

10-STORY ALL DIFFERENT! DETECTIVE

MAGAZINE

10¢

SEPTEMBER

THE
MORGUE
IS FULL OF
HEROES

Hollywood Novellet
By JAMES A. KIRCH

BULLET
BANDWAGON

By H. F. SORENSEN





**YOU CAN PLAY
THE MELODY OF "SWANEE RIVER"
RIGHT NOW—HERE'S HOW**

Way down up-on the Swanee Rib-ber

E D C E D C C A C

B C D E F G A B C D E

far, far, a - way

G E C D

C D E F G A B

Thousands Now Play Who Never Thought They Could



Surprised Friends

I want to say that my friends are greatly surprised at the different pieces I can already play. I am very happy to have chosen your method of learning.

*B. F., Bronx, N. Y.



Learned Quickly at Home

I didn't dream I could actually learn to play without a teacher. Now when I play for people they hardly believe that I learned to play so well in so short a time.

*H. C. S., Calif.



Best Method by Far

Enclosed is my last examination sheet for my course in Tenor Banjo. This completes my course. I had ten lessons before under teachers, but my instructions with you were by far the best.

*A. O., Minn.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

SEE HOW EASY IT IS!

LOOK at the diagram above. The first note is "E." That's the white key to the right of the two black keys near the middle of the piano keyboard. The next note "D," one note lower, is the next white key to the left and, similarly, the next note, "C," is the next white key to the left of that one. The following three notes are simply a repetition of the first three and there you are, actually playing the familiar melody of "Swanee River."

That's the modern way to learn music; you learn to play by *playing*. No tedious study and practice. This shortcut method starts you on a real tune in your very first lesson. After a few weeks, you'll be able to read the notes off like a regular musician. Soon you are able to play scores of familiar favorites and new hits at sight. And that applies to any instrument: violin, guitar, accordion, saxophone, whatever you want to learn. It takes only a few minutes a day, costs only a few cents a lesson.

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10-STORY DETECTIVE

MAGAZINE

ALL STAR
ALL DIFFERENT

Vol. III

SEPTEMBER, 1939

No. 1

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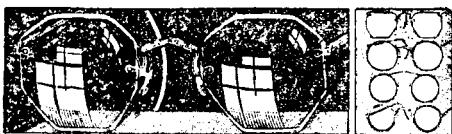
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| 20x4.40-112 | 6.65 | 5.70 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-113 | 6.65 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-113 | 6.70 | 5.75 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-114 | 6.70 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-114 | 6.75 | 5.80 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-115 | 6.75 | 2.70 |
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| 20x4.40-118 | 6.95 | 6.00 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-119 | 6.95 | 2.70 |
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| 20x4.40-121 | 7.10 | 6.15 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-122 | 7.10 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-122 | 7.15 | 6.20 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-123 | 7.15 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-123 | 7.20 | 6.25 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-124 | 7.20 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-124 | 7.25 | 6.30 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-125 | 7.25 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-125 | 7.30 | 6.35 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-126 | 7.30 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-126 | 7.35 | 6.40 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-127 | 7.35 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-127 | 7.40 | 6.45 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-128 | 7.40 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-128 | 7.45 | 6.50 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-129 | 7.45 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-129 | 7.50 | 6.55 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-130 | 7.50 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-130 | 7.55 | 6.60 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-131 | 7.55 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-131 | 7.60 | 6.65 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-132 | 7.60 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-132 | 7.65 | 6.70 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-133 | 7.65 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-133 | 7.70 | 6.75 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-134 | 7.70 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-134 | 7.75 | 6.80 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-135 | 7.75 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-135 | 7.80 | 6.85 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-136 | 7.80 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-136 | 7.85 | 6.90 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-137 | 7.85 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-137 | 7.90 | 6.95 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-138 | 7.90 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-138 | 7.95 | 7.00 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-139 | 7.95 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-139 | 8.00 | 7.05 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-140 | 8.00 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-140 | 8.05 | 7.10 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-141 | 8.05 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-141 | 8.10 | 7.15 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-142 | 8.10 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-142 | 8.15 | 7.20 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-143 | 8.15 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-143 | 8.20 | 7.25 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-144 | 8.20 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-144 | 8.25 | 7.30 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-145 | 8.25 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-145 | 8.30 | 7.35 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-146 | 8.30 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-146 | 8.35 | 7.40 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-147 | 8.35 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-147 | 8.40 | 7.45 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-148 | 8.40 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-148 | 8.45 | 7.50 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-149 | 8.45 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-149 | 8.50 | 7.55 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-150 | 8.50 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-150 | 8.55 | 7.60 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-151 | 8.55 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-151 | 8.60 | 7.65 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-152 | 8.60 | 2.70 |
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| 20x4.40-157 | 8.90 | 7.95 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-158 | 8.90 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-158 | 8.95 | 8.00 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-159 | 8.95 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-159 | 9.00 | 8.05 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-160 | 9.00 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-160 | 9.05 | 8.10 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-161 | 9.05 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-161 | 9.10 | 8.15 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-162 | 9.10 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-162 | 9.15 | 8.20 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-163 | 9.15 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-163 | 9.20 | 8.25 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-164 | 9.20 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-164 | 9.25 | 8.30 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-165 | 9.25 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-165 | 9.30 | 8.35 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-166 | 9.30 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-166 | 9.35 | 8.40 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-167 | 9.35 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-167 | 9.40 | 8.45 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-168 | 9.40 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-168 | 9.45 | 8.50 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-169 | 9.45 | 2.70 |
| 20x4.40-169 | 9.50 | 8.55 | 81x4 | 20x4.40-170 | | |



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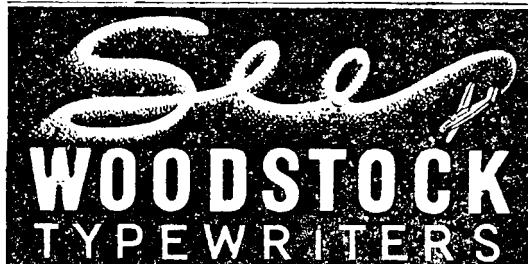
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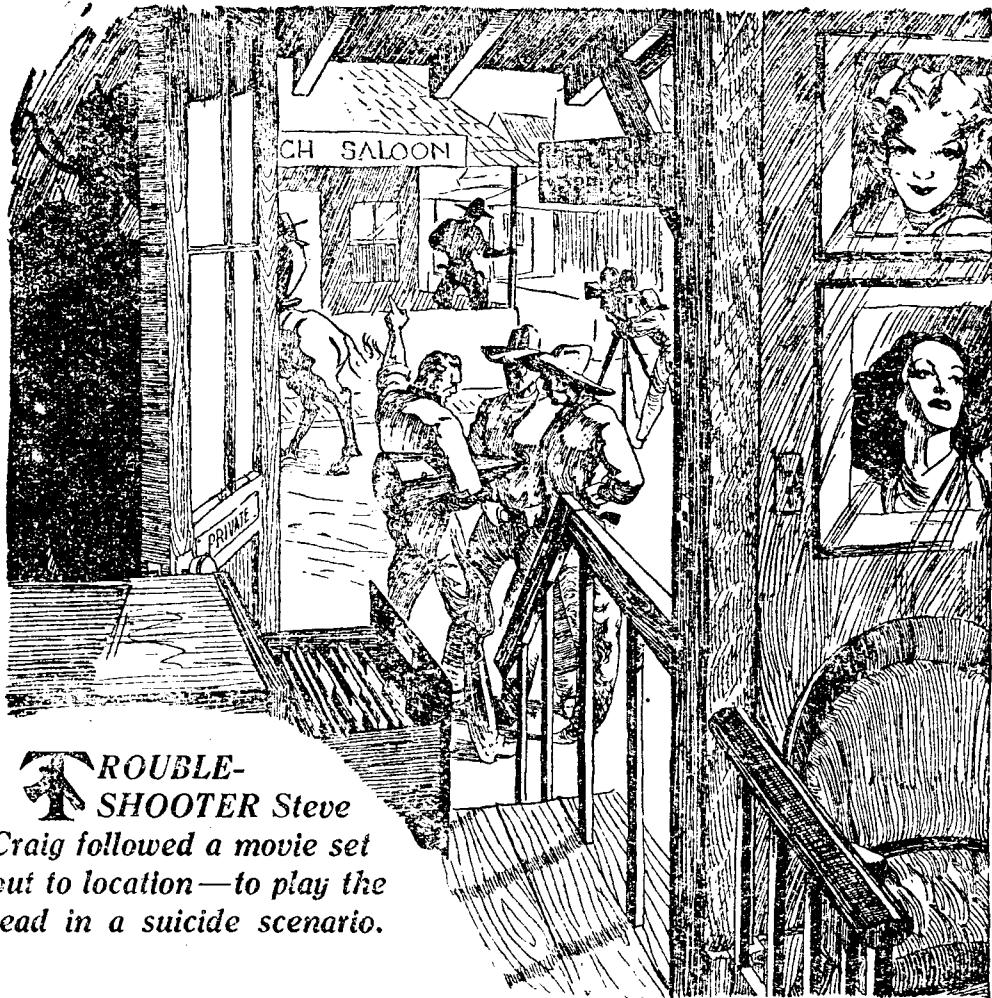
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TROUBLE-
SHOOTER Steve
*Craig followed a movie set
out to location—to play the
lead in a suicide scenario.*

CHAPTER I

MURDER ON THE MAKE

MADDEN said: "You can pick him out easy, Steve. The little punk at the Hedgewick table. He gets the rush."

I said: "Right. He gets the rush."

I went out the side door of Madden's office and moved toward the dance floor. I cut around to the edge, so I could get a look at the guy's face, but the black-haired girl was leaning across the table, shutting off my view. She was worth watching, so I just stayed where I was. Her dark eyes

were fastened on Hedgewick, drinking in his words, and every once in a while she'd curve her lips in a smile.

I placed her, all right. Vera Renault, newest find dug up by Tommy Hedgewick, the boy wonder producer. The tall, sallow-faced lad next to her was Henry Voss, who'd been built up for the lead in her next picture. And the little, spidery fellow near Hedgewick was Thornton Kane, ace director. Vera Renault, Voss, Kane, and Hedgewick himself—about four million dollars worth of Grandeur Films on the hoof—and the fifth guy was

Full of Heroes



By

James A. Kirch

Author of "Corpse of Honor"

Hollywood Novelet

supposed to be a two-bit lug that Madden wanted eased out.

It didn't add up right.

Hedgewick wound up his story with a grin and the girl leaned back to laugh, clearing the view. I made the guy at first glance.

He wasn't laughing. I'd heard about that. There was a story around back home that nobody ever saw Dart Ricconi laugh, and I could believe it. It would be like stretching leather to

screw that face into a grin. There was just enough flesh to cover the sharp bones; no more.

Dart had his elbows on the table and his eyes were turned toward the girl. While I was watching, his thin lips opened a crack and he shot a few words at her and she stopped laughing and stared at him.

I wasn't having any. Not on my salary, I wasn't. I turned around and went back to Madden's office.

HE WAS sitting the way I'd left him, his elbows propped up on the desk, and that ugly, fat head resting on the backs of his hands. He looked up as I came in, his eyes narrowing. I moved across the room and sat down on the edge of his desk.

"Well?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Well! So I'm the sucker. Nice, that."

He let his elbows slide off the table and jerked his head up with a snap. "I don't get it, Steve," he said. He had a nice bland voice, Madden did.

"No," I told him. "You don't get it. I do. Or, I'm supposed to. It's a sweet setup."

He shook his head, frowning. The movies were missing a swell bet in that guy. "I don't get it, Steve," he said again. "Something wrong? Something about that punk out there?"

"Yeah," I admitted, "about the punk. Only he ain't a punk. He's a bomb."

"You're jittery, Steve," Madden told me. "That guy's front, all front. He'll blow apart when you tackle him. He's not in your class, Stevie."

I leaned across the desk at him, sore. "Listen, Madden," I said, "when I get the jitters, I'll let you know. And when I say a guy's dynamite, he's dynamite. The name is Dart Ricconi, in case you hadn't heard. And they didn't call him punk where I came from."

Madden said: "Listen, Steve. The guy's gotta go. I don't know who the hell he is, but he's gotta go. And I can't shoot a crowd of bouncers out there, with maybe a lawsuit. You can pick a personal row, and keep me out of it. That's what I pay you for."

"Sure," I said, "that's what you pay me for. Sixty bucks a week. Only this is no ten buck a night job."

The boss slouched back in his chair and blinked his eyes at me. He snaked a cigar out of his pocket, chewed off the end and lit it before he said anything. When he spoke, his voice was flat. "How much?" he asked.

"A century." I told him. "One hun-

dred bucks and out he goes. Easy like." I threw him a grin. "Just like the punk you had him figured for."

"Yeah," Madden said softly, "just like I figured."

His right hand dug into his pocket and came up with a fat roll. He peeled off two fifties and pushed them across the desk at me. Then he stacked five more in front of him, a little green wad.

"There might be more in it if he was leavin' for good," he suggested. "If I could be sure he wouldn't be around again, there might be more in it."

I said: "I'll keep that in mind."

I stuck the bills in my vest pocket and headed out. At the doorway, I stopped and turned around to look at Madden. His eyes were lifeless, disinterested, but the hands were a dead giveaway. They were pressed deep into the desk top, the whites of the knuckles standing out against the thick blue veins.

"Easy like," I reminded him.

"Sure," he said. "Sure." But this time his acting wasn't so hot. The guy was scared stiff.

I moved down the corridor, out to the bar, and checked the Hedgewick table. The producer was still shooting off his mouth, with everybody but Dart Ricconi hanging on his words. I sent a waiter over to call Ricconi to the phone and stood there, watching him.

I could see his lithe body tense slightly as the waiter spoke, and then he uncoiled from the chair and started across the dance floor. He moved easily, knifing his way through the crowd, and the dancers drew back as he came past. Not knowing him, not knowing why, but sensing somehow that the guy was dynamite.

I decided that the job was cheap at a century.

His eyes flicked over me as he came near, just from habit. There wasn't a chance that he'd know me—we hadn't played in the same league back home—but I could see he was sizing

me up. I let him come abreast of me, on his way to the phone booth, and then pushed myself out from the bar, slamming into him. He started around, fast, his left hand moving down toward his shoulder holster.

That was a mistake, that move. The guy was off balance. I caught his left with my right and pulled it up and out, hard, and the thirty-eight slid out of the holster and went spinning across the room.

I said: "Pullin' a gun on me. The nerve of the guy, pullin' a gun on me."

Ricconi didn't say anything. He stood there on springs, ready to leap, but he didn't say anything.

"A guy can't have a drink at the bar without some louse pullin' a gun on him," I yelled. I was laying it on thick, for the benefit of the Hedgewick table. "What the hell's the idea?"

I COULD feel the guy's eyes burning into me. His thin, dry face was black with rage, the skin stretched in tight lines across the bones, but he wasn't talking. And he wasn't falling for my stall. He was watching me, waiting to see what my move was. He was like a cat, poised to jump me, but trying to find out first how deep the water was.

I said: "You're leaving, buddy. Right now, you're leaving. Nobody pulls a gat on me and gets away with it."

The crowd closed in, waiting for it. Waiting to see how he'd play it. They didn't have long to wait.

He started forward and I caught him with my left and sent him back against the table. He came forward again, swinging, but he was playing the wrong game, boxing. I sent him back with a one-two. When he came up this time, he had a knife in his right hand.

I let him get halfway across the room to me before I covered him.

"I wouldn't," I said softly. "Not if I was you, I wouldn't."

He froze.

"If I was you," I told him slowly, "I think I'd get the hell out of here. I think it would be a lot safer for you to get the hell out of here."

He just stood there, hating me with his eyes, and I moved forward. "I never start a game," I told him, "without finishing it. And I don't much care how this one plays out."

I kept going toward him and he stood there, holding the knife in his right hand and staring at me with his bright eyes, not moving. "So you want more," I said evenly. "You like it, maybe." I stepped in close and brought the barrel of my gun down on his right wrist, hard.

He stood there, looking at me, his eyes suddenly cold. His fingers opened slowly and the knife dropped out, clattering to the floor. He let his eyes follow it for a half-second, watching the bright blade spinning on the floor. Then he turned on his heel and walked down the line of tables toward the door.

The hat-check girl held his coat out and he let her stand there, holding it, while he knitted his white muffler around his throat. He slipped into his coat carefully, his back to the room, then adjusted the muffler again. He reached into his pocket and gave the girl a coin and picked his hat and stick up off the shelf.

Then he turned around, and I could feel his eyes burning at me across the room. He stared at me for a moment, not moving, and then he turned and went out into the night.

He hadn't said a word from the time I first slammed into him.

The headwaiter, Donato, pushed through the crowd and got the orchestra blaring away again, then moved down toward me and started apologizing, the way you would to a regular guest. Madden had taught him his lines, all right.

"Forget it," I said gruffly, "couldn't be helped. The guy must've been a hophead or something. I don't know why the hell he went for me, though."

Tony, behind the bar, threw in a

quarter's worth of: "I saw the whole thing. This gentleman was just moving away from the bar when the guy rammed into him, and then tried to pull a gun. I saw the whole thing."

"Yeah," I said, "everybody saw it. Let's forget it."

The orchestra was going full blast now and the dinner crowd were mostly back at the tables, or moving around on the dance floor. There was still a chatter of ". . . did you see that . . . ?" but it was dying out.

I glanced over at the Hedgewick table and discovered that nobody had moved; they were all sitting the way they'd been when the waiter called Ricconi, except that now they all seemed tense, as if they'd been suddenly wound up. I just caught a quick glimpse of them and wondered idly why none of them had moved out to help the guy; then I turned back to the bar.

"I could use a Scotch," I told Tony. The truth was, I could've used about eight Scotches. I could still see Ricconi standing there, not saying anything, but promising me death with his eyes. I didn't like the picture.

CHAPTER II

CORPSE RENDEZVOUS



TONY pushed the Scotch out across the bar at me and I reached to pick it up, but I was slow. The girl's fingers curled around the glass and pulled it away from me, sliding it down the bar. I knew who it was; just seeing her hand, I could tell. I turned slowly, watching her pour the drink between her red lips.

"There's more," she told me, "lots more, where that went to."

She was leaning toward me, as though she might be having trouble in standing up, as though in a minute she'd pitch forward into my arms. I

wondered what it would be like to have a beauty like her fold up in my arms. Nice, I decided. I turned back to the bar without saying anything and ordered another Scotch. It worked swell.

"Just suppose," she said softly, "just suppose some one wanted to buy you a headstone. What name would they have carved on it?"

I said: "The name is Steve Craig. With one 'g.' But they put the tombstone order in twenty-nine years ago. And it's still on the books."

"Yes," she agreed, "it's still on the books. And no wonder, if you can make men like Ricconi crawl."

She was turning it on heavy now, but there was something in her voice I didn't like. As though the picture of Ricconi crawling gave her a thrill. I swung around, sore.

"Listen, sister," I told her. "That guy didn't crawl. He didn't open his trap. He was just overplayed, that's all. And he had brains enough to know it."

I tried to keep my eyes off her, but they kept swinging back, and I began to realize why Hedgewick called her the find of the year. "He could see the cards were stacked against him," I finished lamely, "but he didn't exactly run out on me. He'll be around."

"He won't be around," she said quietly. "Not him."

I grinned. "All right," I told her, "so he won't be around. So you know his type better than I do. He'll let me push him all over the lot and not come back for another crack. I don't think."

She shook her head, carefully, so the dark hair would curve gracefully around her slim shoulders. Everything that fluff did was careful, studied.

"We're going back on location," she explained. "Hedgewick, Voss, Kane and I. We're finishing my new picture in the valley, about one hundred miles from here, just past Larido. So we'll all be leaving soon."

I said, "All?" and the girl let her white teeth flash out at me.

"Where I go," she said, laughing, "Ricconi'll go." I didn't like that laugh. And I didn't like the way she finished it, either! "Unless I change my mind." She seemed thoughtful about it, as if she'd maybe decided to change her mind, after tonight.

I said: "You sure mow 'em down, sister." I was getting ready to point out that maybe Ricconi wouldn't think much of her changing her mind when a shadow fell between us, and Voss and Kane moved in. The little director's eyes were nervous, jumpy, and his voice came out in a thin squeak.

"We'll have to leave, Vera," he piped. "We should never have stopped here in the first place. If you and Voss are going to be in any sort of shape tomorrow, we've got to be moving. And we've got to get an early morning start on the picture."

The girl said, "We always have to get an early start," and then Hedgewick was behind her, her wrap over his arm.

I reached out and slipped it off, holding it for her. I could feel three pairs of eyes glaring at me, and I grinned to myself and let my arms fall down over her shoulders, straightening the wrap. Hedgewick said, "Well," and brushed past me, taking the girl's arm. I grinned again. I got a kick out of seeing them jump.

She threw a smile over her shoulder at me, and then they were gone, down the aisle between the tables. I turned back to my drink.

I couldn't quite figure that crowd, but I began to see why nobody had made a play to help Ricconi. Hedgewick, Kane and Voss were probably bats over the girl, and Ricconi was the fly in the pastry. A very tasty bit of pastry, too, if you like a cyanide filling.

I LET my eyes turn toward the door, but the girl was gone. Voss and Kane were standing there, the young actor pulling on heavy black riding gauntlets, and the director struggling with his scarf. Kane looked even more

like a spider that way, his thin, feeler-like arms twisting around his neck, but actor Voss was a handsome lad from a distance.

The body of an Olympic diving champ, broad shoulders, well cut waist. And you couldn't make out the sallow lines of his face from across the room. I decided they probably used him in long shots as much as possible, and turned back to finish my drink.

I downed the Scotch and wandered back into Madden's office, but he wasn't there. I sat down at his desk, thinking about the girl, and wondering what they were going to call her next picture. I had a couple of good ideas myself, but I didn't think they'd use any of them.

I was sitting there, waiting for Madden, when Donato stuck his head in the door and said there was a guy asking to get a check cashed, and would I okay it. I went outside and okayed the check and then the night crowd started coming in and kept me pretty busy keeping an eye on them.

From ten until three-thirty we're always rushed, and after that there's generally somebody who insists on sticking around, and this night was no exception. The sun was just beginning to ease its way into the sky when we finally closed up. I started back to say good night to the boss and changed my mind and went out the back way, toward my car.

The crisp morning air worked on my brain a little, but I was still pretty foggy from cigarette smoke and liquor. I was that way, sort of half-asleep, until after I'd slipped into the car and pressed down the starter. Then I woke up.

I could see him in the mirror, sitting in the seat behind me. It was maybe the only time the guy's face had been twisted into a grin. I sat there, not shifting.

I said: "All right, Ricconi."

He didn't answer. He was leaning back in the seat, his lips partly open

and curved in that half-sneer. I felt my stomach freeze up on me.

I said: "All right, Ricconi. You'll just get yourself jammed up on this. You're making a sucker play." It wasn't any use. I knew it wasn't any use, but I was going to play it out, anyhow. I wondered if the dame would remember about the one "g" in Craig.

I said, "Listen, Ricconi," and then I pushed hard against the dashboard and went over the seat backwards, swinging to the side. I caught his left with both hands and twisted downward.

The guy fell apart on me.

He flopped in the seat, arms swinging wildly, and his head bounced toward me, the mouth hanging open. I let go his hand and stared at him. I got out of the car slowly, keeping my body away from him, and snapped on the light in the roof. There was blood all over the side of the guy's coat and a thin red line running out across the cushion of the seat. There was blood on the knife handle, too.

I pushed his body back, holding his head, keeping away from the blood, and I could see the "M" through the red stain. That would make it one of Madden's; probably a steak knife. That meant there'd be five inches of blade buried some place in the guy's side.

It was a nice picture, but I wasn't thinking of the picture.

I was remembering how six hours ago I'd slapped Ricconi's ears back for him. And how at least twenty people had seen me do it. That made it sweet. I throw the guy all over the lot, making a chump out of him. And somebody else carves him up like a dead steer and props him in the back seat of my car. No, it wasn't the picture I was worried about.

It was the frame.

I switched off the car lights and locked the doors, then headed for the roadhouse. Halfway there, I realized I'd pulled a chump stunt, and I went back and unlocked the doors. Having

Ricconi's body turn up in my car was going to be hot enough—with the doors locked, I'd've been ready to fry.

I went into Madden's office without knocking. He was standing across the room, looking out the window. He had his coat on and his hat in his hand, as if he'd been just getting ready to leave. He spun around as I came in.

"Hello, Steve," he said.

I didn't answer. I moved across the room toward him and grabbed his coat lapels, pulling that ugly head up to mine. I said, "Nice work, Madden," and slapped him across the face with the back of my hand.

His breath came out in a quick *whoosh*, and then he choked it back in, gagging on the words. "Stevie . . . what the hell, Stevie . . ."

I cuffed him across the face again, hard, then jammed him down in the chair. "All right, wise guy," I said evenly. "You've had your fun. Spill it."

He just sat there, gaping at me, as though he didn't know what it was all about. I decided I could be wrong.

"Ricconi's dead," I told him, not taking my eyes off his face.

HE DIDN'T get it, at first. He sat there, gaping at me, not getting it. I said it again. "Ricconi's dead. Somebody jabbed a knife through his side, right up to the hilt. He won't be bothering you any more."

Madden said: "Dead?" He drew the word in toward the back of his mouth, gasping it, and I said: "Dead." It was beginning to sound like a black-face act. I let go of his lapels and slouched back on his desk, watching.

"You wouldn't know anything about it?" I said carefully. "You wouldn't know how it happened?"

He shook his head. "No," he said dully, "I wouldn't know about that."

The guy was in a fog. I dragged open a drawer of his desk and pulled out a bottle of rye, poured him a drink. He spread his lips like a frog and threw the liquor at them, some of it spilling out over his shirt. He

reached out with his left hand to wipe it away and then forgot what he was doing and spread the stuff over his shirt front, pawing at his chest.

I said: "For cripes' sake, Madden. Snap out of it. This is a murder rap." His hands stiffened suddenly and I went on, giving it to him cold. "We're in deep, Madden. Up to our throats. Somebody left the stiff in my car."

He said, "In your car," not knowing what he was saying, and I got sore.

"I'll whistle it for you, buddy, if that'll help. Somebody rubbed out Dart Ricconi. And Dart Ricconi's the guy you had me bounce out of here about six hours ago. There's the motive. And the stiff's parked out front. There's the body. And you're the guy who hired me. There's where you come in. Maybe they'll give us a love seat wired."

His face went white, but he forced the words out between tight lips. "You made a mistake, Steve," he croaked, "I didn't mean anything like that. I didn't want you to kill the guy. This is terrible, Steve."

I said, "Holy mike," and leaned across the desk at him. "I'll read it again, Madden. I didn't kill the guy. I don't know who the hell did kill the guy. But if we don't find out, it's going to be pretty hot around here."

Madden said: "You better find out, Steve." His eyes were suddenly veiled. "I ain't in this. You better find out."

I said: "Sing that to the D.A. Maybe he'll like the tune, not me. I want to know why the hell you were so scared of the guy."

Madden said, "You got me wrong, Stevie. I wasn't scared of the guy," and I reached out and grabbed his fat head in my hands, twisting it back.

I said: "No, you liked him. I could see that." I let go of his head and went around behind him, catching his shoulders, and he squirmed forward, sprawling out on the desk.

I said: "The guy knew you from way back when. And you'd crossed him up, some place. Right?"

Madden said: "Stevie, I could've

ducked him. He didn't even know I was here. I could've just kept out of sight. He wasn't looking for me."

He had something there.

I said: "Yeah, you could've ducked him, all right. He wasn't looking for you." I straightened up, trying to figure what was wrong, and then it hit me.

"Who hired you to get the guy buncned?" I demanded. "If you were ducking the guy, you'd've let him alone—if somebody hadn't put up the dough to get him cased out. Who coughed up for that?" I swung him around, my eyes hard, and he sat there blinking at me.

"He won't fit," he said slowly. "That guy won't fit at all."

I said I'd decide whether he'd fit or not, and Madden stared at me for a minute, his eyes still blinking. When he spoke, I could barely make out the name.

"Hedgewick."

That was fine. The boy wonder producer mixed in a murder case. And it would be easy as hell to tie him up with it, I didn't think.

I said, "Be seeing you," to Madden and went out, closing the door carefully behind me. I was hoping he'd have brains enough to keep out of the cops' way, at least for a few hours.

I cut across the parking lot to the entrance and picked out Madden's roadster, a big shiny boat with red wheels. Unlocked. I backed the car in close to the house, then sent it forward and out down the highway.

CHAPTER III

SUICIDE SCENARIO



IT TOOK me about three hours to reach Laredo. There was a little shack that might've been a store and a gas station, and a pill box post office. That was the town. I went through it fast, the

wheels of the roadster shooting thick dust out, like a speedboat cutting through the water.

I heard the guy at the gas station yell something at me, but I kept going until I reached the crest of the hill. From there, I could see the movie location, a dim blur down in the valley.

Drawing near, I could pick out the buildings. Rough frame houses, one large one in the center, probably meant for a saloon. It was something like the old ghost towns of the west, but this one had been built specially for Grandeur's epic of the great open spaces, and from where I was you could tell it was phony. Nothing concrete, nothing you could put your finger on, but something about the way the buildings were laid out, spotted around carefully, so you'd get a pretty picture from the crest of the hill.

I cut the motor and drifted down toward the edge of town, pulled off the road and walked the rest of the way.

A young kid lugging a camera came out of the buildings and I cut in front of him, putting on a grin. "What's the matter," I asked, "no work today?"

He looked at me curiously and I said, "Press," trying to act like a guy who wrote for the papers.

"Sure," he said shortly, "we just finished a scene. We'll be getting back to work after we've had some food. But I don't think Mr. Hedgewick wants any reporters out here."

I said: "I've got an appointment with Miss Reynault. If you could tell me where to find her. . . ."

"Third cottage down on your right," the kid said. "But I don't think Mr. Hedgewick wants any—"

I said: "Don't lose any sleep over it, sonny."

I walked away from him, toward the cottage, but before I reached it, the door opened. A little spidery guy came out, scuttling across the yard. He was dressed in an old frock coat, pulled in tight around the waist. I couldn't place him, but I was sure I'd

seen him before. He stopped and looked at me for a minute, then turned and cut down the road, his legs still moving like feelers.

I watched him until he'd gone around behind one of the buildings, trying to place that scurrying walk, but I couldn't make it fit. I gave it up and rapped on Vera Reynault's door. I heard her voice say something that sounded like "Come in," so I pushed the door open and went inside.

She was leaning back on the couch, playing with a white Persian. When she saw me, she let her slim legs slide to the floor and moved forward, cradling the cat in her soft arms. It made a nice picture, that; the silk white fur of the Persian against her rich black hair. It made a nice picture, and she knew it.

She said, "You again," and her lips curved in a smile. A cocky, the-fish-is-landed sort of smile. The lady was sure of her man.

"Yeah," I said, "me again. Only this is business."

"Business?" She said it doubtfully, questioningly.

"Yeah," I repeated, "business. I'm looking for a guy. A guy named Dart Ricconi." I watched her eyes as I said it. They were blank, completely cold. But that didn't mean much—the dame was an actress.

I said: "I figure maybe there was some reason for Ricconi's gunning for me. And the more I can find out about him, the more chance I'll have of figuring it out. And I've been wondering why none of the guys at your table gave him a hand when he was in a jam."

Her dark eyes narrowed suddenly, but she didn't answer. I went on, keeping my eyes turned away from her:

"I've been wondering what you are to Ricconi, and how much the guy meant to you. And whether your friends sat back because they didn't want to mix in a brawl, or because they don't like Ricconi. I can't figure it."

She moved toward me, smiling.

"You worry too much, Craig," she said softly. "Ricconi"—she shrugged her shoulders carefully—"he was sort of fun. But I haven't seen him since last night. And I don't believe the others have, either."

I said, deliberately: "Maybe somebody else saw him. Maybe they could tell me where the guy is, or what it's all about. Did you drive back with any of them?"

HER dark curls waved slightly as she shook her head. "No," she admitted. "I'd come with Dart, in my car. I drove home alone. The others all had their cars with them. We'd had sort of a race earlier, trying out the cars, with everyone driving their own. So it's pretty hard to tell whether or not anybody saw him after he left.

"And I think you're going to find out you're just wasting your time. Dart and me, and the others—that's none of your business." Her voice rose at the last part, and some of the liquid tone went out of it.

I said: "I hope you're right." I turned to the door, ready to leave, but stopped as she spoke. The velvet was back in her voice again. This lady was really good. "Craig," she said slowly, "I'll show you something." Her slim body stretched out to me, the white Persian curled in her hands. "Will you hold her for me?"

I reached forward, wondering what her move was. I felt the cat's soft fur and the warm touch of the girl's hand, then there was a quick flash of white fur, and sharp teeth stung into my wrist. I stepped back, slashing down with my left to send the animal sprawling on the floor, then turned to the girl. Her dark eyes were suddenly bright.

"She doesn't like being meddled with," she said, softly. "Not at all." She hesitated, watching me. "There are people like that, too. They don't like being meddled with."

I stared at the sharp red holes in my right wrist, then back at the slim form of the girl. I reached out with

my left hand and slid my hat off the table, placed it carefully on my head and walked out, closing the door slowly behind me. When I reached the dirt road, I took a deep breath.

"Cripes," I whispered softly to myself. "Holy cripes."

I walked down the road a way, my head swimming. There was an empty watering trough about a hundred yards down and I parked on the edge of it, trying to think.

I was jammed up, royally. By now it was a good bet that somebody had stumbled on Ricconi's body and tipped the cops. And the boys in blue were probably putting the pressure on Madden, heavy. The guy couldn't stand much pressure.

That meant that they'd be on my tail before long. This was working out nice; not at all like I'd figured. I'd figured I could maybe get some line from the girl, something to work on, something that would let me blow this thing wide open.

If I could blow it fast, I'd maybe be in the clear. If I couldn't—I didn't like to think about that. I was sitting there, trying to fit the puzzle together, when I felt a hand on my arm.

The camera man again. He said: "I'm pretty sure Mr. Hedgewick . . ."

I got up, pushing away from the horse trough. "That's right, sonny," I told him. "That's who I want to see. Hedgewick. Which way?"

He raised his arm without thinking, pointing to a spot somewhere behind the saloon. "The 'dobe cabin," he told me, then stopped. "He doesn't like being disturbed when we're making pictures."

I grinned at him. "Mister," I said gently, "one thing I wouldn't think of doing is upsetting Mr. Hedgewick."

I moved away from him, headed for Hedgewick's cabin. I'd taken two steps when I heard the shots—three of them, in rapid succession.

I had my gun out before I hit the dirt behind the horse trough. I lay there, my gun ready, trying to see through a crack in the side. I heard

the kid laugh, and I twisted to look at him. He was standing still, looking down at me and laughing.

I said, "What the hell?" and he stopped laughing for a minute and grinned.

"You'll get used to that, mister," he told me. "This is a western lot. And some of the boys let go once in a while, just to make sure their guns are working. You don't want to be afraid of gunshots around here, mister."

I said: "I don't want to be afraid of them at all."

I straightened up, sliding the gun into its holster and shaking the dirt off my clothes. I left him there, still laughing, and headed back in the direction of Hedgewick's place, walking slowly.

The door was partly open and I could hear a radio going softly, one of those morning jazz band programs. I eased the door back with my shoulder and stepped inside.

THE boy producer was sitting at a desk, facing the doorway. He said, "Well?" without looking up, and I studied his face for a moment before I answered. A good-looking lad. Not pretty, but strong, well-cut features, with a sharp chin and wide, rangy forehead.

He looked up and let his eyes rest on me and I realized the driving force of the man in his eyes—his eyes and the firm mouth. I was trying to frame a picture of him sliding a knife in a man's side when he said, "Well?" again, and I came back to the present.

I said: "The name's Craig. Steve Craig. You may not place me."

He straightened, peering at me in the dim light, and then nodded. "Yes. Craig. The man who picked a fight with Ricconi last night." He stopped, leaving it to me.

"That's right," I told him. "The guy Madden paid to do your dirty work for him."

His blue eyes hardened, watching me. "I wouldn't know about that," he said, carefully. "And if you're plan-

ning a shakedown of some sort, you can just forget it. I don't go for that sort of thing." I could tell the guy meant it.

"You got me wrong, Hedgewick," I said easily. "I'm just looking for a little information. I'm just trying to figure why you wanted Ricconi eased out. That's all."

"I see." His voice was cold. He pushed his chair back and moved toward me. "I see. You'd just like a little information. That's all." He stepped in close, suddenly, whipped out a right.

The slashing fist grazed my jaw and sent me back two steps, my hand going for my gun. He let go with another blow, but I was away from it, my gun out, and he wound up with his back to the door.

I said: "Listen, Hedgewick. I just want to talk to you. You got me wrong. I just want to talk." I put the iron away, to prove I meant it.

I could sense his body stiffening up. "Go ahead," he said evenly. "Talk."

This was working out swell.

I decided to play it different. "Ricconi's dead." I said it slowly, deliberately.

His eyes froze up on me, and for a half second he stood there, not answering. When he spoke, his voice was calm. "How?" he demanded.

"Knife in the ribs. His body was found just outside of Madden's." I didn't mention my car.

His brows drew together, sliding down over his eyes. "This isn't going to be so good," he said slowly, half to himself. His eyes shifted slightly, staring at the wall, and I let mine shift with them. There was a picture of Vera Reynault hanging over his desk.

I said: "Buddy, it already isn't good." I was thinking of Ricconi's body, propped up in the back of my car, and wondering if the police had located it yet. I found out about that, too soon.

Hedgewick seemed to have forgotten I was there, went on talking, half to himself. "She may be mixed up in

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it," he said slowly. "I wouldn't put it past her."

I said: "She's over her head in it." I jabbed the words at him, trying to shake him out of it, and he looked up, seeing me again.

"Where do you fit?" he demanded.

I shook my head. "On the right side." I told him. "Wherever that is. Madden doesn't like killings around his place. Especially unexplained ones. We'd like to crack this."

He said, "Oh," vaguely, and his eyes narrowed a trifle. "Where the hell are the police? If you people have told them your story, why haven't we heard from them? We'll be questioned, naturally."

"Maybe," I said. "I wouldn't know about that." I went on, lying beautifully. "Madden wouldn't want to cause any trouble for you. He figures maybe your crowd is in the clear. And if you string along with us, we'll string along with you."

"He's playing with fire," Hedgewick said slowly. "Cutting in on police work. I don't like it."

I SAID maybe he'd rather have Vera Reynault's name plastered all over the tabloids, and he shook his head, frowning. He was doubtful, trying to make up his mind which side of the fence to sit on. Then he evidently decided.

"I haven't heard a word you said," he told me carefully. "In case anyone asks me, I've never even heard of the murder. And if you state publicly that you advised me of it, I'll deny it. Deny it absolutely. Is that clear?"

I said it sounded pretty clear and Hedgewick motioned me to a chair, dropping in one himself. "What do you want to know?" he asked.

"About Vera Reynault and Ricconi. What the setup was."

"The girl had been playing around with him on the quiet for about two months," he told me. "Then, when we came out here to make this picture, he followed her out. She was attracted

by the man—strongly attracted. But she wasn't in love with him."

I said, "She wasn't in love with anybody, I suppose?" and Hedgewick shook his head.

"I wouldn't know about that," he admitted.

"So," I suggested, "could be the little lady decided she'd had enough, and Dart Ricconi couldn't see it that way."

"Could be," he agreed. "If you've got that sort of a mind. Only it wasn't."

I said: "No, it wasn't. You decided you'd seen enough of Ricconi. That if he kept running around with your pet star, it was bound to hit the papers sooner or later. And for the little angel of the screen to be mixed up with a guy like that would cost you plenty. So you figured out a pretty little set-up, with me in the payoff spot. Nice, that." I didn't know whether I believed it or not, but it added up right.

Hedgewick said: "You're half right, Craig. I wanted Ricconi out of the way. But I didn't want him killed. In fact, I didn't need him killed." He stopped for a moment, watching me. "You don't know Miss Reynault very well?"

"Well enough," I told him. "Just about well enough. But I don't see where that comes in."

"She rides high," he explained. "She rides with winners, and winners only. She was through with Ricconi after you made him crawl the other night. She'd been fascinated by the man's hardness, the awe he inspired in others, and you made a fool out of him. That's what I was betting on."

"Yeah," I said, "you were betting. A pretty slim bet." But, remembering the dame, I wasn't so sure it was slim. I went on, talking loudly to make myself heard over the radio. "I'm willing to keep the dame out of this, if she's in the clear. All I want is a chance to save my own neck. And if you'll give me a little time, I think I can do it."

"I may be wrong about the whole thing. It could've been the dame. It

could've been you. But, for that matter, it could've been the director guy, Kane, or Voss. Both those guys are nuts about her. So we've got four suspects, with plenty of motive." I got up to leave. "Four people, and I've got to figure out which one fits."

"Five." His voice was low, and I could hardly distinguish the word over the band music.

I said: "Listen. To you I may be a murderer. To the cops I may be a murderer. But me, personally, I know I'm clean. So that leaves four."

"Five." He said it again. "Five. You were forgetting Madden."

I said: "Yeah, I was forgetting Madden." The words seemed to shout in my ears, but I didn't realize why. I was thinking of the spot I'd be in if it turned out Madden had pulled the job. If it was Madden, it might as well've been me.

A new voice broke in on us, and I understood why my last words had seemed so loud. The band music had been cut off the air, and the announcer was giving out a staccato announcement:

"We interrupt this program to bring you a special bulletin. The body of Dart Ricconi, eastern gangster, has just been discovered by police, in a sedan parked outside of Madden's Roadhouse, on the Woodside Highway. Police have interviewed Madden and ascertained that the sedan is owned by one Stephen Craig."

"Madden stated that Craig was formerly in his employ, but was fired last night, after publicly fighting with the gangster whose body was found this morning. A dragnet is being spread for Stephen Craig, and police expect his early apprehension. Keep tuned to this station for bulletins of local news items. We return you now . . ."

Hedgewick was staring at me, his eyes suddenly wide.

I said: "You don't have to've heard it. Nobody knows whether you heard it or not. You can keep your trap shut a few hours."

"In your car," he said softly. "In

your car. No wonder you're worried."

I said: "Listen, Hedgewick. I'll plaster her name all over the front pages. I'll make her the cheapest tramp that ever came out of Hollywood. Or Brooklyn. When I get through with her, she'll be on every blacklist in the country. It's up to you."

"Yes," he said evenly, "it's up to me. And I'm—" The door swung open and the little guy in the frock coat scuttled inside.

CHAPTER IV

HOLLYWOOD HELLCAT



I PLACED him this time, in spite of the make-up. Kane, the director. He stopped, seeing me, and Voss, coming in behind, socked into him, throwing him forward. The actor was in cowboy rig, chaps, spurs, ten gallon hat, thick black gloves.

The sallow look was gone from his face now, probably due to a few hours' work by the makeup crew. A hard, lean son of the West, with a build to make the shopgirls swoon. That was Voss. And he was in my way, blocking the door.

His eyes passed over me for a second, then shifted back to Hedgewick. I was watching the producer, waiting for it. My right hand was free, ready to drop, but my spot was bad. Hedgewick was half behind me, Voss and Kane in front. It was going to be hard to cover all three of them.

Nobody said anything for a minute. We just stood there, eyeing each other, and I felt the fingers of my right hand tightening up on me. It was Hedgewick's show now, not mine.

Kane broke the silence, ignoring me, and speaking to the producer. "Coming out to watch the retakes?" he piped. "I don't know yet how much we'll have to change, but Miss Croy's note said the scene would have to be

done over. I'm meeting her in the saloon set."

He paused, waiting for an answer. "It's my fault," he went on, finally, "for stepping out of the direction to handle a character part. Still, my assistant's directions were clear. But if Miss Croy says there was something wrong, we'll have to check on it. May not be important, though." He scuttled toward the door, spinning back toward us. "Coming?" he squeaked.

Hedgewick nodded slowly. "I guess so," he agreed, and I felt my hand relax. "Mr. Craig here is thinking of doing some—some publicity work. And he's interested in finding out about pictures." He moved toward the door, not looking at me.

I followed them slowly, letting Voss fall in beside me. I heard him clear his throat several times before he spoke, but I didn't pay much attention to him. I had too much on my mind now.

"I feel I should warn you, Craig," he said, finally. "That fellow you tangled with last night; he's dangerous. He may cause you trouble."

I looked around, letting my lips grin at him. "He's got me scared stiff right now," I admitted. "Scared stiff."

Voss frowned. "I'm not kidding Craig," he said, and I stopped grinning.

"To tell you the truth, Voss," I said slowly, "I'm not exactly kidding, myself."

We were halfway across the roadway, maybe twenty feet behind the others. Voss leaned over me, and then stopped, staring down the road. I followed his eyes and got a quick glimpse of Vera Reynault's slim figure slipping into her cottage, and then I felt Voss' hand tighten on my arm.

"Well," he finished, abruptly, "don't say I didn't warn you." He started toward the saloon, his long legs stretching out over the ground, reaching the steps as the door swung to behind the others.

We were at the door when we heard it. A thin, wailing scream. Like a woman's. We dived inside, slamming

against the swinging panels, into the saloon. There was a girl there, all right, but she wasn't screaming. Her screaming days were over.

She was lying stretched out on the sawdust, one arm flung over her head in a crazy triangle. Her thin blond hair spilled out onto the floor, tangling with the sawdust. There was sawdust all over her clothes, in her eyes, on her lips, as if she'd slid on her face in it, then rolled over. There was a fat red clot of the stuff plastered over her heart. That was the tipoff.

Hedgewick bent over her, poking at the lump with his fingers. He probed at it for a second, then pushed himself slowly to his feet. His face was gray. "She was shot," he said it carefully, as if he was trying to make himself believe it. "She was shot," he repeated, dully.

The little director screamed again.

I said, "For cripes' sake," and Voss moved over to him. He slapped him across the cheek with his left hand, hard, and the little guy blinked at him. "Easy," Voss told him. "Take it easy, Kane."

The director shook his head wonderingly, his eyes still glued on the girl's body. "It's Miss Croy," he mumbled. "Miss Croy," and Voss slapped him again, easier.

"Okay, Kane," the actor said, "Okay. Relax."

The director's head started bobbing up and down and I stood there, waiting for another scream, but it didn't come.

He moved away from Voss, toward the window. "All right," he whispered. "All right. I'll be all right. Just leave me alone. Leave me alone." I wondered how good a character actor the guy really was.

Hedgewick said: "This girl was murdered." He still didn't seem to believe it. He was talking to himself again, trying to adjust himself to it.

THE voice from the doorway said: "Murdered?" She said it lightly, easily. The way you might say:

"Bridge?" She drifted into the room, her tiny feet seeming to glide over the sawdust floor. She stopped near me, looking down at the body.

I said: "Enjoy yourself, sister. It may be your last chance." I was beginning to feel sick. I've seen 'em hard, but this little fluff was beyond the pale.

"This is a job for the police." That was Hedgewick again, and this time I listened. "I'll send some one to the village." I could feel his eyes on me, and I knew what it meant.

"Yeah," I said, slowly, "you'd better send some one to the village." I went outside, leaving them there. The last glimpse I had was of Vera Reynault standing there and staring at the body on the floor.

I was through, licked. I'd figured on time, time to sort out the crazy angles of the setup. Even though the police had already found Ricconi's body, parked in my car, I'd figured they wouldn't locate me right off. That's how I'd played it; on a time basis. And that was over.

I moved down the road toward my roadster. It would be maybe an hour and a half before the cops showed. In an hour and a half a guy could get a pretty good start. And it looked as though I needed it. The little blonde's killing might've been tied up with Ricconi, in some sort of a triangle, but it might not have, too.

As far as I could see, that didn't help my spot any. When the police pulled in to figure the second murder, they'd find the guy they'd been looking for for the first. There was about one chance in fifty I could sell them the idea I was clean. Nice odds, those. When you're on the short end.

I wasn't kidding myself any. If the police found me there, I had a damn good chance of winding up in the death house. Okay. So they wouldn't find me. If I had anything to say about it, they'd have one hell of a time finding me. I slipped behind the wheel of the roadster and unlocked the ignition.

Before I knew what was up, a guy slid into the seat beside me. I turned

around, carefully, then relaxed. It was the nutty cameraman.

"I saw you starting for your car," he panted. "And thought maybe you'd give me a lift to the village. I'm supposed to call the police."

I said: "Your boys are awful careless with their gun practice, sonny. But don't let that scare you." I backed the car out on the dirt road, swinging toward Larido, and the kid shouted at me over the roar of the motor.

"It was terrible," he said, his voice shaking. "Terrible. Did you ever see anything like it?"

I got a mental picture of Ricconi, propped up in the back seat of my car, his lips twisted in that sickly grin. "I've seen 'em tough," I told the kid. "Not exactly like that, but tough."

"Sure," he said, "I guess maybe you have, being a reporter. But this girl. Who'd kill her? She was the best script girl we've had. Never slipped up, always checked everything, to make sure there were no boners. Just a careful, hard-working kid. The best script girl in Hollywood."

That clicked. Like that, it clicked. "I'll be damned," I said softly, "I'll be damned." I stopped the car and turned to the kid, my eyes suddenly hard. "What the hell did you say she did?"

"Script girl," he repeated. "You know, checking up on the actors, the scenery, that sort of thing. To make sure there's no sudden change. To make sure nobody slips up from one day to the next."

I said: "Yeah, to make sure nobody slips up." I slid out from behind the wheel, pulling the kid under it. "Go ahead, sonny," I told him. "Go ahead. Bring on your police force."

I cut across the rough ground, back toward the saloon. A heavy touring car pulled out, loaded with men, the bright sunlight glistening on their rifle barrels. The car swung out onto the highway, following the kid in my roadster. I knew what that meant. Hedgewick had resigned from my team. And the heat was on.

He was coming out of the building as I reached it, and he pulled up suddenly. I grabbed his arm, dragging him toward me.

"This is it," I told him. "Listen, quick. Where do you keep the films? The stuff you run off every day." He was standing there, gaping at me, and I yelled it at him this time. "The stuff you run off every day. The rushes, I think they call it. Where the hell is it?" I guess he thought I was nuts.

"Rushes?" he said, vaguely. "Rushes? In the main building. Behind my cottage. You can see it from the window. Why?"

I PULLED him after me, breaking into a trot. "I'll show you why," I told him. "If we're not too late, I'll show you why."

I headed toward his cottage, running, the guy at my heels. We cut around back, past his place, picking up speed. But we were late. I caught a quick glimpse of Vera Reynault slipping in the long, flat building just as we rounded the turn.

"It's downstairs," Hedgewick gasped in my ear. "We keep the films downstairs." The guy was catching on fast. "In the projection room." He sprinted past me, toward a basement door and through it into the darkness.

His body flung back, sliding against the wall, and I went through the door after him, the echoes of a shot ringing in my ears. I heard a laugh somewhere in the dark and risked a shot, but there was no answer. I moved out, toward the center of the floor, trying to find the projection booth in the blackness. I found it, all right.

The spot light fanned out at me, slapping me between the eyes. I fired twice, rolling over, and when I came up the spot light was out. A red light spotted out at me, picking its way across the floor, and I let go with three shots before I clicked. There was no answer. The murderer was playing it safe, waiting until I was bathed in the floodlight, before shooting. It was a hell of a spot.

I pushed myself forward, trying to rush the booth before another light came on, but I didn't have a chance. A white spot flashed out again, covering me, and this time there was a sharp report with it. I didn't realize I was hit. My gun went spinning out of my hand, but I didn't feel the shock of the bullet. I spun around twice and this time I heard that low laugh from the booth again.

That's what did it, I guess. I should have been out, through; but that laugh jabbed at my nerves. I threw myself sideways, out of the light, rushing the booth. I reached the stairs and forced myself up, the white spot searching the room for me.

I was halfway up when I heard the booth door open. Whoever it was couldn't get a gun lined up on me from inside, and was coming out, to finish the job. I lunged forward, diving for the booth, waiting for the slug in my chest and praying the murderer's aim wouldn't suddenly improve.

There was a thin ray of light from the open door, and I made out the vague shadow, and the bright glint of blue metal. There wasn't a chance of missing at that distance. The gun came up fast, the ray of light shining at me from the barrel.

This was the business.

I kept going, somehow, diving low as I heard a shot ring out, reaching for the place I figured the legs would be. I never touched the legs. The body fell over on me, rolling down the steps, landing at the bottom, outside the ring of light, a vague, meaningless mass. Behind me, far off, I heard the girl's voice, in a shrill pitch: "Got him!"

I sat down on the steps, not giving a damn. I heard the girl say something else, in that same exulting tone, and then the room filled with spotlights, shooting out at me from the ceiling. I passed out, cold.

When I came to, Hedgewick was leaning over me, a white gauze bandage standing out against his dark gray suit. He said, "He's coming out of it," and I looked over his shoulder

and saw two guys in uniform and Kane, the spidery director, crowded in a corner of the room. I could hardly get the word out, but I wanted to know.

"Voss?" I whispered.

HEDGEWICK'S voice was low, guarded. "Dead," he said softly. "Died just after the police arrived. But he confessed. You had the motive on the Riceoni killing, but only part of it. He was afraid if the girl ditched him completely for Ricconi, she'd be through with him in pictures. And he needed her influence to keep going. He snapped at the chance to frame you. And then the script girl jammed the works. She was a problem. She's where he slipped."

"Yeah," I agreed, "she's where he slipped. And I almost muffed it. Me, right at the very end, I almost muffed it. It wasn't until I realized why the girl was insisting on the retakes that it hit me. Whoever moved Ricconi handled a pretty messy body. And it was a good bet that he'd have to do some permanent clothes changing.

"So if the script girl noticed something wrong—a coat, maybe, or gloves—when you filmed the scene, that would explain her murder. I figure it was the gloves, probably."

"You hit it," Hedgewick said. "It was the gloves. He wore his heavy black riding gauntlets the night we drove to your place. And he ruined them, moving Ricconi. So he used a pair of black gloves, instead, when we filmed a scene this morning. But they were gloves, not gauntlets. And the script girl noticed it. He knew she'd bring it up, to Kane and myself, when she insisted on a retake. And he couldn't afford that, with you on the spot, looking for a lead on the murder. So he killed her." He hesitated, his eyes puzzled. "I still don't understand how you uncovered him."

I grinned at him. "I didn't, mister," I said. "Not me. I knew what the set-up was, and that somebody had made a mistake. And that that somebody

would have to get rid of the films, fast. But it didn't have to be Voss. It could've been anybody who was in the picture. Right up until five minutes ago, when I saw him standing behind you, I'd've put my dough on Kane. It could've been him."

It could've been Vera Reynault, too, but I didn't say that. I didn't have to say it. Hedgewick knew it.

He raised his voice suddenly, letting it carry across the room. "Well," he said, "I'm not sorry I killed him," and I sat up in bed, staring at him. His lips closed in a thin line and he shook his head at me slightly. He said something in a low tone to Kane, and the director left the room, the cops following.

The producer waited until the door closed behind them, then spoke slowly. "Listen, Craig," he began. "Vera Reynault saved your life. She killed Voss, I didn't—we both know that. But it was a question of saving you. You owe her something for that.

"The publicity would ruin her. I've had her taken away, back to Hollywood. And I'm going to keep her name out of this as much as possible. If it became known that she shot a man—she'd be through. It wouldn't matter about the circumstances." He went on, speaking seriously. "I'm counting on your cooperation. I need it."

I leaned forward, raising my voice. I wanted to be sure he heard it. "It wasn't killing him," I said evenly. "Hell, I was trying to do that myself. The guy was a murderer. That was okay. It was the way she acted about it. The way she said, "Got him!" like he was an animal, or something. She's too much for me, Hedgewick. Way too much."

I dropped back, relaxing against the soft pillows. I was suddenly tired, dead tired. I finished slowly. "You don't have to worry about me talking about her, though. Hell, I don't even like to think about her. I'm trying to forget her, right now."

. That was eight months ago. And I'm still trying.

Bullet Bandwagon

By Harold F. Sorensen

Author of "Homicide Demon," etc.



For a private detective, Keating was a pretty good ringside rooter. But when the Big Timekeeper began to strike death's gong, the only way Keating could stay for the count was to climb on the—bullet bandwagon.

THE car ran along smoothly at fifty. Keating held the wheel lightly, let down the window a few turns of the crank. All along the road the fields were bare, except for long lines of stacked stalks, and the colors were everywhere cracked brown and light yellow. The air was

just cold enough that it distorted objects slightly, as though Keating saw them through imperfect wavy glass.

It did a man good to get out for a bit. Keating opened his nostrils to the clean vigorous air. He had thought of Jake Frey. That brought Jake's fighter, Plummer, to mind, and Plummer

in turn led to the notion of running up to the training quarters.

Another fifteen minutes of swift easy riding before the wind brought Keating to the gleaming white farmhouse. There was a big barn out back to match. House and barn had freshly painted light green roofs.

Only the cook was in the house. Keating opened the screen door, and the fat-faced cook, thoughtfully cleaning carrots, managed a turnipy grin, started to say something, then just waved to the barn and sighed.

Keating shut the door and turned towards the barn. He rubbed the frown out of his wide, low forehead with massaging fingertips, his clean-shaven tan face turning thoughtful. Though he only sensed it as yet, his extremely short-lived holiday had already thumped to the first clod dropped on its casket.

In jumping at the idea of this trip as just an excursion, he hadn't stopped to reflect that fighters are prima donnas. Jake was sending Plummer into an important fight tomorrow night. This was a bad day for a visit, if the cook's face was any guide; the cook sure had more on his mind than his biscuits.

KEATING pushed into the barn and stood watching, unseen, unnoticed. It was no longer a barn, of course; it was a gym, and fitted with everything from a slightly off-center ring to a chinning bar. Light gloves on his hands, Plummer, an ox of a man, was punching the heavy bag as though he had a grudge against it, but not exerting himself.

Plummer's sparring partner was stretched out on the rubbing table, reading a magazine. A colored boy sat moodily in the corner, staring out the window at the blue sky, the slanting shaft of sunlight, full of diamond dust motes, just grazing the side of his milk-chocolate face.

Apparently the only reason it wasn't Plummer reading the magazine was that Plummer's brain was

troubling him. Keating figured Plummer had a thought, and Plummer didn't like being aware of his brain any more than another man did of his teeth; it meant pain, that's all.

Keating bit his thumb. It was a cinch that Jake Frey wasn't here. Plummer stood there with a scowl that was almost too big for his face. Keating had long ago sized Plummer up as a natural strong-man with a temper that made him a fighting menace. The big body was smooth and hard, but training had done the smoothening and hardening. Keating sensed a conflict between Plummer's inclinations and this perfection.

It was written all over Plummer that he'd prefer to put on a little fat, strut his huge physique and poisonously ugly face about town, demonstrating his dangerous strength for the amusement of his cronies by dashing his immense fist into whatever face was handy at proper moments. To put it plainly, Keating had an idea the guy was lazy as hell, and wondered if Jake knew it too.

Keating's sole creaked as he advanced towards Plummer.

The colored boy jumped into the air. The sparring partner fell off the table with a thud. He tried to roll over to see who it was, attempting in the same movement to conceal the magazine, he was so sure it was Jake. Plummer's face creased up like a gorilla's sensing attack.

Relaxing, Plummer stepped to the light bag, and started some fancy rat-a-tatting.

"Hello, Keating." Plummer stuck his jaw out and narrowed his eyes on the bag. "Jake send for you?"

Keating shook his head.

"Well, he shoulda." Plummer punched viciously with the right, then the left. "He needs some guy like you, a dick that can find his way around."

Keating had surmised it. Just as a doctor has an eye for patients and a lawyer a nose for clients, Keating was always aware of it when he had

waltzed into a trouble zone calling for a private detective's talents. Only half watching Plummer's sullen expression, Keating was cynically telling himself: A day off!

He hadn't taken a day off since he could remember. He should have known there was trouble up this way, or the combination would never have worked out to bring him here.

He asked Plummer what was what.

Plummer's curt gesture sent his sparring partner and the colored boy out of the gym on the double-quick.

Sitting up on the rubbing table, Plummer drew the gloves off his big hands, flexed and unflexed his thick fingers while his mouth drew into a hard line.

"You know Alfred Giles?" Plummer's eyes bored in, as though he suspected Keating might know Giles all too well. "Giles is after Jake for a fix on tomorrow night's fight."

Keating's eyes flashed. "How do you know? Jake wouldn't tell you—just before a fight."

PLUMMER shook his big head. "Giles got to me. Laid me the proposition himself. I ain't throwing the fight that means my career. I'll be a million-dollar-champ in a year or so. Not even for Jake I wouldn't do it."

"Well, don't worry about Jake asking you to," Keating snapped. "When Jake asks any fighter to throw a fight, you can believe the swing-and-jab racket is really finished."

Plummer's eyebrows twitched, but his little eyes stared brightly ahead.

Keating knew his way around well enough to understand what the situation was. Giles owned a piece of the present champion, but the champ was eating his head off and not fighting. The competition was too tough, and the champ was after the soft money that the title was worth, not the gate receipts. What Giles undoubtedly had in mind was that the champ had to fight two or three battles yet be-

fore losing the crown, to show a profit.

If Plummer won tomorrow night, Plummer would be a menace overshadowing the champ. Any fights the champ might put on before meeting Plummer, the public would figure as just so much loss of time. Ticket buyers would save their dough for the day when it was Plummer against the champ.

Keating asked: "Where is Jake?"

Plummer slid off the table. He brought his heavy hand down hard on Keating's shoulder, and they stood so close their noses almost touched.

There was quite a contrast, except that their heights were equal. Keating's face was narrowed by high cheekbones, Plummer's was saucer-like; Keating's nose was sharp-ridged and pointed, Plummer's concave and spread.

Keating was built with a compactness that deceived; alongside Plummer he looked thin. Plummer, though only thirty pounds heavier, gave the impression that his muscles wanted to burst a seam in his thick skin.

"That's what I'm worried about, Keating. Jake went in to town. You know Jake don't get mad often." Plummer waved to correct himself, for the stout, small Jake Frey gave the impression of being almost constantly in an uproar. "I mean, real sore, where you can't do anything with him. But this time he is."

Plummer's small bright eyes darted about the gym, slapped back to Keating. "Jake's got something on Giles. I dunno what. I dunno if Jake just got hold of it, or had it up his sleeve. But he got it. From the remarks he let out and the way he's acting, I knew Jake's got something. Keating, take it on, will you? Geez, I got dough, I'll pay you."

"Thanks," Keating answered dryly. "The day isn't yet when some one has to pay me to help Jake."

Plummer dragged his hand off Keating's shoulder. "I didn't mean to make you sore." Plummer screwed

up his face. "I don't know what the hell way to talk to you guys, you and Jake, you. . . ."

Keating grinned wryly. "It's okay. I got to be going, Giles is a tough man. If he wants this fight thrown, big money is involved. And Jake is sticking his neck out, putting pressure on Giles. There's—" Keating stopped, indicated the ring. "Better go into your routine. Jake will be counting on you to win. Right now Jake is out gambling his life, to protect your right to fight your best."

"You bet!" Plummer bustled about, raised his voice and shouted energetically for his helpers.

Keating got out. It looked like Plummer was going to give himself a workout, and that was all right. Plummer was not trained to such a fine edge that he would go stale. Stalling around thinking of Giles was the worst thing Plummer could do.

Flying back down the road, with the needle sticking over the sixty-five mark, Keating chafed. It was a lot faster than he had driven on the way up, when the sense of speed had elated him, but he felt that the car was now merely rolling. The necessity of dropping to thirty miles an hour when he got into the city was almost enough to make him abandon the car and walk.

KEATING tried all the places. He was looking for Jake, but he didn't care much if he didn't locate Jake if he could just get some assurance that Jake and Giles hadn't clashed yet. The hands got around to the three o'clock mark before Keating worked down to a lay-off joint behind a cigar store, and found Giles.

"Listen, chump," Giles snarled at an overture for conversation. "I'm playing them close—this is money I'm losing."

Keating nodded and waited for him to lose some more. Alfred Giles in a hole-in-the-wall joint like this spelled out that Giles was avoiding his usual haunts where he played it in grands

on the nose, grandly, instead of tens and twenties anxiously wagered on place or show.

A big man, dressed in the height of almost ostentatious fashion, Giles held a racing form in trembling hands and listened to race results with a face that became a deeper and deeper red. Keating knew that after a while the color would recede, leaving Giles' face pasty. Giles' shrewd eyes were blurred, he stared at familiar objects as though he had never seen their like.

Keating knew the symptoms. Giles considered himself big, Giles had the idea that the world was in its condition because of what Giles had done to make it that way. The first shock of feeling the current running against him was enough to do anything to a guy like Giles.

Figuring all the time that he was on the inside, pulling the strings, Giles' sort always ran against a combination of men and circumstances that licked him, and the frenzy of losing bets, of being opposed, was as incredible as though a table started to walk on its own legs.

The consternation wasn't in losing the money, but in the terrible fear that all personal power had been lost. There's nothing that sounds so hollow and mocking as "There's plenty more where that came from," when the speaker no longer believes there is.

Giles got up unsteadily. He put a hand over his eyes, quickly slapped it to the table to steady himself, and bewilderedly rubbed his face with his other hand. With a rolling gait, Giles left the room with its dense clouds of smoke, blackboards, muttering radios, and men with shades hiding their eyes, and nothing hiding the grins on their crooked mean mouths once Giles' back was turned.

Keating heard the mutters:

"He took a cleaning. And don't think he can afford it, either. He had it coming. . . . Yeah, the lousy son . . . thought he was . . ."

Keating followed Giles out through the narrow cigar store to the street.

"I told you to leave me alone." Giles whirled on him.

"Sure, I'll leave you alone. I've always felt sorry for bums."

Giles clenched his fist and lunged at him.

A woman stifled a scream, caught her companion's arm and edged round where she could see things better. Men ran out of the cigar store, and there was a knot of spectators before Giles' first swing was completed.

Keating caught the fist, gave Giles' arm a fast twist, and spun Giles against the crowd. Men and women backed frantically; Giles stumbled out to the curb.

"You dope," Keating whispered fiercely. "You got to make yourself look like a small-time hoodlum? Get in that car."

Giles flushed, the bags under his eyes turned black, his eyes glittered murderously. But Giles got into the car.

Keating drove a few blocks, pulled to the curb.

"Things are getting tough, eh?" Keating took a cigarette, offered Giles one.

Moodily, Giles nodded slightly, started to take a cigarette, then pettishly slapped the package away.

"I know where I'm going to get plenty more. You mind your business, Keating, and—"

Giles started to get out of the car. Keating kicked his ankle, caught his arm and pulled Giles down on the seat.

"If you think your next bankroll is coming from fixing Jake's boy, you're crazy, Giles. Now you can go. That's what I wanted to tell you."

GILES' face puffed, then turned to a sneering grin. "You waited an hour for that! You— Look, Keating, nothing's going to stop me. Nothing! I don't know who asked you to put your nose into this, but you better get it out."

Keating threw the cigarette through the window.

"You know how I feel about threats."

Giles' shaggy eyebrows went up. He edged closer to the door.

"Forget it, Keating. I wasn't threatening you. We never been anything but friendly . . ."

"But you're fighting for your very existence now."

"That's right." Giles stared at him with a sharp intake of breath. "Don't make any mistake, Keating. I'm not afraid of you or anybody. Things are tough, don't crowd me."

Keating felt stopped. There was no use arguing with Giles on any level save Giles' own. The man saw things with an eye that estimated profit and loss in money, not in anything else. If Plummer won the fight tomorrow night, Plummer's prestige would damage a valuable champion's. That was how Giles saw it.

Keating realized that Giles thought his efforts to make a deal with Jake or Plummer were reasonable enough. The way Giles would see it, Plummer had nothing to lose but time. Chuck the fight tomorrow night, let the champ ride along as a tough guy with no contenders worth getting excited about, and the champ could put on a couple of exhibition matches that would pull gates and offer good opportunities for betting. Keating shifted the attack.

"I've seen it happen to others, the way it's hitting you, Giles. You thought you were one of the big boys, but you've discovered that what they say still goes, and that you can scrape by only when they let you. Right?"

Giles didn't answer. The skin crawled under his eyes, his mouth worked as though he wanted to deny it, but knew the senselessness of telling a lie like that.

"Okay." Keating shrugged. "You're cleaned out, Giles. You know why, and so do I. That's lesson number one in discovering that you're not one of the top ten. The boys at the top gave

you a bunch of bum steers, and you wound up broke because you thought you were still getting the answers from the back of the book. The next step, you'll be found full of slugs."

"Damn it," Giles burst out, throwing up his fists and banging the roof of the car. "Leave me alone, Keating."

"I'm working up to something," Keating remarked. "Your trouble started because you were given the job of fixing the fight, and you can't handle Jake Frey or Plummer. You had to tell that at headquarters, and it got two strikes called on you. Your bosses are wondering what the hell they're keeping you around for, if you can't do a job when you're told to."

"So what?" Giles bellowed hoarsely.

"So you're in the crack." Keating tried to show that he understood, even sympathized a bit. "I know what it means. I've seen more than one man that was picked up after the mob was finished with him. You know it's either fix this fight or take the works. I know what it is to think you're co-operating and swinging a lot of weight, and suddenly find out you're nothing but a hired man. It's happened to me."

Keating stopped, and the car was full of Giles' loud tortured breathing. "You see Jake Frey today, Giles?"

"What if I did?" Giles groused, staring down between his wide knees at the dark floor of the car.

"Then you know"—Keating snapped on the parking lights—"that Jake has the sign on you. If you buck Jake, you're in for it." Keating made it sound as if he knew what Jake had on Giles. "If Plummer loses or throws the fight, Jake will come down on you. You've spoiled Plummer's conditioning even if you don't make Plummer dive. I know this will be over your head, but Jake has ideas about honesty, and stuff like that.

"To get down to your level, the situation stands with you caught be-

tween your bosses and Jake. If you fix the fight, or if you don't fix it, you're in for trouble. There's a way out, Giles." Keating grasped Giles' arm hard. "I'm warning you, don't take that exit."

Giles stared at him. "Good cripes! You think I'd—"

KEATING leaned close. "Somebody might suggest it. . . . I want you to know from right here, that putting Jake in the morgue won't solve anything."

Giles jerked, thrashed about, broke out of the grip.

"All right." Giles got out of the car. Keating watched him stomp along in the lights that sprang up in the store windows as Giles went along, as though they were so many eyes coming to life, gleaming mockingly at the stoop-shouldered big man.

Keating sighed, wrung his hands hard. Is it lousy to see a man walking in the valley of death, and herd him back in when he tries to climb out?

Keating shuddered, turned his lights up, started the motor and drove away. His first impulse was to take the road to the country again.

He remembered that Jake had a married sister across the bridge. Keating drove over the bridge.

As Keating got to the foot of the stoop, Jake came out of the house. Jake's face lighted up immediately, clouds disappeared from his eyes, and his fleshy nose lifted as it did when Jake whiffed a good dinner cooking.

"So hello Wesling!" Jake stood on the top step, his eyes level with Keating's. Then Jake clumped down to the street to Keating, raised his hands and clapped Keating in the vicinity of the elbows.

"Wesley!" Keating corrected. He'd tried so long to get Jake to pronounce it correctly that he'd given up; the exclamation was purely automatic.

"Sure, Wesling! So what am I calling you? Charlie?" Jake grinned and breezed right along. "So you're ask-

ing should you put the roll on Plummer. What a question, what a question! In the first round he'll win!" Jake squared off comically. "A knock-out! I ain't telling—"

"Okay, Jake." Keating gestured. "You don't have to put on the act. I saw Plummer. I just left Giles."

Startled for a moment, Jake sighed. His shoulders sagged, his eyes clouded, flashed, and his face was heavy the way it had been as he came out of the house.

"Giles, that gonif! Look, Wesling, it ain't making—"

"Jake, what have you got on Giles?"

Jake rubbed his chins, the scrape of the bristle sounding like the workings of his emotions.

"You I could tell it, Wesling. Remembering Whitey, mine boy that made a program for Gang Crushers yet?"

"Sure, kid who used to fight for you, Jake. The police killed him last week when he tried to shoot his way out of a hideout."

"With me, he stayed all the time a good boy," Jake replied stoutly. "He is coming to me two days before the cops are shooting him, and telling how Giles was in a job with him one time." Jake tightened his jaw. "The gonif, in prison I could put him."

Keating led him out to the car and sat on the fender. "You ought to tell that to the cops in any case, Jake."

"With me, I am having my business with fighters, and the cops are having business with crooks. Snitching yet I ain't doing, Wesling, till I am driven. So"—Jake hunched—"can I prove it? I couldn't tell till I ask the cops, then it's too late to warn Giles already he should keep out of my business." Jake spat. "A snitcher I should be."

"Have it your own way, Jake. Only, don't crowd Giles too hard. The guy is desperate, and I don't want you to get hurt."

"Sure," Jake beamed. "So having friends is better than money yet. I

ain't making trouble till I got to. Am I Hitler?"

Keating shoved off the fender and opened the car door.

"Either tell the cops what you know, or forget about it, Jake. Don't try using it on Giles yourself. Come on, I'll drive you up to the training quarters."

Jake was dismayed. "Right here I got mine car, Wesling."

Keating nodded. "Jake, you want me to come up there with you?"

JAKE shook his head. "Funny business Giles ain't trying, Wesling. Already I told him off. You should drive so far and back again in one day twice? For what?" Jake shrugged heavily. "Only I'm asking you, have a good time and get some sleep tonight, so you are looking with clear eyes at a fine fight Plummer is putting on, is all I'm asking, Wesling."

Keating waved good-bye and watched Jake's car turn the corner.

Jake was a good guy. Half the time Keating felt like laughing at Jake, the other half the time like socking those who did laugh. The fat little Jake was a bundle of nerves and square-dealing.

Maybe Jake's idea about not running to the police with what he knew about Giles was bad, but at least it was the result of Jake's sincere efforts to deal with a complex world, where everyone was on the make and nobody knew a trick he had not tried at least once, and on Jake first.

Things seeming to have quieted down, Keating got himself something to eat. A couple of other things came up after that. He went for a drink, stayed for seven, and got into a tangle of meaningless conversation.

Keating stopped his chatter abruptly; he knew the signs: when he gabbed, he was nervous. When he got screwed up over something, he inevitably let loose with the gab, tried to cover up from himself just how crawly he felt inside.

He cut the talk and got out. It was

n't hard to figure what had him on edge; he was worried about having permitted Jake to go back to the training quarters alone.

Home, Keating felt the same, but strongly. He should have gone with Jake. He could have spent the night up there and stayed on till Jake brought Plummer in for the fight. Maybe he still ought to go. Hell, hanging around like this, worrying and fretting wasn't going to do him any good.

The simplest way was to get Jake on the phone and ask how things were going. But he hated to have Jake give him the horse-laugh for being nervous about nothing.

The phone rang while he stood thinking about it. Keating threw off his hat and pressed the phone to his ear.

"Keating!" It was Plummer's thick voice, hoarse with excitement. "Listen, Giles phoned me. He got nasty, told me I better make up my mind."

"What did you tell him?"

"To go to hell."

"That's fine. Where's Jake?"

"Outside on the porch. I had to get him out so I could phone you. Keating, I'm scared to hell. Giles didn't say it right out, but he means that if I don't call him back and tell him I'm going to throw the fight, he's going to take it out on Jake. He more than half said he ought to bump Jake anyway, on account of what Jake knows about him."

Keating hung up and made it to his car before he drew his next breath. He drove with the gas pedal to the floor, trying to feel thankful because this was a little-used road this time of year, all the while that impatience crawled under his skin like a million fuzzy maggots.

He kept an eye on cars coming from the direction of the training camp, but they were few, and he blurred by them so fast that looking was a waste of time.

Keating didn't see the roofs of the house and barn, they were too dark.

The first things he saw were the dull white walls.

A blur of shadow against the white of the house—that was some one running round the corner, then up this side of the house.

Keating got the car door open, swerved off the road dangerously and clicked his headlights up bright. The white paint of the house glowed luminously, throwing a ghostly glow.

It was Jake running. Before Keating could yell, Jake had disappeared round the back of the house.

KEATING got out on the running board, let the car travel under its impetus as he heard three shots blast the night apart. Running heavily, Giles stumbled right into the headlights, the gun in his hand smoking lazily.

Overwrought, Keating jumped for him. The car rolled up close and stopped, as they went down, Keating knocking Giles' gun aside and punching Giles' face.

Keating mercilessly pounded the face of the man who had Jake. He was not trying for a knockout, he wanted to cut Giles to pieces with his sharp fists. He didn't want to kill him, but he wanted to leave the cops only enough to march to the death chamber.

"Keating, Keating," Giles cried, trying to roll from under the blows. "I—"

Gigantic, Plummer swept round the back of the house. Plummer had an axe in his big fist, an insane look on his ugly face in which the narrowed eyes shone like two bars of quicksilver in the slits. At sight of Keating and Giles on the ground, Plummer stared at them without blinking, his eyes shining at them like lights in a false face.

"Keating!" Plummer's voice rumbled from the depths of his huge chest. "Kill that louse, he murdered Jake with this axe, and then"—Plummer waved the axe and its polished head reflected gleams of light

out into the darkness beyond the margin of the headlight beams—"took a couple shots at me. Hold him, Keating, I got to see, there might be a little life left in Jake."

Forgetting about Giles, Keating crawled off him, trying to come up off his hands and knees as he ordered.

"Stay right there, Plummer. Don't go round that corner."

With the pantherlike speed that his training had engendered in his immense body, Plummer streaked in, so fast that his knees hit Keating's head and shoulders. He threw Keating off balance and toppled him on his back.

"What's the matter, Keating?" Plummer bent over him. "You gone nuts? Don't take it so hard. Geez—"

Keating got an arm under himself, started to get up. His brain was spinning like the drums of a slot machine. Every time he thought he had the combination he wanted, the drums took another roll.

What was the matter with him? Did he doubt it because he didn't think an axe-murder was characteristic of Giles? That was drawing things too fine. Because Giles had a gun in hand, and would have shot, not axed?

That knock-over Plummer had given him was no accident, Plummer wanted to keep him where he was.

Keating shouted: "Don't tell me Giles killed Jake with that axe." The light flashed on the polished axe-head again. "There's no blood on it."

Plummer laughed, the shining axe whirled down in a glittering silver arc.

Keating rolled away, his hand fumbled for his gun as he turned over. Drawing his legs up, his toes caught in the earth, and Keating came up like a jack-in-the-box as Plummer closed in, their bodies meeting with a heavy shock, the axe raised high again.

Keating grabbed the handle. His hand grazed its razor edge, and he felt the warm blood gush down from the base of his thumb, down inside

his sleeve. But he got a grip on the handle.

Roaring, Plummer smashed his left fist into Keating's face. Keating lost track of things for a moment. He realized he was back on his heels, going back over. Then Plummer grasped his wrist above the gun, yanked him back, let go the axe handle, and hit Keating with his rock-hard right.

ALL the explosions of all the world's wars, and all the lights of all the world's fairs, conjuncted in Keating's head. He had just sense enough to realize there was no use kidding himself. He was no match for Plummer now, if ever. This business of beating a title-contender in the heavyweight class is no such easy job as it can be made to appear.

Keating had the axe short by the handle. Desperately, he brought the blunt back edge down on Plummer's forehead.

Plummer's roar beat against Keating's heaving chest. Darting his hands at Keating's throat, Plummer laughed harshly. Keating felt the fingers, gulped. He knew what their grip would mean.

Groggy, he threw himself forward, broke through Plummer's thumbs, and as Plummer jumped back in surprise, Keating brought up his gun and laid it into Plummer's face to the tune of cracking bone.

Keating dropped the axe, put out a hand and supported himself against the house. Everywhere he put his hand, he left a big black mark of blood. Panting, he stumbled along.

In the darkness back of the house, Keating stumbled over Jake's body. Hooking a hand in under the belt that went round Jake's ample girth, he half carried and dragged Jake to where the headlights illuminated the ground.

Jake was out, a terrific bruise just forward of his graying temple, but otherwise unhurt. Slapped lightly several times, Jake opened his eyes,

stared up at Keating.

Jake's expression changed so quickly Keating could hardly follow it. Jake began to smile, looked up in round-eyed wonder, then opened his mouth to scream and could only avert his eyes, shudders tremoring his body.

Keating looked up. Plummer was standing over him with the axe.

Keating bitterly realized he should have known that the big ox could take more than a normal man could. He should have battered Plummer's head off. It was too late now.

Keating tried to bring his gun up, otherwise he made no attempt to move. If he got out of the way of the axe this time, Jake would get it. And it was too late to use even the gun. The muzzle was dragging up, and the axe was falling with the incredible speed of a meteorite.

Behind Plummer, a gun blazed up orange-red, twice, at high-angled firing from the ground. Plummer pitched forward, one of his leaden feet cleared the prostrate Jake, kicked the kneeling Keating in the stomach.

Keating sprang up, shoved Plummer back as the gun roared again. Plummer turned his face to the headlights, weaved a step towards the gun fire. Keating looked at the back of Plummer's head, dark, shiny with blood, and bit his own thumb as Plummer toppled over and lay on his face.

Keating exploded: "Whew!"

Helping Giles to his feet, Keating remarked: "That was a helping hand, Giles. Sorry about the earlier parts of it, I hadn't caught on yet."

"That's okay." Giles wiped blood from his face. "I would have told you the truth the first time, only I was playing both ends against the middle. I got too smart even for myself."

Keating steadied Jake. Jake was on his feet, but wobbling all about.

"You got too smart!" Keating snorted at Giles. "What did Plummer do? I haven't figured all of it out yet, but if that big stumblebum meant to

win the fight, then this puzzle is absolutely the worst I've ever come up against."

Giles sat on a windowsill, his hand scrounging his face.

"My"—Giles almost choked on the word, but got it out—"bosses—" Giles gulped. "The bosses put thousands on Plummer to win. The grapevine started to work, and they began to worry. They gave me the job of seeing that Plummer did win. All Plummer had to do was want to, and he would have."

Keating burst out: "Then why the hell didn't you tell me you were on the level?"

Giles tried to answer that, but Jake shouted: "So how could I believe a story like that?" Jake sputtered. "I suppose Plummer wanted he should lose!"

GILES looked at Keating, as much as to say: "There you are." Keating realized that Giles was right. He wouldn't have believed Giles, and neither would anyone else have. Even if Plummer went into the ring and lost, Giles would never be able to prove he had wanted Plummer to win. If nothing else, Giles would always have it against him that he had upset Plummer on the eve of a big fight.

And what was worse probably, in Giles' estimation, would be the loss of face. Giles wasn't supposed to have to ask, Giles was supposed to command.

"That's the truth, you can believe it or not." Giles squared his shoulders, the reflected glow from the white walls robbing his face of color, the bruises and blood showing black against his white skin. "Plummer wanted to lose. There was so much money bet on Plummer that the odds shot up like a rocket. Plummer bet every nickel he owned against himself."

"With the odds the way they were, Plummer would have made more out of it, net, than out of being champ."

TSD

Plummer never cared for the fight game. He told me to my face that he was sick of training and doing without things he wanted." Giles grinned bitterly. "The guys at the top, who think they're so smart, foxed themselves on this one."

Keating nodded. "You mean that they're sick of the champ?"

"Who isn't?" Giles exploded. "He won't fight, and when he does he'll be a pushover. All we wanted was for Plummer to win tomorrow night. Then the big shots were going to match Plummer with the champ right away. Plummer would have met the champ in a few months, and taken him easy. But the big lazy bum, he saw the way the odds were going, and decided to make a fortune betting against himself."

Keating thought it over.

"I guess I believe you, Giles. I had a hunch that Plummer wasn't anxious to be a fighter. I looked him over today and I could see the guy hated this work of conditioning himself. Why didn't you tell Jake the whole truth? You know how square Jake is." Keating rested a hand on little Jake's shoulder. "Jake would have laced into Plummer."

Giles swerved his eyes to Jake, dropped his gaze to the ground.

"I was desperate. No use telling you that Jake wouldn't have believed me. The important thing was, that because I couldn't fix Plummer, the big shots decided I was losing my touch." Giles' face fell. "I knew I was finished. They put the screws on and I lost my dough. Next, just as you said, would come a burst of slugs and some cop would fall over my body in an alley. I had to get out of town."

Giles drew a deep, tremulous breath.

HE went on: "I put the bee on Plummer. I told him to go ahead, lose, but he had to pay me off. I wanted half what he was going to win. Only, I wanted it before the fight. If I stayed in town, I wouldn't

be alive to collect after Plummer threw that fight. Plummer said he was getting the money; he phoned me to come up here tonight and get it."

"You must have been late," Keating put in. "Because Plummer phoned me. The guy wasn't crazy—he must have figured on a schedule that would get me here just after he finished killing you and Jake."

"I was here, but I didn't show myself," Giles shrugged. "I'm not crazy either, and I knew blackmailing Plummer was a risky job. Finally, when Plummer came out of the house, I stepped forward.

"Plummer said to wait a minute, he was going to get Jake. When I heard that, I knew the wind was blowing wrong. Plummer tried to grab me, and I started to fight. Plummer had an axe under his jersey. I let go with my gun, and ran."

"You gonif," Jake screamed, "into me you are running, and knocking me out cold like a herring."

Keating patted Jake's shoulder.

"Giles saved your life, Jake. If Plummer had thought you were able to get away, Plummer would have killed you, then gone after Giles. Don't you see it, Jake? Plummer wanted to bash your head with the axe, then kill Giles, and say he killed Giles for killing you.

"But the way it worked out, Plummer saw Giles getting away. Plummer figured he had to slaughter Giles first, then butcher you. Well, there won't be any trouble with the authorities, and with all bets off, Giles, you got nothing to worry about."

A long moaning wail came out of Jake.

"Stand up, Jake," Keating supported him. "Jake, you have to be able to take it. After all the work you put into Plummer, there he is, cold meat, dead."

Jake waved. "So, again I'm starting. Like babies these fighters are, nice when you get them, but growing up . . ." Jake glanced at Plummer's body: "Phooie!"

The Vengeance Broker

By
Benton Greer
Author of "Fatal Effigy"



Detective Krueger was out for the money and out for the clients. But the only way he could solve the case of this particular client was to get into hot water with another one. But hot water was where Krueger figured to get—cold cash.

A DETECTIVE gets some side-lights on people and the way they act. When the average man meets a person, he takes him for the best; but a detective takes him for the worst—that's his business. He gets paid for finding out how crooked people can really be.

Perhaps I had better introduce myself. I'm Detective Harry Krueger, owner and sole operative of the

Krueger Detective Agency. I answer to the name of "Slam," which is supposed to mean that I hit hard. I used to be in the fighting racket before I had the bright idea that there was more dough in the detective racket. Most of my work is on divorce cases—turning up love nests and so forth. Personally, I'd prefer having more real criminal work like you read about in detective maga-

zines, and less dirt, but then a detective's got to live.

At any rate, I was sitting in my office one day waiting for a suspicious husband that wanted his better half checked up to see how good she really was, when the phone rang.

"The Krueger Detective Agency?" asked a booming voice. After I had assured the voice that I was, it went on: "This is Mr. Laverne Neihart, of the Neihart Jewelry Store. May I have an appointment with you this afternoon some time? I think that I may have a case for you."

I regretfully told him that I was busy the entire afternoon. I knew what he probably wanted. I recalled that his jewelry store had been robbed the week before, and to date the police had accomplished nothing as usual.

"If you're going to be at your store late this afternoon, I might be able to drop in and see you," I suggested. "I have a very important case now that will keep me busy for the rest of the afternoon, but I may finish it early." My case wasn't really important, but it was good for my rates to let him think I was a busy man in much demand.

"No, no," he said hurriedly. "There are certain—er—delicate features that I couldn't discuss there."

"Perhaps I could call at your home this evening," I offered.

He agreed to that, and I arranged to see him there at seven-thirty.

PRIMPTLY at that hour I was at his door. A rather fat and pompous man opened it.

"Mr. Laverne Neihart," I asked.

"No, but he'll be here in a few minutes," he said in a thin shrill voice. "Won't you come in?"

He peered at me uncertainly, as though wondering who I was and what my business was. Then the light of recognition came into his eyes and he held out his hand to me. "You're Mr. Krueger, the private detective, aren't you?" he asked. "My name is

Jackson. You've probably heard of me; I have a drug store not far from your office—the Jackson Pharmacy."

I shook his hand and admitted that he had guessed my identity. I remembered seeing him occasionally in the drug store. He showed me into the living room, seated me and offered me a cigar. I refused it and took a cigarette from the polished silver case that a satisfied client had given me.

"I suppose," said Jackson, "that Neihart is hiring you to investigate the robbery at his place last week."

"I don't know," I answered guardedly. "I haven't talked to him yet." Since Jackson apparently lived in the same house with Neihart, I judged that they were reasonably intimate, but I always try to guard the confidences of my clients as carefully as possible.

"That's it, all right," piped Jackson, bobbing his fat head. "He wouldn't have any other use for you. Have you accepted the case?"

"Hardly, since I don't know why he wants me," I answered.

Jackson leaned forward confidentially and lowered his voice to a shrill whisper. "I advise you not to accept it. Neihart's a hard man to get along with. I ought to know—I've lived with him for fifty years. And he's so tight that you'll hardly be able to get a penny out of him."

"I'll have to learn more about the case before I can say whether or not I'll take it."

I admit I was puzzled. That was strange advice to give me. I felt that there was something behind his words that he didn't want to say outright. When he had mentioned Neihart, I thought I had caught a flash of something in his eyes—was it hate? I wasn't sure, but I began to be interested.

But he changed the subject abruptly. "I suppose that you heard about the robbery of my drug store?"

I told him that I had not. I try to keep well up on the crime news

of the city, but when you travel about the country following errant lovers as much as I do, you miss a lot. I asked him about it.

It seemed that one night about a month previous, someone had broken in the back door of the drug store, had opened the safe and had walked away with about six thousand dollars in cash and negotiable bonds. The safe had been opened without the use of tools, and the police had pronounced it a professional job. They had found plenty of fingerprints both upon the broken lock and upon the safe, but there was no record of them in their files.

"And now, Mr. Krueger," continued Jackson when he had completed his description of the robbery, "I'll offer you this job on one condition."

"And that—"

"That you don't take this robbery at Neihart's. If you're going to work for me, I don't want you dividing your time elsewhere."

I muddled on this a minute. You've got to admit that it was a peculiar proposition; I get one job if I don't take another.

"Well, how about it?" he asked.

I looked at his face. He seemed eager to have me accept. I said: "I don't know, Mr. Jackson. I'll have to see Mr. Neihart first and find out what he wants me to do."

"But I want your answer at once I am leaving in a few minutes."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jackson," I said. And I was. I always hate to turn down a client. I don't have enough of them so that I can afford to. "I can drop in on you tomorrow and let you know if I change my mind about handling Mr. Neihart's work."

HE SCOWLED on this, started to say something, but was interrupted by the entrance of a short thin man considerably over sixty. Jackson introduced him briefly as Mr. Neihart and left. From the way they glared at each other, and the sullen

manner in which Neihart frowned after Jackson, I judged that there was no love lost between them.

"What did he want of you?" demanded Neihart.

I saw no harm in telling him. I said that Jackson had proposed that I take the case of the robbery of his drug-store the month before.

"Don't you do it!" snarled Neihart in a deep voice that belied his frail body. "Don't you have anything to do with him. If you're going to work for me, you can't work for him at the same time. I won't have it!"

I saw the same strange look, which might have been hate, in his eyes. Decidedly, these two were not a congenial pair. He raved on. I didn't say much. I wanted his job, but I wanted Jackson's too if I could get it. Two fees are bigger than one. Neihart wanted me to promise that I wouldn't take Jackson's case, but I just sat tight. I knew that if it ended by him not giving me the case, I could get Jackson's case by promising him not to take Neihart's case.

Finally he got around to the work that he wanted me to do. "I'd like you to watch my clerk," he said.

"Um-m. Think he's mixed up in some crooked work?" I reached for my cigarette case; I like to smoke when I think. Neihart asked for a cigarette, so I tossed the case to him. He took one out and returned the case to me.

"Yes, I'm afraid that he's responsible for the robbery of my store." Then he went on to tell me all about the robbery.

It had occurred on the previous Saturday night, when the store remained open until nine o'clock. Neihart himself had left, according to his custom, to go to a lodge meeting at eight thirty, leaving William Madigan, his only clerk, to take care of the last customers and to close and lock the store.

Just a few minutes before nine o'clock, when the store was clear of customers, a masked man had en-

tered, held a revolver upon the frightened clerk and forced him to turn over a large part of the diamond stock. The clerk's story was straight enough, but there was no one to corroborate it. No one had seen the masked man either enter or leave the shop and, as Neihart pointed out, it would have been quite possible for the clerk to have taken the diamonds and jewelry himself and fabricated the story of the holdup.

"Well, will you take it?" demanded Neihart.

I grinned. There is always the matter of fees to be taken up. I can't work for nothing, as some people seem to think, and they sometimes balk at paying the fees I demand. I asked for fifty dollars as a retaining fee and, after a lot of argument, finally got it. Neihart proved to be quite as tight as Jackson said he would be.

Before calling it a night, I dropped into the police station. I found Assistant Chief Hamilton, who took care of the night shift, in his office.

"Hullo, Slam," he said as I dropped into a chair. "You're about ready to begin work, I guess. On the trail of more red-hot mamas and papas?" He smirked at his jest, took a bottle from a drawer and poured out a couple of drinks.

I sampled the stuff and forgave him for his poor joke. It was good. It ought to be. He had the pick of everything that came into the city.

"Not tonight," I said, smacking my lips and pouring out another drink for myself. "I've got a robbery job."

"The hell you say! So you got away from the bedrooms for once?"

"Yup. Neihart, of the Neihart Jewelry Store, wants me to get back his sparklers for him."

HAMILTON'S eyes narrowed. "Yeah? Well, you've got a fat chance, Slam. Whoever did that made a slick getaway."

"Neihart's got an idea that his clerk, William Madigan, might be mixed up in it."

"Well—it's possible. We thought about that, but he seemed straight enough. You never can tell, though."

I asked him about the robbery and he brought out the records on it. I read them through, but in the end I knew no more than Neihart had told me. Unless this Madigan was mixed up in it. I stood a fine chance of getting anywhere.

When I finished with Neihart, I got to mentioning Jackson. There was still a chance that I might get a job from him if I worked it right, and I wanted to get the dope on him.

"He's a queer duck," confided Hamilton. "In fact, they're both queer birds. I've never been able to make them out."

I was interested. I asked him for more information.

"I've known them both for years," went on Hamilton. "Knew 'em when they were still in high school an' I was just quittin' the grade schools to go to work. They're cousins, you know, an' they used to stick closer together than a couple leeches. They were both orphans an' they lived in the same house with their uncle, old man Jackson. He died about twenty years back an' left what he had to both of 'em. They got to quarreling after that—I guess each of 'em figured that he should've got all the money—an' it ended up by their becomin' bitter enemies. They still live in the same house, but they won't hardly speak."

"I noticed they didn't seem to like each other very much," I said.

"You haven't heard the worst. I've never seen any two persons that loved money better than they do. Mebbe you won't believe it, but they've got their wills made out to each other, and each one's waitin' for the other to die so he can get his money."

"Jackson tried to get me to work on the robbery of his drug store," I said, "but on condition that I didn't take Neihart's case."

"It sounds like 'im. I'd make Jackson sore if Neihart got back his spar-

lders. There's nothing those two birds like better'n seeing the other get hooked. Jackson'd pay you to keep you from helping Neihart."

"Well, what about this robbery at Jackson's? I may take a crack at that if I don't have any luck with Neihart."

Hamilton got the records on this case also and I looked them over.

"How about these fingerprints?" I asked. "If it's a professional job, you ought to find copies somewhere."

"No luck yet," replied Hamilton. "We've sent copies all over the country. It must be a new guy."

I STARED at the record of the prints that had been found on Jackson's safe. All along I'd been having a kind of funny feeling about this robbery. Call it a hunch if you want to. I don't know where it came from, but it was there in my head all right.

Perhaps it was because it didn't seem to me that a professional who could open a safe without tools would leave fingerprints. It didn't stack up right. Finally the hunch grew so strong that I decided to take a chance, crazy as it was. I took the polished silver cigarette case from my pocket, holding it carefully by the edges, and laid it on a stiff blotter.

"Can you print this?" I asked. "I've got a hunch we might find something interesting on it."

Hamilton stared at it in surprise. "Sure," he said. "Andrews is gone, but Salzberg is here. What do you expect to find on it?"

"Mebbe the prints of the man that cracked the Jackson safe," I said. "And mebbe not."

Salzberg came in answer to Hamilton's ring and took the case. He returned within five minutes, with the case upon a tray and the fingerprint records in his hand. The case had been sprinkled with a dark gray powder.

"The prints on the cigarette case check with those that were found on

the safe in Jackson's Pharmacy," he reported.

I had asked for it, but I hadn't expected it. So it had been Neihart that had robbed Jackson! No wonder that Neihart was so anxious that I shouldn't take Jackson's case.

"What the hell!" said Hamilton, his eyes almost popping out. "Sa-ay! Where in thunder did you get those prints, Slam? Who made 'em?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I taunted him. I picked up my cigarette case from the tray, took out my handkerchief and wiped off the gray powder. Then I took out a cigarette and lit it.

"Come on, Slam," pleaded Hamilton. "Don't hold out on us. Tell us who the guy is so we can make a pinch."

"Not me. I haven't got paid yet. I don't work for nothing. If Jackson wants to pay my fee, I'll tell him who cracked his safe."

Hamilton alternately begged and bulldozed me, trying to make me tell who had made the prints on the cigarette case, but he might have saved his breath.

It wouldn't have been good business to tell old Hamilton. If I did, and Neihart had been arrested, where would I be? I'd come out on the small end. Jackson might not pay me—probably wouldn't if he was as tight as Hamilton said. There'd be no more fees from Neihart. But there was no hurry. Maybe later, after I'd seen what I could do on the Neihart case.

THE next morning, at eleven fifteen, I knocked on the door of William Madigan's apartment. Neihart had told me that his clerk had from eleven to twelve off for lunch, and that he ate it with his wife in their apartment on the outskirts of the business district.

A young woman that I judged to be Mrs. Madigan admitted me. A few minutes later William Madigan came into the room. I liked his looks at once. He was quiet and well-man-

nered; his wife was good-looking and evidently adored him; and there were two small children in rompers playing about on the floor.

When I told him that I was a detective investigating the robbery he didn't seem to be disturbed. I asked him to describe it in his own words.

"There isn't much to tell," he said, touseling the hair of one small youngster that crept up to his leg. "The last customer had left the shop and I was just taking the trays out of the show cases getting ready to put them in the safe. I heard a man enter the door and I turned around. He had a mask over his face and a revolver in his hand. I didn't have a chance to do anything. He made me put my hands over my head and stand in a corner while he cleaned out the showcases and the safe. As soon as he left, I turned in an alarm."

His story seemed straight. I liked him, and his wife, and his kids, and I couldn't imagine him being mixed up in a robbery.

"Can you give me a description of the robber?" I asked.

Madigan frowned. "I couldn't see him very well. He wore a large top-coat buttoned up under his chin, but I could see that he was rather fat. His mask covered all his face except his yes, and his hat was pretty well pulled down over them. His voice was thick and not exactly natural, as though he were disguising it in some way. I had an idea that his normal voice was much higher."

Then I had my second hunch, and it turned out to be a good one.

"Did you ever hear this voice before?" I asked.

Madigan pulled at his lower lip thoughtfully. "Well, to tell the truth, I have an idea that I have. Though for the life of me I couldn't say where. In fact, it seemed to me that I ought to know who the robber is. He reminded me of somebody that I know, though I can't place who it is. I've been trying to think who he resembles ever since the robbery."

I tried out my hunch and watched him closely. "Maybe he reminds you of Mr. Jackson?"

Madigan first looked startled, then an expression of incredulity came over his face. He seemed to be struggling with his memories, trying to arrange them, trying to convince himself of something.

"Well?" I prodded him.

"I—I'm afraid the robber does remind me of Mr. Jackson," he confessed. "His voice was just about the same as Mr. Jackson's would be if he were to put something in his mouth to disguise it. It had the same high, shrill quality. And I'd say that their figures were about the same, too."

"You could identify him as being Jackson?"

"Oh, no! It couldn't have been Mr. Jackson! It's impossible that he'd do a thing like that. But the robber did remind me of him."

I had to be satisfied with that, Madigan refused to say that the robber was Jackson, though he admitted that it might have been him.

Here was a pretty picture that I had painted. Neihart robs Jackson's safe of about six thousand in cash, and Jackson turns around a few weeks later and robs Neihart of his jewelry. And neither of them suspected the other. No wonder that each of them tried to keep me from working for the other!

But, while I could prove by the fingerprints that Neihart had robbed the Jackson Pharmacy, I was still a long way from proving that Jackson had robbed the Neihart Jewelry Store. And Neihart was the one that was paying me. Unless I could get the goods on Jackson for him, I would be no money ahead. If Jackson had already sold the various jewelry that he had stolen, I was sunk. Once the stuff was in the hands of a fence it would be almost impossible to locate it. But when I thought of it, I had an idea that Jackson had not sold it. For

one thing, he had scarcely had time to dicker with a fence.

I went to one of the beer joints on South Main street. Passing behind the cigar counter in the front, I went to the bar in the rear.

"Hullo, Slam," said the bartender. "How's the detective business?"

"Sc-so," I said. "Let's have a shot, Ray."

He set a small whiskey glass on the counter, poured out the drink. I downed it.

"Seen Shorty Nagler around lately?" I asked, lighting a cigarette.

"Oh, he's here an' there. Dropped in last night."

"Well, if you get in touch with him, tell him I want to see him bad. Have him ring me up this afternoon."

IT WAS five minutes of nine that evening when I dropped into the Jackson Pharmacy. There were only a couple of girls at the soda fountain and Jackson was getting ready to close up.

"Oh, it's you," he said not very enthusiastically when he saw me.

"Yeah." I lowered my voice so that the clerks couldn't hear me. "I want to talk to you. Mebbe I'll take your case after all. But I'll wait until you've closed up."

It was fifteen minutes before the clerks and the girls were all out. Jackson came over to me where I stood leaning against the tobacco counter.

"I'll take your case," I said.

"So?" he answered. He seemed even less enthusiastic. "You've decided not to take Neihart's case?"

"Well, not exactly. But I don't seem to be getting anywhere on it. I may give it up."

I made a mistake here. I saw him brighten up perceptibly when I said that I wasn't getting anywheres on the Neihart case. Maybe also, in thinking it over, he had decided that I was little likely to find that he had robbed the Neihart place, and so he

need not hire me away to keep me from learning his secret. At any rate he said:

"But I'm not sure I want a detective. I don't know whether you could do me any good. My money's gone. You couldn't get that back."

"I'd like to take the case for you," I urged him. "I'm sure that I can get your money back. I have ways of getting at such things that the police don't have, and I'm pretty sure that I can find the man that cracked your safe."

But he was even less sure now that he wanted a detective. I talked with him, urged him, coaxed him, until he finally asked me what my fee would be. I told him that the retaining fee was fifty dollars, and that it would cost him two hundred more if I found the thief. He finally took out his pocketbook and stripped off five ten dollar bills.

"But it's money thrown away," he complained dolefully. "There won't no good come of it. I warn you I won't give you another cent unless you find the robber."

"I don't think I'll have much trouble," I promised him. "Let's see the safe."

He took me back through the prescription room to his office at the very back of the building. The safe proved to be an antiquated box that any self-respecting peterman could open by touch in a few minutes. I gave the safe and Jackson's voluminous explanations little attention, but wandered about the room inspecting the locks. I opened a door in the back and looked out into a dark ailey.

"That's the door the robber came in," said Jackson. "He forced the lock open. But I've had a burglar alarm put on it now. I'm not taking any more chances. When the night catch is on that lock it connects up the burglar alarm."

I shut the door, snapped the lock shut and turned to Jackson.

"I know who robbed you," I said.

"What! Already?" He stared at me

incredulously. "But I haven't finished telling you—"

"No matter. I've worked it out. I can put my hands on the robber any minute I want to."

"Then tell me who he is," demanded Jackson skeptically.

"My fee for the successful conclusion of a case is two hundred dollars," I reminded him.

"What?" he shrieked, purpling with anger. "I've just given you fifty dollars, and you want two hundred more? You just look around and then you tell me you know who the thief is! Do you expect me to believe that? You're trying to rob me! I won't give you a penny. Oh, you crook, you crook!"

I COULDN'T keep from grinning. "Call up Assistant Chief of Police Hamilton," I suggested. "Ask him if I know who robbed you."

He grabbed a phone from his desk. "I'll call him, you crook. I'll tell him that you're trying to rob me." He glared at me as he gave the police number.

"Better ask him if I know who pulled this job first," I advised.

A few minutes later Jackson set the phone back on the desk. His eyes were dazed as he turned to me. "Chief Hamilton says that you know who robbed me, but that you wouldn't tell him who it was. He says that you've got the fingerprints of the man that did it."

"I didn't tell him, and I won't tell you unless you come across with my fee," I said. Of course, I would have to tell the police anyhow, but maybe I could get the money from Jackson first.

He made a move toward his pocketbook again, then stopped. "Maybe if I did find out who he was I wouldn't be able to get my money back," he moaned.

I assured him that the robber had plenty of money and that he would have no trouble in getting his money.

At last he took out his pocketbook again, visited the cash register, and made up two hundred dollars.

"Here you are, you crook," he flung at me. "Now tell me who he was."

I carefully counted the money, pocketed it, then said: "Mr. Neihart."

"What!" he howled, almost dancing with rage, apparently thinking that I had tricked him into paying out two hundred dollars for nothing. I explained to him how I knew that Neihart was guilty and finally convinced him.

"Oh, that crook!" he said. "He was standing near me once a long time ago when I opened my safe. He got the combination then. I'm going to the police station now and have him arrested. He'll pay for this." He ran to the front door and held it open. "Quick! Get out, you crook. I'm in a hurry."

I walked out and watched him snap off the light switch and lock the door behind. He hurried down the street and disappeared around the corner. Then I walked to the opposite corner and joined a figure that was waiting in the shadow of a doorway for me.

"Hullo, Shorty," I said. "Ready for work?"

Shorty Nagler was one of the best petermen in the state. I had once saved him from being framed and had earned his eternal gratitude. It had paid, too, for he had more than once been of use to me in helping me get into safes where I was not wanted. You can't tell where you'll have to grub around for evidence.

WE WENT down the alley and stopped at the rear door of Jackson's Pharmacy. I took a bit of curved wire from my pocket, stuck it into the lock and twisted it. The lock clicked and I swung the door open. I knew that there would be no burglar alarm, for when I had opened the door before I had carefully neglected to snap back the night catch which connected the burglar alarm.

Shorty started work on the safe at

once. I really think that I could have opened it myself, for I am no slouch at such things, but I thought that it was wise to have an expert on hand.

He had it open within two minutes. I snapped on a flashlight and played the beam over the contents. There were the usual books and ledgers. I ran rapidly through the compartments, but found nothing. Then I pulled out the ledgers and found a small box hidden behind them. I took it out and opened it. It was filled almost to the brim with rings and a few unset precious stones. The loot from the Neihart Jewelry Store!

Shorty and I closed the safe, locked the door and left. We went to a tavern for a few drinks. After half an hour I went to the police station.

The desk sergeant grinned at me when I entered. "You sure have created one hell of a rumpus," he said. "They're in the captain's office now. One of 'em's been hollering at the top of his voice that you're a crook."

I opened the door of the office and walked in without rapping. Hamilton was seated at his desk writing something. Neihart and Jackson were standing before the desk, and two policemen stood beside Neihart.

Neihart saw me first and his face turned several shades darker with anger. He seemed to have the same opinion of me that Jackson had expressed, for he yelled: "Oh, you crook! What do you think I hired you for? Do you think I hired you to get me put in jail?"

"That's a fine way to treat a client," said Hamilton, looking up at me. "Work your head off to get him arrested."

"You should worry," I told him. "You've got the man you were belly-aching about last night."

"Give me back my money!" cried Neihart. "Give me back the fifty dollars that I gave you to find my jewelry. You're no good. You get me put in jail. Give me back my money."

"Nope," I said. "That money's

mine. I worked hard finding out who robbed your jewelry store."

"Wh—what?" stuttered Neihart.

I looked at Jackson. His fat face had grown a pasty white when I said this, but I don't believe anybody else noticed it. Hamilton's mouth dropped open and he rose slowly to his feet.

"Look here!" he exploded. "D'you mean to tell us, Slam, that you know who robbed Mr. Neihart's jewelry store also?"

"Yup. An' I can lay my hands on the jewelry any time I want to."

For a moment Neihart forgot that I had been the cause of his arrest. "Who did it?" he demanded. "Tell me who did it."

"My fees for bringing a case to a successful conclusion are two hundred dollars," I reminded him. "And I guarantee to produce your jewelry."

Neihart glared at me and choked on some words that he did not say. Hamilton was staring at me like a fish and making little noises in his throat. Jackson was almost glassy-eyed with fear.

Neihart finally took a deep breath, then said: "All right. I'll give you the money. But it's the last cent I'll ever give you, you dirty crook."

He took out his pocketbook and began to count out the bills. "I've only got one hundred and sixty-four dollars," he said.

"That'll do for cash," I said. "Write out a check for the balance. I'll trust you."

He wrote the check and I put it in my pocketbook, which was now crammed to bursting with bills. Then I took the small box from my pocket, opened it and poured out a cascade of diamond rings and precious stones upon Hamilton's desk.

"Here's your junk. And the robber is—Jackson! Madigan recognized him when I jogged his memory, and I found this stuff in his safe."

The two cousins turned slowly from me and stared at each other. The humiliating irony of the situation suddenly burst upon them. They real-

ized that each had robbed the other—and that I had helped each of them catch the other in a trap.

Then, without warning, they threw themselves upon each other. Jackson's greater weight bore his slighter cousin to the floor, where they rolled about striking and scratching at each other. It took the two policemen and myself to separate them.

When we got them quieted down, they swore out warrants against each other. If I had been surprised before, I was amazed now. I had rather expected that nothing would happen when they learned how they had robbed each other. There was no point in their sending each other to jail.

But that's exactly what happened. Neihart's case was tried first and Jackson refused to drop his charge. As a result Neihart received from one to ten years in the penitentiary.

Then Jackson was tried for the robbery of the jewelry store, and he received the same penalty.

When two people hate each other they'll go a long way to get revenge on each other. But it isn't very often that they'll go to the pen so that they can see the other in the pen also. Though, as I said, there's no trying to explain human nature.

I saw the two cousins several months later. I took a trip to the state penitentiary to see a man who had promised to make a squeal. They were in the same cell block only a few feet from each other. The warden told me that they hated each other as much as ever, and that each boasted that he was waiting for the other to die so that he would get his money.

But when I saw them, they were both in agreement for once. For they both yelled. "You crook!"



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Disaster Snare

By Stanley Crawford



SHRIEK, throaty and horrible, shattered the stillness of Hamilton Square. Night shadows lay like pools of ink on the serpentine asphalt walks. The dusty, heavy, mid-summer foliage swayed lazily in the

breeze, making faint, eerie whisperings.

Then the shriek came again, followed by another and another.

Heads appeared in windows of a half dozen nearby apartment houses.

Radios were quickly snapped off. Men and women looked fearfully at each other, then gazed down into the square where the darkness made everything indistinct.

The cop on the beat running parallel with the square heard the shrieks, too. He whirled and dashed forward, vaulting over the low iron fence onto the grass, his nightstick clutched in his hand.

Swift footsteps sounded ahead of him. Then a figure burst from the end of one of the walks. It was a girl, running till her breath came in labored, sobbing gasps. Her face had the deathly whiteness of parchment. Her eyes were wide and staring. Strands of loosened hair whipped behind her, and a gleaming white shoulder showed where one side of her dress had been torn away.

Her steps quickened when she saw the policeman. With a last burst of energy that made her high heels click over the asphalt, she ran toward him and collapsed at his feet, moaning hysterically. Then words came from her lips.

"I saw him," she gasped. "The Tarantula! He's back there—in the square. Don't let him get me—please!"

The cop bent down, but the girl had wilted suddenly, falling into a dead faint.

Figures began to slip out of doorways and move toward the spot. A small crowd was gathering. They pressed around the unconscious girl, turning to stare uneasily into the shadows of the square.

The cop growled at them: "Stand back—give her some air."

He stooped, gathered the girl in his arms and carried her into the lobby of the nearest apartment. Then he called headquarters, his voice hoarse and low.

Five minutes later the French type telephone in Phil Hart's bachelor apartment jangled. Hart picked the instrument up. His gaunt, bronzed

face with its pencil-thin moustache line tightened as he heard the excited voice of the desk sergeant at the other end.

"It's the Tarantula again, Hart. The boys are on their way now. The square's only a few blocks from your place. Better run over and take a look. Something funny is up."

Hart replaced the instrument in its bed and slipped out of his tasseled lounging robe. Funny was no name for it. The first "Tarantula" scare had startled the city a few nights before. A man crossing Hamilton Square claimed that he'd seen a great, black, eight-legged creature moving over the grass, moving like the spirit of death itself. The thing, he said, was seven feet in diameter—and for want of a better name he called it a tarantula.

It was too fantastic to be believed. But it made good newspaper copy. The tabloids had played it up. Now the Tarantula had been seen by a girl.

Hart smiled grimly as he got into his coat. He was too hard-headed to take stock in such a thing. He wondered what new kind of a racket some one was trying to put over.

Men from the tenth precinct were beating through the shrubbery of the square when he arrived. Their flashlights gleamed everywhere.

They had almost finished their search and nothing had been found. A burly detective whom Hart knew approached and spoke:

"She musta been cuckoo," he said. "There ain't nothing here, no tracks even. Better go in and talk to her, Hart. The sergeant's there now."

Hart took the advice. He found the girl on a leather lounge in the apartment lobby. A negro janitress had put a screen in front of her so that curious people in the street couldn't stare in. A sergeant of detectives was bending over her, getting ready to shoot questions, and the girl was just coming to.

HART moved close and nodded at the sergeant, whose name was Stix. The girl's eyelashes were heavily mascaraed. Her lips were a vivid crimson against the white oval of her face; but when she opened her eyes there was something wistful and appealing about her.

She sat up and clutched at her torn dress.

"Don't mind us," said the sergeant. "Just tell us what you saw out there."

"The Tarantula," she whispered. "I saw its hairy legs and its horrible red eyes. It grabbed at me with its claw. It was the most terrible thing I've ever seen—like a nightmare."

The girl shivered and half closed her eyes as though to blot out the memory.

"It *must* have been a nightmare," said the sergeant pointedly. "What's your name, miss?"

"Faith Tashman. Please take me to the apartment next door—where my friends are."

The sergeant nodded. Cops held the curious crowd back while he and Hart escorted the girl along the sidewalk and into the next building.

As soon as they got inside Hart verified what he had already guessed. The girl was an actress. A couple of other young women crowded around her, asking questions and trying to comfort her. One was a platinum blonde; the other a redhead. Hart could tell by their speech and ultra-sophisticated dress that they were stage people.

"Faith and I were in the same troupe before the depression hit," said the platinum blonde.

Hart smiled. He wondered what Faith Tashman's real name was. The combination sounded too stagey to be genuine.

They ascended to the girls' rooms, and from glimpses he got through half-opened doors Hart judged that the place was a hangout for down-on-their-luck bohemians. The building was shabby and run-down, contrasting sharply with the expensive apart-

ments on the south side of the square.

The platinum blonde spoke again.

"I'll make Faith lie down," she said. "The poor kid's got the jitters."

Hart watched Miss Tashman being led away. He saw her pale face and the look of terror that still lingered in her eyes. Whatever had caused it, her shock was real enough.

The sergeant began talking to the redhead.

"You people who live here must be hitting the bottle to see things like that," he said. "It'll be snakes next."

He laughed, jollying the red-headed girl along till the platinum blonde made her appearance again. She came out, closed the door quietly behind her and put her fingers to her lips.

"I gave Faith a snifter," she said. "She's going to take a little nap. She was on her way to a party at Jack Baron's across the square. But I don't believe she'll make it now."

"Well, we'll be going," said Stix. "Don't let this Tarantula business frighten you kids. It's a lotta boloney. Some nut is—"

He stopped speaking suddenly and leaned forward. A sound echoed through the apartment. The faces of the two girls went white as death.

It was another shriek—a shriek of terror. It came from the door through which Faith Tashman had walked a few minutes before. From the room where she was supposedly lying, resting after her scare. The scream ended in a choking, inarticulate cry.

Phil Hart leaped to the door and threw it wide. The chamber was brightly lighted. There was a small bed with rumpled coverings. The window was wide open—and Faith Tashman was gone!

THE sergeant was close behind him as he thrust his head over the window sill. "Look—there she is!"

Hart's eyes widened with horror as he glimpsed the crumpled form on the sidewalk three stories below. The girl lay there, pitifully sprawled out.

and Hart knew that she must be dead.

"She jumped," said the sergeant hoarsely. "She got so scared she bumped herself off. She shouldn't have been left alone."

Hart turned away from the window.

"Where does that door lead?" he asked, pointing across the room.

Then, without waiting for an answer, he strode forward and flung the door open.

He found himself in the corridor again. Just as he stepped out another door down the hall opened. He looked into the eyes of a tall, somber-faced man; a man with thin lips, a hawkish nose and features that held a bizarre mixture of power and cruelty.

Hart had the feeling that the man had started to step back, then shown himself when he realized he'd been seen.

The two girls were coming out into the hall, too. The redhead was sobbing hysterically, but the platinum blonde was still calm.

"It's only Marko," she said, seeing the intent look on Hart's face as he stared at the man down the hall.

"Marko?" Hart's voice was questioning.

"Yes—Marko Durer, the magician. A swell guy. I did a disappearing bathing beauty act with him at the New Century last winter."

Hart nodded and went on down the hall. His eyes rested on the tall man speculatively. The magician came forward as he reached the stairway.

"What's the trouble?" he asked softly.

"Miss Tashman saw the Tarantula," said Hart. "Now she's fallen out of her window and is down in the street—dead."

He looked sharply at Marko Durer and saw the muscles in the man's leathery face go taut.

"Dead!" The word came like a gasp.

"She must be," Hart said. "It's three stories to the sidewalk."

He turned and ran down the stairs. Sergeant Stix was beside him when he reached the huddled body on the pavement. A policeman, the same one who had helped her out of the square, was bending over her.

"She's finished this time," he said soberly. "The scare must have got her in the head—made her jump."

Hart bent down and stared at the face of the dead girl. He reached forward and brushed a strand of loose hair away from her neck, then he gave a stifled exclamation.

"Good heav—look!"

The others saw what he was staring at. Sergeant Stix began cursing hoarsely.

On the girl's white neck, close to her throat, were two terrible wounds, crimson holes where gigantic fangs seemed to have penetrated.

"She would have died even if she hadn't fallen," said Hart. "This is murder, Stix—the Tarantula has claimed his victim. Better question everybody in the house."

"But how did he get to her room? Some guy's doing this—but who? And why?"

"You've got me, Stix. I feel as if I'd had a shot too many myself. Miss Tashman was three stories up. She was alone only two minutes or so—but there was that door leading into the corridor!"

Brakes shrilled as an expensive sports roadster roared around the side of the square and drew up at the curb. The door opened and an excited man stepped out.

"What's this I hear? What's happened to Faith?"

The man came forward, then recoiled in sudden horror as he saw the figure on the sidewalk. His finely chiseled but dissipated face went ashen.

Hart turned and stared at the newcomer.

"It's Jack Baron, Jr.," whispered the cop. "Lives across the square and spends his old man's dough on radio and high-stepping dames."

HART remembered then. A few weeks back he had read about Baron's amateur radio station on the roof of his apartment, the station where he experimented in a haphazard way. The slender antennae masts of his transmission set, duly licensed by the radio board, thrust steel fingers upward into the sky above Hamilton Square.

So this was Baron, heir to millions, dilettante, inventor and expert ladies' man! Hart looked at him closely. The thing was getting complicated. Marko, the magician—and Baron. They both seemed strangely interested in the dead girl.

"What happened?" Baron repeated, his voice shrill with fear.

"She saw the Tarantula," said Hart. "She's been murdered. Look at her throat."

Young Baron did so, and the color left his face.

He said: "We were having a party at my place—most of the stage people who live here, and a lot of others. We were expecting Miss Tashman. I phoned, and the janitress told me there'd been an accident."

As though to prove his words, some of his guests who had hurried around the square after him came up. Hart recognized a few. There was Lucille Roberts, the blues singer, Bert Thelmo, vaudeville clown. Bowers and Bender, the trapeze team, and Manricki, the contortionist, who had played six years on the Keith Circuit.

They pressed in, staring curiously.

The strident clanging of an ambulance sounded, and the crowd parted to let the white-clad attendants reach the girl. But Hart wasn't interested. He knew without being told that Faith Tashman was dead, beyond human aid. He was looking at the faces around him, trying to read the subtle emotions hidden behind the masks of fear.

Bert Thelmo's expression was, as always, faintly idiotic; his lips twisted by years of professional grimacing. Manricki was a thin, emaciated

man. The trapeze artists were contrasting types; Bowers, powerful and stolid; Bender thin and weakly.

Then Hart raised his eyes and stared again into the face of Marko Dürer. The man had followed them down into the street.

He stood there, aloof, brooding, staring at the dead girl with an inscrutable look. But Hart sensed some deep emotion behind his unfathomable expression.

He was glad when he saw Sergeant Stix questioning the man closely. Dürer would bear watching, though the police would be up against a blank wall when it came to connecting the Tarantula scare down in the square with the murder of Miss Tashman in her third-floor room.

Hart listened while the police inquiry went on. Then the ambulance bore its pitiful burden away, and the crowd began to thin.

Jack Baron did not offer to take his guests back to his apartment. He drove off, looking drawn and shaken. The guests wandered away as though shunning the murder house.

Hart slipped into the square, feeling that in its eerie shadows lay the solution of the ghastly mystery. He found a bench partially hidden by shrubbery, yet giving him a view of the building where Miss Tashman had met her terrible end.

IT WAS getting on toward eleven when he suddenly leaned forward, staring up at the roof of the building across the way. A faint flicker of light showed for a moment, then winked off. It came again as he stared. Some one was up there, but who?

He slipped out of the shadows of the square, crossed the street, and entered the building next to the one where Miss Tashman had been killed. He showed his special investigator's card bearing the signature of the police commissioner himself, then climbed to the top floor.

Cautiously he opened the door leading to the roof and stepped out. He

TSD

crouched and crept forward. A low brick wall separated the roof of the building he was on from the next one.

He stared over it and saw the light again. Some one with a small flash in his hand was moving over the roofs along the edge of the square. Hart followed silently, then stopped as the flashlight ceased its flickering and a dim form loomed ahead.

He moved to the rear of the roof and crouched down, feeling a prickle of excitement along his spine. Then he drew in his breath sharply.

A figure came opposite and was silhouetted for an instant against the glow coming up from the street.

It was Marko Dürer, the magician, prowling along the dark roof, and his right hand was deep in his right coat pocket.

What was he up to? Did he suspect some one, or had he some more sinister reason for being there?

Hart remembered the door leading into the corridor from Miss Tashman's room, and the strange look on Marko Dürer's face as he had come out.

He saw Dürer quicken his pace, then disappear through a skylight door in the building where he lived. Hart at once left the roof, went down into the street again, and strolled back into the square.

His eyes were alert now, his attitude tense. In a moment he saw Dürer come out. The man lighted a cigarette, tossed the match away, then crossed the street and entered the square also, following one of the asphalt paths.

Hart eased into the shadows near his bench till Dürer had passed. Then he came out and followed, sticking to the grass plot beside the path, moving silently as a shadow.

The magician walked with an air of determination, heading straight across the square toward the south side where the more expensive apartments were situated; where Baron had his place.

He reached the exact center of the

square and stepped into the little open space where a small fountain played. A thick-branched maple made mottled shadows close to the fountain.

For a moment Dürer's form blended with these, then he emerged again. But Hart bent forward, every muscle taut, hardly believing his eyes. The shadow behind Dürer seemed to spread; seemed to enlarge and creep forward.

Then there came a hideous, choking cry. Hart saw Dürer go down on his face, saw the thing that had seemed a shadow leap upon him, saw a horrible, black something lift up and reach down for Dürer's throat.

For a moment the body of the magician was blotted out by the darker thing crouching on his back.

Hart sprang forward, breath hissing through clenched teeth, his hand reaching for the gun in his armpit holster.

The shadow on Dürer's back twisted for an instant. Hart got a second's glimpse of two red eyes, baleful and devilish in their inhuman intensity. Then he saw the horrible black hairy legs, and he knew he was looking at the Tarantula; knew he had seen it strike another victim down.

He raised his automatic to fire; but the black, ghastly shadow was gone. It had disappeared as mysteriously as it had come, seeming to blend with and vanish into the larger shadows of the trees. All that was left to prove it had been there was Marko Dürer's sprawled form. Hart fired two shots as a signal to the detectives patrolling the edges of the square.

Then he went up to Dürer. The first glimmer of his flashlight showed the telltale throat wounds. A stream of crimson was running from them, glistening and spreading on the asphalt. The Tarantula had struck for Dürer's jugular vein.

Even in that moment of horror Hart's lips curled in a faint, grim smile. He was smiling at himself, at

his own false hunch which had made him suspect Dürer as the murderer. Now the mystery of the Tarantula seemed more impenetrable than ever.

But suddenly he bent forward, eyes narrowing. On the asphalt beside Dürer's head and shoulders was a faint streak of whitish powder. It was fresh, lying on the very surface of the walk.

Hart set his flashlight beside it. Then, with delicate care, he scraped the powder onto a piece of paper which he took from his pocket. He had just finished the job when the first detective arrived.

He told his story then, told it briefly, and felt almost like a suspect himself, so fantastic were the details of the killing.

"Which way did the Tarantula go?" asked the detective.

Hart shrugged. "I couldn't tell. One moment I saw it against the asphalt. The next it was gone."

"It's a hell of a note," said the dick. "Two murders in one night on the same case. The inspector himself will want to look into this."

BY DAYLIGHT, with Inspector Thompson at his side, Hart went over the square again. The grizzled head of the city homicide bureau, who at first had taken the Tarantula case as a joke, was now deeply troubled.

"Any theories, Hart?"

"Not yet, chief—none worth mentioning. Let's go call on Jack Baron. His radio apparatus interests me."

"Are we studying radio or making a murder investigation?"

"Both." Hart spoke quietly.

He didn't tell Thompson about the white powder. He wasn't sure how it fitted in himself, and it was his habit not to give voice to a theory till he had some facts to bolster it. The powder puzzled him. He had had it analyzed, established the fact that it was magnesia. But the idea that it suggested seemed too far-fetched to be real. He had nothing to back it up, no subsidiary theories to prop the

main one. He stared up at the high, slender masts of Baron's radio station as they crossed the square.

But Baron was out, and the servant couldn't tell them when he would get back.

Thompson seemed dissatisfied; but there was a gleam in Phil Hart's eyes.

That afternoon he rented a room on the south side of the square; in the only rooming house left in a row of high-class apartments. It overlooked the square, and from his windows he could see the shadows of the Baron radio masts on the grassplots below.

The shadows lengthened as evening came, seeming to stretch over the square like long and sinister fingers. Then they dimmed as the sky darkened.

Hart went for a stroll in the square, every sense alert. He crossed it and met a party of stage people from the murder house on their way to dinner.

Manricki, Lucille Roberts, Thelmo, the clown, Bowers and Bender, and the two girls who had been near Miss Tashman's room were in the party. The platinum blonde greeted him.

"We're all going to move out at the end of the week," she said. "It gives me the heebie-jeebies to think of what happened to Marko and Faith. The rest feel the same way."

"And I've just taken a room across the square," said Hart. "The second floor front of the brownstone house. I'll be nearby then if anything else breaks."

The blonde shuddered.

"Let's hope it doesn't. I didn't sleep a wink last night, and I won't tonight either."

Hart nodded. He didn't expect to get much sleep himself.

IT was another warm night. He left the window of his room wide open and turned the light out. He had a deeper reason than merely wanting to watch the square in taking a place so close to the scene of the murders.

Alert, Hart waited in his room, waited for something he was not sure

about himself. The hours passed. Mid-night came, and still the tomblike quiet of the square had not been broken.

He sat down in a chair for a few moments to rest his legs, facing the window, his gun near his hand. Another hour ticked by. He dozed.

Then a sound wakened him, a sound that seemed nothing more at first than a faint, mouselike scratching. But his eyelids opened, his head lifted up; and if he hadn't been a man with nerves and muscles under supreme control he would have cried out; shrieked aloud in the wave of stark horror that gripped him.

The square of the window, dimly illuminated by the street lights below, was now blotted out. In it was a huge, vague form; a black something with hairy legs entering the room.

He found himself staring at two red eyes set in a black, indistinct head. Then the thing came into the room and lunged toward him. A sense of loathing mingled with the horror he felt, as though at a presence unspeakably evil.

Against the window now he saw a black claw with gleaming points at the end reach upward and outward toward him. He hurled himself sidewise in the chair; dropped noiselessly to the floor and reached for his gun at the same moment.

The thing seemed to hear him. Hart heard a scraping movement across the floor, saw the black bulk leap backwards toward the window.

He fired just as the light was again blotted out as it went through. But the indistinct bulk made a poor target.

Yet it seemed to him that his bullet must have struck home, that the killer must have fallen. He leaped to the window half expecting to see it lying on the street as he had seen the body of Faith Tashman.

But it was not there, and the night was empty, except for a strange whisper of sound that seemed to fill the air, coming from everywhere at once

as the surface of the buildings reflected it. The uncanny whisper died away as Hart listened. It died, and he heard only the running feet of the detectives coming at the sound of his shot.

HART ran to the door of his room. That strange whispering sound—the powdered magnesia—the two things set his brain working, gave shape and substance to the theory his mind had been evolving.

He went out into the hallway, but instead of descending to the street to meet the detectives and tell them what had happened he turned and ran up the stairs to the roof.

Like a wraith he stole across the roofs toward the higher bulk of the building where Jack Baron had his apartment. A fire escape, not visible from the street, snaked up the side of this. There was one landing at the rear which could be reached from the roof Hart was on.

He climbed the iron ladders, passing window after window. There were no lights in Baron's apartment.

He was more cautious than ever as he went up the last slender ladder to the roof. The masts and aerials of the experimental radio station showed.

Hart stopped and listened. A faint noise came, so faint that if his ears had not been alert for it he would not have detected it. It was the scrape of metal on metal, the soft clicking of well-oiled cogs. And high above him a shadow was moving. Like the boom of a derrick, one of the steel radio masts was lifting upward, lifting from an inclined position which had brought its top over the center of the small square.

Hart stole forward toward its base. His gun was out now, his fingers clenched over the hard-rubber butt like the talons of a hawk.

He crouched, went forward on hands and knees, and suddenly leaped. A cry of terror broke the stillness of the night as he jabbed his gun forward, jabbed it against a man who

was bending over the handle of a gear box from which cables led upward to the mast. Sweat streamed from the man's face.

"Drop it," said Hart tensely. "Drop it before I shoot."

The man's face went white.

"I had to do it—he made me—he would have murdered me."

Like a cringing cur the man groveled at Hart's feet.

"Get over there and stand still. Make any move and I'll kill you."

Hart pocketed his gun and took hold of the crank handle. The derrick-like boom of the mast, which had a ball and socket base, was almost vertical with the roof now. A few more turns of the crank and the steel cable leading through a pulley in the top of a still higher mast had drawn it up. It could be lowered and turned to alter the length and direction of the antennae.

Another cable led from the mast's end; a slender, almost invisible, wire. And from this something was dangling, swinging. The black shadow came in toward the end of the roof and landed as the slender wire unwound on a steel reel. A metal fastener was snapped open and the black shadow bounded toward Hart.

This time he fired coolly and accurately. Fired—and the thing collapsed into a shapeless heap. Hart's flashlight stabbed the darkness, played over the thing on the roof.

The shape of the Tarantula was visible then, legs sprawling. With a look of disgust he walked to it. From the heap of cleverly designed cloth and hair a harsh voice was swearing monotonously, swearing in pain.

Hart reached down, tore at the vicious head with its red reflecting lenses and disclosed a man's face—the face of Bowers, of the trapeze team of Bowers & Bender.

Bowers' left hand had a clawlike glove on it, set with two razor-sharp blades on the end which could be pressed together with his thumb and forefinger. His right hand was uncov-

ered and blackened, but the palm had whitish powder on it.

"You shouldn't have spilled that magnesia," grated Hart. "It started me thinking. I used magnesia myself in my own gym work—bought it at a drugstore to put on my hands and keep them from slipping. Then I heard the wire whisper when you swung away from the window after trying to kill me. Baron will be surprised when he learns that you used his radio mast for a purpose he hadn't intended. Sneaked up the fire escape, didn't you? But what was your motive, Bowers?"

A stream of curses was his only answer.

But Bender, the Tarantula's white-faced partner, gave the details of the ghastly plot later.

"He made me help him," he repeated. "He was after Baron's money. Faith Tashman was Bowers' wife, though she didn't live with him. He tried to play the badger game—compromise Baron, and get a big cash settlement. But Faith got to like Jack and stalled along.

"Bowers read one of her letters—learned that she wasn't going through with it. That's why he swung up to her room and killed her after failing to get her in the square. Marko Dürer was sweet on Faith and suspicious of Bowers. Bowers guessed he might be wise and killed him for that reason, after seeing him prowling around the roofs. He liked the Tarantula stunt and was going to work it some. He had it all doped out and that's why he pulled the first scare in the square. He did a spider act at the Criterion two years ago. Climbed up a rope web and used the same costume."

Hart nodded. He had known all along that there was some simple and rational explanation. The deepest-looking puzzles sometimes have the simplest solutions.

"He's got himself mixed up in another web now," he said quietly. "The web of the law—and he knows where it will land him!"

Plunder Deadline



*Eddie Foster made
good in the big city
—in a bad way.*

By Paul Adams

Author of "Mausoleum Mission," etc.

MISSING

FOSTER, EDDIE. Age 22, five feet, nine inches tall, weighs about one hundred and fifty pounds. Blue eyes, brown hair. Slender scar across left wrist. Please come home, Eddie. Mother is ill, she needs you. We all miss you. Emily is waiting. Marguerite, Vidalia, La.

FOR A LONG minute the boy sat motionless on the edge of his bed. He read the notice again and again. His mother sick, Emily—waiting.

A sudden deep yearning for all that he had left filled him. The quiet, the eternal, blessed quiet Cotton fields like a great white carpet spread before the setting sun. The distant crooning of a darky laborer ambling slowly across a field to—home. And one by one, as the purple in the sky deepened, the lights of Natchez, across the river, peeping out, blinking unsteadily.

He was heartsore, homesick. He wanted more than anything to sit again upon the rambling levee, Emily at his side, watching the lights of Natchez twinkle across at them

watching those broad old packets, decks aglow, breast the current toward Vicksburg or sweep down with it toward Baton Rouge. And at intervals to tell Emily how he loved her.

That was why he had come to New Orleans so full of hope and earnestness. For Emily. He didn't want a fortune, he had told her; ten thousand would do. There seemed to be so much money in New Orleans.

Emily had smiled and had kissed him a pecking little kiss on the chin.

"Of course you don't," she had said. "You won't need nearly that much. But if you try, you can get it—I know you will. And I'll be waiting, Eddie, when you come back. Don't forget to write?"

And the train had drawn out of the Natchez shed.

Well, he hadn't written. That is, not lately; not for three months. Jobs hadn't been so plentiful in New Orleans as he had supposed. Nor money. For five months he had been here and he had worked not one day. "Come around later," they had told him, or "We'll keep you in mind."

But he knew what that meant. A polite way of saying they didn't want him. Steadily his money had dwindled; finally, he had hardly any.

Then it was that he had taken to hanging around Bud's place. There he had met Whitey and Snizzler and Bo. They, wise in city ways, had kidded him about the country. He had taken it good-naturedly—because Bud would let him eat hamburgers on credit.

SERGEANT O'TOOLE, a genial, bluff detective on the city force, did not approve of it. But the boy had talked glibly for ten minutes and the sergeant had subsided. They were old friends; the sergeant had found him his present rooming house.

So that was why he had not written to Emily. He hated—as only youth can hate—to admit defeat, hated to have her know he couldn't

earn ten thousand dollars. Ten thousand! More than once he had laughed at that, laughed with a choking sob in his throat. Ten thousand! It might as well have been a million.

"If you try," Emily had said, "you can get it." Ten thousand dollars! Eddie Foster rose. The newspaper fell from his hands to the floor, its front page uppermost. A headline, coldly malevolent, stared up at him.

LONE BANIT ROBS ACME OF \$15,000 PAYROLL

Well, he had gotten it. He had it here in the room with him, under the mattress.

It had been simple, childishly simple. The bookkeeper had offered no resistance. He had merely adjusted his mask, walked into the Acme side office, poked his gun into the cashier's face and taken the money.

His retreat had not been hasty. He had removed the bills from the black satchel and had placed them in his shirt bosom, afterwards buttoning his coat loosely. The satchel he had tossed over a decrepit fence. And to thwart anyone who might be following him he had boarded three street cars in his journey back to his room.

Whitey had given him the idea two nights before at Bud's. Whitey had been talking to Snizzler, and had sketched the whole simple layout. Eddie had overheard and, possessed of one of those abnormally reckless spells which had grown upon him lately, he had carried out Whitey's plans to the last detail.

He had been deadly calm as he faced the cashier; later, he had been shaken with fright. But he had gotten away with it. He had his ten thousand dollars—and more.

Eddie extracted the packets of bills from the mattress and spread them out on the bed. Ten thousand dollars! He wondered now where he had ever found the nerve to go through with it. But he had been mad! Mad from continual defeat, mad from the knowl-

edge that others had the money he wanted—for Emily.

As in a dream the whole exploit came back to him in fragments. As in a dream, too, he saw his mother, his two sisters, his kid brother who considered him a hero; saw the lights of Natchez—the broad, puffing pack-ets—the moon's long reflection dancing upon the muddy waters of the river . . . and Emily, pale and beautiful, at his side.

It was the kind of dream to grip a man whose life had once been tranquil, who had known peace and security and contentment; the kind of dream which furnished a striking contrast to the frantic speed and hur-
ly-burly of the city.

He retrieved the newspaper, read the notice again. "Mother ill . . . Emily waiting . . . Please come home."

Eddie saw now that he could never go home with this money, saw that his best explanations would be futile, saw that the faith they all had in him would waver. Oh, they'd say they believed him, would no doubt compliment his genius, but—

Money or no money, he was going home! His mother was sick, she needed him! He'd find work in Vidalia, or on a nearby plantation, or in Natchez. Anywhere near home, anywhere away from this continual rumble and clatter, this clanging and screeching of street cars and trucks.

Sudden fear for his mother rose in him. What was wrong? Why hadn't Marguerite said? But of course she couldn't. He'd telephone—no, he'd board the next northbound train, get there by seven.

THE MONEY? Oddly, he didn't want it now, even wondered vaguely why he had ever thought he wanted it—like that. He'd turn it over to Sergeant O'Toole. No! That wouldn't do. The sergeant could be hard at times, might for all his friendship think it his duty to arrest him.

A better idea would be to mail it to

the Acme, mail it in deceptive bundles, in plain wrappers, from different boxes.

Feverishly, Eddie gathered up the packets of bills and carried them to the center table. He felt a tug at his hip pocket. It was his revolver. He opened the table drawer and threw it in.

With the coming of this new resolution a weight he had not actually been conscious of before seemed to fall away and in its stead a clean feeling pervaded him. It was good to be doing the right thing—good to know that his mother needed him, that Emily was waiting. Eddie smiled. Good to know he was going back honestly, with clean hands. Somehow he knew that his mother was not seriously ill. A cold perhaps? Fresh air and sun-shine would cure that.

No more stale hamburgers on credit, no more of Whitey or Snizzler or Bo—no more of Bud's. The clean white of Vidalia instead, the soft happy chatter of the darkies, the fresh odors of the vast fields.

As Eddie carefully bound the last small package of bills and stamped it, his heart was singing. Some people might laugh at him. Whitey, for example—but they couldn't understand, couldn't *know* how it felt to be going back. People were made different, that's what it was. Some liked the city. He didn't. He had found that out.

He reached for his cap. He'd mail the money, return to pack and then he'd be off—

A sudden knock sounded on his dcor. The boy stopped dead still. The cops? Hastily he turned the bundles over so that the addresses were down. He half covered them with a magazine.

The knock sounded again.

"Are you in, Eddie?" his landlady called.

"Yes," Eddie said. "Come in."

The door swung open and he beheld the broad smiling face of Sergeant O'Toole.

"H'lo Eddie," he said softly.

Almost imperceptibly the boy's hand jerked toward the drawer in which he had placed his gun. He collected himself, however, and smiled.

"Hi, sergeant. Come in and grab a chair."

The detective entered and closed the door.

"Nice room you got here, Eddie," he said, settling himself upon the bed. "Plenty o' light an' fresh air."

"I like it fine." The boy sank into a chair near the table, facing his visitor.

"Get work yet, Eddie?"

"No. Everywhere I go they tell me business is bad. No I haven't got anything yet."

"It ain't healthful," said the sergeant slowly, "for a young fella to be in the city alone an' out o' work. He gets to thinkin'."

The sergeant's eyes spotted the headlines on the paper under his foot.

"Pretty slick robbery yesterday afternoon, wasn't it?"

"I—I just read the headlines."

"Fifteen thousand dollars, lone bandit—real big city stuff."

"Yes?"

"Makin' plenty o' fuss about it, too. Mr. Gubler, head o' Acme, is on the town council. Got the whole force out lookin' for this guy."

Eddie's throat grew tight.

"Do—do you think they'll catch him?" he asked.

"I don't hardly know, kid. They's some powerful dumb cops on the force. The chief had to call me in last night. Ordinarily I do fingerprints."

Sergeant O'Toole produced a thick cigar from a vest pocket.

"Got a light kid? . . . Better let me hold it. You're kind o' nervous this mornin'. Late hours does that. Thanks."

"Chief called me in last night, give me all the dope as he had got it from the Acme cashier an' says, 'Look here, Jim, we got to get that bandit! The whole dam' council's on my neck. Go out an' see what you can find.'"

"Well, I figured out a plan or two, but you know how they are. Sometimes work, sometimes don't. I just happened to be passin' so I thought I'd drop in an' see how you was gettin' along."

The sergeant rose.

"Mighty nice of you to drop around," Eddie said, the tension in him beginning to lessen.

"Well, I always take a sort o' personal interest in my neighbors. I usually like to know a lot about 'em."

The detective walked toward the door. He halted in front of Eddie, looked for a moment at the bundles, then back at Eddie.

"Goin' to mail it to yourself somewhere, eh kid?"

"What?"

"Slick. I never would of figured a little country kid like you could pull a big time robbery like this. It's the movies, I guess."

"What do you mean?"

"Come now, Eddie. You wouldn't pull that innocent line on old Sergeant Jim, would you? You let that Acme cashier see that scar on your wrist yesterday an' I knew only one man in this whole town who had one like it. Besides, I seen you make a move for your gun a while ago. Cut it out, kid. Come across."

EDDIE FOSTER went suddenly limp. Caught. For a moment he felt a childish tendency to tears. He overcame that and looked up at the serious face of Sergeant O'Toole.

"Yes," he said, "I did it."

The sergeant wiped the end of his nose with a green silk handkerchief and remarked in a very steady voice,

"What I don't see, kid, is how you got them bills rolled so round. Nobody would ever think them bundles contained money."

"I used cotton. I padded 'em with cotton," Eddie told him levelly.

"You got talent, Eddie. It's too bad you misuse it. I bet you made good grades in school."

"Valedictorian. Four year average

of ninety-four," Eddie said tonelessly.

"Yep. Well, I got to be goin'. Maybe you wouldn't mind comin' down to the station with me?"

"No," said Eddie. "In the wagon?"

"It's only two blocks. I don't guess you mind walkin'?"

From the bedpost Eddie lifted his cap and pulled it low over his eyes. He started toward the door.

"You better bring them bundles along, kid. The chief's gonna be right glad to know where they are."

One of the packages slipped from Eddie's hand and rolled to the floor. The sergeant retrieved it, glanced at it and handed it back to Eddie.

"It would be a disgrace," he explained smilingly, "to be seen carryin' anything. A taxpayer might think I was doin' some work an' taxpayers don't want to think that. They gotta have something to gripe about, kid."

The boy nodded. He liked Sergeant O'Toole and realized that the officer was trying to make it as easy for him as possible. But he could not now appreciate the sergeant's dry political humor. He was a criminal being arrested for a daring robbery and would be dealt with as such.

As they started down the stairs the sergeant spoke.

"I see I done you an injustice, Eddie. You got them bundles addressed to the Acme. Is the money in 'em?"

"Yes. It's all there."

"It's right nice o' you to think o' that, Eddie. It shows a good Christian upbringing."

"Wen't do me a lot of good—now," Eddie said.

"Wal, I reckon not, come to think of it. The attorneys'll say it's just a trick a clever bandit like you would think of in case he did get caught carryin' the stuff. They'll make a mighty bad case out against you. Still, the bundles might help some, seein' as this is your first job."

"I got it comin' to me. I'm gonna take my medicine."

THEY reached the pavement outside the house and started toward the station.

"That's the right idea, kid. What your folks gonna say about this, do you think?"

Eddie's jaw set.

"I haven't got any folks," he said.

"Hm. Well, maybe that's best. They won't be so awful proud if they find out about it, will they?"

Slow, hot tears welled in Eddie's eyes.

"No," he said. "I guess they won't."

For a space the two walked in silence. Sergeant O'Toole spoke.

"Y'know, Eddie, I been right worried about you lately. I always believe in givin' a boy a break an' for that reason I always hate to see one go wrong—an' that's what happens when they get out o' work. I seen it happen time an' again. You looked to me like you was a right nice sort an' I judged your folks was, too."

"I seen you hanging around Bud's joint again last week an' I said to myself, 'Jim, he's sinkin'. Some day you're gonna have to bring him in'. But I never thought it would be for a big thing like this. I never thought it would be so soon."

The sergeant glanced at his prisoner. The boy's face was motionless, his eyes fixed glassily ahead.

"This ought to be a lesson to you though, Eddie. It's hard to take, but if you're a man you'll take it an' profit by it. An' I figure you're a man, Eddie."

The sergeant stopped.

"Dam' cigar's gone out. Gimme a light, kid. Thanks."

"I'm gonna try to keep this quiet as possible for you. No use to disgrace your folks. They don't know where you are, you told me once, an' I won't tell 'em. I guess it's better now that they don't know your address, 'cause it's likely to change soon. Yep, best not to tell 'em."

"Your ma would be heartbroken an' your sisters too. They'll find it

hard to live down. An' your little brother that you mentioned who looks up to you as his model—well, he'd just about die. He'd never get over it, kid."

THE sergeant saw the very edges of his prisoner's lips quiver. The boy was trying mightily to keep his expression stony. But the lips told.

"An' your sweetheart, Emily—wasn't that what you said her name was, Eddie—waiting back home for you to make good down here. As long as she lives she'll remember what might have been. You'll never know how hard it will be for her. She'll forgive you, Eddie, because she loves you an' I judge that's the kind o' gal she is. But always she'll remember that once her Eddie fell."

Through the whole of the sergeant's last speech the boy had been struggling with himself. His eyes brimming, he turned on his captor.

"Cut it out, can't you!" he cried. "Cut it out! Leave her out of it!"

"Get hold o' yourself, kid," Sergeant O'Toole said. "Sure it's hard, but it's true. Society's funny that way. They seem to hold a whole family responsible for what one member of it does. It pays to go straight."

The sergeant stopped.

"Well, kid," he said, "here we are at the station. I got some work to do an' you told me you had them packages to mail. They's a box right across the corner. S'long, Eddie!"

The wide portal of the station house closed after the broad form of Sergeant O'Toole. . . .

At two o'clock that afternoon Sergeant O'Toole entered the Item-Tribune building and approached the Classified desk.

"I want to pay," he told the girl who stood there, "for that ad I ran in this morning's paper."

"Did they find the man?" the girl asked.

"Yes," the sergeant said, "they've found him. He's on his way home now."

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Classroom Sleuth

By S. J. Bailey

Author of "New Flavor in Death"



Young Johnny Cushing drew high grades—for a bullet diploma. For his father's death gave him homicide homework—and it was up to Johnny to bring back hot-lead honors.

YOUNG Johnny Cushing was the best of his class in political science, senior year, Maplewood High. So they chose him to be mayor on the annual occasional when

the students ran the city government for a day.

His mother was proud, her eyes misty. "What with your father promised by Mr. Crayfield the first real job

in two years and you having this great honor, I'm about the happiest wife and mother in all Maplewood."

Johnny was too excited to notice the tears irrigating her careworn cheeks. He rushed to city hall and was admitted to Mayor Harrigan's august presence by a respectful secretary.

Johnny's heart thumped as he shook hands with Mayor Harrigan, the ideal of all the political science students. Miss Hutch always referred to him in a hushed voice. Out of respect and awe, Johnny had always thought.

The early morning sunlight was reflected by the mayor's friendly, bald dome; his lips, big enough to be called slabby in an ordinary man, greeted Johnny with easy comradeship. "So you're the new mayor, eh? Ha, ha! Going to take my chair right away from me, eh? A better man than I am, Hunka Chin! Ha, ha!"

He leaned down and patted Johnny on the back. Johnny was straight and serious. If the pun on Gunga Din was just a little feeble for so great a man, he excused it at once as having been a sincere attempt to make a young, inexperienced boy feel at ease in these luxurious surroundings.

"Thank you, Mr. Mayor," he said. "I'll do my best, but I know I'll wish you were at my side, coaching me every minute."

"Well put! Well put! Er—I'll be going now. Some one waiting to have a word with me. Take over, son."

YOUNG Johnny settled into the big chair whose leather upholstery had pleasant warmth from the big man's body. He stared dazedly at the row of white buttons and the list of official appointments. One item on the list stood out in caps: *Council meeting at eleven A. M.*

Johnny's heart thudded. Presiding over a council meeting made up of students from his class! He wished it could be postponed to the end of the wonderful day, like the dessert of an enchanting meal.

Johnny's finger shook as it ventured

toward one of the magic buttons which would call a secretary, hurrying to do his bidding. He pulled it back quickly, staring at the door through which the mayor had disappeared. Voices were raised sharply.

"Who do you think you are, Harrigan!" a rough voice rasped through the panel. "Damn it, you better get something on Crayfield fast. He won't come across. That bus franchise has got to be killed."

"Chief, I—" Johnny recognized Mayor Harrigan's voice. He sounded upset.

"Don't gimme any alibis, Harrigan," rasped the voice. "You been stalling on Crayfield. You can that guy right away or I'll smash you as fast as I made you."

"But, chief, I'm trying to tell you—"

The voices drifted away. Johnny sat perfectly still. He was trying to recall all his lessons. He couldn't remember any city official called "chief" who gave orders to the mayor. The mayor was supposed to be tops.

Johnny sat quietly, fine lines of perplexity railing his brow. Finally he pushed one of the white buttons timidly. A secretary appeared.

"Who is the chief?" asked Johnny.

"The chief?" The secretary frowned and a peculiar light shone in his eye.

"Yes, the chief. Is he some kind of official?"

"Oh, no," said the secretary. "I guess you mean—No, he isn't a city officer."

"Then why does Mayor Harrigan call him chief?" persisted Johnny.

The secretary's brow clouded. "I think you would be wise, young man, not to pry into affairs which do not concern you. Such matters are personal and are not included in the duties you take up here today in your honorary capacity as mayor."

"But," dogged Johnny, coloring, "when a man talks to the mayor the way this chief talked, it seems to me he's got something to say."

"You are mistaken," broke in the secretary coldly. "They are old friends and the mayor doesn't stand on ceremony with his old friends."

"Oh," Johnny said, subsiding.

But the keen taste had gone out of the day. At the council meeting he squirmed in the mayor's chair, looking behind it every few minutes to see if anybody was standing there. He forgot a good deal of the coaching Miss Hutch had given him. Consequently the procedure of the meeting was ragged. His classmates stared at Johnny, always so cocksure, now so ill at ease.

Johnny's mind was bubbling. He knew pretty nearly everything there was to know about the machinery of city government. He'd studied it so faithfully. Nowhere was there mention of an official or unofficial advisory position behind and above the mayor. If there had been such, boylike, he'd have expected to get it, for being head of the class.

He went through the day in a daze and when he got home, his mother greeted him wearily. "How did it go, my son?"

"Lousy!" erupted Johnny. "I hated it. All day I felt peculiar, sitting in the Mayor's—Mom! What's the matter? You're crying!"

"Your father's upstairs, Johnny. I tried to cheer him but this time he's down pretty low. He'd been counting so much on that bus job."

Some electric fire bit into Johnny's stomach. His eyes flashed suddenly. "What about that bus job, mom?"

Mrs. Cushing shook her head hopelessly. "Crayfield called a while ago. He's dropping the whole proposition. Some political pressure or something. If he goes ahead, they threaten to—"

She broke off as the sound of a shot crashed through thin partitions. Mother and son stood side by side, staring fearfully up the narrow stairway. There was a dull thudding sound. Then silence.

"Johnny!" screamed Mrs. Cushing. "Your father!"

JOHNNY insisted on attending school the next day, in spite of the fact that his father was dead. He didn't want to miss the political science period. He promised to come home right afterward out of respect for his parent.

Miss Hutch called the class to order. She was scrawny, dried of bosom. Her voice shook a little as she called on Johnny Cushing. "Your classmates wish me to express their sympathy, Johnny, in your bereavement."

Johnny bowed his head, then raised it quickly and stared straight ahead. He was like a window pole, propped upright against his desk.

"If you do not feel like reporting to the class on your day at city hall, you may postpone—"

"I want to report—to give a *full* report," Johnny said in a low, tight voice.

"Very well. Before telling of the various civic matters which came before you and those members of this class who comprised the council, will you tell us something of how you felt at occupying the chair of the highest city official?"

Johnny's lips trembled. His eyes flashed. "All the while I sat in the mayor's chair I had a strong feeling of being *watched*. I felt as if there was *someone* at my elbow, telling me what to do. I didn't feel as if I had any *personal* power. I felt that power had been *given* to me and I had to use it a certain way."

Miss Hutch beamed. "Fine! Go on."

"I know what you're expecting," said Johnny. "You think I'm going to say that at my elbow I felt the people of Maplewood voicing their wishes *en masse*, guiding me in the execution of their combined will."

Miss Hutch looked a little startled at Johnny's sudden change of manner.

He continued, biting off his words: "It was nothing of the kind. The presence I felt at my elbow was a certain man they call Chief who bosses

the mayor around like he was a sewer sweeper. I heard—”

“Johnny!” cried Miss Hutch. “Have you gone out of your mind?”

“No!” shouted Johnny. “I heard it, I tell you! This chief asked Mayor Harrigan who *he* thought *he* was. The mayor, mind you, the chief treated him like scum! And Mayor Harrigan took it! And between them they killed that bus franchise. And—and last night my father shot himself!”

Johnny sat down suddenly, his head fell into his arms and he sobbed. Miss Hutch went over and laid a wrinkled hand gently on his heaving shoulder. She looked around at the open-mouthed class. She nodded to them. One by one they got up and filed out on tiptoe. Miss Hutch and Johnny were alone.

After a while Johnny raised his head. Little sobs still wracked his chest. But there was a strange tense light in his blue eyes. “*He* killed my father.”

“Who? Your father shot himself.”

“Chief. That’s who. *He* killed my father. He told the mayor to stop the franchise for the bus line because Crayfield wouldn’t cough or something. My father expected a job. He’d been out of a job so long he was desperate. When he found out there would not be any bus job, he shot himself.”

Miss Hutch tried to reason. “After all, you’re not sure there wasn’t some good reason—”

“I heard that chief talking to Mayor Harrigan,” said Johnny. “I heard just what he said. I hate him. Talking to the mayor that way. Making people shoot themselves. He talked like he was bigger than everybody. I hate him. I hate them all. Everybody.”

“Oh, Johnny. Please don’t talk that way.”

Johnny threw off Miss Hutch’s hand. He got up and flung out of the classroom.

After that Johnny didn’t study. He was no longer the wide-awake eager

student, bubbling with thirst for knowledge. In political science he flunked one quiz after another. He was at the bottom of the class.

He spent his spare time and nickels in the lunchroom around the corner from city hall. A lot of city employees came in there and stood around chatting and tickling the pin-ball games.

Johnny kept his ears open and his eyes peeled. One day a man came in and all the hangers-on greeted him with great respect.

“Hello, chief,” they cried in unison.

“Hello, boys,” rasped the man. He flung past them and sat down at a table in a booth. Two waiters hurried to serve him.

Johnny’s heart thudded as he recognized the voice. Hate folded over his brain like cheese melting over a sandwich. He watched the man swagger to his seat. He was short, heavily built. His clothes were expensive. He had a derby cocked to one side and a huge, unlighted cigar in his hand. His voice, like the rasp of sandpaper, sent shivers to Johnny’s core.

Johnny moved as if in a trance. He idled past the booth. Chief paid no attention to him. He entered a booth on the other side of the aisle, just past the one where Chief sat. Johnny could see the profile of the man, his neatly garmented knees, his slick, gray spats, the ferrule of his polished cane.

THE door opened and a gaunt man entered stiffly, moving forward, glancing to right and left with hesitant manner. His clothing hung loosely; his right coat pocket sagged. His features had a moth-eaten aspect, and hopeless waves droned at the pillar of his eyes. He was haggard.

Fire flared for a split second in his glance as it rested on chief. Without an invitation he sank onto the bench opposite chief, in full view of Johnny.

A waiter stopped at Johnny’s side. He waved him away with an impatient: “Waiting for a friend.”

Words trickled across the aisle.

"Well, Professor Crayfield?" rasped Chief, sarcastically.

The title sent wave shocks to Johnny's brain. Professor Crayfield, of whom Miss Hutch had spoken as a home town boy, now holding the chair of political science at Northwestern! What was *he* doing in Maplewood, his old home town? And was *he* the Crayfield who had organized the bus line? Johnny's spine tingled as he tuned his ears to the wave length of those two voices.

Up front, pin balls clicked and coarse jokes and racing dope filtered through cigarette haze. The lunch-room was a hangout where food was a sideline, not the main business.

"You won't let an honest man make a living. You don't care what you do—even murder—so long as you keep your iron heel at the throats of ten thousand honest people." Crayfield's voice crackled.

Johnny could see the corner of chief's mouth dragging in a sneer. "Crayfield, you're not so smart. Don't you suppose I knew what you were up to, almost before you began? *You* don't want to make a living. *You* don't care about running a bus line. It was just a gag to begin your career in your old home town. You were planning a reform movement, with all the *best* people."

His voice mocked on these words. "I got my ways of finding out things. *I have* to, to keep ahead of the game."

Professor Crayfield's countenance was gray and bleak. He nodded coldly. "I gave up an important chair at Northwestern to come back here and prove that a city can be run clean in practice as well as in theory. I came back here to break your stranglehold on Maplewood if it takes my life."

Chief made a low guttural sound. "By the way your coat pocket sags, professor, I guess you're stooping to non-academic methods."

Crayfield grated: "A fine, loyal man who had refused to go on relief killed himself because you decided the fran-

chise wouldn't be allowed. That's blood on *your* hands. I ought to kill—"

"I'm surprised, professor," mocked chief. Then his tone got brittle: "You try and sling slugs around this burg and see how fast you land in the morgue. Now beat it, you rattle-boned windbag."

Johnny gulped as he saw the professor rise with dignity and walk out on shaky legs. He saw chief raise stubby hand. Two men left the pin games, came back and conferred in whispers, then hurried out in Crayfield's wake.

Johnny got up and drifted out. He saw the gaunt form of Crayfield a half block away. The two mugs had climbed into a big limo and it was whispering on Crayfield's trail.

Johnny broke into a run, heart thumping. Breath squeezed from his lungs, shrieked in his ears. A desperate cry broke from his white lips as the sedan spurted suddenly. The professor was about to turn the corner when it came abreast. Johnny was a hundred feet too late.

SOFT, splatting sounds beat hollowly in his ears. The professor stopped, clutched his side. One hand reached for a mailbox fastened to a concrete post. It missed. His body folded against the pillar.

The big limo skated around the corner with a burst of power. The ghost of an evil face peered out the back window just before the shade went down.

There was blood on the concrete post. It ran down stickily, disappeared behind the professor's twisted shoulder. Johnny was on his knees, shivering at the rattle on Crayfield's throat.

"Chief did it!" he cried. "I know! I heard him talking to you. He was afraid you'd kill him, so he got you first. The dirty—"

Crayfield's eyes struggled open; he looked Johnny over. "You—you're one of *them*," he stated painfully.

Johnny stared. "One? Of what?"

"The good children of Maplewood who deserve better. . . Son, I was going to kill a bad man. But I was wrong. It wouldn't have solved the problem. Son, your face is familiar. Weren't you presiding—"

Johnny nodded. "I was mayor because my marks in political science were highest. But I didn't see you."

"I looked in at the council meeting for only a moment. I was called away to be informed of the failure of my plan to rid Maplewood of this terrible thing that's got it by the throat."

Johnny gulped, watching Crayfield get weaker. "I heard it all. I *know!* Chief talked to Mayor Harrigan like he was scum."

"They're all thieving wolves. I wanted to organize the town's better people, throw out the old, rotten system and install a city manager form of government. Do you know what that is?"

Johnny nodded. "We studied it, but Miss Hutch said Maplewood had made the old way work."

"Don't you believe it," whispered Crayfield fiercely. "Miss Hutch *had* to say that. She hated herself for it. She was forced to teach falsely. City managership is the only thing. Run a city like a business firm. Economically for the stockholders who are the citizens."

Crayfield paused, breathing with effort. "Son, take the gun from my pocket and drop it in the sewer. Be careful of the rough edge on the butt. It is broken. I don't want them to find it on me. I want to die in peace. I was mad to think I could solve the problem by killing him."

"He deserves to die!" muttered Johnny fiercely. "I wish you had—"

"No, no! You can't understand! It doesn't solve—"

Johnny pulled the gun out. It scratched his finger. There was a broken side plate on the butt. It was an old gun. He put it in his pocket just in time. People were approaching.

"I know what I have to do," he

whispered. His eyes burned narrowly, with set purpose.

Crayfield cried weakly, shudderingly: "What have I done! Oh, Heavens! Don't let me go out leaving blood on a child's hand! Son, promise you won't—"

Johnny's head bowed, then shot up straight. "I'm sorry, professor, I can't promise."

Tears filled the professor's eyes. "You must be bitter to be so resolute."

"I'm Johnny Cushing," he said simply.

Then the professor died.

Johnny had a hard time shaking off the terrible feeling that came from refusing the wish of a dying man. But it had to be. Chief was all the professor had said. Johnny had to do what the professor had failed to accomplish.

He pushed through the chattering people and went back to the lunchroom. Inside his chest there was a tight knot of lead. His eyes were narrowed down to a slit through which burned set purpose. He knew what he had to do. There were no silly doubts now. He could smash the whole system with one blow. What did it matter what happened to him or whether it was right or it was wrong? The end justified the means. Hadn't Crayfield said that this chief was strangling the city?

The hangers-on were still rattling the pin games, filling the air with smoky jokes and coarse laughter. The chief was sitting in his booth, pulling contentedly at his cigar, drumming idly with pudgy fingers.

Johnny met a waiter halfway down the aisle. "What's the matter, kid? Your friend didn't show? Say, you look sick."

Johnny felt the jagged edge of metal in his pocket. He pushed past the waiter, then slowed when he saw there was some one in the seat opposite the chief. A thin, younger man with a hard cast to his big jaw. Johnny pulled his fingers away from the

TSD

gun and kept on going to the rear of the lunchroom.

It was dark back here. No customers. Three telephone booths yawned blackly. He stepped to the last one, sank onto the little seat and sat there, head in hands.

What was the matter with him? Had he gotten cold feet? Why hadn't he opened up through his pocket and let the dirty son-of-a gun have it right in the chest? Nobody could have stopped him. It would have been over before they could have done anything. And the chief would lose his stranglehold.

Disgust for his momentary weakness crept like acid into the folds of Johnny's vitals. He was no good. He'd flunked every quiz and now he couldn't even shoot. Pah!

FEET poked down the aisle. Big, ruthless feet. The man with the big jaw slammed into one of the booths and dialed. He didn't trouble to close the door entirely. He hadn't noticed Johnny, crouched in the last booth in the darkness.

"Hello, Pete? Didja make the geezer? . . . Ya did? Good—what's that? A kid? He took the rod from the geezer's pocket and headed this way? What kind of a kid? . . . Yeah, I got it. The chief'll want to know—Wait a minute. There was a kid shuffled in while me and chief was talking. I thought he was just—"

The voice lowered suddenly. "Listen, Pete, maybe *this* is it. If we give this kid a chance. . . . Yeah, I got everybody lined up. By tomorrow night we'd be organized on the new basis. . . . Ah, what the hell? Sure, chief gave me my start, but this is a dog-eat-dog game. What the hell? Chief thinks he's the whole damned works. No guy is *that* good. . . . Yeah, I'll nose around and if it is the kid, like you say, I'll give him the breaks. . . . Sure, I'll rub him *after* to make it smell good. Why should I take chances. . . . Yeah. S'long, Pete."

The receiver clicked and a heavy

foot made a floorboard creak. The man's body bulked in the shadows. Johnny clung tightly to the wall, breath stifled, trying to piece together what he'd heard.

The muffled sounds from the front of the lunchroom were the same. Blue smoke rose from chief's booth. Only a tiny island of his skull was visible. Not enough to shoot at. You'd have to walk up to him and give it to him in his chest, to make sure of the job.

The back of the lunchroom was strangely quiet. Muted sounds issued from the small short-order kitchen where the chef was taking it easy. Johnny's fingers bit into the telephone ledge. His body ached. His mind whirled dizzily like a top spinning on a narrow ledge forty stories high.

The floorboard creaked again. The man's body was shifting. The meaning of the conversation began to sift through Johnny's racked brain. Neat facts piled in orderly row. This man was chief's right-hand man. *He* coveted leadership of the organization. *He* was waiting for the chief to take a slug. *He* was even ready to *help the assassin!*

Hopelessness choked Johnny's resolve. It was like cutting off the tentacles of an octopus! He realized what a fool he'd been to think of shooting chief. He realized with a dizzy burst of logic how little it would accomplish. He'd also have to kill this man who waited to take over the leadership. *And how many more after that?* Why, he'd have to kill and kill and *kill!*

A peculiar rasping sound broke from his lips—half sob, half hysteria.

The big man heard it, moved up, stared down at Johnny. His lips curled. "So this is what took the rod from the geezer," he muttered in a low voice. "Well, you gonna use it? Or not?" He jerked his thumb toward the booth where the blue smoke rose in satisfied curls.

An ambulance sirened outside. Something shrank in Johnny. They were coming for the professor. He'd refused his dying wish. A great sob

thrust up into his throat. Well, the poor old man would have his wish. He would have it, even if he were dead and couldn't know it.

Johnny licked his lips. "I'm not going to use it. I was, but I changed my mind."

Heavy jaw tilted. Lips curled. "Yella. I mighta expected it." Strange light shone in tense eyes. The big man looked front, backed into the booth alongside Johnny, pulling on a skin-tight glove. "Gimme the gun, you," he ordered.

Johnny shook his head. The man reached down, fastened a big fist on Johnny's throat and pushed his head against the wall. Johnny struggled, felt the hard metal slipping from his pocket.

The pressure released on his throat and he heard a voice call out, low enough to reach one pair of ears: "Hey, chief. Come here and see what I caught."

Feet in the aisle. Satisfied, lumbering feet. A voice rasping: "What is it, Mills? What'd Pete say?"

"Here," called Mills from the booth beside Johnny. The safety clicked.

"Where the blinkin' blazes you hiding, Mills?" blinked chief. "Damn it, I can't see—"

The gun exploded. Powder burned into Johnny's eyes. Through the acrid haze he saw chief jerk around, melt into a lifeless heap. Dark liquid pooled slowly at his head.

SOMETHING clattered on the floor at Johnny's frozen feet. Mills let out a yell. "He got him! He was hiding in the booth and shot the chief when he went to phone! He got him!" As he hollered, he was busy stripping off the filmlike rubber glove. . . .

Dazed, Johnny sat beside the captain's desk at headquarters and told his story. Captain Andrews had white hair, kindly eyes and a careworn brow. Now and then, as Johnny spoke haltingly, Captain Andrews looked across at Miss Hutch, the political science

teacher. Her thin, bloodless lips were tight.

"I wanted to kill him," Johnny was saying. "After what he did to my father and then murdering Professor Crayfield in cold blood. But when I heard the way Mills talked over the phone, I realized I'd never help clean up Maplewood just by shooting lousy guys like them. Why, I'd have to be shooting, shooting every day and still there'd be scum—"

Captain Andrews cleared his throat. His eyes were moist. "Your story hangs together, son," he said gently. "All except the fact that yours and Crayfield's will be the *only* prints on the gun. Mills was too smart. As you say, he wore a glove. The prosecutor was in with chief. He'll send you to the chair—"

"No!" cried Miss Hutch, springing up and throwing an arm around Johnny. "Captain, you mustn't let it happen! This boy is the best potential citizen I have had in my classes in years. He really *cares* about public service. Why, if he could grow up and be our city manager—"

Captain Andrews eyed her sadly. "That's a dream, Miss Hutch. We'll never have a city manager in Maplewood. Not while—"

"But the chair!" cried Miss Hutch. "The electric chair for a boy."

"It was premeditated," Captain Andrews said. "It's on the record that he *intended* to kill chief."

Miss Hutch sat down weakly.

"There is one element that is on his side," Captain Andrews went on. "The short time between the shooting of Crayfield and the shooting of chief. If we could make it look as if chief was shot *first*, then the killer's prints might easily be those of Crayfield, a dead man who—"

"No!" shot out Johnny, his head springing erect. "You can't do that! Professor Crayfield was a fine man. He realized killing scum was no way out. He asked me to put the gun in the sewer so they wouldn't find it on him and think he even intended—No!"

You can't pin it on Professor. He's dead! You can't say he did it!"

Captain Andrews said gently: "We're only trying to save your life."

"I don't care!" yelled Johnny wildly. "You can't make them think Professor Cray—"

"What did I tell you?" broke in Miss Hutch shakily. "Captain, is he the kind of boy that will grow up into a good citizen or not?"

Captain Andrews blinked, blew his nose. He leaned back in his chair and stared out the window. Over his shoulder he said: "There is no other way. Mills wore a glove. We'll never hang *him*. Your fine boy will never have a chance to grow up into a citizen. I'm afraid."

There was a light tap at the door. "Come in," said Captain Andrews in a choky voice.

A man in white apron stepped in, laid papers on the desk. "The lab report on the gun prints, captain. There were three sets of prints."

Captain Andrews almost jumped out of his chair. Miss Hutch screamed. Johnny sat dead still.

"Three" barked Captain Andrews.

"Yes. Professor Crayfield's compared post mortem, Johnny Cushing's and Joe Mills!"

Captain Andrews stared. "Joe

Mills! Why, that's impossible! Johnny said Joe Mills wore a very thin rubber glove. He put it on in front of Johnny—"

"It's a peculiar print, a section of palm," said the lab man. "Fragmentary, blotted out in portions by some halfmoon-shaped matter, yet nonetheless positively identifiable through pores and—"

"I know!" cried Johnny. "The plate on the gun butt was broken and there was a jagged edge—"

"That's right," nodded the lab man.

"And when he held the gun, the thin tight rubber must have caught and pulled apart a little, allowing his hand to touch the gun."

"That's it," admitted the lab man.

Miss Hutch sobbed as she crushed Johnny to her scrawny, dried bosom.

Johnny pulled away roughly. "I—I want to go home and find my books," he muttered. "I—I got to get back to the head of the class. I'm gonna learn all I can and maybe some day—"

Captain Andrews clenched his fist, tried to look hard-boiled. Miss Hutch's eyes shone. "That's it!" she whispered. "Maybe some day we'll get the best people together and have a city manager!"

Her eyes continued to shine hopefully after Johnny as he went out, head high.



*He thought life was a gag, a barrel of fun—till he met a blonde and
brunette at the*

Party Girl Murder

By Ronald Flagg



THE way Algie was swinging down the street, no one would have taken him for forty years of age. That was probably because he didn't take life seriously. "Life," he often said, "is just a gag, boys. Just a gag." Forty years before, his parents had named him Algernon—which was where the Algie came from—but when people kidded him about it, he only laughed and said the old folks had just been having a little joke. "It was just a gag, boys," he said. "Just a gag."

So now he was slim and limber—he was quite short, too—and his face was smooth and his blue eyes twinkled.

He was on his way home, well after midnight, when he ran into Sophie on the street.

"Hello, Algie," said Sophie.

Algie stopped. Sophie was bright eyed and red lipped, and she had a shape that would have justified anybody in stopping.

"Hello, Sophie," said Algie. "Ain't it kind of late for you to be out alone?"

"I know my way around," said Sophie.

Algie knew that; he hadn't intended the question seriously. Sophie was very well informed. She was quick with a wisecrack and quicker with a gun.

"Well," said Algie, "I'll be running along."

"What for?" said Sophie. "I like you. Come along with me."

"No, no." Algie laughed. "Me—I'm nobody. Just a pool-room ball

collector. *Me go with you!* What is this—a gag?"

Sophie put a dainty hand on his shoulder. "Come on, big boy!" Really Algie was no larger than Sophie herself. "You needn't be afraid of Parsons. He'll be there. In fact, he'd *like* you to come along. Said so himself! We're going to pull a little party."

"Parsons said that!" Algie whistled. Parsons was the gentleman who claimed Sophie as his own, and, in his own special line of business—which wasn't at all legal—he was regarded as of considerable importance. "Parsons said that I— Say, I don't believe that."

"I'm telling you," said Sophie, smiling very pleasantly.

She took his arm and there seemed nothing for him to do but go along. It was rather nice, having a dame like Sophie clutching his arm. Still, he would rather it had been a different kind of girl. Algie was sentimental about girls. In a few minutes they were in an apartment—Parsons' apartment.

Parsons himself was there, a large man with a strangely small nose set in the middle of a wide face, and eyes that never flickered. And Parsons was not alone; there was a man named Frank and another named Armand. These two men were not so large, but they needed steel, not muscles, in their work.

"Hello, Algie," Parsons said, grinning. "So Sophie brung you up, huh?"

"Sure." Algie grinned, too, but he was a little nervous. "She—she said there was going to be a little party."

"So there is," said Parsons heartily. "So there is."

"But the rest of the bunch ain't showed up yet, huh?" Algie queried anxiously.

"Not yet. It's a kind of surprise party, see?" said Parsons. "Ain't it, boys?" he asked the two gunmen.

They both said sure, it was a surprise party. But they didn't bother to grin. And Algie wondered what the surprise was going to be, and who was going to be surprised, but he felt that it might be impolite to ask.

"It's going to be fun, with Algie in it, ain't it?" put in Sophie.

"Sure," said Parsons. "Glad you brought him up, Sophie. We'll have a nice dame for him, too." He stared at Algie, and then grinned again. "Tell you what you do, Algie. You just go in that next room there and wait a little while, see?"

"In the next room." Algie grinned back, but he didn't feel just right about it. "But why—"

"Right in there," said Parsons.

He took him by the arm and pushed him gently but very firmly through the open door, and then closed the door.

Algie turned and stared at the door. Then he twisted about and looked over the room. It was a bedroom. There was just one light, a small, dim one over in the corner. At first Algie didn't see anything very clearly.

But something about the bed struck him as strange. There was something on it. He walked over to the bed and looked, and at once began to wish that is hadn't been so easy for Sophie to bring him along.

On the bed was a young lady!

She was small, with golden-brown hair. He couldn't tell the color of her eyes, because they were closed. Her face was very pale, and there was something vaguely familiar about it. Her hands were tied behind her back. There was also a rope fastened about her ankles.

She appeared to be asleep. But somehow Algie knew that she was doped.

There was a chair by the bed. Algie sat down in it. He felt very weak, because he was sorry; he was sorry for himself, and sorry for the young lady. It seemed to him that they were both in a bad situation.

He glanced about. There was only one door to the room, the one through which he had just entered. The window was five stories above the sidewalk.

The door opened suddenly. Parsons came in. Frank and Armand followed, and they closed the door again. Parsons seemed quite cheerful. Algie looked up at him, motioned feebly toward the bed.

"What—what is this?" he stammered.

Parsons grinned broadly.

"Just a gag, my boy," he said. "Just a gag."

ALGIE put a hand on the bed and pushed downwards, so that he might get to his feet.

"I—I guess I'll be getting home," he said. "I had a kind of hard day—"

"Oh, I wouldn't go yet, Algie," Parsons protested genially. "The party ain't started yet."

"Sure. Thanks. But I better be going."

He weaved toward the door. But the forms of both Frank and Armand were in the way, and they showed no disposition to move. Indeed, they were looking at him with wooden-faced solemnity, as if they might take it as almost an insult if he tried to push past them.

"Better sit down, Algie," Parsons advised.

Algie went back to his chair. "What—what's the matter with the little dame?" he inquired.

"Oh, she's just waiting," said Parsons. "Sophie thought maybe you would like her for a partner, see? A kind of travelling companion."

"She—she's a swell looker," Algie said. "But I don't even know her."

"I'll make you acquainted," Parsons

offered. "Algie, meet Miss Felice Fancone."

Algie was almost as pale as the young lady. "Felice Fancone!"

Now he knew why the face had struck him as familiar. Felice Fancone! Headliner at the Tivoli! The best-known girl in the city—if not in the country!

Then Algie laughed. "She's way out of my class, Parsons! Why, I ain't nothing but a—"

"Class, hell!" Parsons gibed him goodnaturedly. "You're here, ain't you? And she's here, ain't she? That makes you even." He paused. "At that, I don't think you'd better stay here."

Algie smiled hopefully. "Okay," he said. "I'll be going—"

"With Felice!" said Parsons.

"With Felice? I—I don't get you."

"She's your partner, so you better take her along."

"But I—I—well, she's dead to the world. And, anyhow, I don't think she'd want to travel with me. I'm nothing but a cheap working stiff, and she—"

"I want her to travel with you," Parsons said softly. "I'll go with you, just to see nothing goes wrong. And we better get started. She'll be waking up before long."

"But geez, I—I don't see why you want me—"

But Parsons wasn't paying any more attention to him. Neither were the others. One of them had pulled a large trunk out from behind the bed. It was empty. They lifted Felice Fancone off the bed and laid her in the trunk, then closed it.

"She'll be okay," Parsons said comfortably. "Couple of air holes in the head end."

Parsons and Armand carried the trunk into the adjoining room and set it down. Algie noticed that Frank stayed close to him, just behind him.

"We're all gonna take a little trip out into the country, Algie. You're going along, see?" Parsons said, calmly. "All you got to do is what you're told. Frank will kind of see that you

don't do nothing that might hurt my feelings."

"Sure. Anything you say, Parsons," Algie said. "But—I—I ought to go home."

"And quit the party! Say, Felice would be disappointed. Okay, boys."

They left the apartment, and went down the freight elevator, taking the trunk. There didn't seem to be any trouble about it. Armand and Parsons carried the trunk out of the rear door to the parking space at the back of the building. One of Parsons' very large cars was there. The trunk was put in the tonneau, and Parsons himself and Sophie got in with it.

Armand took the wheel, Frank sat in the front seat, on the outside. Algie sat between them.

"Better be quiet, Algie," Parsons cautioned, in his jovial way. "Better be quiet until we get way out in the country, see? No wisecracks."

"No wisecracks," Algie agreed.

The fact was that, for the first time in his life, he couldn't have produced wisecracks at a thousand dollars apiece. He couldn't think of anything to say at all. He was trying to figure out just what sort of a set-up he was in, and getting no answer.

They rode out into the country for at least two hours, took a number of side roads into the foothills, and finally stopped at a small house, old and deserted, concealed by woods. Algie found he had no idea of the direction they had taken, nor where they were.

Inside, some one lit a lamp, Algie looked about. The house was furnished in a dilapidated fashion. There were three rooms; kitchen, living room, and bedroom. They were in the living room.

"Better open the trunk, boys," said Parsons.

FRANK opened the trunk. Algie stood back while the others peered in.

"She's coming to," Parsons said. "Give her a little cold water."

Armand went to the kitchen and re-

turned with a glass of water, which he dashed in the girl's face.

There came a moan from the trunk. In a little while, the girl lifted her head stared wildly at the others.

"Geez!" muttered Algie. "What a beaut!"

Felice Fancone was, indeed, a beauty; a frail, delicate beauty. But there was nothing fearful about her. She gazed at them in amazement.

"What's the meaning of this?" she demanded, in a steady voice. "Where am I? Who are you?"

"Just a little party for you!" said Parsons.

She glared at him scornfully. "Am I—kidnaped?" she said.

Parsons' laugh was a roar. "Call it that if you want to," he said. "We're just taking you out of circulation for a couple of days, until we can collect some dough."

"Very well," she said quite calmly. "But you'll die for it!"

Parsons grinned broadly. "Okay, baby. But we'll die in the money." He took Algie by the arm, led him into the kitchen. "I'm gonna leave you here with the two dames, Algie," he said. "Lucky guy, ain't you? Two dames."

"Me!" gasped Algie.

"Sure. Me and the boys got business to take care of, so we got to go, see? We're leaving you with Sophie and Felice—a brunette and a goldie! I'll be back later, maybe toward night. There's grub here."

"Leave *me* here with them." Algie couldn't get over it. "But I—I ain't never been mixed up with this kind of racket. If I was you, Parsons, I wouldn't trust me—"

"That's why I took you in the deal, Parsons exclaimed. "Because I *can* trust you."

"I—I don't get you." Algie wagged his head sadly. "Why, I ain't in on any deal!"

"You're in on this one," Parsons told him. "Suppose you was to go to the cops right now and claim you was forced into this. They just wouldn't

believe you, see? They'd figure you was just trying to alibi." He chuckled. "You was seen coming up to my place with Sophie, see?"

"But I—geez, I ain't never—"

"Another thing," Parsons added, "there's some stuff planted back in town now which ties you up with us, see?"

"Well, it ain't right," mumbled Algie. "It just ain't right!"

"And the way it works out," Parsons went on, "I got to leave Sophie here with the dame. I ain't got no one else to handle that end. But I need some one with Sophie, and I had to get some one I could trust. Some one," he added, his eyes narrowing, "that I could trust—with Sophie!"

"Sure you can trust me with Sophie," Algie asserted. "She's yours. I don't want her."

"That's all," snapped Parsons.

He walked out to the living room. Algie followed. It all seemed to be very simple. Felice Fancone had already been placed in the bedroom. The windows of the bedroom boarded and the door locked.

Algie observed that the door was substantial. Felice was going to be easy to handle, imprisoned like that.

Algie looked at Sophie, who was saying good-by, very affectionately, to Parsons. Sophie would be the boss now, and it would be simple for her. She was wearing a sort of suit, with a jacket. And Algie knew that under the jacket was a holster, and in the holster was an automatic.

"Okay," Parsons said breezily, as he got ready to leave with Frank and Armand. He grinned at Algie. "You don't look happy, like you usually do," he chided him. "Cheer up."

"Sure," said Algie. "Sure." He tried to smile. "It—it's a great gag."

WHEN Algie was left alone with Sophie, he sat down in a chair at one end of the room. Sophie sat down at the other. Algie was looking at the ceiling. Sophie was looking at Algie.

Presently Sophie got up and took a chair over close by Algie. She laughed.

"What are you laughing at?" said Algie gloomily.

"Parsons," said Sophie, and laughed again.

"I don't get you," said Algie. "Why—"

"Because he's a sap," said Sophie. Suddenly there was a more serious expression on her face. "Geez, you're a nice-looking guy, Algie! Did anybody ever tell you about that?"

Algie shot a startled look at her. "Well, I—I don't remember—"

"You know why Parsons glommed you to stay with me—you, instead of some other guy? Because, Algie, he figured you as a punk, see? He figured he could trust you with me!" Sophie's laugh rang out merrily. "He didn't know that I think you're a swell guy, Algie."

"That's nice of you," Algie said uneasily. "But I—well, you—you're Parsons' girl. And Parsons is one of the big boys. He's got dough, and he—"

"He's a monkey!" snapped Sophie. "I hate him!"

Algie flashed a quick glance at her, and he was startled again. She was a pretty little thing, and he had never dreamed she could look so savage.

"Now listen, Sophie," he said. "Parsons is a big guy, and I'm only a—"

"Parsons is about through." Sophie put a hand on Algie's, and stroked it. "Listen, Algie. You know what he's doing? Well, he figures he's through. The boys ain't so strong for him any more. So he figures he'll pull his biggest job and slide out. This snatch is big business. Felice Fancone is engaged to the big multimillionaire, Bert Funston. You know what Parsons wants for her?"

"I wouldn't know," said Algie.

"Two hundred and fifty grand! A quarter million! And he'll get it, too. Most of the ground work was done before he snatched the girl. Why, Bert Funston would scratch up ten times as much for little baby Felice."

"So would I," said Algie, "if I had it!"

Sophie looked disappointed. She moved her chair very close to his. "Algie," she said softly, "this is our big chance."

"For what? Getting bumped off?"

"For glomming a big bunch of dough and going away together—you and me," Sophie said briskly. "I got it all worked out."

"I don't think I want to hear about it."

Sophie smiled. She seemed confident of her ability to make Algie see things her way. "We got lots of time," she said. "Parsons won't be back for quite a while. You can be thinking it over. You got to go in and feed baby Felice in the other room now. That's part of your job."

"Sure," said Algie. "What—"

"But kiss me first," said Sophie.

"Well, I—all right."

He kissed her.

"Not that way," complained Sophie. "I'll show you."

She showed him. They went into the kitchen together, put some sandwiches up, and returned to the living room. Sophie, although obviously intent upon forming a partnership with Algie, was taking no chances in the meantime. She followed along after him, watchfully.

Sophie carefully unlocked the bedroom door, opened it. Algie stepped in with the sandwiches. Felice Fancone was lying on the bed, still bound up. She was evidently exhausted, and had closed her eyes. Algie stood there for a moment, looking at her. It seemed to him that he had never seen anything so sweet in his life.

"I—I got some grub for you," he said apologetically.

She opened her eyes, gazed at him thoughtfully. "You don't look so bad," she said quietly.

"Well, I guess I'm all right."

"Feed the baby!" Sophie's voice crackled from the doorway. "Just feed her the food and save the candy for me."

Algic smiled at Felice a little sheepishly.

"Sophie's the boss," he said. "She's got the gun."

He put the sandwiches on the bed and went out. Sophie locked the door again.

"I hate that dame," she spat at him.

"I could love her," said Algic, "easy. But I'm only a—"

SOPHIE slapped his face sharply. He stared at her. Then she softened. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I just got sore, because I'm bugs about you."

Algic looked serious. He was so little accustomed to it that his face muscles ached.

"Say," he said firmly, "I ain't your sweetheart. I don't want you, see? You're Parsons' girl, and he can have you."

"Geez, you look swell when you talk like that," Sophie said admiringly. "But you just don't understand. You see, you just got to play with me—or else."

"How do you mean—or else?"

"Don't be dumb. You don't think Parsons figures on letting you and the baby there get away from him, do you?"

Algic stared at her silently for some time. His voice lowered to a whisper. "You—you mean—"

"I mean," said Sophie, "that this is the biggest thing Parsons ever pulled. It is also the hottest. And he wants to make it the last. So he ain't taking no chances on you or Felice telling anybody about it. That's all."

"But cripes, Sophie, you—you wouldn't stick to a play like that, would you? I mean, we could all make a get-away right now! Geez, you wouldn't—"

Sophie laughed. Algic gazed at her in stupefied amazement; it didn't seem possible that anyone so small and pretty could be so vicious.

"In the first place," Sophie said, "I don't want that gorilla! I want you! For once I'm going to get the kind of

a guy I want! And if I can't have you—nobody can."

"But—"

"And in the second place, I want the dough. I want you—but you wouldn't be much good to me without the dough."

Algic sat down and thought it over. "Beautiful!" he murmured. "Beautiful!"

He was thinking of Felice. But Sophie thought he was talking about her, and she smiled. She sat down again, very close to him.

"I'll tell you what we can do, and how to do it. If Parsons gets the dough—which he will—he'll be back here soon after dark again. He figures on croaking both you and baby Felice then. So we got to get the jump on him."

"Tell me," said Algic.

Sophie didn't need any encouragement. "That's what I'm doing. It's this way. Parsons picked you for this job for two reasons, because he figured he could trust you with me, and because he figured you would be scared to do anything except what you're told."

"Sure, but—"

"Okay, now, we got to be careful, because, if that monkey was to suspect anything—why, he might plug me!"

"That," said Algic, "would be tough."

"Parsons has a secret compartment in the back of his car where he'll have the dough—two hundred and fifty grand! He'll drive back here with those two mugs of his, Frank and Armand. One of them will stay in the car, probably Frank. Parsons and Armand will come in here. They'll first go in to take care of Felice—"

"Take care of her?" queried Algic.

"Sure—with a flock of lead. That'll leave you and me out here in this room. I'll scream and pretend you knocked me down. You can grab the key from me and lock them in the bedroom. Then you can take my rod and go after Frank. You plug Frank

and I'll beat it out and join you. Then we can hop in the car, and—on our way!"

Algie considered for some time. "But suppose Frank gets *me* instead of me getting him?"

Sophie smiled sweetly. "That would be too bad—for you. But I had to figure it out so that I'd be in the clear whatever happened. She leaned over and kissed him lingeringly. "You ought to be willing to take *some* chances to get me, hadn't you? Me—and the dough."

"I guess so," said Algie.

Sophie pouted. "You don't seem very happy about it," she complained. "And that's one reason I fell for you, because you're always so happy!"

Algie grinned feebly. When he spoke, his voice was barely audible: "Sure," he said. "It's a great gag!"

A FEW hours later, Sophie had Algie feed Felice again. It astonished him that such a frail young lady had shown no signs of hysteria. She said very little to him; merely looked at him out of her gentle eyes, a little reproachfully.

"Geez, she's sweet!" he told himself. "I could fall for her in a minute. I—I guess I'm crazy about her right now! But, hell, I'm only a—"

"What are you groaning about?" Sophie asked him.

"You!" lied Algie. "Ain't you getting sleepy?"

Sophie smiled, and somehow managed to get both affection and cunning into the smile. "I'm crazy about you, Algie," she said. "But I don't trust you—yet. I ain't sleeping until you and me are far, far away. You go ahead and sleep if you want to. It's only morning, and Parsons won't be back until evening."

So Algie lay down and slept fitfully. In his sleep he dreamed about Felice. And in the dream he rescued her from a band of ugly gorillas, led by Parsons, and at the end, with blood streaming down his face, he told her he loved her, and she kissed him.

Then he woke up and found that it was Sophie who was kissing him. "Geez, Sophie, don't—"

He was interrupted by the sound of a car grinding to a stop outside. Sophie moved away from him very quickly and Algie sat up.

The door opened. Parsons came in with Armand. Sophie ran and kissed him. "Did you get it, big boy?" she asked.

"Did I get it!" Parsons grinned. Sophie could see that he was keyed up to a high pitch. His eyes were points of glittering light. "Did I get it!"

"Swell," said Sophie.

She glanced quickly at Algie, from around Parsons's arm.

"How's baby Felice?" said Parsons.

"Sick," said Sophie. "Better take a look at her."

Parsons leered and wagged his head at Armand. They walked toward the bedroom. Sophie took out her key, unlocked the door. Parsons and Armand walked in, leaving Sophie and Algie in the living room.

Sophie darted a look at Algie. He knew what it meant. It meant: "Now's the time. They're going to croak Felice now! You shut the door, slap me, and take my key and gun away from me, lock the door, run out, and get Frank—if you can!"

Sophie had the key in her hand.

Suddenly Algie snatched at the key, kicked the door shut, locked it. Sophie smiled encouragingly. She screamed as he slapped her face and took her automatic.

"He's got my rod!" she yelled at Parsons through the door.

Parsons was rattling the door-knob inside.

"Sure I've got it!" Algie shouted. "And I'm gonna use it, too!"

He stuck it against Sophie's side. Sophie didn't understand. Her eyes told him to hurry out to Frank. But she had never seen Algie's face so un-smiling.

"If you think I'm gonna let 'em croak Felice," he said savagely,

"you're nuts! Get out! Walk ahead of me!"

She walked in front of him to the door. He told her to open it, and she did. The car was down by the corner of the house. Frank, whose orders would be to stay with the car, had left the seat and was standing by the running board, peering through the darkness.

"Walk toward him!" Algie ordered Sophie.

He was grasping her shoulder from behind with one hand, directing the gun at Frank with the other. They were within a few feet of Frank before the gunman realized that something was really wrong.

"Throw your gun on the ground," Algie told Frank.

Frank grinned slowly. His hand went to his coat pocket, came out with the gun. But he did not let loose of it; instead, he swung it around toward Algie.

"Don't shoot! Frank, please don't shoot!" cried Sophie.

"He won't!" said Algie, and fired.

SOME THING plopped against Frank's windpipe. He dropped his gun to the ground, and followed it himself. Algie, keeping Sophie covered, stooped and picked up the gun.

Frank was quite motionless.

"Geez!" murmured Sophie. "Swell shot, Algie. Everything's clear now. Let's go!"

"We'll go," said Algie, grimly, "back to the house."

The gun was again pressed against Sophie's side. Sophie hesitated only a moment.

"I never thought you'd be like that," she complained bitterly.

They returned to the living room. Parsons was crashing against the door.

"Listen, you mug!" Algie yelled. "Frank is croaked! And I got Sophie covered! I could easy beat it right now—with the dough!"

The crashing on the bedroom side of the door stopped.

"Okay," grumbled Parsons. "What's the answer?"

"You get the ropes off Felice," Algie ordered. "Let her come out through the door. I'll unlock the door and—"

"And you beat it, anyhow!" snarled Parsons.

"When I unlock the door," Algie pointed out, "you can come out, too!"

Parsons seemed to be considering for a moment. "Okay," he said.

There was a rustling in the room for a little while. Sophie was glaring at Algie in a rage. But Algie kept a cool eye on her.

"She's free!" Parsons called presently.

"Yeah?" said Algie. "Is that right, Felice?"

It thrilled him to be calling her Felice.

"Yes," said the girl. "I'm right here by the door."

"All right," said Algie. "I'm going to unlock the door, and open it a little for you to come out. When you come through—come fast!"

"All right," Felice said.

Algie looked at Sophie. "You are going to unlock that door," he told her.

"Me? Why—"

"I'm giving you the key, see? And I'm backing away to the front door there. But I'm keeping you covered, and when I say the word, you unlock the door."

"I—I could kill you!" Sophie gasped.

"Not now," said Algie. "I've got two guns now—Frank's and yours! And I'm using 'em both. Another thing—when Felice steps through the door, you step right into it, so that you keep Parsons and Armand from coming through too quick!"

"And suppose I don't?"

"I'll plug you," said Algie, "sure as hell!"

He cautiously retreated toward the front door, until he could feel his back against the door jamb. The door was

open and a cold night breeze chilled him

Sophie was watching him intently.
"Okay!" he said.

She turned the key, pulled the door open a little. Felice Fancone appeared through the doorway, moving as gracefully as if she were moving onto the stage, and fearlessly.

"Run!" shouted Algie.

She sprinted toward him.

Almost at once, Parsons and Armand started to push after her. Frantically Sophie billowed forward, trying to hold them back.

"Out to the car!" Algie urged Felice, as she reached him.

He stood his ground while she ran past. Sophie was hurled backwards. Parsons and Armand broke into the room, guns out. Parsons' face was livid. He didn't stop for questions. His gun spat flame at once. The woodwork just above Algie's head was splintered.

Algie fired—missed.

SOPHIE was down on her knees, clinging to Parsons' legs. "I don't want to die!" she screamed.

Parsons cursed and kicked her aside. He fired again. Pain shot through Algie's left shoulder, and he was swung half about. He steadied himself, took aim, fired.

He missed Parsons, but the shot did something to Armand. The gunman, just getting ready to shoot, looked surprised for a moment, then, without a word, sank at Parsons' feet.

Algie felt as if he, too, were going to sink. But he knew Felice would be waiting for him, out there in the car. And somehow he had to get Felice home. He steadied his arm again, just as Parsons snapped the trigger twice, in quick succession. Algie knew that he had been hit, but he couldn't tell where, because nothing seemed to impress him any more.

It appeared to him that he was almost blind. Parsons' big figure, there across the room, was just a blur. But he took aim at that blur deliberately.

He heard Sophie screaming again, screaming at the top of her voice. But the scream was smothered very soon.

It was smothered because the blur which had been Parsons had pitched over on top of her.

Algie knew, then, that he could go. But it seemed to be difficult.

"Come," said a gentle voice, very close to him.

He knew it was Felice, although he couldn't see her. He had told her to go out to the car, but evidently she hadn't. They were out in the night air now, and she was walking with him, her arm about him, and it was very sweet.

"Geez," he said, "you're beautiful!"

She was talking to him: "I'll drive—"

"No," he said, "I'll drive. I got to drive you—home!"

He felt his hand on the cold wheel. And then he started to dream. The dream was very much like the one he had had before. He had just rescued Felice from Parsons and a lot of gorillas. Blood was streaming down his face. Felice was bending over him, and he was telling her he loved her.

And then he woke up. Some one had kissed him. It was Felice!

He was lying in a bed. Felice was bending over him. He was awake and he knew that it was true. She smiled at him.

"Why did you do this—for me?" she asked softly.

It was hard work, but Algie smiled. Now was the time. Now was the time for telling her about how much he loved her.

Then he noticed that there was a young man with her. He stood very close to Felice, holding her hand.

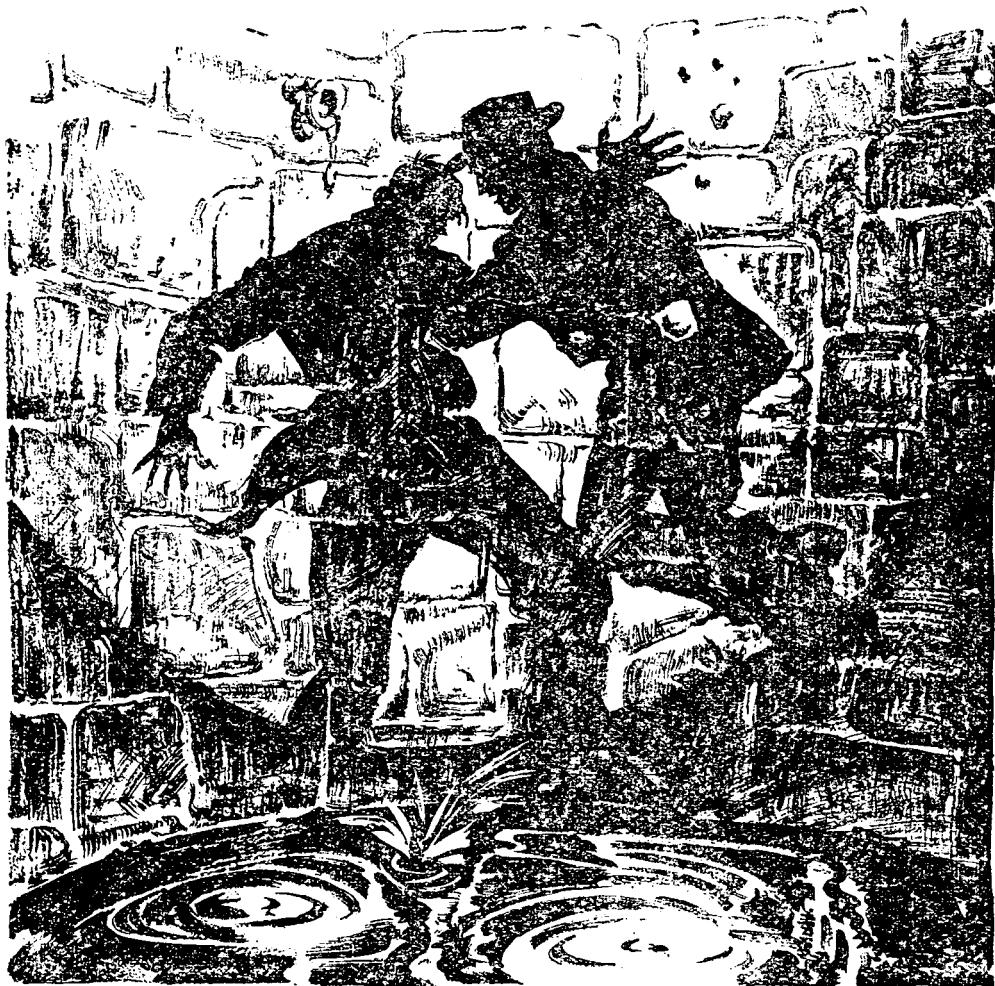
"Why," she said again, "did you do this—for me?"

Algie's arm was weak, but he waved it with a brave care-free motion. His voice was weak, too, but the words came out of his mouth through smiling lips:

"It was just a gag, lady. Just—a—gag!"

They were locked by destiny and separated by hate, these two brothers whose only kinship was

Satan's Shackles



By Leon Dupont

Author of "Slaughter Epidemic," etc.

FOR TEN long years stark hate had hovered like a sinister black pall over the grim gray house wherein lived the two brothers Fenton.

Though the soft sun of a late spring was shining warmly on the day that was to bring Aaron Fenton's

death, the pall never lifted. The hate that filled that house was too utterly savage and long-standing to be lightened by any such physical trifle as a spring sun.

Ironically enough, it was the very presence of that warm sunshine which was to make it possible for the

hate to flame forth naked, in a grim climax that would bring death to Aaron Fenton. Aaron could not plausibly be expected to wheel his chair down to his favorite place beside the old abandoned well unless the weather was reasonably warm and pleasant.

Consequently, for weeks Dave Fenton had been impatiently awaiting the arrival of a clear sunshiny Thursday. Clear skies on other days of the week meant nothing. Thursday was the day when old Eli, the aged man-servant of the Fenton household, went to the village on his weekly marketing trip.

The brothers Fenton were an oddly assorted pair. Dave at thirty-three could easily have passed for a youth of twenty-five. Large of body and darkly handsome, he was of that vital, full-blooded type which ages little until middle life.

Aaron Fenton at forty-three looked sixty. His slight body was twisted and wasted from years of semi-invalidism, while the deep lines etched in his sallow saturnine face were those of an old, old man. It was small wonder that strangers often took the brothers Fenton to be father and son.

As a matter of fact, they were not even blood brothers. Dave's father had late in life married a cousin of the same family name. Aaron, even then an invalid, had been added to the small household. The marriage lasted but a few months before it was tragically terminated by a railroad accident which killed both Dave's father and Aaron's mother.

The stepbrothers found their destinies locked together by the terms of the will that was left to them, a will that practically made Aaron, Dave's keeper. Aaron could not will the considerable property to anyone except his stepbrother. But Dave could not hope to come into its possession before Aaron's death.

The younger man was given a bare living allowance. Even that dole was rigidly dependent upon his remaining

constantly with Aaron. This dole was created only so that Dave could look after and care for the invalid.

It was an arrangement which could have bred nothing but hatred, and its promise was more than fulfilled. Aaron moved to the gloomy gray house on the extreme outskirts of a stodgy little Middle Western village because he knew that Dave would instinctively hate such surroundings.

To Dave the warm, mad pleasures of a cosmopolitan setting were life itself. He had spent one blazing year as an art student in Paris. He lacked the moral fiber to ever be a genuine artist. But his natural talent was great enough to give him a logical place among the riotous activities of the art colony's younger set. Since then he had lived only for the day when his legacy would again make Paris possible.

Aaron, embittered by his own sorry gift from the hands of Fate, took a greedy and vindictive pleasure in being the barrier that barred Dave from any realization of his Bohemian dreams. The two men made no effort to veil the naked hatred they held for each other. Life in the grim gray house of hate settled down to a long nightmare ordeal.

At first, Dave had waited patiently for Aaron to die. But the years passed and the invalid clung to life with a grim tenacity that was maddening. Dave had waited for ten years now in that dreary gray house—ten wasted, empty years!

BUT at last the day of release was at hand. It was the climax of long months of planning and preparation. Perfect murders are not committed in a day. And the murder of Aaron had to be absolutely and flawlessly perfect if Dave were to remain free to enjoy the fruits of his labors.

The curious terms of the will, together with the fact that the intense hatred between the two stepbrothers had long been common knowledge in the village, would have been more

than enough to point the deadly finger of suspicion at Dave, even had it not been for the arsenic episode of the previous winter.

That arsenic incident had been very nearly a stroke of genius upon Aaron's part. Apparently reading the stark murder that was growing daily in the younger man's sullen eyes, Aaron had forestalled him with a coup as brilliant as it was unexpected.

It had been simple enough. It was a matter of planting a small quantity of arsenic in Dave's room, of substituting a deadly dose of the poison for the invalid's medicine, a dose that Aaron apparently discovered only at the last moment.

Aaron had refused to press the case against Dave and it was dropped, but not before the damage was irrevocably done. Dave was henceforth marked indelibly in the eyes of the entire village as a potential murderer.

That coup of Aaron's made Dave's task doubly difficult. With suspicion surrounding him on all sides the moment the crime was committed, Aaron's death must occur in such a manner that Dave could not possibly be suspected of it. And yet, if Dave's hatred was to be fully appeased, Aaron must know that it was at Dave's hands that he was meeting his death.

Working patiently through the months, Dave perfected a plan that he believed was as utterly foolproof as any mortal plan could be. It only remained now for that pottering old fool of an Eli to start for the village.

He strode out into the kitchen where the old man-servant was scurrying around preparing a cup of broth for Aaron.

"Why so late in going to the village today, Eli?" Dave growled impatiently. He snatched out his watch and thrust it before the old man's face. "It's a quarter of twelve now. You should have been started half an hour ago."

"I'm a-goin', Mr. Dave, I'm a-goin'," wheezed old Eli petulantly, "Jest as soon's I give Mr. Aaron his broth here. Though I suppose if you had it to do you'd jest as soon see him go hungry!"

DAVE started to voice an angry retort, then thought better of it. Old Eli, like everyone else, sided with Aaron, of course. His impatience was foolish anyway. Why worry over a few minutes? He had plenty of time yet.

Time—that was the essence of the whole plan. These village dolts lived their stupid lives to the very ticks of a clock. Bah! They were nothing more than automatons in their terrible listless round of daily habits. Yet it was in the unrelenting regularity of those daily habits that Dave was relying for immunity from any suspicion in Aaron's death.

It was nearly twelve-thirty when Eli hitched up and started in the ram-shackle old buggy for the village. The horse and buggy had been Aaron's work, of course. An automobile of any kind on the place might have given Dave too much pleasure.

Dave knew that old Eli would return to the house within five minutes either way of three o'clock. In all the years that he had made the weekly marketing trip he had never missed by more than five minutes in returning at three.

It remained now only to check up on Jed Turner. It seemed almost as futile as checking the rising and setting of the sun, but still there was no use taking any unnecessary chance. Jed might be sick, or something.

Dave phoned the Turner home.

"No, Jed ain't here," came the nasal drawl of Jed's wife. "He went down to th' village after th' mail. He oughta be back right soon, though."

Dave nodded in grim satisfaction as he hung the receiver up. Of course Jed had gone to the village after the

mail. He made the trip every week-day of the year, rain or shine.

And every day he returned home just half an hour after the one o'clock train first whistled for the village. Ten minutes for sorting the mail at the little post-office, then twenty minutes for Jed's leisurely homeward trip. Dave had timed him often enough to be sure of his unvarying schedule.

AARON was sitting in his wheel-chair out on the big sunny front porch. For over a year now he had been unable to leave that chair without assistance. Yet once he was in the wheel-chair he was able to propel himself easily enough about the lower floor of the house, out on the porches, and even on down into the yard. A long, easily sloping board incline from one end of the front porch's low floor made the yard trip possible.

Dave went to the open front door and stood there looking out. Though Aaron must have heard him, the invalid never even turned his head. The brothers Fenton never spoke to each other unnecessarily. Days often passed without a word between them.

The clear, soft blue of the sky held not even a threat of a cloud. Dave again smiled to himself in satisfaction. There would be no rain that afternoon to hamper his smoothly worked-out plan.

He walked to the western end of the porch and briefly made a final calculating study of the terrain. The house, located at the top of a sharp little rise, was nearly surrounded with thick-foliaged evergreens. The little-used dirt road passed within thirty yards of the place, yet not until it was directly in front of the house did it give any view of the front porch. Even then, the high railing and solidly boarded space under it barred anything but a head-and-shoulders view of anyone sitting on the porch.

Over the wooded hills to the west was the village. It was from that

direction that Jed Turner would come driving. And Jed, as he always did, would stop for an instant down there on the road for a word of greeting to Aaron huddled in his wheel-chair up on the porch.

Dave, from his position at the west end of the porch, looked down an easy smooth slope to the old well. The deep, rock-lined pit had been dry for years. There was no cover of any kind over it, and only a few scattered boulders guarded its sheer edge.

On sunshiny days Aaron liked to wheel his chair down that smooth, grassless slope. Stopping at the very edge of the pit, the invalid would spend hours peering down into it, idly watching the lizards that scurried and flickered from crevice to crevice in its rock walls.

Old Eli was forever moaning that Aaron would some day lean over a little too far and go pitching head-first to his death at the bottom of the pit fifty feet below. But the invalid always sneered alike at the solicitous fear in old Eli's eyes and the unholy hope in Dave's, and went ahead with his trips to the abandoned well whenever the spirit moved him.

Dave entered the house and went to his own room. There he unlocked his trunk and took out the stage properties for the last act of the tragic drama in the house of hate—the masque, the shawl, the cord, the chair-back "wings," and the weighted tin box. He carried them into the front room and, sitting down, waited patiently for the whistle of the train as it approached the village.

Aaron was still sitting there in the sun on the porch. It would simplify matters if he should decide voluntarily to wheel himself down to the well. But it was immaterial. Dave had that phase of it well covered in his plans.

Then there finally came from the west the mellow whistle of the train, the whistle that was to be the death knell of the unwitting figure wrapped

TSD

in its shawl there in the big wheel-chair.

David stepped swiftly out on the porch. Aaron never lifted his brooding gaze from the road, not even when Dave stood directly beside his chair.

"A beautiful view, is it not, beloved brother?" Dave asked mockingly. "Trees, rocks, hills, grass—bah, not a spark of real life in a thousand miles of it! But you seem to like it. All right—I'll leave you here while I go on to Paris."

Aaron turned his head then and looked up into Dave's face. There was no trace of fear in the invalid's eyes, only a slight astonishment and a great hatred. Even the hatred failed to warm those somber eyes, for when hate persists through the years it loses its fire and becomes a cold deadly thing of ice.

Dave laughed at the expression in Aaron's face. "You do not seem to understand me yet, dear brother," he mocked. "I am leaving—for Paris—very soon. But you—ah, you are staying here—forever. For in a very few minutes now I am going to kill you, Aaron."

Even then there was no fear in the invalid's weary eyes, only a faint contempt. "You don't dare," Aaron whispered hoarsely. The recent months of his illness had reduced his voice to that harsh, croaking whisper. "Everyone would know that it was you who killed me. You would only put a noose around your own neck."

Dave laughed. There was such an unmistakable note of triumph in that mocking laugh that a shadow of fear for the first time lurked in Aaron's eyes.

DAVE swung the invalid's chair abruptly around until it faced the front door of the house, then stepped quickly into the room. An instant later he reappeared in the doorway with a gray shawl in one hand and a curious masque in the

other. He held the masque up for Aaron's inspection and laughed again at the invalid's amazement.

"A fairly good likeness, is it not?" he jeered. "Good enough for an artist of my ability anyway, considering the ugly model I had and the secrecy with which I've had to work. Only a bit of painted silk and a few gray hairs, but from the road anyone would swear that it was your face.

"And this shawl, exactly like the one in which you are forever bundled, even down to the soiled places and the frayed fringe. When I sit in your place on the porch there, with this masque on and this shawl wrapped over my head and around my shoulders, anyone from the road there would swear it was you.

"No, Aaron, there will be no noose around my neck when you die," Dave continued. "When Jed Turner drives past here about twenty minutes from now, you'll be lying at the bottom of the old well with every bone in your miserable body broken. But Jed will see me sitting here in masque and shawl, and he'll wave as he always waves to you. Then when Jed turns the bend I'll fling my masquerade aside and cut across the field and join him.

"I'll stay with him till old Eli finds your body and gives the alarm. And my alibi will be perfect—because Jed Turner will swear that you were sitting here alive only a minute or so before I left the house. I couldn't possibly have had time to kill you and remove all traces, as I'm going to."

Fear shone forth naked then in Aaron's eyes, the terrible fear of the utterly helpless. Dave flung the masque and shawl aside and advanced swiftly upon the invalid. The time for gloating was past. The minutes were rapidly passing and much remained yet to be done.

Aaron fought with all his puny strength as Dave lifted him from the wheel-chair, but in the younger man's

powerful arms he was as helpless as a child. With firm, unhurried steps Dave bore his writhing, squirming burden across the porch, down the grassless slope, and to the very edge of the old well.

There he tore the shawl from about Aaron and dropped it to the ground. He held the weakly struggling figure of the invalid head-down over the yawning pit for an instant, fiercely exulting in the rasping, choking sounds of utter terror that came from Aaron's lips. Then Dave hurled his writhing burden headfirst down into the pit.

There was a terrible instant of silence, then a sickening thud as the body crashed on the stone floor fifty feet below. No need to investigate the result—that fall would have killed the Devil himself.

Dave picked up the gray shawl at his feet and carefully arranged it on the edge of the well, just as it might have caught there, had Aaron fallen forward from his chair while sitting in his favorite place at the brink of the pit. Then Dave quickly returned to the house, taking long, careful strides so as to disturb the bare surface of the slope as little as possible.

He returned a minute later with a broom. There had been no prints on the slope before he had carried Aaron down to the well, for the meticulous Eli swept the space as regularly as he did the house itself. Beginning at the edge of the well, Dave quickly swept the sandy surface smooth again, leaving it clean and unmarked as he worked back to the porch's edge. When he had finished, every trace of his footprints had been obliterated.

Returning the broom to its place, Dave hurried back to the front porch, and fastened a large barbless hook into an opening in the wheel-chair's back. Its own weight carried the wheel-chair down the easy slope to the well while Dave stood at the porch's western edge slowly paying out the light strong cord to which the hook was attached.

He halted the chair against a boulder at the well's very edge. Its position was perfect. With the shawl caught on the rocks just in front of it, the scene was exactly what would have been left had Aaron toppled forward to his death on one of his usual trips to the well.

THE surface of the slope, though easily marked, was hard enough so that Dave knew there was no danger of anyone noting from the wheel-prints of the chair that it was empty when it went down the slope. He dexterously flipped the hook free and wound the line in.

Then he brought a heavy straight-backed chair from the house and, placing it where the wheel-chair had been on the porch, he fastened the falsework "wings"—distinguishing marks of the real wheel-chair—into place on either side of its top.

He then slipped the masque over his face, wrapped the huge gray shawl closely around his head and shoulders, and huddled down in the chair in Aaron's usual posture. As seen over the porch's high railing from the road below he knew that the view must be an almost photographic likeness of Aaron sitting there as usual in his wheel chair. He had just one other little bit of acting in mind, a bit that would not only add a final touch of realism but would establish the time element indelibly in Jed Turner's mind as well.

Dave waited motionless and tense for the sound of buggy wheels on the road to the west that would herald Turner's approach. His only thought now was one of fierce anxiety lest something might go wrong and Jed would not come.

Slow, dragging minutes passed—minutes that seemed hours. Then at last there came the welcome sound of buggy wheels.

A minute later Jed Turner's rig came into view down the road. Jed looked up and, as he saw the solitary figure sitting there on the porch, he

stopped his horse momentarily and waved a hand in his usual greeting.

"How're ye, Aaron? Nice day, ain't it?" Turner's booming voice came up to the motionless Dave.

Dave merely nodded his head. He knew that Turner expected no verbal answer. Aaron's throat affliction was well known.

Then Dave did his final bit of acting. He lifted a shawl-wrapped arm in the gesture of signal that Aaron and Jed Turner had worked out months before. Aaron never carried a watch, and the signal gesture was merely a pre-arranged way of asking Turner for the time.

Turner fished out a large silver timepiece from his pocket. "Jest one-thutty, Aaron," he announced.

DAVE waved his shawl-wrapped arm in brief thanks and dismissal. Turner clucked to his horse and drove on.

The instant that Turner was out of sight of the front porch, Dave sprang to his feet. Returning the chair to its usual place in the front room, he ripped the false "wings" from its back. These he dropped into the small heavily-weighted tin box, together with the masque, the gray shawl, and the hook and cord.

He clamped the lid of the box securely shut and, snatching up his coat and hat as he went, he sped to the back of the house. There he lifted the board covering the cistern and hurled the box down into it, to rest safely there under twenty feet of water until he could later fish it out and destroy its contents at his leisure. Then he hurried around to the side porch.

The road swung sharply to the left just after it passed the front of the house, and when it passed the side porch it was again only a hundred feet or so distant. It was barely half a minute before Jed Turner's rig again came into sight. Dave promptly hailed him.

"Just a minute, Jed," he called,

"and I'll ride over home with you and visit a while."

"Sure thing, Dave," boomed Jed, stopping the buggy as Dave came running down to the road. "Come right ahead. Glad to have ye!"

Dave was unusually talkative as they jogged along on the short drive to the Turner farm. He found it hard to keep from singing aloud. Everything had gone with such perfect smoothness.

Aaron was dead. And yet here was honest Jed Turner ready to swear that he had seen Aaron alive less than two minutes before Dave had left the house. Dave's alibi was absolutely airtight. No ten men could have hurled Aaron down into the pit and removed all traces of the crime in two minutes.

Now Dave had only to remain with Jed Turner until old Eli came home and found Aaron's body. The sheriff might be suspicious. He probably would be, remembering that incriminating arsenic incident of several months before. But no man in his senses could seriously suspect Dave in the face of the testimony that Jed Turner would give.

Sitting in the cozy living-room of the Turner home, Dave talked brilliantly and steadily of life in New York and Paris, and Jed listened with the avid curiosity of one to whom those places have never been more than magic names. Jed was too interested in his guest's vivid narratives to notice that Dave's eyes were forever wandering to the big clock over the mantel.

Once Jed excused himself with a sly wink and came back into the room bearing a jug of home-made wine. Knowing Jed's weakness, Dave's heart sank. If Jed became drunk, of what good then would be all the carefully planned fabric based upon his testimony?

But the vigilant and sharp-tongued Mrs. Turner swooped down and removed the jug before more than a small glass apiece had been drunk,

and Dave heaved a great sigh of relief.

The hands on the clock over the mantel lagged ever slower. Yet Dave knew that he must talk on and on, telling endless stories to that grinning dolt, anything to kill time until old Eli should phone. Heavens! It seemed that he had been talking for hours now! New York—the bizarre life of Village studios—Washington Square—Paris—the Montmartre—the Latin Quarter—

IT WAS nearly three-thirty when the phone finally rang. Jed called Dave to the phone. It was old Eli.

"Mr. Aaron's dead!" came the shaking, excited voice of the old servant. "Come home quick, Mr. Dave. I called everywhere before I finally found you. The sheriff's here. I told Mr. Aaron he'd fall down that old well and kill himself some day. I told him! You're coming home right away, ain't you, Mr. Dave?"

"I'll be right over," Dave snapped, cutting short the old man's garrulous rambling.

"Aaron's dead," he explained briefly to Jed. "Fell down that old well, I guess. Want to go back to the house with me?"

Jed was eager to go, as Dave knew that he would be. On the short drive Dave made no effort to conceal his satisfaction over the news of Aaron's death. He had decided upon that attitude long ago. Everyone knew that he hated Aaron.

If he were to turn hypocrite now and simulate grief over Aaron's death, that in itself would excite suspicion. His best attitude was a perfectly natural one of frank relief that his stepbrother was finally out of the way.

Dave kept that attitude even after they had joined the little group of men gathered about the well. His spoken references to the dead man lying down there inert and broken at the bottom of the pit were as bitter as they had been during Aaron's life.

The sheriff, a fussy little man with cheeks as rosy and smooth as prize apples, gave a brief word of explanation. "We had to send back to the village for a longer rope. We're waitin' on it now 'fore we can bring him up." He beckoned Dave off to one side of the little group.

"Old Eli tells me your brother was in the habit of wheelin' hisself down here on sunny days," the sheriff commented. Dave could read the frank hostility in the other's frosty blue eyes. "Mebbe so. There wasn't any footprints between the well and the house except Eli's when we got here. Mebbe your brother did fall out of that chair all by hisself like Eli's always been afraid he would. But what I want to know is—where were you this afternoon, Dave?"

"Over at Jed Turner's," answered Dave promptly.

"All afternoon?"

"From about one-thirty on. Jed picked me up on his way past the house."

"Where was your brother when you left the house here?"

"Sitting in his chair out on the front porch in the sun."

The sheriff called Jed Turner over to them. Jed promptly substantiated Dave's story.

"Aaron was alive when I drove by," he said, "because he waved to me and wanted to know what time it was. I told him. It was jest one-thutty. Then when I drove on around the bend there was Dave on the side porch.

"He yelled at me and I stopped for him. Then he went on over to my place and we've been there ever since. But I'll swear that Aaron was alive out there in his chair on the front porch not over a minute or so before Dave left the house."

The sheriff scowled thoughtfully for a minute, then Dave saw the hostility fade from his eyes. "Well, I guess that about clears you then, Dave," he admitted a little grudging-

ly. "You could've removed all the prints and traces after throwin' Aaron down the well, but you couldn't have done it in the space of time it took Jed to drive around the bend. Aaron was alive when you left, so he must've fell down that hole hisself."

The messenger came with the new rope just then. Dave had no desire to watch the gruesome job of recovering the body. He went on into the house.

THREE WAS a vast relief in his mind as he stood there looking out one of the windows to the east. Somewhere in that direction lay Paris, the city where dreams come true and memories live again. Only a few short weeks now and he would be on his way eastward, with the nightmare of the house of hate forever behind him.

The light spray of clouds in the eastern sky seemed like the effervescent bubbles in a limpid glass of champagne. A white-limbed sycamore on the far hillside flung one great branch out like a silvery beckoning arm.

Dave was aroused abruptly from his pleasant reverie by the sheriff's voice behind him. There was a new and grim look on the sheriff's face, as well as on the faces of the little group of men clustered behind him.

"We got Aaron's body up, Dave," the sheriff said slowly. "He was dead, all right. And we found something else, too. It was layin' under him. Here it is."

He thrust out his hand abruptly, and Dave nearly cried aloud at sight of the object in the sheriff's palm. It was Dave's watch! No need to try to deny the ownership. The initials

"D. F." were inscribed on the case, as half the village knew.

"Aaron must've grabbed it out of your pocket just before you threw him over the edge," the sheriff went on grimly. "Aaron never carried no watch and it's a sure thing he'd never ask to borrow yours. Eli says you had your watch when he left for town because you shoved it in his face, tryin' to hurry him up.

"The watch is stopped at five minutes after one. So that must've been the time you threw Aaron down that well to his death, then went back to the porch and did your play-actin' for Jed Turner's benefit."

For an instant the room swam dizzily before Dave's eyes and the sheriff's voice became a meaningless hum as full realization came to Dave of the utter wrecking of his carefully-laid plans.

He knew the keen mind of the sheriff too well to doubt that it would be only a matter of a few hours before the cistern and every other hiding-place would be ransacked in the search for the disguise that obviously must exist if Aaron were killed at five after one, twenty-five minutes before Turner believed that he saw him sitting on the front porch.

"All right," he broke in wearily upon the sheriff's droning accusation. "I killed him. Come back to the cistern with me and I'll show you how I set the scene to fool Jed."

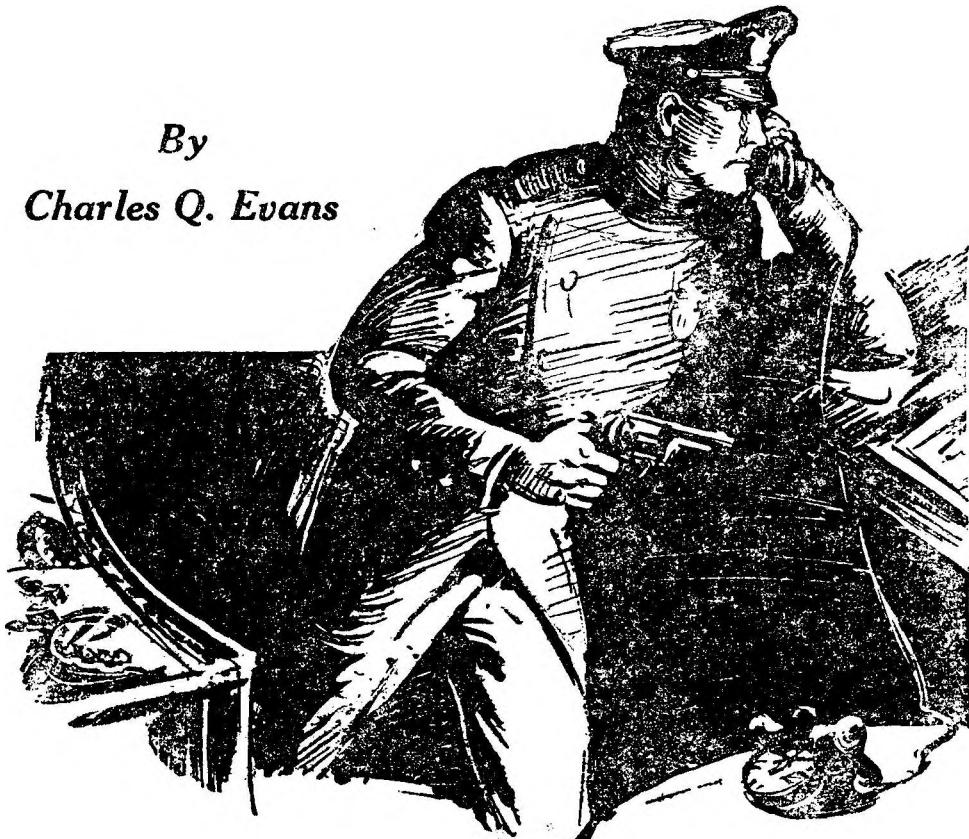
As Dave turned he took a final glance out the window to the east, but the scene had subtly changed. The cloud scum was now suggestive of the bitter dregs of sour wine. And the beckoning branch of the sycamore had become terribly like a gaunt white gallows.



Prison-Proof Payoff

By

Charles Q. Evans



Valetti pulled a fool-proof steal—with a prison-proof plan.

OLD BAUDET had the diamonds! It was late afternoon when Slick Valetti got the tip, but he was ready enough. Slick was no punk stick-up who blundered upon his prey by catch-as-catch-can methods. He was a big-shot crook who used his head. He had chased this job for months; checking every habit and vagary of the old jeweler; tailing him from home to office, and even bribing his confidential clerk. Now he prepared to pull the supreme heist of his career—ninety grand in pure, blue-white sparklers!

Zowie! What a sweet haul for Slick and what a lump in the craw for his ancient enemy, Police Inspector Hale.

That glorified copper would storm and bluster and rub his blue nose to throbbing purple. He would set a flock of dicks on Slick's trail and drag him in for questioning. Well, let him. Slick was ready. He had an airtight alibi.

For months now, the feud had raged between Police Inspector Hale and Slick Valetti. When Slick beat the rap for the Central Bank heist, the inspector had stopped him, outside the court room, to shake a blunt forefinger beneath his nose.

"Listen, punk," roared the officer, his blue eyes taking scathing inventory of the other's flashy person, in its green suit and fawn colored spats,

"you're not feelin' us. Next time, the smartest mouthpiece in the world won't spring you. You're going to register up at the Big House—permanent."

"Sez you, Inspector?" Slick grinned derisively.

"Sez me," roared Hale. "Call yourself *slick*—a dumb hood like you! Get this, Valetti. You're just a gat plus an empty noodle. The only thing slick about you is that greased hair. And the only way for you to come out on top is to grow bald-headed. Hah-ha-ha!" The inspector threw back his big head and laughed offensively.

Fat hippo! Even now at the memory of that insulting guffaw, the crook's face paled and his small eyes glinted. Well, tonight Hale would laugh out the other side of his mouth. Slick had been plenty smart when he selected Pierre Baudet as his next victim.

The senior partner of Baudet and Company, Gem Importers, was old, rich and a bachelor. Instead, however, of enjoying his money and life, Pierre Baudet had but one passion—diamonds! The old gent insisted on examining all sparklers shipped his firm, from abroad, personally. And, what was more to the point, he selected the best stones from each new consignment and carried them home to study and grade.

Soft, eh? While the world at large believed all Baudet gems to be securely locked in their burglar-proof vaults, this poor sap had paraded around, for years, with a fortune in his pockets. Well, those promenading days were over for jeweler Baudet. Slick Valetti would see to that.

Only this morning, the crook had received his long awaited tip: a fresh shipment of diamonds newly arrived from Amsterdam. Even now Pierre Baudet was sorting the rocks in his office, and tonight, according to his custom, he would drag home the cream of the lot.

Slick's tongue darted avidly over dry lips. Complacently, he settled the

pinch-tailored lavender coat upon his narrow shoulders and fluffed a resplendent purple tie. Here was ripe fruit begging to be picked.

At nine-thirty that night Slick Valetti dropped unobtrusively from a trolley car, and stared with approval at the slumbering residential district in which he found himself. The old-fashioned house in which Pierre Baudet and his lone man-servant had lived for thirty years, lay but two blocks away.

Slick lit a cigarette, fanned his lungs, and sauntered slowly down a tree-shaded street. In five minutes the beat cop would have made his round past the jeweler's place. Time enough after that to force entrance and wait the arrival of his man. As for the old gent's butler, he was only a doddering wreck in his seventies—any guy could handle him.

Slick stepped into action when the illuminated dial of his wrist watch showed 9:35. Eagerly he yanked his gray cap down over his nose and turned his ulster up close about his ears. Then, with swift, feline steps he streaked toward the Baudet home.

The big house lay in the center of a spacious lawn, the terminus of an hedge-lined driveway. Slick had studied the place too often to hesitate now. He darted furtively along the lines of shrubbery until he gained a broad veranda and cat-footed up its steps to a pair of long French windows. Before these he crouched and peered stealthily within. Cripes, what a layout!

Sheen of russet velvet and mellow glow of bronze lamps. Firelight dancing on soft rugs and silver candelabra. Rows of red-brown books; a carved desk, its polished surface reflecting the graceful lines of a Chinese bowl. From within, a clock, chiming the quarter hour, warned Slick to hurry. At ten sharp old Baudet was due to arrive.

Hastily, the crook removed the jimmies from his pocket and pried at the

windows until they swung open on well-oiled hinges. It was almost too easy! Nothing remained but for old Baudet to walk into the trap. In two shakes, Slick would shove a gun into his ribs and take over a fortune in blue white stones.

Slick entered, closed the windows cautiously behind him and drew together the heavy velour drapes. Now for a hiding place from which to leap out and get the drop on his victim. Old man or not, he would take no chances. A tall, lacquered screen, in the corner, offered the necessary shelter. From this place of vantage, the intruder took up his position and began a leisurely inventory of his surroundings.

Jeez! What junk these rich fellers wasted their jack on! *Candles Statues* of undraped figures That picture over the mantel, too, the beery-faced old bum with the ruffles 'round his neck and a jane's plumed hat. Every flop house was full of 'em. Slick spat disgustedly on a thick rug.

And—fish!

The heist man snorted as he tiptoed across to the aquarium, where a dozen goldfish disported placidly above a bed of iridescent shells. Ugh! Slimy things.

The sudden roar of a motor car in the driveway cut short his speculation. Slick took cover behind his screen, reached into his coat pocket, and, withdrawing a silk handkerchief, tied it for a mask below his eyes.

From somewhere in the house, an electric buzzer rasped. Slow feet shuffled down the hall to the front entrance. Followed the click of a released latch and the murmur of conversation. One voice was low, mumbling, unintelligible; the other, high, staccato, with a foreign accent.

"Non, Emery. You serve me no coffee tonight. Go to bed, my friend. Me? . . . I shall work late, in my study *Bon soir!*"

Abruptly, the massive library door opened and Pierre Baudet entered.

THE newcomer was a small wisp of a man with a precisely waxed gray mustache and mild blue eyes. As he hurried forward, the firelight gleamed on his white shirt front and his polished boots clicked on the inter-spaces of the hardwood floor. He was humming gaily.

Monsieur carried a parcel in his hands and now he removed the oiled paper and disclosed a bouquet of blue and yellow flowers. These he arranged deftly in the bowl upon his desk and then stepped back to note the effect.

"*Charmant!*" exclaimed the old gentleman, his gaze encircling the room appreciatively. "*Charmant—*" For a heartbeat, the nearsighted blue eyes seemed to linger on the screen in the corner, and the waiting intruder tensed to charge forth at the first hostile move. But it was a false alarm. The little man turned away again with a shrug, and, mincing toward the opposite corner of the room, addressed the goggling goldfish.

"What, hungry, my children?" he chirped, tapping upon the glass bowl with a pointed finger nail. "Come, then. Come and feast."

As he spoke, Monsieur Baudet extracted a box of white wafers from his waistcoat pocket and, crumbling them into bits, began to scatter the flakes upon the surface of the water.

Slick Valetti sneered behind his screen. The old bird was cuckoo, all right. Now was the time to pluck his tail feathers. Cautiously, he emerged from his shelter and cat-footed forward, gun trained on that tapering broadcloth back and the slender hands that fluttered, here and there, above the aquarium.

His unconscious victim continued to chatter cheerfully to the fish. He upbraided the efforts of the largest specimen to crowd his fellows away from their food. "Back, gourmand," he chided, wagging his white head, "back, for shame!"

It was at this moment that Slick stabbed his gun into the jeweler's

ribs. "Stick 'em up, quick!" he snarled. "Stick 'em up and don't yap!"

"*Mon Dieu!*" The little man turned slowly to face his captor. His narrow brows arched. "My wallet," he suggested mildly, "is in my hip pocket."

"Wallet," spat out Slick. "Chicken feed! I come for the sparklers."

"Sparklers? I don't think—"

"Ye-ah, you do. You ain't that dumb. I want them diamonds. Shell 'em out!"

"Mis-tair," protested Pierre Baudet, "I assure you there are no precious stones on me. You have my word."

His word. Hooey! The old coot thought he could string a wise guy. Slick's white face convulsed with rage.

"You," he snarled, "turn and face that wall. I'm friskin' you right."

And then commenced a feverish search of the jeweler's person. Vest pockets. Coat pockets. Trouser pockets. Eagerly Slick emptied them all—and found nothing. What th' devil?

He reversed his search. Trouser pockets. Coat pockets. Vest pockets. *Again nothing!*

By now the labored breath hissed sharply through Slick's clenched teeth. His hands trembled. Could that damned clerk have ratted? No. The feller had lammed it out of town, scared stiff. This old coot *had* to have the rocks somewhere.

A hidden belt—maybe? Cursing, he spun his small captive about and, in a frenzy of thwarted avarice, ripped open that outraged gentleman's satin waistcoat; tore away the snowy shirt and undervest.

Still not a thing! The dandified cockroach didn't have the rocks. The nasty fact was that Slick Valetti was stung. The smartest heister in the state was stung by a doddering half pint, who didn't know enough to bring his treasure home with him. Unless Baudet had dared . . . ?

MURDER flamed in the gunman's eyes. He pounced upon the little jeweler and rammed his gun so hard against the captive's heart that the latter gasped in pain.

"Feller," he gritted, his thin lips, beneath the mask, writhing back over yellow teeth, "feller, if you've tucked those rocks somewhere else, you better say your piece quick. Because if I leave *without 'em*, feller, I'm goin' to bump you off—first!"

"Ah," nodded Pierre Baudet. "Quite so. Since it is impossible for me to grant your request, Mis-tair, you would kill me. What is the life of an old man to you? Pouf!"

"Shut up! You hand me the sparklers or I drill you now. One—two—"

"Stop, Mis-tair! Who am I to disappoint one so clever as you? If I had those diamonds—if *I had had them*—they would be yours. Most certainly."

"You're stallin'. You lousy buzzard!"

"But *now!* I protest. See for yourself, my friend. There are no—er—sparklers on me. None in my overcoat—my desk. Look where you will."

"Then, you're cashin' in, y'ole cockrel!"

"Look, my friend! There on the desk. The fat wallet, eh? Behold, what you have so scornfully tossed aside. Why not compromise and take it? You are ver' smart man. Too smart to risk murder for so li'l gain!"

Slick hesitated. The red mist in his brain began to clear. Maybe the damned frog was right. He had to keep his head—couldn't risk the hot squat. That leather, now?

His glance wavered uncertainly from Pierre Baudet's bland face to the desk, on which he had tossed the miscellany of articles extracted from that gentleman's pockets. He had ignored that pocketbook in the frenzy of his hunt. Now he observed it lying there, sleek and plump, beside the key rings.

"Take it, my friend, and depart," urged the soft voice of Monsieur. "It

shall be a souvenir, eh? A souvenir, of, shall we say, your—Cr-reat Mo-ment!"

Jeez, could you beat that? This sap was actually kidding himself out of his bank roll. Scared daffy. Well, wasn't that jack better than nothin'? Besides, it was gettin' late. The beat cop would be around soon; Slick better lam.

He reached the desk in one swift stride, and, seizing the wallet, crammed it into an inner pocket. Roughly, he yanked away Monsieur's bow tie and appropriated two of the jeweler's fine linen handkerchiefs. In a few seconds, Pierre Baudet was gagged, and bound securely to a heavy oak chair.

Then, gun in hand, Slick backed through the long windows.

POLICE Inspector Hale wallowed his huge body back into his office chair and lit a long stogie.

The prisoner stood sullenly before the desk, his eyes on the floor.

"Hrr-umph!" Inspector Hale cleared his throat.

The man before him started at the sound; his furtive black eyes darted nervously to the officer.

"So it's you," growled Hale. "Back here just to prove I'm always right, huh?"

Slick Valetti squared his thin shoulders and his sleek head thrust forward like a snake. "I wanna mouthpiece," he rasped. "I got rights and—"

"Shut up!" The inspector rubbed his rubicund nose speculatively between a broad thumb and forefinger.

"Slick," he rumbled, "you better hunt another moniker. You're the dumbest crook this side of Matewan."

"Yeah?" Slick's pallid cheeks flushed but he forced a defiant grin.

"Let him sit down, Sergeant. No—over there, where I can get the light on that pasty mug." The inspector closed his heavy eyes and, teetering

back in his chair, blew a cloud of smoke to the ceiling.

"Caught by a beat cop," he ruminated, as if to himself. "Caught robbing a poor little old codger with one foot in the grave The big shot heist guy!"

"And, did you get this, sergeant? We found all his big loot on him. One pocketbook, sarge, containing a batch of jewelry quotations—and *two dollars and eighty-five cents!* There's brains for you. There's smart casing. And this punk here calls himself a big shot! Why—"

"That's a lie," snarled Slick, springing to his feet. "If that old coot hadn't—" He stopped short.

Inspector Hale suddenly sat bolt upright in his chair; his sharp gray eyes impaled the man before him.

"You mean," he snapped, "that it would have been a swell heist if Baudet had brought home that ninety grand in ice. And you mean that if he hadn't delayed you so long, huntin' the rocks, you'd have scrammed away, safe. Ain't I right?"

Slick said nothing.

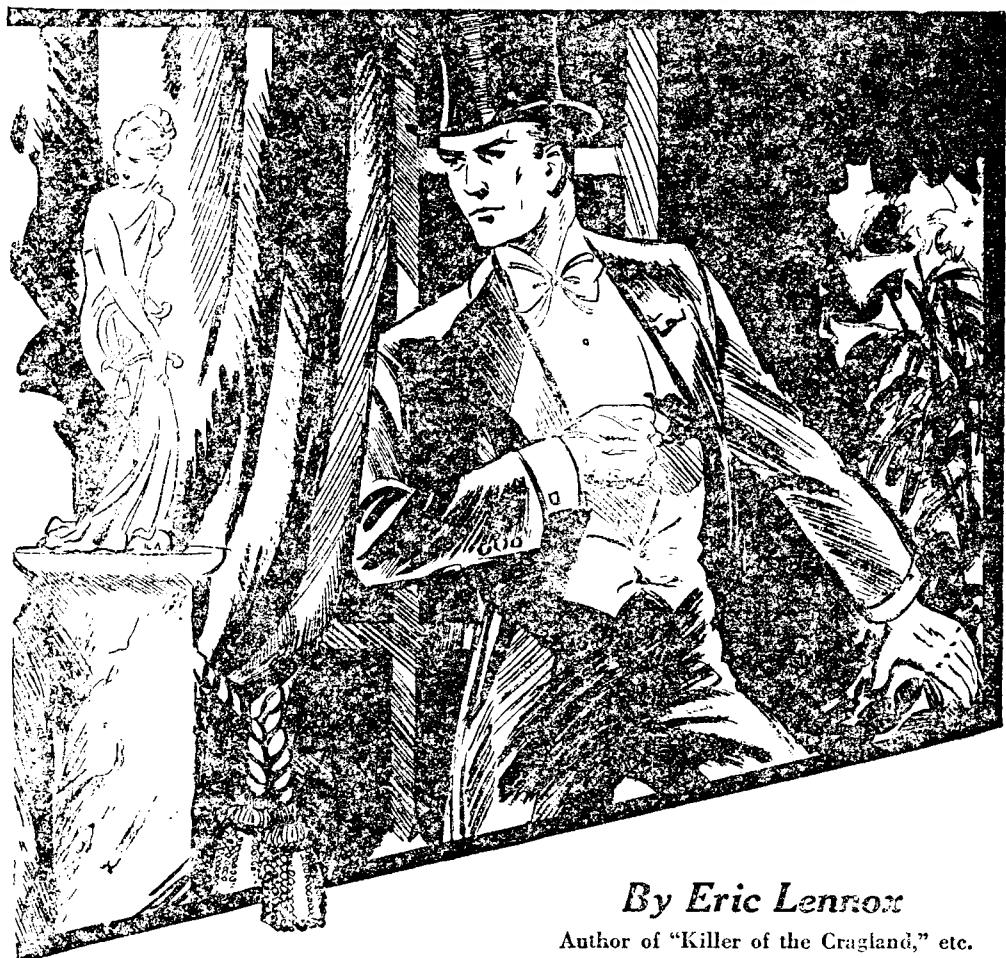
"Listen, Valetti. I'm goin' to tell you a joke that will make every other crook in the city crack his sides with laughin'. You think you're smart? You think you're *slick*. Say, last night a defenseless old gent played you for the biggest sucker in the racket.

"Old Baudet came home with them diamonds. He had 'em right in his vest pocket. When he spotted you behind that screen, he knew what was comin', so he walked over to his aquarium and, all the while you was hidin' there, breathin' hard and polishin' up your gat, he's feedin' the ice to the—goldfish."

The inspector threw back his head and burst into a raucous bass guffaw that rattled the window panes; the sergeant echoed in joyful baritone.

"Take this mug out," wheezed the inspector. "He'll get ten years up river to laugh *that* off!"

Phantom Lootter



By Eric Lennox

Author of "Killer of the Cragland," etc.

The phantom thief had to run a Scotland Yard gauntlet to snare the swag. For the elusive marauder always warned the police of his plunder plans. And this time headquarters prepared a—phantom reception.

MR. WINSTON KEITH, amateur criminologist, smoothed out a furrow in his tastefully trimmed ricket's dressing gown. An inquisitive frown pursed his high forehead as he raised deep, gray eyes to his attentive valet.

"Yes, Quirt," said Winston Keith. His voice was low and well modulated, yet it carried clear and distinct against

the raging elements outside. He seemed oblivious to the gusting howl of the wind, and the patter of the myriad, tiny drops of rain that beat against the windows like a haunting tattoo from the nether-worlds.

A flickering light gleamed momentarily in the depths of Quirt's somber eyes, and the brief flicker was not lost on Keith, for Quirt had been Keith's

batman in France. Thus the chasm of rank and position was bridged by a rare understanding between them.

"Inspector Gilmary of Scotland Yard to see you, sir," murmured the valet.

A visit from the inspector held promise of excitement. Thus it was that Keith rose to his feet, eyes alight with amusement as an excited and decidedly irritated Inspector of Metropolitan Police came barging into the room.

Winston Keith opened his mouth to utter some inane banality, only to be forestalled by the Inspector's anticipation of just such a thing.

"Cut it, Keith. I've got no time to discuss 'Cezanes' or 'Carots' with you today."

"You mean 'Corot' my dear inspector," murmured Keith pleasantly. "Carrots are an edible root y'know." But Keith's levity was lost upon the harassed guardian of the peace. The inspector merely grunted and handed Keith a thin sheet of note paper with the curt admonition: "Read it."

Keith stretched a languid hand for the note. Securing it, he turned his full attention on it. As he read, the amused smile gradually replaced itself with hawklike keenness. Finishing the brief note, Keith returned it to his friend. His eyes closed lazily as he leaned back comfortably in the deep, old chair.

"So!" he drawled. "The Gray Ghost grows bold, eh?"

THE Gray Ghost! A name to conjure with. A name that brought romance to the drab existence of London's teeming millions. Romance at the expense of the Metropolitan Police. The name was synonymous with that princely hijacker of hijackers. That robber of robbers.

Some cursed him. They were those whom he had visited as the "Ghost," relieving them of some of their nefarious gains. Others blessed him. They were London's poor, to whom half of that spoiler of spoilers' gains went.

The police neither cursed nor

blessed him. They went after him as a matter of course and duty, but now the Ghost had made it personal by sending a taunting note to the police. He had addressed the note to Inspector Gilmary, for Gilmary's chief had charged him with the task of capturing the Ghost, and somehow the Ghost had learned of it. Now he was challenging the inspector to a duel of wits.

The note, itself, merely stated that he, the Gray Ghost, was going to rob Wallace Cranther's palatial London home, and it also invited the inspector to attend if he so desired.

"H'mmm, now let me see," soliloquized Winston Keith. "Wasn't there a big reception there last night? U'mm, yes. That leaves whatever jewels and valuables that were worn last night in the safe over Sunday doesn't it?—Quite right," he answered his own query. "All of which makes tonight, being Sunday night, an ideal time for the Ghost's little sortie against society. And by the way," drawled Keith, "isn't Cranther the big philanthropist?" He nodded slowly to himself when Gilmary grunted in the affirmative.

Winston Keith knew that Wallace Cranther was a philanthropist, and in addition to being a philanthropist, he was also London's leading milk king. Philanthropist! Keith smiled sardonically.

Every time Wallace Cranther contributed a hundred pounds sterling to some worthy cause he raised the price of milk a bit and made a thousand back again. Yes, most decidedly Mr. Cranther was a philanthropist—of sorts.

Winston Keith roused himself from his apparent lethargy long enough to summon his valet.

"A whisky and soda for the inspector, Quirt," he murmured languidly, "and Cliquot '19 with a dash of '46 for myself. And, Quirt, that box of cigars for the inspector."

There followed a moment of silence until the required stimulants were before them. Then, selecting one of his inevitable and atrocious "Berbere"

cigaretts from an exquisitely wrought case, Winston Keith turned his attention to his friend. His eyes gleamed with suppressed excitement as he sipped slowly at his drink. Curling wreaths of delicate blue smoke spiraled gently upwards from his cigarette, permeating the air with the acrid, pungent odor of Arabian tobacco.

"Well, Martyn," pressed Keith with the intimacy of long years. "Just what is the campaign of action you intend to follow? You ought to get him this time. Y'know, Martyn, the study of criminology is very interesting, and quite instructive. Take this note for instance. It is rather indicative of supreme ego. Almost a case of solipsism, and bordering on—"

But Keith didn't get a chance to finish his discourse on criminology. Gilmardy interrupted him with an irritable gesture.

"Oh, come Keith. Can your irrelevant meanderings, and your theories too," grumbled the inspector. "What I want is facts. Facts and a feasible plan for catching that damned pest. You have helped me out of some rather awkward holes before, Keith, and I need your help on this."

WINSTON KEITH nodded, but said nothing. Instead he listened closely to Gilmardy's plan of action. The inspector seemed to think that it would be best to have one man in each of the ground-floor rooms of the Cranther home during the night, and several scattered throughout the grounds. Keith listened intently until the inspector had finished, then he added a few revisions of his own.

"Y'know Martyn," Keith murmured softly, "this Gray Ghost is a rather cagey bird, and from your own accounts, plus our papers, from screaming tabloids down to the more conservative sheets, he seems to be quite a genius in the line of clever simplicity. That, in itself, is a dangerous quality, and it becomes more dangerous than ever when taken in conjunction with

his apparent knowledge of psychology.

"Now take this note, he may be throwing a bluff, and he may not, but if you fill the house full of blundering, derby-topped dicks he may just give you the merry ha! ha! and postpone his little job. I, personally, would vote against carrying out such an obvious trap.

"I would suggest that you read Professor Hans Goss' *Handbook on Kriminalpsychology*.' It's quite illuminating." Keith drew indolently on his cigaret, and then continued in the same thoughtful voice.

"The Professor says, or he gives the impression, that every master criminal is eventually betrayed by his own egotism, which is just about the truth. Now, supposing this to be the betraying exhibition of the Ghost's egotism, we must not discount his caution, his daring, nor his positive genius for details.

"From the note you have, one draws one of two possible inferences. Either the ghost is supremely egotistical, or he isn't. Therefore, he must, then, be a consummate actor. That, however, is a chance we must take.

"Y'know, Martyn, I rather admire this 'Gray Ghost.' He's really clever. In this day of mediocre crimes and criminals he stands out like a rose among thorns. I rather hate to see him caught, yet my curiosity as a criminologist is quite intrigued.—U'mm, yes. Suppose you bring two men with you and meet me here about ten o'clock tonight. I rather fancy that four of us can match him, and after all, it is more or less a matter of wits rather than brute force."

Inspector Gilmardy smiled his relief at the prospect of having Keith's valuable assistance once again.

"Then I can really count on you to go with me tonight, eh?" he asked, and for answer Keith summoned his valet, turning lazily in his chair as Quirt entered the room.

"I say, Quirt," he drawled, "haven't I an engagement for this evening?"

Quirt consulted a well-worn leather

notebook he produced from his pocket and then looked up.

"You are to attend the opera with Sir Cecil Ballinger and his party this evening sir."

With that Winston Keith nodded Keith. "But I say, Quirt. 'Was' is the word, not 'are.' You must tender my apologies. I really shan't be able to attend the opera."

With that Winston Keith nodded his acquiescence, and five minutes later, with plans all set for the evening, Inspector Gilmardy, looking much relieved, took his departure.

Shortly before ten o'clock that evening a long, black car purred through the fog-enshrouded streets of London. In the rear seat, as in the front, rode two stern-faced officers of metropolitan police.

Not a single word was spoken by any of the dour quartet as the big car hurtled through the silent streets.

It was just ten-fifteen when the driver drew to a brake-squealing stop in front of a staid, brownstone house in Grosvenor Square. The car had no more than stopped when a lithe figure, immaculately clothed in dark garb, slipped wraithlike into the front seat.

"Greetings," laughed Keith as he settled himself in the car's soft upholstery. The inspector grunted sourly, and the grunt served a two-fold purpose. It reproved Keith for his levity, and served as a signal to the driver.

Winston Keith turned about leisurely and scrutinized the two officers in the rear seat. He had met them before. They were Harder and Svenson, both sergeants and connected with the Criminal Investigation Department. As usual, they were scowling and chewing ferociously on unlighted cigars. They looked quite vicious, but Keith recalled that they were both heavy on the brawn and strong-arm-tactics, fairly good pistol shots, but not very long on intelligence.

"Well, Svenson," Keith smiled his most disarming smile, "will we catch him tonight?"

Svenson grunted and tapped his pistol holster significantly.

"Sure, we'll catch him, Mr. Keith. Won't we, Harder?" Svenson turned to his teammate as though daring him to deny the assertion.

"Uh-huh," grunted Harder. "Ghost or no ghost he can't make monkeys out of us."

Keith smiled inscrutably. He couldn't resist the temptation to insert a satirical barb.

"Oh, quite, Harder," Keith murmured, "but d' y'know Harder, good material is quite a problem today. It's a problem that's bothering our biggest producers. H'mm, yes. It is quite a problem, an interesting problem, worthy of one's best thought, Harder."

And with that Winston Keith turned his attention to the gleaming silk ribbon that formed the wet and shiny Marleybone Road, and in the rear seat Harder and Svenson scowled on, oblivious of the oral barb that had sailed serenely over their heads.

"I say—" Keith turned to the silent official beside him, "does old Cranther know what's all ado? Be quite a shock to the dear old gentleman to have the King's representatives calling on him at such an hour, what?"

Keith waited a long time for his answer, during which he shuddered to think what might happen to the Gray Ghost were he to accidentally run afoul of either of the two worthies in the rear seat. Slippery as the Ghost had been on past occasions, Keith felt that he might not prove elusive enough to elude a .38 caliber bullet if he came under the gunning eye of either Harder or Svenson.

Then Keith smiled. He had worked with them before, and he knew that if they spotted the Ghost, they would, no doubt, advertise themselves as representatives of the law sufficiently ahead of time to allow their quarry to elude them.

Keith was still smiling to himself as he recalled the blunderings of Svenson and Harder on past cases. It

was with a guilty start that he recalled himself as the inspector addressed him.

"We'll soon be there, Keith," muttered Gilmardy, "and Mr. Cranther knows nothing as yet. He may get a bit testy and he may not, but I'm counting on you to help me smooth things over if he does."

Keith nodded, smiling amusedly as he puffed at his wind-blown cigaret.

"Oh, I've no doubt that he'll be quite amicable when he learns that some of his treasured baubles are in danger of being annexed by the elusive Ghost."

The luminous dialed clock on the instrument board registered ten minutes of eleven when the big car purred to a stop about half a block from the Cranther house.

A few minutes later Inspector Gilmardy, having stationed his two men at opposite corners of the house, rang the bell, jabbing at it imperiously.

A stony-faced butler opened the door and stared haughtily at the two men.

Gilmardy started to say something, but the officious butler cut him short.

"Mr. Cranther is not at home, and Mrs. Cranther is quite indisposed this evening. Would you care to leave a message?"

WINSTON KEITH could hardly repress a smile. He knew the type of butler these *nouveau riche* usually engaged, but he had a hunch that this particular flunkie was due to drop his dignity like a well-punctured balloon. And Keith was right, for Inspector Gilmardy bridled like an angry bulldog.

"Never mind the details of the Cranther family, I'm not interested. Just tell your mistress that Inspector Gilmardy of New Scotland Yard is here to see her. I've no doubt that she will be most delighted to postpone her indisposition."

The butler's face underwent a change, and his abrupt transformation from a dignified butler to an obse-

quious servant was, as Keith later termed it, exceedingly amusing.

Mrs. Cranther puffed laboriously down the broad staircase and wheezed breathlessly into the richly furnished library. The room to which the butler had previously conducted them.

Keith shuddered inwardly as he surveyed the monstrous specimen of feminine pulchritude that advanced ponderously into the room to greet them.

"Ah, Inspector Gilmardy," she burbled pantingly, "what is it? Has anything happened to Wallace, my husband? He just will be so terribly rash at times."

Mrs. Cranther was far from beautiful when partially composed, and Keith dreaded to think of what it would cost his nerves were she to suddenly break into a spell of copious weeping.

However, Gilmardy, having allayed her fears regarding Mr. Cranther, related, as briefly as possible, all the events leading up to their presence in her home. He told her of the scourge known as the Gray Ghost, but, indeed, she had already heard of that individual of dubious fame. He told her of the note; of the Ghost's intentions, and finally showed her the note he had received that morning. Whereupon Mrs. Cranther immediately burst into agitated tears, bewailing the possible loss of her valuable jewels.

"Oh, Inspector," wailed Mrs. Cranther, "what shall I do? All my jewels are in that flimsy wall safe in the library." Great tears rolled down her cheeks, leaving distinct rivulets in the heavy make-up on her face.

"Now, now," consoled Gilmardy, under the watchful eye of his secretly amused friend, "you mustn't take on so. All I want you to do is to go to bed just as though nothing had happened. Your jewels will be quite safe. We are here to catch the Ghost, and the best help you can give us is to go to bed and tell all the servants to stay in their own rooms. Everything will be all right, and we'll have the Gray Ghost before this night is very much older."

Gilmardy's face, however, bore a worried look, for Gilmardy had been the unsuccessful opponent of the Ghost on past occasions and he was well aware of that gentleman's elusiveness.

"Got your pistol, Keith?" queried Inspector Gilmardy, after Mrs. Cranther had disappeared beyond the bend in the polished mahogany staircase.

Keith nodded, and a few moments later he found himself alone in the study. The inspector took up his post in the darkened library, leaving the connecting doors between the two rooms open. Keith was guarding the approach, and Gilmardy was guarding the library, the room where the jewels were ensconced in a flimsy wall safe.

A brief smile flitted across Winston Keith's features as he slipped into a dark shadow and took up his lonely vigil.

All was silent throughout the great house as Keith waited motionlessly in the dark. The silence did not bother him in the least, for he was well used to dark silent places. His nerves were steady, and his breathing low and regulated as he picked out the dark silhouettes of the massive furniture scattered here and there in the semi-gloom of the somber study.

THE very oppressiveness of the intense silence rasped on Inspector Gilmardy's keyed-up nerves. The faint snapping of timbers in the old house, the swishing of draperies, the distant chirp of crickets, the whirring purr of a passing motor's exhaust and the many imaginary sounds of a silent night beat against Gilmardy's tortured sense as he awaited tensely in the darkened library for the coming of the Gray Ghost.

Gilmardy had few doubts as to whether the Ghost would appear or not. He was positive that he would. His only qualms were as to whether or not the Ghost would be too smart for them. Then Gilmardy smiled as he thought of Winston Keith waiting in the next

room. Keith, and the open door between the two rooms. It would be a smart man that would succeed in getting by Keith. Gilmardy remembered that Keith had caught others as clever, if not more so, than the Ghost.

"Stout fella, Keith," the inspector muttered to himself. Then, settling down in a more comfortable position, Gilmardy started going over his mental dossier of the Gray Ghost.

When, the Inspector asked himself, had the Gray Ghost started his depredations on the "legal lawbreakers" of London? He guessed it was with the robbery of the bank cashier who had decamped with the funds of one of the branches of the "Commercial Industrial Bank." Yes that was it. He had robbed about every successful robber since then, and on two occasions when the police had got wind of the whereabouts of stolen valuables, they had arrived only to find that the Ghost had beaten them to it.

The Gray Ghost was notorious for his ability to theorize the correct solution to robbery mysteries from the accounts found in the papers. He usually arrived at the correct solution just a few minutes ahead of the police, and he never returned any of his loot, for he robbed only robbers and swindlers. It was because of this very fact that the police could get no adequate descriptions of his identity.

The Ghost's victims, if any of them recognized him, which was highly improbable, dared not squeal without putting themselves in decidedly embarrassing positions. As for reprisals of their own—they were all informed that he, the Ghost, kept a very unpleasant diary. Blackmail? Perhaps. Precautionary measures? Most decidedly. Yes, Gilmardy decided, the Gray Ghost was clever. Devilishly so.

Inspector Gilmardy didn't get much time to think further on the bitter, yet enticing subject of the Ghost, for at that instant the silence was shattered with a resounding thud, followed by a muttered curse, and the crashing slam of an overturned chair

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or table. A door banged defiantly, then silence descended again, a silence more pregnant with suspense and danger than before.

The Gray Ghost! That was the thought that flashed through Gilmary's stunned mind as he leapt from his place of concealment and dashed into the study, the room from which the sounds of struggle had emanated.

SWITCHING on the lights, he looked about the room for Keith, but only a mocking emptiness met his straining eyes. In one corner of the room, near a small door, he saw an overturned chair. On the floor near the chair was Keith's handkerchief, and nearby was his automatic pistol, but of Winston Keith there was no sign. Gilmardy tried the little door, only to find it securely locked.

"Good Lord!" ejaculated the inspector. "Keith gone!"

Then the import of it struck him full force. The Gray Ghost was on the scene, and as before, he was just a bit too clever for them, but where was Keith? Had he gone in pursuit, or had he fallen victim to the Ghost? Yes, that was it. Gilmardy remembered the sounds of struggle he had heard, and he knew that Keith had only been persuaded to leave his post by superior force.

"Where in hell did the Ghost take Keith?" asked Gilmardy of the night in general. He punctuated his query with a verbal explosion that would have done credit to a Liverpool dock hand.

The little door, securely locked; the previous slam of a door. Obviously, Gilmardy decided, the Ghost had removed Keith through that door, but where did the little door lead to? That was what Gilmardy meant to find out.

As the inspector stepped out of the study and down the hall with the idea of finding out where the door led, a shadow detached itself from the opposite side of the darkened corridor. Padding noiselessly through the study, the shadow slipped on into the library.

The shadowy figure resolved itself into the figure of a man. The upper part of him was shrouded in a dark, capelike affair. A close observer might have noticed that the texture of the cape was strikingly similar to the texture of the Cranther draperies. The new arrival's face was dead white, almost waxen in hue, and ornamented with heavy, drooping mustaches. Two eyes, snapping brilliant in their utter blackness, peered forth from beneath a high, pallid brow.

The newcomer strode unerringly to the pendant tapestry that hid the little wall-safe. He neither looked about him, nor appeared at all hurried, yet he worked with a sure deftness that bespoke of cool nerves and a serene confidence. Such were the ways of the Gray Ghost.

Two minutes had passed since the struggle in the study. Only one hundred and twenty seconds. Yet in that short space of time the Ghost had made his appearance, outwitted the trap, opened the safe and extracted a necklace of diamonds, and one of costly matched emeralds, contemptuously passing over the baubles of lesser values.

With a low chuckle at the ease with which the Inspector's trap had been eliminated, the Ghost left a small white envelope in the safe. An envelope addressed to Inspector Gilmardy, then as he started away from the safe, approaching footsteps interrupted him.

The Ghost took one long step and melted behind an enshrouding tapestry just as the library door swung open. Inspector Gilmardy slipped into the room, closing the door after him. With silent steps Gilmardy crossed the library and eased into the study.

An instant later the study was bathed in light as the inspector snapped on the switch. Not a sound, save Gilmardy's nervous breathing, disturbed the heavy silence. The lights in the study snapped off in accompaniment to the inspector's muttered oath.

Gilmardy had found that the little

door led only to a communication passageway, leading, in turn, into the main hall and as such it held no interest for him, for Winston Keith certainly wasn't in the passage. Gilmardy's lined face was a study in perplexity.

SNAPPING on the lights in the library, the inspector paced the room, wondering whether he should spread the alarm or not. He had just about reached the decision to do so when a drawling voice smote his ears. A voice that was perfectly clear, yet almost sepulchral in tone.

"Good evening, Inspector. Were you, by any chance, looking for me?" The voice was deep and low, almost taunting in its hollow mockery.

Gilmardy whirled abruptly and found himself gazing into the bore of a large and amazingly steady pistol. The inspector stared at the pistol like one in an hypnotic trance. Then, slowly, as a fascinated bird watches a striking snake, his gaze traveled from the pistol to the man in back of it.

His eyes flew wide with amazement as they encompassed the face of the Gray Ghost. The face with its death-like, waxen hue, the piercing, black eyes, and the mocking smile that wreathed the lips beneath the heavy mustaches. Again the sepulchral voice broke the silence.

"You didn't play quite fair with me, inspector," chided the Ghost. "Here I invite you to one of my parties and you bring along a spectator. Makes it rather awkward for me. Suppose I hadn't located him first? Tsk, tsk—inspector. Such unfairness."

Gilmardy could only grind his teeth in impotent rage as the taunting, mocking voice drawled on.

"Yes, inspector—it was quite unfair of you, and quite stupid, too. Spectators are always blundering and useless. Why—I—might—yes 'pon my soul I will go so far as to say that this blithering idiot, a — ah — Winston Keith or Kite or something by name, is positively stupid—a blunderer. A

complete ass, if you get what I mean, or if not a complete ass, he'll do till one comes along.

"Of course the police are stupid too, but they are paid for being stupid. It's an art with them, and after all society must have its protection. I'm sure you agree with me, inspector."

Gilmardy's neck looked like it was about to burst either itself or the collar of his shirt. He was just debating whether it would be prudent or not to make a pass for his own gun, but the Gray Ghost interrupted him.

"Now—now, inspector. I shouldn't do that. You see I should be forced to kill you if you did and then think of all the horrible notoriety I should be subjected to. No, indeed, inspector, I shouldn't recommend such a course, but as long as you are so nervous I think a sedative is in order, what? Just step over a little closer and extend your bared wrist,—left please."

"That's right, inspector," mocked the Ghost as Gilmardy, knowing that there was no alternative, stepped forward and held out his arm, sleeve drawn back and corded sinews exposed to view.

"Just take it easy now. This fluid"—the Ghost held up a tiny hypodermic syringe—"is quite harmless. Amazingly effective, yet absolutely non-injurious." And while he kept up a running fire of caustic comments, watching the inspector closely, he sent the little plunger down.

Something warm and prickly coursed through the inspector's arm, slowly creeping up into his shoulder and on through his body. He had a hazy recollection of being assisted to a chair. He tried to struggle, but his arms and legs were leaden. They refused to obey the dictates of his fuddled mind. Things began to blur in his vision. He experienced a whirring sensation in his brain. He was conscious of nothing but the Ghost's mocking voice.

The last thing he remembered with any degree of distinctness was the Ghost telling him that he would find

his spectator friend behind the divan in the study. And then, as the Ghost's voice faded in a haunting, derisive laugh, Inspector Gilmardy's reeling senses slipped away in a gorgeous panoply of kaleidoscopic colors.

THE Gray Ghost had long been gone when Gilmardy emerged from his involuntary trance. He looked about him in a daze. His head felt very light and he still had that whirring feeling in his mind, that feeling that had accompanied his sojourn into oblivion.

Then the memory of things came back with a rush as he glimpsed the open safe, and a corner of a white envelope sticking from its yawning mouth. Mute testimony of the Ghost's triumphant visit.

Gilmardy groaned miserably as he struggled to his feet. He dreaded telling Mrs. Cranther that her jewels were missing. He dreaded reporting failure to his chief at the "Yard," yet he knew there was nothing else to do.

He smiled a bit ruefully as he staggered unsteadily on his feet, weaving an uncertain course to the safe. Reaching up, he extracted the envelope and ripped it open as he glimpsed his name on the front. His face took on a suffused glow of anger at what he read.

*To Inspector Gilmardy:
Many thanks, and with the compliments of—The Gray Ghost.*

There could be no doubt in Gilmardy's mind, for he had received all too many notes upon similar occasions in the past, and each note had been identically worded with the one he now stuffed in his pocket. A souvenir—a souvenir of another bitter failure, and the Gray Ghost was still as elusive as ever.

The angry red slowly drained from Gilmardy's taut features, leaving them grim and white as he hurried into the study to find and release his friend.

Inspector Gilmardy pulled the massive divan away from the corner of

the room, and for an instant he stood there, almost tempted to laugh. Mr. Winston Keith was all doubled up in the corner like a fowl trussed up for the market. On his forehead was a tiny blue lump where he had been hit, and his hands and feet were bound with a running slip-knot in such a manner that even though he had been conscious it would have been some time before he could have accomplished much in the way of movement.

All in all, Gilmardy thought, Mr. Keith looked like anything but a successful amateur criminologist. In fact he looked as though he had been rather roughly manhandled. His usually immaculate clothes were much rumpled and twisted, and he looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"Humph," grunted the inspector. Then he remarked mentally that he would, at least, have the laugh on Keith when that gentleman again started to dwell at length on the proper procedure for catching a criminal. And, with that thought in mind, Gilmardy lifted Keith out of the corner and deposited him on the divan while he released his bonds and chafed his wrists.

After forcing a bit of brandy, procured from a liquor cabinet in the library, down Keith's throat, the inspector stood back and awaited Keith's returning senses.

A troubled moan escaped the lips of the unconscious man, accompanied by the fluttering of eyelids. Then Keith's faculties appeared to return to him with a rush. He looked up into the grinning face of his friend, and essayed a feeble grin of his own.

"I say, Martyn," Keith mumbled thickly, "did you get the beggar? He must have been camped right on my tail. I never even saw him."

Keith struggled to his feet, swaying uncertainly and looking at his friend inquiringly. He seemed to sense from the inspector's look that all did not go well.

GILMARDY growled under his breath. Keith caught something that sounded like anything but a compliment to the Ghost. Then, as briefly as possible, Gilmardy recounted the happenings since Keith had fallen victim to the superior cleverness of their intended quarry.

There was little enough to tell. All had happened with such dramatic swiftness that it was practically over before it started.

Keith managed a rueful smile as the inspector finished the recital.

"H'mm, I jolly well owe the beggar a score for tonight's work, what?" Keith fingered a tiny blue lump on his forehead.

Gilmardy only muttered deep in his throat and strode towards the library door.

"I'm going up and break the news to Mrs. Cranther, Keith," he snapped. "You might get our coats and wait for me in the vestibule." And with that the inspector disappeared into the darkened hallway.

Keith smiled with amusement as he recalled Mrs. Cranther's appearance when they first arrived. A low chuckle escaped him as he thought of Gilmardy explaining the Ghost's success. He did not relish the inspector his job.

Keith's train of humorous thought was interrupted by the arrival of his friend. Gilmardy was mopping at his brow with a much needed handkerchief, and about his lips was a certain hint of grimness as he greeted Keith shortly.

"C'mon," he growled, "let's get away from here. We've missed him and there'll be hell to pay at the Yard."

Keith slipped into his burberry and helped Gilmardy into his, then he turned back to the inspector, holding out his hat and stick.

"Hold these a moment, Martyn, while I light up." Keith selected a long, black cigar from his case. Offering the inspector one, he lit it and puffed with evident enjoyment.

"Oh, damn the cigar." Gilmardy snapped irritably as he stamped down the steps with Keith's hat and stick in his hands. Keith grinned, and hurried forward. Retrieving his belongings, he donned them and fell in step with his friend. The two defeated "Ghost trappers" strode silently down the drive—one scowling, the other curiously smiling.

GILMARDY paused and blew his police whistle. It was answered by two echoing blasts and a few minutes later Harder, with Svenson close on his heels, stepped out of the shadows of the trees and approached.

"Either of you two see anything?" queried Gilmardy shortly as he scrutinized them with a dubious eye.

"No, sir," rumbled Svenson, "nothing got by us, eh, Harder?"

"Nope," echoed that worthy, "there wasn't anything that got by us tonight."

Inspector Gilmardy looked at his two aids witheringly. The Ghost's words about police dumbness danced tauntingly before his eyes, and he half agreed. At last, however, he spat in disgust and sighed.

"No, no, of course not," he drawled sarcastically, "nothing ever does. Well, the Ghost arrived, accomplished his purpose and departed, and it's a damn sure thing he didn't fly away. —Oh, hell."

Inspector Gilmardy was very much disgusted. He turned on his heel and strode away in the direction of the waiting car.

"C'mon, Keith, and you two. I'm going to get some sleep if I don't get anything else." It was a very silent quartet that climbed into the car a few moments later.

The inspector grunted something to the driver and the machine purred smoothly away from the curb. Swinging about adroitly, the driver sent it hurtling towards the heart of London. Not a sound, save the diapasonic roar of the powerful motor, disturbed

the silence of the night, as the driver crouched over the big wheel.

Keith and Gilmardy seemed buried in retrospective thought, oblivious to the weather and the road alike. Silence reigned as the car slipped rapidly through the streets of the Metropolis, drawing to a stop, finally, in front of Keith's Grosvenor Square house.

"Eh?—what's this?" Keith grunted as he looked out to the glistening pavements. "Oh, home, eh? Won't you come in, Martyn, and have a little spot before you go to the Yard?"

Gilmardy shook his head in the negative, smiling wryly.

"Not tonight, old fellow," he smiled feebly, "I might have a hard time convincing the chief as it is. See you some other time." And with that the police car streaked away from the curb, leaving Keith standing alone.

A moment later Keith let himself in with his latch-key. A smile of satisfaction illumined his thin features as he noticed that Quirt had everything all set for a light lunch.

ON A SMALL chair-table was waiting coffee service and a plate of sandwiches. On a small smoking stand was a neat sheaf of papers containing the condensed account of the latest crime news, all written in Quirt's bold scrawl. Beside the papers was a pipe and a humidor of tobacco.

Keith had deposited his coat and hat, and was standing by the center table when Quirt entered noiselessly from the tiny kitchen. He smiled a silent greeting, connected up the coffee percolator and retired to fetch Keith's dressing gown.

With a sharp wrench Mr. Winston Keith removed the head from his stick. He turned it upside down and shook it gently. A quizzical smile flickered at the corners of his lips as a tiny phial of Belladonna slipped out, a drug, by the use of which gray eyes could be made to appear snapping black, harmless in the hands of its masters. Keith shook the stick some

more. A tube of whitening cream and a pair of drooping, black moustaches fell beside the phial of Belladonna.

Something else trickled out of the hollow stick, and the top of the table gleamed and glittered with the scintillating red, white and blue flames as a long string of costly diamonds caught and reflected light. Beside them flashed myriad, dark, green pools of iridescent fires, alluringly provocative, yet cold and hard. On the table reposed both the Gray Ghost and the Cranther jewels.

Keith smiled with amusement as Quirt reentered the room.

"Oh, I say, Quirt," drawled Keith as he fingered a small blue lump on his forehead, "did you ever strike yourself on the head to purposely raise a bump?—Rather a painful procedure, Quirt."

Keith regarded the blue smoke that curled from his pipe bowl thoughtfully.

"H'mm, yes, Quirt. You are right. The police are dumb, but—they are amusing too and—and quite harmless." Keith smiled whimsically.

"And that brings us back to the entrancing problem of the painless self-affliction of bumps on one's own forehead, what?—That's an interesting problem, Quirt. Interesting, but, unfortunately, quite hopeless. However it might be worth a bit of cogitation."

"Thank you for your reports, Quirt." Keith picked the little sheaf of papers.—"And good-night, Quirt."

Mr. Winston Keith stretched out luxuriously in the deep, old chair, preparatory to enjoying a cup of Quirt's incomparable coffee. He smiled softly as he thought of Gilmardy holding his hat and stick while he lit his cigar in the vestibule of the Cranther residence.

Keith's smile changed to a chuckle of interest, as his eye encountered a report of a large robbery of an importing house's offices in Piccadilly.

A sigh of content escaped him as he sipped his coffee. Mr. Winston Keith was at peace with the world.

The Corpse Clue



By
Grant
Mason

Author of "Long-Distance
Doom," etc.

The killer had an iron-clad alibi. But Dr. Kettle, who was a disciple of deduction, played a poker hand as lethal as—steel-clad bullets.

IT WAS ALL over in less than ten minutes. Braxton Hewett, in pajamas and dressing gown, was in his room playing solitaire and munching an apple. His face was tranquil, his eyes sleepy, and his fingers worked mechanically.

Gradually his motions became slower and finally he left the game suspended in mid-air. He had picked up the four of hearts, but before he could

place it on top of the three, his attention had wandered elsewhere. His eyes closed. The card slipped out of his fingers. Then, abruptly, he clenched his right hand and brought it down on the table with a bang.

"That's where I've seen him!" Hewett did not speak aloud. He thought the words, but the thought was a roar within him. "Now I know why I always had the feeling that

there was something familiar about him. Well, well!"

A door closed. Hewett heard steps on the hall stairs. He looked at the small clock on the dresser.

"That's probably him now," he thought. "Well, there's no time like the present."

He opened his door and waited on the threshold for the man who was coming up the stairs. Soon the man reached the landing.

"Oh, hello there, would you mind stepping in for a minute?" Hewett asked. "I'd like to talk to you."

The man glanced at Hewett quizzically, and then, without replying, followed Hewett into the room. Hewett closed the door.

"I understand," said Hewett, "that your romance with Betty is budding nicely and will soon blossom forth into a wedding."

"You understand rightly," answered Hewett's visitor, curtly. "I suppose I ought to thank you for your interest, but frankly, I can't see that the matter is any of your business."

"My interest is pardonable, I think," mused Hewett. "I once had designs on the lady myself. But with the entrance upon the scene of my rival"—he bowed toward his visitor—"I seem to have been shoved backstage."

"Some fellows have all the luck," replied the other.

"Yes, that's so," said Hewett. He paused a moment and then added with forced nonchalance: "Some fellows certainly do have all the luck, Mr. Leoni."

The visitor started, but regained his composure quickly. He arched his eyebrows and stared at Hewett as though he did not quite catch the last remark.

HEWETT was smiling now. "I'm glad to see you still know your right name. Do you know, Val old boy, you looked familiar to me the very first time I saw you. That was about four months ago. At that time I had known Betty twenty-three years

and five months—she is now twenty-three years and nine months old. But a good-looking stranger is more fascinating than a fellow who saw you the day you were born. And you worked fast, Val, old timer, you certainly worked fast.

"Listen—let me refresh your memory a bit. Nine years ago I was plugging popular songs in small night clubs. One night during intermission, I was talking to the manager in the lobby. We saw two men engaged in a brawl on the other side of the street, and as we ran over, one of the men broke away and disappeared. The man who disappeared was never seen again; at any rate, not in St. Paul, where it happened.

"Well, Val, the manager bent down over the other fighter who was on his back on the side-walk. The poor fellow was moaning, 'He's killed me! Tell the cops Leoni killed me!' 'Are you sure?' the manager asked. 'Leoni is the name of the man who plays the piano in my tavern.' 'That's him,' said the man on the sidewalk. 'That's the fellow—Val Leoni, the pianist. We had a fight over a girl and he stabbed me.'

"Two days later this chap died in a hospital. And Leoni is still on the man wanted list of the St. Paul police."

"If you think I killed a man in St. Paul—" began the visitor.

"Where've you been all this time?" interrupted Hewett. "Leave the country for a while? I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll call up Betty on the phone—I suppose you saw her home after the show—and we'll make an appointment to have dinner tomorrow at any restaurant you name. I'll explain matters to Betty and lay all the cards on the table.

"As I remember it, that girl in St. Paul over whom the two men fought, was quite bitter against Leoni. Well, if it's humanly possible to do so, I'll find that girl and pay her expenses to come East and take a look at you. She'll know Leoni even though he's

changed somewhat in appearance. And if I'm wrong, I'll promise to retire gracefully from the field and buy Betty and you the handsomest wedding gift in—”

“You've been retired from the field already,” snapped the visitor. “And as for this Leoni yarn—you're crazy.”

“Well, an innocent man always calls a bluff. If you prefer to discuss the snatter with the police rather than with Betty—” Hewett turned and walked toward the desk.

“Stay away from that phone!”

Hewett, at the desk, his right hand near the telephone, turned and faced his visitor. The man's manner was completely changed. His eyes were narrowed, his fists clenched, and his lips thinned and drawn back in an ugly grimace. He had followed Hewett belligerently.

“So I am right!” said Hewett. He reached for the telephone. “Well, Val, old boy, here's where I break up the best-looking team in vaude—”

A SNARL escaped the visitor. He lashed out his right fist. The blow struck Hewett on the side of the head and caused him to lose his balance and fall heavily to the floor. Encouraged, he cried: “Now I can thrash you before turning you over to the cops.”

And then something unfortunate happened, something which may have caused the visitor to misinterpret the word “thrash.” In attempting to regain his feet, Hewett seized the top of the desk for support. Quite accidentally his fingers closed over a leaden paper weight which lay near the desk edge.

The visitor cried out, a cry of frenzy and fear. His hand went to his hip pocket. He pointed the gun at Hewett and fired. The bullet caught Hewett in the left temple. He was hurled back as though by a kick and crumpled to the floor again without uttering a sound.

For several moments the visitor stood stock still, like a man in a hyp-

notic trance. Then a sob burst from him. Frightened by the sound of his own voice, he hastily pocketed his gun and then crept to the door and peered out into the hall.

It was not until twenty minutes later that he left Hewett's room. . . .

DOCTOR ALEXANDER KETTLE arrived at Mrs. Steinhardt's Forty-fourth Street boarding house at eleven o'clock on the morning of February twenty-first. The doctor, a tall, lean man with prominent cheekbones, mild blue eyes, enormous hands and a phlegmatic manner, was a medical examiner on the staff of the homicide bureau.

“They pay him,” the boys at headquarters said, “to perform autopsies on corpses, but he frequently performs them on the living and on the crime itself. He is as skillful in dissecting human motives and methods as he is dissecting human bodies.”

When Kettle functioned as a detective, he of course did so in an unofficial capacity. Officially, Inspector Baldock of the homicide squad received the newspaper men and the credit. This arrangement was altogether satisfactory to the publicity-shy doctor.

“Who's the victim this time?” asked Kettle on entering the Steinhardt house.

“Fellow by name of Hewett, Braxton Hewett, actor,” said the inspector, who had arrived about an hour and a half earlier, and who had already completed his routine preliminary investigation. “Quite a varied career; started as a song plugger, went into legit and became somewhat of a matinee idol and finally drifted into the movies in a small way. Once won a prize contest for the best-dressed Thespian and has written three or four articles on what the gentleman will wear, for magazines. Posed for a clothing ad for a nationally known haberdasher.”

“What's it look like?”

“Cinch. Straight case of **murder**,

undoubtedly not of the planned kind, with robbery for a motive. What I mean is, Hewett surprised an intruder in his room; there was a scuffle and Hewett was shot. Wounded in the left temple—one of those wounds where the bleeding is mostly internal."

"When'd it happen?"

"At exactly fourteen minutes past eight o'clock last night."

"I know," said Doctor Kettle smiling, "it's one of those cases where a clock was conveniently broken during the brawl. The hands of the clock stopped at eight-fourteen—"

"Well, that is exactly what *did* happen. But I'm not that simple to take the word of any clock, because how do we know the clock kept proper time? However, there is plenty of other evidence to corroborate—Say, take that suspicious look off your face. I'm giving you straight goods. If you want to question the other four boarders yourself and learn—"

"Let me see the boarders. I'm getting interested."

BALDOCK left the sitting room on the lower floor in which this conversation had taken place. After a few moments he returned with a man he introduced as Mr. Louis Lerian.

Lerian was a well-built man of about one-hundred and seventy pounds, tall, with dark, flashing eyes, a strong jaw and black hair, gray at the temples. He gave his age as thirty-six and in response to the doctor's question explained:

"I am at leisure at the present time. I've done a little of everything that's done in vaudeville but my specialties are juggling and card tricks."

"Can you account for your movements last night?"

"I left this house at seven, strolled around, met some other disengaged —ahem—artists, chewed the rag in front of the Palace, returned at nine, went to bed and to sleep."

"You heard no shot fired or other suspicious sounds?"

"I understand the murder was com-

mitted at eight-fourteen. At that time I was in front of the Palace, we remarked on curtain time, and two of us pulled out our watches. However, even if I had been in the house and sleeping, I probably would not have heard anything. Hewett's room is second floor back, mine third floor front. And I sleep like a dead man, doctor."

"Are you married, Mr. Lerian?"

"On the brink. Waiting for booking before I take the fatal step."

Lerian was excused.

"Vain chap, isn't he?" remarked Baldock. "Dyed hair." He left the room and this time returned with Valentine Janson, age twenty-seven, who had reddish hair, freckled skin and was handsome in a robust way.

"I left here just before eight o'clock with three other boarders—Watwood, Miner and Hewett," he explained. "We walked west. Near Broadway there's a fruit shop, which Hewett entered. At Broadway I turned south and Miner and Watwood went north. I'm playing in *Screaming Flames*, the mystery show at the Delphic Theatre."

"I've seen that one, but I don't place you," said Kettle.

Janson smiled. "No one remembers me, and yet I'm the fellow about whom all the fuss is made. When the curtain goes up at eight-thirty, I'm on the stage alone, playing the piano. Seven minutes later I am shot. Thereupon I go home."

"Is that the program you followed last night?"

"No, sir. Last night I visited a friend. He had a gang at his place and we played cards. I got in at one A. M."

Gene Miner was on the carpet next. He was of medium height, husky without being broad, blue-eyed and fair-skinned. He said he had left the house with Janson, Watwood and Hewett a few minutes before eight. Hewett had dropped into the fruit store. At Broadway, Janson had turned south and he had headed north with Watwood.

"I'm playing in the *Limousine Lady*, the musical comedy at the Altoona Theatre. I'm one of the Four Hoofing Sailors, a dance act which is on for fifteen minutes—from nine-thirty to nine-forty-five. Last night after the show I dropped into the restaurant next to the theatre for coffee and pie. It takes me a little time to get back into my street clothes, so I should say I entered the restaurant at about ten-thirty. Watwood came in while I was there and we came home together at eleven."

"What room do you occupy?"

"The one above this one."

That was all for Gene Miner.

THE FOURTH and last boarder brought in was Billy Watwood, a tall, corpulent chap with a round face, brown hair and extraordinarily large eyes which were slightly bulging. This defect was by no means disfiguring; in fact, Watwood's was the pleasantest face in the house.

"I'm on the program of the Roxamount this week," he stated, in answer to Kettle's questions, "Me'n Miss Stone. Watwood and Stone, rapid-fire patter and songs, that's us. We're the best team in vaude, we admit it, and on the strength of our showing at the Rox, we've just received twenty weeks' booking. We hit the trail in two weeks and before we do, we're Mr. and Mrs. Me, I get all the breaks."

"What time does your act go on?"

"At night? From nine-ten to nine-thirty-five. Last night I saw Miss Stone to her home before dropping into the eat place where I met Miner. I came home with him."

Kettle dismissed him.

Inspector Baldock then led Doctor Kettle up into Braxton Hewett's room on the second floor. A uniformed officer was seated on a chair in the hall near the door.

The bed, Doctor Kettle noted, had not been slept in. Contents of the dresser, desk and bureau drawers were scattered about on the floor. A

small clock had toppled off the dresser; it lay face up, its hands indicating eight-fourteen.

"Now observe," Baldock pointed out, "that Hewett is lying on the floor in the centre of the room. There's a splotch over his left temple where he was shot. His hat still partly covers his head, he has on his overcoat and its collar is still buttoned around his neck. To his right, his cane is lying.

"On the floor near his left hand is the bag of fruit, some of which has spilled out. Now we have the word of three men—Miner, Janson and Watwood—that Hewett entered a fruit shop three blocks from here at eight last evening. But that wasn't good enough for me. I checked up at the fruiterer's. He told me Hewett was there last night at that time, that he is a regular customer, and that he knows Hewett well.

"Figure it out yourself. Hewett enters a fruit store at eight, spends a few minutes making a purchase and then walks home three blocks. How much time elapses? About fifteen minutes. And that's why I believe the clock!"

"What happened? Somebody was eyeing this joint: somebody saw the landlady and the five boarders go out. He knew then that the house was empty. He came in—with a skeleton key, probably.

"But Hewett returned home immediately after buying the fruit. He caught the intruder in his room, and was shot. The landlady has given me a partial list of jewels she knew Hewett had and which are missing—"

"Yes, it all matches perfectly," agreed Kettle. He had opened his medical case and drawn out some instruments. "Has the body been touched?"

"It has not. I leave them as I find them for you as often as possible."

KETTLE and Baldock lifted the body on the bed. Doctor Kettle then removed the overcoat and hat

from the body. The dead actor was wearing a white silk scarf with small red dots; the doctor removed that too. Then the doctor unbuttoned the actor's coat, vest and shirt. He was taking off the tie, when he suddenly checked his motion. He looked down at the body, a long, lingering, puzzled look. Then he looked at the inspector.

"Do you see what I see?" he demanded.

"Hm," mused Baldock, "some layout, eh?"

"Did I hear you say this man once won a prize contest for the best-dressed actor? Did I hear you say he wrote—"

"So the landlady and other boarders told me. And over there on the desk is a magazine containing an article on what the gentleman will wear and signed by Braxton Hewett."

Kettle picked up the magazine and read the article; it was a short one.

"Of all things!" he exclaimed. "Listen to this." He read:

"No matter how excellently a man's clothes are tailored, the effect will be spoiled if he wears colors which do not become him or colors which are improperly matched."

"Funny, isn't it?" remarked the baffled inspector.

"Funny?" cried Kettle. "It's just simply impossible! Here we have a man who is noted for his correctness in dress, a man who writes articles on the importance of properly matched colors—and how do we find him? We find him wearing a *light-brown* felt hat, a *bluish* overcoat, a *cinnamon-colored* suit, a *white* scarf with *red* dots, an *orange* tie on a *light-blue* shirt, a *green* vest, a *white* soft collar with *brown* stripes, *purple* sox, *tan* shoes, and a *black-bordered* handkerchief!"

"It's the strangest thing I've ever seen," admitted Baldock.

Doctor Kettle remained standing over the body for several minutes. A vacant expression came into his eyes



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and he seemed to be going to sleep on his feet.

Suddenly he snapped out of it. He examined the scattered contents of the dresser drawers. He picked up the bag of fruit and the oranges which had rolled out of it. He spilled the contents of the bag on the desk. Then he scribbled a note on a pad.

"Please have the officer outside take this to the fruiterer, and have him ask the fruiterer to answer my questions in writing."

Baldock gave the note to the uniformed officer still sitting in the hall. The officer returned in a short time and handed the paper to Kettle.

"I thought so," smiled the doctor, after reading the fruiterer's reply. Thereupon he sent the officer on another errand. A pack of playing cards was in a cubby hole of the desk. Kettle extracted a card from the deck, gave it to the officer and whispered something to him.

The officer went out and when he returned the second time he handed a new deck of cards to Kettle.

"Now please summon Mr. Lerian," said Kettle to Baldock. Before the boarder was brought into the room, the doctor had covered the body of Braxton Hewett with a bed sheet.

"I believe you mentioned you could do tricks with cards, Mr. Lerian."

"Righto," said Lerian.

"Let's see you try this one," invited Kettle. "Observe, I have here on the desk two decks of cards. One of them belonged to Hewett, the other was just purchased for me. Now watch: I draw a card from the new deck,"—he suited the action to the words. "It is the Ace of Spades. See it?"

"Look at both sides of it. I now insert the Ace from the new deck into Hewett's deck. I shuffle Hewett's deck and lay it on the desk face down. Without turning the deck face up, do you think you can extract from it the new Ace of Spades?"

A look of surprise spread over the trickster's face. "But my dear doctor, that's not a trick—that's—"

"I'll explain later," cut in Doctor Kettle. "Please try to do as you were told if you can."

Lerian picked up Hewett's deck, went through it without turning the cards face up—and finally held up one card, the new Ace of Spades.

"Good," said Kettle, "now listen. I shall ask the other boarders to join us in a card game. I'll make the game stud poker, and arrange matters so that you deal the third hand. Keep that Ace of Spades in your pocket." Kettle then drew Lerian aside and whispered something to him. Then he asked: "Can you do that?"

"Certainly."

Kettle left Hewett's room and when he returned several minutes later he announced: "The others are agreeable. We're going to play downstairs in the sitting room. You too, inspector."

READING clockwise around the sitting room table, we have: Gene Miner, Billy Watwood, Inspector Baldock, Valentine Janson, Doctor Kettle and Lou Lerian.

"Three hands, stud, quarter limit," said the doctor. "I am going to try to make this the most interesting card game any of you have ever sat in, for while it is in progress, I shall give you the details of the murder of Braxton Hewett."

"But we're playing for keeps, ain't we?" asked the corpulent Billy Watwood.

"Sure," said the dapper Miner. "Poker is poker, murder or no murder."

Valentine Janson, to whom Kettle passed the cards, started dealing.

"Braxton Hewett was not murdered at eight-fourteen, but at some time between ten and half-past," began the doctor. "He was in his room for some time before being killed, for the fruiterer, in reply to my question, said he remembered distinctly that Hewett had bought six apples and six oranges last evening, and when I counted the fruit in Hewett's room, I found only four oranges and five

apples. In other words, Hewett ate two oranges and one apple—and he probably ate them in his room."

"Interesting," said red-haired Janson, dealer. "My queen is high and I have another queen in the hole. Bet a quarter."

"The hocus-pocus of the stopped clock now explains itself," the doctor went on. "The murderer had a perfect alibi for eight-fourteen. But here's the unusual feature of the case. When Hewett was killed, he was nearly stripped for bed, or else he was in his room in his pajamas and dressing gown. And so in order to strengthen the evidence of the clock the murderer completely dressed the dead man, including overcoat and hat.

"By so doing, he made it appear that Hewett was killed on returning from the fruit store. But this maneuver partially betrayed the murderer, for his act narrows the suspicion to a group of persons who knew that Hewett had gone out to buy fruit and who knew that the others in the house knew it to."

"Putting it bluntly, the murderer is one of us," said Lou Lieran, calmly, "I have nines. You have kings, inspector? Your pot."

As Baldock raked in the money, he let his eyes fall frankly on each of the players in turn. But if there was a disconcerted man in the room, it was himself. These poker players had poker faces. Not one of the four countenances betrayed a sign of guilt.

Doctor Kettle took the cards and dealt the second hand. He continued: "It was a clever trick, this dressing the dead man, and it would have succeeded except for one thing. The murderer is afflicted with one of the strangest, and indeed the most inexplicable maladies which can beset a member of the human race. I refer to the murderer's eyes. Your jack is high, Mr. Janson."

"A quarter for a starter," said Janson.

But all heads were now turned to Billy Watwood and his large, bulging

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eyes. Billy did not flinch under scrutiny.

"Half a dollar for luck," he said.

"Gentlemen," said Doctor Kettle, "when we removed Hewett's overcoat, we found that he was wearing an orange tie on a blue shirt, a white collar with brown stripes, purple sox, a green vest—"

"Holy smoke!" interrupted Watwood. "You mean the vest with the green-flower design—the one he wore in a comedy vaudeville act before going into the movies?"

"That's probably the one," said Kettle. "Just a minute. What does it cost me to come in? A dollar? I'm seeing. Three sixes. Your three tens beat me, Mr. Miner."

AND now Lou Lerian took the cards for the third deal. The expressions on the several faces now became a bit more tense. This was to be the last hand, and it was evident that the doctor had reached the climax of his disclosures.

"Yes, siree," said Doctor Kettle. "Hewett, the best-dresser, the man who was noted for his clothes, was all dressed up like a vaudeville comic going to a masquerade ball—he wore every color in the rainbow. And what's the answer? A most astounding answer, and yet the only answer to fit the facts: the murderer is *color blind!*"

"Color blind!" cried Watwood.

"Color blind!" repeated Kettle.

There was a long silence.

"Won't that be difficult to prove, doctor?" Miner asked.

"It will be the simplest thing in the world to prove," Kettle assured him. "The fact is already established by the outstanding manner in which Hewett was dressed. He has perfectly-matched outfits in his wardrobe—a shirt for the collar he wore, a tie for the shirt he wore, and so on. He certainly didn't dress himself so crazily; remember, he had a reputation to uphold in this respect."

"The murderer would not have done

anything so ludicrous on purpose, and he could not have done it by accident unless he were color blind. There's an amber bulb in Hewett's room and so the light added another confusing tint for the killer to cope with. He may be only partly aware of his affliction, or totally ignorant of it."

"Well, name him!" said Val Janson, impatiently.

Kettle leaned forward. "Mr. Watwood," he said, "the inspector is going to arrest you for the murder of Braxton Hewett!"

"Arrest me?" cried Watwood, rising.

KETTLE SMILED. "Please observe what has happened, gentlemen. We have been playing with Braxton Hewett's deck of cards—cards with pinkish-red backs with the common wheel design. At my suggestion, Mr. Lerian, the dealer, has slipped one *green-backed* card with wheel back design into the deck. Each of us has two cards before him: One face down, the hole card, and the other face up.

"The green-backed card was dealt to Mr. Watwood; it is lying directly in front of him, face down. But it is especially difficult, impossible, in fact, for a color blind person to distinguish between red and green—red-green blindness is the most common form of the malady.

"And so Mr. Watwood has not noticed that he was dealt a phony card for his hole card."

"But Doctor Kettle—" began Val Janson.

The doctor cut him short quickly, "Please let me do the talking. Or perhaps Mr. Watwood would like to say—"

Billy Watwood, whose bulging eyes were bulging wider than ever, exploded: "If that card lying in front of me face down is a green-backed card, may they cancel my booking and may my girl give me the air! And in addition," he roared, "I'll eat the dam—"

"All right," laughed Doctor Kettle, "you're excused, Mr. Watwood. May you continue to knock your audiences for loops and may your girl never lose you. I'm just a little playful, and I've used you to trick the real culprit. The green-backed card is lying in front of Mr. Miner and he is the murderer. Mr. Miner, we have you. You have permitted me to accuse Watwood when all the time—"

"I knew all the time the green-backed card was in front of me," interrupted Miner, aggressively. "I didn't say anything because when you asked me privately to play cards, you said that something strange might happen but that I was to affect not to notice it."

"Hm," mused Kettle, "then you can say truthfully that you were aware that a green-backed card was dealt to you from a red-backed deck?"

"I was, and am aware that my hole card is a green-backed card," declared Miner, emphatically.

"That's all, gentlemen," said Doctor Kettle.

Val Janson stirred uneasily in his chair. "I'm afraid, Miner," he said, "that you'll never wriggle out of it now. You see, the green-backed card is lying in front of me!"

THREE WAS a moment's terrible silence. Suddenly the table was thrust violently forward. Miner leaped to his feet and dashed through the door. But he had forgotten the patrolman whom Kettle had stationed in the hall for just this emergency.

Those in the sitting room heard the sounds of a brief, furious struggle. A few minutes later the handcuffed man was sobbing out his confession.

He told everything. Nine years previously, he had killed a man in St. Paul. He fled the country, going to Italy. Here he put on considerable weight and had a cast removed from his left eye. (This operation had nothing to do with his color blindness.) Returning to New York after six

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years, he changed his name from Valerius Leoni to Gene Miner. No one questioned his identity.

But on the previous evening, Hewett, who had seen him in St. Paul, recognized him. Hewett had threatened to betray him to the woman both men loved. Doctor Kettle had accurately described the technique of the killing; the crime had occurred at ten minutes past ten. Later he dropped the stolen jewels and his gun into a sewer and then went into the restaurant which Watwood regularly visited. He had a perfect alibi for eight-fourteen. Three men would have sworn that he was in the Altoona Theatre at that time. . . .

"I tested Lerian first," Doctor Kettle explained to Inspector Baldock. "You will recall that he picked out the green-backed card from the red-backed deck in Hewett's room. That narrowed the list to Watwood, Miner and Janson. I determined to accuse the guilty man under circumstances which would betray him not only to me but to everyone present. By having the green-backed card dealt to Janson, and then accusing Watwood of having it, I created a situation which could not fail to disclose the color blind person, whoever he was.

"I rubbed it in by first asking each man to try not to notice anything unusual which happened. I knew that despite this warning, no man with normal vision would be able to keep an impassive face when a green-backed card was dealt from a red-backed deck. Janson became so excited, he almost babbled the trick away—thereby proving his innocence; and Watwood had great difficulty in controlling himself. That put it up to Miner.

"And by the way: when a man commits a crime in the heat of passion, it is commonly said that he sees red. The next time you hear that phrase used in that sense, you tell them that you once arrested a murderer who couldn't see red!"

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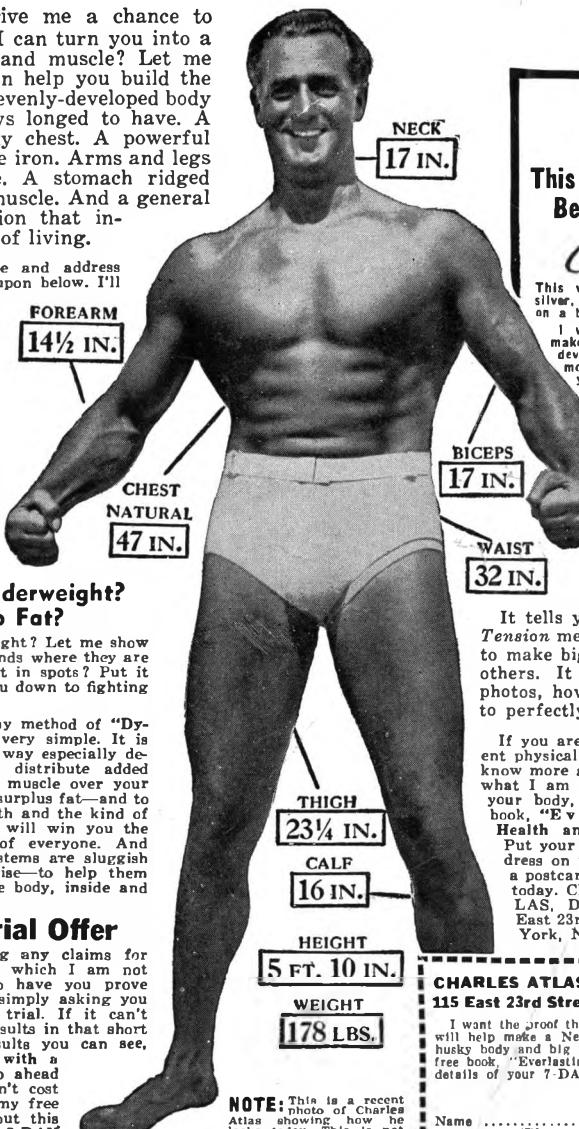
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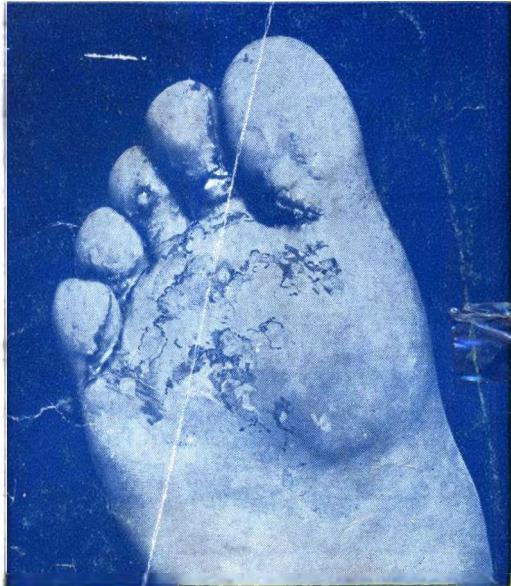
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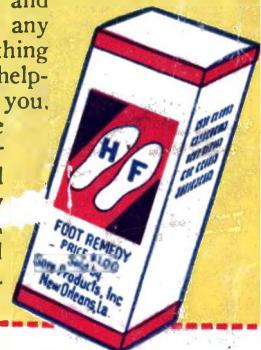
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As soon as you apply H. F. you should find that the itching is quickly relieved. You should paint the infected parts with H. F. night and morning until your feet are well. Usually this takes from three to ten days, although in severe cases be sure to consult a specialist.

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