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Being acquitted of a murder charge doesn't satisfy Jeff Corey

ILL WIND BLOWING . . . . . . . David X. Manners 75
Mac Green uses meteorological knowledge to combat a racket

THE CAT CAME BACK . . . . . . . Ken Tillson 80
Bill Ames uses a feline as his deputy in trailing killers

And

HEADQUARTERS . . . . . . . A Department 6
Where readers, writers and the editor meet.

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INCE the end of the war, a lot of us have been settling back comfortably and saying, “Well, we showed those birds who wanted to take over the whole world! This should settle the hash of a certain political philosophy known as Fascism.”

Even Rolph Burnham thought so for a little while. The star of the Young-Burnham circus and of Hollywood, ace counter-espionage agent of the F.B.I., had done more than his share to smash the Axis ring of agents in the United States. He had earned, he thought, a little rest from the strain that had aged him, had put the circles under his eyes and the gaunt hollows in his cheeks.

He found out how wrong he was!

The newest Rolph Burnham adventure by Thomson Burtis is called THE CENTER OF THE STAGE and it takes top billing in next issue’s THRILLING DETECTIVE. And it tells how enlightenment that the war for human liberty was not yet won—may never be completely won—came to Rolph Burnham in the middle of a movie set.

**Jungle Trail**

The set was a jungle. Burnham, in khaki shirt and shorts, was walking down a tangled matted jungle trail. Beside him was Isabel Brothers, glamorous movie star. Their safari of native bears came behind.

Around a bend in the trail came a huge, black-maned lion. With assorted shrieks, the bearsers took to the jungle. Burnham pushed the girl behind him, drew a sheath knife from his belt and quickly hacked off a section of a thick vine. From a three inch butt, it tapered, fifteen feet away, to an inch thick tendril.

The lion crouched, ready to spring. Burnham walked toward the beast with the improvised whip in his hand. As the lion hesitated from sheer curiosity, the man’s arm shot out and the tip of the vine uncoiled like a snake. It darted forward and clipped the lion on the forehead. Back again came the man’s arm and forward hissed the vine again. So rapid and expert were the movements that the air seemed full of writhing vines. The baffled lion, his attention completely distracted, struck ferociously, like a giant house cat, at the stinging tormentor.

**The Leap**

Jungle drums throbbed through the air and a chant of natives came closer. Under this new sound, which mingled with the lion’s roars, Burnham was barking short commands at the beast. The lion crouched and leaped, to land ten feet from the man. And then something went wrong.

A roar that was like a scream of pain was torn from the lion’s throat. It slid to a stop, turned over in a flailing mass of vicious claws and churning legs, to roll on its back and bite and claw at a forefoot.

Burnham dropped his vine and whirled to the girl.

“Out—quick!” he shouted.

She ran from the caged jungle set. Somewhere came another shout:

“Kill 'em!”

The glaring lights winked out and ordinary bulbs came on.

“The net!” Burnham yelled. “Sultan has something in his paw!”

(Continued on page 8)
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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 6)

Walking forward, Burnham could see that "something". It was a thin, shiny nail, imbedded a full inch in the lion's tender paw.

The net was flung by Burnham's assistants. He saw that it would fall short, leaped to catch it and pull it over the lion's head. As he did so, he lost his balance and fell, throwing himself backward. The lion, Sultan, went crazy, thrashing about in the net like a mad cyclone.

Just as Burnham hit the ground, he heard something like the sound of a giant bee. Sultan's roars choked off. Lying on his back, Burnham stared at the massive head of the lion, not four feet from his own. It was twitching a little, just a little. Blood was flowing from a wound just under Sultan's left ear. The lion had been shot with a high powered bullet. And that bullet had passed within inches of Burnham's own head.

He knew, instantly, and beyond doubt, that it had been meant for him, not for Sultan!

Target Number One!

Thus Rolph Burnham came to know that Fascism was not dead and that the Fascists and Nazis had not accepted defeat with the death of their dreams of empire. For Rolph Burnham was target number one for the little men of the swastika and the double-cross. He had caused them too much trouble in the past and he was too much of a threat for the future—for that long postponed "tag" which was yet to come.

Put a mark on your calendar for next issue's THRILLING DETECTIVE and THE CENTER OF THE STAGE by Thomson Burtis. It's chills and thrills and edge-of-the-seat suspense all the way in a full length novel of exciting adventure and intrigue!

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<th>Hawaiian Guitar</th>
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<th>Piano Accordion</th>
<th>Ukulele</th>
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<td>Clarinet</td>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>Finger</td>
<td>Reed Organ</td>
<td>Tenor Banjo</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Harmony</td>
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<td>Trumpet, Cornet</td>
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The car door was pulled open, and armed men cut off any chance of escape for the occupants.

The Mystery Man of Soho

By MARGERY ALLINGHAM

Bob Fisher, ace of Scotland Yard, takes a hand in a grim game when the strange underground "vortex" of London is the focal point of a baffling murder and kidnapping puzzle!

CHAPTER I

PARKER MAKES AN ARREST

DETECTIVE Sergeant Richardson's keen eye took in every detail of the man's appearance.

"There he is. Funny-looking chap, isn't he? You wouldn't think a man with a face like that could get away with half a million."

Detective Sergeant Richardson spoke softly and without turning his head, and the inconspicuous, raincoated figure at his side grinned almost imperceptibly.

"You wouldn't think he could count to half a million, by the look of him," Sergeant Murdoch observed.

"Probably can't," said Richardson drily, and the two Yard detectives remained standing where they were on the quay, watching the stream of passengers hurrying down the gangway from the Channel steamer.

The man they watched so intently, moved slowly away from the boat, almost as though he were loath to set foot on English ground.

He was a strange-looking man, approaching sixty, heavily built and small-eyed. He was well dressed, but his clothes sagged upon him, indicating suddenly lost weight. There was a stoop about his shoulders also, and a certain furtiveness in his glance.

This was Joseph Thurtle, the man who three months before had been at the head of
one of America's biggest cotton combines. The spectacular crash of the company and the subsequent revelation of its affairs had turned Mr. Thurtle, from a millionaire to a hunted fugitive.

The sensational story of his escape from the States with at least half a million sterling in negotiable securities, had made newspaper history. Extradition warrants had followed him from country to country. He had fled from France to Italy, from Italy to Greece, from Greece to North Africa, but everywhere the bar had been placed against him, and now, as he set foot in England, he did so with the knowledge that one of the best police systems in the world must have prepared a suitable reception for him.

As he stepped off the boat he had looked behind him sharply.

It was quite evident to the two men who watched that he expected a hand on his shoulder at any moment.

"Come on. We'll follow him through the Customs."

Richardson spoke softly. A flicker of disgust passed across his red face.

"I don't like this method of Parker's," he added. "Why not arrest the man right away and put him out of his misery? This waiting for him at Victoria, so that he can have a snappy arrest with the Press standing round admiring is a bit cheap, to my mind."

"Detective Inspector Parker is a bit cheap," said Murdoch. "You and I have been on this job for ten years, and I was thinking, have you ever before heard of or known a fellow with Parker's reputation at the Yard? He's an unpopular publicity hound. Come on! We must do our job, I suppose. We'll keep an eye on this poor devil until he gets out of the train at Victoria feeling perfectly safe and walks straight into the arms of the unpleasant Parker and a battery of cameras."

They sauntered into the crowd and, with the ease of long practise, edged their way through the jostling groups of passengers until they walked directly behind the man they shadowed.

There were many friends and relations awaiting passengers on Folkestone Harbor Station, but there was one young man among the throng who served in neither capacity. He was a shortish, round-faced, fair-haired individual with a foolish expression and rather blank, trusting blue eyes.

He observed Joseph Thurtle and sauntered forward casually as the man came hurrying down the platform.

When he was within a few feet of Thurtle, however, he caught sight of the inconspicuous raincoated officials walking behind the financier. He hurried past the man and climbed into an empty compartment.

To all outward appearances there had been nothing odd in his behaviour, and yet in that brief instant quite an important person in the underworld of Europe had abandoned one plan and embarked upon another.

The fair young man settled himself in a corner of his first-class compartment, turned up the collar of his immaculately-cut greatcoat, pulled his hat down over his eyes, and prepared to go to sleep.

Mr. Joseph Thurtle, with his attendant spirits, settled himself in another compartment further down the train. It was cold. The station looked damp and unattractive, and as the train steamed through the chalky tunnels on the upward run, some of the dank hopelessness of the day seemed to permeate the consciousness of every traveler.

Thurtle was afraid. He was also puzzled. He had felt that this landing in England was tantamount to handing himself over to the police, and coming over in the boat he had steeled himself to face an arrest upon the quay.

It had not come. He could not understand it.

He leaned further back into the cushions and peered out at the sodden landscape with weary, anxious eyes. He had played a dangerous game and he had lost. He wondered idly if life in prison was as bad or worse than current reports would have it.

The innocent old lady sitting opposite him thought he looked very tired, and wondered if he had found the crossing as trying as she had done.

Meanwhile, on Victoria Station, Inspector Parker, that rarity, an unpopular member of the C.I.D., strode up and down the platform, his fingers caressing the handcuffs in his coat pocket.

This situation he enjoyed. He was like that. His career had been one long line of rather unsavory little triumphs which had forced him slowly to his present position. His reputation for minding other people's business had earned him the somewhat obvious sobriquet of "Noisy," and his narrow, gray eyes and sharp and sometimes brutal tongue, had added to his ill repute.
Inspector Fisher stepped back off the curb and stumbled just as Box fired, and it was this mishap which saved his life.
There were two or three camera-men outside the station, and he was looking forward to a photograph of himself in the evening papers handcuffed to the celebrated absconding financier. It was against the rules, he knew. The superintendent might even comment upon it unfavorably. But Inspector Parker privately considered that the publicity would be worth it.

As he waited for the train, he amused himself by imagining suitable captions beneath the picture.

Detective Inspector Roland Parker Arresting Joseph Thurtle at Victoria Station This Afternoon!—and the like.

Parker was pleased with himself. Soon after he had received Richardson's phone message from Folkestone saying that Thurtle had boarded the train, he had hurried down to the station, and incurred the totally unnecessary expense of keeping a taxicab waiting outside the station, so that he might walk straight into it with his charge.

As soon as the train was signaled, he retired outside the ticket barrier and stood waiting for his man.

The train came in, and immediately the partially deserted platform sprang to life, as carriage doors swung open and weary and excited travelers swarmed out, clamored for their luggage, lost their children, and rushed aimlessly to and fro after the manner of their kind.

Richardson reached the barrier first.

"He's just coming, sir," he said. "You can't miss him. Black overcoat, check muffler, soft cloth traveling cap."

"All right, all right. You leave this to me, Richardson."

Parker spoke testily, as though the man had been hindering him rather than giving him valuable information.

Richardson surrendered his ticket and wandered over to the bookstall to wait for Murdoch. The faintly contemptuous expression which always came into his face after dealings with his chief was very apparent.

Thurtle came heavily down the platform towards the barrier. Most of the fire which had once made him such a dangerous force in the business world, had long since died down. He was old, tired, and at the end of his tether.

INSPECTOR PARKER pounced upon him as he stepped through the barrier.

"Joseph Thurtle," he said.

The man swung round, and as he faced his captor there was an expression in his eyes which was almost relief. It had come at last, then. The wearing uncertainty was over.

"Yes," he said quickly. "Yes. You are a police officer, aren't you? Very well. I'll come with you, only don't make a scene here!"

But Inspector Parker was a man who took an officious pride in his job. He recited the formula of arrest clearly and unnecessarily loudly, and then, producing his handcuffs, slipped a bracelet over the older man's right wrist.

"Surely that's unnecessary? I said I'd come with you."

The man who had shunned publicity all his life glanced nervously at the curious crowd which was already beginning to collect.

"I'm sorry!" The inspector spoke curtly.

The other bracelet of the handcuff was attached to his own wrist now, and together they walked across the platform, a small section of the crowd streaming after them.

On the top of the steps, in the archway to the station drive, Inspector Parker paused for an instant to glance behind him, ostensibly to look for Murdoch. It was only for a moment, but it gave the photographers time.

A faint smile of satisfaction spread over the inspector's face, as he hurried over to the waiting taxi.

Had he been a little less pleased with himself, a little less self-conscious, it is conceivable that he might have noticed a single swift glance which passed between the driver of the cab and a plumpish, fair young man, who had come out of the station by another door, and who now stood watching the departing taxi, an indescribable expression, in his mild childlike blue eyes.

It is also just possible that the inspector's sharp, well-trained glance might have observed that the driver, although remarkably like, was, indeed, not the actual man who had driven him from the Yard less than twenty minutes before.

* * * * *

"I suppose you're taking me to Scotland Yard?"

The crumpled, dejected prisoner, who sagged against the leather upholstery of the cab, turned an inquiring eye upon the lean and wiry inspector at his side. Their two wrists, handcuffed together, lay upon the seat between them.

Inspector Parker vouchsafed no reply. Like
many rather stupid men, he prided himself upon his taciturnity.

The cab was passing Westminster Abbey now, jolting and bumping along at an unusual speed for such a vehicle. When they came out upon the Embankment the traffic thinned because of the wide road, and the cab gathered even more speed than it had before.

Inspector Parker sat up stiffly. His mind was far away, rehearsing just exactly what he would say to Superintendent Wetherby. The job had been so ridiculously simple that it was going to be difficult to introduce any element of self-congratulation.

He was still pondering on the problem when something occurred which materially altered the whole course of Inspector Parker’s career and took his mind off the subject of what he was going to say to Superintendent Wetherby forever.

A huge moving van stood by the side of the road, its doors gaping and its drawbridge-apron down.

It was growing dusk and, save for a tram and a few other cabs, the road was temporarily deserted.

The inspector was gazing through the glass with unseeing eyes, when the utterly incredible occurred. The cab driver slowed down, dropped into low gear, and, crouching low over his wheel, suddenly and unexpectedly swerved and charged straight at the back of the van.

There was a jolt as the front wheels hit the bottom of the apron, the engine roared as the cab took the strain, and the next minute they were plunged into darkness as the whole cab entered the van.

The doors clanged to behind them and, as the inspector drew his gun, a figure swayed through the window towards him in the darkness and something hard and circular was pressed into his ribs.

“Sit still!”

The strange voice was calm, almost conversational.

“Don’t start yelling or I’ll fire. The difference between a revolver shot and a truck backfiring is negligible, you know.”

The inspector jerked the wrist of his prisoner.

“I suppose you think you’re very clever, Thurtle,” he said. “But this’ll mean another ten years on your sentence.”

“I don’t understand.” The man’s voice was genuinely afraid. “I can’t move myself.”

It was at this point that the inspector realized that a second assailant was leaning through the other window of the cab. Meanwhile, the van had begun to move. He could feel its rumbling wheels beneath him. The whole plot had been worked so smoothly and neatly that he realized that it was unlikely that anyone witnessing the incident would have guessed that anything was seriously wrong.

It took Inspector Parker some moments to grasp the enormity of the situation. Then he suddenly became angry. Only the gun muzzle in his ribs prevented him from becoming violent.

He was not a timid man, however, and he leaned back against the cushions with at least a show of ease.

“I suppose you realize the penalties for this sort of thing?” he remarked gruffly.

The owner of the gun in his ribs laughed softly.

“The trouble with you bobbies is that you believe you’re invulnerable,” he said. “You shouldn’t have handcuffed yourself to your prisoner, my son. As it is, I’m afraid you’ll have to come the whole way. And something tells me, Inspector Parker”—the voice was soft, almost caressing—“something tells me that you’re going to find that very unhealthy indeed.”

“I don’t know who you are,” said another voice out of the darkness, which the inspector recognized with a sudden shock as his prisoner’s. “But you’re doing me a great dis-service. Why don’t you let this man arrest me in peace?”

Once again the soft, explosive laugh, which was beginning to grate on the inspector, sounded in his ear.

“Good heavens!” the second man said.

“What do you think we are? A charity organization? If you’ve come from the States, Mr. Thurtle, you ought to know you’ve been hijacked. Perhaps you’d like me to translate for you inspector? You’re one firm, as it were. Mr. Thurtle is another. And the bright lads who are taking you on this joy-ride represent a third party who happens to be interested. Have you got that clear?”

The van swerved round the corner and gathered speed.

In its depths, Inspector Parker leaned back, the gun still in his ribs, and began to curse softly beneath his breath.
CHAPTER II

PARKER’S FATE

At the Yard headquarters, Guthrie was talking to one of the most promising young men on the Force.

“Well, Fisher, you see what you’re taking on. We found the taxicab. Fortunately, Murdoch was able to identify the number. And we’ve found the moving van. What a nerve those fellows have! But the men, Thurtle, and Parker, have vanished.”

The heavy, gray-haired man, who paced up and down the square carpet in the big, brightly-lit office, paused to glance at Fisher with shrewd eyes. Chief Detective-Inspector Guthrie, of the C Division, was at once the most liked and the most respected man of his rank. Even his most ardent admirers admitted that he was hard, but there was no one who could call him unjust.

“I am confident of you, Fisher,” he went on. “We are all confident of you. But—well, this is your first big chance up here, and you know the old saying—’Nothing succeeds like success!’ This is a serious business for us. When a world-famous criminal is arrested by a Yard Inspector on Victoria Station, and they both disappear, together with the taxi in which they are riding, kidnapped by an unknown gang, well, that sort of thing makes for newspaper crusades, questions in the House, and that sort of thing. I don’t mind telling you, Fisher, you’ve been given the job partly because of your record up north, and partly because you’re new to this district, and there’s a chance that crooks won’t recognize you. But I don’t want to suggest that it’s going to be easy. It’s a very difficult proposition, Fisher, very difficult, indeed.”

The young man at the desk looked up from the plan which all but covered it and grinned.

“I feel it’s a tremendous opportunity, sir, and I appreciate it,” he said. “I admit it looks pretty difficult at first glance, but these things have a way of straightening themselves out, haven’t they?”

Guthrie smiled. He liked youth, he liked confidence, and he liked Detective Inspector Bob Fisher. There were very few people who did not. The big, fair-haired officer, with the round face and unexpectedly sharp, gray eyes, was already a general favorite.

The third person in the room sat in a chair by the fire. At first glance he might easily have been taken for some stool-pigeon who had called in to make a report. He was middle-aged, disgracefully untidy by comparison with the spruce, almost military precision of the other men’s clothes, and at the moment he was apparently half asleep. His face was red, his eyes watery, and he had a really appalling shock of gray-black hair which showed quite clearly the depression made by the dilapidated derby hat he usually wore.

This was “Snoopy”—Snoopy Franklin. No one seemed ever to have heard of his first name, and he was, perhaps, one of the most remarkable people employed by that most remarkable organization in the world, Scotland Yard.

On official documents he was described vaguely as “information man,” and very few people could have defined his exact position more definitely.

Snoopy provided information about London which could not be procured by the ordinary routine methods or through the usual channels. It was generally queer information, details of odd clauses in agreements between landlord and tenants, intimate gossip from the doss-houses, and the reasons for strange little discrepancies in crookdom’s social scale.

For the rest, he had a limp, a wheeze, and he affected to be slightly deaf, which he was not.

At the moment he was stumped, and consequently extremely bad-tempered.

He glanced up.

“That WX-Fifteen district, where the boys found the cab, is a vortex—a thieves’ vortex,” he remarked, after a preliminary snuffle in his thick, unlovely voice. “They just stand there, and it swallows them up. It’s happened time and again.”

“That’s quite true,” said Guthrie. “But if it swallowed them up completely it wouldn’t matter so much, although I suppose we ought all to wish for Parker back. The exasperating thing about the WX-Fifteen vortex is that its prey comes up again—somewhere else.”

He walked across the room and stood looking over Fisher’s shoulder.

“There you are!” he said, running his finger round an area marked in red on the large-scale plan. “Here’s Perry Street, Perry Square, Winton Street, and Winton Mews, and surrounding them one of the most important districts in London—Oxford Street,
the beginning of the West End itself, Tottenham Court Road, Charlotte Street, Goodge Street. And in the center is this silly little patch, apparently as innocent and blameless as the Bank of England—and yet that's the spot. If a crook gets to that spot he can disappear. Moreover, if a whole party of crooks, together with an absconding financier and one of our men, can drive there in a taxi-cab concealed in a moving van, they can all disappear. It's ridiculous, isn't it?"  
Fisher passed his fingers through his fair hair.  
"I'd just like to make sure, sir, exactly what has been done already," he ventured.  
"Everything's there," Guthrie pointed to a tremendous pile of manuscript on a side table. "You'll find details of everything that's been done in the last nine months, but I'd like to give you a brief resume, myself. I first noticed something odd about this particular district a little under a year ago. A big jeweler's shop was held up in Oxford Street. To all appearances it was an ordinary smash-and-grab carried out with really clever teamwork. The two fellows who took most of the stuff went off in a car and were chased. They turned down St. Francis Passage and got into Tottenham Court Road."

GUTHRIE paused, then continued dramatically.  
"The odd thing was, Fisher, that the raid was staged at night. We had a cordon right round the district looking for the Hendridge kidnappers. It was after midnight, and every car was stopped. The whole district was alive with police. These smash-and-grab raiders were seen to abandon their car at the corner of Goodge Street and turn into Perry Square. From that point they disappeared completely and utterly with their haul. Some of the stuff came back to us through the usual channels six months later.  
"Now that, I expect, is not a very extraordinary story to you, and it wasn't to me at the time. I thought it was odd, and that some of our men had not been as smart as they might have been.  
"But that was only the beginning. Since then, as you know, a peculiarly clever brand of smash-and-grab raid in the West End has been on the increase. The crooks have always used this method of escape, and the procession of incidents connected with the vortex finished triumphantly last night with this exasperating kidnapping."

He paused and Snoopy grunted.  
"We know," he said. "We've read the papers."

Chief Detective-inspector Guthrie shot an irritated glance in the disreputable person's direction. No one but Snoopy would have thought of referring to the press's attitude towards the fiasco of Thurtle's arrest to Guthrie's face.  
"Yes, well, the press is hysterical," he said. "There's someone with brains and a system in that racket, and someone who obviously knows all there is to know about WX-Fifteen. It's got to stop, Fisher. That man, whoever he is, has got to be caught. And that district has got to be laid open. The rat-hole must be plugged. Take my advice and pin your faith to the WX-Fifteen district. That's where the solution of this mystery lies. What it amounts to is that we cannot surround WX-Fifteen, and a certain section of the underworld knows we can't. That's what's got to stop!"  
"It's a vortex," said Snoopy's throaty voice.  
"Just like I told you."

Guthrie turned to him irritably.  
"I wish you wouldn't keep saying that," he said. "It doesn't help, and it's not a very apt simile. Things that disappear in vortexes don't come up again."

Snoopy snuffled.  
"As I see it, it's a vortex," he said obstinately.  

Bob Fisher bent low over the plan.  
"As I see it, sir," he ventured, "Winton Mews, where the taxicab and moving van were found, seems to be the centre of interest. I see they've traced the owners, by the way. Both vehicles were stolen early yesterday morning. It's rather odd that the mews was built in the middle of a block like that, isn't it?"

"I don't think so. The two sides that face on the square and Winton Street are modern. They consist of flats and tailors' work-rooms. The other two sides are older, and consist of the original houses to which the mews belonged in the old days. Some of these have shops on the ground floor. Then just across the road there's another block of flats of rather better class. Southwold Mansions, I think they're called, and by the side of them is a yard leading to an old warehouse."

He bent over the other's shoulder and indicated the buildings he mentioned on the plan.  

Fisher nodded comprehendingly.
“And all these places have been combed, I take it, previous to the—er—outrage yesterday and the discovery of the taxicab and the moving van in the mews early this morning?”

“Combed?” Guthrie threw out his hand in an expressive gesture. “Ask Ames if you want to hear about that.”

“I’ve combed it myself,” said Snoopy, as though the matter were now settled.

He rose to his feet and came shambling and snuffling across the room till he, too, stood behind the desk.

“Here you are,” he said, running an extremely dirty forefinger round the two older sides of the block which housed the mews. “This is Joe’s cafe. Only done time once, Joe; very honest fellow. Reputed to put peafowl in the coffee. That’s all that’s known against him. Next door there’s the laundry, man and his wife run it. Chinese blood there somewhere, and nice people. They let lodgings. We know all about them. The cigar store next door is okay. So is the coal agency, and the general store has nothing to hide.

“Now we come to the mews itself.”

His finger was leaving a grimy mark on the surface of the drawing-paper.

“Only one fishy thing about this place—no swell hideouts. For some reason or other they don’t frequent it. Probably because of the rats. Most of the garages are used by private owners, all respectable. We’ve gone over them and gone over them. There isn’t even a cellar under most of them.

“Only two are used as dwellings. This one here on the corner is the wash-house of the laundry. Man and wife sleep above. There’s nothing there. Next door, of course, is old Mrs. Wheeler. She’s a fine old London character. Says she’s a hundred and one next birthday. Bedridden, you know, and lives all alone except for charity folk who hover around her and the tourists who come and have a look at her.”

“She’s quite a personage,” Guthrie said. “Well known people sent her telegrams last year when she reached her hundredth birthday, and the newspapers ran a story. We thought at one time that she might have done a little fortune-telling, but I didn’t think so, Parker would have found out all about that—trust him.”

“Anyway,” said Snoopy, who was openly bored when anyone else was speaking, “there’s nothing in her place. There you are, you see.”

FISHER nodded. His handsome young face was grave and his shrewd eyes intelligent.

“What’s underneath this district?” he inquired.

“I knew you’d ask that,” said Snoopy in triumph. “I’ve got it all out for you. There’s the Underground, the Forty-Y sewer, and the old post office tube now used by the Westbridge Stores to join its two branches for parcels delivery, so they can avoid the traffic from the Oxford Circus shop. And you can run round that lot until you’re sick and tired, and a fat lot of good it’ll do you.”

“What Snoopy means,” said Guthrie, using the nickname before he could prevent himself, “is that there is no entrance, as far as we can see, to any of these underground ways from the WX-Fifteen district. Of course, things are made more difficult because Westbridge’s are inclined to be independent and don’t like police interest in their tube parcels system. But it’s the way in that’s important.”

“That’s it,” said Snoopy. “Find the entrance and you’ve found everything—including old Nosey Parker, I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“You will certainly have found out a good deal,” Guthrie agreed, ignoring the last part of Snoopy’s remark. “But your present task is to recapture Thurtle. I don’t think his friends are in it, by the way. I think it’s private enterprise on the crooks’ part—rescue Parker, and lay hands upon the man—the man with the brains and the system.”

Snoopy raised one dusty eyebrow, and was about to speak, but before he could open his mouth the phone bell rang and the older man lifted off the receiver.

“Hello, Fisher,” he said. “This is for you. Sounds like a private call.”

There was just a tinge of disapproval in the last phrase, and Fisher took the instrument with a slight feeling of embarrassment.

“Hello—hello, I say, can I speak to Bob Fisher? It’s really terribly important. I mean, I think there’s something going on here he ought to know about. It’s no use arguing with me; I shall hang on until I get hold of him. And if you cut me off I shall come round to find him.”

The voice had a quality of weary insistence about it which was slightly comic. Bob Fisher recognized the tones instantly.

“Is that you, Box?” he said.

“Yes. Is that you, Bob?”

The voice had become animated.
"Look here, old boy, I'm in a flat—a furnished flat. I've taken it—not pinned it, you know—just rented it. It's for my aunt, as a matter of fact. She's coming to town tomorrow, and I don't think it'll suit her. You must come here and have a look at it, and I think you'll agree with me."

In spite of his exasperation, Fisher smiled. The request was typical of George Box, that idle, impecunious soul whom he had met while on holiday earlier in the year, and whom he had bumped into several times since in the West End.

To Fisher's more sober mind, Box was one of those slightly comic individuals who are always rolling out of one ridiculous predicament into another. At the moment his appeal came at an awkward time, to say the least of it.

"Look here, old man," he said, "I'm sorry. I can't manage it. I'm frightfully busy. Yes, busy. I can't talk now, either. I'll phone you later."

"But Bob, I say!" The tone was aggrieved. "I'm putting something in your way. This is important. You come along. You'll regret it all your life if you don't. Listen, Bob!" The voice was lowered mysteriously. "I can't say much over the phone, but I believe you'll find this a very interesting place."

Fisher caught a fleeting glimpse of Guthrie's irritated expression, and he spoke severely into the mouthpiece.

"I'm sorry, Box. I'm busy," he said. "If you'll give me the address I'll see what I can do later." He pulled a scribbling-pad towards him. "Hello, yes—Three-A Southwold Mansions, Perry Street."

He sat staring at the address he had scribbled down, and then turned and spoke into the phone with considerably more interest than before.

"Did you say Southwold?"

"Yes—Southwold Mansions. You come along!"

"Right. I will. Goodbye!"

Fisher hung up the receiver, to find Guthrie looking down at him.

"That's a queer coincidence," he said.

"Very odd," agreed Fisher.

"Is your friend wealthy?" the older man said. "Those are expensive flats. Dacre, the actor, has one. Also a well-known surgeon lives on the first floor, and the other apartments belong to people of that type."

Fisher smiled.

"Box hasn't any money, but the aunt he's taken it for is quite wealthy. She's interested in charities and that sort of thing. I think I may drop in there tonight."

"I think it would be wise," Guthrie agreed.

"Eh, Davidson? What's the matter?"

His last remark was addressed to the man who had just entered. Davidson was a tall, gaunt individual of Guthrie's own age. He had one of the saddest faces and most genial spirits that were ever housed in one body. At the moment, however, his naturally lugubrious expression was enhanced by genuine worry lines across his forehead and at the corners of his mouth. He sauntered across the room and stood beside the desk, facing the other men across its expanse.

"The country's very nice at this time of the year," he remarked unexpectedly. "Damp, brown, covered with dead leaves, bonfires and low mists. Very attractive. I like trees in winter, don't you?"

They stared at him in bewilderment.

"Fisher and I are just off to Epping," he went on. Then he caught sight of the plan on the desk. "That's interesting. That's the spot where they found the kidnapped cab, isn't it? Poor old Parker! He'll never under-tip another taximan."

[Turn page]
Guthrie's rubicund face turned suddenly very pale.

"D'you mean to say that Parker's—been found, Davidson?" he asked.

The lugubrious man nodded solemnly.

"A hole through his forehead and the back of his head blown out. Lying under an oak tree, partially covered with leaves. That's why we're off to Epping, Fisher. They say on the wire that he's been dead for several hours. Poor fellow, I never liked him."

CHAPTER III

SUSPICIONS

WHEN the two officers returned from their jaunt, the local police inspector in charge of the tiny police station on the outside edge of the forest, regarded Fisher and Davidson with respect.

Inspectors Davidson and Fisher had just come in from a grueling search of that part of the district where the body had been found. Their search had been fruitless, and, a little dejected, they had retired to the police station to inspect the body and examine the clothes.

"Everything that was taken from the pockets is on this table," the local inspector said.

Fisher stood looking down at the miscellaneous collection of articles which Inspector Parker had been wont to carry about him—his watch, his knife, a note-case, a packet of letters, several odd pencils, a tobacco pouch, and a dozen or one odds and ends.

Davidson sighed.

"Nothing to help us among those," he said gloomily. "Let's look over the clothes."

Together they examined the crumpled, bloodstained garments, which had once clothed the perky, conceited little inspector. It was a melancholy business. Although Fisher had attended to such a task hundreds of times in his career, he could never rid himself of a sense of distaste for the job. Suddenly an exclamation escaped him, and Davidson and the local inspector glanced up. Fisher stood holding a tiny scrap of dirty paper which he had extracted from Parker's left shoe. He spread it out on the table in the charge-room and they bent over it together.

The discovery was about three inches square, muddy, and clearly marked with the imprint of a heel. It was evidently a page torn from a pad of forms. There was a single line of printing below the perforated edge. "Hotel Formby", it ran. "To be retained by owner." And scribbled beneath in what appeared to be indelible pencil, were the figures "178."

Davidson frowned, and the local inspector looked puzzled.

"What do you make of that, Fisher?" Davidson spoke casually. "In his shoe, was it? What is it? Some hotel shoe cleaning arrangement?"

Fisher shook his head.

"I don't think so. It looked like it at first, I admit. But why 'to be retained by owner'? Have you ever stayed at a hotel where they gave you a receipt for your shoes?"

Davidson rubbed his chin.

"That's true," he said. "What do you make of it?"

"Well, first of all," Fisher answered, "I assume that it didn't get into the shoe by mistake. Someone must have put it there deliberately, probably Parker. Now it's just possible that Parker was in the habit of depositing things in the Hotel Formby's safe, but I don't think so. Anyway, if he did, why did he carry the receipt about in his shoe? Also there's this muddy heel mark.

"The whole thing suggests that it has lain upon the floor at some time. The theory I'm inclined to favor is that Parker was imprisoned somewhere, looked round for something that might give him a clue to his whereabouts, and picked up this off the floor. Therefore, I think our next step is the Hotel Formby. You know the place, don't you? It's on Euston Road—a respectable middle-class establishment."

Further examination of the dead man's belongings proving unproductive, the two Scotland Yard men climbed into Fisher's coupe, and they set off for town.

As they went Davidson reviewed the facts of the case.

"Well," he said, glancing at the rough notes he had made, "I think it's clear that Parker was shot before they got him out to the forest. I'd say there are two men in it, possibly more. Parker could fight like a tiger, remember, and he was very handy with his gun."

"I don't think he was shot in cold blood," said Fisher, his eyes on the road.

"You mean the angle of the bullet? Yes, I think perhaps you're right. He was shot from a distance. Probably he was trying to make a getaway, poor chap. I take it we are on our way to the Formby Hotel?"
"That's right," Fisher trod harder on the accelerator and the little car leaped forward through the gloom.

The manager of the Hotel Formby received them not without some trepidation. He was a plump little man, over middle age, with quick, dark eyes and a small black imperial. The arrival of the two Yard men in his ultra-respectable establishment was an unprecedented event, and he eyed them nervously.

When they were comfortably ensconced in his small office, Fisher drew out his notebook and, extracting the grubby scrap of paper, handed it to the manager.

"I wondered if you could tell me what that is, Mr. Weller?" he said.

The fastidious little man picked up the scrap of paper between a thumb and forefinger. At first he seemed inclined to doubt if such a disreputable item could ever have had anything to do with the elegant Hotel Formby, but upon examination a frown spread over his forehead.

"Why, yes," he said. "There's nothing extraordinary about this—or at least I hope not."

He shot an inquiring glance at the two inspectors, who remained completely wooden-faced and uncommunicative, waiting for him to continue.

"Oh, yes, it's quite simple," he repeated. "You see, since we are rather cramped for space here, we have no garage belonging to the hotel. So in order to accommodate our guests, we have an arrangement with a big garage down the road whereby clients can leave their cars, but the charge is put through us and goes down on their bills in the ordinary way.

"Sometimes when that garage is overcrowded, we patronize two or three other smaller establishments of the same sort in the vicinity, and when this is done we make a practise of giving the owner of the car a slip like this. The duplicate half is handed in to the garage. Without this ticket no one can obtain his car."

"I see. Then this is a garage ticket?"

Mr. Weller deigned to glance at the offending scrap of paper once again.

"Exactly," he said. "A garage ticket belonging to a client who occupied Room One Seventy-Eight."

A smile which he could only just hide flickered for an instant across Fisher's face as he shot a covert glance at his companion. Inspector Davidson grinned openly.

"Would it be possible to find out exactly who was the owner of this slip?" Fisher asked gently. "These figures are made of carbon, aren't they? Probably you have the original slip still in your pad."

With an exaggerated sigh of exasperation the manager of the Formby Hotel pressed a bell and summoned his secretary. In a few moments the pad lay on the table in front of the detectives. Fisher turned over the leaves. After a few moments of anxious search, a grunt of satisfaction escaped him.

"Here we are," he said. "Yes, this is it. And there's a date, too—February the twelfth. Would it be possible, Mr. Weller, to find out who occupied Room One Seventy-Eight on the night of February the twelfth?"

For an instant it seemed as though Mr. Weller was about to expostulate, but long experience as a hotelkeeper told him that it is wisest always to assist the police who, from being the best friends in the world, can always turn into the worst enemies.

The desk clerk was summoned and he came immediately, a pale, fair young man carrying a register. Within a few moments the identity of the mysterious owner of the garage ticket had been revealed.

"Mr. Richard Holt," said the booking clerk, looking up from the register with some surprise. "He's one of our oldest and most regular customers."

"I've known Mr. Holt for years," the manager said. "He's a manufacturer in Walsall, and always stays here on his trips to London.

"I'm afraid we must ask you for his address," said Fisher quietly. He turned to the desk clerk. "I don't suppose you know anything about this ticket?"

The young man examined the slip of paper with more interest than his employer had done.

"Yes, I think I do," he said. "I remember Mr. Holt coming to me for garage accommodation rather late one evening. I phoned up our usual garage just down the road, but they were full. I remember I had to make other arrangements for him."

Fisher was conscious of a thrill of satisfaction. Here, at last, was a witness who, while being obviously cautious and of an orderly mind, was yet possessed of a good memory and a genuine desire to be helpful.

"Could you tell me the name of the garage where the car was left?"

"I'm not sure. It must have been one of
three. We have a resident chauffeur who fetches the cars from the garages for their owners. He might remember."

There was a pause while this individual was summoned, and Fisher took advantage of it by obtaining Mr. Richard Holt's home address. The chauffeur proved to be a disappointment. He was a harassed, plainly overworked individual who, besides being a chauffeur, had the thankless job of odd man at the Formby. He remembered Mr. Holt's car quite well.

"It was a big Graham-Paige," he said. "Not a new model. I put it in one of the three garages we use when the big one's full, but I couldn't say which now. I was very rushed, and it's some time ago now. They'd probably know there, though."

"I'll give you the addresses," the desk clerk said helpfully, and while he jotted them down on a slip of paper for the detectives the manager turned to Fisher in appeal.

"Naturally I don't know what business you're on, Inspector," he said, "but Mr. Holt is a very old client of ours, and you understand I was naturally loath to give you his address. If it would be possible for you to—er—discover what you have to, without referring to him, I should be tremendously obliged. Naturally we don't like our clients to think that we give away their addresses."

Fisher's friendly, disarming smile did much to reassure him, and presently the two detectives took their leave. They stood for a moment on the pavement before entering their little car. Fisher ran his eye down the list.

"Burchell's Garage, Albany Street, the Fairlop, Fitzroy Street, and Knapp's, Grafton Street. That's interesting, Davidson."

The inspector met the younger man's shrewd, gray eyes.

"Grafton Street," he repeated softly.

Fisher climbed into his car and, turning on the dashboard light, drew a roughly-made plan from his coat pocket.

"Look here," he said. "This is the diagram of the underground ways in the WX-Fifteen district. Here's the Forty-Y sewer, here's the underground railway, and here is the old post-office tube now used by the stores. See what I mean? This tube runs right through this area and comes out at Westbridge's other store in the Tottenham-Court Road. On its way it runs beneath Grafton Street. I wonder? Anyway, let's go there first. And yet I don't know. Routine is routine, and the others are nearer. We'd better cover them on our way."

Burchell's garage proved to be a comparatively large establishment in the charge of a very efficient ex-Service man who kept a careful record of every car he received from the Formby. He was so positive that no Graham-Paige had been housed by him on the night of February 12 that the inspectors were satisfied and moved on to the Fairlop.

Here, too, they were unsuccessful. The garage was smaller, but no less respectable, and they went on. As they turned into Grafton Street and drove slowly down the narrow road looking for Knapp's, however, Fisher felt a thrill of exhilaration.

Knapp's garage was an old stable, approached by a narrow bricked way between a second-hand shop and a dairy. It looked uninviting, dark, and none too prosperous. As they turned into the half-empty building a disreputable figure came out to meet them. He was small, rat-faced, and clad in garments which appeared to have been soaked in oil for many years. His one concession to smartness was a huge flat cap which he wore at a rakish angle.

He regarded them with the knowing eyes of one who has seen the police before and is not likely to forget them. Fisher plunged straight into the business in hand.

"I'd like to speak to the manager, please."

"I am the manager. And the proprietor, too. There's me name over the door—Thomas Knapp—and I'm not ashamed of it."


"I knew that before you told me," said Mr. Knapp truculently. "I didn't think you was in fancy dress."

Fisher ignored the dig and went on.

"You sometimes garage cars for the Formby Hotel."

"That's nothing to be ashamed of, I hope," said the little man with dignity. "Seems quite a nice 'otel. The Formby's a place I wouldn't mind stayin' at meself."

Fisher, who had had some experience of this particular type, knew too much to resent the combative manner. He drew the scrap of paper from his pocket and showed it to the garage proprietor, without, however, allowing it to leave his hand.

"Ever seen that before?"

Mr. Knapp sniffed noisily.
“Might 'ave,” he said non-committally. “It's the sort of thing anybody might 'ave seen before.”

“Well, do you recognize what it is?”

“Yus,” said Mr. Knapp, after a pause, with might have been the effort of tremendous mental concentration on his part, or mere caution. “It's a ticket from the Formby for boardin' a car.”

“That's right. Well, this ticket was given up in exchange for a Graham Paige on February the twelfth last. Wilkinson, the chauffeur of the Formby, thinks he may have brought the car here.”

“Very likely,” said Mr. Knapp with irritating vagueness.

“Well, did he?” said Davidson, breaking in. "Did you house a Graham Paige from the Formby on the night of February the twelfth? And is that the ticket which was given up in exchange for it?”

“Might 'ave been.” There was no telling from the crafty expression of Mr. Knapp’s unlovely face whether he was telling all he knew or whether the subject had ceased to interest him.

“Better have a good think, my lad.” Fisher spoke sharply. “This is important. You know who we are. We don't come round asking questions simply for fun.”

“Really,” said Mr. Knapp with contempt. “Well, I'll 'ave to think then, won't I?”

“It wouldn't be a bad idea.”

The two detectives waited with impatience while Mr. Knapp performed this unusual feat.

“No,” he said at last. “No, I don't think I did. I wouldn't be sure, of course, but I don't think I did.”

Fisher's eyes narrowed.

“The car hasn't been stolen,” he said. “There's no complaint about it. If it was here you needn't be afraid to say so.”

“Well, that's a nice thing to suggest!” said Knapp with sudden indignation. “I'm doin' my best to 'elp you, aren't I? I say I don't think it was 'ere.”

“Don't you keep any records? How do you know what to charge the Formby?”

“I don't run up any accounts. It's cash on the nail. I don't say I don't trust 'em, but I like to be on the safe side.”

Fisher did not speak immediately. His quick eyes were taking in every detail of the big, draughty garage, and he had just caught sight of something lying among the litter which strewed the unswept floor. He bent down and picked it up. It was another ticket, save for the number similar to the one he held. Mr. Knapp grinned, but there was a shifty expression in his small, crafty eyes. “Lookin' for clues?” he inquired.

Fisher slipped the scrap of paper into his pocket-book beside the other.

“Do you always keep your receipts on the floor?” he inquired.

“I can't waste my time tidying up after customers,” said Mr. Knapp, netted. “When a man I know gives me a receipt for a car 'e brought in the night before I let 'im 'ave it. And if the receipt falls on the floor I let it stay there. I don't spend me life cleanin' up.”

“So I see,” said Fisher.

Mr. Knapp hesitated.

“Since you're so interested in me business, would you like to 'ave a look 'round?” he suggested. “I've got a nice little place 'ere. I know you traps like to nose round a bit.”

He led them solemnly into the small office at the back of the garage and into the minute yard behind. The whole place was indescribably untidy and dirty, but although both Yard men were on the alert, they saw nothing unexpected or unusual.

At the back of the garage there was a car pit of an ordinary type, but as a huge truck stood over it at the moment Fisher did not consider it worth while investigating. “Me and me mother lives in the attic above,” volunteered Mr. Knapp confidentially. “I don't keep any pets, and I'm fully insured in case of fire. Anything else you'd like to know while you're about it? Just ask. Don't mind me.”

“Any cellars?” said Fisher casually.

Mr. Knapp, who had turned aside to look at a pressure gauge on the tire of a limousine, bent a little lower over the disc, but when he spoke his voice was as perky as ever. “No,” he said. “Nothin' but drains, and they're not too good. Would you like to 'ave a look at the family album?”

This sarcasm was apparently lost on Davidson, but Fisher grinned.

“We've got it all at the Yard, I expect,” he said, and, nodding to the man, he went out to his car again.

“Well, what do you think?” said Davidson, as he climbed in beside him. “That man's got a record, I expect, but he seems to be on the straight now.”

“I don't know,” said Fisher slowly. “But I rather think I'll have the place watched. We'll see what Snoopy knows about it, too.
Of course, we’ve got nothing to go on, but I’ve got a hunch that Mr. Knapp’s establish-
ment is well worth keeping an eye on. We’ve got to get Thurtle back, Davidson, and we’ve
got to get the man who shot Parker.”
“Perhaps Thurtle shot Parker?” suggested Davidson.
Fisher shook his head.
“Not on your life,” he said. “There’s a very
different man behind all this. Thurtle took
a big risk and came an almighty cropper,
but this fellow takes risks all the time. But
I’ll get him, Davidson. I’ll get him, if it’s the
last thing I do.”

CHAPTER IV
Sinister Happenings

IT WAS after midnight when
Fisher at last found the time to
present himself before the door
of 3-A Southwold Mansions. The
lights in the neat, well-kept hall
were lowered to half strength,
but the bright green door looked
expensive and inviting.

In response to his ring the door was opened
perhaps three inches, and Box’s pink face
appeared in the aperture.

“So, you’ve come at last, have you?” he
said. “Come in, I was beginning to be afraid
you’d back out of it altogether. Come in and
have a drink.”

He was in pajamas and dressing-gown,
and his diminutive figure had acquired a
certain negligent charm from his costume.
Box prided himself on his taste in clothing,
and his green silk dressing-gown with white
polka dots was luxurious, as he said himself,
without being in any way vulgar. At the best
times he was a slightly cherubic person
with the engaging frankness of a child and
the plastered, bright yellow hair of a school-
boy.

Fisher followed him into the main room of
the suite. It was a big, ornate apartment, very
well furnished, if a little on the elaborate
side, but at any rate extremely comfortable.
Box went over to the sideboard and mixed a
drink for himself and his visitor, talking
volumbly the whole time.

“I was afraid you hadn’t taken me seri-
ously. I had great difficulty in getting on to
you at that place. You bobbies ought to be
always on the alert, you know—always eager
to pick up a crumb or two of information
which might lead you on to big things. Have
a cigarette? That box is full of ’em. The man
I rented this flat from seemed to want to
make me comfortable. He’s left the whole
place in running order.”

Fisher walked over to the window, and,
sweeping aside the heavy satin curtains,
stood looking down. Perry Street, with its
sinister yard, lay directly beneath him. Op-
posite was the narrow alley which led into
Winton Square, with its tiny shops, unsavory
mews, and curious renotation. Really, the
view of WX-15 from the window at which he
stood was extraordinarily complete.

Fisher’s eyes glinted. He had made up his
mind that he would wrest the secret from
the district if it were the last thing he ever
did. He was interrupted in his thoughts by
Box, who thrust a glass into his hand.

“Well, what do you think of the flat?” he
asked. “It looks pretty nifty at a first glance,
doesn’t it? If you were looking for a fur-
nished flat for your aunt, wouldn’t you say
it’s the very place?”

Fisher, whose only aunt was an impecunious
and elderly spinster with strong teetotal
convictions, grinned in spite of himself.

“I might,” he conceded. “But seriously,
George, if you’ve brought me up here to con-
gratulate you on your house-hunting, you
haven’t been very intelligent.”

“Oh, but wait. I’m giving you a drink to
brace you up.” Box’s round face was mo-
mentarily serious. “There’s more to come.
First of all, suppose you step in here?”

He conducted Fisher into an adjoining
bedroom. It seemed an ordinary room, a little
too elaborate for Fisher’s own taste, but
otherwise perfectly normal. Box was quiver-
ing with excitement, however.

“When I changed for dinner tonight, I
dropped a stud,” he said. “I was crawling
about on the floor looking for it when I dis-
covered this. Rather queer, isn’t it?”

He lifted up the bed valance, rolled back a
run-end, and pointed to a ring set in a floor-
board.

“Now look,” he commanded.

He pulled it up and revealed a small square
aperture in the floor which contained, to
Fisher’s astonishment, three revolvers. Box
rose to his feet, dusting his hands.

“There you are,” he said. “That’s the first
exhibit. Apparently my landlord likes to be
ready for burglars. At the first alarm he can
hop out of bed and go to meet them, a gun
in each hand and one in his teeth. An im-

pressive first appearance, I should think."
Fisher shrugged his shoulders, but his eyes were grave.

"May be just an idiosyncrasy," he said. "It certainly seems funny to leave them in a furnished flat."

"Funny?" said his host. "It's a laugh in itself. You wait. Our next port of call is the kitchen. Here we have a service lift."

The little white-tiled kitchenette which they next visited had a wedge-shaped shaft built in across one corner, and in it was a small lift worked by ropes and unusually solid for such a contraption.

"This takes you right down to the back yard of the block," Box said. "Interesting, isn't it? It goes through the flat below, of course, but it doesn't have an outlet there."

"How do you know?" Fisher inquired.

"Because I've been to see. I've ridden up and down in that thing twice. You'd find it more difficult because you haven't got my elegant proportions, but I did it quite easily. Look!"

He climbed into the hatch and sat there cross-legged, smiling out at his visitor.

"There you are," he said. "These ropes work at a touch. Very different from the one at my people's house. There's a certain amount of work in that, I can tell you."

He touched the rope at his side and moved himself up and down a few feet either way with extraordinary ease.

"This isn't all," he went on hastily. "See this?"

He stretched out his hand and touched a minute switch on the inside panelling of the lift shaft. Instantly they were in complete darkness.

"See that?" Box's voice was triumphant in the darkness. "That turns out every light in the flat. And what's more, you can't turn them on again until this has been readjusted. You try!"

Using his torch, Fisher made the experiment. But it was not until the little switch had been put back that the flat was once more a blaze of light.

"Well, you're glad you came along, aren't you?" he said.

Fisher grinned down at him.

"I am, certainly. You must have had a joyful evening playing with these gadgets. Any more?"

"Only one that I know of." Box was as pleased as a child with a new toy. "Come and stand in the big room."

They went back to the room Fisher had first seen, and Box indicated the fireplace. This was a tremendously ornate affair. The overmantel rose up to the ceiling and was made of lacquered wood ornamented with an inlay of mother-of-pearl in the form of a cherry branch in full blossom. The fireplace itself was set further back in the wall, and there were small inglenooks built in on either side.

"What do you think of that?" Box demanded.

"Hideous," said Fisher frankly. "That decoration doesn't go with that design."

Box grinned.

"Well, you stand and watch it, that's all."

He went out of the room, leaving the door open, and from where Fisher stood he could see his dressing-gowned figure pass down the corridor and unlock the front door, through which he disappeared.

"Now," said his exuberant voice. "See the fireplace?"

Fisher glanced up, a startled expression in his eyes. Each mother-of-pearl bud and flower was glowing with a ruby light. The effect was pleasant and somehow startling.

Box came back highly delighted.

"Did you notice it? Rather natty, isn't it? I saw it first when the grocer's boy came. It works very simply. Anybody standing on the door-mat forms a contact which produces the illumination. Rather a jolly little flat, isn't it? Just the place for auntie."

Fisher sat down in one of the deep armchairs before the fireplace.

"Look here, Box," he said. "How did you get hold of this place? How long have you been here?"

"I moved in about four o'clock this afternoon, and I took the flat off a most respectable agent at eleven o'clock this morning. Apparently his client had gone abroad on a film contract. He's an actor. I forget the name. He left very suddenly and just threw the keys in at the agent's and told them to let it. It's very cheap, considering, and I snapped it up.

"Of course," Box went on gravely, "I don't know if I should have been so certain it was just what auntie wanted if I'd noticed all the parlor tricks, but I didn't spot them until this evening. I rang up the agent, but he'd packed up for the night. Then, of course, I just had to have someone in to see my display, so I got on to you. Would you like the history of my life now? Or perhaps if we
could think of a crowd we could ring up we might throw a party. It’s only about one o’clock. There must be a few people we know who haven’t gone to bed yet.”

Fisher did not respond immediately. His mind was taken up with the strange disclosures he had just witnessed. Of course, there was just a chance that these elaborate signals and precautions were the property of a burglar-shy householder alarmed by the recent increase in crime, but on mature consideration this seemed hardly likely.

Box broke in on his thoughts.

“There’s another bedroom over there you can have,” he said. “Or don’t the police ever sleep? I’m not a nervous man, you know, but there’s something about this place that gives me the creeps. Do you notice it? There’s a sort of—how shall I say?—expectant atmosphere about. Something most extraordinary.”

Fisher did not answer. He opened his mouth to speak, but at that instant there came an interruption so remarkable that it brought both young men to their feet, their eyes starting. A prickly sensation ran down Fisher’s spine.

FROM the fireplace someone had spoken.

The voice, or whatever it was, for it sounded hardly human, had the curious metallic, yet hollow quality of a bad loud speaker, or the noise made by someone shouting over a telephone.

“Put out the lights,” it said. “Put out the lights. We’re coming up!”

The simple words touched a depth of elemental horror in that eerie flat. As Fisher stood there wrestling with an overwhelming sensation of dismay the voice came again.

“Put out the lights. We’re coming up!”

Fisher was the first to pull himself together. He sprang forward into the wide, open fireplace and peered under the mantel. The explanation of the alarming phenomenon was instantly apparent. A disc covered with gauze was let into the underside of the lacquer work. It was a loud speaker. The microphone to which it was connected was somewhere downstairs, no doubt in the yard of the block. This, then, was yet another of the many curious devices hidden in the flat.

Even as he watched the disc it spoke again.

“Put out the lights. Hurry!”

Motioning Box to follow him, Fisher darted into the kitchen and pressed back the master switch. He had no doubt that there must be another such device more conveniently placed in the flat somewhere, but now was not the time to search for it.

Then, drawing his gun, he crept back into the main room again, keeping the unarmed Box well behind him, since there was no time to acquire a second gun from the store in the bedroom.

As they stood waiting in the darkness, the silence became unbearable. There was very little traffic in the street outside and the whole place seemed to be holding its breath waiting for the unknown.

Suddenly Box gripped the detective’s arm, and Fisher, who had had his eyes fixed on the spot where he guessed the doorway must be, caught sight of the cherry branch picked out in crimson lights on the mantel. The warning was dramatic. Someone stood outside the gaily painted green door.

After what seemed an age there was a faint click from down the passage, followed by a rustling. Fisher laid a restraining hand on Box’s arm. He was sufficiently experienced not to go leaping into a fight single-handed without first discovering the odds against him.

The silence became unbearable. The darkness seemed full of strange forms, and yet there was hardly a sound, hardly a breath, to tell them whether they were alone or not.

It was the crimson warning over the fireplace flashing out again which was the first real indication of movement on the part of their extraordinary visitors. Three times the light flashed out, and then all was darkness again.

Fisher pulled out his torch and, keeping his gun leveled, swept it round the room. Nothing had been disturbed. They appeared to be alone.

Box stepped back into the kitchen, and a second later the lights once again shot up, blazing down upon the gilt and over-polished furniture, the luxurious hangings and deep pile carpet.

It was Fisher who first caught sight of the object down the end of the corridor just inside the front door. With a smothered exclamation he darted forward, Box at his heels. When they were within six paces of it, they pulled up short, and the two young men stood staring at this newest and most remarkable of the surprises the flat had to offer.

Half-lying, half-seated upon a heavy hall chair which had been dragged out from the wall, her head thrown back, her eyes closed,
and her slim hands and ankles bound with narrow cord, reclined one of the most beautiful girls either of them had ever had the good fortune to see.

Fisher bent over her.

“Good heavens!” he said. “This is a most extraordinary thing. Look here, you go and get her some water while I untie her.”

He turned his head as he spoke, and just for an instant he caught sight of an extraordinary expression on the other man’s face. Box’s cherubic countenance suddenly became white, and in his blue eyes, which were usually so mild and child-like, there had crept something that was palpably fury.

Fisher only caught a fleeting impression, and the next instant it had passed from his mind as Box’s face regained its normal color and blissful expression.

“Oh, yes. Yes, quite. I think that’s a good idea. What a funny flat. I must tell the man tomorrow it won’t suit auntie. Strange women popping in like this and that sort of thing. She doesn’t consider herself old-fashioned but she wouldn’t like it. She’s funny that way.”

He trotted off to the kitchen while Fisher unbound the cord which fastened the girl’s wrists and ankles. She was really extraordinarily beautiful. Her red-brown hair, which curled under her little green hat, coiled against a white skin, and her heavy, dark lashes enhanced her pallor. Suddenly she opened her eyes and looked at him. Her first expression was one of surprise, which quickly turned to sheer terror.

Before Fisher could speak, Box’s inconsequential voice echoed from the kitchenette:

“Here, I say, Bob, half a minute! Come at once, will you?”

There was an urgent note in the tone, and Fisher turned instinctively to his friend. He found Box hanging over the lift.

“Listen,” Box said. “Can’t you hear something?”

Fisher bent over the shaft.

“There’s nothing there,” he said at length. “What did you think you heard?”

“Someone screamed.” Box had lowered his voice mysteriously, and the effect was somewhat comic. Fisher was inclined to be irritated. That was the worst of Box, he reflected—a scatterbrained soul at the best of times.

He took a glass from the dresser and filled it under the tap.

“Come on,” he said. “Don’t forget the girl. She can probably put us wise to the whole thing.”

But even as he entered the passage he heard a sound which brought a smothered curse to his lips. As soon as he came in sight of that empty chair he knew he was too late. The cords which had bound her lay on the floor and the front door hung wide. The girl was gone.

CHAPTER V

TORTURE

FISHER turned round and thrust the glass into Box’s hand.

“Here, take this,” he commanded.

Box stood in pajamas and dressing-gown, the glass in his hand.

“I say, where are you going?” he shouted. “Here, wait for me!”

Fisher glanced at him over his shoulder as he reached the door.

“I may just catch her,” he said. “See you later.”

Box followed him to the doorway and stood on the mat, an absurd figure in pajamas and dressing-gown. Then he frowned and, coming back slowly into the flat, shut the hall door behind him. For a moment he stood hesitating. Then he shrugged his shoulders and, placing the glass of water on the hall table, went back into the bedroom and began to dress at speed.

His movements during the next ten minutes were extraordinary, to say the least of it. He dressed in record time, and when he emerged from the bedroom, although his round face was still bland and good-humoured, a subtle difference had come over the expression in his eyes. They were no longer frank and child-like. Instead, a purposeful expression lingered in their depths, and a gleam of intelligence that was not altogether pleasant.

He went round the flat turning out the lights, and then, making his way to the kitchenette, entered the lift with the air of one long accustomed to do so, and lowered himself swiftly into the yard below.

The dark raincoat which covered his plump form rendered him inconspicuous, but it seemed a little odd that he should have taken the trouble to don thick wash-leather gloves before climbing into the lift.
When he emerged into the yard he stood for a moment looking about him. Then, convinced that he was unobserved, he sent the lift back into position, and, pulling his hat down over his eyes, he stepped softly across the concrete and entered what appeared to be an area leading to a coal cellar.

The place was empty, and had evidently been built in the days when the whole block of flats was a private house. The young man seemed to know his way, for he used no torch although the building was in inky darkness. He crept softly round the wall, and finally, discovering the door he sought, passed through it into yet another cellar.

He came out of this into another area precisely similar to the one by which he had entered, and stepped up into the street in a narrow turning on the opposite side of the road from the block of flats.

He stood for a moment listening, but there were no unusual sounds above the roar of the distant traffic, and presently he set off down the narrow pavement and turned into Winton Mews.

The narrow, unsavory court was quiet, and no gleam of light showed from the windows above the big garage doors. Box stepped forward and, moving up to the third door on the left, knocked twice, once loudly and once softly. Instantly it swung open, and he stepped into the darkness within.

* * * * *

"I wish you'd talk. You get on my nerves sitting there, Fishy Eyes!"

Mr. Knapp stood at the end of the wooden table in the damp, ill-lighted cellar and looked at the man who sat opposite, his head resting upon his clasped hands, a dull expression upon his drawn white face.

Joseph Thruttle had looked weary when he had stepped off the boat train at Victoria a little over twenty-four hours before, but in the interval he had become more haggard and white than would have seemed possible. He took no notice of the garage proprietor's opening gambit, but continued to stare straight in front of him.

"Leave 'im alone, Thos, can't you?" The speaker was a heavily-built, red-faced individual, who lay sprawled upon a pile of sacks spread out on a packing-case in the corner of the cellar. "Leave 'im to the boss!"

The other two occupants of the apartment, who were cutting for half-pence on yet another packing-case, nodded their approval. One was a slender, dark young man with more breeding than strength in his face, and the other a splendidly proportioned, hard-bitten-looking giant with three days' growth of honey-colored hair on his chin and the clear, smiling eyes of a sailor.

Mr. Knapp sniffed, and wandered over to join the card players.

"I can't understand you, Jack," he said, eying the dark young man. "You sit here and play with Bill all day long. Don't you ever get tired of it?"

"Run away, Thos. You're interrupting!" Jack Simmons' voice was unexpectedly well modulated.

"Bill and I have done enough work for today. We must do something. We don't get our fun as you do, tormenting the prisoner."

"That's right." The man addressed as Bill revealed a guttural Scandinavian accent. "You go and worry Tim." He indicated the big man in the corner.

"If he comes over here," said that worthy with sudden violence, "I'll break his skinny little neck."

"All right. No offence, I 'ope!" Mr. Knapp perched himself on the end of the table and considered Joseph Thruttle once again.

Suddenly a rumbling roar shook the room in which they sat, but none of the occupants so much as batted an eyelid. They were used to the tube trains which hurtled past within a few feet of them. Joseph Thruttle stirred wearily where he sat, but the blank, helpless look did not vanish from his eyes.

Suddenly there was the sound of a small electric bell, and instantly the little company in the room glanced up. Mr. Knapp slipped off the table and stood respectfully at attention. A rough wooden door at the far end of the room swung open and a young man appeared. The collar of his dark raincoat was turned up and his hat was pulled well down over his eyes. He stood for a moment looking round at them, his plump, cherubic face bland and inscrutable.

George Box, part time man-about-town and part time one of the most powerful crooks who had yet escaped the attentions of Scotland Yard, surveyed his assistant and his prisoner.

"Where's Casson?" he demanded.

"In the office," Mr. Knapp indicated a further door on the opposite side of the cellar. "Mr. Levine and Jamieson are there, too."

Box nodded and hurried through the apart-
ment, disappearing into the next.

The room he entered, although a cellar like the first, presented a very different appearance. Its walls had been painted, a heavy carpet covered the floor, and it was furnished with a certain amount of taste and comfort.

The three men who lounged on the couch before the electric stove were different also from their colleagues without. There are as many social distinctions in crookdom as in the world upon which it preys. Here was the nucleus of the powerful organization which caused Scotland Yard so much anxiety; Casson, a little, wiry man with the toothbrush mustache and bearing of an Army major. Jamieson, a quiet, grave-faced business man and Levine, perhaps the cleverest of the three, an elderly, dapper Frenchman, irreproachably dressed in the latest fashion.

Box took off his hat and coat and threw them on a chair.

"Really, Casson," he said mildly, "I wish you wouldn't leave your lady friends about my flat without warning me. I had a visitor at the time, and it was very awkward. I've got nothing against the girl, mind you. It was only the way she intruded. You don't mind me mentioning it, do you?"

Casson started up in alarm.

"Good heavens!" he said. "Who was there? I didn't know what to do with the girl. I couldn't very well have her here. The flat seemed to be the best place to leave her."

Box sat down on the arm of the couch.

"Suppose we get this thing straight," he said. "In the first place, who on earth is she?"

Casson and Levine exchanged glances. In spite of Box's light manner there was something sinister in his tone, an implied reproach which they were quick to notice.

"We found her in the tube, hiding. She couldn't give any account of herself, and it occurred to me that she might be dangerous."

It was Levine who spoke, his slight French accent clipping the words.

Box smiled.

"I see. So you tied her up and left her in the flat for me to deal with? I recognized your voice, Casson, over the microphone. I only hope that Inspector Fisher didn't make a mental note of it also."

"Inspector Fisher?"

All three men stared at him.

"In the flat? Then he knows?"

"Everything," said Box complacently.

"He's seen all the gadgets and was suitably impressed. I admit the sensational appearance of the girl was more than I'd bargained for."

"But how did he get there? How did he find it?"

"I invited him, and I showed him." Box's smile broadened.

Jamieson rose to his feet and peered into the round, smiling face.

"What are you playing at, Box?"

"Sit down. Don't worry. Let me explain. It occurred to me that the tremendous police activities in the WX-fifteen district, as they call it, are becoming irritating, to say the least of it. Frankly, Jamieson, things are getting too hot. I considered the matter, and it dawned upon me, in a sort of blaze of understanding, that the best things to do was to give them something to get their teeth into. I've been cultivating Fisher for some time, as you know; in fact, I might almost say he knows me quite well. He holds the interesting theory that I'm a half-wit—one of those elegant fireflies who spend their time between stage dressing-rooms and the better-class cocktail bars."

BOX paused for a moment, smilingly, as if pleased by his own cleverness.

"I told him I'd rented the flat for an aunt of mine, and that I thought there was something funny about it. At first he wasn't interested, but when I gave him the address, he perked up his ears and came along this evening. I showed him over the place, and was just going to leave him to draw his own conclusions when the girl made a sensational entry. I'm afraid she got away, and he's after her. Now, Casson, if he caught her, how much will she be able to tell him?"

"Not much," said Casson quickly. "Fortunately not much. We didn't bring her here at all. We blindfolded her in the tube and took her up through the garage. She'd never recognize it again."

"Who d'you think she was? A police spy?"

"No, I don't think so. She's too young for that. I can't imagine what she was doing."

Box's eyes narrowed.

"You ought to have found out."

The other three men were silent, and their leader rose from his seat on the arm of the couch and walked down the room.

"I've covered our tracks with regard to the flat. Jack Simmons put it in the hands of an agent this morning, and I took it about an hour later, so if there's any inquiry in that direction we're covered. Now, since our friend in the next room has had about twelve
hours to think it over, perhaps he may consider our proposition with a little more interest. Suppose we have him in."

An ugly light came into Jamieson's eyes.

"The man's a fool," he said. "I'm in favor of using a certain amount of third degree methods. You'd almost believe he wants to serve his sentence."

Box regarded his colleague with mild disapproval.

"My dear fellow, why so crude?" he said. "Do remember we're business men, even if our methods are a little unorthodox. You keep reverting to the bang-him-on-the-head school of thought. I don't like it."

"That's all very well, Box."

It was Casson who spoke.

"But we've got the fellow here, and as long as he's here he's a source of potential danger to us. If he's discovered, things can be very awkward indeed. Don't forget Parker!"

A regretful expression spread over Box's round, friendly face.

"That was a pity, I admit that," he said. "But the fellow was half out of the garage window. I agree with Bill it was the only thing he could have done. Besides, the fellow knew too much. Now I think we'll concentrate on the business in hand. Let's sit round the table, shall we? Casson, I wonder if you'd mind bringing our obstinate guest in from the other room."

Box, as chairman, took the head of the table, and Joseph Thurtle sat opposite him. His eyes were heavy, but there was still a sullen expression on his mouth, and his hands were clenched.

The other three men showed their reactions toward the situation in different ways. Jamieson was palpably nervous. The murder of Inspector Parker had got under his skin, and secretly he was afraid. His fear made him savage, and he glared at their captive as though he could hardly bear to keep his hands off him.

Levine was impassive, save for his bright black eyes which were fixed upon Thurtle's drawn face. Casson watched Box, grudging admiration in the half smile on his lips. That individual was the only one of the party who seemed completely at ease.

"Well, Mr. Thurtle," Box said, "You look tired. I do hope you haven't found your companions in the other room too boring. It is astounding how irritating one's intellectual inferiors can be if one lives with them. Suppose we take up our conversation where we left it yesterday?"

"I don't want to treat with you. You can hand me over to the police, if you like. I'm at the end of my tether. I'm done."

"Well!" continued Box. "And I always thought you were an ambitious man. Come, come, Mr. Thurtle! This isn't the way to treat friends who have gone to the extent of getting rid of a too attentive police officer and rescuing you. Suppose we talk business. You have a son in London, Mr. Thurtle?"

For the first time during the conversation a flicker of animation came into the financier's dull eyes.

"He can't be here yet," he said before he could check himself.

Box smiled.

"I'm glad to be able to give you the good news," he said. "Your son arrived at Southampton on board the Elephantine late last night. Naturally the authorities had no quarrel with him, and part from a somewhat sketchy surveillance, they're leaving him alone. I imagine their interest in him would be considerably increased if they realized that he carries half a million about with him—that half million, which you, Mr. Thurtle, were clever enough to rescue from the Trust crash."

"That's a lie!"

T HE man was on his feet now, facing his enemies. His eyes were blazing, and he had all the dark defiance of an animal at bay in his quivering form.

"Well, well, well, why so defiant? You shouldn't protest so much. It makes people think. As I was saying before you interrupted me with less manners than usual, I am sure the authorities will be more interested in young Mr. Rupert Thurtle when they hear the interesting piece of information I shall be able to give them. In fact, I shouldn't be at all surprised if it didn't alter their view completely, and if young Mr. Thurtle were to stand in the dock beside you."

"But he's innocent," the old man persisted. "He didn't realize what he was doing, and I didn't enlighten him. The fault is mine—entirely mine—and I'm prepared to pay for it."

"Well, let's hope the authorities take the same view," said Box pleasantly. "I've often found, however," he went on in a conversational tone, "that it's very difficult indeed to convince them of a thing like that. They're inclined to be obstinate. Officialdom again,
cry escaped him and he sprawled forward across the table.

"All right," he said. "All right. I'm beaten. I'll do it!"

CHAPTER VI

A BAD BLUNDER

uttering a suppressed exclamation of triumph, Jamieson leaned forward across the table, but Box laid a restraining hand upon his arm.

"That's very wise of you, Mr. Thurtle," Box said softly. "Very wise indeed. I was only putting my own case to you. My friends have devised other means of persuasion."

He took a fountain-pen from his pocket and handed it politely to the stricken man. Casson brought notepaper and an envelope from a desk in the corner.

"One moment," Box's face was very grave. "I should like to point out to you, Mr. Thurtle," he said, in a voice completely unlike the bantering tone he had previously used, "that we are not joking. Nor are we fools. Any attempt on your part to double-cross us, to drop a concealed hint to your son or to frustrate us in any way, and we have our revenge. It is very simple, and we shall not hesitate."

The other man looked up and met his eyes. "I understand," he said solemnly. "You and I can take each other's words. Honor among thieves!" He laughed bitterly on the last words, and while Levine reddened angrily, Box's smile broadened.

"How true," he said.

The elder man wrote swiftly, and when he had finished he handed the sheet to his captor.

Box read it through aloud.

I have been hijacked. I am held here for ransom. For heaven's sake, obey instructions, since my life depends upon it. Pay up to one half of what you hold. I dare not write any more, but do this for me.—Yours, Dad.

"Yes, I think that I'll do very nicely," Box drew a paper from his pocketbook and put it on the table. "This is a sample of your handwriting," he said. "I took the precaution of procuring it so that we should not have any hitch at the outset. Yes, that will do. I congratulate you, Mr. Thurtle, on your intelligence."
"Now, since we are partners, as it were, perhaps you would prefer to spend your time in here? It's warmer and more comfortable. I'm afraid one of us will have to remain with you, but I assure you that you will find any of these three gentlemen excellent company—quite different from the person Knapp, who, I admit, has all the hallmarks of the complete social failure."

He put the two papers carefully in his pocket and went over to the door.

"Bill!" he said, "I'm going out. Just make certain that everything is clear, will you?"

The words died on his lips, for at that moment Mr. Knapp came hurrying into the room.

"I say," he said. "I thought I'd choked the police off, but there's a whole group of 'em round the garage."

Box thrust out a hand and caught his shoulder.

"What's this?" he demanded sternly.

As he jerked the man towards him he revealed unexpected strength for one of his stature. Somewhat incoherently, Mr. Knapp poured out the story of Fisher's visit to the garage that evening with Davidson.

"Look out, guv'nor," he concluded. "Your fingers ain't 'alf bitin' into my shoulder! What d'you think I am? Bloomin' rat or somethin'?"

"I wouldn't embarrass you by telling you in front of all these people," said Box. But his usual good humor had vanished and there was an element of anxiety in his voice. "I thought that garage was safe. It's outside the area, and until now they haven't had a line on it. "They got you on a car ticket from the Formby Hotel, you say? Well, I wonder how that happened?"

He stood thinking for some moments, and then a sudden expression of alarm flickered across his face for an instant.

"Parker!" he said. "Parker was in that office alone for about five minutes. My heaven, Knapp, you ought to clean up that place of yours. Your filthy shed and disgusting business methods will be the finish of us."

As he flung the man from him he glanced round the group. Their faces were white, and there was something very near panic in some of their eyes.

Box's nonchalance returned as if by magic.

"If only it wasn't Fisher we might have something to worry about," he said easily.

"But I assure you if you knew that man you wouldn't be alarmed. He's the most harmless, good-tempered soul alive, with about as much brains as an overfed Pekinese. Oh, well, we must take to the tube!"

Casson went over to him. "Be careful of the mews exit," he murmured. "There's a patrol which goes through there every twenty minutes."

Box nodded.

"I just missed it as I came in," he said. "But don't worry. I think in the circumstances I shall take a trip on our emergency railway. Bill and Knapp can come with me, just in case of accidents."

Casson raised his eyebrows.

"The store?" he said softly. "That's not very safe, is it?"

Box patted his shoulder.

"My dear fellow!" he said. "What an engaging person you are! I don't know whether it's occurred to you, but the whole method by which we live is not exactly renowned for safety."

Casson looked after him as he went through the door. He had a tremendous admiration for Box, but there were times when he was afraid.

* * * * *

"Call this a joy-ride? It gives me the creeps!"

Mr. Knapp's unlovely voice was raised in the stuffy gloom.

"Just fancy what'd 'appen if someone was to set a parcels trolley in motion?" he asked.

"It'd come 'urtling down 'ere like one o'clock and where should we be then, I'd like to know?"

"Safely under it and out of this business for good," said Box cheerfully.

The three men were walking down the old post-office tube now used by the two branches of Westbridge's Department Stores. Box went in front with an electric torch. Mr. Knapp trotted along at his elbow, and Bill, the Swede, brought up the rear. They bent low to avoid the overhanging electric cables which propelled the swift little parcel trucks from one store to the other.

Here and there along the line there were old "stations" which marked the site of the long-disused post offices. Mr. Knapp's garage was one, and there was another beneath the modern block of Winton Street Flats. But these had been long passed by the three men, and they now came to a bend beyond which
Terry Trapped The Alien Smugglers And Then...

Here's your cut, Corbett... three hundred bucks. Guide 'em to Tony's shack and you're through. Okay, Louie. Another load tomorrow night? Hands up! You can see why I had to cover your mouth... one peep would have spoiled our show. Gracious! And the "signaler" is your man. Senator Congdon's camp, Miss? Why you're three miles out of your way. Come back to border patrol headquarters and I'll drive you over.

Do you mind if I use your phone? Uncle Harry may be worried. Go right ahead. Meanwhile, if you'll excuse me, I'll clean up. This blade's a honey... three days' whiskers gone like magic. Thin Gillettes are plenty keen and easy shaving, Terry.

Why, Uncle, do you know Mr. Corbett? Know him? Why Major Corbett was my best intelligence officer! I'd been planning to visit you after I cracked this case, Colonel... I mean Senator.

You get smooth, refreshing shaves in jiffy-time with thin Gillettes. They're the keenest, longest-lasting blades in the low-price field, and because they fit your Gillette razor accurately, your face is protected from the scrape and irritation of misfit blades. Use thin Gillettes.
was the faint light of a single electric bulb.

This was the end of the tube as it was now used—the dispatch department of Westbridge's Oxford Circus branch.

Box turned off his torch and spoke softly.

"Keep back! There's an armed watchman on the premises, and it's most important we shouldn't get caught tonight."

"It's most important we shouldn't get caught any time, I 'ope," said Mr. Knapp truculently, and he shrank closer to the dusty sides of the tube.

The dispatch department was yet another of the old "stations." A low, concrete platform ran down to the rails, and five or six parcels trucks were drawn up at the far end. The single electric bulb, which was kept alight night and day, glowed over the ghostly and deserted scene.

Motioning to the others to follow him, Box crept forward across the concrete way and tried the doors leading into the back basement of the shop. They were unlocked, since the only approach to them was through the shop's private tunnel. He passed through silently, Mr. Knapp, sniffing irritationally, followed him, and Bill, a life-preserver clenched in one mighty fist, came last.

Inside all was pitch dark and uncannily quiet. Box drew out his torch and flashed it round. They were in a huge packing cellar, but the doors to the concrete staircase stood open, and they moved towards it.

They climbed up the stairs on silent, rubber-shod feet. At the first landing they paused. Had they been attempting a burglary nothing would have been more simple, but since their intention was merely to get out, the problem was, perversely, more difficult.

The service doors were closed with huge iron bolts which would make a tremendous noise when moved. Moreover, they were probably well provided with burglar-alarms.

Box seemed to have an uncanny gift of finding his way about, however, and he led the others down a corridor, past great show-rooms covered with ghostly piles of merchandise under dust-sheet shrouds, and came at last to the thing he sought, a side door in the street.

It was at this moment that Mr. Knapp caught his breath noisily, and Box, glancing over his shoulder, saw the flickering light of a torch coming towards them down the passage. It was the night watchman.

"He's armed," Box whispered to Bill. "At-
tend to him." And then, with all the coolness in the world, he bent again over the lock which held the door.

Mr. Knapp, who, to do him credit, had more courage than would appear, stepped forward into the passage and tore off down it like a rabbit. The night watchman turned his torch full upon him, and his startled voice shattered the silence.

"Hands up, my lad! You're covered!"

Mr. Knapp turned at the far end of the cul-de-sac, and the watchman, keeping his torch full upon him, advanced, his gun leveled.

He passed within a few feet of Bill and Box, who were still working unconcernedly upon the door. As the man went by Bill leaped forward. For a second the life-preserver hung in the air, and then descended with a thud upon a spot just above the man's left ear. He went down without a groan and lay sprawling upon the ground, his gun and torch flying wide.

MR. KNAPP came back grinning.

Box was still working on the catch which held the door. A new system of locks had recently been installed at Westbridge's, and his task was not as simple as he had hoped.

It was at this moment that the disturbing thing happened. The lights suddenly went on all over the building. The effect was terrifying, and Box started back from the door with an oath. At first he fancied that he had disturbed the mechanism of some new burglar alarm attached to the door, but the next moment he knew that he was wrong. He could hear the sound of voices and the tramp of feet.

He swung round on the terrified Knapp and Bill.

"Get back to the tube. Whatever you do, don't get caught. Go on! Beat it!"

They needed no second bidding, and the Swede lumbered off the way they had come, while Mr. Knapp seemed to have disappeared into thin air at the first word of command.

Box himself stepped into one of the great deserted showrooms, sprang lightly over a counter, and crouched there, his gun drawn. He could hear people moving, and then the gruff, unmistakable voice of a police constable echoed from the passage he had just left.

"Hello, what's this? Quick! Here's the watchman, laid out!"

There was a trample of feet, a certain
amount of confused conversation, and then silence.

Box was no coward but neither was he a fool. He realized that now the watchman had been found by the police, a thorough and most exhaustive search of the whole building would be made. He crept along, keeping his head below the counter, and worked his way to the end of the showroom until there was only six feet of open space between him and the service stairs.

He raised himself cautiously and looked about him. At first he thought no one was in sight, but suddenly a slight sound above him made him look up. A narrow balcony ran round the show-room, from which great double doors led into other departments. Two people stood upon this, deep in conversation. Their backs were towards him, and he knew himself to be undiscovered. But what did startle him and sent an unaccustomed thrill of alarm through his heart was the fact that he had recognized them.

On the balcony was no other person than Bob Fisher himself, and beside him was a girl. Even at that distance Box knew her. It was the young woman who had been left bound on the ball chair of the Southwold Mansions flat less than two hours before. Box crept away and sped down, making for the tube.

Meanwhile, up on the balcony, Fisher continued his conversation with the girl with the red-gold hair.

"But they were here," she said excitedly. "There was someone here!"

Fisher grinned. "That's all right," he said. "We've got the place surrounded, and if there's anyone still left in the store we shall catch them. But I fancy they'll have taken to the tube again. It was very lucky I caught up with you in Perry Street, Miss Bellew!"

Phyllis Bellew looked at him gratefully. "I was a fool to run away," she said. "But I was so scared that the moment I was free I just took to my heels and ran. I didn't know where I was, and I had only the vaguest idea of how I'd got there."

The detective nodded. "I shall want a complete statement from you, if you don't mind," the detective remarked. "I think I've got the facts fairly clear, but one or two points remain. You're in charge of the dispatch service here, aren't you?"

She nodded assent.

"Yes; I'm going all through the business. My father is the manager of this branch."

"I see. And you noticed that someone had been tampering with your delivery trucks?"

She nodded again. "I ought to have informed the police right away. But I—I didn't know the police would be helpful like you. I thought they would be difficult, officious people. Anyway, I decided I'd make my own investigations. Not a very intelligent thing to do, I'm afraid."

Fisher smiled wryly. "Well, not very wise, perhaps, when you're dealing with this kind of customer. So you went down the tube alone after closing hours this evening?"

"Yes. I had a torch, and I'm afraid I didn't think there was anything to worry about except rats. I seemed to walk for miles, and I passed one disused platform, which, I think, must have been built in the post office time, and then a good deal further on I came to another. This one was much cleaner than the other, and—well, it looked used. So I climbed off the track to investigate. I went through an archway and found a stone flight of stairs. I went up, feeling that I couldn't be trespassing, since, as far as I knew, the whole line belonged to the stores. Then I saw a door with a crack of light under it."

SHE shivered as if in remembrance of what she had gone through.

"I pushed it open and went in. The next thing I knew, someone had thrown a sack over my head and I was knocked to the ground. Then, with my head still covered, they bound my hands and ankles, and someone picked me up and carried me quite a long way. I struggled to get free, but it was impossible, and finally they put me down on a stone floor and I heard them whispering."

"When you say 'them,' how many were there?"

The girl narrowed her eyes in an effort to remember. 

"I don't know. Three, I imagine, or perhaps four."

"Men?"

"Yes. I didn't hear a woman's voice."

"Can you remember the voices? Anything they said?"

"They were whispering. I couldn't catch any words, but I had an idea, from the voices, that some of the men were better educated than others, if you get what I mean. Finally, I was put in a car and driven through some
streets. Then I think I must have fainted. I don't remember any more until I saw you bending over me.”

“I see,” said Fisher. “Well, we’ll have all that written down, if you don’t mind coming back with me. Meanwhile, you’d better ring up your people. They may be anxious. It’s dreadfully late. There are phones here, of course, aren’t there?”

“Thank you for reminding me,” she said gratefully.

Bob Fisher watched her go off down the balcony, but whatever he was thinking, it was put out of his mind by the arrival of a sergeant.

“Everything’s quiet now, sir. They’ve taken to the tube. As far as we can see, nothing’s been touched, although we can’t be sure of that, of course, until tomorrow, when the assistants return. The watchman’s coming round nicely. He’s still a bit dizzy, though. Says he knows there must have been two men, but he only saw one. He can’t give a very clear description of him at the moment, but he thinks he’ll be able to remember better when his head clears. I’ve sent a couple of men down the tube. Is that right?”

“No,” said Fisher quickly. “Call them back. I think our best way is to sit tight at the end of the tube, sergeant. If you go down a rat hole, you know, you drive the creatures out the other end. But if you sit quietly at the opening, that’s when you catch your rats. We must concentrate on stopping up the holes and waiting till they come up for air.”

The sergeant went off to recall his men, and Fisher strolled down to the main hall of the stores to wait for Phyllis Bellew.

As he went he was conscious of a secret glow of exultation. Things were beginning to move at last. Instinct told him he was on the right track, although one thing still puzzled him intensely; the identity of the man behind it all, the brain which had conceived the whole cunning scheme.

CHAPTER VII
TRAPPED

CASSON strode up and down the small room, his hands deep in his pockets, a frankly scared expression in his eyes.

“I don’t like it, Box,” Casson was saying. “It’s dangerous.”

Thurtle had been relegated to the outer room again and Box, Casson and Levine were alone.

Jamieson came in a moment later. His face was very pale.

“We’re trapped,” he said. “It’s happened at last. I always knew it would some day. The store end of the tube is filled with police. The garage is watched most carefully, and there are three or four plainclothesmen actually in the mews.” His voice rose wildly. “D’you realize it? We’re caught. They’ll get us.”

Box, perched on the edge of the table, grinned irritantly at the other man. Two sharp lines of anxiety across his forehead were the only indication of strain which he bore.

“Don’t get hysterical,” he said lightly. “You haven’t got the build for it, Jamieson. It makes you look slightly foolish, if I may say so. Don’t worry. We’re very comfortable here, aren’t we?”

The other man stared at him.

“Don’t play the fool, Box,” he said. “This isn’t the time for it. We’re up against something worse than anything we’ve ever tackled before. I tell you we’re trapped!”

“I see no reason for getting excited just because we’ve got a few coppers hanging round the house, as it were.”

Box’s tone was still light, although there was just the faint suggestion of anxiety in his voice.

“Don’t worry,” he repeated. “We’ve got out of worse scrapes than this. Besides, you mustn’t forget our guest, the amiable Mr. Thurtle, who is going to pay us so handsomely for his deliverance. It would be a pity to lose our heads just now when everything’s going so well.”

“It’s all very well to talk like this.” Levine had broken into the conversation. “I am afraid you are just trying to encourage us, my friend. I am afraid that you, too, are alarmed. After all, you have in your pocket the letter to young Thurtle, but you have not yet been able to deliver it. Isn’t that so?”

There was a suggestion of more color in Box’s round face at this announcement, but he still seemed completely at ease.

“Of our three exits it occurs to me that the mews is by far the most convenient,” he observed. “I think I shall go out that way. After all, as you point out, Levine, I really ought to deliver Mr. Thurtle’s message to his son. Yes, I think the mews.”

“But it’s madness!” It was Casson who spoke. “If you’re caught you bring the whole hornet’s nest down upon us.”
Box laughed.

"If I'm caught, it's funny what a difference that one little word makes."

He walked over to the desk in the corner, and, taking a small steel key from his pocket, unlocked a drawer in its depths. From this hiding-place he extracted three glass balls, resembling gold balls, save that they were apparently lined with some silvery substance. These he placed very carefully in the pocket of his raincoat. From another drawer he took out a gun and slipped it into his hip pocket.

"What are you going to do?" Jamieson's eyes were fixed upon him questioningly.

It was one of George Box's foibles that he hardly ever carried a gun, but, on the rare occasions when he did so, he never came back without using it.

"Be careful," muttered Levine. "Don't forget Parker. I saw in the evening papers that they've found the body."

"Of course they've found the body," said Box. "The police are always finding bodies in Epping Forest. It's quite the fashionable spot to leave them. I don't think I shall ask any of you gentlemen to accompany me—you're too jumpy. I'll draw my recruits from the other room. I suggest that you sit round the fire and tell one another's fortunes by cards, or amuse yourself with any other lady-like pastime. You can expect me back in about an hour. By the way, if you hear a certain amount of noise upstairs, don't be alarmed. There's nothing whatever to be excited about."

He went out and the three men left in the room exchanged glances.

"He has courage," said Levine.

"He's a fool," said Jamieson.

"He likes to pretend he is a fool," said Casson. "I wish I had his stupidity."

Jamieson said nothing but began to pace the floor, and there were beads of sweat upon his forehead.

Meanwhile, in the outer room, Box had signaled to Simmons and Tim. They got up and followed him without a word. He stepped out of the room and into the dark, damp smelling passage without.

It was very narrow and scarcely high enough for a man to stand upright. To their left there was a flight of steps leading down to the tube, and opposite them a narrow tunnel wound upward.

Keeping his head low, Box advanced cautiously along the upward tunnel. It was pitch dark and clammy with damp, but it was evident that they all knew the way well, for they hurried along with apparent unconcern. At length the tunnel broadened into a square cavity with a very high roof. In this there was a ladder, stretching up into the gloom above. Box mounted it and they followed.

The top of the ladder rested against a small wooden platform built on to the wall like a shelf. Box climbed on to it and his head came within a few inches of the roof. He knocked upon the boards above his head very softly and waited. Almost at once the signal was answered. Three soft thuds, followed by one loud one, sounded from the other side of the partition.

Tim clambered up beside Box and together they thrust back the heavy iron bolts that kept the trapdoor shut, and then let it gently downwards. There was the sound of something heavy rustling to one side and they clambered up into an extraordinary apartment.

The trapdoor through which they had entered lay directly beneath the lower half of an enormous bed, under which there was just room for them to creep out. In the bed, propped up among a nest of cushions, lay a little old woman. Her face was incredibly wrinkled, but her black eyes were sharp and intelligent. She greeted them with a wide, toothless grin and muttered some completely unintelligible remark.

Box beamed at her.

"Thank you, Mrs. Wheeler," he said. "Sorry to disturb you again so soon. Rather a lot of traffic this way tonight, I'm afraid."

"Be careful."

A woman's voice spoke out of the gloom that enveloped the far end of the room, and the next moment a tall figure glided forward. A woman dressed in the uniform of a Sister of Mercy stood before them. She looked the part perfectly, but when she spoke, the uninitiated might have been a little surprised by her tone and manner.

"You can't go out there. It's dangerous. It's a good job you put me on to watch tonight. She's so old you never know what she might tell 'em." She pointed to the strange little old figure in the bed. "The police have been here three times tonight already. They've questioned everybody in the mews. They don't suspect us more than anyone else, but they've got their eyes on the whole place. For heaven's sake, be careful."

Box signaled to her to be quiet and tiptoed
over towards the door. Opening a flap in the
paneling, he peered out.

The sight which met his eyes was not reas-
suring. Three men stood talking in the mid-
der half of the yard. He fancied he could see other
men lurking at the only exit. But what par-
ticularly surprised and discomfited him was the
fact that the tallest of the three silent
figures, not a dozen yards away from him,
was Fisher himself. The man seemed to be
ubiquitous.

Box swore under his breath. He had un-
derestimated the energy of this apparently
slow-witted young man. It was evident that
he was tenacious, too—certainly not a man
easily put off his purpose.

A sudden misgiving seized the watching
crook. Perhaps he had been unwise in asso-
ciating himself with the flat. Perhaps already
Fisher knew too much. A strange expression
crept on to the round face that was usually
so good humored, a curious, remorseless look
which set the lips into a firm line and nar-
rowed the ingenuous blue eyes to slits. Box
drew out his revolver.

Then he beckoned his two companions and
gave them some muttered but explicit in-
structions.

"Look here, Grace," he went on, turning
to the woman. "You lie low. They'll come
here, but don't worry about that. Rave at
'em for disturbing the old woman, if you like,
but don't forget to play your part. This is
going to be a ticklish job, but the way we
shall work it I don't think there's a chance in
a million that they'll associate us with you if
you play your part properly. Are you ready,
Tim? Tackle low, remember."

The big man grunted and Jack laughed
softly.

"That's Fisher himself out there, isn't it?"
he whispered. "Will you get him?"

Box's hand closed over the butt of his gun.
"I might," he said softly. "It occurs to me,
Jack, that I might. Now, ready?"

He pulled the flap in the door open wider.
His movements were so quiet that even those
in the room could not hear him make the
least sound. Having got the opening clear
and with a stream of cool air blowing in upon
his face, Box felt softly in his coat pocket.

He drew out one of the little silver balls
and held it for a moment poised delicately
between thumb and forefinger. Then he
raised his arm and there was a tiny click far
off across the yard as the pellet struck the
bricks.

One of the three plainclothesmen swung
round in its direction, but, seeing noth-
ing, he turned again to his companions. What
he had not noticed in the gloom was the cloud
of grayish smoke arising from the tiny bro-
ken missile.

Box hurled another of the smoke bombs,
and another, one in the direction of the gate-
way, one further down the yard.

The effect was extraordinary. Within three
minutes great clouds of smoke were belching
out of the yard, with the detectives coughing
and staggering in the midst of them. Some-
one was blowing a police whistle furiously.

Box seized his opportunity. The moment
the smoke became dense enough to cover his
tracks he threw open the door and, with his
two companions following him, slipped softly
out. The woman closed and barred the way
behind them.

The difficulty of the smoke screen was that,
one in it, they were blinded themselves, but
Box was undeterred. He pressed on towards
the opening between the two shops at the
far end of the mews.

Once a figure loomed towards him and he
had the satisfaction of seeing Tim hurl him-
self upon the policeman and bear him heavi-
ly to the ground.

With Jack behind him he hurried forward.
As he reached the beginning of the narrow
cobbled way which led out of the mews into
the street he caught a glimpse of a familiar
figure towering up through the billowing
smoke. It was Fisher, standing ready to seize
any man who attempted to leave the yard.

Box raised his gun.

It was at that moment that the young in-
spector stepped back off the curb in the dark,
stumbled and this saved his life. A bullet
whirled over his head and flattened itself
against the brickwork of the house behind
him.

He drew his own gun and fired. The bullet
blanced through the sleeve of Box's rain-
coat, but, seeing his way was clear, the crook
did not hesitate but dived through the pass-
age into the street.

Jack would have followed him, but he had
reckoned without Fisher. From his place of
vantage at the top of the yard, Box, looking
over his shoulder, saw the two men strug-
gling. He fired again and heard Fisher cry
out as he staggered and clapped his hand to
his side. Then Box waited for no more. He
slipped out into the street and walked swift-
ly away in the direction of Oxford Circus.
From the yard behind him the revolver shots had occasioned a perfect tumult of police whistles, and from every road in the police-infested vicinity, uniformed constables came hurrying to answer the summons.

Box came face to face with one man, who almost knocked him over as he came hurrying round a corner into the street. An ordinary criminal might have found this encounter disturbing, to say the least, more especially as his revolver lay heavy in his raincoat pocket and there was a suspicious tear in his sleeve. Box took it like everything else, in his stride, however.

"I say, there's something tremendously dangerous going on down there, constable," he said, his rather foolish voice squeaky with excitement. "It looks as though a house is on fire in Winton Mews. I was going to have a look at it, but then I heard shots, and I thought perhaps I'd better get out of the way."

"You thought right, sir," said the constable, who had no time for foolish young men. "You get along." He hitched his belt as he spoke and continued down the street at the double. Box did not even trouble to glance after him. As he strode away he was feeling peculiarly pleased with himself.

At Oxford Circus, he turned into a public call-box and rang up Mr. Rupert Thurtle at the huge Anglo-American hotel in Cornwall Street, where he was staying under the assumed name of Crayle. Because of the hour, Box had some difficulty in persuading the night porter to connect him with the young man's room. But Box's power of persuasion were enormous and in the end the man consented to put "Mr. Crayle's oldest friend" through to the instrument in the young financier's bedroom. It was answered almost immediately and Box guessed that Thurtle junior had been finding it hard to sleep.

"Hullo, Mr. Thurtle," Box said softly.

There was a perceptible pause, during which the American was evidently making up his mind whether to admit to the name or no.

Box continued, speaking softly:
"I'm afraid I can't introduce myself very fully over the 'phone, but I am alone and I bring you a message from Spider. Do you hear me? Spider. Could I see you at once, do you think?"

A smothered exclamation at the other end of the wire told him that the use of Joseph Thurtle's nickname had been successful.

"Right. Yes. When can you come?" Box answered cautiously.
"I could be with you in under ten minutes. By the way, Mr. Thurtle, I should advise you not to try any tricks. Communication with the police will be followed by the instant lodging of information with them concerning your luggage. Do you understand me?"
"I don't know who you are," said the strange voice at the other end of the phone, "but you seem to know everything. If you will come to this hotel at once I will see you alone. I shall not be foolish enough to talk with the police."

Box hung up the receiver.

CHAPTER VIII

A Fortune for Ransom

WENTY minutes later, a pale-faced, disheveled young man in pajamas and dressing-gown sat in his hotel bedroom reading and re-reading the message which Box had brought. Box, completely at ease, sat perched on the edge of the bed.

"Well?" he said at last. "This is a business deal, Mr. Thurtle. I hope you will not be so silly as to raise any objections to a scheme of which your father has already approved very vehemently, if I may say so."

Rupert Thurtle passed his hand over his forehead. Then he looked up and faced the smiling man before him.

"This is my father's handwriting," he said. "And these are the words he would use. And yet the whole letter is unlike him."

Box remained silent, and the other man went on:
"I don't know your name," he said, "and I don't expect you will give it me, but I feel there is something I must point out to you. That is, the money which you demand is the only weapon I have with which to defend my father legally. If I part with the money and he still falls into the hands of the police, I am lost."

"In other words, you want to make certain that you're going to get the goods," said Box easily.

"Yes, I want to make sure that, if I pay, my father will be a free man—at least so far as you are concerned."

Box considered. He was no fool and the request was reasonable.
"How soon can you actually lay your hands on the money?" he inquired.

"Tomorrow morning. Naturally, I dare not keep so much in negotiable securities in my hotel room."

"It's in a safe deposit, I suppose?"

"Naturally."

Box bent forward.

"At Lantern Bay, a little place on the coast just beyond Southampton, there is a motor yacht," he said. "It's captain is a very intelligent, discreet person called Tomlinson. I will see that he meets you at the Ship Hotel there at noon tomorrow. Take the money with you and wait on the boat. I shall bring your father down by car. Pay me the money there. And if you take my advice you'll smuggle your father into southern Ireland."

"I may as well warn you, however, that any attempt to doublecross me and my friends—well, we are not particularly fond of your father and I don't suppose any of us would be completely heartbroken if the police discovered that in attempting to escape he had been accidentally drowned."

The words were spoken lightly, but there was an undercurrent of sincerity in the quiet voice which made young Thurtle look up sharply, a light of fear in his eyes.

When Box had first entered, the American had been struck by the ingenuous, friendly expression in the very blue eyes, but now, as he stared, he caught a glimpse of something else, something purposeful, something relentless.

"Very well," he said. "Yes. I—I quite understand. Tomorrow at noon; then—my father."

The cold blue eyes smiled into his own.

"Tomorrow," Box agreed. "A quarter of a million pounds." With this, he nodded to young Thurtle and left the room.

It was nearly dawn when Box, a solitary figure in the dark raincoat, walked slowly down Perry Street. Since he was alone, he had permitted the mask of bland good humor, which he usually wore, to drop from his face. He did not make the mistake of deceiving himself into thinking the situation was not desperate.

For some hours now he had been doing his best to return to his underground retreat where his assistants and prisoner awaited him. It was not simple. Both store entrances to the tube were guarded by police. The garage also was surrounded and Winton Mews was infested by plainclothesmen. All the entrances were blocked.

For the time being he was checked.

He walked on slowly, his quick brain reviewing the situation in its every aspect. He was not sure what effect his shot might have had on Fisher, or whether Jack Simmons had been successful in getting away. On the whole, Box rather fancied he had. It was one of that young man's peculiarities that he fought like a fiend, and had the slipperiness of the proverbial eel.

Yes—at the moment things were desperate. At noon, young Rupert Thurtle would be waiting with the ransom. Somehow or other his father had to be spirited away from beneath the eyes of the police.

It was at the moment when this problem had presented itself with all its difficulties that Box, in passing, happened to glance up at the uninspired facade of Southwold Mansions. As he did so he was conscious of a thrill of surprise. Every window in his flat was ablaze with light.

He stood there looking up at the windows for some moments, and then, with that characteristic recklessness which made him the personality he was, he turned into the darkened entrance of the flats and went quietly upstairs.

As he approached his own door, he took off his raincoat and hung it negligently over his arm, so that the tear made by the flying bullet was not apparent.

He thrust his latchkey into the lock, opened the door and walked in. He closed the door noisily, threw his hat and coat onto the stand and strode into the main room.

He had prepared himself to meet any emergency, and nothing but the merest flicker of surprise ruffled the urbanity of his expression when he caught sight of the figure reclining in the big chair in front of the fire. It was Fisher.

Fisher looked very white and his shoulder was roughly bandaged. He was also wearing Box's own dressing gown.

"Hullo, Box," he said. "I say, I hope you didn't mind me coming back here but I've got to hang about in this district, and I'd had a bit of a scrap. It occurred to me that this was the most comfortable and convenient place. I felt pretty sick when I found you weren't around, but the door was on the latch and so I walked in and made myself comfortable."

Box stifled a desire to laugh. There was
something definitely amusing in the situation, he found. So his bullet had gone wide. He was angry with himself for that. He sipped back into the part that he always played in Fisher’s company with the ease born of long practise.

“No at all—good idea,” he said. “It say, what’s the matter? Hurt yourself? Where have you been all this time? I’ve been career round the streets looking for you and that girl. When I realized I’d missed you I didn’t feel like coming back. I’ve been on to the all-night cafe in Piccadilly.”

He walked over to the hearthrug and stood looking down with apparently friendly concern at the man he had attempted to kill such a short while before.

“What’s all the drapery for?” he demanded, indicating the bandages.

Fisher grimaced.

“Nothing very much. We had a bit of a dust-up in Winton Mews and a fellow put a bullet through the fleshy part of my shoulder. It’s nothing at all—merely a nuisance.”

Box’s blue eyes grew round with childlike astonishment.

“Really?” he said. “Winton Mews? Why, that’s quite near here, isn’t it. Good heavens, this flat isn’t all the place for auntie. What’s up? Did you catch the girl?”

“Yes,” Fisher replied. “But that was hours ago. She had an extraordinary story to tell. D’you know, Box, this flat of yours is owned by crooks?”

“Really?” Box’s eyes were twinkling, no doubt with suppressed excitement.

“I’m afraid so,” Fisher spoke slowly. “I won’t bother you with a lot of details, but there’s an underground tunnel used by two stores as a sort of parcels shoot, and this girl was investigating a certain trouble they’d had with their dispatch service when she was kidnapped and brought up here.”

“Really?” said Box again. He was sitting on the edge of his chair and his expression of mingled excitement and alarm were positively comic. “I say, I’ll move out first thing tomorrow. I don’t want to be mixed up with anything like this. Look here, what are you doing? Although, I forgot you bobbies are like doctors—you never tell, do you?”

The detective grinned.

“Not in the usual way,” he said. “But as a matter of fact tonight I feel I’d like to talk this thing over with some one and, after all, although you’re a congenital idiot, Box, you can keep your mouth shut, can’t you?”

“Me? I’m silent as the grave, and about as deep.”

“Well, this is strictly unofficial—get that into your head. But I believe we’re on the verge of a big thing. I don’t know if you read the papers at all, but you must have heard of the disappearance of Joseph Thurtle, the financier.”

Box looked vague.

“Oh, yes,” he went on, brightening up suddenly as his mind appeared to have taken hold of the problem. “I do remember now. You fellows made a complete hash of his arrest, didn’t you? I remember now. There was a leader in one of the papers—oh, very uncomplimentary. I say, are you on to this fellow?”

It was a superb piece of acting. The blue eyes revealed nothing but ordinary interest, and the hand that held the cigarette he smoked was perfectly steady.

Fisher hesitated.

“I ought not to talk like this,” he said, “but I’m nervous tonight, or something. A most irritating thing happened to me down in the yard. When that fellow shot me I caught his assistant. The fellow wriggled like a fish, but I got him by the back of the jacket. Then my

[Turn page]

Can’t Keep Grandma In Her Chair

She’s as Lively as a Youngster—Now her Backache is better

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature’s chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don’t wait! Ask your druggist for Doan’s Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan’s give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan’s Pills;
shoulder started to go numb and, although I clung on to his coat with one hand, my other hand was helpless. Before the sergeant who was with me could catch up with us the brute had slipped out of his coat and streaked off down the road like a shadow. I was just left with the coat, which won’t be much help.”

“Hard lines.” Box managed to look genuinely sympathetic. “Look here, you’re tired out. Hadn’t you better get to bed?”

**FISHER** shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. We’re on the eve of a very big thing, and if I can only carry through my plan this morning, I shall have Thurtle in jail by one o’clock, and, better still, an even more important person from the English police point of view will be keeping him company.”

Box bent forward to flick his cigarette ash into the fireplace.

“Sounds exciting,” he said. “Can I hear, or am I too young to know?”

Fisher hesitated.

“It’s awfully unprofessional,” he said, “but I do want to talk the thing out. This fellow is one of the most important crooks in the whole of secret, underground London. He kidnapped Thurtle with the idea of holding him for ransom. I call him the Mystery Man of Soho. We’ve been looking for his hiding-place for months, but now I do believe I’ve stumbled upon it.”

He lowered his voice.

“It’s somewhere in one of the old post-office stations along the line of the disused tube.”

Box raised mild blue eyes to the other man’s face.

“I can hardly believe such things exist,” he said deliberately, but his hand had strayed to the heavy object lying in his coat-pocket. Blissfully unconcerned, Fisher went on.

“I’ve narrowed it down,” he continued complacently, “and as soon as it’s light I shall put the little scheme into operation. It’s beautifully simple. You see, these fellows have only three possible exits; either of the stores, and one other in Winton Mews. Well, I’ve arranged for a strong force of police to wait at the beginning of the tunnel in each store.

“We also have Winton Mews completely surrounded. When I give the signal my two posses of police at either end of the store will advance slowly down the tube, examining every conceivable outlet on the way. Well, you see what that means. These fellows will be driven out into Winton Mews and we shall nab the whole lot of them. It’s a peach of a scheme.”

Box, who had been listening to this recital with his head slightly on one side, regarded the man opposite with open admiration.

“I say, I didn’t think you had it in you,” he said. “I always imagined you coppers were bone from the neck up. I don’t mean that offensively. It’s the general idea, you know.”

Fisher went on with great satisfaction.

“It’s not a bad little plan,” he said, “and I’ve got a hunch it’s going to succeed. I’m only waiting till it’s light so there’s no possible chance of anyone getting away in the flight from the mews. It sounds pretty foolproof, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Box slowly. “Unless—I say—of course, I don’t know anything about these things, but are you sure you’ve got every exit covered? I mean, are you sure they can’t get out some other way?”

“Certain,” Fisher sounded quite childishly pleased with himself. “I thought at first that there was another way out through a garage in Grafton Street, and I had the boys watching it until about an hour ago. But then it dawned upon me that we were probably wasting our time. I got a search warrant and examined the place thoroughly, and satisfied myself there was nothing there. So I’ve withdrawn the guard—or I’ve just sent a sergeant to withdraw them—and I shall wait here, I think, until it’s light.”

“Well, I’m not staying,” said Box, with sudden deliberation. “The whole thing’s too darned risky for me. I suppose you’d think I was terribly scared if I went and took a room in a hotel?”

Fisher laughed.

“You’re hopeless,” he said. “I was going to offer to take you with me.”

“Not on your life!” Box looked genuinely appalled. “This isn’t in my line at all. Finding a flat full of gadgets is one thing, but revolver shots and desperate criminals just haven’t got the same appeal in my young life. I’ll ring you up later in the day and find out if you’re still alive.”

Fisher looked uncomfortable.

“Look here, I can’t turn you out like this,” he said.

“Nonsense! Anything to oblige an old friend. You stay where you are, then if anything queer happens in this beastly place it’ll happen to you and not to me.”
Box went out into the hall, still talking volubly. Outside the door he drew out his gun and hesitated. Finally, however, he shrugged his shoulders and began to laugh silently to himself.

Later on, after he had shouted a cheery good-by, he went slowly down the stairs to the street, his shoulders heaving. From his point of view, the situation had its amusing side.

CHAPTER IX

ESCAPE

MR. KNAPP, his pale, unpleasant face greasy with excitement, leaned forward across the table in the “office” where the entire gang was assembled.

“You’re right, boss,” he said. “The guard was withdrawn about three-quarters of an hour ago.

The faces of the others, who had spent a terrifying night trapped in their own fastness, were haggard, but there was a new light of hope in their eyes.

“Of course it was,” said Box testily. “I’ve just come in that way. I tell you our young friend Fisher has surpassed himself. At the moment he’s sitting up in the flat waiting for the light, and I have a fancy that it’s going to descend upon him in a blinding flash.”

Perching himself on the edge of the table, he repeated the main substance of the detective’s discourse. Levine began to laugh. Presently Jamieson joined him, and gradually the whole room echoed with their amusement. Box glanced at his watch.

“Knapp,” he whispered. “Are the cars ready?”

The little man nodded.

“All set, boss. There’s the Cadillac and the Hispano. They’ll both beat any police car on the roads.” He grinned. “I’ve got a new set of number plates for every twenty miles.”

“Very well, then.” Box surveyed his forces. “Tim, you’ll drive the Cadillac. Jack, are you steady enough to take the Hispano? Get into the chauffeur’s uniforms in the office and clear out every scrap of incriminating evidence in the outer room. Look here, Jamieson, you and Levine and Bill had better take the Hispano, and Casson and I will take Thurtle in the Cadillac. We’re making for Lantern Bay, remember. Captain Tomlinson has orders to put out as soon as he gets young Rupert aboard. Then if he should have any idea of doublecrossing us, our tracks are covered. We’ll wait for them at Lantern Bay, hand over the prisoner, get the money, and then lie low for a bit. It’ll be worth our while. You two go on ahead and get the cars warmed up.”

As he spoke, he moved over to the desk and methodically moved every scrap of paper out of it. Having satisfied himself that there was nothing left in the room which could possibly incriminate any of them, he signaled to Knapp, who brought a duster.

Meanwhile the others had donned thick wash-leather gloves, and within a few minutes every polished surface of the room had been wiped clear of fingerprints. It was a most methodical, careful piece of work which any Yard man could scarcely have helped appreciating. At last everything was ready. Box glanced at his watch. Five minutes to five.

“I rather fancy we have about half an hour to spare,” he remarked. “Unless—hello!”

They paused, listening. Unusual sounds were issuing from the staircase which led down into the tube. The raid was beginning. Box was very cool, and his blue eyes were dancing. He seemed to be positively enjoying the situation.

“Come,” he said. “We shall just do it, and in great style.”

He led the way down the staircase into the tube. Casson and Levine brought Thurtle along between them. The old man walked like one in a dream. He seemed to be completely apathetic.

Far away, from both ends of the tube, came the hollow sound of voices. Evidently the police were making no secret of their attack, and Box reflected, with a little thrill of amusement, that Fisher had been so certain of success, so convinced that every exit was stopped, that he was exercising hardly any caution.

After moving some thirty yards down the tube, Box led the way through a door in the wall to a second stone staircase. Here the air was close and stifling. He hurried on to a square landing, leading out of which there was a second door.

He pushed this open cautiously, and entered into a small, cupboard-like apartment, where the air was surprisingly fresh. The reason for this was apparent when one
glanced up to find that the cupboard was really the inspection pit of Mr. Knapp’s garage, which had been built by the previous tenant by the simple expedient of cutting off the head of the cellar stairs.

Box pulled himself out lightly, and leaned back to help Levine hoist up their prisoner. It was not yet quite daylight, and it was still dark in the garage. The big doors had been opened, however, and against the gray patch of light which they framed the big cars loomed out, dark and graceful.

THE crooks worked swiftly. As soon as Box’s head appeared above the inspection pit the uniformed figures in the drivers’ seats had started their engines, and now Mr. Knapp darted forward and opened the Cadillac’s door. He had been the last man up, and now spoke in a muffled whisper to his leader.

“Hurry, boss. I heard the trucks moving. I expect they’re using them. It’s going to be a near thing."

Box chuckled.

“It’s going to make them very sick,” he said. “We shall wriggle out straight under their noses, net the money, and get away with it.”

He sprang lightly into the back of the car, where Casson had already seated himself with Thurtle beside him.

Mr. Knapp settled himself on the floor at their feet.

“Let her go, Tim.”

Box tapped the glass of the limousine, and the massive figure in the cap nodded.

The great car leaped forward, and Box leaned back among the cushions, a smile of complete satisfaction spreading over his face.

His eyes rested idly upon the shoulders of the man who had just brought the car swinging out of the garage at such tremendous speed. He stared he suddenly noticed something which sent a chill thrill or horror down his spine and started his senses reeling.

Between the back of the chauffeur’s collar and his cap, and lying against the neck, which somehow did not look as though it belonged to Tim, was a tiny end of surgical bandage. The man who drove the car in which he and his prisoner rode so complacently had a wounded shoulder.

With a muttered exclamation, Box leaned forward and felt for his gun, but at that instant the car came to an abrupt stop, its brakes grinding at the sudden impact. Box was thrown forward, and in that moment his chance of escape vanished.

Both doors were pulled open, and armed, uniformed men appeared at each aperture, while from his position of vantage in the driver’s seat Bob Fisher turned round, smiling as he removed his cap and goggles.

The Hispant and been pulled up the same way a little farther down the road, and the grinning young detective who had taken Jack Simmons’ place climbed out into the road, a pardonable expression of delight upon his face.

The roundup was complete, neat, and precise in every detail. The hidden police trap had swept down upon the cars at the moment their drivers had brought them to a standstill.

Joseph Thurtle, alone unperturbed among the wrestling throng, permitted himself to be led quietly into a police car and driven, this time without adventure, to Scotland Yard. The other men put up a fight, but they were completely unprepared for the attack, and no match for the myriad police who surged down upon them.

It was some time later when George Box was being driven in his own car to Headquarters, with Fisher seated on one side of him and Davidson on the other, that the slightly puzzled expression returned to his mild blue eyes.

“I don’t bear any grudge against you, Fisher,” he said affably. “This is first blood to you. But you haven’t done with me yet by any means. You and I will be up against each other again before long. You laid a trap, and I fell into it. I thought you underestimated my intelligence. It happens, I underestimated yours. But what I want to know is this: How did you spot me? When did you realize I wasn’t quite the innocent little friend who had rung you up to show you his funny flat?”

“You’re under arrest, my lad. You take my advice and keep quiet,” said Inspector Davidson.

Box shook his head.

“Not at all,” he said. “I’m naturally curious. After all, Inspector Bob Fisher, I think you owe it to me.”

Fisher turned, and for a moment his shrewd gray eyes met those of the crook.

“Two little incidents,” he said, “and one rather striking corroboration of the suspicion planted in my mind. When I looked over your entertaining flat, at your own invitation, mark you, you told me that you had only
been in the place five or six hours. And yet
every ash-tray in the flat was filled with
cigarette stubs. My naturally inquiring mind
compelled me to have a look at them. They
were all of your own particular brand, with
the tips discolored. You're a very wet smoker,
Box. Perhaps that's why you only smoke them half-way through?

"Of course, that was a very small point,
but it did occur to me that no human being
could have smoked so much in a mere after-
noon. That put me on my guard."

"Then, when the young lady made her sud-
den and startling appearance, I caught a
glimpse of your face. I expected you to be
surprised, astounded, bewildered—anything.
And yet I saw none of these in your face.
You were angry—lividly furious. At the time
I didn't quite understand."

BOX laughed unpleasantly.

"You're a brighter little detective than
I thought," he said. "Anything else? I'm
afraid it doesn't strike me as being very con-
clusive so far."

Fisher grinned.

"It was your generosity, my dear fellow,
which undid you in the end," he said. "I think
I told you that in the fracas in the mews one
of my assailants slipped his jacket. That
jacket had a tailor's label with his client's
name neatly written inside. Do you give all
your old clothes away to your assistants?"

Box swore softly under his breath.
"I told him to take it out," he said.
Fisher went on.

"Even that wasn't proof," he said. "But I
thought I recognized the figure who fired at
me through the smoke. I fired back. The
bullet passed through the sleeve of his rain-
coat. When you came into the flat the sec-
time this evening, I noticed you left your
raincoat in the hall. I was making up my
mind to go and have a look at it when I
caught sight of something which rendered
that precaution unnecessary. If you will look
at the sleeve of your jacket—it's rather high
up on the left side nearest Inspector David-
son—see?—a short, grazing burn. When the
bullet went through the raincoat it injured
the stuff beneath. After that I just took my
chance. I outlined a scheme, and you very
obligingly fell in with it. I might almost say
told you. Any more questions?"

Box slumped down further on to the cush-
ions.

"I hand it to you, Fisher," he said. "The
game is yours."

Fisher smiled, and the three drove on in
silence to the Yard.

"Someone Here Has a Gun Which Has Been
Fired Once—and I Want That Man!"

FOR a few seconds after Rolph Burnham spoke, the
silence was as complete as though even the
mechanical equipment on the truly huge sound stage
had been frozen. Into that pulsing void Burnham's
next words fell clearly:

"It might have been an accident. It might have been
an honest attempt to protect me. But if, within the next ten seconds, the person
with the gun which fired that shot does not speak up—he or she will be pre-
sumed guilty of attempted murder! That, ladies and gentlemen, is official. I
carry proper credentials."

The stunned occupants of the set silently counted. Finally—"Ten" Burnham
said aloud. And the police took over—holding every one of the scores of per-
sons on the movie set under suspicion—in THE CENTER OF THE STAGE,
the exciting complete mystery novel by Thomson Burris featured next issue.

This novel is the most thrilling of the Rolph Burnham yarns to date—look
forward to it for a real mystery treat!
With the muzzle of the rifle through the hole in the windshield, Asa lined up the sights, relaxed, stopped his breath and squeezed the trigger.

SHOOT FAST, BUT SHOOT STRAIGHT!

By SAM CARSON

They called Asa Myers, ex-cop, a "back number"—but he didn't hesitate to match lead with murderous gangsters!

THE north wind thrust a rose vine against the living room window, causing it to make a raking sound across the panes. Asa Myers stood looking out at the gloomy weather, an old, restless man.

He was restless because he had spent the majority of his years outside, as a peace officer. And because he had spent all those years, Asa Myers paid attention to jangling nerves, the aching right leg and the tingling area at the base of his skull.

Trouble! Asa never had claimed to have psychic powers. But he was alerted for some sort of danger, and it worried him. Asa had survived a number of tight situations in his forty years, first as U.S. marshal, and then as sheriff of Roane county. And he had never given up following hunches.

It wasn't personal danger for Asa to worry about. He was a back number now, with Readyville so grown up, thanks to war plants, that he was all but forgotten in the wave of progress. Asa listened to his daughter Ann, singing as she went about her work in the kitchen. Asa shook his head. He wanted to forget right now, the bitter disappointment of the morning.

The phone rang. Ann, Asa's daughter, came out of the kitchen, hands covered with biscuit dough.
“Answer it Dad,” she called. “It may be Bob. He said he’d come home to lunch if he could get off.”

It was Bob, Asa’s son-in-law.

“Howya feeling, Pop?” he asked. “Say, I got to pinch hit for Blair and sign for the factory payroll. Means I won’t be home for lunch after all.”

“I’ll tell Ann. She was baking biscuits.”

“Boy, what I could do to them. Sorry, Pop. I got to make a living.” He hesitated. “Pop, maybe I’ll get a chance to drop in on Lee Sanders this afternoon. He might change his mind about a rifle team after all.”

“Don’t do it, son,” Asa told him. “Chief Sanders don’t equip his squads with rifles any more, and the sheriff don’t give a hoot. They’re not interested.”

“Well, don’t take it hard, Pop. After all, this isn’t horse and buggy times. Officers have to shoot fast and at close range. Remember that. It’s different now. Well, see you later.”

Asa cradled the phone and looked across the room at his daughter, back again in the doorway.

“Bob’s got to look after the factory payroll again.”

“Oh.” Ann’s face fell. Then she laughed. “I’ll save the dough till dinner.” She darted away on clicking heels.

Asa Myers walked back to the window. On the table nearby was the letter from Chief Sanders, the college trained chief, which had given the bad news.

BEFORE Pearl Harbor, for two decades, Asa Myers had captained a team of law enforcement officers from Roane county to the Southeastern Police Association pistol and rifle tournament.

They were going to renew the matches, down in Florida, and Asa had talked with various men he had shot with before. But none of the officers was interested, it seemed. And now Asa knew why. Chief Sanders had frowned on the idea.

Horse and buggy! You had to shoot fast and close up these days! Bob was trying to make it easy, but he had repeated the words of Sanders, and Asa knew Bob really believed the same way.

For the first time in his life, Asa Myers felt helpless. Bob and Ann had dragged him off the little place up North River Road, and were trying to make him comfortable and contented, at least. He liked Bob, cocky as he was. Bob had to fill the place made so tragically vacant by Clint Myers.

Clint had been born two years ahead of Ann, a sturdy, sure thinking kid who made football history on the Readyville High School team. But Clint rested in the heart of the Coral Sea, and a lot of Asa Myers, which had survived his wife’s death, was with Clint’s drifting body today.

Now it was Ann, and Ann alone. Therefore, Asa tried to bend his life to her wishes. But he was unhappy, and today he had tasted of the dregs of bitterness.

Why, Asa could never explain. But as Ann called him in to lunch, he went over and switched on the police radio receiver. That receiver was a gift of Bob, wangled from Chief Sanders. And within seconds after the receiver came to life, there was the warning whistle of a general call. The operator’s code words were not casual, but snapped out.


“Bob!” Asa whispered. It had to be Bob!

The bandits had waited for him to get the money, then head west a block on Market to E street. There was a bunch of warehouses at that corner, and few passersby. There was bound to be shooting. Bob carried an automatic, and the factory guard probably had a sawed off shotgun.

He forgot Ann, till she appeared at his side, face pale but in complete control of herself. They stood there as the police radio operator assigned every radio car in the city to road blocks, others to join county officers and state patrolmen. And in a momentary lapse of orders, the operator directed an ambulance to the holdup scene.

Ann whirled, dashed to the phone. Asa restrained her.

“Don’t,” he said. “You’d just be wasting time.”

“Then let’s go—Hurry!”

Ann ran to her bedroom, shedding her apron. Asa paid her no attention. From the steady barrage of messages he gathered that state patrolmen were in motion. That meant officers would come roaring down the major highways from stations as distant as twenty miles.
And already it was evident the payroll bandits had made a circuit of side streets and had reached Ferry Road ahead of the police. Ann came racing back, car keys jingling in her hand. Whatever she meant to say remained unspoken. The police operator came on with a message to be shuttled on by the state patrol station.

"Look for black Buick with Ohio license plates. Probably stolen. Left rear side window shattered. Bullet holes in trunk. White side wall tires. Driver is heavy set, blond man. Other two men were medium sized and masked. These men have machine-guns. They shot two men in payroll car."

"Bob's in General Hospital then," Ann said. "We'll go straight there."

She hurried to the door. Asa hadn't moved.

"Come on, Dad!"

Asa looked at her, shook his head.

"Nothing I can do. It's in the hands of the doctors. You go."

Ann looked her father over gravely. She closed the door slowly, walked up to him.

"Why are you staying, Dad?"

Asa sighed.

"I'm keeping you, honey. The way that operator said it, Bob ain't dying."

"That isn't what you're thinking about."

"No," Asa saw much of Clint's resolute chin and frank eyes before him. "No, I was thinking, if I could handle a car like I used to, I might catch 'em. I'm afraid they'll get away."

ANN was twisting the key ring, as if in extreme doubt. She started again toward the door, but came back.

"Tell me," she said finally. "How would you catch them—the ones who shot my man?"

"The robbers took the Ferry Road. They won't cross Blue River. The ferry crew have a police radio. They'll stick on the far side. The state patrol has a bunch coming down Highway seven-sixty-one. There ain't a train this side of Elmore Junction. South, the road blocks are easy to set up, and by now nobody can hide inside Readyville. And those bandits ain't roosting either."

Ann waited. She asked no questions.

"Way I'd take if I was a payroll bandit, is to skylight out seven-sixty-one ahead of pursuit."

"But the state patrol—"

"They have twenty miles to meet the bunch going north. Look, I'd take Ferry Road to North River, out past my place. I'd go around Longnecker hill and ease into Highway seven-sixty-one for three miles. And when I got by Roane Ridge north of town, I'd cut back into Highway eight-twenty-three and double back by Roane Ridge."

"But that would be losing time."

"Listen, seven-sixty-one and eight-twenty-three make a V, with Readyville in the middle and the ridge between town and eight-twenty-three. That's why it goes north to make the intersection. Once they're on eight-twenty-three, they're wide open, for that highway cuts across a half dozen roads in twenty miles, and no bunch of officers can block 'em."

Ann looked up, face still pale.

"How can you get to eight-twenty-three ahead of the bandits?"

Asa looked at the electric clock on the mantel.

"Been five minutes since it happened. Due west by northwest of here, it's just four miles. But the way the bandits are traveling, it's thirty-two. There's a gravel road over the ridge. Has four ladderbacks in it. A good driver—"

"Get your rifle," Ann said grimly. "We might make it."

The rain now falling was little more than a drizzle. Ann sent the car toward Roane Ridge, its pine crest dim in the low clouds. The gravel road curved like garden hose tossed down impatiently, and Asa held his rifle between his legs.

It was the weapon he had planned to take to the Florida match, the one with which he had tied for first place in 1928. It was a 30-30, and the sight was Asa's invention. The stock, he had made himself, and now, holding it so reverently, as he always had, Asa didn't feel so helpless.

Yes, it might be a wild goose chase. Ann would never reproach him. Asa knew that. But he hated to think of what Bob would say. And he hated too, to think of what he would think of himself, if Bob were hurt worse than Asa had surmised. Then Ann took the first ladderback turn and Asa wound up in a corner, rifle barrel rapping his shin. It was a wild trip over Roane Ridge.

Lee Sanders was a nice young man, and not at all like the traditional chief. But Asa knew his own kind were regarded as obsolete by Sanders' new men he was placing in all key positions.

Readyville no longer was an overgrown
village. It was a city, and its population was three fourths foreign.

Maybe Sanders was right. But things like payroll holdups, committed within four blocks of Police Headquarters, were fundamentally the same problem as in Asa's day. If you didn't catch them immediately, you had to play bloodhound, and take all the laughs, the sarcastic cracks of the press, and the bawling out sessions of the big shots.

Ann was taking the ladderback on the far side of the ridge. The rain was heavier now and the landscape was swaddled in mist. Ann spoke now.

"That row of poles—"
"Highway eight-twenty-three." Asa told her. "Easy on that last curve. Then let her go."

Ann let her go. She tried to put on her brakes at the stop sign, slid out on the highway. Asa opened the car door, landed on the shoulder, rifle at ready. He heard the roar of a motor.

"Get down," he cried to his daughter. Asa got in front, crouched behind the hood.

PRESENTLY a pickup truck came up, and Asa showed himself, waving his hat. The truck stopped.

"Howdy, Asa," a bearded man called. "What in thundersation are you hunting this kind of a day?"

"Holdup. Shot son-in-law. Swing the truck across the road."

"Well, I'll be blasted," the man exclaimed. All at once he seemed to comprehend. Putting the truck in low, he made a half turn.

"Who pays, if they wreck me?" he demanded.

"I will. Get down in the ditch. Hurry."
The farmer obeyed. Before he slid off the shoulder, he turned, listening.

"Car," he shouted to Asa.

"I know it. Ann! Dive for the ditch."

She was out of the car, and she held an automatic. Asa backed to her machine. He reached out and shoved his daughter backward. She went down in heap, but she didn't try to rise again. Coming out of the mist ahead was a car. It was black.

Watching from behind Ann's car, Asa saw the black sedan slow up a block distant. Then the driver sent it out to the far shoulder. Asa had expected that too. The farmer hadn't done an expert job, but the sedan would have to slow down a lot, or risk tumbling into the ditch. With a squeal of tires, the sedan plowed around the truck, driver wrenching at the wheel to regain footing on shoulder and pavement.

From a rear window a submachine chattered. Glass crashed from Ann's car. The sedan hung precariously on the shoulder, then skidded back to the pavement.

Ignoring the machine-gunner, now forced out of range, Asa dropped to a knee. He held the rifle steady. The sights lined on the right rear tire.

Spong!

A blob, whitish, like dust, appeared behind the sedan. It went roaring on, but from the farmer came the first whoop.

"You got his tire, Asa. You busted it—with one shot."

"Ought to, at less'n a hundred yards."

He ignored sporadic fire as the gunner on the back seat tried to fire from an awkward position, half out the rear window. Ann had crawled up, flushed and muddy. A stocking was down and her skirt was torn.

"Turn the car around," Asa said. "They're still going, but they ain't going fast. Pete," he snapped at the farmer, "hightail down the road. When you reach Joy's tourist camp, tell 'em to take out this way with whatever they got. In other words, call for help."

Ann was backing the car. Tight lipped, she whipped the machine around. The sedan was already a mile away. Asa clambered in.

"How fast can you go?" he asked.

"Bob's made seventy-five. I never tried that speed. Till now," she added.

Asa glanced at her.

"Honey, I'm not crazy," he cried over the roar of the car. "I have to do it."

Before she could ask his meaning, Asa lifted his rifle stock, drove forward against the windshield on his side with all his might. The shatterproof glass held, save in the spot of direct contact. There was a hole somewhat larger than a dollar. Asa slid his rifle barrel through the hole.


Ahead, they could see the black sedan. It was coming back to them rapidly. Orange dots flashed in staccato brilliance from the rear window. Asa chuckled grimly. A submachine gun! Just a pistol on a gun stock, with rapid firing mechanism.

"He is doing what Chief Sanders likes," Asa mused. "He's firing fast."

Ann lifted her foot from the throttle when
a slug kicked up sparks directly ahead.

"Steady," Asa called.

He laid the sights on the sedan. Try as he might, the rifle bounced. He risked a shot. It missed. Asa swore. "Open up," he told Ann. "Run up, then slow down quick."

The girl obeyed. Orange sparks stuttered, but this time Ann didn’t lift her foot. They were within considerably less than a block of the sedan. In fact it was, as Asa computed it, under a hundred yards, and twice slugs hit their car. Then Ann lifted her foot.

THIS time Asa brought the rifle sights up, till they centered momentarily upon the gas tank. Slugs hit back again, but not with force.

Spong!

The sedan pulled away again. It weaved across the road. The driver made a desperate effort and won out. But Ann shouted as she identified the wide, slick trail parting the surface water caused by rain.

"Gasoline!" she called.

Asa nodded. "Yep. She’s leaking. Just take your time, from now on."

"Don’t you want to try again?"

"Just follow."

The sedan shot ahead, went over a sharp crest. Ann opened up, saw the bandits on a second crest. She saw also the ever present trail. It showed much plainer as they began to run out of the rain area. And now the sedan swerved from the road.

Asa whooped.

"Get ready to stop. They’re out of gas."

Men were piling out, three of them. The first one ran down from the road bearing machine-gun and a heavy satchel. The other two crouched beside the sedan and opened fire. Ann clamped on the brakes to a sliding stop. And Asa held his rifle through the windshield hole.

This was easy. Three hundred yards! With the sights Asa had used, afield and on target ranges, this wasn’t a hard shot. He picked the bandit beside the left fender.

Spong!

The man rolled off the fender, machine-gun falling to the pavement. The man with the satchel had gone over a stone wall. From there he fired, reloaded and fired again. But Asa was drawing his sights on the man still behind the sedan.

Asa was working slowly. He had the man now. He squeezed the trigger slowly.

Spong!

"Oh," Ann exclaimed. "Dad, I slipped off the seat."

The man behind the sedan evidently had had enough. He made a flying leap, crossed the ditch and rolled over the stone wall. The man with the satchel took off like a scared rabbit, ran toward a wooded ridge.

"Won’t do for him to reach the woods," Asa muttered. He swiveled his rifle. The angle was short enough. The man had reached the bottom of a dry creek bed, was clambering up the far side. "Five hundred," Asa said.

He aimed carefully. This was the man with the factory payroll—with the money he had taken from Bob.

Spong!

For seconds Asa thought he had missed. The bandit was near the top of the bank over the creek bed. Suddenly he let go and rolled in a heap to the bottom. He threshed about. And to Asa’s ears came the distant wail of a siren.

"They’re coming," Ann said. She said it calmly, not at all with a trace of excitement. "They’re coming."

"Uh-huh." Asa had reloaded.

He watched the bandit in the creek bed grow still. Then he saw the man behind the stone wall climb up, hands upraised. Asa grunted. "All right, honey," he said quietly. "Now you can take that automatic down there and hold one of Bob’s robbers, till they get here."

But Ann was shivering, and crying softly now. So Asa got out and waved for the surviving bandit to come forward.

Roaring up were two cars, loaded with state patrolmen. They bounced out with shotguns and submachine guns. They shouted, circled Asa and others, at the ex-sheriff’s words, shinned over the stone wall and headed for the bandit in the creek bed. Others were examining the man Asa had shot beside the sedan. Then they looked at tire and gas tank. They were gathered about Asa, supporting one bandit, guarding the second, and laying out the third, when two more cars came to screeching stops.

Chief Sanders got out ahead of his men. He hurried to the sergeant in charge of the state patrolmen. The state patrolman talked rapidly, indicating Asa and Ann.

Sanders looked at the sedan, then shook his head. The chief came up to Asa, and he had a strange look on his face.

"You got both, and the car?" he asked.

"You and your daughter?"
“Matter of getting ahead of 'em, then stopping 'em,” Asa answered. He felt tired, and not as exalted as he had. “If I hadn't, maybe somebody else would have. What's more important now, is how bad off is Bob?”

“Shoulder,” Sanders said. He looked at Ann, grinned. “You can't hurt that guy. Bet he's wondering why you're not at the hospital, instead of running down three armed men like these.”

Sanders put Ann in her car. “Drive back as fast as you want,” he said. “I'll take that old rascal of a father back with me, with all the fixings of a war hero. He rates it, the old son of a gun.”

Asa didn't realize, till they were on their way back to Readyville, how it had told on him. But Chief Sanders was talking, and he was mentioning the rifle match. “Changed my mind,” he was explaining. “You're going to captain a team. It's going to be my best shots. Coached by you, of course,” he added. “And I'll put up money the Readyville team will be heard from.”

Asa thanked him, mumbling the words. He closed his eyes. The tires were singing sweet music as the caravan headed in triumph, back to Readyville.

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DEATH IN A HURRY

By J. LANE LINKLATER

A trail of blood leads publisher Roy Quick to a corpse in a closet — and plunges him into the midst of a grim, puzzling mystery that calls for some prime sleuthing!

CHAPTER I

BLOND LURE

ROY QUICK stood outside the Circular Fan—self-advertised as Lanning's Number One cocktail parlor—and watched the blue light from the window play on a puddle of water in the gutter. He chided himself for taking an interest in so childish a matter, turned his attention to his watch. He noted that it was ten minutes to nine, so he went in.

He strolled through the milling crowd inside. At the extreme rear he found a vacant booth, and sat down.

Munson, the proprietor, came over. Munson smiled at him out of his fat pasty face. Not, Roy reflected, that Munson liked him. For that matter, neither did Roy Quick like Munson. But he smiled back up at him.

"I won't order yet," he said. "I have a date to meet someone here at nine o'clock."

"Okay, Roy," said Munson. "Who's the date?"

"A dame. But I don't know which one." Roy peered at Munson quizzically. "Do you?"

"Me? Why should I?"

"I don't know," said Roy. "Only I notice that in spite of the crowded condition of your joint, this booth is not occupied. I can only assume that it has been reserved for me—and my date."
Munson didn’t smile.  
“Just happened that way, I guess. I don’t know a thing about it.” He hesitated. “I hear old John Hodges is up to something in the south end of town.”
Roy inclined his head, not politely. “Anything that Hodges is up to is all right with me.”
It was, too. It was from old John Hodges that he had bought the local newspaper. His respect for the old fellow was unbounded.
“Me,” said Munson, “I don’t like it.”
“You wouldn’t like anything,” remarked Roy, “that took business away from your door.”
Munson scowled.
“Okay. Yell, if you want something.”
Roy Quick was left alone again. He amused himself watching the crowd. He was an over-tall young man whose shoulders sloped a little, concealing the power that ran down through them into the long arms. If his face had been a little less rugged, he would have been handsome. It was a pleasantly hard-bitten face.
He glanced at his watch. It was a minute after nine.
He glanced up at the entrance of the booth. And there was his date.

SHE was young—could have been twenty-two but might have been three or four years more than that. She was a modified blonde. The hair-do was a bit fantastic, but cute. The eyes were darker than might have been expected in such a fair face. She was wearing an informal gray toptop, open in front, and beneath that an informal frock. Only modesty—which Roy hadn’t known he had—kept him from paying more attention to the figure.
“Mr. Quick?” she said, in a low voice, and smiling.
“Yes. And I recognize your voice. It’s a nice voice, even over the phone. Please sit down. What’ll you have?”
“An old-fashioned, please.”
He yelled across at the bar, which was the way they did things in the Circular Fan, and Munson himself came over. The orders were placed. Munson, acting like he had never seen the girl before, shuffled away.
“Your name, please?” said Roy.
“Verna.”
Roy wagged his head reprovingly.
“In the newspaper business,” he said, “we always want the last name. Also whether miss or missis.”
Her lips set prettily, but firmly.
“It’s just Verna.”
Munson came with the drinks and went away again.
“Mr. Quick,” said Verna. “I understand you’re the publisher of the Lanning News.”
“Issued twice weekly,” said Roy. “Tuesdays and Fridays. Only this is Saturday night—my night to howl.”
She lifted the glass to her lips. Roy noticed that in spite of her seeming composure, her fingers were unsteady.
“Sorry to keep you away from your fun,” she said. “I just want to put you onto a story—a good one.”
“On Saturday night stories don’t interest me. My one passionate interest is a game of poker. Unless,” he added, “you can dish me up a murder.”
She shivered a little.
“I can’t promise you that. But what I can promise should be sensational enough.”
“Okay. Spill it.”
“Oh, not here. You’ll have to come with me.”
Roy squinted at her thoughtfully.
“That should be fun. However, I have an engagement in less than an hour with three thugs. I don’t want to miss it. Where to?”
“You’ll know when you get there.”
Roy let the rest of his cocktail slide down his throat in a pleasant trickle.
“I do this against my better judgment,” he said. “Lead the way.”
“The side door,” said Verna.
There was a green coupe in the Circular Fan alley. They got in and the girl took the wheel. He noticed that she turned north at once, avoiding Lanning’s bright lights. In a few minutes she stopped in front of a house on the edge of town.
“This is it,” she said.
Roy Quick did not move at once. He had been away from Lanning for some years, in his country’s interests, and had returned just a few months before. This house was fairly new—one of the few new houses that had managed to get built—and he did not know it. It stood in a rather neglected block.
“You go right on up to the front door,” Verna said. “A friend of mine will let you in.” She spoke quietly, but there was a tense tightening of the muscles about her mouth.
“I’ll be in as soon as I park the car in the garage.”
“You wouldn’t fool me?” Roy asked.
“Why should I?”
“I don’t know.” He put his hand over hers. She had a soft hand. The fingertips were tingling with warmth. “I came along because of you,” Roy said. “The devil with the story. So if you ran out on me, I just wouldn’t like it.”

Her lips moved, but she said nothing. Roy shrugged, and stepped out. He strode up the walk to the door, pressed a finger against the bell button. The girl was starting the engine.

The door opened and a man’s voice inside said:
“Come in.”
Roy didn’t like the voice and stood where he was. The girl was driving away.
“I can’t see you, pal,” Roy said, peering into the dark hall. “Step out into the light.”
“Aw, go on in!”

This was another voice, behind him. Apparently someone had stepped out from an alcove. Roy could feel the cold hard pressure of the gun against his back.

He stepped into the hall. The door behind him closed. He caught a glimpse of a moving shadow, and there was a dull flash of dark steel. The lightning struck the back of his head. He had a vague impression of the contents of his skull shifting about violently as he lapsed into an agonized slumber.

Somehow his wrist watch had got smashed. That was why he couldn’t tell what time it was, nor how long he had been groping in nightmarish darkness, when his eyelids started to work again. He seemed to be burdened by an enormous head supported by a wobbly neck but, with great care, he moved his head upward.

He was lying on a rug. The rug was in a bedroom. It took some time to determine this, since the one light in the room seeped out from a shaded table lamp in one corner.

Roy moved his hands. They were too heavy, and seemed to want to stay together. Same thing, he discovered, with his feet.

The steel cuffs that bound both wrists and ankles, he decided, must have been stolen from some negligent police station.

Roy moved his head in a sort of jagged arc, thinking hard and painfully. He remembered the girl then, and felt a little sad. She had seemed such a nice little thing. And pretty—very pretty.

What was her name now? Oh, yes. Verna.

Roy frowned and managed somehow to get up to a kneeling position. There was a small table with a large photograph on it not far from the bed. He wriggled over that way and peered at it. It was a picture of a dark-haired young man and a light-haired young woman. They seemed to be in love.

Roy Quick didn’t know them.

He had started to move again when the door opened. The man who stood in the doorway seemed, in the dim light, to be quite large and bulky. He had black hair, black eyes, wide nostrils and five o’clock shadow.

“Good evening, Mr. Black,” Roy said.

The man scowled.

“My name ain’t Black.”

“Well, what is it?”

“Nothing. It ain’t Black, that’s all.”

Roy smiled, although the effort hurt him.

“Then you’re Mr. Black to me. You’re a stranger in our city, aren’t you?”

“I ain’t no home-town boy.”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Roy agreed pleasantly. “More of an over-grown alley rat.”

Mr. Black didn’t like that, but he didn’t say anything. He slipped a gun out of his pocket, thought better of it, and slipped it back again. Then he strolled over to Roy and kicked him in the side. Roy fought off the faintness and nausea that gripped him. His faculties cleared again just in time to see the door close behind Mr. Black.

He glanced moodily about the room. It occurred to him suddenly that the room was in some disorder; not much, but enough to register. Especially the rugs. There were two rugs beside the one he had been lying on. Just small circular rugs such as people use to break the monotony of a hardwood floor.

One of them especially fascinated Roy. There were blotches on it. They were rather dark blotches and small—a reddish-brown, or a brownish-red.

Blood!

Roy moved slowly on his hands and knees. There were drops of blood on the floor, too. A trail of blood. He followed the trail. It led to a closet. Roy raised on his knees, grasped the knob, turned and pulled.

Something fell against him.

Roy sighed heavily and stared at the body. Good old John Hodges!

He looked at the fine face of the old man, the thick mass of gray hair, the blood that soaked the white shirt. He looked and was
sick. Then his sickness was sopped up in an unholy rage. This lifeless corpse! Never, even in the hottest moments of Iwo Jima and Okinawa had Roy Quick felt such a surging call for vengeance.

He was backing away from the closet just as the door opened again. Mr. Black was looking at him.

"You ain't doing yourself no good, being nosy like that," Mr. Black said severely.

Roy was silent. He was in no mood now to bandy quips. Mr. Black stood there, hesitant, as if he were debating whether to use his gun or his foot. Then he grinned.

"You know the old guy, huh?"

"I know him."

Mr. Black started into the room, but was halted by the sudden strident ringing of the phone bell. The phone was just outside the door, in the hall. Mr. Black had evidently had instructions to answer the phone quickly, and he almost darted back out to the hall, leaving the door open a little.

Roy felt a sudden desperate anxiety to get to the door. In a big hurry. And with no noise. How not to make noise puzzled him for a moment. Then he remembered the rugs. One of them was close by.

He got on the rug, on his knees, like someone on a magic carpet. It was easy to propel himself across the hardwood floor on the rug. He reached the door, peeked out. Mr. Black was talking into the telephone, and listening, and looking the other way. The telephone was on a small stand, six feet from the door.

Gently, noiselessly, Roy Quick pushed the door open just a little wider. Quietly, he used his manacled hands to raise himself to a crouch on his manacled feet. He shot himself forward.

His shoulder crashed behind Mr. Black's knees. Mr. Black went down. The telephone stand went down. The telephone went down. They were all tangled up together on the hall floor.

Mr. Black was on top, but his head had cracked sharply against the floor and he was slightly stunned. Roy rolled out from under, turned rapidly and brought the steel manacles down on Mr. Black's face. Mr. Black yelped and squirmed and reached for his gun.

Roy had the same idea. He was a trifle faster and slid the gun out of Mr. Black's pocket. He brought the butt of the gun down briskly between Mr. Black's eyes.

Mr. Black was motionless. Roy looked down at the battered, blood-streaked face and felt mildly pleased.

Then he frowned at the steel cuffs on his wrists and ankles. He would have to get them off. It seemed quite likely that there would be visitors soon, and he was in no position to cope with them.

People who had handcuffs, he thought, should also have keys. Hurriedly, he searched Mr. Brown's pockets. Yes, here they were.

CHAPTER II

VIRTUOUS BLACKMAIL

It was awkward work, took a little time, but at last Roy Quick was rid of the imprisoning steel. He flexed his muscles, shook himself vigorously, and got up. He could hear a car stopping outside. Roy scooped up Mr. Black's gun.

He stared down the hall at the front door. It was a long hall, running straight through from the front to a door near the rear. Roy decided to retreat. He moved hastily back to the door at the rear, opened it, and saw a room that appeared to be the kitchen. He walked inside the room, which was dark, and stood there so that he could watch the front door.

The front door opened. Three men spilled in. They were all shortish men; one stocky, one medium, the third one quite thin. The stocky one appeared to be the leader, the medium one backing him up with a gun.

The thin one somehow seemed to be a little apart from the others, as if he didn't quite belong to them. He was about thirty, was pale, and he was certainly worried. His hand went to his face in a nervous gesture, and even at that distance Roy noticed that his hand was dirty. A black-smudged hand. Roy Quick didn't know any of them.

They reached Mr. Black, who had just started to move into consciousness.

"What happened?" said the medium one.

"Never mind that," snapped the stocky one. "Take a look in that bedroom."

The medium one lunged into the bedroom and was back almost instantly.

"He's gone!"

Mr. Black, groaning, and wiping blood
from his face, was sitting up now. Mr. Stocky kicked him in the thigh.

"Get up, Stupid," he said. "We've got to get out of here fast. The job's about finished, anyhow."

They helped Mr. Black to his feet. Roy Quick, watching them, nursing Mr. Black's gun in his hand, thought that he shouldn't let them go so easy. He wondered which of them had killed that great old man in the closet. He decided on Mr. Black for that, and fired at him.

Mr. Black yelped, but did not fall. Just nicked him somewhere, Roy thought regretfully. Instantly, all three of them had swerved and were blazing away at him. There was no percentage in this. He backed into the kitchen and kicked the door shut. They did not follow him.

A few more shots were fired down the hall at the kitchen door, then the front door banged. It was quiet. Roy slipped through the kitchen to the back door, unlatched it, let himself out into the yard and raced around the house toward the front. The car was already turning the corner nearly a block away.

Roy Quick was very tired. He sat on the tiny lawn in front of the house. Within five minutes, a police car zoomed up. Two men got out of the car and stared at Roy.

"What the devil goes on?" said one of them.

"So the phone operator reported the rack- et, did she?" Roy said. "It's murder, Joe. Old man Hodges."

"Hodges? Good glory!"

"He's in the bedroom closet."

"But what was he doing in this house?"

"I don't know. Probably someone phoned him and asked him to come here. Maybe a woman."

"What woman?" demanded Joe.

"How should I know?"

Roy wasn't going to tell them about the young woman with the soft hands. What was her name, now? Yes. Verna.

"You know how Hodges was," he said. "Anyone with a hard luck tale could get him to go anywhere."

The two officers didn't say anything. They went into the house. Presently one of them returned.

"Have to get the chief for this," he said. "Coming along?"

"Sure."

They rode down town. Police Headquar- ters was within a block of the office of the Lanning News. The car stopped outside Headquarters, and Roy got out.

"I'll see the chief later," he said.

"You can't do that, Roy," said the officer dubiously. "You're in on this."

"Sure. But I'll see the chief later."

HE WALKED off. The officer hesitated, figured he couldn't grab the editor and publisher of the Lanning News just like that, so he let him go.

Roy walked rapidly to the office of the Lanning News. The front door was locked, and it was dark inside. He was just about to unlock the door when a young lad with a bundle of papers under his arm hurried toward him from the corner below.

"Mr. Quick," he said, "I was told to tell you that your gang went up to Mr. Pitzer's office."

"Thanks, Eddie."

Roy pondered a moment, then decided to go to Pitzer's office before entering his own. It was in the building directly across the street. The gang would have been wondering about him, of course. Just a little poker-playing club—three other men and himself. They played every Saturday night in Roy's office, starting at ten o'clock and ending at breakfast time the next morning.

Earl Pitzer's office was on the second floor. It was a fairly large office—three rooms—since Pitzer was a man of large affairs and had a hand in several of the city's major industrial and real estate developments.

The light was on in the center room. Roy opened the door and walked in. The three men sitting at the card table glanced up at him. They were in the middle of a hand. No one said anything.

Roy slumped in a chair and watched them, morosely.

There was Earl Pitzer, broad-shouldered and pot-bellied. Gary Hayden, tall and slim, was present, a high school teacher who lived in fear of someone reporting his poker playing to the school board, and Fred Dexter, small and dapper, who ran a pool hall.

Soon the hand was over. Pitzer raked in the pot, and looked up.

"What kept you, Roy?" he said, a trifle annoyed. "We waited outside your place and got tired when you didn't show up. We'll go back over there and finish the night now, if you say so."

"No," said Roy.
They all looked at him then.
"What's up, Roy?" asked Fred Dexter.
"Murder," said Roy. He swore mightily.
"Some filthy son of Satan killed old John Hodges!"

They all seemed to be shocked, and Roy gave them the details, leaving out the part about the girl, Verna.
"I guess we should quit playing," said Pitzer. "It doesn't seem right to go on, under the circumstances."

"Sure," cut in Gary Hayden, in his high nervous voice. "You're way ahead, so we should quit. That's just fine, Earl." He was bitter. "We don't get a chance."

He shut up suddenly, as if he realized that he was making a poor show.

Fred Dexter said nothing one way or the other.

Pitzer shrugged his big shoulders.
"Okay, boys, if that's the way you feel about it. It's my deal." He glanced at Roy.
"You want in?"
"No."

Roy straddled his chair and watched. And while he watched, he thought. His thinking was mostly about that girl who had called herself Verna. A phony name, of course. He wanted to get his hands on her, maybe so he could clutch her pretty soft neck in his own powerful fingers. Or maybe not. He didn't know, wasn't sure.

And while he thought, he watched.

And as he watched, he thought moodily that poker-playing was a cynical business. If you liked poker, you'd play with anybody, whether you liked them or not. You might even despise them.

Like those three at the table. Roy Quick, now that he thought of it, didn't really like any of them. The big predatory Earl Pitzer—the intelligent but weak fool, Gary Hayden and the foxy little Fred Dexter.

Then somehow Roy was thinking of the thin little fellow he had seen up in that house of murder, the one with the pale face and dirty, smudged hands. He got up suddenly and walked out of Pitzer's office without saying a word to anyone. . . .

The office of the Lanning News seemed normal enough. Roy could see that as he switched on the light just inside the front door.

There was the main office with several desks and a couple of small private offices off to the right.

The printing plant was in the rear, beyond the main office.

One of the private offices was his own. Roy walked in, snapped on the light. The room looked orderly.

It was a littered mess all week, but Roy always had it neatly straightened out by Saturday evening.

But he wasn't satisfied. He was the kind who could walk into his own place and sense that something was not just as he had left it. He spotted it presently. Just a little thing. A chair had been moved about six inches. That was all.

ROY wandered out into the main office. Nothing here. He strode on through the door to the printing plant. The big room looked about right.

It had been cleaned up and put in order on Saturday afternoon, as usual, right after closing time.

He thought a moment, then walked past the linotype machines and a row of small presses to the far rear corner of the plant. Here were several neat piles of type. Old printing forms, tied with string, held for possible repeat orders. And one of the piles was of type that had been used in stories that had appeared in the News. They were kept mostly for possible reprint orders.

Most of the stuff had been there since long before Roy Quick had taken over. It was covered with a thick layer of dust. Yet that dust had been disturbed. Roy could see that.

There were streaks in it. So someone had certainly been going through that old type. And whoever it was had got his hands dirty; dust and printers' ink.

Roy walked back to his own office. He studied the chair that had been moved. The chair had been standing almost in front of the large old-fashioned safe. Silently he swung the dial, opened the door. He scrutinized the contents.

Three large carefully-sealed envelopes had been removed. He closed the safe again. Then he sat down in the chair at his desk. He got up again right away. The front door was being rattled angrily.

It was Chief of Police Detwiler. He was a heavy man with a heavy face; shrewd and tough.

"Roy," the chief said. "I want you to come with me. I don't like the way you avoided coming to Headquarters."

"Never mind that," said Roy. "Come in
and sit down. I have quite a number of things to tell you."

Reluctantly, the chief came in. They sat in Roy's private office. The chief waited, ominously.

"I'm worried," Roy said.
"You're worried?" sneered the chief.
"Yes. I'm worried about a girl."

The chief straightened.
"So there's a girl in this?"
"Yes. And since she was a party to the murder of one of the grandest guys who ever lived, I should be hating the ground she walks on. Instead of that, I'm worried."

He told the chief exactly what had happened.

"Then she's in it up to her neck," said the chief.


"Maybe nothing. If she ain't, then you're just telling us a yarn to cover yourself up. We ain't found any trace at all of a dame in this."

Roy scowled at him.

"Now, listen," he said. "There are five people, all strangers in town. There was a guy I call Mr. Black, and a stocky lad, a medium-sized one, and a thin, little fellow. And the girl. I saw them all. And, the way I see it, each of 'em had a job to do."

"I'm listening."

"Okay. I figure Mr. Stocky was running the show. The girl was here to keep me away from my office while the job was being done. Mr. Black was here to hold me in that house—and maybe he killed Hodges, too. Mr. Medium was a safe-cracker, here to get in my safe. And the thin fellow was a printer here, because he knew the set-up and had to do a job of searching."

"You mean the thin one used to work here?"

"Probably. Years ago, I imagine. The others probably had never been in town before, although my guess is that Mr. Stocky and Mr. Medium have been hanging around for several days getting the lay of things."

The chief was still doubtful.

"If you're on the level with all this, those guys are miles away by this time. You should've told me this right away. You just let 'em get away!" The chief glared. "That dame got under your skin, huh?"

Roy hated to admit that.

"I'll give you something else," he said. "As you know, John Hodges ran this paper for many years. I bought him out a few months ago. And there were, in that safe, three large manila envelopes, sealed. He didn't tell me just what was in them. And he made me promise never to open them unless he said so."

"Those envelopes are gone?"
"Yes."

"What sort of stuff was in them?" the chief asked.

"I can make a good guess," Roy said. "You know, John Hodges was a good guy, always helping people out. But he could be pretty tough with the wrong ones. Now, suppose a citizen did something that was out of line. Hodges would get the dope on it. Then he would write the story, and probably sit down at the linotype himself and put it into type. He would then pull a proof of the story. After that he would call in the erring one and say, 'My good man, I've got the dope on you, and I've put it into type, ready to run in the paper. Here's the proof. Read it over.'"

"The fellow would read it. And then Hodges would make him a proposition. The guilty one would have to stay good, and make restitution if that were possible. As long as he did that, Hodges would not print the story."

"A kind of blackmail, huh?"

"A virtuous kind of blackmail," Roy corrected him. "So you see what that leads to. Someone hired those guys to do two things—kill Hodges, because the stuff was in his head as well as in the safe, and steal the stuff from the safe so that I couldn't get at it."

"There's a local angle?" the chief said grimly.

"I don't know," said Roy. "But you might look up Munson, at the Circular Fan."

"Munson! Why?"

"That's where I met the girl. By appoint- ment. He seemed to be in on it."

The chief got up suddenly.

"That ties in with something he said. The young couple that own that house where Hodges was murdered. Name of Gaylord. They left town for a visit a couple of days ago."

"Where does it tie in?"

"The young fellow, Gaylord, is an electrician. He'd been working at the Circular Fan for about a week before they left, fixing up a new lighting system."

"That may get you something," said Roy.
CHAPTER III

THE LOCAL ANGLE

The chief was gone. Roy Quick sat alone. He hadn’t been quite on the level with Chief Detwiler. He had told him what he knew, but not what he thought. On account of the girl, of course.

He had a moody feeling that he should be doing something, that something was happening that he should be in on. From where he sat, he could turn his head and look out through the top of his office window and see the light in Pitzer’s office, across the street.

That was another thing about poker players. You couldn’t break up a poker game for a mere murder. As long as there were chips on the table, nothing else mattered.

Roy was vaguely conscious of a clicking sound somewhere, but it didn’t register. He was too absorbed in his thoughts; thoughts about the girl, about the pale little fellow with the dirty hands, about the girl again.

Abruptly, he looked up. She was there, standing in the doorway. She smiled faintly and stepped into the office. She had a key in her hand.

The key, Roy thought, would be to the stock-room door. The lock on that door hadn’t been changed in years. Some printer who had worked there years ago could easily have kept a key.

"Sit down, Verna," Roy said softly.

She sat down in a chair, not quite opposite him, but about halfway facing the front window.

"I came to apologize, Mr. Quick," she said, her voice slightly husky.

Roy peered at her. He wondered how tough was the tissue under that soft skin. She could be hard, he decided. The dark eyes, against the fair skin, seemed a little darker now. There was a touch of fever in them.

"So you’re sorry about something?" he said.

"Yes. I didn’t know you were going to get hurt when I steered you to that house."

"Are you sorry about Hodges, too?"

"Hodges?" queried the girl, and she looked innocent.

"Yes. The old man who was murdered."

Her face paled. Roy noticed that she wasn’t quite looking at him, but rather, beyond him.

"I never knew any man named Hodges," she said. "Did he die?"

"Yes."

"Well, I didn’t think you would call it murder."

"Why not?"

Her lips fumbled. "You killed him, didn’t you?"

Roy stared at her. So someone was building the idea that he had killed old John Hodges! He noticed again, uneasily, that her gaze, fixed and intent, was going beyond him, not touching him.

The front window.

"What time is it?" Roy asked.

"Time?" She seemed startled.

"Yes. Someone busted my watch."

She took a moment to glance quickly at her wrist-watch.

"Seven minutes to one."

"Thanks. It’s later than I thought. I think you and I need a drink." He got up. "We’ll go up to see Munson at the Circular Fan."

Verna’s right hand moved quickly. It came out of her coat pocket and there was a gun in it.

"Sit down," she said quietly.

Roy sat down slowly.

"You’re a faithful little laborer," he said, with a touch of bitterness. "First, you keep me away from my office while someone robs my safe. And now you keep me in my office while—well, while what?"

Her lips were tight, yielded no words.

"I wonder if you’re tangled up with that printer," Roy said thoughtfully.

"Printer?" The word was startled out of her.

"Yes. Little fellow with the pale face and dirty hands. Printers usually have pale faces and dirty hands. He looks like a rat to me, but I don’t think he’d go for murder. Does he belong to you?"

The gun in her hand shook a little. She flicked a glance at the window again. But she said nothing.

R oy smiled grimly and leaned back in his chair. He stretched his legs. His fingers played idly on the top of his desk. It was an open-faced desk, with a set of drawers down each side and a vacant space in the middle.

Abruptly, he jerked his right leg. Verna’s chair went over backward. So did she. Roy had thrust his leg all the way through and
hooked his toe against the chair leg.
Roy sprang around the desk. The girl was scrambling up. Roy flung his arms about her, held her tight. Her gun had dropped to the floor and Roy kicked it through the door into the main office.
Her face, under his, flamed angrily. Her lips were tight again, but he kissed her.
"You’re through making a monkey out of me, little chum," he said savagely.
She was still wordless. It seemed to Roy that all the emotions in the book showed in the changing colors of her eyes, but most of all there was fear.
He dropped her, limp, into the chair. He dusted his hands. He found an automatic in his desk drawer, settled it comfortably in his hip pocket, and walked out of the office. He went out and locked the front door.
That poker game was still going on. Roy could see the light up in Earl Pitzer’s window. Sure. They wouldn’t quit. Not Pitzer, nor Hayden, nor Dexter. Not while there were chips in sight.
Roy hesitated for just a moment on the sidewalk. He had to pick the right spot to go to. He had to be right the first time.
He hurried across the street, walked north half a block, melted into a dark alley that ran alongside the Circular Fan, and then swung south again, away from the cocktail parlor, along the backs of the buildings that faced the main street.
He was now in a large unlighted square that served as a service approach to the several buildings. A blank wall ran along one side. Only the side of the square that faced the parallel street beyond was open.
In the heavy darkness, he could see a large car stopping against the curb on that street. He drew back into a shallow doorway, and watched.
Two men got out of the car. They walked briskly across the square. One of them was of a stocky build, the other just medium. No doubt, Roy reflected, two men had been left in the car—Mr. Black and the little fellow with the dirty hands.
Mr. Stocky and Mr. Medium had approached one of the doors in this rear wall. They walked silently. The door evidently wasn’t locked, for they just opened it and walked in. The door closed.
Roy stepped out of his doorway and moved noiselessly down toward that closed door. The room beyond, as he remembered it, was a vacant store-room. It was behind a restaurant, but it was also connected by a stairway with the second floor. He listened. The voices inside were low.
With great care, Roy took the door knob, turned it, pushed the door in a few inches. One dangling electric globe illuminated the room. Mr. Medium and Mr. Stocky were there; no one else. They were waiting. Roy waited, too.
In a minute or two, steady footsteps were clomping, with a careful tread, down the stairway. The two in the room were facing the bottom of the stairs. Mr. Stocky was holding two large manila envelopes in his hand. The man on the stairway was just coming into view.
Then someone behind Roy cracked him on the head with a gun butt and pushed him at the same time. Roy found himself, dazed and angry, on the floor inside. Mr. Stocky and Mr. Medium had turned to look at him. The man who had hit him, Mr. Black, was standing over him, and gloating.
And also looking at him, an icy murderous glint in his eyes, was the man who had just come down the stairs—Earl Pitzer.

UNCERTAINLY, weakly, Roy got on his feet and swayed on wobbly legs.
“So you’re the local angle,” he said to Pitzer. “You’re the guy who engineered this whole thing. You’re the killer who planned, the murder of old John Hodges!”
“For a pretty fair poker-player, Roy,” said Pitzer, deliberately, “you’re a fool. You should have stayed put, and saved your own neck.”
“Shall we—” Mr. Stocky said.
“Just a minute,” cut in Pitzer. His eyes narrowed. “Roy, how come you turned up here just now?”
Roy shrugged.
“The way I figured it, some local guy—and it turned out to be you—hired these thugs to pull the job. No doubt you had to pay something in advance, but you wouldn’t settle in full until the stuff—which is in those envelopes taken from my safe—was turned over to you!
“There had to be a time and place for that. I didn’t know about the time, but I finally tumbled that that girl called on me at my office just now for the sole purpose of keeping me out of the way until the deal was closed.
“And the place? Well, that poker game of ours was a good blind. Getting me lured out
to that house served to keep me away from my office while it was being searched. And it also gave you a good excuse to transfer the game to your office.

"Why would I want that?"

"Look! You're having a poker game in your office. And at a certain time—say, one o'clock—you get up and tell the others that you have to go down the hall for a minute. Would they suspect anything? No. All they've got on their minds is the next hand. So all you'd have to do is go down the hall, and then down the back stairs to this place, complete the deal and go back up again."

Pitzer's tight thin mouth twitched in a sardonic smile.

"I guess the boys should have just finished you along with Hodges," he said.

"Maybe." Roy stared at him curiously. "One of those envelopes contained something on you?"

"Yes. I don't mind telling an old poker pal about it—although it won’t do you any good. It was ten years ago. I was mixed up in a little something, and was careless. Hodges got the dope on it. He held it over my head."

"But you must have had some reason for going after it now?"

"Certainly. There's a thirty-acre tract down at the south end of town. You know about it. I've been carrying an option on it—at a dirt cheap price. Hodges wanted it for a memorial park for Service men. He was stubborn about it. His scheme would have done me out of at least a hundred thousand in profits, since the tract is mighty valuable now for a big industrial project." Pitzer smiled bleakly. "He couldn't stop me legally, but he held that old stuff over my head. I just had to clear it up."

"Yes, and that fellow with the dirty hands?"

"The devil with this!" cut in Mr. Stocky, angrily. Let's get this over with."

"Yes," agreed Pitzer. "Certainly. No fireworks here, though—it might attract attention. You boys just take Roy along with you. Plenty of brushland west of here where you can drop him off."

"Okay," Mr. Stocky said to Mr. Black: "Frisk him."

Roy Quick was motionless. No chance to go for his gun. Both Mr. Stocky and Mr. Medium were covering him now.

Mr. Black was just about to work him over. But, behind them, the door squeaked open.

"Let me in on this," a voice said. It was the girl, Verna. She looked small and frail, standing by the door, her hands in her topcoat pockets. There was something a little desperate about her, too.

"How come you let this guy get out?"

Mr. Stocky grunted at her.

"He outsmarted me," she answered. "But he was in such a hurry he forgot I had a key."

"Yes," thought Roy, "and I also forgot about her gun."

"I've just been talking to Frank, out in the car," the girl added softly.

Mr. Stocky frowned. "Okay. So you talked to Frank."

"Yes." There was a quiet ferocity in the girl's voice. "And I know that you lied to me—tricked me!"

They were quiet then. They hadn't forgotten Roy, but it was the girl who riveted their attention now. They had suddenly become wary of her.

"You're crazy," Mr. Stocky murmured. "You don't know anything."

"I know you're a killer—a filthy murderer!" The girl's voice had gone up a notch. "You told me there wasn't to be anything like that. You said—"

"Grab her!" Mr. Stocky snapped at Mr. Black.

A gun roared. Roy didn't quite see how it happened, for the girl was behind him. But he swung about and there was Mr. Black, flinging up his hands, then clutching at himself, and pitching over. And the girl was standing there, very still, a smoking gun in her hand.

"They'll kill her!" Roy thought. "They'll kill her now, sure!"

CHAPTER IV

BESIEGED

LL of them had guns. Even Earl Pitzer had produced one. Roy remembered his own gun then. He snatched it out as he swung backward. Someone was firing but he didn't look to see who it was. He was groping for the girl, but she had moved. He muttered a curse as he saw that she had moved further into the room, around toward the side.

Another door was there. It was open a
little. Roy hadn't noticed it before, in the shadows. He remembered now that it opened into a small stock-room, probably empty.

Desperately he lunged in that direction, shoved hard at the girl. He heard her gasp as she was flung through the door.

Someone else was firing and something hot ripped through his coat. He swiveled back to face them. He could see three guns. He dropped to his knee as another man fired. He took an instant to decide which of the three he hated the most. He fired at Earl Pitzer.

A sort of childish amazement on his face, Pitzer dropped his gun and groped around his chest. He was toppling as Roy backed quickly through the door into the stock-room, and slammed the door shut.

Verna was just getting to her feet. In the complete darkness, he nearly tripped over her. He righted himself, put an arm about her shoulder.

"My gun," she complained. "I dropped it out there, when you pushed me."

"Little girls," Roy said, "shouldn't play with guns anyway." He stood silent for a moment. "Well, we're in a nice spot. No way of getting out of here. Not even a window."

It was quiet now. There was not a sound except the low murmur of voices in the next room.

"The door isn't locked," the girl pointed out. "Why don't they just come after us?"

"Too risky," Roy said. "Look! There are two of them out there, with two guns. And there are two of us in here, with one gun. Suppose I was to open that door to go after them. What would happen? I might get one of them, but it's a cinch at least one of us would get it, too—death in a hurry for either you or me. Same thing with them. They won't open that door until they can figure a way to do it safely."

"I hope you're right," whispered the girl. "But the shots won't they attract attention?"

"I doubt it," said Roy. "Not the way this building is put together. Those poker players upstairs will hear something, but they'll think it's a couple of trucks backfiring—if they think anything."

They were silent for a moment. It was still quiet.

"If only Frank does as I asked him!" the girl said then.

"Frank? Oh, the little fellow with the dirty hands, out in the car. And what did you ask him?"

"To go call the police!"

"Was he still in the car when you left him?"

"Yes."

"Then he won't call the cops," said Roy. "Not that little rat!"

She caught her breath. "He might," she insisted. "Even though he'll get himself in bad at the same time!"

Roy's hand clasped the girl's shoulder. "This fellow, Frank," he said. "What's he to you?"

"He—he used to be my husband!"

"Ah!" Roy made a face in the darkness. "You'd better tell me the rest."

"Okay," she said wearily. "Frank used to work here, for that old fellow, Hodges, several years ago. Frank's a printer. In some ways, he's a bit of a heel. He got into trouble with a girl. At the same time he was mixed up in something crooked—stole some money, I think. Hodges got hold of all the dope. He held it over Frank to make him do right by the girl.

"Afterward, Frank left here and went to San Francisco but he still had to send money to that girl because he knew that Hodges kept the dope on him. Well, I met him, and we fell for each other. It was a crazy thing—I guess it was the mother instinct in me, darn it! Anyhow, it only took a few months to show me that Frank was hopeless, so I divorced him."

"You must have known you were going to meet me some day," Roy said, with a grin.

**THEY** were silent again for a moment, and listened. It was still quiet in the next room.

The girl sighed.

"Even after I left Frank, he kept in touch with me," she said. "He was always getting me to help him out, one way or another. He was that kind. And I did it for old times' sake—feeling bad about having had to ditch him."

"So not long ago these crooks contacted Frank and told him that there was danger of Hodges springing that stuff he was holding in the safe, or maybe that you would do it, and that the only way to stop it was to rob the safe. They said another fellow who had money was interested, too, and would finance the deal."

"They wanted Frank to come in with it because he knew the set-up. And they wanted
Frank to get me to go along to—to—"

"To take care of me?" Roy said grimly.

"That's right."

"So they figured I'd be a sucker for a good-looking dame!"

"I guess they did."

"And," said Roy, "they were right! I guess," he added, "Munson, of the Circular Fan, didn't really have much to do with this."

"I don't think so. I think they just used his place to get a line on locating a house that would be temporarily vacant."

"One thing I want to know," Roy said, his voice hoarse. "Did you have anything to do with getting old John Hodges out to that house?"

"No! I knew nothing about it!"

"That makes me feel better," said Roy. "Well, I guess your pal Frank decided against calling the cops. He's probably ten miles out of town by now. You couldn't expect anything else."

She laid a cautioning hand on his arm. They listened again. There were shuffling sounds out in the other room.

"If they start anything," Roy said, "we can't last long. There are only three shots in my gun."

The girl said nothing, only moved closer to him. Roy moved her with him, back against the wall. They waited.

Then it came. At first it meant no more than a faint sound. It took a moment for Roy to realize what it meant. The door between the two rooms had been gently pushed open. But the other room, too, was dark now.

And then, suddenly, two powerful fingers of light were pointed straight into the stockingroom!

Mr. Stocky and Mr. Medium had rigged up a simple scheme. They had pushed a packing-case to within a few feet of the door, and on it they had placed two large flashlights. So that now the two gunmen were under cover of darkness, while the small stock-room was illuminated.

Roy and the girl were cowering in twin circles of light. A shot shrieked at them. Roy moved fast to an inner corner, yanking the girl with him. He aimed then at one of the flashlights, fired—and missed. More shots poured into the room, just missing them. Roy aimed again. This time one of the lights was shattered.

But there was only one shot left.

The girl started to creep out in front of him. Savagely he yanked her back, thrust her behind him.

A shot from the other room seared his left shoulder.

Peering into the darkness, Roy thought he saw a moving shadow. Recklessly, he aimed at it.

Someone grunted, and there came the sound of a fall.

"One light left in there—and one gun," Roy muttered.

But his own gun was empty.

They waited, Roy and the girl, shrinking back into the corner, Roy in front of her. For a little while there was silence. Roy watched intently. And presently he saw the gun barrel edging around the door jamb, and pointing straight at him.

Roy hesitated. He could not leave his position without leaving the girl exposed. Trusting to luck, the flimsiest kind of luck, he grabbed the girl with a backward thrust of his arm and plunged forward. They both landed on the floor halfway to the door.

The gun was blazing at the spot they had just left.

Then came a momentary silence. A gun roared again. Roy shivered, but he wasn't hit. He felt surprised. Then someone fell across the door opening. Roy stared in amazement.

And suddenly there were heavy footsteps in that other room, and voices. Roy noticed, especially, the voice of Chief of Police Detwiler.

"I guess Frank went for the police, after all!" said a small voice beside Roy.

"Ah!" said Roy, struggling up, and pulling the girl with him. "It was your good influence." Her hair was soft against his face.

"Kiss me!"

"Kiss you?" said the girl. "The way you've been mauling me around, I should bat you one!"

But she kissed him.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

MAKE MINE MURDER
A Swift-Paced Johnny Castle Novelet by C. S. MONTANYE
Seeing the grisly corpse then, Arlene's dark eyes were stark and wide.

FINAL JUDGMENT

By RALPH OPPENHEIM

Being acquitted of a murder charge doesn't satisfy Jeff Corey, who won't rest until he finds the guilty party!

JEFF COREY emerged from the stuffy courthouse into bright afternoon sunlight that made his blue eyes blink. He stood on top of the steps, dazedly breathing in the air of freedom.

People—spectators from the trial, passers-by—were pointing out his tall, well-built figure, so easily distinguishable because of his red hair. He gave no heed. He was grimly accustomed to being stared at, and his face, strong despite its pallor and strain, remained masklike even when he heard a woman's shrill voice exclaiming:

"A disgrace! They should have hanged him! The whole city knows he's guilty!"

Yes, he thought wearily, the whole city. He remembered the frustrated tone the foreman of the jury had used when he had
said: "We find the defendant not guilty, your Honor."

Being honest, the jurymen had gone against their emotional belief only because of insufficient evidence.

Three men, emerging from the courthouse together, came over to Corey. One was John Hatcher, the city's leading realtor, a jovial-faced, stocky man, wearing sporting tweeds, and with no hat covering his mass of gray hair. He seized Jeff's hand and pumped it.

"Congratulations, my boy!" Hatcher said.

"I knew you'd be cleared! You can come back to your job as my A One agent any time!"

"That's swell of you, Mr. Hatcher," Corey said huskily. "I know how you felt about—about ex-Judge Prentiss, so you must have believed me innocent."

"How about me?" boomed the other man, Arthur Blanchard.

He was short and broad, with bushy-dark eyebrows. Though he had been ex-Judge Prentiss' lawyer as well as friend, he had undertaken Jeff Corey's defense.

"I did my best for you," he said, "though I admit it was a stroke of fate that turned the final trick."

When the third man, tall, suave and dark-haired District Attorney Floyd Saxon spoke, his tone was that of a beaten enemy who has not forgotten the battle.

"I also considered myself one of Jonathan Prentiss' best friends," he said. "All the more reason I was anxious to convict him—murderer."

He was doubtless bitter because, regardless of what developed now, Jeff Corey could never be tried again for the same crime, for so the law said. But Saxon's attitude, as well as the open hostility of the townsfolk, strengthened the determination that had been growing in Jeff Corey.

"Mr. Hatcher," he said, "I'll come back to my job—as soon as I find ex-Judge Prentiss' real murderer! Oh I know"—he waved off protests from Hatcher and Blanchard—"the murder is months old, the trail cold. But I want to stay in this town—for a lot of reasons. To do that I need more than a technical acquittal, and I aim to get it!" His blue eyes were agate-hard. "As soon as I go home and get my bearings, I'm going straight to the scene of the crime."


"Corey, you're not going to the Prentiss estate, are you? You must realize how upsetting that would be to Miss Arlene Prentiss."

PAIN clouded Corey's eyes, but his voice was hard.

"I'll try not to upset Miss Prentiss. It's the caretaker, Chris Jenson, I want to see. That's where I'm starting, and I'm not stopping until I find the killer!"

A few hours later Jeff Corey, having gone to his apartment to shave and change to a clean, pressed suit, sat at the wheel of his convertible coupé, driving toward the Prentiss estate. Grimly he was reviewing the whole nightmare sequence of events that had brought him within the shadow of the gallows.

Hauntingly, the image of a slender, winsome girl kept thrusting itself foremost in his thoughts. Arlene Prentiss. He saw her lovely oval face, her liquid dark eyes, the page-boy cut of her auburn hair.

"I'm sure Dad won't have any objections, Jeff darling," she had said only the day before the tragedy, when she had been sitting in this very coupé with Corey.

And more than her words, the soft surrender of her lips had told Corey that a childhood playmate, now grown to lovely womanhood, would soon be his wife. He remembered how, as a little girl, Arlene had come out of her opulent environment to play with less privileged kids and, still more scandalous, with young Jeff. For her father, then an incumbent Judge, had sent Jeff Corey's stepfather to prison for embezzlement.

Jeff's real father had died in an accident before Corey was born. The man who had married Jeff's mother had been a spineless weakling tempted to stupid crime. He had died in prison of pneumonia, and Jeff's brokenhearted mother had soon followed him to the grave.

Jeff, in his teens, had been thrown on his own, but John Hatcher, the realtor, had given him a good job. The city had not forgotten about his stepfather, though, and regardless of the fact that the embezzler had not been his real father, they had been prone to say "like father, like son."

That was, until Jeff had returned from the war, bedecked with medals. The city had seemed willing to forget the past then, until tragedy had come.
Jeff was remembering more.

“So you want to marry my daughter, eh?” Jonathan Prentiss, seated at his scroll-oak desk in his sumptuous, paneled library, had translated Jeff’s fumbling words into crisp, brass-tack facts.

Arlene and Jeff had agreed that he would do the asking, and Arlene, unable to hang around in suspense, had gone out horseback riding shortly before Corey arrived, around two o’clock that afternoon. Chris Jenson, the old caretaker and gardener, had greeted Corey as the young red-haired man had approached the house. Ex-Judge Prentiss, alone in the house, had opened the heavy front door on a chain and, seeing who the caller was, had then admitted Jeff.

Screwing up his courage, Corey had told Prentiss that he and Arlene wanted to live on his, Jeff’s income, in a house of their own. The ex-Judge had seemed pleased. He had been a man with democratic ideas. He himself had been born to wealth, but that had not prevented him from giving his whole life to public work.

When arthritis and age had caused him to retire from the bench and kept him a virtual recluse, he had still participated both financially and physically in many civic activities. Shortly before his death he had become chairman and treasurer of the War Memorial Fund, a big enterprise whereby long-neglected park grounds would become a beautiful monument to commemorate soldiers who, unlike Jeff Corey, had never come back. It had been Jonathan Prentiss’ brilliant scheme to have important public and business men campaign personally for funds, each to collect through his own channels.

It had been just short of two-thirty by the heavy, onyx electric clock on Prentiss’ desk when a joyful Jeff Corey had taken his departure, with the ex-Judge’s full consent to marry his daughter. No mention had been made by either of them of Corey’s stepfather, both considering this as belonging to the dead past.

Treading on air, Corey had left the estate—but Chris Jenson, the caretaker, hadn’t seen him leave, having been busy with some rose bushes. Jeff had driven off in his car to intercept Arlene on the bridle path he knew she had taken, to break the news to her. But he had been so absent-minded in his joy that he had taken a wrong turn, and had been delayed half an hour before he finally got to her. And when they had returned to the Prentiss estate, the police had been there.

Ex-Judge Prentiss had still been in the library at the scroll-desk where Corey had last seen him. But he had been slumped over that desk, his skull hideously bashed. The police had found the weapon—the heavy onyx electric clock. A brutal killer had ripped it from its wires to deal the fatal blow. It had stopped at nineteen minutes to three.

Chris Jenson, the old caretaker, had already told the police he had seen Corey go into the house around two o’clock. A little after half-past two he had heard a loud argument coming from the library, as he had been near, trimming some hedges. A man had come out of the house, hiding his face with one arm.

As Jenson had tried to intercept him, the man had knocked the caretaker down and leaped through a hedge. Jenson had caught one clear, sunlit glimpse of the back of the man’s head beyond the hedge before it had disappeared, and there had been the sound of a car driving away.

Rushing into the house, Jenson had discovered the body and had called the police. And Jenson had sworn that the back of the head he had seen had been Jeff Corey’s—Corey’s conspicuous red hair.

By grim irony, it had been Arlene who unwittingly had supplied the motive when she had confessed that Corey had gone to ask her father for her hand, and that she had not broached the subject to the ex-Judge. District Attorney Floyd Saxon had based his case on the theory that Prentiss had refused to let his daughter marry the stepson of a man he had sent to jail, that Corey became enraged and killed him, then wiped his prints off the clock.

The city folk had readily accepted the theory, believing indeed that there had been “bad blood” between Jeff and the ex-Judge. Arlene, at first seeming unquestionably loyal, had insisted that Arthur Blanchard, her father’s lawyer, undertake Jeff’s defense. But she had not attended the trial, and Corey could not help feeling that she also must have had her doubts, her suspicions.

After all, her own father had been killed. And she could not know what had transpired at that interview between Prentiss and Jeff, and she knew that Jeff had no alibi except “taking the wrong turn” for the time of the murder.
The verdict had been a foregone conclusion—even Blanchard had seemed too resigned to put up much of a defense—until, unexpectedly, Chris Jenson had wavered in his repeated testimony. Where the old caretaker had been so positive, now he was uncertain. No, he decided, he couldn’t positively identify the man he had seen running away.

So the case had blown up. But Corey knew that ugly rumor said he had somehow got to Jenson, bought him off. Not only because it might be dangerous to live in a city that still thought him the killer of one of its most beloved citizens, but also because of his love for Arlene, he must once and forever clear his name.

Now, as he drove on in his coupé, the familiar Prentiss estate loomed out of the late afternoon landscape, with its sprawling mansion, its well-tended gardens and gravelled private road. Driving through the open gate, Jeff Corey stopped near a small cottage screened by trees from view of the main house. This was where Chris Jenson the caretaker lived. Since Corey didn’t see him outside, he hoped the old man had come home.

His face grim and determined, Corey climbed out of the coupé and approached the cottage door. His mind teemed with the questions he would put to Jenson. Why had the caretaker at first been so sure the killer was Jeff, and then changed his mind at the last moment? Had he lied deliberately, then become frightened? Had someone got him to lie, or had it been his own idea?

Corey lifted the decorative knocker hinged to the door, rapped with it. There was no answer. The shades of the cottage windows were drawn. He tried the door, found it unlocked. He let himself into a shadowy living room which had a rustic, raftered ceiling.

He took two steps, then froze in his tracks, icy needles of horror stabbing his spine. In the half-light of the room, he saw the figure of a man hanging on a rope that was fastened to one of the rafters!

Corey recognized the ghastly, death-frozen face as that of the grizzled caretaker. There was an overturned chair nearby, also some coiled, stout clothesline from which enough had been cut to make the improvised noose. Evidently Chris Jenson had come home and hanged himself.

But why? Had the same guilty knowledge which had made him change his testi-

mony led to this final act of expiation? Had he feared that with Corey acquitted, he might somehow be involved in the unsolved crime?

Abruptly, Corey’s thoughts broke off as a draft on his back warned him that the door behind him was opening. Even as he whirled, he heard a girl’s familiar voice.

“Jeff! I saw your car from the house! Mr. Blanchard phoned to tell me you were acquitted and—”

The voice broke off with a gasped intake of surprise and horror. And Corey, turning to look at the girl, didn’t know just what her expression had been when she had first greeted him, for now her dark eyes, seeing the grisly corpse, were stark and wide, and the color had drained from her lovely oval face.

“Jeff—what—” Her voice was a sob. “It’s Chris Jenson! He—”

“Yes, Arlene.”

Corey spoke grimly. He had forced his own eyes back to the hanging man, was scrutinizing the dead caretaker. And now he saw the ugly bruise on Chris Jenson’s scalp, saw darkening blood drying.

“Jeff, it’s suicide, isn’t it?” he heard the girl say tensely.

He didn’t answer at once. He was moving about the room, his alert eyes searching. Presently his gaze narrowed, agate-hard, grim. Half-hidden under a book-shelf was a length of lead pipe. It seemed to have bloodstains on it.

He turned to the girl.

“No, it’s not suicide,” he answered her now. “It’s murder, Arlene! And unless I’m wrong, it was done by the same killer who murdered your dad months ago!” His eyes were slits. “Evidently the killer feared that Jenson could somehow expose him if I started probing.”

He stopped on that thought, grim memory working in his mind. Only three men had known he was coming here to question the old caretaker—D.A. Saxon, Blanchard the lawyer, and the realtor, John Hatcher, his boss. Was it possible that one of them was involved? It seemed fantastic—the man who had tried to convict him, the man who had tried to save him, and his own boss who had offered him back his job. And yet—

He moved to the corpse, felt one of the dangling wrists. It was just growing cold.

“Did you see anybody else on the estate before I came, Arlene?”
He was not surprised to get a negative. The killer would have moved surreptitiously. This cottage could not be seen from the windows of the mansion.

"Clever," he muttered fiercely. "Fiendishly clever!"

"What do you mean, Jeff?" Arlene's dark wide eyes were bewildered.

"I mean, this time the killer tried to frame me for keeps! I was supposed to assume that Jenson committed suicide, that I—or you—would call the police voluntarily. The police would quickly see that Jenson couldn't have hanged himself, and would find the weapon that had really killed him before he was strung up!"

He was half-grateful now that he had been through such a long ordeal with the police and the law. It had taught him something about crime and clues, enabling him to observe things which, when he had been more naive and uninformed, he would surely have overlooked, just as Arlene had.

"But Jeff, why would the police accuse you?" she asked. "Why should you kill the man whose final testimony saved you?"

"Suppose, as the city believes, I did murder your father, Arlene. Suppose I had somehow got Jenson to change his testimony, but still knew he could put the finger of guilt on me. I couldn't be tried again, but I could be lynched, or driven out of town, once the people had proof of my guilt. With that motive, it would be logical I might kill Jenson, and try, bunglingly, to make it look like suicide." He gave a harsh, bitter laugh. "Convincing, isn't it Arlene? Perhaps it even convinces you!"

"Oh Jeff, how can you think such a thing?"

Her dark eyes filled with tears, the girl suddenly flung herself into his arms. He drew her to him, held her tightly, gratefully, both of them for a moment forgetting the macabre surroundings, the ghastly hanging corpse.

"Jeff!" she sobbed. "I never believed you guilty! I was confused, bewildered, and I couldn't bear to go to the trial, but all the time I was waiting for them to clear you! Darling, you must believe me!"

Some of the long-pent bitterness melted from Jeff Corey. He felt strong now, capable of fighting and beating this thing.

"If you'll help me, Arlene, I can clear myself."

"Of course. What are we going to do?"

He answered with one word. "Nothing."

"What do you mean, Jeff?"

"We're going to do nothing," he said fiercely. "That's the one thing the killer doesn't expect! We're going to leave this cottage exactly as if we had never been in it! We never discovered Jenson's body, understand? Can we lock the door?"

She took a key hanging on a nail near the door, gave it to him.

"We've got to move fast and carefully," he warned her.

He opened the door, slipped out. Darkness was enveloping the big estate now, and he was grateful for it. He didn't think the killer would be lurking around the premises, but had to chance that. He motioned Arlene to come out, then locked up the shaded cottage with its silent inhabitant.

Even as he started toward the mansion with the girl, his tensed ears heard a sound in the falling night. The sound of an approaching car. "Are you expecting someone, Arlene?" he asked.

"No," she said.

"Car seems to be headed here. Come on—hurry!"

He took her arm and guided her swiftly to the mansion. She had left the big front door unlocked. They entered a spacious living room, and she switched on lights. Corey moved to one of the heavy-portiered windows. He lifted the curtain, peered out. Headlamps swung eerily over the estate gate, then cut through it.

"Someone's coming all right," he gritted. "Quick, Arlene! Pour out some wine or something. Light a cigarette. We must act as if we're thoroughly and comfortably at home."

He had peeled off his coat and hat, heard the girl moving swiftly. He saw the car stop, recognized it as Blanchard's heavy limousine. Two men got out. They walked past Corey's car, and Corey held his breath as they disappeared momentarily in the trees that also hid the cottage. They appeared again, coming toward the house, and Corey dropped the curtain.

"Now listen, Arlene. If anyone asks about the caretaker, he left your employ this afternoon. Understand? He locked up his cottage and left. You don't know where he went."

Before she could even answer, the doorbell pealed. There was no servant staying
in the house at night to answer it, so Arlene went herself. Corey went to the coffee table where she had poured wine from a decanter, took a glass of it, and was sitting on a chaise-longue, relaxed, glass in hand, when Arlene ushered in Lawyer Blanchard and the other visitor, who proved to be the gray-haired realtor, John Hatcher.

Both men looked a little grim as they saw Corey getting up from the chaise-longue. Blanchard first spoke.

"We've just had a long talk with the D.A.," he said. "We wanted him to come along with us, but he felt his position would make him seemed biased and unfriendly. It seems the town has been taking the verdict pretty hard. For my part, I wish to protect the good name of Miss Prentiss here. Mr. Corey's coming here is naturally going to make more talk, add fuel to the fire."

Arlene answered him. She moved to Jeff, her slim hand taking his. Her eyes were clear and shining.

"You might as well know that I intend to marry Jeff as soon as possible," she said.

The words brought a thrill to Corey, his blue eyes going almost happy for the first time. John Hatcher turned to him then.

"Look Jeff, I have your interests at heart, also. If you and this girl want to get married, more power to you! But why try to live in all this ugly gossip? Move out of the city—go to another. I promise I'll use my influence to see that you get a good position."

"And I'll administer this estate for you," Blanchard told Arlene. "You won't have to worry about it."

Corey's voice was crisp. "Thanks, gentlemen, but you forget what I told you and Saxon. When I've cleared my name there will be no necessity for our moving out of town!"

Blanchard's bushy brows went up. "You'd have to have pretty obvious proof to convince the suspicious townfolk, Corey. What progress have you made? Did you talk to the caretaker?"

The question was casual enough, but Corey watched Blanchard carefully as he answered it.

"No, I didn't. Unfortunately, I learned that Jenson has left Miss Prentiss' employ."

Arlene nodded. "He didn't give any reason, just closed up the cottage and left," she said smoothly.

"That's tough," Hatcher put in. "It looks as if you'll just be batting your head against a brick wall, Jeff."

But both he and Blanchard still found Corey and Arlene adamant. The two men took their departure, but as Blanchard pulled a hat over his thin dark hair, he said:

"If you should change your mind, Miss Prentiss, please get in touch with me."

From the window, Corey saw the two walk to Blanchard's car. Again he held his breath as they passed the tree-screened caretaker's cottage. Then they climbed in the car and drove off.

Had either of them known that Corey and Arlene had lied about Jenson, that the caretaker was actually in that cottage, a gruesome hanging corpse? Only the murderer knew that. Corey thought of suave, dark Floyd Saxon, the D.A. who had refused to come though he had also been a friend of Judge Prentiss' and had felt involved. One thing was clear—the murderer, whoever he was, must be worried to know that the trap he had prepared had not yet sprung. Nor could the killer do much about it. The body had to be found and reported legitimately.

"Well, Jeff," Arlene's tense voice broke in on his thoughts. "What do we do next?"

Corey turned from the window. "We have to go back to the very beginning now, Arlene."

There was desperation in his voice. He knew he would have to work fast, that he was virtually sitting on dynamite with that unreported murder on the estate.

"Arlene, I'd like to go into the library where your father—" He left the rest unsaid.

The girl's face tightened a little, but she accompanied him through French doors and, as she found the wall-switch, the familiar, paneled room leaped into light. There was the same scroll-desk, with its now vacant leather-back chair. The electric clock was missing, still held as an exhibit by the police. On the carpet under the chair was an ugly dark stain—the once-red blood of the man who had been murdered in this room.

Corey was letting the familiar room revive his memories of that day when he had asked Jonathan Prentiss for Arlene's hand. He resurrected the kindly Judge in his mind, imagined him sitting in that chair. He tried to think of anything Prentiss might have said, any little hint of manner or speech that might have presaged some knowledge on Prentiss' part of his coming doom. Certainly the ex-Judge had seemed cheerful.
Corey cudgeled his brain in fierce concentration. And then one little fact did seem to stand out. He remembered how Prentiss had let him into the house, first opening the door on a chain and peering out to see his visitor.

"Was your father always cautious about letting people into the house when he was alone, Arlene?" he asked.

"Well, being a Judge who had sent up many criminals—" she began, and stopped, her face coloring. "Oh Jeff, I didn't mean that!"

"I know, darling," he said reassuringly.

So the Judge had been cautious. It indicated that his killer, whom he must have admitted, had been someone he knew, trusted.

"I know the D.A. and the police must have gone over all his papers and records," Corey said. "But I'd like to go over them too, just in case they missed something."

Arlene opened a wall-safe, and also took papers from the desk.

"I'm afraid you'll find precious little, Jeff," she said despairingly. "Dad had developed a habit of destroying records as fast as he made them—which seemed strange, since his memory was not wonderful."

The papers proved to be only bills, canceled checks which had gone to the local stores, and some carbon copies of letters relating to the ex-Judge's latest project, the War Memorial Fund. The letters gave his full plan for the organization of the campaign, and among the names of the public figures who were individually to collect funds and turn them over to Prentiss, were the names of Saxon, Blanchard, and Hatcher.

Corey asked Arlene if any of those three had had any quarrel, no matter how small, with the Judge. To her knowledge, none had.

Finding nothing else in the library except the grim memory of that tragedy, Corey and the girl went back into the living room. Arlene insisted that they have a snack to eat. It was far past dinner time. She fetched some cold cuts from the kitchen and, though neither had appetite, they forced themselves to take the nourishment.

"I'm still up against a stone wall," Corey told her. "Arlene, you've got to help me! I want you to talk about your dad now—tell me everything you can about him, no matter how small. I never did get to know him well."

Arlene did her best. As she spoke, with the grief of remembered loss in her tone, a clearer picture of Jonathan Prentiss shaped itself to Corey. The Judge had been an astute man, a thorough man who had been a stickler for details, and on whom it would have been hard indeed to pull a fast one. Though rich, he had—before he had acquired that habit of tearing up his records—always accounted for every penny in any financial dealing.

The more the picture grew, the more Corey became convinced that a man like Judge Prentiss should have had some inkling of a murderer's intent, if that murderer was someone he knew.

Arlene began talking about the Judge's hobbies. In his younger days, he had been an outdoor man, loving fishing and other sports. He had also been a home-movie enthusiast, who developed his own 16 mm. films. Confined indoors, he had turned this latter hobby into still another one. He had begun photographing old criminal records and other interesting material, creating for himself a home-made microfilm library.

IT WAS then that Corey abruptly stopped the girl's recital. "Did the police look at his microfilms, Arlene?"

"No, they didn't attach any importance to them."

Corey's brain raced. A man who had lately destroyed records, yet who did not have a good memory—

"It may be another blind alley, but I'd like to look at those films!" he told Arlene.

In the cellar of the mansion was a well-equipped laboratory and dark-room. The microfilm collection was all in neat tin boxes, stacked and dated. As the night deepened, Corey worked feverishly, taking out the most recent film and putting it in the special, magnifying machine where the photographed print or writing could be examined.

Luck, if it could be called that, proved to be with him. For on a reel that was otherwise black, he suddenly found a photographed paper that made his heart leap. It was written in a bold hand, and read:

In event anything happens to me, I want to make this record, trusting that it will be found in time. It has come to my knowledge that a dastardly crime has been perpetrated against the city. Someone has been appropriating funds collected for the War Memorial Fund, and the money runs into a large figure. I am going to
check to find the guilty man, and call him to account.

Jonathan Prentiss

When Arlene had tensely identified the writing as her father's, Corey said:
"There's the motive! One of the men collecting funds must have been juggling his books! But who?" He ran a harassed hand through his red hair. "Your father evidently had suspicions, but so had the guilty man—who killed the Judge before the thing could come out!"

For there was no further record. Corey's hunch that the astute Judge would have had some inkling of tragedy had been borne out, but it still was not enough.

"Only one more road still open to us, Arlene!" Corey gritted. "We've got to go back to Chris Jenson's cottage, see if we can find any thread of a clue there."

He had to ask her to go with him because she would know the cottage better than he did. As they emerged from the mansion the night was deep and the sky full of stars. Again they moved furtively. They reached the tree-screened cottage, and Corey inserted the key. Within he found a lightswitch and, since the shades had looked heavy to him, he dared to snap it on.

Light flooded the raftered room, illumined the hanging corpse that now was growing stiff with the signs of rigor mortis. White-faced, Arlene helped Corey rummage around the place.

A large roll-top secretary where Chris Jenson kept most of his accounts was the main object of their search. There was nothing in it but commonplace items—a letter from some relative, bills, receipts. And a book which proved to be an itemized catalogue of all the flowers Chris Jenson had planted and cared for on the estate.

As Corey opened the book, several little placards, each on a small wooden stake, fell out. He looked at them, read the titles printed by hand on them:
Red Roses
Tea Roses
Yellow Tulips
Red Tulips

Arlene saw Corey looking them over.
"Poor Chris," she said. "He always kept such strict records of the flowers he planted. He put those markers in each bed, even insisted on leaving them there when the flowers bloomed. Dad said he made the place seem almost like a botanical garden and..."

What is it Jeff?"
She broke off, for Corey was standing very straight now, his eyes gleaming.
"I think I've got the answer!" Corey said. "I think I know who the killer is now! But don't ask me to explain yet. We've got to work fast!" He took her arm, leading her to the door. "I'm going to make the killer go through a little torture so I can trap him, as he tried to trap me!" he said fiercely. . . .

Close to midnight, Corey and Arlene walked into a brightly lit office where three men greeted them with grim inquiry. The office was that of District Attorney Floyd Saxon, who sat at his desk, his dark eyes suspicious. Also present, having been summoned from their homes, were Arthur Blanchard and John Hatcher. Arlene, phoning from the mansion, had told Blanchard to arrange this night meeting. Then she and Corey had come here in Corey's coupé.

"Well, Miss Prentiss"—Blanchard's bushy dark brows were working—"I hope you have a good reason for your strange request for this meeting."

"I have," said Arlene, as she and Jeff had planned she would say. "You gentlemen, as friends of my father, will be interested to know that I am closing up the estate in the morning, taking a few things from the mansion, and the caretaker's cottage, and moving out. In fact, I shall sleep at the home of a friend in the city tonight."

Blanchard started to smile, but it was the D.A. Saxon who spoke.
"That's sensible, Miss Prentiss. You've decided not to face all this publicity and gossip."

"Let me finish," Arlene said. "I'm moving out and marrying Jeff. We're going on a short honeymoon, then we're settling in a house we've picked out in this city."

"That's right," Jeff corroborated, as the three men stared askance at the couple who had roused them to deliver this news. "Because by tomorrow I shall show you who killed ex-Judge Prentiss, and why! I only want a little more time to check on the evidence I've gathered."

"Evidence?" John Hatcher demanded. "You mean you really found something the police overlooked? Where, Jeff?"

"My evidence," said Jeff Corey with deliberate emphasis, "will come from a dead man."

All three men looked startled and confused. One of them, Corey was certain,
knew which “dead man” he was referring to, knew now that he had discovered the body of Chris Jenson. The others, unaware of that murder, could only assume he meant ex-Judge Prentiss, and of course the murderer would have to pretend to assume the same thing.

“You mean,” Saxon’s voice was skeptical, “you found something in Prentiss’ effects which we overlooked?”

“Yes, but I am thinking of something else,” Corey said, just to make things clear to the one man in that room with whom he was playing his grim game. “Unfortunately, owing to my own delicate position, I wouldn’t be believed if I just told you what I knew. You will have to see the evidence to believe it, and if you all come to the Prentiss estate tomorrow, you will see it.”

It was on that dramatic statement that the meeting broke up. All left the office except the District Attorney, who remained behind to close up. Blanchard and Hatcher went out to their respective cars. But Corey and Arlene only went as far as the entrance corridor of the building.

“I must hurry, Arlene, to spring the trap!” Corey whispered. “You understand just what you are to do?”

“Yes, Jeff. You’ll be careful, won’t you?” As she spoke she was opening her purse. She thrust a compact revolver into Corey’s surprised hand. “It was Dad’s,” she explained.

“I— I thought you might need it.”

“Thanks, Arlene—and I won’t hesitate to use it if I have to!” Corey promised, pocketing the gun.

Minutes later he was breaking all speed laws, driving his coupé by the shortest route back to the Prentiss estate. When he reached the dark grounds, he parked his car outside the gate, around a turn that screened it where it stood in the shadow of trees.

Like a shadow, he moved onto the grounds. He saw no sign of any other person, but knew he had better move fast. Stealthily he slipped to the little caretaker’s cottage. Once more the key went into the lock. He slipped in, this time moving in absolute darkness.

His nerves went cold when his shoulders hit a bulky object. He could faintly see the dead man swaying from the impact. Using his memory of the layout of the room, he crossed the floor, found a closet door. He squeezed in among earth-smelling overalls and coats. Then, experimentally, he reached out until his hand closed on something cold and metallic—a telephone on a little stand. He had remembered its location precisely.

He waited, silent, tense, alone in the dark cottage with only that vaguely visible hanging corpse for company. Minutes passed. A cold fear began to oppress him. Suppose he was wrong? Suppose the murderer didn’t fall for the bait?

He stiffened. Was that the sound of a car, somewhere outside? Silence again. The minutes became eons. And then, someone was trying the cottage door!

Instantly Corey lifted the telephone from its cradle, drew it into the closet to muffle the faint buzzing sound. He did that with his left hand. His right went into his coat pocket, grasped the gun Arlene had loaned him.

The door was opening. Moonlight slanted in. Corey had deliberately left it unlocked. A shadowy figure appeared momentarily, then blended with darkness as the door closed. Corey heard a man breathing. His breath came rapidly, panting, the breath of a badly frightened man, almost a sob. Corey’s eyes were slits. The killer was going through torment all right!

A little funnel of light suddenly cut the gloom. The man who had come in was focusing a flashlight on the corpse. His movements were frantic as he searched around confusedly. He seemed to reach decision then. He stood up the overturned chair near the hanging corpse. He climbed on it, and in the dim light, the knife he held in his other hand, the knife with which he apparently was going to cut down the corpse, flickered evilly.

THAT was when Corey walked out of the closet, gun in hand.

“All right, you can keep your hands up right as they are!” he gritted.

The light flashed crazily, picked out the sheen on Corey’s gun, then hastily dropped.

“I can see you well enough to shoot!” Corey warned. “And I don’t have to see you to know who you are—John Hatcher!”

As he spoke, he moved to the wall-switch, flooded the room with light. John Hatcher, his face blanched under his gray hair, climbed down off the chair. The man was actually shaking.

“Drop that knife.” It clattered to the floor.

“So you were going to try to take the body away, to cover up your second murder, eh?” Corey snapped. “You couldn’t find the evidence, could you?” He was still too wary to
say that there was really no evidence to be found! "Well, you'll soon be swinging from a rope just like poor Chris Jenson, Hatcher."

Hatcher's face was glistening with sweat. "Listen, Jeff," he croaked hoarsely. "You're not forgetting all I did for you!"

"You undid it when you framed me for murdering Judge Prentiss!"

"I didn't frame you! I didn't frame anybody! It just happened that way, and what was I to do when you were blamed? I stood behind you at the trial."

"Yes, and then tried to frame me for killing Chris Jenson."

"I had to, Jeff!" the man shouted insanely. "I had to kill Jenson when I knew you were going to pump him, even though I didn't know for sure that he could pin the crime on me!"

"You killed both men," Corey grunted. "And that's not all. You appropriated those funds from the War Memorial Fund, cheating honest people who wanted to build a monument for some of the boys I went with overseas! I ought to shoot you down like the rat you are!"

"No, Jeff," the cringing Hatcher pleaded. "No Jeff! Please Jeff! Listen, Jeff!"

Then, with a truly insane scream, he leaped wildly at Corey. The move was so swift, so desperate, that Corey found the gun knocked up before he could fire it. Screaming, cursing, Hatcher was fighting like a wildcat, until Corey, with his free arm, doubled a fist containing all his own pent-up fury, brought it to Hatcher's jaw with a cracking impact.

Even as Hatcher went down like a log, the cottage door burst open. Blue-clad police filled the raftered deathroom, and with them came District Attorney Floyd Saxon and Arlene!

"Jeff, are you all right?" Arlene threw herself into his arms. "I kept begging them to come in, but—"

"But I wanted to hear as much as I could," Saxon said. "Which, it seems, was plenty."

"I did just what you said, Jeff," Arlene explained. "I went right back to Mr. Saxon and told him there had been another murder, that he had to come with me immediately, bringing police. We raced in his car to a drug store just a little distance from the estate. There I kept calling this cottage every five minutes, until I got a busy signal. Then—"

"We came, with me fit to be tied by all this run-around." Saxon grinned tightly. "It seems I owe you an apology, Corey, but it also seems you owe us all an explanation."

"Once I came to the conclusion that the criminal was Hatcher," Jeff said, even as the police were reviving and handcuffing the realtor, "I knew that I had to set a trap for him, because I had no real proof. So I made up a story about there being some evidence here. He fell for it and, already worried because the body here hadn't been reported, he rushed out in his panic. I arranged for Arlene to bring you, Mr. Saxon, to a nearby store, because I knew if you got here too soon and found the body and not the real killer, you might arrest me."

"But Jeff, you still haven't told you decided that Hatcher was the murderer," Arlene said.

"Those flower markers told me that, Arlene." Corey nodded to the desk where they still were. "When I linked those up with the peculiar way Chris Jenson had changed his testimony at the trial, there was only one answer. Although too proud to admit it even to his employers, Chris Jenson was color-blind. He couldn't have told you the color of a tulip, or any other flower that might grow in more than one shade. That was why he left markers to label the colors even after the flowers bloomed.

"Seeing the back of a man's head, a color-blind man might of course easily confuse red hair for that of some other light color. I had three suspects. You, Saxon, and Blanchard both have dark hair, and the one thing a color-blind man can tell is the difference between dark and light. But Hatcher's hair is gray, and he has a lot of it, too, just as I have.

"The reason Chris Jenson was sure it was me at first was a psychological one. He had seen me enter the mansion, and hadn't seen me leave. When a man did come out, he simply assumed it was I, and also assumed the back of the head he saw was red. But as the trial went on, and I kept insisting I had left the mansion unobserved and earlier, he began to think about it, and realized he couldn't be sure after all. That's why he changed his testimony."

The suave, dark-haired D. A. spoke then with grudging admiration.

"Well, Corey, you certainly cleared yourself nobly. And the whole city will bring in the verdict this time. People will be glad you and your future missus are staying in town. We need honest citizens like you!"
ILL WIND BLOWING

By DAVID X. MANNERS

Mac Green runs into an astonishing racket that calls for the swift application of some meteorological knowledge!

MAC GREEN was getting worried. His lean face was sober and his lips an unhappy line as he unlocked the door of the apartment and pushed inside.

Ellen, his wife, was sitting near the window, knitting. She put aside her things and hurried to meet him. She was petite and birdlike, and her bright blue eyes were so large she looked like a child.

"Mac, is it all settled?" she asked. "Did you get it?"

Mac Green slumped in a chair, and stared down at his tightly clenched hands. He had been lucky, he thought, in Ellen's waiting for him all through the long years he had put in as a meteorological specialist in the Navy, and he had been lucky in finding an apartment in crowded New York so they could have a place to live when they were married. But now his luck seemed to have run out.

"I don't know," he said uneasily. "I paid the two thousand cash and Daum signed over the papers to me, but now it doesn't look so good."

In alarm, Ellen sat on the arm of Mac's chair and grabbed his shoulders. That two thousand dollars was everything Mac had saved while in the Service, and it was meant to set him up in business. The filling station over on Edgewater Avenue had seemed an ideal investment.

"You mean it's not going to be all right?" Ellen asked.

"I don't know," Mac said, lines furrowing his brow. "I hope I'm mistaken, but I'm beginning to think Rolfe Daum is a crook. I happened to strike up a conversation at a corner dog cart with a fellow named Ed Friend, just after I'd paid the money for the station. And this fellow, Friend, claimed he'd bought the station an hour before I did!"

A sob broke from Ellen Green's throat. "But there must be some mistake! You should have gone back to see Daum and straightened it all out."
“We did go back,” Mac said, his face frozen in a mask, his thin lips scarcely moving, “but Daum had already left. We saw his assistant, Hafey.”

“You mean that horrible-looking man?”

Mac nodded. “Hafey tried to calm us down. And he might have a point. It seems this fellow Friend was also considering another station down the road, so that there might have been some misunderstanding about who was buying what. Hafey said Daum would straighten it all out when he got back late this afternoon.”

“What do you think?”

Mac Green rose from the chair. His hands were cold and clammy, and he rubbed the palms against the sweater he wore under his pea-jacket. Then he crossed the room to the telephone.

“Listen, and you’ll see what I think,” he said.

He looked up a number, and quickly dialed it. As he did, he thought back to the ad in the newspaper, two weeks before, that had led him to Rolfe Daum. He had thought from the first that two thousand dollars was a small down payment even for a run-down service station like the one on Edgewater Avenue. But Daum, talking calmly, had convinced him that there were no catches in the deal. Daum, with his brightly polished, rimless glasses and a developing little pod at his waistline, certainly had not looked like a sleek, high-pressure slickster.

The number answered on the first ring, and after briefly explaining what he wanted, Mac was connected with a gruff voice that barked:

“Racket Squad. Detective Coolidge speaking.”

“My name is Mac Green,” the ex-G.I. said. “I think I’m being cheated on a deal for a station on Edgewater Avenue.”

“Just a minute,” Coolidge interrupted. “Is this the same deal a man named Ed Friend is mixed up with?”

Mac contained his surprise that the detective already knew what he was talking about. “Yes, it is.”

“Ed Friend called me just about three minutes ago,” the detective went on. “He gave me the whole story, and we’re getting to work on it right away.”

Detective Coolidge checked to make sure that Mac had no additional information, and took Mac’s name and phone number.

“It sounds like a racket all right,” he finished. “You stick close to your phone. We may need you.”

Ellen was standing right beside Mac when he cradled the receiver. Her big blue eyes were staring up at him anxiously.

“What did he say?”

Mac’s lean face split in a smile. He put his arm around her and gave her a reassuring hug.

“They’re already working on it! Ed Friend beat me in getting through a call to them. And, if you ask me, we may as well make ourselves comfortable and wait. The whole Racket Squad will be lighting on Mr. Daum in practically no time flat.”

Mac went into the bedroom, and took off his pea-jacket and sweater. The sweater was one Ellen had made. It didn’t fit too well, and was bulky at the seams, but Mac had never let her know that it was anything but perfect. He wanted desperately to make Ellen happy. Which probably was the reason he hadn’t come right out now and told her that he thought their two thousand dollars was as good as gone.

He knew how the police operated. They would look on him as just another ex-Serviceman who was a victim of the rackets, and, as such, a dime a dozen. If they could help, they would. But no ligaments were likely to be strained in his particular case.

He looked out the window at the skies that were as dark and leaden as his thoughts. A strong gusty wind swept up the street, sailing the last of autumn-tinged leaves from spindly trees that struggled for survival in their small, pavement-hemmed squares.

During the war, when he had been stationed in Iceland, the days had often been dark, and bleak, and lonely like this one, but then Mac had had his meteorological duties to keep him busy. He went back into the living room. Now there was nothing for him to do but wait.

It was late afternoon, and he had just about made up his mind he could sit around no longer when a siren sounded in the street. Ellen drew back the curtain to look out the window.

“It’s a police squad car,” she said. “They’re stopping here.”

A moment later the doorbell rang, and Mac admitted a sharp-eyed stocky man whose gruff voice tagged him even before he’d said his name was Jim Coolidge and pulled out his identification.
Mac took him inside and presented Ellen. “I was over on Edgewater Avenue and I saw Rolfe Daum,” the detective said then. “He says it’s all a mistake, and that he’ll straighten it out at once.”

Mac stared at the man incredulously. “You mean you were over there and you found Daum in? He wasn’t due to get back there until tonight.”

“Well, he’s back there now.”

“You mean he’s probably flown the coop by now!” Mac snorted angrily, his patience worn thin by the long wait. “Why didn’t you haul him in?”

“Because I have no reason to haul him in yet,” Coolidge answered in unhurried calm. “I’m not going to lay myself wide open to false arrest charges until I have the evidence to back me up. I didn’t let Daum know who I was. I pretended I was an ex-G.I. with some free cash to invest, and I made an appointment to meet him at a bar downtown at eight tonight to talk it over.

“I’m pretty sure this Daum must have a con record. There are little scars near his ears that show his face has been lifted, and there are more little scars on his nose, showing that has been altered too. I collected certain bits of evidence to check on and I’ll be ready to nab him when he meets me tonight.”

The breath went out of Mac slowly. This Jim Coolidge was a smart number after all. He knew his business, and he was unhurried in the way he acted because he was sure of himself and knew better than to go off half-cocked.

“I’m sorry if I lost my temper!” Mac apologized. “But that two thousand dollars I’ve sunk in this means everything to my future.”

“Then just stay clear of this and let us handle it,” Coolidge said, “and everything will be all right.”

When the detective left, Mac was feeling better. Ellen was feeling better too, and she said as much.

“The police are so methodical,” she said, “it’s no wonder people get impatient sometimes. But if they just knew how effective and smart police methods were, they wouldn’t be so quick to complain.”

“I wonder how Ed Friend will take Coolidge’s plan?” Mac mused. “Friend struck me as being the kind who would be impatient.”

“Why don’t you call him?” Ellen suggested.

Mac dialed it. A woman, who said she was Mrs. Friend, answered. She said that Ed wasn’t there, but when Mac explained who he was, she hurried on to explain.

“Oh, Mr. Green, I’m so worried. The police detective was just over here to explain what they were doing and Ed got into an awful state after he left. I’m terrified. Ed was so mad he said he was going over to that Edgewater Avenue place and have it out with Rolfe Daum right now!”

Mac hung up the receiver.

“I better get over to Edgewater Avenue fast,” he said to Ellen. He saw the questioning look in her wide blue eyes. “Ed Friend’s gone for a showdown with Daum. I better head him off, or he may queer the whole works.”

Mac was glad Ellen didn’t try to discourage him from going.

“Mac, be careful,” was all she said, and he loved her for it.

He slipped on his sweater and pea-jacket and took the subway downtown, walking the last four blocks to the waterfront section where the gas station was located. A strong wind was blowing from the west and boats were hooting dismally in the late afternoon mist that had brought darkness, though it was scarcely five o’clock.

The gas station, a greasy-looking white structure, was dark and deserted-looking. The place was in need of painting and a general cleaning up, but that it could be developed into a money-maker was clear, for the traffic in trucks and passenger cars along this waterfront street was exceptionally heavy.

A car was parked under the station’s drive-way roof and Mac Green walked toward it. The motor was running and someone was sitting in the car’s front seat. Mac was a little surprised when he saw who it was.

“Hello, Ed Friend,” he began, coming up alongside the car’s open window. “I hope you haven’t—”

Mac broke off suddenly, and all the strength abruptly drained away from him. Ed Friend’s head was lolling unnaturally forward on his chest. His white shirt front was a bloody smear.

Mac put out his hand to touch the man, though he knew even before he did that Ed Friend was dead. The throb of the car’s motor masked the sound of footsteps behind him.

Cra-a-ash!
A gun-butt smacked hard into Mac's skull, sending him to his knees. Then a second blow landed and he went out completely.

When Mac came to, he was lying on a wooden floor. A toe was poking him in the ribs and rolling him over. He blinked his eyes open and he looked up into the feral face of Hafey, shadowed behind a flashlight he held.

"So you're comin' out of it, are yuh?" the man whom Daum had described as his assistant sneered. "Well, behave, or I'll have to put yuh out again."

"Where am I?" Mac asked stupidly. "Who hit me?"

"I hit yuh," Hafey said. "An' it won't do yuh no good to know where yuh are. Yuh ain't goin' any place. Just behave."

Turning on his heel, the squat man went out through a door, darkness following after his retreating flashlight. A key turned in the door lock then, and Mac heard the scrape of a chair being drawn up near it. Hafey must be settling down into it.

Mac staggered to his feet and, as his senses steadied, he remembered what had gone before. Ed Friend had been murdered. And probably, as soon as Ed's body had been disposed of, Mac Green, would share the same fate.

Taking a packet of matches out of his pocket, Mac struck a light. He was in a small, ramshackle room, bare except for a dripping-faucet sink with a few old magazines under it, and an empty orange box. It had one shaded window.

RIPPING off the rag that covered the window, Mac raised the sash and looked out. For a moment he thought he must be in Hiroshima or in bomb-leveled Berlin. The building he was in was the only one standing in several square blocks of rubble.

The window was four floors up a sheer wall. Three blocks to the east were the nearest buildings. This, apparently, was a section being cleared for a housing development, which would get under way as soon as materials were released. And suddenly Mac knew that in all Manhattan there could be no more isolated spot. No one walked up the section's streets. No traffic rolled through it. It was all fenced off!

Then Mac thought of Ellen, and their two-thousand-dollar nest egg, and knew he couldn't sit idly by any longer, waiting for something to happen. He struck another match, looked about the room with its sink and the few magazines and newspapers under it and the orange crate.

He probably could set fire to the place, he decided. But that trick, he knew, would hasten rather than delay his end. But there was something else he could do...

An hour later, by the clock in a tower Mac could see in the distance, the same car he had seen parked at the Edgewater Avenue gas station pulled up at the building. A few minutes later footsteps approached outside his door and stopped. The new arrival was Rolfe Daum. Mac heard Hafey speak the killer's name.

"How is he?" Daum asked.

"He's come around," Hafey answered, "but he ain't made no trouble yet. Those licks over the head I give him took the dander out of him. How'd you make out?"

"Good," Daum said, his voice pitched low. "I got rid of the body in a wonderful place. Down here at the river where they load the garbage scows. It'll get dumped with the garbage, three, four miles out at sea."

Mac heard Hafey's shortling laugh.

"It's such a foolproof setup," Daum went on, "that I think we better treat Green to it too. We've got to shut him up, and one killing more or less won't make any difference now."

"Do we just go in there then and let him have it?" Hafey asked.

"You leave it to me."

There was a pause, then the sound of the door being unlocked. The beam of the flashlight stabbed into the room, Rolfe Daum behind it.

"Hello, Green." Daum's rimless glasses gleamed in the semi-dark. A pleasant, easy smile was on his lips. "We're going to let you go."

Mac Green looked out into the hall, saw Hafey standing there. He looked at the dark well of the stairs ahead.

"So that's the way it's going to be, is it?" he asked. "I start down the stairs, and you shoot me in the back?"

The smile wore thin on Daum's lips. With his free hand he took a gun out of his coat pocket.

"If you'd rather have it here, that can be arranged too. Do you want to cry, or pray a little before you go?"

Mac's heart throbbed louder in his chest, like a clock, beating out the last seconds of his life. Once more he thought of Ellen.
“The money,” he said. “The money I paid you, Daum, and that Ed Friend paid you. I guess you’re taking good care of that. Maybe you’ll even try to sell that gas station again.”

The smile came back to Rolfe Daum’s lips.

“I’ve sold it four times. I think that’s good enough for an old boarded-up property I never saw until two weeks ago and whose real owner I still don’t know.” He tapped his wallet pocket. “Yes, I’m taking good care of my dough.”

Mac leaped at that moment. His legs thrusting him forward, he sailed into the racketeer. Daum’s gun went off wildly, and then Mac grabbed the killer’s wrist.

With a muttered curse, Hafey rushed in to grab Mac from behind. Stout fingers closed around Mac’s throat until he couldn’t breathe, and his eyes started in his head. He kicked backward and caught Hafey in the shins.

At that moment Daum clubbed Mac free. As Mac reeled backwards, he saw Daum’s gun lift and line.

Daum had started to squeeze trigger when a shot blasted—a shot from the hallway behind him. A sickly grin came to Daum’s face. The gun sagged limply in his hand and as it tumbled to the floor, he clutched a shattered shoulder.

DETECTIVE JIM COOLIDGE, with two bluecoats behind him, barged into the room, bristling with guns. Hafey stopped massaging his barked shins and raised his hands. Daum turned, his eyes behind his polished specs blinking in disbelief as he recognized Coolidge.

“Cops,” he muttered. “So it was a frame-up. And that’s how you found out we were here.”

“It was no frameup, Rolfe Daum, alias Rick Destry, alias Ralph Dalton,” Coolidge said. “I traced some fingerprints I got from you this afternoon and found out you’re wanted on three counts for embezzlement and murder back in Montana. And we found out you were here from a message on a kite some kids picked up.”

“A kite?” Daum gasped incredulously.

“I’ll tell him,” Mac cut in then. “I used to be in meteorology, Daum, and we used kites in our weather forecasting work. I made this kite out of an old orange crate, newspaper, and glue which I soaked off old magazine bindings. I made a tail for it out of a rag I ripped off the window. I saw there were people passing about three blocks from here, and when I got the kite about over where they were, I cut it loose, so it would drop. I was sure they’d go after it, and find my message for the police. I was lucky, though. I had a good wind.”

“It was an ill wind for you, Daum, or whatever your name is,” Coolidge said, relieving the man of his fat wallet as he searched him. “And your lucky day, Mac Green. All your money seems to be here, plus some interest.”

“Lucky in every way except one, I guess,” admitted Mac, smiling. “The sweater Ellen knitted for me. I don’t know what she’ll say when she hears I raveled the whole thing out for string.”

Next Issue: DEATH STARTS THE YEAR, a New Year’s Mystery Story by JOHNSTON McCULLEY

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE F-N TEST?

The Famous Finger Nail Test
1 “It’s F-N, the test for men! Scratch your head—if you find dryness or loose dandruff you need Wildroot Cream-Oil. Buy the large economy size.

2 Only a little Wildroot Cream-Oil can do a big job for your hair. Keeps your hair well groomed all day long without a trace of that greasy, plastered down look! Your hair looks good and feels good too.

3 Get Wildroot Cream-Oil from your barber or drug counter. AND TUNE IN... "The Adventures of Sam Spade" on CBS Network every Sunday.
"HATCH" WELTON pulled his taxi up in front of Marlow Manor, the fancy name for the shabby apartment house where I stayed.

"It's only ten, Bill," he said. "How about a hand of gin rummy at my flat? It's kinda lonesome with the wife out of town."

"No soap, Hatch," I said. "I'm leaving for Seattle tomorrow."

Hatch shook his head sadly.

"You gonna jump from job to job, place to place, all the time? Why don't you find a nice steady chick and settle down?"

"Let her find me. I grinned. "So long."

His cab rattled off and I went up the steps. In his slow way, Hatch worried a lot about me. He had, ever since I'd come back with a Purple Heart and war nerves.

The door opened in my face and that good-looking blonde from the apartment above mine came out.

"Hello," I said. "Warm evening, isn't it?"

Maybe it was, but she provided a chill. She went right past me as if I were one of the potted ferns in front of the door. I watched her trim figure hurry down the street. Too bad all that snobbishness had to be wrapped up in such a nice package.
She was still on my mind as I entered my apartment. Funny girl. Since the day she and the elderly guy I figured to be her father—the card outside gave their name as Ingles—had moved into Marlow Manor a few weeks back, both of them had deliberately avoided their fellow tenants.

They looked and dressed like people who could afford better dumps than run-down Marlow Manor. What was behind their standoffishness? Suspicion? Fear? Suspicion and fear of what—or whom?

A blast of noise was hitting my eardrums. That canned symphony breaking out again from the top floor, Room 411. The manager, after I'd beefed about it, had told me why. Old lady Mayo, who had moved in just a week ago, was deaf, bedridden, and had insomnia. It took a forty-piece philharmonic to lullaby her to sleep, with her pig-eyed nephew, Hugh Mayo, running the automatic phonograph. The music soothed her nerves, and had to be loud because otherwise she couldn't hear it.

Half-undressed, I went into the bathroom and shaved. By the time I came out the music had stopped.

Then the cat walked in.

He came right through the window from the fire-escape and in one jump was on my bed. It was the Ingles' cat. I'd seen the snotty blonde petting it. A handsome white Persian that had a habit of wandering all over the apartment house.

"Scat, cat!" I yelled at it. "Get off that bed!"

The silver bell on the cat's thick leather collar tinkled clearly as the animal pranced up and down on my clean sheets. It was leaving muddy tracks!

I yelled at it again, then sat up straight. Mud? When it hadn't rained all day?

I grabbed the cat, examining each of its four paws. The pads were dark, moist. Not mud. The smears were reddish-brown. Blood!

Revolving the squirming feline, I looked for cuts. Not a mark. I dropped the cat and went to the window. On the sill were the animal's footprints. I got out my flashlight and opened the window all the way. There, on the white framework of the fire-escape, were the cat's ominous paw-marks, leading from somewhere above.

No cat could have had the curiosity I had then. I was sans shirt and shoes, but still decent. I climbed out onto the fire-escape and started up. The spotty trail led right to the landing above my apartment.

A window was partway open and under the half-drawn shade light showed. I used the flashlight. The cat's trade-mark was darkly outlined on the sill. It had come from this apartment—the Ingles apartment.

No sound from within. I peered under the shade. And I saw it. An overturned chair. A man lying face down in front of it. Blood spreading out in a pool around him. And from the pool, tracks of blood-stained paws leading to the window.

Something—maybe it was the thought that the man wasn't quite dead—pulled me into the room. Except for that still form on the floor the place was quiet and unoccupied. But not undisturbed. It looked as if a truck had gone over it lightly, then backed up and plowed through without brakes.

The man on the floor was Ingles all right. And dead. With a bullet-hole through his forehead, and another wound in his right shoulder. That's where the blood had come from. A revolver lay close by. His left hand, with the index finger pointing in an odd way, was limp in a smear of blood.

A key turned in the lock of the door. I swung around like a guilty man caught in the act. The girl came in. She shut the door before she saw me standing there, covering the body. She dropped a package and her purse, and a scream started in her throat.

"Hold it," I said quickly. "And brace yourself."

That seemed to scare her into silence. I moved aside so she could see the body. She looked, then tottered. I held on to her to keep her from keeling over. She was as white as a sheet, but her whispered words came out almost unconsciously:

"I knew it! I shouldn't have left him alone."

I helped her into a chair and she suddenly broke down, covering her face with her hands.

"It's too late for a doctor," I said awkwardly. "Maybe I'd better call the police."

"Police?" She pulled out of her haze and nodded jerkily. "Yes. The police. My—my purse please."

She had courage, that girl. I picked up the bag she had dropped and handed it to her. Then I went to the phone and called Headquarters. I gave the address, said it looked like murder, and hung up. When I turned
around the blonde had a gun on me.
It was just a little pearl-handled deal she
had taken from her purse, but the way she
held it and looked at me made my hair
stand on end. I sat down.
“Miss Ingles, I hope you don’t think I did
this!”
“You broke into this room!”
No denying that. I began to tell her why
I was there, but stopped when I saw that
her red-rimmed accusing eyes were fixed on
my chest. I looked down and saw a dark
smear on my upper torso—just a brief side-
swipe of that cat’s blood-damp paw when
I’d picked it up—but it was enough to make
me a murderer in this girl’s eyes.

Inspector Doyle and two cops ar-
ived. Doyle was a bulldogish character
who listened carefully while the girl ex-
plained how she had gone blocks looking for
a drug store, to fill a prescription her father
needed, and had come back to find him dead,
with me standing over the body.
Doyle looked at me as if I had been the
guy who shot Lincoln.
“Search him, boys,” he said.
“Do I look like I’m hiding anything?” I
demanded. “And will you give me a chance
to put some more clothes on?”
The medical examiner arrived and went
into a huddle with Doyle over the corpse.
Doyle crooked a finger at me.
“Let’s have your story, Ames.”
I told him. He walked over to the window
and flashed a light on the fire-escape.
“So you bust into this apartment just
because a cat had spots on its paws,” he said.
“When’d you hear the shots?”
“I didn’t hear any shots.”
He scowled.
“No shots? This man was plugged with
what looks like a thirty-eight. There had
to be shots.”
“The music was too loud, I guess.”
“Music? What music?”
“From upstairs,” I said. “Mrs. Mayo. She’s
an invalid and her nephew plays the phono-
graph for her. Loud.”
“Music. Cats. A trespasser without shirt
or shoes. This is some case,” Doyle walked
over to the blonde. “I know this has hit you
like a ton of bricks,” he said to her, “but we’ve
got to know why your father was
killed.”

His blunt kindness seemed to steady her.
She had put that deadly pearl-handled toy
aside, and now she looked at me, then back
at Doyle.
“You know. He knows. My father was
murdered for the Paris Star.”
“Paris Star?” Doyle stared. “Then your
father was—”
“John Ordway. I’m his daughter, Joan.”
“But why are you living here under the
name of Ingles?”
“We were being followed. Somebody was
after the jewel. Father wouldn’t put it in a
deposit vault or let it out of his sight. I
persuaded him to move here under another
name. He said not to worry, that he’d hide
the Paris Star where nobody would find it.
Except me. He said he’d tell me. But he was
killed before—”
“Before he could tell you where he hid
the diamond?” Doyle prompted.
“No.” Her voice was almost inaudible.
“Before he could hide it.”

Diamond. Paris Star. It was all some-	hing out of Dali to me. Even what I was
staring at now—the strangely pointing finger
of the murdered man’s left hand. The light
shone down on that smear of blood and I
could swear there were letters there. A
faint crude scrawl, “C-O-L” that trailed off
as though Ordway had died before he could
finish his message.

Was I sure? Was I crazy? A dead man’s
writing, in his own blood!
I looked again. Yes, it was there. “C-O-L.”
You could pass it off as a bloody smear if
you weren’t standing where I was.
Doyle carefully picked up the gun beside
Ordway and showed it to the girl.
“Your father’s gun?”
She looked at it and nodded.
“It hasn’t been fired,” Doyle said. He gave
me, suddenly, that bulldog look. “I want to
see your apartment, Ames.”

“Okay.” I shrugged.
I stopped by the girl on the way out.
“Miss Ingles—I mean Miss Ordway,” I
said, “I’m just a lad who wants to helps you.
You’ve got to believe that!”
She had her hand over her eyes and didn’t
look up.

“Come on, Hennessy,” Doyle said. “Cobb,
you stay here.”

When we reached my apartment, the cop
began to prowl around like a movie dick
looking for clues.

“Isn’t a search warrant in order for this
sort of thing?” I said.

Doyle smiled.
THE CAT CAME BACK

“Did you have a search warrant when you climbed through that window upstairs?”
I shut up and watched Doyle snoop around. He picked up something from my dresser. It was my ticket north.

“You were figuring on leaving town,” he accused.

“Yeah,” I said. “I got a job coming up in Seattle.”

“You’re not going anywhere, Ames,” he answered as he shook his head. “Joan Ordway’s swearing out a trespassing charge.”

Hennessy plowed into the room.

“Chief, I found this pushed down back of the cushions in the davenport.”

He held it by the muzzle—a .38. While Doyle examined it, I stared stupidly. I could see it had been fired.

“She says trespassing,” I thought out loud. “So now you make it really what she’s thinking. Murder!”

Doyle wrapped the gun in his handkerchief.

“Don’t talk if you don’t want to,” he advised. “Is this your gun?”

I shook my head.

“I hate guns. Ever since the war.”

Doyle gave me a keen look. “You a war vet?”

I nodded. They looked at me a while, and I got the idea of what a third degree is like. Then Hennessy whispered in Doyle’s ear, but so loud I caught it:

“Maybe he’s one of these psycho-neurotics.”

“Quiet, Hennessy.” Then he spoke to me, but not unkindly, “Ames, you’re in a tight spot. I’ll have to book you as a material witness.”

“That means,” I said, “I go to the jug.”

He nodded.

“Hennessy, stay here till he finishes dressing. I’m going upstairs and check this gun with the M. E.”

He went out. I sat down on the bed and started putting on my shoes. Directly in front of me the cop leaned against the dresser. He had one leg crossed over the other, loosely. That’s when the idea came to me.

The girl thought I was guilty. The cops could hold me in the clink till this whole mess was cleared up. I had to prove her wrong. And I couldn’t prove it in the clink.

I finished with my shoes and then, still with my head down, I reached out, grabbed Hennessy by the ankles, and pulled him violently off his feet. He came down fast with a thok. I swarmed over him, ready to land the kayo punch. It wasn’t needed. The back of his head had hit the dresser coming down. Hard. He was out cold.

I was in it now up to my neck. Housebreaking and resisting arrest. They would throw the book at me, and that gun along with it. But who had planted the .38 in my apartment wasn’t so important right now. Those blue eyes upstage were on my mind. I had to prove how wrong she was.

I went out the window, down the fire escape, along the court, and out through the back alley. I knew a hideout where I wouldn’t be disturbed.

Hatch Welton’s flat was five blocks away. I saw a light under his door as I went down the dark hall. He looked sleepily surprised when he let me in. I shut the door, locked it.

“If anybody asks, I’m not here. I’m just not around.”

His slow brain told hold of that.

“What’s up, Bill? You been evicted?”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

He sat down, a puzzled look on his face.

“If you don’t wanna talk about it, Bill, it’s okay with me.”

I saw it was getting late and I had a lot of thinking to do.

“I’ll flop here on the couch, Hatch,” I said. “And don’t worry. Everything’ll pan out all right.”

“I wonder,” he said. “You got a genius for getting into trouble. Now if you’d just get married and settle down—”

“Not a chance. Women”—my mind was on a certain blonde—“are dangerous. Good night, Hatch, and don’t believe everything you read in the papers.”

I tossed for an hour before I dropped off. About all that thinking did was tire me out. It didn’t solve a thing.”

Hatch woke me up the next morning. He was standing there with the morning paper in his hand.

“I mighta known it,” he said. “Not just fun. You gotta get mixed up in murders.”

“I told you not to believe everything you read in the papers,” I said.

But there it was on the front page. John Ordway, the murdered man, had been a professional buyer for a wealthy collector of valuable gems. He had come West to purchase one of the world’s most perfect dia-
monds, the Paris Star, from a private owner. Although Ordway had tried to keep the story quiet, a reporter had broken it, and then trouble had begun for John Ordway and his daughter Joan.

A bodyguard Ordway had hired had been slugged and laid up in the hospital. Once, while father and daughter had been out, their hotel rooms had been ransacked. Followed wherever they went, they had done some fancy dodging around while waiting for plane reservations east, and had ended up at Marlow Manor under the name of Ingles. Where the tragic climax had been reached.

The Paris Star was gone. So was the murderer, or murderers. One police theory was that “Professor” Tobin might be in on it. Tobin had been tagged Professor by the police because he looked like a lean and hungry college teacher, but actually, he was a slick jewel thief with a dozen aliases. A master at impersonation and disguise.

The Paris Star would have been big game for Tobin, who was mean enough to kill, or hire killers, to get what he wanted. And me? Sure. Bill Ames was one of the murder suspects.

After Hatch left in his cab, I paced the floor and smoked cigarettes in a chain. Maybe I’d been a fool for running out. They couldn’t hold a man on circumstantial evidence. But now? I was Number One on Doyle’s list.

I prowled the place like a nervous cat until Hatch showed up with the afternoon papers. One look at the latest story and that spot I was on began to sizzle. The gun Hennessy had found in my apartment was the gun that had killed Ordway!

“If I didn’t know you better,” Hatch said, “I’d swear you were guilty as sin.”

I’d told Hatch the whole story. Now I said:

“Doyle was right. It’s a funny case. The killer hangs around to plant a hot burner in my apartment while I’m upstairs being grilled. Maybe the killer’s still hanging around.”

Hatch looked worried.

“Now, Bill, don’t let this throw you. Just sit tight.”

“While everybody’s yelling I did it—excluding that girl?” I paced up and down again. “There’re things I’ve got to know. Who tried to frame me? What was Ordway trying to write in his own blood? And I

[Turn to page 86]
can't find them out sitting around here. Hatch, tonight I’m borrowing your chauffeur’s cap, coat and your cab.”

“Hold it!” he yelped. “That cab’s my living. If anything happens to it, I’m sunk.”

“Nothing’ll happen to it,” I said. “I’m just going to use it as a blind to get back into Marlow Manor . . .”

I circled the block in Hatch’s cab. As far as I could make out, Doyle had planted only one lookout. He was in front of Marlow Manor, impersonating a potted fern. So I kept going and parked about half a block from the rear alley.

I sat there a minute, deliberating. Maybe there was another cop hanging around the dark court, near the fire-escape. Then I shrugged. If he was there he was there.

I stepped into the alley and moved along, hugging the wall. Nobody yet. Just that loud music from upstairs. Number 411, of course. Hugh Mayo was trying to put his deaf aunt to sleep with a recorded symphony.

I saw the white framework of the fire-escape ahead, dim in the shadows. Still moving cautiously, I got to it—then stopped cold. Voices. From my apartment.

They had the lights off. Waiting in the dark for Bill Ames to come back and walk into their open arms. And I wasn’t buying.

“—we know this much,” I heard. “The girl left the station after making her report, to come back here.” That was Doyle’s voice. I’d caught him in the middle of a sentence.

“She should’ve arrived an hour ago. But maybe she’s suffering from shock. It was a terrific blow. Might be wandering around town. She’ll be back.”

What did he mean—that Joan Ordway was missing?

Then Hennessy’s voice: “First that Ames takes a powder. Now the girl pulls a vanishing act. Something’s fishy here. And just let me get hold of Ames for socking me from behind!”

“He didn’t sock you, big brain,” Doyle broke in. “You knocked yourself out when he caught you napping with that old leg-from-under trick. Now let’s get down to business before we’re all monkeys. We’ve checked the whole house. Even that sick old dame and her nephew upstairs. Nothing’s out of line except—”

I didn’t wait to hear any more. I was back—pedaling up the alley to the back entrance. I had strained my ears to catch what I had because of that music from up-
stairs, and even now I wasn't sure I'd heard right.

Where was Joan Ordway? It didn’t make sense. But at the moment I was intent on one thing—the Ordway apartment. If it was momentarily unguarded, I meant to slip in.

I found the rear door locked, but I had my key. The dimly lighted back stairs showed no uniformed bulk waiting to grab me. I went up two flights, then peered around the wall. Nobody. But how long would that sales meeting downstairs last?

The door to the Ordway apartment was slightly ajar, and the lights were on. That meant somebody would be back, so I had to work fast. I went in. The body had been removed and the bloodstains cleaned up, but nothing else had been disturbed.

Joan Ordway thought the Paris Star had been stolen at the time her father was killed. I wondered if I was the only one who figured her wrong. Ordway had been no fool. He knew the thieves were right on his tail. So he had picked a hiding-place for that jewel—just in case. And he had tried to tell Joan just before he died. Tried in his own blood, in that almost illegible scrawl, “C-O-L.” Then and there I finished it for him. Cold.

I was already in the kitchen of the apartment. Didn’t a diamond look like a piece of ice? Sure. And the last place a killed in a hurry would look for a precious stone would be in a refrigerator.

I was starting to pull the ice-trays out when my cocked ear caught sounds and voices. I froze like that ice. Doyle and Hennessy were coming back!

It was seconds to safety. I shoved back the trays, shut the refrigerator, and ducked out through the living room window, crouching down out of sight on the fire-escape.

I heard Doyle’s voice at the door.

“I’m leaving Cobb in Ames’ apartment, just in case the guy comes back. You stay here by the phone, Hennessy. And stay awake. That girl’s gotta be found. I’ll check back from Headquarters.”

“Okay, chief.”

Doyle must have left then, because I heard Hennessy moving around, muttering to himself. Then quiet, except for a rustle of paper. The cop had probably flopped in a chair and was reading.

The fire-escape was no place for me. Hennessy might take it into his head to wander
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over and look out the window. And downstairs was out, with Cobb waiting to nab me. Only one direction to go. Up.

I made it to the rail on my knees. Now! I started up. Where I was going I didn’t know, but—

I jerked back, almost losing my grip on the rail.

I was staring into two glowing eyes, hardly a foot from my face. Wide, unblinking eyes. Then I heard the clear tinkle of a bell, a lazy purr, and I drew a deep breath.

That blasted cat! It was sitting right on the fire-escape, looking at me. Joan Ordway’s wandering Persian. I pushed the animal aside and climbed on.

At the next landing there was a closed window, with no light from behind it. But from another room within, came the pounding strains of music. The Mayo apartment.

I had taken plenty of chances already, so one more didn’t matter. I tried the window. It was unlocked. Even knowing the old lady was deaf, I opened it as quietly as I could, and slid over the sill into the dark room.

Deaf people have a sixth sense. That’s what flashed through my mind as the lights went suddenly on.

It was Mrs. Mayo’s bedroom all right. And she was sitting upright in bed, fixing me with a horrified look. She wore an old-fashioned nightcap and lace-trimmed nightgown, but with her pale angular face she reminded me of some kind of unhealthy bird. A vulture. She pulled the covers up to her chin and let out a strident squawk.

“Hugh! Hugh! There’s a burglar in my room!”

The loud music just outside the bedroom was shut off abruptly. A heavy figure bounded into the room. Hugh Mayo squinted at me over the barrel of an automatic. Then, recognizing me, he lowered the gun slowly.

“What the devil? You, Ames! Don’t you ever use a door any more?”

He turned to the bed and made with the fingers—deaf-and-dumb talk, I figured. The death-faced figure in the bed seemed to relax a little, but still glared at me.

“Look, Mayo,” I said, “I didn’t mean to frighten her, but the place is jumping with cops.”

HUGH MAYO’S lips twisted in an odd smirk.

“You and the cops don’t get along, do you, Ames?”
I followed him into the living room. It seemed loudly quiet now without that music. He looked me over.

"That cabby's outfit is a bum disguise," he said. "And why'd you come back here when the cops are so hot on your tail?"

He seemed more curious than belligerent. And he had put that automatic back in his pocket. He waved me toward a straight-backed chair, but I sat down in one with deep cushions. It was near the radio-phonograph.

"I had a hunch," I said, "about the diamond. I figured I knew where Ordway hid it before he was shot."

Hugh Mayo squinted at me with his pig-eyes.

"What d'you mean he hid it? Wasn't the diamond what he was killed for?"

"Sure. But Ordway was smart enough to cache it beforehand. He knew he was on the spot. Just like I am."

I turned my head slightly. I hadn't been sure before, when I first heard it, but now I was. A tapping sound behind a wall nearby, like somebody trying to get a message across.

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The ROSICRUCIANS
SAN JOSE (AMORC) CALIFORNIA
Mayo got up suddenly and turned on the phonograph. Music began to blast through the room.

“Aunty’s nerves,” he explained over it. “I better give her some medicine.”

He went into the bedroom. I strained my ears over the music. Yes, a tapping sound—quick, urgent. I turned in my chair to look at the door it seemed to come from behind. And my hand touched something that had been shoved down behind the chair cushion, so that just an edge of it stuck out. A woman’s purse.

Mayo came back into the room and squinted at me.

“So go on, Ames,” he said. “You know where the diamond is?”

I fumbled for a cigarette. He came over and held his lighter to it. Over the flame his pig-eyes bored into my face.

“I could turn you in,” he said.

“Okay,” I said. “Turn me in. The cops are right downstairs.”

That smirk twisted his slot-mouth. “On second thought, they can wait. I’ve been hoping you’d come back, Ames.”

“Meaning?”

“Let’s talk about Ordway, and why you murdered him.”

I blew a cloud of cigarette smoke in his face. He stepped back, squinting. He looked mean.

“I didn’t murder him,” I said. “But I got an idea who did, Mayo—or whatever your real name is.”

His shoulders came down, like a rug getting set for some infighting.

“Any other bright ideas, Ames?” he rasped.

“Yeah.” The record ended, and in the lull before the next platter dropped, I heard it again. The tapping from the door at my left.

“What is she doing here?”

“Huh?” he answered.

“Joan Ordway.”

I pulled the black suede bag from under the cushion and laid it on the chair-arm.

Hugh Mayo looked at it and smirked.

“That belongs to my aunt.”

“Try again. Joan Ordway had this bag when I last saw her. I ought to know. She pulled a gun out of it.”

He didn’t say anything. He just turned up the volume on the phonograph a little louder. I got out of the chair.

“Miss Ordway,” I said to the door at my left, “can you come out?”
The door stayed shut. I went over and turned the latch and pulled it open. It was a closet and Joan Ordway had been propped up inside. She slumped out against me, exhausted from tapping on that door with her high-heeled shoes. She was gagged, and tied at wrists and ankles. I eased her into a chair and started getting her untied.

Mayo said something through the music at me, but I went on with my work. Un-gagged, she looked at me with those wild blue eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know."

"Forget it," I said. "We all make mistakes."

I left her to untie her own ankles and turned to Mayo. I wasn't surprised to see the automatic back in his hand. I'd felt it burning my spine.

"She wouldn't talk, Ames," he rasped. "But maybe you will." He shoved me into a chair. "You dropped in on us. Just like we wanted. How much are you asking?"

"I'm not selling," I replied.

THERE was a heavy ring on his left hand. That hand bunched into a fist and the ring sideswiped my jaw, with teeth-rattling impact. As my head snapped back he hit me again, then kept hitting. I tasted blood.

"Where is it?" Crunch! Crunch! "Where's the Paris Star?"

He was growling that at me between punches. Then he stepped back, breathing heavy. He was muscle-bound and short-winded. I was glad of that. I wiped the blood off my mouth and looked at the girl. She was rubbing her numbed wrists, shaking her head.

"Tell him," she urged. "Tell him, if you know!"

"Okay," I said. "Refrigerator. Look in the ice-trays."

Again a vicious swing of that ringed fist cracked against my face. I managed to stay upright in the chair, but bright lights were flashing in my head.

"Ice-trays, eh?" Mayo growled. "We looked there. And all over. No diamond. Now out with it, Ames!"

That cleared my brain. So I'd been all wrong on that hunch. And not one of us knew who was carrying the ball!

But that same hunch, in bringing me here, gave me the whole rhyme and reason for the murder. And now, action was in order.

[Turn page]
Mayo came at me again. I slumped side-ward, head down. He stopped right in front of me, the gun dangling.

"Guess I got too rough," he rasped. "He's out like a light."

What else he may have wanted to say came out in an agonized whoosh as my fist plowed into his soft middle. Two could play at a dirty game, I thought. He doubted, his fat face livid, and I went after him, twisting his limp gun arm. The automatic slithered away out of sight, under the phonograph.

He came at me, swinging drunkenly, and I let him have it, one, two. He went glassy-eyed, his jaw wide open. So I let him have it from the floor. I heard something give, then he went down, and out.

A half-scream of fright from the girl whirled me around. A fantastic figure was holding a gun on us from the bedroom door. It still wore the make-up and the night-dress of "Mrs. Mayo", but under the gown were trousers, and the gaunt frame and face of a "lean and hungry college teacher"! Something clicked in my brain.

"You recover fast, Aunty," I said. "Or should I say—Professor Tobin?"

"You guessed it, Ames." The voice was harsh and masculine; no longer shrill and senile. "Tobin. Don't look so amazed, Miss Ordway. Slug and I—Slug's the stupid ox your boy friend just knocked out—have been on your tail for weeks. You nearly gave us the slip. But not quite."

I looked at Joan.

"It adds up," I said. "Murder with music. Music loud enough to cover the shots when Tobin and Slug killed your father and searched your apartment. And loud enough to cover any screams you might have let out when they kidnapped you."

Tobin took over.

"When we finally traced you here, Miss Ordway, this apartment was vacant. It looked like a good pitch, so Slug and I put on the sick aunt act and moved in. Who'd suspect an invalid and her doting nephew?"

"Nobody," I said. "Except when that gun showed up in my apartment I began to get ideas."

"From the first, Ames, we had you spotted for the frame," Tobin went on. "Slug slipped down the back way while the cops were working on you in the Ordway apartment, and planted the murder rod in your room."

"You—you murdered my father!" Joan murmured as she stared at Tobin.
The grotesquely attired figure shrugged.
"We had to. He wouldn't play ball or
tell us where the Paris Star was after Slug
shot him from behind through the shoulder.
So I had to finish him." Tobin suddenly
snarled: "Now, which one of you has the
Paris Star?"
I saw murder in his eye. The music was
swelling to a climax. Before the record fin-
ished he would shoot!
Then suddenly came a soft thud in the
bedroom, the clear tinkling of a bell. I saw
a cat's glowing eyes behind Tobin. And all
at once I knew the answer!
Tobin turned slightly, and in the brief
second he was off guard I crashed into him
with a flying tackle. I winced as the gun
roared almost in my ear, but the bullet raced
into the ceiling. I grabbed his wrist, yelling
to Joan to do something. But she was way
ahead of me.

She shut the phonograph off and screamed
at the top of her voice. Tobin cursed
and fought like a madman. We rolled across
the room, fighting for the gun. Then I
twisted his wrist and the weapon clattered
to the floor.

He clawed at my throat with bony hands
that had steel-like strength. Viciously he
brought up his knee. In a wave of nausea
I felt the power drain out of my fingers.
Then we rolled over again, the floor came
up and slapped the back of my head, and I
suddenly lost all interest in the affair....

Doyle was helping me to my feet, and the
room was seething with uniforms. I looked
around for Tobin and his hood, "Slug." They
were both handcuffed, and Slug was
holding what looked like a broken jaw.

"Feel okay—hero?" said Doyle. He
grinned as I gave him a questioning look.
"The girl just explained. But next time,
Ams, let us in on your capers. And why'd
you run out?"

[Turn page]
I felt a goose-egg lump on the back of my head, and winced.

"War nerves, Doyle. I didn't want to be cooped up in a nice cool jail."

"Tobin, the big jewel crook, under our noses," he said wonderingly and scowled.

"But where's the Paris Star?"

A furry shape was slinking toward the open window over the fire-escape.

"Grab it!" I yelled. "Grab that cat!"

They looked at me as if they thought that conk on the noggin had affected my brain. But Hennessy was near the cat, and reached out for it. I went over and took the squirming Persian from him. Then I looked at the girl.

"Miss Ordway, your father had the Paris Star's hiding-place figured out ahead of time. And he tried to tell you in his own blood, before Tobin shot him through the brain. But I figured the letters 'C-O-L' all wrong. What he was trying to write was this:"

I had the leather collar off the cat.

"'Collar'," I said. "'What better hiding place?'"

I was right this time. I felt the bulge as I handed the collar to Doyle.

"With his knife your father slit an opening in the leather, inserted the jewel, and—"

I didn't have to go on. Doyle was already holding a glittering object in his hand. A mass of white fire—the flawless Paris Star. The cops gathered around, gaping. Joan Ordway looked at it, then at me.

"And to think I accused you, made you a fugitive."

"I told you once—forget it."

I smiled. She smiled. We were standing there like that when Hatch burst into the room.

"Bill! Where's my cab? If anything's happened to it—"

He stopped, seeing I wasn't paying any attention to him. I was still looking at the girl and she was still looking at me. Hatch looked at both of us.

"Bill," he said slowly, "is this it?"

"Hatch," I said, "this is it."

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HEADQUARTERS
(Continued from page 8)

so badly scrambled that he had been dropped at even the lowliest gyms.

It was more by accident than anything else that he idly noticed a vague form in a blue suit at the top of the stairs leading to the balcony.

But when the gun went off, he reacted instantly. He dashed through the crowd and up the stairs just in time to see Blue Suit doing a disappearing act through the exit doors. There was a fire extinguisher on the wall and three pails of sand on the floor below.

Johnny Castle played hunches. He dipped into the pails and in the middle one was a gun—a short barreled .38. Feeling like the well known cat who had swallowed the canary, he went back down to find the gendarmes had arrived.

Captain Mullin was tired of finding Castle every time he was called out on a murder.

"Every time anybody gets killed in this town you're there, under my feet and in my hair! I'm sick of looking at you! I'm tired of that worn out press card you stick in my men's faces! I've a good mind to lock you up on a nuisance charge!"

It looked Simple, But—

Johnny got out. To find that the g.f. Libby, had some words for him. She had noticed Blue Suit too. But she had been more careful than Johnny. She had seen his face. They both knew him. He was the husband of the girl Terry Logan the stumblebum had been dancing with. And Terry Logan was the corpse.

Which made it pretty simple. Terry Logan goes dancing with a gal, friend husband gets a gun and knocks him off. Or so Johnny Castle thought. Until he got home and examined the gun he had taken from the sand pail. Every chamber in the cylinder was full. The gun had never been fired.

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LETTERS FROM OUR READERS
WE TAKE a small bow of gratified pride this month. Just as we predicted, the reader response to William Chamberlain’s hilarious story DON’T FORGET YOUR GUN in the July THRILLING DETECTIVE was little short of colossal. Just look at these:

Where has this Bill Chamberlain been all our lives? We want more!—Ed Hanahan, Memphis, Tenn.
The D.S.C. to Chamberlain. DON’T FORGET YOUR GUN is my idea of what a real detective story should be! Thrills and laughs, that’s the combination that clicks every time.—John MacLean, New York, N.Y.

More! More!—Shirley Backus, Syracuse, N.Y.

Chamberlain shows up some of the other pencil pushers. It’s like a 1920 Model T trying to race a 12 cylinder souped-up 46 model. When do we get his next story?—Albert L. Miller, Trenton, N.J.

Few of the “kill-em-and-guess-who” gang write with the simple ease and joy that Chamberlain does. It is a pleasure to read him.—Harry Abel, Philadelphia, Pa.

Well, anyway, you get the idea. There were more, along the same lines. Then, of course, there were some of these:

Except for DON’T FORGET YOUR GUN, the July issue was not so hot. BLOOD ON HER HANDS was as wild as a madman’s dream—like one of the old horror stories Uncle Sam’s post-office decided we could do without. Murder and a crazy doctor about to operate on live victims—oh, brother!—Charles Stark, Manhasset, L.I.

There are them who say anyone the doctors operate on is a victim, Chas. The nutty doctor creeps in every once in a while—makes good drammer. Story was exciting just the same, wasn’t it?

Seems to me the loner I read good old T.D. the better it gets. Guess that’s why I keep reading it, hah? How about some more Johnny Castle stories?—William Tuttle, Denver, Col.

More Johnny Castles are in the offing, friend, and we mean friend. You will have discovered that already if you read the first part of this HEADQUARTERS department where we have discussed the new long nov- elet MAKE MINE MURDER, coming in next issue. A good long tale, full of the crackling wit and gaiy doings which make the Castle series so popular with discriminating fans. And that’s all the time we have this trip. So with grins for the bouquets and groans for the brickbats, we remain faithfully, your obedient servants. Address all future bouquets and brickbats to The Editor, THRILLING DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th St., New York, 16, N. Y. A postcard will do as well as a letter. Thank you!—THE EDITOR.
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A Few Forthcoming Titles

DUEL IN THE SUN by Niven Busch
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THE RED LAW by Jackson Gregory
DIVIDEND ON DEATH by Brett Halliday
A VARIETY OF WEAPONS by Rufus King
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