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by
Gary Sheene

GUNMAN'S
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by
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ARMED LEGS
by
D. B. Chidsey

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STAR DETECTIVE

James Randall, Editor

MAGAZINE

EXCITING ACTION STORIES

Vol. 2, No. 2

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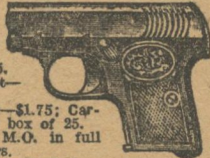
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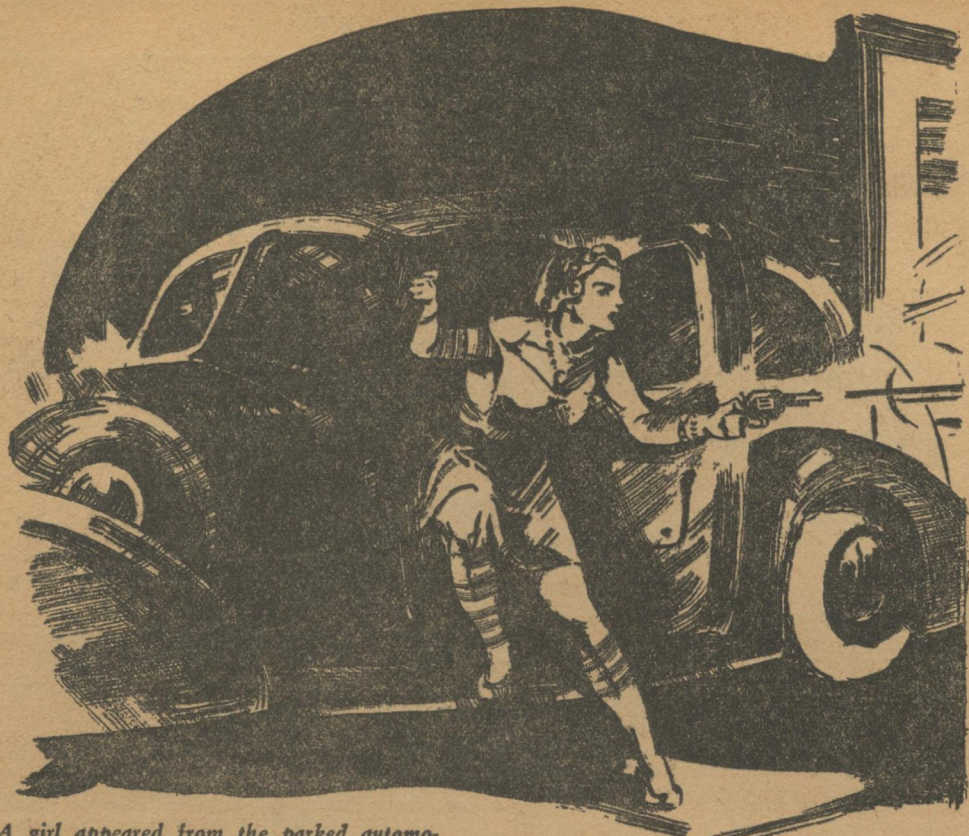
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A girl appeared from the parked automobile. There was a muffled roar, the smell of burning clothes, and suddenly Feroni went limp.

ARMED LEGS

a complete novelette

by Donald Barr Chidsey

IT was the only time in her life Cora Phillips had peeked through a keyhole; and what she saw made her almost sick from fright.

Certainly Cora was not a keyhole-peeking kind of secretary. Clean, cool, crisp she was; neat, quiet, precise. "That girl really runs Standard Products," they said. "Rutledge may be president, but as far as the real business goes, *she's* Rutledge!"

This wasn't strictly true, for Arthur T. Rutledge was a man who would have

been successful even if he hadn't employed a girl he himself admitted to be the world's best secretary. Still, there was no doubt that Cora Phillips was an invaluable aid.

Ambitious, too. There was nothing dowdy about her—quite the contrary—but she carried her businesslike attitude even to her wardrobe, and at work she wore tailored clothes, smart but severe, and flat-heeled shoes.

"She'd be a good-looking kid," they said of her, "if only she didn't have



*A fast-moving action story in which the lure seeks the hunter
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those glasses, and if she didn't do up her hair like that, and if she'd wear something less mannish. All efficiency, that's the trouble. She's a wonder, but she isn't *human!*"

They were mistaken. Cora was human. At least, she was human enough to turn all warm jelly inside at the very thought of Arthur T. Rutledge, Jr., that lazy, laughing youth who called at his father's office sometimes but who never had even glanced at his father's capable secretary. It had been a mention of Junior Rutledge's name, when the firm president's mysterious visitor had

raised his voice once—"Yes, and that goes for your son, too!"—which had caused her to lose all her poise and her pride.

For she knew that something was wrong today. Something was wrong with her boss: something horrible haunted him: he was nervous, troubled. It was not a business matter, or Cora would have known about it. It was something else. Something personal.

There had been several strange telephone calls. Then, a short while ago, there had arrived a tall man with dark hair. This man was handsome in a

flashy way—thin, straight, swarthy, with gay clothes. There were many small diamonds on his fingers, and a huge ruby glittered in his necktie.

"Rutledge in? Tell him Feroni's callin'."

Cora had started: "Have you an app—"

"Never mind! I'll walk right in."

Cora had followed him, murmuring protests. But the sight of her boss's face had stopped her short in the threshold.

Arthur T. Rutledge was pale as a ghost.

"Send the jane out. My business is with you alone."

Arthur T. Rutledge had waved her away without even looking at her. He had told her he would ring when he needed her.

This was not like him. Cora had retreated, troubled. For ten minutes she had heard the mumble of voices from the president's office. The visitor had done most of the talking, and his voice was harsh, cold. Only once had he raised it enough for her to catch those words of threat in which Junior Rutledge's name was used. And it was then that, breathless, frightened, she had ventured to peek through the keyhole.

WHAT she saw was a large blue automatic pistol.

She heard Feroni snarl: "Just in case you don't think I mean what I say, see?" Then he started for the door and Cora sprang back to her seat behind the prim little desk in the ante-room.

Feroni emerged, grinning. He had the air of a conqueror. He paused at her desk and leered down for a moment.

"Listen, baby. Anything you just heard, forget about. See?" He nodded, still leering. "You'd be a nice-lookin' kid," he said, "if it wasn't for those cheaters." And he went out.

Arthur T. Rutledge had not rung for her, but Cora went into his office anyway. She placed four letters in front of him.

He didn't seem to see them. He was staring after Feroni.

"Trouble?" she asked, coolly, impersonally.

"Yes, Cora. A lot of trouble."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

He smiled sadly, patted her hand. "No, I'm afraid not. There isn't a thing you can't do around an office, as well as I can do it myself. But this—this is—well, something else."

He signed the letters. Cora blotted them, shuffled them together, started for the door. But she paused.

"If it's anything about the business and I can—"

"It isn't," he said, "and you can't." But he said it in a kindly voice. He was fond of Cora.

"Is it blackmail?" she asked suddenly.

He started, staring curiously at her.

"I suppose that's what they call womanly intuition. Yes, Cora, it's blackmail. That man who was just in here is demanding fifty thousand dollars. Not for anything I've done. . . ." He glanced at the picture of his wife, the large picture in the silver frame, which he kept always on his desk. He never had remarried.

"Your son?"

He nodded. "Yes. A woman, of course. Junior's been pretty wild lately. He—he's all I've got, and I suppose I've let him run around more than I should have. But he told me about this right away. There was nothing—nothing wrong, he told me. But he'd written some letters."

So it was a woman? At last some woman had trapped that eager, tall, straight-cut youth, though Cora had never even dared address him when he swung past her desk on the way to his

father's office.

Cora's heart was battering wildly against her breast. But outwardly she remained unruffled, cool.

"Are you going to pay?" she asked.

"I don't see what else I can do!"

"How do you know they really have the letters?"

"I'm to meet them out near Eagle Rock, at midnight. Junior will identify the things. And I'm to pay the money then."

"Fifty thousand dollars," Cora said, "is a lot. You'll need that much to swing the Fisher deal next week, and I don't know where you can borrow it."

"I don't see what else I can do!"

"If the Fisher deal doesn't go through," Cora reminded him, "it may mean—" She glanced at the letters she held.

"I know! I know! But I'd rather see the whole business go smash than see my son start out in life with a scandal like that hanging over him! I wish there were some way you could help me, Cora, and I appreciate your offer. But there just isn't anything else to do. I'm going to pay."

CORA shrugged and went out. A little later she returned, to ask for the rest of the afternoon off.

Rutledge was mildly astonished. He supposed Cora Phillips had no real existence outside of this office. At least, it was impossible for him to think of her anywhere else.

"Why, of course. Dentist appointment?"

She shook her head.

"I want to get my hair marcelled," she explained, and left him gasping.

He would have gasped even more if he had seen his secretary a few hours later. The horn-rimmed glasses had been set aside, and this fact, and the marcel, had changed her whole appearance. She was dressing carefully, elab-

orately. Filmy chiffon step-ins, a white brassiere, a white satin slip, sheerest silk stockings. The "common-sense" shoes she wore at work were in her closet, and her small feet were sheathed in white satin slippers with French heels.

Yes, Arthur T. Rutledge would have gasped. He would have gasped, too, if he had seen her at work in front of her mirror with face creams and orange sticks, rouge and mascara, scarlet nail polish and lipstick and eyebrow pencil—and if he had seen her select from among many a long white organdie evening gown, cut low in front and back, with a skirt consisting of very feminine flounces.

But he would have gasped most of all—he would fairly have fallen over backward in astonishment—if he had seen what Cora Phillips did after she turned away from the mirror.

She took a small, flat automatic pistol from a lower drawer of her dressing table. It was in a leather holster, which she strapped around her shapely right leg just above the knee.

She was ready for business now. Not the sort of business Arthur T. Rutledge usually gave her, but nevertheless business which vitally concerned that gentleman.

It was dark, and the grocer on the corner was just closing his shop. "I want half an onion," she told him. "Half a *small* onion."

She wrapped this in a handkerchief and held it to her nose; so that by the time she arrived at the Green Mill there were large and convincing tears in her eyes.

"Do I know you?" the doorman said dubiously.

"Why, of *course!*" She smiled through her tears. He should have stopped her, checked her up; but he couldn't resist that smile.

"Boy, what a swell lookin' number!"

he muttered, after she had swept past. "Wonder what the Niagara act's all about?"

There were only a few men at the bar, and nobody at all sitting at the tables around the freshly waxed dance floor.

Cora went to a table, ordered a drink.

"Feroni here yet?" she asked the waiter.

He looked at her curiously. "He's in the private dining room back there, with a friend. He don't want to be disturbed."

"I've got a date with him."

"He didn't say anything to me about expectin' any dame."

Cora swallowed a little of the whisky—not much, just enough to make her breath smell. She rose, simulating a lurch.

"Jus' the same," she mumbled, "I got to see him."

Feroni had done the same thing to her, that afternoon. She staggered past the waiter and entered the private dining room.

FERONI was dressed just as he had been in the afternoon, but his hat was pushed far back and Cora saw now that there was a jagged scar on his forehead just underneath the curly, tight hair. In that dim place he looked indescribably sinister, cruel.

His companion was little, dapper, cold, shiny, with eyes like black shoe-buttons, and a bloodless mouth.

"Hello, sister. Who let *you* in?"

Cora asked, in a frightened, quavering voice: "Are you Mr. Feroni?"

"Who wants to know?"

"You are, then?"

"Well, maybe I am. What of it?"

She knew that he didn't recognize her. She walked toward him slowly, holding her breath, staring as though fascinated. She did not even glance at

the other man.

"I—I've heard so much about you," she whispered.

His chest went out. But he waved her away. "Sorry, sister. Busy. Some other night maybe."

"My boy friend says you're a punk," she stated suddenly. Still she gazed at him, open-mouthed, adoring.

"He does, eh?" Feroni grinned. "Who is your boy friend? I'll teach him to keep his trap shut, next time I run into him."

"He says you're a punk," she repeated stupidly. "But I told him I'd heard you were a lot more of a man than he was."

"That's right, sister. You stick up for me."

"He was nasty."

"That why all the weeps?" Feroni asked.

Cora nodded.

The other man spoke for the first time. "Listen, Joe, you ain't got time to be foolin' aroun' with any dames to-night. We got somethin' on, remember."

"I know! I know! But we got plenty o' time yet."

"This little bum is drunk. You can smell it on her."

"Sure. What of it?" Feroni gestured toward a chair. "Sit down, sweetheart. Maybe somebody'll buy you a drink."

She sat down. She was very lovely, with her yellow hair, her trembling hands, her cupid's-bow mouth, and the large blue eyes that were brimming with tears. She continued to stare at Feroni.

"So you're really Mr. Feroni?"

"That's right." He pushed a buzzer. "What'll you have?"

The other man whispered: "Remember, now! We got somethin' to do to-night."

"Okay! Okay! One or two won't do no harm."

The waiter appeared. He gazed dubiously at Cora Phillips, but he accepted Feroni's order without a word; and presently he returned with a bottle of whisky and three glasses.

"None for me," Feroni's companion said hastily. "An' remember," he added, "we got to be seen outside every now an' then."

"Sure. Sure." Feroni glanced at Cora. "Maybe it might be a good idea if you was to go out an' show yourself now, Harry."

"Maybe it might be a good idea if we was *both* to do that little thing," Harry snapped.

Feroni sighed. "Okay. Business is business, I suppose." He rose, never taking his gaze from Cora Phillips. "What's your name, angel-face? An' where've you been all my life?"

"Madge," she whispered, breathless.

"Okay, Madge. Me an' Harry here have got to go talk to a few friends, see? But we'll be back. Don't get lonesome."

THE tears were streaming down her cheeks, and the more she patted her eyes with the handkerchief the more tears there were. "Don't be too long," she whispered.

"We won't. *I* won't, anyway! An' don't you guzzle too much of that liquor before we get back, either." He added hastily: "I don't mean you can't help yourself all you want o' course. Anything you want, when you're with me. I'm that kind o' guy."

"I knew you would be," she said.

"Sure I am."

Harry snarled: "Let's get goin'!"

Left alone, Cora considered the situation. Meeting Feroni had been even easier than she had expected, and clearly he was a man who could be led around by the nose—by a clever woman. But his friend Harry seemed devoted to the work at hand and in no humor for pleasantries

She had no preconceived plan of campaign. The tears already had done their work, so she threw the onion into a cuspidor. She dumped almost half the contents of the whisky bottle after it.

Harry's reference to being "seen" would indicate, she figured, that the two men already were planning an alibi. They wished to be able to say that they had been in the private dining room of the Green Mill all that night—and to have other men support this statement. In case of emergency, that was. But how did they plan to get out? There was only the one door. Cora examined the single window, but found it led only to a closed airshaft: exit was impossible that way.

Besides, why should they wish an alibi? Blackmailers had no need for such stories. Arthur T. Rutledge already had seen Joe Feroni, could identify him if necessary.

Was there some other crime mixed up in this? Was it more than merely a case of blackmail?

She patted the pistol strapped just above her right knee. It comforted her to know that it was there.

About an hour later Feroni came back, alone. He leaned over her chair, grinning at her.

"Still think I'm a better man than the boy friend?"

She cooed: "Oh, much! I'm through with him for good."

"Well, well! Don't cry any more, kid. You look pretty when you cry, but you look even better when you don't."

"Do you think so?" She flashed him a dazzling smile.

His chest went out a little more.

"I could go after a doll like you in a big way," he confided. "Too bad I'm going to be busy tonight."

"Is it so important?"

He frowned. "It's important to the tune of fifty grand, that's how important

it is." Then he smiled again. "But you don't have to worry about things like that, babyface. You just lap up the liquor an' be nice to little Joe-Joe, an' everything'll be swell."

"Oh, that's wonderful!"

"Think so, eh?"

He put a hand on each of her bare shoulders and bent far down, moving closer to her. His dark eyes were slits of desire, bright and hard and hot. His breath was coming in short gasps.

She did not stir. She just gazed up at him, as though fascinated.

Then Harry came back. Joe Feroni, with a muttered curse, moved to the other side of the table and poured himself a drink.

"Good Gawd! You kill all that liquor, Joe? Or the dame?"

FERONI glanced carelessly at the bottle. "I guess it was her. Quite a capacity you got, eh, Madge? Like this stuff?"

"I've tasted better," she admitted.

"It's not much good here, that's a fact. Now I got some rye over at my apartment—"

Harry interrupted. "Lay off that stuff, Joe! Remember, we got something to do tonight. You can't afford to take this dame over to your apartment."

"Yeah? I don't know why the hell I can't, if I feel like it!" Feroni looked at his watch. "Only ten after ten right now, an' we don't have to be out there till twelve."

"I know. But we got to stick around here, to make sure of— Well, you know." He glanced at Cora, whose head was low; she was mumbling, chanting something; and her right hand, on the table, was moving her glass around and around in a wet circle.

"Sure, but what's the harm of me an' Madge here breezin' over to my joint an' havin' a few drinks an'—an'—" He drew a deep, slow breath, his slit-

like eyes fastened hungrily upon the girl. "We got plenty o' time. You could pick us up there later."

"An' bring her along, I suppose? That'd be just jim-dandy!"

"Hell, no! Leave her in my place."

"How'll we get her out of here?"

Harry was whispering now. "She's drunk, but even so she might remember—something like that."

"Simple. You walk her out to the street an' put her in a cab an' tell the driver to take her to my place. I'll slip out the other way an' take the big car an' meet her there. Then you can come back here, an' later you can come over to my place in the roadster. Right?"

Harry shrugged. "I suppose, if you say so."

"Sure. It's a cinch. Then later we both slip back here an' nobody outside in the barroom knows we've ever been away."

He shook Cora gently. "Come on, Babyface."

She permitted Harry to help her out of the room, "Don't you be late," she muttered thickly, over her shoulder.

"I won't, sister. Don't worry!"

Cora knew now that there was some secret entrance to that private dining room which she had not discovered. Harry and Feroni planned to use it for getting back and forth, without going through the barroom; in this way, they would have a perfect alibi.

But why were they so eager to have an alibi? She still was wondering about this when Harry bundled her into a taxicab and gave the driver two dollars and Feroni's address.

It was a small apartment house on the outskirts of the city, not far from the Eagle Rock Road. Feroni was there ahead of her, seated at the wheel of a large limousine. But he didn't speak to her or approach her until the taxicab had disappeared. She knew that he didn't wish the driver to see him.

There was nobody in the lobby, and the elevator was self-operating. Feroni leaned close to her, put his arm around her waist.

"You never got a brighter idea in your life, sister, than when you picked out me. I'll treat you right. I'll hang pearls on you, kid!"

He tried to kiss her, but she lurched against the row of buttons and stopped the elevator. He cursed quietly, but good-naturedly, and did not touch her again until they were inside the apartment.

It was a big place, dimly lighted, luxuriously furnished. Feroni took his coat off promptly, grinning at her.

Cora began to feel panicky. She ran her tongue over her lips.

Feroni threw his coat over a chair and approached her, arms outstretched, mouth curled lasciviously.

A SMALL bundle fell out of the inner coat pocket—four letters in envelopes, held together by a paper clip. Cora pointed. "You—you don't want to lose that," she faltered.

He frowned for a moment, but then he smiled again. He picked up the letters and stuffed them back into the pocket. "Damn' well right I don't want to lose 'em," he said. "Worth a lot of jack to me, those things're goin' to be. Not that it makes much difference now. I could just as well throw 'em away, now."

Again he approached her.

"How 'bout a drink," she muttered. "Firs' thing, a drink."

Now he began to look troubled. "You've had quite a few—"

"I know, but I need another. One more."

"Okay." But he did not sound enthusiastic. He started for the kitchen. "I'll mix you a stiff one, eh?"

"That's the idea."

She was at his coat almost before he

was out of sight. A glance at the letters was sufficient. She took them out of the envelopes, and then she filled the envelopes with pieces of paper of about the same size, snatched from the open desk. She put these back into the coat pocket, but the letters themselves she kept.

She was wondering what Feroni meant when he said that the letters didn't matter anyway, now. She was worried about that.

Feroni came back with two old-fashioned cocktails. He handed one to Cora, and after she had accepted it he ran still-wet fingers slyly up her bare arm, cupping his hand over her lovely white shoulder. He squeezed the shoulder, grinning, leaning closer.

"No sense wastin' any time, eh, sister?" he leered.

There was something snake-like about his tiny, black eyes, glittering with lust. They came closer and closer . . .

Cora, almost hysterical with fright, raised her glass to her mouth. His own lips had been within inches of hers when she did so; but now he drew back slightly, grinning, reminding her more than ever of some venomous snake which pauses for only an instant before it strikes.

He finished his own drink in one swift gulp and deposited the glass upon a table at his side, but he never took his hand from her shoulder, never ceased to devour her with his hot gaze.

The pressure of his fingers was tight upon her shoulder: he had a grip of steel. How was she to escape the man—a man no longer but a passion-mad beast? Playing with him in a speak-easy, toying with his vanity, had been simple enough. But now she was in his own apartment, trapped. There was nothing even faintly ludicrous about Joe Feroni now. The snake could strike, was swift and strong, and there

was deadly poison in its fangs. While he was good-natured, all was well. But already it was apparent that he was becoming impatient.

"Kill it, sister. I'll get you another one—later."

She could sip at her cocktail no longer. She was obliged to finish it.

And again Feroni's face came closer to hers, and closer. . . .

She tried to laugh, and turned away, simulating a hiccup, staggering as though drunk.

But he jerked her toward him. Suddenly he was angry, suspicious. His teeth were bared in a snarl, while blood throbbled in the scar on his forehead.

"Wait a minute! *Wait* a minute! Don't pull that pretending-to-be-tight stuff on little Joe-Joe, sister! You know what I brought you up here for, an' don't try to act as if you didn't!"

HE paused, his eyes becoming even smaller, even brighter. He ran the tip of a red, red tongue over his upper lip.

"You'll string along with Joe Feroni, sister, or else," he said slowly, nodding down at her, "or else you'll wish you had, see?"

She cried wildly: "Sure! Sure! I'm with you, Joe!" She wriggled away from him, started around the little table. "I just wanted to get my—"

He took one long stride and grabbed her wrist. "You'll get nothing—except what I'm going to give you now!"

Then she slipped. It was not a trick, but a true accident. Trying to back away from him, shrinking from him with every nerve and muscle in her body, she stepped on the edge of a rug—and the rug slid. She went down. The back of her head struck the table, and she was pitched forward on her face.

It was a hard blow, but because of her hair it stunned her for only a mo-

ment. Still, she kept her eyes closed.

She felt Feroni's hands upon her shoulders. He shook her. But she was limp.

She heard him curse softly, then make for the bathroom.

Tense, she prepared herself to spring to her feet and make a dash for the hall door.

But Feroni was back almost immediately with a glass of water and a wash cloth. He dabbed the cold water on her temples. He picked her up, carried her to the day bed.

Again he went away, but again only for a moment. From the kitchen he brought a piece of ice, which he rubbed on her forehead.

"You all right, kid?" he muttered, shaking her.

She did not open her eyes, did not respond in any way.

She heard him say: "I guess you'll be okay in a few minutes." He was sitting beside her, and she felt his hands, trembling with desire, caress her neck, her breasts . . .

She was frozen with terror, breathless.

He started to pull down the shoulder straps of her evening gown. His hot breath was upon her face.

Then a bell rang.

Feroni, with a muffled curse, rose. Presently she heard him talking to his partner, who was downstairs.

"Okay, I'll be with you in a minute. . . . Her? Oh, she passed out. I'll leave her here. Something to give me a little fun when we're finished with this job, hey? . . . Them?" He patted his coat pocket, "Yeah, sure I got 'em. Not that it makes any difference. Only they might be good to show these guys so's you can slip aroun' an' slug 'em from behind in case anything goes wrong. . . . Okay, I'll be right down."

Suddenly Cora Phillips understood.

These men were not going to sell the

letters at all. It was no more than a scheme to lure Arthur T. Rutledge and his son to a lonely spot near Eagle Rock with \$50,000. The letters, or the supposed letters, would be retained for purposes of additional blackmail in the future. Tonight's transaction was to be nothing but a hold-up.

And if there was any resistance, death would be the penalty. That was why Harry and Feroni had arranged for an alibi.

Murder! What did it mean to these calloused brutes? All part of a night's work.

FERONI had said: "In case anything goes wrong. . . ." And something *would* go wrong, of course. Junior Rutledge would insist upon seeing the letters before his father handed over the money, and Feroni would produce the sheets of empty paper. Then Feroni would know that the game was up. And he and Harry would slaughter both the Rutledges. Without ever giving them a chance to fight.

Cora went cold all over.

She heard Feroni go outside, and instantly she was on her feet. But she heard the key turn—she was locked in!—and then footsteps crossed the hallway, the elevator door opened and shut, the elevator whined diminishingly in its descent.

Frantic, she tried the door. It was a heavy door, much too heavy for her to think of breaking open.

She remembered having seen a fire escape. She ran to a window which looked out upon a side street, opened this, crawled out, and stumbled down to the sidewalk, dropping the last ten feet.

She hurried around to the front of the building, where two automobiles were parked, one of them the car Feroni had been driving, the other a roadster with the top down.

The two men she had glimpsed in the apartment house lobby, through the big glass front door. They were buttoning their overcoats, whispering together. They had not seen her.

There was nobody in sight. She might bang upon the door of one of the nearby houses, get to a telephone, call the police. But all that would take time. People would think she was drunk, smelling as she did of whisky.

This was near the edge of the city. Harry and Feroni would go fast; and probably before policemen could be summoned the killing would be finished.

Besides, she didn't even know the location of the proposed rendezvous, except that it was somewhere near Eagle Rock.

She ran to the two automobiles. The roadster was long, bright red, a foreign car. They wouldn't use that: it would be remembered by anybody who happened to see it.

So he got into the back seat of the limousine. She lay upon the floor, slipping her pistol from its leg holster.

A moment later Feroni and his companion climbed into the front seat.

Harry drove, very fast, and Feroni talked. "We don't get rough with 'em so long as they behave themselves. We just tell 'em we've decided to keep the letters anyway, to be on the safe side, an' that the best thing for them to do is not to tell the cops anything about this, or otherwise we'll publish the letters, see? But if anything goes wrong, if they get fresh or anything, you slip around back of 'em an' slug 'em with the butt of your gat. I'll give you the high sign."

"Why slug 'em? Why not shoot 'em? Nobody'd hear anything, out there."

"Because that'd be murder, an' this guy Rutledge being a big millionaire it'd mean a lot of fuss. Of course, we're covered anyway—we got our alibi—but still there's no sense takin' any

chances. By slugging 'em we can make it an accident, see? We just stick 'em back into the car, an' one of us drives that over to Eagle Rock, an' then we run it off the cliff. Nobody's goin' to know, when they shovel up what's left of those guys then, that they was slugged, see? I got a flask with me, an' we'll sprinkle a little liquor on 'em first, so's it'll look like they was drunk and crashed through the fence there. It'll be a cinch! There ain't a gas station or a hot dog stand or anything between there an' the top of the rock. That's one reason why I picked this place, see?"

"I get it," said Harry, and chuckled. "Sure I get it!"

"All that," Feroni reminded him, "is just in case there's any trouble."

"I got an idea there will be, though."

"Yeah. I got an idea there will be too." He loosened his gun in its holster under his left arm. "Well, here we are."

THE spot had been well picked. It was lonesome, bare, flat. It was on a side road, where there was almost no traffic at night. Not even a farmhouse was within hailing distance. And there were no bushes, no trees, no large rocks, nothing behind which men could be concealed in order to spring a trap on the blackmailers.

Arthur T. Rutledge and his son had been standing beside their limousine when the other car arrived. Now they walked forward to meet the two criminals. They were both in evening clothes.

Junior Rutledge was about the same height as his father, a breath under six feet; but he was thinner, and so he looked taller; he was compact, springy, an athlete.

"Well, have you got those letters?"

"Sure, we got them," Feroni said. "You got the dough?"

"Let's see the letters first. We insist on having them in our hands before we pay you a cent. We'll pay tonight, but that's the end!"

"Okay," Feroni drawled, glancing significantly at his partner. He drew a bundle from his inner coat pocket and handed this to young Rutledge. "Okay, if you're goin' to be tough about it."

Junior Rutledge and his father were close together, leaning over the letters.

"These are the right envelopes, anyway," Junior muttered. He opened one of them, and stared at a blank sheet of paper. He opened the other three hastily—and found the same in each.

"So that's the game? So you're going to—"

There was a scream from the Feroni automobile, the crack of a pistol.

Junior Rutledge heard a grunt of amazement behind him, and wheeled to find Harry with a clubbed gun raised high. It was a moment for quick thinking. Junior hit, and hit hard—a thudding right to Harry's jaw—and the gangster crumpled without a sound.

There was another shot, two more. A girl in white came running from the parked automobile.

Joe Feroni's pistol was out like a flash. Once it spoke—but only once.

Arthur T. Rutledge ran for his car to get a weapon he had concealed in a side pocket. But his son, not at all certain of what all this was about, saw one thing clearly: that Feroni was trying to kill a woman. So Junior Rutledge grabbed Feroni's wrist before the second shot could be fired.

They fell to their knees, struggling, Junior pushing the pistol hand further and further back.

Feroni made one last desperate effort to wrench himself free. There was a muffled roar, the smell of burning clothes, and suddenly Feroni went limp. He swayed for a moment, there on his knees at the side of the road. Then he

fell sideways, and pistol dropped harmlessly to his side.

Junior Rutledge rose, to confront his rescuer. He thought he had never seen such a lovely girl.

She was tucking a smoking automatic into a holster strapped just above the knee, and he gasped at the glimpse of an exquisitely shaped leg sheathed in silk.

Then she drew four letters from the neck of her fluffy white evening gown, and thrust these into Junior's hands.

"You were a fool for writing these in the first place," she whispered, "and you were both fools for coming out here tonight. Now drive away as fast as you can."

She started off.

"Wait!" he cried. "You're hurt!"

SHE smiled fleetingly at the place on the back of her right hand where Feroni's bullet had creased her. It was no more than a short, nasty scratch, now filling slowly with blood.

"It's all right," she said. "It's nothing."

She ran back to the other car before Junior could say a word, and a moment later he was staring after a bobbing scarlet tail light as a man stares after a departed vision.

Arthur T. Rutledge hurried back with a gun.

"I didn't see her! Who was she?"

"I don't know," breathed Junior, "but I certainly wish I did!"

Cora Phillips, when she entered her boss's office the next morning, found Arthur T. Rutledge, Jr., there. She nodded, expressionless.

She was holding a handkerchief over the back of her right hand, and trying to seem casual, matter-of-fact about it. But Junior Rutledge had caught sight of the wound there, and gaped at her, blinking.

"My son is going into the business

with me," Rutledge, Sr., explained. "Thought it might keep him out of mischief. That—uh—that matter I spoke to you about yesterday afternoon, by the way, has been satisfactorily arranged."

Neat, efficient, quiet, as always, she placed some papers in front of the President of Standard Products Corporation.

"I'm glad to hear it," she said. She was dressed in a prim tailored suit, severe, practical; and flat-heeled shoes; and wool-and-lisle stockings. She wore horn rimmed glasses, and her hair was combed back over her ears as straight as a recently achieved marcel wave would permit. "There's no hurry about any of these except the two top ones. Mr. Montgomery was here about the Watson contracts, but he said there was no need to bother you, so we arranged it all outside at my desk. He asked about the Fisher merger, and I told him it was as good as settled already."

"And I suppose it *is*, with you doing all the work." Arthur T. Rutledge looked up at her, nodding admiration. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Cora."

"Thank you." But she didn't smile. She said politely to Junior, "I'm glad to hear you're going to be with us," then she quit the office without a sound.

"A remarkable woman," Arthur T. Rutledge said. "A pure business machine, if there ever was one. I admire her enormously, but sometimes she almost gives me the shivers—she's so efficient! She isn't *human!*"

Junior Rutledge still was staring after her, and there was a faraway look in his eyes.

"I wonder . . ." he murmured.

A MOMENT later, he said: "Excuse me, Dad," and went out to the anteroom where Cora Phillips had

her desk. She was standing behind the desk, sorting some cards in a filing case, and her hands trembled at sight of him, and she found it difficult even to breathe evenly, much less appear businesslike. But she was telling herself that she should not permit herself to feel this way, ever. She was a business woman. She must be efficient, impersonal.

He looked at her quietly for a moment or two.

She swallowed. "Yes?" she asked, striving to keep her voice low and cool. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"There is. You can permit me to

take you to dinner some time soon and get better acquainted."

The hands that held the filing case trembled more violently than ever. She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. "Tonight perhaps? At seven?"

Again she nodded. She kept repeating to herself that she must be calm, collected.

"That's settled, then." But in the doorway of his father's office, Junior Rutledge paused. "And I'd appreciate it," he added slowly, "if you wore that white dress again."

The filing case crashed to the floor.

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C. O. D.—CASH OR DEATH!

by Gary Sheene

THE little man, the tailor Emanuel Swartz, was pressing a suit; but his thoughts were not on this routine operation and resembled more those of a soldier in a front-line trench expecting shell fire.

When Serra—the young man with a scar who, every week, collected ten dollars each from the small tailor shops for the Big Guy who had the tailor racket—came in, Emanuel was going to refuse to pay. His face, which nature had made somewhat putty-like and inexpressive, depicted the struggle which his mild and placating spirit had been through before he reached this desper-

ate determination; his situation was indeed desperate.

For two months the rent of the shop had not been paid and Emanuel saw no way of paying it. His wife and children had had to go to live with her brother, Gustave, who was failing as a market gardener on a plot of ground he rented in the suburbs. Every Sunday Emanuel journeyed by elevated and trolley-car and a two-mile walk, to take them what money he could, which sometimes was ten dollars. More often it was eight, or six; and this week, if he paid Serra, it would be not more than three.



While Serra was unconscious he sewed him tightly in linens.

When gunmen crowded little Swartz, it was they who needed protection!

In the immediacy of these misfortunes, Emanuel only occasionally recollected that the doctor had told him, some time before, that if he did not get outdoors more he would not live very long and had suggested California. California? That was something to laugh about bitterly—ha! ha! A man who could not feed his children should take a vacation and go to California!

WHEN the bell over the front door of the shop tinkled, Emanuel left the pressing machine and went and peered through the opening between the two rooms. The arrival was Serra, right enough.

Serra was a sleekly fat young man, who probably ate a good many times a day, for his skin had a smooth and oily appearance. His clothes were the most expensive money could buy and in the latest and most pronounced style; they always were brand-new. His face had an unreadable and aggressive expression which the scar extending from his temple across his cheek and down underneath his collar made threatening and, to Emanuel, terrifying.

Behind Serra, Emanuel could see through the street door that there was no car in front of the shop and he took note of this fact unconsciously. Sometimes Serra came in a car with two or three other young men who waited while he got the money; sometimes he came in a car alone; occasionally he walked. This was one of the times when he was alone and walked.

"All right, Swartz," he invited; and this indicated that he was ready to receive the money. His voice was guttural, and habit made it purposely unpleasant.

Emanuel pulled himself desperately together and moved to the pressing board behind the counter, so that Serra could not see how his knees were shaking.

"Nossir, Mr. Serra," he said determinedly. "I got no ten dollars."

He had meant to say outright that he would not pay, but when it came to the point he said he did not have it, which was untrue.

"Sure, you got it," Serra told him confidently. "It don't mean nothing to you, Swartz, because you charge it on the customers."

"Mr. Serra," Emanuel said in agony, "for ten months I been waiting there should be someone like that, some customers, and I ain't seem them yet."

Serra stood looking at him steadily and terrifyingly.

"You remember, Swartz," he said "when you first opened this shop you didn't want to pay and the shop got busted into by somebody, I don't know who, and six suits of clothes got burned up with acid."

"Sure, I remember, Mr. Serra. My troubles begun with settling with the customers for them six suits."

"You don't want nothing like that to happen again, do you? You want to stay in business?"

"Sure. I got to stay in business. I got five children."

THERE was no use kidding himself that he was courageous; he was scared to death, and only the memory of his family made it possible for him to speak connectedly. But he, he reminded himself, should take ten dollars out of the mouths of his children so that Serra and the Big Guy could ride in limousines!

He leaned across the counter pleadingly.

"Mr. Serra, you don't understand this proposition. What troubles I got, Mr. Serra! The guy what sold me this shop made crooked books on me. So much pressing, the books said; so much cleaning, even so many suits got made here. There ain't none of them things.

What books would have told the truth the guy burned up. Ten months I been here and every month I got less than what I got the month before. Now I got nothing. You tell the Big Guy, Mr. Serra, 'I seen Swartz and Swartz ain't got no money.' ”

But Serra had not been coming into the shop every week without learning something of its customs and arrangements. He walked silently past Emanuel into the rear room, where was the big moth-proof and air-tight closet for the storage of clothing. He pulled open the door of the closet, switched on the light, went in and picked up the tin box in which Emanuel kept his money, fingering the small bills it contained until he had counted ten of them, and stood looking at the two which were left as though he might take those also on account.

“I knew you had it all right, Swartz,” he said comfortably and triumphantly, grinning.

When Emanuel saw Serra coming toward him out of the vault, putting the ten dollars into his pocket, his brain, in rage and resentment, stopped working. There was nothing startling in his brain's not working; but what was amazing and utterly unprecedented was that simultaneously his body galvanized into action. He rushed at Serra with a loud cry and pushed violently at his chest with his thin arms; and as Serra, taken off his guard, staggered and fell backward into the closet, Emanuel, with practically a single motion, crashed the door shut and locked it.

THEN he leaned against the door of the closet, sick and shaken through and through with terror, while he listened to Serra's muffled voice shouting and cursing. Oh! what had he done? A man could not live very long in that air-tight closet, whose atmosphere was

heavy with preservatives for clothing. In a few minutes at most he would have to let Serra out. Then what? Serra's threats left no doubt as to what would be immediately ensuing. He, Emanuel Swartz, would be bumped off. Marietta Swartz would be left without a husband, and five children—whose names were Percival, Millicent, Waldo, Imogene and Ferdinand—would then have no father.

At this inopportune moment, the bell above the shop door gently tinkled, denoting a customer. Emanuel wiped the cold sweat of terror from his face and steeled himself and gathered himself together. The customer, with an alarmed and questioning look, was listening to the muffled noises. Emanuel carefully closed the door between the two rooms and faced about with a sickly smile.

“Such boys!” he said. “Outside, in back, they always make such noises, cursing and yelling.”

The customer, he saw anxiously, appeared to accept this explanation. He had come for a suit left to be cleaned and he was very particular in examining it. Before he had finished, a second customer came in and, after him, a third. This itself was amazing. Usually not as many as three customers came in in a whole day. They apparently had time unlimited at their disposal, and were deliberate about everything; the third one even stopped and talked about the weather. As soon as they were gone, Emanuel tore open the door between the two rooms and listened at the door of the closet. There had been no noises since before the second customer had come in, and now with his ear against the door he could hear nothing. It was not possible that in so short a time Serra could be dead; but, as a matter of fact, Emanuel, in his excitement, could not form any idea how long the time had been.

HE walked up and down, wringing his hands. He could not leave Serra in there any longer, but when he opened the door he knew what was going to happen; Serra would rush out at him and bump him off. Or else Serra would be dead. Either way it would be entirely horrible. Emanuel went on tiptoe to the door of the closet and silently unlocked it and, with his body shaking violently, opened it inch by inch until he could peer in.

Serra was lying on his back, with his legs wide apart and his hands pressed to his throat. He was dead, Emanuel decided. He dragged the door wide open and rushed in and seized Serra by the feet and pulled him out to where the air was better. Serra's face was discolored, his eyes were closed but his heart was still beating. The cold sweat which had been running down Emanuel's legs because Serra was dead now ran more freely because he foresaw that presently Serra would be coming to himself.

He looked desperately around the shop, but there was nothing there with which Serra could be tied, but there were pieces of linen. Laboring in haste and panting, he wrapped them tightly around Serra's body, enclosing his legs, and then around his arms, and sewed them with strong stitches. Then, seeing with terror that Serra's eyes were about to open, he pushed a piece of the cloth into Serra's mouth and tied a strip over his mouth and around his head so as to gag him. Serra's eyes opened with a dazed expression which changed with returning consciousness to amazement and fury, and he attempted to struggle, but his arms and legs remained immovable.

Emanuel looked on in misery. "I didn't go to do nothing to you, Mr. Serra," he asserted placatingly. "I'm sorry what I did. I know what you'd do to me if you got loose."

He fled from the threatening anger in Serra's eyes to the front room and sat down behind the counter with his hands pressed against his temples. This was terrible. What he wanted most was to tell Marietta about this and get advice from her, but Marietta was twenty miles away and he had no means of communicating with her. Several times he went in and stared silently and inquiringly at Serra, but the malevolent gaze sent him hastily back to the front room. It was plain that he could not release Serra without disastrous consequences to himself, but neither could he leave him as he was. He could think of nothing that could be done and the problem appeared to him unsolvable.

At seven o'clock, after taking a final look at Serra, he locked the front door of the shop and took a street car to the neighborhood where his old shop had been and borrowed from his friend, Guldensup, the grocer, the small truck with which Guldensup delivered groceries, promising to return it in the morning filled with gasoline.

Emanuel had learned to drive by experimenting with an antique and vibrant car which his brother-in-law, Gustave, had bought for fifteen dollars for his market business. He parked the delivery-wagon in front of the tailor shop and waited for the streets to become deserted; and at two in the morning, panting and sweating with effort and apprehension, he performed the stupendous task of getting Serra out of the shop and into the truck, and closed the rear of the truck upon him so that he could not be seen.

EMANUEL, driving north through empty streets and then along country roads, with a weight of guilt upon him, realized that he was now a criminal. He perceived—rather dimly, to be sure, but terrifyingly—how easy it was to get into crime. One performed

some impulsive and unconsidered action, such as pushing a tough young man into a closet, and thereafter every criminal step followed of necessity and was done merely to protect oneself. It was not yet quite daylight when he reached Gustave's shack, standing with no other building near it, and Gustave, aroused by the arrival of the car, came to the door pulling on his trousers over his nightclothes.

"Get Marietta," Emanuel told him briefly.

Gustave turned back to arouse his sister and then came out again. Gustave was not bright; his struggling intelligence could not be much astonished at anything that happened, because everything was so inexplicable to him that events looked very much alike. So he accepted as a matter of course that Emanuel should arrive unexpectedly in a strange truck at four in the morning, but when Emanuel opened the rear of the truck and showed him Serra, a look of mild surprise came over his features.

"Don't ask nothing," Emanuel commanded him. "Just help me."

Between them they pulled Serra out of the truck, lifted him and carried him into the lean-to behind the kitchen where they laid him down and Emanuel took the gag out of his mouth.

"Now you can yell, Mr. Serra," he said politely, "because nobody hears you here and it don't get you nothing, except maybe you wake up the children."

But Serra did not yell. When he had worked the cramp out of his jaws and moistened his dry tongue, he burst into a flood of threats and oaths which turned Emanuel's blood to ice and made Gustave study him with bewildered admiration. Then Marietta, coming upon this scene through the kitchen door, with four children in their nightclothes trailing behind her, stopped in amazement and alarm. The children, not un-

derstanding any more than their mother what was going on, but accustomed to accept their father's actions as correct, showed only curiosity.

"What is all this?" Marietta demanded.

EMANUEL put his arm around her and led her back into the kitchen. "This is the guy that came every week for the ten dollars, Mamma." And he explained to her what had happened, while she sat and wept with anxiety and fear.

"But why did you bring the guy here?" she asked. "We can't do nothing with him here, and if he gets loose he bumps off all of us, maybe even the baby."

"I couldn't think what I could do, Mamma, so I bring him out here so that you should help me think about it."

"I should think!" Marietta returned, unhappily. "I got no thoughts for such a case like this, except that now you bring the guy here you got to stay here with us."

"I got to go back to the shop, Mamma."

"What good is the shop? Probably next month the landlord takes it away from us anyhow."

"I got people's clothes there. Besides, I got to take Guldensup his truck back. But I come back quick this evening, Mamma."

Emanuel returned the truck, filled up with gasoline as he had promised, and took a street car back to the shop, but it was impossible for him to do anything after he got there.

A little after noon a car stopped in front of the shop and three hard-faced and carefully and inordinately well-dressed young men got out and came in. At sight of them Emanuel's knees turned to water and he sat down suddenly on the stool behind the counter

because he could not stand up, but his face kept desperately a look of innocence and placidity.

"You seen Serra?" one of the young men asked.

"Yessir, mister," said Emanuel. "He come in yesterday, mister."

"You know anything about him since?"

"Nossir, mister. He come in and I give him ten dollars and he went away."

"Did he say where he was going?"

"Nossir, he didn't say nothing about that." Then by immense mental effort Emanuel accomplished a speech of duplicity. "Did something happen by Mr. Serra?" he asked innocently.

But the young men did not answer that. When they had gone, Emanuel sank forward onto the counter, very nearly fainting. They would go to other places, asking questions, and they would find out that this was the last place Serra had been. Then they would come back. It did not occur to Emanuel that even imaginations accustomed to ideas of variegated violence would not be able to picture him, Emanuel Swartz, as having done harm to Serra.

He must close up the shop. He could not go back and forth between the shop and Gustave's without being followed, and they would find out where Serra was. Fortunately, no one in the neighborhood knew where Gustave lived; Emanuel had been ashamed that he could not support his wife and children and he had told the neighbors only that they had gone to the country.

BY late afternoon the shop was empty. Emanuel locked the place and stuck the key under the door where, if he died before he could return, the landlord would find it, and hurried to the elevated to go back to Gustave's.

When, walking so fast he panted, he came in sight of the shack, his heart leaped to see Millicent, Imogene and

Waldo contentedly playing. They at least were still alive. Odors of cooking which filled the yard told that Marietta was getting supper.

Emanuel, before going into the house, looked into the lean-to, where Serra appeared to be talking with Percival. At sight of him, Serra snarled and his eyes glared yellow like those of a trapped beast, so that Emanuel shrank back shivering.

Marietta was bending over the stove and Gustave sat watching her. So here, at least, everything was all right. But as he looked at them, he became less certain it was all right.

"Has something happened here?" Emanuel asked anxiously.

"Pretty near something happened," his wife answered. "Pretty near Gustave let that guy loose."

Emanuel turned in horror to Gustave.

"The guy offered money to Gustave should he let him go," Marietta explained.

Emanuel went and stood accusingly in front of Gustave, who hung his head in shame.

"You done that, Gustave?"

"Sure," Gustave confessed in contrition. "I begun to unsew him but then I thought first I should ask Marietta. Marietta says, would I let the guy loose, he would bump us all off and then he would take the money back."

Emanuel looked from his wife's uncompromising countenance to Gustave's bowed head. After all, nothing actually had happened.

"You done right to ask Marietta, Gustave," he said consolingly. "Always ask Marietta."

"Gustave didn't want the money for himself; he wanted it for all of us," Marietta explained.

BUT Emanuel, no longer listening, went and sat down and put his face

into his hands.

"Mamma, I don't know what we should do," he said despairingly. "I don't know nothing."

"First you should eat."

He looked at her gratefully. He would probably be able to think better after he had eaten.

"After you eat," she said, "I tell you what we do."

He looked up at her quickly. "You got it thought out, Mamma, what we should do?" he asked her eagerly.

"Sure. I got it thought."

Immense gratitude toward her flowed in on him. He could always depend on her.

"I eat better," he said, "should you tell me now?"

She surveyed him in doubtful consideration and decided in his favor.

"We go away from here, Papa," she said, "somewhere far off. Maybe we take some other name, not Swartz, so they don't find us."

"We can't go nowhere, Mamma."

"Sure. In Gustave's car. Gustave goes too."

"Mamma, that car comes from too far out of past times. We don't get twenty miles in it and it falls into ten thousand pieces."

"Whatever place that happens we buy us a new car."

"Mamma, we got no money to buy no car. We got no money to buy us nothing."

SHE held the spoon poised over the pan she had been stirring. "How I knew the guy meant to take the money back," she stated, "was he offered so much to Gustave should he let him go. Five grand."

"Five grand?" Emanuel echoed in astonishment. "Five thousand dollars? From where would he get so much money?"

"In his pants pocket."

"I don't believe it. He ain't got no five grand."

"I seen it," Gustave asserted. "He said I should unsew him over his pants pocket and take the money out and look at it and put it back."

"We take the five grand out of his pocket," Marietta concluded happily, "and we go."

Emanuel's heart sank with disappointment. So this was her plan! It was no good. He would go a long way to relieve the needs of his family, but he could not steal, could not take money out of Serra's pocket.

"No, Mamma. Already I done enough that's bad, ain't I? For what they call it kidnapping this feller I get sent to prison if they catch me, and you ain't got no husband and the children ain't got no father. What happens to you then?"

She sighed; when he took that tone she knew there was no hope of moving him. Then she went and called the children to come in and get ready for supper. They came in and Millicent began to wash the hands of the younger ones. Emanuel sat with head bowed, staring at the floor. It was all bad, awful. The children looked at him with trusting eyes, as though he were really—as, indeed, they thought he was—someone great and powerful; they never questioned that he would feed and take care of them. It was terrible to think that he was not able to do it.

THEN Percival, who had not come in with the others, came to the door between the lean-to and the kitchen.

"The guys says you should give him something to eat," he announced.

"Sure. He eats pretty quick," Emanuel answered. "How soon is supper, Mamma?"

She looked at him as though she were not going to answer. "In five minutes," she said finally.

"What is for supper?"

"Onion soup, and Gustave went and got some meat so we got now Spanish stew and, for after, pudding with sauce."

Emanuel went out into the lean-to.

"You going to starve me, Swartz?" Serra demanded. He was not, for some reason, threatening now; he was questioning and even conciliatory.

"Nossir, Mr. Serra. Supper is in a couple of minutes."

"I get some, do I? Remember, Swartz, I ain't ate nothing since yesterday. Four or five times since then I ought to have ate and no one gives me nothing."

Emanuel was astonished. "You ain't et, Mr. Serra?" he inquired incredulously.

The glare in Serra's eyes seemed to him now not anger but hunger, and he could imagine that the stout body had grown smaller under its wrappings. He returned to the kitchen door.

"Mamma, ain't you fed Mr. Serra nothing?"

SHE turned to him defiantly. "You ain't said nothing I should feed him, and I ain't had no more than just enough for us and the children. You would want maybe that Waldo and Imogene should go hungry so that fat guy can eat!"

"No, Mamma; no, Mamma; but we got to feed him."

"He should pay for it then," she answered angrily.

His uncertain stare at her changed to startled exultation. Such a look Mrs. Issac Newton and Mrs. Galileo and Mrs. Einstein must have seen on their husbands' faces when the great idea, long sought and elusive, flowered, suddenly dazzling and exalting them.

"Mamma, always you got it thought out, always you got it the big idea that makes everything come out right. Sure,

the customer should pay! Many times he says that to me. Mamma, you are wonderful!"

He took the paper the meat had been wrapped in and wrote on it in big letters:

Onion soup\$300
Spanish stew\$500
Pudding with sauce\$200

He took the paper out and pinned it on the wall of the shack, where Serra could read it.

"What's that?" Serra demanded.

"Bill of fare, Mr. Serra."

"You gone nuts, Swartz? You think I would pay you three hundred dollars for a plate of soup?"

"I don't say yes, I don't say no. You got it plenty time to think about it. Guys like you, Mr. Serra, don't care what they spend because they don't work none but take their money off of other people. Easy come, easy go. Many times, I guess, like my son says, you sit by some night clubs where you pay it sixty dollars for a bottle of wine. Soup for three hundred dollars is better. The soup is good soup and the wine ain't even wine yet."

"Get out of here, Swartz!"

EMANUEL moved toward the kitchen, from which delicious odors of food poured out into the lean-to.

"Hold on, Swartz! I'll pay you. I got to eat. I'm starving."

"Sure, Mr. Serra; and money ain't nothing when a guy has got to eat."

Emanuel went on into the kitchen. "First Mr. Serra eats, then us," he told them. "I feed him."

He took the supper which Mrs. Swartz prepared and carried it out to Serra.

"First money, Mr. Serra."

"In my pocket," said Serra, his nostrils drinking in the odors of the soup.

Emanuel felt in Serra's pocket, took from his roll two five-hundred-dollar

bills and then began to feed him.

"Good food, Mr. Serra," he said. "You will enjoy it."

When he went back into the kitchen after feeding Serra, the others were at the table. He showed the bills to his wife, then gave them to her and she put them in her bosom.

"Five times he eats," he announced comfortably, as he seated himself, "and then we go away from here. You got to think now, Mamma, how we do about Mr. Serra. We can't leave him tied up here."

"The way to do that," Percival informed them, "is from somewhere far off you call up the police station. You say, 'If you go such-and-such a place you'll find a man tied up.' When the police station says, 'Who is talking?' you don't answer even anything and hang up."

Emanuel looked at his son unhap-

pily. "He is ten years old," he commented, "and already he knows everything how crooks do it. Like Mamma said, we got to change our name. We don't call ourselves Swartz no more, children. We call ourselves Black. You got to learn that, all of you. Millicent, what is your name?"

"Millicent Black, Papa."

"Waldo, what is your name?"

"Waldo Black, Papa."

"What is your papa's business?"

"I don't know, Papa. What is my papa's business?"

"He grows oranges in California. Imogene Black, what is Papa's business?"

"He gwows owanges in Talifornia."

"You are good children." But he looked at them sadly. For he was afraid, with the terrible example he had set them, they would all grow up to be crooks.



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GUNMAN'S ALIBI

by Gregory Regan

This taxi driver's fare paid off with lead poison — but Plug O'Bannion had a special antidote.

business on Tenth Avenue, but a passenger had taken his cab from Grand Central into the very depths of that frequently sinister neighborhood, and the beckoning hail caught him as he was emerging.

He halted the cab at the curb before a drab tenement house and threw open the door for the slender, sharp eyed young man who stood there waiting. The young man made no instant move to enter. Instead he turned his head and addressed two men concealed in the shadows of the tenement doorway. All three then moved together, and quickly, and the cab door slammed shut on their very heels.

"All right, Chief, beat it," ordered a voice through the window at Plug's right ear. "Cut across to the East Side. We'll tell you where to stop later." And the window slid in its groove and was tightly closed.

For an instant Plug remained still, his hands on the wheel, his wide black brows gathered over his eyes in concentration. He did not look around. Then he slid the gear lever into low, shot the cab forward, snapped into second and into high, and went speeding along the empty street. His head bent over the wheel intently as though this were no battered hack he drove, but a flying racer.

Plug's hunch had come true, and now he knew it for a veritable hunch indeed. The face of the second man to enter his cab had been visible in the light of the street lamp for a scant second. It was

PLUG O'BANNION was not by nature a timid man, nor one over-imaginative. Still, he possessed enough imagination to permit, with the passage of time, the transmutation of a certain sensible respect for danger into a vaguely annoying dread. He called it a hunch, when he thought of it, but it was something more than that. It was, for Plug, the first really disturbing fear of his life.

Plug was convinced more than ever that it was a hunch when he responded to a hail on Tenth Avenue one warm summer night. He disliked to pick up

a face Plug knew, a countenance which months before had been forcibly impressed on his memory. Its aspect was to Plug unlovely and unwelcome.

THOSE months counted up to more than a year, and that day Plug had been in good humor because intermittent spring showers had brought a rush of business. Late in the afternoon, close to shift time, Plug had cruised leisurely up Lexington Avenue. Near a quiet crossing a speedy sedan had suddenly started from the curb in high, and Plug had barely escaped a bad side scrape. Jamming on the brakes, Plug sent a wrathful oath after the reckless driver of the sedan. And then his wrath was distracted by the outcries of a white coated man who came running out of the corner drug store, hands tearing despairingly at his hair. Plug was of the city; he knew he had witnessed the getaway after a holdup.

In an instant, and somewhat to the surprise of all concerned, a policeman was on the scene. He too was of the city, and the fleeing sedan was no sooner pointed out than he leaped on Plug's running board.

"Come on, after them!" he barked.

"But—" began Plug. His taxi could never hope to outdistance that powerful sedan.

"Move, damn you!" roared the cop. Plug moved.

Of the two the policeman was the wiser in this instance. There was traffic on the avenue, and there were crossings where officers on duty would on principle strive to halt any car advancing at undue speed. There was a chance, even with a battered, ancient hack.

The pursuit lasted thirty blocks. The sedan was unavoidably delayed several times by knots of vehicles in the way, and the road was cleared for the cab by the mere presence of the officer cling-

ing to its side. The cab caught up. The larger car was pocketed by a minor jam and could not escape. The policeman leaped from the running board and thrust his service pistol in the face of the sedan's driver and the latter's companion. The pair surrendered. They had gambled and lost.

Now that he could appreciate the reason for the other car's wild dash from the curb, Plug felt quite impersonal about the whole affair. He bore the unhappy pair no resentment. That he had aided in their capture was nothing of his doing, and he would have felt no disappointment had he failed. He sat at the wheel as the officer made his capture and looked on with keen interest and nothing more.

The two bandits, however, were unable to regard the affair impersonally. They knew that they faced severe penalties; and two facts — first, that sheer rashness had inspired the holdup in broad daylight in such a neighborhood; and second, that ill luck in the person of an adjacent policeman damned their enterprise—combined to sour their natures. The driver, young, slight, blond and sullen, said nothing; but his partner, about thirty-five, gnarled of face and frame, studied Plug O'Bannion over the cop's shoulder and addressed him.

"You creeping Judas!" he said. His voice was impressive with feeling. "I'm going to remember your mug till they carry me into the icebox. I'm going to meet it again sometime, and I'm going to stop long enough to take it apart in little pieces. You sneaking rat—"

"Shut up!" said the cop.

"The hell—" began the man with the gnarled face, but abruptly he subsided.

There was too bright and hard a gleam in the cop's eye. That cop had silenced hard men before.

The incident was closed for Plug O'Bannion after that. At least, he was

relieved of further obligation to assist the police department. He made certain of that by departing quietly during the subsequent excitement, unnoticed and unknown. He assumed, correctly enough, that the pair were tried and convicted. The newspapers found too many other exciting items to chronicle on the following day, and Plug saw no record of the bandits' fate. He was satisfied. Plug wished only to forget them.

A MAN who knows his city as well as Plug, however, may find it hard to forget some things. Plug had knocked around in the harder depths of the town, and accident more than intention had steered him clear of trouble with the law in his reckless years of youth. He had done unpleasant things, but with the saving virtue of doing them pleasantly.

He was good natured and innately philosophic, and it was when he discovered that there were things which he balked at doing then he took to hacking. The pay was satisfactory, and the constant movement pleasant to his unconventional soul. He was thirty, big framed, black haired and black eyed, and an air of easy guilelessness concealed his completely self-reliant determination to carry through to the very end anything that seemed fair and aboveboard to Plug O'Bannion.

Plug knew men of the city; it was one of the hard won tricks of his trade. He knew the type of which the outspoken bandit was a fair example. He could read in those hard gray eyes peering from the gnarled face an implacable spirit of hatred which time would not weaken. That fellow might realize in cooler moments that Plug was an innocent victim rather than a participant, but the fact would not daunt him. In it all there was something of an elemental law which has been form-

less since the beginning of time. It is the law of the jungle.

It is also the way of the city.

"The hell!" Plug argued with himself. "Why should I let that bozo bother me? That imitation big shot—with a stretch up the river to cool off in. And if I should run into him, what of that? I've put out a few false alarms before, when they sounded off in a way I didn't like." Plug repeated, eloquently, "The hell!"

It was eloquent, but not completely effective. Plug knew, as a hack driver, that they might very logically meet once again on the streets of the city; and he knew also, as an instinctive student of men, that neither would ever forget the face of the other. What would happen with that encounter he dared not venture to predict, but irritatingly, annoyingly, a vague apprehension grew in Plug's heretofore untroubled mind. He recognized it only as a hunch.

As he drove the three men across the town from Tenth Avenue, that warm summer night, Plug faced the fact that his foreboding was well founded. The second man, he of the gnarled face, had been smiling. But he had not glanced toward the cab driver, and the smile meant nothing. The outcome must yet be seen. Plug felt no fear now, but a grim, cold interest in eventualities. He had been too long ready for them, and too long a stranger to panic, to be dismayed.

At Lexington Avenue one of the three ordered a halt and climbed out of the cab, to disappear promptly down a subway stairs. Plug was ordered to go on.

At Third Avenue another departed, wasting no time. The man with the gnarled face and hard gray eyes remained within. He told Plug to proceed uptown on First Avenue.

It was on a clammy, odorous side street in Harlem that the cab finally

halted before an unkempt flat house. Plug jerked on the brake and half turned in the seat as his passenger stepped from the cab.

"Well, what's the tariff, bud?" the latter asked, pausing with hand in pocket.

"I make it one buck thirty," said Plug—and waited.

THE man drew forth a wad of crumpled bills. He fingered the wad leisurely. His unhandsome face, which looked as though it had once known inglorious service in the ring, was placid, even faintly smiling, and the gray eyes were masked by heavy lashes. Nearby a group of loungers in the doorway of a resort unidentifiable by any sign, but obviously a cheap saloon, ceased their desultory conversation to watch.

"That makes quite a lot I owe you, doesn't it?" asked the man.

"Well—" began Plug. He eased out of the seat to face his passenger on the sidewalk, a tall, hard figure of a man. "I guess it all depends on how you look at it. One thirty won't make or break anybody."

"No," agreed the other. "But when I happen to owe more than that it's tough on a heel like you."

"Is it?" Plug's whole body became instinctively tense. "Give me the jack and I'll fade, and you can hang me up for anything else."

The man uttered an epithet. He uttered it casually, but it was the sort of epithet which custom has decreed to be anything but casual. The man developed the theme, his voice growing colder and harder as he talked. Plug stood motionless, his eyes fixed on the man. He did not interrupt.

"I spotted you from that doorway," said the man. "I'd known you anywhere! I've been looking for you. I waited almost a year to start looking for you. And now—I've found you."

"Yeah?" said Plug. "You found me. Well, what about it?"

This was no challenge; it was a question, a question Plug had been waiting to utter for many months. He hung upon the answer with a suspension of all emotion.

"This," said the man smoothly.

His move, too, was smooth. It brought him close to Plug, and it brought still closer a black, small, heavy something, that appeared between them with a flip of the man's hand and pressed gently into Plug's body.

"You rate a good long ride, you heel!" Electric, vengeful hate lashed out with the words. "You rated it a year ago. You were looking for it and you had it coming."

"Easy!" said Plug, in something of a grunt. "What happened a year ago was none of my doing."

"Yes, damn you — but I spent ten months in stir for what you did!"

The logic of this was certainly open to question, but Plug refrained from comment. He knew now what it was to experience fear, he who had never known before. This man wanted payment for his ten lost months, and he intended to exact it from Plug, who stood silent at this moment with a gun thrust in his midriff. The group in the nearby doorway did not stir. They were interested, even fascinated, but impartial. This man knew his neighborhood.

The fellow stepped slightly back. Plug's shoulders hunched imperceptibly in an instinctive attitude of defense. The other's lip curled.

"All right, you rat—take it!"

And Plug took it. What it was he did not immediately know, for it consisted of a sudden, agonized movement, and a shower of stars that filled the night and brought oblivion.

Awakening came suddenly but painfully. Plug found himself piled into his

cab in a heap. His driver's cap was jammed down over his eyes, and his head throbbed mercilessly. The effort of orienting himself required a moment, for Plug's stunned sense of balance functioned poorly just then. Presently, sore but apparently sound, he pulled himself to his feet on the sidewalk. It was curious and surprising that the feat was possible.

The block was empty. The door of the nearby saloon was closed and deserted, though a dim light burned within. On either avenue traffic rumbled by, but no pedestrian ventured down the street.

PLUG uttered a slow oath. It relieved some of the bitter wrath within. He condemned himself for a complete sucker to have let himself in for this. The extent of that which he had let himself in for was not at first apparent, but certainly it was less than that fellow would have desired, had he full opportunity to wreak his will. Despite the throbbing, Plug's head was not seriously injured; exploring with his hand he found a rising bump on one side. A slashing blow with a gun can administer severe punishment, but the stiff vizor and band of the cap had saved him. Plug glanced at the cab. It seemed unharmed. And then his hand shot to his pocket, and Plug learned the worst. He was cleaned—not a cent remained of a hard and profitable day's receipts.

Once again Plug cursed, and this time with heartfelt abandon. The theft was sheer wantonness, that was certain. By it Plug was robbed not only of his earnings but also of every dollar that he, generous and improvident, owned in the world. He glared up and down the empty street, baffled. He threw his big frame into the cab seat behind the wheel. Jamming the lever into speed, he shot away and went roaring up the block toward the avenue.

Plug received scant sympathy when he reported the unhappy affair to his boss. The latter, a round, red faced, angry man, heard the story standing on the wet concrete of the garage floor just outside his office.

"You sap!" he commented harshly. "And you let him get away with it! Why didn't you call a cop?"

"What for?" demanded Plug. "To weep on his shoulder or something? What good was a cop?"

"What d'you think they're good for? Not a hell of a lot, but they couldn't be more helpless than you!" Plug's employer probably had other troubles, and this was the last straw. "Well, get this—you better find that guy or you stand the tariff yourself. There'll be no more of you chiselers making a monkey out of me."

Plug's large mouth tightened.

"Easy with the cracks," he said. "I took plenty, and I'm not taking any more from you."

"Is that so?" retorted the red faced man. "It *that* so? Well—we'll see!"

The office door slammed, and Plug was left standing alone. He stared at the panels a moment, then shrugged and went his way. And as he went he felt of his bruised skull gingerly and thoughtfully.

Reporting for work next day, Plug found awaiting him police orders to repair to the local station house to report his loss. He did so, philosophically resigning himself to the additional loss of such time as the errand required. A detective questioned him closely, and then to Plug's not very pleased surprise, bade him go along on a visit to headquarters. He was given no explanation.

At the grim fortress on Center Street Plug was received and questioned again in one of the squad rooms—which one, he was uncertain. It was a busy place, and these were busy men. They were too pre-occupied to give him more than

cursory attention, it would seem, yet far too interested to let the matter drop, as Plug was now more than willing to do.

Plug told of the first holdup and the threat of the captured bandit. He could not recall the exact date, nor had he ever learned the fellow's name. He told of his ride with the three men and included every word of the conversation with his enemy. His story was received without comment by an audience consisting of an inspector and several plain clothesmen. He repeated it at least three times. After the last recital he was left sitting in idleness in a chair beside a desk while his inquisitors busied themselves mysteriously at telephones or with hurried errands and sober conferences.

PLUG began to regard with increasing displeasure the fact that he was missing a day's work. The boss could not make him pay for yesterday's loss, but the thought offered poor consolation for the fact that the boss would on no account give Plug any remuneration for time squandered on this unlucky affair.

One of the officers in the squad room was a uniformed man who, when his duties were not pressing, seemed to enjoy a measure of idleness. Plug eyed him for a time and, finally catching his gaze, beckoned him over from the doorway.

"How long do they keep a guy hanging around here, Chief?" he inquired.

"You're here on that taxi holdup, ain't you?" returned the officer.

"Yeah, but not from choice."

"Well, I guess you'll have to grin and bear it," said the cop, grinning himself. "You picked a bad time for trouble. The whole department is on the jump today, and I guess you're only small potatoes."

"What happened?"

"Ain't you seen the papers?"

"Not yet."

THE other paused, relishing his news. "Sid Cromwell got bumped off last night."

Plug stared, incredulous.

"Lord Almighty, no! Did they really get him?"

"They did. They simply got tired of Sidney Big Shot Cromwell running half the rackets in town for his own exclusive benefit, and gave him a one way pass on the powder wagon. The department picked him up dead in his room at the Hotel Granada at dawn. He'd been plugged by parties unknown twelve hours or more."

"Jeez, think of the biggest shot of them all going on the spot!" This was inside dope on that stratum of the city which Plug knew best, and while he was personally unaffected by the news, he nevertheless found it of absorbing interest. "Who did it?" he demanded.

"Wouldn't half of New York like to know?" jeered the officer. "Take a guess. Take a whole lot of guesses. They'll never find the guy."

"It don't seem likely," granted Plug. "He must be a power in town this morning. Well, he had his nerve. It ain't any of my business—but I'll never thank him for bumping off Cromwell the night before I come down here. I'm out a day's work now."

"Cheer up. You still got your health."

The cop grinned amiably and then hastened away in answer to a bellowed summons from an inner office.

It was much later before the tedium of Plug's long wait was relieved. And relief failed to come in time to allay a growing nervousness. Plug respected the police, but he bore them no affection. If they kept him this way after he had told his tale in full there must be a reason. Did they, for instance,

suspect him of a hoax whereby he pretended a holdup and appropriated the cash that would otherwise have been turned in to the boss? Such things have happened, and cops are paid to be suspicious.

A stocky, grizzled veteran of the force approached Plug. A silent, wise looking younger officer trailed at his heels. The elder studied Plug, lips pursed thoughtfully.

"Well, me lad, you're in a bit of a jam, ain't you?" he offered.

"No kidding!" said Plug, with irony.

The detective smiled.

"It might not turn out so bad at that. I think you can do something for us and clear up your own case completely."

"Yes?" said Plug, waiting.

"Come along. I've got something to show you."

Plug quitted the chair gladly, and the two officers escorted him out of the office and down the corridor. They proceeded leisurely, and meantime the older man talked.

"You've heard of the Cromwell murder, haven't you?"

"I just learned," replied Plug.

"It's a tough case, but maybe we can crack it. We have sources of information that have helped before, and are helping now. I suppose you understand what I mean."

"I do." Plug had heard of stool pigeons before, and was well aware of their fundamental importance in the scheme of things; though the means be shady, the end was incalculably worthy.

"Well," continued the older man, "we can tie the raspberry on a guy named Mike Murtha — providing we can find just the right touch of evidence. We braced Mike early this morning, but Mike has an alibi. He would, of course. We don't believe it, and he knows we don't. But he also knows that we realize that most juries *would* believe it. He's safe."

"Yes?" encouraged Plug with interest.

They entered a small room, occupied solely by a table and a desk and several chairs. The detective strode to the desk and picked up a stiff piece of cardboard about the size of an ink blotter. He glanced piercingly at Plug and, turning the thing over, handed it to him.

"Is that your stickup?" the detective asked.

On the cardboard were mounted the twin pictures always taken of a convicted criminal, to be filed in the rogues' gallery. Beneath them were names and notations. Reading, Plug learned that this was Mike Murtha. A glance at the face told him instantly that it was also his year old enemy.

IT is doubtful whether Plug O'Bannon ever faced a more momentous decision. On his word depended the life of a man — perhaps also of his own. Plug could not guess just how he could help fix the guilt of murder on Murtha, but he knew that the detective looked to him for an answer that would somehow effect it irrevocably.

Sid Cromwell had meant nothing to Plug, and his death, for all Plug knew, might have been well deserved. Murtha, beyond a matter of assault and trivial robbery, meant little more. Plug had never given trust or confidence to the police. Had he the choice, he would wish nothing better than to withdraw himself entirely from these unpleasant matters. And paramount among the ways of the city is scorn for the squealer.

"This guy," said Plug slowly, "I guess is out. I can't say that I've ever seen him."

The detective's brows rose and then lowered gently, until a bright, hard coldness lay concealed behind narrowed eyelids.

"There is a crime called accessory

after the fact of murder," said the officer. "I've sent a dozen up the river for it in my time."

The barely veiled threat had the opposite effect than that intended. It would, with Plug O'Bannion. It made his decision final.

"I wish you luck this time," he said innocently, and he handed the photographs to the detective with no further word. No man would burn on the idle word of Plug O'Bannion.

They left Plug to cool his heels in a corner of the squad room; and, alone again, Plug analyzed the situation and tried to draw from it the conclusions which tended to be of greatest benefit to himself. The older detective's threat was exaggerated; so much he felt sure of. Still, he was under suspicion of theft, and the cops would not thank him for refusing to aid them. If they became convinced that he could help if he would, they would find some means of paying him off for his stubbornness.

Plug could not feel certain that they were convinced, however. They had skilfully matched his story with known facts, and had unerringly selected Murtha as the bandit whom he had helped capture. Yet they had no record of Plug's participation, and they would have difficulty proving it. They had only his story to go on, and Plug could develop a faulty memory hereafter if necessary. Robbery was one thing, but murder was entirely another, and Plug had no wish to be drawn into it. Murders frequently come in pairs; and Plug valued his own skin highly, while the police valued only his testimony.

In any case, there was time to stall them off for awhile. Before they could scrutinize their records of a year gone, and prove Plug conclusively the driver of the taxi which captured the bandit car, something might break which would point the way to a safer conclusion. Plug had been unable to shake

off a certain worry for more than a year, and he balked at shouldering another of even greater proportions.

They let Plug go free late in the afternoon. He was informed that the robbery of the night before would be investigated and that results would be made known to him as they developed. He was also made to understand that it would probably be wise to think certain matters over very carefully during the coming day or two. Delicately they let him know that flight or evasion of any kind would go exceedingly ill with him, and that it lay well within their power to render adequate punishment. Plug listened, thanked them impassively and walked out of headquarters building.

THAT was an unpleasant night for Plug O'Bannion. Being broke, he ate in a restaurant where his credit was always good and retired to his room for the evening. And in his simple, comfortable room, he found himself unable to do other than think unpleasant thoughts. There was no escape.

Plug could but poorly tolerate being afraid, and dread visited him now. He dreaded the police, and infinitely more he dreaded Murtha and all the man represented. By staying neutral he courted the enmity of the cops, which was dangerous; and by siding with the cops he won the vengeance of Murtha's mob, which was fatal. Alone with himself, Plug growled and cursed futilely, unable for the first time in his life, when confronted with danger, to tear slashingly into it and fight it to a successful and intensely satisfying finish. Instead Plug began to know something of how it feels to be completely licked.

He reported for work next day, uncertain of his reception at the garage. The boss was not present, and his assistant noncommittally checked Plug out with a cab. Plug roved forth through the streets and worked hard.

But he avoided his usual haunts, warily dodging trouble, and in consequence his receipts suffered. He pulled into the garage that night at shift time in no equable temper.

The boss was waiting beside the cash window as Plug turned in the money. He glanced over Plug's shoulder at the amount.

"Huh!" he commented. "So nobody took it away from you today, eh?"

"No," said Plug.

"Imagine!" observed the boss. "What a chance they missed to clean up!"

It was a double edged crack. Plug thrust the cash through the window, stared hard at his employer while his nostrils quivered faintly, and then strode swiftly away over the concrete floor.

Plug O'Bannion was rapidly passing into a state known as being fed up. His gorge was full. Departing from the garage, he walked the streets for many blocks. He dropped into a restaurant and, with some of the loose silver accumulated that day, bought himself a sketchy meal.

Action was brewing within Plug O'Bannion. Something must happen, and soon. It was the way of the city, and the way of Plug O'Bannion. Reckless he might be, even foolhardy; but patient and guileful never. There was the matter of a certain murder, which he must keep out of at all costs—but there was also the matter of a certain jam involving Plug, which must be settled now, immediately, murder or no murder! And Plug, draining the last of his cup of coffee, thought he knew a manner of settlement that would prove decisive.

When he left the restaurant Plug traveled in a fixed direction. He traveled determinedly, and his objective was the drab little saloon on that empty side street in East Harlem.

It was the sort of resort which offers no problem to the stranger, for the reason that strangers would not likely be disposed to enter. Plug merely thrust the door open and walked inside. He was in a place resembling a small store, with a counter to one side, chairs scattered about the floor, and shelves lining the walls which contained the merest pretense of a stock of staple merchandise. Immediately to the rear there was a light partition. It did not reach the ceiling, and by the sounds and lights beyond, Plug knew that the business was mainly conducted on the other side.

There was a man in shirtsleeves seated behind the counter. Atop the counter sat another, apparently a patron pausing for a chat. They regarded Plug in silence.

"Is Mike Murtha in the back?" Plug demanded.

THE two men continued to study him, then exchanged a quick glance.

"No," said the man in shirtsleeves. "He ain't."

"Will he be here?"

The other shrugged.

"I should know!"

Plug leaned on the counter confidentially.

"I want to see him, get me? I don't care where he is. Find him and tell him to turn up here right away."

"Oh, you don't say?" retorted the man pleasantly. "I should tell Mike Murtha to come running, eh? Well, will you please do me a favor in return and kindly go to hell all of a sudden, eh?"

Plug smiled sardonically. He drew forth a cigaret and touched a match flame to it.

"You can mention," he added, "that he's due to get scorched in a certain very unpleasant way unless he shows up here in a hurry. Just pass the word. I'll be in the back."

Plug turned and strode through the open partition to the rear. There was a bar against one wall, and half a dozen customers stood before it. Plug tossed a coin on the wood.

"A large glass," he ordered, and in a moment was drinking deeply from a mug of acrid, foamy beer.

He set himself to wait.

Plug was incurious about the procedure adopted by the man in shirtsleeves. It mattered little, so long as Murtha came. And Murtha would surely come if Plug's last words were relayed to him. Plug smiled grimly as he waited. Murtha would come.

And in time Murtha came.

Plug was aware suddenly of his presence; his entry had been so inconspicuous that it went unnoticed. Plug, looking in the bar mirror, saw that gnarled face studying him from a point of vantage just within the partition door. It bore no expression, no sign. Plug turned, glass in hand. He leaned back to the bar and scrutinized Murtha from head to foot. Murtha approached.

"So it's you, eh?" he said.

Curiosity worked within him.

"It is," agreed Plug. "I wanted to talk to you."

"I see. But what about?"

"A matter of murder," said Plug.

Only by the merest flicker of his mobile brows did Murtha give any sign. It was unlike him to practise control, but these were unusual circumstances. Plug, for the while, had the upper hand; and they both knew it. There were things which Murtha must find out.

"What about what murder?" he asked.

Plug kept him waiting a space.

"I found out something very strange," he said. "A year ago I nailed you to the cross—by accident. This time I can do it again, and it won't be any accident. All I need to do is say

the word. Big shot, I've got you cold!"

"Yeah? How?"

Plug smiled, with narrowed eyelids. That was one question he had no intention of answering. He did not know the answer. Sufficient that the police had courted his testimony.

"If you can't figure that out, big shot, that's too bad for you. You told me you were waiting more than a year to square things with me. Well, they're more than squared now. So far as I'm concerned you're safe right now; I'm not taking any tales to the cops. But next time you start thinking about me, remember that I can singe your hair for you in a second."

Murtha said nothing. He was thinking hard.

"First thing we'll do," continued Plug, "is square a little matter of my own. Come across with seventy-seven dollars."

Murtha's gaze turned upon Plug.

"For what?"

"To settle for the jack you lifted the other night."

Baffled, dangerous anger was simmering beneath Murtha's still exterior. Plug watched him, estimating the signs. He knew the type of man Murtha was. There was no compromise in him, only passion. Plug would win—or he would lose. Either way, it would be without reservation.

And as he watched Plug began to realize that his words had failed to win for him. Fear was dominant in Murtha; not fear of Plug, but of the unknown which Plug represented. In Murtha fear was a treacherous, ferocious emotion. It caused his lip to curl slowly, and Plug knew definitely that he had lost.

Now fear, in Plug O'Bannion, was a strange emotion too. These were men of the city, and in that strange way they were alike. Good natured and generous was Plug O'Bannion—to a certain

point. That was the point, in the common run of men, where the lust of battle cools and gives way to the impulse of flight. In Plug it marked the moment where the battle has just begun.

Plug began to smile. It was a hard, crooked smile, and with it the hackles were rising. He anticipated Murtha's answer.

"You think you're going to tell me to go to hell, don't you, big shot?" he said. "You think you can tell me to go to hell?"

Murtha turned on him.

"I certainly do!"

Plug's beer glass was placed on the bar with a sweeping motion, and the motion, in returning, brought Plug's open hand against Murtha's jaw with a shocking smack. There was no gun in Murtha's hand this time.

The blow flung the unprepared Murtha across the floor against the opposite wall. Plug came away from the bar, teeth bared in a kind of reckless joy, following up. Murtha had a gun somewhere on his person, but Plug intended that Murtha would find no chance to go for it. Plug struck again, and this time the hand was closed in a hard, battering fist.

Murtha was ready. In his eyes the ferocity of his hatred was now bared. He took that second blow on the arm with an ancient skill, so that it glanced off harmlessly. And sidestepping quickly, he struck back, shiftily, mercilessly. His movement was fluid. This was an old, familiar game.

They battled. The others in the room recoiled with astonishment and, seeking the shelter of the bar, watched with hot eyes. The bartender seized the club that hung ever ready at his hand, and then, realizing the identity of at least one of the combatants, stood helplessly looking on. He dared not interfere, for this was no common brawl.

Plug battled for his life and for vengeance.

Beneath their feet damp sawdust flew. Their bodies struck the bar and bottles rattled. Plug collided with the wall, and a dusty, ornately framed lithograph leaped from its resting place and crashed to the floor. The skin on their knuckles slipped and their blows left marks of blood on white skin. They battled on.

They were breathing heavily. Grim determination succeeded the first flush of fury. They stood up together, reckless of punishment, until the powerful impact of a fist threw one or the other back despite his will.

PLUG knew he had no assurance of victory. He ceased to think simply of smashing the face before him and kept in mind the necessity of ending the fight quickly. His fist sought repeatedly to land on the point of that ugly chin, to land fairly. Murtha was too quick; his head shifted a fraction of an inch just in time and the blow accomplished nothing. And each time Murtha seized the opportunity and came back viciously to the body, so that Plug grunted.

Plug was receiving a lesson in combat, and soon was wise enough to know it. He changed his attack. He too strove to plant a blow in Murtha's soft midriff. Murtha was no fighter in the pink; he was exceedingly vulnerable.

Pain and exhaustion were draining Plug slowly but surely. He was supported by the knowledge that the same weakness was coming over his antagonist. Plug's left arm was numb and almost ineffective; he used it only to feint.

A right to the body, which Murtha evaded; then another to the face, which failed. Next a smashing blow on the shoulder from Murtha, which flung Plug again to the bar. He braced him-

self, heaved his body forward and charged.

And then suddenly it was done, so suddenly that Plug, standing over the fallen Murtha, still twitched with instinctive movements of battle. The feint had worked, and the right, snapping immediately after, had landed hard. The sound of the impact still echoed in his ears. Murtha had simply sailed across the room and crashed once against the wall and then to the floor. He lay still in the scattered sawdust.

Plug looked around. Behind the bar stood the barkeep and the customers, still immobile. In the partition door was the man in shirtsleeves, aghast.

"It was a fair fight," said Plug. "Keep out of it."

None displayed any intention of joining.

Plug leaned over his foe. He ran his hands over the body. In a skeleton holster attached to the rear of his belt there was a .32 revolver. Plug broke it, removed the cartridges, and tossed the weapon to the other end of the room. Next he emptied Murtha's pocket of a wad of folded bills. He came erect, and counted out seventy-seven dollars in plain sight of the watchers.

"I'm taking this," he told them. "It's mine."

Plug discovered that nobody seemed to hear. They were staring at the door. He swung about. Behind the man in shirtsleeves, rapidly estimating the implications of the scene before them, were two policemen.

They pushed the man aside and walked into the room.

It was only after Plug had been left alone in the cell at the police station for a quarter of an hour that reaction set in. It took a strange form. Plug laughed.

The situation was fantastic enough for laughter. He was held on charges of fighting and of robbing the uncon-

scious Murtha. He could easily exonerate himself by telling why he had fought and taken the money—but that involved retracting his statement at headquarters. Now that the excitement was over, Plug could see the hand of an ironic fate moving through the affair, and he could laugh, loudly and rather profanely.

He was completely stumped about what to do next. He would like to have a talk with that elderly detective again, a guarded, noncommittal talk that might shed some light on the way ahead and still leave Plug clear. Scorning these local police, he had told them nothing. And Murtha, brought to consciousness and also arrested, for very evident reasons had refrained from talking.

THERE was a disturbance in the corridor outside, and Plug looked up from the pallet on which he sat. They came to his cell door. An officer thrust a key in the lock, and behind him, to Plug's not very great surprise but much to his pleasure, waited the man himself—the grizzled detective whom Plug had wished to see. He was smiling. It was a slightly crooked, rather assured smile.

The detective entered the cell. He gave Plug a brief greeting and sat down beside him. He offered him a cigaret and a light.

"Well, you're sure hell bent on getting into trouble, aren't you?" he observed.

Plug grinned.

"I was just thinking the same thing."

The officer was in no hurry. He smoked his cigaret.

"It looks pretty bad, all right," he said. "Just for the hell of it, I bet I could line up about a dozen assorted charges against you, misdemeanors and felonies both."

Plug shot a glance at him. Just how serious was this guy?

"Off hand," the other continued, "I'd hesitate to say how much time they would call for. But it would be considerable."

"Oh, yeah?" said Plug.

"Yeah!" echoed the other.

An interval was spent in silence.

"Look here," continued the detective suddenly. "You've got something that we want, and I might as well tell you that it's useless for you to stall us off. I know damn well you lied to me about Murtha. Now I want you to tell the truth, and to tell it so that a jury will believe you."

"I thought so," said Plug, with evasive disgust. "But look here yourself—why drag me into your dirty work? It's your job and they pay you for it. I'm no cop and never will be."

"I'll explain. I told you Murtha had an alibi that cleared him on the Cromwell murder. It's a good alibi. He was supposed to have been playing cards in Stamford during the time that the murder was committed. We did some fast work, and found out that the alibi was no bluff. It was well prepared and would be a formidable defense in a trial. Murtha, you see, has been a small time gangster, and he was picked to do the Cromwell job because he had never been in any way connected with the man. None of his known enemies would dare to try the job. They hired Mike and paid him well, and Mike took it because the alibi alone would clear him. If we bust that open, we bust Mike."

"Where do I come in?"

"Well, Mike claims he drove down from Stamford after the poker game, early in the morning. He claims that because it was safer than to try getting out of town to Stamford after the job—there's always the chance that one of our men might see him going, since he's

known. And it looks very reasonable. Here's the point. If he robbed you, he could hardly have been in Stamford playing poker that evening at the time he says he was. If he has no alibi, we can make several points with some other evidence we have. And if we prove that he created a false alibi, we discredit everything else he may assert. See?"

"I see," Plug said slowly.

"And now it's up to you. If you keep your mouth shut, you are guilty of a very serious crime, and the department will be mighty slow to forget it. Tell your story and it's all over."

PLUG rose and paced the brief length of the cell. He returned and looked down on the officer.

"Well, you got me. I'll be damned if I'd talk for you for any other reason. I'll talk."

"Fine!" The detective came to his feet. "I'll fix it up so that you won't be held as a material witness, and I'll keep my mouth shut so that you needn't be afraid of Murtha's friends. He hasn't many, and the guys that hired him will be glad to see him burned and out of the way." He drew open the cell door. "Come on, let's get started."

"Just a minute!" interposed Plug. "This is all very well, but how about my seventy-seven bucks? Do I get them?"

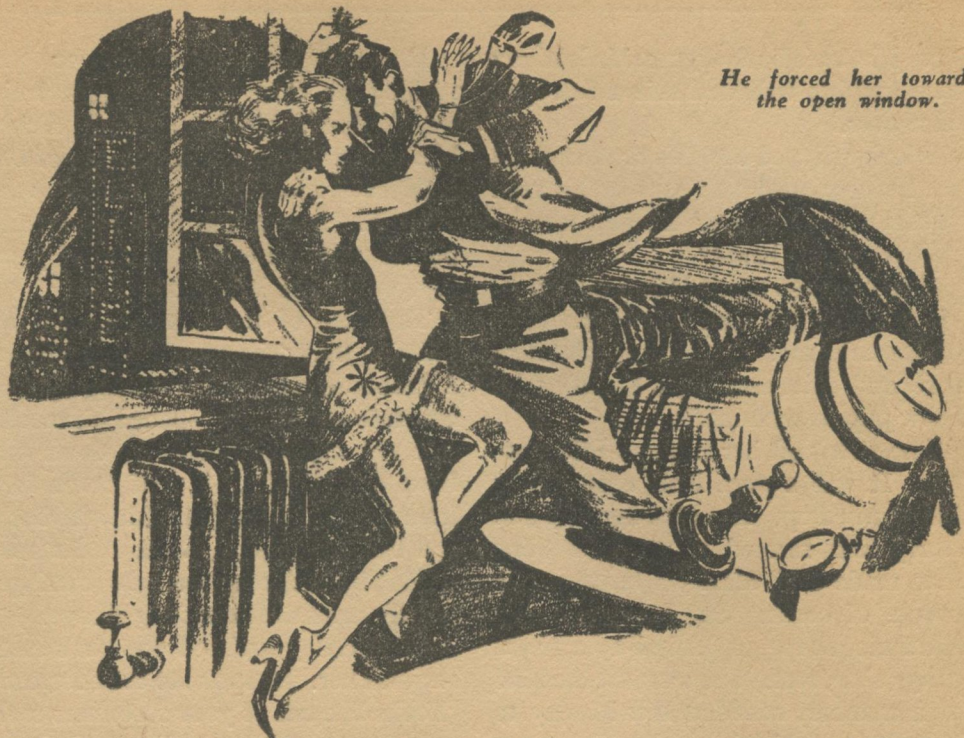
The officer smiled. It was again that same slightly crooked, assured smile.

"I guess you do." He pulled forth a roll of bills. They amounted to quite a sum. "Seventy-seven? I'll make it a hundred, to pay for the day you missed."

Plug pocketed the bill, shrugged and smiled philosophically in return. This was the way of the city.

They walked together out of the open cell.

See page six for special announcement!



*He forced her towards
the open window.*

COPPERS STRIKE HOT

by S. J. Bailey

*One pretty girl is big enough a headache in any murder case
—but when they come in pairs . . .*

FIRST Grade Detective Bill Marley wedged his crate against the crowded curb and made for the ritzy entrance of the Cabot Arms Hotel.

He found his passage into the hotel blocked by a very pretty girl, heatedly arguing with the doorman over a fleecy, white animal she had at the end of a blue silk ribbon.

Marley's eyes widened as he saw the animal. The tough lines of his jaw softened a trifle. It was a lamb and it couldn't have been more than a couple

of months old. There was a big blue bow around its neck, and the bow was almost bigger than the lamb. It let out a plaintive cry and began to stalk in a semi-circle, on wobbly, spindly legs. The ribbon started to wrap around Marley's leg.

Marley resisted an impulse to reach down and pick it up. He got a kick out of pet animals, especially young ones. "Well," he demanded, his voice gruff, "do I get in or don't I?"

The doorman, fat and resplendent in blue uniform decorated with gold braid,

gave Marley's burly figure, his leathery face and his wrinkled suit a fish-eyed once-over.

Marley flipped back his coat, exposed the badge pinned well back on his vest. "From Headquarters," he said tersely. "What goes on here?"

The doorman opened his mouth to reply, but the girl beat him to it. "Oh, please help me! I've an appointment here and this man says I can't take Snow-pup in with me."

She wrinkled her nose at Bill Marley. It was a pert, little nose, just a trifle turned up. Her eyes were big and starry and seemed to say something that made Bill Marley's heart pop a couple of corks. She was small and had a nice shape, well set off by a green, clingy silk dress. She was just the kind of a number, confided Bill Marley to himself, to whirl his pulse dial for a long distance call.

"Snow-pup?" he said, screwing his mouth to one side to keep from grinning.

"No," she replied innocently, a hint of mischief in the back of her baby brown eyes. "Of course not. 'S no pup. It's a lamb, silly, can't you see?"

"I mean it's name, snub-nose," returned Marley. "And don't get smart." He reached down and untangled the ribbon from his leg. "Call him off, will you? He's getting me all tangled up."

The girl was suddenly furious. "Untangle him yourself, smart guy. Maybe it'll make your face red and you'll stop going around calling ladies names."

Marley grinned. "Okey, snub-nose."

He turned to the doorman. "Let snub-nose take her pet in with her. He won't do any harm. Now, I got to get on inside. I've got a call—"

SUDDENLY, things were happening around Bill Marley. The girl's face turned white and she swayed in her tracks.

It wasn't the blood-chilling scream, rushing at them with express train speed, that made his stomach flinch. Nor the scraping, ripping sound of the collapsing awning as the body tore through. It was the thudding sound, punctuating the end of the brief journey, that made him sick.

The face of the doorman went as white as the collar around his fat neck. A cabbie who had been leaning against his crate at the curb, opened his mouth and the cigarette bounced down the front of his shirt. A half dozen feet from the fire hydrant on which the body had been impaled, a white-clad nursemaid fainted across her baby carriage, into the arms of her wailing charge.

Bill Marley grabbed the girl's arm, steadied her. He spoke to the doorman. "Looks like one of your customers took a short cut to the gutter, Pat." His tone was deceptively light. His lean, leathery face was taut.

"Jeez," said the doorman.

"Recognize her?" demanded Marley, tight-lipped.

"That's kinda hard—now," mumbled the doorman.

"Move over here, where you can get a squint at her face—"

"It's hanging up-side-down. But—ah-h!"

"Well?" asked Marley impatiently.

"It's Alice Lang, the musical comedy star!" The doorman blinked, licked his lips.

Marley's jaw hardened. "Alice Lang, eh? Playing in Tulip Time, isn't she? Say, wait a minute! You say it's Miss Lang?"

The doorman nodded unsteadily.

Marley let out a low whistle, his face grave. "A Miss Lang called Headquarters from here and said she had some information for the police. Wouldn't say anything over the phone. Insisted that somebody call on her."

"There was only *one* Miss Lang,"

supplied the doorman.

Marley shook his head slowly.

He surveyed the scene carefully, while traffic piled up, and people appeared magically, knitting themselves into a large, buzzing circle. A police whistle shrilled down the block, which was occupied mostly by swanky apartment houses.

A thin negligee exposed a voluptuous slim figure. The flimsy material was blood-soaked. The girl's stomach had been impaled on the hydrant. Her arms and head dangled down into the gutter. A black handbag hung by a narrow strap from one wrist. It was open and its contents were strewn on the pavement.

"Dressed in a negligee," muttered Marley, "and carrying a handbag. Suicide—hell."

He gathered the articles from the bag. There were bills in fives, tens and twenties to the tune of about four or five hundred. Lip stick, change, cigarette lighter, a card of the Elite Beauty Shoppe, and a small flat key.

Something made Marley look up. It was a squawling noise. The kid in the carriage was trying to struggle out from under the unconscious nurse. Nobody was paying any attention to it. All eyes were centered on the dripping horror at the hydrant.

Marley went over and picked the kid up. He was a big man but somehow he didn't look funny, holding the kid. He made a small noise at it. It stopped squawking right away. It chortled and grabbed for his nose. Marley's nose was something to grab at. It was a little long and a little thin, but straight as a blackboard pointer.

MARLEY looked down, noticed a monogrammed "L" on the corner of the baby's blanket. He slapped the nursemaid's cheek. She slipped from the carriage and sat down hard on the

sidewalk. That brought her out of it. She got up and took the kid. The kid started to wail as soon as it was out of Marley's big arms.

Marley stationed a cop who had broken through the press. Then he ducked into the building. The girl with the pet lamb had disappeared.

The desk told him Alice Lang's suite was E-26. Marley found the door ajar. He put purposeful feet across the threshold, took quick inventory.

The rooms were modernistic with white the dominant color. At first he thought them empty. Then he found the maid. She was standing in a shadowy corner of a big closet which opened off the living room, a dozen feet from the open window through which Alice Lang must have fallen.

She was darkly pretty, in her trim, short-skirted uniform. She was staring straight ahead, dry-eyed, her hands clenched at her sides, her lips trembling. Marley saw immediately that she was suffering from shock.

He dragged her out of the closet. He spoke to her softly. At first she didn't seem to realize his presence, then gradually she responded to the compelling influence of his comforting presence.

"Miss Lang was too ill to go on tonight. I don't know, I guess she'd worried herself sick over something that's been bothering her. She was waiting for her understudy to get here. There were some lines or something they had to go over. I was in the bedroom. . . . I didn't know anybody else was in here until all of a sudden I hear a man's voice. It was raised, like he was sore. Then I heard her scream. I ran in here and just caught sight of a man disappearing through the door. The window was open. I ran over and—" She buried her face in her hands.

"You saw the man's face?"

"No."

"Did you recognize his voice?"

"No."

"Could you distinguish anything he said?"

"No."

Marley shrugged, eyed her keenly. "You're Miss Lang's personal maid, eh? Do you know why she'd have her handbag in her hand when she fell from the window?"

"I don't know."

"She wasn't dressed for the street. If she'd wanted make-up, she'd have gone to her dressing table in the bedroom." Marley's brow knit in puzzled fashion. "She must have picked the bag up for some other reason. Something in it—"

He pulled the key and the beauty parlor card from his pocket, examined them.

The maid eyed him fearfully as he turned the key over in his palm. It was stamped: *No. 27, Times Square, B. M. T.*

Bill Marley shrugged, picked up the phone and dialed a number. He waited a few seconds, then: "Detective Marley reporting. Gimme Homicide . . . Hello, Sergeant McComb? Listen, Sarge, Alice Lang, the actress, just fell out of her window, Cabot Arms Hotel . . . Yeah, all over the sidewalk. Looks like she was pushed out . . . How do I know? Listen, you never did like me, Sarge, and I guess it's too late for any love to sprout between us. I know it's murder. Tell you when you get here . . . What? All right, you can push my face in when you get here. You'd better do it right away, because it's gonna take the rest of your life, probably, to pin this crime on the real killer."

Marley hung up, grinning. Sergeant Dan McComb of Homicide never had had any use for his, Marley's detective ability. Marley had tried to make the homicide squad more than once, but Dan McComb always stood in his way.

THREE quarters of an hour later, Bill Marley entered the office of Inspector Lanning. "I just got back from the Cabot Arms Hotel, Inspector. You know, the Alice Lang killing. I turned things over to Sergeant McComb. He's going to dig something up, pretty quick—"

"He's already *dug* something up," rapped out Inspector Lanning, his face drawn with serious lines. He stopped for a moment and Marley stared. The old boy sounded as if he had a hell of a weight on his chest.

"Marley," went on Lanning, "is it true that you stopped outside the Cabot Arms Hotel to talk to some jane that was running around with a pet lamb?"

"Why—why—" began Marley.

"Yes or no!" roared Lanning, pounding his fist on the desk.

"Yes—sir," said Marley.

"You were sent out on an assignment," said Lanning. "We did not know why this Lang woman called, but we did know she had something of a serious nature to impart to us. Instead of getting to her and listening to her story, you stopped to chin with a chippie, who for all we know, was an accomplice of the killers. You failed to get the Lang story. The fact that she was murdered indicates that she had some information of criminal activities. Now she's been silenced. We have a murder on our hands, and what's worse, the matter she wished to report is still unknown to us."

"But, Inspector," began Marley.

"There's nothing more to be said," interrupted Lanning. "Turn in your shield. You're under suspension."

Bill Marley went out of headquarters with a weight dragging like lead inside him. He had never given thought to the possibility of one day having to give up his shield, even temporarily. He had not realized how much the badge meant to him.

He kept thinking about the girl with the pet lamb. He felt certain that she was a decent kid. He didn't believe she had been planted to hold him up while the killers could polish off Alice Lang. Why, she hadn't delayed him more than three or four minutes.

Still, he couldn't deny that those three or four minutes would have saved Alice Lang's life. It was a tough spot to be in. He had an honest mind, clear through, and he couldn't help feeling that he was at least partially to blame.

Despairing anger turned to bitter resolve. He'd find that dame with the lamb. He'd soon find out if she had anything to do with the killing. Somehow, he'd get to the bottom of this mess and do what he could to clear himself.

He decided it shouldn't be hard to trace a girl traveling around the city with a pet lamb in tow. He was right. After canvassing eight of the cabbies who frequented the stand near the Cabot Arms, he found one who had seen her.

"Do I remember that dame?" said the cabbie. "Well, I hope to kiss a pig's ear, I do. She had the lamby-wamby under her arm. Say, did she steal that annie-mile from you, bud?"

"Listen, bo," growled Marley, "this is police business. Maybe you want me to draw a diagram on your ugly puss. I got a pan-kissing right that's aching to go into action."

"Okey, okey," said the cabbie. "I was only kidding. Why didn't you say you was from headquarters? I rolled up a dollar ninety on the clicker, taking her to Darwin Street. I think the number was 436—no, 463."

"Roll up another dollar ninety," ordered Marley, throwing himself into the cab, "and when I say roll, I mean ROLL."

Number 463 Darwin Street was a walk-up apartment house. The superintendent at once identified the girl as a

swell kid but an awful nuisance on account of her lamb. Name of Vera Trent.

HE found Vera Trent in a little two-by-four apartment. She was wrapped up in a negligee that brought out one or two other little things in her favor. She seemed glad to see him. He admitted right away to himself that he was getting a big kick out of seeing her again. But he didn't let on to her. He laced right into questions, direct, hot and to the point.

"I get sick when I think of it, Bill," she said. "Alice Lang was always swell to all of us girls. I hate to think of her—like that."

Marley's blood pounded. He threw his hat into the overstuffed chair and flopped on a pillow-strewn studio couch. "You *knew* Alice Lang?" he exploded.

"Why, of course. I'm in the show. *Tulip Time*. I'm her understudy."

"Then you're the dame she was waiting for! And *you're* going to take her part permanently now that she's—"

"Please! Don't say it!" protested Vera. "It sounds so—" she broke off suddenly and stared at Bill Marley, as if she had just thought of something disquieting. "You didn't come out here because you thought I had anything to do with—" she faltered, pained.

"Down at headquarters," said Marley, "they naturally jumped to the conclusion that you were deliberately stalling me at the door so that—"

"Oh!" cried Vera. "Do *you* think that, too?"

Marley shrugged, eyeing her closely. "I don't know what the hell to think. I've just been invited off the force because I couldn't help talking to you for a minute. You were such a nice clean kid and that damn lamb kind of got me—say, where is Snow-pup?"

"In the bath tub. I was just going to give him a shower. Would you

like to see him take a shower? He adores—”

“Get your clothes on,” suddenly gritted Marley. “You’re coming with me. I just thought of something.”

Her eyes became suffused with fright. “Bill! You’re not—” She released the front of her negligee to grasp his coat lapel, bringing to view a generous expanse of firm, youthful breasts.

Marley grinned mirthlessly. “I haven’t got power now to arrest a cockroach for blocking traffic in the sink drain. So stick your worries in the bath tub with Snow-pup and hang some clothes on that beautiful chassis.”

Vera went behind a flowered, Japanese screen and Marley heard the soft rustle of silk. He plunged his hand in his pocket and brought out the key and the beauty parlor card. He frowned, spoke: “Ever hear of the Elite Beauty Shoppe?”

“Why, yes,” came from behind the screen. “It’s a nice place. I go there often.”

“Did Alice Lang ever go there?”

“She used to. But—say! Why do you ask?”

“I’m asking the questions,” countered Marley. “What’s on your mind?”

“Well,” said Vera, emerging from behind the screen, hooking a black satin dress up the side, “it isn’t anything very definite, but day before yesterday, I was talking to her and I suggested casually that we go to the Elite together. She got pale and changed the subject very quickly. I didn’t think much of it at the time—”

“Let’s go,” said Bill Marley, rising.

They had to walk to the nearest subway station before they found a cab. “Times Square,” Marley told the driver. “And take the dollar and a quarter route, instead of the dollar ninety route.”

“Okey, buddy,” saluted the driver. “Union man?”

“What,” asked Marley, when they were bowling along at a good clip, “does this Elite Beauty Shoppe look like? Anything odd about it?”

Vera wrinkled her pert little nose, looking off into space. Then she turned her soft brown eyes on Bill Marley, snapping her fingers excitedly. “I have it! A very peculiar thing I’ve never seen in any beauty parlor. They have specially built phone booths. They’re really little lounging rooms, with deep leather cushions and mirrors. Each one has a French phone. They seem to be sound proof. The women that go to Elite spend a lot of time sitting in the booths, telephoning their friends, while they’re letting their hair dry or waiting for the bleach to work.”

“Hmm,” said Bill Marley thoughtfully. He stared out of the cab window, frowning at a cab that had pulled up on the right and was apparently trying to maneuver past them.

“Look out for the guy on your right,” Marley called out to the driver. “He looks like he wanted to chew your fender off. He’s—”

THE cabby shot one look at the other cab, then yelled: “Watch it, buddy! There’s a mugg in the back of that cab and he’s toting a rod. Looks like he’s gonna plug you!”

Marley grabbed the girl and shoved her down to the floor. He squatted gun in hand, waiting to get a peek at the occupant of the other cab.

The two taxis were racing along, almost neck and neck. At the next intersection, a trolley car halted and a small knot of school kids began to get off. The driver of Marley’s cab slammed on his brakes. The other cab swerved widely to the right, and crashed through the intersection, barely missing a couple of the kids.

Marley, leaning out the window, got a fleeting glimpse of a head inside the

cab. He saw an arm extend through the small oval in the rear and heard the whine of a slug whistling past his head. The report of the gun wafted back as the cab disappeared in traffic further up the block.

Marley waited, fuming, for the trolley to move on. By the time they got into the chase, the other cab was hopelessly lost.

Vera climbed back on the seat, dusting herself off and throwing little side glances at Marley. "Gosh," she said, "you're a roughneck, aren't you? Almost broke my back, shoving me into the floor."

Marley grinned, then looked serious. "I'll lay odds we've been playing tag with the guy that murdered Alice Lang. Did she have any enemies that might know you?"

Vera shook her head. "Alice was liked by everybody I know. She was one hell of a swell trouper. Say, you don't think that man was out gunning for me?"

Marley looked puzzled. "I don't know."

A half hour later, Marley dragged Vera Trent down into the B. M. T. station at Times Square. "What's the idea?" she exclaimed. "The beauty parlor is over near Eighth Avenue, on 43rd."

"Just a minute. I held out something on Sergeant McComb." He took her over to a battery of steel checking lockers, pulled out the key that had fallen from Alice Lang's handbag. He found number 27, inserted the key and pulled open the door. He let out a low whistle, stuck in his hand and showed Vera what he had found inside the locker.

"A fifty dollar bill!" she breathed. "Gee, Bill, but am I hungry. Let's you and me go into the tavern upstairs and talk this thing over."

"Not so fast, snub-nose," laughed

Bill Marley. "There's something phoney about this. I find the key on Alice Lang and here's fifty bucks in her locker, how come?"

"It's the prize!" exclaimed Vera. "You know, Steve Kelso, the gink that runs these locker boxes in the subway stations advertises a fifty dollar prize each week to one of his patrons. It's a new way to bring prosperity to the checking business."

"Yeah, I know," said Marley. "Kelso's practically turned his checking business into a gambling racket. Even people who don't have bundles to check, gamble a dime on finding the lucky locker. But how come—?"

"I see what you mean," broke in Vera. "If Alice gambled a dime on finding the lucky locker, which is indicated from the fact that she had the key, why didn't she take the prize money? Is that it?"

"Yeah, that's it," said Marley. "It looks damn phoney to me. Come on, we're going to look up this guy Steve Kelso."

The phone book showed Kelso's office to be in the Channing Building on Forty-second near Eighth. Marley left Vera in the cab and took the elevator up to the top floor. His number ten's hammered purposefully down the hallway. He laid a big fist on the knob of a door whose frosted glass panel bore the inscription:

Steve Kelso, President,

Kelso Lucky Locker Company.

A big-breasted blonde with a chin full of chewing gum was pecking away at a brand new typewriter. Marley stumped past her desk and twisted the knob of the inner office.

"Hey, you got an appointment, hey?" hollered the blonde. But the door was already shutting behind Marley, who now faced two men seated in the private office, one behind the desk, the other in a visitor's chair.

MARLEY, grim-lipped, planted his two feet apart and fixed his eyes squarely on the man behind the desk. He was a tough-looking hombre, heavy-lipped, shaggy-browed and rock-jawed. He glared up at Marley and clipped out the words: "Who let *you* in, mug?"

Marley whipped back: "I asked myself, can I come in, and then I told myself, sure you can come, so then I came in."

"A wise-ock, eh?" The big man behind the desk shifted his position. He edged open a drawer on the side furthest from Morley. He paid no more attention to the other man.

Marley stood tight-lipped. The other man was of medium build, wore glasses and was nattily dressed. He stared from Marley to the big man. Then he said: "Well, Mr. Kelso, I've said all I had to say. Now I'll be going and let you transact your—er—business." He put a peculiar accent on the word "business."

Marley said, "Easy, Kelso. Don't put your hand in the desk. I'm fast and jumpy on the draw." To the visitor, he said, "State your piece over again, mister. I'm from Police Headquarters and I'm interested in anybody that's interested in this mug."

Marley noticed Kelso start at the mention of the word, "Police." The other man looked relieved. He beamed. "Why, I'm glad to hear that. I thought this was one of those gang feuds you read about. You see, I realize I'm not in what you'd call the best of company. En—here's my card."

Marley glanced at the slip of pasteboard. It read: *Better Trade League, Leslie Warren, Manager, New York Office.*

"We're a national organization," explained Warren. "We make it our affair to investigate men who run business firms in a manner which may not be unlawful, but which is unfair to the pub-

lic. My visit here today was to attempt to persuade Mr. Kelso to refrain from conducting his Locker System as a more or less open gambling racket. I regret to say Mr. Kelso has not seen fit to fall in with my suggestions. I don't mind saying that, as a national organization, our power is considerable, and I have just had the unpleasant duty of informing Mr. Kelso that we will not stop until we have run him and his low gambling racket off the business map!"

Mr. Warren then clamped his hat securely on his head, bowed and said: "Good day, sir."

"Just a minute," said Marley. "You might as well stick around and get a load of what I've got to say to Kelso."

"Very well, if you wish." Warren stood patiently by, his head on one side, his ear almost literally cocked.

"Kelso," Marley drove the words home, "I found a locker key on Alice Lang's body this afternoon. When I used it to open the locker it fitted, I find a fifty dollar bill. How do you explain that?"

Kelso leaned back suddenly in his chair and roared. "Is that all you want to know?"

"Look," said Marley, "if Alice Lang risked a dime and opened one of your lockers, and it contained the fifty dollar bill, she wouldn't be likely to leave it there and go away. Now, would she?"

"Well," said Kelso, "our lockers are popular. As this jack rabbit here—" waving his hand carelessly at Warren "—has pointed out, a lot of people are gambling. So what? They get sore when they don't find a fifty. Then what do they do? They walk off with the key. So then what? We have to go around every other day, opening the lockers and changing the locks where there aren't any parcels checked."

"Yet," persisted Marley, "the key I took from Alice Lang opened the locker.

Apparently the lock had not been changed on that one."

Kelso shrugged. "Maybe it just happened, the same key fitted the new lock. That's possible."

"Yeah," said Marley, "it's possible—about one chance in a million. Okey for now, Kelso. But you'll be seeing some more of me."

"Don't rush back on my account, copper," returned Kelso sarcastically.

THERE were fine lines of puzzlement on Bill Marley's forehead as he climbed into the cab. He told the cabby to cruise around the block, then explained to Vera what had happened.

"So the riddle of the key is still a riddle," she said.

"I don't know," said Marley. "I've got a hunch, which points a number one finger at a ticklish possibility. I need you to stage a little act. May be dangerous. I hope not. What about it?"

"You can count on me," flashed back Vera, "just like you would count on your vest button."

"You mean as long as I don't put on too much weight, eh?"

Vera giggled. The idea of lean, wiry Bill Marley busting off a vest button tickled her. Then she sobered. "What do I have to do?"

"First of all, don't ask questions." Marley tapped on the panel. "Stop here, driver."

He turned to Vera. "The Elite Beauty Shop is just down the street. Go there and step into one of those luxurious phone booths you were telling me about. Look up the phone number of the Mercer Drug Store—look it up mind you, don't ask information. Then—"

"Mercer Drug Store?" breathed Vera, staring at him in puzzled fashion. "Why, that's right over there, across the street."

"Exactly. That's where I'll be. You ring me and repeat this message over the wire: Better write this down:

"That you, Joe? Listen, get this straight. I contacted Alice Lang's mother. Yeah, you had it straight. She's lousy with dough and she'll cough up 25 G's with no questions, to find her grandchild, Alice Lang's baby."

That's what you say," finished Marley. "Then I'll say—"

"Say, what are you giving me," broke in Vera. "Alice didn't have a child. And her mother is dead—"

Marley grinned. "That's what everybody thought. But I've got a pretty good idea she *did* have a baby. There was a kid in a carriage in front of the building. The nursemaid acted awfully queer. And there was a monogram on the kid's blanket. An embroidered 'L.' And the kid was right under her window. She probably swore the maid to secrecy and had her bring the baby around on that street every day so she could see it without anybody getting wise. Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't think so."

"Well, *I'll* be a late supper snack," exclaimed Vera.

"Yeah, and so now I'll chew another little chunk off your ear," snapped back Marley. "Shut up and listen. After you say your piece, I'll say:

'Okey, Gert. Bring the old dame and the dough to 32 Harmon Street. Tell her we'll deliver the kid when we get the dough.'

Then you hang up and beat it home."

"Home?"

"Yeah, home. There's liable to be fireworks later at 32 Harmon Street, if my hunch is right, and I want you to be where I know you'll have a chance to say your prayers right through without being disturbed."

"Oh, yeah, I see," replied Vera, absently.

"And one thing more. I don't think you'll have trouble inside. But watch your step. If that Beauty Parlor is the clearing house I think it is, there's a certain very tough guy behind it. I don't figure he'll have any reason to stop you, because he'll figure you're the little girl who's gonna bring Santa Claus, see?" But watch your step just the same."

Vera Trent's lips quivered. She threw a longing glance at Marley, then she got out of the cab.

NUMBER 32 Harmon Street was a five-room bungalow standing somewhat apart of its neighbors in an outlying residential section. Bill Marley paced up and down the small living-room, glancing now and then at his watch. A stump of a candle stood on an up-ended egg crate near the center of the room, throwing big, black shadows on the cracked plaster of the walls.

A car was stopping in front of the house. He glanced again at his watch. It was ten minutes past eleven. His jaws grew taut as he peered through the dirty window, saw a shadowy figure coming up the porch steps.

There was a light tap at the front door. Marley moved cautiously into the tiny hallway, released the latch and yanked the door open. A slim figure in a dark coat moved toward him. It was Vera Trent.

"Bill! Are you all right? I *had* to come."

Marley slammed the door, eyed her furiously. "You little fool," he broke out angrily. "I'm expecting gun trouble. Why didn't you go home, like I told you?"

"I—I was worried," she faltered, "about you, I mean. I thought—"

"Quick!" he snarled. "Somebody's coming. Beat it back into the kitchen and keep out of the way." He shoved

her roughly back. She ran down the narrow hallway and disappeared.

A heavy foot sounded on the porch. The door shook as heavy knuckles beat a tattoo on it. Marley stepped back into the shadows, reached out and released the catch. The door swung ajar and a big, heavy-set man bulked slowly into the opening. He moved forward until the feeble rays from the guttering candle in the next room picked out the details of his features, the thick lips, bushy brows, mountainous jaw.

Bill Marley darted out of the shadows, sent his right fist crashing into the side of that big jaw. The big man grunted, swayed forward. Marley caught his toppling figure, laid him neatly along the wall of the narrow, murky hall. He shut the door quickly and spent a long moment peering through the small square of glass set high in the door panel.

Then he nodded, and knelt by the unconscious man. He clicked on a flashlight and stared down at the man's face.

Vera Trent came out of the kitchen, looked down at the recumbent form. "Who is it, Bill?" she asked.

"Steve Kelso," replied Marley. "The guy that runs the lucky locker racket."

"*He's the murderer!*" breathed Vera. "He must be! He came here in response to that fake call you had me make to you. You were right about that beauty parlor."

"Yeah, I was right about it," replied Marley grimly. "It's being run as an information clearing house for a blackmail racket. Those swell booths you were telling me about were supplied to encourage wealthy women patrons to talk over the phone. Very often they would call intimate friends and talk about their personal problems. The wires are permanently tapped. They would spill bits of information and then they would be blackmailed for it. But don't get the idea we're in the clear. Get

back in the kitchen now and sit tight, no matter what you hear. I'm expecting all hell to break loose here tonight."

Marley waited, crouched beside Kelso's unconscious figure until he knew Vera was safe in the kitchen. Then he got up, hammered into the living room and swung a vicious kick at the crate which held the candle. The crate whipped up and crashed into the opposite wall. The flame of the candle described a graceful arc, then snuffed out, and the room was as black as a mine pit.

Deafening, sustained pandemonium ensued. The walls echoed, the floor thundered, the windows rattled, plaster flaked from the ceiling. This kept up for a couple of minutes, then something bulky crashed into one of the windows and glass tinkled on the floor. There was a couple of shots, flame lanced through the inkiness, then everything went quiet.

Bill Marley, his chest heaving, crouched in one corner, near the smashed window, his feet motionless, his elbows pressed against the plaster. In his right hand, his smoking gun felt warm and comforting.

ABOUT five minutes ticked by. The house was silent as a crypt. A light breeze wafted through the smashed window, fanned gently against Marley's tightened jaw.

Suddenly a shadow, darker than other shadows, bulked in the window opening. It remained motionless for tense seconds as Marley waited, every muscle taut. Then there was a light scraping sound and a leg thrust into the room. A moment later, a man moved forward, not three feet from Marley.

"All right," ordered Marley, his voice sounding low and clear in the empty room. "Hold it, lug." His flashlight clicked on, illuminating the broad back of the man.

But even as the tiny beam focussed, the broad back was melting away, toward the floor. The man flung himself down, rolling, and fired at Marley's light. The flashlight flew from Marley's hand and he felt the slug crease his arm. His own gun roared, and missed.

The flashlight fell to the floor, but did not go out. Its beam splayed out along the floor, picked out Marley crouching, gun in hand. A smooth voice came from the darkness, beyond the flashlight. "Drop it, copper. You're covered."

Slowly Marley complied. The man picked up the flashlight, moved forward and scooped up Marley's gun.

Marley said quietly: "I figured it was you, Warren."

The man stared. "You did?"

"Yeah, I figured you'd tail along behind Kelso, just in case there were any loose ends left to tie up."

"There *is* a loose end to tie up." Warren looked meaningly at Marley and moved his gun menacingly. A change had come over his face. He no longer wore glasses; his eyes glinted dangerously. "Before I plant a slug in you, tell me, what else did you figure out?"

"Oh, I doped out the whole case. You see, I know the local branch manager of the Better Trade League. So I knew you were a phoney. Then why, I figured, were you so anxious to make Kelso run a legitimate business? You sounded as if you meant it when you threatened to wipe him off the map.

"Now, Alice Lang had a key to the lucky locker, but she hadn't taken the prize money. Apparently she'd never opened the locker. So I figured she'd got the key some where else. But where?"

"I figured, suppose some bird is running a blackmail racket, using the lockers for the pay-off, sending his victims a key so they could go and leave the

dough for him. Naturally such a bird would be safer if the locker business was run quietly, without the gambling angle. I was right. You're that bird, Warren.

"You found out through your beauty parlor information clearing house that Alice Lang had a baby and didn't want her public to know. You blackmailed her regularly. After paying off for several months, she got tired of the business, and, from what I hear of her, being a pretty decent person at heart, decided to expose the racket which she knew was operating through the Elite Beauty Shoppe and getting an awful lot of women into jams. She foolishly told you over the phone that she was calling in the police, and you had to go and throw her out the window to shut her up.

"Then, you figured you'd blame the crime on Vera Trent, her understudy. You followed Vera home, waiting for a chance to plant some evidence in her apartment that would make it look like she hired somebody to shove Alice Lang out the window. You saw me go in Vera Trent's apartment, then saw the two of us come out. You figured something was up, and you tried to knock us off from a cab.

"I suspected you when I saw you in Kelso's office, but I had no way of being sure. I decided to trap you. But not the way you think. I figured you would follow us when we left Kelso's office. I decided to let *you think* that I was laying a trap and that I was expecting you to walk into it. I *expected* you'd see through our little telephone gag. I *figured* you'd send a fall guy here to take it on the chin, and that you'd follow up, as I say, to clean up the loose ends.

"I was right. You must have told Steve Kelso some crazy yarn to get him to walk in here—"

"He had some dame call me on the

phone," broke in a heavy voice from the doorway. "She told me I'd find *him* here. I could rub him out, she said, and so help me, that's what I'm—"

ORANGE flame jettied from an invisible source, lanced across the room. The gun in Warren's hand exploded and a slug furrowed a bloody channel across the side of Marley's face.

Marley leaped into action as the flashlight bounced to the floor. He closed in, grabbed Warren's wrist, twisted the gun from fingers that were strangely flabby. Then Warren sank away, to the floor, and Marley's fist fanned air. He realized that Kelso had planted a slug in Warren's back.

"Listen, mug," said Steve Kelso, a couple of minutes later when Marley had righted the box and re-lighted the candle. "Are you the gent that cooled me off when I come in here?"

"Yes, he did, all right," said Vera, looking proudly at Marley. "He's got some wallop, hasn't he?"

Marley glared at Vera. "No hard feelings, I hope?" he asked Kelso. "I just wanted you out safe, while I staged a fight-to-the finish noise to lure Warren in here."

"No hard feelings," said Kelso. "Say, I hear you got suspended. I could use a rough and tumble guy like you in my business."

"No thanks," grinned Marley, "I'll be back in harness in a couple of days, after breaking up this Lang killing like this, right under Sergeant McComb's nose. Oh, boy."

"Sure," said Vera, her eyes shining. "You'll be in harness."

"I don't like the way you said that," returned Bill Marley.

Vera grabbed his arm. "I'll bet Snow-pup is lonesome, right now. How about going back with me now and helping me give him a bath?"

Crowley was hemmed in by armed natives led by the grinning Kely.



G-MAN WANTED

by Lemuel De Bra

A G-Man goes manhunting—and finds a woman too!

WITH a suddenness that compelled Crowley to grab the steering wheel with both hands, the old woods road swerved to the left and ended against a dilapidated rail fence that staggered across one end of a small clearing.

Perched on this fence, a dirty slouch hat drawn low over his narrowed eyes, a dirty smudge of black beard covering most of his face, was a long bony backwoods native holding a double-barreled shotgun across his skinny knees.

Steve Crowley, crack under-cover

G-Man of the United States Department of Justice, knew this wild Florida gulf coast region. As he leaned forward casually and shut off the ignition, his right hand dropped to the butt of his government .38 in the holster strapped to the steering post.

“Hello!” Crowley called out, and gave the native a cheerful, devil-may-care smile. “Going hunting for yellow jingle-bugs?”

Without taking his gaze from Crowley’s face, the native turned his head and spat—copiously and emphatically.

With his left hand he made a quick dab at the tobacco juice that dribbled over his unshaven chin; then the hand dropped again to the shotgun.

"Jes' whar you headin' foh, strangah?" he asked coldly.

"Jes' what business is it o' your'n?" countered Crowley, still grinning.

"This is mah land," the native fired back quickly. "The road ends heah."

Crowley knew he was almost in the center of a two-thousand-acre tract of Government land, but he let that pass.

"Yeah?" Crowley said as if surprised. He glanced quickly around the old clearing. Two huge China-berry trees, now almost choked by a dense undergrowth of jasmine and ti-ti, were, to Crowley's discerning eyes, evidence that, years ago, there had been a dwelling in this spot; now the clearing was hemmed in by an almost impassable barrier of brush and scrub oak, and so overgrown with palmetto that he could not even locate the site of the building.

A SLIGHT frown creased Crowley's forehead. According to the map he had found on the body of Deputy Sheriff Rogers, this road should have continued on through the "sticks" for another five miles. Obviously some one had made a mistake. Had that mistake caused him to stumble into the smugglers' camp? Crowley wondered.

"Yeah, this is mah land," the man with the shotgun repeated. "An' Ah don't 'low no huntin' since somebody shot three o' mah hawks. An' no fish-in'!"

"Suits me!" exclaimed Crowley, smiling again. "I don't hunt or fish. I'm a timber scout for the Southern Pines Naval Stores Corporation. And I'm not interested in your land. I'm looking for a big tract of Government —"

"You done passed hit," the native cut in. "Go on back 'bout five miles an'

take the road to the left an' keep goin'."

"Well, I'll be darned!" Crowley growled with assumed annoyance. He got slowly out of the car, stretched his cramped legs and arms, and strolled up to where the native now stood by the fence, the butt of the shotgun held against a post, the muzzle aimed with apparent carelessness at Crowley's abdomen. "Don't see how I got lost," Crowley went on, appearing not to notice the threat of the shotgun. "Show me that road on this map." He flipped a folded paper from his shirt pocket, unfolded it and reached out to give it to the native.

"Keep back!" the man with the gun ordered savagely.

"What!" Crowley stiffened. A look of sudden fear came into his face. The paper slipped from his trembling hand.

"Git goin'!" the native growled; "an' keep goin'!"

"All right," Crowley agreed chokingly. "I-I'll go; but—"

He leaned over to pick up the paper; but, just as his fingers touched it, he hurled himself forward. Backed by a hundred and seventy pounds of hard muscle, Crowley's head rammed the native's stomach, sent him crashing back against the fence.

A loud, gasping groan of agony burst from the man's lips. He dropped the gun, clapped his hands to his abdomen and leaned on the fence, sick and helpless. Kicking the shotgun far to one side, Crowley passed his hands swiftly over the man's clothes, found a loaded revolver and appropriated it. "Thought you had me scared, eh?" Crowley chuckled.

He looked at the native. Familiar with the cruel fighting tricks of the lumber camps—tricks that Crowley used only in a desperate emergency—he knew how that solar plexus blow had shattered the man's courage. Stepping close, he pressed the muzzle of the re-

volver against the native's right hand held tight over his stomach. The man did not move. His eyes closed, he leaned against the fence, gasping, reeling, sick.

"Where's Kelvy?" demanded the G-Man.

"At—the cabin," the native answered in a hoarse whisper.

"What cabin?"

"Mah cabin. Short piece—up the trail—back o' me."

"How far is it to Kelvy's camp?"

"'Bout a mile down the bayou from mah cabin."

"What's Kelvy doing at your cabin? Was he expecting me?"

THE native nodded.

"Huh!" Crowley grunted. "Did Kelvy plant that map on Deputy Sheriff Rogers—after he had murdered him?"

"No—Rogers had the—map. Kelvy left hit there so's you'd find hit."

"Huh!" grunted Crowley again. He started to ask another question but, instead, looked suddenly past the native into the woods. Two cardinals—a male with his brilliant crimson coat and black collar, and a female in her spring dress of soft brown—were darting from limb to limb, making angry, disturbed cries. Discovering the two men by the rail fence, they whirled suddenly and vanished in the woods to Crowley's right.

"Get down!" Crowley whispered quickly. With his free hand he seized the native's arm and forced him to lie down by the fence. Crowley was dropping to his knees when from the woods came a cool, arresting voice:

"Never mind that, Crowley. I've been watching every move you made. Was afraid Taylor would make a mess of things."

With that, the speaker emerged suddenly from behind a clump of palmetto.

Crowley covered him with the revolver but, somehow, he felt that the move was futile.

"So this is the famous G-Man Crowley?" the new arrival exclaimed, ignoring the revolver. "I must say I'm disappointed, Crowley! You don't look a bit heroic!"

"No?" Crowley's lips parted in one of his lazy, contagious smiles. "Well, give me time, Kelvy. I haven't got started yet."

"You have started—and finished!" snapped Kelvy. "I have three men in the woods covering you with rifles. Give me that gun!"

Crowley hesitated and, for an instant, the two men looked into each other's eyes. Kelvy was about thirty, not much older than Crowley; but there was a glitter in his black eyes and a hardness in his handsome, dark face that made him appear many years Crowley's senior. He wore khaki breeches with leather puttees; a cool white shirt open at the neck, and a gray leather case containing a pair of field glasses.

"I suppose," Crowley said calmly, "that you were perched up in some tree—where you'd be safe—watching me with those glasses. Wonder you didn't have this bird shoot me down in cold blood—like you shot Rogers."

"I didn't shoot Rogers," Kelvy corrected without the slightest show of emotion; "but I had him shot—which means the same thing. And that's what I'll have to do to you if you start any trouble. I say, give me that gun!"

Again Crowley hesitated. Kelvy appeared to be unarmed. Taylor, still looking very sick, was struggling to his feet.

"Supposing I refuse, Kelvy?"

Kelvy turned his head slightly. In swift succession he called three names. From the woods behind Kelvy came a native carrying a rifle; from the woods

on the other side of the clearing, back of Crowley, came two more.

"Very dramatic," Kelvy commented, smiling; "but you've overlooked one thing. *I know that you're no fool!* So quit bluffing. Killing me, then getting killed yourself, isn't going to—"

"You win!" Crowley interposed. He gave his gun a flip, caught the end of the barrel, and held it out, butt first, to the smuggler.

Kelvy took the gun and barked out orders to his men. The one behind him vanished again in the woods; one of the others behind Crowley followed him; the other stepped up and with awkward hand searched the prisoner. He found no weapons.

"Taylor!" snapped Kelvy, "get yourself in shape and take charge of Crowley's car. Crowley, get over the fence and go ahead of me down the trail. Willet, you follow me."

PASSING around the clump of palmetto, Crowley found the trail clear enough. For several minutes they wound through the dense underbrush, emerging suddenly on the bank of a broad and motionless bayou. Some distance on his left, Crowley espied the moss-covered roof of an old cabin; but instead of turning in the direction of the cabin, Kelvy directed Crowley to go around a huge magnolia standing on the bayou bank. Here Crowley discovered two skiffs equipped with outboard motors.

The two men who had preceded Crowley and Kelvy were already in one of the skiffs. At a signal from Kelvy, they put off. Kelvy then directed the other men, Willet, to get in the other skiff. He did so, laid down his rifle, and prepared to start the motor. Crowley took the middle seat, Kelvy pushed off and sat down in the bow.

"Well," remarked Kelvy as the boat

swung around and headed down the bayou. "I have to admit again that I'm disappointed in you, Crowley. You walked right into my trap like—"

"And I'm disappointed in you," the G-Man cut in. "Do you think I didn't know a trap had been set for me? Huh! I suspected something when I found Rogers' body. A double charge of buckshot had torn the poor devil's heart clear out of his body. Rogers never walked a step after he was shot; he was dead when he hit the ground; yet *there was blood all down the front of his overalls.* I knew then that some one had picked him up by the shoulders and dragged him to the road where I found him, that he had been planted there so *I would find him.* And when I looked back and saw a clump of palmetto on each side of the road, where there wasn't any palmetto when I passed a few minutes before, I knew I had to go on, that I couldn't go back even if I had wanted to. And as for Taylor trying to send me back to that other road, any fool could see through that. You want me, for some reason; but you wanted me to wander around Mangrove Swamp for a day or so until you were ready for me."

"Good!" exclaimed Kelvy, his eyes sparkling. "I see that after all you have sense. And eyes. You didn't get what Rogers got for the very reason that I felt you were worth saving. Rogers was honest, but he had no sense. You have sense; and—" Kelvy's pause was significant.

"And what?" prompted Crowley, although he felt certain he knew what was coming.

"Well, I'm not saying you're not honest," Kelvy answered with sudden earnestness. "If you hadn't been on the square you'd have been kicked out of the Service long ago. But I do believe you'll listen to reason. For instance, Crowley, I know that Uncle

Sam pays damn poor wages. Now I can fix things so that you can keep your job with the government, yet bank a clear two thousand a month—for many months to come.”

“Two thousand—dollars—a month!” The G-Man sat up, staring with assumed incredulity. “That’s almost as much as Uncle Sam pays me in a year. And then makes me advance all my expense money. How can you do it, Kelvy?”

“Easy enough! And the game will get better; especially if you come in with me. You see, you did me a big favor when you put Havana Pete out of business. Since then I’ve perfected my organization—at both ends. And I’ve branched out. Now I’m running aliens, as usual; but I also take on a load of dope and liquor. The dope is paying all my expenses and the rest is all velvet. Why, I can hide a hundred five-*tael* cans of opium in less space than it takes to carry one man. See?”

CROWLEY saw, but he shook his head. He wanted Kelvy to talk. Undercover agents in Havana had reported that Kelvy was getting five hundred dollars a head for aliens. They had been unable to get any line on any of Kelvy’s other deals. Crowley, working on the gulf coast side, had learned that Kelvy was covering his smuggling operations by operating a small turpentine camp in a little known and almost inaccessible spot known as Snipe Key. That crude map he had found in Rogers’ pocket had partly confirmed that tip; but there was still much to be learned.

“Listens good,” Crowley admitted dubiously; “but two thousand dollars a month—”

“Did I say a month?” Kelvy broke in. “Well, see here, Crowley! If you’ll work with me I’ll put you in the way of making *two thousand a week!*”

“And landing in prison?”

“Not a chance. I have all the country officers fixed. Rogers, a hang-over from the former sheriff, didn’t have sense enough to get in line with me—and that put him *in line with a shotgun*. Does that—er—convey anything to you?”

“Plain enough,” Crowley answered, smiling. “And quite like you. How soon must I make my choice?”

“There’s a shotgun at the camp,” Kelvy said, his narrowed eyes glittering. “We’ll be there in five minutes.”

Five minutes! Crowley looked around. Steered by the sour-faced natives, the little “coffee-grinder” was driving the skiff rapidly down the bayou. At the native’s feet, within quick reach of his long arms, lay his rifle.

Turning again, Crowley looked ahead, past the smuggler-chief in the bow of the skiff. The dark water of the bayou was as smooth as glass, reflecting on each side the oaks and magnolias and palms that lined the banks. As they rounded a bend, two blue herons broke the water and sailed gracefully on down the bayou out of sight.

He turned his attention to the boat. It was none too clean. Fiddler crabs scuttled catiously over the soggy floor between Crowley and the man in the bow. There were old fish-scales, half a dozen sun-dried minnows, and a bunch of Spanish moss that apparently had been used to shield fish from the burning sun.

But there was nothing that would serve as a weapon. And Kelvy not four feet distant with a revolver in his lap.

“Where’s the other skiff?” Crowley asked suddenly. “It wasn’t going fast enough to—”

“Never mind where it went,” Kelvy cut in sharply. “Be thinking of where you’re going.”

"Yeah?" Crowley grinned cheerfully. "Supposing I go in with you—or say I'm going; what's to prevent me from double-crossing you then?"

"Just one thing. I made sure of that first. You're not that kind. You'll either go in with me and play square, or you'll tell me to go to hell."

"Thanks!" Crowley smiled again. "I suppose the reason you wanted my visit postponed a day or so is that you have something—or some one—at the camp now, that you won't have in a day or so. Eh?"

"Maybe."

Crowley glanced around again. They were passing near a swampy spot overgrown with saw grass. From his sun-parlor in that grass, a fourteen-foot alligator leaped suddenly and vanished in a swirl of muddy water. With the scheme that was taking shape in Crowley's mind, the sight of that 'gator was not reassuring.

BUT minutes were passing; and Kelvy was eyeing Crowley with open suspicion. No doubt, Crowley reflected, Kelvy had already guessed that the G-Man had never for a minute entertained a thought of accepting the smuggler's proposition.

Past the marshy spot, the boat swung to the left; and Crowley saw that they were turning into a narrow branch. Already the water from the branch was discoloring the clearer water of the bayou.

"How much longer have I?" Crowley asked with a seriousness that was not entirely assumed. He knew that the little motor was doing about twelve miles an hour, but he hoped his question would lead Kelvy to disclose the exact location of the camp. The ruse worked.

"That's Snipe Key," Kelvy said, indicating the wooded tract just ahead. "The camp is about a quarter of a mile up the right bank of this branch. Now

don't be a fool, Crowley! Even if you escaped now, you know my men would run you down before you could get out of these swamps."

"Are those your men?" Crowley asked casually, pointing up the branch behind Kelvy.

The question caught Kelvy off his guard. He turned to look up the branch.

The skiff was then swerving sharply to the left to head straight into the branch. Swiftly as he had ever done anything in his life, knowing that failure meant death, Crowley made a side-flip, landed with his feet on the starboard rail while both hands seized the cross-seat at the port railing. A quick backward heave—a warning bellow from Kelvy—and the water was hissing in Crowley's ears as he struggled to free himself from the overturned and sinking boat.

With relief, Crowley discovered that the water here was several feet over his head; which meant that even if Kelvy had retained hold of his revolver he would have a hard time taking a shot at his escaping prisoner. But Crowley took no chances. As he headed for the bank, swimming beneath the surface, he allowed the current of the branch to carry him farther out into the bayou. As long as he could endure it, he kept going; then, half strangled, lights flashing before his eyes, Crowley came slowly to the surface and looked around.

The boat, as he had expected, was gone. Near where it had sunk, Kelvy and Willet were swimming for the shore; on their left! This put the branch between them and Crowley. Delighted with his good luck, Crowley struck out for the bank, struck sand bottom presently, waded the rest of the distance, and stumbled into the concealment of dense firebush just as Kelvy's revolver broke into rapid firing. Laughing, not surprised that Kelvy had had

the presence of mind to hang onto his gun, Crowley wormed his way swiftly through the brush and got behind a huge water-oak.

"Hugh!" grunted the G-Man as he hastily wrung the water from his clothes. "Lost the best hat I ever had! And Uncle Sam won't buy me another, either. I wish those birds in Washington who are always criticizing my expense accounts could be with me right now!—queer that Kelvy and Willet went to the other side of the branch! I'm sure Kelvy said his camp was on this side!"

SEVERAL pounds of water wrung from his clothes, his shoes emptied, Crowley fought his way through the brush to an old magnolia whose low-hung branches made easy climbing. He climbed up until he saw in the distance what he sought—a white-scarred pine that had been chipped for turpentine. There would be a path to that tree; and from there, other paths made by the turpentine dippers would lead to the smugglers' camp.

The best course to the scarred tree picked out, Crowley sat there for a moment and considered. On his left—to the north—a jungle growth of trees shut out the branch bayou from his sight; to the south, an opening in the trees gave him a glimpse of the blue water of the gulf, of whose sullen roar he now became aware. Listening, he could hear no sound from where he had last seen Kelvy—only the hum of a myriad insects, the harsh scolding of blue jays, the glad song of the mocking birds in the woods all around him.

Concluding finally that he would have to go it blind and trust to luck, Crowley descended the tree and struck out through the barrage of bamboo vine, crimson creepers, jasmine and other growths and finally reached his chipped pine. The path to and from the tree

was very faint, but Crowley followed it, came to another pine, and kept going. Now and then he stopped and sniffed the air, knowing that in these woods he could smell smoke farther than he could see it. Once he stopped just in time to avoid the vicious strike of a huge moccasin.

Kelvy had said that his camp was a quarter of a mile from the mouth of the branch bayou. Keeping count of his steps, making allowance for the crooked paths from tree to tree, Crowley estimated that he was within fifty yards of the camp when he caught sight of the rough, unpainted side of a board shack. Here, too, the paths, which had increased to a regular network, converged at a wagon road running east and west, and passing on the north side of the shack.

His clothes soaking wet again from his run through the stifling heat of the semi-jungle, Crowley paused to rest and to listen. About him now was a strange silence, an ominous silence broken only by the muffled roar of the gulf. Puzzled, Crowley started for the shack, keeping to the concealment of the brush and trees at the roadside.

Coming up at the side of the shack, the G-Man put an ear to the boards and listened. Hearing no sound, he cautiously crept to the corner and looked around. The front door stood open. On the sand, near the pine-log step, lay a half-burned cigarette. Crowley reached out and picked it up. The tobacco was warm.

Scarcely breathing, his eyes narrowed, Crowley looked around. The turpentine road wound on through the woods. There was no other shacks in sight; but Crowley's sensitive nostrils now caught the fragrant scent of pine-wood smoke. Directly across the road from where he stood was a bay tree against whose trunk stood a packing case. On the sand around the case

were cigarette stubs and half-burned matches. Footprints in the sand led back and forth from the packing case to the door of the shack. Beside the footprints were other marks over which Crowley puzzled for a moment or two.

"A negro," mused the G-Man, frowning. "Big brute—from the size of those prints. Is carrying an old box-axe. Doesn't live in this shack. No one has lived here for a long time. What's he been doing? Huh!"

BENDING low, so his shadow would not fall across the step and betray him, Crowley crept to the door. Cautiously, he looked in. At first, in the gloom of the cabin, he could see nothing. Then he made out a rough board table, a bench—and seated on the bench, his head resting on his arms folded on the table, a boy of about sixteen, apparently asleep.

One more swift survey of the woods, and Crowley stepped boldly into the cabin.

But the boy was not asleep. At the sound of Crowley's first step, he sat up, a startled gasp on his lips. And Crowley saw then that his wrists were bound, that a rope ran from his bound wrists to one leg of the heavy board table.

"A friend," Crowley said, then added quickly: "*Amigo!*"

The boy checked a scream. He was staring at Crowley, fear and bewilderment in his big dark eyes. And suddenly, as Crowley's gaze went swiftly over the neatly cut dark hair, the slender form, the even features and full lips, he sprang forward, caught the bound wrists, felt of the palms, examined the fingers. He straightened, stared for an instant at the prisoner's face. "*A girl!*" he exclaimed softly. He got out his knife and slashed the rope that bound her wrists. "No time for questions, *Señorita!*" he said rapidly in Spanish as the girl started to speak.

"Who are you? What are you doing here—a prisoner? Tell me everything—quickly?"

The girl's big dark eyes studied the man's face for an instant. There was intelligence in those eyes—and courage. She flung a glance at the open door, then spoke in swift Spanish.

"I trust you. I am Rosite Carlotta. With ten of my countrymen I came a week ago on a boat from Havana. I wore these clothes because Señor Kelvy would not take a woman. And I wanted to be with Jimenez, my Jimenez. My father would not let us marry, but Jimenez said that in this free country we could find a priest who would help us.

"The others shared my secret and did all they could to help me; but I could not hide my secret from Señor Kelvy. At first he was furious; then—well, the look in his eyes terrified me more than the threat of death.

"Yesterday Jimenez disappeared. I asked everybody; but no one had seen him. Then Kelvy came. He told me that Jimenez had tried to run away, had been bitten by a moccasin—and was dead. I knew it was a lie and told Señor Kelvy so. He declared that it was true, and that now I should have to marry him—the pig! To keep me from running away, he made me a prisoner here. All day a horrible negro with a big axe has watched me."

"How much did you pay Kelvy to bring you to this country?"

"Jimenez paid him two hundred of your American dollars. We were to pay three hundred apiece when Señor Kelvy delivered us."

"Delivered you where?" demanded Crowley quickly.

"I do not know the name— Yes! I heard Jimenez say it! We were to go at night by boat forty miles north, then by cars sixty miles to a big lumber camp. The Longleaf Pine and—"

"I know the place!" Crowley broke in exultantly. "Kelvy owns a controlling interest. Employs over a hundred men. No wonder his scheme has worked so well. Did he bring over anything else?"

THE girl started to speak but Crowley stopped her. His sharp ears had caught the sound of voices. Stepping quickly to the door, he peered cautiously out. Three men—Kelvy, Willet, carrying a shotgun, and a huge negro carrying an old box-axe—were hurrying down the road toward the shack.

"They're coming!" Crowley whispered. "Sit down—and be quiet!" He placed the rope over her wrists so that they would appear to be still bound. "Why did the negro leave here?"

"He heard shots and—"

"Is there a good trail to the bayou on the other side of the branch?"

"Yes. The men always go that way to the boats."

"That explains how Kelvy got to the camp ahead of me. Now keep your nerve, Señorita!"

"You are armed?"

"Yes," Crowley lied, looking desperately around for something that would serve as a weapon—and seeing nothing. "Armed with two good American fists," he muttered to himself as he skipped softly to a corner back of the open door.

The men were rapidly approaching the cabin. Soon Crowley heard Kelvy speaking.

". . . No more nonsense. . . . Won't listen to reason. . . . Don't shoot him, Willet. Bring him back here. I want the pleasure of seeing Mig cut the fool's head off."

The men apparently went on down the road. Kelvy turned and entered the cabin. He was still in his wet clothes, but had buckled on a belt and

revolver. He stepped up to the table and looked down at the girl. Rosita, the better to hide the fact that her wrists were free, had bowed her head again. She appeared to be crying. Kelvy spoke to her in Spanish.

"For whom are you grieving, my pretty? For Jimenez who left you? Or for me because I was away from your side for so long?"

The girl did not answer. Crowley waited. He did not like to see her suffer the suspense; but he knew that a struggle was coming and he wanted Willet and the negro to be far enough away that they would not hear the noise and come back.

"Jimenez didn't want you," Kelvy went on. "But I want you; and what I want—I get! So be sensible, my sweet! I can give you everything. I can—"

Abruptly, Kelvy whirled around. A creaking board had betrayed Crowley's cautious approach. With an explosive curse, Kelvy jerked out his revolver, fired from the hip. It was done so quickly that not even Crowley could have prevented it. His leap at Kelvy was stopped short. For a split second he seemed on the verge of collapsing; then, his deep-tanned face ashen, he shot forward, caught Kelvy's wrist in both hands. As he rushed the smuggler backward, the gun exploded again, but the bullet went wild. Crowley caught a glimpse of Rosita backed against the wall, her eyes wide, her lips parted, one hand pressed to her throat. "Get out of here!" he shouted. "Quick! Any place! Hide!"

The girl started for the door, but stopped. The two men were struggling with savage desperation, for each man knew precisely what defeat would mean. Kelvy was the heavier; knew all the brutal tricks of the lumber camps; but Crowley was the quicker and he had the endurance born of youth

and a clean life. He dodged Kelvy's vicious knee-kicks, but could not avoid his left-arm jabs.

Blood was oozing from his battered face when Crowley finally got the "break-arm" hold. "Drop it!" he gasped through bleeding lips.

KELVY knew that hold. The slightest movement of his body, even the effort of breathing, caused excruciating pain. He knew that with that hold Crowley could break his arm as easily as a man snaps a match. He dropped the gun—and into the room tumbled Willet and the negro.

"Kill him!" bellowed Kelvy, and hurled himself at Crowley just as the latter leaned over to grab the revolver.

So quickly had Kelvy struck him that Crowley's grab for the gun missed. He tried to straighten, and fell forward, face-down across one end of the bench.

"Kill him, Mig!" bellowed Kelvy again, and Crowley knew what that order meant. He lay helpless across the bench, his arms pinned to his side, his head hanging over the edge.

"Hold 'em, boss!" yelled the negro with fiendish glee.

Rosita screamed. Crowley saw her dive for the revolver, saw Willet strike her with his fist, saw her fall in a heap in the corner.

The negro was swinging the box-axe, a frightful weapon with a keen blade eight inches long and with ten pounds of oak and steel behind it. Crowley had seen those axes used in fights in turpentine camps. He knew that a single blow could behead a man.

Queerly enough, the one thought that beat through his half-paralyzed mind was not for himself; it was this: "*I hope Thompson will save the girl! . . .*"

In a second of time it was all over.

Weighted down by Kelvy's heavy body, unable to move his head or his body, Crowley was frantically doing the

only thing he could do. He was kicking—kicking wildly with both feet, trying desperately to do something—anything.

And, suddenly, one foot caught on the leg of the heavy broad table. With all his strength, Crowley *shoved*.

A horrible cry burst from Kelvy's lips. Beneath the savage blow of the heavy axe his body quivered frightfully, then went suddenly limp.

Crowley's desperate shove threw the bench clear over. The two men crashed to the floor. Shaking himself free of the thing on his back, Crowley made a dive for the revolver still on the floor where it had fallen from Kelvy's hand. He got it, whirled, and backed against the wall—crouching, his eyes narrowed, face tense with deadly determination.

Just in time he saw Willet raise the shotgun. Without a warning word, Crowley fired. Willet staggered, fell at the feet of the girl that a moment before he had struck down.

Through the smoke Crowley saw the negro's brutal face, the low forehead, the bloodshot eyes—saw the swinging axe. Again, without a word, Crowley shot. The huge negro stopped; his giant body shook like an oak under the axe; then, with a wild roar, he swung his box-axe and charged.

The explosion of the revolver blended with the splintering crash of wood as the heavy axe tore through the wall where Crowley, a split second before, had stood. It was followed by another crash as the negro fell.

Crowley gave a single glance, then sprang to where Rosita had fallen. She was getting to her feet. "All over," Crowley told her. "Don't worry!"

CROWLEY leaped to where Kelvy lay. The man was on his side. The absence of blood on his shoulders confirmed what Crowley had already suspected. The *sound* of that blow was not the sound of steel crushing through

bone; it was a dull, flat sound. Just in time, the negro had seen what Crowley had done. Too late to check entirely the descending axe, he had turned it, struck Kelvy across the shoulders with the flat side of the blade. It was a crushing blow, but not fatal.

Crowley picked up one of Kelvy's hands. The fingers did not move. He let go of the hand. It dropped lifelessly.

"You're out of the fight for awhile," Crowley told him. "Rosita, that rope! Kelvy, you can walk; get up!"

Helped by Crowley, the smuggler got to his feet. Crowley tied his wrists to his waist, gave Rosita the free end of the rope, and the revolver. "Walk close behind him," Crowley told her in Spanish. "If he starts anything, shoot him!"

He picked up the shotgun that Willet had dropped. Both barrels were loaded. A glance at Willet and the negro told Crowley that they would cause no more trouble. He told Kelvy and Rosita to start on—to the main camp. Kelvy obeyed without a word.

As Crowley had expected, they no sooner had started up the road than they met two men armed with rifles running toward them. Much to Kelvy's disgust, expressed with savage profanity, both men threw down their rifles at Crowley's command. Marching ahead of Crowley and Kelvy, they proceeded on to the camp, a cluster of four shacks near a wharf on the bank of a small bayou. Here two other men, after an instant's hesitation, also surrendered.

"Hell!" growled Kelvy. "I deserve to lose—picking men like that! But—you're not out of the woods yet, Crowley! And you're alone—"

"Yeah?" Crowley grinned through bleeding lips. "Rosita, where are the men who came over with you?"

"In that cabin," the girl answered, pointing to one of the shacks. "Locked

up like criminals!"

"All right. Now listen close! Get matches and fat wood. Turpentine or coal oil. Anything and everything that will burn. Set fire to those barrels of gum on that wharf. Get it going good. Then go tell your people that they have nothing to fear. I'll tell them later what must be done with them. No, keep this revolver with you—and don't hesitate to use it if necessary!"

Kelvy was staring at the G-Man. "What's the idea?" he demanded. "What right have you to burn—"

"See here, Kelvy!" Crowley broke in sharply. "You lied to that girl, Jimenez did not try to run away. And you haven't killed a man worth three hundred dollars to you. Where is he?"

FOR a moment Kelvy tried to look Crowley in the eye; then he shifted his gaze.

"I suppose," Kelvy said with sullen defiance, "I may as well tell you. He's in a cabin back up the bayou. That's where my two men went who started out ahead of us. But you can't get to him; and—"

"See how those pitchy barrels burn!" Crowley cut in as a black smoke began rising from the wharf. "Kelvy, have your men reported any strange craft around here lately?"

"Only a clumsy fishing boat manned by a few negroes."

"Yeah? Well, listen, Kelvy! One of those negroes is my buddy, Thompson. Through glasses, he'll see that smoke he's been watching for. Then things will happen! Down will come the false canvas sides Thompson and I fixed on that 'clumsy fishing boat'; and out will shoot the prettiest and fastest seaplane that ever hit water! It'll be here in a few minutes with deputy marshals and—"

Crowley broke off, unable to restrain a laugh at the look on Kelvy's face.

FLAME OF THE DEVIL

by E. Hoffmann Price

CHAPTER I

"IT SOUNDS wild to me," frowned Don Cragston, addressing the owner of the seagoing *Ibis*. "Though you've been cruising around in this yacht for five years, the fire-bug didn't get busy until you left Egypt, six weeks ago. Anyway, coal in bunkers often develops spontaneous combustion."

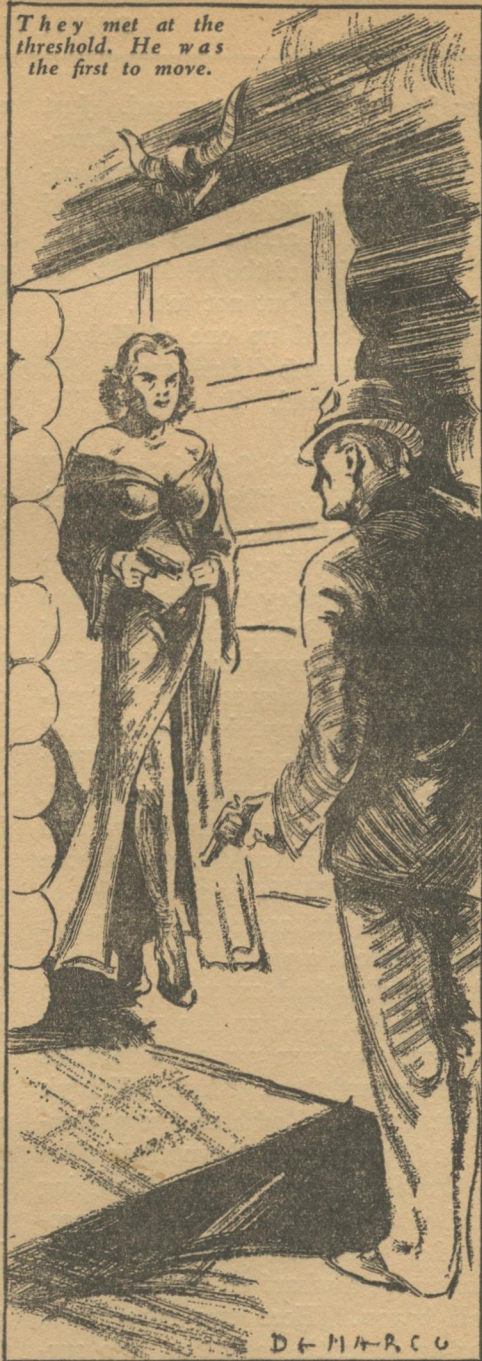
"Spontaneous!" echoed Gordon Holt. The retired racketeer's square face was haggard, and his little blue eyes had the red-veined glassiness of protracted sleeplessness. "How about papers stored in a fireproof safe being charred to a crisp—behind air tight doors! That was in Singapore. I tell you, this damn' boat is jinxed!"

Don Cragston, licensed investigator, wore his shaggy tweeds as if breeches and riding boots would be more to his taste. He was lean and rangy; his crisp, sandy hair was sunbleached, and his aquiline face was deeply branded by the Asiatic deserts and jungles he had recently forsaken in favor of man-hunting in San Francisco.

For a moment his level gray glance was divided between the three who awaited his decision. Cragston was not yet certain that he wanted an ex-racketeer as a client; but if Gordon Holt's problem was legitimate, the past did not count.

Including himself, there were four in the salon; but Cragston sensed a fifth, and unseen presence: undefined fear, that invisible tenant in rifled tombs, that lurker along the orchid

They met at the threshold. He was the first to move.



Horrible burning death followed whenever this beautiful exotic creature appeared—but Don Cragston would not believe a woman so desirable could have the brain of a soulless devil.

blazoned margins of lakes lost in venomous jungles. And that presence hovered near the woman at Holt's right.

She was tall, with firm breasts, her soft shapeliness strengthened by a straight nose and a red mouth that was a shade too hard. Somehow, Linda Grayling made him think of ivory that masked steel; and her hazel colored eyes hinted that the iron of her soul was reaching the cracking point. Their apprehensive shifting kept pace with the nervous, almost subdued play of her hands. Her voice betrayed the terror that had followed the *Ibis* all the way from Egypt as she cut in, "A cigarette butt might account for the fire in my wardrobe. But good heaven, Mr. Cragston, how about a steamer trunk that for no reason at all began smouldering, down in the hold—behind a locked steel bulkhead?"

And Linda, like Holt, betrayed her sleeplessness: except that her eyes were not reddened, and that the vitality of thirty-odd still kept the ravages of insomnia from creeping into her lovely face.

"Mmm. . . that is odd," admitted Cragston, noncommittally. Then he turned to the thin, scholarly man who abstractedly polished his *pince nez* glasses. "Doctor Fillmore, what are your ideas?"

"If I were a scientist instead of an antiquarian," answered Ellis Fillmore, "I might laugh at Holt's fears."

"So you believe the *Ibis* is hoodooed? Jinxed?" Cragston challenged, teeth clamping down his cigar butt.

An odd light flickered in Fillmore's frosty eyes. He smiled, then answered, "Strange things come out of Egypt. I have seen too much of that dark land to be a good sceptic. And we did come back with more loot than we should have. Tomb and temple loot."

That, Cragston told himself, was pure rot; but it piqued him, and he said

to Holt, "Remain at anchor, and I'll give this boat the works. But I'm not making any cruise with you, regardless of the fee."

"If you think I'd get out of sight of land, you're crazy!" flared Holt. Then, as a steward entered in response to his ring: "Binns, show Mr. Cragston his stateroom."

The *Ibis*, riding at anchor in the sunset reddened crescent of Half Moon Bay, some twenty miles south of San Francisco, was well off shore; but as he turned to follow Binns, a mirrored glimpse told Cragston that Holt was agitated as though he were in a city where machine gunners lurked in every alley, waiting to pour out leaden vengeance. Yet more than the fear of death haunted Holt.

"Dinner will be at eight, sir," announced wooden faced Binns.

"Tell Mr. Holt I'll be too busy to join him at dinner," said Cragston. He gestured toward his luggage, adding, "Lot of equipment to unpack. Could do with a sandwich, later."

THE large suitcase he had brought from the car parked ashore did contain a compact kit of investigator's equipment, from fingerprint to *moulage*; but arson, whether for vengeance or insurance money, leaves too few of the traces that camera and glass and test tube can convert into convictions. Cragston had no intention of unpacking anything.

He wanted to see the passengers of the *Ibis* when they were not aware of his presence. The whole thing was wild, right from scratch. After having voluntarily made his peace with the treasury department, Gordon Holt had set out to sea to prove that one can quit the game and live; it seemed somewhat late after that five year absence from the states for some surviving former associate to begin seeking vengeance

disguised as an Egyptian curse. In fact, Cragston had gathered, not only from gossip in town but also from Holt's remarks that the ex-racketeer's departure from Egypt had been only because he was certain that his exile could safely be terminated.

The blow-hard, garrulous underworld could scarcely have suppressed a rumor of lurking wrath. Vengeance not preceded by boasts and followed by "I-told-you-so's" would be flying in the face of nature.

Once dinner was announced, Cragston emerged for his reconnaissance. He made no effort at stealth; yet he sensed that his sudden appearance in the passageway had been just an instant too late to be enlightening. He could not be certain that he had heard a door click and the whisper of trailing garments; but a lingering, pagan sweetness convinced him that some woman must have vanished just in time to escape observation.

The subtle, foreign perfume was not Linda Grayling's; but something alien, disquietingly reminiscent of the bazaar just off Shâri' el Ghûri in Cairo, or a breath of fragrance exhaled from some latticed window in Damascus: a costly, cunningly blended sweetness that proved he still had things to learn about the passengers of the *Ibis*.

And this, following Holt's assurance that aside from the crew, there were aboard the yacht only himself, Fillmore, Linda, and her salaried companion, Martha Finley, lengthened his face into angles.

He spent little time peering through a porthole at the diners. Fear, he sensed, still was the unseen guest. For a moment he studied the sweet faced little blonde near the foot of the table. She must, he concluded, be Martha Finley. She had long lashed blue eyes, nice features, and a determined chin; and her reserve in that small gathering

confirmed her status. It also encouraged Cragston: when she found an audience, she would be willing enough to talk. A salaried companion generally is!

He left his observation post, assured that the three he had met on his arrival aboard the *Ibis* had not been staging an act. Then he prowled about the yacht, noting the portable fire extinguishers that gleamed from every bulkhead. There were twice as many as ordinary prudence dictated; and the inspection tag dates indicated that they had been installed many months before the *Ibis* had left Egypt.

That was a thought Cragston carried back to his stateroom; that, and his speculations as to the mysterious woman whose presence had been concealed from him. One way of bringing her out of cover would be to turn in a phoney fire alarm. Another . . . he opened his kit, and considered the dusting powders he might later that night spray on the deck, in the passages, then check up on heel prints. In spite of every sign to the contrary, Holt might be setting the stage for an insurance fire, now that escape from the *Ibis* was just a matter of rowing ashore.

But that woman? Surely not necessary in any such scheme!

And then there was a preemptory tapping at his door. It was Holt, who abruptly began, "Fillmore's driving me nuts, and Linda's out of sorts—which gives me a chance to show you around the boat this evening."

As they passed the guest staterooms, he named the occupant of each, concluding, "The others are used for storage. Cruising as I've been, one takes along a lot of stuff, and accumulates a lot more."

"Let's have a look," suggested Cragston, noting that one of those designated as storerooms must have received the unseen woman.

"Better get the layout of the boat first," Holt brusquely countered, turning toward a companionway.

ONCE below deck, Cragston observed that the hold was guarded by a compressed carbon dioxide system which automatically would flood it with a blanket of extinguishing gas when the temperature rose beyond a certain degree; but he made no comment until Holt unlocked a compartment door.

"For hell's sweet sake, what's this? A museum?" he demanded.

Blocked against the further bulkhead was the green basalt figure of a woman with the head of a lioness; Sekhmet, the Egyptian goddess of solar flame.

"That's what I wanted to show you," Holt solemnly answered. "I'm sorry I ever let Fillmore talk me into bringing her along. There's the hoodoo!"

"You're goofy!" snapped Cragston, resenting the instinctive awe that that solemn image had aroused in him.

"Maybe I am." Holt would not argue. "Anyway, idleness was getting me, so I began collecting. Anything to escape bridge and Scotch."

Holt, though much of his work had been evil, had likewise been the brain of legitimate enterprises. Neither archeology nor any other intellectual pursuit was out of character. That seemed to explain Fillmore: companion, and guide to new interests.

"Ever since I met him in Paris," Holt carried on, referring to the doctor; but the words froze on his lips, and Cragston whirled, following his gesture.

Black fumes and little yellow tongues of flames were rising from the joint where the lid fitted on a gilded mummy case that stared from a corner. Cragston knocked the cover aside and leaped back to avoid the flame that surged out.

The fumes reeked with blazing bitumen and the sickening stench of long dried flesh well afire. The entire compartment was heavy with the horrible sweetness of corpse-flavored frankincense.

He snatched a portable extinguisher from the outside of the bulkhead and commanded, "Don't spread the alarm! Keep this thing quiet. I can handle it."

He pumped a jet of tetrachloride into the flaming mummy, then seized and emptied a second extinguisher, subduing the blaze before the automatic system could function in reaction.

"Got it!" coughed Cragston. "Whew—what a smell! Now, shut that door. Not a word about this. I've got a hunch I want to follow. Give me your keys—yeah, the whole bunch."

He followed Holt up the forward companionway; but as he emerged, an eye-searing radiance from overhead blinded him. There was a crackling as of intense combustion, a shrill cry from aft, hoarse shouts from below. The deck quivered under successive detonations as though the bay itself were boiling; and as clouds of vapor surged up the companionway, Cragston heard the ringing of alarm gongs, the commands of the officers.

It had all happened in a succession of stunning instants; and then he caught the horrible odor that tinged the steam which billowed about him and Holt: the reek of burned flesh, and this time, *not mingled with embalming spices.*

The vapor poured from a porthole that opened to the main deck. It came out of Linda Grayling's stateroom! Cragston knew that death had struck; hideous and unspeakable death. There was no sound; and he was glad, thinking of how a body must be burned to taint so much vapor.

CHAPTER II

C RAGSTON, dashing down the passageway, could not tell whether Holt was praying or cursing. His voice was scarcely articulate. Binns, the steward, was chattering meaninglessly. That awful flare, that odor—they needed no explanation.

Cragston unlocked the door. Light gleamed murkily from the steam clouded stateroom. As he recoiled, Fillmore came running. He blinked, fumbled with his vapor clouded glasses, letting his flannel robe whip open in a gust of wind. He was groping for words and before he spoke, Cragston, with that strange perception of trifling details that a moment of horror brings, noted that the scholar's chest and throat and legs were gleaming with great patches of scar tissue. Old burns. . .

"Good Lord—what's happened—how—" he stammered, blinking behind his misted glasses and drawing his robe about him.

"Take Holt away!" snapped Cragston. "Isn't that smell enough?"

The wind thinned the vapor which obscured the further angle of the stateroom. Cragston shouldered the owner of the *Ibis* against Fillmore and crossed the threshold. There he halted, staring.

It would have been bad enough if Linda Grayling had been burned to a crisp, but this was worse. Though her turquoise negligee was smouldering away from her white body, she was untouched except for an oblong area reaching nearly from hip to her breasts. And in that space, most of her torso had vanished, blotted out of existence by the fiery mass which had dropped from above.

The upholstery of the *chaise longue* was afire, and the deck beneath it had been cleanly burned through. Cragston was glad that she was dead; and as he reached for a fire extinguisher, he care-

fully avoided looking at her face.

"What happened?" reiterated Fillmore, still dazed.

Holt, escaping restraint, stood there, mumbling.

"Take him away, you damned fool!" croaked Cragston. He gestured toward the ceiling. "Something hot enough to burn its way through steel plates overhead dropped down on her. And went on through. Get out!"

Cragston had enough to torture his eyes, without hearing the horror struggling for expression. Fillmore went, leading Holt.

The veneer which covered the steel deck was spattered with lustrous gray drops, but the edges of the hole beneath the *chaise longue* still glowed dully; and so did the metal which, like drippings from a blast furnace crucible, had congealed at the edges of the opening overhead.

Cragston withdrew, locked the door, and staggered up to the hurricane deck. For several feet around the source of that incredible heat he found droplets of cooled metal; and the hull of the lifeboat nearby was similarly peppered, and filmed with whitish dust.

Then he saw a thin ribbon of white ash, an eighth of an inch wide. The heat of combustion had made the deck paint boil, and thus extinguish the flame, so that an unburned bit remained. It was magnesium ribbon, dull silver gray, such as photographers used to use in place of flashlight powder.

"That makes it murder," Cragston reasoned. "A magnesium fuse to touch it off. . . God, what a death. . ."

His lingering nausea left him, and his face hardened like his granite gray eyes. Someone aboard the *Ibis* was quite beyond the pale of humanity.

Cragston now had to notify the police, and while waiting their arrival, guard the scene of the crime; but this was more than one man could do. Since

murder and arson had joined red hands, the uncanny combustion of the mummy was just as important as the stateroom and deck. Wherever he watched, he would be leaving openings for the criminal to obliterate clues elsewhere.

He stepped back from the opening in the deck, pinched the tip from a cigar, but did not light it. And as his teeth sank into the tobacco, he looked out across the black expanse that reaches all the way to China, then studied the shore line. One or two lights from farm windows blinked in the darkness of the narrow strip of fertile soil devoted to artichokes and garden truck; and in back were the sombre Montara Hills.

THOUGH little more than twenty miles from San Francisco, this was beyond the country jurisdiction. There was not a headlight moving down the new highway. In midweek, the sea food and dancing resorts were unpatronized. By night, the country seemed almost as unpopulated as when stout Don Gaspar de Portola camped there, a century and a half ago, ill and with no food but the mussels his soldiers could find at low tide.

"Why anchor the *Ibis* here? If afraid of fire, San Francisco harbor would have been infinitely better; and even though Holt might still fear underworld vengeance, he could scarcely be attacked aboard a yacht on the Marina or the Embarcadero.

"And it couldn't be secrecy," Cragston concluded. "He'd know that I wouldn't drive out here without leaving word where I'd gone."

Anyone going over the side could swim or row ashore, and head for the hills which, despite a network of highways, were as undeveloped as in the days of the Spanish regime. Further south, the country, though wilder, was dotted with summer cottages occupied

only over week ends—an ideal hideout for a fugitive.

"I'd pick a place like this," he argued, "if I had to make a getaway from a boat. But who was figuring on checking out?"

He descended to the main deck and strode along the rail toward the radio room; but he paused at the portholes of Linda's stateroom. The lights were still on.

Whoever had planted that incendiary bomb had to know exactly where the victim would be when it was touched off. Cragston looked through the polished glass, and could just see her brocaded mules; enough guide for whoever had planned the crime.

There was a perceptible smudge on the pane. Someone had peeped into the stateroom, pressing his face close to the glass to block out reflections. If a woman had made that smudge, some cosmetic trace would offer a hint; if a man, there might at least be some revealing imprint of skin texture and sweat glands.

He shifted toward the opened port, which brought him squarely in line with the corpse. Had she looked up, she would have seen anyone spying on her; and Linda's constantly shifting glance, he had concluded that afternoon, was a firmly fixed nervous habit.

"That half scorched book lying near her, looks as if she'd been trying to read away the jitters. Someone had her well mapped out, and knew better than to risk looking in through this open port."

Cragston had to risk leaving the main deck. After all, as long as no one knew that he had evidence of murder—that scrap of magnesium ribbon—the assassin would feel too secure to risk tampering with the stateroom.

Passing Holt's quarters, he heard the owner's now somewhat coherent speech, and Fillmore's reassurance: "I know I

spoke of a curse. Everyone has considered such possibilities, ever since the mysterious deaths of those who opened the tomb of Tutankhamen. But—"

"But you yourself explained a curse as something not entirely necessarily screwy!" protested Holt. "Hypnotism. Post hypnotic suggestion. They're acknowledged by science. Someone aboard may be committing these outrages without even being aware of them! But that damned green statue—I'll throw it overboard—"

"Listen, Holt—"

"Listen, be damned!" the racketeer flared. "Over it goes; I financed this party, and even if I did tell you the loot was yours, you've got no fair claim against my wishes!"

The closing of the porthole cover reduced the altercation to a confused blurr.

Cragston found Blaine, the radio operator, with his feet propped up on a table. He was reading a magazine six months old. His eyes were straightforward, but his thin, swarthy face was too hard for its age. The fellow was wary as a cat, swiftly shifting to his feet as Cragston entered.

"I want to send a message—"

"No go!" Blaine cut in, brusquely. "Unless Holt or the captain says so."

"Buddy," smiled Cragston, "let's not be that way. You know there has been a nasty accident aboard. I have to notify the police."

"The cops can wait till Holt's ready. Or you can lower a boat and phone from shore. I got my orders, and I'm no sap for your convenience."

He grinned, shook his head, and reached for a fresh smoke.

"Listen, Blaine," continued Cragston, still very amiably. "I'm a licensed investigator. I'm the law until the sheriff arrives. This boat is within the three mile limit, so the captain's got not a thing to say about it. Now get busy

with that key."

"Fade!" snapped Blaine, eyes hardening, one hand slipping behind him.

Cragston didn't know what the operator was reaching for, and he was taking no chance. Before the furtive gesture was fairly started, Blaine was looking into the muzzle of a 7.65 Mauser. His jaw sagged, and he jerked bolt upright from his menacing crouch.

"Hey—wait a second! I was reaching for matches."

Smack! And that was Cragston's fist, not gun, that came into play. Blaine dropped, frozen and popeyed. His sudden stiffening at the sight of Cragston's pistol had unmasked a switch in the bakelite panel behind him; that, and the box of matches that lay in plain sight *in front of him* had betrayed his move to cut the antenna circuit before the investigator forced him to hammer the sending key.

"Ought to put a lily in his hand," he grinned, checking the operator's drop to the floor.

Cragston stepped to the key and tapped out his message. Some ship or land station would get it and relay it to the police. He had to gamble on that, since he did not know how to tune the sending wave to the proper band.

"But if I make enough of a riot in the air," he reasoned, repeating his laboriously pounded code, "someone's bound to get it."

That done, he bound and gagged Blaine, and stowed him in a locker. Unless someone missed the operator, there was a chance that the police would arrive before anyone aboard would suspect that they had been summoned.

It was becoming personal. He was the only stranger aboard. Once he was disposed of, it would be a simple matter to rivet in new deck plates, report Linda as having fallen overboard, and that was the end of it. And Cragston's

car, parked near the highway, would not prove that he had ever boarded the *Ibis*.

But did that mysterious woman, whose only trace thus far was a whiff of Asiatic perfume, fit into this gruesome tangle?

A latch click warned Cragston. As the knob turned, he drew back, letting the inward swinging door hide him.

"Lloyd?" A woman's voice, low and tremulous, was hailing Blaine.

She repeated the name, paused a moment, then entered the radio room. It was Martha Finley, and the aura of *Vrai Narcisse* which accompanied her was neither Asiatic nor haunting. For a moment, not perceiving Cragston, she stood there, tense, perplexed. Then she started, sensing a presence in the room.

"I'm looking, for him myself," was Cragston's amiable observation as she whirled, her eyes wide blue queries. "Sending a message?"

"Oh—!" Alarm, and suspicion chased each other from her face. Then she caught his arm, and said, "Mr. Cragston—you must be the investigator—I'm scared silly. I know something's happened to Lloyd."

Score a half point for feminine intuition; she obviously did not connect him with the operator's disappearance. She at once went on, "Could you step to my stateroom? I've got to talk to someone. While I have a chance."

She said not a word as he accompanied her down the passageway. It was not until her own door had closed behind them that Martha began, voice tremulous and scarcely above a whisper, "There's a woman—or *something*—somewhere on this deck. I caught a passing glimpse of her. One night when Linda—Miss Grayling—was remaining in her stateroom! And I've heard her. I know it wasn't Linda's voice. You know how a bit of sound just filters in. A stray bit, picked up by a ventilator."

"A stowaway? Well, what of it?"

"But it's not a stowaway!" Her fingers sank into his arm. "Holt knows about her. Why does he have to conceal a guest?"

"Can you describe her?" he went on.

"All I could see was her face and those utterly preposterous eyes. The rest of her was in dim light. She seemed shrouded in something shapeless and flowing."

She paused, and Cragston prompted, "Those eyes?"

"Like—" Martha shivered. "Like something carved in an Egyptian tomb. Very long, very large eyes. And she seemed to fade, like that!"

"So you went to tell Blaine about it, just now?"

"No. I'm . . . well, rather fond of Lloyd. It's mutual. I wanted him to get me off this yacht. Both of us. Before it goes up in flames."

C RAGSTON frowned. Try and sift the facts from the hysterics! Martha's crude description suggested a Coptic woman, one of the survivors of the old race that ruled Egypt, long before Persian, Greek, Roman, or Arab invaded the land. It might all be illusion, suggested by the goddess of solar flame, and the curse of fire. Yet that lingering trace of alien perfume confirmed her impressions. Literally, there was an unseen presence aboard!

He resumed, apparently changing the subject, "Did Linda have any premonitions? This afternoon she had a fine case of jitters."

"She's always been that way," answered Martha, "ever since I met her, shortly before she asked me to join the cruise of the *Ibis*. Always taking bromides and sedatives. An overdose almost finished her."

"Pleasant cruise," he wryly observed. "What was the angle?"

"I've not the least idea!" Martha's

answer was entirely too ready. "But she and Holt got on each other's nerves. They quarrelled bitterly. Particularly since leaving Egypt with all that cargo of antiques. It took money and pull to get the lot out of the country, but Holt had both."

"Better forget this idea of checking out," warned Cragston. "After what's happened aboard, anyone missing will be suspected."

"Oh, good Lord!" she gasped. "But Lloyd couldn't—I know he wouldn't have left—without telling me—"

Cragston left her to simmer. Wondering about the missing radio operator might make her blurt out things he was certain she was withholding. He stepped to the passageway. Now that he'd put a message through, his best move was to guard the scene of the crime. He had been away longer than he realized.

But it was not until he reached the porthole of Linda's stateroom that he realized how long his vigilance had been broken. The porthole pane was now absolutely clean. The smudge had been wiped off!

CHAPTER III

C RAGSTON strode to his stateroom, took some wax from his kit, and sealed the door and portholes of Linda's stateroom. Then he broke in on Holt's conference with Fillmore.

"Someone," he bluntly began, "destroyed some evidence. But I've sealed the room. If anything else is messed up, you're responsible."

That left Holt and Fillmore groping; and Cragston clinched it by demanding, "Have you radioed the authorities ashore?"

He expected an affirmative; but instead, Holt answered, "Hell, no! Though I should have. But after what

happened, I've been—why didn't you remind me sooner?"

Cragston was certain that no one had witnessed the encounter in the radio room; therefore if Holt had forbidden the operator to transmit messages, the logical falsehood would have been to insist that he had reported the tragedy. His frank admission was a contradiction.

"Fillmore," continued Holt, turning abruptly to the scholar, "Have Blaine get in touch with the police." Then, to Cragston: "Let's go below and have a look at whatever it was that burned through everything but the hull plates. The captain insists it's a meteor, though the impact should have sprung every rivet in the boat. Moving at such speed—"

"Air resistance," suggested Cragston, keeping his own counsel as to the betraying strip of magnesium ribbon, "would slow a meteor down as well as heating it to incandescence. So it might be burned down to a very small bulk of extremely hot substance."

"He said it seems to be pure iron," persisted Holt. "Let's see what your guess is."

He followed the owner of the *Ibis* below deck. The throbbing of pumps hinted that the terrific heat of the thermite had sprung some rivets, admitting water; but the monotone of the rumbling voices below indicated that it was nothing serious.

It might not even keep the *Ibis* from pulling out to sea.

As they reached the compartment behind whose locked door the statue of Sekhmet cryptically regarded the half consumed mummy, Holt halted, abruptly turned, and fished for his keys, "That fire in there has me stumped. Let's have another look. No one has had a chance to tamper there."

Cragston checked his fumbling, saying, "I have your keys. You gave them

to me, remember? And I could do with another look. Fact is, I was thinking of it."

Cragston unlocked the bulkhead door. But as Holt groped for the switch, Cragston checked him. In the murky half gloom he saw a wavering, phosphorescence on the deck. It also outlined the half consumed mummy.

"There's something!" he muttered, answering Holt's incredulous query. "Leave the light off until I get a sample."

As Cragston strode forward, he produced a handkerchief. White phosphorous could account for "spontaneous" combustion; and the carbon tetrachloride used to extinguish the blaze had dissolved the stuff, along with the gums and resins of the mummy, making that glow.

"This Egyptian curse seems to have laboratory training!" he exclaimed; but his voice suddenly had a hollow rumble. He whirled. The door was closing. Then darkness, and a click as he bounded forward, too late to wrench it open.

"You —— —!" he swore to the gloom. Then, finding the switch, he added, "And I'm another, getting caught this way!"

Holt had him out of circulation.

Cragston's first concern was the air supply. Unless he could quickly extricate himself, he would suffocate. The compartment reeked with the fumes of fire extinguisher fluid, making his eyes smart and his head ache.

Sweat cropped out on his forehead. It was only with an effort that he compelled himself not to try to calculate how long he could remain conscious in that limited air supply. For a moment he deliberately surveyed the compartment and in his exaggerated effort to retain command of himself, he scrutinized each of the objects it contained.

The pitch of the ship, and the mocking stare of Sekhmet suggested the first

move; that, and the hazy recollection of an old story about the havoc wrought by the escape of an improperly lashed cannon on a warship, back in the days of muzzle loading artillery, when the guns had to be drawn back on carriages, loaded, and rolled forward to the firing port.

THE statue, if released from its blocking, would at every pitch of the *Ibis* be skated across the deck and against the opposite bulkhead. That would spring a plate, create an alarming disturbance, force the ship's officers to come in and stow the cargo. Thus he would gain at least an exchange of pistol fire. Better go out in a red blaze than to die like a rat in a fumigated hold. Police interference was too slender a chance to consider in this emergency.

He was already dizzied by the pungent fumes exhaled by the half burned mummy; but as he approached the goddess, he saw that he still had a slender chance. She was secured by threaded tie rods which, after passing through the bulkhead, were fastened to four by fours that crossed the pedestal, knees, and breast of the image. And large wing nuts made his task easier.

They were not as tight as he had expected. The statue was perceptibly shifting with the motion of the boat. A splash of extinguisher fluid, though cutting the thin film of grease and grime from the steel deck plates, had not quite obliterated traces which indicated that Sekhmet had been moved not long before the mummy caught afire.

He removed a wing nut; and then another. The compartment was now whirling, and every breath was a knife thrust, a gulp of burning, half poisoned air. But finally he kicked aside the bottom block, and as the *Ibis* pitched, he watched the statue slide slowly forward, then jam against the angle of a massive

granite sarcophagus.

Cragston wedged himself behind the image. For a moment a backward lurch crushed him as in a deadly vise; then the next pitch helped him, and Sekhmet slid free. His ears were roaring, and uncounted hammers seemed to be beating inside his brain. He slumped, nauseated and helpless. Then he felt the vibration of the deck, heard a splintering of wood, a terrific crash, a tinkling of steel.

The image had tipped over, the impact breaking off a knee and hand. It rolled, then slid; and for a moment, its direction hung in the balance: whether it would crash against the further bulkhead, or slide back to pin Cragston against his wall and the sarcophagus was an even chance. Though his head was light, his body was a sluggish, inert mass.

Scrambling clear, he dislodged the tie rod. It slipped freely, dropped back into the adjoining compartment, exposing the hole drilled into the steel plates. Then, as he desperately pulled himself to the half inch opening to suck in a breath of untainted air, the roll of the *Ibis* sent Sekhmet smashing against the door.

Wind and tide were helping him. The sea was becoming heavier. The sculptured stone swooped crazily into a corner. Above the crash he heard the groan of a strained rivet. A plate had been sprung. He gulped another breath from the drilled hole, then turned back to watch for the next dive of the statue. The deck was now littered with green fragments. As it chewed itself to pieces, its motion would become faster, a growing danger for Cragston, who would have to dodge the juggernaut he had released.

The *Ibis* nosed down. The ponderous bludgeon came tumbling toward him. The deck was slick, the angle was steep. He scrambled, slipped, then flung himself to the lid of the heavy sarcophagus

just as the statue smashed home, raining him with basalt splinters.

"That was damn near personal!" he gasped, shuddering as he saw how the erratic tumbling of the goddess had almost trapped him.

Then he noted the heavy chunk broken from the pedestal, and the white fragments scattered by the impact. *Plaster of paris!* And it concealed a cavity in the back. The deck was strewn with a dully gleaming powder with a metallic lustre—odd cargo for Egyptian tomb loot!

Cragston was on deck as the next roll sent Sekhmet skating across the deck. He caught a glimpse, just as the overhead light broke the shifting shadows, of paper wrapped parcels in the crevice. Risking the treachery of the now battered stone, he plunged after a package that had broken from its concealment.

There had been no investigation of the terrific hammering and thumping Cragston had released. Apparently the threatened destruction of all the cargo in that compartment was less important than keeping him imprisoned.

"Nobody wants to swap lead, yet," he growled. "Waiting for me to suffocate."

His imprisonment must be known to the ship's officers; otherwise someone would have come running. And being thus lightly disposed of whipped the captive's wrathful determination to get out.

THEN he recalled that scrap of magnesium ribbon he had picked up on the hurricane deck, tore open the little envelope in which he had sealed it, and reached for the parcel of thermit. He poured the powder out in a train that included a circle a yard in diameter. At one point he heaped the stuff higher, making a mound sharp pointed as possible.

With his penknife Cragston split one

end of the scanty bit into several little tongues, set it upright in the heap. He broke the first match he struck, and his hand trembled as he brought the second one, lighted to the fuse.

Damn that ribbon! The metallic mass was pulling the heat faster than the match could supply it. And then a wink of white. He drew back. False alarm. Another match —

Its flame was blotted out by a penetrating white glare. Magnesium is slow, deliberate in its burning. Cragston reeled back, but as doom clawed at his throat the glow of the magnesium was swallowed by a blinding incandescence, a rain of white hot sparks.

Then, as he counted the endless seconds, there was a terrific hissing, an overwhelming increase of pressure. The automatic fire extinguisher system was pouring carbon dioxide into the compartment to blot him out like a candle, smother him, keep even a drop of air from coming in. The roar of gas now seemed to come from a great distance. It whistled past him as he crawled to the bolt hole to get a gulp of air. That was a vain effort; the gas, rushing out, kept any air from getting in. The thermit providing its own oxygen, needed no outside air to burn, and carbon dioxide was drowning him surely as though he had been inhaling water.

The incandescence was spreading. It became a circle of radiance whose coolest spot was over 7000 degrees. Packing cases were ablaze from tiny bits of the flaming stuff. Cragston's clothes were now smouldering.

Suddenly the white hot ring dropped from sight. A three foot hole gaped in the deck. The gas pressure dropped, spent by the opening. Cragston, scarcely conscious, seized one of the pieces of wood used to block the statue into place; and with that to protect his hands, he dragged himself toward the hole. The dull red, glowing edges set

the wood smouldering; but as he gulped in fresh air from below, his head cleared. He rose, snapped off the light. Looking down, he saw that the metal cut out by the thermit had rolled clear. He then stepped from the two by four that protected his feet from the hot edges, and dropped out of the compartment.

He landed in a coal bunker. It was already partly ablaze from the hot iron that had fallen into it; but that was somebody else's worry. A moment later, Cragston was ascending a companion-way, pistol drawn.

CHAPTER IV

AS CRAGSTON reached the main deck, he saw that the cutter which had brought him aboard was again swinging from the davits. Someone was leaving the *Ibis*; or rather, someone hoped to.

"Hold it!" he shouted. Then, pistol leveled, he backed against a bulkhead and as the officer in charge whirled toward him, he added, "Swing it back, and never mind what Holt told you!"

For a moment their eyes clashed; then the mate's hand dropped to his side. The cutter swung back, sank to its blocks.

"Line up, and hoist your hands!" he continued. Then, recognizing Holt by the deck lights, he added, "You, in there, pile out."

The ex-racketeer's face was gray as he confronted his escaped captive.

"I left orders for you to be released when I reached shore," he protested.

"Skip it!" Cragston's laugh was iron.

And then Fillmore emerged from the cutter. He frowned, perplexed and annoyed rather than alarmed. He demanded, "Cragston, what's all this?"

"No one leaves until the police arrive. You might as well know I radioed them before I asked Holt if he'd sent word."

"If you'd said so," snapped Fillmore, "it'd have saved a good deal of confusion. We were going ashore to report. When I went to the radio room, the operator was missing. I couldn't find him anywhere."

"You fool!" growled Holt, recovering from his panic, "Put up that gun."

"You might tell me," countered Cragston, "why you locked me in that compartment."

"I had my reasons," was the sullen answer. "How did you get out?"

"With a can opener."

He could not indefinitely hold the *Ibis*; and that radio message was entirely too uncertain.

His sudden stride brought him close to Holt, and so quickly that no one could venture a false move. Then, with the 7.65 jammed against the racketeer's ribs, he said, "Don't move, any of you! I'll blow Holt's guts out quicker than I'd argue."

"I tell you," stuttered Holt, "I left orders to release you. Listen—"

"You tell the skipper to run this boat into the rocks so it can't get away. If she's not headed in for a crackup in thirty seconds, I'm giving you the works. And report it as killed while attempting to escape. With your record, I can make it stick, and you know it."

A dozen eyes probed Cragston's grim face, striving to read whether he would methodically cut down the owner. The conclusion was yes; and Holt concurred.

"Go ahead, McCulley," he ordered. "Tell the skipper to run her aground. By my order."

"By your order, hell!" boomed a deep voice from the companionway. The red faced Captain hove into view. "Do you think I'm going to do that on a calm night and spend the rest of my life trying to prove the owner ordered it?"

"Captain," grated Holt, "damn it,

you can't disobey—"

"I can and I am!" retorted the captain. "If he wants to plug you, that's your look out. I'm not having my ticket threatened to save your neck."

That threw it to Cragston. If a weapon were drawn by anyone at all, it would be different, and Holt would die first; but cracking down on him to compel another's obedience was something else.

The captain's ruddy face twisted ironically. He knew the answer; but he had not anticipated the next move.

Cragston thrust Holt forward, then slipped to the rail of the launch. Still commanding the situation with his 7.65, he said, "Captain, it would be dumb to crab yourself to save this louse. So I'm taking him ashore. Lower us over the side, or you won't be living long enough to worry about a master's ticket.

"Holt—Fillmore—both of you into this tub. Backs toward me."

The captain's triumph froze. Cragston had reversed the field; it was no longer a question of cutting down a hostage, but of squeezing lead into anyone who tried to hinder the getaway.

"You win," was the answer; and then he gave the orders.

C RAGSTON, behind and between his two captives, covered the deck crew as he retreated over the side and into the cutter. Once the launch cleared the rail of the *Ibis*, he herded Holt and Fillmore ahead of him, jamming them into corners of the small cockpit where he could watch them.

"Take the wheel," he commanded, once the sea picked them up.

"Where are we going?" demanded Holt.

"To police headquarters. And if anything funny does happen aboard the *Ibis* during your absence, you can't be held responsible for destruction of evidence, or the *corpus delicti*. You're

getting a break."

"Listen, you chump!" Holt was aghast. "I didn't kill her."

And then, above the sputter of the engine, Cragston heard a latch click behind him. He whirled, leaped back. A small caliber pistol crackled. Numbness gripped his gun arm. The 7.65 dropped from his fingers before he could face the enemy who had emerged from the cabin.

"Don't move!" It was a woman. Her voice was on the verge of cracking. Her shooting would be wild, but with lead spraying the entire cockpit, Cragston knew that his chances of disarming her were slim. "Grab him, Gordon!"

"You damn idiot!" swore Holt. "Nefeyda, why did you butt in?"

But it was the woman herself who shocked Cragston more than the tiny slug that had numbed his arm. Nefeyda was slender, very shapely, and partly enveloped in a loose brown woolen robe—an Egyptian *aba* that covered a low-cut revealing dress, muffled almost all of her face and arms. Her features were aquiline, finely modelled: cheek bones just prominent enough to be piquant, a firm red mouth, a thin, highbridged, haughty nose. She held the gun tightly, and the rise and fall of her full breasts underneath the silken dress made plain her tautness.

She reminded him of an Egyptian tomb painting. It was her incredible eyes that fostered the illusion: long, black, with dark lashes so closely spaced that the edge of her lids seemed to have been streaked with mascara. Her remote ancestors had worshipped Sekhmet and the other gods of Egypt. This was the stowaway of the *Ibis*.

"Don't move!" she threatened, soft voice menacing as a serpent's hiss. "I slipped—I didn't intend to shoot you, just then. But I will."

And he knew that she would. Des-

peration had made her superior to reason.

"Wait a minute!" protested Holt. "This is going wild—cut it out—damn it, you'll make things worse—"

"It will be still worse for you, Gordon," purred Nefeyda, "if I get nervous and shoot this gentleman. Get back there in the cabin—both of you—"

"Cragston," warned Holt, seeing the investigator suddenly becoming tense, "don't risk it—she's screwy!"

"Follow them, Mr. Cragston," said Nefeyda, snaking back out of arm's reach.

She could still spray the entire cockpit with lead; and a desperate woman with an automatic pistol is utterly unpredictable. So he obeyed; and a moment after the door locked behind them, the engine revved up. Nefeyda was heading ashore.

Cragston cursed wrathfully, looked about for an exit. But the girl had prepared in advance for her prisoners. The milled head of the latch was missing; and breaking down the door would invite a hail of slugs from his own pistol.

"Who the devil is she?" demanded Cragston, turning to Holt.

"A political refugee," answered the racketeer. "I wanted to get her off the *Ibis* before the police came aboard. That's why I locked you in that compartment. I never thought of the fire extinguisher fumes. She's afraid that this awful mess will end in her being deported and sent back to Egypt, which would mean a quick finish."

"It would," interpolated Fillmore. "So we smuggled her aboard with the antiques. We kept her presence concealed from everyone. So there would be no leaks when we reached the states."

That did make sense; but Nefeyda might have imposed on Holt with the express purpose of avenging his interlude of tomb looting in Egypt. Or she

might have been jealous of Linda Grayling. But before Cragston could plan a move to recapture the boat, he heard the drumming of a motor, and a search light beam picked the cutter out of the gloom. A launch, coming from the direction of the *Ibis*, was overhauling them.

"Police boat!" exclaimed Cragston. "They got my message, headed for the yacht, and now they're after us. Tell her to halt. She may listen to you. No sense making it worse by trying to run out."

AS HOLT turned to the door, Cragston opened a porthole, thrust out his head, and yelled. For a moment the searchlight blazed full into his face as he gestured. Then the engine of the cutter ceased turning.

"Getting sense!" exclaimed Cragston.

As if to mock him came the crackling of pistol fire from the cockpit: the spiteful smack of a light automatic and the heavier report of the 7.65. He heard the whine of bullets ricocheting from the water. Nefeyda, apparently at her wit's end, was shooting at the approaching launch long before it was within range.

A rattle of machine-gun fire answered. A porthole glass was spattered to fragments. Slugs drummed like a rivetting hammer against the cutter. The counter attack, however, ceased as the shots from the cockpit stopped as suddenly as they had begun.

"Maybe they winged her!" hazarded Cragston.

Then there was a gusty rumble from the cockpit: the surge of fierce flames. Through the porthole he saw the lurid glare on the water, the thick, black fumes whipped by the wind. Apparently a stray bullet had glanced, struck the carburetor sediment bowl, and spilled enough gasoline to start a blaze.

"Fire!" shrieked Holt.

"Take it easy!" shouted Cragston. "It's mainly lube and greasy rags and wiring. Smell the fumes? We can break out the back and get out on the fantail. The gas tank won't explode. She gummed up this lock, just so we couldn't escape and go forward in a hurry to nail her."

But that effort was wasted. Before the door yielded, the approaching launch grated against the side of the cutter. It was a harbor patrol launch, but crowded with a squad of harness cops. Guns down, they swarmed to the fantail.

"What the hell's up?" roared a familiar voice. "Who was shooting?"

Cragston recognized the speaker: burly square-jawed Sergeant Harley of the San Francisco police. He answered, "Prisoner got us bottled up. She's in the engine compartment. Maybe overcome by fumes. Shake it up!"

Then, to Holt: "Let's forget that you locked me up on the *Ibis*. Get the story: we were going ashore to report, and Nefeyda went loco and started shooting us up."

"But how—"

"Play it anyway!" snapped Cragston. "Give 'em the exile angle, if there is a word of truth in it. I figure you were too rattled to have a dime's worth of judgment left. But if it came out that you tried to put me on ice, you'd be incriminated up to your neck."

"He's right, Holt," said Fillmore. "Do you think she's guilty?"

"That's not the question," temporized Cragston. "Her flight speaks for itself and helping her escape would make him—and you too—an accessory after the fact."

That last left Cragston entirely in command.

The police launch pulled up. And during the confusion of question and answer, identification and explanation, some minutes elapsed before it was es-

tablished that Nefeyda was missing, not suffocated. That put Cragston, Holt, and Fillmore on the spot; trying to make an absent and seemingly imaginary woman take the rap for shooting at a detachment of police.

"But I told you," repeated Cragston, "she was pulling a gag. Listen, you damn block head! Don't you get it? First shooting, then setting the waste and drippings in the bilge on fire is doing just the thing she figured it would. Giving her time to make a getaway!"

They got it. They played the searchlight over the black water, and toward the shore. But while the distance was not great, the crescent of outline of Half Moon Bay was. The tide was right, and a creditable swimmer could make it without much effort.

CHAPTER V

TIME was lost in convincing the police that there had been such a person as Nefeyda. More was spent before circling the bay was abandoned, and one of the squad went ashore to telephone the sheriff of San Mateo County, giving the alarm that the short wave from Palo Alto would put on the air. By every rule, Nefeyda should not have a chance.

The San Francisco homicide squad that had accompanied the harbor patrol was far out of its jurisdiction, but being on the scene, they took charge until the proper authority arrived. And furthermore, so much of the city's business population lives on the Peninsula that San Francisco keeps an unofficial finger on that narrow fifty-mile tongue of land that separates San Francisco Bay from the Pacific Ocean.

Thus, finally, the disabled cutter was towed back to the *Ibis*. Cragston's bullet crease cleared him of suspicion. Harley's one crack was countered by, "I told you once we were going ashore to

notify the police! She sprung a surprise on us, hiding out in the boat. Does it look like we were helping her? That jane wasn't playing cowboy and Indian, either, Harley. You know I don't usually give up a gun that easy."

Holt's courage was returning. Despite his unsavory past, Cragston's jockeying was getting him the breaks. But suddenly his heavy jowls sagged, and he hoarsely whispered, "Lord . . . when they find Blaine!"

"Pray, if you've not forgotten how," was Cragston's grim comment. "I've been thinking about that . . ."

If the ex-racketeer wondered at Cragston's change of heart, he was at least not looking a gift horse in the mouth. Logically, he could attribute the switch from grim resentment to alliance as the result of Nefeyda's desperate and incriminating moves. That, however, was not the investigator's motive.

If Holt, the center of a vortex of intrigue, were in the hands of the police, it would drive to cover those plotting against him; or if he really were responsible for the atrocity aboard the *Ibis*, his being in custody would keep him from making some move that would betray him.

Cragston could not afford scruples. If his client was guiltless, then nothing short of murder was too much to serve his interests; but if Holt was criminally involved, gaining his confidence to trick him was just part of the game. And thus, while the law ploughed into Linda's stateroom, Cragston found his chance to release Blaine, the radio operator. The tragedy was gruesome enough even to shake men accustomed to fishing unmentionable things from the water front.

"Keep your face shut, Blaine," Cragston counselled, jerking him out of the locker. "If they ever hear you refused to send my message, you'll be stuck as an accessory after the fact—helping

your boss get a murderer off this boat. And keep away from Martha."

Blaine thought he understood, and nodded wisely.

Once the police had things in hand, they accomplished by advantage of numbers what Cragston had not been able to attempt: a simultaneous inspection of hold and guest quarters. Fingerprint and *mouflage* equipment was methodically brought into play. The photographer, arriving later, took pictures not only of the corpse, but of the holes burned in the deck, of the compartment in which Cragston had been imprisoned, and of the incandescent missile, now cooled, which had welded itself to the bottom plates of the *Ibis*.

There were no fingerprints to identify whoever had stored or removed a portion of the thermite concealed in the now-shattered statue of the Goddess of Fire; only the traces left by Cragston's hand as he burned his way to freedom.

Then it seemed to Cragston that his sudden turn to act as Holt's advocate had been one of those uncanny hunches that guide an investigator through a tangle of complications. That was when he reclaimed his emptied but undamaged 7.65 from the police, who had found it in the cockpit of the cutter; but what most interested them was a briefcase and its badly-charred contents. It contained a thick bale of unregistered government bonds, easily negotiable as cash.

"Whose are they?" the sergeant demanded.

"How should I know," countered Holt, "without looking at the serial number? But the brief case is certainly mine."

"Quit squirming around and gimme the dirt!" Harley was now well in the saddle. "I guess a hundred grand in bonds is a total secret on this tub, eh? Look at 'em—if they ain't yours, who do they belong to?"

Cragston was now on the edge of his chair. The answer did not surprise him: "They must have belonged to Linda Grayling."

"Damn it, then you birds were covering up that Turk jane—"

"Egyptian, Sergeant," corrected Cragston.

"That female Turk," persisted Harley, face stormy as his blue eyes. "That escape of hers was a gag. And in the confusion, everybody forgot the hundred grand."

"I told you," Cragston cut in, "that she sprang a surprise on us all. But if you insist on believing Holt roasted Linda Grayling and then robbed her, when he could have pushed her over the rail any place between Nagasaki and here—a matter of 5500 nautical miles—I won't argue with you. And if you figure it was clubby, skating a .25 slug through my arm and then locking us up in a blazing tub, that's your idea of an accomplice."

But that clash was checked by the fingerprint men, who came in to report his findings: that Nefeyda had been in Linda Grayling's stateroom, and had opened a concealed, built-in locker, the disturbed contents of which indicated that a parcel the size of a sheaf of bonds had been removed.

"And that's only half of it," he concluded. "While it'll take an autopsy to make sure, there's a glass and a bottle that show that the victim took a heavy dose of a strong sedative. A bottle that size is missing from the medicine cabinet in Holt's stateroom, and the one on Linda Grayling's table shows signs of his handling."

That swung it against Holt. His color receded, and he shot a despairing glance at Cragston. The investigator's face froze. There was no ready answer for that.

"Looks like this is winding up," declared Harley, "before anyone arrives

from the sheriff's office. Holt, you better cough up. You doped her, robbed her locker, and then cremated her."

The racketeer's protests were scarcely articulate. He was cracking under the deadly succession of reversals of the evening. Almost secure, he had his feet knocked from under him. And then Cragston said, "You've asked Martha Finley just about one thousand assorted questions, trying to get her to say that Holt and Linda Grayling had been quarrelling about Nefeyda.

"You might risk another one. She told me, before we started ashore, that the deceased was pretty much addicted to sedatives, *ever since this cruise* started. Put her on the mat again, and have her cover that angle."

Sergeant Harley took him at his word: the blonde girl not only confirmed Cragston's contention, but concluded, "She'd run out of those tablets last night, so this evening, she sent me to Mr. Holt's stateroom to get a bottle. So I did. And that's the one—the one you've got tagged."

Cragston wanted to wipe the rush of sweat from his forehead, but he had to deny himself that luxury. He sighed, stretched the kinks out of muscles aching from tension, and said, "After all, sergeant, I was with Holt for a good half hour before the murder. Just because Nefeyda isn't here to explain the circumstances under which her fingerprints appear on the panelling doesn't mean that you can dump it all on my client."

"You know more about this than you're letting on!" flared the sergeant, who had to concede Holt's indisputable alibi and the utter lack of any proof to show that a mechanical time-bomb device had been used to make an alibi possible.

"I've just been thinking about it a bit more than you have," Cragston drawled. "And you know damn well

that from the time I opened my office in San Francisco, no one has hinted that I ever helped any client get away with murder."

That was another claim that was beyond disputing; and the law presently brightened up, realizing that Nefeyda could not long hide out after emerging from Half Moon Bay—that is, if she had really emerged.

CHAPTER VI

IT was Holt's alibi that won him the decision; that, and because no case could be made during Nefeyda's absence. And not even her capture would necessarily implicate the ex-racketeer. The immigration authorities, checking the accounts Holt and Fillmore had given of the mysterious beauty, learned in response to their radioed queries to Egyptian officials that she actually had been deeply involved in native politics. Thus, with no proof that he had intended to smuggle her into the States, he had an out on that score.

The following day, it was a toss-up: Linda Grayling had either been murdered for a parcel of bonds, or she had been a victim of Egyptian vengeance. It made good newspaper copy, the log of the *Ibis*, the shattered goddess, the hell-heat of thermit. As for the hole in the compartment from which Cragston had escaped—he had successfully represented that as the result of an experiment to identify the parcel of substance concealed in the statue.

Cragston had the game in his own hands, but it was dangerous. Unless he quickly solved the riddle, some slip would expose his strategy. Now that he had a tiger by the tail, he would be finished, once the beast turned on him. He told Holt as much, as he and Fillmore sat in the racketeer's suite in a San Francisco hotel.

"Give me all the dirt," he concluded,

"or you blow up with me. That robbery angle doesn't add up. What the hell would an alien like Nefeyda figure she could do with a bale of bonds?"

"You're in the clear, but you know the cops are not through with your crew. One leak about your having locked me up aboard the *Ibis* will not only make a liar of me but an accessory of yourself—"

"And of me, as well," Fillmore interpolated, readjusting his glasses. "You might as well be frank, Holt. Cragston's right."

"I needed some quick cash," Holt admitted, after a long pause. "To take care of Nefeyda after she got ashore. I knew Linda would be in a drugged sleep, so I sent Nefeyda to do the looting while I took you on a tour of the ship."

"Then, after that ghastly murder, I had to get Nefeyda off the *Ibis* before the police arrived. I had a damn good hunch you'd strong-armed Blaine and send a message, so I booted you into that compartment. As I said, I was too rattled to think you might suffocate from fire-extinguisher fumes."

And that was logical. Holt was wealthy enough not to have an ample supply of *cash*. Furthermore, in the interests of secrecy, he could hardly ask Linda Grayling for the loan of her bonds.

"But it's crazy," declared Cragston, "figuring that Nefeyda would pull a job like that, unless she handed you that verified exile story just to blind you to her real purpose. Did you get any threats while in Egypt, any warnings telling you to desist from your digging?"

Holt shook his head. Then, as he chewed another cigar to shreds, he said, "I still think Fillmore's right, even if it does sound screwy. That fire goddess angle. If it's not a traditional curse, then a fanatic is trying to blot us out. I don't believe Nefeyda did it—

but a fellow never can believe anything like that about—"

"Uuh," agreed Cragston, smiling thinly. "She's just the type of gal one could get unbalanced about. I'd never have figured she'd try to sift some lead into me, only she did. But this ain't getting us anywhere."

"What was Linda Grayling afraid of, from the very start of the cruise? Why, did you humor her phobia against fire? That yacht was a fire extinguisher salesman's paradise. And that Finley girl told the cops how Linda had had the jitters right from the start of the cruise."

Holt's face tightened. He shook his head, muttered, "Uuh. That began to eat at me. And after those fires broke out, I got that way myself."

"Get it off your chest," prompted Cragston, at the end of a long silence. "I'm in this up to my neck, having covered your tracks. There's only one out—a solution. Tell me all about Linda Grayling. Everything. Or you and I will end telling things to the cops, and not liking it."

HOLT'S glance furtively shifted toward Fillmore. The scholar rose, saying, "It might be easier if I left you two to talk it out. I'm sorry. I'd have thought of that sooner, but I've been so accustomed to be under Holt's feet, so to speak—"

A vague gesture ended his apology. He found his hat, then with scholarly deliberation picked his way toward the door.

"Splendid chap, Fillmore," sighed Holt, as he turned to face Cragston. "I'd have gone nuts if I hadn't run into him in Paris."

"But Linda Grayling?" persisted Cragston.

"That's what I meant," was the sombre response. "Something was eating at her. I figured a cruise would

straighten her out. But it worked the other way around. I ended cutting paper dolls myself, just from having her on the *Ibis*.

"She'd been assistant to a psychiatrist who was treating a wealthy old duffer by the name of Cyrus Patton. He was just screwy enough for some businesslike relatives to try to have him declared incompetent, the idea being to get hold of a pretty juicy estate."

"Nice business," was Cragston's dry comment.

"Well, that part of it wasn't so bad," amended Holt. "It's what followed. Patton retained the psychiatrist to prepare a defense. But in the meanwhile, Linda had played up to him—Patton, I mean—and learned enough of his eccentric points to make it a sell-out in court, crossing him and the psychiatrist.

"That way, she clinched the rather wabbly case against Patton, and the old chap was locked up. In what they politely called an institution—but it was just a de luxe bughouse. And Linda's crossing him actually did make him crazy. He spent most of his time in a strait-jacket."

"Then Linda's conscience began griping her?" Cragston wondered.

"Don't be silly!" Holt smiled sourly. "Not that early in the game. The stake was a bale of bonds that Patton had secretly put into a safe deposit vault. That was Linda's suggestion. A sort of ace in the hole, just in case his relatives did get him declared nutty. He bit at her good advice."

"Clever gal," remarked Cragston, beginning to follow the play.

"But once he was caged up," continued Holt, "his ravings about a hundred grand or more in bonds were considered hallucinations. When a man is assumed to be insane, everything he says is suspected. So Linda grabbed the plunder which had been stowed away in a joint tenancy account. Legally,

she was absolutely in the clear, as the dough had been put into the box before Patton was declared incompetent."

"Where's the fire phobia come in?"

"When the institution burned down," answered Holt, grimacing. "Maybe you heard of it. Over a dozen patients died in the blaze. Patton was among them. He was in a strait-jacket. Not a Chinaman's chance, though a couple firemen got badly injured trying to save him. And until the flame choked him, he was cursing Linda, damning her and prophesying her death by fire.

"Which gave her the jitters. And since I was making a cruise . . . well, for my health, you might say, I told her she could hop along. A dumb move. I knew the story, and with Linda mumbling about it, month after month, I began to get kinked myself. Particularly after we left Egypt and began to catch hell from mysterious blazes."

"Anyhow," said Cragston, after a long pause, "the madman's prophecy came true. And those were old man Patton's bonds that you borrowed in Nefeyda's behalf?"

"That's right!" snapped Holt, "though I can't say I'm tickled at the way you put an accent on *borrow*. Damn it, I'm not broke. I just didn't have enough ready cash to stake Nefeyda. But we went into all that."

"Yeah, we did," agreed Cragston, trying to get the rotten taste out of his mouth. While Linda's death had been hideous beyond all reckoning, he could not help feeling now that there was such a thing as poetic justice. Then, reaching for his hat, he went on, "I'm going on the prowl. Can't get to first base sitting around here nursing a gun and looking at you. It's your hide and mine too, if I don't get to the bottom of this. And if you still feel jumpy, even in this fireproof hotel—"

"Fire, my eye!" scoffed Holt, "I'm off the *Ibis*, ain't I?"

"That's right. And if some of your former *business* associates are still in your hair, I know an agency that can fix you up with a body guard. The number is—"

"Skip it!" Holt chuckled grimly, patted his armpit, and added, "Anyway, that's been outlawed by G-men bullets. Good luck."

BUT as he stepped from the suite and headed toward the elevator, Cragston was warned by a sixth sense that intent scrutiny was stabbing him in the back, despite there being no one visible in the corridor. That uncomfortable sensation persisted as he strode through the lobby. He began to realize that, oddly enough, Holt had not asked him for any details of his plan to clear up the case.

That implied an assumption that Cragston had in his possession some fact that could uncork the case; which made that intent, back-piercing scrutiny as he left Holt's suite a warning just vague enough to be heeded. He began wondering if Holt *feared* that he might trap the fire-slayer!

He walked at random, thinking it out. It was now certain that he was being followed. Declining a body guard hinted not only at confidence, but also at a trick to convince Cragston that Holt did not have anyone secretly checking up on the investigator.

The entire crew of the *Ibis*, still wanted as material witnesses, were out on bond furnished by Holt. That was another disquieting consideration.

Cragston knew that the more purposeless his direction seemed, the more persistently he would be followed. So instead of carrying on with his original plan of seeing the dead woman's salaried companion, he looped down toward the warehouse district along the waterfront, where, after six in the evening, the all-day riot of business is blotted out

by a deserted darkness.

This was a city jungle; yet in jungle strategy, no city dweller could long compete with Cragston. Thus, presently, he not only had learned that he actually was being followed, but likewise had made good use of the tangle of alleys.

His timing was perfect. He calculated his shadow's progress to within a few paces. And he was lurking in a narrow, apparently blind passageway when the muffled figure that for some blocks had trailed him strode past the mouth of the eight foot tunnel into the gloom.

"Let's talk, buddy!" he challenged, one hand reaching out, the other ready to offer fist or pistol as he lunged from cover.

There was a start, a gasp, the beginning of a scuffle as his grip closed on the collar of a topcoat. And then, face to face, he recognized Fillmore. Before the scholar could find his tongue, Cragston went on, "This hide and seek stuff is dangerous. I might have popped you. What the hell's the idea, doctor? Afraid I'll pin something on your buddy?"

CHAPTER VII

FILLMORE groped for words. He was decidedly embarrassed. Finally he answered, "I couldn't quite decide whether to hail you or not. But you've taken the decision away from me."

He paused, his thin face troubled and uneasy. At last he blurted out, "It's about Nefeyda. She's bound to be apprehended, sooner or later. And the longer she remains in hiding, the worse it will be for Holt. He knows where she is."

"The hell he does!" exclaimed Cragston, who was not surprised.

"Yes," affirmed Fillmore. "He managed to throw the police off the track.

But he can't keep her from the law. So I'm trying to save him from his foolishness."

"Very prudent, doctor. Though he'd probably not appreciate it."

"I know it!" Then, less angrily: "She's hiding not far from La Honda, in a week-end cabin owned by a friend of Holt's. That was the original plan. He gave her the directions. Even before the police boarded the *Ibis* he couldn't have taken her all the way out there. Not after suspecting that you had radioed San Francisco.

"And unless she drowned while trying to swim ashore, she must have headed for that cabin. A good fifteen-mile walk, but she could make it. She'd be too shrewd to risk a . . . ah, hitch-hiking, I think you call it."

That was all plausible. Fillmore would have Holt's confidence. But Cragston came to the point, "What am I to do?"

"You might guess! Go out and get her. Before her capture makes Holt an accessory. Makes you one, makes me one! And keep it to yourself, this matter of exactly where you found her. Just a reasonable error in reporting the location of her hiding place will save us all."

"If she suspected Holt of betraying her," objected Cragston, who now was fairly certain Fillmore was most concerned about his own learned hide, "she'd spill the whole works, and I would be up a stump."

"Convince her she can't stay under cover indefinitely," the doctor impatiently countered, "and that she owes Holt any advantage she can give him. That it will be to her own advantage as well. As long as he is not implicated, he'll be better able to defend her. She's intelligent enough to realize that."

Then, after giving him the directions to the cabin, Fillmore added, "And now I'd better get back to Holt's suite."

"They way you put it," Cragston admitted, "I've got no choice."

He paused for a moment, eyeing the retreating doctor. Then he reasoned to himself, "This is it, just like I figured. Holt suspects me of having a hunch, so he gives this learned benny a stall to pull on me. A foolproof stall. Next move, I lean up against some gun muzzles, just so I can't spill my private notions about Nefeyda, who is probably in Frisco, and not in the Peninsula hills."

But Cragston accepted the challenge. By barging into an ambush, he would, if he survived, gain definite evidence. He had more than once offered himself as live bait, trapped the trappers, and thus worked back to the man behind the scenes. It was just a matter of drawing first and shooting straightest.

Thus, in a very few minutes, Cragston was driving out the Bayshore, and hoping no highway patrolman would nail him for doing considerably better than seventy. Having deliberately taken a roundabout course, he had to make time. Ignoring the obvious route, he was approaching the La Honda sector from the *south*.

At the end of his mountain maneuvering, with headlights out, along a narrow road practically untravelled except on week-ends, Cragston parked and set out to do some bushwacking of his own.

He emerged from a thicket and paused in the dense shadow of a monstrous redwood stump. At the further end of the clearing he could just distinguish a drive which led to the main road: the direction from which his approach would be expected.

His prowling, however, was terminated as he caught a glow from a window of the large, rustic cabin. That was odd. An ambush could not have been planned so far in advance that a fire would have time to burn down to embers.

Like a jungle cat, he crept forward; and at last, reaching the window, he saw a slender form within, breasts darkly outlined against the glow of a grate. It was a woman scantily clad; and as she stirred, Cragston recognized the fine profile of Nefeyda, one of the few survivors of that ancient race to whom scientific tomb-looting could only be unpardonable sacrilege.

Fillmore had given him a straight story. Though unexpected, it added up: the doctor had betrayed Nefeyda to save Holt.

PERHAPS, Cragston reasoned, there was something in Egyptian vengeance. She might be there to tempt Holt to make an effort to take her to a more secure hiding place, and thus give her a second chance to strike. What else but fanaticism could have motivated that desperate break from the launch? If Nefeyda was a descendant of a line that centuries ago had served Sekhmen, goddess of the solar flame, she might have picked on Linda Grayling because of her association with Holt; if only because of the girl's unsavory history would make such a doom seem like a divine visitation, and thus crack the main victim.

Slowly, Cragston circled the house. He found an open window, guarded only by a screen. With his knife he soundlessly cut it; then, discarding his shoes, he cleared the sill. Finally he was pressed against the jamb of a door opening into the spacious living room. He did not want to alarm her, or give her a chance to use the automatic she might have brought from the cutter.

He released the catch of his cigarette case; then, muffling the cover with his hand, he snicked it shut, making a small, indefinite sound that could be vaguely placed as coming from somewhere in the hall.

Being but one of the faint stirrings

of the night, it did not startle her; but it was repeated with maddening precision, slowly, regularly, until its rhythm, arresting her attention, brought her upright, forward. As she crouched, tense, the fire's glow behind her outlined the rigid stiffness of tapering thighs. Rays of firelight danced among the glistening hollows of the smooth whiteness of voluptuous breasts.

She was listening to that *snick . . . snick . . . snick . . .* indefinite, challenging; yet its monotonous regularity was assurance that it could be no more than a chance sound. Nothing animate would thus deliberately make that small, vague disturbance; yet it got her on her feet. She stood a moment, listening, her supple figure covered with but a light silken robe.

As Nefeyda approached, Cragston could almost hear her breathing. She did not strike a light. Fugitive's nerves were moving her. And at the threshold she paused, instinctively waiting for the next repetition of the sound she could not quite localize.

Cragston moved just as she sensed an animate presence; but she had no chance for outcry or retreat. He pinned her arms to her sides, and said, "The last time you tried to shoot, so I could take no chances."

Her low, bitter laugh was followed by relaxation. Her soft body drooped against him. Then she said, "I might have known Fillmore would betray me. Or did Gordon Holt send you?"

That last was hopefully spoken. Cragston, however, evaded, "Over the week-end, the woods are full of people visiting their cabins. You couldn't hide much longer."

She considered that for a moment, then said, "If I were found here, it would implicate Gordon."

He told her of what had happened after her desperate break, concluding, "Right now, Holt is in the clear. Dead

or alive, I am his alibi. And you are wanted for murder."

"I would be," she admitted. "No one could believe I acted on a frantic impulse. I did get those bonds, while he was side-tracking you. But Linda Grayling was alive. I made that break just because being deported would be more deadly than anything American law could do. I hoped to hide until the case was cleared up. But that is out of the question, now. As you say, my best chance is to conceal the fact that Gordon knew where I was hiding, and so leave him in a position to defend me. If there is any defense."

"If I had ignored Fillmore's hint," said Cragston, "someone else might have been put wise."

"I'll go with you," she agreed. "Peaceably, I mean. What was written, must be."

Their scuffle had disarrayed the robe, uncovering her left shoulder down to a rounded breast. He stepped back, avoiding her eyes. She quickly adjusted the robe and stepped into a small compartment at one corner of the cabin. She reappeared shortly, dressed in a green silken gown. She certainly prefers silk, he reflected, and could readily understand her choice. The soft material emphasized full breasts, small waist, and rounded thighs.

"First we'd better clear up traces of my living here."

That was presently accomplished. The fire in the grate was not extinguished, but left to smoulder to ashes. They bundled up the empty cans which would have indicated that someone had drawn on the supplies in the cabin.

Cragston did not handcuff his prisoner or attempt to search her for weapons. He was more than a captor; he was the intermediary who was giving her the best remaining chance with the law. And when they reached

his parked car, the glow of the dashlight revealed the brooding resignation of her olive-tinted features. For an instant, she reminded him of one of those age-old sculptured figures that stare through the veil of time and space, looking back to the days when the gods were still living in the valley of the Nile.

He hesitated, twice reaching for the starter, and each time refraining. A sudden conflict in his reasoning was making his thoughts whirl.

"Your fingerprints were on those bonds," he observed.

"Of course, they'd be," she admitted.

"And you did know your way about her stateroom?"

"Certainly. I often came from hiding, late at night."

"Thinking of Egyptian vengeance?" hinted Cragston. "Of the sacrilege committed in looting a tomb or temple?"

"Fillmore's superstition!" she scoffed. "Why would the vengeance of the gods strike an innocent person—as she was?"

"The gods?" He echoed her words, impressed by the meaning she gave to those who were but myths in his world.

"We Copts," she answered, "were Christians centuries before your ancestors ever knew that word. But deep in our marrow is the memory of the forgotten gods. Before Gordon radioed you to come to the *Ibis*, he told me that he had heard of you. That you knew the east, that you were the one to look into the curse on the yacht. And I told him that gods who could no longer protect their temples would be too weak to reach after his trifling loot."

"Wait a minute!" Cragston suddenly protested. "You're making me forget something I almost had at my finger tips."

"You were wondering just why you really came out here tonight?"

"Yes." He caught her arm. "We're going back to the cabin. I came out here expecting an ambush instead of

you. But since you were there, we would by every rule be driving back to the city. And you and I are both dangerous to Holt, who is in a ticklish position.

"If I were shot, supposedly by you, and you were found in my cracked-up car, supposedly killed as you drove through these treacherous mountain fogs—that would close the case?"

"Then—" She paused. "You think Gordon did kill her? And would finish us?"

"He might suspect me of remembering something that would upset the alibi I furnished him. You, alone, could not have gotten that thermit out of the hold *and* doctored that mummy with phosphorous, *and* touched off that murderous blast. Neither could he. Someone trusted someone else."

Though he was thinking of the smudge that had been wiped from the porthole glass, he did not mention it. His move was now to avoid the trap that he still anticipated. Curiosity had snared Nefeyda; it might do as much for others. If he failed to return on time, with his prisoner, someone might come to the cabin to find out why.

Presently they were retracing their steps to the clearing. Though he was technically her captor, the situation made him a protector. And as they approached the side door, he was thinking, "I'll let one light burn. Just to be natural. Set a floor lamp cockeyed, so it will throw her shadow against a shade, with her out of range. And when they bite and start shooting—"

"They'd learn things about bushwhacking."

Cragston's hunch had become real. He was instinctively groping for some shred of logic in the web. There must be an ambush. But the one thing that his reasoning had not been able to take into account was the time element. Thus he was caught offguard as they

slipped into the living room.

Alone, he might have had a chance when that muffled figure flashed out of the shadows. But as he whirled, Nefeyda's taut nerves cracked. Her recoil blocked his draw. A pistol blast ripped the silence. Nefeyda cried out, crumpled against him; the impact deflected his answering shot. And when he fired a second time, he was too late.

CHAPTER VIII

A HAMMER blow numbed Cragston; scorching fire creased his ribs, and one of his legs was paralyzed. As he sank, still trying to disentangle himself from Nefeyda, a small piece of furniture was hurled athwart them. The impact kept him from scoring with his next shot. He smelled the stench of scorched wool as the pistol was knocked from his grasp. He had missed by a hair.

Strength sapped by lead and bludgeon, he could not resist when he was dragged back and to one side, then thrust across a threshold. Nefeyda, flung after him, blocked whatever effort he might have made.

Then a door closed heavily, and a key turned. He struggled to his feet, and encountered garments suspended from hangers. They were in a clothes closet.

Cragston began to realize that none of his wounds were serious; that shock, and the impact of a smoking stand or the like had kept him out of action just long enough to let the aggressive lurker imprison them. And Nefeyda was stirring. Though the swiftness of the ambush had overwhelmed them, the enemy's frenzied haste had saved their lives.

"Steady!" he whispered. "I've still got my knife. Let's cut some strips from your gown to plug up the leaks he shot through us."

"It's not as bad as I thought," she

answered. "Though one shoulder seems wooden. But I've still got my pistol. Two shots left."

"You had it all the time?"

"Of course. I brought it from the cutter. I realized that setting it afire would give me the best chance of escape. So I stopped shooting."

The two prisoners stealthily assisted each other with improvised bandages. The lurker's ineffective marksmanship must have been caused by more than darkness. Cragston sensed that he had been surprised as they had.

Then, knife in hand, he crept to the door and silently began cutting to enlarge the narrow crack between two heavy boards; but as he worked, he wondered why there had been but one assailant, whereas he now plainly heard a low, muffled voice that muttered as in explanation to a companion. If he could widen the crack, he could look at an angle, and thus see the speaker who now was out of line.

"You don't need to know anything, Holt," droned that mechanical voice. "I'm wearing this mask to make my message more convincing. A dead man is talking."

There was a pause, but no audible answer; only a half choked breathing, the scrape of a chair. Why didn't Holt speak? Why was Holt in that cabin?

"Do you understand," continued the voice, "a dead man is speaking! Now perhaps you know why you are in a strait-jacket, and why I suspected you'd come out to this cabin?"

Another pause, as though the speaker enjoyed listening to Holt's efforts to answer. Then, "I disposed of your friend out there in the hall. There is no one left to interfere. I'm Cyrus Patton's son. Remember how he burned in a strait-jacket? That was Linda Grayling's treachery—but you explained to her how easy a trick it would be. You're as guilty as she was. Worse, for you

didn't need the money she stole from my father. You were in it just for the sake of the game . . ."

The choked outcry now was a gurgling all the more horrible for being inarticulate. Holt now knew what was to happen, and so did the two imprisoned so close to him. Cragston, weak from his flesh wounds, could not break out; but he whittled, frantically, desperately, raising great blisters as he plied his knife. There might be a chance to drive home one shot from Nefeyda's automatic when the opening was large enough to allow the barrel to reach through at an angle.

". . . so there'll be burning flesh tonight, Holt," mocked that low, venomous voice, "just to fulfill a madman's prophecy . . ."

Liquid splashed. A quavering, half human shriek shook the room. Holt's mouth must have become ungagged, but he was beyond words. He choked, groaned as the shattering of glass was followed by a final drenching of liquid.

Cragston, sick with horror, thrust the pistol through the opening. He still could not see the two in the other room. An angle of the wall blocked him; but he fired, hoping to distract the masked man from his work.

That effort, however, was wasted. There was a gusty roar, a golden-red-dish blaze, an outcry that stopped before it was fairly started, but though that brief sound was a lifetime of horror, the avenger had overstepped himself.

THAT complete drenching with gasoline had so enveloped his victim with lashing flame that the first inhalation had stopped all utterance. Cragston knew that though flesh would roast, char to a horrible cinder, sensation could not endure after one breath of that swirling hell roar. Nevertheless, what had been done in the adjoining

room whipped him to frenzy. He kicked the walls, cursing and challenging the fire-fiend to come within arm's reach.

A window crashed to shards. That was the answer. Then a voice yelled from outside, "Madman's prophecy, Gordon Holt!"

The seasoned timber of the cabin added its crackle to the gusty roar of the blazing gasoline. The broken window, and the open door which the avenger had not dared approach lest Cragston pick him off was supplying a draft. The air in the closet became unbearably hot and choking.

As fear took the place of horror, Cragston hurled himself at the door. The impact stunned him. Nefeyda crept to his side and said, "Wait. I'll get some clothes off the hooks. Pad your shoulder. Let's both try. The extra weight may help. I felt it yield."

By the hell glare which now came in through the loophole, he saw her sweeping fishing jackets, old coats, old trousers worn by the owner as he potted about his camp; overalls—

A pair of wire cutters dropped from the pocket.

"Got it!" he croaked.

With the jaws of the side cutters he caught the edge of the loophole; he tugged and wrenched. A long, ragged piece tore from the plank.

"Muffle your head!" he spat from thick lips. "Stand by and flop something over me when I make it."

If he made it . . . but he fought on, the steel jaws chewing, shredding the wood. And at last, the bottom plank released, he gained a leverage. An upward tug tore the protesting nails from their beds.

They plunged through. There was one heart shaking instant of suffocation and flame that sought their swathed faces; then they stumbled into the clearing, and out of reach of that hungry fire.

They both needed medical attention, but once they reached Cragston's car, he drove straight through to San Francisco, to Holt's hotel.

Sergeant Harley and his squad were in the suite. They were looking for signs of struggle, for evidence of Holt's having been drugged to effect a silent capture. Fillmore, calm, but weary and haggard, had the floor.

He was saying, "I came from my room to see him, but he didn't answer. The door was ajar. So I went in, and he was not there."

Then, seeing Cragston: "Good Heavens, man! What—where—"

"Nefeyda Malouf, believe it or not!" Cragston announced, dividing his words between the doctor and the staring police.

Fillmore's glance was trenchant and querying, as though he wondered if the reeling investigator could remember the details needed to cover Holt's trail; and before Cragston could answer Harley's questions, Fillmore broke in, "Where did you find her?"

He seemed to be prompting him to protect his client. Cragston flashed him a reassuring glance, and then the sergeant boomed, "So Holt faded and went out to get this jane, only you beat him to it? That makes him an accessory. I had a hunch, right along."

"And you were wrong," Cragston interrupted. "The guy you want is Doctor Fillmore. He killed Linda Grayling—and Gordon Holt!"

FILLMORE recoiled, his pallor becoming perceptible; then, very deliberately, "That's absurd."

They listened to what had happened in the hills near La Honda. Cragston concluded, "You're it, doctor. You're Cyrus Patton's son. Shut up—wait till I finish! I'll prove it. And without checking upon a car you must have rented.

"That smudge wiped from the porthole glass of Linda's stateroom was the false note in the case. Remember, Nefeyda went in to get the bonds while Linda was heavily doped with a sedative. Remember also that Nefeyda did not bother to wipe her prints from the panelling, even though she had ample time. So why would she have wiped the smudge from the porthole pane?"

"And why would she have peeped in through the porthole? No need to. She knew Linda was out cold! But the person who touched off that thermit did not know that, and so had to look in to check on her position. That means you, doctor."

"But Nefeyda," Fillmore cut in.

"Too bad!" snapped Cragston, though the room was now whirling. He shook off Harley's supporting hand, and went on, "When you tipped me off to Nefeyda's hideout, supposedly to protect Holt, I first thought it was a trap for me. Then when I actually found her there, I figured it was a set up to blot her and me, just to prevent leaks. I can now tell the law I held things out to protect Holt—so I could keep him out of jail and under my eye.

"When Nefeyda and I went back to the cabin, figuring on outwitting the ambush that seemed to be ahead of us, the masked man who trapped us and finished Holt gave me the answers, even though the disguised voice fooled me.

"Fillmore, you must have told Holt I was wise to Nefeyda's hideout. That would send him a-helling to beat me to it. He was plunging right into a nice, quiet spot for you to finish him. You probably did not originally plan to cremate us. In fact, Nefeyda on the hoof would bear out your Egyptian vengeance theme song. The wrath of Sekhmet, and all that."

"That's insane," the doctor declared. "You're badly shaken. That fire—"

"Speaking of fire!" Cragston's eyes

blazed, and he straightened. "I nearly popped the masked man when he slugged me. I smelled the scorching of his clothes. I must have creased his ribs. And you, Fillmore, are sagging a bit on one side. Watch, Harley—"

Cragston's hand shot out, jerking the doctor's vest open. The other hand yanked his shirt free and open. That exposed a red weal, and powder dotted flesh. More than that, it displayed the scar tissue that made Fillmore's body a record of old burns.

The scholar swayed for a moment, corpse-colored. Then he said in a firm voice, "You win, Cragston. But this game was worth losing. These scars were the result of trying to save my father that night. I'd come from Paris to help him escape from the madhouse. I nearly died, trying. And I failed.

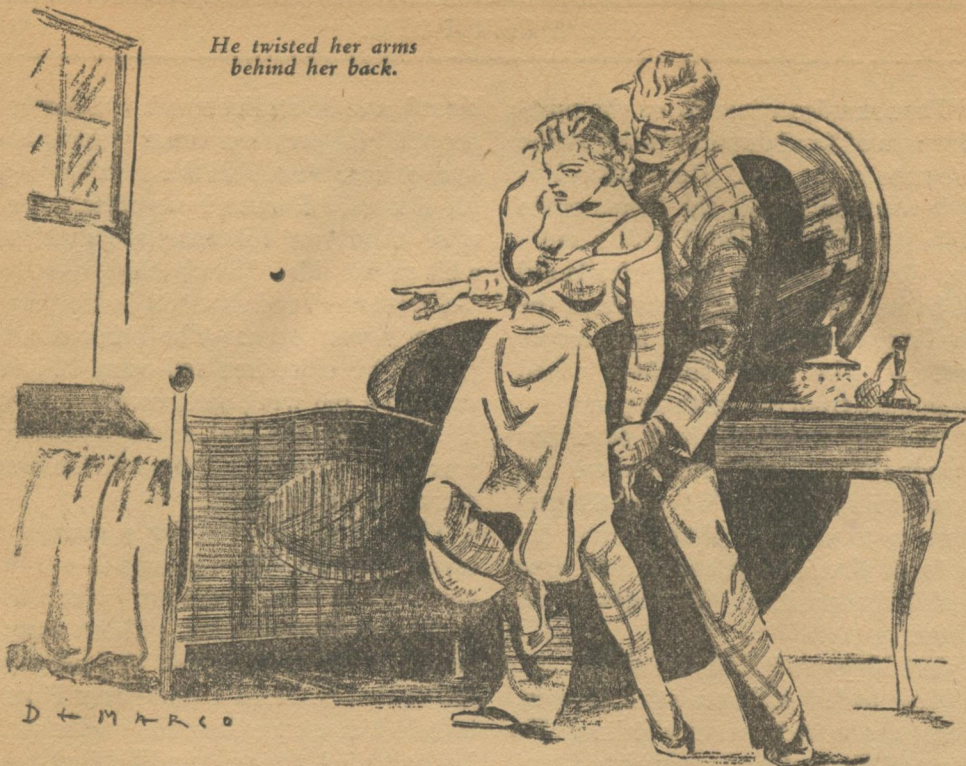
"Cyrus Patton wore a beard, which I never did. His eyes were brown, and he was heavy. So you see, I wouldn't resemble him, particularly since my nose is straight, and his had been broken and not properly set. Thus neither Holt nor Linda Grayling suspected that Fillmore the scholar actually was Glenn Patton, the madman's son. It was easy, joining those conscience haunted people as they dredged Paris, trying to forget the clever trick that drove a man to insanity and cremation."

Cragston, accompanying Nefeyda and Sergeant Harley to the emergency hospital, said to the girl, "Maybe the immigration authorities will at least delay your deportation until your political dangers are over. There is a new government in Egypt, and—"

"You're very kind," she smiled. "I wish I could stay here. At least long enough to convince you that it was accidental when I fired the shot that raked your arm."

Cragston's smile assured Nefeyda he could be convinced.

*He twisted her arms
behind her back.*



WOMAN-BAIT

by Vick Shelton

*He played a woman against a woman—
and he was the loser!*

A CERTAIN detective once remarked that Danny Serota was the most innocent-looking crook between the Battery and the Bronx. This same detective also said many things about Danny that would make a blue police blotter blush for shame. On one occasion he had remarked to his chief that he hoped some fine day Danny would make the mistake of killing somebody, so that they could ticket him to Sing Sing for good. You gather from this that Danny was no dub in his chosen profession; that as a crook

he was really a crook, and no false alarm.

Danny was. He had crossed the sea when all the world was in chaos and had done most of his fighting in crap games behind the lines. He had earned himself no glory, and after the Armistice he had drifted to London's East End and run with the gutter-snipes there. He knew the dank alleys of Montmartre, too, and he had killed a man in Barcelona. Mexico City had claimed him for a while, and a Creole woman in New Orleans had slipped a knife between his

ribs in a shady dive down near the river. More than one crooked deal he had engineered in Chicago, and finally had skipped to New York in the nick of time.

Perhaps Danny was thinking of his colorful past as he sat in Tony Rigotti's restaurant near Chatham Square, idly stirring a mug of dark-brown coffee. Perhaps not. Anyhow, you couldn't say for sure. Danny had such a guileless face, such gentle blue eyes, such a wistful smile. His hair was blond and silky, very much unlike the waitress's in Tony Rigotti's place; her hair was coarse and dull like old straw. With a detached air he watched her gather up to an ample bosom an armful of dishes and breeze into the rear, her high heels rapping the floor resolutely, her starched apron swinging. Then his eyes drifted back to his coffee and he drank it slowly.

A few moments later he sauntered out into the street, with a fresh cigarette between his lips, pulling his hat well down over his eyes against the bright morning sun. He was not good-looking, yet there was something subtly engaging about his pale, thin face. His chin and his forehead seemed to retreat from his long nose, and a perpetual smile—that wistful smile of his—always held his mouth a trifle askew.

He drifted down the Bowery to Pell Street. He turned into a crooked Chinatown alley and slowed down when he saw up ahead a crowd of people gathered on the street and sidewalk. He caught sight of a policeman or two, stopped in his tracks with intention of turning back, but after a moment's hesitation moved on. He stopped and lingered at the outer edge of the mob, which consisted for the greater part of jabbering Chinese.

Presently a tall, rangy man, inconspicuously clad in dark clothes, with a cigarette-butt drooping from one corner

of his mouth, appeared in the doorway of the building that seemed to be the center of interest. Under the low-slung visor of his cap a pair of cold agate eyes glinted aggressively, and his mouth was wide and hard. The agate eyes, sweeping the crowd like an icy winter's blast, froze on Danny. The hard mouth bent down at the corners. He spat away the cigarette and elbowed his way through the crowd.

"Hello, Danny," he bit off, his eyes narrowing.

"Why, hello there, Jerry! Gee, I'm glad to see you!"

"Yeah, is that so? Well, listen, guy, I'm glad to see you, too. I'm looking for 'Slick' Morelli. Wise me up as to where I can lay hands on him."

DANNY'S innocent blue eyes dilated. "How should I know where he's hangin' out, Jerry? You know as well as me I got no use for Slick, same as Slick has no use for me. We hates each other like poison, Jerry. You know that."

"I know—I know," went on Jerry a little impatiently. "But that ain't preventin' you from knowin' where Slick hangs his hat. Come on, Damy, open up. Comè across. Be decent. Ain't us guys at the precinct been treatin' you decent right along?"

"Sure, Jerry—sure thing. I ain't kickin', but I don't know where Slick is, so help me. We don't travel in the same comp'ny. You know how high-hat Slick has got recent. I hates him, Jerry, an' I wouldn't mind seein' him get plugged some night, or sent to the chair. Now, if I knowed where he is, wouldn't I tell you?"

Jerry jammed his fists against his hips and rocked on his feet. "I don't know whether you would or not. With that there pious mug o' yourn, a man never knows when you're lyin' an' when you ain't. Yes, I know you hate Slick like

poison, an' that's why I figure you're keepin' tabs on him."

"But, Jerry, now listen. If I knowed where he was, me havin' a grudge against him, like I said before, wouldn't I tell you?"

Jerry snorted. "That's just it—I don't know! Y' see, guy, you're such a lousy liar, I sometimes feel like takin' a poke out o' you. Well, never mind, then. Better drift, though, because this here street ain't no healthy place for a guy like you."

"Sure. But what's up, Jerry?"

"Soo Ling was found this mornin' with a knife in his guts."

"An' Slick Morelli?"

"Seen beatin' it down Doyer Street at one this mornin'. Aw, say, come on now, Danny, an' tell your boy friend Jerry what you know about this here Slick Morelli."

"Jerry, will you listen t' reason? I tell you I don't know a damn thing—"

Jerry made a rasping noise in his throat. "Drift, Danny! Breeze. Scat. Blow. Get the hell out of here before I get sore. Hey, wait a minute! Got a butt?"

Danny proffered his pack and Jerry took a cigarette, lit it and plowed his way back into the crowd. Danny did not linger there for long. He retraced his steps to Pell Street and then up the Bowery to Canal, in no great hurry, ruminating meanwhile that Jerry Donovan was a tough dick. Jerry had tried to plant something on him more than once. Yeah, he was some go-getter, this here Jerry, with a record at Headquarters for doing his stuff. He'd like to get somethin' on Danny—yes, sir! But Danny was no sap—not by a long shot. It would take a better guy than Jerry Donovan to give him a one-way ticket to Sing Sing. Betcha life!

He headed westward on Canal and after a while slipped into a speakeasy near West Broadway. Pete Manino

sold fruits and vegetables in the front and red ink in the back. Upstairs were a dozen or more rooms with dubious reputations. Pete was a pretty good sort, though, take him by and large. Danny passed the time of day with him, went into the rear and then climbed a flight of stairs. He walked down a narrow, gloomy hallway where the floorboards creaked under a worn carpet. He stopped before a door and rapped it lightly with his knuckles. After a moment it opened on a crack, then swung wide, and Danny entered.

"Lo, Rosie," he said, with his most wistful smile.

Rosie stifled a yawn. "Oh, it's you. Park yourself."

She dropped to a rumpled cot, drawing her bare feet up and leaning back against the wall. "Gimme a butt." She wore a cheap Chinese kimono. . . . In the position she assumed the kimono draped backwards to expose soft white thighs. Youthful breasts, pressed tightly by her knees, strained at their silk coverings. Her hair was jet black, bobbed, disheveled. She was pretty in the way that glass may be pretty, and her eyes were lazy. Her mouth was insolent.

She was saying, "Well?"

Danny held a match to her cigarette. He blew the match out, leaned back in his chair, and rubbed his hands together musingly. Then he looked up at Rosie gently, and his soft, liquid eyes wandered over her face, breasts and gleaming legs. She frowned, shuddered a trifle.

"Get it off your chest!" she snapped. "An' for God's sake, don't look at me that way!"

Danny smiled sweetly—just that—sweetly.

"The cops is after Slick," he said.

ROSIE held her breath for a moment, staring blankly at Danny. Then she exhaled a stream of smoke and

chuckled sardonically. "What's that to me, huh?" But her heaving breasts betrayed her interest.

"Maybe nothin'," he shrugged, clasping his skeleton hands between his knees and regarding the ceiling. "Just thought I'd tell you, Rosie."

There was a long silence during which Danny continued to gaze at the ceiling and Rosie gazed moodily at Danny.

Then a cloud surged up in the woman's eyes, and she sat erect, disregarding the kimono which fell away from quivering breasts.

"What are you drivin' at?" she gave him harshly.

Danny looked around the room, wagging his head sorrowfully. "Rotten dump you got here, ain't it, Rosie? H'm. Kinder rotten of Slick, the way he gave you the cold shoulder."

Rosie half snarled, jerked to her feet and stood before the window, gazing out bitterly. After a moment she swiveled about, bare legs flashing from under the kimono, her hands clenched, her bosom heaving, dark fires in her eyes.

"What do I care!" she flung at him savagely. "What did you have to come here and tell me for? What do I care! I wish they'd get him—I wish they would!"

Danny stood up, his hands and eyebrows raised in a gentle plea for silence. "Don't yell like that, Rosie. You'll get yourself all unstrung." He went over and put his hands on her shoulders, but she shrugged them off and drew the kimono tightly about her lithesome figure. "Take it easy, Rosie," he went on, unabashed. "I like you, Rosie. I ain't what you call a handsome guy, but me heart's in the right place. I know you're heartbroken."

"Aw, cut the sob-stuff!"

"Now it ain't sob-stuff a-tall, Rosie. I mean it—honest. It wasn't right for Slick to treat you mean for Skippy Chalmer. She's a gold-digger, Rosie,

an' you know it. Why, hell, I don't know what he seen in her, though, because she ain't half as good-lookin' as you are. But what I was goin' to say. Jerry Donovan—you know that tough dick—well, Jerry's got a hunch Slick knifed Soo Ling last night. Jerry tried to pump me before, but I acted dumb."

"Soo Ling," echoed Rosie flatly.

"Yeah, well, you know as well as me, Rosie, that Slick's been runnin' dope to a high-class dump uptown paternized by, you know, the idle rich. Soo was supplyin' it to Slick an' Slick was sellin' it to the swells at a fancy price. Slick always had too much temper to do him any good, an' I ain't su'prised if he got in a row with Soo an' stuck him. Maybe the Chink wanted more money or somepin'. Anyways, I got an' idea Jerry's hunch ain't wrong."

"You got a grudge against Slick," she said, half-rebellious.

"I ain't denyin' that, Rosie, but it ain't that I'm thinkin' of—honest. Slick did you dirt. You got a chancet to do him dirt. Me, I got a bright idea. You ain't ought to live in a dump like this. Slick's got money. You work with me, Rosie, an' we'll fleece Slick an' split it two ways."

She lowered her head, brushed flat hips by him and sat down on the cot, placing her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands. His eyes followed the sweeping line from delicate throat to the deep white valley between her breasts. After a while she said, "Well, what's your bright idea?"

She did not see Danny smile covertly and moisten his lips. He sat down to closer regard those entrancing mounds, and the ghost of a twinkle flickered through his blue eyes.

"Slick is layin' low in a hotel uptown," he explained. "An' Skippy is livin' with him."

"Ancient history!" muttered Rosie ironically.

"I got some dough," Danny continued. "You go an' take a couple o' rooms in a place I'll tell you about later. You get Slick on the wire—he's registered at this swell dump as Joseph Harris—you get him on the wire. Tell him you got somepin' important to tell him, an' have him meet you on a street corner. Then take him to your rooms an' keep him there, sayin' you got tipped the cops is after him an' they're on the way to nab him at the hotel. Keep him with you, Rosie, an' I'll give you a number you can get me at from a public phone, an' I'll hand you more instructions. Does that much listen good to you, Rosie?"

"It sounds interestin'," she admitted in a muffled voice.

"Then we'll see about them rooms," he told her. "Nice rooms, Rosie, an' I'll get you some glad rags. You look mighty nifty when you're dolled up a bit. We'll fleece Slick, eh, Rosie?"

She nodded but did not raise her head. Hence Danny did not see the soft, warm look that came into her eyes, the color that mounted to her cheeks, and he did not see the way the hardness faded magically from her lips.

DANNY was finishing another breakfast at Tony Rigotti's restaurant. He had placed Rosie in a couple of furnished rooms uptown, and he was complimenting himself on having thus far succeeded in his plan to fleece Slick Morelli. Everything had gone along smoothly, and in an hour or so he would tell Rosie to start the ball rolling.

Strolling along Canal Street a little later, he almost ran into Jerry Donovan as the latter came out of Elizabeth Street at a brisk walk. As usual, Jerry wore a dark frown on his forehead, as though some weighty business rested heavily on his mind; and as usual, he asked Danny for a cigarette.

"Left mine at the precinct."

"Nice day," offered Danny.

"Yeah, if it don't rain. How's tricks?"

"So-so; can't complain, Jerry. How's everything by you?"

"Rotten! That Slick Morelli case. The papers are on our neck, Danny. I've turned this damned town inside out for Slick, an' I ain't even warm yet. It's the bunk—we got a lot of snow in Ling's joint. Now if you was a real friend of mine, Danny, like I am to you, you'd put me on the right track."

"Jerry, you know me, an' you know if I knowed anything about Slick I'd be only too willin' to tip you off. Cripes, I'd like to see Slick get his. He's pretty high-hat now, but some day some guy's gonna plug him, an' won't be sorry none. Where you headed?"

"Pete Manino's."

"Huh?"

"Yeah. There was a frail Slick used to trot around with. Might know her—Rosie Connor. I was just wised, an' I'm gonna see if she'll open up."

"Mind if I go along, Jerry? I'm just out for a walk, anyhow."

"Sure. Come on."

Jerry led the way into Pete's, nodded toward the back room, and Pete, grinning and rubbing his hands, showed them through the door and waved them to a table, with a grand Sicilian gesture.

"Bring you best, Pete," clipped Jerry, "an' then squat."

Pete brought his best and took a seat at the table.

Jerry said, "There's a dame livin' upstairs I'd like to have a chat with, Pete. Rosie Connor. Know if she's alone now?"

"Ah, Jerry, Rosie she go away," replied Pete.

"Away? When did this happen?"

"Rosie she go yest'day mornin'."

Jerry snorted, "Another bum break! Where'd she go, Pete, d'you know?"

"Ah, dunno, Jerry. Mebbe Danny

know, eh, Danny?"

Jerry shot a fast glance at Danny.

"What about it, Danny?"

"Don't know, Jerry. I was speakin' to Rosie a couple a days ago but she didn't say nothin' about movin'."

"Didn't know you was hangin' around her, Danny."

"I wasn't, Jerry; just dropped in, you know, to say hello."

"Sure that's all you said?"

"Sure, Jerry. Now what else would I say?"

"Lots of things. Now look here, guy. You an' me ain't goin' to get along so good if you keep on bein' so tight-mouthed. I happen to know that Slick chucked this here now Rosie frail for a Polack blonde a year or so ago. I understand Rosie was head-over heels in love with Slick, an' she'd ache to get back at Slick somehow. All right. You got a grudge against Slick. Rosie is got a love grudge. Now, tell me, guy, what the hell's preventin' you two from joinin' and playin' a two-handed game against Slick?"

Danny smiled peacefully. "Nothin' preventin' us, Jerry—nothin' a-tall. Only thing is, you're way off your track."

"Oh, I am, am I?" rolled out Jerry. "Maybe I am—maybe I ain't. Anyhow, I got a hunch that you're the lousiest liar on the face o' the earth. From now on, Danny, you want to watch your step. I'm goin' to get this here Slick now, but it would give me a lot more satisfaction if I could land you. Huh, a guy can't be decent with you bums. Why, last night I read a letter in the newspaper from some shocked reader—says us cops aren't gentlemen, because we handle a suspect too rough. I'd just like to take that guy on a stroll some night an' show him the kind of boy scouts we gotta handle. He'd damned soon change his mind. Well, here's how."

HE DOWNED his drink straight and got up. "Remember, Danny," he said. "I've declared war on you, an' in war everything's fair." With that he turned and strode out.

Pete leaned over and said, "Dis is wan tough worl', Danny."

"Oh, it ain't so bad," Danny replied softly. "Jerry? He'll get over it. Jerry thinks he's a good dick, Pete, but he's awful dumb—terrible dumb."

"Ah, dat is wan question! Allah tam it ain' tah de wise cop make-ah de big haul. Some tam de dumb cop makeah de big haul by—whatcha call—dumb luck."

"Dumb luck is right, Pete—if Jerry ever nabs his guy. Well, I guess I'll be gettin' along."

Calm, unruffled, benign, Danny made his way to the street. Inwardly he was amused. Jerry always amused him, Jerry always took himself so seriously—he wasted so much energy dashing around on blind leads. Yes, he had a record at Headquarters, but—dumb luck.

Danny entered a cigar store and closed himself in a telephone booth. Soon he had Rosie on the wire.

"Hello, Rosie. This is Danny. Say, it's O.K. to call Slick now." He gave her the phone number of the hotel where Slick was registered as Joseph Harris. "Get him to meet you, Rosie, an' get him in your rooms an' keep him there. An', instead of you callin' me at that number I gave you, I'll call you when it's time for you to breeze. If I say, 'O.K.' you'll meet me at Times Square, north side o' the Times Buildin'. That's all I'll say, an' you hang up an' remark to Slick someone had the wrong number. I'll pass your place in a couple o' hours. If you got Slick, open one o' your windows; if you ain't, leave 'em closed. All right, then, Rosie, start in an' do your best."

Leaving the cigar store, Danny

smiled to himself. To kill some time, he took a subway down to Cortlandt Street and hung around in the Hudson Tubes station. A small, commonplace, inconspicuous figure he made, looking for all the world like a stranger in the big city—and a forlorn one at that, with his clothes, decent enough though they were, hanging from his narrow shoulders like the rags of a scarecrow.

The time dragged by until finally he went outside and took the Sixth Avenue "L" uptown. He got off at Herald Square and drifted west at a leisurely pace, circling a few blocks, pausing to look idly in some store windows, and to glance at his watch. Finally he entered a street where traffic was light, gazing obliquely at a row of buildings across the way. Then he stopped, scratched his chin and smiled, nodding his head thoughtfully as, after a moment, he turned about and retraced his steps at a somewhat faster gait. The window in Rosie's room was open!

ON THE following day, after a luncheon at Tony Rigotti's that consisted of a Spanish omelet, French fries, raspberry pie and dark coffee, Danny, permitting himself the infrequent luxury of a twenty-five-cent cigar, strolled along Canal Street in his most benign manner.

He was about to enter the West Side subway kiosk when someone yelled, "Hey, Danny!"

He stopped, turned about slowly and saw Detective Jerry Donovan crossing the square. Jerry's frown was more important than ever, and he had never walked more briskly. Jerry was indeed a human dynamo. Danny wondered what he wanted, and even as he wondered Jerry reached him and asked:

"Got a butt, Danny?"

"Sure. How about a cigar?"

"Well, now, don't ask foolish questions."

Jerry clamped the cigar between strong teeth and Danny held a match to it.

"Ah, some smoke, Danny! How do you do it? Some day you'll be in Slick Morelli's class."

"How's the case comin' along, Jerry?"

Jerry spat sharply. "Rotten! I can't even seem to get me mitts on it. If I could get a holt of this here now Rosie frail, I might be able to do somethin'. But I been gettin' so many bum breaks, it gets me sore. Well, thanks, for the cheroot."

"'S all right, Jerry. So-long."

"G'bye. An', say, don't forget."

"What?"

"Our little war is still on."

Danny descended into the subway, mildly amused, and caught a north-bound local. He left the train at Pennsylvania Station and walked through Thirty-third Street to Broadway. Soon he was in the ornate lobby of a pretentious hotel. He found the hotel switchboard and asked the operator for Mr. Joseph Harris. A moment later she indicated a booth and Danny entered, closed the door and put the receiver to his ear. A woman's voice floated over the wire, and Danny smiled.

"Is this you, Skippy?" he asked.

"Yes—ah—who—who is this?"

"An old friend of yours, Danny Serota."

"Oh, for cryin' out loud! Where are you, anyhow?"

"Downstairs, an' I got somepin' to tell you, Skippy, if you'll come down an' meet me in the lobby."

"What about?"

"Somethin' *very* important, Skip. When will you be down?"

"I—ah—in about ten minutes, Danny. But, say, listen—"

"I'll be waitin', Skippy."

He hung up and drifted back into the lobby, leaning against one of the mar-

ble columns near the row of six elevators that were forever in motion. Skippy appeared quite on time. She was a small, chic blonde, with a doll-like face and rosebud lips; with small pert breasts and rounded thighs tightly encased in shining satin. Your average cosmopolitan would label her, "beautiful but dumb." She walked with her nose and chin elevated at a rather snobbish angle—as though the humanity about her was as dust beneath her feet. However, Danny knew her of old.

"Come down to earth, Skippy," he said genially.

"Never mind any wisecracks, an' let's get into the writin' room, where it's darker an' not so public."

In a secluded corner they found a divan and sat down. Skippy was restless and kept fingering the folds of her dress where it covered a restless bosom.

"Well, Danny, what's so important, huh? You got me all worked up. I been awake most of the night besides an' even a Bromo Seltzer this mornin' didn't do me no good."

Danny smiled gently, inclining his head on one shoulder. "Yeah, Skip, I s'pose it's Slick you're thinkin' of."

"Huh?" With a rapid glance.

"Yeah. I seen Slick last night."

"You did! Now, where?"

Danny clasped his hands together between his knees. "Well, now, Skippy, maybe I oughtn't tell you."

She leaned forward, grasping his coat sleeve. "Is—is Slick pinched—is he?" She wore a delicate perfume, he now perceived.

"Pinched? What for?"

SHE sat back, holding a hand over her rising breasts. "Oh—nothin'. I—I—well, Danny, you know how it is. You never knew when they might frame him for somethin' he didn't do. But you saw him, Danny? Tell me where."

"I—well, Skippy, I seen him on

Broadway with Rosie Connor."

"Rosie Connor!" she gasped.

"Yeah. You know, Skip, I always liked you like a sister. When you went wit' Slick I says to meself: 'He'll chuck her over just like he's chucked the rest.' Slick's that kind of a guy. It's only because I like you, Skippy, that I'm tellin' you. An' it looks like he's keepin' Rosie on the side now."

Skippy pursed her lips. "Danny, you're lyin'!"

"Honest t' Gawd, Skippy, I ain't. I seen 'em together, an' I know where they're stayin'. They got a couple rooms over near Eight' Avenue. It ain't fair by you, Skippy. Hell, I don't know what he sees in Rosie. She ain't nowhere near as classy as you are, Skippy."

Skippy put her hands on her narrow hips. Despite the heat of the conversation she was conscious that the motion brought to light every generous curve of her proud breasts and supple waist that rippled beneath the clinging satin. "Say listen, Danny, lay off the applesauce. You got to show me—see? You got to prove that Slick is stayin' with Rosie."

"Gee, Skip, don't treat me so rough. I'm only tryin' to be your friend. Guess I shouldn't ha' told you in the first place. Well, anyhow, I told you, an' I can prove what I say, if you don't want to take my word for it."

"Well, if you can, then begin struttin' your stuff."

"All right. But you got to promise to hold your head an' not start any fireworks."

"All I want is to see Slick where you say he is. I got a better idea than startin' fireworks."

"Let's go, Skip," said Danny.

They went. Danny even went so far as to hire a taxi, and this gave Skippy plenty of opportunity to powder her nose and primp up generally. They

alighted a few blocks away from the apartment-house and walked the remainder of the distance, and Danny motioned Skippy to precede him through the entrance. Then he led the way up two short flights, turning at the top to put a finger to his lips. Skippy nodded understandingly and followed him down the corridor, her lithe body taut. He stopped before a door near the end, and Skippy put her ear against it. After a few moments she stood erect and whispered in Danny's ear:

"I can't make them voices out."

Danny looked around, then clasped his hands in front of him and braced one shoulder against the door frame. He nodded to Skippy. She raised her shapely right leg until her dress slid back to free creamy tapering thighs. She put her foot in his clasped hands, grasped his shoulders and raised herself up to the level of the transom above the door. Danny held his breath as her soft luscious breasts rubbed past his face. He sensed rather than felt that a tremor ran through Skippy. She almost lost her balance and might have fallen had not Danny unclasped his hands and flung his arms about her as she toppled. Still holding her, he ran down the hall to the stairway and did not set her trembling body down until he was on the floor below.

"They might ha' heard us," he told her.

She was busy with her pocket mirror, adjusting her hat, which had been knocked on one ear in the scuffle. She lowered her dress over gleaming thighs and adjusted the low neck to show just the right amount of the curve of her breasts.

"But I seen them, so I don't care," she retorted.

"Don't talk foolish, Skippy. We got to get out o' here." He grasped her hand and pulled her down to the street door. "Keep close to the buildin's," he

warned. "They might be lookin' out."

At the next corner they entered a taxi. Skippy was quite breathless and in a state of nervous excitement. He watched the rise and fall of her breasts.

"I seen them all right," she said. "My Gawd, she was layin' in his arms like a fade-out scene in a bum movie. Well, he won't kid me any longer. I been gettin' tired o' him, anyhow, lately. Some nights he didn't come home at all. So that's where he was hangin' out! He must think I'm a fool. I'll fool him!"

"'Tain't right, him treatin' you like that," Danny reflected with a sad smile. "That's why I told you. I always liked you, Skip. I ain't good-lookin' like Slick, but me heart's in the right place. Maybe I can do somepin' for you, Skippy, huh?"

"You can come right up to my apartment an' help me pack. I'm givin' this here burg the air an' I'm leavin' Slick flatter than a flat tire. When I get through with that guy he won't have a cent to his name."

SKIPPY'S three-room suite was a comfortable affair. Danny followed her lissom figure in and closed the door softly, scanning the appointments with an appreciative eye. Skippy had flung her hat across the room and was now hauling her array of clothing from the closet. She pointed to a wardrobe trunk and told Danny to get busy.

"You help me, Danny, an' I'll slip you five grand," she said.

"Aw, gee, Skippy, I wasn't thinkin' o' that. I was just doin' you a friendly turn, for old times' sake."

"Well, anyhow, shake a leg, Danny, will you?"

Danny smiled behind bony fingers and opened the wardrobe trunk, but he kept his eyes on Skippy. He saw her go into the next room and unscrew the knob from one of the brass bed-posts.

He nodded to himself and smiled his crooked smile. Everything was working out as he had hoped it would. He saw Skippy draw several rolls of bills from the hollow bed-post.

He was about to thrust a long white silk scarf into the trunk, but hesitated, looking from the scarf to Skippy. Holding the scarf before him with both hands, he tiptoed across the soft carpet, and with a quick, deft movement clapped it over Skippy's mouth. The only sound was a muffled gasp. He twisted her arms behind her back until she dropped the packets of money, when the front of her dress burst apart to expose pert breasts forcing against a thin lace bandeau. Then he bound her hands and feet with a convenient pair of silk stockings. He lifted her in his arms unmindful of the closeness of her tender young body and carried her into the closet, where he left her half-unconscious. Closing the door, he went back into the bedroom and gathered up the money; three compact rolls of yellow bills which he flipped hastily.

"Easy ten thousand," he told himself.

Slick would feel this blow. But that wasn't all. There was more to come. It all had been carefully planned, carefully thought out, and the black conscience of Danny had not felt a qualm in considering the human pawns that would unwittingly serve his own personal greed.

He stuffed the money into his pockets.

Now for the culmination of his old grudge against Slick. He would never have planned all this for the grudge alone, for he was quite incapable of an emotion strong enough to warrant a grudge for the grudge alone. But now he would wipe clean the slate with one vast flourish. He had Slick's money, and now he would get Slick out of the way.

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He picked up the telephone, clearing his throat. His voice was naturally soft, and with a little effort he could make it sound like a woman's. He called his number, and in a few moments he was connected with a downtown police station.

He said, in his most feminine voice, "Tell Jerry Donovan that he'll find Slick Morelli in an apartment house at number 1200 Eight' Avenue—apartment 33."

He hung up, rubbing his hands together, smiling wistfully. The police might trace the call, and if they did they would find Skippy bound and gagged. Now to get away. He would not hurry. He had plenty of time. He would drop down to Penn. Station and hop an outbound train for—anywhere. Skippy—Rosie? Pawns—nothing more. And to look at him, with that sad, gentle smile, you would have thought him the embodiment of all that was good and benevolent.

He put on his hat, buttoned his coat and, with a last look at the room, opened the door to go out. He walked straight into the muzzle of a blunt automatic pistol.

"Back up!" bit off the man behind the gun.

He was a tall, slim man, immaculately dressed from gray spats to kid gloves. He had a small, well-groomed mustache and piercing black eyes. He shoved Danny back into the room, closed and locked the door behind him, removing the key. His white teeth glittered in an uncanny smile.

"The elevator boy, a kind of friend of mine, casually remarked that I had a visitor," he explained. "I suspected who the visitor was. Surprised, Danny?"

"Aw, now, look here, Slick, put away the cannon," whined Danny. "I just come up to tip you off the cops was after you."

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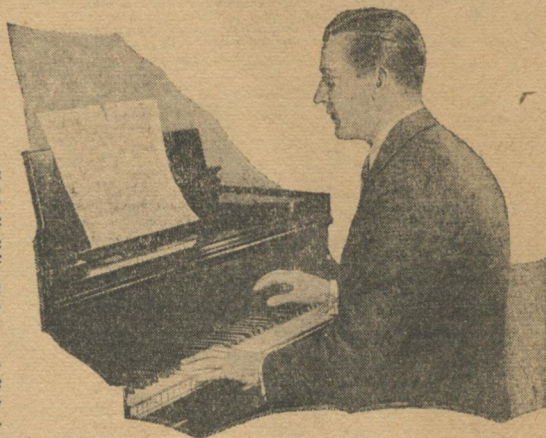
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S SLICK MORELLI chuckled dryly. "It that so? Come out of your shell, buddy. Rosie told me everything."

Danny blanched.

"Yes, everything," went on Slick. "She told me everything because, you poor fool, she loves me. She can't help loving me. Why, you dirty little shrimp, you should have known that much. No, I don't love her, but that doesn't stop her from loving me. Huh, and you thought you could make her work with you! I love Skippy. I don't know why, but I do, and I only wish she'd love me the way Rosie does. Where is she?"

Danny was almost speechless. He kept moistening his lips, shrinking from the man with gun.

Slick's face went dark. "Damn you, where is she? If you so much as harmed a hair on her head—"

There was a groan from the closet, and for a split-second Slick's eyes left Danny. Danny saw it was his only chance, and he flung himself at Morelli's legs. They crashed to the floor, knocking over a pedestal, and Slick snapped out a warm oath.

At that instant the closet door swung open and Skippy, still bound and gagged, fell into the room. Through much effort she apparently had managed to open the door, and now she lay there, watching with wide eyes the two struggling men.

Her dress had given away further until now she lay almost entirely naked, with the whiteness of her thighs and curve of her heaving breasts sharply outlined against the green of the floor carpet.

Danny was small but unbelievably quick, and he knew a dirty trick or two about the rough-and-tumble game. Slick, taller and heavier, had his hands full. They rolled back and forth across the floor striving frantically to break

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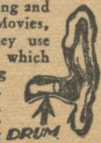
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each other's grip, and a hand-painted floor-lamp crashed down in ruin. Slick had lost his gun, and now it lay in the center of the floor.

By sheer superior strength he succeeded in heaving himself to his feet, with Danny still clinging to him like a leech. He then tore about the room in an effort to fling Danny loose and, losing his balance, tumbled over a chair. This broke Danny's hold, though Slick found himself in a bad way with the chair on top of him. Danny had landed on the back of his head and twisted about with startling agility. Though a bit stunned, instinct prompted him to struggle to his feet, and, swaying, he saw Slick shove aside the chair and try to get up.

At the same instant his foot kicked something. He looked down and saw Slick's revolver lying at his feet. With a sweep of his long arm he snatched it up, even as Slick, with a snarl on his lips, picked up a chair.

"You damn pup, drop that gun!" roared Slick.

Danny crouched, the revolver pressed along his hip, a weird smile twisting his mouth. Slick, instead of raising the chair above his head, swung it at arm's length as he lunged and let it skim along the floor. Ten to one, Danny had no intention of shooting at that moment. He had killed a man or two before, but the acts had been done under circumstances favorable to Danny's subsequent freedom as far as the law was concerned. But now he realized that it would be suicidal plain and simple to do any killing, and he yelled:

"Put up your hands, Slick!"

However, the heavy chair had already been flung and it struck him a cruel blow across the legs. He hit the floor on his elbows and shock caused his finger to yank the trigger. The gun boomed with a deafening roar.

Slick buckled to his knees and fell

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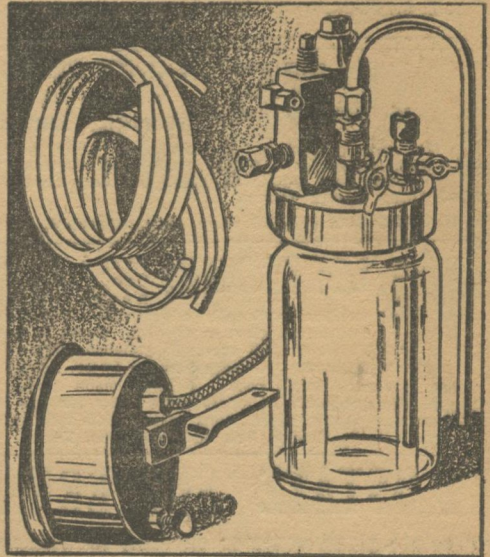
A famous automotive engineer made the statement that if all the energy in a gallon of gas could be harnessed it would drive an automobile 450 miles. We do not claim that a Diamond Fuelizer will give you 450 miles on a gallon of gas, but we do say that it should greatly increase your gas mileage by eliminating wastage. It uses the simple principle of adding extra air and vaporized oil to your gasoline, thus breaking it up into a vapor instead of feeding just plain wet gasoline to your motor. By this vaporization process, less gas is required and you get more power and pep.

Automatic Fuel Control

The Diamond Fuelizer is absolutely automatic. It goes into operation when autos attain a speed of approximately twenty-five miles an hour. It then feeds additional air to the gasoline and at the same time the air passes thru the oil creating a very fine mist of air and oil which sprays the valves and cylinder walls. The automatic feature of the Fuelizer eliminates the difficulty of slow starting and motors laboring at low speeds that was caused by other types of gasoline savers.

Not A Gadget!

This device is the invention of a famous aviator who has perfected various automotive devices that have been used on millions of cars. It is solidly built of the finest materials and is scientifically correct in its principles. Users report three to five miles saving on a gallon of gas with the Diamond Fuelizer. They say it greatly improves motor performance. Every car owner owes it to himself to equip his car with this invention.



AMAZING DEMONSTRATOR AND SELLER!

You do not have to be a super-salesman to make money with the Diamond Fuelizer. With this device installed on your car, all you have to do is make a simple one-minute demonstration that will show your prospect right before his eyes how the Fuelizer actually saves gas and oil and your sale is made. A few sales a day will make you \$10.00 or more and many a single demonstration should make five sales.

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heavily on his face, groaning between clenched teeth. He twisted around on his back, clutching at his chest, gasping spasmodically. His body heaved with a jerk, rolled over, shuddered and then lay very still.

There were loud knocks on the door.

Danny, his face pale with a ghastly pallor, the revolver still clutched in his hand, shrank away from the door. He turned and looked out of the window. Below—far below—a dozen stories or more—was the street. He grimaced, brushing a hand across his face. He ran into another room, looked out. No fire-escapes there either. It must be in the hall. Then—then he was trapped!

There was the sound of splintering wood—and a crash. Danny spun about, crouching with his back against the wall. There were voices—hoarse shouts—running feet. Danny felt his heart pounding against his ribs like a sledge-hammer. His hand shook. Perspiration poured down his face and made his clothes cling to his body. He felt very weak, very small, very much alone.

NEVER before had he been in a tight corner like this. Never before had he been trapped. He had never known what it was to be afraid. But he was afraid now. He was lost—irrevocably lost. Rosie had turned on him. Skippy had seen him shoot Slick. He could not have foreseen this. He would have sworn by Rosie. Damn Rosie—damn all women!— He had not meant to shoot Slick—he had not—

Two men rushed through the door from the other room. He saw them through a mist—house detectives. One

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ripped the gun from his hand; the other held him in a grip of steel. He did not struggle. Hot sweat enveloped him and made him very weak. He was half-dragged, half-carried into the other room. There was a crowd there. He saw Skippy, flushed and wild-eyed, fixing her hair with one hand and pointing at him with the other. And she was talking—he didn't care about what. It all seemed like a dream—a horrible nightmare. He had been tricked. He had not meant to kill Slick—

Later he saw Jerry Donovan come in and take command of the situation. Jerry was brisk as ever.

He was saying, "Hell, Danny, I never expected a haul like this. Trailed that phone call here after I looked up that tip. Yeah, I found Rosie—found her *dead!* Poisoned herself! Yeah. I don't know, but there's a sob artist from one of the yellow sheets swears it's a case o' love spurned—somethin' like that. An' I find Slick here killed, an' *you* killed him! Baby! Say, you got a butt handy? Thanks."

Danny lit one himself and smiled wistfully at the match until it burned out. "You just got me, Jerry, by—well, dumb luck," he said.

KNOCK-EM-COLD!

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER—Especially if that knowledge is of American Police Jiu-Jitsu, the world's most efficient protective science. Send fifteen cents TODAY for full course on 13 KNOCKOUT BLOWS ABOVE THE WAIST WITHOUT THE USE OF FISTS 15¢ written and illustrated by internationally known police instructor. Also learn how you may defend yourself against any man, regardless of size or strength, whether he be armed with gun, knife or club.

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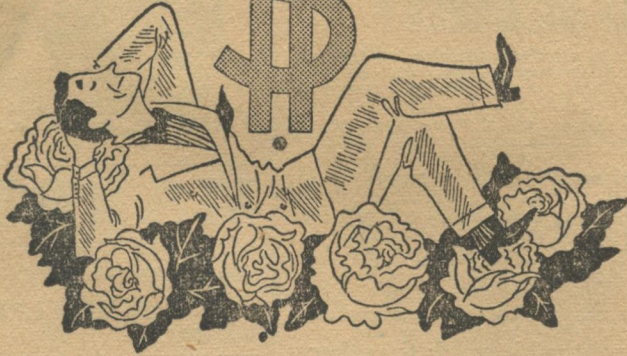
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