were questioning me, I said that this Whitson fellow once in a while dropped into my restaurant, that he was there the night of the killing, about eight o'clock, forty-five minutes or so before it's figured the blonde was killed. But who in this town doesn't drop into my place once in a while! Do you think I know everybody personally? Maybe we said 'good evening' or 'good morning' to each other sometimes. That's as far as us knowing each other went. I didn't even know what his name was—I recognized him from his picture in the paper after he was arrested."

"And he didn't say anything at all that night about this blonde or about where he was going that evening or anything like that?" Albert Finch, the insurance man, asked.

"I told the lawyers who questioned me before the trial started just what happened," Joe Morris replied a little wearily. "The guy came in and ordered a hamburger. I fixed it up for him. When he was through eating it, he got up and left. Maybe we said 'good night' to each other. I don't even remember that. We were busy that night."

"Then how can you be so sure he didn't do it?" Albert Finch wanted to know demandingly.

Joe Morris shifted his stogie again. "I'm not so sure," he said, shrugging a little. "It's just that I'm not so sure he did it either, that's all."

AT THIS point everybody hopped on Joe Morris at once, going over the whole case from start to finish, arguing it back and forth, detail by detail. They stressed the big points over and over: that the defendant, Max Whitson, admitted he was crazy about the blonde and that he'd found out she'd been seeing another man, this rich Henry Curry; that Curry had a pluperfect alibi, having been out of town that night; that Max Whitson, looking distraught and upset, had been seen in the vicinity of the blonde's apartment at the night of the killing. Although he had denied it at first, he was forced to admit it after the prosecution produced witnesses who'd seen him there. Finally, if all this weren't enough, there was the letter found in the blonde's apartment and in which Whitson had written starkly that if he couldn't have her, then nobody else would.

Hunched up in his chair, his cigar jutting like a cannon thrust from a porthole, Joe Morris listened for something like two hours while the bombardment of arguments swept down on him from all directions. When everybody was finally done and a great hush came over the room, the restaurant man shifted his cigar once more and said, "I'm still not convinced he did it."

With a hopeless shrug and much waving of hands the others just about gave up. The judge insisted, however, that they keep trying to reach a verdict.

Eight hours later a mistrial was finally declared.

Since it seemed so plain that Max Whitson really had killed this blonde, nearly everybody in town looked at Joe Morris askance. This lasted for two weeks. Then sensational news broke about the arrest of one Tony Marcus. It was just a routine pick-up in the hobo jungle, apropos of nothing special, but the mousy, long-nosed character, bleary with cheap wine, suddenly blurted out that he'd killed the blonde, that Harry Curry had paid him to do it. Then the whole business came to light about how the blonde had been blackmailing Harry Curry with the upshot

that Curry tried to skip town, was shot down by a shadowing policeman and, erroneously thinking he was dying, confessed that he had hired the Marcus character to kill the blonde.

All of which was quite a bit of excitement for any case, and all eyes were turned on chunky Joe Morris, the restaurant man, regarding him and his cigar with what amounted to unmitigated awe.

The eleven persons who'd served on the jury with him came down in a body to his restaurant and actually drank a toast "to the man who prevented us from

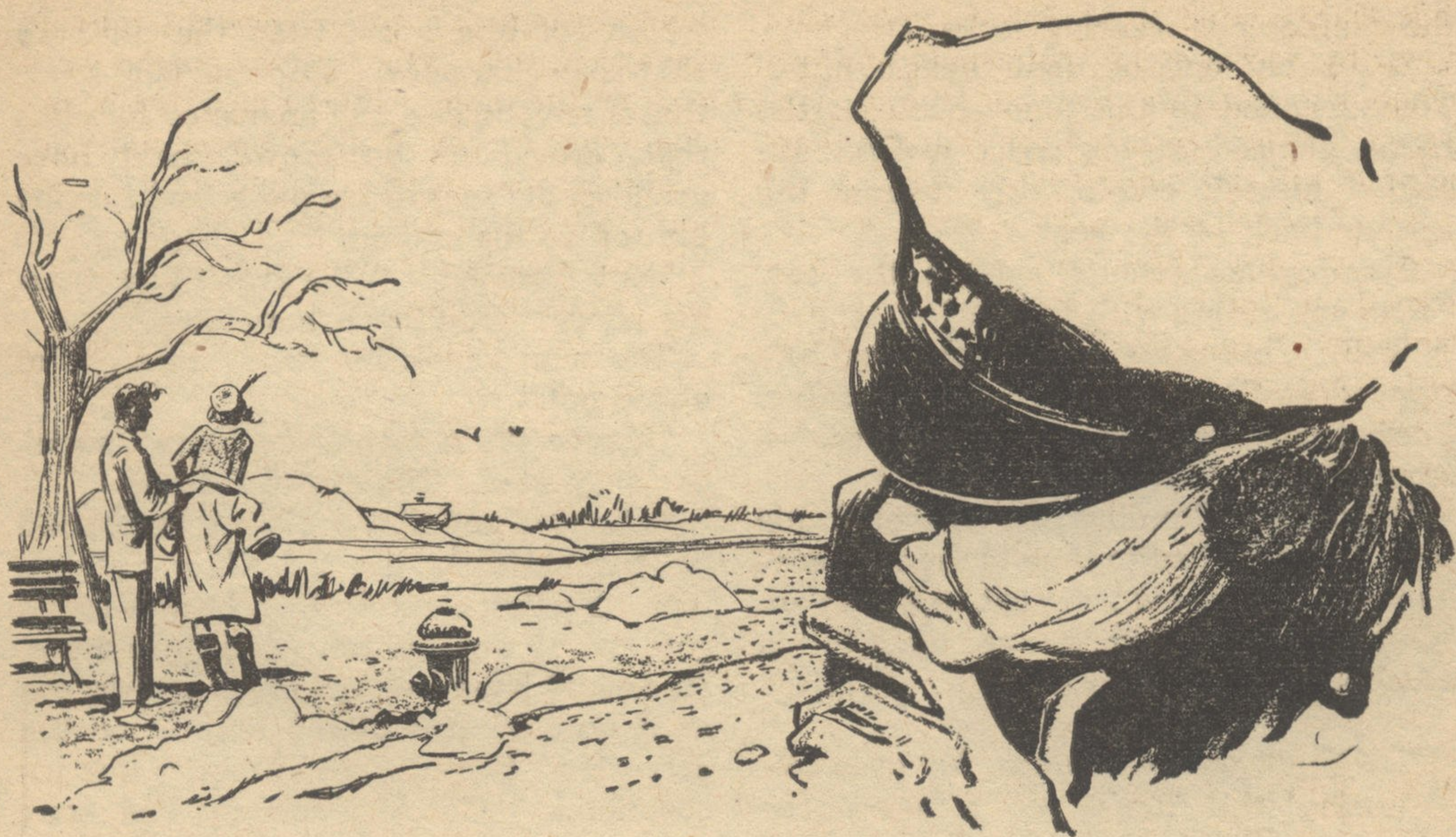
being responsible for a grievous miscarriage of justice." When all the glasses were back on the table, Albert Finch, the insurance man, looked at Joe Morris and said, "There's one thing, though, that keeps bothering all of us—how could you have felt so strongly all along that Max Whitson wasn't the murderer?"

Joe Morris allowed himself the touch of a smile. "It was just a little personal notion I had about it," he said. "I just figured a guy who intended calling on a pretty blonde girl-friend wouldn't order a hamburger—with onions on it!"

CRIMINALS AROUND THE WORLD

EVERY country has had its share of criminals and outlaws whose various crimes will always be remembered. Listed below—in jumbled fashion—are 8 such notorious characters, and the countries in which they committed all or most of their crimes. Match up at least 5 correctly for a passing score. 6 correct is good, 7 excellent, and 8 perfect.

- | | |
|--|-------------------|
| 1. JACK SHEPPARD, robber bold | (a) Scotland |
| 2. DORETEO ARANGO, alias "Pancho Villa" | (b) Italy |
| 3. DR. H. H. HOLMES, who murdered some 20 (and more) women for money | (c) England |
| 4. LANDRU, known as the modern "Bluebeard" | (d) Canada |
| 5. SALVATORE GIULIANO, bandit leader | (e) Mexico |
| 6. ABELARDO HURTADO de MENDOZA, assassin. A president of (?) died by his hand | (f) France |
| 7. WILLIAM HARE, wholesale killer | (g) United States |
| 8. J. ALBERT GUAY, mass murderer who time-bombed an airliner, killing his wife—and 23 other passengers | (h) Peru |



Bread Upon the Waters

By MORRIS COOPER

The cop thought he was seeing things—and he was!

PATROLMAN MIKE CUNNINGHAM chucked a gloved-thumb in the direction of the snow-blanketed park. His breath broke into steam puffs against the icy wind sweeping from the river. He asked, "Am I seeing things, Tony?"

The driver of the radio car twisted his head to glance toward the park. "I don't see anything," he said, after a moment.

"That guy on the bench. Take a good look at him."

Tony stared and shrugged his shoulders. "His clothes are kind of ragged, if that's what you mean. Guess it's tough on him in weather like this, but it ain't nothing new. You seen plenty like him before."

"His feet," Cunningham almost shouted. "Look at his feet."

Tony's lips pursed in a soft whistle of

disbelief. "He isn't wearing any shoes."

"Yeah!" There was an echo of awe in Cunningham's voice. "Even with two pairs of wool socks, not counting my brogans and rubbers, this snow is freezing my tootsies."

"Think we ought to go over?" Tony asked half-heartedly, reluctant to leave the comforting shelter of the prowl car.

"Maybe. Besides which I'm curious." Cunningham glove-warmed a nose which felt as though it might detach itself from his face at any moment. "Only thing—I was figuring we might look kind of silly if we had to book him for not wearing shoes."

"There's always a morals charge."

"Where's the indecent exposure in going around without shoes? Besides which

the character is wearing socks."

"Probably one of them health nuts." Tony listened to the time check on the radio, glanced at his wrist watch. He settled himself comfortably against the leather back of the seat.

Cunningham leaned against the car. "Who you riding with today?"

"Bill. This makes the sixth time he's stopped at Gussie's to tank up on coffee. Been yappin' all day about how cold—*saaay!* look at that!"

Patrolman Cunningham swiveled his neck. He was just in time to see the shoeless man giving his overcoat to a woman. "Guess maybe we'd better see what this is all about."

TONY got out of the car, his eyes following the figure of a retreating woman, the shoeless man's overcoat clutched tightly about her shivering body. She disappeared around a corner before the two officers were halfway across the street.

Patrolman Cunningham pointed to a rapidly gathering crowd apparently more interested in what they were witnessing than in getting out of the bitter cold. "This is one deal I've got to satisfy my curiosity about."

They pushed through the crowd and halted in front of the bench. "Okay, buddy," Cunningham asked, "what's the idea?"

"Idea?" The man glanced up pleasantly, the sharp wind ruffling the hair on his hatless head. "Idea of what, Officer?"

"Well, for one thing, how come you just gave your overcoat away?" He felt a strange reluctance to treat the man as a bum.

The man's face was calm and relaxed. His thin body gave the illusion that the park bench was longer than it actually was. "I'm afraid that's my business, Officer," he said. "I can't think of any reason why it should concern you." There was a note of softness in his voice which took the sting from the words.

There was something about this man

which set him apart from the ordinary skid-row character. Cunningham knew that if anyone else had answered him like that, crowd or no crowd, he'd have grabbed the seat of his pants and hustled him off to the station.

Tony frowned. "Why aren't you wearing shoes? Don't you have any?"

The man shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid not."

"Maybe it's a man from Mars," someone suggested. The crowd tittered.

A tinge of red that could not be blamed on the weather crossed Cunningham's face. Feeling or no feeling, he was still a cop and it was his job to ask questions. He should have collared the guy right off; as it was, he had placed himself on the defensive. He put stern authority into his command. "Cut the comedy and start talking, or I'll run you in."

"I think not," the man said quietly. "I'm not aware of any law which forbids my going about without shoes. Or," he added innocently, "is there such a law?"

"That's not an answer," snapped Cunningham.

The man smiled. "From the tone of your voice I gather there is none." The crowd burst into a spontaneous cheer and the man winked at them.

"We could always run you in on suspicion of insanity," Tony offered. This whole incident was definitely not in accord with the book of regulations, and he was regretting the impulse which had made him leave the warmth of the squad car.

"I don't doubt you could," the man nodded in agreement. "But I fear it would prove rather embarrassing. I assure you I'm quite capable of passing any sanity test."

CUNNINGHAM gave up the cause and searched for a means of graceful retreat. "Okay," he said, "let's have your address."

"I don't see why that should concern you, either."

"You don't, huh?" Tony glowered. "Well, that's one question the law does take care of."

The man shrugged his shoulders. "In that event I must regretfully inform you I am temporarily without an address."

"You are!" gloated Cunningham. "Got any money?"

"That is something of which I have but a dim memory."

"Let's go," Cunningham ordered. "That's plenty for a vagrancy rap."

"But," protested the man, "I had a dollar a few moments ago."

"And where is it now?"

"I gave it to a young lady. She said she was hungry, so I gave her my dollar. I could see she was suffering from the cold, so I gave her my overcoat."

"Just like that," Cunningham grunted. "You must be nuts."

"On the contrary, Officer, you might term it foolish gallantry. One night without an overcoat won't hurt me, while it might cause irreparable harm to a frail woman."

"I suppose," Cunningham asked sarcastically, "she's gonna bring it back to you tomorrow?"

"Oh, no. But in the morning I'll be able to find some work, and I can always get a coat from the Salvation Army. That is where I intended sleeping tonight, but I hardly imagined you would consider it a suitable address."

"What about your shoes?" Tony asked

"More evidence of my overwhelming lack of control. An aged man with tattered footwear passed and I gave him mine."

"The poor giving to the poor," snorted Cunningham. "But that don't change nothing. I'm still going to book you as a vagrant."

A woman pushed her way indignantly

through the crowd. "A fine thing!" she shouted, "putting a man in jail simply because he's kind!"

Cunningham backed up. "Sorry, lady, but I gotta do my duty."

The woman glared at him, then smiled in sudden triumph. "You couldn't arrest him, Officer, if he had any money, could you?"

"I wouldn't," Cunningham amended.

The woman turned to the crowd. "Well, what are we going to do about it?"

Cunningham watched a man's hat go around, saw Tony put some money into it, and shamefacedly added a dollar of his own to the collection.

Cunningham waited while the man limped off. As they headed back to the squad car, he shook his head. "Think I'll go to Gussie's for some coffee. My feet are killing me."

"When you get there, tell Bill to shake a leg," Tony said.

Cunningham turned for a last look and saw the shoeless man limp around a corner. "I can't figure him. But if it's a racket, he can have it."

The shoeless man grabbed the overcoat from the girl's hand. "I almost froze to death, waiting. Why didn't you come back?"

"I wanted to see what those cops would do. Then I spotted that charitable female in the crowd. I can tell her kind a mile off."

The man shivered in his overcoat. "I'm going to get some winter underwear." He jingled his pockets and smiled. "But it's worth it. Got almost sixty dollars."

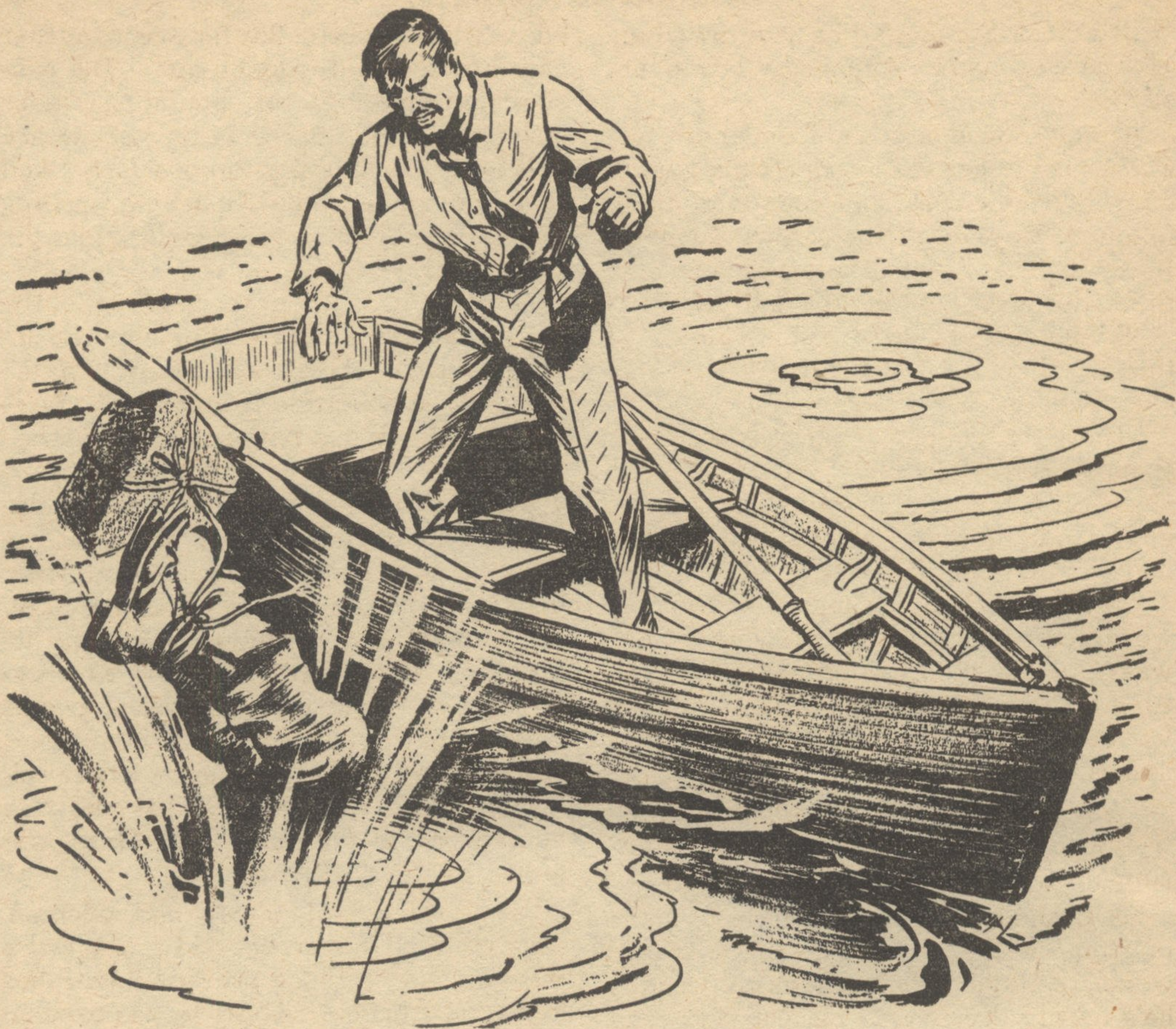
The girl linked her arm in his as they walked off. "Those feet of yours are like money in the bank."

The man grinned. "But we'd better hurry home. This wet weather is bad for wood—rots it."

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"You rowed out and dropped the bodies into the ocean. . . ."

As Good as a Corpse

By ROBERT ZACKS

*It was a big-time swindle
based on the flying saucers—
and when the con men got
going, the sky was the limit*

I GOT the call from my pal Detective Parker, and after phoning my city editor, I hopped a ride with a patrol car heading toward the office of the district attorney. When I got there, Parker was coming out of what he calls the "questioning" room, his beefy face red with irritation.

"Hi, Roy," I said. "Got something nice and bloody for me?"

"It's Geek Simmons," he said, scowling.

"The con man? Somebody knock him off?"

"I wish somebody had," he muttered. Parker bent over the wooden railing, took a folder from a desk, and nodded to me to follow. "Boy, of all the screwy swindles I ever heard of! What will these con men think up next? Wait till I tell you . . ."

"Swindles!" I said, disappointed. "I thought there'd be a nice corpse around. Our readers—"

"There's a couple of corpses around," snapped Roy, "if we can only find them. Geek Simmons is slippery. The kind of guy whose story you can't shake. We've had him on the griddle for hours."

"Maybe he's telling the truth," I said as we entered the bare room where Geek was seated on a hard chair surrounded by tired and frowning cops. "Con men don't let themselves in for murder raps. What makes you think—"

"Wait till you hear the hogwash he's trying to get us to swallow," Roy interrupted, his blue eyes glinting.

He pushed through the circle to stand in front of the con man. Geek looked worse than I'd ever seen him. Usually he's nattily dressed, in perfect taste, and gives the impression of an executive who's in the know on a big deal that will make everybody rich. He's about thirty-eight and his hair is blond and has a little wave to it, and his shoulders don't need padding. Right now the handsome face had deteriorated via dark circles under the eyes, paleness, and an agitated, frantic manner.

"Parker, honest," he wailed. "I'm giving it to you straight. That's just what happened!"

"Yeah, sure," said Roy coldly. "We believe every word you say. All we want to know is where to find Silvio and Dennison."

"But I told you," Geek said hysterically. "I told you what happened."

"Tell it again. From the beginning."

"I told you ten times, over and over . . ." Geek was wild, exhausted, close to the breaking point. Just what Parker want-

ed. I wish I had a dollar for every murder case broken by this technique. The constant questioning, the pounding under staring faces, until the brain gets weary and for a moment slips on *one* fact. And then the trained minds listening, waiting for that one break, leaping on it to tear the veil of lies away.

"Tell it again," Parker said patiently. He shifted his aching feet, uttered an inaudible sigh. Geek looked around appealingly at the circle of unbelieving faces and began to speak falteringly.

HE HAD been feeling good that day. He was in the money, though even if he wasn't you'd never know it. A confidence man's business capital is excellent clothing, shrewd understanding of human nature and an eternally vigilant alertness for a new method of separating people from money.

In the bar on Ninth Avenue where colleagues in his specialty brooded over new approaches to an easy buck, Geek was hailed by Jerry Silvio.

Jerry was small, tough, and talented. As a child he'd been boosted into many a transom, one of which proved an entrance into reform school. There he acquired an enthusiastic beginner's approach to locksmithing, safe-cracking, wire-tapping and sundry arts. After serving his term he developed a real talent for auto mechanics and such skills as were necessary in the art of hastily disguising stolen autos by changing fenders, switching wheels, and eliminating engine block numbers.

"Hey, Geek," said Jerry eagerly, grabbing his arm. "Have a drink on me."

Geek graciously consented, his patronizing manner being dictated by the fact that con men are the elite of the crime world. However, his sense of superiority was shaken when he saw the huge wad of bills Jerry Silvio hauled out to pay for the drinks.

"You're doing well I see," said Geek, staring hypnotized at the money. His mind began working. "Perhaps you'd care to join me in a scheme I—"

"That's just what I wanna talk to you about, Geek," said Jerry excitedly. "Pike Dennison and me is already in a setup."

Geek's face stiffened. Dennison was an unbeloved competitor with a tremendous reputation for swindles on an international scale.

"The Spanish Prisoner game?" sneered Geek.

"Nuttin' like that," said Jerry, his eyes glittering. "Pike's got a pip of an idea. We'll make a pile of dough. And we want you in with us, Geek. How about it?"

Geek's eyes narrowed. "Me?" he asked suspiciously.

"It takes three men at least." Jerry was virtually panting with eagerness at this opportunity to move in higher, more exciting echelons of crime. "Pike asked if I could get you in. He says you're as sharp as they come."

"He did, eh?" Geek watched Jerry stow away the huge roll of bills. "Well, I'm open to suggestion. Let's find Pike."

Geek had never been in Pike Dennison's hotel suite and when he and Jerry got there he was awed at the lavish furnishings. Pike was a smiling, white-haired man of sixty. He came forward, hand outstretched cordially.

Unlike Geek who alternated between separating foolish women from their money and the equally risky phony business directory advertisement sales, Pike Dennison was big time. In his younger days he'd developed a virgin swindling field. He'd act as a fishing and hunting guide to wealthy men on vacation in the wild north country. During a long trip he would show them a private cabin retreat of his own and somehow the customer would stumble across gold-bearing quartz on the property, and frantically buy the supposedly ignorant trapper out for a goodly sum. The suckers never squawked. Indeed, Pike Dennison sturdily maintained that he did more good than harm because his suckers were left with an idyllic wood retreat where they could get fresh air, quiet and sleep, even though the price was a bit high.

"Mr. Simmons," Pike greeted him. "How good of you to join us."

"What's on your mind, Mr. Dennison?" asked Geek warily as he sat down. Jerry nervously sat down beside him, grabbing for the brandy Pike had placed on the end table near the couch.

"I have an idea," said Dennison, pulling up a chair, "that I feel will make us money. Interested?"

Geek waited politely. Jerry's eyes were riveted on Pike Dennison's face. Pike chuckled as he slowly unwrapped a fat cigar. He had the con man's sense of the dramatic; all con men are fine actors and must love their work. Geek began to appreciate the pace and timing.

"Shoot," said Geek impatiently.

Pike Dennison took a deep puff of his cigar. He leaned forward, eyes shining. "We are going to build a flying saucer."

Geek looked stunned. Jerry uttered little giggles of delight and hugged himself.

"What the hell for? And how you going to do it?" gasped Geek. "There aren't any flying saucers. It's all imagination."

"A million people have been seeing flying saucers," Pike went on. "All over the country. Papers, magazines are full of it. We're going to cash in on it. We'll build a flying saucer and fly it around. I've got a chunk of wild country I picked up for peanuts. It's half hill country, half scrub pine. We'll build it there. That's why Jerry's in on this."

"But—" Geek was at a loss for words.

"Can you imagine the excitement when our flying saucer hovers over New York and lets everybody get a good look? We'll tease them for a while and then, of course, we'll probably be followed by Government planes, or by reporters, to our landing place. They'll break in and question us, take newsreels. Why, we'll have the whole nation focusing on us!"

"How's that going to make money?"

A LOOK of great scorn came into Pike Dennison's face. He shook his head pityingly, as does a great teacher talking

to a moronic student.

"Man alive, there's a million ways! Half of them legitimate, too. We can sell a phony story to the newspapers about our new invention which we've got to keep secret. We can sell stocks to the public in our new flying saucer company. We'll be endorsing all sorts of products, making personal appearance tours. All we need is one or two rich suckers to invest in the business and we're rich."

"How are you going to build a flying saucer?" demanded Geek, his eyes bulging with the concept, the vastness of the scheme.

"It's simple," said Pike grinning. "I was thinking about it and suddenly it came to me. One of the main characteristics of these supposed flying saucers is their ability to hover in one place, then dart away. Like dragonflies. Now, think carefully. A helicopter can hover in one place, can't it? Why can't we build a couple of round aluminum sheets shaped like saucers and put one under a helicopter and one over it? I can buy a helicopter for twenty thousand and—"

"Wait a minute," said Geek. "You mean the top aluminum sheet will *enclose* the helicopter blades? Won't that stop air from getting to the blades? Will it fly that way?"

"We'll have to do a little experimenting, of course," Pike admitted. "But I can tell you this. I guarantee you we'll get that helicopter off the ground and that it'll look like the reported flying saucer. Even if we have to put the blades outside we can go through with it, because from the ground they'll just see the bottom aluminum plate and we'll be high up."

"You'll need a good man for that—a pilot," protested Geek.

"We've got one," Pike told him. "A young research engineer right out of school. He thinks we're a legitimate outfit trying to turn out a flying saucer that will sell."

There was a moment of silence and the three of them stared at each other. Geek gulped.

"Count me in," he said.

"Good." Pike Dennison was pleased. "That'll cost you fifteen grand for your share. We have to buy a helicopter, a lot of sheet aluminum and pay off some truckers to deliver stuff late at night, boys who can keep their mouths shut. Then I'll need a couple of power units, too. It'll take plenty of dough, but the take will be worth it."

He stared sharply at Geek and Geek knew he was being studied to see if he was big time or small time.

"Okay," he said promptly.

* * * * *

"Go on," Detective Parker said mercilessly.

Geek Simmons looked up with lacklustre eyes. His throat was rasping.

"Please," he moaned, "can I have a drink? My throat's killing me."

I watched as one of the detectives brought in a paper cup of cold water from the inside office. Parker came over to me and muttered in my ear.

"How d'you like that? Flying saucers yet."

"Well, I don't know," I said slowly. "You know, Roy, a swindle like that really could go over. You should see the people who drop in at the newspaper office who swear up and down they saw one. Sound, respectable business men, doctors, merchants."

Parker gave me a hard look. "I'm glad you aren't on the Force, that's all," he growled. "Wait till you hear the rest of his story. You'll probably have headlines that will drive everybody nutty."

He turned on his heel and went back to Geek.

"Go on," he snarled. "Tell the rest of that pipe dream."

* * * * *

At first there was some technical trouble. Geek Simmons was told about it by Jerry Silvio who came back from the wild brush spot where construction was proceeding.

"Geez," said Jerry, awed. "You oughta see what's goin' on up there. I thought I was good at tools. That young feller Pike's hired is smart as a whip. He's got gadgets I never heard of."

"What's holding things up?" Geek asked restlessly. "I already got the charter for the corporation. Thirty thousand shares of stock ready to go at a par value of a hundred bucks. I got a sucker stock list I bought at a fancy price, too."

"That young engineer wants a thing called a wind tunnel," explained Jerry. "I gotta buy some awful big fans and it'll take a month at least till it gets built because we dassn't hire no more guys. Pike don't want too many guys should be in on it because somebody'll have a loose mouth."

"What the hell's he need a wind tunnel for?" Geek wanted to know. "Won't that cost a lot of dough?"

"Yeah, but he's gotta have it. Something about how the helicopter blades can't get a bite on the air and the air flow is wrong. The aluminum saucer we put around the copter stops the wind from—"

"Damn it!" shouted Geek. "I told Pike that it wouldn't work."

"Pike says the engineer knows his stuff," Jerry said impatiently. "For cryin' out loud, what are *you* complaining about? You got the easiest part. We're up there getting eat up by mosquitos, breaking our backs, and *you're* kicking. At least we got a finished full-sized saucer. Here, lookit these pictures Pike sent."

HE TOOK them out of an envelope he had in his breast pocket. Geek stared at them. A dish-shaped whitish object rested in an open space surrounded by trees. You could judge the size of it by comparison with the men standing nearby. It must have been thirty feet in diameter and ten feet high.

Geek felt a rising excitement. Jerry Silvio beamed at him.

"Pike says you should set up a dark room and make a couple of thousand of

these prints. Don't give it to no photographer. Do it yourself."

"What for?"

"The day we fly over a city you send a print to every paper in that city, see? You sign a phony name, with no return address, like you're careless and forgot. Say you're a kid and you were hikin' through the woods and you heard noise, see? You saw this saucer and you had a camera with you and took a picture."

Geek looked pained. "They'll never swallow it."

"Listen, will ya? For the luvva Mike, let me finish. Pike figured this out. You say in the letter that if they'll buy the picture and pay you extra you'll lead them to where you saw the flying saucer. It'll drive them crazy, especially when people will see it in that city we're flying over."

"Suppose the engineer never gets the thing to fly?" demanded Geek.

"If he don't," Jerry said with a smirk, "he'll be flying himself, with wings of his own, don't worry. And we don't lose much because we can always sell the helicopter and tools. It's a cinch. All we gotta do is make the helicopter look saucer-shaped and that ain't turned out to be hard at all."

After Silvio left Geek got busy setting up a malodorous dark room in which he sweated out the development of a few hundred prints of the flying saucer, getting an ex-con friend to help with the work.

When he was finished he sent a message to the post office of the small town nearest the isolated spot where construction was secretly taking place. Ten days of weary waiting and then the answer came, an exultant letter from Pike Dennison. They had made their first flight. It had been necessary to put the blades outside the aluminum oval that enclosed the helicopter and very slight changes were made in the shape to improve air flow, but they were ready. Geek was to come up for the first daytime test over wild country, the previous flight having been made at night.

Geek rushed up by car.

With Pike Dennison and Jerry Silvio,

he stood in the small hollow and stared exultantly at the huge silvery flying saucer. The engineer, a young fellow of twenty-three with large competent hands and steady gray eyes, was, with difficulty, rolling himself into the open space between the two aluminum edges that tapered down from the top and up from the bottom. "Gosh," said Geek nervously. "I hope it'll go up."

"It went up last night," Pike told him, chuckling. "Come on, the view's better from the hill. He's goin' to fly out over the ocean so nobody'll see him. There's no shipping in this area."

The three of them labored up the hill. From its summit could be seen the thin edge of blue where the ocean began, and faint, soaring dots that were seagulls. It was a cold, wet day and Geek shivered as he thrust his hands in his pockets.

"Okay," yelled Jerry Silvio, waving wildly in answer to the pilot's wave. "Go ahead."

They waited tensely. Then a roar broke from the silvery oval and the helicopter blades began to whirl, and suddenly they seemed to flatten, go faster and become invisible as the immense dish lifted and moved slowly upward. The three of them watched it move faster and faster out over the water and then, suddenly—

Boooooommm!

Transfixed, they saw the tremendous flare in the distance, saw the twisted top shell of the flying saucer whirl off and the two flaming segments fall into the ocean.

"Come on!" Pike shouted. "Maybe we can pick him up."

They ran toward the beach. There was a rowboat used by Pike Dennison for fishing. He and Jerry clambered into it. Geek held back.

"Get in, for the luvva Mike!" yelled Jerry, grabbing an oar. "Hurry."

"I—I'm afraid," gulped Geek. "I can't swim. I'll get drowned."

They cursed Geek fluently, acidly, and bending to the oars, rowed away, the boat rising and falling in the choppy water. Geek watched them fight their

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way through enormous swells, his heart in his mouth.

Suddenly a huge, frothy wave surged high, and with a roar tumbled the row-boat with the spinning figures in it over and around like chips of kindling in a torrent. Geek covered his eyes, uttering whimpering sounds. . . .

DETECTIVE PARKER straightened up and looked over at me. There was a look of admiration on his face. The other detectives were grinning at each other.

"Daggone," said Parker. "Now there's a pip if I ever heard one."

"It sure is," I yelped. "Oh, boy, what a story! This'll boost circulation fifty thousand. Let me at the phone. Thanks, Roy. I appreciate—"

"Wait a minute, kid," he said sorrowfully. "You aren't going to print that malarkey?"

"It's true!" hollered Geek. "Every word."

Parker whirled, his face grim. "You killed Pike and Jerry," he accused, moving in menacingly. "You put them in the boat, rowed out and dropped their bodies into the ocean with weights tied to them. You sneaked into camp at night and shot through the cabin window."

"Why would I do that?" yelled Geek. "We were pals. I—"

Parker thrust his face an inch from Geek's, making the con man recoil.

"Why?" jeered Parker. "Because you discovered they'd been swindling you! The whole scheme was devised to separate you from your fifteen thousand dollars. There was no young engineer, no sheet metal aluminum, no helicopter, no nothing. Just one of Pike's hunting cabins. You swallowed it hook, line and sinker, like any simple sucker. It sounded like a natural, didn't it, Geek, that flying saucer plan? Until you started wondering what was taking so long. Until you sneaked up there and found the place and—"

"You're a liar!" said Geek thickly. His face was livid. He wrenched at his collar. "You found those photos of the flying

saucer, didn't you? At my apartment. Why would I invent an elaborate lie like that, you dumb cop? Why would I tell about a flying saucer falling into the ocean? I could say Jerry and Pike got drowned fishing, couldn't I?"

"Because you've got a big mouth," snapped Parker, "and had to boast around town about the big con deal you were in on. Word got out and everybody got interested and a couple of the boys wanted to horn in. Right, Geek?"

Geek stared at Parker. His eyes were wild. He licked his lips nervously and Parker pressed in on him, not letting him have time to think, to get organized.

"It sounded good and you sold half your interest in the deal the way managers sell a percentage of their fighters. At a nice profit. Then everybody started getting impatient and you began to get worried and went up to see what was delaying things. You found out you'd been taken, but good. Not only were you in real trouble with a couple of investors but you'd be a joke, a belly laugh wherever the underworld meets. You'd be finished. They'd laugh in your face. You, the rising young con man, the wise guy..."

"You can't prove it!" yelled Geek.

Parker whirled toward the door. "Bring it in," he snapped.

Geek, the detectives, myself, we all stared as a blue uniformed cop carried an object into the room.

It was a tiny model of a flying saucer about a foot in diameter. It rested on a miniature plot of earth, was surrounded by miniature trees, and nearby were tiny shapes of people carved out of wood.

Geek stared at it with bulging eyes, his face flushing. "So that's how they made the picture!" he whispered.

He looked up at the grinning detectives, at the vast scorn in their faces, the contemptuous pity for this petty swindler who had been swindled by a master swindler, and something snapped, the too-stretched ego, stretched and stretched by hours of pounding questions.

"The lousy doublecrossers!" he

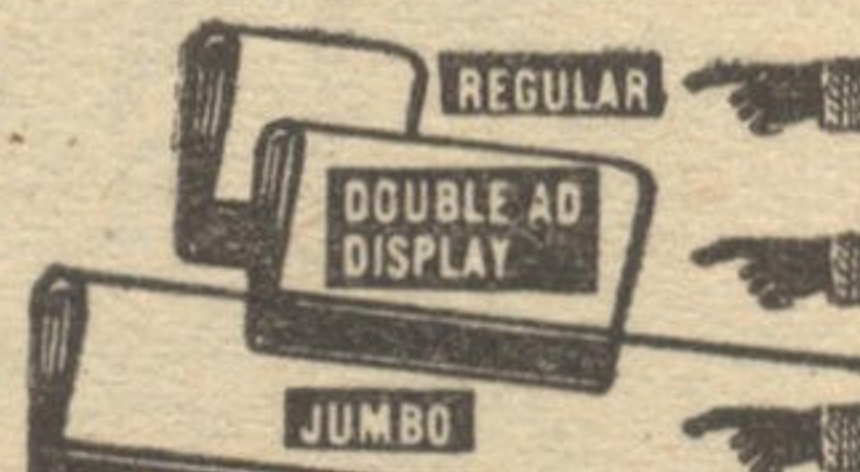
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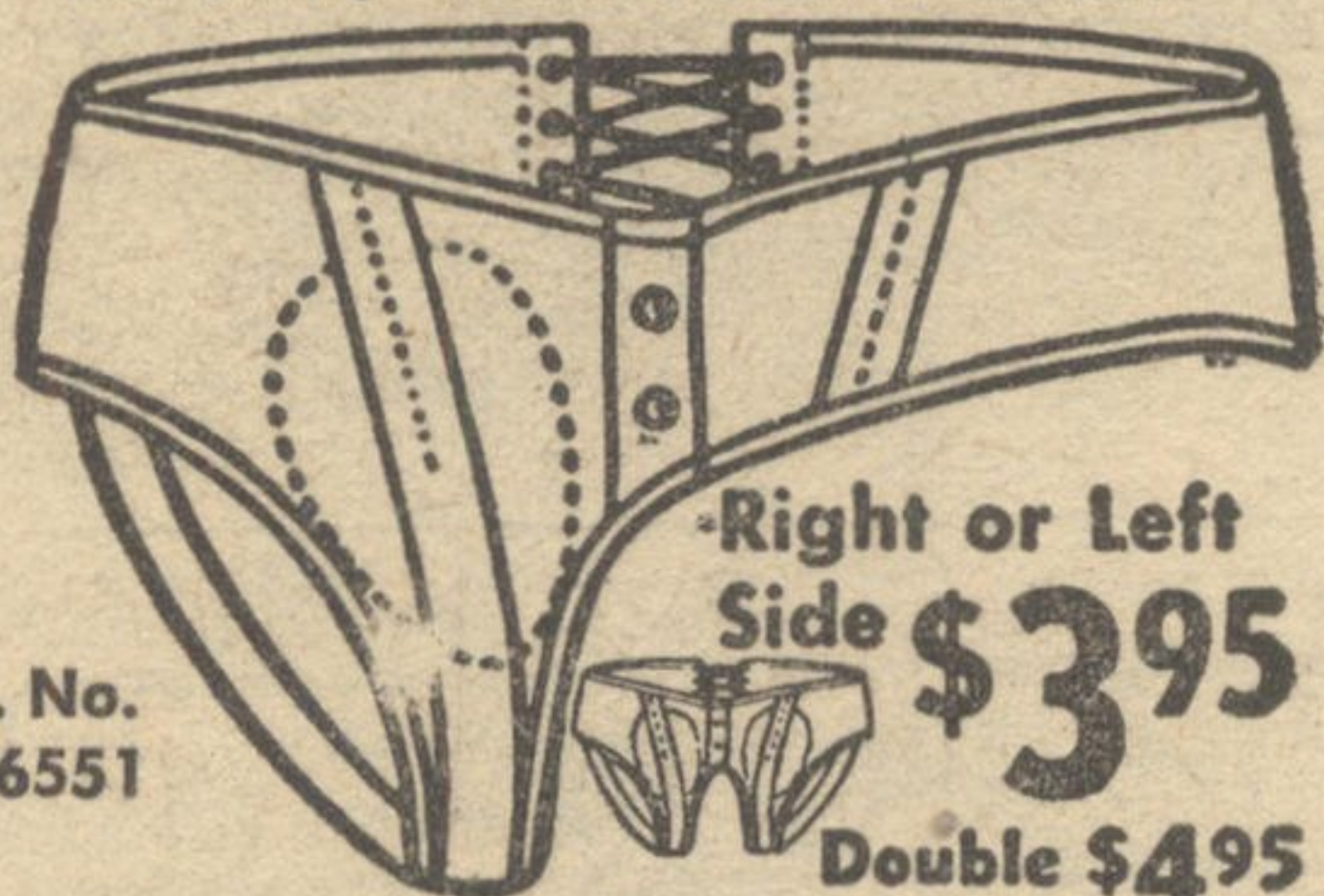
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screamed. "They had it coming to them! I'd kill them again if I could, only slower. A bullet was too good." He stopped and whimpered bitterly, "Only why did they pick me for a sucker? Why should Pike work with a mug like Jerry Silvio and go for my roll? I don't get it. I just don't."

His ego was killing him, giving him unbearable pain. A true con man.

"Because," said Detective Parker grimly, "one of the dames whose savings made you your bankroll was Rosa Baron. Remember Rosa? The very pretty girl? You promised to marry her, as you usually do in your filthy racket, and then you disappeared with her savings."

"Rosa?" said Geek, his eyes large. "What—what's she got to do with this?"

Parker said elaborately, "Nothing. She's just Jerry Silvio's sister, that's all. She changed her name to Baron."

Geek seemed to fall apart right before our eyes. I couldn't look at him; it made me sick. I followed Detective Parker outside where he offered me a cigarette.

"By the way," I said, staring sharply at him. "If you knew Rosa Baron had been swindled why didn't you pick up Geek Simmons on that charge?"

Detective Parker shrugged. "No complaint was made. Apparently it was considered a family matter. I got the story from one of our stoolies." He looked at me reflectively, smoke curling from his nostrils. "Anyway we got rid of three crooks instead of one this way."

"But you haven't got the bodies," I said. "We'll find them, all right. We've got divers searching off the beach where we found marks of the rowboat. But even if we don't..."

Parker grinned at me. I understood. Even if they didn't find the bodies there were a number of very angry gangland investors who didn't like to be made fools of. Also there were Silvio's relatives, Pike Dennison's friends.

"I see what you mean," I said.

Answers to Quiz on Page 102

1-c, 2-e, 3-g, 4-f, 5-b, 6-h, 7-a, 8-d.

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