

THRILLING DETECTIVE



10¢

SEPT.

**THREE
DEAD
MEN**

A Baffling
Mystery Novelt
By **ROGER
TORREY**

FEATURING

**THE
SMUGGLING
RING
MURDERS**

Novel of
Death's Cargo
By **ROLLAND LYNCH**

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

THE 500 POUND MONSTER GRABBED ME IN THE DARK!



A True Experience of Richard Kroener, Keeper of Gargantua, mighty gorilla owned by Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus



1. "ONE NIGHT I entered the compartment just outside Gargantua's cage on a routine check-up and forgot for a moment that Gargantua was always waiting to kill me. Suddenly, with crushing force, he grabbed my left shoulder.

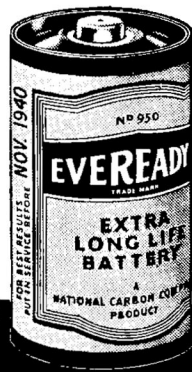
2. "ALMOST PARALYZED with horror, I thought the end had come. Then I remembered the flashlight in my right hip pocket. I whipped it out and turned the bright beam full into Gargantua's cruel, glittering eyes.



3. "FOR AN INSTANT he glared into the hated light, then relaxed his grip and lumbered to the other side of the cage. Your dependable 'Eveready' fresh DATED batteries saved me from a horrible death that night. I will never be without them.

(Signed) *Richard Kroener*

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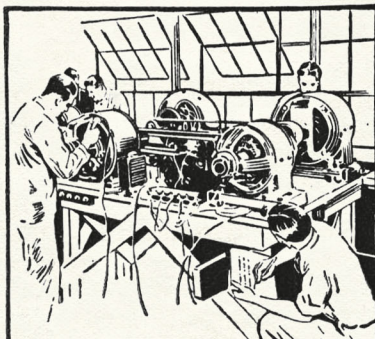
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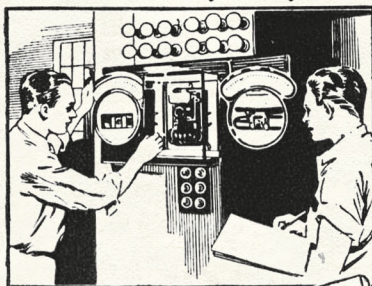
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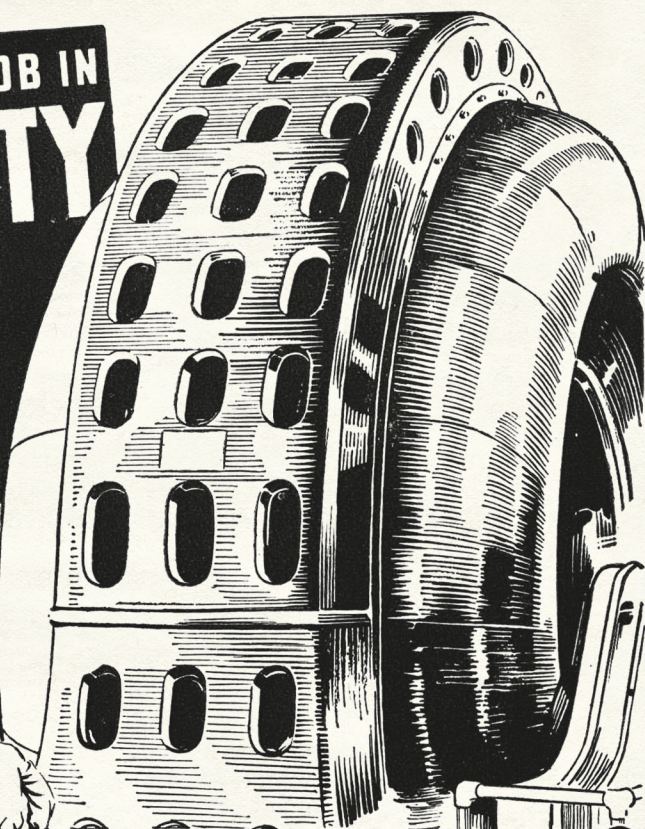
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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. XXXVII, No. 1

HARVEY BURNS, Editor

September, 1940



Complete Detective Novel

The Smuggling Ring Murders By ROLLAND LYNCH

Tal Carson, Private Detective, Plays a Lone Hand on a Government Assignment that Carries Him from Shanghai to the Mexican Border in a Running Fight Against Wily Dealers in Human Misery! 12

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... Mailing a Coupon like the one
below started me on my way
to success...

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Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Mail me FREE without obligation, your 64-page book, "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out Radio's opportunities and tells you how you train men at home to be Radio Technicians. (No salesman will call. Write Plainly.)

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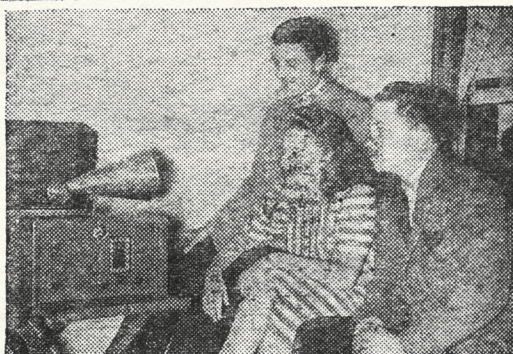
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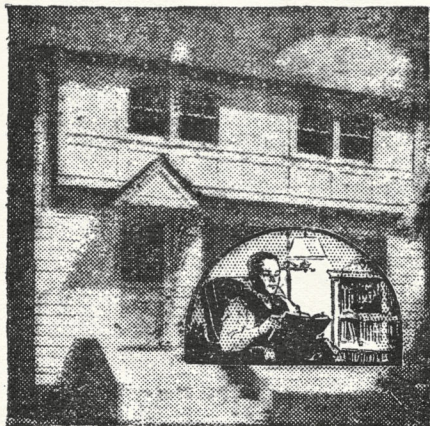
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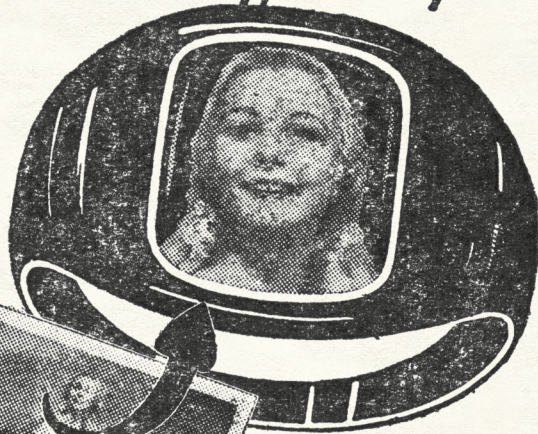
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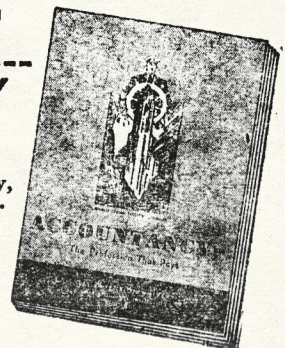
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City

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Age



The Smuggling



His fist landed with a sickening thud on the slaver's chin

A Complete Baffling Mystery Novel

By ROLLAND LYNCH

Author of "Outcast," "All Quiet on Air Patrol," etc.

CHAPTER I

MY CLIENT, THE GOVERNMENT

THE almond eyes of the Oriental lost their impassiveness for a moment. Slowly, the coolie turned his grimy, burlap-clad

body for inspection. Captain James McDermott, Thirty-first Infantry, Shanghai Patrol, looked him over critically.

"You'll do, sir," he said.

The inscrutability of Tal Carson's face fell away as he grinned.

Ring Murders



Tal Carson, Private Detective, Plays a Lone Hand on a Government Assignment that Carries Him from Shanghai to the Mexican Border in a Running Fight Against Wily Dealers in Human Misery!

"Velly fine Chinees boy, so?" he chuckled.

The captain's weathered countenance remained stern, immobile as the visage of a jade Buddha.

"You'd make a better soldier, Carson," he said. "You have no fear.

But I warn you your chances are slim here, even in that get-up. Shanghai has a way of swallowing people who pry into her affairs. Isn't it a bit extraordinary for a man in your line to come so far afield?"

"Not for my client, the govern-

ment," answered Carson. "Crime has no particular home; therefore I have no home. The government has given me carte blanche here. Thousands of Chinese are being smuggled into the States, selling their lives, poor beggars, for their chance in a new land. We've got to smash the ring that trades on their gullibility."

"But why didn't they send a regular F.B.I. man?" interrupted the captain.

"Pressure of work at home," Carson explained. "The Federal Bureau of Investigation has taken on an amazing amount of work. But they are making history in stamping out crime. In my capacity as a free lance detective I specialize in international cases—speak numerous languages, among them Chinese. I just finished a job in San Francisco's Chinatown. The government called me in at the recommendation of the F.B.I. As a lone operator I get by with things others cannot.

"I've found out this smuggling ring has an espionage service of its own. They have their fingers on every Federal and military man they might run across. But they don't know me." He grinned with satisfaction. "From here I'll find out where the smuggling ring winds up in the States."

The captain pyramided his fingers and studied their tips without reflecting the young detective's enthusiasm.

"You've a long march ahead of you," he said soberly. "You'll need all the luck of the fool. This ring is smart at both ends, here in Shanghai and in the States. You've got a solid start. You know the language and mannerisms of the Oriental. Yet there's something we're both over-looking and I can't put my finger on it."

TAL CARSON was silent for a moment. He went over the details of his apparel and plans.

He could find nothing wrong.

"I'm ready," he announced flatly. His brown hand shot out and the captain gripped it.

"Good luck," he said solemnly.

"Thank you, sir."

Carson acknowledged the officer's good wishes with a bow and turned from Headquarters. As he let himself into the dark side street he was once again the Oriental of a few moments ago.

His broad shoulders were hunched and thrown forward. His burlap clothing was ill-fitting and baggy. His feet were bare and dirty, soled by reed slippers whose thongs ran between his grimy toes. A coarse black wig hid his blond hair and a queue hung to his waist. The thin gelatin-like coating of brown on his face gave him the mask of Buddha and hid the minute pieces of tape holding his eyes slanted.

AS HE shuffled onto the Bund and headed toward the native sector, he trundled along with mincing steps. Darkness was an aid, making little things obscure.

He chuckled as he passed rickshaw runners who only hours before had clamored for his trade. They disdained him now.

It was a far cry from this burlap to the white linen he had worn this afternoon.

The Sikh police regarded him suspiciously as he passed. Only this afternoon they had bowed with austere politeness to the American who walked beside the captain of the soldiers.

Carson felt that his masquerade was a success. And the thought helped quiet the disturbing seed Captain McDermott had planted. Tal Carson was sure he had not overlooked one characteristic of this race he portrayed.

Swiftly he padded along the Bund that parallels the Wang Po River. He

turned onto Nanking Road, leaving the American and British Concessions behind him. He passed through the Arcade, reflecting on his backtrail.

The secret of this ring had first been divulged to him in San Francisco. When he had taken the case of a powerful mandarin who had lost a son by murder. Two dead Chinese had been found without cards—the identification necessary for them to possess and show they had been in the States at the time immigration law forbade further entrance to the Chinese.

That led to the finding of others without identification cards and proved the existence of a master smuggling ring.

The only information gleaned from the stoic Orientals was that they had signed away their lives to enter America, sacrificed everything to reach this land of no famine. The same situation existed in Los Angeles and San Diego. Those rounded up knew nothing of the higher-ups.

Extensive search had netted nothing. The method of smuggling in the Chinese was baffling, even to the Federals. Carson grinned wryly. He was a long way from the end of his vicious circle. He would probably have to make the complete circuit before getting what and whom he wanted. This was only the start of a dangerous trail that would span two continents.

As he skirted the edge of the French Concession, he felt the mystery of the Orient close about him. The smelly, filthy, twisting alleyways reeked with an intangible something no white man could identify. Here was enigma. Here was superstition triumphant over learning. Here hunkered the impassiveness and patience that was a peril to the world.

There was a thrill in its nearness. Carson had brushed the secrets of this race but lightly, for none but the Oriental himself was gifted to see behind the Buddhalike screens that



Tal Carson

held their mystery. Here aged traditions and aged wisdoms linked hands and defied advancing civilization to break the clasp.

With all this pressing tightly about him, Tal Carson turned into a dark doorway. He kicked off his sandals, brushed aside the reed mat draped there, and felt a twinge of excitement shoot through his veins as he padded past the aged man sleeping in the chair just inside. The Old One's pose was too indolent for natural relaxation, and the young man knew those slitted lids watched him covertly.

At the end of the corridor he rapped lightly on a door. He drew a deep breath and waited, hands folded across his chest and into his sleeves. Here was a dangerous test.

A slot slid slowly to one side and a yellow rectangle of light winked out. A head came up to blot the aperture and two beady, opium-dulled eyes centered there.

Carson's knuckles whitened as his fists balled within his flared sleeves.

With studied impassiveness he waited while the scrutiny continued.

The head disappeared and the door opened. Hunched characteristically, Carson shuffled into the room. He bowed and mumbled Chinese words of greeting.

"Pipe?" questioned the old Chinese who had admitted him.

Carson shook his head. "Honored One," he sing-songed, "who has the power to help a poor coolie escape this poor land, I have come for consolation. Come far. Let us burn the joss-sticks to drive away what evil spirits may have attended me."

He reached for the lighted candle to his left and touched it to the short lances protruding from holders. The sticks sputtered and crackled and set up an acrid smoke.

"You have come to me, my son?" queried the Old One.

"I have heard of the land across the water," said Carson gravely. "It is the nearest thing to the Land of the Seven Suns. I would go there for money and sons to have with me when I die."

The old Chinese nodded slowly. "Well spoken, my son. Your ambitions are high and there are many who would go to this land. How will you pay for this?"

With a hand schooled to tremble with eagerness, Tal Carson fished money from his rags. Greedily, the Honored One counted it out. He deposited it in a red-laquered box on the table.

"The first part is paid," he said. "I warn you the next installment will be bigger. Come, we will make out the papers."

Obediently, Carson followed the man. In an alcove pungent with incense, he was handed a document and pen.

"This contract is written in American," said the Old One. "You will sign at the bottom. When you are safely in the States it will be read

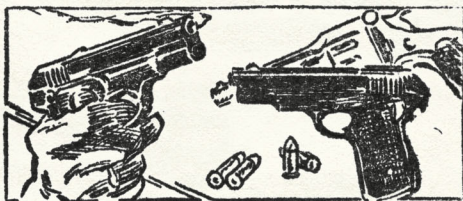
to you. You swear your life to secrecy before Buddha?"

Holding the pen Carson turned to the idol in the alcove. Three times he bowed low and muttered his prayer of fidelity. Then he turned back and slowly affixed his signature to the paper. As he did so, his narrowed eyes caught phrases:

The signee guarantees to pay eighty percent (80%) of his total yearly earnings for life. . . . The signee makes this contract at his own risk. . . . The signee's life is in his own hands, but he must sacrifice it at any time the Association sees fit. . . .

There were a number of other lines but he didn't have time to read them without exciting suspicion.

When he finished scratching his signature, fury was shaking him. These smugglers had placed a premium on the ignorance and poverty of these poor people. Each man who gained entrance to the States was a slave to this Association. Carson knew what was meant when it said the signee made the contract at his



own risk. At the first hint of trouble, the smugglers would do away with their cargo. Life was cheap to them. For more human cargoes were waiting to take their chances.

"I will abide," Carson murmured in a controlled voice.

"That is good," said the Old One. "This way."

He led the way down a long corridor that grew dank and moist. Carson could feel the river now. This district was a maze of underground passages that would defy an expert tracker. Only those connected with these intrigues knew where they went.

THE Old One ushered the disguised Carson into a dark room and closed the door behind him. For a long moment he stood just inside the threshold to accustom his eyes to the gloom. He was conscious of the breathing of many men, of the restless scraping of their feet. Underneath it all murmured the river's current.

As his eyes became inured to the dimness, he made out the forms of the men sitting about the room. There were forty in all, breathing the air that was fouled by dampness and poor ventilation.

He sat down cross-legged. Minutes became hours and were lost in the slow passage of time. Breathing became more difficult as the air failed, and sweat began to pour from his face. His lungs rose and fell laboriously and he felt as though they would all die of suffocation unless led away soon.

During the lengthening hours he thought of Captain McDermott and of the officer's warning. His hand went up to paw the sweat from his forehead and chin. Then he was freezing, his hand scrubbing harshly over the stubble of beard on his face. Icy sweat broke from his body. He knew now what the captain had meant when he had said that he felt as if they were overlooking something.

It was this beard! Chinese never have whiskers until they begin to be very old. During this wait, Carson's beard had sprouted. It was a dead give-away. He started to his feet. If he were caught like this. . . .

When he reached full height, the door at the far end of the room opened and lantern light flooded in.

"Line up!" a guttural voice said in bad Chinese. "Single file! Boat's ready."

Carson reached behind him for the thong on the door he had entered. It was locked from the other side!

CHAPTER II

DEATH ON THE RIVER



TAL CARSON'S jaws set tight. Once this mate who did the checking saw the stubble on his cheeks it would mean certain death. He cursed himself bitterly for not remembering this one thing. Now all his efforts faced collapse. His masquerade as an Oriental was over. Eight months of carefully seeking out this beginning stood for naught.

He lined up with the rest and shuffled toward the door, his muscles tensed and ready for action. As each coolie filed past, the sailor checked them with the Old One. He called their names in sing-song and allowed them to continue down the dark passageway.

As Carson stepped up the man swung the lantern and peered at him owlishly. The sailor's swart, brutal face was damp and glistening with sweat. The cruel leer to his thick lips broke and he swore luridly.

Tal Carson struck. His fist brushed the lantern from the man's hand, then his right was cutting an arc through the air to land with a sickening thud on the slaver's chin. With a grunt, the checker folded and went down.

Carson's legs pumped like pistons as he dived along the corridor. The jabbering of the frightened coolies was in his ears and through that ran the piercing shrill of the Old One.

Gritting his teeth, Carson came to the end of the passage that opened onto a slimy wharf at the water's edge. He swooped over and through the startled men gathered there and hit the turgid Wang Po. At the peak of his dive he drew in a great draught of air. As the murky river closed about him he was conscious of a shot and the angry zip of a bullet close to his head. With strong strokes he clawed for depth, then leveled out

and swam under water as far as he could.

When his lungs were ready to burst from lack of oxygen, he rose slowly to the surface. He lay on his back looking up at the cool stars. About him spread the dark mystery of this river. Lanterns bobbed along the water's edge, but all was silent, with the deathlike quiet of the tomb. There was only the sigh of the water against the gliding shapes of sampans taking advantage of the outgoing tide.

One thing was in his favor. The smugglers did not dare attract the attention a search would cause. Sikh guards and military men were everywhere.

Expertly Carson peeled off the weighty burlap impeding his swimming. A grim set came to his lips and he breast-stroked his way noiselessly back toward the boat moored at the wharf he had just quit. He had to get aboard and find out this tramp steamer's destination. He could not let all this work and planning fail. He was on the very brink of a discovery. If he could get aboard the boat unnoticed—

Circling slowly Carson cleaved the water to the boat's barnacled side. The excitement ashore had subsided, but he knew they would be alert now. In this moment he could grin over the shock the sailor must have had when he looked into an Oriental face dark with beard stubble.

Snaking his way to the bow line, and gathering his strength, Tal Carson went up to the rail, hand over hand. Poised there, he scanned the decks. The crew stood by the gangway up which trooped the Chinese.

Catlike, he leaped aboard and shielded himself behind the capstan until he felt the chill of the water leave his body. Then he ran along the starboard side, up the bridge ladder and into one of the officers' cabins directly behind the chart room.

He found a piece of cloth and wiped

the water-softened make-up from his face. Peeling the tape from his eyes and taking off his wig he wrapped them in the cloth and pitched them through the open porthole. The transformation was startling. His Oriental impassiveness and characteristics were gone. He stood now a clean-limbed, muscular American, young and handsome and blond, with the bronze of his cheeks deepened by exertion.

Quickly he rummaged beneath the bunk and found faded dungarees and jumper. Clothed, he returned to the deck and ducked beneath the starboard lifeboat. The crew were padding forward to cast off the lines.

BELLS rang and the ship's engines sent a shudder through the hull. The nose swung away from the pier as the steamer backed into the stream. The bells changed the reverse to slow speed ahead.

Tal Carson had to move fast now. Move before the ship cleared the sandbar which lay across the Wang Po and Yangtze where they meet the Pacific Ocean. For from there, there would be no swimming back.

Cautiously he crawled from under the lifeboat. The darkness made tricky shadows as the boat glided downstream with the sampans. He could make out the dark blot that was the crew up forward. The green running light shimmered faintly on the cargo boom. The ship's tumblehome threw off wavelets musically. He breathed deeply of the ship smell; of tar and rope and paint. It revived his courage to face what would happen if he were discovered.

The chart room was his best bet, he thought. The officers would be on the bridge now, and perhaps he could find their course and destination laid out on a map. He crossed the deck and gingerly tried the door. It gave under the pressure of his fingers. He stepped into the room—and suddenly,



The muzzle of the gun pressed deeper into Carson's back

the lights were switched on. He straightened and grinned at the gaping sailor who had caught him.

"What the hell?" shouted the man. "Hey, Jake!"

Tal Carson leaned against the bulkhead, his grin widening. His actions did not call for violence. He wouldn't have a chance. He had to play a different role now.

"How about some chow?" he asked.

He remained indolently against the bulkhead while the officers crowded into the room. The mate he had hit back there on the wharf was among them. He was the first officer, Carson guessed, for he took command now.

"Where did you come from?" he asked heavily.

Carson shrugged. "Off the docks."

"What docks?"

"From the south side. Had a sampan put me aboard on the starboard side. Hell, I gotta get back to the States. Consul won't do a damn thing for a man on the beach."

But uneasiness seized Carson as the mate surveyed him from bare feet to the top of his tousled head.

"Stowaway," mused the officer brutally. "Where did you hide?"

"Beneath the starboard lifeboat," Carson answered glibly.

"No place else?"

"No place."

The mate's eyes narrowed to mere slits. "Answer this then," he said harshly. "How come you to be wearing dungarees and jumper belonging to Jake, here?" He took a threatening step forward and his hairy hand went toward the knife belted at his side. "How come your hair is all wet?" He drew his knife.

"Wait!" cautioned one of the officers. "He may be a big shot. Better take him on to Mexico—to Rio—with us and let Nick handle this."

"Shut up!" swore the mate. "One more body in the river won't hurt."

He lunged at Carson. The detective caught the downward sweep of

the knife with his forearm. He set his teeth against the pain and swung at the mate's stomach with his free hand. That drew a grunt. He got his back to the door as they rushed him. Their momentum carried them all onto the deck.

Tal Carson lashed out crazily in an effort to gain the rail, but they had him hemmed in. Blows rained about his head and shoulders. He twisted and battled back, fighting against their turning him into the mate's knife.

With all his strength, he kicked out with his bare foot and caught the man between himself and the rail in the stomach. He dived through this small opening he had made in the circle and lunged. The sailor he had put down grabbed his leg and kept him from clearing the rail.

A BLINDING flash went through his brain and he felt himself falling. One of the men had caught him behind the ear with something hard and blunt. With arms and legs out of control he fought unconsciousness. Then the river water was closing about him with numbing shock.

He felt himself being twisted by the current. Frantically he tried to get away from being pulled into the propellers. He wanted depth, but natural bouyancy was bringing him to the surface. He felt something hard and sharp strike him on the back. His lungs sobbed for air. Everything went black. . . .

When Tal Carson returned to the realm of reality he squirmed restlessly and cried out against the pains racking his body. Every fiber ached. With an effort he opened his eyes and looked into a round, olive-tinted face. Concern showed in the young Oriental's slanted eyes, but at Tal's rapid blinking he chuckled with a peculiar catch in his thin voice.

"You dlunk an' fall overboard?"

The young detective-at-large felt

the roll of the sampan beneath him.

"The fool luck of a drunk all right," he breathed.

"What you slay?" queried the Chinese, tipping his head owlshly.

"Oh, nothing," muttered Carson. "Where are we?"

"One-two day from Shanghai—near fish."

Carson eased his aching head on the hard reed mat.

"How come you didn't put me ashore?"

For a long moment the young Chinese studied him. He was lithe, and his muscles were thin and wiry strings beneath his dark skin. His jet black hair was close-clipped and torn in patches as if he had done it himself. He shrugged his shoulders characteristically.

"China has enough trouble without Hi Hip Wong bringing more," he said. "China boy land A-melican he lose his head, chop-chop."

Tal Carson saw the wisdom of Hi Hip's words. He might have caused international complications. Everything was an international something-or-other these days.

"How far to Manila?" he asked.

"Four-fiv' days."

"You take me there," said Carson, "and name your own ticket."

Hi Hip grinned. "I namee ticklet—you punch 'em for trip to your country."

"You'd have to come right back," warned the detective.

"All light." The yellow boy nodded morosely. "But I see one minute of heaven. Enough for Hi Hip Wong, China fisherboy."

Then he turned from the smelly little cabin and onto the deck.

Carson sank back to a comfortable position. He found a plausible reason for being alive. Nothing, human or otherwise, fell into China waters in sight of a sampan without being picked up. The sharp bite he had felt at his shoulder had been the boat hook

of this young Chinese. Such was Hi Hip's life—like that of millions of others. They crowded close to all boats, waiting like vultures for the refuse. There were no seagulls along the ocean and rivers of China, and as quickly as something was thrown overboard some one of these poor maligned people were there to grab it. Venturesome salt water birds were captured and eaten.

Now despite his pains, Carson felt excitement flooding him. All his careful study and danger had paid. He had something tangible upon which to work. The name of Nick and the town of Rio. Two slim threads of evidence, but the smallest findings could lead to the biggest discoveries.

He felt the surge of the boat beneath him. The gurgling of the water eased the pains in his head and arm. A soothing restfulness came over him and he dropped into a deep sleep.

When he awoke the sun streamed through the small companionway and the aches had left his body. Hi Hip Wong was busy preparing rice on the charcoal-fed fire. The young Oriental turned.

"**M**ANILA, four-five-six day, wind don't blow," he said.

Carson struggled upright. His neck muscles and forearm were still sore.

"We've got to make better time than that," he muttered.

Hi Hip shrugged. "No pushee, no pullee. Go with the wind."

Tal Carson went on deck and circled the horizon with his eyes. The little sampan seemed a tiny spot in this big expanse of blue. With expert eyes he judged the pull of the reed sails. He softly cursed the vagrant winds that worked the craft into the wind, held it there for long moments, then let it fall off again. He had to reach the mainland soon, for there was work to be done before the arrival of the slave ship. He had to find a place named Rio on the Mexi-

can coast. Disgustedly, he went back below.

On the eve of the second day Hi Hip came into the cabin.

"I whistle too strong for wind," he said. "She come now—how!"

Carson could feel the new lift to the sampan as he went to the deck. To the east a dark curtain was rising to blot out the early evening stars. It was like black bales of cotton rolling up to canopy the sky. It struck with stunning force. A China Sea typhoon!

CHAPTER III

A GIRL—AND NICK



FOR five days Tal Carson and Hi Hip fought for their very lives. Tossed, submerged and racked by mountainous seas, the sampan rode it like a cork. And when the storm was done there was a close bond between the American and the young Oriental. Haggard and worn from their work there was admiration and respect for each other in their eyes.

Hi Hip passed it off with, "Four-five-six day from Manila with no wind. Plenty wind—now nine-ten—leven days from Manila."

Carson calculated the time. Two days becalmed, five storm-bound, and eleven days from the island. He figured it would take the tramp steamer twenty-two days at least to make port. He still had a chance if he caught the China Clipper, the eagle of the Pacific.

He was irritable and haggard when the verdant green of Luzon Island was raised. It had taken fourteen days. Once in Manila harbor and ashore, Tal led Hi Hip Wong through the walled city to the cable office. In code he asked for money, explained some of his findings, and asked that some research be done.

They loafed about the city until the

answer came. The young Oriental's eyes bugged at the sight of the roll of American money.

Clothes and tickets on the Clipper were purchased. Tal Carson was jittery with impatience until finally the giant wings and motors lifted him into the sky. He could not suppress a chuckle at the Chinese. The youngster sat with head in hands, muttering the wisdoms of Buddha to ward off the evil spirits possessing this flying devil.

Guam, Wake Island and Midway slid beneath them, but mere green knolls in a ruffled field of blue. The Hawaiians were behind them, then came the beautiful slot through the bluffs that is the Golden Gate of San Francisco. Easing down from the sky in a graceful glide, the Clipper shot over the Golden Gate Bridge and down to a landing on the flat breadth of the airport.

In Quarantine the immigration officers took over Hi Hip Wong. Carson slipped him money through the bars and shook his hand.

"Thanks," he muttered solemnly.

"Fly like devils can't catch up!" enthused Wong. "Chinee fisher boy see everything now."

"Where did you learn your English?" asked Carson.

"Mess boy for army officer," answered the Oriental. "Dlam fine man, but he eat too much. Bury him in China."

"Thanks again," said the young detective fervently. "May you have sons to gain you admittance to the Land of the Seven Suns."

Hi Hip gestured characteristically. "May joss surround you and keep you from evil. We shall meet again—in the Seven Sun Land."

"Good-by," said Tal Carson and turned away.

He could not trust himself to say more. There was a man, despite his color and creed. A man worthy of equal footing in any race. Yet, he

must return to his own country, out-cast from this land which was hallowed ground to him. A land of plenty where he could have raised himself above fishing. But Carson knew that was best.

Taking a taxi across the Alameda Bridge to the lower edge of Market Street, Carson got out at the Federal Building. He presented himself to John Stockton, head of the Federal forces west of the Mississippi.

"You've come a long way," murmured the official.

FOR a long moment the private detective studied the Federal man's lean and handsome face. There was power and intelligence and finely balanced justice.

"A long—still a short way," corrected Carson. "The first step has been taken. Where it leads I don't know—yet."

Stockton smiled grimly. "As always," he said, "they're howling for action. The state, county and city forces along the Coast are working, but getting nowhere. It seems incredible. Every known method of smuggling has been investigated. Still nothing. Are they dropping the Chinese from heaven?"

"Maybe the stork's bringing them," Carson said, with a wry grin. "We'll find out."

"Whoever heads this ring is a com-

bination Houdini and ghost," went on Stockton. "He's dumping these coolies into the country with nary a sight or sound or smell of him. I'm satisfied you will be the man to crack it open, but you'll have to go on alone, for though I hate to admit it, we haven't been able to put a single Federal man on the case. They're over-taxed now. I found the town for you to try. Rio Nuevo. I can't guarantee you any personal help, but you can call upon the county, city, state, and Coast Guard."

"It's still a one-man job," Carson said tersely. "Right now I've got to get to Agua Caliente. I've got to beat that ship carrying the coolies into Mexico. I'll need a plane."

"You'll have it!" boomed the official, and reached for the phone.

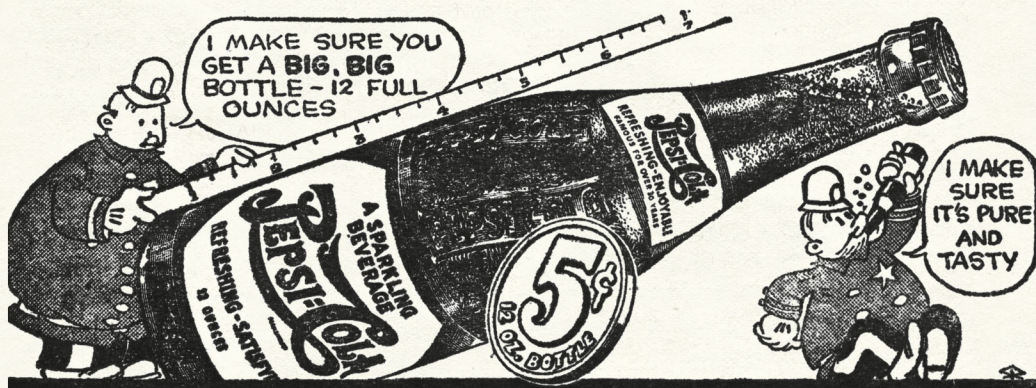
While the call was being put through, Tal Carson figured rapidly with pencil and paper. When he was through he whistled soft and low. If his calculations were right, flying would get him into Mexico in time. But he didn't have a single moment to lose.

"All okay," said the chief investigator, and hung up the phone.

"Wire entrance papers to Caliente," said Carson, and ran from the office.

At the airport his instructions to the pilot were to fly high and fast.

[Turn Page]



The helmeted pilot nodded and they soared into the sky.

As the serrated rims of the Sierra Nevadas wiggled beneath the plane, Carson gazed at the wondrous scene thoughtfully. Nick and Rio Nuevo. There could be many ways the smugglers ferried their human cargo into the country. By plane, car, truck or train. But all of those methods had been investigated without success.

Trains were being searched now every time they got to an international boundary line. Every car was stopped by the Border patrol. Trucks did not have a chance. All this led to the fact that master cunning was behind this ring, for nothing had been found. It was a cunning that had eluded the combined forces of local and state officers.

This ring had something new—something different. Because he knew the tramp steamer was headed for Rio Nuevo, Carson had one thing upon which to work. Criminals of all trades make mistakes. Cunning as they might be, somewhere something slipped up. All Carson asked was to be there when the mistake was made this time.

He settled back in his seat and enjoyed the country sliding in ruffled waves beneath him. They zoomed past Point Loma and circled slowly over Agua Caliente. When they were grounded, the pilot stepped from his controls.

"Four and one-half hours," he said proudly.

"Good!" said Carson and turned to a Mexican in an old Ford. "Rio Nuevo?"

"Si, Señor. Cinco pesos."

Carson nodded and leaped into the car.

The engine coughed and sputtered and the car leaped forward. Then, in a cloud of dust they turned onto the Ensenada road and jounced along.

Rio Nuevo came up over the horizon an ugly scatteration of adobe

hovels. The town was a series of narrow and dusty streets with ominous alleyways threading their ways between buildings. The 'dobe walls of the buildings were bleached to crystalline whiteness by the sun. At the end of the main street the Mexican stopped the car and Carson got out. They bowed politely to one another as the American paid and the man drove off.

TAL CARSON'S eyes explored the place. Numerous *cantinas* faced the main street. At gnawed hitch-racks dozing ponies were tethered. Beside them stood expensive high-powered cars. This was a gambling playground for rich Americans who sought the atmosphere of Old Mexico. It was a town frequented by oil men who were interested in the development of fields in this wealthy land. It was a perfect spot for any kind of nefarious business. The law was lax, and some of the *rurales* were men with a price.

He headed for the largest saloon on the street. There he would laze out the day and listen to gossip, for nothing would be done until nightfall. These smugglers were creatures of the dark, with the moon as their sun, the stars their candles. Even with the laxity in this place they would be careful.

As he turned into the swing doors he stepped aside quickly as a girl swung from across the street and came up behind him. She was an American, slim and supple. Blond hair showed beneath a smart small hat. Her smoothly fitting print dress, belted at the waist with a wide red strap, accented the lithe gracefulness of her movements. She had the carriage of an expert tennis or golf player. Her stride was long and each neatly shod foot came forward with determination.

But Carson saw that her delicately molded face was set and morose. Her

lips were tight to keep them from trembling.

She brushed past him into the saloon, with only a glance at Carson. He followed behind her.

She strode to the bar where a lean and lanky youngster clad in flying togs bent over the mahogany. Plainly he had already been there too long. A three-quarters empty bottle was before him and his slim, freckled fingers were wrapped about a full glass of *tequila*.

Carson sidled close. He meant to be of service if he could. This was probably the girl's husband on a bender. The rich, who could afford such things as this, overdid it.

"Bill," said the girl in a strained voice, "come on home. You've spent enough now. And you're tight as a fiddlestring." She tugged lightly on his arm.

"Go 'way!" commanded Bill loosely. His angular face was flushed, and his thin lips hung slack.

"Come on, Bill!" pleaded the girl. "Mother's worried."

Bill swung around and swayed back and forth as he faced the girl.

"Worried, eh?" he snarled and wagged a finger. "Worried that I'll spend a little money. That's the trouble with our family. Money! Always worried. You go back an' tell Mom to tend to her knittin'. Lemme alone, Sis." He pulled a roll of bills from his pocket and waved them. "There's more where this come from. Nick's got plenty!"

Carson's heart skipped a beat. Nick! He started forward.

"Would you like some help?" he said to the girl.

She turned distraught, blue eyes upon him. There was a moment of hesitation, but it vanished before his grin.

"I can't handle him when he's this way," she answered hopelessly.

"Enough said." Carson smiled and grabbed the young fellow by the col-

lar. "Come on home to Mother," he ordered.

Bill squirmed and cursed in the young American's viselike grip, but he could not tear himself free. With the girl leading the way, her head bowed in mortification, Carson followed, dragging the protesting flyer beside him.

CHAPTER IV

THE THOUSAND DEATHS



MOVING down the street to a small adobe house at the far end, they were the cynosure of all eyes. The girl pushed back the door and Tal Carson thrust Bill roughly inside. Then he swept his hat from his head. He wanted to stay, to find out who this Nick was. The girl was staring at him strangely now, and he was sure he saw fear lurking deep within her eyes. He could not account for that, so he put it down to embarrassment.

"Thank you," she murmured in a strained voice, and had started to turn inside without an invitation to Carson to enter when her mother came to the door.

"Nan!" she exclaimed excitedly and with a great deal of flutter. "Is this the gentleman who brought Bill home? Have him in for tea and cakes. My goodness, where are your manners?"

The girl frowned and Tal Carson could see she was laboring under some emotion. She wanted him to leave immediately. But he could not let this slender lead slip through his fingers.

He bowed politely to the buxom mother of the two and stepped into the coolness of the room. The girl followed, going directly into another room.

Fluttery and nervous, the mother offered Carson a chair.

"Land sakes, my children!" she ex-

claimed. "One's drunk, and the other's shy."

"I know just how it is, Mrs.—" murmured Carson apologetically.

"Oh, no, you don't, young man. I know the Southerns better than you do. My husband drank himself to death and William has a good start. I wish I had been shy like my daughter. Henry Southern wouldn't have married me, and I would never have had this to contend with. You don't drink, do you, Mr.—er—"

"Talbot," he answered. "Everybody calls me Tal. No, I don't drink."

"You're the kind of a man I want for my daughter," the woman said promptly and drew a flush to Carson's cheeks. "William lost his transport license for drinking. Now he's down here flying this Nick DuVene person to God knows where. These oil men like DuVene give me a pain. Are you in the oil business, Mr. Talbot?"

"Well, not exactly," murmured the young detective. "Right now, though, I'm interested."

"Stay out of it," warned Mrs. Southern volubly. "No good'll come of all this gambling and robbing the *peons*. Nick is a fine upstanding man, but he's gained so much power in the fields he thinks he runs everybody. Maybe I shouldn't say that because he picked William off the streets and gave him a job. It's a lot of money for what he does—just fly around. But Nick is wild, and that encourages William's drinking. I wish something would happen to my boy to bring him to his senses."

"Maybe it will," Carson said vaguely.

Mrs. Southern would have continued her discourse if Nan had not stepped into the room. Her eyes were red-rimmed from crying, but she held her head high.

"Perhaps the gentleman has business elsewhere, Mother," she said throatily. "You might be detaining him."

"Pshaw, now," scolded the mother. "You keep him company until I fix the tea. 'Tisn't every day a handsome man brings my boy home."

Carson rose. Nan was scarlet with embarrassment.

"Your daughter's right," he said to Mrs. Southern. "I do have business. It can't wait. Happy to have been of service." He moved to the door.

"Come any time you like," invited Nan's mother. "Be glad to see you. Won't we, dear?"

"Thanks," murmured Tal Carson dryly.

That strange fear was in Nan's eyes again as she accompanied him to the door. Carson was at a loss to define it. At the threshold she extended her hand. The detective took it, feeling its warmth, its strength. A thrill shot through him. The touch of her hand was like a caress and took away his cynicism for a moment. But her words brought it back abruptly.

"I'm indebted to you," she said, quickly, "so I'll tell you this. Rio Nuevo is a poor place for a private investigator, Talbot Carson. I advise you to return to where you have some jurisdiction." She turned and closed the door.

CARSON stood stunned. How could this girl know him? He had never seen her before in his life! She had even called his name, had pegged him for what he was.

If she knew, how many others might know? Was she one of these smugglers? Obviously so.

For a moment he had drunk deep of her beauty and charm. That picture was changed now. On other cases he had found a demure and charming girl the brains of a thieving or murder ring. His training and experiences warned him to look behind the natural acting ability of a woman.

Carson's jaws set. With her knowing his identity, and her brother connected with Nick, he trod on dangerous ground. Then another thought struck him. Could it be there were two Nicks? It was a common enough name. One could be a shyster oil man in whom Tal Carson would have no interest, but might frighten this girl. But if it were oil, there was nothing to fear from an investigator out of his territory. These thoughts brought Carson back to the assumption he was close to this smuggling ring now.

It led him to believe that Nan and her brother were part and parcel of this slave ring. He shrugged. If they were, they were his enemies; breakers of the law. They would have to suffer. The ring must be broken. He could not touch them down here in this country. This was but a licensed terminus for the ring. His chore was to apprehend the men operating on United States' soil. Once they were taken in, this terminus would be useless. To gain a livelihood, these people would have to return to the States. They would be picked up at the Border.

Morose and bitter against what people would do for money and power, Tal Carson moved back down the street. For the first time since he had arrived in San Francisco he was conscious of the weight of his gun he had hurriedly stuck in a shoulder holster. Absently he unbuttoned his coat and cleared the way for its quick usage. Known as he was now, he might look for anything to happen. If Nan Southern told who he was, his life would not be worth a plugged *centavo*.

He turned back into the saloon from which he had taken Bill Southern. After ordering whiskey at the bar, he turned with his glass in his hand and surveyed the place.

It was a long and narrow room. The bar ran the full length of this

side. Against the far wall the different gaming tables stretched along, unattended now but readied for the evening's play. Roulette, faro, poker and the semi-circular blackjack tables were there. Spaced in between them were high stools where resting dealers or gun guards sat. At the far end of the room a stairway went up to a balcony off which several doors led. Carson guessed they were offices and private dining rooms. Idly he wondered what intrigues and deals went on behind those portals.

Now he was conscious of three men entering the saloon. The leader strode straight toward Carson, his eyes on the stairway at the back. The young detective pulled in his arm and hand in which he held his untasted whiskey, for the man was making no effort to go around him. Even as he passed in his seeming thoughtfulness he succeeded in knocking the whiskey glass to one side and spilling some of its contents down the front of his coat. He spun with a snarl.

"WHY don't you watch what you're doin'?" he barked.

Carson's face flushed with anger.

"Clumsy!" he swore softly.

"Yeah?" muttered the florid-faced man.

He drew back his arm as if to strike. Carson set his glass down and squared away. He had encountered many such surly men. He meant to make short work of this annoyer.

As the irate man lunged in, Tal Carson let fly with his balled fist. He never knew if it landed. An avalanche bore him down from behind. He fought like a tiger amid the maze of pummeling arms and legs. But the odds were too great. He suddenly realized that this had been a plant, that the knocking of the whiskey had been deliberate. The men siding the first one were cohorts prepared for this.

Bitterly and doggedly, young Car-

son took the terrible punishment. His last conscious thought was that Nan Southern had lost no time in making his identity known. These men were hirelings of Nick.

They pinned his arms securely behind him and rushed him up the balcony steps. Behind them, the lazy bartender scrubbed away all marks of the struggle. . . .

Tal Carson fumed with anger when the haze cleared from before his eyes. He knew Nan for what she was now. As bad as her brother. Behind her shy manner lay a cruelty that was vicious. Tal vowed she would pay the penalty the same as a man, if he pulled out of this. A pretty face and an innocent mother could not be used as pleas for forgiveness. She was as deep in this racket as the rest of the ruthless gang.

Carson's cynicism became a thing of cement as his captors thrust him into one of the rooms and bolted the door. He heard one of them murmur something about the Death of a Thousand Cuts.

Faint light filtered into this room, which was surprisingly large. It was plain and bare, its walls of thick adobe. There was a door splitting the middle of the wall to the left. Carson tried it. It was locked and solid. No hope for escape there. The two dingy windows were barred like the apertures of a cell. Not only was the steel imbedded deeply into the wall, but the openings were too small to permit the passage of his body.

A musty odor clung to the air of the room and conjured up memory of the place in which he had waited long hours in disguise at Shanghai. Then he knew what this room was used for! Here was the second stop for the Chinese who sold themselves into slavery.

Carson grinned wryly. His second discovery, and he was in worse danger than when he had made the first. His lips tightened into thin lines as

the sound of muffled footsteps came to him.

A key grated in the lock outside of the door leading into the rear stairway. It swung open and shadows began moving inside. Here were the Chinese with whom he had waited there beside the Wang Po. Their hands were bound and their mouths gagged. They would remain trussed like this until freed in the States. The smugglers did not take chances. If trouble came they did not want to wait to have their orders obeyed. With their prisoners gagged and bound they could deal with them as the occasion demanded.

CARSON felt sick at the sight. These frightened people had been duped into this by a diabolical ring of men who took advantage of their plight and bled them for the rest of their lives. In this moment he knew a terrible anger, and a keen disappointment that Nan Southern, such a pretty and charming girl, could be mixed up in this trading in lives.

After the Chinese were locked in the room, two of the men who had helped capture Carson came to him. They spoke no words, but the eloquent hardness of their pistols shoved in his ribs told him what to do and how to act.

They guided him the length of the balcony into an office. He could plainly hear the conviviality going on in the saloon. A shouted word would throw the place into a turmoil. But he did not dare try it. These guns would go off in his back, and he was of the school who believed that while a man was still alive he had a chance. He did not resist being pushed into the office.

One man there he recognized—the mate of the slave ship. The man's swart face paled a little at the sight of him. There was both admiration and anger in his eyes.

"You stick like a barnacle," he

rumbled. "But this time you get scraped off."

The slender baby-faced man behind the desk aroused Carson's interest. He was suave and debonair, with sleek, dark hair, and was immaculately groomed. His eyes were black and snapping, and he had a strange way of looking at a person and seeming not to look at all. His manner was feline and silky.

ON EITHER side of him were his bodyguards. Burly and big and strong, Carson recognized them as former inmates of San Quentin—"Torp" Pedrotti and "Sheve" Sangster. Both killers of the almost forgotten beer baron era. The suave man they guarded then was Nick DuVene, leader of this ring.

Nick pyramided his tapering fingers and fixed Carson with his reptilian eyes.

"You've come a long way—a lucky way," he said in a well modulated voice. His tone held no rancor. It was coldly impersonal.

The young detective nodded and a slow smile split his features.

"Things kept turning up," he said casually.

"That's over," said Nick DuVene. "Things turn up for just so long. Then they don't any more. The chips begin to fall the other way."

"You should know," Carson said, with a nonchalant shrug.

Nick's face twisted in a scowl of intense hatred.

"Cocky," Torp Pedrotti growled. "Lemme have 'im, Chief."

The head smuggler's hand gestured for patience and he smiled. The pulling of his lips into straight lines transformed his face and made it oddly predatory.

"Don't be a fool, Torp," he said. "When you knock off a special investigator the Government never forgets it. I've other ways—ways that look like accidents or that somebody

else did it. You know of those ways, Carson?"

"Some are familiar to me," murmured Carson. "But the service men are seeing through all of them these days."

"They won't this one," countered the smuggler. "The idea I have is fatal, and leaves no traces. It will serve my purpose doubly. I've got another man who has found out too much. You'll both go at the same time—when I'm through using him. You'll wire Headquarters that you're returning to San Francisco. Enroute, your pilot will be drunk—and you know what happens when you fly a faulty plane like that. But actually you'll have no interest in the flight. You'll be dead. . . ."

CHAPTER V

THE UNPREDICTABLE CHINESE



CARSON did not hear those last words. He had grasped Nick's meaning about the plane and pilot. Bill Southern! Nan's brother! He was not on the inside of this deal. Nick kept him drinking, to use him. Bill had done some of the dangerous work and was now showing signs of knowing what it was all about, so Nick had to eliminate him.

But there was more behind this cunning leader's plan than the killing of an ignorant accomplice. It must be Nan. Nick was in love with her, perhaps knew what Bill would say if he knew. One other thing now was evident. Nick covered his slave-running with the cloak of the speculative oil man. Therein lay a clue to the entire problem.

"It won't be as easy as that," Carson finally said, in answer.

The smuggler grinned. "It will, because you won't know anything about it. You see, I know the feeling that exists between private investigators

and civil service men. You won't be looked for, for a long time."

Then he seemed to forget about Carson and said to Torp: "Get Southern. We're ready to ship. Give him a bottle." When his henchman moved off, he looked back at the young detective again. "Take him, Sheve," he ordered. "Turn him over to Pancho." A cold smile touched his thin lips.

Coolly, Carson turned and followed the killer. They went down the stairs and out the back door. Sheve's gun was a persistent threat in his ribs. There was no hope for escape, for Sheve Sangster's gun seemed almost begging him to run. Tal Carson remained quiet, but his mind was riot.

Those few moments in the office with Nick had told him much. They had given him a theory as to how these Chinese might be smuggled into the States. But still he could not conceive how an oil field could be used to land Chinese. Yet no flight of imagination seemed beyond this Nick. Any wild thought might be the solution.

Sheve led Carson down a dark alleyway and into the small Chinese quarter of Rio Nuevo. The smell of the Orient reeked here and made him remember his mincing progress at Shanghai when he had left Captain James McDermott. Figures, silent and catlike, hunkered in ominously dark doorways. Again, he felt the threat of mystery and magic the Occidental can never understand. Here was patience that had outlasted the rocks of ages.

At the far end of the street, Carson was prodded into a doorway. Soft footsteps padded up and other shadows leaped from the gloom pools. He was seized roughly, but did not struggle. The Orientals hustled him forward and into a dimly lit room.

"He's yours, Pancho," Sheve said. "Give him the works."

Carson's flesh crawled at sight of the sinister countenance thrust before

him. He had supposed he was to be held captive until taken for the promised plane ride. Now he knew he would be dead when he entered that plane. For there was no mercy in this Yaqui face. The thick lips were cruel, the dark eyes beady as a rattlesnake's. The man was a giant, a fitting henchman for Nick, and a strong man who could control this Chinese quarter of Rio Nuevo. A man who knew this country and its ways, and was enough of an Oriental throwback to make him a leader.

Sheve backed away and was gone. Tal Carson stood in the center of these leering men and felt the pit of his stomach become light. As his shoulder shifted and he turned slightly, his fist balled. Swift as lightning, he struck.

His knuckles landed full upon Pancho's lips. The swart visage spouted blood, but before the detective could turn and dash for the door, the Orientals closed about him. He went down in a welter of arms and legs. Under control, he was jerked to his feet and propelled toward still another room.

Something had gone wrong with his eyes. He thought he saw Hi Hip Wong before him. He would have known that round, slant-eyed face anywhere. But Hi was on his way back to China. All Orientals looked alike anyway.

A PRISONER of the Chinese, for long hours Tal Carson fought to fit together the things he knew. He was in the very midst of this smuggling ring, but the answer to the question in his mind as to their method of smuggling was as yet unsolved. Nan Southern's calling him by name still stunned him. How could she have known?

His quick capture after leaving her house made it obvious she had lost no time in telling Nick DuVene who he was.

Nick had said enough in the office to give Carson a slender lead, and the fact he posed as an oil man was another. Fatalistically, at last, Tal Carson gave it all up. Only one thing was sure—he was in the hands of Nick's hatchet men who were led by a Yaqui, men who would carry out their leader's every wish.

IDLY Tal Carson was wondering whether Nan thought her identification of him would help her save her brother when his reverie was broken by the silent opening of the door to his small, prisonlike room. He choked back an exclamation of unbelief. Hi Hip Wong entered stealthily, his pudgy finger to his lips.

Carson drew a shaking hand across his brow. "That's what I call getting around."

Hi Hip frowned. "I'm smuggler now—get myself in country. Maybe bad, so?"

"I owe you plenty," Carson mumbled fervently. "I'll do what I can for you."

"Chinee fisher boy glad to serve," said the Oriental soberly. "It is written in the Book to serve a friend is to make a lasting bond with Buddha. Come!"

Gliding quietly, they left the room and slid down the hallway toward the street. The reek of opium was pungent in the stale air. As they slipped past the open door, the detective could



*A Mysterious Package — a Baffling Note — and
a Murdered Japanese Embroider Owen
Gilbert in a Deadly Espionage Plot in*

THE GREEN MASK MYSTERY

By **ROBERT MURRAY**

NEXT MONTH'S FEATURED NOVEL

"We go now," he whispered. "Pancho smoke pipe to catch dream for killing you. Only Chinese can handle pipe."

Speechless, Tal Carson grabbed the youngster's arm. "How did you get here?" he managed to get out.

Hi Hip shrugged and grinned.

"Chinee boy know army game. Cooked once for claptain. Watch him steal out many times after taps. Immigrant guards easy. They looking other way, so I walk out. I follow you. You take plane for Rio Nuevo. Hi Hip climb into baggage place of other big bird an' come to San Diego. I get caught an' run like hellee across Border. I am here. Hi Hip Wong would serve Amelican."

see the men sprawled in grotesque huddles about the floor. Then the blood was congealing in his veins. One of them cried out in high falsetto.

"Get going!" ground out Carson and led the way.

Running swiftly, they hit the street. Soft padding feet sounded behind them and a hatchet whistled through the air, to imbed itself in the side wall.

Streaking through the narrow alleyways, Carson allowed Hi Hip to take the lead. For a moment it looked as if they were penetrating deeper into this maze of passageways, then suddenly they debouched onto the desert floor surrounding the town. Ahead hunkered hangars.

"You fly likee bird?" gasped Wong as they ran.

"Yes!" Carson panted.

"Double whirr birds here," said the Oriental. "Two tails that go *swish!*"

Tal Carson did not understand him for the moment, but when they approached the hangars he could make out the two planes on the starting line and he knew what Wong meant. They were autogyros. Carson felt a thrill shoot through him as he saw them, for here was proof of the fantastic theory with which he had toyed.

A shadow loomed before them and uttered a challenge. Carson did not stop his headlong flight, but crashed into the man with both fists swinging. The impact was terrific and the smuggler went down with a grunt. Carson hurdled his body and continued on. Behind rose cries of pursuit.

Indicating the front cockpit to Wong, Carson leaped into the rear. He turned the switches into position and whirled the crank of the motor. Then he reached into the forward pit and cut loose the starter. Like the working of a well oiled watch, the engine roared into life.

LEERING faces were at the wing tips now, their weapons upraised. One man hit the body of the ship and made the length of it shudder. Behind the Orientals and the Yaqui came the heavier voices of white men. Carson had no recourse but to take the ship aloft with a cold motor. He poured the gas to the engine and streaked across the tarmac. Putting his upper blades into gear, he lifted into the air.

Gazing back along the slipstream, he could see the floodlights of the field come on. Then a pencil of light picked him up and held him in its white beam. He rolled and dived and raised this clumsy crate, but could not shake off the beam. Down there two planes were already leaping after him.

Climbing out of the light range, he

headed the humming plane toward the Border. His lips compressed. This would be a race against time. He gave the engine full throttle.

Hi Hip Wong looked back and pointed skyward. Carson turned. He could make out the dark outlines of two racing planes. They were closing in on him fast. They were pursuit ships, Boeing's fastest. No doubt used as convoys for the smuggling plane.

In moments the screaming hornets were upon him. Carson eased his rudder forward and dived. Then he was rising swiftly as the planes swooped close and discharged a rattle of machine-gun fire. Small holes appeared in the wings of the autogyro.

The two pursuits fell away from Carson like chips of paper thrown from the ledge of a building. Then they were worming up beneath him like flaming killer fish anxious to rip the belly from the cumbersome machine above.

Carson snap-rolled away in a fall that carried him close to the ground and brought a shout of fright from Hi Hip. Then he was hedge-hopping as the planes circled and dived. As they did, Tal Carson cut the updraft blades in and rose to meet them. He had his ship shooting skyward like an elevator when the two ships went past. Again bullets ripped the fuselage.

Tal Carson was conscious then of the lights of San Diego coming up. He dived straight for town, knowing the fighting machines dared not shoot again for fear of attracting the Border Patrol. Over the center of the town, Carson streaked toward the bay. Below him, he made out the long ribbon of black that was the inland water. The planes followed him brazenly, trying to force him into the water.

Carson grinned. He would let them believe he had crashed. He put the ship into a dive and let it go. The

pursuits saw he would never pull up safely, and fell away from his sides.

As he neared the water, Carson cut the forward prop and gunned the lifting blades into motion. The bottom of his stomach seemed to fall out as the ship settled and lost momentum. He set the plane down lightly on the water. It began to sink immediately. He pulled the paralyzed Hi Hip from the cockpit.

"Swim?" he gritted.

"Chinee boy never touch water!" screamed Wong.

Tal Carson's arm went about the boy. Then, with powerful strokes, he was heading toward the lights of a Coast Guard boat.

CHAPTER VI

THE DRAGNET



SHOUTING with all his strength, Tal Carson attracted the night watch. His challenging cry brought other blue-jacketed men and they fished the two men from the bay.

The rigid bo'sun stared suspiciously at the young Oriental.

"Take us to your captain," ordered Carson in a voice that carried authority.

With a curt nod, the bo'sun spun around and led the way amidships. He rapped sharply on a steel door and answered the gruff response from within by entering. The weathered officer of the ship pushed back his desk chair and eyed the dripping men narrowly.

"Just fished them out of the bay, sir," said the bo'sun in reply to his superior's quizzical look.

"I'm Tal Carson, private investigator—my client, the Government," said the young detective crisply. He indicated Hi Hip. "He is my evidence on the case I'm trying to break. For identification you can radio Headquarters in San Francisco. I'd like

to send a message in code to John Stockton there."

The grizzled sea-dog nodded and handed Carson a sheet of paper and pencil. Quickly he scrawled his message. Then while waiting for identification and reply, the captain courteously provided heat for the drying of their clothes. When the replies were received, the captain nodded.

"I'm at your service, Carson."

The detective nodded, but made no reply. His brow was wrinkled in thought, his mind whirling, considering all the things he knew about Nick DuVené.

"Vanity will be a guiding force with that man," he muttered half aloud. "He'd make his deliveries with the same flourish with which he does everything else. That alone would help him escape detection, for most of us look for something below the boards instead of above them. That's why Nick's been getting away with this. He has a new idea, one which I can hardly believe myself. Where he would be discovered if he used a secret landing place in the country, he escapes discovery by using one right out in the open."

He smacked his closed fist into the palm of his left hand.

"I've a hunch so strong I've got to play it," he said to the captain. "I wrecked their plans for their shipment tonight by making off with a plane. But they'll come tomorrow. I want you to have six of your Coast Guard planes in the air after dark then. Have them cruise at fifteen or twenty thousand and pick up anything that crosses the Border. If my guess is right, they'll intercept an autogyro and two convoy ships. Have your squadron commander keep them in sight until he sees a searchlight signal from the ground. Then he is to attack and force them to land!"

"I've been instructed to give you every aid," the captain said simply.

He got up and went to the door. "Bo'sun," he called out. "Get my personal gig alongside." He turned to Carson and extended his hand. "Good luck!"

"Thank you, sir," murmured the young investigator and motioned to Hi Hip to follow him.

Foaming ashore in the gig, the young Oriental said:

"Chinee fisher boy catchum plenty in bloat like this. No wind, no oars, go like hellee allee same."

Carson reached out and patted the youngster's knee.

"I'll have you one of these if you'll promise to return to your own country when this is over."

"I go back and be kling in bloat like this," muttered Hi Hip.

When they were landed, Tal Carson hailed a taxi and told the driver to get to the airport. There he chartered a special plane for Long Beach.

"Allee time fly," Wong remarked, when they were soaring through the air. "Pretty soon all Amelicans have wings."

"The new rackets are fast," commented Carson. "You match speed with speed these days."

Then he settled back to enjoy a moment's relaxation. It was just as he had said. He had come far and fast in the past weeks. His client demanded that.

HIS thoughts drifted to Nan Southern. Here, with the monotonous drone of the plane's motor in his ears, he wondered what would become of her innocent mother when they were all captured and placed behind bars. For Nan was an accomplice and must stand the consequences, though the girl's shyness and charm affected him strangely and he could not get her out of his mind.

She did not seem like other sirens he had known who had taken to crime. Yet who could tell what lay in anyone's heart or brain? Some of the

prettiest faces he had ever seen had masked the cruelest hearts, and some of the most charming manners had been a blind for intrigue.

He cursed himself for a fool and tried to put thoughts of the girl from him. But he could not. He could not see how Nan could hurt her mother so. She was a kindly woman, despite her volubility.

And through his swirl of thoughts emerged a fear. If Nan were one of the gang she might be with them when they made delivery. If she remained in Mexico, the powers of this country could not touch her. Somehow Carson hoped she would—for her mother's sake. If she should be caught here . . .

His cynicism deserted him for the moment and the ending of this case became distasteful. But he had his duty to perform. He must put his code before the individual.

When his plane came to rest at the Municipal Airdrome just behind Signal Hill, Carson went into town and straight to Police Headquarters. He had little trouble making himself known to Captain Alex Bridges.

Through the morning and into the afternoon, they talked. The detective found out what he wanted to know from city records. Nick DuVene owned four oil wells in the field that had started to peter out. This, then, was what had forced him into the smuggling field — this and natural criminal tendencies. He had a record for shyster promotions, but smart lawyers had won him acquittals.

Hi Hip Wong was a silent listener, now and then muttering a few words in Chinese that Carson translated, and a few times confounding the captain by answering direct questions in English. It was nearly five o'clock when they were finished with their plans. Carson rose and shook hands with the police official.

"If it works," he breathed wearily, "it's really beyond believing."

"A long shot," said the chief. "But if you're on the right track—"

"Maybe I'm in the wrong field," mused Carson ruefully. "If such is the case, I'll have to start all over again."

"You should have some sleep," suggested the chief.

"Tomorrow," said Carson. "If everything goes all right I'll sleep for a month."

He fell to looking at the recorded deeds of oil well property. His head began to bob and in a moment he was resting his forehead on the desk edge. The chief and Oriental smiled to themselves.

It was nearly eight o'clock when the chief awoke him. Carson looked around and blinked sleep from his eyes.

"Everything set?" he asked.

"Everything," returned the officer. Then he was pressing a service pistol into the detective's hand. "Best of luck."

"This time I really need it," murmured the investigator, and laid his hand on the shoulder of faithful Hi Hip Wong. "You're staying here, ol' son. There'll be shooting tonight. Maybe I will be able to get you some extra money for taking your countrymen back on the boat I'm going to buy you."

Hi Hip nodded. "'Tis said that no return home is bitter. If you find them, they will come peacefully and willingly."

Carson nodded, and with a glance at the chief, left the room.

Out on the street, he crinkled his nose at the sky. The stars were tumbling out. He had plenty of time. He swung up Third Street to Cherry Avenue and on toward the hill with its hundreds of derricks towering to the sky.

As he strode along, his sharp eyes picked up parked cars that bore men who seemed ready to pull away from the curb at any moment. These were

the men stationed by Chief Bridges with orders to continue their vigil throughout the night, or act when the prearranged signal came through. Here were the sentinels of the highways leading from this city—a tight net that would allow nothing suspicious to escape.

CARSON'S step grew more laggard as he neared the hill. The mast-head lights of the derricks gleamed like diamonds against the dark sky. The slow transition from light to dark in this seacoast town had been completed. He still had hours before the smugglers would operate.

He pulled his hat low over his eyes and trudged among the derricks. The panting wheeze of the turbines hissed like fiery-mouthed serpents. The clank of steel against steel made an undertone. Huge arms rose and fell with regularity as they pumped the black gold from the bowels of the earth.

Slanting his way toward the uppermost knoll, he veered sharply to the right. Searching the dark outlines of the derricks, he marked the four atop the hill at the highest part. Then he chose another which was almost identical in height. Gripped now by the excitement of his hunch, he found the derrick deserted and climbed to the topmost landing. Here he settled down comfortably to wait.

Minutes dragged by and seemed hours. The chill of the ocean crept in and made his perch clammy and cold. Minute particles of moisture gathered on his face, and turned his bronze skin wet and shining. Still he waited. Throughout his service to various clients he had learned that patience brought its own rewards.

And now the piercing headlights of a lumbering truck turned onto a little-used road and began winding its way up the hill. The meshing of the gears groaned under the ponderous vehicle as it passed directly beneath Carson.

He held his breath. Here was what he sought. He could not be sure yet, but his hunch was working out. The dragnet was set. Here was the end of the trail.

Tensely, Tal Carson poised on his perch. His eyes were narrowed, but nothing escaped him. The truck made its tortuous way to the four widely placed derricks and stopped. The watcher could make out the dim blob of the driver as he climbed from the cab and went into the tool house.

Tal Carson's pulse began to hammer as a high-powered car crept up the road with all lights out. So silently did its motor run that it could not be heard above the natural noises of the field. It would have escaped Carson's notice entirely had he not been on this elevation. He knew who were the occupants of that long, sleek car.

He counted the shapes that got out and went into the tool shed. Three. Nick DuVene, Torp Pedrotti and Sheve Sangster. Carson sighed with relief. He had half expected Nan Southern to be with them. He was glad she was not. At least she would not be caught in this net he had drawn about the criminals.

He watched while the men came from the tool house and scattered out to the four derricks. They worked at something. Carson could not tell what, in the darkness. From somewhere in the tool shed a motor started up. Were they hoisting some signal?

Then his muscles were bunching. Another car was coming up the road at high speed, reeling crazily about the turns. Its headlights were on full and as it swung it etched the truck and car already at the derrick. Its beams caught something weblike between the derricks. The brakes screeched and a slim shape slid from behind the wheel. In the glare of the headlamps, Carson made out—Nan!

Men boiled from the tool house and surrounded her. He could see her

waving her arms angrily, then the men closed in on her. Her scream was muffled by the running motor. Then she was borne into the derrick shed. Someone switched off the lights of her car.

Carson cursed softly. It tore at him to know they were hurting her. He could not understand this action or the weblike netting he had seen being hoisted amid the derricks. His jaws tightened. Something had gone wrong somewhere between this girl and the gang. He had to free her, for now she would be valuable state's evidence. He was beginning to climb down when the droning of a plane came to his ears.

Memory of his duty to the Government made him draw back onto the platform. Much as he would like to help Nan, there was no forsaking the work he had to do. Torn with doubts and impatience, he crouched, waiting.

Then he was conscious of an amazing thing. Looking down, he saw a hooded light. Immediately, he knew what it was. From inside those derricks burned rays shot into the sky. From above a perfect square was produced in which the autogyro could center itself and hang almost motionless by its upper blade!

CHAPTER VII

SMUGGLER SHOW-DOWN



AS CARSON stared, he saw something hurtling from the sky. It was a tiny bundle that grew larger and turned end over end as it fell. Carson held his breath. That bundle was a man, an Oriental. Squarely in the center of the four derricks he fell, bounced high, came down again and seemed to scramble in the air to the derrick's edge.

Here was the most cunning plan ever devised by outlaw intelligence. Here in the heart of this noisy oil

field was a huge net stretched between four derrick tops. The Chinese were dropped from the clouds onto this net and they scrambled to the ground and entered the huge drum truck to be wheeled away. It was both a fantastic and a sound idea, an idea taken from the old haystack method of smuggling. In those days, when smugglers had first used planes, the Orientals had to be dropped on the hay and taken away in cars. That entailed a huge field, repeated dives by a plane that attracted attention. That method had been short-lived because of its crudeness. Here the two convoy ships scattered attention by zooming around as if to land at the Municipal Airdrome. It was ingenious.

Few people penetrated this field on sight-seeing tours. The only way for this plan to be discovered was from a height. That was foiled by aeronautic laws. No plane could come within range of another when it is about to land. Cruising ships would cut a wide arc around this oil field so long as the convoy ships kept up their circling.

The men working the wells were the men hired by DuVene for that work, and entirely free from suspicion. It was a perfect scheme. Carson paid tribute to Nick DuVene's cunning. Something like this was the only way to fool the efficient state peace officers. Smuggling had been brought to a standstill by their efforts. They had forced Nick DuVene into something brand new to gain his ends.

Grimly, Tal Carson nodded to himself. He had not figured it this way, but his hunch had proved correct—as far as the oil fields were concerned. His pistol came into his hand as he counted the men released from the plane above.

He could see the dark forms coming down the derrick ladder and being jammed into the truck. When

the last one was stuffed into the vehicle, Carson's finger tightened on the trigger. The gun bucked in his hand and its bark echoed among the towering oil derricks.

The piercing beam of a searchlight beat into the sky and fastened on the gyro. Then came the drone of Coast Guard planes as they swooped down. Whining like hornets, the squadron dived upon the smuggler convoy and began circling them into a landing.

Sirens screamed from the roads below as police cars came from all directions. The din was terrific, mingled with the wheezing and clanking of the field machinery.

Bedlam reigned at the derrick tool house. The spotlight on the shiny black car pointed out Carson before he was halfway down the rig. Two guns spoke and the breath of hot lead fanned his cheek.

Agilely he swung inside the derrick and came down a cable. The wire tore and shredded his hands, but there was no time to think of that. Here was the end of a long and dangerous trail. Long Beach police had the hill completely surrounded and there was no chance for anyone to escape. He knew the radio was blaring the call for many more squads to come to their assistance.

As he hit the earth, he spun to the threat of shouting men. A pistol flamed in his face. Torp and Sheve had come for him.

The detective had no alternative but to shoot. His code was to apprehend and not kill unless absolutely necessary, but now it was his life or the killers'. His gun bucked and the men went down.

GRIPPING the butt of his pistol firmly, Carson hurdled the men's bodies and streaked for the derrick. Already, the police were closing in and the mass of smugglers were milling hopelessly about.

One man detached himself from the

rest with someone struggling in his arms.

Yelling, Carson plunged in pursuit. Nick DuVene, yellow as others of his ilk, was making his getaway, using Nan Southern as a shield.

Over the rugged terrain they bounded, Nick making startling speed despite the thrashing girl.

"Stop!" shouted the detective. "You're through, Nick!"

The answer was a shot. Like the cornered rat he was, the leader and brains of this ring meant to sell himself dearly. He was possessed of animal courage and was showing it now. Carson could not return the man's fire for fear of hitting Nan.

Into the darkness they raced. Carson was gaining at every step when suddenly Nick dodged into a derrick house. Cautiously, Tal Carson approached, unaware that his body was silhouetted against the night sky through the doorway.

"Look out!" screamed Nan.

Instinctively, Carson threw himself forward and down. A bullet plowed a furrow through his hair. Growling, he came to his feet and with Nick's weaving form before him, struck out. His palm-edge blow hit Nick across the wrist and sent the smuggler's gun spinning into the darkness. The detective grabbed him.

Wiggling like an eel, the gang leader fought free. Then his fists were raining blows about Carson's face. Grimly, the detective's chin came down against his chest. All the hatred he could feel for such a creature who dealt in slavery was in his hard muscles. He launched himself at Nick.

The fight developed into a grim slugfest. Nan crouched against the far wall, her breath coming jerkily as she watched the tide of battle swing from one to the other. Her presence and the slow rhythmical pumping of the long arm of machinery in the center of the room were the only witnesses to this battle of ha-

tred—hatred for what each man represented.

Carson's breathing became labored, but he bore in the **harder**. In the darkness he could not always hit his target—his opponent's face—but he could feel the pains shoot up his arms each time he landed solidly on any part of Nick.

Nick grunted and fought like a cornered cougar. With the abnormal strength of men gone berserk, they slugged and slashed and slammed their way about the derrick house. Once Nick tried to drive Carson onto the pump and crush the life from him. Nimbly, the young investigator avoided it and renewed his savage attack.

At last Carson could instinctively feel that Nick was through. The man's type of life and living could not stand up against a battering such as was being dealt out to him. The sting was gone from the smuggler's blows. His breath wheezed from his lungs.

Then Nick made one last desperate move. He drew back and dived headlong at Carson. It was a lunge intended to catapult the detective into the machinery which ran this well. With a bound, Carson avoided Nick and tried to catch him as he went past. But it was useless. It was the smuggler himself who plunged among the cogs. His awful screams tore the air as the wheels bit into his flesh.

Sickened by Nick's fate, Carson rushed to Nan's side. She was swaying against the wall, her hands to her ears, sobbing as he caught her in his arms.

Gently, Tal Carson led her into the open. The machinery of the well kept grinding.

AS THEY trudged up the hill toward the circle of lights that were the police cars, Carson spoke firmly to Nan.

"Tell me quickly all you know about this."

In a voice that trembled, she told him.

"I suspected something was wrong, when Bill went to work for Nick. I tried to stop him. I knew Nick wasn't paying important money just to be flown about oil fields. It wasn't until you escaped from those men that I found out what the job really was."

"Why did you tell Nick who I was?"

"I had to protect Bill for Mother's sake," she went on wearily. "I thought you were after him. Nick said you crashed in San Diego Bay. I died a thousand deaths, for Nick said he would see that you were only run back across the Border if I told him who you were. Then Nick came out openly and told me Bill would run Chinese tonight—or else. They left Mother and me in Rio Nuevo. I got the car and came here. They would have killed me—"

"How did you know who I was?" Carson asked, eyeing her narrowly.

"When Bill was flying transports to San Francisco, I made a trip with him. He was showing me about Chinatown. It was right after you broke that Tong case. We both saw you there, and saw your picture in the paper. I—I've just never forgotten. That's all."

Warmth flooded Tal Carson. Her final words had been a confession she could not conceal. This girl had seen him once and had never forgotten him. It had taken a smuggling ring to bring them together. No more cynicism now. This was more than coincidence—it was Fate.

He squeezed her arm. "I think everything will be all right," he said. "I'm convinced Bill didn't know what he was doing until it was too late. I'll get him off as easy as I can."

SHE looked at him thankfully, but uttered no words.

Inside the police circle, Carson was confronted by Chief Bridges.

"We've accounted for everyone but Nick DuVene," he said.

"Nick's dead," Carson said simply.

Bridges clapped him on the shoulder.

"A fine job this night, Carson!" he boomed. "You figured it out—but how?"

"I was lucky," the detective said, grinning. "I let things I heard said develop a hunch and followed through. I started at a given point and then worked to the end. The case developed for me. The big idea came when Wong led me to the autogyros at Rio Nuevo. Knowing what could be done with one of them after I had flown it, I told myself that if Nick had a finger in the oil business there was something to this autogyro idea. I knew his method of smuggling was something different. All the old ways have been exposed. I figured he was smuggling through an oil field somewhere. Signal Hill—and the City Hall records confirmed my guess he had property there—sounded like the best prospect. It was less likely he would be detected here. I didn't dream of the net idea. He must have developed it from the old haystack gag."

"I missed one guess a mile. I had thought of the gyro being landed among the derricks. I can see the impossibility of that now. He would have got caught sooner or later if he had tried it. I really couldn't miss, no matter how he did it, with our dragnet in the sky and on the ground."

"And good work, too," said the chief admiringly. "You let the case develop itself. That's good. And here's a message from the airport. The Coast Guard forced all three planes down intact. The two convoy pilots won't talk, but the one flying the gyro keeps hollering he wants to get his hands on Nick DuVene."

Tal Carson turned to Nan. She was smiling, her fears and worries gone.

"You'd better get some sleep now, Carson," the chief said. "You'll crack up if you don't."

"Then I'm going to bust wide open," the detective declared, grinning. "I've got to get a Chinese fisher boy a boat and send him home. I've got to get out my report to my client, the Government. I've got to get a

transport pilot reinstated—and I've got to get Miss Southern's mother out of Mexico."

"Mother's here in Long Beach," said Nan. "She'll be glad to have me bring you home—if you aren't too tired."

Tal Carson's grin widened more every minute.



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The Comeback

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The blackjack caught Berger on the head

AT THE door, erstwhile Police-lieutenant Ralph Bolton took his fiancée's small hand and kissed it, and tried a Continental bow from the hips, but the by-play was dismal because of the tears swimming in Judy's eyes.

Bolton whispered good night without kissing her lips because Sammy was there. Sammy was on crutches.

Tossed Off the Force in a Frame, Detective-Lieutenant Bolton Tackles a Grim Gambling Set-Up to Smash Through to Vindication!

He was grave and clear-skinned and he grinned bravely up at Bolton, his idol. One leg extended stiffly backward from the knee. Judy wouldn't look at him. When she was alone, Bolton knew, her tears were not always held back.

He patted Sammy's head wordlessly and went down the three flights of stairs from Judy's small apartment with a lump in his throat. As he reached the sidewalk in the squalid neighborhood the lump had turned to gorge and he was angry again at the futility of everything. Not discouraged; angry.

Walking was cheaper than taxis and he had plenty of time, so he walked to the newsstand Lally had mentioned at about nine o'clock. The newsstand was an odd place for a big shot racketeer like Lally to want to meet him. It was a hole-in-the-wall affair. Opening off the front room which held a showcase and magazine racks was another, smaller, cubicle which might have been an office but was nothing but a storeroom in which were a littered desk and two chairs.

The newsstand owner, Rogers, was gaunt, Slav-cheeked, leather-skinned, beady-eyed, suspicious, foreign. He showed Bolton in, shut the door, left him with Lally.

"You look good, Lieutenant," Lally said graciously. "You ain't changed a bit."

Bolton sat down with his overcoat on.

"Cut the lieutenant part, Lally. I've lost my sense of humor. What do you want?"

"Don't get riled," Lally said easily. "You always was quick on the draw, like the night your squad raided my place out at Laramore and you conked my man Speers. Speers was the best bouncer I ever saw, but he sure let you in."

Lally offered Bolton a cigarette, which Bolton refused.

"Let's get down to cases," Bolton

said sharply. "I don't like this place. Anyhow, Speers had it coming to him."

"I know. You're square. That's why—"

"Get this, Lally," Bolton interrupted. "I didn't come here on a post-mortem. You know about me. I used to be a bureau lieutenant, with a future. Now I'm driving a taxi for hamburger money, and taking it. The girl I was going to marry is discouraged. Her brother was hit by a car and may be a cripple for life. I'm wearing last year's suit and year before last's overcoat. We won't talk about it any more."

"I was going to say that's why I sent for you," Lally said, with his black eyes on Bolton's face. "I can get you back where you were. I can give you back your good name. That's what I'm offering you—not money, but your reputation and your job and your future. I know what that means to you."

JOHN LALLY was one of those plump men who, underneath, are solid and muscular. Bolton knew his career. The police files gave him plenty of space. He had fought his way up through hijacking, rum-running, policy games, slot machines, through the better part of two decades until now he was king of the gambling ring which had this town sewed up. He was an organizer of great ability. He controlled criminals without actually being one of them. Policemen respected him because they had never been able to break him.

Bolton's gray eyes were hard and cold. He laughed edgily.

"You talk as if you're mayor, Lally. What the hell could you do for me? I got a trial board hearing. Halladay and Chief Larkin tried to help me and couldn't. That hearing was secret. You couldn't—"

Lally quickly held up a finger. Through the glass partition they

could hear Rogers talking to a customer. The talk ceased and the outer door closed. Lally shrugged.

"I could," he said. "Now get this, Bolton, and then tell me how secret the trial board hearing was kept. Six months ago you and Rochelle took a squad car and drove out of town. You had with you Michael Chepak, the embezzler. Chepak, as cashier of the Loman Bank got away with half a million, cold, and broke the bank and a lot of the bank's customers. He was a very important guy and would be more important when Swazey, the bank president, was caught, which he never has been. You and your sergeant, Rochelle, were to take Chepak to Joliet, with orders not to let him out of your sight. Even the train wasn't to be trusted. So what happened?"

"Pretty soon you get to a gas station and you stop for gas, even though the car's tank had been filled at the Bureau garage before you left, and Joliet's only forty-five miles away. Rochelle goes in the rest room and leaves you with Chepak—leaves you handcuffed to Chepak. When he comes back, Chepak is gone. You've been slugged and are out like a light. Somebody has taken the cuff key out of your pocket, loosened Chepak and taken him along. You say the guy who did it was Chino. You say you saw Chino but he hit you before you could draw your gun. You tell the trial board that, and they laugh at you. They figure Swazey or Chepak got to you. Rochelle wasn't even in the car, so he's cleared."

A little too steadily Bolton brought out a cigarette and lighted it. He blew the match out deliberately and ground it under his foot.

"You know quite a bit, Lally. I'll say that. We did need gas. There was a leak in the tank or the line, somewhere. So I said let's pull into the gas station. Rochelle backed that up, too, only he said it was my idea to

stop. It was. I did see Chino—I'd know him anywhere because I'd pinched him twice and because he'd escaped just a month before and the whole country was looking for him.

"But that was what made everything stick. The day after Chepak's lam from us, Chino and Chepak are killed. Chino's body, or pieces of it, is found alongside a trestle. Both of Chepak's legs and one of his arms are found. They must have been afoot, in the middle of the trestle, so with both of them gone the only witness I'd ever have was gone. That cooked me. Chino was a convicted murderer on the lam. Chepak, or Swazey, or both of them, got to him, paid him to free Chepak. He did."

"If you could find Swazey—" began Lally studiously.

"Swazey's in Turkey," said Bolton shortly. "Or Greece. Anywhere, some place where he can't be extradited. I can't go after him. Even so, what could I prove?"

"You don't have to go anywhere," Lally retorted. "I said I can clear you. I can. Right here."

BOLTON smiled bitterly.

"You'd convince Mayor Halladay and Chief Larkin . . . Hell, John Lally, since when is your word worth any more than a broken cop's? Even so, how could I help *you*? I know my hands are clean. Think I'd dirty *them* working for a—"

"Not working," Lally answered quietly. "What I ask of you won't soil your self-respect if that is what you call it. Like a lot of honest guys, you are a fool, Bolton. You'd rather have Judy Marshall, your sweetheart, worry herself sick over her brother, you'd rather she stayed an old maid eating her heart out for a home and a future with you, you'd rather go along pushing a hack for stamp money than—"

"That'll be enough," Bolton whispered, and Lally shut up. He sat still

as another customer came into the front door of the newsstand and then went out.

"I want to ask you one thing," Lally went on quickly. "Did you ever try to figure out just where Steve Rochelle fitted into all this? Did it ever occur to you—"

Again the gambler's voice faded out. Someone was rapping on the glass of the partition. Bolton looked up to see the gaunt face of Rogers. He was rolling his eyes down at Lally, jerking his head. Lally jumped up quickly.

"I'll get in touch with you, Bolton," he snapped.

He fled toward another door in the rear room, a door all but concealed by stacks of magazines and newspapers. The door opened and shut behind him. At the same moment, Bolton heard the front door slap shut. Another shadow was at the glass-partition, a peering face. Fishlike eyes stared down upon him momentarily. He heard Rogers' murmured words but could not catch them. There was a light patter of feet and the tinkle of silver on the showcase in the other room. Then the outer door shut again.

Bolton came out of the rear room, frowning.

"What was Berger doing in here?" he asked.

Old Rogers' voice was guttural.

"Berger? I do not know a Berger. That man who was just here? He bought cigarettes. That was all. I do not know."

Bolton eyed the old man, his anger showing. Then he gave up. The tough, crinkly face was a mask that hid many secrets, that would keep them hidden. Yet part of it, Bolton knew. Berger was one of Rochelle's stoolies.

He got back to Judy's apartment at ten o'clock as he had promised. Sammy had gone to bed. Judy was lying on the studio couch, reading.

He kissed her and sat down in a chair, holding her hand.

"What did Lally want?" She tried to smile cheerfully but the worry remained in her eyes.

"He didn't have a chance to tell me all of it," Bolton said slowly. "He had another appointment. But he seems to have figured something out. About Rochelle."

"Rochelle! That—that—"

"Now, sweet, we don't know yet. Besides, what good is it without proof?"

"What did Lally know?"

"He'll tell me later. He wants something in return."

"Don't get mixed up with Lally. Please, Ralph. At least, there's still us, you and I."

HE GLANCED about at the clean but threadbare apartment. His eyes stopped momentarily on the door beyond which Sammy lay.

"I won't," he said. "But we've got to get out of this. We've got to get married, start a home, take care of Sammy. But don't worry. I know Lally. He's a crook, but he's square in his way."

"Don't trust any crook!" Judy flared, but it was not in anger. It was fear.

"You saw Doc Fellows?" he asked abruptly. "What did he say about Sammy?"

He searched her brown eyes and watched her face turn white. When she answered so casually he knew she was lying, trying to save him worry.

"He'll have his report ready in a day or two," she said, and added seriously: "Sammy can be cured. His leg can be saved."

"Did Doc say that?"

"No, but—"

He dropped to his knees and took her in his arms. For a minute they clung together, then drew apart as they heard footfalls on the stairs and a knock at the door. He got up and

opened the door. A telegraph messenger stood there. The message was from Lally. It read:

Come to the newspaper room of the public library at one tomorrow. Important.

Bolton showed it to Judy.

"Don't go!" she begged. "A crook is a crook. No matter what he says."

"I'll be careful," he promised, "but I must at least find out what he wants. He might know a lot that would help us."

At eleven, Bolton went to the taxi garage for his cab. At seven, tired, he checked in and went to his hall bedroom. He slept badly.

At five minutes to one the next day he came into the cavernous, book-smelly, brightly daylighted room at the public library. Meeting Lally here was even more incongruous than meeting him in the newsstand back room. Lally in a library! But Lally was there, waiting, with his hard, roundish face casual and his black eyes profound. Bolton sat down beside him at a table behind a long bookcase. They whispered.

"Berger's a rat," Bolton said. "He's Rochelle's stool-pigeon. Why was he spying on us? And where does Rogers fit into this? He was on the watch for you, tipped you off. Now come clean, or I'm getting up and walking out of here now."

"That's what I started to tell you," Lally replied, "when I ran up against those—what do you call them—scruples of yours. Now listen to me, Bolton—or you are a fool. If you walk out, you're sunk. You know Rochelle, or did. Since you were ousted he's a lieutenant, being next in the seniority ratings. He's also ambitious. Among his ambitions is a scheme to break me and my organization. He's working under a banner of reform. In reality, he's crooked, crookeder than I ever was. He's working for Setinius."

"Marco Setinius! New York!"

"Yes, Marco. New York's too hot, what with Dewey out for president and all. Marco Setinius is making a fight to get into Chi. Rochelle is with him. A police lieutenant can swing a lot of weight in certain districts, no matter what kind of men the mayor and the chief are. Rochelle wants to be a millionaire. Maybe, if Setinius gets in, he'll be one. He's not a cop at heart and never was. You know it."

BOLTON was white with genuine astonishment. Lally was coming clean, telling him this. Here was news that was worth a fortune. But not to him, unless—

"What good will this do me? If Rochelle had a hand in framing me he still wouldn't admit it. He'd laugh and deny tampering with the gas tank and putting a leak in it so we'd have to stop at that gas station."

"He won't laugh—not if you help me," said Lally, barely moving his lips.

"What can I do that others can't do?"

"Plenty. Listen! If Setinius gets in, I'm out, I'm ruined. They'd gun me if I stayed. So Setinius must not get in. There's one way to stop him."

"How?"

"Blow the fact that Rochelle is in with him."

"That's hard to do."

"You can do it. You're the only man I know of who can—that I would trust." Lally, leaning forward, staring down at the table, was talking fast but carefully. "Meech, city editor of the *Times*, is one of your best friends. He's tried to help you, but you've been too stubborn to let him. Now he can help—and he will. Go to him and tell him you can get him a picture of Rochelle talking to Setinius. Tell him that after you get the picture, you'll have the story of what's behind it. That'll be curtains for Rochelle. The *Times* is a powerful sheet, and Meech is too honest

for anybody but you to approach."

Bolton's hands opened and closed under the table.

"I ought to poke you, Lally," he said angrily. "You must think I'm dumb as a dog. You use me as cat's-paw. You run Setinius out. You break Rochelle. And I'm left just where I started. Out! Why, damn you, Lally!" He started to rise, and sank back in his chair. "I thought you had more judgment, you—you—"

Lally didn't move a muscle.

"I've got a watch camera here," he said evenly. "It cost four Cs. Came from Germany. They tell me it's got a lens on it that's years ahead of anything its size that's out. It'll take good pictures. I had it tested. You can carry it in your vest pocket. Take it and go to the Club Arroyo tonight at eleven o'clock. In a private dining room on the second floor you'll find Setinius and Rochelle. Take their picture. This thing holds three films. It's simple to operate. There's full directions with it. Then bring the films to me, in the camera. I'll have a man develop them. If they're good enough to see I'll clear your name completely, Rochelle or no Rochelle. I say it just like that."

"Where'll I find you?" Bolton stood up.

"If you come out of the Club Arroyo alive, go to Judy's house. I'll send you a wire there by one o'clock. . . . I mean Miss Marshall. Excuse me."

"I work, Lally. I'm due at eleven."

"That's up to you. Here." Lally's hand went into a pocket and came out with a small square box. Bolton took it.

"Nuts," whispered Bolton and then pushed himself away from the table and walked away.

At the door he glanced back. Lally was watching him, the round head turned over a heavy shoulder. Lally was wiping his lips with his tongue.

ON THE street Bolton trudged along moodily. Boul' Mich' was bright and colorful and the crowds were hurrying and the wind off the lake fresh and clear. He went on and in half an hour came to his room. Into the lower drawer of the bureau he stuffed the box containing the watch camera. He wouldn't use it. Hell, no. Getting tangled up with Lally would kill even any slight chance he might have to demand another hearing before the police trial board. To men like Mayor Halladay and Chief Larkin, Lally's kind were dynamite. Besides, how could Lally help him?

He left the room and went over to the garage from which he worked. He took a couple of extra shirts from his locker and tied them in newspaper for leaving at the laundry. The day super came over to him and put his hand on his shoulder.

"I hate to tell you, Bolton," he mumbled.

"What?"

"The last ten men have to go. Can't afford to keep 'em on for another two months, till summer. Company's hedging. Orders. Not enough for gas and maintenance. You know how fares are."

"When?" asked Bolton dully. He knew, too well.

"Saturday."

Bolton walked out. He didn't begrudge the two thousand that had gone from his savings for Sammy. In thought, Judy's brother was already his brother. It was Judy he was thinking of. Doctor bills were mounting. The thought drove him to a drugstore telephone. He called Doc Fellows.

"Got a report on Sammy yet?" he asked.

"Why yes, Ralph. Sorry to tell you this. There's one man I'd trust to cure Sammy and I'd trust him absolutely. But, damn it, he's in Florida. Operates a bone clinic—"

"Can't you?" Bolton asked it desperately.

"Wouldn't take a chance touching it. Haven't had enough of that kind of thing. Lattimer has. He can have Sammy running within three months. I know it. Let me know and I'll transmit my case history. . . ."

Bolton did not see Judy that evening. She was working. Yet his thoughts of her were achingly tender because of his feeling of something impending, something either tremendous and final or tragically burlesque. The feeling remained until he was on his way to his room and then his mind came back to Rochelle and how Rochelle had brought the car around to the front of the bureau the day they had started for Joliet with Chepak.

Michael Chepak had been in the front seat, slim, straw-colored, shifty eyed, a little defiant. He had been at the beginning of a thirty-year sentence, no time off. None of the money stolen by Swazey and himself had been recovered. Chepak denied having hidden it. He had accused Swazey of doublecrossing him, and had promised to testify against Swazey. But Swazey was then inaccessible—and would remain so. And Chepak had been mangled by a train.

Chepak had been a desperate man that day he had started for Joliet. His money gone, his beautiful, hard sweetheart gone, he faced eternal loneliness. Bolton had known Chepak's desperation, and had been careful. He had put the prisoner between himself and Rochelle, with Rochelle driving. It had been Rochelle who noticed the leaking of the gasoline, and who had called Bolton's attention to it at the gas gauge.

"PULL in at the next station," Lieutenant Bolton had said.

Then he had remained with Chepak, as ranking officer, and because he was conscientious about his responsibility. Chepak's bank had been in a

Bohemian neighborhood and most of the defrauded depositors were Slovaks. They had become mob-mad, which was the reason for the special trip by squad car to prison instead of by train.

Bolton hadn't even seen Chino, who was as agile as a ferret, until Chino was on the running-board with his gun lifted. Then it had been too late. The clip on the head had knocked all light from Bolton's brain. He hadn't felt the unlocking of the handcuffs. Rochelle hadn't arrived until the escaping pair was three minutes gone, more than two miles down the road.

At the hearing, Rochelle had made a great display of sincerity and honesty, apparently trying to defend Bolton. Yet everything he said put the blame squarely upon Bolton. Rochelle, with his beefy face glowing and his voice unctuous, had looked like an honest bumpkin. He was, as Bolton knew, as cunning and devious and hard as a jackal. In doing his sworn duty he had ruined Bolton's career and had been awarded Bolton's job. . . .

Bolton went to the garage and from there called Meech at the *Times* office. Meech listened enthusiastically.

"Come up here and get a press-card," he said finally. "Hurry, Lieutenant. This is great!"

Without changing his clothes, Bolton drove his cab out of the garage. At the *Times* editorial office he got the press-card. It was exactly eleven when he pulled into the lot behind the Club Arroyo.

In front there was a doorman, who let him pass. Inside the foyer a thin, gray-haired man in evening clothes moved to block his path, then gave way. Bolton checked his hat. Turning from the counter he faced a full-bodied, bull-necked figure.

"Looking for someone?" The tone was politely sinister.

"You Mr. Lipscomb?" Bolton saw the thin man over the heavy man's

shoulder, hovering close. "The manager?"

"Sure—but we go formal here at night."

"Press!" snapped Bolton impatiently. "I wanna interview a party."

He jerked from his pocket the red press card that Meech had given him. The big man, Lipscomb, took it and studied it. A change came over him.

"Who do you want to interview?" he asked patronizingly.

"You should be told!" Bolton feigned sudden anger. "You letting me in, or not? Since when has the Arroyo started high-hatting the *Times*? What have we ever said against you?"

"Okay. Okay." Lipscomb stepped back with suddenly understanding eyes sweeping over Bolton's far from dapper clothing. "Okay, *Times*. How'd I know?" He swung to the thin man. "Jeeter, take this gentleman through the lounge and give him a table."

At the table, when Jeeter had left him, Bolton took a two-minute survey of the huge, low-lighted room, then, following a waiter, went on into the kitchen. A big chef grinned at him.

"Where's the service stairway?" Bolton asked, an official note in his voice.

The chef pointed. Bolton went on, through a door, up the dark passage. In a dim-lit upper corridor a figure blocked his way. It was Berger. Berger's face was in the light, Bolton's was not.

"You ain't no waiter, bud," snarled Berger. "What d'ya want?"

Berger's hands were on Bolton's shoulders and Berger was bending slightly, trying to see into Bolton's face.

"I'm looking for the rest room," Bolton said. "They told me—"

His hand came out of his hip pocket and he swung. The blackjack caught Berger on the forehead, high. Berger

slumped, his hands trailing along Bolton's arms. Bolton caught him and lowered him to the floor.

There were four private dining rooms. With the watch camera in his hand, Bolton opened the door of the first one and looked in. There was a party of four, elderly men with young women.

"Pardon me," Bolton murmured, and went out.

In the second room, a handsome young man was kissing a pretty girl.

"Come right in," the fellow said sarcastically. "This is a convention."

"Well, I like that," the girl said, as Bolton went out.

In the third private room two men sat talking. One of them was small and dapper, with a long white face that came to a peak at the nose and tapered off to forehead and chin. From pictures, Bolton knew this was Marco Setinius.

"Hold it, Rochelle," Bolton said to the man with Setinius: "Berger let me in. I want to talk with you a minute or so. What I've got to say won't take long."

Rochelle's round, red face seemed to fade into colorlessness as Bolton watched him.

"How the—" Rochelle began. Then he finished with the one word: "Bolton!"

"I get around," Bolton told him and came to the table.

He nodded down at Setinius. Setinius smiled coolly and turned to Rochelle.

"Is this *the* Bolton?" he asked, and Rochelle nodded.

Pulling out a chair, Bolton seated himself and put his elbow on the table.

"Let's skip the introductions," he said swiftly. "I got word that Mr. Setinius was on business here, so I figured maybe I could do myself some good. You know how my luck has been, Lieutenant." He was talking to Rochelle, and Rochelle was listening while his jaws worked under the

heavy folds of skin on his cheeks. Bolton turned to Setinius. "I need something to do and need it bad. The lieutenant can tell you that. Maybe you'll have something for me here in Chi. If you do, get in touch. I figured coming here was the surest way to see you."

He stopped, pulled out a watch and looked at it, holding it in his palm. Then, keeping it there, he went on talking.

"I been driving a cab," he said, and smiled slowly. "I know the town like a book."

Setinius was smiling also, watching the former detective's face and his lips. The eyes of Marco Setinius were deep set in his narrow face and seemed the eyes of a very old, very shrewd, very hard animal. Rochelle suddenly found his voice.

"It's okay with me, Bolton. I didn't know you were looking . . . Well, you know, looking for something better. If I had, I'd have had you in mind."

Rochelle was recovering himself, Bolton saw. The man was worried, but he was hiding it.

"Sure, I know," Bolton answered easily.

Setinius put a quick query. "Who knows of me being here? Who told you?"

"A New Yorker," answered Bolton with a grin, and met those powerful eyes straightly. If he could hold out for two minutes longer, he would win.

BUT Rochelle's sharp mind was working again.

"That's not quite enough, Bolton. Tell us just who put you next to our meeting. Now's the time to come clean if you want to work with us."

Rochelle was too smart, Bolton knew, to have a bluff tried on him. And too desperate for anyone to take chances with him.

"Lally, John Lally," he said, turning his watch over in his hands. "I drive him around a lot. I heard him

tell Henry Flowers that Mr. Setinius was coming to Chicago."

Setinius folded his arms and Bolton saw him do it. Mentally, he computed the length of time it would take for Setinius to seize the gun under his arm, level it and fire. Setinius was far more dangerous than Rochelle.

Once more, Bolton turned the watch in his hands. He tilted his chair backward, facing them both. Outwardly he was calm, inwardly as rigid as stone. Only the truth would be plausible enough to stop Setinius. And that had to be within the time Berger would require to recover consciousness or be found. Bolton felt sweat on his forehead.

"Have you told anyone?" Setinius asked.

"Not a soul," said Bolton truthfully.

Setinius straightened a little in his chair. Bolton waited. Except for the blackjack, he had come here unarmed. Then he saw the New Yorker's arms tense slightly. The muscles in Bolton's legs tightened for a leap.

"I see no reason for not taking him on," Setinius said, looking at Rochelle. "We'll need men, plenty of men—of the kind we want. From what I've heard, Bolton can't be anything else but that kind of man. He'll never get back on the police force, will he?"

Tight-lipped, Rochelle would not look at Bolton. Bolton answered for him.

"The only witnesses I ever had are dead. Rochelle will tell you that. I've got to make money. I can't do it driving a taxi. Figure it out for yourself."

His eyes never left Setinius' face and he could see Setinius' shoulders, too, and would know if they moved. If they did move, the hands would move, and it would be all over.

"I have one thought," Setinius said. "You might be crossing us for Lally. You could make money working for

Lally, too. You must be a friend of Lally's. What is your answer to that?"

"If I was working, or wanted to work for Lally, why should I come here? I got it doped out this way: you're coming in—Lally's going out. I'm playing the winner. If I thought Lally would win, I'd be talking to him, not to you."

Bolton could feel warmth on his back, and his head felt tight from his muscular tension. Then Setinius' hands came out from beneath his arms and slid down his dinner coat lapels. Bolton's sigh was nearly audible.

Setinius' hands rested on his knees. He smiled.

Leaving, Bolton used the front stairway. He knew that within minutes Berger would be up. Yet that was all the leeway he wanted. As he hurried out the door, the thin man made him a little bow. . . .

JUDY was waiting up for him as he had known she would be. But Sammy being there with her showed that the boy was worried, too. Sammy, too thin in his pajamas and a bathrobe of Judy's, was manly enough not to ask questions, but he watched Bolton out of his worshipful eyes.

The message was there, also. It had been delivered an hour ago. Bolton frowned at that. Lally's fatalism apparently included himself. If he hadn't come out of the Club Arroyo alive . . . But he shrugged this off. Lally's message read:

Come to 201 West Oak Street. I'm waiting.

Judy wouldn't get any sleep until he called her, so Bolton hurried, first to his own room, where he discarded the blackjack and got a gun—his policeman's gun. It was nearly one o'clock when he knocked on the door of a small frame house set back from the street. When the door opened, he saw Rogers, the man of the news-

stand. Rogers faded back and Bolton went in. Lally was there, this time sunk in a worn, overstuffed chair, in darkness, out of the circle of yellow light cast by a frayed bridge lamp.

The apartment was not American. It was Continental-peasant. Bolton knew the difference subconsciously. A music-box stood on a mantel. Scattered about it were little porcelain figures. On the wall was a large lithograph of a bearded statesman, stiff, military, without the kindliness of a Lincoln or a Washington. Another picture showed mountains, exact, regular, cultivated mountains, with a spired village at their foot.

Standing, Bolton glanced about the room and saw that Rogers had disappeared. Lally continued to look at him without showing any anxiety.

"All right," Bolton said. "Now it's your turn to do some talking."

He sat down in a stiff-backed chair facing Lally. He was wondering again at the strange meeting places Lally picked.

"I guess I don't have to ask," Lally said. "You got the pictures." It was a statement.

"I think I did. The light was fair. You said the lens was very fast."

Lally didn't ask him how he did it and this nettled Bolton.

"Give the camera to Rogers," Lally instructed. "He'll develop the films. If you've got what I want, I'll deliver my part of the bargain."

"You'll deliver—here? Now get this, Lally—"

Bolton jumped to his feet and towered over the dark figure. A door opened and Rogers was standing there in the shadows. At a gesture from Lally, the old man ambled forward. He was watching Bolton.

"Let him have the camera—the films." Lally spoke wearily. "I said I'd clear your name, and I will, whether the films are good or not. But I figure they will be. You're a

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Cokey's Perfect Plan

By ROBERT LESLIE
BELLEM

Author of "Triple Cross," "Blood Debt," etc.

A Safe-Cracker Gets a New Angle on the Proverb: "Do Unto Others as You Would Have Others Do Unto You"

BY TEN-THIRTY that night, "Cokey" Bond had the bank thoroughly cased. He knew just when the watchman made his rounds, and how often. He knew what kind of front-door lock he would have to jimmy, and where to bridge the wire connected with the burglar-alarm system.

His plan was mapped out to the minutest detail. This time tomorrow night, he told himself as he walked back to his parked sedan, he'd be sixty or seventy grand richer and the bank would be in the market for a new vault.

Cokey scowled as he approached his car. A kid was hovering near it, ostentatiously flicking a dirty rag.

"I been watchin' your buggy for you, Mister," he said to Cokey. "I wiped it down, too." He held out an expectant hand for a tip.

It was an old racket that kids like that work on people. Some hungry kid was always trying to put the sleeve on you for guarding your car



and giving it a few leisurely swipes with a greasy cloth.

"Beat it, rat," Cokey Bond spat out viciously. "Nobody asked you to watch the chariot, did they?"

"No, but—"

"Then blow, before I dust you off."

"Aw, gee, Mister," the kid wailed. "I—"

Cokey's right hand was encased in brass knuckles when he swung. The brass knuckles caught the kid high on the cheek, cutting his flesh and knocking him backward. He landed on his shoulder-blades, bleeding, whimpering a little.

"Next time somebody tells you to blow, blow." He stormed into the sedan and gunned the motor to life.

He drove away, grinning softly. Funny the way that kid had bounced when he hit the pavement. Like a rubber ball, almost. Cokey chuckled at the recollection.

It was ten o'clock the next night when he parked at the same spot. The side-street was dark, deserted. Cokey moved like a shadow, and as silently. Two minutes work got him into the bank. Then came the hard part—the waiting.

Cokey never liked to wait for anything. But this time it was necessary. He lurked in the darkness, keening his ears for the sound of footfalls. Presently he heard them, growing louder. The watchman was coming.

There was a sap in Cokey's hand. It was a short length of garden hose loaded with buckshot at one end. When the watchman shuffled wearily past Cokey's hiding-place, Cokey struck!

HE STRUCK without warning, as a cobra strikes. The watchman grunted and fell on his face. He stopped breathing, permanently. Cokey didn't even look to see what lethal damage he had done. He sped toward the rear of the bank until he came to the vault.

He bridged some more wires. Then he filled the channels around the vault's steel door with soft soap and poured nitroglycerine into the pockets thus formed. Then he detonated the charge. The door lifted outward, fell with a crash.

Cokey frowned. "Too much soup!" he whispered to himself, angrily. He'd merely wanted the door blown open on its hinges. As it was, the crash of falling steel would certainly be heard all over the immediate neighborhood. That would mean the police pretty quick. He'd have to work fast.

He began scooping banknotes into a sack. When the sack was full, he

stuffed his pockets. In the distance he heard a faint, whining wail. A police siren!

"Damn!" Cokey grated. He looked longingly at the stacks of currency he couldn't find room for. He hated to leave it, but he knew he'd have to. There wouldn't be time to go to the car, get another sack and return here for the extra cash.

"Well, so what?" he asked himself.

The job would net him thirty thousand, anyway. Maybe more. He couldn't stop to count what he'd taken. That siren was growing louder. Time to get going. . . .

He scuttled out of the bank, raced around the corner to his sedan. He squirmed under the wheel, heeled the starter. The motor purred to instant life. Cokey grinned wickedly. Damned good engine in the old bus. Hadn't he torn it down himself, put it together again with lightweight pistons, high-compression head and racing carburetor? He geared into second, hit the throttle with his sole. The car surged forward with a heartening blurt of power.

And then it went completely dead.

Cokey grabbed frantically for the choke, pulled it wide. Nothing happened. He mashed the starter-button down. The starter whirred dutifully, but that was all. The sedan was drifting to a halt now, and the prowler's red spotlight was blazing in Cokey's rear-vision mirror.

"Gawd!" he moaned. He drew his automatic, scrambled out of the machine and started to run.

"Stop!" somebody yelled. "Stop, I say!"

Cokey whirled just long enough to trigger a bullet. Then hell cut loose.

He saw flame-flashes in front of him, heard gun-thunder roaring in his ears. Something kicked him in the chest, paralyzing his lungs. He fell down, hard. When he coughed, his mouth was suddenly full of something warm and liquid and salty.

He was dead before he realized it was blood—his own blood. . . .

In an alley eleven blocks away, two youngsters were pitching pennies at a crack in the pavement. One of them had a patch of dirty adhesive-plaster on his cheek.

"Yeah," he said, "the rat biffed

me with brass knucks and then fed me the leather. But I got even."

"How?"

"I seen his jalopy parked in the same spot tonight. So I dumped some moth-balls in his gasoline tank. I'd like to see his face when his motor conks out on him."



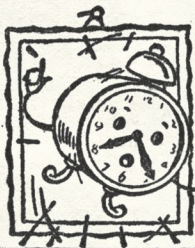
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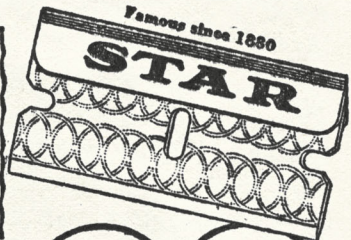
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CHAPTER I

JUDAS PINCH

THE bar was almost deserted when I came from the back room, with only one boiled customer and one bored bartender in it. The customer was Steve Kovacs and the barman, Henry Gillis. Steve had a gyppo logging contract which probably made him about as much

money as Henry dragged down in wages. And Steve, who was one of the few Hungarians in the country, had been all over the world and liked to talk about it.

Henry had been tending bar for thirty years and had never crossed the county line. They got along just fine together, because Steve thought Henry was stupid for staying in one place all his life while Henry thought Steve was a fool because he didn't stay in one place and get acquainted with the neighbors for a hundred





miles around. They argued it all the time.

Steve was in the middle of the bar, all sprawled out with his elbows wide and chin almost on the bar, so I stopped at the end of the plank. Steve stared at me for at least ten seconds before I registered on him.

Then he waved a hand toward me. "Hi, Joe," he said. "You have drink with me?"

I had stopped with the idea of having one quick one and then home and to bed. I had been in the game since three that afternoon and ten hours of tough poker playing is wearing.

A BAFFLING COMPLETE CRIME NOVELET

Henry set up the bottle of Sunnybrook and the plain water chaser, without being told, and Steve waved a hand at me again.

"You come here, hey, Joe?" he said. "You have drink with me, yes?"

I poured out a drink and held it up and nodded to Steve. There was no point in going down where he was. I don't like being mauled around by a stew unless I'm one myself, and Steve, very plainly, was in the arm-across-the-shoulder mood.

"He's been on it three days now," Henry said. "He's waiting for some friend of his that's just come over from the old country. He's going to work for Steve, I guess. Steve's been waiting for him since seven."

"Steve's a good boy," I said. "He tried to sit in the game but Fales wouldn't let him light. He had too much. About ten, that was."

HENRY sighed and went back to Steve and poured out a drink for both of them. If Steve had tried to pour his own, he would have spilled it all over the bar, and Henry was a careful man with the owner's stock. So we all held up glasses and nodded and smiled and drank. I nodded at Henry, who poured another one for the two of them, and then drifted back to me carrying his glass. He nodded toward the back.

"Looked pretty steep," he said. "How'd you come out?"

I had lost a hundred and forty dollars and said so. I'd been losing steadily for about three weeks and it about had me down. Any time I'd get a good hand I wouldn't get a play on it and every time I'd get a fair one I'd find it beaten. I'd win a pot now and then, of course, but the percentage was going down hill with me all the time.

"Steve's a lousy poker player when he's sober and he's worse when he's tight," I said. "Fales did right in keeping him out. There's a bunch of

sharpshooters in there that would put their hands in your pockets if they couldn't rob you any other way. I've been finding it out."

About then we took the second drink and I paid for it—and about then in came the night cop. A bird named Sol Dickie. Just a big country kid who had a gun and a sap and who didn't have the faintest idea of what either of them were for. He came dashing in, put on the brakes when he saw Steve at the bar, and then hauled out his gun. A man could have walked from the bar to the door while he was getting it out. He pointed the cannon at Steve.

"C-come along," he said.

Steve had heard him come in and had wobbled around on his seat to see who it was. He saw the gun was headed in his direction.

"Hey!" he said. "You be careful."

Dickie tried to look like a policeman about to make an arrest, and didn't do well at it. He went a little closer to Steve, acting as though he was easing up to a cornered wildcat.

"Come along," he said again. "Don't make a move."

I laughed and Henry laughed. Steve gave us a puzzled look and then laughed because we were doing it.

"Put away the gun—you don't need it," I said to Dickie. "Since when are they picking up drunks in this town? You're going to need a bigger jail to hold everybody from the mayor down, aren't you, Sol?"

He quit pointing the gun at Steve but he didn't put it away.

"I ain't picking him up for being drunk, Joe," he said. "He's killed a guy, that's what he's done. He beat him to death with a jack."

"You gone crazy, Sol?" Henry Gillis asked. "You must've."

"The guy's out in the car," Sol said. "In Steve's own car. His head is all beat in with a jack. Steve must've had a flat and just left the jack out

on the floorboards, and he must've picked it up and started to swing with it. The guy's deader than hell."

STEVE had stopped laughing when Henry and I had. He was staring at Dickie but he wasn't understanding what Dickie was saying. Henry's mouth was open and he was looking as though he didn't believe what he had heard.

"This jack's a big old thing with a square base," Sol went on. "It must weigh ten pounds or more. Every time the guy was hit, one of those corners must've gone in. His head's spread all over the front seat of the car. You guys should see it. I guess I'd better not move the car until the coroner gets here."

"I guess you'd better not," I said. "What makes you think Steve did all this?"

"The guy is the one that was going to work for Steve. He just come here from Europe, some place. He got in town yesterday but Steve, here, wouldn't get off his bust and take the guy to camp. I got the doctor and the doctor said the guy'd been dead about three hours and Steve was talking to him about nine o'clock. Couple of fellas saw him talking to him. Besides, Steve's the only one this guy knew in town. He just got here yesterday."

"You talk about what?" Steve said. "What's the matter with you? You crazy?"

"Look, Steve," I said. "I'm a friend of yours, ain't I?"

"You my friend, Joe."

"Then come on and take a walk with me."

"Sure, Joe. I go. Where we go?"

I winked at Dickie and he got the idea. He put his gun where it belonged and went out ahead, starting for the jailhouse, and Steve and I followed. Steve was wobbling all over the street.

"What you been doing tonight,

Steve?" I asked. "Besides drinking up all the drinking liquor in town?"

He said he'd been doing just that—that as soon as his friend from the old country came along he was going to camp.

I asked him where he'd been around nine o'clock.

"Drinking," he said, and waved his hand. "I drink because I have to go to camp and I not drink there. It is my camp and it does not do to drink where the men are hired."

He wasn't stalling—I was sure of that. He just didn't remember. About that time we got to the door of the jailhouse, which Sol had left invitingly open, and in we went. Steve didn't even hesitate. He was so tight he didn't have any idea of where he was. Sol motioned toward the last of the three cells, where he was standing behind the door, and I walked Steve right into it and Sol slammed the door.

"Go to sleep, guy," I said to Steve. "I'll see you in the morning."

HE HELD on the bars of the cell and then suddenly realized what they were and where he was.

"Joe!" he cried out. "You! My friend!"

I felt like Judas—but it was better than having the big dopey kid cop lose his head and start work with the sap, which is what he'd have done. He'd think he was dealing with a murderer and he wouldn't have taken any chances. We went out and Sol shook his head.

"I'd have never believed it of Steve," he said.

"I don't now," I told him.

"He *must've* done it."

"Well, you're the cop—you should know," I said, and went back and said good night to Henry Gillis. I knew Henry would be glad to hear that Steve had ended up in jail without having his face all marked up with the sap.

CHAPTER II

SELF-DEFENSE



I HAD been in Ellerville about a month by then, looking for a man named Schuyler. George Schuyler. At least that had been his name seven years before, when he had taken forty-eight thousand dollars from the bank he worked for and skipped out with it. The bonding house I work for had trailed him for awhile, but he got clear away and for five years we had let it rest.

But a month before we had received a letter from a girl he'd run around with while he was in the bank, and she told us she'd heard from him and that the letter had been mailed from Ellerville. He didn't want an answer, he said, but just couldn't help writing her. He said he was going under another name and was living honestly, and that when he was able he was going to pay off the bank the money he'd stolen and the rest of the line that went with it.

That's common. It's hard for a man to forget everything in his past, and they'll write letters like that and visit the old home town and telephone long distance a surprising amount of times. Of course lots of times it's when they are drinking and Old Man Remorse is walking hand and hand with them. And lots of times they really mean it—but they never do it.

I had a poor snapshot of Schuyler taken some time before he skipped, a general description of him that didn't necessarily mean a thing, and that was all. And a man can change a lot in seven years—particularly if he's a fugitive from justice.

I figured my best bet was to hang around town and wait for him to come to me, so I spent the time hanging around in bars and in playing cards when I could find a decent game. I'd be a lot more likely to run into him in

such place than I would around the church crowd. I like to hang around 'em anyway, so I was combining business with pleasure and nobody was hurt.

Besides that, I'd have to get acquainted with the man before I could put my finger on him and say, "I want you, Schuyler," and there's no easier place in the world to get acquainted than in a saloon. The man would be going under a different name, would be altered physically and mentally, and I had to be sure. Then I knew he wouldn't be inhibited.

The only thing in my favor was the size of the town—there wasn't more than fifteen hundred people in it—and they all made a living from the mills and logging camps around. All I had to do was watch them, and the loggers when they came to town to spend their money.

I was staying at the best hotel, which would have classed as a rooming house in a town any bigger. It was clean, but that was about all you could say for it. Just a cubby-hole off a corridor with a wash-bowl in it. The bathroom was two doors down the hall.

And you don't usually look for trouble in a bathroom and I had no reason to expect any—so I don't figure I was to blame for walking in on it in my shirtsleeves.

I'D TAKEN off my shirt, shoes, and gun, even my undershirt. I was lugging a pair of pajamas and all I was thinking about was the shower I was going to take. So when I opened the bathroom door and a guy with a handkerchief over his mouth and nose stuck a gun at me I was in no shape to argue.

"Inside here!" he said. "Out of the hall!"

I went inside, holding my hands up at shoulder height. I didn't drop the pajamas because there was no sense in dropping them on a dirty floor and

they were the last clean pair I had left until the laundry got back.

"What did Steve Kovacs have to say, hunh?" the man said.

"He was too far gone to talk," I said, and tried to figure what was holding me up.

He was dressed like a lumberjack, with pitch-crusted denim overall pants and a blue cotton work shirt. His logging boots looked as if they'd seen a lot of service. His hat looked kosher, too. All battered and out of shape, but with a sort of reckless tilt to it.

But his hands were smooth and clean instead of calloused, and he didn't talk like a logger. He had just the trace of an accent, but I couldn't figure what it was.

"What was the idea of helping the cop take him in?" he said. "You a policeman?"

"Steve's a friend of mine," I said. "I figured the cop might go wacky and start sapping him all over the place. The cop's just a kid and he was scared of Steve and I figured he might blow his cork and start kicking Steve all over the place. Steve's so plastered he wouldn't know what the cop was trying to get him to do."

"Your name's Walters, eh?"

"That's right."

"What d'ya do?"

"Play a little cards."

"Cross-roader, eh?"

"Well, yes."

A cross-roader is a gambler who plays in one town for awhile, then hears of a big game somewhere else and goes there. They'll jump five hundred miles to sit in one all-night game, if it's steep enough to warrant it. In other words, a professional gambler who's not working for the house. The man with the gun looked me over, not missing a thing.

"You don't look like one," he said.

"You look like a wrestler."

"Too hard on the ears," I said.

"So you're not a wrestler, eh?" he

said, and laughed. "Well, you're not a cross-roader, either. You've been losing too steady. You're nothing but a damn liar."

With that he took a step ahead and hit at me with the gun.

I'd lied to him both ways. I wasn't a gambler and I had wrestled quite a bit. Amateur stuff, but there's a lot of good wrestling done among the amateurs because they're leveling instead of doing the circus tricks. So when the gun came down I stooped fast, and took the blow on the big shoulder muscles, and I got my arms around his middle before he could get away.

AND that's where the pajamas wrecked us both. Instead of being able to get one hand in the other, I had to get my right wrist with my left hand in order to get a hold. I still had the pajamas in my hand and I couldn't get 'em out of the way.

That extra four inches cinched his belly against me harder than I realized. Enough so that when I yanked in with my arms and butted up with my head, I caught him fair on the chin and he had no slack to take up the shock.

When I heard the crack I knew I'd done it. It sounded as though somebody had stepped on a rotten stick—a sort of crunching noise. He sagged back against my arms, the gun dropped out of his hand on the tiled floor, and then I let him down.

He had a broken neck, that I knew. But there was a chance, if the cord hadn't been broken, that he could be put in a cast and would get over it. If the cord was just pressed he might still live. If it had been broken he was dead.

And the cord was broken. He was as dead as a man could be.

My shoulder, where the gun had landed, was already getting over the numb feeling it had and was beginning to ache. And so was my head,

for I'd managed to kill a man who certainly knew something about the jam poor Steve was in. I hadn't done it on purpose. He'd smacked at me with the gun and I'd done just what I'd been taught to do by a wrestling coach in case a thing like that should ever happen.

As far as the man himself was concerned I didn't care a damn. He'd threatened me with a gun and he'd tried to smash my head in with it with no provocation whatsoever. But a dead man can't talk and I'd wanted to ask some questions and hear some answers.

I pulled down the handkerchief from his face and saw he was some bird I'd remembered seeing around the card tables once in awhile—but that didn't mean a thing. There's always bystanders, if the game's of any size. The gun was right by him but I didn't pick it up. I could see where it was worn, where the blue had been polished off the barrel and cylinder—which meant it had been carried for some time in a shoulder rig. For several years at least. I stood up, and then Sol Dickie said, from behind me:

"Hey! What's this?"

Sol was in the doorway, gaping at the man on the floor.

"What's the matter with him?" he said. "Didja upset him?"

"I certainly did," I said. "He held me up and started to crown me. We scuffled around a bit and I guess I broke his neck. It was self-defense, Sol. I had to do it or get smacked on the head with the gun. The gun's there on the floor."

He edged ahead until he was between the gun and me and he stooped for it, fast. I shoved him clear on over it.

"Leave it alone," I said. "It's got his prints on it and none of mine. It'll prove my story."

He didn't like the shove much, but he didn't argue. He picked up the

gun, using a handkerchief I gave him and we went in my room and I helped him wrap it so any prints wouldn't be damaged.

"The D. A.'ll be over," I said, "both about this and about Steve Kovacs, and this wants to be the same as it is now. You've put in a call for him, haven't you?"

He said he had. That the whole law enforcement group had already left the county seat and were on their way.

"Say, who are you anyway?" he asked then.

"Joe Walters," I said. "Joseph H. Walters."

"What are you doing here? You're no gambler."

"How d'ya know that?"

"You always lose."

I asked him if he was trying to rub it in, and he grinned at me.

"Look, Walters!" he said. "I know there's something funny going on and I know you're in it. You stick around and you spend money and all you do is lose more in the games. You gave me a hand tonight. That Steve Kovacs, when he's been hitting it up, is like a crazy man if he gets mad. Here's two murders in one night and—"

"Now wait a minute," I said. "Maybe the fellow in Kovacs car was murdered—I don't know. This man wasn't. I've got a right to protect myself. It's not murder when you're protecting yourself, is it?"

The kid shook his head. "I don't know anything about it," he said. "I hate to ask you on account of you helping out, but come on. We'll lock your room and the bathroom. It's not so bad in jail—we keep it clean. If I don't keep you there until the D.A. gets here I'll lose my job, sure as hell." "Wait until I get dressed," I said. "D'ya know the guy in the bathroom?"

"Yeah," he said. "His name was Schuyler."

CHAPTER III

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE



THERE was a lot of time for me to think during the rest of the night. The jail was clean enough, but it had that funny jail smell of disinfectants and of staleness and I'm used to a mattress instead of iron slats under two thin blankets.

I knew that once I told the D.A. who I was and what I was in Ellersville for, I would be in the clear, and so I wasn't worried about myself. As far as the Schuyler case was considered, that was in the bag.

The one I'd tangled with was too young and too big to be the Schuyler I was looking for, but it was a cinch to be some relative of his. All I'd have to do would be to look around and locate this bird's running mates, and my man would be among them.

But I was bothered about Steve Kovacs. He was tied up in the business, some way, because the Schuyler I had killed had been after me for butting in on the Kovacs angle.

And, worst of all, it was entirely possible that Steve had killed his friend during an argument and had been too tight to remember it afterward. While I didn't think he had, there have been a lot of cases where just that same thing has happened. And while Steve wasn't a pal or anything like that, I liked the guy and didn't want to see him railroaded if he didn't have the ride coming.

Sol stopped by and saw I wasn't sleeping, so he went over to the one all-night restaurant and brought back coffee for both of us.

"You see how it is," he said. "If I didn't take you in I'd lose my job. It was a lousy trick, after you helping me with Steve Kovacs."

I asked him how long Kovacs had been in the country. He said Steve had drifted in about a year before,

had worked for wages until he got an idea of what it was all about, and then had branched out for himself. And also that he had brought money in with him when he came.

"Who were the two guys that saw Kovacs talking with the man he's supposed to have killed?" he asked.

Sol looked startled. "Golly!" he said. "One of them was this Schuyler—the one that held you up."

"The one I killed, you mean."

He got red in the face. "Yeah! The other one was a pal of his named McGrath."

I asked what McGrath looked like and got a description that might possibly fit the Schuyler I was looking for. I asked if the man Kovacs was supposed to have killed had been robbed.

"I don't know," Dickie said. "I had the car towed to the fire station and I ran the fire truck out and backed the car in the stall. That place is locked, and the coroner can't say I let anybody disturb the evidence. Same as the guy down in your bathroom. That door's locked and I got the key."

"Do me a favor, Sol," I said. "Go in and turn Kovacs over on his side. He's driving me nuts."

I was in the next cell to him and the guy was sleeping on his back and sounding as though he were sawing through a heavy log.

"TELL me something else," I said, when Sol came back and Kovacs was quieter. "You asked me what I was doing here in town. What's the idea of that? You don't usually go around asking people their business, do you, Sol?"

He got red again. "Well, no, Joe—I mean Mr. Walters—but I heard several guys talking about you and nobody knows anything about you. I guess I was just sort of curious. I guess some of them think you're looking for a place to buy, and some

others think you're some kind of a cop, and some others think you're hiding out. I guess I just got curious, is all."

That's small town for you. All I was doing was minding my business.

"Y'see, you wear decent clothes most of the time," Sol went on, "and you got a good car and you talk like you been educated. So they wonder what you're doing here, like I say."

"Sol," I said, and made it mysterious, "I'm looking for the Lost Dutchman mine. I have reason to believe there's gold in these hills."

"But there ain't no mines around here," said Sol, looking bewildered.

"There's no law against a man digging one, is there?" I asked. "I think I've run into a gold mine."

He left me then, shaking his head as though he thought I was crazy. He was wrong, for if I dug up George Schuyler after he had been missing seven years I was a cinch for a bonus—and gold is where you find it. George Schuyler was my particular gold mine and I'd found him in Ellenville.

The D. A. and the sheriff and two deputies and the coroner all got there between eight and ten the next morning. They came in two cars, with a hearse to boot, and as the D. A. was in the ten o'clock car it was a quarter after that before I got out. I told him who I was, what I was there for, how I had miscalculated and killed the brother of the man I was looking for, and how and why I was pretty sure I knew who my man was. The D. A. scowled.

"We'll have to have an inquest, you know," he said. "It's too bad you didn't have a witness to this attempted assault on you, Mr. Walters."

"If I'd had a witness the assault wouldn't have been attempted," I told him. "But you've got something here that's phony. These two Schuylers are tied up with Kovacs in some way."

"How? And why?"

"That's what I'd like to know. I can't very well find out while I'm sitting in jail. And my man is liable to get away and I'll have to start hunting him all over again."

Sol Dickie hadn't even bothered to search me for a gun the night before. I still had one, as well as all my identification. The D. A. checked this over again and compared my gun license with the number on it.

"I GUESS I can release you on your own recognizance until the inquest," he said grudgingly. "But don't leave town or anything like that. . . . I'll tell you when the inquest will be."

"Thanks," I said. "Maybe I can help out."

"I don't see how," he said severely. "We apparently have an open and shut case against this man Kovacs. Kovacs is the only one in town who knew the man who was murdered. He's the only one that could have had a possible motive for the crime. He was seen talking with the man at the scene of the crime, at approximately the time it was committed. The fact of his being drunk doesn't alter the matter one way or the other. He claims he remembers nothing of the evening at all—doesn't even know how he arrived in jail. It's an open and shut case, Mr. Walters."

"Well, maybe," I said. "I've been wrong before. D'ya mind if I go and hunt up this man McGrath and see if he's the one I'm out here looking for?"

"I've already sent an officer after the man. He's the one remaining witness to the talk between Kovacs and the murdered man at nine last evening. You—you unfortunately disposed of the other."

"I'd say fortunately disposed of the other," I commented. "If I hadn't disposed of him he would most certainly have disposed of me. Do I understand that you'll release this McGrath to us, after he's testified about

the Kovacs case? I've got a warrant for him."

"Well, he might fight extradition," the D. A. said cautiously. "As long as he tells his story about seeing Kovacs and this man he killed together, he's nothing to me."

I left then, just in time to join the sheriff and Sol Dickie. They were going to make the rounds and look at all the corpses again. Sol had already gone around once with the D. A. and the coroner, but the sheriff was up for reelection in the fall and had stopped to do a little campaigning. Business before duty was his motto, I guess—and besides that saloons are swell places to campaign in and I guess the sheriff figured he needed a few drinks before looking at a bunch of dead men.

After seeing the man in Kovacs' car I didn't blame the sheriff a bit. I'd expected something pretty bad, but this was worse than that. The poor guy's head was all over the front of the car and there was blood splashed up on the roof of it. The man was so badly battered around the face you had to guess what he must once have looked like. The coroner was there, fidgeting around.

"A brutal crime, Sheriff!" he said to the lawman. "Brutal! The man who did this must be a maniac."

The sheriff had heard the story about Kovacs' nasty temper.

"Or a guy that lost his head when he was full of liquor," he said.

I'd been thinking hard about the night before, so I took the sheriff to one side.

"Now look!" I said. "Last night, just about half past nine or a quarter to ten, Kovacs tried to sit in Fales' poker game. Fales wouldn't let him light because he was just about at the falling down stage. But he was good-natured. Now if he'd been mad enough to beat a man to death a half hour before that, he wouldn't have taken it that way. He'd have still

been on his toes. And he was too far gone to pick up the jack the job was done with—I'll swear to it. There were six of us in the game besides Fales, and every one of us'll tell you the same thing."

The sheriff looked very wise. "I don't know what a drunk will do and you don't know," he said flatly. "He could have forgotten all about it in that length of time."

"Well, the guy was killed before that time, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, sure. Between nine and half past."

Then I gave him the clincher.

"I saw Steve after that then. And anybody in town'll tell you he came to town in the clothes he's got on now. Figure it out—you've seen him."

"I don't get it," said the sheriff.

I waved at the car.

"Take a look," I said. "The killer was inside the car. D'ya think he could have done a job like that and not be covered with blood? And Steve hasn't got a speck of blood on him anywhere. I took him to jail last night and I know."

"Hey, Doc!" the sheriff called heavily. "C'mere and listen to this."

About then the D. A. wandered in, and in fifteen minutes Steve Kovacs was up in front of a bar, taking his morning drink and wondering what had happened the night before. He was telling both Henry Gillis and me that the town had gone crazy.

CHAPTER IV

EVERYTHING IN LINE



MCGRATH, or George Schuyler, as I was beginning to call him to myself, was not to be found. Nowhere. He'd been the boss office man at the biggest mill and was fairly well known, but he'd apparently just dropped out of sight. I thought he might have been afraid the Kovacs affair would

bring a lot of law to town and that he would be recognized. But this didn't hold much water when I stopped to think how long he'd been in town and that he was wanted for something that had happened seven years before and about fifteen hundred miles away.

The D. A. seemed to think I'd given him a break by not letting him take Steve Kovacs to the county seat and charge him with the murder, so he was playing ball with me like a major leaguer. He was letting his men do the looking, and their stall was that they wanted McGrath for a witness about whom he'd seen talking with the murdered man in the car and also about the Schuyler I'd killed in the bathroom. Sol Dickie was also supposed to be looking for McGrath, though he didn't know what he was wanted for any more than the sheriff's deputies knew.

"I should have asked Joe Schuyler last night, just where McGrath was," he said. "I mean when Joe Schuyler told me about seeing Kovacs talking to the man in the car. But how'd I know you was going to break his neck?"

"It was Schuyler, then, who told you that he and McGrath saw the guy and Kovacs talking," I said. "That it?"

He said that was it.

About this time the coroner and the D. A. came down the street.

"How'd it be, Walters," the D. A. asked, "if we held the inquest on this man you killed day after tomorrow at the county seat? Can you make it? I'll leave two of my boys on the job here. They've got nothing to do until then, anyway."

"Broken neck," the coroner said to me. "Clean break. You must be a powerful man, Walters."

"It's a trick, is all," I admitted. "If the guy had known anything about rough-and-tumble brawling he'd just have a sore back. He could have

let himself go and it wouldn't have hurt him seriously."

We walked down to the hotel, the four of us.

"I don't think that there'll be any trouble about this," the D. A. said to me. "I'd like to know something about the man, is all. All I know is that he came to town and moved in with McGrath—McGrath has a house, you know. He's a bachelor."

I knew it, and said so. Since I'd decided McGrath was my man I'd found out a lot of things about him.

"That's what makes me think your theory as to their being brothers is correct," the D. A. went on. "McGrath wasn't a friendly man by any means, and yet he takes this stranger in. That would tend to prove you correct—this McGrath is undoubtedly George Schuyler, the man you're looking for."

"And the man you're looking for, too," I said. "It seems damned funny to me that a man as well known as he is could just drop out of sight."

"We'll find him," the D. A. promised. "He didn't leave in a car. Of that, we're fairly certain. They had a traffic check on both sides of the town last night—state policemen checking licenses. He didn't go out by car, I feel I'm safe in saying."

BY THAT time we were at the hotel and we went to the bathroom to look at the corpse I'd made.

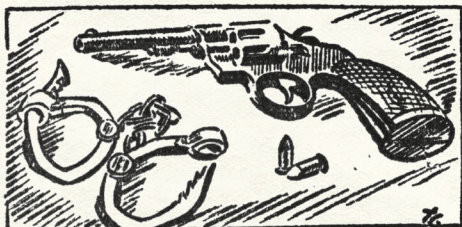
The guy looked smaller than he had the night before, but that was only natural. Death always seems to shrink a person. He had a thin, hatchet face, which had become a discolored, dirty gray. There wasn't a mark on him except a half-healed scratch on his wrist, and there was a little blood on the sleeve of that shirt, which was surprisingly clean compared to the rest of his costume.

There was little tan on his face, and his hands were clean and well kept, with the forefinger on the left

amputated at the first joint. It all meant plenty.

"Well, maybe I can give you a hand," I said to the D. A. "You check your records for a bird that's been vagged a good many times. This guy's a professional gambler, and he's probably been playing the small camps around on pay-days. He's not a logger, in spite of his clothes, because his hands are too nice, and that forefinger being off makes him, in all probability, a fast man with the cards.

"He can get that stump under the deck and take off bottoms without the end of his finger flashing out into sight. He lit in here and his brother



had to take care of him and introduce him around. He hasn't played around town or I'd have sat in a game or so with him, so that means he's been playing the camps. The clothes make that almost a cinch bet. Does all this make sense?"

They all agreed and the D. A. promised he'd look up the guy's record.

"Well, you'd better get your boys on the hunt for McGrath and let 'em try and see what happened to him," I said then. "And my guess is that when you find him you'll find something that isn't pretty."

Both the D. A. and the sheriff started to stutter together, asking what I was driving at. And then, before I had a chance to tell them, Sol Dickie came dashing in.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Come on! It's another one, by hell! Down by the tracks. Some kids found it."

A train had run over this one, and my guess about him not being pretty was absolutely correct. From his

shoulders up, you'd never have known it had once been a man. The train had just spread the neck and shoulders for twenty feet down the track. Even the ties were smeared. The clothes were ordinary business clothes and the D. A. went through the pockets.

"Well, here's your man all right," he said to me as he straightened. "At least it's McGrath. Here's bills and a couple of letters and his wallet with a driver's license."

I'd been seeing too many dead people and it was getting me down.

"I'm going back to town and get a drink," I said. "When are you going to move the bodies back to town?"

"I doubt if we will until tomorrow," the D. A. said, shaking his head. "What d'ya think, Doc?"

THE coroner looked up from the body, or what was left of it.

"I'm going to have the inquest here," he growled. "I can set it at the scene of death if I so desire. There's too damn many killings going on around here."

"This is an accident," the D. A. said.

The coroner shrugged. "If you can tell me why the man was walking out here along the railroad tracks, I'll maybe believe you," he said. "There's a road that runs the same way fifty feet from here and it's a lot easier walking. He'd have had to climb up the bank to get here. We did, didn't we? Don't tell me he was trying to catch a ride on the train because he'd have done that in the yards, when the train was stopped, or just this side when it was pulling out slow.

"And"—he waved his hand—"if you'll look you can see how the embankment is all scuffed up. The kids might have done some of it and we might have done a little more, but we didn't make those deep gouges. They were made by two men carrying a third. This would be the third. They

laid his head on the track and the train took care of the rest."

"But why should they do that? We know it's McGrath."

The coroner said he'd be damned if he knew, but that he intended to find out. That it was part of his duty to find out, and by dad, nobody ever accused him of not doing his duty.

"It'll all come out in the wash, gentlemen," I soothed, "and I think we'll do the washing tonight. I've got ideas about this."

"Somebody's going to hang for this!" the D. A. promised.

"Five'll get you ten they don't," I said. "I'm in here pitching for my bonus and I can't get it by any guesswork. You'll never hang the guy that did this."

I left them and went back to the saloon.

"That was a shame about that guy Schuyler, Joe," Henry Gillis said. "Who'd have thought he was a bad one!"

"You knew him very well, Henry?" I asked.

"He came in the bar now and then. Once in awhile he'd get plastered maybe. That's all. Always had money and he always spent it. I like people like that, Joe."

I DIDN'T know whether the last was a hint or not but I bought both of us another drink.

"What about McGrath?" I asked. "Was he good bar business, too?"

"He never came in the place," Henry said. "But then, I guess maybe the guy didn't have any money."

"I wouldn't know," I murmured, thinking about the forty-eight thousand George Schuyler—McGrath to Henry — had taken off with. "He must've had a salary, at least."

Henry shook his head and said that most salaried people weren't good bar customers.

I left and went looking for Steve

Kovacs, figuring to get him before he got too full to talk. There was one point I had to straighten before everything fell into line. Steve was in the second bar down the street but was still in fair shape, so I bought a round.

"Hey, Steve!" I said. "I want to ask you something."

"You my friend," he said. "From the jail you take me. I tell you anything."

He had forgotten I was the one who had led him to jail, and I didn't remind him of it.

"It's about this friend of yours," I said. "I can't pronounce his name."

"It is Bela—" The last name was something that had to be half sneezed.

"That's right," I said. "Now tell me—he's supposed to be from the old country. Wasn't he here in this country before?"

"Bela, he travels like me," Steve said very proudly. "All around—all around. Four times Bela has been in this country. He has worked in this country. He can the language speak."

George Schuyler had come from a factory town called Roslyn. I took my chance and asked, "Did he by any chance ever work in Roslyn?"

"Ho!" Steve chuckled. "In Roslyn Bela works in a what you call canner. The canned corn. The canned pea. The canned bean."

"How long ago?"

"Eight—nine year ago. It was Bela's second trip to this country. He save his money and he lose him to this Schuyler man you kill. That was a fine thing, my friend, that you kill this man. He was crook. He take Bela's money with the cards, the dice. All the money Bela has in the bank he takes."

"Thanks, Steve," I said. "You've done me a favor."

"Joe, you do me the favor," Steve insisted. "You kill the man that rob my friend, which is very fine."

Everything was in line then.

CHAPTER V

"GOLD IS WHERE YOU FIND IT"



OF COURSE there was nothing doing until dark because I had no way of telling if McGrath's house was being watched or not. Of course the sheriff had gone through it, after a fashion, after finding the body by the tracks, but he hadn't been in there long. I had made a point of seeing he wasn't.

The D. A. and the sheriff and I now went in the back door, without turning on a light, and I parked the D. A. in the front room and the sheriff in a closet off the kitchen. I'd even borrowed a gun for the D. A.

It was only about nine-thirty, but we weren't taking any chances of missing our man through carelessness. I took a sort of roving assignment, but I'd found a pair of McGrath's carpet slippers and I wasn't making any noise while I prowled around.

About eleven I had to stop the D. A. from smoking a cigarette. It hadn't occurred to him that somebody coming in from outdoors would smell fresh smoke and recognize it as such. About twelve I had to wake up the sheriff, because he'd fallen asleep in his chair and was snoring along in great shape.

But at one-thirty the screen door at the back creaked and we got ready to go into action.

I was just inside the dining room, with my back against the wall so that whoever came in would pass me. I had a finger on the light switch. It was all arranged that we were to let whoever it was get all the way in, so we'd be all around him and there would be no chance for trouble, but the sheriff must have gone to sleep again and was waked by the noise.

"That you, Walters?" he called out softly.

The screen door slammed when whoever had it let it go, and I went through the kitchen and past the sheriff and to the door. I could see a dim figure, going like hell toward the road.

"Hold it!" I shouted.

The man kept running, and I lined the gun at him about knee level and started in. It's hard shooting like that. It was shooting by feel, and that means you have to know your gun. I didn't want to kill the guy because he had done nothing to warrant that. All he was after was money. So I kept my shot low and got him through the ham on the fourth try.

He went down and never said a word. And that scared me. The sheriff and the D. A. came boiling out from behind me, but I yanked them back.

"Now wait!" I told them. "We do this right. Split up and each of you take him from one side. When I shout, you put the flash on him and be ready. I'll do the shooting."

"The hell you will!" said the sheriff. "Why should you?"

"I don't want him killed. Do as I say."

"Do as he says, Pat," the D. A. ordered. "It's his show."

So they spread out and turned their flashlights on when I sang out.

HENRY GILLIS, the bartender, was on the ground with a gun held up and ready. His bad leg was doubled under him and he sat on it like a hen on a setting of eggs. He was grinning, but he didn't look as though it was at anything funny. He kept jerking his head toward each one of the three beams of light coming at him.

"All right—come and get me," he snarled.

The sheriff was at his right.

"Drop that gun, Henry," he cried. Henry turned and swung the gun

up, and I took a chance and shot at it. The slug hit both the gun and Henry's hand, and it sent the gun spinning through the air for twenty feet.

And then we collected Henry and took him to the doctor's house. . . .

They held their inquest the next day and I headed back for the home office the following morning. With a letter from the D. A. to my manager, telling him what a help I'd been to law and order. The stolen money that we'd found in the McGrath house had been put in the bank and would be released to us as soon as the formalities were over, which meant a bonus for sure for me.

And this part of the business was a real break for everyone concerned. Usually an embezzler spends the dough as fast as he can get rid of it, but George Schuyler had happened to be a miser.

Henry Gillis was back of the whole thing, though Kovacs' friend just coming to town speeded it all up. But they didn't even make a charge against Henry. There was nothing they could hold him on that would stick.

George Schuyler's younger brother, who was a professional crook and gambler, had wandered out to Ellenville, probably just passing through and dropping in to say hello, and possibly wanting a little dough. Of course he knew about brother taking the bank for forty-eight grand.

He got tight and talked in front of Henry, and Henry promoted the idea of finding where the money was hidden and hijacking it. McGrath couldn't complain, because as George Schuyler, he'd stolen it in the first place. The gambling brother had just found where the money was when Steve Kovacs' friend came to town.

Kovacs' friend knew both the gambling brother and the absconding one. He had banked with one, and lost

money to the other. They knew he'd be a cinch to talk. So they knocked him on the head, figuring that Kovacs would be blamed for the killing—and even went out of their way to plant that idea with Sol Dickie. They were trying to make it certain.

Then the gambling brother got panicky and really went bad. He asked for get-away money and the miser brother wouldn't come through. They probably had a knock-down, drag-out fight about it, though it's possible it was just plain cold-blooded murder.

Anyway, the gambling one killed the absconding one and took the body down to the tracks, thinking the law would figure the man had accidentally been killed while trying for a get-away. Somebody was going to be blamed and he didn't want it to be him.

IT WAS after this that he told Dickie about seeing Kovacs and the friend arguing in the car. He stuck around for just that. That would throw the first killing on Kovacs—and with his brother's death being passed off as an accident he was in the clear. But then, when he saw me butting in and helping Sol take Kovacs to jail, he got worried and thought maybe I'd seen something fishy.

That's where he slipped. If he had let well enough alone he'd have probably made out all right. But he followed me and braced me, and he got a broken neck for it. I got wise to him being the killer when I saw the blood on his sleeve. The shirt had been put on after his arm had been scratched, so the blood must have got there from somewhere else.

It all checked up. After killing his brother he'd gone home and changed his bloody clothes, all except the shirt. He either hadn't noticed the blood on the sleeve or figured no one else would. We found the clothes in a

trash barrel out behind the house.

Henry Gillis had made the plans, and the gambling brother had told him where the money was located. The dead brother had even added to it. Just a miser. The gambling brother wasn't taking any chances in telling Henry this, because the money was under the floor and we had to tear up half the house to get it finally.

Henry had made the plans but no one had acted on them and the D. A. couldn't do a thing about it. In fact, Henry threatened to sue the county and state for being shot, and the only reason he didn't was because we all three swore we would testify he had broken into the house.

He hadn't—he was just getting ready to. And the funny part of it was that he didn't hold a grudge against me, and he knew I was the one who shot him, that I was the one who had figured he was back of it, and that I'd laid for him and trapped him so I could be sure and find the money. He explained to me how he felt.

"It's your job," he said, "and you get paid for it year in and year out and I can't blame you for working at it. I don't hold a grudge."

There was something that puzzled me. The guy had been thirty years tending bar in that one county and had never even seemed to want money. He lived quietly and money seemed the last thing on his mind.

"What in hell did you want with

that much dough, anyway, Henry?" I asked.

He looked wistful. He was propped up in the hospital bed.

"I got thinking about what Steve Kovacs was all the time talking about," he mumbled. "About seeing different people, different places. It takes money to travel around like that, and I didn't have any. It wasn't like I was robbing anybody—the guy had stolen the money himself. And then, I didn't figure any killings in it."

I STARTED to laugh and Henry asked me what was so funny.

"Just this," I said. "Here Kovacs gets you all hot and bothered about traveling. I was just talking to him, down the street, and he told me he's going to stay here the rest of his life—that he's never going away. He says he's going to settle down and grow up with the country. He's giving me your argument and you're giving me his. As near as I can see I'm the only one in the whole affair who wins. And I win, for sure."

Henry asked how I meant that.

"Well," I said. "I told Sol Dickie there was gold in these hills, and I was right. And part of it will be coming back to me on the bonus I'll get."

"You ought to travel on it, Joe," Henry said thoughtfully. "Get around—see things and people."

I told him I had.

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-

Law, under any and all circumstances.

You, too, may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you, too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 397, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use, too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 397, Moscow, Idaho. Adv. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

Murder Stamped in Orange

By FRANK DEMPSEY

Author of "The Model Murders," "Death at Leisure," etc.



SAM CUDDY, trouble shooter for the Sentex Circuit of movie houses, leaned back in his chair, long legs on his desk.

The phone again. Sam reached lazily, then straightened to immediate attention.

"Sam Cuddy speaking. Sure I know you, Mr. Thompson."

Mathew Thompson was one of the largest stockholders of the Sentex Circuit. His excitement was apparent even before he told Sam the reason.

"Sam, do you remember the Bombay Orange?"

"The Bombay Orange?" Sam's feet dropped off the desk as Thompson's words sank in. "You mean the twenty-five thousand dollar stamp that was on exhibit at the Paladium Theater, when they showed the 'Bombay Letter'? The watchman was killed when it was grabbed. That was two months ago."

"That's it," Thompson told him. "I have just been offered the stamp at a greatly reduced rate. I'm a collector, you know."

"Who has it? Where are you now?"

"I don't know the man. I'm at the

Shermund Hotel on Fifty-fifth Street."

"Where is this man now?" Sam was making mental plans.

"He is coming back in an hour. I told him I would have ten thousand dollars in cash for the stamp. I am supposed to go to the..."

Sam heard a distinct *plop* over the wire. It was such a sound as might be caused by a heavy object striking a more yielding substance.

"Hello," Sam called frantically. "Hello!"

No answer.

Sam cradled the phone while reaching for his hat. Unconsciously, his hand felt underneath his left armpit as he ran for the door.

Sam's office was in the Marlboro Building on Forty-second Street. Although his roadster was parked a short two blocks away, Sam flagged the first cab in sight. Fretfully, he swore at the Times Square traffic, which seemed deliberately determined to block his cab. He had a one-spot in his hand as the cab drew up before the Shermund Hotel, and he slipped this to the driver while opening the cab door with his other hand.

SAM CUDDY streaked across the lobby of the Shermund, to the desk.

"What room is Mathew Thompson in?" he barked at the clerk.

The desk clerk drew up his five-foot-four in a huff. Sam deflated the huff by grabbing a handful of jacket with

*The Bombay Stamp Was a
Rare Collector's Item—Until
Death Cancelled It in Red!*



A thin man lay on the floor staring at Cuddy with sightless eyes

his left, as he flashed a badge in his right. Close inspection would have shown the words "Private Detective," but the clerk was not inspecting.

"R-room nine seventy-three," he stammered. "Here is the manager—"

Sam turned. The manager was elegant enough to be a floor-walker, white carnation and all. Sam grabbed his arm, propelled him to the elevator.

"I say," protested the manager. "What is all this?"

"Nothing—I hope," Sam said. "But I have reason to think that the party in nine seventy-three was hurt while speaking to me on the phone."

"Oh!"

The manager preceded Sam to 973. He started to insert the passkey into

the keyhole and found that the door gave slightly beneath his push. It was unlocked.

It was the manager who opened the door and took the first step in—and then stopped suddenly with an "o-oof," as if he had received a kick in the belly. Sam elbowed him aside, but also stopped short.

Mathew Thompson was lying face down on a maroon carpet. The thick nap and maroon color absorbed most of the blood. But the deep gash in the back of Thompson's skull was very apparent. Might have been a gun butt, if wielded by a strong person. Mathew Thompson was a tall, heavy man. It looked as if he had been killed by a single blow. The phone had been replaced on the little side table.

"What—what am I to do?" The manager almost wrung his hands.

"Get the cops," ordered Sam, "But not on this phone."

"But the hotel. Reporters will come. It—it. . ."

"What do you want me to do?" Sam was angry. "Drop him in the river? His family might want him for burial."

"I wasn't even thinking of it," the manager protested.

"Then call the cops. Scram." The manager went.

Sam glanced at his wrist-watch—11:05 A.M. It had taken him less than fifteen minutes to get here, so Thompson had been killed at 10:50.

Sam looked around the room. It was the usual two-room suite of the better type hotel. The killer must have submitted the stamp to Thompson and left after agreeing on a price.

But, Sam worked through a mental picture, the killer was wary. He left the hotel suite, but did not close the door hard enough to snap the lock. He must have listened to Thompson phone Sam. When he was sure of Thompson's object, he eased in again and slapped Thompson down with his gun.

Sam's thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the police. He heard them coming when the elevator stopped on the ninth floor. He turned to meet them—groaned inwardly.

Detective-sergeant Leary was in the lead. Leary had won promotion honestly. His hamlike fists and spectacular manner had brought him returns where wiser men had failed. A craggy face, atop a body as solid as the foundation of the Empire State Building, completed his ferocious aspect. And he did not like private dicks.

Leary's sharp glance took in the whole room, the body of Thompson and Sam Cuddy. It remained on Sam.

"You here?" he advanced belligerently. "Gonna claim it was manslaughter?"

"Did any one," Sam asked politely, "ever tell you that you have many points in common with Ferdinand the Bull?"

LEARY purpled. He swung suddenly to locate the bluecoat who snickered. But the cops had long faces when he turned.

"Start explaining," he roared at Sam.

"Well, Ferdinand the Bull looks ferocious but likes to smell the flowers. . . ."

"So help me"—Leary advanced with raised fist—"if you don't open in a hurry, I'll have you in the back room."

"With the cuffs on?" Sam asked. Then, as Leary appeared to be on the verge of apoplexy, he hastened to explain:

"I got a telephone call from Thompson. He wanted me to come over on something important. Before he finished speaking, I heard a blow and Thompson stopped talking. I hurried over, got the manager and this is what we found."

"You could have knocked him off and come back." Leary was loathe to let Sam off so easy.

"You can trace the call to my office. Also the testimony of one Adelbert Paganucci, cab driver, license number twelve-seven-three-nine, who picked me up at Times Square and brought me here. Also the testimony of Myrtle Bunyan, age forty, occupation, secretary, employee of Sam Cuddy, who can testify that from nine to ten-fifty A.M. I was ensconced in the confines of my office."

"All right." Leary interrupted. "Who is the corpse and what did he want you for?"

"This is, or was Mathew Thompson. He is one of the stockholders of the Sentex Circuit. He was killed before he got much off his chest."

"If you're holding out on me like you did the last time," Leary threatened, "so help me, I'll have that

chicken inspector badge of yours—with your license.”

“Why, Ferdinand—”

“Get out,” roared Leary. Sam got out. . . .

Sam had no qualms about withholding the information about the Bombay Orange from Sergeant Leary. Leary, on the trail, would be like Ferdinand the Bull in a china shop. In attempting to smell the flowers on the vases, he would knock them over.

The Bombay Orange was the result of a press agent's nightmare. When the Paladium Theater showed the “Bombay Letter,” the Sentex press agent had conceived the idea of placing the Bombay Orange in a glass case in the lobby of the Paladium. The stamp had been hired from a noted collector named Perry Morris. The news had been advertised in all the papers, together with the fact that the stamp was conservatively valued at \$25,000.

The crowd that appeared in order to gaze at a one-inch square of orange paper worth over \$25,000 broke all records of the Paladium. At the height of the crush, a fight started in the lobby of the theater. In a few seconds, everybody was swinging at everybody else. Amidst this din and furor, the noise of shattered glass passed unnoticed.

The one person, who would have noticed, was found later, dead. The skull of the watchman had been fractured by a billy. When the police restored order, the stamp was gone from its black plush dais in the broken glass case.

By agreement, the Sentex Circuit was responsible. The money had been paid to Perry Morris.

Sam had spent a month investigating Perry Morris. The killing had been gang stuff. Morris showed a clean bill of health. Now, Sam hailed a cab, gave Morris' downtown address. Morris might be helpful.

Perry Morris, thin, small and schol-

arly, was glad to see Sam. The robbery had been the most exciting event of his life.

Sam accepted a drink, leaned back in the chair in Morris' study.

“I'm here on a peculiar mission,” he told Morris. “Before I tell you, I want your promise to keep it a secret, whether or not you agree to help me.”

MORRIS was thrilled.

“Anything at my disposal,” he promised.

“I have reason to believe,” Sam told him, “that the Bombay Orange is being offered for sale.”

“What!” Morris sprang up.

“Yes,” nodded Sam. “I got a call from Mathew Thompson, who told me that he had promised to buy the stamp for ten thousand dollars.”

“It's worth three times that amount!” Morris was indignant. “I know Thompson. I would never believe he would buy a stolen stamp.”

“He didn't. He was going to set a trap for the seller. He was killed less than an hour ago.”

Morris sank limply into his chair.

“Killed,” he whispered. “Mathew was the squarest collector in the city.”

“The police,” Sam continued, “do not know about the Bombay Orange. The newspapers will not mention it. Under the circumstances the stamp may be offered for sale again. It may already have been shown to certain collectors.”

“It—it is unbelievable.”

“It was done once,” Sam pointed out. “Although, why they chose Thompson . . .”

“It is like this,” Morris explained. “A stamp collector has a peculiar mind. He may be as honest as an angel—in every way but stamp collecting. A collector is like a miser. He would be glad to acquire the Bombay Orange, even if he had to keep it hidden and gloat over it alone.”

“But not all collectors could pay ten thousand dollars, even if they

were so inclined," Sam pointed out. "Could you give me a list of men who are not only able, but would be willing to pay that amount for the Bombay Orange?"

Morris nodded.

"Every collector knows every other collector or dealer. I presume that large firms are not involved?" Sam nodded assent. "Then, offhand, I can think of Roale on Central Park West, near Sixty-seventh Street. Beauvais is on Riverside Drive, near One Hundred and Twentieth Street, and Varian lives in Long Island, Forest Hills, I believe. I'll get you their addresses."

"Don't bother," Sam wrote down the information. "I'll check in the phone book."

"There are others less well known," Morris added. "Do you want them?"

"If you will make up a list, I'll call you back. Thanks for your help and maybe you will get a chance to buy back the Bombay Orange."

"I would pay five thousand dollars extra for the privilege," Morris said.

Stamp collectors are funny creatures, Sam reflected as he left. He dropped in at a cigar store to check the addresses of the three names listed. Roale was first, he decided, being the nearest.

Whatever else might be said about them, Sam thought, as he paid off his cab in front of the Roale residence, these collectors must have dough. The Roale house was a three-story brownstone front, modeled in a bygone era. It was solid and stodgy alongside its modern fifteen story apartment house—yet exuded an aura of wealth.

SAM rang and waited, rang again. At his second ring, the door opened, to frame a bald man of medium height. There was a curious whiteness about the man, further accentuated by his dark somber clothing. It was a face, such as might never have seen the sun, so pale was the skin.

"Mr. Roale?" Sam asked.

"I am his secretary," the pale man told him. "Have you an appointment?"

"No," confessed Sam. "But it is very important. About a very valuable stamp."

"Come in," the secretary led Sam into a front living room. He disappeared silently, but did not give Sam much chance to wonder, as he entered shortly and beckoned him to follow.

Roale was the exact opposite of his secretary. His height was overlooked in the immensity of his girth and genial grin. His eyes were blue reflections shining through slits in fatty pouches. Rising would be too much of an effort, Sam felt, as Roale waved him to a seat.

"And what is this about a stamp?" Roale boomed in Oxford English. "My secretary was rather vague."

"It is confidential," Sam hesitated.

"Leeman is my *alter ego*, my physical self," Roale laughed. "You may speak."

"It is about the Bombay Orange."

It was hard to tell Roale's expression beneath those layers of fat. But he stopped smiling.

"What about the Bombay Orange?"

"I have reason to believe," Sam told him, "that it is being offered for sale. Did anyone offer the stamp to you at a low price?"

Roale did not answer immediately. When he spoke he astonished Sam by his admission.

"If I had been offered the Bombay Orange at any price I would have bought it. Since it was stolen however, I have not seen or heard of it."

"You would have bought it, knowing that it was stolen?" Sam asked, amazed at the admission.

"The past history of the Bombay Orange does not interest me," Roale stated. "I would have given it an honored position among other great historical mementoes."

He indicated the album that Lee-

man was cataloguing. Sam watched, fascinated. Leeman's hands, like his face, were utterly devoid of color, except where tiny blue veins shone through the skin. Beautiful hands, artistic hands that daily handled fragile thousands in stamps.

Sam left Roale with mixed feelings. Roale's frank admission seemed to bear out the truth of his assertion that he had not been offered the stamp.

Sam had not stopped to eat since he had received the call from Thompson. Now he took time out for a sandwich, after phoning the garage for his roadster. The car was waiting in front of Child's Restaurant, when Sam stepped out. Next stop was Varian.

He drove rapidly, but was caught in the home-bound traffic to Long Island. It was twilight when Sam finally located Varian's estate. The natural stone house, although it was not large, was almost invisible among pines and maple, in the center of a large plot. High hedges, in lieu of a fence, added further seclusion. Sam almost missed the driveway which was a carwide break in the hedges.

THE man who opened the door to Sam's ring, was not his conception of a servant. Insolent eyes regarded Sam sharply. The man had a broad face atop neckless shoulders. He was short, husky and capable, with a wrestler's grace.

"Yeah?" he asked Sam.

"I would like to see Mr. Varian," Sam told him.

"Varian is busy."

"This is important, about a stamp of great value," Sam urged.

"Name?"

"Sam Cuddy."

"Okay, this way." Sam's inquisitor stood aside and motioned him forward.

Sam stepped past the man. He heard a sound, half turned. It was his last conscious memory, as a ter-

rific blow changed his thoughts to a myriad of dancing lights.

Sam's first conscious thought was of a terrific pain that hammered upon his brain. He struggled to rise, fell back. It was much easier to lie back, but Sam felt, without knowing why, that he must get up. Fingers clawed the wood of a table leg, as he pulled himself to his feet, inch by painful inch.

Teetering unsteadily on his feet, he almost dropped at what he saw. A thin, long man lay on the floor staring at him with sightless dark eyes. The man's sharp-cut features were spoiled by the course of a bullet that had entered below the chin and gone out through the cranium. A gun was clasped in bony fingers.

Sam slowly became aware of his own right hand. He was clutching an unfamiliar revolver. He felt for his own gun—and encountered an empty holster.

He looked around. The room was evidently a den. Near a desk against the further wall, a safe stood open. Stamp albums had been scattered about.

The corpse wore a smoking jacket and house slippers. Varian. The short man who had admitted him was gone.

A police siren wailed suddenly in the distance. Sam moved. Picking up his hat, he left quickly, rushed for his roadster. Whatever the setup, Sam knew one thing—if he were found in the room it was a perfect setup for the police. And only a good, hard skull had saved him from being found near the dead man, holding what was probably the murder weapon. Which was what the police were supposed to think.

The brisk fall air helped clear his head. Sam groaned inwardly as he remembered that his prints were scattered all over the murder room.

Sam tried to high-pressure his brain by the very wish to think. Mentally he reviewed his findings.

The Varian kill was gang stuff. This fitted in perfectly with the method of the stamp snatch. Also, the fear on the part of the various collectors to open up. Also, the Thompson kill.

The gang had tried to stop Sam by leaving him with a murder setup. Why?

Sam thought he knew. The gang had further business. Beauvais.

Beauvais, the third collector, had probably been offered the stamp, too. And if that were so, what better chance to get rid of the stamp than right now? Sam headed his roadster for Beauvais' apartment.

Sam cast a swift glance at the bell-board at Beauvais' apartment house. His quarry was on the fifth. Sam buzzed a button at random, slid into the hall as the ticker buzzed back. He did not use the elevator going up, but darted into the fire tower. He arrived at the fifth floor a little winded but unseen.

The exit from the fire tower to the hall was between the elevator and Beauvais' apartment. Sam found, that by opening the door an inch, he had a clear view of Beauvais' door through the aperture between the hinges of the fire door. He settled down to wait.

His watch showed halfpast eight when a furtive figure passed his line of vision. Of medium height, the man appeared short. His rounded shoulders and shuffling slouch were aided by the way his neckless head ran into his shoulders, giving him the appearance of an ape. As he rang Beauvais' bell, Sam could see his profile, which looked as if it had been battered flat. It was the man who had admitted him to Varian's house.

Beauvais admitted his visitor as if he had been expected. Sam thought fast, could see only one line of action. He hefted the automatic he had found in his hand.

The ape-man did not stay long. Sam reversed the automatic in his

hand as he came out, and shuffled towards the elevator.

Sam flattened against the door, watched the side facing the elevator. As the hood passed, Sam silently swung the door open and stepped behind Beauvais' visitor.

He did not pull his punch as he smacked the butt of his gun into the hood's skull.

As the hood slumped, Sam grabbed him and pulled him into the fire tower. He shut the door, then dragged his prize into the light of the low watt bulb. Swiftly he went through all the pockets of the unconscious man.

First, there were several bills made to Chas. Dinkle. The name was familiar. As Sam repeated it it came to him. This was no other than Dinkle, Dinkle Little Bell, gun-toter and strong arm man for Red Fallon. The Fallon mob was mixed up in almost everything that was illegal—and gainful. It must have been the Fallon gang then, that was peddling the Bombay Orange.

The next item was a well-filled wallet. Aside from some fives and singles, it contained sixteen five hundred dollar bills—eight grand.

A LITTLE address book came next. Sam flipped it open carelessly, and whistled in surprise. Between the pages of the little book, as Sam turned them, he saw the Bombay Orange. Then another one and another. Eight in all.

Sam placed the stamps together, side by side. They were alike as eight proverbial peas from one pod.

"Counterfeit," Sam spoke aloud.

Understanding came to Sam in a flash. The Bombay Orange had been cleverly counterfeited. Every collector in the city knew that the stamp had been stolen. The stamp could be sold time after time to unscrupulous collectors. Each man would think he had the original. Each man would hoard the stamp in secret,

If a collector did find out that his stamp was a forgery, he could not squawk. He had bought what was apparently a stolen article. The gang that counterfeited the stamps could clean up in New York and then go out of town, Europe—anywhere. The Bombay Orange was internationally catalogued, and known wherever stamps were collected.

The sapped hood showed signs of life. He was regaining consciousness.

Silently, Sam faded down the stairs. Waiting until the elevator was up, he slipped out into the street. He got into his roadster, parked a half block from the entrance to the door. The thug he knocked out would appear in a hurry.

Finding his money and valuables gone, Sam reasoned, Dinkle would immediately head for help. Sam intended to follow.

Sam looked through Dinkle's little black book. Names and addresses were listed. Opposite some names, sums of money were listed. Sam saw Mathew Thompson at the head of the list with \$10,000 after his name. There was a pencil line through the name. Beauvais and Varian were also crossed off as well as some names Sam did not know.

SAM searched through the list but did not find Roale listed. Evidently his story that he had never been offered the stamp was true.

Waiting for Dinkle to come out, Sam went over his facts again. Then suddenly the whole thing was clear. The solution came as a flash, but the flash was set off by a combination of all the facts that he had gathered. Sam glanced at his watch, nearly ten o'clock. Then Dinkle came out.

Dinkle walked to the corner, went into the drugstore. He was going to phone. Sam would have liked to listen in an adjoining booth, but it was too dangerous. He waited.

Dinkle emerged in a few minutes. He lit a cigarette, paced nervously in

a continuous circle before the drugstore. He did not have long to wait.

A black sedan drew up to the curb. There was only one man in the car, the driver. Dinkle got in. The car shot ahead. Sam allowed them a block, then followed.

The occupants of the black sedan evidently did not fear pursuit. They continued at a moderate speed going east and downtown. Maybe they reasoned that Dinkle was the victim of a coincidental holdup.

The sedan stopped at Sutton Place, near Fifty-fifth Street. Sam parked in front of a garage a block away. He saw Dinkle get out and head for one of the palatial apartment houses that fronted on the East River. The driver of the sedan did not get out. Sam got out, slipped into the shadow of a doorway near the sedan.

From a quick glance at Dinkle's black book, Sam knew that the gangster was visiting another collector. They were evidently cleaning up fast before news broke of Varian's death. Maybe they were getting ready to lay low in the city. They had to be clipped now or it would be too late. The driver of the sedan had brought along a new supply of counterfeit stamps.

As before, Dinkle did not linger. He came out of the apartment house, hurried over to the car. The door opened and Dinkle started to slip in besides the driver.

Sam moved fast. In several long-legged strides, he was beside the sedan.

His left hand wrenched the rear door open. His right had a fistful of gun, which he used as a sap. Again Dinkle slumped unconscious under Sam's pistol-caress.

The driver half-whirled, hand streaking for his left armpit. Sam shoved the muzzle of the .38 into his neck. He was not gentle.

"Reach, chum," he told the driver.

The driver lifted his hands. Sam removed an automatic. Otherwise, the

driver appeared clean. Sam dug his gun a little deeper into the driver's neck.

"Now, chum, lower your mitts. Reach very slowly with your right hand into Dinkle's pocket. There's a wad of dough there. I want it."

The driver lowered his hands.

"I hope you know who you're monkeying with," he said.

"Sure, chum. Red Fallon. Now reach easy for the dough."

The driver reached into Dinkle's pocket, pulled out a loose roll of bills. He passed them over his shoulder to Sam.

"Red won't like this," he said.

"Sure, chum, sure." Sam told him.

"But don't forget that I'm leaving you the stamps. Maybe Red'll peddle them around. He's all right on the retail end. Me, I'm leaving him this territory."

"Leaving town?" the thug tried to be casual.

"Sure, all New York is yours now. Only, I'm taking the guy who makes them. So long, and don't get ideas. When I get out—drive."

HE SLIPPED out, stood besides the sedan. The driver put the car in gear, shot away. Sam did not attempt to follow. He located a phone, called Headquarters. He asked for Sergeant Leary.

"Hello, Ferdinand the Bull," he greeted Leary. "How would you like to solve a crime?"

"Where are you now?" yelled Leary.

"If it's about some clues at a place in Forest Hills where a man named Varian was murdered—" suggested Sam.

"So you were there?" Leary was almost friendly. "Of course, I know you didn't put the slug on Varian. . . ."

"If you're trying to keep me talking until you trace this call," Sam told Leary, "then don't waste time. Listen. There's going to be a pay-off on the Thompson kill as well as the death of

the watchman when the Bombay Orange was stolen. Get this, and get it right the first time."

Sam talked fast, giving Leary instructions.

Sam got into his roadster and headed west. For the second time that day, he pulled up at Central Park West and Sixty-seventh Street. Light still showed in the home of Roale, the fat stamp collector. He rang the bell. As before, Leeman, the white-faced secretary, opened the door. He recognized Sam Cuddy.

"What do you want now?" he asked. "Mr. Roale cannot see you at this hour."

"Important." Sam rushed his words. "I've got eight copies of the Bombay Orange. I want to know which is the original. Roale is an authority." Sam handed the secretary the eight stamps.

"I've got to go!" Sam appeared frightened. "I'll be back in fifteen minutes. Roale ought to know by then."

Sam started for the door, opened it to go out. Leeman disappeared into Roale's study. Sam banged the door shut, but remained inside. Silently, he ran up the carpeted stairs to the second floor.

He did not have long to wait. He heard the bell ring downstairs. From the darkness, Sam peered down to the lighted hall. Leeman opened the door.

It was Red Fallon personally, who headed the four hoods. He straight-armed Leeman, who fell against the wall in a sitting position. One of the hoods sapped him to sleep. It was the driver of the sedan.

Guns out, the quintet barged into the study of Roale. Sam could hear the surprised roar of the gargantuan collector. He heard heated conversation.

Sam slipped out the Varian murder gun and the automatic taken from the driver of the black sedan. He stole down the stairs and opened the door into the street. He left the door open

and walked back towards Roale's study. He halted just beyond the door. Red Fallon was talking.

"You're gonna be nice to work on. Plenty to melt away." He laughed huskily.

"But you've got the wrong idea," Roale was pleading. "Why should I hold you up, only to share it with someone else? We were doing all right together."

"Shut up," Fallon grated. "Either you name the punk who sapped Dinkle or we'll roast you."

Sam heard Roale bleat in terror. Shoving his guns ahead of him, he stepped into the doorway.

Red Fallon, hate masking his features, was facing Roale. The big collector was being held by two hoods. Dinkle had a cigar lighter in one hand, was ripping at Roale's clothes with the other. His hand came away with fingers full of shirt. He flicked the cigar lighter into flame. Roale's big body squirmed in helpless terror, held down by the thugs.

Sam took another step in.

"Hold it," he spat.

RED FALLON went rigid. For an instant the tableau was suspended, like a moving picture which had stopped.

"Let go," Sam commanded.

The hoods dropped their hands. One turned slightly. For an instant, Dinkle was obscured. His hand streaked for his gun. His shot mingled with Sam's.

Both men dropped. But Dinkle did not move. Sam rolled.

Four guns flashed as Sam's hand reached the light switch. Sam's hand pressed down and he rolled left.

"Get him," Red Fallon grated.

Sam loosed two shots at the voice and was away before he got three bullets in return.

As momentary silence settled down upon the room, Sam heard a welcome sound—footsteps in the hall.

"Leary," he yelled. "Look out."

"Put on the lights inside," Leary's voice grated. "Come out with your hands up."

Shots blasted the doorway. It was suicide to enter.

There was a soft *chug*, a *plop*. Another and another.

Sam became conscious of a peculiar odor. Tear gas. He pulled out his handkerchief, covered his face. He lay face down on the carpet trying not to breathe.

He could hear choked sobs. Coughing. Then one of the hoods broke. Clutching at his face, he staggered to the doorway and air. Leary appeared in the light from the hall. No shots greeted him.

Sam Cuddy lifted tear-stained eyes to Leary. Red Fallon was one of a quartet of handcuffed and silent hoods. Leary rolled Dinkle over.

"Who killed him?" he demanded.

"I—I did," Sam said.

"Well, what're you crying about?" Leary was enjoying Sam's discomfort to the full. "Now let's hear what it's all about."

"Sure, but first put a pair of bracelets on Mr. Roale here."

For a fat man Roale was fast. His large hand stopped rubbing tear-stained eyes to streak for a gun in the desk drawer near his seat.

Leary loved it. His hamlike fist closed over Roale's hand, bringing a gasping cry of pain from the fat collector. A short right to the jaw caused Roale to sag.

"Isn't that smart," Sam jeered. "Now you've got to revive him again."

"Start explaining," Leary ordered.

"It started with a call from Matthew Thompson this morning. He told me some people offered him the Bombay Orange at a reduced price."

"You held out on me," Leary rasped. "This time I'm going after your license, personally."

"I held out on you?" Sam asked innocently. "If I did, then how did you solve this murder racket?"

"You mean—"

"Sure. The newspaper boys will be here shortly. Here's what you tell them:

"While Mathew Thompson was phoning me he got sapped. Evidently his caller had returned and heard him speaking to me. But I knew the Bombay Orange was being offered around."

SAM drew a deep, self-sacrificing breath.

"I visited Perry Morris, the original owner of the stamp and an authority in general. He gave me three names. These men both could, and would buy the Bombay Orange even though it had been stolen. They were Roale, Beauvais and Varian.

"I was fooled on Roale. I gave him a clean bill of health. But Roale knew I was going to visit the various other collectors. He called Red Fallon. Red had a reception committee for me at Varian's.

"As I get it, Varian must have balked at becoming further involved. Dinkle shot him and left me holding the bag. Two birds with one shot. They wanted to stop me until they got rid of a few more counterfeit stamps.

"I headed for Beauvais, figuring they would try to sell him in a hurry. Dinkle appeared. I sapped him, and when I found the counterfeit stamps, I got the setup immediately. I took

Dinkle's stamps. I knew he would call for more if he wanted to clean up in New York in a hurry.

"By this time I suspected that there was more to it than just gang stuff. Somebody had conceived the idea, which was cleverer than Red Fallon could originate. It had to be somebody who knew stamps and stamp collectors. Somebody good.

"Then I remembered Leeman, Roale's secretary. Leeman was so white-skinned, he looked like a ghost. He also spoke without moving his lips. Prison stuff. Add to that, the fact that Leeman had the smoothest looking pair of hands I ever saw. Well, it meant that Roale had located a forger who could duplicate the Bombay Orange. He used the Fallon gang for the rough stuff.

"As far as I was concerned, I knew the setup, but had to prove it. I followed Dinkle until he made another sale and held him up again. I let him think I was working for Roale and that we were ready to give him the doublecross. Dinkle got Red Fallon and I called you. The rest you will probably find in the house—records, printing press and all."

Leary, swaying between satisfaction at bagging Fallon and anger at Sam, finally grinned.

"Okay," he said. "I'm ready for the press now."

Next Month: BIG DAY FOR LADYFINGERS,
a Complete Crime Novelet by **FREDERICK C. PAINTON**



The Smart Guy

By JOHN McCURNIN



Natty sent a stream of lead at the doorway

"Sleepy" Morgan Had a Slow, Sure-Fire Scheme for Easy Money — but His Speedy Getaway Backfired!

THE radio at the end of the bar was playing in low tones. The indirect lighting above threw a pleasant glow over the mahogany counter. "Sleepy" Morgan admired himself in the polished glass mirror behind the bar as he took a drink of beer.

He put the glass down and kept looking at himself. His eyes were at-

tracted to a bottle of Very Old Rye, but he put the thought of a stiff drink out of his mind quickly. He had work to do tonight and he'd have to keep his head clear. And tomorrow there'd be plenty of dough in his pocket to buy cases of good whiskey.

He wouldn't be pushing taxis ten, twelve, fourteen hours a day for twelve or fifteen bucks a week if he

kept his head clear. And he could be in 'Frisco in three days with all that jack. What would Lil say when he flashed that wad at her? He knew. She'd melt into something soft and plenty pleasing.

"I'll get me a swell suite of rooms with a whole case of good rye and Lil 'n' me'll get damn good and drunk for a week," he muttered. The bartender looked over and Sleepy realized he was talking out loud to himself. "Gimme another beer," he said, trying to make it sound like he'd been saying that.

The bartender drew him another beer and Sleepy slid a dime across the counter. When he raised the glass, his eyes fell on the clock above the bar. It was 11:25. Twenty minutes yet before he had to meet "Snig" and Natty.

A thin smile quirked his thick lips as he thought about them. The two wise guys. The two smart boys that the dumb dicks were not going to get. No, naturally not as long as Sleepy Morgan did the driving for them. He'd driven them out of a half dozen tight squeezes in the last six months. But those mugs didn't give him any credit for it. No. They gave him fifty bucks a trip. Fifty lousy bucks for doing the big end of the job.

Any dumbjohn could throw a gun on a joint and shake it for the dough, but a guy that could make a getaway through traffic like Sleepy Morgan could, was worth something. At least more than fifty bucks.

But after tonight. . . . This was going to be a real haul. The big crap game up on 90th Street. Four thousand dollars at least in it. Maybe five or six. And at least another grand in that neat leather wallet that Snig carried. It'd be a cinch after tonight with all that dough— A train from Peekskill, three days of pullman luxury, and then 'Frisco and Lil. Boy, it'd be good to be in the same room with Lil again and plenty of good rye. Like old times.

The wall clock chimed the half hour and Sleepy slowly swallowed the rest of his beer. He unwound his long, loose legs from the bar stool and started to leave. The bartender made a motion for another one on the house.

"Sure," Sleepy accepted. Beer settled his nerves and he was a little jumpy thinking about all that dough. He gulped the beer down without taking the glass from his lips.

"IN A hurry?" a slow, controlled voice said at his side.

Sleepy jerked the empty glass down hard and looked into the calm, gray eyes of Clem Pell, detective, first-class. He'd seen those same eyes too much before. They were the eyes that had sent him up the river for a stretch, only a couple of years back.

"Don't you ever say anything without asking a question?" Sleepy asked, annoyed.

"Questions are my business," Clem Pell answered in that menacing, slow tone of his. "And I'm always looking for business."

"Well, you ain't got nothin' on me, Copper, so scram. Besides, you'll give me a bad name talkin' to me," Sleepy said.

"A bad name?" the detective questioned. "Stick around. I'll buy you a beer."

"I'm choosy who I drink with," Sleepy said, and left abruptly. . . .

Turning into a side street, he slowed down when he got to the middle of the block and looked at the cars pulled up to the curb. Somebody moved in one and he stopped. The door opened and he saw Snig stick his head out.

"Sleepy?" Snig asked in a low voice.

"Yeah," Sleepy said.

"Okay. C'mon."

Sleepy stepped closer and looked the car over in the dim light from the street lamps.

"Why didn't you bring a tomato

can with wooden wheels on it?" he asked sarcastically.

"C'mon, cut the grandstand stuff and let's go," Snig ordered.

"Did you change the plates?" Sleepy asked.

"Yeah. C'mon."

Sleepy walked around, kicked the tires to see how strong they were, and got in behind the wheel. He liked a small car for fast traffic work, but he liked them new with two or three thousand miles on them. He looked at the mileage. It read twenty-two thousand. He looked at the gas gauge. It read full.

"Where did you get it?" he asked.

"Natty got it uptown," Snig replied.

Sleepy started the motor and listened intently. The motor was in good shape.

"Yeah. It's okay, I guess," he said.

"Sure it's okay, and it won't be hot for another hour or so. Natty borrowed it from a high school skirt in front of a party. She won't miss it till she comes out."

Sleepy cramped the wheels away from the curb. They turned easy. He slid the gear into first. The gear worked smoothly. The kid sure kept it in good shape. Sleepy turned around and looked at Snig.

"How about the coin?" he asked. He always got paid first because when he left Snig and Natty, they were usually in a hurry.

SNIG pulled out the neat leather wallet he carried and gave Sleepy five tens. Sleepy tucked the bills in his watch pocket and slid his hand around the .38 Colt that rested in his hip pocket.

"Small change," he thought to himself as he let the car roll out of the parking space.

Sleepy pulled up in front of the brownstone house on 90th Street and Snig and Natty got out.

"Keep this back door open and

when you see us comin', be ready," Snig ordered curtly.

Sleepy nodded and watched them go up the steep front steps. In a few moments they were gone. He widened his parking space by pushing the cars in front of him and in back of him away with his bumpers. When he had enough space to go out with a clean sweep, he settled back in the seat and waited.

He thought he heard a shot and he looked up at the door of the brownstone house. Then Snig and Natty broke through and were racing down the steps. In an instant Snig was piling into the back seat. A shot came out of the door of the brownstone and ricocheted off the sidewalk with a whining whistle. Natty sent a stream of fire at the door of the house and piled into the car. Sleepy let the clutch in and swept out into the street and turned south at the corner.

The steel uprights of the elevated were duck soup to Sleepy and he swerved in and out of them with calm ease until he had put plenty of blocks behind them and the 90th Street brownstone. He cut his speed and turned crosstown for Eighth Avenue. He idled through Times Square traffic. No big hurry now. And he wanted to take no chances of getting into any fender scrapes in the one way street.

Through the rear-view mirror, he watched Snig put a rubber band around a big roll of bills and a little shudder of eagerness passed through him as he thought about feeling the smoothness of that roll between his own fingers. Then he had that longing feeling of having Lil sit beside him again with a glass of good rye and blowing cigarette smoke in his eyes.

He turned into Eighth Avenue and made no attempt to make the light at 42nd Street.

"What's holdin' you back?" Snig

asked. He seemed a little nervous. "Think we got all night? Hell, maybe we got a murder rap over our heads. We had to do some shooting."

Sleepy didn't say anything, although he felt his throat tighten at the mention of murder.

"He thinks he's on a pleasure cruise in that hack of his again," Natty cut in sarcastically.

Sleepy bit his lip. The light changed and he went on down Eighth Avenue.

"Why didn't you go down the ramp to the tubes?" Snig asked.

"There ain't no side streets to run in if anything gets after us," Sleepy replied.

These wise guys. Why didn't he go down on the ramp? A jackass would know better than to get up there in a hot car with a load of hot dough. If it wasn't for his driving, the cops would have had these two smart boys long ago.

Sleepy cut back to Seventh Avenue at 14th Street and turned south again. He went through the Village and crossed Canal into Greenwich Street. The warehouses that lined the street looked dark and deserted and the black elevated overhead gave the street the sinister aspect of a dark tunnel.

A FRUIT truck rumbled out of a cross-street and made the break Sleepy was waiting for. He swerved out in front of it and got by and rocked the car back onto the right side of the street. When he was about a quarter of a block past the corner, he jammed on the brakes fast and the car slid to a jarring stop.

Before Snig and Natty knew what was happening, Sleepy flicked on the dome light and was waving the .38 Colt back and forth in their surprised eyes.

"What the hell!" Snig exclaimed.

"Shut up and reach, both of you,"

Sleepy dictated nervously. The gun was shaking in his hand.

Snig and Natty reached their hands up. Natty watched Sleepy intently, looking for a break, but Sleepy's nervous eyes saw every movement they made.

"Look out," Natty warned Snig. "He's plenty nervous with that gat."

"Get out. Lay down on the sidewalk and keep your hands out in front of you," Sleepy commanded Natty. Natty got out and stretched himself out on the sidewalk. Sleepy's eyes flicked back and forth quickly over the space he had to cover. "Throw the roll on the seat and follow him," he ordered Snig, then.

Snig put the roll of bills on the seat slowly and got out and laid down alongside of Natty. Sleepy got out then and kicked the back door closed with his heel. He leaned over and yanked the neat leather wallet out of Snig's back pocket.

"Now roll over and face up," he said. "Quick."

They both turned over and he took the guns out of their shoulder holsters.

"Now get up and walk for that light at the far corner and don't look back."

"You can't get away with this, you dumb hacky," Snig snarled between clenched teeth as he got up.

Sleepy smiled smugly and made his hand twitch on the trigger.

"Start walkin'," he growled.

Snig and Natty started walking. Sleepy tossed the guns into the front seat, got into the car and watched them turn the corner where the street light was. Then he whirled the car around and headed back for Canal. At Canal he turned west and headed for Seventh Avenue uptown. He'd have to get rid of those guns—he didn't want them around with him. But he'd see to that later. Throw them into some river on his way west.

He passed 42nd Street. What a cinch! What a cinch this was. He stopped the car near the curb and reached his long arm back on the seat for the roll. He looked at the green bills hungrily. What a cinch! The two smart boys couldn't squawk because it was hot dough and a hot car. The crap game couldn't squawk because the cops couldn't cover them.

"Sleepy Morgan," he said out loud to himself, "you got the brains of a wizard. Lil, old gal, here I come."

At 72nd Street he turned for Riverside Drive and settled into the speed that would catch the lights. At 84th Street he turned out of the Drive and stopped in front of a darkened rooming house. He put the roll of bills inside his shirt and went up the steps two at a time.

IN HIS own room he flicked on the light and pulled off his sweater coat. He threw it in an open suitcase already packed. On the bed lay a coat and vest ready to be put on. He slipped into them quickly and went to the closet and brought out a freshly blocked hat and put it on.

He tossed the cap he had worn into the valise and closed the bag. Then he smoothed the roll of bills into four neat piles so they wouldn't bulge his pockets. Looking quickly around to see if he had forgotten anything, he grabbed up the bag and hurried out.

On the front steps of the rooming house, he pulled a dollar watch out of his pocket. With luck, he could catch the 12:45 out of Grand Central at Peekskill and then Chicago, Omaha, Cheyenne, Sacramento and Frisco!

Frisco with Lil. But Lil couldn't see him with a watch like that. He'd get himself one that'd open her peepers when he pulled it out to show her the time. He tossed the dollar watch away. There was the instant tinkle of shattered glass fall-

ing on the pavement. He'd never heard a watch break with so much noise before.

He got in the car and swung around to 85th Street and came back onto the Drive and headed for the Bronx and Peekskill. Something prompted him to look into the rear-view and when he did, he saw a green and white coupé trailing him. Cops! The coupe behind him picked up speed. Was this car hot already? The coupé swung up alongside of him.

"Pull over," a cop yelled out the window.

"Pull over hell," Sleepy said to himself and gave the car the gun. The eight cylinders of the little sedan responded quickly and rolled the speedometer up to thirty-five. At the next corner he turned sharply. He'd give these dumb cops the ride of their lives through traffic.

Weaving in and out of other cars, he circled the block. Traffic was thick and slower than he'd figured. The green and white coupe was still on his tail. Maybe he better beat it for the Hendrik Hudson Highway and outrun them. These small eights had the wings of the wind on a straight-away.

As he pulled into the fast lane of the highway, he thought for a minute he'd lost them but then he heard the wail of a siren fighting some traffic behind. He kicked it up to forty and marveled at the way these small eights could move. The speedometer hit forty-five. Something seemed to drag. Something seemed to be holding him back. He slammed the gas all the way down to the floor.

The engine was pulling hard against some force that held it back. He'd driven a half a million miles and never felt that strange pull at a motor before. An eerie feeling crawled over him. The scream of the siren came closer.

"C'mon, you screwy jalopy," Sleepy groaned. But the unseen thing holding it back, held on. Sleepy cursed. If only this car hadn't begun acting up, he'd have gotten away okay.

HE STARTED figuring fast. The cops in the coupé hadn't got a good look at his face. If he bailed out and they caught him with all that dough, they'd nail him sure. He began sweating. Snig had mentioned a possible murder rap. It was too dangerous to be caught. And there were those guns—they might be hot! But without the dough, all he'd get would be a minor rap for stealing a car.

He reached for his pockets and got the four stacks of bills out and began stuffing them into the tangle of wires under the dashboard. The guns followed. Nobody would bother looking there for anything. Then he reached over and got his suitcase up on the seat beside him. A tag with the name and address of a filling station hung on the choke. He ripped it off. Braking the car to a stop, he jumped out and started running for the park along the highway.

Halfway around the car he froze to a stop. The tail-light was out. That cockeyed watch had busted it. Was that all those cops wanted him for when they first tried to stop him? Well, it was too late to argue with them now. He saw the flash of their red spotlight and ducked for the park and went up the steep bank to Riverside Drive. He still had the five tens Snig had paid him and he hailed a cab for a hotel.

He was sorry now he hadn't kept the dough, but he felt safer this way. Anyway, he was confident he would get that money back. . . .

The next night, just after dark, Sleepy sat at an uptown bar with his eyes glued on a filling station across the street. It was the filling station named on the tag he'd pulled off the choke. Sooner or later, he figured,

the little eight would come in for gas and oil. A hollow pain went down his throat every time he thought about that strange, unseen thing that had held him back just when he was about to make a getaway. If it hadn't been for that, he'd be on his way west. He knew almost everything there was to know about cars, taxis, trucks, and tractors, but that was one thing he couldn't find an answer for.

But with all that dough under the dashboard, he had to find it. If he could just spot it, he had a chance to get those bills back into his pockets.

A little after nine he put down his beer and narrowed his eyes at a small sedan pulling into the filling station. That was it all right! He could tell by the brightness of the new bulb and red glass of the tail light. He walked out of the bar, his nerves tense, his fingers tingling for the soft, smooth feel of those bills in his hands again.

But that wasn't a high school girl that got out and spoke to the attendant. It was a tall guy that looked like some kind of a business big-shot. Sleepy got closer to the car. It was the same one. Probably the kid's old man had brought it down to be serviced.

When the attendant finished and the car came out of the station, there wasn't a taxi in sight. So Sleepy hit the street and started running to keep up with it. The tall guy drove slowly. A red traffic light stopped it at the next corner and Sleepy stopped, trying to catch his breath. There was a dull, aching pain in his side but when the car started, Sleepy started too. Luckily, the car turned the corner and parked only a few doors up the street.

Sleepy watched the tall man get out and go into one of the swanky apartment houses that lined the street. He waited a minute and then approached the little sedan. A ghoul-ish feeling swept over him and the skin on his back tightened and flexed at the thoughts of the jinx that

seemed to surround the little sedan. Forcing himself, he opened the door.

The tall guy had left the parking lights on and the dash light lit up Sleepy's anxious face as he bent down to get his hand under the dashboard. His fingers found the tangle of wires and groped greedily.

"You won't find it there," a low voice said from the back seat.

SLEEPY'S eyes blazed as he looked into the muzzle of a Police Positive held steadily in a big hand. Then he looked up into the calm, gray eyes of Clem Pell.

"Somebody who don't like you any too well," Clem Pell said, "called me up last night and said you'd been borrowing cars again, Sleepy. I don't go too much for anonymous calls, so I had that call traced right away. We located your pals, Snig and Natty and held them for questioning about your borrowed car— And a good thing we did!"

His lips twisted into a grim smile.

"There was some shooting uptown at a big crap game. The boys couldn't cover up fast enough before the police got there—and they found a murdered guy."

Sleepy's face paled.

"They managed to get descriptions of the two holdup fellers," the detective continued, "and they fit right in with Snig and Natty. So we didn't have to go looking for them! They were right in jail. They didn't have guns or the money and they don't want to talk. But that business of the borrowed car added up to something, and we kind of figured things out. So when this car was brought in, we looked it over and found the guns and the dough. The filling station tag had been ripped off, so I figured you'd come back looking for that dough. I've been riding around on the floor of the back seat all night."

Sleepy started pulling himself up from the floor of the front seat. He was desperate with fright. A murder

rap! He was involved in it, even though he hadn't fired a shot.

"Don't come up too fast, Sleepy," the detective warned, "and get out reaching."

Sleepy got out. Hot, hopeless anger smoldered around his ears. When Clem Pell started squeezing his big frame through the back door, Sleepy tried to go for the .38 rod in his hip pocket but a big, hard knuckled fist crashed into the low side of his jaw and flashed him into a hazy fog. . . .

When he came to, a cop in uniform was leaning over him and Sleepy shook his head to settle his eyes. He sat up groggily.

"Aw, nuts," he groaned.

Clem Pell was standing off to the side talking to the tall guy that looked like a business big shot.

"Nice work," the tall guy was saying.

A black patrol wagon pulled up to the curb. The cop helped Sleepy to his feet and started leading him to it. Sleepy stopped. His eyes were fixed on the tall guy.

"I want to say something to that guy," he said thickly.

"All right," the cop said. "Make it quick."

The tall man heard Sleepy and stepped over closer to him.

"That damn car of yours," he snarled. "That was what stopped me, or I'd never been caught. That car is screwy. Get it up to forty-five and the whole motor just plugs up like something's got a hold on it. . . ."

"Oh that," the man said. "I got that car for my son and daughter to go to high school in. And when they go off on week-ends, I don't want them burning up the highways. I had a governor sealed on it that checks the gas when the speedometer hits forty-five."

"Oh," was all Sleepy said as a dumb, washed-out expression crept over his drawn features.

"C'mon," the cop in uniform said. "Let's go."

DEATH'S DANCE

A Kidnap Crime Novelet

By
**DON JAMES
JOHNSTON**

Author of "Some One in Red,"
"Fit to Kill," etc.

CHAPTER I

GONE—ONE DAUGHTER

PATRICIA KANE minced into the office, her retroussé nose tilted up in the air like a disdainful prize peke approaching a mangy hound. She laid a card on the desk.

Cole Kinnard continued gnawing mournfully on the end of an unlighted cigar, his feet propped on the desk and his long face making you think he might have just taken a dose of bad news.

He ventured a glance at the girl. She was gazing fixedly out the window and her nose was still up there.

"Aw, now pet, don't be like that!" Kinnard pleaded, disregarding the card she had brought in.

"Don't pet me, you overgrown tomat!" Pat said crisply. "Of all the skirts in this man's town, you pick a brick-top!"

Kinnard made a tight grin.

"Believe it or not, Pat, that red-



"A little bonfire and I

head last night was strictly business," he muttered.

"I'll say she was!" the girl cut in. "Otherwise you wouldn't have been so interested. I know you only too well, big boy!"

He shrugged, got his feet off of the desk and picked up the card. It bore the legend:

PHINEAS B. PHUTILE
Investment Counselor

The name brought a low chuckle. "What a handle!"

"He's waiting out there," Pat said.

"What's he look like?"

"Futile," she told him and went toward the door.

Cole Kinnard gazed after her ap-

Cole Kinnard Adds Gunpowder Spice

HOUSE DATE



go about my business," the killer gloated

provingly. They did not come any better than Pat Kane, but she had a vicious temper that was not to be trifled with.

"Well?"

She tossed the single word over her shoulder without turning.

"It would be," Kinnard agreed, "if you weren't so damned unreasonable. Oh hell—send him in."

Phineas B. Phutile was small and had the quick movements of a startled rabbit. He also had that rodent twitching, nervous mouth. His eyes reminded you of those you see in a fish market. Dead-gray and glazed.

"Kinnard?" he said hesitantly.

The big man nodded, picked up the card again.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Phutile?" he inquired.

A gray tongue came out, slid over thin blue lips as the man opened his mouth, then closed it again without saying anything. He took off a shapeless black hat to reveal a scalloped gray fringe of hair around a pink bald pate.

Cole Kinnard knew there was no point in trying to rush him.

"Have a chair," the big dick invited.

The graying head bobbed quickly, like a bird going after a worm, as he slid into a big high-backed leather chair. It made him appear even smaller than he actually was, and increased the air of futility.

to a Brew of Blackmail and Murder!

Cole Kinnard slowly took a bottle from a desk drawer, placed two glasses side by side and poured Irish whiskey into them.

"What you need," he told the investment counselor with a grin, "is a drink to settle your nerves."

"I don't drink, sir!" The statement was sharp, disapproving.

"Too bad," Kinnard murmured, and downed both drinks with relish.

He wiped a hand across his mouth and fished in a vest pocket for a fresh cigar. He put it between his teeth, leaned back in his swivel chair studying the little man.

"I came on business—" Phutile said, then hesitated.

"Sure! They all do, I assure you. Now why don't you take a deep breath and give it to me in a gulp? Start with what it is you're afraid of."

Phutile's face mirrored surprise which faded when he realized that anyone coming to a private detective would be afraid of something. He shrugged his thin, narrow shoulders.

"About a month ago I began to get letters—threatening letters. There were reasons why I didn't want to consult the authorities, so I just disregarded the threats. But now—"

KINNARD raised his eyebrows, chewed on his unlighted cigar and made no comment.

"My daughter has disappeared!"

The big detective came forward in his chair, leaned elbows on the desk and waited.

"It might have a connection with the threats."

"You have the letters, of course?"

Phutile hesitated an instant.

"No," he declared. "You see, they were not the sort of thing I wanted to have lying about. If their contents became public I would be ruined, not only in a business way, but socially as well."

Kinnard nodded.

"Why?"

"I prefer not to discuss that," the little man declared in level tones.

The big dick shrugged, spread his hands and got up.

"It's been nice meeting you," he said with a slow smile. "But you can't imagine anyone in his right mind being silly enough to take a commission without full information, Mr. Phutile. You had better inform the police."

"I'll pay—"

"You would, if I took your case," Kinnard agreed. "But I'm not taking it. See?"

Phutile evidently saw. With an effort that was plainly visible, he forced out the words.

"About a year ago, a woman came to me for advice, investment advice. She was—well, she had a strange attraction for me."

Cole Kinnard suppressed a grin, made a mental bet it was blond attraction.

"We started seeing each other," the little man continued, talking faster now that he was into his narrative. "The attachment grew as we came to know each other better. And all this time she was getting financial advice from me, the best I could give, based on more than forty years in the business. Then about six weeks ago, I learned, quite by accident to be sure, that she was not using this information herself but passing it on to—shall we say, her gentlemen friends?"

"She had an angle there, all right," Kinnard agreed. "If she gave them a tip and they came out on top, she'd be rewarded handsomely. If they lost, it cost her nothing. That it?"

Phineas B. Phutile nodded, swallowed nervously.

"Perhaps," he said, "but I have no way of knowing the facts. You see, she left where she'd been staying. Where she went, I don't know."

The big detective took the cigar from his mouth.

"Those letters, were they in a wom-

an's handwriting, or a man's?" he asked.

"Neither. They were typed and carried no signature. All of them were posted here in the city."

"Just what did they threaten?"

THE little man colored, wet his thin blue lips again.

"To acquaint my wife with my friendship for this other woman, insinuating the worst, and to alienate several of my best accounts by revealing that I was, consciously or not, betraying their best interests. You can understand my position—"

"And you made no attempt to meet the demands?" Kinnard said.

"No."

That one did not fit the picture or the man. Phutile was scared. Plenty scared. He would have reacted in the same manner to any serious threats to his person or possessions.

"Why?" Kinnard demanded. "Did they ask too much?"

"N-o-o, they didn't. They did not ask anything—outright, that is. They wanted me to give my clients false advice that could have only resulted in ruin."

"In what way?"

"To buy an unknown and unlisted stock of a South American nitrate corporation. They even suggested a plausible story to support my arguments for its purchase—the almost inevitable outbreak of large scale military operations would mean large returns for those in on the ground floor."

"Neat," the big dick conceded. "But who is the woman and have you a picture or anything that will give me a lead?"

Phutile bobbed his head, and took a bulky envelope from his inside pocket, got up and placed it on the desk.

"I obtained that in a highly irregular manner," he admitted. "It came by mail and was at the cottage after she departed."

Kinnard noted the casual reference to the cottage, let it pass.

"You just neglected to return it to the postman?" he asked.

"Yes. You see, I was anxious to locate her and get back some letters."

Cole Kinnard wanted to laugh, but he wanted the fat fee he smelled even more, so he choked it off.

"If I had a five-spot," he said, "for every man who's written letters . . ." The words trailed off, died.

He took the papers out of the envelope, then whistled in surprise. They were the final discharge papers from a Mid-western penitentiary issued in favor of one Myrtle Schultz, alias Lorraine Murdock, alias—

The big dick grinned widely.

"Your friend must have just gotten out of the clink when you met her."

Phutile nodded and made a wan attempt at a smile.

"Of course, you realize I never suspected—"

Kinnard nodded agreement. "I'll just keep these, Mr. Phutile," he told the little man. "They'll help me get a line on her."

The financial advisor opened his mouth, started to say something, then thought better of it.

"Now tell me about your daughter," the big detective directed.

"Mariam didn't come home last night. After dinner she said she was going to a show. That's all I know."

"How old is she?"

"Twenty-three last month."

"Any boy friends?"

"Of course not!" Phutile snapped. "I never allowed her to get interested in boys. She'd have been taken in by some fortune hunter."

"Got a picture?"

The investment counselor gave him a small, indistinct snapshot.

"There are some better ones out home," he mumbled.

Kinnard glanced at the picture. "I hope so," he murmured.

He got out the bottle and glass

again, repressed a grin at the little man's disapproval, poured his drink and downed it.

Then he threw a dozen quick questions and got their answers.

"You realize," he said finally, "I can't promise to return the girl. She is her own boss if she so chooses. Just to keep the records straight, my job is to find her, that right?"

Phutile nodded, wet his lips.

"Those letters—" he began in a shaky voice.

"One thing at a time," Kinnard told him. "Right now we're thinking about your daughter. I'll take your check for a retainer and get to work on it."

"How much?"

"Five hundred," Kinnard suggested, "and that much more when I deliver."

Phutile whipped out a checkbook without hesitation, wrote in it with a fine, timid hand.

Cole Kinnard took the green slip of paper and showed the gentleman out.

Patricia Kane slid through the open doorway. Her nose was not quite so high this time.

"Before you throw all that money away on some redhead," she said stiffly, "I'd appreciate my last two weeks' salary."

He grinned, watched as a stifled smile stole across the girl's face.

"My! What big ears you have, grandma!" he said wonderingly.

She grew serious.

"What do you make of him?" she asked.

The big fellow shrugged and then spread his hands.

"He seems harmless, but I've a hunch he hasn't told me everything. For instance, he is threatened with exposure because of the girl, but he keeps on seeing her, and that makes me think he is *sure* someone else is involved. You'll notice he didn't say anything about it, supposing I would

think the blonde was taking him for a ride."

"You men," she sniffed, "are all alike. You'll chase anything in skirts."


"We've got work to do, pet. You can recite my failings later."

She thawed completely. "You big lug," she said poutingly, "doesn't five hundred even call for a drink on the house?"

It did.

CHAPTER II

MURDER BY KNIFE!

GEORGE MURFF, senior clerical officer of the identification bureau raised his head from the study of a fingerprint classification, scowled.

"Old nose-trouble himself!" he grunted. "What's on your mind?"

Cole Kinnard stood in front of the desk, took the unlighted cigar from his mouth.

"Just this—I'd like you to get a line from the prison authorities in Indiana on one Myrtle Schultz, alias this and that."

Murff grinned. "So you're having blonde trouble," he jeered. "I don't have to get a line on her. That dame's got a dossier that'd break a camel's back, and her mother's heart—if the old woman was still alive."

"My pal! My pal!" Kinnard said. "What would I do *without* you?"

The officed heaved himself out of the chair, shook his head slowly.

"To hell with that," he drawled. "What I'm interested in is, what you are going to do *for* me?"

The phone broke into an angry clatter. Murff gathered up the receiver.

"Identification Bureau," he said.

He listened, frowned.

"I'll take a look," he promised. "How do you spell that last name?"

When he put down the phone he

pulled a long face. "It takes all kinds—Some bird by the name of Phineas B. Phutile is so inconsiderate as to get himself bumped off."

Cole Kinnard's eyes popped open in surprise. He slammed his cigar on the floor, grabbed the other man by the arm.

"Out with it lug!" he demanded. "He's a client of mine. Where'd it happen?"

"His office, so they tell me."

The big dick was going away with the words, his long legs covering lots of space.

"I'll give you a ring or drop in later about the Schultz sister," he called over a shoulder.

The I B man grunted something unintelligible, went back to the record files to check on the late Mr. Phutile. . . .

An Irish cop barred the doorway, shaking his head stubbornly.

"Orders is orders, and it's me that carryin' thim out. Nobody goes in, the louie said, and me boy, Mike Murphy nivver—"

"But he's a client of mine, you numbskull monkey!" Kinnard declared with a slow grin.

The cop was still stubborn.

"It wouldn't be makin' any difference to me if he was yer patron saint."

Lieutenant Jim Hogan of the Homicide Squad stuck his head out of the door.

"What in hell are you magpies chattering about?" he roared. Then he recognized Kinnard. "I don't know how you do it. Maybe you just smell blood—"

The big private detective pushed his way in.

A female about forty was trying to squeeze some tears into a white handkerchief. She was not doing it very well. Now and then she sniffled.

"His secretary," Hogan said, and steered Kinnard into the other office. Inside, he added, "She found the body

when she returned from lunch, so *she* says."

The little man was slumped forward in a chair behind a flat-top desk. The knife between his ribs had been planted with sufficient force to drive it into the heart. He had bled plenty. One perfectly good office rug was all shot to hell.

Even in death, the little man's hand seemed to be reaching for something. Kinnard moved around to see what.

It was a gun lying in a partially opened drawer.

"This charming thing was on the floor by the desk," Hogan said. He held out a wisp of lacy froth.

COLE KINNARD took it, put his faculties to work. There was a faint smudge of lipstick and the heavy sweetness of perfume. He sniffed at it several times, but could not have told you whether it was Passion Flower, A Night in Paris or Maiden's Delight. But he could remember it.

The medical examiner bustled in with a black bag, looked about professionally, and went briskly to work.

Kinnard started out.

"I wouldn't ask for the world," Hogan threw after him, "but how in the hell did you turn up almost as soon as the body?"

The big dick laughed.

"Murff and me were chinning when the call came. I'm naturally curious."

The lieutenant grunted, went back inside. Kinnard went through the outer office. The dead man's secretary was weeping now as if she really meant it. . . .

Myrtle Schultz alias Lorraine Murdock was a plump, straw-colored blonde with big mulberry eyes and a full red mouth. You could guess at her age. Maybe twenty-nine, perhaps better than thirty-five. A wine-colored dressing gown was belted at the waist, open at the throat.

Cole Kinnard grinned.

"May I come in?" he said. "I see

you were not expecting company."

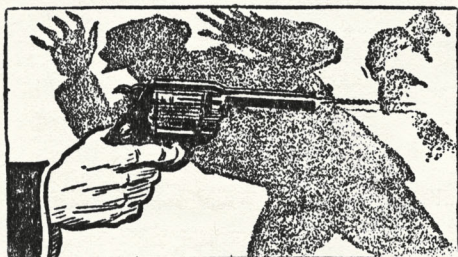
He watched while those big eyes narrowed and the blonde wrinkled her nose as if she smelled something unpleasant.

"What do you want, Copper? You haven't anything on me and I get sick and tired of being followed around like—"

"A criminal," the big dick put in soberly.

He pushed in past her, settled himself in a chair and waited for her to speak.

It became a game. She took a cigarette, lit it and puffed evenly. He decided she was as hard as Hitler's



head, wordly wise. But she did not look like the kind that mixes in murder.

"This is about a friend of yours," he told her. "A rather good friend, I think. Phineas B. Phutile."

SHE laughed and it did not seem strained. "That little anemic old fossil! He's no friend of mine!"

Kinnard leaned forward, elbows on his knees and jabbed a finger.

"Fine, then you won't be wanting those letters of his any more, Miss—"

"That's what you think, Copper!"

The big detective's face went solemn, his voice sad.

"Blackmail is an ugly word—"

She shrugged, lit another fag from the butt of the one she had and settled into a chair. Her eyes were wary, alert, not afraid.

"Supposing I have the letters. Do you want to buy them?"

"No, you're going to give them to me," he said evenly.

"Why?" She laughed.

"One damn good reason is that you can't blackmail a dead man. Another is that you're in a spot—a bad spot, if you can't prove where you've been for the past couple of hours."

Her eyes filled with quick fear.

"Dead!" The word came unbelievably. "How? And listen, you've got to believe me, Copper! I been right here all morning. When you rang I was just getting out of my bath."

Cole Kinnard nodded. "Maybe, but you can't lay any odds the police will believe it. They might see it different."

"Who are you?" she asked. "How'd you locate me? I don't give my address to everybody in town."

Kinnard put on an engaging smile.

"I'm a private detective," he explained, "and the girl who works for me gave your brother the come-hither and hinted she'd pulled a stretch with you back—"

"Skip it," she snapped. "Even thinking about it still gives me the shivers."

"You can forget all about it," he told her. "Here's your formal discharge."

He handed her the envelope.

She glanced at the papers. Her eyes went hard, her chin rigid.

"Stealing from the mails," she said, "has gotten a hell of a lot of people in bad!"

"Not dead people. Your late lamented friend and financial advisor got them after you skipped out on him."

She nodded understanding.

"Baby, kidnaping is even worse than blackmail," Kinnard said softly. "You wouldn't know anything about Phutile's daughter disappearing?"

Those mulberry eyes were filmed with fear again, but she spoke levelly and without hesitation.

"That's right, I wouldn't. S-a-y, what the hell is this, anyway? Him killed, his daughter snatched—"

CHAPTER III

THE MRS. PHUTILE



COLE KINNARD got up, stretched, put a fresh cigar in his mouth and let her wonder about it. A door was standing partially open. He went to it, saw it was the bath and went in. There was a faint gray ring around the tub. Its sides were still wet. A couple of bath towels were damp.

"Just checking, big boy?" she said when he came out.

"Just being careful," he amended. "Murder makes you that way when you've been around it long enough."

She waved a hand. "Help yourself."

"Thanks."

He went into the bedroom. It fitted the straw-blonde. Pale rose wall-paper and curtains, the furniture done in old ivory and a bed that would appeal to a person who used one a lot. The mattresses were deep and comfortable.

From the vanity, he took a square of linen, sprayed perfume from an atomizer, then wiped a lipstick across it.

The blonde was watching from the doorway.

"It's a frame!" she yelped. "I can see what you're up to, you—"

He turned to face her.

"Keep your what-your what-you-call-ems on, girlie," he said softly. "You ain't going to be framed. I'm just trying to find out something."

She was undecided on what to believe.

Kinnard sniffed the perfume. "What is this stuff?"

"French perfume. They call it *Couleur de Rose*."

He nodded and made a guess the lipstick matched that on the same kind of a tiny handkerchief found at the murder scene.

"How many of these have you got?" he inquired, holding out the patch of linen.

"A dozen," she said positively. "A friend gave them to me."

"I'd like to see the other eleven."

She smiled thinly and did a rolling, loose-hipped walk to the vanity. After a lot of sorting she had a total of nine to show for the effort.

"The others will be in my pocket-book," she said, and Kinnard thought she acted as if she meant it.

They went back to the other room. She fumbled in a blue leather purse, brought out two of the 'kerchiefs. A worried frown creased her forehead and fear was once again in those mulberry eyes.

"Why, I must have lost one."

"There was a rag like that," Cole Kinnard said slowly, "with the same perfume and lipstick laying alongside Phutile's desk when he was found with a knife in his gizzard."

She went white. "A knife!" she gasped.

He nodded.

"You send Phutile any threatening letters?" he asked sharply.

"No."

It was a definite statement and she seemed to mean it.

"You knew about them?"

"Yes, of course."

"Have you any idea who might be behind it?"

For a brief instant, her eyes went about the room while she hesitated.

"No, I don't," she said.

The big detective marked it down as a lie, but let it pass.

"Who steered you to Phutile in the first place?" he demanded.

"I—I just came across him—accidentally."

Cole Kinnard snorted his disgust.

"You better talk now, girlie," he declared. "If the police take you in, whatever you say won't have near as much weight, when you're a suspect."

She shook her head stubbornly.

"There's nothing to talk about. I'm no more guilty than you are."

"I'm not saying you stuck the knife in him, but you are covering up for some reason, perhaps protecting the guilty person."

She wagged her head, kept her lips closed.

KINNARD pounded questions that bounced back without answers, finally gave up.

"Okay, sister, have it your way. And you might start thinking about how Jim Hogan'll just love to have a person with your record to hang the rap on."

"I'm no more guilty of anything in this than you are!"

Kinnard spread his hands.

"I believe you, but—"

"You would!" Pat Kane spit the words from the hall doorway. "What are you going to do, move in as a permanent guest? Funny how it takes you nine times as long to get what you want from a dame as it does from some guy. Or am I wrong again?"

"Right or wrong, you're jealous, pet!" the big dick declared with a pleased grin. "And it tickles my soul."

"You conceited jack-ass!"

"If you take a powder, baby," he said to the blonde, "it'll mean the slow music as soon as you get picked up. See it through and maybe it won't be too bad."

She flashed an artificial smile.

"You ain't a bad egg for a dick," she said. "Come around and see me sometime."

"The warden'll let you have an hour, Cole, on visiting days," Pat sneered.

The blonde began to sputter. The big detective threw both hands in the air, shrugged and stalked out. Pat trailed along. They both got in his coupé.

"Pet," he chided, "you shouldn't talk that way to a lady."

"A lady!"

The exclamation was a masterpiece of ironic sarcasm. . . .

Mrs. Phineas B. Phutile wore a woebegone, why-does-this-happen-to-me expression. Her face was narrow and sharp.

Cole Kinnard soon learned that her mind was on the same lines.

"I've talked to the police," she declared in a high, treble voice. "There is nothing further—"

"I know how you feel," the big detective said softly, "but after all, you should be willing to lend every assistance—"

"If you are implying—"

"I'm not implying anything," he told her almost sharply. "I'm merely stating a fact."

Her narrow face was grim, frigid.

"Very well! What do you wish to know?"

Kinnard chewed on his cigar, studying her. "About how long have you been married, Mrs. Phutile?"

"Five years this June."

"Then Mariam is not your daughter?"

"That is obvious!"

"Ever been married before?"

"Young man, I'll have you understand my private affairs have nothing to do with this."

"I take it you were?"

"You can take it any way you like!" she snapped.

He shook his head sadly.

"Let's be reasonable." He waited for some of the tense alertness to go out of her, then threw a rapier thrust. "When did you first become aware of your husband's association with Miss Murdock?"

Caught off guard, the widow stammered at an answer.

"Why—why I don't know what you are talking about!"

For a long moment, Kinnard remained silent, with just a trace of a smile pulling at the corners of his lips.

"I'd like to talk to the servants," he said.

"You can talk to them, for all of me," she told him shortly. "The police have taken the butler, and the maid has been home the past couple of days. Her mother is sick, so she says."

"Her address?"

"One-twenty-nine Cottage Grove."

Kinnard jotted down the address, nodded and went out. And somehow, he had the hunch, the impression that Mrs. Phineas B. Phutile was watching his departure with secret amusement. He wasn't amused, but rather deep in thought, trying to figure a reason why it seemed impossible to get a lead.

His coupé was gone. So was Pat Kane.

HE SWORE roundly and started to leg it. Five blocks over was an avenue where he would have a chance to flag a cab.

The exercise was good for his head, fanning some of the cobwebs out of his brain. He knew the blonde was not telling everything she could tell. He was reasonably certain the widow was giving him the runaround, that she lied in respect to her knowledge of the girl. But all this was less significant than the fact that she had shown no concern, had not even mentioned Mariam Phutile's disappearance! He had purposely avoided the subject and was glad he had. It told him something.

Kinnard hailed a cab and headed for Central Station and the I B, formulating a plan of action. There were several things he wanted to check.

Cole Kinnard shouldered his way into the bureau.

George Murff, looked up, grinned.

"Your blonde trouble must be serious!" he said. "I dug out her record, fella, and the sheaf of data is as lengthy as *Gone with the Wind*."

The big detective nodded, took the phone from its cradle and dialed a number.

"Society Department," he said.

Getting that, he gave the party instructions to look in the June files of five years before for a wedding announcement. And would they phone the date of the event to his office? They would.

He broke the connection, dialed again and inquired of a brokerage house about the home office of the Virgo Nitrate Corporation. It took a while, but he hung on. The answer was Santiago, Chile. They could tell him nothing about the company's officers.

Kinnard put down the phone.

"Going international, eh?" Murff said.

The big dick merely shrugged.

"Have you anything on the late Phineas B. Phutile?" he inquired.

"Little enough," the clerical officer said. "He was picked up twice on traffic violations, and figured in another case as the complainant."

"What about?"

"Claimed some bird, by the name of Juan Cordova, decamped with close to twenty-five thousand dollars. We didn't catch up with the guy because he skipped the country. And the records show the charge was later withdrawn."

Cole Kinnard considered the information, filed it away for future reference.

"Any fingerprints or Bertillon dope on this Cordova?"

"None."

Kinnard thought a moment.

"How's about digging me out the name of the police chief of Santiago?" he asked.

Murff unearthed the information, and while he was so engaged, Kinnard studied the blonde's past history. It showed everything from petty larceny to shoplifting, jewel theft to badger game. It was the same old story, and there was nothing to make him change his mind about the girl. He still could not make himself believe she was directly implicated in

murder. But it was impossible to shake off the conviction she fitted an integral part of the puzzle. For the life of him, he could not seem to figure how.

Murff brought the police official's name. Kinnard thanked him and then went away.

At a telegraph office, he filed a day rate radiogram and learned that such things cost like hell. He was hoping the reply, collect, would not be too long-winded.

CHAPTER IV

PURSUIT OF MURDER



THE telephone was jangling as Kinnard unlocked the door and went into the office. He gathered up the instrument.

"Yeah, Kinnard talking—"

It was the society editor of the *Times*.

"The Phineas Phutile wedding was June fourteenth, Nineteen thirty-five."

He muttered his thanks, broke the connection and dialed the county building, asked for the license bureau. He got it and waited while they looked up the information he sought.

When he put down the phone he was a lot nearer a solution of several things, including the death of his client. He wished he had his money back for the radiogram. Whatever it brought him could not add materially to the theory he had formulated. Any way he looked at it, the theory squared with the facts, but it did not explain the blonde, nor the disappearance of Mariam Phutile. He had to get the answers to those points.

Kinnard poured himself a drink, downed it and stuck a fresh cigar in his mouth. He sat there, adding facts, checking them. He was still doing it when the phone skirled like an angry rattler.

He took it. Pat Kane's voice, tight with excitement, came over the wire.

"Your overfed blonde has gotten over her yen for you, Cole."

"She took it on the lam?" he hazarded.

"Not that, dummy! She hasn't any yens anymore. Get it?"

"Sufferin' Santa Claus!" he said. "Hold it down, pet, I'll be right there."

The cab he got was jockeyed by a boy with a head on his shoulders. They made time.

The big detective tossed him two ones before they stopped rolling, and jumped out. He pounded up the stairs to the blonde's apartment, turned the knob. It was locked.

He tapped guardedly on the door. Pat opened it, trying to appear nonchalant and not quite making it. She nodded toward the bedroom.

"It isn't pretty," she murmured.

What was left of the blonde was sprawled beside the bed. There was a .25 automatic in her hand and a bullet in her heart. The wrapper was partially open and soaked with blood. No powderburn showed around the wound.

"Kitten, you buzz the police," Kinnard said. "She wasn't a southpaw, and she'd have had to be a contortionist to shoot herself like that!"

Pat made the call. They prowled around, waiting for the law to come.

"Here's something, pet!" Kinnard called from the bath. "There were two damp towels in here before, now there's only one."

They went over the place and finally gave it up as a bad job. The towel was gone.

"You could muffle the report from a twenty-five with it?" he said.

"You could do a lot of things with it," Pat agreed. "But maybe that's what happened."

Hogan came in with his felt pulled low over his eyes.

"Imagine meeting you here!" he grunted

"Yeah, *imagine*," Kinnard said disgustedly.

Hogan snapped orders. Other officers checked the body and began to canvass occupants of the building.

"It's murder," the big dick said. "Phutile and the girl were pretty good friends."

The lieutenant was nosing about the vanity. He came up with a handkerchief and brightened.

"She couldn't have jumped him and then done the Dutch act herself, could she?"

"She could, but she didn't," Kinnard insisted. "But with her record, it won't be hard to make it lay that way."

"Record?"

"Yeah. From the I B report. She wasn't an angel with a dirty neck."

"Well!" Hogan said. "It looks like we get a break."

THE officers reported no one had heard the shot. Hogan discounted that. The bark of a .25 is not especially vicious.

Knowing Hogan did not like people who disagreed with his pet theories, Kinnard decided to keep quiet about the towel. He pulled Pat to a corner, whispered instructions. She nodded that she understood, started to wander aimlessly about. After awhile she was not there any more.

Hogan noticed it. "Where's that stooge of yours, Kinnard?"

The big detective spread his hands, apologized.

"You know how women are, Hogan. It sort of got on her nerves."

"Yeah," Hogan said, his voice brittle. "You get on mine, too. If I ever get a stiff and you don't turn up beside it, you better have a damn good alibi."

Kinnard grinned. "Don't I always pass along the credit?" he asked soothingly.

The lieutenant snorted, began to ask questions. Kinnard answered

them partially, talked a lot without saying anything in particular.

"Some day you'll be wanting your license renewed, and I'll give *you* a hand," Hogan told him. "You big baboon, I've a notion to toss you in the can on general principles."

Cole Kinnard wanted to say he had never been in on exactly such a charge, but he managed to keep quiet. He wondered if Hogan was considering the few moments it would take for him to get out on a writ.

The I B squad came and got their inevitable pictures. The medical examiner went through the motions as if it pained him to distraction.

"Got a date, Hogan," the big detective said, "if it's all the same to you."

"Go ahead, and I hope she poisons you."

Kinnard went out, headed for his office.

When he got there he found Patricia Kane perched on the edge of the desk, swinging a silken-clad leg back and forth while she masticated a wad of chewing gum. It was a nice leg and she knew it. So did Kinnard. He tore his eyes away.

"What about the maid?" he asked. "Would she talk?"

Pat snapped her gum. "*Would* she!" she exclaimed. "That girl was vaccinated with a victrola needle! She gave me the lowdown, with the accent on the low. And it is the usual thing—family trouble. The Mr. and Mrs. didn't get along and never had that she knew of. The girl, Phutile's daughter, didn't get along with her stepmother."

"And to add spice, the old lady had some young blood visiting her, but never when the old man was there. Put your mind to work on that!"

Kinnard had to smile at the expression on Pat's face.

"Sometimes things are not what they seem, pet," he said. "If the

maid had been there longer, she'd have known the answer to that one."

"She was pretty sure, but have it your way. On the girl's doing the vanishing act, she said she wouldn't be a bit surprised if she just got sick and tired of fighting with Mrs. Phutile and pulled out."

"She didn't take any clothes," he reminded. "But did the maid suggest where she might have gone?"

She had. Pat told him of a cabin up in the mountains, owned by the family.

Kinnard considered it, reached for the bottle and poured a drink. Before he got around to taking it, a door opened and someone came into the outer office. Pat slid off the desk, went to investigate.

A MOMENT later she stuck her head in the doorway.

"There's a messenger here with a radiogram, collect, and he wants seventy-one dollars before he'll turn loose of it. I told him there isn't that much in the treasury. No message we would get could be worth it anyway."

Kinnard snapped to attention, sprang out of his chair. He upset his drink as he did it. He looked at the liquor almost sadly.

"Send him in, pet!" he commanded. "He's the guy we've been waiting for."

The kid froze onto the yellow envelope until Kinnard peeled seventy-one dollars from a large roll and handed it over, then he shoved the message and his book out together. The big detective signed, took the envelope.

He ripped it open, read the contents quickly and poured another drink to make up for the one he had spilled.

"Well, what is it, fan mail?" Pat asked.

"Just a receipt for a special kind of rat poison, pet. There's a glimmer

of sense coming into this thing now."

She wagged her head from side to side.

"There's never any sense in murder," she declared. "Since you've cashed that check, how's about me getting mine?" she asked brightly.

"Swell," he told her and counted out some bills.

She stowed them in the top of her stocking. He had a notion to give her some more to see her do it again, but he never acted on crazy notions.

Instead, he suggested acting on the only good one available at the moment.

"Maybe the night air'll do us good, pet, so let's take that ride up in the hills, to the Phutile cabin."

The ride was a long one even at their consistently high speed. When they reached the hills, however, they had to slow down. They crawled up the mountain road, driving carefully. You only made one mistake along that stretch. That one was inevitably your last.

A gas station loomed ahead. It had a single lonesome pump.

Cole Kinnard pulled up, blew three blasts with his horn. The old fellow sitting in a chair propped against the inside wall of the tiny structure came to life with a startled jerk. He came out rubbing his eyes.

"Reckon as how maybe I kinda dozed off," he said, and showed his gums in a toothless grin.

Kinnard chuckled. "Lookit, Pop, somewhere out here there's a cabin belonging to a fellow named Phutile. Would you know where it is?"

"I reckon as how I would," the old guy said, squirted a stream of tobacco juice toward the bottom of the pump, and continued his drawl. "I sell 'em their groceries every summer. You go up the road half a mile, then you pull off the main highway to the left and follow the trail you find yourself on. Another little spell and you're there."

"Sold anything to anyone who might be up there now?"

"Naw, I ain't sold nothin' but a few gallons of gas all winter. There ain't enough business to keep me awake."

Pat smiled. "Fill us up with gas and oil, and I'll take a couple packs of cigarets, Pop," she said.

He hopped to it, pumped gas, ducked inside and came back out. Pat took the cigarettes.

"That'll be three dollars."

Cole Kinnard glanced at the pump.

"You're selling gasoline, Pop, not radium," he said.

The old man squirted tobacco juice again and told the truth.

"Don't get many these days. When I do get one, got to make a penny."

The big detective paid him, got the car in motion. For a while, they drove in silence, then Kinnard looked at Pat, frowned.

"I'm a sucker for bringing you up here, pet," he said. "Too many things can happen."

SHE sniffed. "Uh-huh, they can happen any place, but I'm sort of used to taking care of myself. Or have you sensed that?"

The big dick grinned at her.

"You'll do, pet. Get yourself a gun out of the glove compartment."

"What for? Are we going to have to fight the dame off to keep her away from you, or are you trying to tell me she blew her top and went in for a mess of murder?"

"Neither," Kinnard said. "We won't and she didn't."

"All right, master mind, perhaps you'll tell me who did?"

"Yeah, I might at that, pet. I've a pretty good idea."

They crawled slowly over the rough trail, still going upward. It was bumpy, tough going.

"A little of this as a regular thing," Pat declared, "and a gal wouldn't be troubled reducing her hips!"

Ahead on the mountainside was a lodge. It loomed large and important in the light of a new moon.

Kinnard killed the motor.

"You stay here," he said.

He got out and went on up the trail. There were no lights in the place and no sign of habitation.

CHAPTER V

ALL IN THE FAMILY



A GIANT spruce threw grotesque shadows that moved menacingly in the half-light. A dark shadowy figure eased from behind one of them, jabbed something hard and round and cold into the back of the big dick's neck.

"Nice of you to come up with your lights blooming, copper!"

A careful hand went over him, took a gun from a shoulder rig and prodded him forward. They entered the cabin from the rear. There was candle light inside and the windows were covered with blankets. The kitchen was strewn with cans and refuse.

"On ahead," the man with the guns ordered.

There were two great fireplaces in the large room. Bearskin rugs were thrown on the natural wood floors.

The girl was bound to a low-built piece of rustic porch furniture. Her dark eyes were large and staring. She looked as if she wanted to say something. The gag around her mouth was an effective reason why she didn't.

The gunman laughed, cold and biting as a mountain blizzard.

"This is going to fix everything—make it perfect!"

Carefully, Cole Kinnard turned. The man was sleek and dandified, his face thin and swarthy. His mere slits of eyes were dark kill-crazed pools. There was an indefinite some-

thing besides his olive skin that told of Latin blood.

"You're making yourself a date, fella, a dance-house date," Kinnard said evenly. "You'll simmer and fry—"

The guns raised an inch or two. "Cut it!" the man snapped.

The big dick shrugged. "A guy who's dealt out as much of it as you have shouldn't be afraid of death."

The killer snarled an oath, motioned with a gun. Kinnard turned his back, letting the man tie him up. The murderous rat sprang a leak of exultant words as he pulled Kinnard over against the wall and put the girl next to him.

"A little bonfire and I go about my business, collecting for the efforts I've put forth. It was planned neat enough, and this makes it even sweeter!"

The girl's eyes sought those of Kinnard. He winked, let the merest suggestion of a smile slide across his long lean face. Hope and wonder came into the girl's face.

It left when the killer began to pour kerosene out of a two-gallon can. The liquid soaked greedily into the pine flooring.

The gunman piled some sawdust on the floor and inserted a kerosene-soaked rope in the center of it. Then he struck a match and applied the flame to the rope. Fingers of flame sprang up and started creeping down the rope toward the floor. By the time the gunman reached the door the flames were licking along the planks toward Kinnard and the girl. A diabolical laugh issued from sneering lips and he went out the front door.

The big dick fought his bonds in desperation born of the knowledge he did not have long. The heat became stifling in an incredibly short time. His wrists were raw and bleeding but the cured rawhide thongs would not give.

He cursed himself for a fool, then knew that no one could have figured on such an inhuman, fantastic thing as being burned alive. He struggled and fought, at the same time keeping his ears alert. Pat was out there, probably unaware of the danger she faced.

The room became a bake oven. Smoke brought tears, caused both of them to cough—and the hungry fingers of flame came nearer—nearer.

Instinctively trying to postpone the inevitable, Kinnard found he could, by exerting every ounce of his strength, move his body a few inches at a time. New hope surged through him. Gasping for breath, he managed to shove backward inch by inch toward a window, and if—

Suddenly two shots blended. Then another single one. In spite of the searing heat, a cold chill went through the big fellow, a chill of fear that his bungling had meant disaster for Pat Kane. He fought doggedly, even though reason told him his chances of success were remote. The flames were almost to him. A glance told him the girl would be spared a few moments yet.

THEN he was at the window. It was now that success or failure hung by a slim thread in the hands of fate. Deliberately he rose waveringly to his feet, swung his head against the glass. It splintered and crashed, several pieces landed on the floor. Falling prone with a crash he had one almost to his mouth when it slipped, fell back to the floor.

Finally, when all seemed lost, he got a piece between his teeth. Working with feverish haste and disregarding the blood that seeped from the corners of his mouth, he sawed for what seemed ages until a strand parted. With a surge of new-found strength he threw the others off.

He bounded to the girl, used his teeth to chew loose the knots in her

bonds, and both of them took a singing while he worked. Once freed, he gathered her up, dashed through the smoke and flame to the open air.

In the open air, her gag removed, Mariam Phutile went completely to pieces. Wracking sobs tore from her throat. Finally she was able to speak.

"Thank God!" she sobbed. "Thank God!"

Nearby, another feminine voice was saying something like it, only different. Pat Kane was cussing in a restrained ladylike fashion.

Kinnard grinned in relief.

"You all right, pet?" he asked.

"Yes, dammit!"

"He got away?" Kinnard inquired.

Pat hobbled to him, shook her head.

"Not any, he didn't. I saw him coming, caught him off balance and told him to reach—maybe he didn't think I'd shoot—"

"Dead?"

She smiled disdainfully. "Hardly! I took good care to see that he'd be alive. Just womanly curiosity. He knows the answers."

He watched her try to hop along on one foot and gathered her into his capable arms.

"Get nicked?" he asked.

She snuggled in his arms, grinned widely.

"Of course not, silly! I can take care of myself. But after I got him stowed in the luggage compartment I saw smoke coming from the cabin and made a dash. Well, you know how it is, Cole. Rocks don't care where they lay. I turned my ankle. It hurts like hell!"

The other girl did not say anything. She was in a daze, mechanical in her movements. Now and then she sobbed anew.

Kinnard put the two of them in the car, made sure the luggage compartment was secure and told them he'd be back in a moment. He wanted to investigate the machine that stood on the far side of the lodge. He did.

(Continued on page 108)

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HEADQUARTERS

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet



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That was the question that baffled Owen Gilbert, famous international con man. What means he used to answer this question provides us with the sparkling and dramatic basis for next month's thrilling complete detective novel, **THE GREEN MASK MYSTERY**, by Robert Murray.

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Why? Well, Hiroyama the Japanese might have something to say about that; and if he hasn't, then there is always the girl in the green mask.

But that ought to be enough to whet your appetite for the fiction feast that is going to be set before you in next month's issue of **THRILLING DETECTIVE** when

Robert Murray spins the baffling, thrill-a-minute yarn named **THE GREEN MASK MYSTERY**. Look forward to it!

A Painton Novelet

You regular readers of **THRILLING DETECTIVE** have enjoyed many a story by Frederick C. Painton. Well, we're going to bring you Painton fans a novelet in the next issue that will make you sizzle with delight, even if the temperature outside is likely to make sizzling decidedly uncomfortable. It'll be **BIG DAY FOR LADYFINGERS**.

You'll probably figure that ladyfingers has something to do with the corner bake-shop, but that's just one of those things we find it difficult to pass up. In this particular instance, Ladyfingers is an adept at picking pockets. You are launched right into an analysis of his technique when he goes to work on a Broadway-Seventh Avenue Express, and from there on the yarn picks up speed that would make the engineer of a subway train slightly dizzy.

Marauders of the Night

And that isn't all. Don Tracy is also going to be with us in a novelet entitled **LEGION OF THE NIGHT**. Tracy takes a group of after-dark marauders that are the object of considerable space in the newspapers, and brings us a smashing novelet that is bang-up from start to finish.

We're doing our best to give you the sort of stories you want. You can help us a lot with your criticisms and comments. Let's have your suggestions and opinions. A post-card is as welcome as a letter. From time to time we'll print excerpts from these communications. Be seeing you next month!

—THE EDITOR.

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DEATH'S DANCE HOUSE DATE

(Continued from page 105)

The only thing it got him was a towel with a very small hole in it that *might* have been made by a bullet. There were some smudges that *might* be blood. There wasn't light enough to be sure.

The big dick went back, got in the machine and they started down the rough trail.

Patricia Kane felt just the right amount of satisfaction.

"Our murderous boy friend back there'll sure enjoy this ride!" she said.

"He'll enjoy the one Hogan gives him even less," Kinnard said grimly.

Pat was quiet a moment.

"Maybe I'm dumb," she said, "but I still can't see—"

"Maybe you are, pet," he cut in. "Why, it's as plain as—as the nose on your face."

"Humph! Plain as that, huh? I like that!"

Picking out a bad spot, Kinnard hit it with a vicious bump. Thinking about the cold-blooded killer being buffeted about behind them, he had a tight grin of satisfaction.

It looked funny somehow. There was dried blood at the corners of his lips and he didn't have any eyebrows. . . .

COLE KINNARD regarded the bottle almost sadly. It was nearly empty. He put a fresh cigar in his mouth. Pat Kane hobbled in the doorway, a twisted grin on her whimsical face.

"Big boy, this is where you get a chance to explain yourself. First, you hold out on me about a redhead, then you play games with what you learn on this case."

He waved the cigar. "You might have a legitimate squawk about the case, pet, the other is a bum rap."

"I'll take your word for it, master

mind," she said, "and you still have some explaining to do."

Lieutenant Jim Hogan pushed in.

"I'll say he has," he said sourly. Then he peered at Cole closely and laughed. "You look like a broiled lobster."

"Yeah, it was a little warm," Kinnard said.

Hogan grunted. "I oughta settle both of you in the can for obstructing justice, withholding information—"

"We give you a killer," Pat cooed sweetly, "and you appreciate it so much you come around and set up a howl about technicalities!"

The Homicide detective winked at Kinnard.

"I wouldn't press you for the world, but—"

Cole Kinnard nodded. "It wasn't exactly as it looked. At the beginning, it looked like the blonde. But after having a talk with her and looking

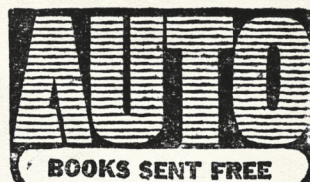
(Continued on page 110)

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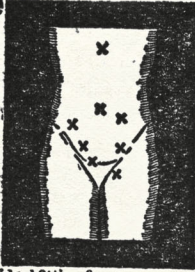
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(Continued from page 109)

around I knew it was a phony lead.

"She couldn't have possibly used the knife on Phutile, though the killer tried to make it appear that way. The only real question right then was the identity of the killer. So I forgot all about the blackmail letters and concentrated on developing a lead on the murder angle.

"When I got to the widow it began to develop. She was as cold as a hangman's heart but a poor liar. She said she didn't know about the blonde, but she couldn't make me believe it. She'd only been married to Phutile five years and she wasn't a spring chicken. I had a hunch she loved money a lot more than she did her husband, but she was in the clear herself, as you learned, Hogan."

The Homicide man nodded, kept quiet.

"Well, the I B was able to tell me that Phutile once filed a larceny charge against Juan Cordova. It didn't mean anything then. But it meant plenty after I checked the widow's marriage license application and learned she was the former Countess Cordova! The guy was her son. The records said he skipped the country, getting out by way of New Orleans.

"That made me think of the Nitrate Corporation angle, so I sent a radio-gram. The answer was better than I expected. The outfit was a typical gyp setup, to fleece suckers. Juan Cordova was known to be an intimate of at least one of its board of directors.

"That gave me all I needed to know about the threatening letters and who wrote them. Then the maid told Pat about a man who came to the house frequently, but never when the master was there. It tied in, made the theory look better. More important, she mentioned the Phutile lodge, and the rest, well, the rest sort of follows."

Hogan shook his head.

"There's a hell of a lot that doesn't

explain," he declared. "What about the girl getting snatched? And why the kills, since it was supposed to be blackmail?"

"Mariam was grabbed simply because she stumbled on Cordova hiding in the garage when she went there to get a car," Kinnard said. "He knew she could tell her father. He took her to the cabin, tied her up and had the bright idea of making it ransom since his original blackmail wouldn't pay off. Then he went to Phutile, and made his proposition. The old man threatened to report it to the police, so he knifed him."

"He musta been nuts!" the Homicide detective said.

"How many sane murderers have you run across, Hogan?"

Kinnard asked the question almost softly, and he knew the answer himself.

"Some of the boys are out picking up the widow," Hogan said. "It would seem that she's crazy, too!"

PAT put in her two cents' worth. "Mariam says Cordova gloated over his plans, told her how he had suggested to the blonde she could make a good thing for herself by developing a friendship with the old man. He was particularly proud of his framing her for the killing."

"Maybe he thought he'd slipped when he followed me to her apartment."
(Continued on page 112)

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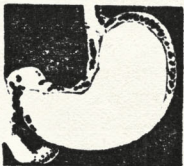
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(Continued from page 111)

ment and realized there wasn't going to be any pinch," Kinnard said. "Panicky with the thought she knew too much and would finally figure him in where he belonged, he killed her, too."

Kinnard brought a Turkish towel from a drawer, laid it on the desk.

"You'll find the mate to this in the blonde's apartment. It was used to muffle the shot. There's a hole in it, and a few drops of blood probably collected when he was arranging it to look like suicide."

"You make it sound nice," Hogan said. "But I still don't think you had enough to base your start on, to assume it was this guy Cordova."

Cole Kinnard laughed. "When the old man first came to me, he said he was threatened in two ways—a leak to his wife and an exposure that would chill several of his best clients. It *had* to be someone who had worked for him. Nobody else would know who those clients were. People getting financial advice are not prone to advertise the fact. They want the credit themselves, if their ventures prove profitable.

"Further, the girl says her father soon knew his marriage to the countess was one of convenience. She wanted his money a lot more than she wanted him, and as much as told him so many times."

Hogan nodded. "That could explain the murder of the old man, and the attempt on the girl. With them out of the way, the estate would naturally go to the widow."

"Just a case of murder in the family, with a money motive," Kinnard stated positively.

The Homicide man got up. "It's good enough for me, and we've got more than enough to make it stick. Be seein' you."

He went out.

The phone rang. Cole Kinnard took it.

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"Yeah . . ." he said.

"This is for you, Hogan," he said in a louder voice.

He winked at Pat, brought his voice down an octave, and spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Hogan . . ."

He listened and something that might have been surprise spread over his face. He grunted, hung up.

"No more deep stuff, Cole," Pat said. "What's it all about?"

"A call from the boys Hogan sent out to pick up the widow. They're having to do it in a basket. She swallowed enough bichloride of mercury to eat the inside out of the *Queen Mary's* engine."

Pat made a face. "Ugh! What a mess. Let's talk about something else."

She hobbled over to him. He helped her get comfortable—on his lap.

Then he talked about something else. He talked about her. Every woman likes that. Patricia Kane was no exception.

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30x40-5	22	1.00	1.00	30x35-4	2.25	1.25	1.45
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30x40-5	22	1.00	1.00	30x35-4	2.25	1.25	1.45
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30x40-3	22	1.00	1.00	30x35-2	2.25	1.25	1.45
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30x40-4	22	1.00	1.00	30x35-3	2.25	1.25	1.45
30x40-3	22	1.00	1.00	30x35-2	2.25	1.25	1.45
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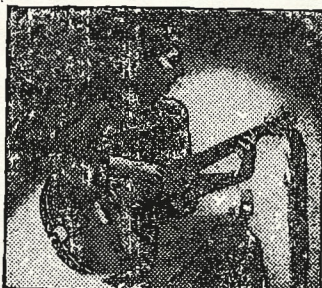
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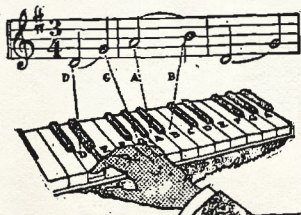
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