

SEPTEMBER

DETECTIVE TALES



10¢

10¢ TWELVE STORIES!



SEPT.

# DETECTIVE TALES

12 STORIES

10 CENTS

A POWERFUL MYSTERY NOVELETTE  
by

DON JAMES

REUNION IN TERROR



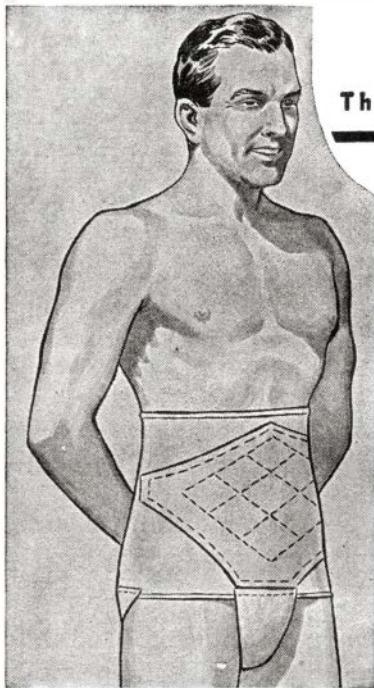
TWO GREAT CRIME-FIGHTERS RETURN  
IN TWO GREAT NOVELS--

**DOCTOR FLAME'S  
MURDER BLACK-OUT**  
by NORBERT DAVIS

**TOAST AND COFFINS**  
FOR FIRE MARSHAL BEN PEDLEY  
by STEWART STERLING

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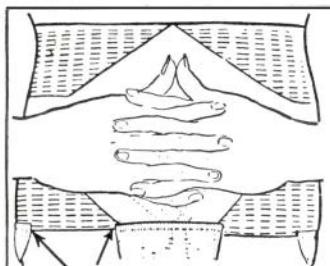
My waist measure..... My height is.....  
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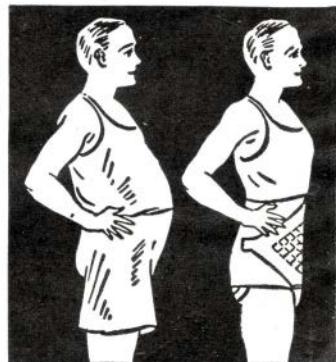
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**GOOD FOR BOTH 64 PAGE BOOK SAMPLE LESSON FREE**

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J. E. SMITH, President  
National Radio Institute, Dept. 2JS9  
Washington, D. C.



AMERICA'S MOST UNUSUAL DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

# DETECTIVE TALES

October Issue  
on sale August 26



VOL. TWENTY-TWO

SEPTEMBER, 1942

NUMBER TWO

### Two Great Detective Novels

1. <b>DOCTOR FLAME'S MURDER BLACK-OUT</b> . . . . .	<i>Norbert Davis</i>	10
Doctor Flame, slum medico by choice, was convinced that his girl patient was no paranoiac. Yet as he set forth to prove it, in a total blackout, he stumbled upon one corpse after another—each slain with the razor he found the girl clutching!		
2. <b>TOAST AND COFFINS</b> . . . . .	<i>Stewart Sterling</i>	80
To Fire Marshal Ben Pedley, this fire looked like the handiwork of a corpse-crazy fire-bug. Rossman's books had been juggled, his bookkeeper cooked alive; a certain middleman sold rabbit for squirrel—and at least one wholesaler was dyeing his skins in blood!		

### Two Strong, Distinctive Novelettes

3. <b>REUNION IN TERROR</b> . . . . .	<i>Don James</i>	48
The story of the priceless sacrifice Cora Cordiner accepted to save her husband's life—and of the fabulous come-back he made to cancel the devil's own bargain!		
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This is what happens when a jailbird, with the Underworld finger on him, goes to work in the first line of defense—an aircraft factory!		

### Four Dramatic Short Stories

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A man sometimes bequeaths to his benefactors not only his worldly goods, but something less negotiable—the fruits of his crimes on earth. . . .		
6. <b>EVOLUTION OF A HERO</b> . . . . .	<i>Henry Norton</i>	40
Never make a fool's promise. But if you do—as Johnny Carr did—back it with your life!		
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After the last curtain call, Death staged a private show.		

—And—

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Clues that pass in the night—almost!		

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!



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ager. S. W. N. knew nothing about bookkeeping. With 18 months of training he passed the C. P. A. examination on first attempt and opened his own public accounting office. Although a university graduate, P. M. was a grocery clerk at small wages. Today he is Secretary and Credit Manager with an income 300 per cent higher. Already in cost work, G. N. P. within nine months was earning 40% more; within two years, 100% more. The third year his income went up still more. Now he is manager.

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<input type="checkbox"/> C. P. A. Coaching	<input type="checkbox"/> Commercial Law	<input type="checkbox"/> Correspondence
<input type="checkbox"/> Traffic Management	<input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Management	<input type="checkbox"/> Stenotypy
		<input type="checkbox"/> Modern Salesmanship



Name..... Age.....

Present Position.....

Address..... City and State.....

# THE CRIME CLINIC

**A**NY ARTIST, be he working with words or with oil paints, must know his subject. Our authors, who deal in human behavior and human values, study the race of Man. Frederick C. Davis, like any good author, is interested in people. He has the imagination to wonder how certain officials in public life would behave in certain circumstances of an unusual and critical nature. You all remember his recent novel entitled "Meet the Executioner," which appeared in *Detective Tales*—the story of a man employed to pull the switch in the state's death chamber, and whose fiancée sat in that dreaded seat. Next month we are publishing Mr. Davis' latest crime novel, entitled **NO APPEAL FOR THE DEAD!** The hero is the District Attorney, and it is doubtful if ever a D.A. found himself in the predicament of James Dexter. We'll let Mr. Davis give you a short preview of the yarn told through the lips of the narrator, Jimmy Dexter's assistant:

I know how a man looks when he's deliberately wrecking his whole world in a single smashing stroke. District Attorney James Dexter looked like that on a sweltering summer afternoon while painstakingly dictating an unusual document called "a confession of error"—though actually, in his case, it was an instrument of professional and political suicide. He raised his hand over the paper, the pen ready. The thing was pure dynamite.

Suddenly I leaned over him, gripped his wrist. I couldn't permit him to do this to himself.

"For God's sake, Jim, wait a minute! Do you really realize what a terrific squawk's going to be raised over this? The whole state will howl to high heaven. The *Star* will scream its head off, tear into you tooth and claw until you've lost every scrap of your scalp.

Just consider one more minute before you sign—and tell yourself it absolutely means your finish."

"I know, Mike."

"No law office within smelling distance of this town will ever take you in," I told him. "Going it alone, you'll never see a client walk in your door. You may even be disbarred. Then what'll become of that big expensive home of yours? How'll you feel when your fine friends start crossing the street when they see you coming? You don't expect a pampered, ambitious woman like Lydia to stick with you, do you, while you toboggan all the way down in disgrace and poverty?"

I could talk to him like that.

Jim Dexter deserved to have every good fortune the bright future promised. In my estimation—and mobs of voters enthusiastically agreed with me—he was the man of the year, this year, next year and every year to come.

I tried again to dissuade him, this time desperately. I cajoled. I threatened to get tough. I begged. Finally I ended with:

"You'll tear your life right up by the roots if you submit this confession of error, Jim!"

"There's nothing else I can conscientiously do," Jim Dexter said quietly. His smile was still there, tight and twisted. "Thanks for worrying about me, Mike, but you damned well know I'm doing this with my eyes wide open and doing it gladly—in spite of the cost . . ."

In what predicament has author Frederick C. Davis placed Jim Dexter?—a situation so urgent and essential to Jim that he is about to toss away his career—and maybe his life—with the simple flick of pen across this document? Here is Mr. Davis at his best! **NO APPEAL FOR THE DEAD!** will appear in *Detective Tales* for September—published August 26th!

THE EDITORS.

---

**BEND EVERY EFFORT TO BUYING WAR BONDS!**

# The 97 Pound Weakling

—Who became “The World’s Most Perfectly Developed Man”

“I’ll prove that YOU, too, can be a NEW MAN!”

*Charles Atlas*

I KNOW, myself, what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn’t know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs.! I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only HALF-ALIVE.

Then I discovered “Dynamic Tension.” It gave me a body that won for me the title “World’s Most Perfectly Developed Man.”

When I say I can make you over into a man of giant power and energy, I know what I’m talking about. I’ve seen my new system, “Dynamic Tension,” transform hundreds of weak, puny men into Atlas Champions.

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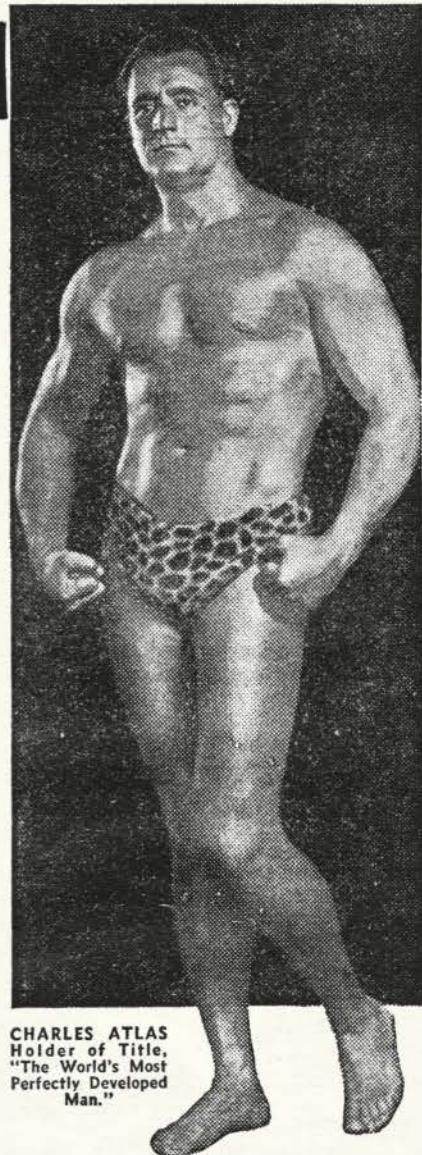
Do you want big, broad shoulders—a fine, powerful chest—biceps like steel—arms and legs rippling with muscular strength—a stomach ridged with bands of sinewy muscle—and a build you can be proud of? Then just give me the opportunity to prove that “Dynamic Tension” is what you need.

No “ifs,” “ands,” or “maybes.” Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, helpless? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details about “Dynamic Tension” and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

“Dynamic Tension” is an entirely NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it’s actually fun! “Dynamic Tension” does the work.

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# WHEN GANGDOM RULED

•AN ILLUSTRATED CHRONICLE OF THE TURBULENT TWENTIES• by WINDAS



WINDAS  
1947

## MICHAEL CARROZZO.

Mike Carrozzo learned his trade the hard way, starting his life of crime as a "slugger" for that Viceroy of Vice "Big Jim" Colosimo of Chicago. But Mike was ambitious and industrious so that in no time at all we find him serving as a bodyguard for the Overlord of the Underworld, Al Capone. Working on the theory that you can't keep a good badman down, Mike then set up in business for himself, and soon rose to the dizzy heights of Chicago Chiseler No. 1, Public Enemy de luxe.



Carrozzo had a faculty for dodging the rap which amounted to genius. Nobody could actually pin anything on Mike. Arrested for the murder of Mossy Enright, labor boss, who was slain by a sawed-off shotgun, Mike claimed it was a 'police frame-up' when the officers produced his own recently discharged scattergun as evidence. He got off. Even when a rival racketeer, Tim Murphy, was found full of slugs on his front lawn, and Mike was nabbed leaving the scene in a curtained sedan, he shrugged it off as a "coincidence" to the satisfaction of the Court, and was released "for lack of sufficient evidence."



Not that Mike confined all his efforts to labor rackets and murder exclusively. Mike was versatile. He pulled a train robbery that would have made Sam Bass turn green with envy, for it netted 320 grand and was staged right at the Dearborn Street depot. Once again Mike went free, for a poor half-wit "confessed" to the crime. Police still wonder how much of the loot Mike paid out for that "confession." Carrozzo next turned his talents to Uncle Sam's mails, and while no statistician has ever figured out how much these exploits boosted Mike's bank balance, it is a fact that along about this time U.S. Marines were put on mail-train guard duty.



And still Mike remained at large, piling up crime after crime, racket after racket; until at the age of 45, Death beckoned.... and Mike couldn't alibi to the Grim Reaper. He had a 20 grand funeral but only a fake preacher, because no clergymen of any Church would touch his dirty money to bury him. So, for the love o' Mike, a gangster dressed in cleric's clothes officiated at the grave, and thus passed into Oblivion one of the most brutal, treacherous and tricky of Chicago's ill-famed banditti.

# WORLD'S LARGEST DENTAL PLATE MAKERS

## FALSE TEETH



### MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE

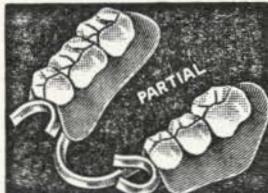
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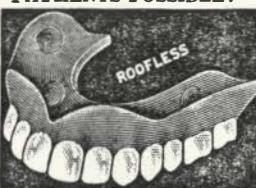
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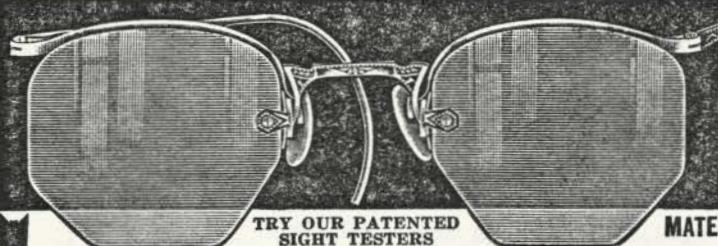
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# DOCTOR FLAME'S

"Maybe his neck is broke,"  
said Klogatz. "We can always  
hope," said O'Phelan.

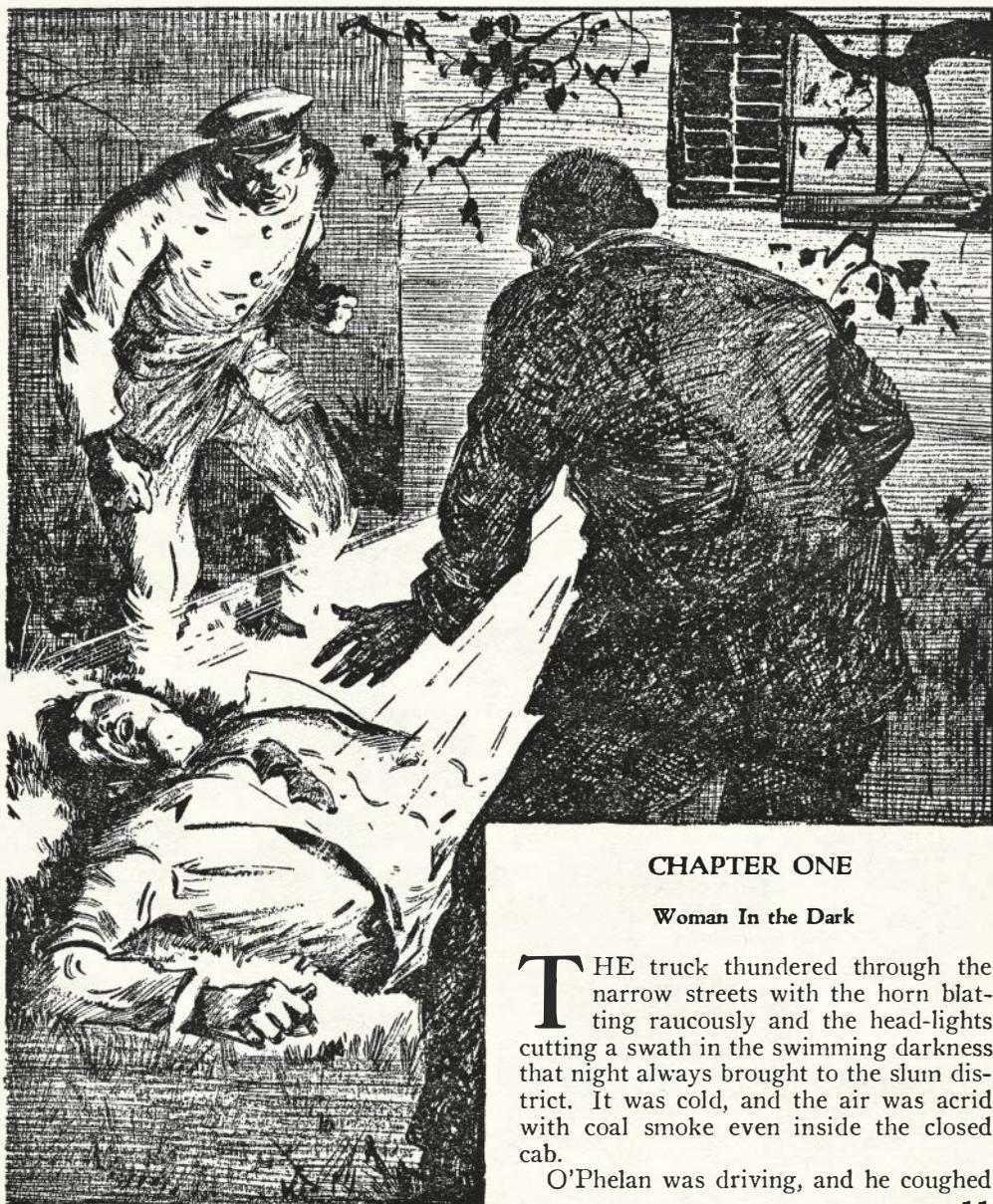


*A favorite character comes  
back by request in this grip-  
ping novel by*

**NORBERT  
DAVIS**



# MURDER BLACK-OUT



## CHAPTER ONE

### **Woman In the Dark**

THE truck thundered through the narrow streets with the horn blating raucously and the head-lights cutting a swath in the swimming darkness that night always brought to the slum district. It was cold, and the air was acrid with coal smoke even inside the closed cab.

O'Phelan was driving, and he coughed

thirstily now, shivering. He was a little man, fox-faced, with a long nose that wiggled inquisitively. He was bundled up in a sheep-skin jacket, and he wore a red stocking cap and a red muffler.

"Klogatz, my friend," he said. "It's a night to chill the bones of a baboon, and I'm thinking it's a beer we need before we start out rattling people's garbage cans. Now if we'd just pause for a second or two at the *Green Clover* over on Decker Street—"

"No beer," said Klogatz. He sat solid and squat, thick arms folded across the barrel of his chest.

O'Phelan struck the steering wheel with his mittenred fist. "Ah, the pity of it! The sin of it, that a scholar like me must ride through the night with nothing for company but a Polish lump of lead with mud for a brain!"

"Look out!" Klogatz shouted.

O'Phelan grabbed the steering wheel with both hands again and twisted it frantically. Klogatz reached down and seized the emergency brake.

One of the front wheels bucked against the low curb and up over it, and the dual rear tires locked and screamed as they slid over the rough paving. The truck rocked to a stop.

O'Phelan knocked up the door catch with his elbow and was out on the sidewalk like a flash. He darted ahead and caught the arm of the dark figure that stood frozen three steps out from the curb.

"So!" he snarled. "You'd run out in the middle of the street in the dark, would you? And with no warning at all. You'd be looking to get a damage suit against the city, eh?"

The head-lights were twisted sideways now, and the woman was out of their direct beams. She was short and thick-set, middle-aged, shabby in a long black coat that had seen better days. Her hat was shapeless, and it looked as though it had been hastily slapped on her head. She was breathing in sobbing broken gasps that shook her whole body.

"Let me go! Let me go!"

"I saved your life," said O'Phelan crossly. "If you know or if you care. What ails you that you should go jumping at trucks in the dark?"

The woman's face was a stiff white

mask. She twisted against O'Phelan's grip.

"She is scared," said Klogatz. "Let her go."

O'Phelan turned on him. "Who asked you—"

The woman jerked frantically and got away from O'Phelan. She whirled and half-fell, and her voice made a whimpering wordless sound in the darkness. Then she caught herself and ran desperately up the street. The hurried, irregular tap of her foot-steps echoed and then was gone.

"Drunk," said O'Phelan. "Or maybe crazy."

"She is scared," said Klogatz.

"Have it your own way, then, lumpskull!" O'Phelan snarled. "And what do you think I am? Me, with my heart in my throat and my stomach tied in a bow-knot?"

"No beer," said Klogatz.

"Oh, so you think I'd stoop to play on your sympathy, do you?" O'Phelan raged. "You think I'd beg you for a small glass to soothe my nerves when they're ready to hop out of my head and—"

A MAN loomed up suddenly in the flare of the head-lights. He was tall and thin, with a sharply white face. The frozen moisture of his breath plumed out raggedly in front of him.

"See a woman run past here?" he asked shortly.

"Did I?" O'Phelan said. "I did. And if I hadn't she'd be spattered on the pavement like a broken egg."

"Which way'd she go?"

"Wait," said Klogatz. "Who is it that asks?"

"Yeah," said O'Phelan. "Who are you to be chasing her through the streets?"

The tall man dropped his hand into his overcoat pocket. "Mind your business. Which way'd she go?"

"As to that," O'Phelan answered blandly, "I disremember."

The tall man's hand came far enough out of his pocket to reveal the gleam of metal. "You'd better remember again, or you'll wish—"

"Troop," said a voice. "Stop that."

The newcomer was back in the shadows, bulking fat and enormous, his face a pale shapeless circle. He moved away as they

turned to look, and the light reflected slickly from his patent leather shoes.

The tall man said: "These guys saw—" "I said stop it. Come along."

"Yes, sir," said the tall man.

He threw a dark look at O'Phelan and Klogatz and walked quickly after the fat man. O'Phelan and Klogatz stood watching them. Just before they reached the intersection, a long shiny sedan slid into sight and paused. The fat man and the tall man got in, and a door closed with a solidly luxurious thump. The sedan disappeared.

"That fat one," said Klogatz. "That is a bad one."

"The tall one is bad enough for me," O'Phelan answered. "That was a gun he

"Just a bit of an argument," O'Phelan said.

"He does not pay attention when he drives," Klogatz added in his stolid, measured tone.

"That's a filthy lie!" O'Phelan yelled. "I'd smash you flat, you Polish ape, if the good doctor wouldn't have to waste his time patching up your good-for-nothing hide again!"

Flame said: "Speaking of patching, I have been meaning to have a look at your arm, Klogatz. But it's too dark here in the street . . ."

"Sh!" O'Phelan exclaimed triumphantly. "I know the very place, Doctor! Just step right in the truck, and we'll be there in the wink of an eye!"

*Doctor Flame, who spent his life serving the destitute, expected hardship. But he had never followed a corpse-strewn trail, in the midst of a city-wide black-out, to a young girl patient clutching a crimson razor!*

had in his pocket. I wonder why they're chasing that poor woman."

"It is not our business," said Klogatz. "We work."

"You mean—right now?" O'Phelan asked weakly. "After I almost ran over a woman and got my life threatened all in the whisk of a minute? Oh, I ought to sit down somewhere and compose myself—"

"No beer," said Klogatz.

"Did I ask for a beer?" O'Phelan shouted.

"Be quiet," Klogatz ordered. "Someone else comes."

O'Phelan looked around. "Eh? Ah, it's Doctor Flame! Doctor! Ho, Doctor!"

Doctor Flame stopped short, peering with one hand raised to shield his eyes from the head-lights. "Who is it?" He was a slight and shabby figure, long overcoat dragging carelessly to his heels, battered old hat pulled low over his forehead. He carried his bulging medical satchel in his right hand.

"O'Phelan and Klogatz, Doctor. And it's a mean, cold night to be out, eh?"

Flame came closer. "I heard some shouting. Was there any trouble?"

THE truck shuddered as O'Phelan threw it into reverse and backed off the curb. O'Phelan straightened it around, and it rumbled on up the street.

Klogatz, standing on the running board, hammered on the window and shouted, "Where are we going?"

"Right here," O'Phelan answered, and swung in against the curb in front of a bleary green neon sign that spelled the words *Green Clover Cafe*. He got out of the truck and batted through the doors of the place like a bandmaster leading a parade. "One side, please! Make room for Doctor Flame!"

Flame and Klogatz followed him, and Flame nodded to the man behind the bar.

"Good evening, Rogan. May I use your place for an examining room for a moment?"

Rogan was a sawed-off little man with a cheerfully battered grin. "To be sure, Doctor!"

"Take off your coat and shirt, Klogatz," Flame said.

The cafe was small and square, unadorned with any furniture except the bar and a line of battered chairs against the

wall. Smoke billowed in blue shifting layers against the low ceiling. Men were crowded thick in front of the bar—mill workers with tired faces.

They shoved back now, making room, mumbling quick greetings to Doctor Flame, some of them in foreign tongues. They all knew him. He might ride on a garbage truck and examine his patients in a slum saloon, but his wishes were obeyed instantly because these men knew him.

This shabby little man with the ugly, tense face and the fiercely burning eyes was Doctor Edward Carl Flame, who could string a half-dozen degrees in advanced medical theory after his name. He practiced in the slums not because he had to, but because he wanted to. Because he hated suffering and sickness.

He lived on fees that would have been scorned by the elegant specialists up-town. He didn't mind. He had found people here who needed him and trusted him.

The slum people never understood him—never tried. They only knew that Flame helped them as no other man ever had. In return they gave him a savage, clannish loyalty that went far beyond words.

O'PHELAN helped Klogatz out of his fleece-lined jacket and his pull-over sweater and heavy flannel shirt and peeled the top of his woolen underwear off his thick shoulders. Klogatz's torso was an enormous, muscled wedge. A jagged red scar ran from the top of one shoulder, down in a semi-circle following the line of his shoulder blade, and ended on his right side under his arm. Flame began to probe gently on either side of the scar.

O'Phelan looked around confidentially at the tensely interested faces of the onlookers. "Ah, you should have seen Klogatz the day that happened! We were picking up cans over on Delancy Street when some drunken skalpeen drove his car into the side of the truck and tipped it over on Klogatz before he could jump clear. Smashed him like a bug! And that little tit-mouse of a doctor on the ambulance took one look at him and says his arm will have to come off!"

"Raise your arm," Flame said to Klogatz.

"But it didn't come off!" said O'Phelan. "There you see it, stickin' up like a red-wood log! And why? Because I ran yellin' through the streets and found Doctor Flame! I brought him to that bloody receiving hospital. And there I sat, sick as a dog, while Doctor Flame carved Klogatz up like a side of beef and put him back together again! I swear it's true!"

Flame straightened up. "It's coming fine, Klogatz. If it bothers any, come and see me."

"I thank you, Doctor," said Klogatz. "I do not forget this—never."

"Can we give you a lift to where you're goin'?" O'Phelan asked.

"No, it's just a block. I'm going over to Rizzio's to take the cast off his boy's arm. Thanks, Rogan."

"'Tis nothing," said Rogan. "Will you have a short drink to keep out the cold, Doctor?"

"Not now, thanks." Flame went out into the night.

"But I will," said O'Phelan, "since you're so kind as to mention it, Rogan."

Klogatz was putting on his coat. He reached out one thick arm, caught the tail of O'Phelan's sheep-skin jacket and jerked him away from the bar.

"No drinks."

"What!" O'Phelan squalled furiously. "You dirty Polish lump of lead! You'd dare refuse me after I helped Doctor Flame examine you, and me with the worry for your health dinging in my brain like a fire gong?"

"No beer," said Klogatz, heading for the door and dragging O'Phelan behind him.

## CHAPTER TWO

### She Left a Corpse

IT WAS almost two hours later that Flame came around the corner and walked down the block toward the dingy building where he lived and had his office. Removing the cast from the Rizzio boy's arm had been a simple enough task but Papa Rizzio had complicated it.

The fracture had been a bad one, compound, acquired when the Rizzio boy had

tried to hop a truck and missed, and all the time it had been in a cast Papa Rizzio had been terrified with fear lest the arm never be right again. When Flame had demonstrated tonight that it was just as good as ever, Papa Rizzio had forced Flame to sit and drink tall glasses of red wine while twelve Rizzios expressed worshipful gratitude.

The street on which Flame lived was never well lighted, but a black-out warning had come while he was still at Rizzio's and now it was pitch-dark. A siren made a thin eery keen in the distance.

Flame's hurried foot-steps echoed emptily until he stopped at the bottom of his front stairs, wondering if there were any calls he had forgotten.

Standing there, he had the uneasy sensation that there was someone close to him. He turned his head quickly each way. Nothing moved in the darkness, and there was no sound except the faint stir of paper rubbish in the gutter. He shrugged and started up the steps.

A voice whispered hoarsely: "Wait. Please...."

Flame turned around. "What?" "Wait, please. Are you—Doctor Flame?"

Flame stared into the darkness under the steps. "Yes. Who are you?"

The shadows moved a little. "Can I see you—for a minute, please?"

"Certainly," Flame answered. "But not here. Come on inside."

"I don't want—nobody to see. . . ."

"Nobody will see you," Flame said. "Come along."

He opened the wide front door and went into the warm antiseptic-smelling waiting room. The steps creaked outside, and then a woman slipped through the door and shut it quickly.

Flame ran his fingers lightly around the window to make sure the black-out curtains were tight and then snapped on the drop-light over the big center table.

His woman visitor was middle-aged and stocky, and she wore a long black coat that fitted her badly. It looked like a hand-me-down and her hat did, too. Her heavy-jawed face was blue with cold, and she was shivering.

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Flame opened the medicine cabinet and poured a jigger of brandy.

"Drink this," he ordered. "Why did you wait out in the cold, especially when there's an air raid warning on? This office is never locked."

The woman's teeth chattered on the rim of the glass. "I didn't want nobody to see. . . ." She drank the brandy and coughed.

Flame pointed to a chair. "Sit down."

**T**HE brandy brought a little flush of warmth to the woman's cheek. "I ain't going to tell you my name."

"I don't care what your name is," said Flame. "Why did you want to see me?"

"It ain't for me. It—it's a friend."

"Well, where is the friend?"

The woman's throat muscles moved as she swallowed. "Do you know anything about people's brains? About people that are—crazy?"

"A little," said Flame.

"Do you know what it is when a person thinks other people are after her, trying to hurt her all the time?"

"It might be several things," Flame said, watching her narrowly. "It could be paranoia."

"Yes!" said the woman, nodding in relief. "That's it. That's what they say. Could you tell if a person had that?"

"Probably," said Flame. "But not without seeing the person."

The woman leaned forward tensely. "Would you go with me—not knowin' me or anything—and see a person like that?"

"Can't you bring the person here?" Flame asked.

She shook her head quickly and desperately. "No! They're tryin' to find her and take her back, and her so young and pretty and scared. They nearly caught me—"

"They?" Flame repeated. "Who are they?"

She shook her head mutely. "I can't tell you. People—ones that live around here—told me you was a smart doctor and a kind one and that you wasn't afraid of nobody. Will you go with me?"

"Surely," said Flame.

"Even if—if someone was to try to stop you?"

Flame picked up his coat. "We'll worry

about that when it happens," he answered.

"Wait," said the woman. "Just one thing I want to ask first. If people were really tryin' to persecute this person, then she wouldn't be crazy because she thought that, would she?"

Flame said: "Certainly not."

"I knew," the woman whispered. "I knew it. She's not crazy at all. They're makin' it up!"

"Better wait until I see her," Flame advised. "Shall we go?"

"If we could go out the back way. . . . They was watchin' for me awhile ago. . . ."

"Let them watch," said Flame. "If they try to stop me when I'm on my way to a patient, they'll wish they hadn't, whoever they are."

"No!" the woman begged breathlessly. "You don't know what . . . Please! The back way!"

Flame shrugged. "All right. Follow me."

+ + +

**T**HERE are degrees of degradation even in the slums, and the blocks back of Trailer Street touched the bottom. The buildings were age-warped monstrosities and the streets were always slick from water that crept up like a sluggish animal behind the mills. Fog moved in snaky tentacles close over the sagging roofs.

The very air was chill with a nameless life of its own and Doctor Flame, hurrying along behind the woman, felt a deep stirring pity for the miserable people who lived here.

"Wait," said the woman.

Flame couldn't see her in the gloom, but he could hear the labored rasp of her breathing. He sensed that she was listening with a terrible intensity.

"There's no one here," he said.

They crossed the black street and entered a narrow passageway that seemed to open up mysteriously. Flame felt the close press of walls on either side, and he stumbled in a puddle that sloshed icy water over his shoes.

"Here," said the woman.

A key clinked in a lock, and hinges creaked.

"It's a little hall," the woman explained.

She tugged at Flame's sleeve, and he stepped up and inside. It was scarcely warmer here than outside and almost as dark, but there was a slit of light showing under a door.

"It's Bessie," the woman called in a low voice. "I'm back with the doctor. Don't be afraid, dear."

A key clinked again. The door swung back slowly. The woman screamed, crazily.

The room was brightly lighted, and a wood stove gleamed warm against one wall. There were two straight chairs and a sagging table, and an iron cot in the corner.

A man was lying half-under the cot, his skinny legs twisted grotesquely. Blood showed on the front of his gray flannel shirt. He was an elderly man with scanty white hair, and his mouth was open.

Flame started forward, and in the same second he sensed movement in the hall behind him. Before he could check turn, he was struck hard in the middle of the back, and shoved.

He stumbled into the little room. The woman started to scream once more, and the sound was clipped off in mid-note.

Flame caught himself and whirled around. He was just in time to catch a glimpse of a tall man with a sharp face. The tall man had his arm around the woman, holding her, pulling her backward, and his gloved left hand covered her mouth. Her eyes bulged in terror.

Before Flame could move the door slammed in his face, the lock clicked. A voice gave some quick order in the hall, and the outer door banged shut.

It was characteristic of Flame not to shout useless pleas or threats or pound on the door. He stood rigid for a second, breathing hard, listening. Then he turned and dropped on one knee beside the body.

There was no need for a doctor here. The gash across the man's skinny throat had sliced deep. The man had died quickly.

**F**LAME stood up and strode over to the one window, pulled away the ragged blanket that served as a black-out curtain. The sash was nailed shut and there were heavy boards behind the glass.

He looked at the rest of the room. It was pitifully barren of all personal touches. It had none of the small things that even the poorest people carry with them to make a semblance of home. A tall box at one side served for a clothes closet, and there was nothing in it but one soiled uniform-like dress made of stiff-starched blue cloth.

He went back to the door and listened with his ear against the panel. There was no sound from outside. He opened his satchel, took out a small scalpel and a pair of thin-necked forceps.

Very gently he pushed the forceps into the key-hole. As he had thought, his captors hadn't taken the time to remove the key. He caught its nub deftly with the forceps and turned it. The lock clicked softly.

He dropped the forceps in his pocket and stepped back, holding the scalpel, ready to slash anyone who opened the door. No one did.

After a moment, Flame opened it. The hall was empty. He picked up his bag and went into the dark alley.

He still held the scalpel as he stood for a full minute on the soggy door-step listening.

Dropping the scalpel carelessly into his pocket, he found a match and struck it. The yellow light made shadows dance in jittering malignance.

Flame leaned down, shading the match. The mud in front of the step was smeared by many feet. Still stooping, Flame moved along the passage-way.

He found what he was seeking then. Small foot-prints that would have fitted easily on the palm of his hand. They didn't belong to the woman who had brought him here, or to any man. They had been made by small high heels and a wedge-shaped sole.

Flame straightened up and blew out the match. He was tense standing there in the darkness, uneasy with a chill of foreboding. The woman who had brought him here hadn't lied. There had been a girl waiting—a girl who was thought to be mad and who had gone away leaving death behind her. Flame didn't yet understand the other things that had happened, but he understood madness, and he knew its danger.

## CHAPTER THREE

## Mad Girl at Large

**F**LAME was back in his own neighborhood. He had come up Trailer Street and across Delancy past the now blacked-out *Green Clover*. He turned into the street where he lived. There was nothing moving in the darkness, save for Flame, until a voice shouted at him shrilly:

"Hi, there—Doctor Flame! Wait!"

Running foot-steps made a quick *thud-thud-thud* on the pavement, and a small bundled figure bobbed across the street and pulled to a stop in front of him.

"Hi! I was waitin' for you."

He was a boy ten or eleven years in plaid macinaw and knitted cap.

"You shouldn't be out during a black-out," Flame said. "What's your name?"

"I was just goin' home from deliverin' my papers. I'm Harry Harkness. My dad runs the Fourth Avenue Precinct Club. You know him—ward captain for this district."

"Oh, yes," said Flame. "Limey Harkness."

"His real name is John," the boy said quickly. "They just call him Limey 'cause he was born in London."

Flame said, "What can I do for you, Harry?"

"There's a crazy dame wants to see you."

"What?"

Harry Harkness stamped his feet. "Gee, it's cold. I told her to wait in your office. I told her you never locked the door. But she's crazy. She gave me a dollar to watch for you."

"What do you mean, crazy?"

"Oh, you know, like all dames. Bawlin' and takin' on. Dames make me sick."

"Where is she?" Flame asked.

"Waitin' in that little alley that goes back to old Moe's junk-yard. I told her that was a dumb place to wait, but dame's are nuts."

"Take me to her!" Flame ordered.

Harry Harkness led the way down the block and around the corner.

"Right over there," he said.

The alley-mouth was a pit-black square bordered by the buildings. Flame slowed to a casual walk.

"I don't see anyone," he said.

"I don't neither," Harry Harkness admitted. "She's probably hidin'." He cupped his hands and shouted. "Hey! Hey, you! Here's Doctor Flame!"

The wind whisked his words away, and there was no answer, no stir of life from the alley. Harry Harkness plunged into it unhesitatingly.

"Hey! Where are you, dopey?"

Flame went after him. "Wait, Harry! Come back here!"

Harry's voice came out of the darkness. "She ain't here at all. She paid me to watch for you and then she beats it! Ain't that like a dame?"

He blundered back toward Flame, who caught him by one arm and steered him out into the lesser darkness of the street.

"Are you sure she's not there?" he asked.

"Yup," said Harry. "There ain't no place to hide in there. I felt all around."

"Could she go out the other end?"

"Nope. Old Moe's got a gate there. He keeps it locked. It's got barbed wire on it. I can't climb it, so no dame could."

Blue head-lights turned the corner above, and a car slid down the street. It flowed past them, and then suddenly halted.

"Gee!" said Harry Harkness. "Cops!"

**T**HE car was a new gray sedan, with police insignia painted on the doors. It backed rapidly until it was even with Doctor Flame and Harry. A man opened the door and slid out from under the wheel.

"Gee!" Harry Harkness repeated. "It's that old sour-puss, Inspector Conniston!"

Conniston was a tall man, erect and square-shouldered. His eyes were a cynical blue. He was wearing a dark tailored top-coat and a dark hat.

"I want to see you, Flame," he said in his clipped speech. "I was on my way to your office."

"I want to see you, too," said Flame.

"Yes," said Conniston. "I can imagine. Were you down on the Flats back of Trailer Street about a half-hour ago? Don't lie—"

"I was there."

"Damn you, Flame," Conniston said irritably. "You can get into more trouble

than any other six people I know. Don't you have any regard for your friends? Don't I have enough worry keeping this lousy district in line without you going around stirring things up?"

"You'll manage," Flame said, smiling.

"No thanks to you," Conniston snapped. "I'll be damned if I can understand why you ever came to this rat-hole, but I'm tired of arguing about that."

"Have you heard any news?"

"No. The police are still on precautionary status. What were you doing down in Feegan's Lane?"

"How did you know I was there?" Flame asked curiously.

Conniston made a stiff gesture. "Some stool-pigeon said Doctor Flame was locked in a room with a murdered man. We found the corpse, all right, but not you."

"Who was the victim?"

"Name of Simpson. A bum. He lived up-stairs over the room where he was found. He was sort of the agent for that tenement. He had a record as a drunk, but he'd never been pinched for anything more serious than that. What do you know about him?"

"Not as much as I'd like to," Flame answered. "I really did want to see you. I was on my to my office to call you. I wanted to talk to you before you did anything. But since then there's been a new development. Harry tells me that—where did he go?"

Conniston said, "The kid? Oh, he ran off like a rabbit when he spotted me. All the kids in this district do that. You'd think I had small-pox. What is this one's name?"

"Harry Harkness. His father is Limey Harkness."

"That slick little blabber-mouth. I'd like to put him where he belongs, and one of these days I will."

"I've always heard he was reasonably honest."

"He's a politician," Conniston said flatly. "All politicians are lice."

Flame chuckled. "You hate almost everybody, don't you?"

"Yes," said Conniston. "And so would you if you were a cop. Now tell me about Simpson."

Flame explained about the woman who

had come to see him; about her friend who was supposed to be insane, and about his trip to the Flats.

CONNISTON listened. "So," he said quietly. "A nice dish you've cooked up. A homicidal maniac loose. If that gets out it'll set this place off like a time bomb."

"Homicidal mania is a much rarer form of insanity than people think," Flame said.

"Not rare enough for me. I can figure out what happened easily enough, even if you can't. This dippy dame escaped from wherever she was locked up and got this other dame—the one called Bessie—to hide her. Old Simpson got to prowling around to see what was going on, and the crazy one slit his throat. And she's still loose with what-ever she used."

"A razor, I think," Flame observed.

"That's dandy. Why didn't you stay down in the Flats? Or phone me right away?"

"I wanted to talk to you personally first. I didn't want you to throw out a drag net for this girl."

Conniston stared at him. "Why not?"

Flame frowned absently. "I haven't seen the girl. I was guessing from the barest sort of description of her symptoms, but paranoia is a most dangerous mental disease. Paranoiacs see the devil's face everywhere they look. Everyone seems to be threatening them. If this girl has such tendencies, the police will drive her completely mad. The results might be worse than you think. She might slash at anyone she sees."

Conniston swallowed. "You mean she might run amok?"

"Something like that."

Conniston cursed to himself. "And I have to look for her during a sample black-out that's liable to turn real any'minute!"

Flame said: "I think you were right about one thing. She was locked up somewhere and escaped. Someone was looking for her—someone Bessie feared. Find out where she was locked up and who she is. If she is a paranoiac, she must have been under the care of a doctor. Find him."

"How?" Conniston demanded.

Flame shrugged. "I don't know."

"That helps," said Conniston. He stood

still, chewing on his upper lip. "All right. But if I don't turn something up soon, I'm going to throw a drag-net around this whole district—black-out or not—and search it from rat-hole to rat-hole!"

He got in his car and slammed the door.



**T**HE instant that Flame entered his office, he knew that at least a part of his quest was ended. The girl was there. The office was dark. He could not see her, but he could feel her presence. She was watching him, like a cornered animal, with a horrible strained intensity.

Flame moved carefully. He made no attempt to turn on the light. He shut the door behind him and leaned against it. She was on the far side of the center table. A floor board creaked there.

Flame said quietly: "Would you rather we'd talk in the dark?"

He could hear her breathing—quick shallow gasps that filled the darkness with terror. He waited patiently, not moving, and then her voice came in a hoarse whisper:

"If you try to keep me here, I'll kill you."

"I don't blame you," said Flame.

"I can do it. I've got a razor."

"Yes," said Flame gently. "Keep it in your hand. Then if I come near you, you can kill me."

Her breathing quieted. Flame could see her vaguely now—a dark shadow beyond the table.

"Everyone—even that little boy—said you could be trusted. Will you promise to let me go when I want to?"

"I promise," said Flame.

"Turn on the light."

Flame flipped the switch, and they were looking at each other. She was very small, and her face was a white oval with small perfect features that were haggard. Her eyes were a luminous black. She was wearing a black tailored coat, and a blue scarf around her hair.

"Hello," said Flame, smiling.

She moved her right hand, and the long blade of a razor shimmered. "Stay where you are."

"I will," said Flame.

She relaxed some. "Will you help me?"

"Yes," said Flame.

"Will you give me some money?"

"You're welcome to what I have. It's in my wallet in my inside coat pocket. Can I take it out?"

She leaned forward. "Yes."

Flame took out his battered wallet. He found three crumpled bills in it—Papa Rizzio's contribution from the family sugar bowl. A five and two ones. He put them on the table carefully and stepped back.

The girl swept them up in her left hand. "I'll pay you sometime. I have to have it now to get out of this district before the black-out lifts. I can't hide here. Everyone stares at me and watches me—everyone I meet."

"Of course," said Flame.

Her eyes gleamed. "Why? Why should they?"

**F**LAME looked surprised. "Your clothes. That coat must have cost a hundred and fifty dollars and the scarf twenty-five. People don't see things like that down here."

"Oh," said the girl. "I didn't realize. That is true, isn't it?" Her face tightened. "I've got to go. They'll find me."

"It is dangerous," Flame agreed in a worried tone. "You'd better go now."

"You—you're really going to let me go?"

"Why, yes," Flame said. "Use that side door back of you. No one will see you from the street."

"Can I come back later?"

"Oh, no," Flame said quickly. "They might see you. You find a safe place to hide and then call me. I'll come to you."

"Thank you," the girl said breathlessly.

She slid out the side door like a wraith, never taking her eyes from him until the door closed. Flame stood listening for a moment and then sighed deeply. He took off his broad-brimmed hat. There was a sheen of perspiration on his bulging forehead.

He had just made a decision no lesser man would have faced for a second. He had used his judgment in a gamble that made him shiver. If he lost, he would have to pay the reckoning. It would be a terrible one.

Behind him the door-bell split the silence with a sudden shrill clamor. He opened the door, expecting to see almost anything in the world except the dandified little man who faced him, standing erect with his carefully brushed derby canted over one arm and his slick blond hair gleaming.

"Good evening, Doctor," said the little man in a faintly English voice. "It's Limey Harkness, at your service. I've a specimen here that I think might interest you."

"Someone sick?"

"He isn't—yet," said Limey Harkness. He turned his head. "Bring him up."

Feet scuffed on the stairs. Somebody grunted heavily and someone else whimpered a little. Limey Harkness stepped neatly aside, and a man stumbled into the room and fell into the wall.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Doctor of Damnation

FLAME caught a glimpse of the men who had shoved him. There were two of them—big and heavy-shouldered, one with a flattened nose. Then Limey Harkness said:

"Wait there, boys." He shut the door. "Now here it is, Doctor. A low fellow by the name of Stevane."

Stevane was a miserable specimen even for the slums, dirty inside and out. His face must have been pale enough normally, but now it was as white as paper. One sleeve of his ragged coat had been ripped out. He had no hat, and his colorless hair stuck up in clumps. He was crying.

"What's the mater with him?" Flame asked.

"He's a dirty copper's nark," said Limey Harkness. "A stool pigeon."

"No!" Stevane whimpered. "I'd never—"

"Quiet," said Limey Harkness. "You'll speak when you're asked. My boy Harry is a smart one, Doctor. He heard what Conniston said to you about someone tipping the cops off to you, and he came and told me. So some of the boys went out to knock on a few doors. Sure enough, they were soon talking to Mr. Stevane. He's the one who called copper on you, Doctor. Aren't you, Stevane? Speak up and answer right."

Stevane gulped. "Yes."

Limey Harkness smiled at him. "That's nice, Stavane. Now tell the doctor how much you wish you hadn't done it."

Stevane stared at Flame with horribly bulging eyes. "Honest, I never meant—I never thought it'd make any trouble for you—Please don't—don't let 'em—"

Flame made a little distasteful gesture. "Never mind that. I don't care what you did, but why did you do it?"

"Don't lie, Stevane," said Limey Harkness. "You wouldn't want to go where you're goin' with a lie in your mouth."

Stevane strangled a terrified sob. "It was a fella by the name of Troop. He used to be a detective—loft squad. They caught him pointin' jobs for some of the boys that knock over fur vaults, and they booted him off the force. He—he knows plenty about me. He could send me away—"

"And don't you wish you were safe in jail?" Limey Harkness asked casually. "Instead of here with me? Keep right on

NO FINE DRINK...



talking, my dear fellow. Go right ahead."

Stevane's voice was a breathless murmur. "Troop said I hadda help him find a dame. She was down here somewhere, livin' here. Name of Bessie Rainey. He had it narrowed down. She was livin' in the Flats. He'd seen her comin' out of there and almost caught her, but she got away. He said he'd pay me fifty bucks if I'd find her, and if I didn't—"

"So you found her," said Limey Harkness. "Get on with it."

Stevane nodded stiffly. "Old Simpson was one of the guys I thought of first. I knew he picked up side-money hidin' out fellas that was hot. I took Troop over there and—and—"

"Yes?" said Limey Harkness gently. "And?"

"I never did it," Stevane said with a sort of numb desperation. "I never—never—"

"Troop did it, then," said Limey Harkness.

Stevane's dry lips opened and shut. "Yes!"

"You're a liar," said Limey Harkness, and reached for the door knob.

"Yes!" Stevane shouted in sudden frantic terror. "I mean *no!* Troop didn't do it! But neither did I! Honest—I never did! I couldn't find old Simpson. I went around to the back and looked for him, and the door was open, and there he was on the floor with his mouth open. . . ."

"Never mind all that," said Limey Harkness. "The doctor and I have seen quite a few dead ones and expect to see a few more before we get through. What did you do?"

"I shut the door. I was scared an air raid warden would spot the light. I went back to the car. . . ."

"Car?" said Limey Harkness softly. "During a black-out? Whose car?"

"Troop's," said Stevane.

"No," said Limey Harkness. "Whose?"

Stevane moistened his lips. "Troop told me it was his."

**L**IMEY HARKNESS smiled again. "Maybe you think I'm joking, Stevane. Troop probably did tell you the car was his, but you know it had to have special permission to drive around

during a black-out. They don't hand out permission to people like Troop. You're the kind that would snoop around a bit. Whose car was it, Stevane? You answer that—now."

"You got to give me a chance. If Troop finds out that I—"

"Why, you fool," said Limey Harkness. "You poor fool. Are you more afraid of Troop than of me? Why then, just say good-by to the doctor, and we'll be on our way."

Stevane's whole scrawny body began to shake uncontrollably. "No, no, no! You can't—you wouldn't— It was a fat guy by the name of Doctor Ogelthorpe!"

"Are you sure that was the name?" Flame asked.

"Yes," Stevane whispered. "Let me out of here. I don't know nothin' more, I swear it. I only called in after Troop grabbed the old dame because he said he'd turn me up for the job unless I peached on Doctor Flame."

Limey Harkness looked at Flame and raised his eyebrows in polite inquiry.

"Let him go," said Flame.

Stevane mumbled thanks in a blubbering breathless voice, watching Limey Harkness like a rabbit watches a snake.

Limey Harkness opened the door. "Let him go, boys."

Stevane ducked out through the door. Limey Harkness shut the door softly.

"Not nice to think about, Doctor. I mean, people as low as that. There aren't many of them about, and now there'll be one less. Tomorrow everyone will know he called the cops on you. If he ever shows his face around here again, he'll be smashed like a bug in two minutes flat. This Troop, now. I don't know who he is or who his doctor friend is or what they are to you, but I could have them looked up if you wish."

"No, thank you," Flame said.

"Then if there's nothing else, I'll be running along." Limey Harkness put his derby on carefully and straightened the front of his neat overcoat with two quick deft hand-pats. He was still smiling in his casually incurious way.

"Good night, Doctor," he said. "I trust I'll have the pleasure of seeing you—"

"Wait," said Flame. "I haven't thanked you—"

"That's not necessary. That's how I get out the votes."

Flame smiled. "Did you do all this just to get me to vote for the candidates you back?"

"No," said Limey Harkness. "I did it so other people would. You have a great influence in this district."

"Wait," Flame repeated. "Aren't you—curious about all this?"

"No," said Limey Harkness. "I'm never curious." He nodded courteously and slipped out the door.

Flame shook his head absently. The queer and devious ways that the slum people took to serve him had surprised him a good many times in the past, and this was another instance in the long line of them. He had a great many other dangerously pressing things to consider now. He located a state medical directory and began to leaf through it.



**T**HE cab drew up at the quiet intersection and slowed as the driver felt for the curb. He set the hand-brake and looked over his shoulder.

"This is about the best I can do. I can't look for house numbers without usin' my spot, and they'd have my license in ten seconds if I tried that during a black-out. The place should be on the left side of the street up about a half-block."

"This is fine," Flame told him. He signed his name and emergency permit number in the driver's call book. "I'm sorry I haven't any change."

"I wouldn't take no dough from you," said the driver. "You want I should wait?"

"No, thanks," said Flame.

He got out, carrying his medical satchel, and the cab puttered away in the darkness. This was the exclusive residential section north of the city. The air felt clean and tingled in Flame's nostrils. Even the stars were closer and brighter. There were no other lights anywhere.

Flame stepped across to the sidewalk, and then a voice said: "One moment, please."

Flame stopped. Feet scuffed on cement, and then a dimmed flash-light outlined the faint bulk of the man holding it.

"Air raid warden," he said, coming closer. "May I ask where you're going?"

"To Twelve-twenty-two Teakley Place," Flame answered. "I'm a doctor. Here's my emergency permit."

"Thank you. That's the Blaine house. I'll take you there."

Flame said: "I was looking for a Doctor Ogelthorpe."

"Yes. He lives at the Blaine house. This way. Be careful. The curb is high here."

"Have you heard any news about the air raid?" Flame asked.

"No."

Flame chuckled. "How many times are you asked that during a raid?"

"Seven thousand on the average," said the warden. "Of course, we haven't had many black-outs here as yet and people aren't used to them. They're doing all right, though. This hedge circles the Blaine house."

**T**HE hedge was like a dark wall close against the edge of the sidewalk, high and thick, its dried leaves rustling a little in the dead silence.

The warden flicked on his dimmed light. "This is the gate. The front entrance is straight down the path. Do you want me to take you to the door?"

"No, thanks," said Flame.

"Good-night, then."

His feet clicked away, and Flame pushed the wrought iron gate open and felt his way along the flagged walk toward the house that loomed huge and ghost-like before him. He stumbled against broad steps and then went across the width of a porch and groped until he found a bell.

The door opened instantly, and Flame slipped through it. He was dazzled for a moment by the bright lights in the high-arched hall. He shut the door, blinking at the man in front of him.

**T**HE man had stepped back in surprise, and now he was staring at Flame with impersonal curiosity. He was enormous, fat without looseness, and his face was a pallid circle with eyes that were like black beads. His hands were disproportionately small and delicate, and he wore tiny patent leather shoes.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"My name is Flame," Flame said. "I'm a doctor."

The beady eyes sharpened a little. "Doctor Flame? I don't think I know that name."

"Yours is Ogelthorpe, isn't it?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"I have something to say to you."

Ogelthorpe's tight lips moved in a disdainful smile. "I don't think I'd be interested, Doctor—ah—Flame. I have a patient here who requires undisturbed rest. The air raid warning has disturbed her enough as it is. I'll ask you to leave this house."

"I'm not going," said Flame, "until I learn a little more about your patient. Where is she?"

"In her bedroom, of course. She's very weak. What business is it of yours?"

"I've made it mine. What's her name?"

"Mrs. Turnbell Blaine. This is her home."

Flame said: "The medical directory gives this as your address and doesn't list you as having an office."

"I live here," said Ogelthorpe in a coldly patient voice. "I am not engaged in general practice. Caring for Mrs. Blaine takes a great deal of my time. I don't think you have any authority to question me, and again I'll ask you to leave."

"Not yet," said Flame. "What is the matter with Mrs. Blaine?"

"Nothing but age and a recurrent heart condition."

"Age?" said Flame, puzzled.

Ogelthorpe nodded. "Yes. Mrs. Blaine is seventy-seven years old."

"I don't believe you," said Flame.

Ogelthorpe moved his massive shoulders. "That's your privilege. Inquire at any of the neighbors, if you wish. They all know Mrs. Blaine. She has lived here most of her life. Your insolence has aroused my curiosity, Doctor Flame. Just what is the point of this questioning?"

Flame watched him. "You employ a man named Troop."

"No, I don't," said Ogelthorpe blandly.

Flame tried a shot in the dark. "You were seen in his company tonight in the slums."

"The slums," Ogelthorpe repeated, raising his eyebrows lightly. "I see. You're

from there. That accounts for your rather —ah—peculiar costume. I wasn't seen there tonight in the company of anyone, because I've never been there in my life. This questioning is quite pointless, Doctor Flame. I can prove the truth of everything I have told you, and I will do it if I'm asked by the proper authorities. I think you'd better go back where you came from. Perhaps the black-out has made you a little hysterical."

"A man Simpson was murdered tonight," Flame told him.

"How very interesting," said Ogelthorpe. "Are you leaving?" He stood immovable, watching Flame contemptuously, and there was no break in the smooth wall of his self-assurance.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Killer's Best Play

FLAME stared back. The whole pattern that he had reasoned out of the events and the queerly dark hints that he had seen and heard this night was breaking up. Ogelthorpe was too sure. He probably could prove what he said, and if so, Flame had been wrong all along.

A squeaky voice shrilled suddenly: "Who's that you're talking to, Doctor Ogelthorpe?"

Ogelthorpe whirled around, sure in his movements despite of his bulk. "Mrs Blaine! You shouldn't be up!"

She was half-way down the long wide sweep of the stair-case—a grotesquely shrunken little figure with her scanty white hair frizzed up and fastened in metal curlers, dressed in a pink robe with the white of a long nightgown showing below it. She was grasping the stair railing with claw-like hands, and her head jerked in little bird-like motions.

"I shouldn't be up!" she echoed triumphantly. "But I am, I am! And that fat old nurse is down! Because I gave her my medicine! And now she's snoring with her mouth open. I stuck her with a pin and she didn't budge!"

"Rather strong medicine to give an old lady with a heart condition," Flame observed.

Ogelthorpe's beady eyes flicked toward

him. "Nothing but a very mild sedative—entirely harmless. The old lady is affected with senile dementia. She exaggerates."

"What's that?" Mrs. Blaine shrilled. "What's that you're saying about me?" She came on down the steps, swaying jerkily, holding on to the railing. "Where are all the servants, that's what I want to know!"

"This is their night off, Mrs. Blaine," Ogelthorpe said smoothly.

"Night off!" she echoed angrily. "'Tis not! This is Tuesday! Their night off is Thursday!"

"I told them they could go tonight," Ogelthorpe said. "You must go back to bed, Mrs. Blaine."

"*You* told them they could go tonight? Why?"

"Yes," said Flame. "Why?"

Ogelthorpe turned toward him. "I'm telling you for the last time, Doctor Flame. Get out of here." He didn't raise his voice, but there was danger in its tone.

"No, you don't!" said Mrs. Blaine. "Oh, no, you don't, Doctor Ogelthorpe! This is my house, and I want to know what that funny little fellow is doing in it. Who is he?"

"His name is Flame," Ogelthorpe snapped. "He's a quack doctor from the slums."

"Quack," Mrs. Blaine repeated, peering eagerly. "A quack, eh? He doesn't look like a quack to me. If he was a quack he'd be dressed better—like you, Doctor Ogelthorpe."

"That's enough!" Ogelthorpe said. "I am going to take you back to bed."

"No! Not until I see Elinor."

"She's asleep. You can't see her."

"Oh, yes I can!" Mrs. Blaine said defiantly. "I won't wake her up, but I'm going to see her! I've got a feeling you're hiding something from me!"

Flame's deep-set eyes were gleaming. "Who is Elinor, Mrs. Blaine?" he asked.

"She's my grand-daughter. What business is it of yours?"

"I think she's a patient of mine," said Flame.

**T**HE silence congealed in the hall, and even Mrs. Blaine seemed to feel it. She drew her robe closer around her skinny throat.

"Damn you," said Ogelthorpe. "Now you've done it. It's your responsibility."

"I'll take it," said Flame. "Let's look at your grand-daughter, Mrs. Blaine."

Mrs. Blaine looked old and tired and very confused. "She's sick. Her mind's sick."

"Yes," said Flame. "Let me have a look at her."

"All right then, damn you," said Ogelthorpe. "If you must have it. Elinor is a dangerous paranoiac. I've been keeping her here at home—under my care—instead of sending her to an asylum where she belongs because I wanted to save the Blaine family from any scandal."

"Elinor—Elinor wouldn't harm anybody," Mrs. Blaine protested weakly.

"Oh, wouldn't she?" Ogelthorpe said brutally. "Well, she escaped tonight and killed a man down in the slums. Cut his throat. That's what brought this little quack down on us. I was trying to save you from the shock of knowing that, and I would have if he'd minded his own business."

Mrs. Blaine swayed. "Killed—killed—"

"Yes!" said Ogelthorpe. "I told you she was dangerous. I warned you. It's your fault. You hired that damned old Bessie, that came around begging at the door. I told you not to. She helped Elinor escape."

Mrs. Blaine stared at him, her withered lips working silently. She finally forced words out:

"Where—where is Elinor?"

Ogelthorpe spread his small hands, palms up-ward. "I don't know! Bessie helped her to hide in the slums. I searched everywhere down there for her. I found Bessie, but Elinor got away again—after she'd murdered a man. You didn't want any scandal, did you? Well, you'll have plenty now."

Mrs. Blaine clutched at the bannister frantically. "They'll—arrest...."

"They certainly will," Ogelthorpe agreed. "They'll arrest Elinor now and put her away in the State Asylum for the rest of her life."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Flame.

"What?" Ogelthorpe said blankly.

Flame said: "Mrs. Blaine, your grand-daughter is not a paranoiac. She is not insane in any ordinary sense of the word."

She is suffering from a severe case of hysteria exaggerated by narcotics and other treatments Doctor Ogelthorpe has given her."

Ogelthorpe's thick lips curled. "And what do you know about paranoia?"

"Quite a lot," said Flame candidly. "An article I wrote about it is required reading in ten medical colleges."

Ogelthorpe's pallid face went a shade whiter, but he didn't lose control of himself. "Perhaps that's true, but you don't know anything about Elinor. You've never seen her."

"Yes, I have," said Flame. "I examined her. I say now—and I'll swear it—that she's not a paranoiac or any other kind of a maniac and never was and that any signs of mental uncertainty she may exhibit are the results of your treatments."

"You—saw her?" said Ogelthorpe slowly.

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know."

O GELTHORPE watched him for seconds and then shrugged his shoulders with a fatalistic movement. "Then we'll have to do it this way," he said. He withdrew from his coat pocket an automatic. "Troop, come here."

The tall man with the sharp face stepped into view. He was carrying a Police Positive.

"I told you," he said. "He's too smart for us."

Mrs. Blaine stumbled down the stairs. "What is it? What are you doing?"

Ogelthorpe said, "Mrs. Blaine, this man is a dangerous fake. He treated Elinor, and now he thinks he can cash in on it through blackmail. I'll see that he doesn't. You must go to bed now. Take her upstairs, Troop."

Mrs. Blaine struck weakly at Troop. "No! No, I won't go! He's not a fake! You are, yourself! You'll not hurt him, do you hear? He's to stay and tell me—"

"If you move, Doctor Flame," said Ogelthorpe, "I'll shoot. Believe me!"

Troop swung Mrs. Blaine's small body up easily in his arms and started up the stairs. Mrs. Blaine cried out weakly again and again, like a lost child.

"Make her swallow one of those tablets in the green bottle in the bed stand drawer, Troop," Ogelthorpe ordered. He had not lost his self-assurance, and as Troop and Mrs. Blaine disappeared at the top of the stairs and the child-like cries died away, he nodded slowly at Flame. "Things are clear to you now, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Flame. "It wasn't a nice story when I first caught a glimpse of it, and it's no nicer now. You worked your way into the confidence of Mrs. Blaine."

"Quite," said Ogelthorpe.

"And then the grand-daughter interfered with you."

"She came home from school," Ogelthorpe said. "She didn't trust me. Surprising, isn't it?"

"Not very," said Flame. "You knew she would undermine the old lady's confidence in you, so you went to work first. You persuaded the old lady that Elinor was insane and then provided proof enough to convince her. An old lady made miserable and a girl tortured until she has almost lost faith in herself. You must feel very proud of your accomplishments."

"There's no need for that," Ogelthorpe said flatly. "I was playing for higher stakes than you could even conceive. The old lady has almost five million dollars and no near relatives except her granddaughter. I wanted just a piece of it at first, and then I thought I might as well have it all. Now I have. I'm the sole executor of the estate. It's all left for me to manage for the benefit of poor Elinor until she—oh—regains her sanity."

F LAME said evenly: "Mrs. Blaine knows what you've done now. She'll change her will."

"She won't," said Ogelthorpe. "Because I'll see that she doesn't. Even if she did, I'd swear that she was mentally incompetent to make a will. No doctor has seen either her or Elinor for the last year. It's my word and my word alone. That will be enough."

"You're forgetting one doctor," said Flame.

"You?" said Ogelthorpe. "No, I'm not."

Troop came down the stairs. "The old lady's out like a light, and that dim-witted

nurse is snorin' like a flight of bombers."

"Good," said Ogelthorpe. "Now you—"

From back in the darkness of the big house there was the faint tinkle of breaking glass.

"That Bessie—" said Troop. "I tied her—"

"Go back and see what happened!" Ogelthorpe snapped. "Quickly! Doctor Flame, do not move. I warn you."

Troop ran back along the hall and through the rear door. He was back in a second, breathing hard.

"She's gone! Bessie's gone! She couldn't have gotten loose herself—not the way I tied her! The window's broken from the outside, and the ropes cut—"

Bessie can't get far in this black-out. They haven't any money or any place to go. We will find them. And when we do, we'll have that murdered man down in the slums to hold over their heads. We'll be better off than we were before!"

"Except for this guy," said Troop.

"Yes," Ogelthorpe agreed. "Except for Flame. But you'll take care of him. You'll make it look like Elinor. . . ."

Troop's thin face looked cruelly triumphant. "Sure. But there'll be no more of this 'sir' stuff to you. There'll be no more orderin' me around like I was your valet. We're fifty-fifty after this."

"Yes," said Ogelthorpe. "Certainly."

Troop grinned wolfishly. "I know what you're thinking, chum. I'm watching you."

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"With a razor," said Flame, his voice very low.

"Yeah," said Troop. "They look like they were. . . ."

Ogelthorpe's beady eyes gleamed. "How did you guess that?"

"Elinor had a razor when I saw her," said Flame.

"Elinor had—" Ogelthorpe stopped and swallowed. "And you let her go—with that? You criminal fool, she thinks she's insane! I've told her often enough that she is! I've convinced her, and if her mind has slipped. . . ." He hesitated, biting his lips.

"This is gittin' too fast for me," Troop said slowly.

Ogelthorpe was still glaring at Flame. "Anything that happens. . . . If Elinor harms anyone, it's your fault! You'll be done for!"

"So will you," said Troop. "You can't buck this bird. He's got more pull with the police department than the mayor has."

"Shut up," said Ogelthorpe, recovering himself. "We're all right. Elinor and

"Get Flame out of here," Ogelthorpe said.

Troop walked around behind Flame and shoved his revolver hard against Flame's back. "Feel that? It's cocked. One jiggle from you, and she blows."

Ogelthorpe's voice was smooth and thick again. "I'm very sorry, Doctor Flame. I abhor violence. But it is necessary now, and you were warned. If you hadn't meddled. . . ."

"March," Troop ordered, pushing with the revolver. "Out the back way. Get moving."

Flame walked steadily down the hall in front of him and through the door opposite the one Troop had used before. They went through a dining room with a long table gleaming lustrously in its center, through a narrow dim pantry and into the spicy-smelling cleanliness of a darkened kitchen.

The revolver still pressed warningly against Flame's back. "That door," said Troop. "Right ahead. Open it."

"All right," said Flame.

"You're a cool one," Troop told him

"Do you think you'll get out of this? Do you think you can buy me off? Not unless you've got five million in your pocket, you can't. Oh, I've got that fat slob where I want him now! I'll pay him back for a few things I've taken! Don't try to run for it in the dark. You won't get far."

In pitch darkness they went across an enclosed porch and down two flat steps to a graveled walk.

"Straight back on the path," said Troop. "We're goin' to the garage and take a ride. The car's got a doctor's plate on it, and we won't be stopped. If we do, keep your mouth shut tight. We're goin' back to your office."

## CHAPTER SIX

### Who's Crazy Now?

THE gravel crunched slightly under their feet, and the squat low bulk of the garage loomed ahead of them. There was a sudden metallic slam and clatter, and then a voice said angrily:

"Klogatz, wil! you kindly watch your clumsy self and make less noise? I am listening for enemy bombers."

"You do not know enemy bombers," said Klogatz.

"You lie in your teeth," said O'Phelan. "I do so. They snore like an old sow. I think there's one up above now, and it's us that should be getting medals by the dozen, Klogatz. Going on with our work silently and bravely with our very lives in danger."

"Stand still!" Troop hissed in Flame's ear.

"Be quiet!" Klogatz said abruptly. "There is someone close to us."

"What?" said O'Phelan. "Where? Who is it?"

Silence seemed to fold down over the yard, and there was no noise at all until O'Phelan's voice sounded very close, just at Flame's left.

"Well, now. Here we are. Two of them. A tall one and a short one."

"Stand back!" Troop snapped. "This is an emergency! We're taking the car out of the garage!"

"Klogatz," said O'Phelan. "Did you hear that voice? I think I've heard it before tonight. Let's see."

There was a snap and a flashlight, shielded by O'Phelan's palm, made a dim red glow.

"Well, now," said O'Phelan in a pleased tone. "Will you look what we have here, Klogatz?"

Troop jumped back and away from Flame, his revolver gleaming dangerously. "Stand back, you! I'm an officer, and I'm arresting this man! Stand back or I'll shoot!"

"Did you hear that, Klogatz?" O'Phelan asked. "You wouldn't interfere with an officer in the pursuit of his duty, would you?"

"Yes," said Klogatz.

"Then do it!" said O'Phelan, and snapped off his light.

Troop's revolver made a blasting roar of sound and a smeared powdery flash in the darkness, and then there was the sharp smack of flesh against flesh and a thudding scrambling tangle on the ground.

O'Phelan touched Flame's arm gently. "'Tis nothing at all, Doctor. We had a word with this fellow earlier, and we don't like him. He was chasing a woman, then. It seems he's a bit free with his gun. Klogatz, do not kill him entirely just yet. Did he hit you?"

"No," said Klogatz. "Did he hurt the Doctor?"

Flame drew a long deep breath. "Not a bit. He would have, if it hadn't been for you two."

"Is that so?" said O'Phelan. "Hit him again, Klogatz."

"It does no good," said Klogatz. "He is unconscious. Maybe his neck is broke."

"We can always hope," said O'Phelan. "Now what is all this, Doctor, if you'll tell us, please?"

Flame said: "This man and another wormed their way into the confidence of the old lady who owns the house back of us. She had money and they wanted it. When her grand-daughter tried to protest, they pretended the girl was insane and shut her up and kept her a prisoner. Perhaps they even succeeded in driving the girl mad. I don't know yet."

"A dirty business," said O'Phelan. "An old lady and a girl and these two crooks after the money they could steal and lie and cheat away. Maybe you'd best make sure that one's neck is broke, Klogatz."

"It is," said Klogatz.

"Then we'll talk to the other one," said O'Phelan. "Come along."

"No," said Flame. "You don't understand. It's very dangerous. He's desperate and he's armed. . . ."

"So are we," said O'Phelan. "Give me that gun he was waving around, Klogatz. Come along now, Doctor."

THE three of them went back along the path and across the back porch into the quiet darkness of the kitchen. They were half-way across it when the pantry door burst open ahead of them, and Ogelthorpe shouted:

"Troop, you fool! Why did you shoot? You'll bring the air warden—"

Klogatz hit him from the side and spun him around and knocked him into the wall with a jar that shook the room. Ogelthorpe screamed as shrilly as a woman, and then Klogatz said:

"I have his gun. His fingers are broke."

Ogelthorpe's cry stopped in mid-note, but there was another scream above and over it that went on higher and higher, full of bubbling unending terror that was beyond endurance.

"Bring him along!" Flame snapped.

He ran through the dining room and along the hall, following the sound that filled the house with its hysteria. His feet drummed thunderously on the stairs, and then he was in the upper hallway and there was a lighted doorway bright ahead of him.

It was a bedroom, softly lighted and furnished for the care of an invalid, with radio and book-case and low medicine table next to the wide high bed. The bed clothes were all crumpled and twisted now and horribly spattered with red.

Mrs. Blaine was curled into a rigid agonized little ball, and the blood had come from between the skinny fingers on her hands that were both clutched tight around her throat. Flame had no eyes for her after one swift glance told him she was beyond all human help.

There was a numb dread twisting him as he stared at the girl named Elinor. She was standing rigid at the foot of the bed, and she was holding a razor in her hand. The blade was not clean now.

It was she that had been screaming,

and she stopped as sobs welled up and strangled the sound. Her face had lost all semblance of sanity.

"Glory!" said O'Phelan in a whisper from back of Flame: "She's a maniac!"

Ogelthorpe, struggling in Klogatz's grip, cried shrilly: "This will be your end, Flame! This is your doing! You let her loose with that razor—"

"Shut him up," said Flame tightly.

KLOGATZ'S thick fingers clamped over Ogelthorpe's mouth. Flame looked slowly around the room. A fat woman in a nurse's uniform was dumped into the corner like a heap of unclean laundry. She was snoring in gurgling thick gasps, still asleep under the influence of Mrs. Blaine's medicine in spite of the uproar around her.

"That razor in her hand," O'Phelan whispered, staring with dread fascination at Elinor. "She'll be coming for us. . . ."

"Be quiet," said Flame. "Stand still."

He stepped forward, one long pace and then another, and Elinor seemed to realize his presence for the first time. She turned her head slowly and stiffly.

"Elinor," said Flame slowly and calmly. "I've come to see you."

". . . see me," she echoed. Her eyes glittered inhumanly, watching him.

"I'm Doctor Flame. You know me."

". . . know you," said Elinor tonelessly.

"Yes," said Flame. "Look at me, Elinor. I'm your friend."

". . . friend," said Elinor, and there was a question in her voice.

"Elinor," said Flame. "Look at me. I'm your friend. I'm helping you now. Put the razor down."

A muscle in her thin face twitched.

Flame said slowly: "Put the razor down. Put it down on the bed, Elinor."

Stiffly, like some mechanical puppet, she turned and put her arm out and opened her red-stained fingers. The razor dropped on the bed.

Elinor turned her glance away from Flame to look at it, and then all the stiffness went out of her body and she collapsed, falling to the floor.

"Oh, glory!" O'Phelan was awed.

Ogelthorpe got his mouth free from Klogatz's hand. "Hypnotism! A quack's

trick, and you won't get out of this—" Klogatz's fingers clamped down again.

O'Phelan swallowed hard. "Doctor, did you really let her go with that razor when you knew. . . ."

"Yes," said Flame quietly. Perspiration glistened on his face, and he glanced around the room with desperate intensity.

Then he breathed deeply once. He touched O'Phelan on the shoulder and pointed toward the closed door across the room and then toward a chair.

"Oh," said O'Phelan.

Flame went quickly to Elinor and dropped on one knee beside her and felt for the pulse in one limply out-flung wrist. After a second, he got up and took the white telephone from its stand.

**H**E dialed a number and waited, watching O'Phelan drift quietly across the room with the chair in his hands. At the closed door, O'Phelan put the chair down and braced its back firmly under the knob. He looked at Flame inquiringly. Flame nodded.

A voice in his ear said: "This is the police department."

"Inspector Conniston, please," Flame requested. "It's an emergency."

The line clicked and Conniston said: "Yes? What is it?"

"This is Flame."

"Oh, you! The black-out has just been lifted, and I'm starting that house-to-house search at once. There's been no report of any insane person escaping from anywhere, and I can't take a chance on delaying any longer. That girl might murder a half-dozen more people—"

"I've found her."

"Where?" Conniston barked.

"Here at her home. Her name is Elinor Blaine. She lived with her grandmother, Mrs. Turnbell Blaine. She was being treated for paranoia by a Doctor Ogelthorpe, and she escaped tonight. Mrs. Blaine has just been murdered."

"Murdered! Wait while I put that out on the radio!" Conniston's voice withdrew to an excited murmur and then came back closer again. "Flame! The prowler car will be there in five minutes! What happened?"

"A doctor named Ogelthorpe and a former detective named Troop decided

that Mrs. Blaine was old and helpless enough to be fair game for them. They moved in on her. Ogelthorpe gained her confidence and persuaded her to leave him a very sizable bequest. Then Elinor Blaine, the grand-daughter, turned up and tried to put a spike in the wheels. Ogelthorpe decided to provide her with a case of paranoia to get rid of her."

"Good God!" Conniston exclaimed. "How did he do it?"

"Drugs and hypnotism and lies and ready-made hallucinations, and I imagine a few other things that were worse."

"Well, damn the rat, he must have succeeded! I mean, the murder of Simpson. . . ."

"No," said Flame. "Look at your reports again. Isn't there any record of an insane woman escaping from an institution recently?"

"No, I told you! Oh, a poison murderer by the name of Bertha Rickson escaped from the State Asylum for the Criminal Insane a month back, but she's a middle-aged woman—"

"Yes," said Flame. "I've found her, too."

"Found her?"

"Yes. She is going now under the name of Bessie Rainey. When she escaped from the asylum, she needed help and needed it badly. If you'll look it up in the medical directory, you'll find that a Doctor Ogelthorpe was a resident physician at the State Asylum for one year. He resigned—by request. I don't know what they caught him doing, but he got out before they could fire him. Bessie Rainey knew something about him, and she came here looking for help. He didn't want anyone reviewing his past history right then. She sensed that, and she played it for all it was worth. She made him give her a job in the house, but that wasn't enough. She tried to move right in on his racket. She helped Elinor escape. She knew that whatever happened Elinor would be so grateful that Bessie would be in clover for the rest of her life."

"Flame!" Conniston yelled into the telephone. "Where is that woman? She's a hell-cat! She poisoned a whole family she was working for! Five of them! Two kids!"

"She's safe," said Flame.

**H**E watched the knob of the closet door turn very stealthily and slowly. The panels of the door creaked, and the braced chair moved just a little and then held firm. O'Phelan was staring at it with his mouth open.

"Bessie murdered Simpson," Flame said. "He knew who she was. He picked up side-money hiding out fugitives. He interfered when she brought Elinor to his tenement building. Maybe he thought the risk was too great, or maybe he wanted a cut of the money in prospect."

"He got his cut," Conniston said.

Bessie decided then to blame his death on Elinor. She had stolen some of Ogelthorpe's medicine for Elinor. It wasn't medicine at all. It was some derivative of hemp—like hashish or marijuana—that produces sensory hallucinations. She gave it to Elinor and left her unconscious at the tenement while she went to find me. She had me all prepared to come in and find a maniac—Elinor—and a dead man, but Elinor regained consciousness and left before we got there, carrying the razor Bessie had planted on her. Elinor had heard Bessie speak of me, and she came to me. I let her go again."

"You—let—her—go!"

"Yes. I knew she wasn't insane. She was so full of dope and so keyed up that if I'd tried to stop her by force, she'd have had a complete mental collapse."

"Good God, man! What a chance you took! If you hadn't been right. . . ."

"But I was," said Flame. "Elinor came back to the house here. Troop and Ogelthorpe had caught Bessie and were keeping her prisoner until they could locate Elinor and get things under control again. Elinor freed Bessie, and Bessie killed Mrs. Blaine and again framed Elinor for that murder. Bessie, you see, has the queer twisted cunning of the genuine homicidal maniac. They kill, not just because they're mad, but because their madness gives them an insane justification for killing. Mrs. Blaine had heard enough and seen enough, without realizing it, perhaps, to prove that there was a connection between Doctor Ogelthorpe and Bessie. She was harmless, really. An old, broken woman whose testimony would have meant nothing in a court. But Bessie feared her

and hated her, and she knew that if Mrs. Blaine was dead then all the money would be Elinor's, and Bessie had a great deal more influence with Elinor than Doctor Ogelthorpe did because Elinor was grateful to Bessie for hiding her and helping her. Bessie meant to have Elinor's money—all of it—and she came very close to getting it. If Elinor thought she was crazy and a murderer and that Bessie was her only friend. . . ."

"Where is Elinor now?" Conniston demanded.

"Right here beside me. She's unconscious. She was completely exhausted physically and when the dope wore off, she collapsed. I hope she won't remember anything that happened. I don't believe she will. With care, she'll be all right."

"Stay there!" Conniston ordered.

He went on yelling, but Flame couldn't hear him now because Bessie had started to scream senselessly and pound on the closet door. Flame paid no attention. He put the telephone back on its stand and knelt down beside Elinor again.

O'Phelan kept a wary eye on the closet door. "And how did you know that—that she-devil was in there, Doctor?"

"She smeared Elinor's hands with blood," Flame explained, "and she got some of it on her own. There's a little streak just below the door knob. See it?"

"Now I do," said O'Phelan. "Did you—really hypnotize that little one?"

"No," said Flame. "Elinor's mind was an exhausted blank. She couldn't think for herself. Anyone could have taken control of her like I did."

"Not anyone," O'Phelan denied. "Not me. And not that fat fake. . . . What's the matter with him, Klogatz?"

"He fainted," said Klogatz.

"Fainted, is it?" said O'Phelan. "And what are those red spots on his throat, then? They look like fingermarks to me."

Klogatz said: "There is an ice box in the kitchen down-stairs. A big one."

"Now don't be an ignorant Polish numb-skull," O'Phelan advised him. "All rich people have ice boxes like that."

"This one has beer in it."

"Klogatz!" O'Phelan screamed. "Get out of the way! Take care of yourself or you'll be trampled in the rush!"

# IMPLACABLE BEQUEST



They carried the body off  
into the gloom beside the  
road. . . .

By  
**CORNELL  
WOOLRICH**

*Mile by mile, the driver's terror  
grew, while the two uninvited  
hitch-hikers seemed to be deciding  
by some weird communion . . .  
when to murder him. . . .*

THE slate roadster coursed steadily onward along the dusky road, chasing its own headlight beams, never succeeding in overtaking them. Overhead the stars seemed to move slowly along the sky in company with it, while the night-bound earth below streamed backwards, like something on a moving belt. An occasional offside light winking from some farmhouse would trundle slowly rearward, finally blink out. The world was asleep.

The man at the wheel hadn't spoken for

half an hour. The woman beside him had been silent that length of time. The dashboard lights illuminated their faces from below, cast phantom-like reflections of them on the windshield.

They both had the set look of people who are lost in thought. Their eyes, staring straight ahead, had the fixed aspect of those who do not see what they seem to be looking at.

The road made a leisurely turn, and the car obediently went with it. The woman spoke at last, unexpectedly, without any preliminary, as though the slight shift of equilibrium caused by the turn had finally dislodged the silence sticking in her throat.

"So that's why," she remarked. "That's why we came away on this trip."

The man continued to stare ahead, hands soldered to the wheel, while the road flowed unendingly beneath their front wheels. "That's why," he answered laconically.

A moment or two of silence followed, and then she spoke again. "Why didn't you tell me before we left?"

"What's the difference when I told you? I've told you now, haven't I?"

"Yes, now I know," she said quietly.

Neither of them looked at one another.

"And what are you going to do now?" she said finally.

His mouth thinned a little. "Just keep going."

"You can't keep going forever."

This time he didn't answer. She had spoken so low that perhaps he hadn't heard her.

"They'll come after you."

"I won't wait for them to get there."

"You've torn down something that it's taken me five years to build. Our home, our good name, friends and security—you have thrown it all away in one reckless, insane—"

"You don't have to come with me," he said stonily. "You can go back. You haven't done anything. I can drop you off at the next town, and you can take the train back."

She turned in the seat and looked directly at him for the first time. She reached out and lightly put one hand on his arm, in a pleading gesture. "Why don't you come back with me?"

"It's too late. They'll find it out to-

morrow morning if they haven't already."

"Then we'll face it together. I'm your wife, I'll be by your side—"

He gave a short, bitter laugh. "You know what it means, don't you?"

"Anything's better than just running away for the rest of our lives. That's a game you're bound to lose in the end."

He shook his head slightly. "Thanks, no. I've made my choice. I've made my bed, I'm ready to lie in it. But you don't have to share it with me, I told you that before."

The car slowed, coasted, finally came to a full halt over at the side of the road. He pointed to a sign just a few feet ahead. His voice was cold. "We're just outside the next town. You'd better get out now, go in on foot. I don't want to stop in the middle of town. If you're not with me heart and soul, no use your being with me at all."

She just continued to look at him as though she felt infinitely sorry for him.

"All I ask of you," he went on, "is don't tell them where I told you I was going."

"You don't trust me at all, do you, Alvin?" she murmured reproachfully. "First you didn't trust me enough to tell me about it before we left. And now you think I—I'll talk."

He didn't answer that. He reached into his inside coat-pocket, took out a wallet, stripped away several bills. "Here, here's some money. This'll see you back. You can take the bus or train."

He looked down at it where it lay, discarded on the seat between them. "Don't even want that, do you? You sure have got religion."

She put out her hand to the door-latch. "I'm afraid I wasn't cut out for—crime."

+ + +

THE lights of the town where they'd separated flickered out behind him, and the car went winging down the long gloomy road ahead once more, a little faster than before, as if to make up for lost time. The world was still asleep.

He gave no sign of being hurt by her defection. If it rankled, he kept it hidden within him. There was only one phantom reflection on the dashboard now, his own.

He stared impassively ahead, eyes fixed on the road. Once and once only he glanced aside at the vacant seat where she had been until now. The money she had refused to take with her, still lying there, caught his eye. He reached down for it, put it back in his wallet. There was a sad expression for a minute in his eyes, as he did so. Then it flickered out.

Mileage went by. The night and the road wore on.

The headlight-wash picked up the object far ahead. A black object. A log or a bundle of rags lying in the road. It came sidling forward as the car drove steadily on. Suddenly it sprouted a head at one end, upturned feet at the other. A human form lying on its back in the road, crosswise.

He stopped the car just short of it. He unlatched the door, thrust out one leg. That was as far as he got.

A voice spoke from the opposite side of the car. A face was looking in at him, dimly outlined by the dashboard lights. Just behind it, in the gloom at the side of the road, the indistinct mass of a bush settled back into repose again. "It's all right, buddy, he isn't hurt. We just wanted a lift."

The other man, the one lying in the road, got to his feet, grinning. He dusted himself off with his hat, came in toward the car on the outside. There was, even in the half-light, something more than just apologetic good-nature to be read in the grin. Something darker. He took hold of the door the driver had already half-extended and swung it the rest of the way out. The other was already on the seat next to the owner.

The man at the wheel looked watchfully from one to the other. He said, quietly but tautly, "That's a pretty high-handed way of asking for a lift, isn't it?"

"We wanted to make sure of not being turned down," the man beside him slurred.

The man at the wheel sat motionless, like someone at bay. The only part of him that moved were the two last fingers of one hand, resting on the wheel-rim. They rose and fell a couple of times. "Where is it you men want to go?" he said finally. Whatever they answered, he was obviously going to claim his route lay elsewhere.

"Just—that way, the way you're go-

ing," the man next to him answered. "Sorry, I'm in a hurry—"

"You've stopped now, haven't you?" the spokesman pointed out, in the lazy purr of a cat playing with a mouse. "Won't take you any longer to get started up with us than without us."

The driver's mouth had tightened into a thin line. He'd made up his mind. But he'd made it up too late. "It's my car and I'll decide who rides in it. Stand back—"

His unwelcome seat-mate's elbow jogged him, as though unintentionally. He glanced over and saw the man absorbed in prodding at his fingernails with a vicious-looking snap-knife. It wasn't pointed at the car-owner; its user wasn't even looking at him. Somehow the implication was even more forbidding.

His drawl was still misleadingly indolent. "Ought to drive on, mister. Don't look good to keep standing here like this. Somebody might happen along and think there's a hold-up taking place. Which there isn't." And to his friend: "Come around and get in on this side of me. There's room enough for three."

Their unwilling host, white-faced now, slowly reached down and took off the brake.

**N**OTHING more was said. The road slipped by; the wavy dark line of the trees went up and down, up and down. The stars followed them slowly across the sky. There were three phantom faces reflected against the windshield now.

He studied two of them there, surreptitiously. The knife was gone again, but even if he made a sudden lunge and grappled for it, he wouldn't win; the man on the outside probably had one too. Besides, he didn't want to become involved in anything that would delay him, bring the police on the scene, with all the lengthy questioning that would inevitably follow.

They didn't give the impression of being just the usual roadside vagrants or bums. There was something a little better than that about them—and also something a little worse, more sinister.

"Look," he said abruptly, "could you fellows use a little money? Is that what this is about? Suppose I let you have ten bucks apiece and we call it quits."

The one on the outside said nothing at

all. That drawl came again. "People that part with money that easy must have quite a lot of it." And then, in reassurance that failed altogether to reassure: "We ain't asked you for any money, mister. We'll just ride along with you a little ways."

He knew he hadn't averted whatever it was that was hanging over him.

Forty minutes went by. Perhaps fifty. Not a word more had been spoken. They were nearing the outskirts of some large town. They could see the preliminary lights sprinkled here and there, in the distance ahead, and the red glow of foundries or blast-furnaces.

The highway suddenly split in two, a main branch and a lesser, back-country detour.

"Take the one on the left," he was instructed. "That loop misses the town."

"But I'm heading for that town, and I've been driving all night. Are you compelling me to go out of my way?"

A truck came thundering up behind them, flashed past. He leaned out, tried to signal the truck driver, but he was already too late. The back of his coat-collar was suddenly tightened into a knot, and he was swung around again. The knife did not show up, but the threat of it peered through every word.

*"Take the one to the left. No one's hurting you yet. But you will get hurt if you try that again."*

Half an hour later a double-flanged roadside-marker went drifting by.

The driver flicked his eyes at his passengers. "That was a state boundary-line we just crossed. You know what that makes this, don't you? Interstate kidnaping. You know what the penalty for that is, don't you? The Lindbergh Law—death."

He saw them exchange a glance, by way of the windshield-surface. But it wasn't a look of alarm; it was, if anything, one of humorous and mutual understanding.

"It ain't us that's going to get the death penalty," the one on the outside said patronizingly. The remark was dripping with ominous double meaning. *It's you, they meant.*

The driver shivered. His lower jaw fluctuated loosely against his upper, like something detachable.

A bar of silver appeared parallel to the eastern horizon, freed itself, floated slow-

ly upward. Then a second one, then a third. They were spaced, like the rungs of a ghostly ladder, with darkness in-between.

"It's starting to get light, Chuck," one of them mentioned quietly.

It was an unnecessary remark. He knew it was some kind of a signal that was being exchanged. He knew they had decided on doing—whatever it was they were going to do—at this approaching moment, when the night changed into day.

He saw the two windshield-phantoms turn toward one another, hold it for a second, exchanging notice of readiness.

HE was shaking all over now, like some helpless animal with intelligence enough to realize its end is at hand, but without power to escape from it. He scanned the darkened road ahead for sight of some other car, some sign of life that might bring help. There was none. Then he tensed himself, about to fling the wheel around, swerve the car off the road into a tree or ditch, and try to escape from them in that way.

Even that move was frustrated, as though they'd read his mind. The nearer man reached out, grasped the wheel-rim in a grip of iron. His foot nudged the driver's own foot off the accelerator with a side-wise kick. He reached across the driver's body with his entire arm and pulled on the emergency brake.

The car screamed agonizingly and swayed to a shuddering stop. The air-currents of its own passage went swirling past it for a minute, in the sudden stillness, then died away.

The door-latch clicked and one of them had left the seat. "Think I'll get out and stretch my legs a minute."

A drop of sweat rolled sluggishly down the driver's corrugated forehead. The increasing number of bars of silver, which kept following one another up, was starting to have an effect on the sky in general, like rods of fluorescent lighting.

The voice of the man who had alighted came back from the rear. "Looks like one of your shoes is on the way out. Musta sprung one of them slow leaks."

The driver's knuckles whitened on the wheel-rim. "Ain't you going to get out and take a look?" the man next to him

suggested with slumberous detachment.

The driver was past mere fright now; he had reached that ultimate pitch of it at which calmness once more sets in, the calmness of despair. "Wait a minute," he said in a voice that was husky, but steady and urgent. "You can have the car. You can have my driver's license, my registration—all my papers. You can have sixty-five thousand dollars in cold cash I have on my person at this moment, in an oilpaper packet pinned to my undershirt. Only just let me walk away from here on foot. I won't even report it. I won't open my mouth—just let me leave here on my own two feet—"

The man beside him drawled, "Then we would be taking these things from you by force, which in a way is the same thing as a hold-up or robbery. That ain't the idea at all. The minute our backs were turned you'd report it as that, no matter what you say now." He smiled disarmingly. "We'd rather just inherit it all from you, and to inherit a thing. . . ." He didn't have to finish it. To inherit a thing, the benefactor first has to be dead.

**T**HE driver turned to face the speaker in one last desperate appeal. His mouth opened, to utter it. It never came. His back was to the outside of the road. Death came from that direction, slinking low around the rear of the car. Death was swift—a shattering blow on the brain with a section of lead pipe.

His mouth slowly closed, but that was merely reflex.

They carried the body off into gloom beside the road. Their voices sounded in quiet, unhurried tones. That drawl hadn't been assumed, it was natural. It came again: "Finish him?"

"I think so, but I'll give him another to make sure."

A dull, sodden impact sounded once. Then their footsteps moved off still further afield, with the measured heaviness of a burden borne between them.

They were gone some time. The car remained where it was, empty. One came back first, ahead of the other; the one with the drawl, who had been their spokesman throughout. He got in, started the engine, glanced watchfully up and down the road,

then sat there waiting. He completed lacing the dead man's shoes on his feet, thrusting the dead man's shirt more securely down under his belt, adjusting the knot of his necktie.

Then he gave the horn an impatient double-tap. Far off in the distance the pea-sized glow of an approaching pair of headlights had crested a rise, then dipped down into an intervening hollow. It wouldn't reach them for a good five minutes yet.

The second man, Chuck, materialized out of the darkness, was suddenly beside the car again. He was rubbing his hands in satisfaction. "That abandoned well was the right answer," he murmured appreciatively as he got in. "Glad I remembered it from the first time we passed here. Did you hear me cave the rest of it in on top of him?"

"No, it's too far in from here."

"Some day, years from now, they may catch on there was once somebody in there, if they dig down deep enough. But, brother, they'll never know who it was. I did it up brown!" He removed a crumpled, balled-up mass from his pocket that looked as though it had once been part of an undershirt, partially opened it, revealing flecks of rust on the inside, then carefully put it away again.

"What've y' got there?" the new driver said.

"His teeth," was the complacent answer. "I had to take the lead pipe to them, but it was worth it. Didn't you ever hear of 'em identifying them just by that alone?"

The approaching headlights blossomed out, dipped in conventional salute as the two cars flashed past one another, receded along the road.

"Pretty nifty car we inherited," remarked Chuck complacently. "Where do we head for now?"

"We head for the border and out, the way we were trying to before we ran into him."

"We need an exit permit, don't we?"

"We've got one. That's where he was heading for himself. We inherited that along with the car, and the driver's license, and sixty-five thousand dollars in cash and—well, just about everything else you can think of. Oh, by the way, meet Alvin

Kern the Second, of Garfield Road, Scranton, Pennsylvania. And meet yourself, his business-partner and associate, making the trip with him. Sole beneficiaries of Alvin Kern the First."

Chuck smote his knee delightedly. "Brother, what a bequest!"

+ + +

THE slate roadster coursed steadily onward under the blazing Gulf Coast sun, chasing its own foreshortened shadow, never quite able to overtake it. The masses of sand dunes to its left made an undulating line, now up, now down. The flaming mass of the sun seemed to move steadily across the sky in company with it, while the road streamed backwards like something on a moving belt.

There was silence, save for the low hum of the engine.

Chuck broke the silence at last, for the first time in half an hour. "Don't you think we ought to ditch the car? It's two whole days now, and we're far enough away. The car is what might trip us up."

'Alvin Kern' hands glued to the wheel, stared straight ahead. "Ditching the car is what might trip us up, you mean. It would be found inside of an hour or two after we dumped it. They'd start asking questions, wondering why. While we are still in it, we got nothing to worry about. The whole thing hangs together. As long as we sit tight in the car, we're him and a friend of his; the minute we leave the car behind, we start being somebody else, and they start wondering what happened to him."

"Yeah, but he might have been expected someplace. Somebody that knows him might be waiting for him, and when he don't show up where he was supposed to—"

"He was heading for Mexico; the exit permit shows that. Well, so're we. He wouldn't have got there any sooner than we will; we haven't lost any time along the way."

Chuck's elbow suddenly nudged into his side, stayed pressed against it in a frozen signal of warning. Behind them a speck on the road, that had been noticeable for some time past in the mirror, had grown

to the size of a car. It came on, closing in fast.

"It's a state trooper patrol car, and it ain't just out for the ride, the way it's tearing along! They must've picked us up at that last roadstand we stopped to eat at. Give it the gun!"

"Pull up, you mean, and see what they want. Hear that? They're tipping us off to stand until they get here."

Chuck's voice nearly rose to a scream as the car began to lose speed. "*Come on, will ya? Are you crazy?*"

"Listen, if we don't pay attention we get bullets next. But that ain't the point. The point is when you're a couple of respectable business-men like us, you don't run away from cops."

The car fell motionless by the glaring roadside.

"It's not the speeding; we were only doing—I told you we shoulda ditched this damn car, didn't I?" Chuck jittered.

"And I told you a guy on a business-trip don't abandon his car. That's tipping our hand. Shut up, here they are."

A cloud of dust blew away from the new arrival, and one of the men in it alighted and moved toward the front of their car, into a position from which he could scan the number.

'Alvin Kern' leaned partially out, resting comfortably on his forearm. "Something wrong, officer?"

The state cop had opened a notebook, was glancing at their plates and then back at the notebook.

"Pennsylvania three-three-two-eight," he read aloud.

There was a moment of tension that swelled like a bubble about to burst. 'Kern' pressed down hard with one hand on his companion's knee to keep him quiescent.

The state cop closed his notebook with a snap, put it away in his pocket before answering.

"Nope, not you. That eight on the end of your plate saved you. The guy we want is Pennsylvania three-three-two-nine, gray roadster with two men in it. Hit and run. Knocked down and killed a pickaninny at a crossroads in Orange County about ten this morning." He shook his head as he moved back to his own car. "Talk about your coincidences, though."

He took out a handkerchief, mopped around under and then inside his headgear. "Sure is hot." He tilted his chin slightly, sniffed the air with a grimace. "And blamed if it don't smell like a kiyote died someplace around here! Come on, Carter, let's vamoose."

He climbed in again, gave them a friendly wave of dismissal. The patrol car circled around and went back the way it had come.

Chuck sagged down into his own lap, like ice cream melting in the sun. "Gee, that was close! Let's get out of here," he said weakly. "He was right. It smells like the beach over there was full of rotting shellfish."

"Alvin Kern' stepped on the gas. "Where would we have been now, if we'd listened to you and tried to run for it? On our way back in their custody, to be held in the county jail until they could find out what it was we were running away from, most likely."



**T**HE filling-station attendant nodded in agreement. "Yeah, I do kinda, myself, now that you mention it. Maybe you gents been driving through some kind of slimy mud. Don't show none on your tires, though."

"The road was bone-dry all the way in," Chuck contradicted.

"Maybe you ran over a rabbit or something, and carried it along with you underneath the car. I've seen that happen. If you want to run up over the pit a minute, I'll jump down and take a look for you."

"No, we haven't time," 'Kern' cut him short. "How much do I owe you?"

They drove on through the small community, in a few minutes were out on the open highway again, under the glorious Texas stars.

"This is our last lap," the driver said. "Our last night on this side. I'm timing it so we'll pull into Laredo right after day-break, just in time for the international bridge to open up for the day. That way we won't have to hang around, can cross right over. By tomorrow night this same time we'll be hitting the Pan American Highway for Mexico City on all six, and

they can whistle for us if they want us back. *Then*, after we're safely over on the other side, is the time to pick up a pair of hot plates for the car, give it a new paint-job, and sell it off to someone. They'll never be able to trace what become of it, down there." He kissed his own knuckles. "And after that, the life of Reilly. Sixty-five thousand dollars makes an awful lot of pesos."

"And all inherited, too!" gloated Chuck. His face weazened up, and he began to fan himself with his hat. "There it comes again—a little. Every time there's a change in the wind. Maybe they use some kind of fertilizer around this part of the country that—"

"Naw, it wouldn't be that," objected the driver. "I noticed it worse in the town, where it was kind of built up around us, than out here in the open. And they don't use fertilizer in towns."

He lit a cigarette to try to kill it a little. "Don't let it get you," he said affably. "It's a small enough inconvenience to go through for the sake of sixty-five thousand dollars."

\* \* \*

The slate roadster took its place in the line of cars waiting at the bridge approach to cross over. The barrier hadn't been lowered yet.

"There always that many of them crossing over?" Chuck murmured worriedly, leaning out to peer ahead down the line.

"That's better than if we were the only ones. Safety in numbers. They don't pay as much attention to you that way. Relax, there's nothing to get steamed up about. I've seen worse line-ups waiting to drive into the Holland Tunnel."

"They don't inspect you going into the Holland Tunnel."

"They hold you up a minute for the toll, and that's about as long as this'll take."

Chuck fidgeted, mopped his forehead. "Let's drive around the town half an hour or so, come back again after it's already open. It gets me nervous standing still waiting like this."

The driver glanced up into their mirror. "Too late now, we've been blocked off behind. We can't back out of line, there's other cars behind us."

Chuck gave a sudden jolt, as though something had just occurred to him. His

face paled. "What about the picture on the driver's license? It's his, isn't it?"

"I fixed that long ago, like we originally planned to. With that one of my own, and a couple of strips of gelatine-paper to hold it in place where his was before. It's good enough to pass at a quick glance."

A small current of early-morning air stirred along the approaches to the bridge. Chuck grimaced. "There comes that funny smell again. I thought we'd lost it—"

"The barrier's down. Here we go." The line of cars started to creep forward with little spurts and stalls, as each successive one cleared the customs booth at the entrance to the bridge. "Now don't act nervous. It'll only take a minute."

Chuck lit a cigarette, leaned back against the seat. "Okay," he said reassuringly out of the corner of his mouth. "I'm steadied up now."

They shifted slightly forward, stopped again. The Oklahoma plates in front of them cleared onto the bridge. They shifted once more, stopped for the last time.

An armed guard approached. "Driver's license?"

The driver handed it over.

He scanned it. "You Kern?"

"That's me."

He passed it back. "What's the nature of this trip?"

"Business."

"Who's that with you?"

"My business-associate, Charles Kendall." He did the talking for Chuck.

"Exit permit?"

'Kern' handed that over too. He glanced at it, tendered it back. He raised his arm, about to pass them through the soldiers doing sentry-duty further along on the bridge. 'Kern' relaxed his foot on the clutch, ready to roll forward as soon as the signal was completed. A little stale air that Chuck had been holding down in his lungs seeped up and out with relief.

"Carrying any short-wave radios, binoculars, cameras, anything like that?"

"Nope, just as we are," the driver said affably.

"Okay, let's have a look in your rumble a minute, and you can be on your way."

The driver fumbled unexcitedly in his clothes, produced Kern's keyholder,

handed it over. "That one there," he said. "Help yourself."

The customs guard drifted back out of sight.

"We never looked in it ourselves," Chuck murmured. "Suppose he does find a camera or something—"

"They'll confiscate it and send us on without it. But don't worry, he won't. Here comes the all-clear—"

A gun suddenly poked in at them. Behind it the grim face of the customs guard looked a little greenish. Chuck clawed for the door on his side. A second gun poked in from there, with another guard behind it. A whistle blew and a squad of soldiers came up, rifles at ready.

"Turn off and drop out of line; drive back the other way!" was the order barked. Two of the armed men mounted the car, to see that it was carried out.

"Now get out of there, you two! With your hands over your heads, both of you! You're under arrest!"

"For what— What about—?" stammered the driver as he stepped out, palms tilted. Chuck followed him a moment later, white in the face and weak at the knees.

The familiar, foul odor that had been haunting them for so long seemed to swirl over them overpoweringly.

"For that," said the customs guard with a rearward stab of his thumb.

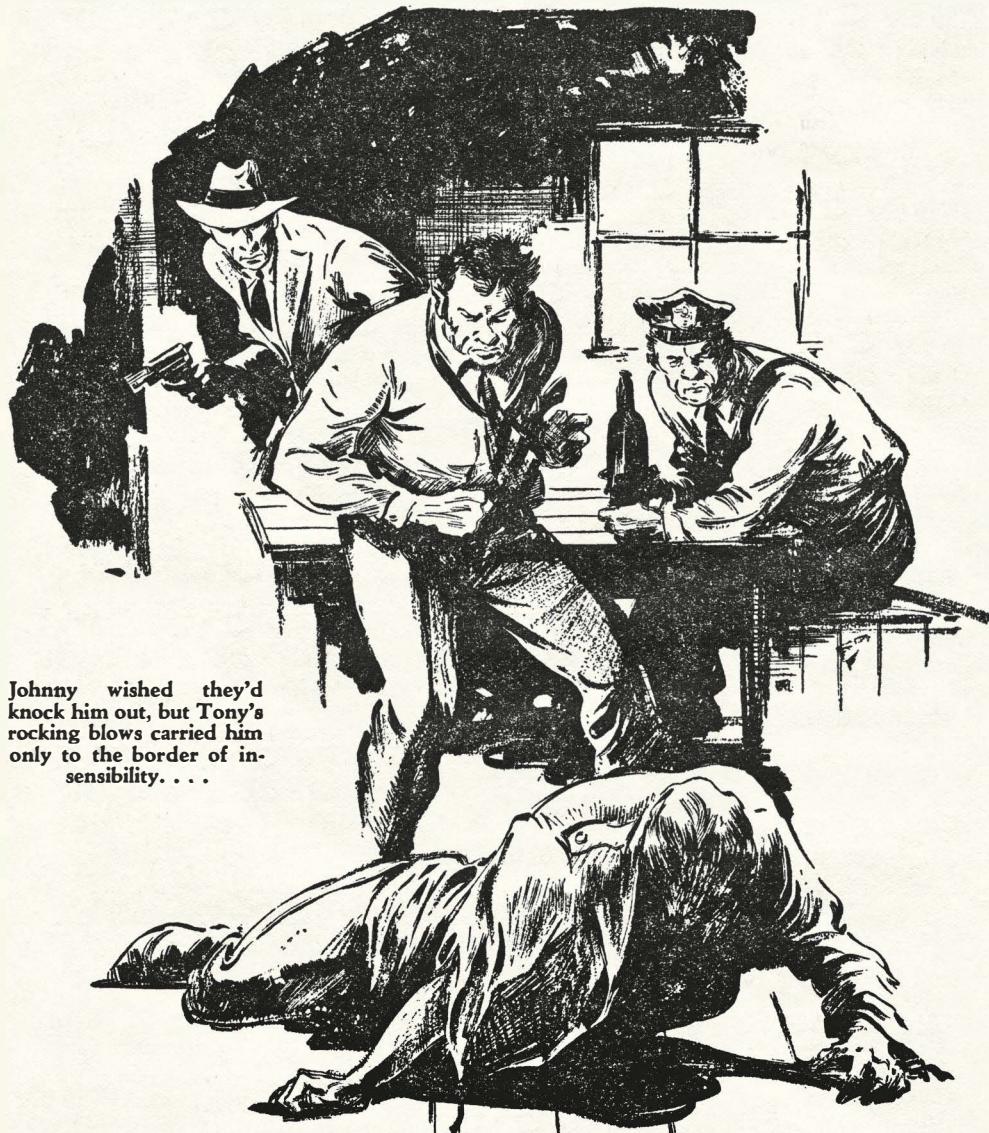
Out of the opened rumble, like a ghastly jack-in-the-box, reared the already badly decomposing head and shoulders of a woman neither of them had ever seen before.

In the cell where they were being held awaiting removal back to Pennsylvania to face murder charges, Chuck looked up hopelessly after awhile. "What hurts most about it," he lamented bitterly, "is they didn't get us for what we done ourselves, but for what that other guy done! They haven't found out about us, even yet! They're going to take us back and fry us for murder, and we can't prove we didn't do it!"

His head dropped into his hands again with a shudder. "That was an inheritance, all right! We not only inherited his car and his identity-papers and his money, we inherited his murder along with it! Some legacy, that was! Some bequest!"

# Evolution of a Hero

By HENRY NORTON



Johnny wished they'd knock him out, but Tony's rocking blows carried him only to the border of insensibility. . . .

*John Carr knew it was a fool's promise, because it was one two men had to keep. Yet it was a promise, and Johnny would die before he'd break it!*

**T**ONY hit him again, so hard his teeth rattled, and blood started trickling from the corner of his mouth. He was already dazed.

"All right, talk," said Dannaher, "was it a tip?"

Johnny Carr, slumped against the warehouse wall, wondered if this beating would

go on forever. He wished they'd slip and knock him out, but Tony's rocking blows carried him only to the border of insensibility, leaving him to struggle up to red-streaked consciousness. With each blow Tony's even teeth showed in a thin-lipped grin. Next to murder, Tony Dalamater liked torture best.

"Hell, lemme burn his feet, boss," he suggested.

Johnny wondered how much he could stand. His uniform was in tatters from the beating he'd taken. They'd jumped him about eight . . . no telling how long he'd been knocked out. The shadows in the warehouse gave no clue; maybe it had been hours. Molly would be worried by now.

She was a cop's wife and a cop's daughter, so she wouldn't make a fuss. But she'd be worried anyway. He remembered once he'd been four hours late, after a riot call from the Arsenal picket line. He'd found her bending over little Tom's crib, and there were wet spots on the baby's sleeping suit . . . wet spots where even a baby couldn't make a wet spot. Yes, she'd be worried.

Dannaher leaned down and slapped his eyes open.

"Come to the party, copper," he said.

Tony's Luger glimmered in his hand, and Johnny knew the salty, numbing taste of impending death. This was going to be tough on Molly, he thought. And the little guy, just getting to recognize his daddy . . . watching for him at the window every evening. Yeah, tough, but an end to agony. An end to Tony's rocking blows; an end to the pain of seeing Tom Gilfoyle across the room.

Gilfoyle cut in now, thick-tongued from drink. He sounded scared, and Johnny tried to make that add up to something. But it was hard to think.

"There wasn't any tip, Jerry," said Tom Gilfoyle. He stood up, holding the table for support. "He just come along by accident. There wasn't any tip."

Tom stopped, and his hand fumbled with the whiskey bottle. Jerry Dannaher looked at Johnny Carr.

"How about it?" he asked softly.

Johnny's bloody lips moved. "Well," he began. He paused. His mind kept slipping back, away from him.

**D**ELANCEY STREET. The jagged skyline of hundreds of scabrous tenements, huddled together between dirty streets. You played in those streets, for there was no other place to play. You learned to hide when the ball crashed through a window, for that meant trouble with Gilfoyle, the cop on the beat. You learned to swipe anything that was lying around loose. Fruit from Guiseppe's corner stand. Once the haul included a fresh pineapple, and Johnny could still remember its disappointing sour taste. But it was something to eat, and everybody on Delancey was always a little hungry. The kids grew up tough, or they didn't grow up at all.

Johnny grew up. A little skinny, maybe, but tough and strong, and wise in the lawless ways of survival. He learned early that laws and rules were made by people who had things. Theirs was the song and dance about fighting fair, and sportsmanship. Why? Because they wanted to keep what they had. If you started from Delancey Street, you fought for what you got. You gouged, and you bit, and you used a knee in the groin, but you got what you went after. Forget the rules and laws. You had two strikes on you anyway, just coming from Delancey street.

He learned fast. He was well on his way to being a shrewd and hardened savage. Then, as savages have always done, he fashioned a god for himself. His god wore brass buttons and carried a night-stick and stopped one rainy night to stand beside Johnny in a dark store entrance.

"Waitin' for somebody?" asked Tom Gilfoyle.

"What's it to you?" asked Johnny Carr.

"It was in my mind," Tom said, "that you might come down and watch the boys work out in the police gym."

"I don't like cops," said Johnny.

"I don't like all of 'em myself," said Gilfoyle, "but there'll be a shooting match plus a couple of good bouts tonight. You might learn something about scrappin'."

Johnny squirmed. It was almost time for Red and Louie to drive by, and that was his cue to make a phone call. A call that would take a night watchman out of his routine path long enough to give the boys an opening.

"I got something to do," he said uneasily.

"You're goin' with me, now," said Gilfoyle.

Johnny went. Half against his will, he had a swell time. Those big tough monkeys played for keeps. Imagine two cops trying to knock each other's head off, just for fun. Regular boxing rules, too. And shoot. They could blow the wings off a fly at sixty yards. And when they shot, they were on the right side of the law. Johnny thought about that, hard. He'd mention it to Louie.

He didn't mention it to Louie. When they left the police gym at midnight, the cop showed him a night extra. Louie was dead. He'd tried to shoot his way out of a blind alley. Johnny thought of the marksmanship he'd just seen, and his stomach crawled. Louie hadn't had a chance. And Red was being held for killing the watchman when he surprised them in their robbery.

"You were headed for that," said Gilfoyle.

Some hitherto unused part of Johnny's brain began working. He knew a break when he had one shoved at him.

"Why'd you do it?" he asked.

"I don't know," Tom said frankly. "You just didn't belong in that league. You aren't tough like those punks."

"You don't know nothing about me."

"Oh, don't I?" grinned Tom.

Johnny quaked inwardly. What was this, a build-up to a pinch? Maybe they had the goods on him, maybe . . . then Gilfoyle laughed, and slapped the thin shoulders.

"I know this much about you, Johnny. I know you've got the makings of a good man in you. Maybe even, some day, the makings of a good cop."

"Me, a cop?"

"Kick the idea around a bit," said Gilfoyle.

Johnny thought, slowly and carefully, keeping his eyes on Tom's face.



A SLAP brought him spinning back to the present. Tom's face was heavier, redder now than it had been then. Somehow, they were on oppo-

site sides of the fence again. He was Tom, and Tom was . . . if he could just get it all straight in his head. Dannaheer sounded far away.

"If it was a squeal, I know where it came from."

"Yeah, that's right," rasped Tony De-lamater.

Tony was glaring at Tom Gilfoyle, and the old man's face paled with strain. His voice cracked audibly when he finally spoke.

"Believe me, Jerry, it's no squeal. He's my son-in-law. He come by to visit with me. It's just happened to be tonight. I didn't sell you, Jerry. Ask Johnny there—he'll tell you. Go on and tell him, Johnny."

Jerry Dannaheer hesitated, and looked at John Carr.

"Well, son-in-law, start telling," he said.

"Don't rush me," mumbled Johnny. "I'm thinking."

You walk up to a door, he was thinking, and it opens, and there you are. No warning, no hint the day will be different from any other. He remembered he'd worn his new uniform. Being on the force had filled him out. Those skinny shoulders were husky now. He'd rapped on Gilfoyle's door with his club, showing off a little.

But it wasn't Tom who answered. It was Molly, with one pale cheek smudged, and black hair tumbling in her eyes. Johnny might have been a dumb thing, for all the words would come to him. Finally she laughed.

"Come in," she said. "Pop's in the kitchen."

"Why," said Johnny in slow wonder, "it's Molly!"

"You act like you're seeing me for the first time."

Well, yes and no. For five years he'd seen a leggy, coltish little girl who seemed forever belting through the room with a ribboned pigtail, like as not, flying to windward. A slim, serious child, sitting quiet in the big chair, watching with round blue eyes while old Tom put him through his laborious studies in the Police Manual.

Now suddenly she was a slender, love-

ly woman. More than that, Johnny knew, she was the woman. He took off his cap as the corners of her eyes crinkled with her gay smile.

"Remember me? I'm Molly."

"Something new has been added," said Johnny Carr.

How he got through the next hour, or the next month, he was never quite certain. He must have done all right, for it was exactly one month later, with Molly very white and serious beside him, that the flowing litany of the marriage ceremony made them one. The boys from the station were uncomfortable and strange in civilian garb, and Tom Gilfoyle a graying shadow in the background.

Johnny was still dazed, and his mouth sweet-stinging from her wedding kiss, when Tom took him by the arm and led him a little way apart from the reception guests.

"Johnny, keep her happy," he said.

His eyes were unnaturally bright, and his breath was heavily spiced with liquor. A characteristic odor, lately, Johnny thought. Well, that was Tom's problem.

"Don't worry, Pop." He grinned, looking for Molly.

"I mean it, Johnny," said Tom Gilfoyle. "I'd rather be dead than see the girl unhappy."

"Don't worry," John Carr said again.

He tried to say the rest with the hard, quick squeeze he gave the old man's arm as they left for the honeymoon. Tom Gilfoyle was a lonely figure, waving goodbye from the porch. But what time was that to wonder how the echoes sounded in that house, with Molly gone?

Molly cried that night. Johnny woke in

the deep black of night to hear her sobbing quietly beside him. He turned to her and the taste of salt was on her lips.

"Because I'm so happy, Johnny," she whispered.

It didn't make a great deal of sense to Johnny, but he tried to understand how being happy could make a woman cry. Molly tried to help him understand.

"I've been lucky with my men-folks, darling. Pop's been so fine, so good to me. And now I've got a husband who—well, I'm just a lucky gal, that's all."

He patted her shoulder, because there was nothing he could say in answer.

"Johnny, it'll always be like this, won't it?"

"Course it will, Molly. That's a promise."

It was a fool's promise, for it was a promise two men had to keep.

**W**HEN that promise was endangered first, Molly probably didn't know it. She must have noticed that Tom didn't take much interest in the little guy named after him. But Molly could not know the things Johnny saw from day to day at precinct headquarters. He didn't talk about them to her, for there was very little to be sure about. But in time the sum of things added to a hateful certainty.

There was the matter of Tom's drinking. Somewhere, some time, he crossed a line. Just because you happen to be a cop doesn't mean you can't drink. But it does mean you can't let it interfere with being a good cop. Tom let it interfere, plenty. Nothing was said, of course, for you don't read schoolboy lectures to

**NO FINER DRINK... for Salesgirl—or Sailor**



a man with Gilfoyle's service record. But word got around.

Johnny didn't know what was making his father-in-law drink, but he didn't figure very hard. If a guy broke his leg, you didn't waste time wondering how it happened. Johnny developed the habit of waiting till Tom came off duty, then asking him out to the house, occupying as much of his time as possible. As time went on, most often it didn't work. Gilfoyle would have some lame excuse. Carr almost tailed him one night, then thought better of it.

"What the hell," he said, "the guy's of age."

That wasn't the answer. Johnny knew it when he said it. He knew it better two weeks later when Captain Lane called him into the precinct office. Lane was wiry, lean, almost dapper. He opened up without preamble.

"Johnny, what's the matter with Tom Gilfoyle?"

"Ask him," said Johnny sullenly.

"Look," said Lane in a curiously gentle voice, "Tom and I were rookies together. I'll go to the bridge for him, any day. But I've got to know what's wrong."

Johnny hesitated. Maybe Lane was on the level, and maybe he was trying to pin something on Gilfoyle. It was bad either way, so Johnny played for time.

"Maybe he takes a drop too much now and then—"

Lane smacked the desk with his palm.

"Forget that! Where's he getting the dough?"

"What dough?" asked Johnny in honest puzzlement.

"Big dough, Johnny," Lane said. He could trust this square-faced cop, he figured. "Nothing he could scrape together on his salary. Important money."

Ever since he'd known Tom, Johnny could remember the old man's gentle beefing about expenses, about making a Civil Service salary cover the cost of raising a girl and running a house. To his knowledge, Gilfoyle had never had more than a couple of hundred dollars at a time.

"Anybody die and leave him money?"

"Come to think of it," said Johnny, "he had an uncle or a brother—I think it was in Canada—died a while back. That's probably it."

"You're a pretty lousy liar," the captain said.

"Maybe he hit a daily double."

"Well, did he?"

The two men stared at each other a moment, and it was Lane who turned away. Once when he was young he had seen that look on his mother's face, the day he had refused to go to church with her any more.

"What happens?" asked Johnny finally.

"Nothing official," said Lane. "Nothing unless we have to. He'll wash himself up. They always do if you let 'em alone."

"Suppose I cut myself a chunk of this?"

"It's your baby," said the captain, instantly regretting the unintentional aptness of his remark.

**J**OHNNY had gone from the room then, knowing the thing was in his hands. Involuntarily, he looked at them, strong and square, with a clean whiteness along the edge where the black hair stopped. He flexed his fingers slowly, and watched the knuckles turn hard and pale. His own helplessness was a bitter taste in his mouth.

He got in his car and drove over to Dock Street. Turning south, he was between the blank, even faces of the warehouse district. He turned into the foot of Oak, and his lights swept along both empty sidewalks as he pulled up within ten feet of the call box on the next corner. Tom would be through his round in a few minutes. He'd see if he could get to the bottom of this, some way.

There was a scrabbling at the door of the car, and Johnny looked into a flashlight beam. He sat motionless, both hands on the steering wheel. The light flicked off.

"What are you doing here?" growled Tom Gilfoyle.

"Wanna talk to you," said Johnny. "Is that a crime?"

Gilfoyle shut the door and walked round the car, trying the handle of the turtle-back as he passed. It was locked. He poked his head in Johnny's window and looked at him intently. His breath was heavy with whiskey.

"You come alone?" he asked.

"Since when do I need help to talk to you?"

"Listen, kid," Gilfoyle said, "I'm in no mood for talkin' now. Beat it on home. I'll drop by later."

"What's the matter with now?" asked Johnny.

"Later, I said. Now shove off."

Tom stepped back from the car. Johnny felt his neck grow hot as he pulled back the gear lever. He looked at the gray shimmer of Tom's face, and it was set and hard. Johnny shrugged, and the clutch pedal came up with a jerk.

He rounded the corner and glanced back, his face dark with anger and humiliation. Tom had walked to the edge of the building where he could watch the car out of sight. Johnny drove straight ahead, until the corner had dwindled and vanished behind him. He was tired of being a boy scout. He was going home to Molly and the little guy. This deal was no pansies off his grave.

Tom was up to something. There'd been no sign of him on the sidewalks when Johnny drove up. Yet he had come from behind the car. He must have come out of one of the warehouses in the block, where he had no business being. So what? He wanted Johnny to leave, didn't he?

Remembered scraps of speech came back at him. Molly through a mist of happy tears . . . "It'll always be like this, won't it?" Tom Gilfoyle, slow and earnest . . . "rather be dead than see the girl unhappy." And John Carr knew, beyond denial, that a fool's promise is none the less a promise . . . knew there are ways a man must act . . . simply because he is a man.

He turned to the right, then right again, and stopped his car presently two blocks from the corner he had left. He walked the remaining distance, keeping in the heavy shadows close to the buildings. The door must be close to the corner. He slowed, then stopped.

A sound had reached him. It had been no more than a vagrant murmur, seeming to come from deep inside the warehouse. Johnny knelt. The crack beneath the door was a shade paler than the surrounding blackness. The sound came again. His gun was in his right hand. He placed his left palm flat against the door and pushed.

The musky odor of stored furs assailed his nostrils as he slipped inside. The noise had stopped, but he could see a light filtering around the corner of what was evidently an office partition. He took two cautious steps and then there was a soft shuffling behind him. He whirled, caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure advancing. The upraised arm came down, and he parried too late. Consciousness dissolved in an explosion of pain within his skull.

HE COULD feel the strength flowing back into him now, as the waves of talk washed around him. He was acutely aware of the present situation. The hazy memories were slipping away. He was beginning to see his way now, step by step. Dannaher slapped him again, and he let his head roll.

"Time's up, copper," said Dannaher. Tom Gilfoyle spoke again, rapidly.

"Listen, Jerry. Why don't you put the kid to work, too? You could use him in your business. The kid's smart."

Dannaher's eyes were bright with thought. The little killer, Tony, still crouched by Johnny, but his attention wavered toward Gilfoyle. Tom waited a minute, then began talking again.

"Do I have to draw you a picture?" he said bitterly. "Work it on the kid the way you did on me. Get him drunk, then frame a job on him."

He's talking to me, thought Johnny Carr. He isn't talking to Dannaher, he's talking to me. That's how it happened.

Jerry's head swiveled toward Johnny Carr, and his look was speculative. Johnny rolled himself painfully up on one elbow, and Tony slipped back out of reach, his gun dangling loosely in his fingers. Johnny's bruised mouth fashioned the crooked semblance of a grin.

"Lay off, Tom, it's no use," he said, and paused. When he spoke again, his words came with a stronger rush. "How much of that did you swallow, Dannaher?"

Tony scowled at Gilfoyle, but none of the three men moved. Johnny sat up, taking his time.

"Sure it was a tip," he continued raspingly. "We got a call at precinct headquarters that you were gonna clean this warehouse, tonight."

His heavy breathing was the only sound in the room.

"You thought I was alone, when Tom brushed me off the first time, didn't you? Well, I was alone then, but not now!"

Tony's eyes flickered toward the big door.

"Who phoned the tip?" asked Danna-her softly.

"Don't be a sucker," said Johnny. "Gilfoyle!"

The name was a shout, and Tom Gilfoyle tensed.

In the aching silence that followed his shout, Johnny studied his father-in-law, and he thought he could sense what Tom was thinking.

He was thinking that this was an end. An end to a boy's worshipping eyes, and an end to the jovous hug a daughter gives the dad she loves; an end to the squeeze of five tiny fingers around one big stubby one. There was an end for good cops, and for bad ones. . . . If Tom was reflecting thus, anything might happen. Suddenly Tom's big frame quivered. And Johnny knew he was right.

"You lying rat!" Tom bellowed, and gained thereby the time he needed.

The whiskey bottle spun from his fingers. It shattered heavily. Tony gave a strangled cry and fell backward, his face half torn away. Danna-her's heavy gun spoke twice as Johnny came to his feet. Then Johnny's lunging dive went home, and the two men rolled over and over.

Johnny was giving away twenty pounds to Danna-her, and his head still rang from his beating. The gunman rained blows on his face and neck. Johnny's clawing hands went upward. They found Danna-her's face, and he screamed as a thumb tore at his eye.

They came to their feet, and Johnny landed as they closed, feeling teeth crumble under his fist. Danna-her went down, and Johnny dived for him. His left arm went under Jerry's neck, and his right hand clung to the other's chin. All the hurt and hatred in him went into that shove, straining till he felt the neck bones crack against his arm.

Johnny Carr stood up slowly. Tony was moving a little, trying to sit up, trying to clear the streaming blood from his eyes.

Carr leaned down and shoved him back, then reached in the killer's pocket and reclaimed his Police Positive. He saw with grim satisfaction that Tony would be dead in a few minutes.

He bent over Gilfoyle. Both of Danna-her's slugs had torn through his chest.

"Tom, we made it," he said gently.

As Johnny spoke, Tom's eyes rolled to look at him. For an instant they were bright, understanding, purposeful, but only for an instant.

**C**APTAIN LANE was in the first car to arrive, and he stared for a moment at the three bodies without speaking. Then he turned and looked at Johnny Carr.

"We've been wanting those two."

"You've got 'em," Johnny said.

"There's a citation in it for you."

"For Tom Gilfoyle," said Johnny Carr.

Lane walked deliberately across the warehouse floor. He knelt by Gilfoyle's body, observing the unbuttoned coat, aware of the sour smell of whiskey. He stood up and looked at Johnny's battered face and torn uniform.

"Tom was a good cop once," he said.

"Like this," breathed Johnny. "Tom was a good cop."

The room was filling. A photographer's flash bulb spread a white light over the still bodies on the floor. The medical examiner came and went.

The captain sighed. He looked at old Tom, and at Johnny, and at other men of the department. He wore the expression of a man bearing the responsibilities of a very large family—but a man who would stand by them to the end. He nodded slowly. "Tom was a good cop."

He turned away, and Johnny felt the weight of his injuries on him like a sudden load. He would go home now, and tell Molly that her father was dead. He would tell her Tom Gilfoyle had died a hero, in more than faithful performance of duty. Some day little Tom would play with a shining medal, to remind him of his grandad.

Johnny Carr shivered a little as he walked into the night air. It was going to be tough, telling Molly. But it could have been a lot tougher.

# ODDITIES IN CRIME

BY JON L. BLUMMER



Investigating "just another hit-and-run case," the police laid bare a brutal murder that shocked all San Francisco. The crushed body of Mrs. Hughes lay on the curb, just as if she had been struck down by a speeding car, but sharp-eyed Detective Capt. Dullea noticed no broken glass about and looked for further clues. What he found startled him —there were tire marks on the victim's dress but not on her sweater! She had been run over first and the sweater put on afterwards! Frank Egan, well-known Public Defender of the city, became a suspect because he had been made beneficiary of Mrs. Hughes' life insurance, but he had an airtight alibi. However, after painstaking search, the death car was found and the owner told of having loaned it to an ex-convict employee of Egan! But still no real proof! When the cops made it appear that the ex-con would have to take the rap for the job by himself, he confessed, implicating Egan and another man—the three paid for their almost perfect crime.



Basing his demands on an alleged grant made by King Ferdinand VI of Spain, James Reavis laid claim to millions of acres of valuable Arizona land. The documents he displayed to support his claim were accepted as authentic by many "experts" and he was paid huge sums of money for the use of the land. But his nemesis came in the person of a small-town printer who proved that the "ancient" papers had been printed with a type designed just a short time before!



A gang of bootleggers bribed a printer and obtained the original plates used in making labels for a rare and costly perfume. Soon they had flooded the market with a bottle that looked exactly like the original but contained a cheap substitute. It was a perfect job of counterfeiting—except for one thing—in printing the phoney labels the crooks had used an ink that to the naked eye was identical with the original, but under a scientific sleuth's ultra violet ray apparatus the two labels glowed with entirely different lights, quickly unmasking the fake. The perfumer soon weeded out all the counterfeit bottles on the market with an ultra violet lamp, and the cops broke up the gang.

The captain of a ship, suspecting some passengers of playing with marked cards, helped to uncover one of the cleverest gambling plots on record. The ringleader, posing as a manufacturer, had sold the steamship company a supply of cards which had secret markings on the backs known only to the gang. Whenever things became a little too "hot" during a game, the crooks merely ordered a new pack from the steward and continued their "taking ways" having completely disarmed the suspicions of the suckers.



# REUNION IN TERROR

*It was a desperate, heart-breaking trade that Cora made to save the life of John Cordner, her husband. But John, his hair white from grief and unbearable torment, his soul filled with hate, came back across the world to write off the grim transaction . . . in blood!*



One of the men held Cora. The other raised his gun and fired at the two men on the ground.

*A pulse-stirring novelette of human bondage!*

**By DON JAMES**



## CHAPTER ONE

### Home From Hell

**Y**OU noticed his eyes first. They were cold and without expression. Then you saw the brown skin, the whiplash body, the height. If he took off his hat, his white hair startled you because he was too young for white hair. Immediately you thought of an illness, or a moment of extreme shock.

His name was John Cordner. Illness and hardships and things that can happen to a man accounted for the white hair. And especially the year of illness after the tramp steamer had left the steaming port.

There was an American woman who ran a tropical honky tonk. There was a room with bamboo screens and a rum soaked doctor. The American woman, named Sadie, immense in size, devoid of morals or fear, had nursed John Cordner through his illness and later loaned him the money for the passage home.

"You did a lot of talking while you were delirious, John Cordner," she said. "There was a woman named Cora and a man named Stanton. You talked about them. You talked about 'the stones' and sometimes you screamed."

That was the day before he left. He listened to her, sipping beer, his eyes without expression.

Sadie wiped her large face and stared beyond him into the white heat of the street. "You have round, small scars on your belly." She glanced at him. "A burning cigarette end could do that."

Thoughtfully he put his glass down.

"A cigarette did," he said.

Sadie drank of her beer.

"So there were stones and a man and a woman. Maybe the man wanted the stones and the cigarette helped to make you tell where they were. The woman—maybe you loved her. Maybe there was something there, too."

"There was," he said. "She was my wife. But you're wrong. I didn't tell him where they were. *She* did."

Sadie's eyes were shrewd. "A woman sometimes can't stand seeing her man tortured."

"You're guessing a lot, Sadie."

"Guessing right?"

"Maybe."

He couldn't talk about it.

They were silent and finally Sadie moved her large body and stood. She looked down at the white-haired man.

"Well, you wouldn't stay here, anyhow. You've got enough dough to get you home and see you through for a while. If you ever want to come back—everything's on the house. You know that."

For the first time expression came to his eyes. He smiled unexpectedly and gently. He spoke softly:

"This is a good time to tell you how much I appreciate everything you've done for—"

Sadie turned and walked away.

"Go to hell," she said over her shoulder. "A woman's got a right to be a sucker once in a while, hasn't she?"

Staring into the glass, John Cordner remembered how it had been. Large, broad Clip Stanton and the three men with him. The car parked in the darkness. The sound of crickets, the brightness of stars. The feel of summer air as they ripped the clothing away. The first agonizing pain as the glowing cigarette tip burned into tender skin. Cora's scream, and her attempt to escape from the man who held her.

Stanton's voice: "The stones, Cordner! Where are they?"

John Cordner was bringing the dia-

monds from New York to the eccentric, wealthy Burley Hale, his employer. Hale collected diamonds with a collector's fervor.

It was Cora, sobbing hysterically, who told them about the secret compartment in her luggage where the diamonds were concealed.

Then there was Stanton's order to kill and Cora's pleas for her husband. The sudden appreciation in Stanton's eyes as he stared at the attractive young woman. Then the suggestion that sickened John Cordner and made him struggle vainly and madly to get at the large man's throat.

The agony in Cora's eyes as she stared at him and the tears. The barely audible word of assent and John Cordner's scream of rage that was cut short by something in a man's hand that cracked against Cordner's temple.

He remembered awakening on the small steamer that smelled of cattle and filth; the long days and nights at sea; the long voyage on a ship without radio. The newspaper that reached a foreign port weeks before the tramp steamer arrived. The headline: "COUPLE FLEES WITH DIAMONDS," and no mention of Stanton, only the missing couple, John and Cora Cordner, and the diamonds. Police are searching.

It was shortly after that when the illness came and the long, confused months at Sadie's, the clouded mind and weak, fever-stricken body.

With the memory of those months came the memory of Cora, the youthfulness of her body, the fine breeding in her face, the soft, brown hair, the steady eyes.

He clenched a fist. Sometimes the worry and fear and hate obscured the memories and there was only fear of what had happened after they'd dumped him aboard the cattle boat. The uncertainty of not knowing; the gnawing, hammering questions . . .

Restlessly he went to his room to pack.

+ + +

**C**ORA had changed. The soft brown hair had become a golden yellow. Her eyes had a new hardness. The youthful figure still was perfect and too well revealed in smart sports clothes.

Sitting at a secluded table in the cocktail lounge, John Cordner stared at her, shaken by emotions that the sight of his wife had brought.

Slowly color returned beneath his skin's burned brown, his lips became less tense, his eyes became calm and without fire. It had taken two months after he had left Sadie's to find Stanton—and Cora.

She sat with Stanton at the bar. People had spoken as they entered, the bartender's service had been directed completely to the man and woman.

That was natural. The cocktail lounge belonged to Clip Stanton. The huge, sprawling hotel on the rim of the desert belonged to Stanton. The elite gambling rooms where Hollywood money mixed with Wall street money, were Stanton's. The expensive, colorful resort, buildings and stables, all were Stanton's. The small town that had grown nearby, the gift shops, clothing stores, eating places, tourists camps for the less wealthy, were his.

"A half million dollars in diamonds," John Cordner thought. "It could buy this and more."

But John Cordner's life had bought the woman for Stanton!

Cora glanced in his direction. He saw her eyes pass over him without recognition. It was the white hair, he thought. It had been coal black that night when Stanton used a cigarette. His complexion had been pale. He had been heavier. And Cora would not expect to see him here.

She was smiling now as two men approached the couple. The smile was sure and wise. There was insinuating glamour in it. For a second, John Cordner felt that she was no longer Cora, that a subtle, permanent change had made her into someone else.

Anger returned as he looked at Stanton. Instinctively he pressed his bicep against the holstered gun slung high near the armpit under his coat.

Black Mike, Sadie's assistant, had shown him how to carry it, how to use it. Black Mike had shown him many things learned from a hundred free-for-alls and a dozen killings.

Cordner thought how easy it would be to pull the gun, take careful aim and send lead smashing into Stanton's thick body.

He drank quickly to stop the thought

and was surprised that his hand did not tremble.

This was the woman he had come to take away, and this was the man he had come to kill.

The couple and the two men were chatting at the bar. Stanton's attitude toward Cora was possessive and sure. Once her hand rested lightly on his arm as they laughed.

The gesture tied a cold, hard knot deep within Cordner.

He hurriedly stood and left the lounge. Outside in the late afternoon sun, he stared for a long time at the desert vista, but his eyes were clouded and his breath was slow and deep with tension.

"Tonight," he thought. "I'll wait until tonight."

He did not hear the soft step behind him, or see the man, until he felt something round and hard pressed into the small of his back.

"Hello, Cordner," a voice said quietly. "Keep your hands in sight and everything will be fine. I'll put this gun away. Right?"

Cordner stiffened and nodded. He felt the man step back from him. He turned and faced a middle aged man, lithe and competent in appearance.

Cordner knew him. Sam Delock was special investigator for the insurance company that carried the largest part of Burley Hale's insurance. The company undoubtedly had taken a huge loss in the diamond theft.

Delock smiled thinly. "I've been looking a long time, Cordner."

He glanced at the white hair. "You couldn't bleach it that white," he said.

Cordner kept his hands loosely at his sides. Seeing Delock was a shock. He tried to be casual.

"It's not bleached, Delock. There's a story that goes with it."

Delock's eyebrows went up slightly. One hand made a bulge in his jacket pocket and Cordner knew that the fingers gripped a gun.

He thought rapidly, weighing what he could say.

"I'd like to tell that story."

"You couldn't make it good enough, Cordner."

"It won't hurt you to listen."

"There's a D.A. on the coast who might listen."

Cordner thought of the small, round scars. "A cop likes evidence," he said. "I might have it."

Delock's expression was inscrutable, but the tightness of his mouth relaxed a trifle. He stared into Cordner's eyes.

"I'll listen," he said finally. "But not because you sold me the idea. Maybe I have a reason of my own."

"My room?" Cordner asked.

Delock shook his head. "Mine. I play best on my home grounds."

## CHAPTER TWO

Cora

CORDNER entered Delock's hotel room first. Instantly he felt the small, round hardness at his back again. Delock's hand skillfully slipped beneath Cordner's coat and removed the gun. He motioned to a chair.

"Sit down," he said. "I'll hear you out."

Earnestly, John Cordner told the story, but it was not the complete story.

"I couldn't stand the cigarette burns," he lied. "I told them."

Delock watched him steadily.

"What happened to your wife?" he asked.

Cordner took a cigarette from a table near his side. Deliberately he lit it.

"I don't know," he said.

He could not tell Delock about the grisly bargain Stanton had made, or of his wife's sacrifice.

"No?" Delock's smile mocked him.

"No."

Delock erased the smile and was thoughtful.

"It's a good story," he said. "It's screwy enough to be true. You lied in a place or two. For instance, you know where your wife is. She's downstairs in the cocktail lounge with Stanton. Do you want to tell me what happened?"

"No."

"I might guess."

"You might guess wrong."

Delock shook his head. "I might not. She wouldn't be the first woman who went overboard for a man—to save her husband's life."

Cordner looked at him sharply and a faint hope stirred within him.

"Then you believe this?"

"I didn't say that. But maybe I do. I've been here a month. Does that mean anything?"

"You could be watching Stanton."

"That's right. I met your wife in New York once. Remember? I don't forget faces or people. A month ago I stopped here for a few days' rest. I saw her and I remembered her, in spite of the blonde hair. I decided to stay a while."

"Then you've discovered something?" Cordner asked tensely.

"Not a damned thing."

Delock lit a cigarette. "You mentioned evidence."

Silently Cordner stood and stripped to the waist. Delock looked at the small scars. For moments he seemed to debate a question in his mind and then he shook his head.

"Whether I believe you or not doesn't make much difference. I've got to take you in."

Cordner was slipping into his shirt, his right hand coming through the sleeve. The words brought a quick flash of apprehension. What D.A. would believe the story? How could he prove anything except through the flimsiness of the scars as evidence? Or could he bring himself to tell the D.A., or a jury, or the world, about Cora's sacrifice?

Under his shirt his shoulder muscles tightened as he brought the arm through the sleeve. His fist doubled. He struck hard and squarely so that his knuckles cracked with pain. Delock went down.

Quickly Cordner finished dressing. He retrieved his gun and slipped it into the holster. Delock was motionless on the floor, his breathing heavy.

Cordner looked down at him and rubbed his knuckles. It was the first time he ever had knocked a man down. His life until that night many months ago, had been routine, as any private secretary's. He felt a sudden elation. He had learned Black Mike's lessons well!

Speedily he ripped a sheet into strips to bind and gag the detective.

He left the room and went to his own. There was little time left. He packed his single bag and took it downstairs. He

checked out and placed the bag in the small, second hand coupe he had bought.

He returned to the cocktail lounge and as he entered he quickly turned his head away.

Burley Hale passed by him without a glance!

The millionaire looked unchanged. Tall, lanky, he carried himself with a stiff erectness and walked with a swinging stride. His eyes were straight ahead, ignoring everything about him. His lips were a thin line, ominous beneath the long nose and dark eyes.

**H**E WAS fifty years old and looked forty. No one knew how he had earned his money. He was hard, secretive and unbending. His life was as mysterious as the source of his original income.

In the three years of employment with him, John Cordner had learned little more than anyone else. His duties had been confined solely to routine work. John never had discovered the original source of the millions.

Thankful that Hale made it a point not to notice those about him, Cordner took a secluded table and ordered a drink.

A vague uneasiness disturbed him. It was quite possible that Hale was at the resort for a vacation, but somewhere there might be a link. Had Delock sent for him? He might want Hale to identify Cora.

He glanced at the bar. Cora and Stanton still were there. At the far end of the bar, two men drank. They were the men who had held him while Stanton had used the cigarette. A film of red clouded Cordner's eyes for a second. He looked away quickly.

He had thought it out during the voyage home. There had been a choice. He could find Cora and they could tell what had happened, try to convict Stanton for the diamond theft, and clear themselves.

That was one solution. A solution that became weak as he thought about a doubting D.A., a jury, and what Cora would be dragged through.

The other solution had been the answer to him. He told himself that he had a right to avenge the things Stanton had done. The diamonds were immaterial.

Money, wealth, material gain, were unimportant. Stanton had taken Cora under threat of her husband's life. Any husband had the right to kill for that!

Upstairs Delock was bound and gagged. John Cordner had to act fast and decisively. He must avoid Burley Hale. The millionaire might recognize him if there were a moment for scrutiny.

He lowered his gaze. Cora was leaving the bar and walking toward an outside exit. Stanton talked with the bartender.

Cordner glanced around. Another exit at his end of the room opened to the side of the building where Cora would leave.

He left money on the table and quietly left. He caught a glimpse of Cora and followed her through a landscaped area to a secluded cottage some distance from the hotel.

She seemed unaware that she was being followed. She did not look back as she went into the cottage, but she left the door open, probably to catch the slight breeze that had sprung up.

Blood pounded in Cordner's throat as he approached the house. His hand neared the door bell button and then dropped. She was his wife.

He walked into the house.

Cora stood at a table in a spacious living room, lighting a cigarette. She was not aware of his presence until he spoke.

"Cora!" he said.

Her eyes lifted from the burning match and she stared at him. With a small, unconscious motion she put the match and cigarette in an ash tray, her eyes slowly widening, color draining from her face.

"John . . ." Her voice was a throaty whisper. Suddenly she trembled.

+ + +

**C**ORDNER took a step toward her, but stopped when he saw the uplifted motion of her arm, the way she drew back.

He laughed softly. "My hair," he said. "I've changed. There's a great deal to tell you. But I'm back, Cora! We're going to get out of here! I've come for you!"

She made an effort to control the trembling and after a few seconds her tight fists opened.

"It's—it's quite a shock, John. I thought—" She shook her head in a helpless gesture.

"We haven't time to talk now," he told her. "There'll be trouble. Pack a bag. We'll leave."

A swift change came over her. The look of surprise and shock disappeared and her lips moved into a queer, twisted smile.

"It's been a long time, John," she said evenly. "A long time and a good many changes."

"We can forget what's happened. What you did to save me—that only makes it stronger."

"You want me now?"

"More than anything."

"What about Stanton?"

His lips became thin. "I intended to kill him. Less than an hour ago, Delock, that special investigator you met in New York, found me. He's been watching you and Stanton. He's tied and gagged in his room. He's resourceful and may be loose. He wants to take me in. I haven't time for Stanton. We'll have to leave at once."

Cora picked up the cigarette and lit it again. Slowly she blew out the match.

"I'm not going with you, John."

He stared at her.

"I don't understand!" he faltered.

She interrupted him.

"Listen, John. I made a bargain that night. I saved your life. I've never regretted that. I loved you. I was your wife. But I made a bargain."

"A bargain like that can't mean anything, Cora! If you think what's happened to you makes a difference to me—"

"Maybe it's made a difference to *me*."

Her words were like a staggering blow to him.

"You mean that you and Stanton...?"

She was completely self-possessed now. Her eyes narrowed as she looked at him.

"I had to make the best of things. The instant that I said 'yes' to Stanton, I knew that our world—yours and mine—was gone forever. But I like life, too! I want to live. I made a bargain and I decided to make the best of it. I have. Clip Stanton has given me the things a man like Stanton can give a woman. In return I've upheld my end of it."

"What can a man like Stanton give any woman?"

She laughed. "That depends upon the woman. I haven't done too badly!"

Cordner's eyes clouded. "You've changed, Cora. You can't mean this!"

"Certainly I've changed! Completely!"

Cordner searched her eyes and saw nothing but faint indifference in them. He started toward her, words coming to his lips in a flood of confused emotions.

He had taken but a few steps when a thin, hard-faced man stepped into the room through an adjoining doorway. He was dressed in slacks and sport shirt. In his hand was a blue steel gun. It was very steady.

"That's all, mister," the man snapped. "You've had your say."

Cordner stopped. Slowly he lifted his hands. The coldness in the man's eyes matched the blue steel of the gun.

Cora smiled as if she found the situation amusing.

"It's all right, Max," she said quietly to the man. "He'll go."

The hard-faced man did not take his eyes from Cordner. He shook his head.

"Sorry, Cora, but the boss better know about this."

The woman shrugged.

The man backed around the room to a telephone. He picked it up, his free hand still holding the gun in its menacing steadiness.

"Stanton," he ordered into the mouth-piece. "Hurry it."

His bleak eyes watched Cordner as he waited.

"Clip? This is Max. There's a white-haired guy here makin' double talk with Cora. He asked her to scram with him. You better come over."

He listened and said "no" twice.

Cora watched him coolly. Cordner thought that some of the color had gone from her cheeks, but her composure remained unshaken.

Max hung up. He walked slowly toward Cordner and stopped two feet away from him.

"Keep your hands high," he warned. His free hand moved swiftly and for the second time Cordner felt his gun being removed from its holster. Max slipped it into a hip pocket and backed away.

"The boss wants to see you," he said grimly.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Escape

**S**O YOU came back," Stanton said. He lounged with one leg draped over a corner of a table. Cordner sat in the chair Max had indicated to him while they waited. Across the room, Cora sat relaxed, a cigarette between fingers. Max still held the gun and stood behind Cordner.

Max had just finished repeating the conversation he had overheard through the open doorway. Stanton had listened quietly. The faint flicker of surprise he had shown when he saw Cordner, had changed to alertness.

Now he gazed thoughtfully at the man he once had tortured.

"So that's what Delock was doing here," he said. "A couple of the boys were suspicious of him."

Cordner didn't answer. The gun in Max's hand, and Stanton, and the situation he was in, were less important at the moment than Cora's attitude. This had been the one answer he had not expected to find.

"Delock's tied and gagged in his room, boss," Max reminded Stanton.

Stanton nodded. He folded his arms and squinted slightly.

"Max, you know that tourist camp twenty miles down the road?"

"Yeah."

"Get a couple of the boys up to watch Delock. When it's dark, take him out of the hotel without being seen—the service elevator to the basement garage. I want Delock in one of those cabins down there."

Max grunted. "How about this mug?" he asked.

"He's going to commit murder," Stanton smiled. "It will be like this: They'll find Delock's body in the cabin with a couple of lead slugs in him. Up the highway a car is going to leave the pavement and roll down the mountain. State cops will find a white-haired guy in it dead. He's going to carry a gun that's been fired. They'll start to wonder and take test shots. They'll find that it was the gun that bumped Delock and figure that the white-haired guy killed him and was making his getaway too fast and went off the highway."

Cordner stiffened. The pattern was clever. They could identify the white-haired man as John Cordner and even the motive for murder would be there. Stanton would eliminate two sources of danger without implicating himself.

Stanton looked at Cora, his eyes piercing.

"You haven't said anything, Cora," he smiled thinly.

Cora put out her cigarette. "A girl can change in a year," she said with a direct look. "Maybe there's nothing important for me to say, Clip. Maybe whatever you want to do is all right with me."

Suddenly Clip Stanton walked to her, the smile unchanging, his eyes hard.

His large hands fastened on her shoulders and he pulled her upright and stared into her face.

Her lips paled a little, but she met his gaze.

"Don't get ideas, Cora," he said softly. "I like things the way they are."

"I know."

"You didn't think of going with him, did you, Cora?"

She shook her head. Stanton's hands were tight on her upper arms and her lips jerked in pain.

"You keep a good bargain," Stanton said. "Show him how you keep a good bargain, Cora!"

Another exciting story by Don James, the author of the story you are now reading, can be found in the September issue of our companion publication, *Ace G-Man Stories*—the magazine of current history and modern mystery which is dedicated to the F.B.I. AT WAR! It's on sale August 7th.

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He pulled her to him and bent his head. She lifted her face, lips loose, body yielding to him in a kiss that was subservient and complete.

Stanton thrust her away and looked at Cordner. He laughed softly.

"Remember how it was, Cordner?" he jeered.

Cordner sprang at him in a white heat of rage. His fist thudded once against Stanton's cheek and then Max was behind him. Max's gun came down in a short arc and cracked sharply against Cordner's skull. He went down.

Very deliberately Stanton kicked him in the ribs.

Cora looked away.



**T**HE noise sounded again. A board creaked and the sound of light breathing came to John Cordner.

It was dark in the room. He had been conscious for some time. His body ached and numbness had spread through hands and feet from the tight bindings that held him.

For seconds now, he had listened intently. Someone moved near him.

Abruptly a faint odor of perfume crept into his nostrils—the perfume Cora used!

He tried to see in the darkness and thought he could distinguish someone approaching him. He mouthed the gag between his teeth and groaned softly. The noise stopped and then cool hands touched his face.

There was brief fumbling and cold metal slipped between the gag and his skin. The gag suddenly was loose. He felt the cold metal on his hands and the bindings parted.

It was Cora and she was cutting him free!

He tried to speak, but her hand immediately covered his mouth.

"They're in the next room," she whispered.

She rubbed circulation into his wrists and hands. His fingers tingled and ached with the return of blood. Finally he flexed his fingers and began to rub his ankles.

"You didn't mean any of that," he whispered. "You knew that Max was in

the room listening. You want to—"

She silenced him again.

"They're taking Delock to the cabin now," she breathed. "They'll come after you soon. You have to get out of here. There's a window and the desert. They won't find you there. You can—"

A door opened suddenly and light came into the room. A man was silhouetted in the doorway. It looked like Max. Someone spoke in back of him and he looked over his shoulder and said, "Go ahead. I'll catch up with you. I want to take a look at the chump and see if he's okay."

A door closed and the man looked into the darkened room.

The fraction of time that he had looked away had been enough. Cordner realized that he was getting a break, that Max would be alone. He had moved quietly to a spot beside the door and as Stanton's assistant turned his head, Cordner struck.

For the second time a man went down under his fist, but the blow had not been solid.

Max reached for a hip pocket as he struggled to get up. Cordner threw his body forward. His fists thudded solidly and after a few seconds he felt Max's body become limp. Cordner took Max's gun and straightened.

Cora was in the doorway, her face without color, her eyes frightened.

"John! Get away. It's your only chance! They'll come back!"

Thought flashed through Cordner's mind in new patterns.

"How much does Max know about Stanton?" he asked.

"Everything. He's Clip's right hand. But you've got to get away—"

Cordner shook his head. "I have a plan," he announced briefly. He stooped and picked up the unconscious man and pitched him over his shoulder.

"There's a back way out of here?" he asked.

Cora nodded and led him to the rear of the cottage. They stepped out into the dark.

"What are you going to do, John? You can't carry him far. Leave him and get away. I'll be all right. I don't think he saw me."

"He saw you," John told her. "I'm sure. Can you get a car?"

**S**HE hesitated and then shook her head. "Clip keeps a man at the garage. I couldn't get one without arousing suspicions. Clip has been liberal, but he never stops watching me. His men have instructions."

They walked through the darkness into the desert. Cordner picked out a clump of desert shrubbery that fringed a ravine. He deposited Max on the floor of the ravine and tore the man's shirt from him and into strips. After moments of swift work, Max was bound and gagged.

When he finished, Cordner looked quietly at the woman.

"There's a lot about this that I don't understand," he said. "Did you know that Max was listening this afternoon?"

"Yes," she told him.

"But all this year—you could have run away, gone to the police—there was an out. What you said about a bargain . . . well, that doesn't hold up, Cora. You had a reason for staying with Stanton. You didn't care anything about him, Cora."

"Stanton has contacts in South America," she said. "He told me that they had you at a place down there. That I'd—well, I'd play his game or you'd never come back."

Cordner swore softly. "They dumped me on a tramp steamer. He lied to you—"

"There was something else," she interrupted. "I hoped always that I'd get some proof—some evidence from him that would clear us. That's another reason why I—I changed."

"The change was on the surface, Cora. Underneath you're as you always were."

She shook her head. "Scars burn deeply sometimes," she said huskily.

Suddenly he kissed her. He felt her lips respond and he laughed in the night.

"We'll take care of scars later," he said.

She was about to speak, but he silenced her.

"Listen," he said, "we're going to take Max with us. We'll make him talk. I think he knows enough to clear us and convict Clip Stanton of all we want without bringing you into the picture much."

She was silent, staring at him, breathing quickly.

"Stanton will have his men looking

for us soon," she said after a moment. "We can't head into the desert with Max. How are we going to get away? They have your car in the garage."

Cordner smiled.

"Burley Hale," he said. "He's here. You probably know that. You can get to him somehow. Explain the whole thing. Hale wanted those diamonds badly. He'll help us."

He felt her hand touch his in the dark.

"I can get to him without being seen," she said, her voice holding hope for the first time. "I'll go at once. He can get his car out. I'll slip out and rejoin you here and we can go down this ravine. It runs near the highway about a mile from here. He can pick us up there in his car. They won't question his leaving."

"Be careful," he cautioned.

"I think that life is going to be too good from here on out not to be careful," she said softly. "I'll make everything up to you, John. I'll—"

He kissed her again.

"I've waited a long time for that," he said, and smiled.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Recapture

**T**HE long wait that Cordner mentioned seemed little longer than the time he now sat anxiously watching the resort lights, and the intervening land between the ravine and the buildings.

Cora had moved quietly away, her figure dimly outlined against the lights and then she had vanished into the night.

It had been a long time ago. Max had regained consciousness and watched Cordner with hard eyes.

Restlessly Cordner began to count seconds and minutes. Cora should have returned by now. Fear filled him. Cora must have been gone at least three quarters of an hour altogether.

No unusual excitement seemed to be taking place around the resort, but that didn't mean anything. Some of Stanton's men could have taken Cora quietly.

A form suddenly emerged from the night on his left. He crouched.

"John!" Cora whispered. He called softly and she ran toward him.

"Did you find Hale?" he asked tensely.

She was out of breath as if she had been running. She nodded and gasped. "I told him the whole story—he's getting his car and will meet us . . ."

"Good girl!"

He picked Max up again and they started down the ravine toward the highway.

"What did Hale say?" Cordner asked.

"He couldn't believe me at first," Cora told him. "It— It was hard to convince him. I told him that he might recover the diamonds."

Cordner grunted as they plodded through sand. "He wanted that collection," he said. "Their value didn't mean as much as the diamonds themselves. I've seen him spend hours admiring the stones he had. He didn't want to share them with anyone. He had a mania for them—they're a fetish to him."

Brush tore at them as they left the ravine and made their way toward the highway. Cordner lowered Max to the ground and gazed toward the resort. Car lights suddenly appeared, circling away from the hotel. They waited until the car slowed to a stop beside them. Cordner stooped to pick up the bound man again. They'd have to hurry. Behind him he heard a car door open.

Cora screamed! A shot cut the night and something kicked up sand in a bank beyond him. Cordner went down and rolled Max between him and the car. Frantically he tugged at the gun he'd taken from Max.

Men were out of the car. One of them held Cora, a hand clamped over her mouth. Another deliberately raised a gun and fired at the two men on the ground.

CORDNER shot. The man beside the car slapped back against the sedan as if he had been kicked. He slowly crumpled forward. Another man shot from the car's interior. Max jerked and moaned. Cordner shot twice. Glass shattered and the man in the car plunged out. His head made a thudding sound on the road shoulder.

The man holding Cora drove a hard jab to her jaw. Cordner saw her become limp.

Holding her in front of him, the man

slowly backed around the front of the sedan. A door opened on the far side. There was sound of movement. Car gears growled and the car leaped away.

Cordner stared after it. The gun in his hand was useless as long as Cora was in the car. There must have been three of them, he thought. Two were motionless beside the road. Max groaned in the darkness.

A half mile down the road, the car slowed and turned. It came back, lights brilliant, motor loud. Cordner dived for the roadside. The car roared by toward the resort.

Max continued to groan. Cordner bent over him and hastily inspected the man's shoulder wound. It already was clotting.

Cordner removed the gag. Even a stooge for Stanton had that much of a break coming, and Max was gasping for air.

"It's bad—isn't it?" Max gasped. There was a deep note of fright in his voice.

Cordner's eyes narrowed. "Not if I get you to a doctor."

"Get me there! For God's sake—"

"You'll talk if I do?"

"Anything! Get me to a doctor!"

"You'll tell about Stanton?"

"Yes—about Stanton. I'll tell more than that! Stanton's not the only . . ."

Max's eyes closed and his head rolled limply. Cordner felt for a pulse. It was strong and steady. The man had fainted.

Cordner folded a handkerchief into a compress and applied it to the man's wound. He picked him up again, more gently than before, and trudged down the road toward the resort. A half mile from it he left the highway and carefully placed the unconscious man in concealment. Max's pulse was strong and steady. The bleeding had stopped and upon closer inspection, Cordner decided that the wound was not serious—except in Max's panic-stricken mind.

As he hurried toward the hotel, Max's words echoed in his mind. Max was ready to tell a great deal. More, perhaps, than even John Cordner knew.

His hand had gripped the gun more firmly as he slipped into shadows and began his all-important search for the large sedan.

He found it in front of the cottage where he and Cora had met.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Right to Kill

THE monotone of voices came through an open window at the side of the cottage. Crouched beneath the window, Cordner listened to Clip Stanton:

"He's out there somewhere. What in hell should we do now?"

A low, throaty voice answered.

"We'll find him. You stopped the other?"

"I caught the boys by phone before they bumped Delock. If Cordner goes to the cops and we had a stiff on our hands—"

"He won't go to the cops. Not as long as we have the girl," the throaty voice said.

Stanton swore. There was movement and then Cora's voice:

"Take your filthy hands off me!"

"You little . . ." Stanton's voice rasped. A hard slap sounded and Cora gasped.

"You can settle that any way you like," the throaty voice said. "A man is a sucker to play with a woman."

"I'll settle it!" Stanton said.

"I'm going back. Get in touch with me as soon as you find Cordner. He has to be erased."

A door opened and closed. A short silence followed and then Stanton spoke rapidly, as if into a telephone.

"Get all the boys. Start down the road and work both sides. He can't get far on foot. Get those dead mugs off the highway before some car comes by. If that was a main highway, the cops would be here by now. And get going!"

The telephone clicked into its cradle.

"I'll take care of you right now," Stanton barked, obviously at Cora. "No dame crosses me!"

"You're very tough with women!" Cora's voice mocked.

"That's right, baby. You've had it easy. Now I'm going to beat hell out of you. I'm going to work you over into something no man would want! Even that white-haired rat of yours!"

Carefully John Cordner pulled himself

through the window. The thud of a blow sounded in the living room beyond the bedroom where Cordner found himself.

He stepped into the living room. The gun was firm in his hand, his eyes were narrowed, lips tight and bloodless.

"Stanton!" he said. "Clip Stanton!"

Stanton stood over the motionless woman who was crumpled on the floor. He had just drawn his foot back to kick.

Slowly he straightened in a strained, careful movement and turned. His eyes widened and he inhaled sharply when he saw Cordner. One hand started toward a pocket and stopped when Cordner shook his head.

"Who was here with you?" Cordner asked quietly.

Stanton's lips curled. "You're a sucker, Cordner. You can't get away with this. The boys will—"

"Who was with you?" Cordner repeated.

The silence in the room was ominous. Cordner hoped that the man who had driven the sedan was gone. He was sure the one with the throaty voice was someone else.

The nervous twitch that suddenly appeared at the corner of Stanton's mouth assured him that they were alone. There was no sign of expectancy, of waiting for someone to appear from another room. Stanton was nervous and frightened.

Cordner laughed mirthlessly. Hot fire raced through his veins and misted his eyes. This was the man who had taken Cora, who had wrecked their lives. . . .

He advanced. The gun arced viciously and split the skin over Stanton's nose. Blood trickled in two small streams down the gangster's face. He grimaced in pain and a hand clutched at the injured nose.

His lips spat out baffled words of rage.

Cordner struck again and white marks appeared across the knuckles of Stanton's raised hand. He staggered back.

"Maybe no *woman* will ever look at *you* again," Cordner said in a brittle voice. "We have some things to settle, Stanton. Who was with you? Talk!"

He advanced and the man stumbled back, tripped, and crashed to the floor. He raised his arms to protect his face. Cordner drew a foot back, but stopped. A feeling of revulsion came over him.

The red haze disappeared. It wouldn't do any good to kill Stanton.

He reached down and jerked the man upright. The gun side-whipped Stanton's jaw, kept him dazed and off balance.

"Who was with you, Stanton? Talk!"

**S**TANTON shook his head. Blood dripped from his lips. He tried to grapple with the white-haired man and Cordner's gun cracked against his arm and he yelped in pain.

Cordner jabbed the muzzle into the man's chest.

"I'll give you one minute, Stanton."  
"I'll talk."

Stanton's eyes were wild. They suddenly stared beyond Cordner to the door.

Instinctively, Cordner shoved Stanton away and dropped to the floor. A shot shattered the silence and the door slammed shut a fraction of a second before Cordner's bullet hit the door frame.

Stanton screamed and threshed vainly on the floor, clutching at his chest. His muscles convulsed and then slowly relaxed.

Cordner realized that the bullet had not been intended for Stanton. If he had not shoved the man and dropped, the lead would have crashed into his own body.

Across the room, Cora moved and her eyes opened. She tried to sit up.

"Get down," Cordner whispered.

Obediently she flattened herself against the floor.

Gun in hand, Cordner got to a light switch and darkened the room. A noise sounded in the bedroom where he had entered. Quietly he withdrew a coin from his pocket and tossed it across the room away from Cora.

Fire bit into the night toward the spot where the coin hit; the roar of a gun filled the room.

Cordner fired at the flash in the doorway of the bedroom.

Someone swore and a body thudded to the floor.

A shot cracked outside the main door and splintered the door panel near him. He returned the shot and wondered how many shots he had left. There could be only a few. The man with the throaty voice must have returned and brought someone with him. They had heard Cord-

ner's voice. One man had come through the open window, the other had opened the door and shot.

Moving gingerly in the blackness, Cordner got to Cora's side and bent over her.

"We're probably trapped in here," he murmured.

"There's another bedroom," she whispered. "They couldn't get in from outside. Not without our hearing it. The window is locked."

"It's a chance," Cordner told her.

"John! I know who—"

His clamped hand on her arm silenced her.

"Listen!"

Someone was moving outside the cottage. Low voices penetrated to them. A car started and was maneuvered about. Somewhere in the building an electric motor began to hum.

"What are they doing?" Cora asked, alarmed.

John squeezed her arm in puzzled manner. "I don't know. Do you know what that electric motor is?"

"It's the ventilating motor. There's a switch in the basement. There's one upstairs, but it can be disconnected down there."

Suddenly they stiffened.

"Smell that?" John asked.

"Exhaust fumes!"

"They've backed the car to the air intake of the ventilating system. They'll send exhaust fumes through the house!"

"The basement, John! Maybe there's a chance!"

She led him to the door. He tried it.

"Locked. Is there an upstairs?"

"No."

"If we make a break for it, they'll be waiting with guns. If we stay here, we'll be gassed. Carbon monoxide doesn't take long."

Cora clutched his arm. "We can break windows. Get air in."

Cordner found a small chair and hurled it through a window. Glass shattered and a single shot echoed the crash. Plaster crumpled in the wall across from the window.

The couple crept to a spot beneath the window.

"There's a full moon coming up," Cord-

ner breathed. "They can see us if we raise our heads."

Little fresh air came through the window and the odor of the car exhaust became heavy. Cora coughed.

"Where's the ventilator intake?" Cordner asked.

"Near the kitchen."

"Wait here."

CORDNER crawled across the floor to the kitchen. Through a window he saw the car backed against the house. It was empty, the motor running steadily. Fifty feet away, two men crouched in underbrush intently watching the house.

The exhaust fumes were making Cordner drowsy. He shook his head and got to Stanton's body. He found a gun in the man's hip pocket.

Back at Cora's side, he inhaled deeply of the faint eddy of fresh air that came through the broken window.

Carefully he reached up and lifted the window sash enough to thrust the gun muzzle through the opening. He brought

the sash down tight on it. Swiftly he untied his necktie and bound the gun into position, looping the necktie through the window lift.

"I need a cord," he said to Cora.

"The Venetian blinds," she told him.

He nodded and grasped at them. Several hard jerks tore the blind cords loose. He knotted segments into a long cord and tied one end to the gun trigger.

"Black Mike used to say, 'You gotta outwit the other guy,'" he whispered. "This is a long chance, but it may work."

"Black Mike. . . ?"

"Later. Let's go."

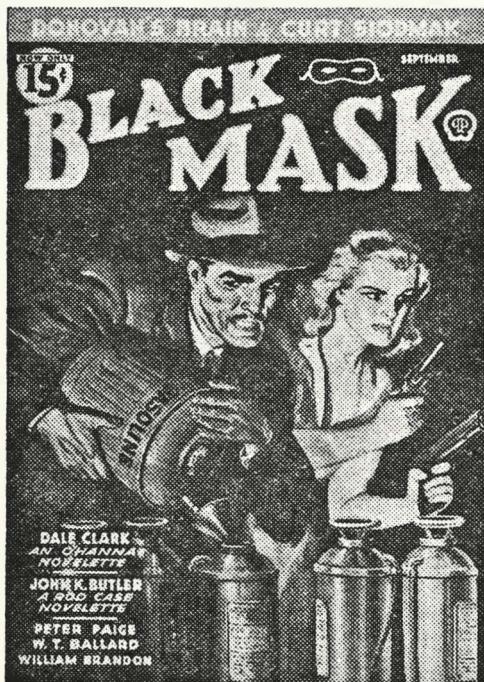
"I'm getting sleepy . . . " Cora yawned.

"Hurry. It's the gas. We're getting too much."

He pulled her with him across the floor to the kitchen, trailing the cord behind them. Carefully he unlocked the rear door and then stepped to the window where he could look out.

The two men still watched the rear of the cottage.

"All right," Cordner gritted. "Here's the chance we take."



It wasn't so much what Patrick Cory did to Donovan's brain as what the brain did to Cory—and to his wife—and to his assistant, Doctor Schrott. The whole ghastly business began, appropriately enough, on Friday the 13th. That was the day the Mexican organ grinder passed through Washington Junction with the tubercular Capuchin. Cory bought the flea-ridden monk even after the beast had bitten him. Ten months later he realized what a madman he'd been ever to make the purchase. Schrott called it *invading God's own hemisphere* and he was probably right. CURT SIODMAK has edited Cory's diary—the whole grisly sequence—and given it the title—

#### DONOVAN'S BRAIN

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He explained briefly to Cora. She nodded dazedly and rubbed a hand across her forehead. She looked pale in the dim light. The faint whir of the ventilation motor mingled with the drone of the running car near the kitchen door. The gas fumes were strong in the room.

They stepped to the door and Cordner jerked the cord he had trailed with them. In the front room, the gun clamped in the window barked. He jerked the cord several times.

In front of the house, shots echoed and crashed into the living room. Cordner opened the kitchen door. The two men were circling, their attention glued to the front of the house and the outbreak of shooting.

Cordner jerked the door wide open. They stooped low and dashed toward the empty car with the running motor. Then they were in it and Cordner was shifting gears. He let the clutch in. Tires spun on grass and the car roared away from the house.

The two men who had watched the back door whirled. Their guns made flashes in the moonlight and one of them shouted. The couple in the car crouched. The engines sang in second gear and the car jolted across the yard to the roadway.

**G**LASS shattered and a shot ricochetted from the hood. Cordner pressed hard on the accelerator and the car swerved away toward the hotel.

Cora suddenly cried out.

"John! There's someone in the back of the car! He's bound and gagged!"

Cordner grinned.

"Climb over and get him loose. It's Delock. They brought him back. This makes it easy!"

They sped past the hotel. Cordner stopped near the spot where he had concealed Max and left the car. He returned carrying the wounded man. Delock was exercising circulation into his limbs, talking with Cora.

Car lights sped toward them from the resort as Cordner started the car again.

"They won't catch *this* buggy!" Delock said. "It must be a custom job."

"It is," Cordner told him. "Another of Burley Hale's idiosyncrasies. He likes diamonds and imported cars. He can't get the cars now. This is the same one he had when I was with him."

"What's Burley Hale got to do with this?" Delock demanded.

"Hale was behind the whole thing. He tried to kill me and shot Stanton instead. Cora saw him in conference with Stanton not an hour ago, listened to what was said. Before that she went to him for help, and that was walking straight into a trap. He sent his car full of mugs to wash us out."

Briefly he told the plan to kill Delock and himself. The capture of Max, the escape and fight on the highway.

"Max will verify the partnership between Hale and Stanton," he said.

"I suspected someone was behind Stanton in his rackets," Cora interrupted. "But I never could discover who it was. That was one of the reasons why I—" She hesitated and didn't finish.

"Then Hale had Stanton lift the diamonds from you two," Delock said. "He collected on the insurance."

"And still had the diamonds," Cordner added. "It made no difference that he could never exhibit them—he has a mania for them."

Delock glanced back. The lights that followed them were almost pin points.

"The state cops can round them up," he said. "It looks as if we know how Hale got his dough now. I wonder how many like Stanton worked for him!"

Cordner did not answer. His eyes were intent upon the road. Cora's head rested against his shoulder and her hand was tucked tightly beneath his arm.

She smiled.

After a moment she asked.

"John—who is Black Mike?"

John Cordner grinned.

"Black Mike is a guy who probably would say that I did a sloppy job tonight—but that I'm learning!"

Delock still talked about Stanton and Hale. Suddenly he glanced at the couple beside him and his lips twisted into a smile.

"Maybe I'd better drive," he suggested. "You need two arms for that, Cordner!"

# Silk Is For Caskets

By ROBERT TURNER



"Why didn't you tell me about the kid?" he shouted.

*Framed for a brutal murder, Mary could not name the real killers—because one word of truth from her would fire a shot through the head of her baby son!*

HE HEARD the clacking high heels but he didn't look up. He had been wrong half a dozen times already. When he couldn't stand it any longer he raised his head. She came into the yellow glow of a street light, and this time it was she.

She was wearing that coat with the

genuine beaver collar and cuffs, the one that held her small, tightly knit figure so nicely. He remembered when they had bought it, that time at Narragansett when a nag called *Mamie's Boy* romped home for him at forty to one.

He sat there in the dark on the brownstone steps of the side street rooming

house until she shot him a quick glance, started to move around him. Then he stood up.

He said: "Mrs. Walter Walker, I presume?"

A little noise sounded in her throat. She fell back one step, straining to make out his features.

"It's me, all right," he said. "Little Walter, come home to roost. All is forgiven?"

"Walter," she whispered, marveling. "Walter! Come up here in the light where I can look at you."

She plucked at his sleeve and he followed her up into the vestibule. The light from inside came through sagging orange curtains and made a red glow on their faces as if they stood before a log fire.

She was just the same, he saw. Her lashes were still long and sooty. Her cheeks were still apple-plump. But the beaver trim of the coat didn't look so good up close.

"You look prosperous, Walter," she said. Her eyes went over him. One little hand rested lightly at the lapel of his new covert-cloth suit, and he saw that she still wore her rings.

He reached for the knob. "Look," he said. "We can't talk here, Mary. Let's go up to your room."

Some of the rosiness went from her cheeks. She glanced nervously inside, didn't look at him for a moment. "We—we can't do that, Walter."

"Why not? You're my wife. Or—or did you get a—"

She stopped him, shaking her head negatively. "Walter," she began, and hesitated; then went on, "are you going to be around?"

"Around? Sure. I've been in Bermuda for thirteen months on a government construction job. Contract's over. I'll probably stay in the states, now."

"Then call me here, Walter. I—I'll have to think things over. I'll give you the number. We can have lunch some day."

"Lunch!" His thin, hard jaw dropped. He shoved his crush-felt to the back of his head. "Listen, Mary, it's all different, now. I'm a new guy. I don't play the bangtails any more. I *work*. I thought we could—I thought maybe we'd start

over. Mary, you need me. I—we need each other!"

**N**O, WALTER." She took her hand from his lapel, ran her fingers over the edge of a small, worn leather purse. "I'm all right, Walter. I—I don't need anything. I've got a good job—well, a job. It's been a year and a half since we broke up. There's too many pieces. We can't just pick them all up again. . . . Look, Walter, you'll have to go. I'm in a hurry!"

"All right." He reached for the door again. "I'll go with you. We'll argue it out up there. I—I know how you must feel, Mary, but I want to prove to you—"

"You can't come up, Walter. I mean it." She almost wrenched his hand from the knob. Her breathing was ragged. She looked almost scared.

"Oh," he murmured. The ridge of his jaw whitened. Flecks of hard brightness flashed in his eyes. "I was afraid of that. Somebody else, huh?"

She turned and faced him, squarely. Two tears pushed through the sooty lashes but didn't fall. "Maybe you don't remember everything, Walter. The terrible things you said that night you left. Maybe you don't remember the heartache leading up to the final night. And the crumby race-track rooming houses, the boiled potatoes and the stale buns and water. For days at a time. Then magnificent hotels—until we'd get locked out."

A sobbing breath pulled between her lips and she rushed on: "I wouldn't have minded if we had been building toward something; or if you'd been trying to get a job and couldn't. But you had to be a wise guy, make the ponies work for you . . . I wanted to settle down; I wanted a baby. But brats would be a burden, you said. They'd get in the way. You *hated* bawling brats, you said, Walter." She spat this out. The tears moved, held a slow race down her cheeks.

"Sure," he put in quickly. "Sure, Mary, but I've just told you, I've changed. I've even got a bank account. Look!"

He reached into his inside jacket pocket, pulled out a bank book. Something else came with it, dropped to the floor. He stooped quickly, fumbled it up again, but not before Mary saw the cheap paper,

the listings in small red type. She didn't look at him again after that. She opened the door. He caught her arm.

"Mary," he cried. "I just bought that scratch sheet for the fun of it. I just wanted to see what was going on at the different tracks. I wasn't going to play anything. I—"

She slammed the door. He looked through the orange curtains, watched her fly up the stairs, out of sight. He punched one fist into the palm of the other, went out and down the brownstone steps onto the street. His big, bony shoulders sagged.

+ + +

**M**ARY had difficulty fumbling the key into the lock of her room. The tears were hot and stinging. *If only he hadn't come.* She had managed to freeze him out of her mind, and now.... *But I have Wally this time. When I get inside, feel his arms around my neck...*

She didn't see Joe Mazola sitting there in the room, holding the newspaper in front of his face. She thought it was Sarah. She ran right past, toward the cheap, gaudy little crib, sobbing: "Wally! Mummy's baby!"

At the crib she stopped, her hands still outreaching, frozen like that. Through the mists in her eyes she saw the wrinkled rubber sheets, the covers thrown back, the slight impression in the mattress. A one-eyed teddy bear winked up at her, knowingly. She turned from the crib.

"Sarah, where is he? Where's little Wally—"

Through the tears she saw Joe Mazola. Her hand came up against her mouth. She leaned against the crib and the rollers creaked a little. "What—what are you doing here?"

He set down the paper, took the cigarette from his mouth and smiled. He was a bulky man, nattily dressed. He had a kind of nice smile if you didn't look too closely. If you didn't notice the too-droopy eyelids, or that the amber orbs under them didn't light up. Even the dimple in his cheek was attractive if you didn't know it was a bullet scar. He said:

"Take it easy, Mrs. Walker."

She watched him flick spilled ashes

from the razor creases of his forest-green suit. She said: "You—you're Mr. Mazola from down the hall? Where—where's Sarah—the old woman who minds the baby? Where's the baby? What *happened?*?"

"Nothing happened," he said, twisting the cigarette slowly around and around between full lips while he puffed. "Sarah took the baby away."

"Away? What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "I just heard her telling the landlady that you called up and said you wanted her to bring the kid downtown to have his picture took."

"But—but—" She had to swallow. The palms of her hands were frosty damp. "But that's not true! I—Listen, Mr. Mazola, what *is* this?"

He held his palms up. He tamped out his cigarette. "I wouldn't know. I just came in to talk a little business."

Her teeth ground together with a faint but awful sound. "I don't want to talk to you," she said. "I want my baby. Something's happened to Wally. I'm going to the police."

**S**HE started for the door, but he glided in front of her and spread his arms out. He wasn't smiling now. The little bullet-dimple was coloring.

"Are you dumb, Mrs. Walker?" he snarled. "You'll get the kid back. But you got something to do tonight, first. You're going back down to that silk warehouse where you work, later on. You got some overtime work to do. We—me and some friends—are going to help you."

"I see." She watched the red fade out of the hole in his cheek. Her eyes, hot and bright with hate, burned into his. He had to look away. "I guess that last batch of raw silk they're holding, *is* worth a lot."

"Yeah." Joe Mazola's amber eyes shone. "Yeah, they say it's just like gold, these days."

She reached down at his arm, tried to move it out of the way. "This is silly!" she stormed. "You can't get away with anything like this. There's a watchman there, and alarms. You must be crazy!"

He started to smile again. "The

watchman will let you in all right. You'll tell him you got to do some work, or you forgot your bag or something. Anything, but you're going to get that place opened."

"Suppose I refuse?"

His lower lip folded out and down and he shook his head. "Nah," he said. "That little kid, Wally, he's a cute little kid. You wouldn't want nothing now, to happen to him."

Her nails dug little half moons of flesh out of her palms. Her stomach tangled. "No, no!" she said. "I'll do what you say. I--" She stopped, thinking of Walter. Maybe he hadn't got too far. Maybe she could catch him, and he'd know what to do to help her. "Look, Mr. Mazola, I've got to go downstairs and see the landlady a moment."

He dropped his arms. "All right. You be back up here in two minutes. Just don't forget. That kid—that baby—he's gonna have an accident, if you do any talking. I got to call a certain place in exactly one hour. If I don't, they'll think something's happened to me, and they'll—"

She cut in: "I've changed my mind."

"That's fine," he said. "Just relax and take it easy. Read, maybe. We ain't going out till around ten."

She stepped past him, sank down onto a chair. She thought about little Wally, with his laughing eyes and the unruly, crisp brown hair. He was just like Walter, his father. Like Walter, who didn't know about his son, who didn't care for babies. Somewhere way down inside of her she seemed to hear a baby voice crying: "Mummy!" The way he did at night, sometimes, when he had bad dreams.

OUTSIDE on the street Walter Walker came around the block the fifth time, stopped in front of the rooming house. He couldn't make up his mind. He looked over the face of the building, at the lit windows showing their grime against limp curtains.

He thought, It isn't Mary's fault. She's right. I was a lousy husband. I must have really hurt her, badly. I didn't know where to write her, but she always knew how to get a letter to me. But she never did, so it must have been really bad.

He started to climb the steps. He threw

his cigarette butt away, stopped. If I go right in, he thought, go right up to her room. . . . Then he wheeled and went back down. Maybe it would be better, he decided, to wait awhile, give her a chance to cool. Maybe she'd start remembering some of the good things. They had had fun, sometimes. It hadn't been all sordid. Maybe it would be better if he waited and talked to her tomorrow night. He walked away into the darkness. . . .

+ + +

HERE wasn't much life on the waterfront. The piers were big, dark bulks of menacing shadow. In front of some, Coast Guardsmen patrolled.

The dark green coupe sped along past the piers, turned into Thirty Fifth Street. The truck tailing it stopped on the corner. Halfway up the block the coupe pulled to a halt before a darkened warehouse.

A flashlight beamed down at the car from the loading platform, caught the white flash of Mary Walker's slim leg as she stepped out.

"What do you want?" a whisky-hoarse voice demanded.

Mary caught her breath. She finally managed: "It's me, Tom. Me, Mary Walker. I—I left my purse in the office and it's got a prescription for the baby. He's sick. I've got to get it."

The old watchman lumbered toward her as she came up the steps of the loading platform. His light was cold and bright on the pallor of her features. She kept her gaze lowered. She couldn't look at him. "Will—will you open up, Tom?" she whispered.

"Ain't supposed to," he grumbled. "But I got kids, too. What's the matter with the boy?"

"He—he's got a fever."

She watched him fumble with the lock. In the glare of the flash his fingers were big and thick and a little swollen at the knuckles. Out on the river a tug hooted. Then there was nothing but the heavy quiet of the deserted street.

The warehouse door groaned and squeaked as the old man slid it slowly open. He reached in, unhooked alarm wires. One brief moment his hand whipped the flash around and she saw his

face; that heavy, seamed face with the fringe of gray beard, the tired rheumy eyes, squinting. Old Tom, she knew, had a family. A big one. For one almost fatal moment she almost uttered the warning that came to her lips. The only thing that stopped her was the flashing memory of Joe Mazola's cold eyes—and the way little Wally looked when he slept.

He pushed her ahead of him into the yawning black vastness. Out on the loading platform there was the faint scrape of a footprint.

They moved through the gloom and the watchman jangled a heavy ring of keys. "You got your office key?" he asked.

Mary looked around at the piled up bales of silk looming about them. Their footsteps echoed across the big room. Old

you guys keep right on working. *You*—" He pushed the gun through the light beam at Mary. "You do as I tell you!"

The cop approached, stepped up on the platform. He held his light on the faces of the men. His other hand was on his gun, had it half out of the holster. "What's going on?" he said.

"We're taking out a load of silk," one of the men said. "Rush job."

"Yeah?" The cop pulled the gun all the way free. "Let's see your papers."

The man jerked a thumb toward the warehouse. "The boss got the bill of lading, inside there."

"Damned funny you ain't using any lights," the cop said. His voice was scratchy. "I don't like this. You guys walk ahead of me, inside."

**Don James (whose REUNION WITH TERROR you have just read in this issue) will be with us next month with another urgent, baffling crime novelette—ANNIVERSARY WITH DEATH!**

Tom spoke again: "I said, have you got you—"

There was a sound like an egg dropped on pavement. The flashlight clanked to the floor, clicked out. The watchman's body struck right after that, made a dull, solid thump.

Another light gleamed and Mary Walker leaped out of its cruel focus, started for the street. Joe Mazola's voice echoed: "Come back here!"

"I've done what you wanted," she said. "Why don't you let me go, now? Let me go to my baby."

A gun gleamed momentarily in the light. "You stay here," he repeated.

Things moved fast then. Mazola uttered a quick shrill whistle and the truck sped up. Two other men leaped out, and while Mazola kept an eye on Mary, they lugged bales of raw silk out of the warehouse.

**A**BOUT a dozen bales were loaded when one of the men came running toward Mazola. "Joe!" he whispered. "The beat-cop is coming this way. What do we do?"

Mazola cursed. "He wasn't due on this block for another ten minutes. . . . Listen,

The trio moved into the warehouse. The cop's flash picked out Mary Walker's chalky face. "A woman!" he gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"I—I—work—" Mary cleared her throat. Her hands twisted in agony. "I work here. In the office. It's all right, officer. A fuse blew out, so—"

His gun drooped a little. "I ain't so sure, miss." Suddenly he started to turn, flick the light around. "Say, listen, I don't like—"

The shot reverberated like thunder in a chasm. Joe Mazola's light went on again, picked out the cop's beefy face as he fell. His skin was now the color of pot-liquor. His dying eyes looked like peeled grapes. He went down slowly, like a big sack of flour.

"You could have just sapped him, Joe," one of the men said, his voice breaking. "You didn't have to kill him!"

"Shut up! He got a good look at your faces, didn't he? You ought to be glad I got that much sense. Get into the truck."

Mazola shoved Mary ahead of him out onto the loading platform. He slammed the big door shut. The men were already in the truck, moving away. Mazola ran

to the coupe. Mary raced after him. She caught his arms as he started to climb in.

"What about me?" she screamed. "What am I going to do?"

"You're hot, kid. You scram out of here and hide out somewhere. We'll find you. Let go my arm."

She clung harder. "You can't leave me here! What about the baby?"

He jerked his arm free, slashed her across the face with the back of his hand. She fell back, blood trickling from her nose.

He said: "Listen, in case you get picked up, don't you forget we still got the brat. If my name is even mentioned, something's going to happen to him. You never saw me, see? You don't know me."

He slammed the door. The coupe bolted away. Mary Walker wiped the blood away on the back of her hands. She staggered up the street toward Twelfth Avenue, her legs rubbery. She swayed from side to side, like a drunk, bumping into loading platforms.

On the Avenue, a few moments later, the spot of a police prowl car lit up her staggering figure like a comedy vaudeville stew. A woman, stumbling along Twelfth Avenue, all alone, near midnight. . . .

+ + +

**T**HE waiting room was small and hot and it smelled. There were benches all around the walls and back to back in the center. They were all filled. An overflow of people lounged and milled around the door.

Walter Walker held the pass in his fingers until it got soggy and then he put it into his pocket.

Across the room a Negro woman got up. Sweat gleamed on her fat, black face. She waddled toward the door with the stiff, careful gait of a woman expecting. She pushed through the jam at the door, mumbled something to the red-faced cop on guard. He shouted at her:

"Go back and sit down. I told you I'd let you know when you can go up. Now for God's sake, don't bother me again."

"The big slob!" said the skinny little man next to Walter Walker. He had a long, pock-marked nose. He struggled to

pull up the trousers of his checkered suit. He had trouble because the narrow bottoms were pegged too small and tight. "You'd think we were the cons!"

The thick-painted, blowsey woman next to him, said: "Yeah. They keep you waitin' hours in this stinkhole. Like cattle! I know a councilman. Some day I'm gonna—"

"What the hell's the matter with Janie?" Longnose interrupted. "I told her over and over, to lay off that corner. What's the matter with her? . . . You ever been in this can?"

"No," the magdalene said. "But once I visited a booster who got caught heisting perfume. It ain't too bad, she told me. They's no rats, anyhow."

Walter Walker fumbled in his pocket for the pass, wanting to make sure he hadn't lost it, that he could get at it quickly when the time came. He found it just as the red-faced cop boomed: "All right, this way! Single file. And take it easy!"

Stumbling up the stairs with the others, Walter kept glancing at the pass. It said: VISITING BOOTH 12. At the top of the steps another officer took the passes, held open a steel gate. Walter followed the others into a long corridor. On one side were bars. On the other side a long row of booths, with numbers on the insides of the partitions.

He walked along slowly. The place was a bedlam, already. Everybody was yelling at the top of their lungs. He wondered what was the matter with them, how they could all be deaf. Shouted phrases dinned into his ears: ". . . I'll get you a writ" . . . "Take my advice, baby . . ." . . . "Momma's fine; everybody's fine" . . . "The hell with what your husband says . . ."

He found Booth 12. Through a thick plate, screen-glassed window, dingy with fingermarks, he saw Mary's face. Her fine brown hair was straggly. There was no makeup on her drawn, wax-pale features. She tried hard to smile, but it didn't work. Her chin puckered and she lowered her face, dabbed hastily at her eyes.

He spoke to her. But he couldn't hear his own voice. Mary looked at him again, through the tears in her eyes, through

the thick, smeared glass and the wire-netting.

**H**E shouted now, but she still didn't hear. She bent her face downward, suddenly, and he heard the faint sound of her voice. No wonder people had to shout. He had to lay his ear right against the glass to hear. And then he could only catch a few words. He straightened up. His face was white and his fists were tight at his sides. The deafening jabber of shrieking voices pressed his ears.

"Shut up, damn you all! Shut up!" he yelled. The words were lost in the rest of the din. He bent his mouth close to the grilled speaker, shouted: "You'll have to speak louder. I can't hear with this racket out here."

This time he caught her reply, by concentrating carefully. "I'm having trouble hearing too," she hollered.

They talked, taking turns placing their lips and then their ears against the grill. They couldn't even look at each other as they talked.

"Why didn't you tell me about the kid?" he shouted. "Why didn't you tell me, Mary?"

He listened to her say: "I didn't want you to know, Walter. I—I knew you didn't want him." Her voice cracked, but she went on. "He's so sweet. Walt. I—Walt—you've got to go make sure he's all right for me. The police don't know where he really is. He's not in a home, like I told the papers. I don't care what they do to me, Walt, but nothing can happen to little Wally!"

In spite of the difficulty of carrying on the conversation she made Walter promise not to tell the police anything and then related most of what had happened that night.

"Go to Joe Mazola, find him somehow, tell him I won't talk so long as he promises nothing will happen to the baby. Make him promise that, after it's all over and I'm convicted, he'll turn Wally over to you. You'll have to take him, Walt. He has nobody else. I—I think even you will like him. He—he's not like other babies. He never cries, Walter."

"But how do I find this guy?"

"When he made a phone call that night,

from the phone downstairs, I opened the door and listened. I didn't get the number, but I heard the exchange, from the dial clicks, then I lost count. It's HA—2, Walt. Maybe that'll help."

"Mary," he pleaded. "They wouldn't dare hurt the child. Why don't you tell the police everything? They'll use discretion. You can't take this rap for that skunk. You've got to come clean on this!"

He begged, cajoled, threatened, but she wouldn't give in. And then a big bell bonged. Something clicked in the grill and they couldn't talk through it anymore. The yelling subsided into a hushed murmuring. He watched her walk away on the other side. Her eyes were like drops of dew glistening in sunlight.

"All visitors out!" Someone shouted. He moved from the booth, went downstairs and out into the air.

"It's hopeless," he muttered, savagely. "Why won't she be sensible? Even if I find this guy, what can I do?"

+ + +

**T**HE two men came out of the poolroom, got into a cab. Settling in the seat of the hack, Joe Mazola poked the gun into Walter Walker's ribs. "Quite the copper, ain't you, Walker?" he sneered. "Getting my description from the landlady, then finding that empty matchbook with the name of the poolroom where I hang out."

Walter Walker didn't answer. He thought, I should have been satisfied when that telephone exchange didn't help. His jaw line bulged white. His crush-felt was tight on his forehead, shading the hardness of his eyes.

"All right," Mazola went on. "You hung around there, waiting to spot me. You want to know where I got the kid, so I'm going to show you. You and the kid'll go out together. A touching little father and son job."

"You ought to hang out a sign," Walker said through taut lips. "Warehouses robbed, women framed, babies murdered!"

The bullet-hole dimple in Mazola's cheek glowed a little, but he smiled. That nice smile, with the amber eyes taking no part. He said: "That's all right, Walker. Just keep it up."

The hack stopped before a purple-stuccoed, remodeled tenement down in the slum section of the Village. The two men got out, entered the building. Inside they stopped before a ground floor door. Mazola cocked his head in a listening attitude. There was no sound. He looked pleased. He said: "He ain't crying, see. We keep him dosed with paragoric. You see all the things you got to know."

He shoved Walker ahead of him with the gun. They stepped into a small, gaudily furnished apartment. Mazola called out: "Hey, Cleo!" His pale brown eyes swept the living room. "Where the hell is that dame? I told her not to leave until I got back."

He kicked open the door to a tiny bathroom. He catwalked across to a curtained archway, pulled back the drape, peered into a small, dark room.

"She must have gone out for butts."

"Where—where's my boy?" Walker asked.

Mazola smiled coldly. "Anxious to see him, eh?"

"What do you think?" Walker sucked in a deep breath. "It—it'll be the first time."

Adjusting the handkerchief in the breast pocket of his forest-green suit, Mazola motioned to the curtained recess, with the gun. "He's in here. Go ahead and take a look. A last look."

Walter Walker walked across the room, stooped a little at the shoulders. His face was cream-white. He twirled the rim of his hat between his fingers. He bent past Mazola, looked into the small, darkened bedroom. On a cot a tiny figure rested under blankets. He was face down, only the black, curly hair showing.

"My son," Walker murmured in a hushed, reverent tone. "He—he's sleeping."

"Yeah," Mazola said.

Walker stepped back, glowered at the gunman. "Listen," he said. "You aren't going to murder him. He's only a baby. Kill me, if you've got to. But—but—" He broke off.

"I don't know. I told your wife if she talked to a soul, I'd bump the kid. I didn't know her husband was alive. She shouldn't have told even you."

They stood staring at each other. Joe

Mazola, bulky, natty, with his amber eyes shining like hollow glass marbles. The dimple in his cheek deepened. Walter Walker's thin, hard face was long and grim and desperate. His eyes glazed crazily. He suddenly spat out words.

"You're going to kill me, aren't you? Well, go ahead, damn you! Get it over with!"

"What's your hurry?" Mazola toyed with his victim.

"Go ahead and shoot that thing, you filthy coward! You grinning sadist!"

MAZOLA'S cheeks blanched. The bullet scar flamed liver-red. He said: "All right, Walker." He stepped toward a closet, pulled out a pillow. He wrapped it around the gun, carefully. He took aim.

Someone rapped at the door. Mazola jerked nervously. He said: "Who is it?"

There was no answer. The crook tossed the pillow aside, went up on his tiptoes. "Is that you, Cleo?"

The rapping became louder, mingled with a harsh voice: "Open up, Mazola. It's the law. We want to talk to you."

Mazola whispered: "Let 'em in!" He leaped toward the curtained arch. He hissed: "Tell 'em there's no one here by that name. If you don't get rid of them, pronto—I'll put a bullet through the kid's head. Get rid of 'em and maybe I'll let you both go."

The curtain dropped, hiding Mazola. Walker stepped to the door. Three husky plainsclothesmen entered. One of them said: "Where is he?"

Walter Walker slid swiftly toward the curtained arch. He yanked the curtain down with one vicious snatch. He pointed at Mazola, cowering there.

"There he is!"

Face twitching, Mazola made a little animal-like sound, backed to the bed. He threw down with the gun at the brown-haired head on the bed.

"Get out of here!" he whined shrilly. "Get out and give me a chance to lam, or I swear to God I'll shoot the brat. Get out!"

None of the cops moved, but one of them said: "Take it easy, Joe. Nobody's going to hurt you. Be nice and we'll fix it up so you get a break."

"Arrgh!" The gunman's lips thinned over small white teeth. "Damned lying flatfeet. You know you can't come and get me. I said *get out*—if you don't want to see this kid drilled!"

Walter Walker took a step forward. Then another. His face held a wild, inhuman look, like a tight-skinned mask. "Maybe *they* can't come and get you, Mazola, but *I* can!" he said, thinly.

"Get back!" Mazola's voice rose to a scream. "Why don't you coppers stop him? He's mad! It's your own son, Walker! You're making me do it!"

"You're yellow!" Walker kept coming. He was almost up to the other man, now. "You haven't got the guts. Go ahead!"

Mazola's face went purple. He made choking sounds and his dull brown eyes gleamed maniacally. "I'll show you!" he shrieked.

He squeezed the trigger and the shot roared through the room, accompanied by a sickly, squealing sound from the bed.

Walter Walker leaped. His strong, lean fingers caught Mazola's throat. They crashed back into a heap at the corner. Mazola's head thumped the floor like the wagging tail of some huge dog. His cries gurgled off.

While two of the cops pulled Walker away, the third drew back the crib blankets, looked at the shattered fragments of a big "Mamma" doll. The bullet had

gone right through the tiny apparatus which makes a doll cry.

They led Joe Mazola away, crying insanely, broken and babbling. It wasn't until he had got through spilling a complete confession of the silk robbery and the murder of the cop, that they told him how Walter Walker had trailed him from the poolroom to the apartment, earlier in the day, had purposely let Mazola catch him snooping later on; how the police meanwhile had captured Cleo, the woman he had hired to watch the child, substituted the doll for the real baby.

"If we hadn't done something like that," Walter Walker explained to his wife, in the cab, going home from the Woman's House of Detention, "you might never have gotten out of that silk-theft rap. Mazola had a tight alibi all established. That apartment wasn't in his name. We *had* to get a confession."

Mary smiled. She didn't answer for a moment. Suddenly she said: "Do you—do you like him, Walt—your son?"

"What do you think?" he said. He snapped his fingers, grinning. He reached into an inside pocket, pulled forth a crumpled racing form and ripped it up, let the shreds fly out the cab window. "Only thing," he said. "What's the lad going to think when he grows up and finds out his old lady was a jailbird, and his pa a horse-player . . . I mean *used* to be!"



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# BACKSTAGE DRAMA

By THOMAS W. DUNCAN



Slim began shooting wildly across the footlights.

*It's all right for a couple of killers to take refuge in a theater—if they know the brand of entertainers they try to intimidate!*

**L**ISTEN," said Zaracobi. "Do I hear shots?" "A motorcycle," I said. "Or a car backfiring."

"Ah—perhaps. But you in America have so much of the crime—is it not so?

Every day the armed robbery, the murder of violence—"

"Just backfiring," I repeated, smothering a smile.

The 2 a.m. silence settled again on the city. It was a fine April night, and the

warm spring air flowed into the Capitol Theater through the propped-open stage-door.

Zaracobi shrugged. "Very well. I'll try again."

He ran the rope through his quick, square hands and attempted to twirl it after the manner of Will Rogers. We were alone in the theater; the other members of the Great Zaracobi's company had long since departed for bed. I was pinch-hitting as night watchman for my sick uncle.

The rope refused to curl in a neat circle; it tangled itself about his ankles; he ground his teeth and stamped a foot.

"Zaracobi," I said, "you're a great man. Your show is swell."

"That is true," he boomed from his barrel chest. "Very true."

"Then why do you burn up your energy trying to learn rope twirling? It's not in your line. Why don't you get some sleep?"

His dark eyes glared at me, and he flung back his coarse mane of black hair. "I am great," he roared, "because I am never satisfied. I have conquered my art. Now I must conquer other arts. New skills. As for sleep, I demand only four or five hours. I am a furnace of energy—"

His speech was cut short by a cold, dry voice: "Can it, brother. Put up your hands."

I jumped off the chair I had been straddling; then halted in my tracks. Through the alley door four men had entered; blued steel gleamed in their fists. The last one banged shut the heavy metal stage-door.

"Gentlemen," Zaracobi boomed. "What is the meaning of this?"

The first man, thin in a tan suit, had two hard lines cutting his face from nose to mouth. "Pipe down." With a slight motion of his head he indicated me, and two of his companions ducked over and patted my pockets, relieving me of my gun.

Zaracobi puffed himself up like an outraged bullfrog. His great chest strained against his sweat-shirt; his legs in their old flannels and tennis sneakers were planted defiantly apart.

"You cannot do this," he shouted. "You are breaking the law."

A smile flickered across the counten-

ance of the man in the tan suit. He concentrated his gaze on Zaracobi's flamboyant masculinity, then noted the rope at his feet. He started to speak, then stopped, listening intently. Distant in the night a police siren wailed. It was coming closer.

"Ho!" Zaracobi bellowed. "I said you could not do this. They are coming after you."

The man in the tan suit said, "The bulls ain't coming here. They're going to Holbrook's Jewelry Company, a block away.

"You are a robber then," declared Zaracobi. "Why do you intrude yourself here?"

The man with the automatic said, "Because it ain't a bad hideaway. The cop on the beat put a hole in our gas tank—before we put a hole in his gizzard. Now we can't have you bellowing—"

Once more he indicated me, and one of the company pressed a gun into my spine. I was certain that Zaracobi and I would be shot as soon as the cops were beyond hearing.

Flanked by two companions, the man in the tan suit advanced toward Zaracobi.

"Lay down," he ordered.

"Why—why—"

"We're going to tie you up. Come on, lay down!"

THE jabbing of three gun-snouts quieted Zaracobi's protests; they bound him hand and foot; but even after they gagged him with a soiled handkerchief he made plenty of noise.

"Crack him on the head, Slim," one of the men suggested.

"He's tough," Slim mused. "He'd wake up about the time the bulls come down this alley. He'd start hollering." Then, spying something against the back wall of the stage, he ordered:

"Drag him over here." He approached a theatrical trunk; big, stout.

The three of them grappled Zaracobi, who squirmed and threshed about, roaring like a lion caught in a net. But they managed to boost him into the trunk. Slim slammed down the lid and snapped the lock.

Not even a muffled protest could be heard.

"Aren't you afraid he'll smother?" I asked.

Slim emitted a short laugh. "You've acted sensible, kid. You're going to keep on acting that way?" I nodded.

"Just the same," he mused, "we'd better tie you. This neighborhood will be pretty hot for a while."

So they laid me out on the floor, binding my wrists and ankles, gagging me. Then one of Slim's men found the switchboard and the lights went out. Nothing is blacker than an unlighted theater.

Nothing happened for a long time. In the distance I heard another police siren, but it didn't come within a block of the theater. Nor would it, I imagined. Only the merest chance could bring the police here. They would figure that the yeggs, after killing the patrolman who foiled their robbery of the jewelry store, had fled.

Lying there in the blackness, I dreaded what would happen when Slim and his companions decided that they had better move on. Undoubtedly, they would shoot Zaracobi and me, to prevent our identifying them.

Then suddenly in that black theater I sensed a change. Something had altered; I felt a tenseness in the air—And at that instant, from out in the auditorium, I heard a sound. The scuff of a shoe-sole. After that, silence again. But the darkness was now alive with something imminent. Close, I heard Slim address a whis-

pered command to one of his men: "Give us the lights."

The stage-lights blazed. In that blindingly bright instant guns roared from a half-dozen uniformed officers.

Down went one yegg. A couple of others streaked for the stage-door, banged it open, and then guns barked in the alley outside. Slim began shooting wildly across the footlights, but a bullet shattered his gun-wrist; he bent double in pain.

Officers swarmed onto the stage from the auditorium, from the alley.

But it was not the officers at whom Slim stared with pain-bleared eyes. It was at Zaracobi—he of the booming chest. Slim gaped at him, then at the locked trunk against the back wall.

"You—you're twins!" Slim gulped.

Zaracobi's laugh shook the stage. "In the darkness," he said, "I slipped to the lobby, and out to the jewelry store. I brought the officers!"

Slim swallowed, blinked. "You—where were you? We locked your twin in—"

Zaracobi strode to the trunk, dragged it to the center of the stage, unlocked it. Inside lay a rope, a soiled handkerchief.

"My friend," he beamed. "My despicable friend, it is impossible for Zaracobi to be restrained in his property trunk. Zaracobi," he added, bowing, "is the greatest escape artist since Houdini!"



in everything—not omitting the gentle art of manslaughter.

Who Said I Was Dead? by NORBERT DAVIS is another smashing Bail-Bond Dodd novelette. Then there's an Acme Indemnity Op story by JAN DANA and other shorts and features to complete a great August issue of DIME DETECTIVE. On sale now!

### THEY'RE OFF . . . !

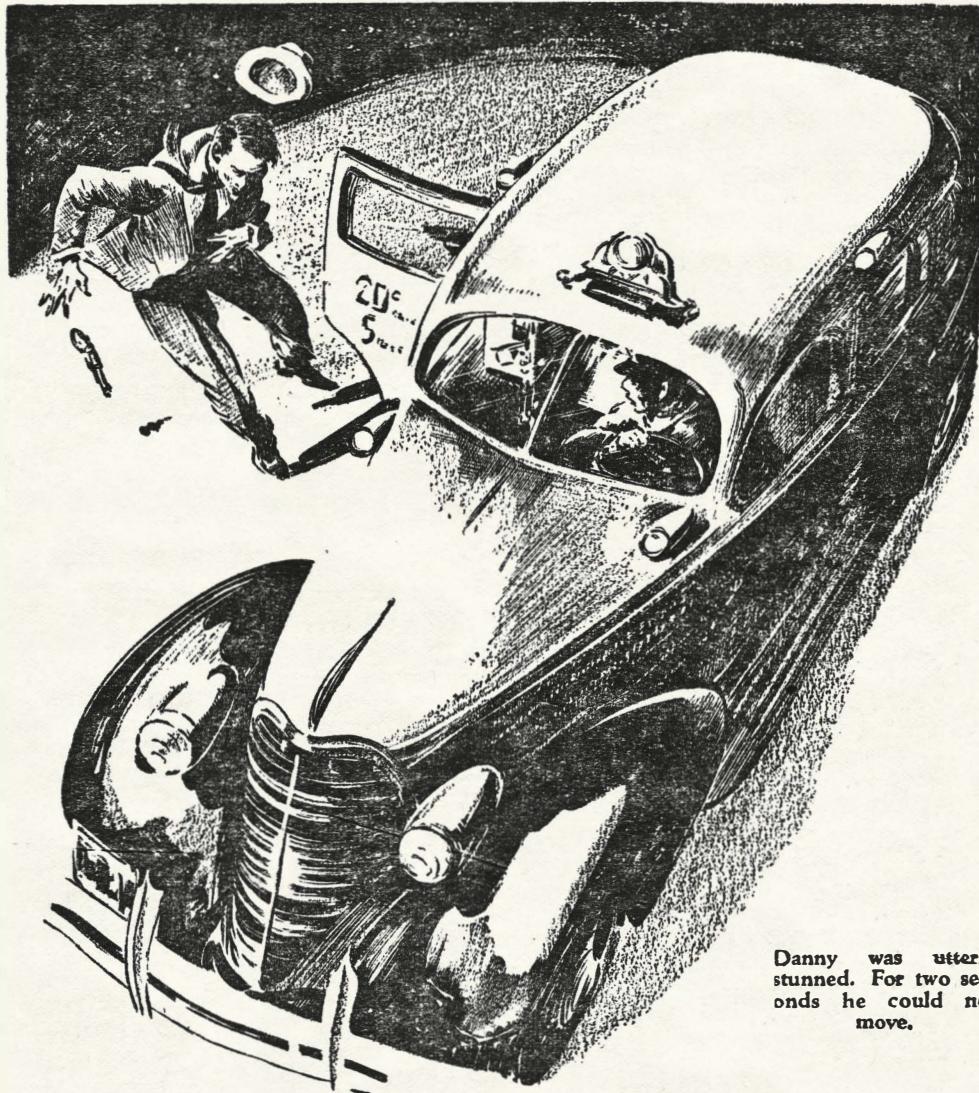
And where the thoroughbreds are running, there you'll find Joe Maddox, the bland Buddha of the horse tracks, making book on the bangtails—and sometimes on murder. This time it's Agua Caliente, south of the border in Old Mexico—and from the time the barrier goes up on the first race until Maddox finally wriggles his cheerful bulk out of a *Tijuana Kill-Trap*, it's a case of track bloody, action fast and more thrills to the page than any yarn yet in this great series by T. T. FLYNN.

MERLE CONSTINGER'S fabulous character, the Dean, is back with his Magnum in *Killer Take All*, to blast his way through the murder mire stirred up by the brutal slayer of Elm Lane. The victim's dying reference to "ghoulish laughter" was the only clue he had to work on—until he spotted the strange ad inserted in the paper by Chombo the Ninth, who gave lessons



# Last of the Big Shots

By MURRAY LEINSTER



Danny was utterly stunned. For two seconds he could not move.

*Nick Facetti was the last of the big shots, a has-been gang boss. But Danny the hackie recognized something in Nick that no one suspected, least of all the man who sought to impress Nick into the most heinous racket yet devised!*

DANNY cruised through the traffic in the early dusk, his brows creased uncomfortably. He was thinking about Nick Facetti. Funny for a taxi driver to be worried about somebody like Nick, but he'd been Danny's good friend. He'd been a big shot, and he was still Danny's friend. Now he'd almost dropped out of sight and Danny felt that it was up to him to be a good

friend to Nick. He cruised for a fare, and worried a little over the problem.

The traffic thinned out a trifle. Danny edged in toward the curb. Think of angels, and there was Nick Facetti. There was a cop's call box on the corner, and a cop was using it. Nick Facetti stood by, smoking. The traffic-light changed and everything stopped. Danny leaned over and said;

"Hi, Nick!"

Nick turned his head. Quick! Then he grinned. He said something to the cop and came out into the street. He moved fast, for all that he was getting fat. Danny opened the door and Nick swung in. The traffic-light changed. Danny let in the clutch. Danny saw that Nick watched the sidewalks tensely.

"Where to, Nick?"

"Just keep drivin'," said Nick.

One block. Two. Three. Danny wondered. Then, all of a sudden, Nick was wiping his face and neck with a silk hand-kerchief and grinning queerly.

"Danny," said Nick, "I'm a damned fool." He sat there on the edge of the seat, as if he were waiting for something.

"What's the matter?" asked Danny. "Anything I can do to help?"

Nick shook his head. He was grinning, but not as if he enjoyed the joke.

"Hit it up a little, Danny," said Nick. "Believe it or not, I'm bein' measured for curtains. Ain't that humorous?"

Danny grinned dutifully. The idea of anybody knocking off Nick Facetti would have been funny, a little while back. Him with his bodyguards and that bullet-proof car. . . . Danny stiffened suddenly. It wasn't funny. Not any more. Nick didn't have a bodyguard now. And when Danny'd picked him up he'd been talking to a cop!

"Hey!" said Danny, startled. "You don't mean that?"

"You can let me out anywheres, Danny," said Nick, gently.

"Where d'you get that stuff?" demanded Danny angrily. "You've always been a good friend of mine! If there's somebody gunnin' for you I'm—"

"I can take care of myself," Nick said. He continued to grin without mirth. "Us fifth columnists—did you hear that about me, Danny?"

Danny scowled.

Nick went on ironically, "I just heard it myself, Danny. Me—a fifth columnist! How d'you suppose they got wise to me?"

Danny scowled more deeply. This didn't sound like Nick. He turned into a side-street. Quiet, now, at this hour and so far west. Everything was all mixed up. Nick, who used to be a big shot, now a fifth columnist? Boloney!

Another taxi turned into the dark street behind them.

"If you're a friend of mine," said Nick drily, "how about losin' that cab? It's made the last three turns we did. I want to stay alive till ten o'clock tonight."

The other cab was gaining. Danny stepped on the gas and turned another corner. The other cab followed. He turned another. The other cab was trying to catch up. Danny set his jaw. No friend of his was going to get killed in his cab if he could help it! He jammed down the gas and set out to lose his pursuer.

He did lose it, but the trouble he had was proof that Nick was right about somebody being after him. It took a red light where there was a traffic-cop to give Danny a breakaway. And if it had been cops in that cab after Nick, they'd have come on through.

Danny felt queer. He turned right, then left, and presently slowed.

Nick said composedly, "Nice work. I'd better get out, though. They ain't given up. They're hell-bent on getting me, Danny. Funny! I was talkin' to that cop because they were right there waiting for a chance at me. Me, Nick Facetti, usin' a cop for a bodyguard! Funny, huh?"

Danny nodded uneasily. But fifth columnists aren't gotten rid of by assassination. Nick was all right.

"Listen," said Danny. "Who's after you? What for? Maybe—"

"No dice," said Nick. "I got to handle this my way. The job I got on hand is keepin' outa sight until ten o'clock."

"I'll keep you outa sight," said Danny. "But ain't there anybody who'll help?"

"Nobody," said Nick grimly. "Not a soul. I chucked my racket, Danny. Patriotism! So I haven't any friends to go to bat for me. It's just me against the guys that want to start some rackets an' run 'em different. I'll handle it."

"I'll keep you goin' as long as you want," said Danny, "an' if you want me to do anything else besides—"

Nick Facetti made a noise like he was laughing.

"I take it back about not havin' a friend, Danny. Do your stuff!"

Danny shoved the meter-flag down, not that he was going to charge Nick, but it looked better. He was uneasy but dogged. Nick was his friend, and if somebody was trying to bump him—well—Nick ought to have a fair chance, anyhow!

Danny was stiff and tense for twenty minutes of cruising. He began to feel easier. And then a car suddenly crashed past a red light out of a side street, swerved desperately to the left. It would have been a collision if Danny hadn't maneuvered expertly. He heard fenders scrape—and then the other cab was gone. Simultaneously Danny smelled something that made the hackles rise at the back of his neck. He realized that in the middle of the crash-noise he'd heard a muffled sound that accounted for the smell.

Instinctively Danny slowed to pull up to the curb. But Nick snapped:

"Keep goin', y'damn fool! It's a plant! Keep goin'!"

Danny shook all over with mingled rage and shock. He stepped on the accelerator. The way was open. Ten, fifteen, twenty blocks with traffic-lights winking red to green as he neared them. Never a need to slow or swerve. But Danny grew more angry as he drove.

"Listen, Nick," he said furiously, "I'm doin' just what you say. But the cops've got nothin' on you, or me either. You were talkin' to one when I picked you up! How about callin'—"

"Nix!" said Nick coldly. "Cops are out. If the guys get me, okay. But if they don't, by God they ain't goin' to put their stuff across! Lookahere, Danny! We're in a war. Me, I'm not so hot as a citizen. I'm too old to get in the army. I've got too bad a record to help any other way. But the guys that are after me to bump me—y'know what they figure on doin'? Rackets, guy—an' not so good. Get guys in uniform drunk an' pump 'em. Feed 'em rotgut an' dope an' worse. Rackets, fella, to mess up guys in our army an' navy; *spy* rackets!"

Danny stopped for a red light. Cars crowded close behind and beside him. His flesh crawled. The light changed. He went off with the rest in an odorous cloud of exhaust gas.

"Say!" he said, "That's Federal stuff!"

"Maybe," said Nick quietly. "But it's my stuff, too. They can't pull any o' those tricks while I'm alive. I know the ropes an' I know too much, fella. Doin' that sort of stuff may not seem like much, but I know what it's all about! I was born on the other side. I remember plenty!"

Danny groped mentally while his eyes went all about him and into the back-view mirror and he remembered the reek of the smokeless powder which had meant a bullet fired at Nick. He didn't understand, but he believed in Nick.

"Maybe you're right," said Danny, watching a car that came up behind, "but it seems like the cops—"

"Cops have to do it legally," said Nick grimly. "I ain't. I got a debt to pay back. I made plenty in this country, Danny, an' this is maybe something I can do in payment. . . . The guy behind this crummy deal is poison. He's had experience on the other side. I know how to fight him."

Traffic thickened. Danny swore because he'd allowed himself to be caught in it. This cab was a marked cab. The killers could spot it a block away, and he couldn't tell what car they'd appear in. . . .

A horn blared up ahead. Another joined in. Then more and more horns blasted. An indignant cacophony set up, echoed and reechoed.

The driver of the truck on Darby's left gunned his engine to a roar. Clouds of sooty smoke curled up under the back of the truck. The noise was unbearable. And then Danny smelled smokeless powder again! He hadn't heard the shot, but he jerked his head around and a man was just dodging through the stalled traffic to the sidewalk.

"Nick!" panted Danny. "Nick! Did he—"

Nick didn't answer. He was sitting very still. But the blaring of horns ceased suddenly. Cars began to move. Danny practically gibbered into the darkened back of the cab while a fresh tumult arose from impatient cars behind him.

Nick whispered, "Go on, Danny!"

"Nick! Did he get you?"

"Go on! Get movin'!"

His voice sounded almost normal. Danny started the cab with a jerk and plunged ahead. But he turned into a side-street, and turned again. There was cold sweat on his face. He plunged for uptown. There were places there where the streets were wide and almost empty at this hour, and he could stop safely and see what had happened to Nick. Presently, with his heart in his mouth, he turned into a place where a closed filling-station occupied a corner lot. He turned in and whisked out of his seat and had the back door open before Nick could stop him.

"Well?" said Nick grimly. His face was a funny color, but his eyes were fiercely level. "Get back an' keep goin', Danny."

"If anybody comes," said Danny desperately, "you give me your gun an' I'll shoot it out—Nick! They got you! Lemme stop the bleedin'—"

"I ain't bleedin'," said Nick. "I made sure. I got it all figured out. That fella thinks he got me. He didn't. If you want to do somethin' for me—"

"That's what I'm sayin'!" said Danny fiercely. "I got to do somethin'—"

"So have I," said Nick. His voice began to go thin. "I got a hell of a job to do. Patriotism, if y'want to know. You get back in an' drive. What time is it?"

Danny told him. Nick said with an effort, "I guess that's all right.... Yeah. I got to wait till ten o'clock. What're those guys doin' over there—"

There was a car stopping at the curb nearby. Danny climbed back in his seat and drove away. Fast. The other car didn't follow. Danny went uptown. He went across-town and all around.

Three times he asked Nick how he felt. Nick answered each time as if through tightly-clamped jaws. The third time—they were uptown again—he said unsteadily, "I'm thirsty as hell. How about gettin' me some water? They think they got me, Danny, but they didn't. What time is it?"

Again Danny told him.

Nick said dizzily, "I c'n last it if I get some water."

Danny said fiercely, "You oughta let me take you to a doctor! You're hurt!"

"Okay—after ten o'clock," said Nick. His voice steadied once more, as if he made an effort to steady it. "You know what kinda talk's been goin' on about me, because I was born on the other side. Well, I'm an American—an' there's a job I can do. I gotta stop a guy who's gettin' ready to feed rotgut an' dope an' treachery to kids gettin' ready to fight Japs an' Germans! He's even teachin' spyan'!"

Danny said miserably, "All right. But right after ten o'clock I'm goin' to take you to a doc. Who's your doc, Nick? I better phone him to be waitin'."

Nick told him on the way uptown again. Danny parked the cab in an alley next to a drug-store. He got out and phoned, while the druggist was filling a quart container with ice and water. He recognized the voice that answered the phone. Nick's brother-in-law was a doctor.

Nick drank in great, gasping gulps.

"God, that's good! Bad for me, maybe, but I gotta have it! Now listen! You drive downtown an' loaf around. I—got an appointment with this fella at ten o'clock sharp. I'll—tell you where to go when it gets near time."

Ten minutes before ten. Danny told Nick. He had a queer feeling that Nick was mustering every reserve of strength for some tremendous ordeal.

At five to ten, Nick spoke firmly. There was new strength in his voice. It was steady, and Danny could almost believe that nothing had happened at all. But he turned around to stare, and Nick's eyes were sunken, and his flesh looked flabby and his lips looked blue. But his voice was forceful.

"Here's the address." He gave the street and number. "About halfway down the block, uptown side. Stop before the door an' kill the motor. It's the house with a plant in a tub on the doorstep. Just wait. He'll come out. Then I'll talk to him."

It was queer, now, to be driving along the silent, echoing cross-town streets in the peculiar hush of night-time. It was queerer to be driving with Nick sitting upright in the back of the cab, looking like a dead man but acting like the big shot he used to be. Danny found an instant in which to wonder, even worried as he was, about what had become of all the

big shots one used to hear about. They're never heard of now. Nick was the last of them. But he himself said things were changing. Time for that stuff to end, with a war on. . . .

There was the street and the block. Danny turned the corner. He drove sedately. There was the house with a tub-plant on the doorstep. Danny drew up in front of it. He killed the motor.

"This right?"

"Sh-h-h-h-h!" said Nick fiercely.

Dim traffic noises far away. A horse clip-clopped somewhere. Queer to hear a horse. A car passed an intersecting street three blocks away. The constant, unintermittant murmuring noise that the city makes every hour of the day and night.

Then the door of the house opened. A man stepped out briskly. Danny felt Nick tense. The man came across the sidewalk. He was a little man, and he looked foreign. He was dapper. Very, very sure of himself.

He opened the door of the cab.

And Nick snarled at him.

Danny never knew what he said, because it wasn't in English. It was savage, deadly. Nick fairly spat the words. And to hear him, you'd never think he'd been hurt. The man from the house gasped. But he moved fast. He jerked back, and a street-light glittered on something that had come into his hand with practiced speed.

Then Nick's gun roared. Danny was utterly stunned. For two seconds he could not stir. The dapper man panted something in a choked voice, and it wasn't English either. Danny didn't know what language it was. The man crumpled.

That woke Danny up. He stepped on the starter and went away at top speed. The open door swayed wildly until he rounded a corner on two wheels. Then the door slammed. Danny jammed the gas pedal down to the floorboards again. He went racing, zig-zagging, and presently realized that nobody followed. Then he slowed and wiped cold sweat off his face.

"M-my Gawd!" gasped Danny. "I didn't know that was what you wanted, Nick! M-my Gawd!"

Nick said through tight-locked jaws,

"That was the fella that was goin' to move in, Danny. He'd ha' pumped some army an' navy information out o' drunks, an' he'd ha' left 'em with a spot of rottenness in 'em to spread. He's had experience at that, over on the other side." Nick's voice wavered. "A systematic fella, though. Always had a cab come for him at the same time when he was goin' home from his girl-friend's. I played on that. Scared the regular fella off. You look in the mornin' papers an' see the rest of it. Take me to the doc, now. Twistin' an' lurchin' has played hell . . ."

Danny drove fast, with sweat standing out on him. He drove to Nick's brother-in-law's house, and went right in the driveway. Nick's brother-in-law was waiting there, worried sick. Danny helped Nick get in the house. Nick moaned once. Then he grained at Danny with deep lines running down from his nostrils.

"It's curtains for me, Danny," he said steadily. "That first fella got me in the belly. But I hadda job to do. I'm too old for fightin', an' my record was bad. But I could do this job. My kinda job. I hadda pay a debt to this country." Then he said very quietly, "Thanks, Danny."

Danny went out. He sweated and shivered by turns. But there wasn't any blood on the seat-cushions. Only spilled water. He went and parked at a cab stand. He wasn't in shape to drive.

Next morning's papers flared headlines of an assassination. A distinguished naturalized citizen, whose activities among associations of the foreign-born had made him prominent. He had been shot down before the home of a friend. His own revolver was in his hand when he was found. There would be keen sorrow in the circles of the foreign-born.

Danny felt numb. Then he heard another taxi driver saying something to another.

"Yeah," said the driver. "I heard that, too. A fifth columnist, this guy Nick Facetti. A hell of a thing to let guys like him go around loose while—"

*Smack!* Danny heard the blow land. Suddenly he realized he had delivered it. He realized he was raging, ready to fight anybody that knocked his friend Nick Facetti. . . .

# TOAST and COFFINS



*Rossmann protested vehemently that his fur loft fire ruined him. Yet grizzled Fire Marshal Ben Pedley knew somebody must have cleaned up a fortune—because the cooked body in the vault, the dead watchman, and the crumpled figure in the furrier's dolly all spelled one horrible word to the veteran Fire Department detective: PYROMANIAC!*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Things in the Vault

**T**HE fire was out. Forked tongues of incandescence no longer licked out from gaping windows, high above the street. Cascades of glittering

*A colorful Marshal Ben Pedley novel*

**By STEWART STERLING**



Rossmann had such a wild look in his eye that Pedley drew his gun.

sparks had died down to an occasional glowing sprinkle. The loft building was nothing more than a gutted seven-story chimney spewing up a monstrous toadstool of smoke against Broadway's red glare. Yet now, with pumbers uncoupling and hose companies taking up, the commotion in West Thirty-eighth Street was at fever pitch.

Brassy gongs clanged the recall for hook-and-ladders. Soot-smudged men in wet rubber sloshed through gutters dragging limp serpents of canvas. Ruddy light from emergency truck headlamps turned sidewalk pools into mirrors reflecting the crowd surging at the fire lines. Still, the tall, lean-faced man kneeling on the curb paid no attention to all this roaring activity at his elbow. He squinted morosely down at the figure stretched out on the sidewalk . . . and his nostrils flared like those of a horse at a feared, familiar smell.

The corpse before him resembled nothing human. A fringe of silvery hair still circled one shrivelled ear. But the rest of the blackened skull was like a charred potato left too long in a camper's fire. No one could possibly have identified the body from the cracked, charcoal mask that had been a face . . .

"Poor old son-of-a-gun!" The tall man laid a palm flatly on the gray fluff which was all the flames had left of the dead man's shirt front. Slowly and steadily he pressed, watching the split and swollen lips. Presently he scowled up at the apple-cheeked individual perched beside him on the running-board of the insurance patrol. "No smoke in his lungs, Shaner."

The other puckered up his face as if he'd tasted something bad. "Don't necessarily signify, Marshal. One of the boys lugged him down the ladder; all the fumes could of been squeezed outa him."

Chief Fire Marshal Ben Pedley shook his head. "Even if they'd used prone pressure to resuscitate him, there'd still be traces. This guy was cooled before he had any chance to breathe in smoke."

The cold night air made the crisped skin of the fire's victim contract with a curious squeak. Deputy Marshal Shaner turned away; made a retching sound. He wiped his lips with a handkerchief. "Cop on the fixed post at the corner claims Whitey had a bum ticker. Old geezer was

pretty feeble to be a night watchman, anyways."

"Hell. He wasn't too feeble to phone in the alarm." Pedley's eyes held the grim bitterness of a surgeon's witnessing an unsuccessful operation. "Or to go scouting around to locate the blaze. Boys said they found him inside that lacquer shop on the third floor. Took some strength to shove the fire-door back and get in there."

"Prob'ly figured he could put out the fire with an extinguisher, before the apparatus got here." Shaner glanced up at the pall of smoke against the midnight sky. "Most likely a flareup from those chemicals hit him soon's he stuck his puss through the fire-door. Autopsy'll show if he swallowed flame."

Pedley pried the fingers of the corpse's left hand away from the strap of a blackened leather case. He turned the case over, exposed the shattered dial of a watchman's punch-clock. The hands of the timepiece had fused against the metal face. "Maybe," the Marshal tapped the case, "when they cut Whitey open, they'll find out how he could have telephoned the Fire Department at twelve twenty-five, when his clock went on the fritz at quarter past."

Shaner's mouth opened. He came over, squatted on his heels beside the body, examined the check-in clock. "Oh, oh! That makes different."

Pedley said: "It makes something stink. In spades. See what dope you can dig up on him. Get a couple of pix of this clock-face. And tell 'em to rush through that Med-exam's report." He turned toward the building, collided with a paunchy individual picking his way over broken glass. The fat man tripped on a hose-coupling, would have sprawled backward against a hydrant if Pedley hadn't grabbed him.

"Somebody's hurt in the fire?" the stout man panted.

Pedley kept his grip on the other's arm; shifted his position to block a view of the body. "Who wants to know?"

"I'm a tenant. Meyer Rossman. Rossman's *Beautifurs*. So was somebody—?"

"How'd you hear about the fire?"

Rossman pushed a protesting hand against the Marshal's grasp. "I'm not hearing about it. I'm only coming to my office. So I see the fire. Natural I should

make a civil inquiry. Ain't that okay?" Pedley let him go. "Queer time to be going to your office, mister."

"What's queer about it? Overtime I don't have to pay myself." The furrier swung around to goggle at an ambulance backing in to the curb. He laid his fingers alongside his cheeks, pulling down the corners of his mouth. "That ain't no crosstown bus. Who gets hurt?"

"Watchman." Pedley eyed him, coldly. "Know him?"

"Whitey? Absolutely I know him." Rossman peered around the Marshal, moaning: "Mine God! Is that thing . . . on the stretcher . . . ?"

"What's left of him. Yair."

The fur man hunched his shoulders and slid his fingers up over his eyes. "To a cinder he's cooked! I couldn't look." But Pedley noted the relief in the man's face; the absence of concern in his voice. . . .



**R**OSSMAN sidled toward the building entrance. "There wasn't anybody else . . . up there?"

Pedley scratched a lump of scar-tissue on the angle of his bony jaw. "Why? Any your employees working late tonight?"

The plump man clasped and unclasped his hands nervously across his paunch. "About this I ain't positive."

"Thought you'd been up in your office, yourself?"

The furrier avoided his eyes, "Did I say so?"

Pedley reached out, seized the V of the man's coat-lapels, yanked him up on tiptoe. "Don't give me that. Where you been tonight?"

"No place but mine home."

"Where you live?"

"Flatbush. Is Brooklyn."

"So all of a sudden, in the middle of the night, you decide you ought to come to New York and do some work!" Pedley released him with a shove that sent the fat man staggering back against the dripping wall.

"Please!" Rossman ducked his head, held up an arm to ward off a blow. "One hundred percent truth I'm telling. I'm home, listening on the radio—"

"You didn't hear about the fire on the radio."

"I don't hear about it at all." The furrier lowered his arm. "It's only on account of this phone call, I'm getting worried."

"Who called you?"

Rossman straightened his necktie. "I couldn't tell. It's about twelve o'clock. The telephone rings. Right away I'm answering. But there ain't nobody on the line."

Pedley slipped a hand under the furrier's elbow, pushed him along the sidewalk, into the lobby. "You get jittery every time somebody calls a wrong number?"

"It ain't then I'm worried." Rossman's eyes bulged at the confusion of plaster, charred wood and glass. "Only after I'm thinking maybe it's Miss Fallucci trying to get me and I'm calling the office without getting *her*."

"Is Miss Fallucci your office manager?"

"Mine bookkeeper."

"Was she working here tonight?"

"Was here when I left around half-past six. Figures we got to get ready for my lawyer."

"Why'd you say you didn't know if any of your employees were up there?"

"Am I positive? Do I know how late she's staying? I'm expecting she'll give me a ring before she leaves. Natural, when I don't hear nobody on the wire, I suppose it's her, trying to get me. So I call back. When I don't receive no answer, I'm wondering."

Pedley prodded the fat man up the littered stairs. The report had been that no one except Whitey had been in the building; still, the firemen hadn't been able to get into those upper floors until the blaze was under control. If the Fallucci girl had been up there when the fire broke out. . . .

They followed flattened coils of hose up the steel staircase, beside piles of brick rubble and the warped skeleton of the elevator-shaft grille. Pedley's flashlight picked out swirls of lazy smoke coiling around the blackened bones of the building. When they reached the ruins of the fourth floor, Rossman began to whimper.

A section of the floor had fallen in. Through the opening rose a thin veil of

steam from a broken main. Pedley propelled the furrier past the gaping hole, past burned-out cutting tables and the twisted wreckage of sewing machine benches. Covering a row of sadly buckled racks were fuzzy layers of dust-colored ash.

"My beautiful squirrels!" The furrier groaned like a man in pain. "Sixty thousand dollars worth squirrels! Burned like a piece paper in the stove!"

Pedley stood at the opening which had been the office door. On one metal desk stood a typewriter with its keys fused into a tangled mass. The base of a telephone had melted, the receiver drooping from its hook. A once-green file-case leaned crazily against a huge, fireproof storage vault. On the vault's closed door gilt lettering was still visible:

Super-values!!  
ROSSMANS  
Beautifurs

The Marshal moved toward a steel coat-tree. From one of its pegs hung something that looked like a sooty handbag. At the base of the costumer was a heap of gray, feathery residue.

"Hey, Rossman. Would your book-keeper leave without her hat or coat?"

Rossman stared. "I couldn't believe this."

"Then she didn't go—" Pedley broke off, listening. . . .

From the interior of the vault came a faint, grating sound.

The furrier squeaked in horror. Pedley lunged for the knob of the vault door.

The knob was scorching hot. But he turned it, tugged at it until the door swung wide. The blast of heated air struck him like a jet of live steam.

Pedley dropped to his knees, crawled in. He smelled his hair singeing, as he got a grip on the high heels which stuck out from under the pile of fur coats.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Trouble In Figures

THE inside of the vault was an oven. The steel floor seared the Marshal's hands and knees; the air pricked his lungs like red-hot needles.

That any human could have lived through broiling heat like this was beyond belief—but the girl beneath those furs *was* alive. The convulsive twitching of those high heels, on the steel floor, had made that grating sound.

Pedley tried to drag her out, bodily. But, at his first tug, it felt as if the girl were glued to the floor of the vault. He'd have to pull that pile of coats off her; lift her up.

He hauled desperately at mink and beaver, seal and fox. She'd wrapped the coats around her; it had given her the one chance in a million to survive that frightful temperature. Furs were good insulators, the Marshal realized; he'd never known them to be used to keep heat *out*, before.

He was near collapse himself, when he finally got his arms beneath her, lifted her, crawled out. She was unconscious. That was a mercy; the agony of her burns would be unbearable. Rossman had such a wild look in his eyes that Pedley drew his gun.

Then the furrier wrung his hands. "Mary! Oh, mine God! I can't stand looking" Suddenly he fainted, pitched sideways against the file and slid to the floor.

Pedley stumbled erect and weaved unsteadily to a window. He put away the gun, yanked the silver whistle from his vest pocket and lustily gave the three blasts.

Down on the sidewalk, by the light of a pencil flash, Shaner was scrawling in a note book. He gawked up in amazement.

"Amby! Rush it!" Pedley shouted, hoarsely. "Get a stretcher up here! Fast!"

The deputy cupped a hand, yelled: "Comin' right up." He ran toward the emergency truck.

Pedley ducked back into the office. There wasn't anything he could do for Mary Fallucci. There wouldn't even be much the doctors could do, except to dull her pain. If the Marshal could only rouse her out of her coma for an instant, perhaps he could find out why she'd burrowed there in the fur vault instead of using the fire stairs to escape, or why she hadn't used the phone to summon help, when she first smelled smoke. But

there wasn't any way of bringing her to, short of a hypodermic.

Maybe he could do something with Rossman. There were things the fur man had to explain. Why had the storage vault been unlocked, anyway? What had the bookkeeper been doing which made it necessary for her to keep the vault open?

The Marshal sopped his handkerchief in a pool of water beneath the window sill. He laid the wet cloth over Rossman's face and unbuttoned his collar. The furrier clawed at his throat, gasped for air, and then Shaner lumbered in with a blue-coat at the other end of a stretcher.

The deputy took one look at the girl, shielded his eyes with a hand, as if from a bright light. "God! Was she up here, all through that!"

Pedley jerked a thumb toward the vault. "Ran in there for some reason." He stooped to lift her onto the stretcher. "Skin's cooked right off her."

The policeman muttered: "She hasn't a prayer."

"Crime to bring her to," the Marshal agreed. "But the surge will have to hyp her up, if he can. Long enough for you to ask a couple questions, Shaner."

The deputy gulped. "What questions?"

Pedley held up a finger: "Does she know how the fire started?"

"Yuh . . ."

A second finger: "Was there anyone here in the office with her tonight?"

"Oke."

Three fingers: "Why'd she bury herself here in the vault? . . . Wait! She's snapping out of it!"

But she wasn't. The puffed lips merely mumbled in delirium:

"Lorena! Is that you?"

The Marshal grabbed the still groggy Rossman. "Who's she calling?"

"Her sister. Rena. By us she's the model." The manufacturer crouched fearfully at the side of the stretcher. "Rena ain't here, Mary."

The swollen lips moved again, tortuously: "Don't hurt Lorena . . . that's all . . . I ask . . ." the figure writhed, was still.

Pedley studied the slack, discolored features. "Get her to the hospital, Shaner. Stick close when they give her the shot. She'll only last a minute. You'll have to

get what you can. Anything may help."

The stretcher-bearers vanished into the smoky gloom.

+ + +

**H**E PUT the flashlight full in Rossman's eyes. "Now let's have it, straight."

The furrier shrank away from the beam. "You shouldn't speak with me in this tone. I'm ruined already. But it don't even make no difference, I'm so sick about Miss Fallucci."

Pedley went to the door of the vault. The heat was bearable, now. "Why'd she run in here, when she could've used the fire stairs?" He reached in, dragged out one of the coats the girl had wrapped around her. It was a velvety gray squirrel; the fur came off the skins like hair from a shedding cat.

"How should I know?" Rossman croaked. "So help me, I didn't even know the vault was open."

"Who had the combination besides you?"

"Only Mary. You ain't saying there was funny business!"

"The fire was set, Rossman. The watchman was murdered. Your bookkeeper was damned near roasted alive. I don't know what you call funny business, but—"

"You ain't even mentioning I'm ruined, absolutely."

"Are you?"

"Sixty thousand dollars squirrels alone. Two minks, anyhow three thousand. Nine, ten seal at sixty apiece wholesale. A couple dozen neckpieces, genuine silver fox—"

"Hell of a lot of stuff to have on hand at the end of the season. Were you covered?"

"Positively I got insurance. But—"

"One good fire's worth a dozen salesmen, eh?"

Rossman's plump cheeks mottled. "It's the fur business I'm in. Arson, it ain't my line. Rather I'd lose every cent I got in the world, God forbid, than see Mary suffering like this." His fists clenched at his side.

Pedley stepped into the vault. "How come all your stuff wasn't locked up in here, instead of being out in your shop?"

There's room enough here for all the pelts in Alaska."

"Only made-up garments, we keep in the vault. And only them which ain't sold yet. All them squirrels . . . yesterday they was bought by Dick Dablin." Rossman gazed miserably at the coats the Marshal had removed from the book-keeper. "Now I can't make delivery on them so I got to return the payment. Also the insurance people wouldn't pay me for them, because legal they ain't mine property no longer. Both ways I get stuck. *Weh ist mir!*"

Pedley came out of the vault with a leather-bound loose leaf ledger. "This your duplicate stock book?"

The manufacturer nodded, warily. "So maybe it ain't exactel up-to-date."

"Show me the set-up on squirrel coats." The Marshal held his flashlight on the volume.

**R**OSSMAN turned the pages uneasily. "Fifty-four swaggers. Forty-one three-quarter models. Nineteen full lengths. . ." he hesitated. "I ain't guaranteeing Mary keeps this checked absolutely."

Pedley let his lips flatten against his teeth. "Listen! If you try to pull that on the people who issued your insurance, you'll be S.O.L. That's up to you. But don't try to outfox the Fire Department. This isn't any backyard bonfire. It's first degree arson; probably first degree murder. Somebody's going to wind up getting his pants legs slit and his head shaved. If you want to be it, just keep on stalling."

"I swear before God—"

"Yah! You've been holding out on me. You know something. Or you suspect somebody."

"I'm giving you my word of honor—"

"All right. Keep on futzing around. If you weren't in on this yourself, you're helping the criminal by withholding information. You'll come in for eight to ten years upriver, as accessory."

Rossman's mouth curled up in a smile but the corners of his eyes crinkled as if he were about to cry. "I give you my solemn oath, there's only one thing about this business which it's bothering me."

"Spit it out."

The furrier held up the stock ledger. "For quite a while, already, the finished garment record, it's all messed up. My office book, it shows right. But this duplicate Mary keeps in the vault, it's cock-eyed. Which one actual shows what merchandise we got in the shop, I ain't been sure."

"Your bookkeeper doing a little double entry on her own, huh?"

Tears trickled down the fat man's cheeks. "My tongue I'd rather cut out than say it. Mary, she's been with me since I start mine own factory. Always I trust her; never would she steal so much as a postal stamp. If only she'd tole me if she's needing money . . ." He blew his nose hard.

There was neither sympathy nor softness in Pedley's tone. "I've been gumshoeing for the Fire Department for twenty years, mister. This isn't the first time I've run up against a crooked employee who's tried to cover up thefts with ashes. And I've learned one thing—"

"Yes?"

"When they decide to burn up a place to hide evidence against them, these amateur firebugs usually are desperate enough to gamble on one last big haul." The Marshal waggled his flashlight toward the rear of the building. "It's ten to one you were practically cleaned out of fur coats before this blaze began. Let's go gander."

## CHAPTER THREE

### Fire Victim No. 3

**T**HE fact that someone had finagled the records of *Beautifuls* didn't help Pedley much. Grim experience had sharpened his suspicions of any fire in the millinery district after the close of the hat season, or in the clothing center at the end of each wholesale garment buying season. Alarms always doubled in those areas, at those times.

Nor did Rossman's story of being home in Brooklyn at the time the blaze started eliminate the furrier from the arson picture. Many a business man now making little ones out of big ones had committed the mistake of hiring a professional pyro and trusting to an alibi. But if the

furrier's story about the sale of sixty thousand dollars worth of squirrel coats stood up, then there wouldn't be any sense to his making a bonfire of property on which he couldn't recover.

Pedley made the pudgy man precede him to the row of heat-sagged racks. The manufacturer stooped, picked up a handful of the fluffy fuzz at the base of the metal stands. He stared at it. His lips quivered and he let the feathery ash sift through his fingers.

The Marshal prodded Rossman with the flash. "What was hanging here?"

The man sniffed. "Absolutely first quality natural platinum squirrels. Prize pelts, long, silky hair. Custom made, with extra-full-cut backs. Hundred percent wool interlinings, Skinner satin besides. And such sensational style. Super-shawl collars on the full lengths. Six inch cuffs, positively . . ." he wagged his head, dismally.

Pedley took a cellophane envelope out of his vest pocket. He held it open with one finger, scooped up an ounce or so of the ash, put the light on it. "Squirrel? In a pig's pazook!"

"I'm telling you!"

The Marshal sealed the envelope. "Squirrel coats might have been hanging here. But they weren't on this rack when the fire caught 'em. This," he shook the envelope, "is bunny."

"Rabbit!"

"Yair. Or whatever the hell fancy name you guys give 'em. Dyed coney. Siberian squirrel."

Rossman seemed dazed.

"Somebody put the snatch on your sixty grand worth of nut chasers and substituted a flock of Belgian hares."

"You couldn't get me to believe Mary done this to me," the furrier breathed heavily.

"How about this sister of hers? This Rena? Could she be mixed up in it?"

Rossman's fingers fumbled at his lips. "It ain't possible. Rena is a *dummkopf*; three years now she's been modeling for me and still she don't hardly know a muskrat from a chinchilla. She wouldn't know to pick good furs from cheap."

"Know where we can find the sister?"

"Somewhere in the Village, she's living with Mary."

"Allez oop, then! Let's look her up!"

THE stairs were clear of hose when they descended. Only the occasional hiss of escaping steam, the dripping of water came to their ears. The street was deserted except for uniformed men from the precinct house and a crew from the electric company.

Pedley gave curt orders to a patrolman, led the way to his red sedan. Rossman started to get in. The Marshal pushed him up against the side of the car, searched him, found no weapons.

"I can't be horsing around with you. You're under arrest, mister. Be right . . . and if your nose is clean, you'll come out okay. Act up . . . and you'll be looking up from an operating table."

The furrier shuddered. They rolled downtown. At Sheridan Square Pedley flagged a traffic officer, sent him into a cafeteria to look in the phone book. The bluecoat came out with an address on Jane Street.

It was a remodeled apartment house. The celluloid card with the inked-in *Falucci* was under the button for 1-C. Pedley thought he'd have to wake the superintendent, but from the front steps he spotted a light in the third floor front. He pressed the button under 3-A. The latch clicked.

They went down the hall to the last door on the right. There was no light showing at the sill; no sound from within. Pedley knocked.

Slippers slapped on the floor. Lights went on. A soft voice inquired:

"Who is it?"

Pedley elbowed the fat man.

"It's Mr. Rossman," the furrier said. The door opened a crack. The girl had a figure made for sweaters; she was wearing thin pajamas and a gauzy negligée. Cornsilk hair tasseled about her shoulders. Pedley thought she might have just stepped out of a bedroom advertisement, except that her eyes were bright with alarm. He pushed past her and walked into the one-room apartment.

"What's the matter, Mr. Rossman?" She pulled the negligée up over her bosom.

"It's Mary . . ." the manufacturer began.

"Your sister's been hurt. I'm from the Fire Department." Pedley switched on the light in the tiny bathroom; he stared at the array of toilet articles on the wash bowl.

"There's been a fire?" Rena put the back of one hand to her mouth. "At the shop?"

"Was terrible," Rossman muttered.

"Mary's over at the hospital. Pretty badly burned." The Marshal noticed the in-a-wall bed with its rumpled covers; the pink silk thrown over the back of a chair. "If you want to go to her—"

"Yes. Yes. Of course." The girl backed away. "It'll only take me a minute. Is Mary—will she—live?"

Rossman started to exclaim, but Pedley cut in, quickly. "One of my deputies is over taking her deposition, now. But she's in pretty bad shape."

She cried, "If you don't mind waiting. Out in the hall. While I get dressed."

"Snap it up," Pedley answered.

It was five minutes before she hurried out, in smart tweeds and a silver fox necklace. She ignored her employer and addressed the Marshal:

"The fire wasn't accidental, was it?"



PEDLEY noted her tightly compressed lips and the sharp lines between her eyes. "What makes you think it wasn't?"

She sat in the rear seat of the sedan. "Because Mary's been afraid of something like that."

The furrier twisted around. "Rena! What you saying!"

"What I believe, Meyer Rossman. That you've been figuring on pulling a fast one, on account of sales were so lousy with you."

Rossman held up his hands. "Yi, yi, yi! It ain't enough we're burned out! Now mine own employees turn against me!"

Pedley got the car rolling. "Keep right on turning the crank, Miss Fallucci. Business with *Beautifurs* wasn't so good?"

The blonde lit a cigarette. "Rossman's in the red clear up to here. If his books don't show it, it'll be because he's been doctoring 'em after Mary set down the facts."

The fat man chattered with rage. "For God's own sake, Rena! Is that why I should pay you sixty a week, so you could lie me into prison?" Her voice was brittle.

"You're not kidding me, Meyer. You haven't been pulling the wool over Mary's eyes, either. She told me two weeks ago you were readying yourself to go into bankruptcy—if you couldn't find some other way out of your difficulties. I guess this fire is your other way. And if you think I'm going to keep my mouth shut for any lousy sixty bucks a week—while you put Mary in the hospital or in her grave—you're damn well mistaken."

Rossman spluttered incoherently, pawed the air in desperation. But he didn't make any answer that was intelligible to the Marshal. The model's accusation put the picture in a different light. If the manufacturer had been planning an incendiary job for the past fortnight or so, maybe he'd already arranged for some hire-out firebug to torch the shop. And, in that case, it was possible that Rossman hadn't been able to get in touch with his arsonist after the sale of those squirrel coats, a transaction which *might* have put the business back into the black. In that case, an insurance payment wouldn't have been necessary.

The tip of Rena's cigarette glowed brightly in the rear view mirror. "Mary said you were working on figures to give your lawyer so he could prepare the bankruptcy petition, or whatever it was. She was looking around for another job already, so instead she lands in a hospital. If you had anything to do with putting her there, you fat little rat, I'll do more about it than just talk—"

Rossman squealed, came up out of his seat gibbering and slapping at the back of his neck. Sparks dropped from his coat collar to the seat cushions. Rena calmly tossed away the cigarette she'd ground out on the fat man's neck.

Pedley braked to a stop. "Lay off the vendetta stuff, Miss Fallucci. I brought you along so you could see your sister,—not to start any private roughhouse. Rossman, siddown. Stop blubbering. If one red-hot cigarette hurts you that bad, imagine what fifteen or twenty thousand volts will do."

That stopped the talk until they reached the hospital. The Marshal herded them into the *Emergency* entrance, down a luminous corridor smelling of ether and antiseptic, to a door at which Shaner stood guard.

"They're having a hell of a time keeping her heart going," the Deputy murmured. "She hasn't been conscious a second."

Pedley motioned Rena into the room. The model's face was frozen, her eyes glassy, as she went up to the cot.

"Mary! Oh, Mary!" She began to sob, convulsively. "It's Rena, Mary. Don't you know me?" She pillow'd her head by the bandage-swathed arm.

The white-coated interne busied himself with a stethoscope. Pedley scowled down at the pitiful heap of burned clothing which had been cut from the dying girl's body; the warm flannel skirt was scorched brown; there wasn't anything left of the jacket.

"How much longer, doc?"

The interne shrugged. "Hard to say. Amazing vitality. Hour or two. Maybe three."

The Marshal patted Rena's shoulder. "Won't help any, for you to stay here."

She lifted a mascara-streaked face. "I won't leave her. You can't make me leave her."

He nodded, gravely. "All right."

In the corridor, he growled to Shaner: "Keep close enough to hear a whisper. And keep an eye on this sister. She seems to know some of the answers."

"Okay, Skipper."

The Marshal gestured brusquely to Rossman. "Time we had a sworn statement out of you."

## CHAPTER FOUR

**Salesman Jack Boyne**

THEY started back to the red sedan. Rossman protested: "About mine own predicament I should be bothered. But it's nothing compared to what that poor girl suffers."

"Rena?"

"Pfui! Should I care how Rena feels, after what she lied about me? No. It's Mary. With her I'm dying a thousand deaths."

"Wasting your sympathy on the wrong sister. Mary hasn't any pain, now. That's all over. Even if she snaps out of it for a few seconds, she'll be so full of morphine she won't suffer much. But the other kid—all the rest of her life she'll remember how her sister looks and what she went through."

The furrier rubbed the back of his neck. "About this I ain't caring. Only three years Rena's been on mine payroll. Twelve years Mary handles all *Beautifurs* confidential matters. If it ain't for her, why would I hire her sister in the first place? Now Rena stabs me—in the back."

"This stuff about your preparing a petition in bankruptcy. That on the level?"

The man's face was greasy with sweat. His pale eyes bugged out with fear. "What's good denying it?"

"Now you're pitching, mister. Keep on pouring it in there. Get it off your chest."

Rossman turned his face sideways, made three quick pushing-away motions with his hands.

"Off my chest I don't need to get nothing. Facts is facts. Anybody is welcome to them. I got nothing to hide, absolutely."

"You weren't so anxious to tell me your business was in a bad way."

"Is any businessman? Besides, yesterday I ain't no more in bad shape. Not after Jack sells them squirrels to Dablin."

"Oh! The sixty gees made you a profit on the season?"

Rossman pursed his lips. "Did I claim I got sixty thousand? A little concession you got to make, sonetimes."

Pedley snorted. "What the hell did you get?"

"'Jack,' I say, 'do the best you can with Dablin. He could dispose of the garments at a nice profit. You should make a good commission. Maybe I pay off a few creditors.' So he goes out. When he comes back, what's he got? A check for thirty-four thousand five hundred. 'It's breaking my heart into bits,' I'm complaining with him, 'but I got to take it.'"

"I bet you were broken-hearted."

Rossman shrugged. "Beggars couldn't be choosing."

"Did you deposit the check? Or cash it?"

"I couldn't do nothing with it. After banking hours, Jack brings it."

"Where is it?"

"Mary had it. To make deposit in the morning." The furrier folded his hands as if in prayer. "Anyhow, it wouldn't do me no good to try and cash it. With the garments only a pile ashes, Dick Dablin is sitting on the bank steps already to stop payment."

Pedley slid in behind the wheel of the official car. "How about proving this gabble you're giving me?"

"Is easy. Call up Jack Boyne."

The Marshal kicked the starter. "I'm a guy likes to do business in person. Where's your salesman hang out?"

"At the Hotel Goelet, he's rooming."



**T**HE *Goelet* was up above Columbus Circle. The Marshal went through the reds with the siren wide open. Rossman closed his eyes; gripped the back of the seat the way kids hold onto a roller coaster car.

In the shabby gilt-and-rose lobby of the hotel, Pedley showed his badge to a watery-eyed night clerk; got a room number. On the way up in the elevator the Marshal seemed pre-occupied.

"No prompting, now, Rossman. I'll do the quiz-biz. You speak when spoken to."

The furrier nodded. "Agreeable by me."

They went down a carpeted corridor, to 604. Pedley put a finger to his lips.

Behind the door a voice had been droning, monotonously; now it stopped. The Marshal couldn't make out the words. But when the speaker began again, after a long pause, Pedley knocked. The talker was abruptly silent.

The door opened a slit. A pleasant, boyish face peered out, inquiringly.

"Boyne?"

"Who're you?"

"Fire Department. Okay to come in?"

"Sure." The man was in shorts and slippers; he held a *Racing Form* in one

hand, a pipe in the other. "What's the idea?" He saw the furrier, frowned. "Meyer!" He put the pipe in his mouth, slowly. "What's up?"

Rossman looked at the Marshal. Pedley closed the door, moved into the room. "Investigating a blaze over at *Beautifurs*, Boyne."

The sporting paper dropped from the salesman's hand; the frown deepened. "Bad one?"

"Yair." Pedley surveyed the room. "Couple people hurt. Considerable property damage." There was a stack of *Turf & Track* magazines on a table; pajamas and a bathrobe tossed on the big double bed; a portable radio set on the bureau. That voice they had heard, out in the hall, had come from the radio. "Reason to believe the fire was incendiary."

The salesman ran tobacco-stained fingers through rumpled brown hair. "Why're you coming to me about it?" He scowled at Rossman.

"Thought you might know who wanted to put your boss out of business."

The salesman took the pipe out of his mouth, laid it carefully on the table. "Meyer, you fat so-and-so. Were those squirrels damaged?"

The furrier held out appealing hands. "Could I help it, Jack? The fire boys done their level best—"

Boyne leaped. His weight forced the fat man back on the bed; his hands went to Rossman's windpipe.

**P**EDLEY grabbed the salesman's shoulders, hauled him up off the bed. Boyne's grip dragged the manufacturer upright, too. The Marshal smashed a stiff right to Boyne's chops. It staggered the salesman and sent him reeling against the wall. Rossman, his face beet-red with congested blood, his hands clawing frantically at the throttling fingers, crashed into the wall alongside his attacker.

Boyne waited until Pedley closed in, then gave him a knee in the crotch. The Marshal grunted with pain, lashed out with a left. It caught the salesman smack in the teeth.

They slid to the floor, Boyne on top. His face was contorted—but he didn't

loosen his death-grip on the fat man's throat.

Pedley's right hand snaked to the holster under his left armpit. He didn't want to shoot either of these men; maybe the butt would do the trick. He clubbed the police positive, clipped Boyne hard behind the ear. The salesman collapsed, his fingers still locked on Rossman's throat. Pedley got a forearm under Boyne's chin, wrenched him up and back.

Rossman fell free, tongue protruding from his thick lips. His eyes were open, but only the whites were visible. He was unconscious. The Marshal rolled him over so his tongue wouldn't strangle him; dragged Boyne's limp figure into the adjoining bathroom.

The salesman towelled vigorously. "Who the hell would be setting the shop on fire, except Rossman. That's how he got his start in business. He was working for Kreiner's, and Kreiner's had a fire one night and got cleaned out. Then Rossman started in on his own by stealing Kreiner's customers."

"Yair? That might be important." Pedley went back into the bedroom. "Get some clothes on. You'll have to go down to the building and check up on what's been destroyed." He went to the bed. Rossman was lying on his side, wheezing. He propped himself up on one elbow, glared at the figure in the bathroom.

"Is a filthy, rotten lie, Jack. From Kreiner's I never took nothing. No more

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**Day Keene, a favorite of *Detective Tales'* readers, is the author of the lead novel in the current issue of *Strange Detective Mysteries*. Read, KEEP OUT OF MY COFFIN!—a top-notch mystery thriller that will satisfy even the most hard-to-please detective fiction fan.**

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There was a lump the size of a pigeon's egg behind the salesman's ear. The gun butt had split the skin. A thin ribbon of red ran down Boyne's shoulder onto his undershirt.

Pedley opened the medicine cabinet. There was a confusion of tooth powder, razor blades, talcum, tooth paste, shaving cream, but no collodion or iodine. He used cold water. Boyne came out of it fighting like a drunk. The Marshal turned on the cold shower, heaved the salesman under it. He spluttered incoherently and swung a punch. Pedley shoved him off balance, bumped his nose against the shower pipes.

"For God's sake cut it out—or I'll slap you silly!"

Boyne cursed and struggled to turn off the water. "Did I kill that dirty little drip?"

"You didn't. And you won't. You're a tough cluck, aren't you?"

Boyne shivered, stripped off his wet underclothes. "Not so tough. Just sore at that chiselling jerk."

"And why?"

do I burn up my own property—including practical every cent I got in the world!"

Boyne pulled on his pants. "I wouldn't know how you worked it, sharp-shooter. But you and that bookkeeper you hired away from Kreiner—between you, you'll manage to come out of it with a few thousand bucks, all right. While I'm up the creek for twelve hundred back commission you owe me."

The furrier sat up. "How could I pay commission on bills I ain't collected, yet?"

**P**EDLEY prodded Rossman with the pistol. "Pipe down, fatso." He turned to the salesman. "Your boss may have held out on some assets, Boyne. But if the bookkeeper was in it, she got paid off the wrong way."

Boyne stopped lacing his shoe. "Mary? What's with her?" The blood drained out of his face.

"She hid in the vault during the fire. Got herself damn near barbecued alive."

"*God!*" The salesman moved toward Rossman, stepping stiff-legged. "Didn't

want anyone left who could testify against you, you rotten louse!"

The Marshal shouldered him back. "Leave the Superman stuff to me, fella. You can't help the Fallucci dame that way. Maybe you could if you'd explain how somebody switched those squirrel coats you sold—for rabbit skins."

Boyne said: "The squirrels weren't burned?"

"I haven't sifted all the ashes in the *Beautifurs* shop." Pedley looked at a silver picture frame on the bureau; it held a cheap glossy print photo of Dorothy Lamour in a sarong. "But I'll lay six, two and even none of the coats you sold to Dablin were cremated."

Rosman blurted: "So figure it, Jack. Insurance on them garments I couldn't collect, by terms the policy."

The salesman finished tying his shoes before he answered. "Hell, you don't think you'll be able to cash Dablin's check, now, do you?"

Rosman merely groaned.

The Marshal examined the radio, idly. "One thing that could have happened; the bookkeeper could have rigged up the deal to cover her defalcations. But in that case, where would those dyed rabbit coats have come from?"

Boyne slapped a shirt on. "From damn near any contractor in town. They're a dime a dozen, now the season's over. If Meyer'd wanted coney or muskrats to substitute for squirrels, he could have gone to any one of a hundred contractors—" he stopped, with his mouth open, his eyes wide.

Pedley swore. "Don't dumb up on me. What's your slant?"

The salesman knotted his four-in-hand, lifted his chin, stretched his neck muscles. "I'll take it all back, Meyer. I might have had you wrong. . . ."

Rosman's eyes glistened in gratitude. "Positively you did, Jack."

"I just remembered something." Boyne stooped to glance in the mirror. "When I mentioned contractors."

The Marshal banged the table, irritably, with the revolver butt. "Don't mind me! Go right ahead with your double talk! A little matter of murder can wait."

Boyne whirled. "You didn't tell me anybody was killed."

"The night watchman at your building was strangled. Ties up to the fire. Which must have been touched off by whoever did that hipper-dipper switch of the furs."

Boyne seemed suddenly tired, drawn. "It would have to be somebody who had rabbit coats to begin with. That means a small contractor, because none of the big manufacturers monkey with that imitation junk."

"Jack, you ain't thinking—" Rosman was shrill.

"Certainly I'm thinking of Lemwitz. You don't farm out work to anyone else, do you?"

"But it's like crazy to imagine about Lemwitz."

"Yeah? When I left the office around quarter to seven, one of his trucks was parked in front of our freight entrance. You know any other firm in our building Hymie Lemwitz finishes for?"

"Exclusive for us, he works. . . ."

"Was he supposed to be delivering any garments tonight?"

"I couldn't say yes."

The salesman slapped on an oyster gray felt. "And Lemwitz had been peddling a couple hundred long-eared 'squirrels' all over the district,—for how long?"

Rosman wrung his hands.

The Marshal gestured toward the door. "Whoever carted those bunnies to your place didn't do it on a bicycle. If this Lemwitz had a truck over on West Thirty-eighth tonight, let's ask him why."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Another Corpse

THE contractor's place of business was the ground floor of a dilapidated brick structure which had once been a garage.

"Hymie lives up over," Rosman muttered, dejectedly. "A family he ain't got."

There was a rickety staircase. They used it, Indian file, with Pedley bringing up the rear. At the landing, he ordered: "Wake him up, Rosman. No tip off, now."

The furrier banged on the door, cried: "Hymie! Hymie! Get up and letting me in. It's Meyer."

There was grumbling and grunting, inside. A chain rattled, a latch clicked. In the dim light from a single hanging bulb, Lemwitz peered nearsightedly at the three men in the doorway, his eyes puffed with sleep.

"What's medder, Meyer?" He had removed his teeth. Tufts of gray hair stood up ridiculously around his bald pate. He rubbed one bare foot against the other leg; the long underwear he wore was patched and baggy.

"It's a fire. At mine shop, Hymie. I'm ruined, absolutely."

The contractor held up his hands in horror.

Pedley pushed the others inside. "Climb into some clothes, Lemwitz. You won't be going back to bed for a while."

Boyne made a grab for the old man, seized his arm before the Marshal could prevent it.

"What'd you do with those squirrels you stole, you stinking old chiseler?"

"Stole—*schmole!*" Lemwitz screeched. "What you accusing me?"

Pedley caught Boyne's wrist, put a leverage on it. "That'll be all from you, Lone Ranger. Keep still or I'll tap you good."

The salesman rubbed his wrist resentfully, sat down on a kitchen chair. Rossman fluttered around like a fussy hen, clucking to Lemwitz in Yiddish.

"Rossman! Do I havé to lock you up to shut you up?" The furrier subsided. Pedley gave the barely-furnished flat the once-over, lightly. There didn't seem to be any place where a hundred fur coats could be hidden. He came back to the contractor.

"What was your truck doing over on West Thirty-eighth Street tonight, Lemwitz?"

"West Thirty-eighth?" The old man buttoned his vest with trembling fingers. "Who says it?"

"I say so, Lemwitz!" Boyne was up on his feet again.

The old man quivered with anger. "Pete drives the truck for only one order all day. Over to Dablin's—which is by Fourteenth Street. So on West Thirty-eighth it ain't."

The Marshal was puzzled. "What were you delivering to Dablin?"

Lemwitz turned to a tumbler beside his bed. When he swivelled around again, teeth showed in a sly grin. "A surplus I'm selling. A lot one hundred and twenty London-dyed squirrel."

"Rabbit." Pedley figured the scar on his chin. "You sold *those* to Dablin?"

"A sacrifice, sure. Over to the next season I couldn't carry them. He offers me forty-two hundred, two percent in sixty days, so am I foolish in the head? I deliver quick before he's changing the mind." His eyes glittered briefly in self-approval.

Rossman pursed his lips. "Was smart business. Only—"

The Marshal picked it up: "Only if those coats were delivered to Dablin, they weren't the ones that went up in smoke in your factory."

**J**ACK BOYNE took his pipe out of his mouth, made a face at the stem and spat. "It's just a gag to explain why the rabbit coats aren't here, that's all. I'll give you the back commission Meyer owes me if any of those imitation skins ever got to Dablin."

Pedley needed his gray matter. The salesman wouldn't have dared to make the statement about the truck unless it could be backed up. There would have been too many people who could disprove it, if it weren't so. The Lemwitz vehicle had undoubtedly been at Rossman's building just before the fire. And that gave a special significance to the watchman's murder. If anyone had been pulling a fast one by sending up rabbit coats on the freight elevator and bringing down squirrel coats, Whitey would have been the first to become suspicious. So either Lemwitz was lying or . . .

"What's happened to *mine* garments, *me?*" Rossman was just beginning to understand. If the squirrels he'd sold to Dablin hadn't been burned, maybe they could be recovered and delivery made in time to get Dablin to make out a new check in payment!

Lemwitz held his hands out, elbows close to his side. "I get an order. I tell Pete to deliver it. I don't know nothing about any stealing or any burning."

"No?" Pedley came in close to him, slapped the old man's clothing. The con-

tractor didn't have anything in his pockets except keys, cigarettes and matches. "Where were you, all evening?"

"Playing pinochle. At the Royale."

"What time'd you quit?"

"Around half-past eleven o'clock."

The Marshal eyed him stonily. Allowing for time to get over from the East Side to Rossman's building, Lemwitz might have been on West Thirty-eighth in plenty of time to set the fire, maybe murder the watchman. But it wouldn't have been enough leeway for him to have made the transfer of the rabbit coats for the squirrels. The truckman might have attended to that, though, if he'd been in on a deal.

Below, somewhere, a heavy duty motor roared suddenly. Lemwitz jumped. "Mine truck!" he squeaked, incredulously. "Somebody's taking mine truck!"

A garage door banged, down on the street. Lemwitz ran toward the stairs. Pedley let him go and barked orders at the others: "Better join the party, guys. Snap it up."

They went down pell-mell, the Marshal last.

One of the garage doors was open when they reached the street. The headlamps of the truck threw a dazzling beam out from the darkened interior. Lemwitz cried:

"Pete! Is that you, Pete? *Was ist los?*"

There was no answer, except the drone of the motor. The contractor paused in the doorway, silhouetted by the light. He turned to Pedley. "So it ain't Pete! It's someone robbing—"

A finger of flame pointed at him from the darkness at the rear of the truck. The bark of the gun echoed and re-echoed.

Lemwitz gasped: "Hah!" He staggered aside and fell, clutching at his throat.

## CHAPTER SIX

### **Murder's Middleman**

**A**T THE shot, Rossman squeaked in fright, sprawled flat on the pavement. Boyne flattened himself against the front of the garage. Pedley dived into the pool of light.

He expected another shot, but none came. He raced toward the comparative gloom at the rear of the vehicle. It took his eyes a second or so to get accustomed to the difference in light. Then he could make out the whole shop; the outlines of scouring boards, driers. But there was no one there.

A cold draft swept across to the garage door. It came from an open window at the rear of the shop. Pedley approached it, cautiously; stuck his head out. He didn't see anyone, nor did he expect to. The murderer's getaway had been easy enough, once that screen-protected window had been opened. And there wouldn't be any footprints on that cement alley outside.

He went back to Lemwitz. The old man lay crumpled like a heap of discarded clothes. There was a glistening hole an inch above his collar button; his shirt was drenched with crimson. He'd never known what hit him.

The bullet had been a .45. It was accurate shooting, even allowing for the fact that the victim had been so plainly spot-lighted by the truck's headlamps. The murderer had probably planned it that way. He had broken into the garage and started the motor at a late hour when Lemwitz would be certain to feel alarmed and go down to investigate; the window had been opened in advance!

He called. "Come on in here, you fellows."

Boyne came in hesitantly—froze at the sight of the body. Rossman poked his head timidly around the jamb. When he saw Lemwitz, he crept in and touched the corpse, nervously.

Pedley barked: "Switch'll be by the door, there, Boyne. Snap it on."

The salesman obeyed. The light revealed scores of furs on stretcher-frames, stacked up against the walls: broadtail, lynx, muskrat. At one side was a long rod with hangers for finished garments. There were plenty made of seal, imitation leopard, phony sable. But no squirrel coats.

If Lemwitz had substituted his low-priced rabbit coats for the high-priced squirrels at *Beautifurs*, he hadn't hidden Rossman's coats here. Unless they were still in the truck.

Pedley went around to the back of the vehicle. It was locked. He remembered the keys in the contractor's pockets, got them. One fitted. The Marshal flung the rear doors open and climbed up. There were a dozen garment-dollies inside, but no coats in them. Nothing except something that, for a moment, Pedley mistook for a piece of chinchilla. Then he called:

"Boyne! Get up in here. Roll out that first dolly. The one backed up against the driver's seat, there."

**T**HE salesman clambered up, edged in past the other wheeled boxes. He bent down over the end one, as if to pat a dog. He drew his hand back with the swift reflex of one who avoids contact with a snake. "Jeeze! There's—a—man in here."

"Yeah." Pedley began to shove the other carriers off the end of the truck to the garage floor. "Don't take him out. Just push the dolly along here."

Boyne obeyed. Pedley put his light on the curly black head of hair he'd mistaken for chinchilla. The body was crammed down into the narrow space, the legs doubled up, the head pushed down so the dead man's face touched the knees.

"That's Pete Lemwitz' driver," Boyne gasped. "My God! Look at him!"

Rossmann scuttled over. "It wasn't Pete who shot Hymie?"

"No." The Marshal growled. "This guy's been stiff quite a while. And it doesn't look as if he had a chance to shoot anybody. Not after that knife had been jabbed into his ribs from behind." He jumped down. This cleared up the possibility that Lemwitz had been implicated in either the theft or the arson. And it meant that the murderer was still running amok!

There was a phone on a wooden cutting table. He called the precinct house; told them to notify Homicide. Then he got through to Shaner. "How's it go at your end?"

"Not so good, skipper," the deputy reported. "The bookkeeper died about twenty minutes ago."

"Break for her," Pedley growled. "How about a break for us?"

"Not so bad. She had a couple lucid moments."

"You get anything, Shaner?"

"I asked her if she was there when the fire started. She didn't answer me. I says, 'Any idea who started the blaze?' and she just gives me the stare. So I try to find out why she hides in the fur vault. For a minute, it don't look as if she's going to speak at all. But then her eyes close and her lips begin to move."

"Skip the details. What'd she say?"

"All I can make out is a name. 'Dablin,' she whispers. 'Don't . . . Dablin.' "

**P**EDLEY was silent for ten seconds. Then he gritted: "I've been running across this Dablin guy's trail, myself. Ask the bookkeeper's sister what she knows about him. She was the model, Rena; she'd be sure to know him."

Shaner swore. "Jeeze. I can't do that, skipper. Y'see, when the doc pulls the sheet up over the bookkeeper's face, this Rena throws a fit. Fell down and bumped her head, passed out cold. The nurses got her in the woman's ward, now, trying to bring her to—"

"For gawsake, don't let anything happen to her, Shaner. We've got enough stiffs in this case now to organize our own private morgue."

"You picked up another deadie?"

"A couple. Came over here to the shop of this Lemwitz who does contract finishing for Rossmann . . . and right away somebody blasts him out with a forty-five."

The deputy cursed again. "How was he mixed up in the fire?"

"It was his rabbit coats that were on Rossmann's racks in place of thirty-five thousand bucks worth of genuine squirrels."

"The old switch game!"

"Point is, somebody must have *known* that Lemwitz had these cheap rabbit coats and that they went out in his truck tonight. Because the truck driver had a knife stuck in his gizzard. Just found him packed away in the empty truck, here. The truck was over on West Thirty-eighth tonight, when it was supposed to be at Dablin's store."

Shaner grunted. "Seems Mr. Dablin might know a thing or two."

"He might. I'm going up to give him the once-over, now."

While Pedley waited for the radio patrol, he asked questions. He didn't get many answers from Rossman or Boyne; none of them helped. The only thing that was clear in the Marshal's mind was that probably the same individual who had stuck the blade into Pete's back had also found it necessary to murder the contractor. Apparently Lemwitz had to be shut up before he discovered that his rabbit coats hadn't been delivered to Dablin's.

Well, this fur-store owner needed to be checked up. All Pedley knew about him was that the name Dablin was flashed nightly, via glowing neons, to thousands who used the crosstown artery of Fourteenth Street. And *Dablin's For Furs* came nightly to the ears of millions, over the radio . . .

**I**T WAS three o'clock in the morning before the red sedan parked in front of the West End Avenue apartment where Dablin lived.

It was an imposing building. But the tiny lobby was smart with chrome and glass. The self-service elevator took them up to the third.

Boyne was worried. "Dablin's practically my best customer. Busting in here like this'll put me in a hell of a bad spot."

Pedley answered gruffly: "What you think you're in, anyway—until we clear this up?"

The furrier was frightened. "I ain't believing it's Dick Dablin who stabs Pete and shoots Hymie. But maybe I'm wrong. So what'll keep him from doing the same with us, I'm asking?"

The Marshal patted his left shoulder. "What you think I carry around with me? A cap pistol?" He pressed the pearl button beside the door of 3-B; had to ring twice more before it opened. The pajama-clad individual who flung it wide was brown with sun-tan; his smile showed strong white teeth. Dark, shaggy eyebrows lifted quizzically as he recognized Boyne and Rossman.

"Hiya, boys. C'min, Jack. What's on your mind, Meyer?" He knotted the silk cord of his dressing gown around him, gestured an invitation. A very imposing figure of a man.

Pedley introduced himself, curtly. "You bought a bunch of squirrel coats from these men, Dablin?" He prodded the furrier and the salesman into the comfortably furnished living-room.

"Plead guilty to that. I'll admit the price was a little low, but it never occurred to me it would be considered as a crime." The store owner seemed ill at ease. "You've really been sticking your nose into my business, haven't you?"

"It's Fire Department business." The Marshal was curt.

"So? Why?"

"Rossman's building went up in smoke tonight. He was wiped out."

Dablin frowned. "What happened to my coats, Meyer?"

"I couldn't tell," the manufacturer began. "Only—"

Pedley cut him short. "That's what we're trying to find out. After you bought the *Beautifuls* squirrel coats, you purchased another lot—cheap dyed rabbit—from a contractor named Lemwitz?"

**T**HE store-owner held up his hands so the dressing-gown fell back loosely from his wrists. "That's right. Nothing up either sleeve, you see."

The Marshal took out his pistol, fiddled with it. "Somebody's hiding plenty. Those rabbit coats were supposed to have been delivered to your store last evening. Apparently they wound up on the rocks at Rossman's—and were a total loss in the blaze."

Dablin scratched his chin with a manicured fingernail. "Don't get it. Am I supposed to?"

"Way I figure it," Pedley watched him closely, "the cheap Lemwitz coats were switched for the expensive ones Rossman was supposed to ship you in the morning. So the insurance people would assume that it was the squirrels that had been burned up, and would pay off accordingly—when it was actually the rabbit imitations that were burned."

Boyne burst out: "It must have been Lemwitz' idea, Dick. Nobody else would have known where to lay hands on just the right number of imitation squirrels."

"Natural, Hymie would know," Rossman agreed. "He's finishing that lot of squirrels for me, himself."

Dablin fumbled in the pocket of his dressing room, produced a cigarette. "I must be dumb. I don't see what Lemwitz would get out of a scheme like that."

"Somebody," Pedley said, "got thirty-five thousand bucks worth of genuine squirrel coats out of it. What Lemwitz got was a slug that sent him to the undertaker's."

Dablin froze, with the match at his cigarette-tip.

"Pete, his truck-driver," the Marshal went on, "got a few inches of cold steel under his heart."

The store-owner sat transfixed.

"The watchman at Rossman's building got throttled to death." Pedley stood up. "And the bookkeeper in *Beautifurs* was roasted alive." He waggled the gun, casually. "That's not the whole ball of yarn, either—because somebody else is going to die for this—and I mean burn!"

"*Yow!*" Dablin yelled, sharply. He flung the flaming stump of the match stick to the carpet, put his finger to his lips. He stared in horror from Boyne to Rossman . . . then at Marshal.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### No Fur Coats In Hell!

THE store owner made a tremendous effort to pull himself together, but his hand still shook when he finally managed to get the cigarette going. "This is terrible. Have you . . . any idea who—"

"Somebody who knew the ropes." Pedley stood straddle-legged, balanced on his toes. "Knew them well enough to dope out that the only way to make the switch was by getting hold, somehow, of a truckful of imitation squirrel coats. After that, it wouldn't be so tough to knock off the driver, run the truck around to Rossman's building and, after putting the watchman and the bookkeeper out of the picture, get the cheap lot of coats up in the elevator . . . and the fancy lot down to the truck."

Dablin seemed too stupefied to reply.

"The guy who ordered the imitation coats from Lemwitz would have to be in on it." The Marshal stepped in, swiftly; grabbed the loose fold of the store-owner's dressing gown and yanked him up on his

feet. "You probably figured that because you'd actually *bought* the squirrel coats, nobody could connect you with stealing them."

"No, no, no," Dablin cried. "You're making a horrible mistake."

"The error was on your side, mister—if you thought you were going to get away with anything like that!"

"I didn't—" Dablin's teeth chattered. "—I didn't have anything to do with the murders."

Pedley shoved him away; shoved him hard enough to send him catapulting into Jack Boyne. The salesman threw up his arm to protect himself. His hand caught Dablin on the side of the head.

The store man struck back, ferociously. But Boyne didn't retaliate. He held out his hands, pleadingly.

"Take it easy, Dick."

"Keep your hands off me," Dablin panted. "I told you I wouldn't have anything to do with it, if there was any chance of anyone getting hurt. And now —four deaths!"

Pedley broke it up. "You're tangled up in all of 'em, Dablin. You were in on the felony; you'll be in on the indictment."

"All I did," the store owner's face puckered up as if he was about to bawl, "was to order the rabbit coats from Lemwitz, and agree to buy the squirrel coats from Jack."

Boyne spat at him. "Don't rat on me, you stinker! You knew what we were going to do."

"I didn't know there were going to be any killings, as God's my judge." Dablin began to tremble; the sweat broke out in a leaden sheen on his face. "I thought it was going to be done when there was no one around Rossman's office."

The manufacturer bit his finger-tips in anguish. "You done this! You—you—slobs!"

"Sure." Pedley pushed Boyne down into a chair. "I said it had to be somebody who knew the ropes. Boyne could get into your office without making the bookkeeper suspicious. He could get close enough to the watchman to strangle him before Whitey could raise an alarm. And he'd know how he had to fix up a deal

with Dablin to sell the coats. Otherwise, there'd have been no profit in the job."

Boyne sneered. "Dick can spill his guts all he wants to. If he says he was in it, maybe he was. Not with me. Because I was right beside you when Hymie Lemwitz was shot. Why don't you ask Dick where *he* was right about then?"

Rossmann muttered: "You got right, there, Jack. Hymie you couldn't have murdered."

The Marshal snorted. "Don't worry about my asking enough questions, Boyne. Rossmann, get over there on the phone. Ask for the police. Give them this address and tell 'em to rush the wagon."

The manufacturer moved fearfully toward the phone. He had his hand on the receiver when a soft voice behind Pedley's shoulder said:

"Drop it, Meyer! Or mamma'll blow your hand off!"

+ + +

**P**EDLEY fought down the impulse to pivot and shoot it out with her. She was too close. She couldn't miss. So when she ordered him to drop his gun on the carpet, he obeyed.

But he was no more astonished than Jack Boyne. "How'd you get here, Rena?"

She laughed, harshly. "I suckered that fat-headed deputy into thinking I was a shock case . . . ducked into the little girls' room and out the window. It was as easy as that."

"Nice timing, babe. The Marshal was about to call up the reserves."

She jabbed her gun into the small of Pedley's back, made him walk beyond his pistol. "I called your hotel, Jack. When I found you were out, I guessed you must have run up here to collect on those coats. Never occurred to me you'd bring company along."

Pedley held his hands up, shoulder high. He turned around slowly, so he could see her. "You didn't come straight over here. You stopped for a bit. In Lemwitz' garage. Didn't you?"

The model picked up his gun. "Now that you know, what good's it going to do you? She handed a heavy automatic to

Boyne. "You can take your .45. It practically broke my wrist when I popped Hymie."

Jack Boyne snarled: "Watch how I do it, babe. You got to keep your wrist stiff." He aimed at Dablin's stomach.

"For God's sake, Jack, don't!" the store owner blubbered. "I wouldn't have said a word against you, only he had me cold."

"Yah," Boyne began. "You yellow—"

"Sure I did," Pedley grated. "I had you, too, Boyne. When I got to your hotel room, you were listening to the short-wave to see if there was any alarm out for you. Those police broadcasters pause too long between items to sound like a regular station."

Rena sniggered. "You'd oughta be more careful about little things like that, Jack!"

"He was too careful." Pedley thought he heard a faint click out in the hall—a click that might be the automatic elevator. "He was so careful that when I told him somebody'd been hurt at the fire he didn't even ask who it was. So I wondered . . ."

Boyne slashed the barrel of the .45 across the side of the Marshal's face. "It'll all add up to a hole in the ground for you, anyway, fireman."

**P**EDLEY listened for the sound of the elevator latch; didn't hear it. Probably the car had stopped at another floor. But the only chance was to stall for time, to hope against hope for a break. "It was a cinch you were hiding some dame's photograph behind that dime-store picture in the ten-buck frame on your dresser, Boyne. I wouldn't have suspected you were tied in with Rena, though, if it hadn't been for the tooth paste in your medicine cabinet."

The salesman's eyes narrowed. "What was wrong with my tooth paste, wisey?"

There was a sound like metal sliding on metal, out in the hall. Pedley raised his voice to cover it. "Tooth paste and tooth powder. Both in the same chest. Man doesn't usually buy both. For himself. Paste was the same brand I saw on Rena's washstand. Made me a little leery. Especially since the two of you would be thrown together a lot, in the

office. But at first I couldn't figure how she'd be in it, with her sister getting broiled alive that way."

"If you haven't doped it out yet, gumshoe," the model shrilled, "you never will. Because in just exactly ten seconds, you'll be—"

"Oh, I get it now." He watched her gun come up level with his chest. "It didn't bother you that Mary'd have to be put out of the way, before you and Boyne did your switching of the coats. Didn't make any difference to you that she'd brought you up. Earned a living for you. Got you a job at her office. Wore cheap clothes or went without things while you tailed around in the height of style. I expect it only made you hate her more when she juggled her books to cover up the stuff you stole from Rossman. Or when, after she saw she couldn't stop you from being crooked, she tried to keep you from getting punished. Don't suppose it meant a thing to you that she was willing to run her chances of dying there in the vault, rather than send out an alarm so you'd be caught."

"Yes! If you want to know; yes!" Her finger tightened on the trigger. "I'm glad she's dead. She's been at me and at me ever since I was a kid, to do this and do that, always things *she* thought were right and proper. Well, I've made my mind to have things *my* way, for a

THE END

### DANCE OF THE DEATH DOLL

His name was now Ed Jones, but once he had been the Flying Hawk, aerial artist, adventurer—and hunted criminal. He thought that he was finished with that former life for good; but then the mysterious little man was murdered in his livingroom, and Ed was forced to solve the uncanny puzzle of the Death Doll—to save his sanity as well as his life! . . . . Wyatt Blassingame is the author of this outstanding mystery novel.

change. And do the things *I* want to do. Right now, the thing *I* want to do most is—"

The shot was thunderous. Pedley was dropping and diving forward when it came. But he saw the gun slip out of her hand as she staggered aside. As he hit the floor, he realized Boyne was shooting, too—at the hall door. From the door to the corridor a gun belched a second orange flame.

Boyne put a hand across his stomach as if he was about to make a bow. He bent over, fell on his face, lay still.

Shaner poked his head around the corner. "What a job I had trailing that witch!" he exclaimed. He stared at Rossman and Dablin, huddled back against the wall like wax figures. He watched Rena crawling feebly along the floor to regain the .38.

"I couldn't make out what it is she wants to do most, Skipper. Or where she wants to go."

Without hurrying, Ben Pedley retrieved the pistol. When he bent to pick it up, he seemed exhausted. He said, "One thing sure, Shaner. She won't need any fur coat when she gets there." His shoulders sagged as he moved toward the door. "Some day," he said, "I'd like to catch a pyro without having to wade through death up to my ears. It'd make my job a little more pleasant. . . ."



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I saw Jade's arm flash just before I dived headlong into the fat man. . . .

## CHAPTER ONE

### What Price Freedom?

“I’VE watched you,” the warden told me, “and I feel sure you can adjust yourself to the outside world. As well as anyone can these days.” He sighed, and held out his hand. “Good-luck, Jordan.”

I went down the hall, the long hall. I had ten dollars in the pocket of my serv-

iceable blue suit, and not a friend waiting for me, out there. Not any friend that mattered. But I didn’t care. I would be free. Free to work at what I liked, make the friends I wanted to. Free to walk and talk and sleep where and when I liked.

An intangible thing, freedom, a taken-for-granted, little-thought-of thing. Until you lose it. Lord.

There were the gray stone walls, the road that led to the gate. There were men with rifles up on those walls, and a guard at the gate. As I walked toward it, the guard at my side was smiling a little.

He said: “I hope I don’t see you again. If you get what I mean.”

"You won't," I promised. "Unless it's just a visit." I would have staked my right arm on that. If I had to clean gaboons, if I had to wash dishes in a grease joint, this time I was out for good.

And the chances were that I would have to do none of these things. For my country was at war. And though they didn't want me in the army, though my kind can't get into the army, there were places we could be useful. Places that were helping to set other people free. I would get a job in one of those. I liked the thought of that.

The guard at the gate was swinging it open now, and he was smiling a little, too. They shook hands with me, and said something I don't remember now, and then I was walking down the sidewalk, outside.

*Outside.* I could feel a tightening in my throat. The air seemed fresher, and the sun brighter. There seemed to be a new spring in my step.

I walked a block, past a bakery and a barber shop and some duplexes. Past a filling station, and then another block. There were trees, here, between the sidewalk and the curb. A couple of girls were playing jacks on the steps of a house. A kid rode by on a bike, whistling, and an iceman was swinging a cake of ice off the back of his truck. He was using a canvas bag; that was new. They were using tongs before I went up.

I took a deep breath—and then I saw this car at the curb.

A Caddy, low and powerful. The motor was running; it was a souped-up motor, and I felt a tingle chase up my spine. Because motors are to me what liquor is to an alcoholic. I looked up at the man behind the wheel.

It was Red Akron. And Tiny Lester was easing his two hundred and fifty pounds out of the seat next to Red. He stood at the curb, waiting for me to approach.

He said: "Hello, Tommy. We've been waiting for an hour." From his seat behind the wheel, Red waved.

Tiny was holding the back door open. There was a girl sitting in the back seat—Jade Tallmadge. Suddenly, I didn't feel so free.

These were my old associates—and these were the people I wanted to avoid.

I hesitated, and Tiny laid a hand on my arm. "Your friends. Tommy. We aren't forgetting that you didn't blab."

I could have, too. I could have dragged both Red and Tiny into that jail with me. And shortened my own sentence. But they weren't my friends. I looked up at Tiny, at the smile on his broad and per-spiring face. He looked like the kind of good-time Charlie you see munching a hot dog at baseball games. He didn't look like a man who would throttle a woman. But he had.

I said slowly: "I'm—I'm different, now, Tiny. That place—" I nodded back toward the prison. "That place changed me."

Jade spoke then, and her voice had a timbre in it, a vibration I remembered. "You're not afraid of us, Tommy boy. Nor ashamed?"

"That isn't it," I half lied. "I've got to go straight, now. And I want to."

NONE of them spoke for a minute. All around me were the noises of the street, and the sun was hot on my bare head. But, for a second, I seemed to be back in the prison. They were all looking at me. Red's eyes were unpleasant; Jade's curious. You can never tell about Tiny, not from his eyes.

Red gunned the motor slightly. "She'll do a hundred and thirty," he said. "Without working at it. You've never wheeled anything like it, Tommy."

"If you wanted to drive it," Tiny said. "we could drive out to Sam's for a beer."

I shook my head.

Red looked at Tiny, and Tiny's smile was a little forced. Jade said: "Now that we've told him everything else, let's tell him the truth."

Red shot her an ugly glance, and even Tiny looked displeased.

Jade pretended not to notice. She said: "They've got a job for you, Tommy. A job you might like. And it will pay well."

I shook my head.

Tiny said smoothly: "It would be best, all of our interests would be better served, if you were to work with us, Tommy. We—I'll put it frankly—we need to be friendly with you."

For the third time, I shook my head. "You don't need my friendship. You

need my silence. And even a term in prison didn't break that. I can't see that you need to worry."

Both of them were looking at Tiny as I talked. When I had finished, there was a pause. I think all three of us held our breath. Then Tiny shrugged, and stepped back into the car.

He settled his big bulk, and his eyes on me were thoughtful. He said: "I'll see you again, Tommy. I'm sorry you couldn't understand my viewpoint." He nodded to Red, and the Caddy moved away from the curb. It disappeared down the street, its exhaust rumbling.

I almost wished I was back, back in that place where I would be safe from him.

I went down toward the heart of town. I suppose the sun was just as bright and the air as fine, but it didn't seem so. I thought of Jade. She was still with them, and I was glad, now, I hadn't answered her letters. She had written every week for months, when I had first gone up.

I thought of the Caddy. They must have pulled a big job, to be able to afford a car like that. But Tiny was always headed for the big money. Tiny wasn't destined to be small time. He was too smart to stay in the minor leagues.

There was a rooming house I liked, one I had lived in before I met Tiny and the boys. I took a surface car out there, and rented a room.

I went to my old boss then, at the garage, to see if he could use another mechanic. I told him: "It's only until I can land a defense job. I need some money."

He was a short man with bright black eyes, constantly in need of a shave. He knew where I had spent the last three years, and it was undoubtedly that which made him hesitate.

Finally, he said: "Okay. When can you start?"

"In an hour," I told him. And I did.

I liked garages. I liked the smell of them, and the work in them. I didn't mind the grease, nor being forced to work in cramped positions at times. I had always planned to have a garage of my own. Until Tiny.

I was back, now, at the same job I had when I first met him. He'd dropped in here, one afternoon, to have a high compression head put on his car. We did a

lot of work like that, souping cars. The boss put me on the job.

That led to driving for Tiny, while he made the rounds on the protection racket he was then working. I won't excuse myself; I guessed what was going on, and I drifted into it without too much of a fight with my conscience. When the going got rough and raw, I tried to back out. But I was in, then, and I knew some things about Tiny that made it impossible for me to quit—and stay alive.

It took three years away from him for me to learn how cleverly he had led me. It took three years in a place I didn't want to see again.

All that, I resolved now, was buried in the past. Now I was free and working at an honest job, and Tiny couldn't touch me. So I thought.

**A** VALVE job came in late that night, and that meant overtime. It was dusk when I went around to the restaurant for supper. It hadn't changed much, the same dark booths and white counter and imitation blonde waitress.

I had an evening paper, and I took a quiet booth in the back. I meant to read while I ate. There was a girl in the booth. She looked up and smiled and said: "Hello, Tommy."

It was Jade. I took the seat opposite her. I had no words right then.

"Tiny didn't send me," she said, as though reading my mind. "I wanted to see you, Tommy, and I guessed you'd be coming here."

I didn't know whether I was glad or not. I was confused, and a little annoyed. And there was a warmth running through me that I tried to fight.

I looked at her. She was something to look at, and if I didn't know her background, I would have been glad she was sitting there.

She said: "I know what you think. And I could think the same of you. But I don't. Tommy, try to understand me. From your own experience, try to understand me."

The waitress came over and I gave her my order. When she had left, Jade added: "I'm not a torch carrier. I never had to be, until—until you, Tommy—"

I lifted my hand, involuntarily. This was embarrassing me. I said: "I can understand you. Knowing Tiny, I can understand a lot of things." I paused. "I swore to myself, up there in that place, that I'd never have anything to do with any of you."

She looked up again. Her eyes seemed to have a veil over them. She said: "You know what you want." She rose. "Tiny had some plan for you. He wanted you to get a job at Acme Aircraft. He sent me to tell you there was a job open, a good one for a man who understands motors."

I looked up at her. "You told me, first, that Tiny didn't send you."

"Yes," she said. "I did, didn't I? I lied. You can put that on your ledger sheet against me." Her hand rested briefly on my shoulder. "Goodbye, Tommy. Good luck." She left.

The food wasn't too good, but it could have been ambrosia, and I still wouldn't have had any appetite for it.

*Acme Aircraft, I thought. What has Tiny to do with that? And why had he planned to have me work there?*

I knew where the plant was, and I knew the foreman of one of their departments. We had worked on a high turbulence head together. I knew they had expanded ten-fold since Pearl Harbor, and I knew the motor they were turning out would make obsolete every fighting plane in the country, in the world. I knew everything, it seemed, but Tiny's place in the picture.

I must have walked five miles before I came back to the rooming house. This Tiny seemed to be a disease I was saddled with for life.

It was a bad night. When I showed up at the garage in the morning, the boss said: "You look sick, kid. There's not much to do today, if you'd like to rest up a little."

I told him about the opening at Acme.

He nodded toward a flivver roadster we used for pick-ups. "Why not drive out and put in an application? I'd hate to lose you, but I'd be glad to lose you to them."

A good guy.

Acme was way out on the edge of town, not near any transportation facilities. When I rattled up to the front gate, I was stopped by a guard. I told him: "I came

out to see Sandy Graham, A. J. Graham." I gave him my name.

Then I was inside and walking down past an endless row of big, air-cooled motors. It was the closest thing to a production line I had ever seen in a plane plant, and it was impressive.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Color of Jade*

**S**ANDY had a small, glassed-in office, in one corner of the biggest room. He was poring over some papers. The desk top was covered with them.

He looked about ten years older than he had when I last saw him. He was thinner, and his eyes were grim. He rose as I entered, and gripped my hand tightly. "You'll never know how glad I am to see you," he said. "Where the hell have you been for three years?"

I told him.

"Oh," he said, and a wrinkle deepened in his forehead. "Oh."

"Would it make any difference? Would it keep me from working here?"

He shrugged. "I'm no lawyer. I wouldn't know. But I'm a mechanic. And I know I need you. Can you start tomorrow? At eight?"

I nodded.

"Inspection, mostly," he said. "A handy man. My right hand. I'm trying to get this business in a groove, but there's a lot of hand work to do, for a while."

"You can pay me for eight hours," I said. "All the work I do after that is free. I owe the People some board and room."

He gripped my hand again, and the wrinkle was gone from his forehead.

I went back to the garage and told the boss. He said: "I guess you'll need a car."

I nodded.

"Take that flivver," he said. "The tires are good. You can carry out some of the other boys from town. That'll be my contribution."

Sandy looked even thinner when I reported for work the next day. He said: "One of my ignition men is missing. I called his home, but they said he didn't come in last night. Think you can fill in?"

"I'll know later," I said. "After I look

at one of those engineer's dreams out there."

It wasn't as difficult as I had feared. But it would have been, I could understand for an untrained man. Looking back on it, later, I really should have got suspicious then. Particularly after Sandy had told me that the ignition man had disappeared.

But I was concentrating on my job, and it was the kind of job that demanded it.

But it was fun learning. It was exciting to work under a guy like Sandy, and above him, the bright boys they were sending us. From M.I.T., and Purdue. Not just text book monkeys. Boys who loved the game, boys who had been souping Model T's when they were in high school, and had gone to college to find out the reasons for all the things they knew were true.

But the real handy-men were rare. Mechanics are a dime a dozen, but mechanics who can think, who can cut corners, who can assemble to the satisfaction of government inspectors can't be bought. They're born, and not often enough.

That's why the disappearance of that ignition artist should have been a tip-off.

I knocked off at nine o'clock that night. Which was four hours for the People. I went into Sandy's office, and he had his head on his desk, and a pot of coffee was boiling on a little canned heat stove he had in there.

**H**E LIFTED his head when I came in, and his eyes were half closed. There were a lot of lines in his face that I hadn't noticed that morning.

He nodded toward the coffee, and said: "There's a couple of cups in the top drawer of that file. And some canned milk. Won't you pour for me, Ethel?" He tried to grin.

I poured it out, and found a couple of dry sweet rolls in a paper bag in the same drawer.

Sandy asked wearily: "How'd it go, today?"

"I've got a lot to learn," I said. "It's a wallop, though."

He nodded slowly. "You can see why the air force is so popular. And when this Acme Fighter hits the skyways, the war is practically won."

I smiled a little at that. Sandy has a way of dealing in superlatives when he's sold on a product.

"Smile," he said. "Go ahead. Laugh out loud. I was always a guy to exaggerate. Only those weren't my words. That came from the Navy. Right from the boys who know. Once this thing is in production, really rolling, it's a question of time. But it's our time. It's our war, from there in. That is for you to know, because you're my right arm. If it ever gets out of here, I would kill you like you were a snake. Even though you're one of God's chosen people, a very good mechanic."

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He didn't look tired now. His eyes were gleaming, and one bony fist was clenched on top of his desk. *How can we lose this war, I thought, with guys like that pitching for us?*

"I was thinking," I said. "We could put a couple of cots in here. We could sleep here, and I could let some of the boys use my flivver."

He put a hand on mine, then, and shook his head. "You're going to need your sleep. In a good bed. Because I'm going to be so tired some day, that I'll make a mistake. And you'll need to be awake, to watch out for my mistakes. That's your job, watching me."

I'm not overly religious, but I said a little prayer as I drove home that night, a little prayer for Sandy Graham. It would help to have God on our side.

I didn't think I could sleep, but I did. I died for nine hours, and the alarm clock brought me back to life.

I had arranged, the day before, to pick up a couple of boys from the shop who lived near, and the first one was waiting for me on the porch when I drove up.

The second one wasn't. I honked the horn a couple of times, and then went up to ring his doorbell. He was in charge of the stockroom, and with the expansion as fast as it had been, he carried about seventy percent of his information in his head. There hadn't been time to install a system as yet. He was about as important to that plant as the foundation.

His wife came to the door. Her eyes were red rimmed. She said: "He didn't come home. I just know he's taken to drinking again. And after we were starting to get our debts paid and—"

I didn't wait to hear the rest. I made that flivver boil, all the way out to the plant. I went directly to Sandy's office, and told him about it.

I said: "I was told to get a job here. By a man who could be guilty of anything. If he wanted me here, for his purposes, he could be at the bottom of this."

Sandy ran the back of his hand over his forehead. He looked at me thoughtfully. "That sounds reasonable. Would you be willing to tell that to an F.B.I. man?"

I hadn't squealed on Tiny when the D.A. had offered me a light sentence. And I wouldn't squeal now, excepting for

one thing. That one thing was a war, a war we had to win.

Finally, I said: "I'll tell him all he needs to know."

I was helping the assistant in the stockroom when Sandy called me into his office.

There was a tall, thin man with a shrewd face standing next to Sandy's desk. Sandy introduced him and left, closing the door behind him.

I told him about Tiny, all that applied to the present case. And I told him enough more about Tiny to convince him that my suspicions weren't groundless.

He looked at me quietly for a moment after I had finished. Then he said: "You realize this puts you under suspicion, too?"

"That's the least of my troubles," I told him. "After Tiny finds out I've talked, I'll be glad to have the law watching me."

**I** WENT back to the stockroom then and tried to keep things moving. The assistant, with the help of a couple of clerks sent over by the office, was starting a card index system.

I helped with that, and then went back to check the ignition on the jobs that had gone through. At noon, Sandy told me: "They haven't located either of those missing men yet. Nor can they find this Tiny."

"If they want to find Tiny," I told him, "they can keep an eye on me. I've a hunch he'll come to see me when he learns about this morning."

They found one of the men that afternoon, the ignition expert. In the river. He had been weighted down with some old chains, evidently, but his body had broken free and floated to the surface. He'd been knifed.

Sandy looked white and sick, and I wasn't feeling too well myself. Sandy said: "That means that someone else knows how good our plane is. Someone who shouldn't."

"Not necessarily," I said. "They may intend to do this in other plants. Killing off the key men can raise hell with production in all of these new plants. And some men turn traitor for very little money. Though Tiny doesn't work cheap, there are thugs who do."

Sandy shook his head. "All we can do is hope that Tiny is nabbed before any-

## THEY DIE BY NIGHT

body else gets it." He turned back to his desk.

I wasn't worth much that afternoon. I knocked off at six o'clock, and went over to the restaurant before going home. And there, in the rear booth, was Jade again.

And again, I felt that fire in me. Again, I fought it. I said: "If Tiny has something to say to me, let him come himself."

"He will," she said. "He didn't send me. But I heard that he was looking for you and—"

"And you came to warn me?"

She nodded, her eyes on mine puzzled.

"I thought you might be bringing another lie," I said. "You've stooged for him so long."

She held up a hand, pitifully, as though trying to stop the flow of words. I felt like a heel, and I suppose I should have.

She said quietly: "All the time you were in that—that place, Tommy, I never saw Tiny. Nor any of the others. I was working. In a store, selling stockings. Did you know that?"

I shook my head. "No. I didn't."

"I went with him that day you got out," she continued. "He wanted me along, to influence you, I suppose. I went along—just to see you." A sort of firmness came to her face, as though she were steeling herself. "Now that I've made a fool of myself again, and now that I've warned you, I won't bother you any more."

She was on her feet, then, and halfway to the door, before I could say, "Wait—Jade!"

She didn't turn, and the screen door slammed behind her. I was half out of the booth, and then I stopped. I remembered the promise I had made to myself, and I remembered her lie, last time she had come here.

I sat down again, and the waitress came over for my order. She was smiling. "Your girl friend left in a hurry."

"She's not my girl friend," I said. But I think I was lying.

It was another bad night. About five, I got up and lighted a cigarette, and stared down at the street below. I'd messed this thing up from the beginning. First, by not trusting Jade, and second, by not going to the police with all I knew about Tiny right from the start.

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## DETECTIVE TALES

I dressed myself. If I couldn't sleep, I could work, and every extra hour of work I put in would help to make up for those men who were lost. I could phone the other man from the factory around seven, and explain that I wasn't picking him up.

Sandy wasn't there when I arrived. He had probably worked until midnight, the night before, so that didn't seem strange. I went into the stockroom, and things looked a lot brighter in there. They were getting it systematized.

I went into Sandy's office. I straightened out what I could, filing away everything that wasn't of immediate importance. I had learned a lot about this job in the past few days, and I hoped we could work a double shift later. He was, I'd learned, sort of a glorified trouble shooter, and I knew I could do the same work in a few weeks.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Tiny's Next Move

THE union's business agent came in a little later, looking for Sandy. He told me: "I've been getting some loud beefs from a couple of the boys in here, but they look fishy. Most of the gang thinks this Sandy is a god."

"He is," I said. "Who are the beefers?"

He shook his head. "I can't tell you that. Unless there's some evidence of sabotage."

"And I can't tell you that," I told him. "But this I can promise you. You could tie those men up with Berlin or Tokio, if you looked back far enough. And the sooner they're out of here, the better for all of us."

He looked at me thoughtfully for almost a minute. Then he said: "I'm inclined to agree with you. I could take away their cards."

"And if you don't want to tell me who they are," I added, "you might tell the F.B.I." He nodded, and went out.

I looked at the clock, then, and it was eight o'clock. And Sandy wasn't here. I went out to examine some defective magnetos for usable scrap, and spent another hour in the stockroom. It was 9:20 when

## THEY DIE BY NIGHT

I looked at the clock again. I began to get a queer feeling in my stomach.

Sandy had no phone. He lived alone in a little cottage near the plant, though, and I could drive over there in a couple of minutes. I got permission from his boss.

I went up to the front door and rang the bell. I kept my finger on the button for twenty seconds, and I could hear it ringing, inside.

The ringing of the bell was the only sound I heard. That queer feeling in my stomach was growing now, and I could feel my heart step up its pace.

I tried the door, then, and it was open. I stepped into a small hall. There was an arch leading into the living room. I went through here, and toward the bedroom door that opened into it.

Sandy Graham was in there. There was blood matting the back of his head. He was lying, face down, on the bedroom floor. I put a hand on the wall behind me, and my eyes left that body to cover the room.

I ran out of the house and across the street. I pounded on the door of that house, the biggest in the block, the one most likely to have a phone.

The door opened and I stammered out my request. I phoned the police, and then went back to wait. I didn't go in. I couldn't go in, though I hated myself because of it. I thought of Tiny Lester, and the fear of him was melting in the hate I had for him, now.

A squad car braked to a stop at the curb, and I went down to meet them. I gave them all the information I had while they walked to the house.

Another one pulled up a minute later, and the police ambulance. I got permission to leave, and went back to the shop. I told the boss what had happened. I said: "I'd like the afternoon off. I know you need me, particularly now, but what I have to do is more important."

"You're not going to try anything foolish?" he asked me. "You're not going to try anything that should be done by the police?"

"No," I said, "I'm not."

I was only half-lying. Because I had a hunch I knew where Tiny was hiding out. But it was no place where a cop

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## DETECTIVE TALES

could go. It would be a tip-off for sure, if I walked in there with anyone else. Alone, I had a chance.

I intended to let Tiny think that I had come around to his side.

+

ONCE before, when Tiny was hiding out, it had been at Sam's. This was a roadhouse about five miles from town. They had a dance floor and bar downstairs, and a crap table and roulette wheel upstairs. And Sam had some rooms upstairs to rent.

There was a good chance, I felt, of finding Tiny here. Or of finding him eventually, if I told Sam I was looking for him.

I had no weapon but the deceit I planned to use. I knew Tiny wasn't feeling any too kindly toward me. I was taking a dangerous risk, but I didn't feel like any kind of a hero. I thought of Sandy, and of those brave boys all over the world who were waiting for the Acme Fighter. And then I thought of Jade. Every quiet moment away from the factory, it seemed, I thought of her.

I pulled up before Sam's in the flivver, just a few minutes after noon. I walked into the barroom, and ordered a beer. There was a greasy little man in a soiled shirt behind the bar.

"Sam around?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"I was looking for a guy named Tiny Lester," I went on. "You wouldn't know about him?"

He shook his head again. He put the beer in front of me, and said: "Ten cents."

I put a bill on the bar. "I used to work for this Tiny. He paid me well. I heard he was looking for me."

The man said nothing. He spread my change out on the bar, and went back to wash some glasses. I was getting nowhere.

Then a door at the back of the room opened. I looked up in the back-bar mirror. It was Red Akron.

He said: "Hello, Tommy."

I turned around slowly and nodded.

"You looking for Tiny?" he asked.

I said I was.

Red went to the front window and looked out. He turned around again, and

## THEY DIE BY NIGHT

jerked his head toward the door. "Up there."

I walked through the door, and Red was close behind. There were some steps here. I went up slowly.

At the top, Red stepped ahead of me and opened a door into another hall.

"The door at the end," Red said.

He followed me again as I walked to that door. I opened it.

Jade was in there. She was sitting in a big chair next to the other door, and her face was white. Tiny sat in another large chair near a window.

Jade whispered, "Tommy, you fool—"

Red said: "Shut up!" He lifted one big hand threateningly.

It was Tiny I had come to see, but my eyes and all my thoughts were on Jade. "What are you doing here?" I asked. And then I could have bitten off my tongue. For that was a give-away.

"What indeed?" Tiny said smoothly. "Or perhaps you thought she was a friend of yours?"

"He's lying," Jade said hoarsely. "Red brought me here, Tommy. I swear it—"

Red's hand smacked on the side of her face, and she slumped in the chair.

I didn't think, right then. I put all I had into a right hand, and it landed in the middle of Red's face. Blood spurted from his nose as he slammed into the wall.

He bounced off, his right hand low. Tiny said: "Stop!"

RED stopped in his tracks, and both of us turned to face Tiny. He had a heavy calibre automatic in one fat hand. He was still sitting, and his face was as bland as ever. But I knew he

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## DETECTIVE TALES

would pull the trigger without giving it a second thought.

"You came to see me," he said. "Why?"

"To work for you," I lied. "But if this gorilla is going to get tough about it—"

Red growled something, and Tiny raised a hand. "This must be a recent decision."

I nodded. "I see I can't fight you, so I figured I could work with you. You could use me."

Tiny pursed his fat lips. "I could," he said. He was looking at me thoughtfully.

"It isn't something I'll like," I said, "working for the enemy, but it's better than dying. Anything is better than that."

Red said hoarsely: "He's a damned liar, Tiny. You know he tipped off the Feds. He's just trying to work from the inside, so he can nail you."

Tiny smiled. He looked at Red, and back at me. "I knew that," he said.

There was silence then. Finally, Tiny said, "You let your mouth get the better of you. You went patriotic on me."

I had nothing to say to that. It looked like I would have nothing to say from now on. I looked at Jade. She was sitting stiffly upright in her chair now, her eyes wide. She tried to say something, but only a strangulated sound came forth.

I looked back at Tiny, and at the gun so steady in his fat hand. If I was going to die, I wasn't going to crawl.

"It's your move," I said. "I always figured you low, but never low enough to work for *them*. I never figured any American that low."

"It pays," Tiny said. "You should be in with us. It's really too bad you're going to die. You were a valuable man to me, Tommy. And you could be valuable to Acme. I'll probably get a bonus for this."

My eyes left him, then. Because I wanted one more look at Jade before . . .

Her right hand was still outstretched, and it was groping. It was groping toward a book end, a heavy book end on a small table near the chair.

I looked back at Tiny. "Don't miss," I said. "Because I'm coming for you." And I started toward him. I'll never know where the courage came from.

I took a step forward, and surprise

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## DETECTIVE TALES

came to Tiny's eyes. It was the first time I had ever seen any emotion there. I took another half step, and the gun in his hand lifted.

Then, from the corner of my eyes, I saw Jade's arm flash, and I dived. The book end landed in Tiny's lap, just before I crashed him. It probably saved my life.

The momentum of my rush carried us both over backward as the chair tipped. Red shouted something, but the chair was between him and us, and he couldn't shoot without taking the risk of hitting Tiny.

Then I heard a sickening *thump*, and I remembered there had been another book-end.

Tiny's gun-hand was sprawled out from his body, and he brought it around toward my stomach. I grabbed that hand and squirmed to one side—and the gun went off. I put a knee where it would do the most good, and slammed his gun-hand viciously against the floor.

The gun clattered from his hand, but I made no move for it. His face was sick, from the kick, I knew, and for a second he was limp. I smashed his jaw twice. seized the gun and got up.

Red was sprawled on the floor, blood oozing from his head. Jade, white and close to tears, still stood there, the book end in her hand.

The door opened, and the greasy little bartender stood there. I had the gun trained on him when he entered.

"I ain't got no part of this," he said quickly. "I just came up to see what the hell all the noise was about."

"If you aren't in with them," I said, "you could call the police. And if they aren't here in five minutes, you'll be a dead duck. Now, scoot." He scooted.

Jade came closer then, and I put an arm around her. She said: "Tiny must have learned that I'd warned you. He sent Red over to pick me up just before you came."

I believed her. From then on, I would always believe her. I held her tighter, and kept my eyes on Tiny and Red. Then, a little later, when we heard the whine of sirens, outside, I figured it was safe, and I bent down and kissed her. It was something I should have done a long time ago.

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